

Sins of Admission



How university application processes impact
schools and colleges

Joanna Williams

Foreword by Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP



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Foreword

by Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP

British universities are internationally renowned for cutting-edge research, world-leading scholarship and the quality of education they offer to millions of students each year. It is no surprise that many of our institutions regularly appear at the top of the Times Higher Education's world university rankings. We should celebrate the fact that so many of our young people now have the opportunity to access higher education and obtain life-changing qualifications.

Yet our universities also face challenges. Last year, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, launched a wide-ranging review of post-18 education and funding led by Philip Augar. The review focuses on choice and competition across a joined-up post-18 education and training sector. This emphasis is echoed in the pages of this report, which calls for a more coherent and holistic approach to education and for schools, colleges and universities to work together in the best interests of all students.

In recent years, much public attention has focused upon how universities are funded and the payment of tuition fees. Whether as students, parents or tax-payers, we all have an interest in getting this right. But too often, the debate about tuition fees risks overshadowing questions about what higher education is for, who should attend university and to what end. This report from Policy Exchange returns our attention to these fundamental issues and also asks us to consider the advice, guidance and opportunities available for the young people who do not go on to university.

Higher education is one of our most important national assets. In an increasingly uncertain future, it is important to consider how our universities can continue to thrive as world-leading institutions. I have recently warned against increasing tuition fees for students from the EU who wish to study in the UK. Students and academics from the EU make a vital contribution to British universities and this must be allowed to continue.

As Britain faces the possibility of leaving the EU, we must go further in ensuring our universities maintain the confidence of students, parents and employers. Universities must not themselves inadvertently undermine the reputation of the UK's higher education sector. This report details how this might already be happening and puts forward helpful solutions. There is a very valid concern about the practice of institutions making students unconditional offers. Indeed, there is no doubt in my mind that unconditional offers can have a disastrous impact on individual students and even entire cohorts of pupils in their final year of school or college. Sadly, this report reveals what so many of us fear. It is time for those universities engaging in this practice to change their approach and work with schools.

This report's recommendation that the distinct parts of our education sector should work more closely together is undoubtedly in the best interests of students. Greater collaboration between universities and schools may help create a more level playing field and allow more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, currently underrepresented in higher education, to access the educational and social benefits a university can provide. The blunt tools we are using at the moment, including contextual offers, risk promoting low expectations for some of the most capable pupils in the schools system.

For more than a decade, Policy Exchange has championed higher standards in education and led the way on promoting greater innovation, competition and choice in schools. This important paper builds on that work, raising significant concerns with the current process by which young people apply to higher education. I hope this will spark debate about how we can best ensure the continued success of our higher education institutions.

Executive Summary

We have hit Tony Blair's target of 50 per cent of young adults entering higher education with little discussion as to why this is the right figure, who should go to university and to what end.

Higher education frequently makes headlines but too often the debate is narrowly focused on how much university should cost and who should pick up the bill. Beyond this, there are criticisms that top universities provide an overly academic curriculum exclusively to a social elite. David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham, has described the University of Oxford as “an institution defined by entrenched privilege that is the preserve of wealthy white students from London and the south-east.”¹ Recently, Robert Halfon, Conservative MP for Harlow and Chair of the Education Select Committee argued that top-ranked universities would be better “if they opened up to skills, degree apprenticeships and technical education.”²

Paul Goodman, editor of Conservative Home, is right to ask: “Above all, what is education for, anyway? Is the academic ideal at its core to be honoured and preserved, or simply outdated – a vanity to be hurled on the bonfire?”³ This focus on the intrinsic nature of education is too often lost amid demands that universities fulfil extrinsic goals related to social inclusion or the needs of the economy. The ‘academic ideal’, as Goodman puts it, has become tainted by charges of elitism and now finds few defenders even within universities.

In the absence of an intrinsic sense of purpose related to the pursuit of knowledge, higher education becomes readily swayed by extrinsic, often political, demands. In particular, competition for students, driven by a need to secure revenue streams, has come to shape the actions of many universities.

The logic of higher education policies implemented by successive governments, such as shifting the funding of universities onto individual students through government-backed loans and lifting the cap on student recruitment, has incentivised universities to recruit as many fee-paying students as the market will allow, onto courses that may have little benefit for individual students or society more broadly. They make greater use of unconditional offers (guaranteed places irrespective of grades) and contextual offers (reduced offers to compensate for socio-economic disadvantage) and accept more students through clearing and adjustment. This transformation in student recruitment has occurred with relatively little public discussion.

In this report we present evidence that these changes to university admissions are having a detrimental impact on schools and sixth form

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/may/23/oxford-faces-anger-over-failure-to-improve-diversity-among-students>
2. <https://www.conservativehome.com/thecolumnists/2018/04/robert-halfon-ministers-should-value-the-open-university-no-less-than-oxbridge-and-the-latter-should-open-up-to-skills-and-apprenticeships.html>
3. <https://www.conservativehome.com/thetorydiary/2019/02/conservative-education-policy-is-up-for-grabs.html>

colleges, as well as on teachers and pupils in the process of applying for higher education. Our research shows that the decisions made by universities are increasingly perceived as confusing and opaque. Teachers no longer feel confident in offering pupils advice about their next move. Worse, unconditional offers can act to demotivate pupils before their final exams and, when given in significant numbers, can disadvantage a cohort as a whole. Contextual offers, often simply lower entry criteria dependent upon an applicant's postcode, are a crude mechanism for promoting equal opportunity and create a perception of unfairness.

There is no correct number of higher education students and this report does not purport to come up with such a figure. Universities are autonomous institutions and we do not seek to dictate a correct means of managing admissions. However, this report does highlight growing tensions between universities, schools and sixth form colleges. We show that too often different parts of the education system are acting in opposition to one another. It is vital that universities act in ways that support the practice of schools and colleges. Likewise, as entering higher education becomes the norm for 50 per cent of the population, it is more vital than ever that we ask about provision and opportunities for those who do not go on to university.⁴ To this end, we welcome the focus of the Augar Review on Further Education and the vital role it can play in boosting productivity and social mobility.

Recommendations

1 Move to a post-qualification admissions system.

Currently, the UK is one of the only countries in the world where pupils not only apply to university but are also offered places before they have taken final examinations. This puts pressure on teachers and pupils and increases uncertainty for universities. Under a post-qualifications admissions system, pupils could continue to apply to university while still at school but no offers would be made, or places allocated, until final exam results are known. A-level exams may need to be sat slightly earlier, or the academic year may have to begin a little later, in order for additional time to administer places after results have been released.

2 Stop the routine use of unconditional offers.

Universities should not make students unconditional offers other than in exceptional circumstances, for example in cases where mature applicants have already met entry requirements. Conditional offers that become unconditional upon firm acceptance are designed simply to consolidate a customer base. This is not in the best interests of schools or students and this practice must end.

3 Remove predicted grades from the application process.

Grade predictions, like academic targets, should be a matter for pupils, teachers and parents and not routinely shared with universities.

4. See, for example, the Policy Exchange report, *A Qualified Success: An investigation into T-levels and the wider vocational system*. Available at: <https://policy-exchange.org.uk/publication/a-qualified-success/>

4 Stop the routine use of contextual offers.

Universities should not make students contextual offers other than on an exceptional, case by case, basis. Universities looking to promote social inclusion and equality of opportunity should establish a close and deep network of partner schools in order to support the education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

5 End higher education as a 'rite of passage'.

A-levels need to be considered worthwhile qualifications in their own right. Schools should promote a wide range of alternative routes to all pupils, including apprenticeships, employment, professional qualifications and higher education. We need more focus on the needs of young adults who do not go to university.

Introduction

In 1999 then Prime Minister Tony Blair pledged that 50 per cent of young adults would go on to higher education by 2010. That goal has almost been achieved. Rates of participation in higher education have increased steadily since 2006/07. By 2018, 49.8 per cent of 18 to 30-year-olds had either attended or were likely to go to university according to the Department for Education.⁵

This increase in student numbers has not been without consequence. There is concern that standards have been lowered both at the point of entry (with the growth in unconditional and contextual offers) and as students graduate (with grade inflation). There is a concern that degrees, as a positional good, have become devalued with graduates today taking jobs that three decades ago would have been filled by school-leavers.⁶ There is also concern that the needs of the 50 per cent of young people who do not go on to university have been overlooked.

The increase in student numbers has taken place with relatively little debate. Almost all attention has focused on funding: who should pay for higher education and how much it should cost. At the time of Tony Blair's pledge, tuition fees were set at £1,000 per student, per academic year. This rose to £3,000 in 2006 and £9,000 in 2012. Today, tuition fees are capped at £9,250 per year with almost every institution charging students the maximum amount.⁷ In May 2019, *The Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* (The Augar Review) recommended that tuition fees be reduced to £7,500 per year. However, whether or not this recommendation is implemented will be for a future government to decide.

The contentious issue of fees and value for money has too often served as a substitute for a wider debate about the purpose of higher education today; more specifically, what proportion of the population should go to university and to what end.

Aims of this report

Although higher education operates independently of schools, sixth form and further education colleges, a majority of students apply to university from an existing educational institution. As the proportion of young adults going to university has increased, sixth form, or Years 12 and 13, is increasingly seen as a stepping-stone to university rather than an end in itself. Indeed, the success of a school or sixth form college is often judged by the number of pupils it sends to high-ranking universities.

This report covers only policy and practice in England, Wales and Northern Ireland as schools and universities in Scotland operate according

5. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tony-blair-s-pledge-on-university-fulfilled-at-last-c6f77jhxp>

6. <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/skills/graduate-employment-gap-report>

7. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN00917/SN00917.pdf>

to different systems and regulations. We recognise that A levels provide just one route into higher education and that technical and vocational qualifications, such as BTecs, form an important part of the admissions landscape.

Likewise, we recognise that not all higher education is carried out in universities. However, the overwhelming majority of youngsters who pursue higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland enter university after having undertaken A levels. The vocabulary of this report reflects this reality.

University admissions processes, the type of offers institutions make to students, when such offers are made and which students are selected, have an impact upon what happens not just in the sixth form but in the rest of the school too. This may simply be a matter of staff time dedicated to writing references and overseeing the submission of completed UCAS forms. Teachers, pupils and perhaps even parents may become involved in discussion about predicted grades and future directions. There is evidence to suggest that pupils offered unconditional university places or lower than expected conditional offers are less committed to their A level studies and may underperform in their final exams.⁸ When large numbers of pupils are made such offers this can have an impact upon the culture of the school or college as a whole.

Interrogating the processes by which potential students are admitted to university allows us to examine the assumptions that currently determine what proportion of young people go on to higher education and on what basis they are selected. Changing admissions processes represent decisions universities have taken about how many students to admit and who is considered suitable for higher education. This is driven, in part, by the impact of marketisation: universities seek sufficient customers to secure long-term financial viability. However, it is also driven by a broader perception of what higher education is for.

While much attention in recent years has focused on tuition fees, the bigger questions about what proportion of the population should go to university, why and for what purpose have been asked less frequently. Through addressing the issue of university admissions, this report seeks to raise these questions.

This report explores the impact university admissions processes have upon pupils in their final years of school and, in particular, the impact of unconditional and contextual offers. To this end, we draw upon a review of current policy and literature as well as interviews with school heads, teachers and pupils, in order to explore the impact of university admissions processes, in particular unconditional offers (guaranteed university places offered to school pupils) and contextual offers (lower entry criteria for students from disadvantaged backgrounds) upon schools, colleges and their staff and pupils.

There is plenty of statistical evidence to demonstrate the increase in the use of unconditional offers by universities over a relatively short period of time.⁹ Many leading figures within both government and the

8. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/unconditional-offers-serving-the-interests-of-students/>

9. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/increase-unconditional-offers-made-young-people-england-wales-and-northern-ireland>

education sector have expressed concern about the rise in unconditional offers. When he was Universities Minister, Sam Gyimah MP said: “The rise in unconditional offers is completely irresponsible to students, and universities must start taking a lead by limiting the number they offer ... Unconditional offers risk distracting students from the final year of their schooling, and swaying their decisions does them a disservice - universities must act in the interest of students, not in filling spaces.”¹⁰

The general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, Geoff Barton, has said the “huge increase” in unconditional offers “is not in the best interests of students.”¹¹ He suggested, “It can lead to students making less effort in their A-levels because their place is assured. That can then hamper their job prospects later down the line if potential employers take into account their A-level grades.” When she was General Secretary of the University and College Union, Sally Hunt also criticised the practice of universities making prospective students unconditional offers, arguing it puts students “under enormous pressure to make snap decisions about their future”.¹² In April 2019, Education Secretary Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP called for a review of university admissions practices. Hinds expressed concern that ‘conditional unconditional offers’ were ‘backing students into a corner’ and encouraging them to accept university places when other institutions could be more suitable.

However, while much attention has focused upon universities making unconditional offers, there has been little attempt to situate this within the broader context of the higher education landscape or to examine the impact of university actions upon schools and further education.

Currently, there is little qualitative evidence as to the impact the increase in unconditional or contextual offers has on prospective students, teachers, schools and sixth form colleges. Through interviews with school leaders, teaching staff and pupils we are able to provide a more detailed overview of the impact of university admissions processes upon the final year of a pupil’s schooling.

The research

The main source of data for this research comes from interviews conducted with pupils who are currently in sixth form or Year 13 and in the process of applying for university, and interviews with their teachers.

In addition, we draw upon statistics released by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) showing the rate of increase in unconditional offers; which institutions and subject areas are most likely to offer prospective students unconditional places; and which students are most likely to accept.¹³ We also consider information universities place in the public domain, for example, on their websites, detailing their admissions processes and, in particular, information they provide to prospective students about contextual offers.

10. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jul/26/rise-in-unconditional-offers-prompts-call-for-university-admissions-overhaul>

11. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-44954154>

12. <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/9735/University-axing-unconditional-offers-demonstrates-need-for-system-overhaul>

13. <https://wwwucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/unconditional-offers-made-third-young-applicants-england-north-ireland-and-wales>

Interviews

We conducted interviews with pupils, teachers and senior leaders from 11 - 18 secondary schools and sixth form colleges.

We interviewed 25 pupils through a mixture of one-to-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The pupils were all in their final year of A levels and came from three different institutions; one sixth form college and two secondary schools. We interviewed 10 members of staff including heads of sixth form, subject leads and A level teachers from a range of institutions including a large stand-alone sixth form college, an independent school and secondary schools with sixth forms.

Throughout this report we seek to preserve the anonymity of both interviewees and their institutions.

1 Issues in admissions

Fees and the higher education market

Changes in admissions practice have been linked to the marketisation of higher education. This refers to the processes by which universities are required to compete against each other for funding with a view to ensuring improvements in provision and greater value for money.

Universities were initially encouraged to compete for a share of government funding. When money is attached to individual students, and the total number of students is limited, then universities compete for students (revenue) through marketing their services regardless of whether students themselves pay tuition costs or not. Later, marketisation came to be understood as the process by which the funding of universities shifted from state to individual. The market in higher education has been brought into existence by successive governments and backed by all major political parties.

The highpoint of state funding for universities occurred in the 1960s when higher education was considered a public good with knowledge an important means of cohering a sense of national identity as well as leading to economic advance.¹⁴ New universities were developed and those that already existed were expanded. For the next three decades, universities received block funding from central government while also enjoying institutional autonomy. Students had their tuition expenses covered by local education authorities and many received comparatively generous maintenance grants. However, throughout this period a far smaller proportion of people went to university than today.

By 1987, there were more centralised plans to increase student numbers. The government's White Paper, *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge*, presented a plan for student numbers to increase, in particular through increasing participation rates "among young people, particularly young women, and mature entrants - by building on improvements in schools and colleges, and in admission arrangements for those with non-traditional qualifications."¹⁵ In a subsequent 1991 White Paper, *Higher Education: A New Framework*, then Prime Minister John Major consolidated plans for "more of our young people to go on to higher education ... we are well on course for one in three doing so by the year 2000."¹⁶

The decision "to end the increasingly artificial distinction between universities on the one hand and polytechnics and colleges on the other" allowed institutions that had previously fallen under the remit of Local Education Authorities greater institutional autonomy including

14. See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03075079.2014.942270> for a fuller discussion of this point.

15. <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/wp1987/1987-higher-ed.html>

16. <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/wp1991b/index.html>

degree awarding powers. This freedom was secured against planned increases in student numbers and a belief that “it is in the interests of universities, polytechnics and colleges to continue to look for increased levels of funding from private sources, in particular from industry and commerce, from benefactors and alumni, and from present sources of fee income. Such private income can enhance considerably the independence of individual institutions.”

In part, this represented a shift away from seeing higher education as a public good of benefit to the national economy and towards a perception, closely linked to the idea of human capital, that higher education was a private good of financial benefit to the individual participants. In this way, growing the number of students, or widening participation, represented both an economic and social necessity. The increase in student numbers and the closer linking of a university degree to individual financial returns called into question both the possibility and the desirability of state support for higher education continuing in the same way and at the same rate.

Tuition fees payable by individual students were first introduced in 1998 at the level of £1,000 per year. This ‘top-up’ fee was payable in advance although students from the most disadvantaged families were able to take a government-backed loan to cover the cost. In the popular imagination, this is the point at which students became customers of a university.

The connection between paying fees and adopting a customer mentality - expecting to receive a guaranteed product or service in return for fees paid, irrespective of effort - is assumed to be inevitable. However, potential entrants to higher education were encouraged by teachers, parents and university marketing departments to seek out the best ‘product’ long before the introduction of tuition fees directly paid by students. This was often based on a perception of the historical status or reputation of the institution or simply the university that appeared to perform most successfully in newspaper league table rankings. However, there are few opportunities for students to ‘shop around’ if they do not like the degree or institution they have chosen.

Since 1998, further increases in fees have been linked to new forms of regulation of the higher education sector, most specifically to the recruitment and retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2006/07 institutions in England that had an access plan agreed by OFFA (Office for Fair Access) could charge students fees of up to £3,000 per year. This increased to £9,000 per year in 2012/13. Students, as fee-payers, became a key source of revenue for universities which, as businesses, compete for market share.

This represented a significant shift in the main source of higher education funding, as the proportion of income across the UK made up of funding body grants has fallen from 39 per cent to 20 per cent and the proportion made up by tuition fees has risen from 24 per cent to 44 per cent.¹⁷ Universities must now attract students to cover their core funding. This has made the financial picture for universities much more complex,

17. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2015/patterns-and-trends-2015.pdf>

with many universities experiencing greater uncertainty and volatility in their funding models.

From 2017 universities in England were permitted to increase fees in line with inflation, taking the cap to £9,250 and the average fee to £9,100 per year. Universities in Wales have not increased fees in line with inflation and remain capped at £9,000 per year. Students from Scotland who study in Scotland do not pay anything for their higher education. Students in Northern Ireland who study in Northern Ireland pay a maximum of £4,160 per year.

The Augar Review, published in May 2019, recommended a reduction in tuition fees to £7,500 per year. The Review recommended government funding offset the shortfall in revenue to institutions but that this be directed towards subjects deemed to be of social and economic value.

There is no evidence that tuition fees have led to a decline in the overall number of students. There is also no evidence that students from lower socio-economic groups or areas with traditionally low levels of participation have been deterred from entering university because of tuition fees. In fact, the proportion of students from the lowest socio-economic groups has increased since tuition fees were first introduced.¹⁸ At the same time, the UK's student debt currently stands at just over £100 billion and is projected to hit £1.2 trillion by 2049.¹⁹ 83 per cent of graduates are forecast not to repay their loans in full within the 30-year repayment period.²⁰

Admissions processes are a logical means for institutions to capture customers from competitors and thereby guarantee an income stream. Although it may appear to students that they are personally responsible for the cost of their university place, in reality the higher education sector continues to be heavily state-subsidised and, consequently, state-regulated. Universities are not free to charge whatever the market will support. Admissions processes, teaching and research all continue to be regulated. In January 2018 the Office for Students became established as the primary regulatory body for the higher education sector.²¹

Current admissions processes

Currently, prospective university students usually apply for their chosen higher education provision towards the end of the first term of their final year at school, sixth form or further education. Having received predicted grades from their teachers, they then select courses from a range of institutions appropriate for the results they may expect to achieve. They submit their preferences via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) along with accompanying references from their teachers and a personal statement. Universities then evaluate the applications they receive and make potential students an offer conditional on their meeting specified entrance criteria, most frequently the achievement of particular A level grades. Applicants normally reply via UCAS, holding one offer as a firm acceptance and one, usually lower offer, as an insurance place.

Once A level results are released in mid-August, prospective students

18. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN00917/SN00917.pdf>

19. <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/graduates-student-debt/57903/>

20. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/9334>

21. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/>

receive notification from their chosen institution that their place is confirmed (sometimes even if they have not met the conditions of their offer) or denied. Pupils who perform better or worse than expected in their A level exams may find a place at a different university in the days after A level results are announced, through clearing and adjustment processes.

Several notable changes have occurred in recent years. Student numbers, at both national and institutional level were once capped by government. This cap on student numbers was progressively removed; universities were in 2013 permitted to recruit as many students with higher A level grades (first AAB, then ABB) before, in 2015, the cap was lifted altogether thereby enabling universities to recruit as many students as they are able to provide for. There has been a well-publicised growth in the number of students being offered unconditional university places. Less well-publicised is the growth in the number of universities making ‘contextual offers’ or an offer that takes into account an applicant’s school and home environment. Finally, there has also been an increase in the number of students securing their university place through Clearing and Adjustment. The scale and impact of these changes will be explored in more detail below.

Student numbers

Despite annual fluctuations, the general trend, extending over many decades, has been towards a large increase in both the total number of students and the proportion of the overall cohort of young adults (18 - 30 year-olds) who enter higher education. In the 2017-18 academic year, the most recent year for which complete statistics are available, there were 2.34 million students at 162 higher education institutions in the UK. Of this number, 1.88 million were from the UK and 1.77 million (75.6 per cent) were undergraduates.²²

Latest statistics from UCAS show that a total of 561,420 people have applied to start a higher education course in 2019.²³ This is up by almost 2,500 compared to the equivalent point in the previous year and represents the first increase in applications in three years. In total, 49 per cent of 18 - 30 year-olds in the UK now go on to higher education.²⁴ For comparison, the proportion of the age cohort participating in higher education stood at just 3.4 per cent in 1950, 8.4 per cent in 1970, 19.3 per cent in 1990 and 33 per cent in 2000.²⁵ Universities have, over recent years, increased the number of offers they make to prospective students.

In the past, student numbers were centrally capped in order to limit costs to the treasury. Now it is established that students pay their own fees, albeit through government-subsidised loans. The cap on recruitment was lifted partially in 2013, and completely in 2015, allowing universities to admit more students. The combination of greater student recruitment combined with a fall in the 18-year-old age cohort, means that a greater proportion of school leavers now enter higher education. Rather than students competing against each other for a place at university, many universities are now competing against each other for a limited number of qualified candidates. In a survey of Vice Chancellors, concern was expressed that this has “changed

22. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sb252/figure-3>

23. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/first-rise-university-applications-three-years>

24. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/sep/28/almost-half-of-all-young-people-in-england-go-on-to-higher-education>

25. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04252/SN04252.pdf>

admission to university from an aspiration to an expectation”.²⁶

As the population of 18-year-olds has fallen and exam success at age 18 has remained relatively stable, there are fewer applicants who meet the typical attainment profile for each provider. In order for acceptance rates to be maintained, institutions have had to make more offers in total, lower the UCAS tariff points (A level results scores) they are prepared to accept, and consider different approaches to admissions such as unconditional offers or accepting more students through the annual round of Clearing and Adjustment. Additionally, universities are increasingly making use of foundation years, or ‘year zero’ programmes to admit students who have not met the expected entry criteria. The number of students on year zero courses is reported to have doubled since 2012-13 to nearly 30,000 in 2018.²⁷

Pupils who have failed to secure a place at their first choice institution may apply to universities with places still to fill in a process known as Clearing. In 2009, UCAS introduced Adjustment to enable those who perform better than expected to ‘trade up’ and gain an available place at a higher tariff university.

In 2018 a record 60,100 students gained a place in higher education through Clearing and almost 600 students made use of Adjustment.²⁸ Of this number, almost 14,500 candidates applied to enter higher education directly through clearing, that is, they had not previously made a formal application through the UCAS system. Although still a small proportion overall, a significant - and growing - number of students are both applying for and being admitted to university after A level results have been published.

Widening participation and diversity

As well as a significant increase in the overall proportion of young adults entering higher education, there have also been changes in who goes to university.

Women now go to university in greater numbers than men and have done every year since 1992. In the academic year 2016/2017, 56.7 per cent of all students were female and 43.3 per cent were male.²⁹

There has also been a marked increase in the proportion of students who identify as black, Asian or ethnic minority (BME). In 2016/17, 419,105 UK domiciled students identified as BME, representing 22.7 per cent of all students and a 60.0 per cent increase from 2003/04 numbers.³⁰ The proportion of students who identify as black has seen the most growth among ethnic groups in this time period, increasing from 4.4 per cent of all UK domiciled students in 2003/04 to 7.0 per cent in 2016/17 (an increase of 2.6 percentage points).³¹

Students are entering university at a younger age: latest UCAS figures show that in England, a record 38.8 per cent of 18-year-olds have applied to university.³² This represents a 1.4 per cent increase on the application rate in the previous year and comes alongside a 1.8 per cent fall in the total number of 18 year-olds in England.

A majority of UK-domiciled applicants to university are offered a place: the acceptance rate now stands at 81.8 per cent, the highest seen

26. Protected Past, Precarious Future survey of university vice chancellors

27. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/join-us-for-an-extra-foundation-year-say-universities-to-weaker-students-sg990m9k2?t=ie>

28. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/record-numbers-students-accepted-through-clearing>

29. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/11-01-2018/sfr247-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers>

30. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/11-01-2018/sfr247-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers>

31. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/resources/2018_HE-stats-report-students.pdf

32. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/english-18-year-olds-are-more-likely-ever-apply-university>

since 2008.³³ Application rates for 18-year-olds living in areas in England with low participation in higher education increased to the highest levels recorded.³⁴ However, there are still social class differences in access to higher education. The proportion of the population entering higher education by multiple equality measure (MEM) group shows that the entry rate of MEM group one (the group having the most combined disadvantages in entry to higher education) in 2017 was 12.2 per cent, compared to 56.2 per cent for MEM group five (the least disadvantaged). This means that the most advantaged youngsters are 4.7 times more likely to enter university than the least advantaged youngsters.³⁵

The higher a pupil's A level grades, the more likely he or she is to choose higher education over employment. Nearly three quarters (73 per cent) of those achieving above an average of C grade at A level stayed in education for at least two terms compared to half (52 per cent) of those below C grade. For those achieving below C grade at A level, one in three (34 per cent) went into sustained employment or apprenticeships compared to one in five (19 per cent) for those above C grade. Of pupils who achieved grades AAB or better at A level, 81 per cent attended a university ranked in the top third of league tables for at least two terms directly after A levels.³⁶

Institutions with the lowest requirements made the largest increase in the rate at which they made offers. Half of school-leavers with predicted A-level grades of between three Ds and three Es had offers from universities in 2010. This has now risen to more than two thirds.³⁷ Additionally, institutions with the lowest requirements are most likely to offer places to students with BTec qualifications. Almost half of white working-class and black British students in England are now reaching university with qualifications such as BTecs, amid concern that top ranking universities "fail to recognise the qualification."³⁸

Social class clearly has an impact upon educational success. Children from lower socio-economic class backgrounds, in particular white working-class boys, are less likely to attend university than any other group. However, socio-economic differences in educational opportunities do not arise at the point at which students apply to university. That a majority of pupils who apply to university are offered a place suggests there is not a large cohort of qualified youngsters who apply for admission to higher education but are then rejected by universities. Likewise, there is no evidence to suggest that a large cohort of high achieving candidates is taking places at lower tariff institutions.

Differences in educational success between the most and least advantaged children emerge from the earliest days of school and are consolidated over each subsequent stage of education. Children from lower socio-economic class backgrounds are less likely to opt for A levels or other routes that lead to university admission aged-18 than their more socially advantaged peers.

33. <https://www.ucas.com/file/196141/download?token=7YGpHk71>

34. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/facts-and-stats/data-and-analysis/Documents/patterns-and-trends-in-uk-higher-education-2018.pdf>

35. UCAS MEM - technical report, October 2018

36. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748199/Destinations_Main_Text_2017.pdf

37. Tuition fee statistics House of Commons Briefing Paper no 917 19 February 2018

38. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/27/universities-btec>

Unconditional Offers

Since 2015, there has been a sharp increase in the number of students being offered guaranteed university places without any demand that they must achieve specific grades in A levels or equivalent qualifications. The university's offer of a place stands irrespective of the prospective student's future exam results. This is known as an 'unconditional offer'.

Some universities make students conditional offers with an accompanying promise that this will become a guaranteed (unconditional) offer, irrespective of final grades, should the student firmly accept the place and not accept offers from any other institution, conditional or otherwise. This has become known as the 'conditional unconditional offer'.

Unconditional offers have always been part of the admissions process in higher education. They have traditionally been awarded to mature students who have already met entry criteria; to those applying for creative arts courses after submitting a portfolio or following a successful interview or audition; or, particularly at Oxford and Cambridge, to students who have passed an entry exam or interview.

Until recently, students offered unconditional university places comprised only a tiny proportion of total higher education applicants. This began to change with the gradual removal of the government-imposed cap on the number of students each university could admit. In 2013 the University of Birmingham made 1,200 applicants in 12 subject areas unconditional offers in what it described as a 'bold' and 'pioneering' scheme.³⁹ Since 2015 and the complete lifting of the cap on student numbers, the growth in unconditional offers has continued. UCAS figures show that the number of unconditional offers made to prospective students rose from 2,985 in 2013, to 67,915 in 2018, an increase of 65,930.⁴⁰ In 2018, 7.1 per cent of all university offers were unconditional. Almost one quarter (23 per cent) of applicants received at least one unconditional offer.

Most unconditional offers to applicants from England, Northern Ireland and Wales, are made to those aged 19 and over. However, since 2013, the share of all unconditional offers made to applicants aged 19 and over has fallen, with the proportion going to 18-year-old applicants increasing.⁴¹

When we look at offers that are not simply unconditional, but do contain an unconditional component (eg: a conditional unconditional offer) the increase is even more stark. In 2013, no conditional unconditional offers were made, but in 2018 higher education institutions made 66,315 conditional unconditional offers.⁴² Combining the data on standard unconditional offers and conditional unconditional offers shows that 87,540 18-year-old applicants (34.4 per cent) received at least one offer with an unconditional component in 2018.⁴³

Offers with an unconditional component were initially used to attract the highest-performing candidates. In 2014 and 2015 applicants predicted AAA were most likely to receive an unconditional offer. Now they are being made more frequently to pupils expected to achieve lower grades. In 2018 almost one in three applicants predicted grades equivalent to BBC received an unconditional offer. This compares to one in ten applicants

39. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/strategic-framework/Resources/unconditional-offers.aspx>

40. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/increase-unconditional-offers-made-young-people-england-wales-and-northern-ireland>

41. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/unconditional-offers-made-third-young-applicants-england-northern-ireland-and-wales>

42. <https://www.ucas.com/file/196151/download?token=jzRAy4kS>

43. <https://www.ucas.com/file/196151/download?token=jzRAy4kS>

predicted to get three D grades or lower at A level and around one in 20 applicants predicted to score equivalent to A*A*A*.⁴⁴

Unconditional offers have increased the most for courses in creative arts and design. In 2018, 18 per cent of all offers to study creative arts and design courses were recorded as unconditional. Offers to these courses are commonly based on an applicant's portfolio, or performance in an audition, meaning that unconditional offers are made after the applicant has already demonstrated a certain level of talent or potential. Relatively large increases in unconditional offers also occurred for courses in mass communications and documentation, and technologies, where respectively 14.5 per cent, and 12.9 per cent of all offers, were recorded as unconditional in 2018. By contrast, only a very small proportion (between 0.2 and 0.3 per cent) of offers to study courses in medicine and dentistry were recorded as unconditional.⁴⁵

Participation rates in higher education are mapped geographically to provide an indication of the proportion of young people who go on to university in each neighbourhood; the data is then recorded by POLAR (Participation in Local Areas) quintiles. In 2013 around one in every 100 applicants from each POLAR quintile held an unconditional offer; that is, there was relatively little variation by socio-economic class. Every year since 2013, the proportion of applicants holding an unconditional offer from each POLAR quintile has increased.⁴⁶ There have been larger increases in the number of unconditional offers being made to applicants from low participation areas.

This means that there is now a wider variation in the proportion of applicants holding unconditional offers according to socio-economic status. This may suggest that unconditional offers promote widening participation; however, if more disadvantaged pupils are encouraged to work less hard for their A levels or to settle for a lower ranking institution then they may further entrench social inequality.

In 2018 applicants from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 (areas of lowest participation in higher education) were the most likely to hold an unconditional offer (27.8 per cent for quintile 1, and 27.6 per cent for quintile 2). In the same year, 24.9 per cent of applicants from quintile 3 held an unconditional offer, as did 22.5 per cent of applicants from quintile 4 and 18.2 per cent of applicants from quintile 5.⁴⁷ This means that unconditional offers are most likely to be made to applicants from areas that have low participation rates in higher education (lower socio-economic groups) and least likely to be made to applicants from neighbourhoods that have high participation rates (higher socio-economic groups).

Unconditional offers have an impact on prospective students' decision making processes. According to UCAS, 60 per cent of new undergraduates who received unconditional offers said it had influenced their choice of university.⁴⁸

44. <https://www.ucas.com/file/196151/download?token=jzRAy4kS>

45. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/unconditional-offers-made-third-young-applicants-england-north-ern-ireland-and-wales>

46. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/dbae94df-12dc-4e90-b73d-fd464963d591/data-analysis-unconditional-offer-making.pdf>

47. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/dbae94df-12dc-4e90-b73d-fd464963d591/data-analysis-unconditional-offer-making.pdf>

48. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/unconditional-offers-made-third-young-applicants-england-north-ern-ireland-and-wales>

Contextual Offers

Contextual offers are a means by which universities can widen participation through compensating applicants for disadvantages they have experienced, at school or at home, that may have had a detrimental impact upon their examination success. Institutions take into account the broader ‘context’ of a student’s application and attempt to look beyond prior attainment and predicted grades. An applicant’s academic performance and his or her potential to succeed in higher education are evaluated in the context of the circumstances in which this success was achieved. This may mean prioritising a candidate for interview or making an adjusted (lower) offer.

As with unconditional offers, contextual offers have existed in various guises for many years. In the past they were issued informally, often on an individual basis, and did not carry the label ‘contextual’. Over the course of the past five years, the number of institutions making unconditional offers has increased and the processes by which such offers are made has become increasingly formalised. Since this time, making some students lower offers based on, for example, their individual performance in relation to their school’s overall performance, has moved from being considered controversial to being largely accepted. It is assumed that “parents’ income, the quality of school attended and myriad other background factors affect educational outcomes for young people”⁴⁹ and, significantly, that universities should take account of this in allocating places.

One reason for the increased use of contextual offers is that since 2008, university funding – in particular the capacity to charge students the maximum permitted fee – has been dependent upon institutions having ‘access agreements’ in place. Access agreements are submitted annually to the higher education sector’s regulatory body, now the Office for Students. They outline how an institution plans to use a proportion of its fee income to widen participation and increase diversity. Contextual offers have become a key component of access agreements at many universities.

Universities are under growing pressure from the Office for Students and government ministers to go further in widening access⁵⁰ and to be ‘more ambitious’ with their use of contextual admissions.⁵¹ This is because, as noted on page 18, there is a far smaller pool of candidates from lower socio-economic groups who meet the entry criteria demanded by the highest-ranking universities. The linking of widening participation to fee income has led to intense competition for this small group of students and a need to increase the number of candidates considered suitable for university entry. The demand to ‘go further’ could mean making a greater number of contextual offers or adopting a qualitatively new and far more holistic approach to applicants.

The Fair Education Alliance notes that many universities have undertaken new approaches within their admissions processes in order to ‘contextualise’ applications.⁵² One element of this includes drawing upon data other than exam results and predicted grades.

Data taken into account in formulating contextual offers includes:

49. Fair Education Alliance (July 2018) Putting fairness in context: using data to widen access to higher education

50. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jul/31/education-secretary-damian-hinds-elite-universities-access-disadvantaged>

51. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/be-more-ambitious-on-contextual-admissions-says-the-office-for-students/>

52. Fair Education Alliance (July 2018) Putting fairness in context: using data to widen access to higher education

- Data about the individual applicant, for example, eligibility for free school meals
- Data about the applicant's school, for example, school performance data at GCSE and A level (Individual performance data may then be mapped against school performance)
- Data about the applicant's home address, for example, area deprivation and geo-socio-economic profiling⁵³

Methods for contextualising this data include:

- Monitoring reasons for the rejection of contextually flagged applicants at all stages of the admissions process
- Having a dedicated post to advocate for applicants from widening participation backgrounds
- Having a dedicated office to under-sign decisions relating to contextually flagged applicants
- Using scoring systems to rank applicants as part of a gathered field after having applied allocated additional points to give an uplift to contextually flagged applicants
- Allocating additional points to contextually flagged applicants based on their personal statement
- Ranking contextually flagged and unflagged applicants separately according to their scores in entry tests and progressing applications from contextually flagged applicants⁵⁴ where this was the only differentiating factor between applicants with otherwise equivalent achievement profiles

Many universities now use a combination of the data and methods noted above to contextualise applications. However, there is considerable variation between institutions in the data utilised, the process of contextualisation, and in how this is then translated into practice.

Here I explore the statements about contextual offers found on the websites of a random selection of universities varied by league table position and geography.

The University of Cambridge has announced plans make 100 undergraduate places available through Clearing and Adjustment, that is, after A-level results have been announced, to students who applied to the university but had their initial application rejected. Only students considered to be 'disadvantaged' will be eligible to apply for these places.⁵⁵

The University of Nottingham tells potential applicants that a range of factors additional to, and in some cases instead of, formal examination results is considered in the selection process. These can include:

- The personal statement and reference
- Additional evidence of achievement, motivation and potential as gathered through interview, additional tests (eg LNAT, GAMSAT) or assessment of written materials

53. Fair Education Alliance (July 2018) Putting fairness in context: using data to widen access to higher education

54. Fair Education Alliance (July 2018) Putting fairness in context: using data to widen access to higher education

55. <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-47458688>

- Other factors as appropriate to the discipline, such as employment or volunteer work in relevant fields and sustained critical engagement with relevant issues
- Contextual factors such as socio-economic and educational background⁵⁶

One way in which the university identifies students from disadvantaged backgrounds is through a postcode check. Its website states, “The University of Nottingham recognises that some educational and personal circumstances affect achievement and so we consider these when assessing your application. Relevant circumstances can include being from a less advantaged area, which we identify through a postcode tool.”⁵⁷

The University of Bristol tells prospective applicants that “At Bristol we want to attract students from all backgrounds because we believe a student community that reflects our society will benefit everyone. Our contextual offer is a grade reduction of up to two grades below the standard entry requirements and is made to those from backgrounds who, generally, are less likely to come here.”⁵⁸ Students are considered eligible for a contextual offer if they have attended a state school or college considered to be ‘aspiring’; they live in an area with low progression to higher education; they have completed a University of Bristol outreach programme; or they have spent time in care.

The University of Kent tells prospective applicants, “A number of contextual factors will be considered when assessing applications, these will help us to identify applicants who may not have reached their potential due to personal disadvantage or prior education circumstances.” Eligible applicants “will receive an adjusted offer, *one grade below the published typical offer level for the course(s) applied for.*”⁵⁹

The University of Bath does not make contextual offers but does use a wide range of data when assessing an applicant’s suitability. This includes information about a candidate’s home area; the school they attended; if they have spent time in care; have a disability; or is a refugee, asylum seeker or has been granted humanitarian protection. Applicants who meet two or more of these criteria will have their application considered by “specially trained members of our admissions staff whose aim is to make sure that information about your background and circumstances are taken into careful consideration before a decision is made on your application.” The university tells such applicants “we are generally able to show flexibility on aspects such as: overall GCSE profile (or equivalent qualifications); predicted grades; subject combination for your A levels (or equivalent qualifications); the strength of your personal statement.”⁶⁰

This variation in practice has led to concern about a lack of transparency across the sector. Much attention is now focused on “creating a shared terminology, a common understanding of good data use, and thereby increasing transparency.”⁶¹ However, attempts at standardising practice risk entrenching the need for contextual offers and thereby accepting that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds will perform less well at school than their more privileged peers.

56. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/academicservices/qualitymanual/admissions/admissions-procedures.aspx>

57. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/ugstudy/applying/postcode-check.aspx>

58. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/entry-requirements-qualifications/contextual-offers/>

59. <https://www.kent.ac.uk/applicants/policies/contextual-admissions-policy.html>

60. <https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/understanding-contextual-admissions-for-undergraduate-applicants/>

61. Fair Education Alliance (July 2018) Putting fairness in context: using data to widen access to higher education

2 Impact of admissions

Student numbers

Universities today are “firmly focused on sustaining financial and institutional health in fiercely competitive markets”.⁶² In practice, this means that institutions are incentivised both to recruit as many students as they can and to ‘lock-in’ applicants thereby guaranteeing market share.

This more competitive approach to student recruitment by universities has been felt in schools.

It’s an open market at the moment. This has brought in some good things but some pretty poor things too ... it is damaging to our education system overall.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

Some teachers link this increased competition for students explicitly to the lifting of the cap on student numbers.

When the cap on numbers was lifted, subjects like law that don’t require much in terms of resources were able to grow exponentially ... there was open competition, open warfare almost, between institutions looking to get bums on seats.

Head of Sixth Form, London Secondary School

At the same time as universities are competing for students, schools, parents and pupils are all becoming more competitive in aiming for higher ranking institutions.

There’s some pressure on teachers to enable students to access certain universities now. It’s a highly competitive environment. Everybody’s aspiring to the top universities.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

Teachers are also aware that the marketisation of higher education could have positive aspects to it.

It’s not all bad for students - universities seem to be thinking of them more; students expect more now because they are paying more. So that shifts the focus and raises questions about how much contact time students are getting, what the quality of education is like.

Head of Department, Middlesex Secondary School

There is a sense that the rules of the game on university admissions have changed and that schools are being pushed to act in response. However, schools report that the admissions landscape is confusing and that wide

62. Protected Past, Precarious Future survey of university vice chancellors

variability in practice has led to low levels of trust in admissions processes.

There is particular concern about the process of making predicted grades for pupils that would then be used to determine university offers.

We feel we need to over-predict because otherwise pupils will not get offers from Oxford, Cambridge or other high-ranking universities. This is proven time and again when offers are not given. But then it seems that pupils get accepted even when they don't get the grades initially demanded. So perhaps universities should give offers that are more realistic to what they would be prepared to accept?

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

One problem is with the whole application process, particularly the reliance on predicted grades. We make these predictions as best we can, we look at their mock exam results, their attitude, how they've performed in the past, but there's just so much at stake. The students know this so they're on our case and then we have parents getting in touch too, they want us to make higher predicted grades for their children.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

Teachers are quick to point out that changes in university admissions practice sit alongside more far reaching changes to A levels themselves.

A-levels are very challenging. Gove's reforms have been successful, they have raised standards and this helps the transition to university – students are now better set up for success. They can cope with degree standard work. I would argue that it's this better teaching that's leading to an increase in first class degrees being awarded when students leave university. The quality of student I'm sending to university now is higher than it was 10 or 20 years ago.

Head of Sixth Form, London Secondary School

I really think the new A levels that have improved things greatly. You notice that the students are more engaged, especially the second years. The groups I've got now, they are just better students all round, they are writing better. They are the first lot that have had the literacy strategy all the way through school. The work is definitely more challenging, but they're up for it, they rise to the challenge.

Teacher, Essex Sixth Form College

The new A-level in politics means there's a lot more content to be covered every single lesson. You're really shoveling facts into them; there's less time for reflection, analysis and evaluation. You can't go off at a tangent at all. You just have to focus on getting through the syllabus. The kids miss out on being able to put what they learn into any kind of context. At the moment they are not prepared to take risks with their work.

Teacher, London Sixth Form College

For some, the changes within higher education make A levels more important.

A-levels do still have value in their own right. Some of my students get back in touch once they're at university and they'll say they are still using the notes that they took with me at A level rather than their lecture notes. I think generally, nowadays, there's a better relationship between teachers and students at sixth form than between university lecturers and their students. We are that much closer to them and we are still able to talk about things that interest them, stories in the news for example, rather than just how to write essays and how to pass exams.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

Unconditional offers

Teachers have noticed an increase in the proportion of their pupils being made unconditional offers although there is a wide variation in the rate of increase.

Unconditional offers don't really figure that much in our school. Perhaps a very few will get them. But generally, the universities and the courses our students are applying for do not feel the need to get into that kind of thing.

Head of sixth form, Kent Secondary School

Unconditional offers are not a huge issue for us but they're definitely about. Perhaps one or two students out of a tutor group of between five and eight have an unconditional offer. More often it seems that students are getting conditional offers but the university says they will make it unconditional if the student puts it down as their first choice.

Teacher, Essex Sixth Form College

Unconditional offers are being given to about 10 - 15% of our students. ... In 14/15 we had half a dozen pupils with unconditional offers, and then we were into double figures by 16/17. The growth was exponential and it was new universities that were making the unconditional offers. By 17/18 this had spread to Russell Group universities; they were making unconditional offers too.

Head of Sixth Form, London Secondary School

Over the past five years the number of unconditional offers has ballooned. 30% of our cohort this year have got unconditional offers of one sort or another either an unconditional offer or what I call a conditional unconditional offer - that is, if you choose us as number one then we'll give you an unconditional place.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

There's definitely been a big increase in the number of students getting unconditional offers over the past three years.

Head of Department, Middlesex Secondary School

Teachers report a variation in the type of universities making unconditional offers.

The institutions making unconditional offers range. One boy was offered an unconditional offer from Harvard and another boy was given an unconditional offer from Oxford Brookes University.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

Some of our students at the very top of the ability range are getting unconditional offers from high ranking universities but the vast majority are going to those who are not the best A level students and they are getting offers from universities towards the bottom of the league tables.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

There is also a variation in the type of students receiving unconditional offers. Some report it is the highest achieving students who are being made unconditional offers but, more often, it is students who are performing less well.

I took up a role as head of sixth form in September 2014. We did the first round of UCAS applications and there was one anomaly in that round - a student who received an unconditional offer despite being predicted relatively low A level grades. Others got unconditional offers but this one student stood out - they were underachieving and their reference reflected the fact that studying was not their forte!

Head of Sixth Form, London Secondary School

There is a general view that pupils holding an unconditional university offer are less motivated to work towards their A-levels although some teachers report that this is not the case.

I've not come across students stopping working when they get an unconditional offer.

Teacher, Essex Sixth Form College

There's no difference in performance between those who have unconditional offers and those who don't. We expect them all to carry on working.

Teacher, Kent Secondary School

I first had responsibility for university applications 5 years ago and probably it didn't hit me straight away - but the second year there were two boys in particular who received unconditional offers from different universities and literally stopped working from that point on.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

Not all the students who get unconditional offers are affected by it. The linear A level means we get a much better chance to see what kind of trajectory the students are on and to exercise our own judgement when it comes to predicted grades.

Head of Department, Middlesex Secondary School

We've seen some students with these offers stop attending classes, or they carry on attending but they don't do any work and they just sit there passively. Some of them can become quite defiant.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

Pupils likewise discussed the impact of receiving an unconditional university offer upon their motivation and work rate.

If you've got unconditional offers then it is really hard to keep your motivation. It's like you've worked so hard for such a long time and then you just don't have to any more.

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

I think the teachers must find it frustrating watching what happens when the offers come in; they have to see their best students turn into their worst students.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

If I got an unconditional offer from my first choice university then I would definitely stop working for my A levels. I mean, why wouldn't you? What would be the point of carrying on? You could just relax and enjoy yourself. It's not like anyone even cares about your A levels once you've got a degree anyway; that's more important. So I'd work once I got to university but I definitely wouldn't work at my A levels.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

Conversely, pupils with only conditional offers report feeling more motivated to work hard.

I've only got conditional offers from three universities; one university rejected me and one university hasn't got back to me yet. I want to go to Manchester because the course is all the things I want to do. I'm really trying to work hard at my A levels now because I'm motivated to get those grades that I need to get into Manchester.

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

I applied to five universities and I've got four offers. None of them are unconditional offers. It's drastically changed my attitude towards my A levels. I'm a lot more motivated now. It puts you under a bit of pressure but I think that's a good thing because it makes you do the work. I want to work hard and get the grades so I can go to university.

Pupil, Kent Secondary School

Teachers report that pupils with unconditional offers can end up with lower A level results than they were predicted.

Our cohort is quite small but those who had unconditional offers last year got, on average, one grade less than their predicted grades compared to those with conditional offers. This can then have a knock-on effect on their future employment prospects.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

I first noticed unconditional offers really taking off about three years ago. Now they're a huge problem for us because the students who've got them can just stop working. On average, I'd say a student with an unconditional offer will tumble about two grades from their expected grades. Last year we had a student who was predicted 2 A*s and an A and she ended up with an A and 2 Bs.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

When unconditional offers, or conditional offers that subsequently become unconditional upon acceptance, were made to a tiny proportion of university-entrants they had minimal impact upon a Sixth Form, or Year 13, cohort overall. Now that a far larger proportion of prospective students hold such offers, their impact extends beyond the individual recipients to teachers and classmates.

Teachers note that when more than just a few individuals have unconditional offers and are less motivated to work towards their A levels then this can have a broader impact across the cohort as a whole.

If you've got someone who has downed tools – either not turning up to lessons or not giving it their full concentration – then this is going to have a serious impact on those around them, on the other students in the class. I've seen this happen many times. It makes everyone's job that much harder. You're not really teaching just trying to motivate people.

Head of Sixth Form, London Secondary School

Unconditional offers first became a big deal about two years ago. You had a sizable number of kids who changed as soon as they got their university offers: they became lazy. Their attitude was 'I've got my offer, I don't care about A levels any more.' The problem with universities giving out unconditional offers is that it redefines sixth form, it changes it into a holding pen for kids who just don't see any point in being there. It feeds into a broader instrumentalisation of education where the message goes out that the only purpose of A levels is just to get into university, it's not worth anything on its own, and if you can get into university without the hassle of A levels then – great, don't bother doing any work. So, I'm furious with the universities for what they are doing. It's like they want to destroy sixth forms.

Teacher, London Sixth Form College

Even worse than this is the destructive impact it has on the school community and the role sixth form plays in socialising young people. It makes it that much harder to build a sense of collective identity, a common purpose if you like, when universities intervene in this thoughtless way.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

I'd say about 20% of the students I teach have one form of unconditional offer or another. It definitely does shift the dynamic in the classroom. Some stop attending or attend only for the absolute minimum they can get away with. This then has an impact on other students in the class. We like them to participate in class discussions and exercises but if some are not joining in then the rest don't want to be seen to show themselves up so they don't join in either.

Head of Department, Middlesex Secondary School

This impact upon the cohort as a whole was also noted by pupils.

When there are people in your class who have unconditional offers and they've given up on working it's so annoying. It's so distracting. And you just keep thinking it's not fair, you're lucky, you don't have to do this but we still have to carry on working.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

There is uncertainty as to why some pupils are getting unconditional offers and not others. This can lead to a sense of unfairness:

Some of our higher ability students struggle to understand why some of our lower achieving students get unconditional offers from the top tier universities when they don't. They just don't understand the rationale behind it. When you're looking at a top ranking maths olympiad student then fair enough but for most subjects we don't have mechanisms in place to recognise that talent.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

Lots of my friends have got unconditional offers but I haven't and it kind of makes me feel like what's wrong with me? Why didn't universities make me an unconditional offer?

Pupil, Kent Secondary School

I wouldn't be upset if my friends got lower offers than me, I'd be happy for them. Especially if they'd worked hard then I'd think they deserved it. I'd be jealous if I didn't think they'd worked hard and they still got an unconditional offer or a really low offer, that wouldn't be fair.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

It's just really frustrating to see people getting unconditional offers when you know they didn't work as hard as you did.

Pupil, Kent Secondary School

If more than just a few individuals have unconditional offers, this can have an impact upon the school's overall performance as recorded in national league tables.

Motivated students carry on and do well, those who are less well motivated can just give up and this then has an impact on the school's overall figures.

Head of Sixth Form, London Secondary School

Teachers are held to account for the results of their pupils. Pupils who have unconditional offers and then underperform can lead to teachers and schools being judged harshly.

Schools use value added measures for pupils compared to particular targets, perhaps their GCSE results, and how your pupils perform in relation to those targets is what every teacher is measured on nowadays. OFSTED and everyone else look at results, we are very much in a results-driven culture, teachers' careers are made or broken on outcomes. But if 10 - 15% of your cohort have received an unconditional offer then there is a chance they might down tools and not take their studies seriously. This then has an impact on the way the leadership team views the teacher. It has a negative impact socially, culturally, emotionally on teachers - including on their mental health - when they are under pressure to deliver results and big obstacles are thrown into their way. If you have a cohort who are not delivering then this is going to have a big impact on your results.

Head of Sixth Form, London Secondary School

Another problem with all of this is that teachers are judged on the performance of their pupils. So if the pupils do badly, because they've got an unconditional offer, then this reflects badly on the teachers.

Teacher, London Sixth Form College

A big problem is that teachers' jobs are put in jeopardy by the actions of the universities. If our students get bad results then managers want to know why. They tell us it's our job to inspire the pupils. We try and explain that it's because of the impact of unconditional offers but this doesn't always wash. This has a real impact, for example on performance related pay.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

Some pupils are unsure how to respond to unconditional offers.

I've got one unconditional offer and one offer where it's a conditional offer but then if I make that university my first choice it will get turned into an unconditional offer. I don't know what to do ... how will this look to the other universities that I apply to if I pick that one just because it was an unconditional offer?

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

Unconditional offers can influence students' decisions about their future.

I've heard the arguments for unconditional offers, I get that they can give students an opportunity to plan ahead. They can be a good insurance position if things don't plan out as expected. I get all this. But it clouds the decision making process as to which university they should choose and their ability to recognise what is a good course and a good university and actually what is in my best interests in the longer term rather than in the short term.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

Some pupils are more likely to accept unconditional offers than others.

Some are swayed by the unconditional offer. We are finding it tends to be those towards the lower end of the ability scale, those who are lacking confidence in their own ability who feel 'I don't need the pressure of getting grades, I just want to know what lies ahead of me.' And I think universities are actually preying on this lack of confidence.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

How pupils respond to unconditional offers will often be influenced by their other priorities in choosing a university place.

I've got an offer from Portsmouth University for History and Politics. It's a conditional offer but they said that it would become unconditional if I put them down as my first choice. They'd also give me £1000 bursary. I told my mum about it but I didn't take it. I'm not really tempted. I want to go to Essex instead so I can go home at the weekends even though the offer from there is higher than the other places I've applied to.

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

I haven't got an unconditional offer but one of the universities I've applied to gave me an offer of AAB to do law, but if I put that as my first choice then the offer is changed to DDB. I'm really pleased about this because it's a university that I really want to go to.

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

I've got an unconditional offer to study management at a university but it was my last choice university so I've not accepted it. If I got an unconditional offer from my first choice university then I would definitely take it.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

I've got two unconditional offers but they're both from universities that are not that great, they're not like my first choice universities, so I might just put one as my insurance but I won't put it as my first choice or anything.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

Some pupils welcome unconditional offers as a means of alleviating anxiety and providing a degree of certainty about the course and institution they will attend.

Having an unconditional offer doesn't make me stop working, it's the opposite, it makes me not worry about it all so much, it makes me more confident, so then I can relax and focus on my work.

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

I'd just be relieved if I got an unconditional offer from my first choice university. I'd carry on working but I wouldn't feel under so much pressure.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

I wish I had an unconditional offer because then I'd be less anxious. I'd just be able to breathe a little bit more.

Pupil, Kent Secondary School

Getting an unconditional offer is just a relief. It really takes the pressure off because you know that if your A levels don't work out you'll still be able to go to university. It just means you don't have to worry so much.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

But the boost to self-esteem provided by unconditional offers is not always welcomed by teachers.

One big problem for us is that universities inflate the students' sense of self-worth. When they get these unconditional offers they think they are in demand, that they have something great to offer the universities. And then they look at us, trying to get them to work hard, trying to get them through exams, and they resent us for not valuing them as much as the universities seem to value them. In this way, the universities are undermining the school community, our aspirations and standards.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

Some teachers and pupils express cynicism towards universities that make unconditional offers.

Lots of my friends have unconditional offers, it's so normal it's not even something we really talk about. But I think that if a university is giving out unconditional offers then really it just tells you what type of university it is. It tells you that it's not really a great performing uni because if you can get into a better uni then you're going to go there and not to the one that gives places to anyone no matter how well they are doing.

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

If a university makes unconditional offers then I just think they must be really desperate and not a very good university. It makes me not want to go there. I'd rather go to a better university that was harder to get into.

Pupil, Kent Secondary School

It's the low rent universities that are making students these unconditional offers and for courses like media studies that are not that academically well respected. Some students decide to reject the unconditional offers and aim higher.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

In my experience it tends to be the lower ranking universities, the former polytechnics that are making the most unconditional offers. It's not just unconditional offers though, it seems that there's been a lowering of offers all round. It's clearly linked to marketisation as far as I'm concerned.

Head of Department, Middlesex Secondary School

As a result, some pupils have become critical of the higher education sector before they had even entered university.

Universities are just like businesses, they're only bothered about money. And it's not like you even get much in return, some places only give you about 3 or 5 hours of lectures each week.

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

Contextual offers

Teachers report that each university having its own system for determining contextual offers makes it difficult for them to know how best to advise their pupils.

The lack of transparency on contextual offers was a source of frustration. Teachers were unsure which universities made contextual offers and, of those that did, on what basis and to what proportion of students.

We need universities to be honest and open about it. At the moment there is too much suspicion and criticism of the way that contextual offers happen. The whole thing has become too politicised. The end result is that a growing number of kids, particularly black kids, risk growing up with this view that the world is against them when this couldn't be farther from the truth.

Teacher, London Sixth Form College

The lack of transparency and consistency leads parents and pupils to believe rumours and misinformation about contextual offers.

Some parents think their children stand a better chance of gaining a university place from a state school.

We don't especially push Oxford or Cambridge but of course we help any students who want to apply there. We know that they are under pressure to admit more state school pupils. But as far as I'm aware they are not offering our students lower grades. The pupils who come here are not really likely to get a special consideration because of where they live or because they're on free school meals. There are a couple of students I know of who have transferred here into the sixth form, they've come from a private school, there's an assumption they'll stand a better chance of getting into a top university from a state school rather than from a private school.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

A pupil, on the other hand, thinks it is children from private schools that have the advantage when it comes to contextual offers.

One of my friends has an offer one grade lower than me to do the exact same course at the same university that I've applied to and that's like really unfair and I just don't understand why she can have a lower offer than me for the same course. She goes to a private school so it makes me wonder if that's why she's got a lower offer.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

Teachers and pupils cannot understand why particular decisions had been made or even if an offer was contextual or not.

By 17/18 Russell Group universities were making unconditional offers too. This was in a secondary modern, we had four grammar schools in the local area and our students weren't the high achievers. So it might have been that the universities were making contextual offers.

Head of Sixth Form, London Secondary School

Some universities seem to be making low offers rather than straight-forward unconditional offers. This might be a contextual offer but they don't make that clear.

Teacher, Essex Sixth Form College

Some teachers assumed a relationship between pupils having a place on a university outreach programme and gaining an offer from that institution. Participation in the scheme, rather than specific contextual data, seems to provide pupils with a better chance of admission.

We don't really hear about contextual offers as such but the pupils at our school are encouraged to go on as many schemes as possible, programmes organised by the Sutton Trust, summer schools run by Oxford and Cambridge - the universities look on them more positively if they've been on these courses. These courses are nearly all oversubscribed but if they're on free school meals, or from an ethnic minority, or live in a certain area, then that gets them onto the course. It doesn't guarantee they get a place at the university or even a lower offer, but it gets them through the door. It often seems that they get given offers because they've been on these courses so it works almost indirectly as a contextual offer.

Teacher, London Sixth Form College

There is concern that the existence of contextual offers has become an easy explanation for high achieving pupils who do not get accepted by the top universities and this could serve as a curb on the aspiration of the most able.

Some of our pupils, those from regular middle-class families, now seem to think that the odds are stacked against them when it comes to applying to university. This might be true in some cases but probably not in all cases. We don't really have any way of knowing. The problem is it can become an unhelpful excuse and stop them seeing all the advantages we do have. I think, as teachers, we just have to be more aware of the way the system is heading and get better at advising our pupils.

Teacher, Kent Secondary School

Some teachers and pupils disagree with the whole concept of contextual offers or think they are simply unnecessary. They point to high profile state schools from economically-deprived parts of London that have a record number of Oxbridge applicants.

One teacher suggested that pupils themselves do not agree with contextual offers.

Some kids disagree with this. They don't want what they see as a handout. I actually think it's fair enough for universities to make a judgement call about particular applicants. It's just when it stops being an informal, personalised exception and turns into this formal programme it sends out all the wrong messages.

Teacher, London Sixth Form College

Pressure to get pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds into top-ranking universities changes a school's approach to their A level classes.

There's huge pressure in the school where I work to get kids through the exams. There's a demand for social mobility, to take these kids from poor areas, where maybe no one in their family has been to university before, and get them into university. So we end up just teaching them directly all the time, cramming them, teaching by rote just to get them through the exams. You end up working against your own best instincts to meet the demands of the exams.

Teacher, London Sixth Form College

The drive to get pupils into top universities can mean that teachers are put under pressure by senior managers, parents or pupils themselves to make overly-generous A level predictions.

Over half of our pupils have got offers for Russell Group universities. The staff are really excited about this but a fair few will not get the grades they've been predicted. Some are way off. And this puts everyone under a lot more pressure.

Teacher, Kent Secondary School

One teacher spoke of higher education in general carrying little value in the minds of some groups of pupils. Contextual offers can only have an impact upon widening participation if students actually apply to university in the first place.

It seems that some bright working class kids, especially white working class kids, are not thinking of going to university at all. They haven't got any respect for universities. It's different for BME kids, they seem to value it more. But for working class kids it sometimes seems that the more higher education is instrumentalised, the more it's seen to be about getting a job, the less they value it. Perhaps they just think why bother if they can get a job without the hassle of going to university.

Teacher, Essex Sixth Form College

Changing the admissions process

The teachers and pupils we spoke with would like to see changes made to the university admissions process. All teachers and almost all pupils expressed a desire to see greater transparency in the way the system currently operates.

I think the universities should be a lot more open about how everything is sorted out. At the moment you just don't really know why decisions are made and these decisions can have an impact on the rest of your life.

Pupil, Kent Secondary School

There is a growing sense that the 'ticket price' demanded by universities, for students to have achieved particular A level grades, bore little relationship to a complex but opaque reality of unconditional offers, conditional unconditional offers, contextual offers, and lower grades for those who made an institution their first choice.

Universities might ask for 3 As at A level and this then puts us under pressure to predict 3 As so that our students get a foot in the door. We then have to pile on the pressure in our teaching and some of our students really worry about meeting these expectations. But then, when results day comes around, it turns out the students get the same places with far lower grades, or have their offers made unconditional, or even get a better place elsewhere through clearing. So it makes me wonder, is it all worth it? Wouldn't it be better if universities were more honest about the grades they are prepared to accept in the first place?

Teacher, Kent Secondary School

I'd like to see universities being far more realistic in the offers they make to students. Rather than setting the bar really high and then offering far lower offers or even unconditional places it would be easier all round if they just made one realistic offer and stuck to it.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

In relation to unconditional offers, almost every teacher agreed:

Universities just need to stop offering them!

Head of Sixth Form, London Secondary School

Pupils are more relaxed about unconditional offers in general. For them, the main issue is that admissions are seen to be fair.

They should make it so that unconditional offers are only given to people who can prove that they've worked hard, like they have to show some of their work or something like that.

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

Many pupils and teachers expressed a desire to see university application moved to after A level results are known.

I think it would be better if it was all sorted after the results came out, like everyone has to go through Clearing, or something like that.

Pupil, Middlesex Secondary School

What am I advocating? For students to apply to university once all their results are out. Teachers are really stretched with the new A level specifications, they are far more rigorous than we originally envisaged, so it would be a real push to move the exams to earlier in the year. Instead, to make it work, we'd need universities to start in November or at the end of October. Then students could have a bit of a gap year, or go and get some work experience and get some cash together for when they start university.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

Pupils disagree about the status and influence of teachers' predicted grades.

P1: Maybe more could depend on the teachers' predicted grades - like as a measure of how hard you work.

P2: No, that wouldn't work because then everyone would just spend all their time schmoozing the teachers and not concentrating on their work.

Pupils, Middlesex Secondary School

The role of personal statements was another area of disagreement. Some pupils wanted universities to take a more holistic approach to their application.

They should look more at the subjects you're doing and other things you do and not just at your grades.

Pupil, Kent Secondary School

They should make university offers more personal, so they really look at who you are and what you're good at, and make you an offer because of that, not just general offers to everyone.

Pupil, Essex Sixth Form College

Teachers expressed concern about wasted time and effort on personal statements that may not be read.

When it comes to clearing, universities are just looking at grades and not reading everyone's personal statements.

Assistant Headteacher, Independent School

Some teachers questioned the assumption that so many school leavers will go on to university.

I don't think the assumption that everyone who does A-levels should be going to university is at all welcome. We've hit Tony Blair's target of 50% going to university but this means that lots of kids end up going to university without any real sense of why they're going or what they're doing there.

Head of faculty, Middlesex Secondary School

I think I'd like to see fewer students going to university so that it's not seen as the only route to having a successful life. We're burdening young people not just with debt but with this expectation that they must go to university.

Head of Department, Middlesex Secondary School

I think it's wrong that we judge schools on how many students go on to university, we should look at the life chances that schools are offering their pupils more broadly.

Teacher, Kent Secondary School

3 Discussion Points

Student numbers

Currently, close to half of all 18- to 24-year-olds in England and Wales go on to university. In historical context, student numbers have grown rapidly over a short period of time. This has occurred despite a shift from away from 'block grant' funding direct to institutions and onto individual students in the form of (government subsidised) loans.

Tony Blair's target that 50 per cent of young adults should attend university was premised on two assumptions: first, that increasing student numbers was good for social inclusion, equality and diversity; and second, that more graduates would bring financial reward to the nation in the form of a more productive economy and to individuals who would reap an earnings premium. These two assumptions come together in the concept of social mobility: a child from a disadvantaged background who makes it to university will be more likely to secure permanent, well paid employment. Now we have hit Blair's target it is worth revisiting his assumptions.

A university degree carries no inherent financial value. Its worth varies with context and demand. Increasing the number of graduates does not, in and of itself, alter the productivity of the labour force or create new forms of employment. A degree is often simply a useful sorting mechanism for employers. This increases the competition for 'top' jobs and leads more students to consider postgraduate qualifications. Additionally, a large number of graduates fill roles that would, a generation earlier, have been performed by non-graduates.⁶³

While some graduates reap large financial rewards from attending university, others do not. Degrees in science, technology and engineering disciplines are more remunerative than degrees in arts and humanities fields.⁶⁴ Yet, currently, the structure of student finance means that taxpayers subsidise arts and humanities graduates to a far greater extent than students in other disciplines because courses are cheaper to run and graduate earnings are lower, meaning debt is less likely to be repaid.⁶⁵ If higher education is considered worthwhile in its own terms then this should not be seen as a problem. However, when economic returns are the sole measure of value, low graduate earnings are perceived as more difficult to justify. Meanwhile, those without degrees suffer most of all from the linking of higher education to employment as they are effectively barred from applying for many jobs. New divides emerge both in terms of economics and the socialisation of a generation of young adults.

At present, there is no significant cohort of young adults with the

63. For a fuller discussion of this point see Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter?*

64. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/New-IFS-report-on-graduate-earnings-by-degree-course.aspx>

65. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/13944>

prerequisite qualifications for university entry who are opting out of higher education. Going to university has become the norm for children from middle-class families but also for a significant section of working-class youngsters, most especially working-class women. In this way, particularly for those looking to enter professional occupations, a degree becomes not just an expectation but a fundamental requirement.

With half of all youngsters entering higher education, university becomes a rite of passage with an expectation of primarily economic and social, rather than knowledge-driven, outcomes. This ‘normalisation’ of university attendance has an impact upon schools and sixth form colleges. Rather than A levels being seen as a worthwhile end in themselves, or as a pathway to other routes post-qualification, there is a risk that they become reduced to a means of entering university. Although A levels are still considered extremely important by both teachers and pupils (arguably more important as more people go to university) there is nonetheless a sense that they are a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. Our research shows that the final year of compulsory education can be unduly determined by the changing demands of universities.

We need to move away from the view that sending ever more young adults to university is a marker of national success. By the same token, we need to challenge the view that getting into university is the sole marker of success for individual school leavers. Schools and sixth forms should be judged on a far wider range of outcomes. Not judging schools on how many pupils go on to university would incentivise teachers and school leaders to promote alternative routes.

There is no straightforward answer to the question of how many people should attend university. Any target referring to a particular proportion of the age cohort, when separated from the reason why people should go to university, becomes simply a target to be met for its own sake. Now that universities are incentivised to recruit as many students as possible, there is a perception that student recruitment is primarily driven by the business needs of institutions for fee-paying customers rather than the needs of students themselves.

A renewed sense of higher education as being primarily linked to the pursuit of knowledge, rather than economic or social objectives, would allow being a student to embody a more specific sense of purpose than simply the fulfilment of a rite of passage. Meanwhile, better vocational pathways for 18-year-olds, including high level apprenticeships and professional qualifications achieved in the workplace rather than in a university, can offer financially rewarding alternatives to higher education for young adults seeking a route into well paid employment.

Unconditional offers

As we have seen, there has been considerable growth in the rate at which universities make prospective students unconditional offers. In the most recent round of admissions for which data is available, 34 per cent of applicants received at least one offer with an unconditional component -

either a straightforward unconditional offer or a conditional offer which becomes unconditional following a firm acceptance.⁶⁶

The growth in unconditional offers has been driven by the shift towards funding higher education from tuition fees paid by individual students in conjunction with the removal of the cap on student numbers and the fall in the population of 18 year-olds. Unconditional offers allow universities to secure revenue streams at a time of increased competition between institutions.

Our research shows that unconditional offers, as well as conditional offers which become unconditional upon firm acceptance, impact upon the behaviour of prospective students. Unconditional offers may influence an applicant's choice of university; have a deleterious effect upon their motivation and effort, and result in them underperforming in final exams. Furthermore, teachers suggest that some pupils, particularly those lacking confidence in their own abilities, are more swayed by unconditional offers than others and this might result in them settling for a lower ranking university despite having the potential to succeed elsewhere. Teachers also note a 'tipping point' is reached when a significant proportion of pupils all holding unconditional offers has a disproportionate impact upon an entire cohort.

Data shows that pupils with unconditional offers are more likely to miss their predicted A level grades than those with conditional offers. Applicants with unconditional offers missed their targets by two grades or more in 67 per cent of cases, compared with 54 per cent of applicants with conditional offers.⁶⁷ Underperforming at A level can have a substantial impact on an individual's future direction, perhaps influencing their success in higher education as well as their future employment prospects. However, it should be noted that a majority of all applicants miss their predicted grades, irrespective of the type of offer they hold.

There is concern that, once at university, students who have not met specified entrance criteria may lack the prerequisite knowledge held by their peers. They may find it more difficult to meet academic expectations or to settle into studying if they have, effectively, had a prolonged period without working. They may require additional support in order to compensate for the work missed.

Unconditional offers are employed primarily as a marketing strategy. However, our research suggests that although unconditional offers often confirm an existing preference rather than fundamentally altering an applicant's decisions. Other factors, in particular course choice, proximity to home, and the views of family and friends, are also important in determining an applicant's preference. Unconditional offers may have diminishing returns for institutions. Some pupils express cynicism about their use and view universities that make unconditional offers as being 'desperate' for students at the expense of maintaining standards.

The mounting evidence of the negative impact of unconditional offers on school pupils, teachers, university students and the reputation of the higher education institutions that issue such offers should be sufficient to

66. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/nov/29/one-third-18-year-old-university-applicants-get-unconditional-offer>

67. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/nov/29/one-third-18-year-old-university-applicants-get-unconditional-offer>

call into question their use. Some universities, such as St Mary's University in Twickenham, have announced plans to end the practice.⁶⁸ However, it is important that all universities, as autonomous institutions, are free to set their own admissions criteria.

There needs to be a far more critical appraisal of the reasons why unconditional offers are being made. For example, institutions make conditional offers that become unconditional upon firm acceptance simply to consolidate a customer base. This is not in the best interests of schools or students and this practice must end.

There may, however, be good reasons for universities to make some students unconditional offers; for example, in cases where mature applicants have already met entry requirements. For this reason, rather than recommending an outright prohibition on unconditional offers, we strongly urge universities to stop their routine use in all but exceptional circumstances.

The extent to which all students miss their target grades calls into question the use of such an unreliable measure in the admissions process. Notably, black applicants are considerably more likely than any other ethnic group to miss their predicted A-level grades.⁶⁹ At present, we do not know why this is the case. It may be that black pupils are less well rehearsed in exam technique than white peers at schools with a longer tradition of securing entry to top universities. Alternatively, it may be that well-intentioned teachers are more likely to over-predict for some groups of pupils.

Our research suggests that teachers may be under pressure from pupils, parents and senior leaders within the school to be generous in their predictions as a means of providing youngsters with the best chance of having their application considered by a higher ranking institution. This practice can put undue pressure on pupils and teachers and can mean that a gap opens up between the grades universities ask for and the grades they accept in practice. This, in turn, further incentivises generous predictions.

Given that predicted grades can be an unreliable indicator of an applicant's achievements and are open to manipulation by schools, their role in the admissions process should be lessened. One option may be for predictions and targets to be a matter for pupils, teachers and parents and not routinely shared with universities. In this way, predicted grades could be used by applicants to guide their choice of institution but not by universities in making offers.

A move towards a post-qualification admissions process would allow all university places to be awarded once applicants know their exam results. This would make predicted grades, unconditional and contextual offers redundant. Currently, the UK is one of the only countries in the world where pupils not only apply to university but are also offered places before they have taken final examinations. This puts pressure on teachers and pupils and increases uncertainty for universities.

Under a post-qualifications admissions system, pupils could submit applications while still in school and able to access advice and guidance from their teachers, as they do currently, but would not receive offers from universities, or have places confirmed, until their exam results are known.

68. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/st-marys-university-twickenham-london-unconditional-offers-ucas-a-levels-grades-degrees-a8610171.html>

69. <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/fact-check-why-do-so-few-black-students-go-to-ox-bridge>

Rather than applying to five separate universities, applicants would narrow their choice to three universities at the outset. In order for such a system to operate, A level exams may need to be sat slightly earlier, or the academic year may have to begin a little later, to allow for the additional time needed to administer places after exam results have been released

We recommend that the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the Office for Students (OfS) and the Department for Education should undertake a review of university admissions processes specifically with a view to moving to a post-qualification admissions system. We recognise that such a consultation was last carried out by UCAS in 2012.⁷⁰ However, the past seven years has witnessed considerable changes to admissions practice; for example, the government-imposed cap on student recruitment has been lifted and increasing numbers of students are now offered unconditional university places.

Contextual Offers

Contextual offers are being increasingly employed by universities as a means of demonstrating compliance with Access Agreements and ensuring they are able to charge students the maximum amount of fees.

It is assumed that contextual offers are a fair way to compensate applicants with academic potential who underperform because of disadvantages associated with their economic circumstances, the area they live in or the school they attend. In some cases, the formalisation and increased use of contextual offers reduces complex details of a candidate's life and future academic potential to their postcode. This simplistic approach leads institutions towards simplistic solutions: candidates labelled disadvantaged are offered places one or two grades lower than the standard offer. Our research suggests that the lack of transparency around contextual offers creates a perception of unfairness among teachers and applicants.

The linking of access agreements to university funding means that contextual offers have become widely (though differentially) taken on board by universities but with little discussion as to their impact. Social inclusion and academic excellence are not always mutually compatible aims. Higher education institutions maintain there has been no associated decline in the 'quality' of their student intakes, but are conducting internal research on the outcomes for widening participation students to verify this.⁷¹

There is undoubtedly a correlation between deprivation indices and lower formal academic achievement. However, the existence of this correlation tells us little about either the causes of underperformance or the best means of overcoming a link between social and educational disadvantage. The expectation that universities should compensate for underperformance risks entrenching educational disadvantage through normalising the assumption that pupils on free school meals or from schools in deprived areas will perform less well than others.

Furthermore, the use of contextual offers means that although all admitted students may have the potential to succeed, they do not all start with the same prior knowledge. This again risks further entrenching

70. https://www.ucas.com/file/776/download?token=6U_ClbPI

71. Fair Education Alliance (July 2018) Putting fairness in context: using data to widen access to higher education

disadvantage. Latest data on university drop out rates shows that although there has been a slight decline in overall drop out rates, there has been a slight increase among students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2016-2017, the proportion of students leaving a university programme before completion was 6.3 per cent. For the most disadvantaged students this stood at 8.8 per cent, up from 8.6 per cent the previous year. London Metropolitan University had a drop out rate of 18.6 per cent, almost one in five students leaving before their degree was completed. In comparison, the University of Cambridge had a drop out rate of just 1 per cent.⁷²

There are many reasons why students may decide not to continue with higher education. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds this may be a complicated array of financial and personal concerns, for example, some may be juggling university with a job and caring responsibilities. Some may feel they do not receive enough support from their institution.

Contextual and unconditional offers are designed to widen participation to students from more diverse backgrounds but having differential entrance requirements may make the transition to higher education more challenging for some students than others. The role of academic ability and preparedness for higher education may also be a factor in some students deciding not to continue. Contextual and unconditional offers encourage some students to embark upon higher education with a lower level of prior knowledge than their peers. Although some may have the capacity to overcome this initial disadvantage, others may struggle to catch up.

The aim of widening participation so that universities are not the preserve of a social elite is admirable. However, contextual offers risk reinforcing a culture of low educational expectations for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We recommend that universities should only use contextual offers on an exceptional, case by case, basis. Contextual offers are appropriate for candidates who have experienced a specific problem in the run up to their exams, for example a bereavement, that may have had a detrimental impact upon their performance.

Universities looking to promote social equality and widen participation should look beyond contextual offers and instead work to ensure that all children receive a high quality educational experience prior to applying to university so that pupils who have faced disadvantage have a chance of success. One idea might be for universities to establish links with local schools. Lecturers and even postgraduate students could be encouraged to work alongside teachers, sharing their subject expertise, perhaps through the development of resources, bringing teachers up to date with latest disciplinary developments or even teaching certain topics either to a whole class or a small group of pupils.

72. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/07-03-2019/non-continuation-summary>

Conclusions

Over the past five years there have been significant changes to the way in which universities recruit students:

- Universities now recruit more students in total and a greater proportion of the age cohort
- More applicants are allocated places through clearing and adjustment
- Universities make greater use of unconditional offers
- Universities make greater use of contextual offers

These changes can be linked to shifts in national higher education policy, in particular: the increase in tuition fees payable by individual students; the lifting of the cap on the number of students each institution can recruit; and the demand that institutions seeking to charge students the maximum permissible fee should have access agreements in place setting out how they will increase diversity and widen participation to under-represented groups.

Universities, encouraged by successive governments to compete against each other in a higher education marketplace, have responded to these changes in a way that best protects their financial interests by securing a customer base.

Yet, as our research presented here shows, there is evidence that changes to student recruitment are having a detrimental impact upon practice in schools and sixth form colleges. Notably:

- Pupils with unconditional offers are less motivated to work for their A levels
- Pupils with unconditional offers perform less well in their A levels than they may have done otherwise
- A 'tipping point' is reached when a certain proportion of pupils with unconditional offers can have an impact upon a cohort as a whole
- Confusion about the methods universities employ to award contextual offers leaves teachers unsure as to how best to advise applicants
- The lack of transparency with contextual offers leads to a sense of unfairness in the application process
- Teachers feel under pressure to game the admissions process through making overly-generous grade predictions

Although beyond the remit of this report, there may also be evidence that changes to recruitment have an impact upon what happens in universities; for example, there are reports of higher drop-out rates; grade inflation and lower financial returns to some degree courses. There is concern contextual and unconditional offers may impact upon the motivation and achievement of students once at university; in particular, an attainment gap for BME students has been noted.

Nonetheless, recent changes to university admissions processes have occurred with minimal discussion. Instead, almost all debate has focused upon issues of funding higher education. Yet changes to admissions practice raise fundamental issues about how many students should go to university and what higher education is for.

In the absence of discussion, a view has arisen that increasing student numbers is, by default, good practice. Increasing student numbers allows universities to secure revenue streams while simultaneously widening participation and fulfilling a social justice mission. However, whether this practice is in the best interests of students or the best interests of higher education more broadly, is debatable.

When the aims of higher education are discussed at all, they are primarily expressed in financial terms in relation to graduate's increased earnings. In this way, higher education is presented as a crude investment of time and money in exchange for a future return in the workplace. Allowing all who want it and especially those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, to access this graduate premium is considered socially and morally just.

Criticising universities for issuing unconditional offers, and thereby following the principles of marketisation, is to criticise them for enacting policies that have been set in place over many decades. Clearly, the impact of marketisation cannot simply be wished away. As we have seen, marketisation is not solely bound up with paying fees. It represents a broader cultural approach to the value of knowledge in general and higher education in particular. The challenge for universities now is to accept marketisation but also to value education for its own sake. In order to ameliorate the impact of unconditional offers we need to encourage a valuing of education that goes beyond the mechanisms of the market.

Arguments that university should have a relationship to the attainment and development of disciplinary knowledge are, at best, accepted with qualification or, at worst, derided as outdated and elitist. There is little sense of knowledge or education being important as an end in itself. Instead, education is valued primarily as a means to an end. Credentials are transferable for further study or employment opportunities and they are valued in this regard. Students are left with few models with which to identify other than that of consumer, seeking the most remunerative product for minimal effort. By this logic, A levels are considered valuable as a route to higher education, and that route becomes available regardless, then there is no longer incentive to achieve at A level.

Reinvigorating a sense of purpose for higher education that takes us beyond the socially or economically instrumental paves the way for

a discussion about how many people should go to university that goes beyond the assumption that more is necessarily better. When university is considered in relation to knowledge then A levels become important as a marker of what a student knows rather than a simple points tally. Unconditional and contextual offers could then be granted to students who are able to demonstrate having mastered comparable knowledge through alternative means or relevant experience.

Recommendations

1 Move to a post-qualification admissions system.

Currently, the UK is one of the only countries in the world where pupils not only apply to university but are also offered places before they have taken final examinations. This puts pressure on teachers and pupils and increases uncertainty for universities. Under a post-qualifications admissions system, pupils could continue to apply to university while still at school but no offers would be made, or places allocated, until final exam results are known. A-level exams may need to be sat slightly earlier, or the academic year may have to begin a little later, in order for additional time to administer places after results have been released.

2 Stop the routine use of unconditional offers.

Universities should not make students unconditional offers other than in exceptional circumstances, for example in cases where mature applicants have already met entry requirements. Conditional offers that become unconditional upon firm acceptance are designed simply to consolidate a customer base. This is not in the best interests of schools or students and this practice must end.

3 Remove predicted grades from the application process.

Grade predictions, like academic targets, should be a matter for pupils, teachers and parents and not routinely shared with universities.

4 Stop the routine use of contextual offers.

Universities should not make students contextual offers other than on an exceptional, case by case, basis. Universities looking to promote social inclusion and equality of opportunity should establish a close and deep network of partner schools in order to support the education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

5 End higher education as a 'rite of passage'.

A-levels need to be considered worthwhile qualifications in their own right. Schools should promote a wide range of alternative routes to all pupils, including apprenticeships, employment, professional qualifications and higher education. We need more focus on the needs of young adults who do not go to university.

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“Policy Exchange’s excellent report highlights the damage unconditional offers can do to students’ motivation and how they can undermine sixth form education more broadly. The enormous rise in the number of these offers is a worrying development and I am persuaded by the argument that they should be scrapped, apart from in exceptional circumstances.”

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