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# Rethinking merit

in pursuit of fairer admission to universities in England

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Centre for Global Higher Education webinar 179  
14<sup>th</sup> January 2021



Office for Students has set challenging new widening access targets for higher-tariff universities...



...and is calling on universities to “rethink merit”

## Contextual admissions

### Promoting fairness and rethinking merit

#### Introduction

This Insight brief is concerned with students' access to higher

In parts of the sector, good progress has been made in recruiting disadvantaged

The Office for Students is challenging universities and colleges to be ambitious and innovative in reducing persistent inequalities in access and participation.

# The traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity model of fair access



Stratification system based on **individual achievement rather than social ascription** (Parsons 1970, Treiman 1970, Bell 1973)

Meritocratic systems seen to be:

- **more efficient**
- **more socially just**

University places go to the **most highly qualified irrespective of social background**

Merit assessed in accordance with the principles of **procedural fairness** interpreted as equal treatment

# An alternative meritocratic **equity** of opportunity model of fair access



**Untenable assumption** that all individuals enjoy equality of opportunity to demonstrate 'merit'

Fairness requires **equity of opportunity** in pursuit of **distributive fairness**

Indicators of merit need to be **assessed contextually**, in light of applicants' socioeconomic circumstances

Universities have an important role to play in **developing as-yet-unrealised potential**

# What do universities mean by “fair admission”?

## In-depth interviews with admissions staff in 2017/18

- 17 HEIs (11 ‘Old’, 6 ‘New’) throughout England, offering courses with high entry requirements and a high demand for places
- 19 interviews with Heads of Admission
- 51 interviews with Admission Selectors

## Access & Participation Plans for 2020/21 to 2024/25

- 25 HEIs identified as higher-tariff providers by the Sutton Trust
- Including 11 of the HEIs included in our interview sample
- Provides a picture of HEIs’ first responses to the call to ‘rethink merit’

# Interviews with admissions staff in 2017/18

## Traditional meritocratic model of admissions...

Goal of admissions is to admit “the best students” ...

*I think the ultimate goal is to ensure that [this HEI] has got a high calibre of students. (H6, Old HEI)*

*I think ethically we've got to recruit individuals who can succeed. (H10, Old HEI)*

...defined as those most likely to succeed on the degree programme...

... evidenced first and foremost by prior attainment

*We are looking for people that we think will succeed on our course, progress. And the single best predictor of that is A Level grades. (S38, Science, Old HEI)*

# Interviews with admissions staff in 2017/18

...heavy reliance on prior and predicted attainment...

High-attaining applicants are typically the first to receive offers

*...somebody who's predicted three A's, the course is an A and two Bs as their standard or typical offer. Everything looks absolutely spot-on, there is no ambiguity whatsoever within the application form, offer done. It's a quick turnaround on that. (H7, Old HEI)*

*So we look at the top eight GCSEs and then it's a sliding scale, so depending on the grades that they've achieved. They'd get a higher score if they've got more A\*s or A grades compared to somebody who's maybe got mainly B or C grades. (S13, Arts, Old HEI)*

Informal use of GCSE performance to assess applicant merit

# Interviews with admissions staff in 2017/18

## ...despite unreliability of predicted grades

Awareness that A-level grades are often over-predicted...

*So at confirmation we're normally trying to recruit to a certain target number [...] That means that in some years [...] we've confirmed down to A\*AA and then no further. [...] And then there are other years where the university where we might be struggling for applicants say the last year where we've actually confirmed down to ABB.  
(S35, Science, Old HEI)*

*...there is a certain practice in the sector now in schools, where they are actually, over-predicting to try and get the students an unconditional offer or at least get them an offer to then hope that, although they will not actually achieve the offer...they will still be accepted as a near miss.  
(H2, Old HEI)*

...resulting in some offer-holders ultimately being admitted despite not achieving the advertised grades



# Interviews with admissions staff in 2017/18

Meritocratic selection also driven by *market forces*

High entry requirements  
used to manage demand

Yes, so putting it higher gives us the flexibility I think to manage or control the numbers.  
(S35, Science, Old HEI)

So, in terms of how we go about setting our offers. That is, to some extent, market-driven. And that's an important thing to have in your mind. What sort of offers are your competitors making?  
(S41, Science, Old HEI)

and to maintain or improve market position

Yes, I do know why [our entry tariff is set so high]. Because it's targets the university has. Isn't it? Apparently, you're higher up in the league tables, the higher your entry criteria. So, that's sad. But it's the truth.  
(S9, Science, New HEI)

# Interviews with admissions staff in 2017/18

## Emphasis on *procedural fairness*

Concerned to ensure transparency...

I think it's looking at, if you are recruiting to a specific subject or to a suite of courses, it's making sure that the applicants are treated consistently and equally.  
(H18, New HEI)

If we do it, we put it online. We put it out in the open. [...] If there is some reason your application should be rejected, you should be able to find out that could be a reason before you apply. And if we don't want to do that then we need to ask ourselves why we are unhappy using that criterion in the first place.  
(H9, Old HEI)

...and consistency

# Interviews with admissions staff in 2017/18

Sympathetic to *distributive fairness*...

Recognition that prior achievement needs to be contextualised

Students with seven A\*s, and one of them comes from a school where the average is 13, it's a different story to somebody where the average is two. Or zero. (H15, Old HEI)

For me it's about being upfront about...what our selection criteria...and actually applying them fairly and consistently to every applicant. But also, as we are moving towards this differential-offer scheme, making sure that applicants that have been at a disadvantage have an opportunity to come to [this university] and benefit from being a student here.

(H19, Old HEI)

All Old HEIs in the sample used contextual data, but only half reduced entry requirements by 1-2 grades

# Interviews with admissions staff in 2017/18

...but ill-equipped to *convert potential into achievement*

*It's not impossible to do. But it would involve, sort of, root and branch upheaval of our curriculum in order to achieve it. [...] It takes an awful lot of work to get there. [...] forces of conservatism would make it very, very difficult actually to achieve that in anything like the medium term, let alone the short term. (S41, Science, Old HEI)*

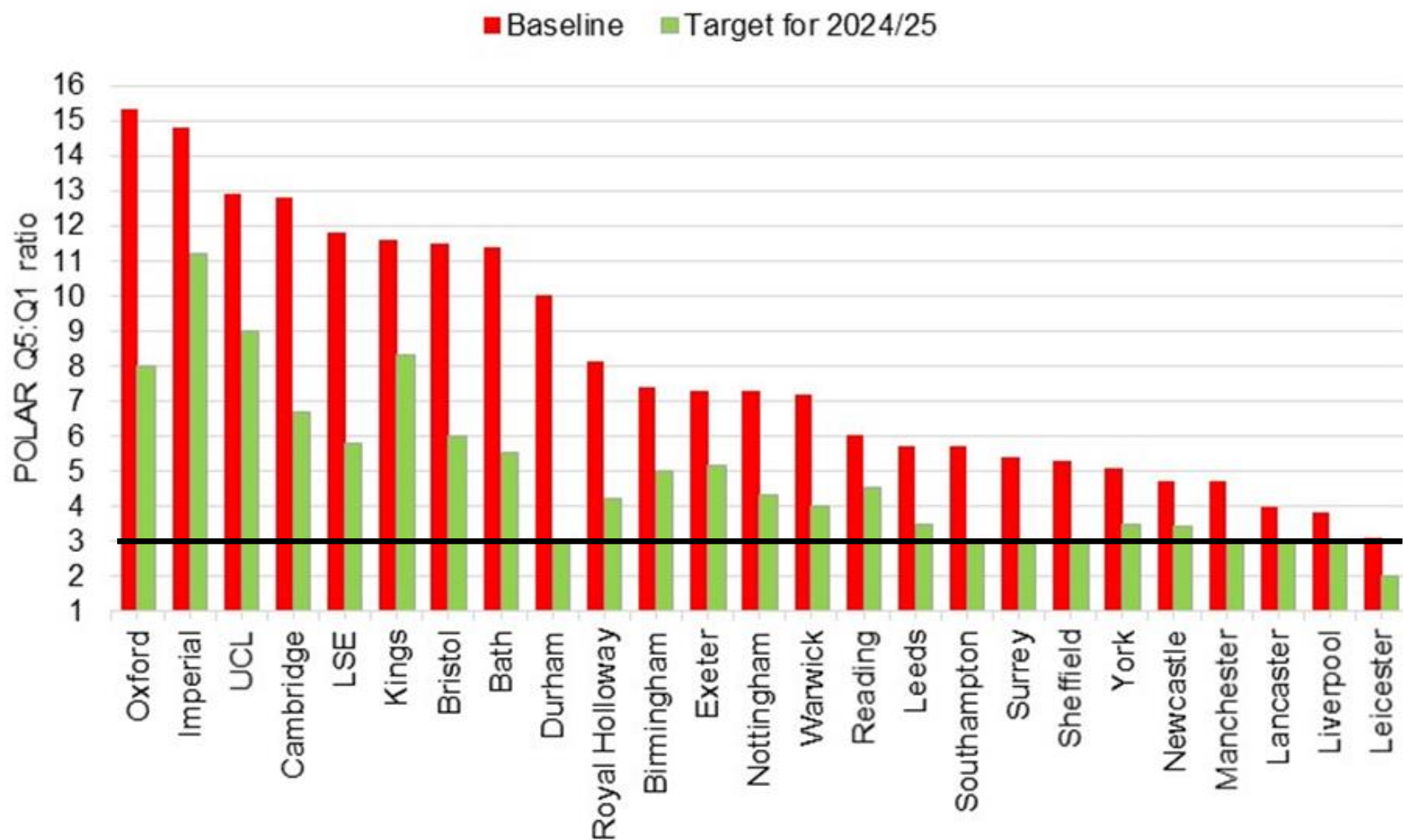
Widespread recognition that HEIs were not geared up to support disadvantaged students to succeed at university

*And then, of course, it's about support on programme as well. You can't just let them in and then go, oh, there you go. Off you go. You have to make sure... And that worries me in that are we prepared at [this university]? With our [internal widening participation] scheme, are we fully prepared for the ongoing support through the first year that these students may need? (H16, Old HEI)*

# Analysis of Access & Participation Plans

## More ambitious widening access targets than ever before

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



# Analysis of Access & Participation Plans

## Acceptance of responsibility to do more

Our new ambitious targets [...] engender a new ambitious chapter of our approach to widening participation and social inclusion. (Warwick p9)

...we will still have a long way to go to reduce our gap further if we are to meet our longer term objective by 2038-39. (UCL p12)

We recognise...the important part that Cambridge should play in making further progress. (Cambridge p2)

We need to move further, faster to ensure that all those with potential are supported to access, succeed in and progress from our university. (Bristol p9)

We recognise we can go further to be more representative of the wider population for the benefit of the region and the diversity of graduates in the labour market. (Exeter p2)

# Analysis of Access & Participation Plans

More structural understanding of prior attainment

Greater acknowledgement that socioeconomic disadvantage affects attainment

*...we know that there is a correlation between public examination results and social background and that some groups of students are disadvantaged before they apply. (UCL p14)*

*Many students from under-represented groups already have the aspiration to access HE, but do not always have support to develop the additional study skills required to achieve their full potential or make a successful application. (Reading p16)*

Greater willingness to look for as-yet-unrealised potential

# Analysis of Access & Participation Plans

## Mainstreaming of contextual offer making

Many universities introducing contextual offers, or extending their reach

*...we will seek opportunities to extend our contextualised offer policy to a broader range of students and circumstances; remove unnecessary barriers to admissions presented through the application process; ensure these policies are transparently and effectively communicated. (Exeter p20)*

*Durham can be bolder in its use of contextual information and data in judging applications and making differential offers (Durham p9)*

Only 4 universities (Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial and Bath) continuing to require contextually disadvantaged applicants to meet standard entry requirements



# Analysis of Access & Participation Plans

Acknowledgement of role in supporting students to succeed

Development of initiatives to support students to succeed

*We will review and refine our approach to the delivery of academic skills, by focusing our approach on providing more support to those students where there are gaps in their attainment and continuation. (Southampton p16)*

*[Our new] inclusive teaching and learning approach aims to improve the student experience for all students [... and] purposefully moves away from the deficit model, which attempts to 'fix' students to match the existing university culture. (LSE pp18-19)*

New commitment to more inclusive teaching and learning practices

# Rethinking merit



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# Next steps on the path to rethinking merit

- Universities should strive to progressively bolder over time in the use of contextual offers
- Important that universities deliver on newly inclusive and supportive approaches to teaching and learning
- Universities should champion their commitment to meritocratic *equity* of opportunity in pursuit of a greater degree of distributive fairness



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