



Promoting fairer access to higher education: the value of contextualised admissions

Vikki Boliver*
Professor of Sociology
Durham University

9th May 2019

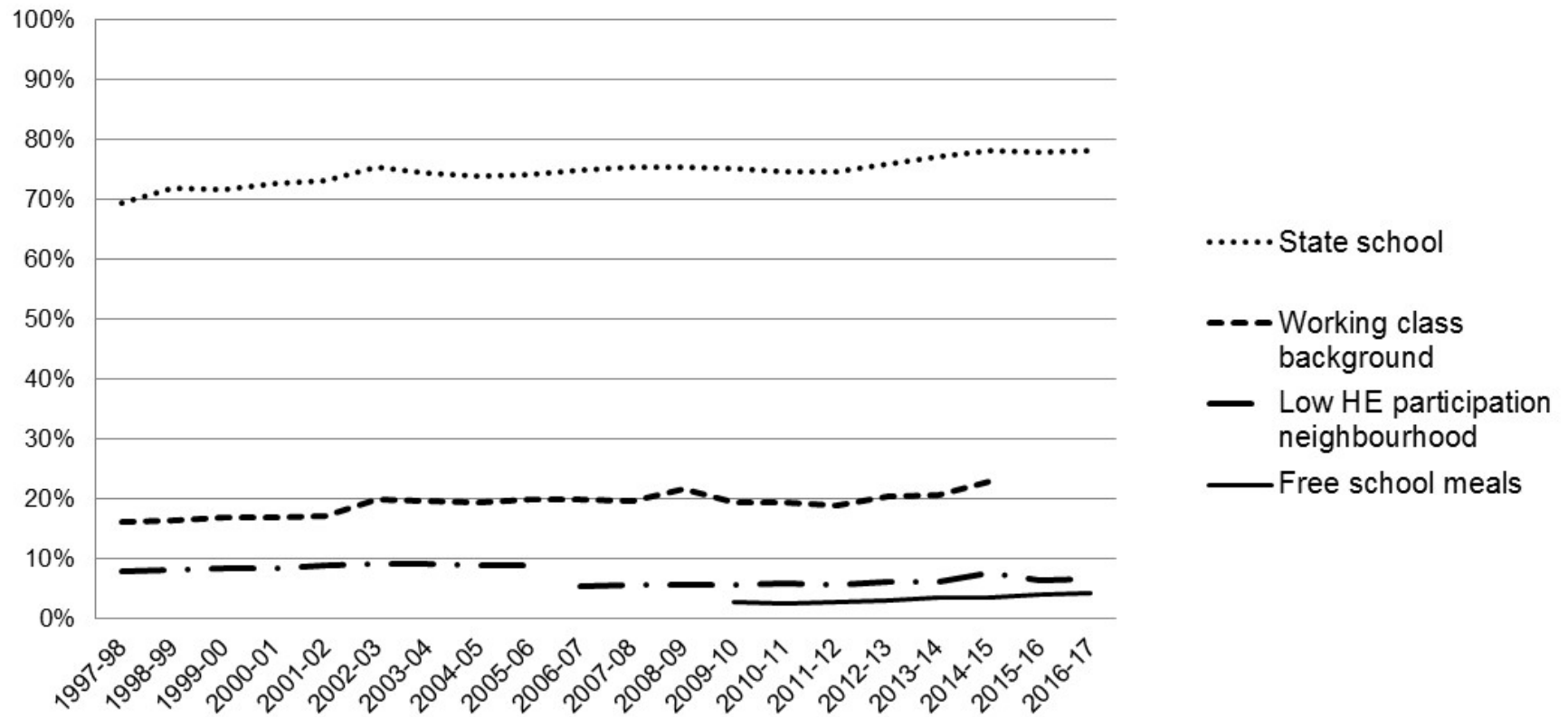
Centre for Global Higher Education Seminar 107
UCL Institute of Education

*Collaborators: Stephen Gorard, Nadia Siddiqui, Mandy Powell & Tiago Moreira



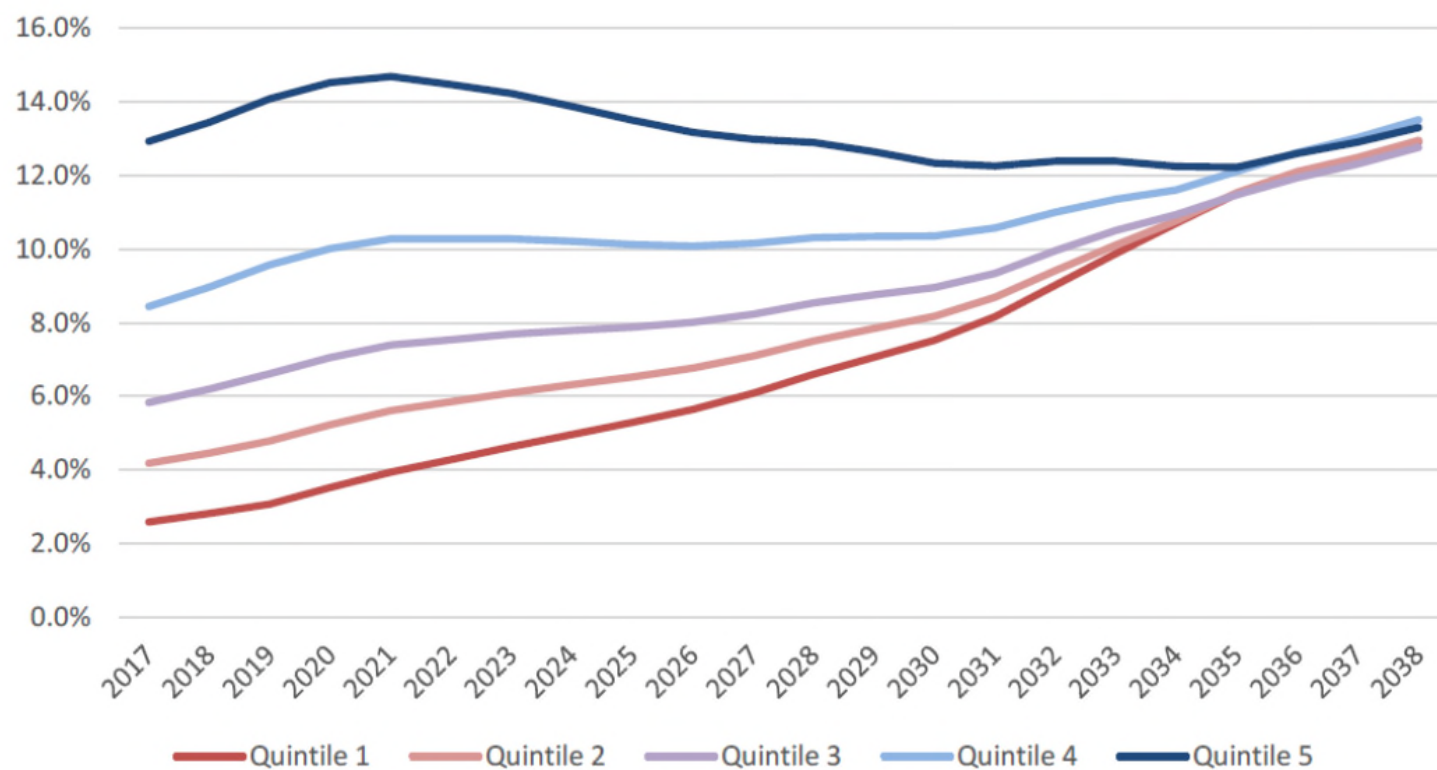
Slow progress on widening access

Young full-time entrants to Russell Group universities, 1997/98 to 2016/17



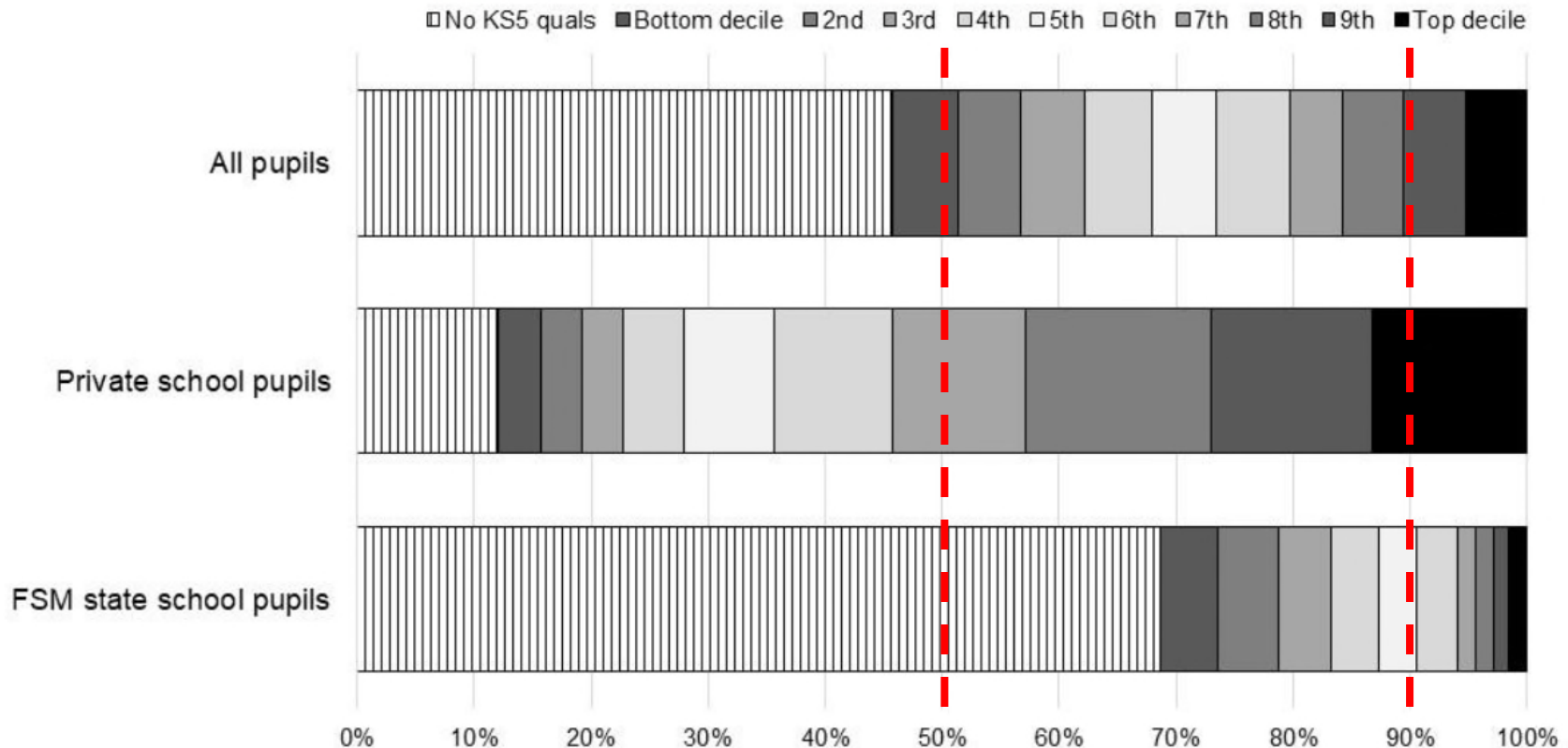
Ambitious new widening access targets

Figure 1. Projected rates of entry to higher-tariff providers in England for UK-domiciled 18 and 19 year olds from areas with the highest (quintile 5) and lowest (quintile 1) rates of young participation in higher education²



The need to contextualise attainment

Figure 2. Distribution of key stage 5 (A-level and equivalent) achievement for pupils from socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds⁶



Rethinking fairness

Claims to fairness made in relation to the traditional model of admissions:

- **Formal equality of opportunity** – anyone can compete freely for a place
- **Selection on merit** – places go to the most highly qualified, deemed the most deserving & the best placed to benefit
- **Procedural justice** – everyone assessed against the same criteria in the same way



Rethinking fairness

Fairness claims of contextualised approaches to admission:

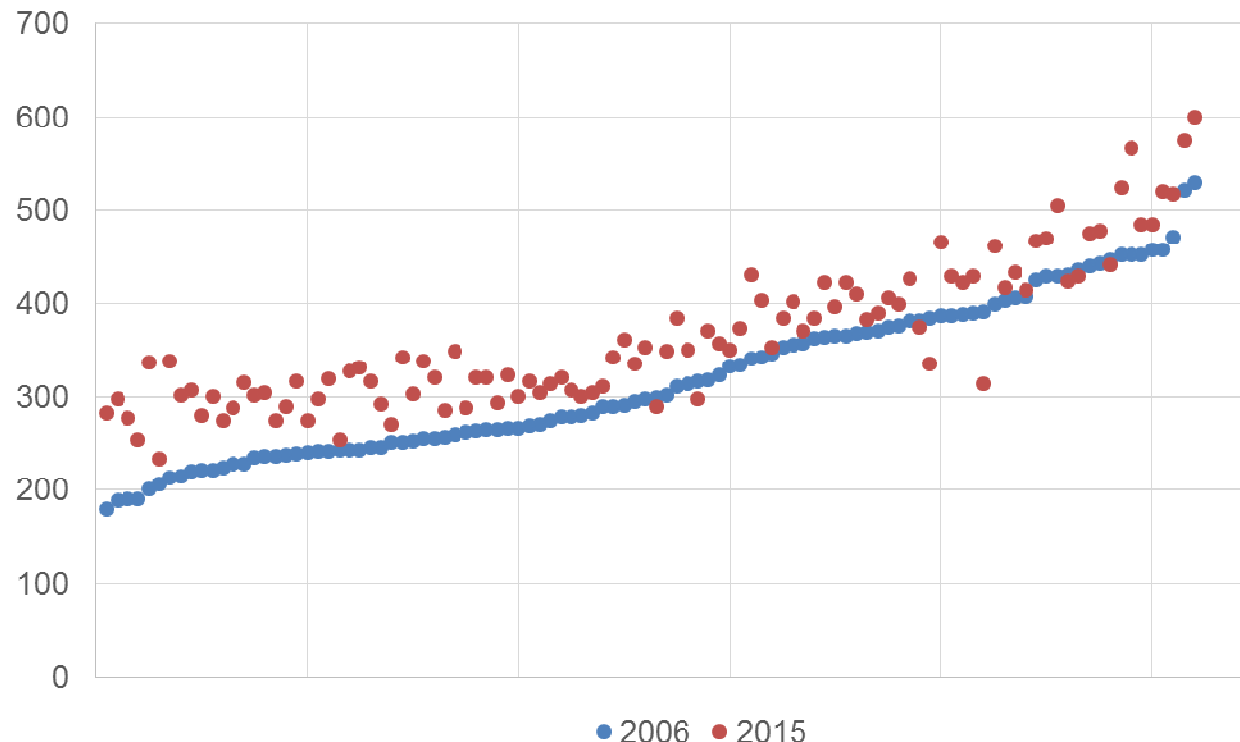
- **Fair equality of opportunity** – recognizes and addresses the lack of a level playing field
- **Selection on potential** or ‘calibrated merit’ – places go to those who have performed exceptionally well *considering their circumstances*
- **Distributive justice** – differential treatment to ensure equitable outcomes



What do you need to succeed?

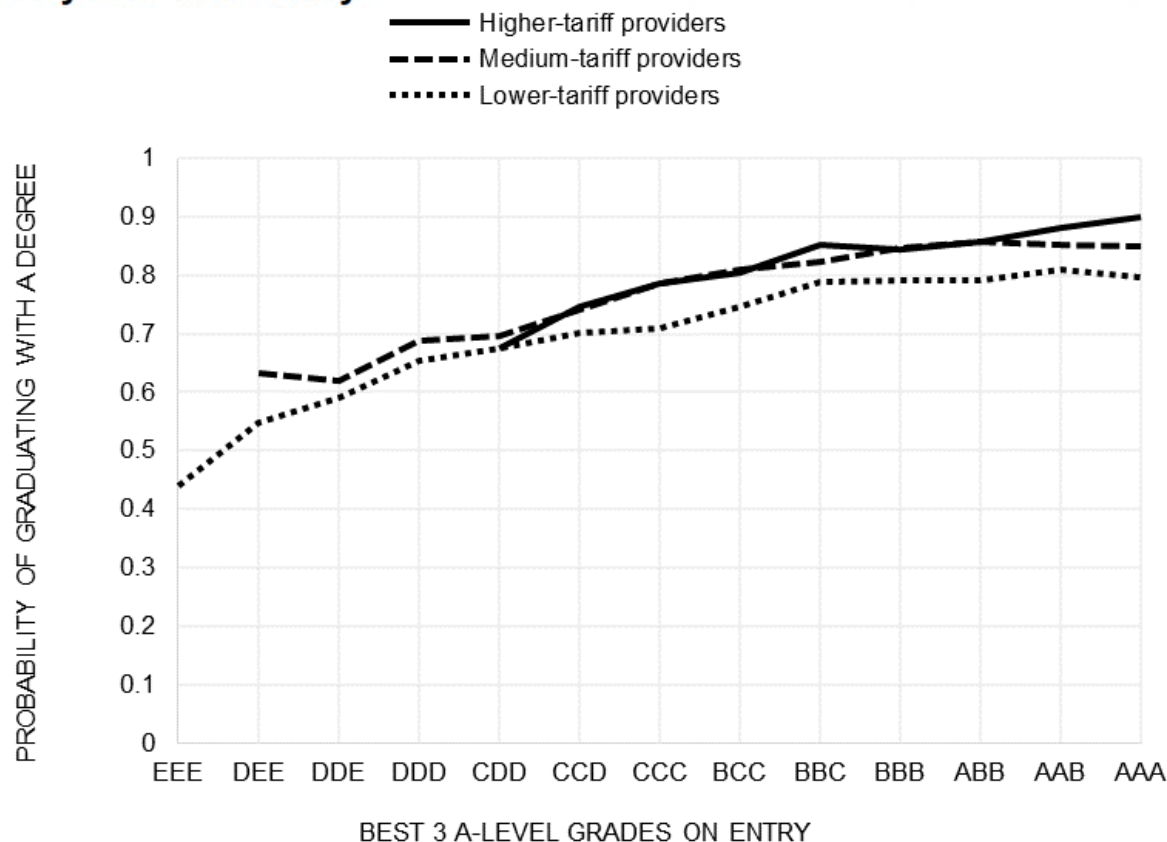
“...many institutions now routinely ask for **substantially higher grades than the level of attainment than is necessary** to successfully complete degree programmes” (CoWA 2016)

Average UCAS points of university entrants in 2006 and 2015



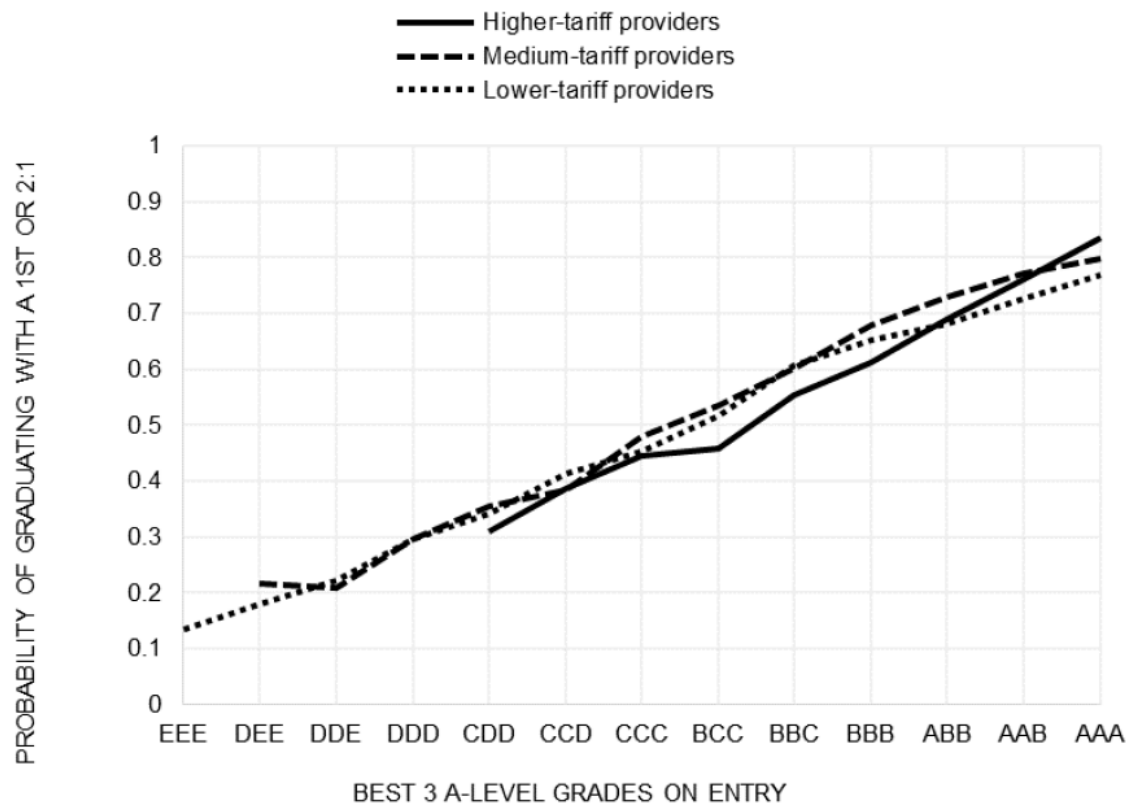
Degree success does not depend strongly on grades on entry

Figure 3. Statistical relationship between best three A-level grades on entry to higher education and probability of graduating with a bachelor's degree rather than non-completion, three years after entry⁸



Stronger link between grades on entry and degree classification...

Figure 4. Statistical relationship between best three A-level grades on entry to higher education and probability of graduating with a first or upper-second class bachelor's degree rather than a lower degree classification or non-completion, three years after entry⁹



Supporting disadvantaged students to succeed in HE



Learning support to bridge gaps in subject knowledge and build academic skills via

- Pre-entry summer schools
- Foundation years
- Supported first years

(Boliver et al 2017 Admissions in Context)

Financial support to enable full-time focus on study

(Hordósy and Clark 2018 Student budgets and widening participation; Harrison et al 2018 Access, participation and capabilities)

Supporting disadvantaged students to succeed in HE

Narrow equation of 'excellence' with academic selectivity and research-intensiveness can be a barrier to supporting disadvantaged learners

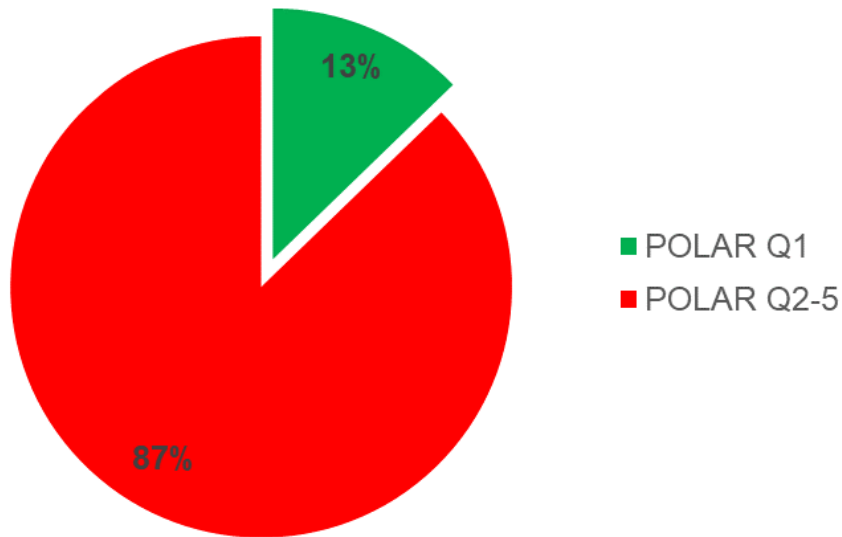
- Widening access largely restricted to the **'heroic disadvantaged'** who have succeeded academically at school against the odds
- Only really willing to 'teach' those who can be expected to **succeed at university under their own steam**

“those who have come through adversity of some core kind and still perform to the level that we want”

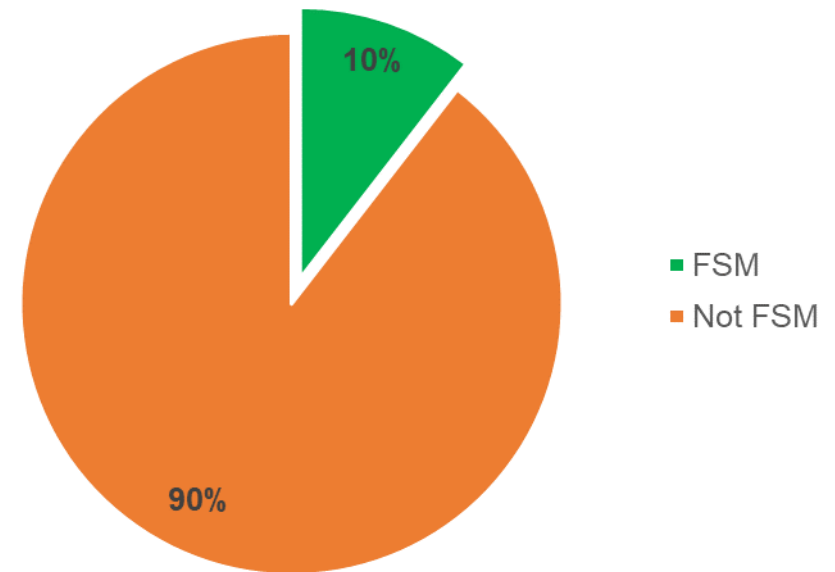
“what university admissions have to be very careful about is that we do not take students in who might perform slightly less well in our institution because of our methods who could have performed exceptionally well in another university”

Must use individual-level indicators of contextual disadvantage

Percentage of free school meal recipients entering HE who were from POLAR quintile 1 areas



Percentage of POLAR quintile 1 residents entering HE who received free school meals



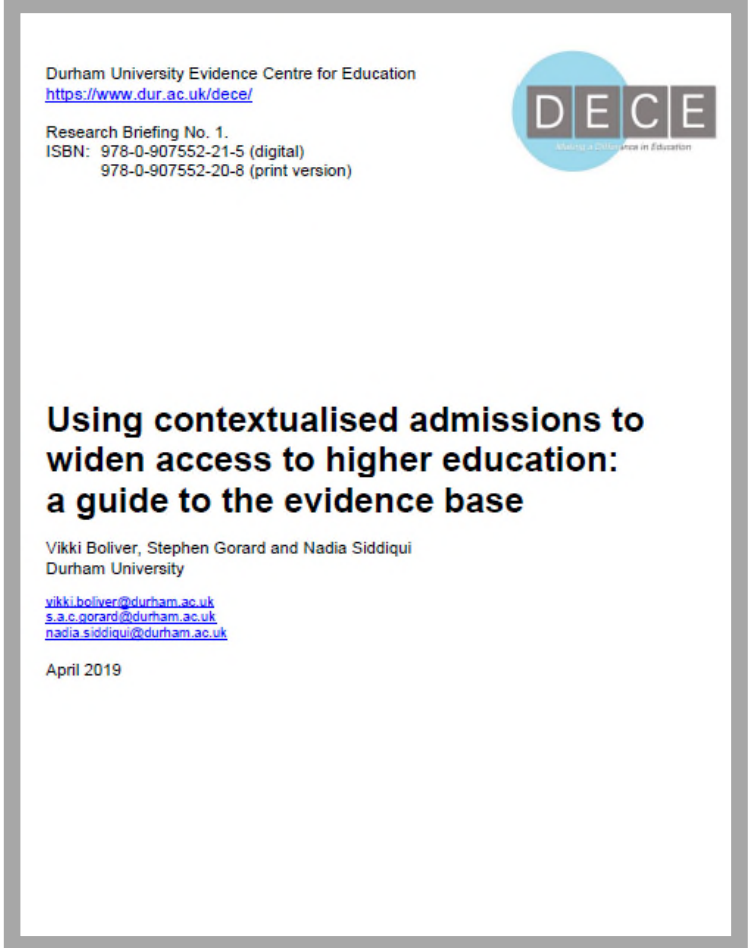
Take-home messages

Untenable to claim it is fair to require the same high grades of all, irrespective of socioeconomic circumstances

Entry requirements can be substantially reduced for contextually disadvantaged students, without setting them up to fail

Universities can and should play a role in bridging gaps in knowledge and skills

Individual-level indicators of contextual disadvantage are needed if we are to be confident of reaching the intended beneficiaries



Durham University Evidence Centre for Education
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/dece/>

Research Briefing No. 1.
ISBN: 978-0-907552-21-5 (digital)
978-0-907552-20-8 (print version)

Using contextualised admissions to widen access to higher education: a guide to the evidence base

Vikki Boliver, Stephen Gorard and Nadia Siddiqui
Durham University

vikki.boliver@durham.ac.uk
s.a.c.gorard@durham.ac.uk
nadia.siddiqui@durham.ac.uk

April 2019



Promoting fairer access to higher education: the value of contextualised admissions

Vikki Boliver*
Professor of Sociology
Durham University

9th May 2019

Centre for Global Higher Education Seminar 107
UCL Institute of Education

*Collaborators: Stephen Gorard, Nadia Siddiqui, Mandy Powell & Tiago Moreira