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Evaluating Contextual Offer Making at Durham University

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ABSTRACT

In common with many other higher tariff universities in the United Kingdom, Durham University uses contextual data about the socio-economic circumstances of applicants to inform decisions about whom to admit to its undergraduate degree programmes. This paper draws on data for undergraduates who entered Durham University in the period 2018–2020 ($N = 11,392$) to assess the extent to which contextual offer making has been successful in widening participation and to examine how contextually admitted students (around a fifth of all entrants) have fared academically at the university in both relative and absolute terms. Analysis of this data shows that contextual offers have helped to increase the socio-economic diversity of the undergraduate population at the university with respect to POLAR quintile and other postcode-based measures of disadvantage, but not with respect to school type. Importantly, without the availability of contextual offers, a significant minority of contextually admitted students may not have received an initial offer of a place, and around half may not have had their offer confirmed after key stage 5 examination results were announced. Relative to standard offer entrants, contextually admitted students had slightly lower pass rates and slightly lower average marks in years 1, 2 and 3 of their degree programmes, and were substantially less likely to graduate with a first and slightly less likely to graduate with at least a 2:1. In absolute terms, however, contextually admitted students performed well at the university, with pass rates of 90% or more and average marks of 60 or higher across all 3 years of study, and rates of leaving with at least an upper second-class degree of more than 80%. Overall, contextual offer making at Durham University has been a success, helping to widen participation without compromising student success in absolute terms. Improvements to student support systems are needed, however, to help close the gap in relative rates of success at degree level.

1 | Introduction

Widening participation in higher education has been a policy goal in the United Kingdom ever since the Robbins Report of the 1960s kickstarted the expansion of higher education by articulating a political commitment to ensuring that ‘courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’ (Robbins 1963, 8). Since then, while absolute rates of participation in higher education have increased for all socio-economic groups, the socio-economic gap in relative rates of

participation has been slow to close (Harrison 2017), particularly at the most prestigious and academically selective institutions (Boliver 2015). The persistence of this gap in access matters not least because holding a university degree has increasingly become a necessary (albeit insufficient) condition for obtaining a professional or managerial job (Ingram et al. 2023), with the labour market returns to a degree being generally greater for graduates of older and more esteemed institutions (Belfield et al. 2018). More equitable rates of access to higher education, especially to ‘elite’ universities, are therefore critical for achieving a more socially mobile society.

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Contextualised admissions practices which involve taking university applicants' socio-economic circumstances into account when assessing their suitability and competitiveness for entry to higher education were first mooted in UK policy some 20 years ago as a means of closing the socio-economic gap in higher education participation rates. The Schwartz Review of Fair Admissions to Higher Education, commissioned by the UK government in response to a decline in public confidence in the fairness of undergraduate admissions decision-making, set out five principles of fair admission, namely (1) a transparent selection process, (2) based on a holistic assessment of prior achievement *and future potential*, (3) using valid and reliable metrics, (4) free of unnecessary barriers (5) as part of a professionalised admissions service (Schwartz 2004). The second of these principles emphasised the importance of recognising that 'equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential' (Schwartz 2004, 5), making it 'fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances' (ibid., 6). At that time, however, contextualised admissions gained little traction within the sector (Boliver et al. 2017), with improvements to admissions practices focused mainly on the first and fifth Schwartz principles of making selection processes more transparent and more consistent through centralised decision-making (Adnett et al. 2011).

In contrast, contextualised admissions practices have become much more mainstream over the course of the last few years (Boliver and Powell 2023). This shift was prompted in England by the creation of a new higher education regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), in 2018 which has called on England's top-third most academically selective universities to dramatically reduce the ratio of young entrants from areas with the highest and lowest rates of participation in higher education from 5:1 in 2017 to 3:1 by 2024–2025 and to perfect equity by 2038–2039 (Office for Students 2018). To achieve these targets, the OfS has strongly encouraged universities to introduce or extend contextualised admission policies entailing lower academic entry requirements for socio-economically disadvantaged applicants. Echoing Schwartz in its guidance to the sector, the OfS stated: "[t]here is a case for rethinking how merit is judged in admissions. Because social background affects school attainment, focusing only on the top A-levels means that the potential of disadvantaged students is being overlooked." (Office for Students 2019, 8).

While it makes intuitive sense that the rolling out of contextualised admissions will inevitably widen access, its relatively recent adoption by UK universities means that the evidence base regarding its effectiveness as a widening access tool is only just beginning to be built. Little is known about the sociodemographic profile of contextual offer recipients in comparison to non-contextually admitted students, or about how much contextual offer making changes the sociodemographic profile of the entering cohort overall. Similarly, not much is known about the extent to which eligible prospective applicants are aware of and influenced, positively or negatively, by the availability of contextual offers, nor about the extent to which contextual offer recipients needed a reduction of academic entry requirements to be eligible for an initial or confirmed offer of a university place.

Moreover, since contextual offer making at scale is a relatively recent phenomenon in the United Kingdom, little is known about how contextually admitted students fare academically once admitted to university. The answer to this question is critical given the high financial and psychological cost to students of dropping out of or performing poorly on their degree programme. The OfS has emphasised that it 'is crucial that a shift in offer making of this kind is accompanied by effective student support' (Office for Students 2019, 5). However, many highly academically selective universities indicated in their Access and Participation Plans for 2020/2021 to 2024/2025 that such student support systems were in the early stages of development (Boliver and Powell 2023). As such, it is important to bear in mind that it may be too early to determine how well contextually admitted students perform at university when adequately supported to fulfil their potential.

With the above caveat in mind, this paper sets out to add to the evidence base on the effectiveness of contextual offer making as a tool for widening access and its implications for students' success at degree level, drawing on data for Durham University, a prestigious and highly academically selective university located in North East England. Specifically, the paper sets out to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent has contextual offer making succeeded in widening access to undergraduate programmes at Durham University?
2. How have contextually admitted students fared academically at Durham University, relative to their non-contextually admitted peers and in absolute terms?

The next section of the paper reviews the existing literature on contextualised admissions, which reveals a significant shift in thinking about what constitutes fair admission within the UK higher education sector and discusses what is known about how academic performance at university differs depending on prior attainment and socio-economic background. We then summarise the nature of contextual offer making at Durham University and describe the data and statistical analysis methods used to answer the research questions set out above. Next, we present the findings of our data analysis, which indicate that contextual offer making does significantly widen access and that success rates at university for contextually admitted students are high in absolute terms, albeit lower relative to more advantaged peers. We conclude the paper by setting out the implications of our findings for the future direction of contextualised admissions practices at UK universities.

2 | Literature Review

While contextualised admissions practices are now mainstream in UK higher education, this has only recently become the case. Traditionally, UK universities with a high ratio of applicants to places adhered to the 'meritocratic equality of opportunity' model of fair admission, evaluating all applicants against equally demanding academic entry criteria irrespective of social background, with prior attainment implicitly assumed to be an objective and socially neutral indicator of ability (Boliver et al. 2022). Evidence of adherence

to the meritocratic equality of opportunity model of fair admission abounds in studies of policy texts and studies involving in-depth interviews with outreach and admissions staff throughout the 2000s and 2010s. The UK's most selective universities invariably articulated their goal as being to identify the 'brightest and best' students as evidenced by prior academic attainment (Bowl and Hughes 2013; Nahai 2013; Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2016; Boliver et al. 2018), expressing a desire to admit more students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds *only* if they met the institution's high academic entry standards (McCaig and Adnett 2009; Graham 2013; McCaig 2015; Rainford 2017). Applicants from less advantaged backgrounds would sometimes be prioritised for standard offers, but there was widespread reluctance to reduce academic entry requirements (Barham 2011; Jones et al. 2018; Boliver et al. 2018; Sosu et al. 2018; O'Sullivan et al. 2019), except where this was necessary to meet student number and associated financial targets for courses where student demand was low (Greenbank 2006a, 2006b) or a significant number of standard offer holders ultimately failed to achieve the stipulated grades (Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2021; Boliver and Powell 2023).

Three major objections to contextualised admissions emerge from the research literature covering the 2000s and 2010s. First, lowering entry requirements for disadvantaged students was frequently regarded as a risk to the institution's status as a 'leading' university as evidenced by its highly competitive academic entry criteria (Cleland et al. 2014; McCaig 2015). Second were concerns about unfairly penalising higher achieving students from more advantaged backgrounds (Adnett et al. 2011; Jones et al. 2018), with a Russell Group report on the widening access efforts of its member institutions cautioning that the '[r]outine use of differential offers raises serious questions about fairness' (Russell Group 2015, 23). Third, there were concerns that reducing entry requirements for disadvantaged students would ultimately set contextually admitted students up to fail at university (Cleland et al. 2014; Boliver and Powell 2023). Indeed, even in institutions where reduced entry requirements and alternative admission routes had been developed, these were often met with internal critique about the declining 'quality' of students (Burke 2013), with some university staff advancing a deficit model of disadvantaged students, characterising them as lacking in aspiration and as intrinsically low-achieving (Butcher et al. 2012). Tellingly, university admissions and teaching staff at more selective institutions often acknowledged that the pedagogical practices and student support services needed to ensure that contextually admitted students fulfilled their potential at university were lacking at their institution, and that there was little appetite for change in this regard (Boliver et al. 2018; Boliver and Powell 2023).

Attitudes towards contextualised admission practices have shifted considerably in the last few years, prompted by their advocacy by the OfS as a means of meeting stretching new widening access targets (Office for Students 2018, 2019). An analysis of the Access and Participation Plans submitted by England's 25 higher-tariff universities to the OfS in response to the new widening access targets found that all had committed to using contextual data to inform admissions decisions, with 19 intending to begin, continue or extend their policy of reducing academic

entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants (Boliver and Powell 2023). Importantly, many institutions acknowledged in these policy documents, often for the first time, that the socio-economic gap in pre-university attainment was rooted in wider structural inequality rather than individual deficit, and that the institution had a role to play in ameliorating this disparity through a combination of contextual offer making and improved academic support for contextually admitted students while at university (*ibid.*).

Perhaps because the vast majority of higher tariff universities have embraced contextual offer making at the same time, concerns about the harm to the institution's reputation as a 'leading' university have been muted. Similarly, the simultaneous shift across much of the sector to a structural inequality rather than individual deficit understanding of the socio-economic gap in prior attainment, and a widening of the definition of applicant merit to include as-yet-unmet potential, has enhanced the legitimacy of contextual offer making as a pillar of a fairer admissions system. Because contextual offer making at scale is a relatively recent development, however, uncertainty remains about the university success rates of contextually admitted students, not least since work to develop student support systems adequate to nurturing potential is ongoing.

Lowering academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants plausibly risks setting such students up to fail since prior academic attainment is the single most powerful predictor of academic performance at degree level. Its impact on the probability of completing a university degree is perhaps more modest than is commonly believed, however, with one study finding that the degree completion rate for students attending higher tariff UK universities was just 8 percentage points lower for those entering with A-levels at grades BCC than for those entering with AAB, at 80% compared to 88% (Boliver et al. 2021). Rates of achieving a first or upper second-class degree, however, were found to be strongly associated with A-level grades on entry, at 46% compared to 75% for higher tariff university students entering with BCC rather than AAB at A-level (*ibid.*).

Early advocates of contextualised admissions pointed to studies which found that attainment at degree level was higher for students educated in state-maintained as opposed to private fee-paying schools after controlling for prior attainment (Hoare and Johnston 2011; Ogg et al. 2009; Kumwenda et al. 2017), and for students with higher prior attainment than the average for the school they had attended (Lasselle et al. 2014; HEFCE 2014; Crawford et al. 2016). The inference drawn from these findings was that academic entry requirements could be reduced by one or two grades without also reducing performance at university for contextually admitted students to levels below those of their non-contextually admitted peers. However, other studies which measured comparative disadvantage at the area level (Croxford et al. 2013; HEFCE 2014) or individual level (Crawford et al. 2016; Harrison 2017), rather than the school level, indicated that disadvantaged students are in fact less likely to succeed at degree level than their more advantaged peers even when comparably qualified at the point of entry. These studies imply that reducing academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants may have the undesired effect of further widening the socioeconomic gap in performance at university.

At present, direct evidence regarding the degree-level achievements of contextually admitted students relative to those admitted via the standard offer is limited. One study drawing on data for highly selective Sutton Trust 30 universities found that rates of degree completion and degree performance overall were just as high at the subset of institutions known to make contextual offers (Boliver et al. 2017). Two other smaller-scale studies focused on a single degree programme found that those admitted two grades under the standard academic entry requirements for the course achieved on a par with non-contextually admitted students (Rowbottom 2017) and that those entering with grades as low as BBC at A-level graduated at a high rate (Curtis et al. 2014). Internationally, large-scale quantitative studies of contextualised admissions policies in Chile (Tincani et al. 2023) and the state of Texas in the USA (Black et al. 2023) have found that these were associated with increases in both enrolment and graduation rates for socio-economically disadvantaged students. The findings of these studies are encouraging, but more research evidence is needed for the UK case.

3 | Data and Methods

In light of the foregoing, this paper sets out to add to the evidence base regarding the scope for contextual offer making to widen participation without compromising contextually admitted students' chances of succeeding at university, drawing on data for one highly selective university in England. The data analysed in this paper was provided by Durham University, a collegiate university founded in 1832 and located in the North East of England. Durham University is a highly prestigious institution, ranking 89th globally in the 2025 QS World University rankings and 7th out of 130 universities nationally according to the 2025 Complete University Guide. The University is also one of the most academically selective higher education institutions in the United Kingdom with standard academic entry requirements for undergraduate courses ranging from AAB to A*A*A at A-level. The University continues to have one of the most socially elite student intakes nationally, with more than one third of its undergraduate students drawn from private fee-paying schools and more than three quarters from families where at least one parent is university educated, compared to figures of 9% and 57%, respectively, for the UK university sector as a whole (HESA 2024). On the OfS's favoured widening participation metric—the ratio of entrants from POLAR quintile 5 to POLAR quintile 1 areas—the figure for Durham University in 2017 was 10:1, the ninth highest ratio across England's 25 most academically selective universities (Boliver and Powell 2023). In its Access and Participation Plan for 2020/2021 to 2024/2025, however, the University committed to reducing this ratio to 3:1 by the end of that period—a more ambitious target than any other highly selective English university—and highlighted contextual offer making as key to realising this ambition (ibid.).

Durham University has been making contextual offers for many years, but until recently only to a relatively small number of applicants whose successful completion of the Sutton Trust Summer School programme or the university's bespoke Supported Progression widening access scheme earned them a reduction in the standard entry requirement of up to three grades. Contextual offers for those who had not participated in

a widening access scheme were introduced in some academic departments in 2017 and across all academic departments in 2018, initially entailing a one-grade reduction to the standard academic entry requirement and subsequently a two grade reduction conditional on 'firmly' accepting an offer in 2019 and regardless of offer acceptance type since 2020. Currently, to be eligible for a contextual offer, applicants must meet at least two of six criteria: A home address in an area of low participation in higher education (POLAR quintiles 1 and 2) or of high disadvantage (ACORN categories 4 and 5), attended a UK state-maintained school, in receipt of free school meals, care experienced or an estranged student.

The dataset on which the empirical component of this paper is based comprises anonymised administrative records for 11,392 'home' students who entered Durham University as first-year undergraduates in 2018, 2019 or 2020. The dataset was made available to the authors by the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office and the Student Registry as part of a programme of internal data analysis designed to inform the university's widening participation and student support strategies. Ethical approval to analyse the data and report the findings publicly was granted by the Sociology Department at Durham University.

Just over one fifth of students in the dataset ($N=2411$, 21.2%) had received a contextual offer entailing a reduction in academic entry requirements, typically in the order of 1–2 grades. Among these contextual offer recipients, most were direct applicants who received a general contextual offer (abbreviated as GCO: $N=2012$, 17.7%) while a much smaller number had completed a widening participation scheme, either the Sutton Trust Summer School programme or Durham University's own Supported Progression scheme (WPCO: $N=399$, 3.5%). Among the majority of entrants who received a standard offer, it is also possible to distinguish in the dataset between those who achieved the standard offer (SO: $N=7643$, 67.1%) and those who did not meet the conditions of their standard offer but were admitted nevertheless as 'near misses' (NM: $N=1338$, 11.7%).

Three of the six indicators used by the University to determine eligibility for a contextual offer are included as variables in the dataset, namely POLAR4 quintile 1 or 2 home postcode, an ACORN 4 or 5 home postcode, and attended a UK state school. The dataset also includes a further measure of disadvantage not used at Durham University for the purposes of contextual offer making, IMD quintile, together with information about students' sex, ethnicity, year of entry and chosen degree programme.¹ For the subset of entrants with A-level qualifications, it was possible to create two further variables which capture the extent to which students' predicted grades and achieved grades at A-level diverged from the standard offer for their degree programme.²

To answer our first research question—to *what extent has contextual offer making succeeded in its aim of widening access to undergraduate programmes at Durham University?*—descriptive statistics are used to compare WPCO, GCO, NM and SO entrants with respect to their distribution across different POLAR quintiles, ACORN categories, IMD quintiles and school types. We also chart how the distribution of these four measures of socio-economic background changed across the entire entering cohort as contextual offer making rates increased between 2018

TABLE 1 | Socio-economic backgrounds of contextual offer and standard offer entrants (column %, $N = 11,392$).

	General contextual offer entrant (GCO)	Widening participation scheme contextual offer entrant (WPCO)	Standard offer near-miss entrant (NM)	Standard offer entrant (SO)
<i>POLAR quintiles</i>				
Q5 (highest HE participation areas)	8.1	11.5	46.7	57.3
Q4	10.7	16.0	25.7	23.3
Q3	13.7	18.0	16.4	12.4
Q2	34.0	28.1	8.5	4.7
Q1 (lowest HE participation areas)	32.9	25.1	0.9	1.0
Not known	0.7	1.3	1.8	1.3
<i>ACORN category</i>				
1 (least disadvantaged areas)	11.6	24.8	59.7	65.8
2	3.4	4.9	11.8	11.9
3	23.6	29.8	23.1	17.6
4	37.0	23.8	2.5	2.5
5 (most disadvantaged areas)	23.6	16.0	1.8	1.2
Not known	0.8	0.8	1.2	1.0
<i>School type</i>				
Private	1.6	0.3	25.1	45.9
State	92.8	98.5	69.0	47.2
Not known	5.6	1.3	5.9	7.0
<i>IMD quintile</i>				
Q5 (least disadvantaged areas)	8.2	14.0	40.2	45.7
Q4	15.1	19.5	28.3	28.2
Q3	21.9	17.5	19.2	16.8
Q2	28.3	24.3	8.7	6.5
Q1 (most disadvantaged areas)	25.0	23.1	2.5	1.7
Not known	1.6	1.5	1.2	1.2

and 2020. For the subset of students with A-level qualifications, descriptive statistics are also used to assess the extent to which WPCO and GCO entrants needed contextual offers to be eligible for an initial offer of a place at the University (i.e., the proportion that had predicted A-level grades lower than the standard offer for their course) and/or to enable their initial offer of a place to be confirmed following the August release of exam results (i.e., the proportion that achieved grades at A-level that were lower than the standard offer).

To answer our second research question—*How have contextually admitted students fared academically at Durham University,*

relative to their non-contextually admitted peers and in absolute terms?—descriptive statistics are used to compare WPCO, GCO, NM and SO entrants on three academic outcome measures: (1) completion of years 1, 2 and 3 of the programme, defined as achieving a pass mark of 40 or above in the year concerned, conditional on having achieved a pass mark in the preceding year of study; (2) average mark achieved in years 1, 2 and 3 of the programme, conditional on having achieved a pass mark in the preceding year; and (3) final degree classification conditional on having passed year 2.³ Multivariate regression models are then used to explore WPCO, GCO, NM and SO differences in these academic outcomes, controlling for other factors associated with

TABLE 2 | Socio-economic backgrounds of entrants in 2018, 2019 and 2020 (column %, $N = 11,392$).

	2018 entrants	2019 entrants	2020 entrants
<i>Entry route</i>			
General contextual offer (GCO)	12.8	14.5	24.0
Widening participation contextual offer (WPCO)	4.4	3.8	2.6
Standard offer near-miss (NM)	10.9	12.7	11.7
Standard offer (SO)	71.9	69.0	61.7
<i>POLAR quintile</i>			
Q5 (highest HE participation areas)	48.3	45.7	44.3
Q4	21.7	22.3	19.6
Q3	13.2	13.4	13.1
Q2	8.9	9.3	14.1
Q1 (lowest HE participation areas)	6.5	7.5	8.2
Not known	1.4	1.8	0.7
<i>ACORN category</i>			
1 (least disadvantaged areas)	56.6	53.9	52.5
2	10.2	10.4	9.9
3	19.0	20.0	19.7
4	8.0	9.4	10.4
5 (most disadvantaged areas)	5.2	5.2	6.6
Not known	1.0	1.2	0.9
<i>IMD quintile</i>			
Q5 (least disadvantaged areas)	39.2	37.3	36.0
Q4	25.1	26.2	25.5
Q3	17.9	18.3	17.8
Q2	10.6	11.1	11.7
Q1 (most disadvantaged areas)	5.7	6.0	7.8
Not known	1.6	1.0	1.3

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

	2018 entrants	2019 entrants	2020 entrants
<i>School type</i>			
Private	32.1	33.8	36.6
State	60.7	59.4	57.9
Not known	7.2	6.7	5.5

achievement at university, namely sex, ethnicity, year of entry and the degree programme on which students were enrolled. For the subset of students with A-level qualifications, we also examine how academic outcomes for these different groups vary depending on how achieved grades compare to the standard offer for the course.

4 | Findings

4.1 | To What Extent Do Contextual Offers Widen Access?

To assess the extent to which contextual offer making has succeeded in its aim of widening participation at Durham University, Table 1 compares the socio-economic characteristics of students who entered the university via contextual offers with those who entered via a standard offer. As Table 1 shows, students entering Durham University via contextual offers were much more likely than standard offer entrants to be from comparatively disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, the percentage of entrants from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2—indicative of being resident in an area with low rates of young participation in higher education—was much higher among GCO (66.9%) and WPCO (53.2%) entrants than among NM (9.4%) and SO (5.7%) entrants. A similar pattern was evident for the ACORN measure, with the proportion from categories 4 ('financially stretched') and 5 ('urban adversity') being much higher for among GCO (60.6%) and WPCO (39.8%) entrants than among NM (4.3%) and SO (3.7%) entrants. The percentage of entrants from state schools was also substantially higher among GCO (92.8%) and WPCO (98.5%) entrants than among NM (69%) and SO (47.2%) entrants. The proportions from IMD quintiles 1 and 2—a measure of deprivation in the local area, not used at Durham University for contextual offer making purposes—are also much larger among GCO (53.3%) and WPCO (47.4%) entrants than among NM (11.2%) and SO (8.2%) entrants.

Table 2 examines the impact of the increase in contextual offer making over time on the social composition of entrants to the University. As the first panel of Table 2 shows, the proportion of entrants in receipt of contextual offers increased between 2018 and 2020, from 17.2% to 26.6%, driven by the growing use of general contextual offers. Over the same period, the percentage of entrants from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 increased from 15.4% to 22.3%. The ratio of entrants from POLAR quintile 5 as compared to POLAR quintile 1 also declined over this period, from 7.4:1 to 5.4:1, indicating that the University had made good progress towards its target of a 3:1 ratio by 2024/2025.

TABLE 3 | Predicted and actual A-level grades of contextual offer and standard offer entrants relative to the standard offer for their chosen course (column %).

	General contextual offer entrant (GCO)	Widening participation scheme contextual offer entrant (WPCO)	Standard offer near-miss entrant (NM)	Standard offer entrant (SO)
Predicted A-level grades relative to standard offer (<i>N</i> = 7466)				
2+ grades higher	24.8	17.0	23.8	51.9
1 grade higher	32.5	23.8	35.1	34.8
Equal to std offer	30.0	28.2	27.8	12.1
1 grade lower	9.9	22.9	11.4	1.1
2+ grades lower	2.8	8.0	1.9	0.1
Achieved A-level grades relative to standard offer (<i>N</i> = 8783)				
2+ grades higher	13.7	8.8	0.0	31.9
1 grade higher	20.5	14.4	0.0	37.8
Equal to std offer	21.1	17.7	0.0	30.4
1 grade lower	26.4	30.7	76.0	0.0
2+ grades lower	18.3	28.4	24.0	0.0

TABLE 4 | Percentages of students achieving a pass mark (40+) in years 1, 2 and 3 of their programmes, conditional on achieving a pass mark in the preceding year, by entry route.

	General contextual offer entrant (GCO)	Widening participation scheme contextual offer entrant (WPCO)	Standard offer near- miss entrant (NM)	Standard offer entrant (SO)
Year 1	93.2*	96.2	96.4	96.4
Year 2	92.2*	95.3	96.7	97.0
Year 3	89.6	90.7	92.3	91.3

Note: Statistically significant differences relative to standard offer entrants are indicated by “*”.

TABLE 5 | Mean marks achieved in years 1, 2 and 3 of study, conditional on achieving a pass mark in the preceding year, by entry route.

	General contextual offer entrant (GCO)	Widening participation scheme contextual offer entrant (WPCO)	Standard offer near- miss entrant (NM)	Standard offer entrant (SO)
Year 1	60.3*	62.3*	62.4*	64.8
Year 2	59.7*	62.7*	62.5*	65.8
Year 3	59.0*	61.0	61.2*	63.0

Note: Statistically significant differences relative to standard offer entrants are indicated by “*”.

The percentage of entrants from ACORN categories 4 and 5 also increased, from 13.2% to 17.0%, as did the percentage from IMD quintiles 1 and 2, from 16.3% to 19.5%. These increases are more modest than that for POLAR quintiles 1 and 2, which is perhaps not surprising given that POLAR is the principal measure on which the OfS assesses widening access efforts, and IMD is not a metric used by Durham University to determine eligibility for a contextual offer. Although state school attendance is one of Durham University's contextual offer eligibility criteria, the percentage of entrants from state schools in fact declined slightly between 2018 and 2020, from 60.7% to 57.9%. This too serves

as a reminder that progress on favoured metrics may result in no progress or even a sliding back on other metrics that are not prioritised but are equally, if not more, important.

Table 3 turns to consider the extent to which contextual offers were *needed* by those students who received them, in order to be eligible for an initial offer, and/or to have their initial offer confirmed. The analysis here is necessarily restricted to the subsets of entrants for whom the dataset contained information about predicted A-level grades (65.5% of all cases) and achieved A-level grades (77.1%), which are compared to the standard offer for the

TABLE 6 | Final degree classification at the end of 3 years of study, conditional on having achieved a pass mark in year 2 of study.

	General contextual offer entrant (GCO)	Widening participation scheme contextual offer entrant (WPCO)	Standard offer near-miss entrant (NM)	Standard offer entrant (SO)
1st	28.8*	34.2*	31.6*	51.3
2:i	54.4*	55.8*	57.5*	42.4
2:ii	9.5*	5.9*	5.9*	2.7
Other	7.3*	4.1*	5.0*	3.6

Note: Statistically significant differences relative to standard offer entrants are indicated by “*”.

TABLE 7 | Regression analysis of student outcomes before (Model 1) and after (Model 2) controlling for students sex and ethnicity, year of entry and degree programme.

	General contextual offer entrant (GCO)	Widening participation scheme contextual offer entrant (WPCO)	Standard offer near-miss entrant (NM)	Standard offer entrant (SO)
<i>Year 1 pass rate</i>				
Model 1	93.2*	96.2	96.4	96.4
Model 2	93.0*	95.9	95.9	96.2
<i>Year 2 pass rate</i>				
Model 1	92.2*	95.3	96.7	97.0
Model 2	92.3*	94.6	96.6	96.6
<i>Year 3 pass rate</i>				
Model 1	89.6	90.7	92.3	91.3
Model 2	90.1	90.3	89.7	91.2
<i>Year 1 mark</i>				
Model 1	60.3*	62.3*	62.4*	64.8
Model 2	60.2*	62.6*	62.1*	64.9
<i>Year 2 mark</i>				
Model 1	59.7*	62.7*	62.5*	65.8
Model 2	60.1*	62.6*	62.8*	65.7
<i>Year 3 mark</i>				
Model 1	59.0*	61.0	61.2*	63.0
Model 2	59.8*	60.9	59.9*	63.1
<i>First-class degree</i>				
Model 1	28.8*	34.2*	31.6*	51.3
Model 2	29.2*	35.3*	32.7*	51.3
<i>First- or upper second-class degree</i>				
Model 1	83.2*	90.0*	89.1*	93.7
Model 2	85.2*	89.0*	88.2*	93.5

Note: Statistically significant differences relative to standard offer entrants are indicated by “*”.

student's course. As can be seen in Table 3, a sizeable minority of GCO entrants (12.7%) and a substantial proportion of WPCO entrants (30.9%) had been predicted A-level grades that were below the standard offer for their chosen degree programme. Without

the option to make a contextual offer, these entrants might not have been made an initial offer of a place, or, if offered a place subject to standard entry requirements, might have been unwilling to accept it. Very substantial proportions of GCO (44.7%) and

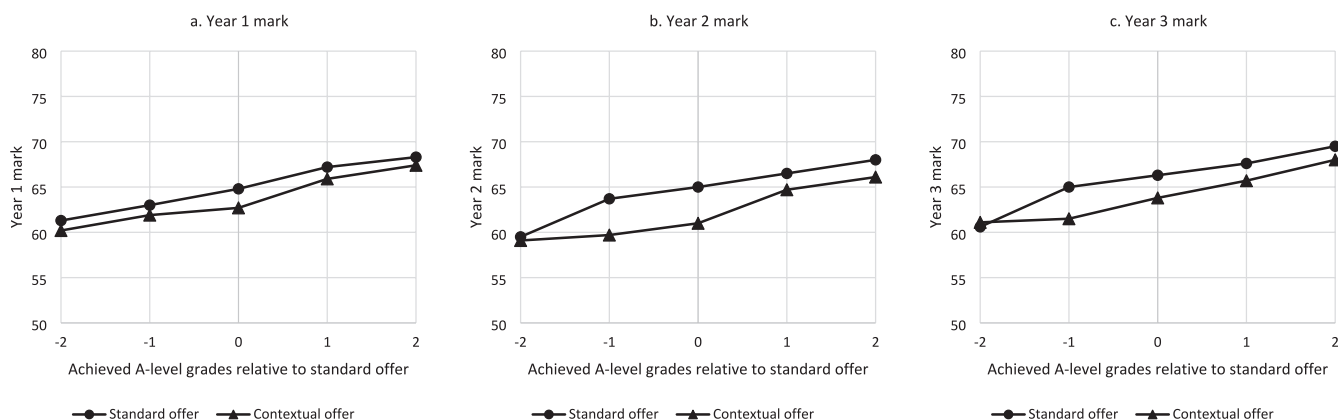


FIGURE 1 | (a–c) Average mark in years 1, 2 and 3 for standard offer and contextual offer entrants, by A-level grades on entry relative to the standard offer.

WPCO (59.1%) entrants ultimately achieved A-level grades that were below the standard offer for their chosen course. Without having received a contextual offer, these entrants may not have had their initial offer of a place at Durham University confirmed following the August release of A-level examination results.

4.2 | How Do Contextually Admitted Students Fare Academically at University?

Table 4 reports descriptive statistics for the rates at which students entering the university via different routes achieved a pass mark of 40 or above in years 1, 2 and 3 of their programmes, conditional on having achieved a pass mark in the preceding year in the cases of years 2 and 3. In year 1, pass rates are universally high for students across all four entrant groups, although they are around three percentage points lower for GCO (93.2%) entrants compared to WPCO (96.2%), NM (96.4%) and SO (96.4%) entrants. Pass rates in year 2, conditional on having passed year 1, remain high for all student groups, although the pass rate gap has widened slightly to nearly 5 percentage points for GCO (92.2%) entrants as compared to SO (97.0%) entrants, whereas pass rates are not statistically significantly different for WPCO (95.3%) and NM (96.7%) entrants than for SO entrants. Year 3 pass rates, conditional on having passed year 2, are slightly lower across all entrant groups than for the first 2 years of study but remain high by sector-wide standards. In year 3, the pass rate gap is small at less than two percentage points for GCO (89.6%) and WPCO (90.7%) entrants as compared to NM (92.3%) and SO (91.3%) entrants.

Table 5 reports the mean marks achieved in each year of the programme, conditional on having passed the preceding year of study so as to exclude from the calculation those presumed not to have embarked on the year of study concerned. In year 1, mean marks are lower by 2.5–4.5 percentage points for GCO (60.3), WPCO (62.3) and NM (62.4) entrants compared to SO (64.8) entrants. In year 2, the gap in mean marks widens slightly to 3.1–6.1 percentage points for GCO (59.7), WPCO (62.7) and NM (62.5) entrants compared to SO (65.8) entrants. In year 3, the gap closes again to 1.8–4 percentage points for GCO (59.0), WPCO (61.0) and NM (61.2) entrants compared to SO (63.0) entrants.

Table 6 reports final degree classifications for those who achieved a pass mark in year 2 of their studies and so can be

presumed to have embarked on year 3. Rates of achieving a first-class degree are substantially lower for GCO (28.8%), WPCO (34.2%) NM (31.6%) entrants compared to SO (51.3%) entrants. The proportions achieving a first-class or an upper-second-class degree are also highest for SO entrants (93.7%); however, the gap is much smaller than for first-class degrees only, and rates are well above 80% for entrants from the GCO (83.2%), WPCO (90%) and NM (89.1%) groups.

Table 7 examines whether the findings in relation to student outcomes presented above are robust to the inclusion of controls for other independent variables. Model 1 replicates the findings previously presented in Tables 4–6, while Model 2 controls for students' sex and ethnic group, year of entry and degree programme. As is evident, the pattern and magnitude of the findings is unchanged by the inclusion of these controls, indicating that the results are not driven by differences between contextually admitted and standard offer entrants with respect to the distributions of these additional variables.

Finally, focusing on A-level entrants, we examine how average marks achieved in years 1, 2 and 3 by contextually admitted and standard offer entrants vary according to how students' A-level grades on entry compared to the standard offer for their programme. Figure 1a–c plot these associations, controlling for students' sex, ethnicity, year of entry and degree programme. Unsurprisingly, there is a positive association between A-level grades relative to the standard offer and marks achieved in all 3 years of study. Also unsurprising, given that the effects of socio-economic disadvantage on academic achievement are likely to persist at university, is that standard offer entrants achieve slightly higher grades than contextually admitted students across all 3 years of study almost irrespective of whether A-level grades on entry were below, equal to or exceeded the standard offer for the course concerned. That said, the magnitude of the gap in average marks is not large, and even those entering with 2 or more A-level grades below the standard offer achieve marks of around 60 on average across each of the 3 years of study.

5 | Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper shows that the socio-economic diversity of the undergraduate population at Durham

University increased with the rolling out of contextual offer making between 2018 and 2020. This 3-year period saw the percentage of entrants with a contextual offer increase from 17.2% to 26.6% with a corresponding improvement in the representation of students from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 from 15.4% to 22.3%, as well as more modest increases in the proportions of entrants from the most disadvantaged ACORN categories and IMD quintiles. Despite contextual offer recipients being more likely than standard offer recipients to be from state rather than private schools, however, state school representation declined slightly at Durham University over the same 3-year period. This latter finding raises questions about the possible unintended negative effects of contextualised admissions practices on comparatively disadvantaged groups which, unlike POLAR quintiles 1 and 2, are not the focus of widening access targets, and may therefore be inadvertently overlooked. Importantly, among those with A-levels, many contextual offer entrants to Durham University needed a reduced offer to secure their place at the university. This was the case both for receipt of an initial offer, since a significant minority had predicted A-level grades that were below the standard offer for their course, and especially for confirmed offers, since around half of all contextual offer recipients did not ultimately achieve A-level grades on a par with the standard offer.

The findings reported in this paper also show that contextually admitted entrants to Durham University do well academically at university in absolute terms, although they do not do as well as their non-contextually admitted peers. Relative to standard offer entrants, contextually admitted students had slightly lower pass rates and slightly lower average marks in years 1, 2 and 3 of their degree programmes. Contextually admitted students were also substantially less likely to graduate with a first class degree overall, and slightly less likely to graduate with at least a 2:1. In absolute terms, however, contextually admitted students performed well at Durham University, with pass rates of 90% or more, and marks of 60 or higher on average, across all 3 years of study. Analysis of A-level qualified entrants also revealed marks of around 60 across all 3 years of study even for those who entered with two or more grades less than the standard offer for their course. Moreover, the rate at which final year contextually admitted students leave the university with at least an upper second-class degree stands at more than 80%. Overall, these findings support the use of contextualised admissions as a tool for widening participation without compromising student achievement at university, and it seems likely that the findings would hold for other highly academically selective UK universities. However, the findings also highlight several areas of policy and practice that require further development.

First, it may be advisable for universities to set widening access targets for a wider range of markers of contextual disadvantage, to ensure that there are no adverse effects of targets for POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 (the OfS's favoured metric) on the representation of other comparatively disadvantaged groups.

Second, even though pass rates across years 1, 2 and 3 are high for contextually admitted students, steps should be taken to close the gap relative to standard offer entrants. To date, there has been little research into the reasons for drop out among contextually admitted students, but factors are likely to include

greater difficulties with university-level academic work due to comparative under-preparedness; more severe financial struggles, especially in the face of rising living costs; and feelings of non-belonging at institutions which continue to be dominated numerically and culturally by socioeconomically advantaged students. Longitudinal research with contextually admitted students, encompassing both those who persist in their studies and those who drop out, could help to identify key issues and provide insights into when and how university support systems might best intervene to prevent drop out.

Third, while contextually admitted students achieve good marks on average across all 3 years of study and have high rates of graduating with at least an upper second class degree, more research is needed to understand where the gap in marks relative to standard offer students is most and least pronounced, and pedagogical initiatives are needed to help close the gaps where these appear. In terms of research, analysis of more detailed data containing marks for individual modules, in addition to mean marks achieved across the entire academic year, might identify particular modules with smaller and larger mark gaps. Those with larger mark gaps could then be prioritised for improvements to academic support for students, with those with smaller gaps possibly yielding insights into what works for contextually admitted students including in relation to inclusive teaching, learning and assessment practices.

A fourth overarching recommendation is that universities could make more use of the student demographic data they collect at the point of admission to pro-actively track contextually admitted students' academic performances at regular intervals through their university careers. For example, universities could identify contextually admitted students who received low marks in their first wave of assessments and engage with them in a timely manner to identify and put in place the additional support needed to get back on track.

Overall, the rolling out of contextualised admissions at Durham University appears to have been a success. Given Durham University's status as a highly selective university with a traditionally socially elite intake, the good absolute levels of performance of contextually admitted students at this institution suggest that a similarly positive picture is possible at other higher tariff institutions.

Author Contributions

Vikki Boliver: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft. **Karen Jones:** data curation, formal analysis, writing – review and editing, conceptualization.

Disclosure

The data analysed in this paper are not publicly available. The authors are employed by the organisation which owns and provided access to the data analysed in this paper.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Sociology Department at Durham University.

Conflicts of Interest

A potential conflicts of interest in this regard was mitigated by agreement in advance that the researchers would be free to analyse the data and write up the results for publication without oversight or influence from the organisation.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

¹ Ethnicity distinguishes six categories (White, Black, Asian, Mixed ethnicity, other ethnicity and ethnicity not known) and degree programme distinguishes 137 categories.

² This calculation followed the University's policy of not allowing higher A-level grades to compensate for lower ones. For example, for a course with a standard offer of AAA, a student with grades of AAB and a student with grades of A*AB would both be counted as having one grade less than the standard offer.

³ All analyses relating to year 3 are restricted to the cohorts entering in 2018 and 2019 due to incomplete data for the 2020 entering cohort.

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