



# Widening Participation: Contextual Admissions Recommendations

---

## INTRODUCTION

As stipulated in the College's internal governance structure, Academic Board (AcB) is responsible for the oversight of admissions and changes in admissions policy.

The original Contextual Admissions proposal was prepared in 2019, in line with the College's Access and Participation Plans 2019-20 and 2020-25 and sets out the case for the introduction of contextual admissions (within a rigorous and holistic process) and sought AcB approval for the introduction of a scheme for 2020 entry and beyond.

'Contextual admissions' is the term used to describe the use of further information, such as socio-economic background and school performance when assessing applicants and making offers. The term 'contextual admissions' relates to schemes that recognise that students from defined educational/social backgrounds should have that background considered in the offer grade(s) required for admission.

Since the implementation of Contextual Admissions for 2020 entry and beyond, the policy has enabled the admissions team to identify applicants with the greatest potential to succeed in higher education, rather than relying on the highest-ranked exam results alone. In addition, the College's efforts in promoting Fair Access to Higher Education is reflective of the increased number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds enrolling.

Throughout the academic year 2020-21, students enrolled through the contextual admissions policy were monitored by the Director of Academic Services, Head of Student Support and Development, and the Lead on Academic Engagement. An initial report of the progress of these students has been prepared and is tabled alongside this paper. The findings in that report have informed the recommendation in this report in relation to the continuation and development of the contextual admissions programme at the College.

As of December 2021, the OfS is still in support of Contextual Admissions initiatives for improving access of the most unrepresented groups. The OfS is now placing greater weight on retention of the underrepresented groups that access higher education through contextual admissions.

## CONTEXTUAL OFFERS WITHIN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Contextual offers are widely used across the higher education sector. Some examples from institutions that the College directly competes are outlined below:

1. Contextual information is used when reviewing applications, but do not result in a lower grade offer. University of Cambridge uses contextual information to offer

interviews to applicants who may fall slightly below their academic entry requirements. If the applicant is successful at interview, they will still need to meet the academic requirements of the programme.

2. Contextual information is used to reduce an offer by up to two A-Level grades. Universities such as LSE, University of Bristol and University of Birmingham use geodemographic information and other socio-economic criteria to flag applicants who are eligible for contextual offers. These offers are generally lower than the university's standard offer by two A-Level grades and are automatically awarded to applicants who meet the entry requirements of the programme.
3. Some universities such as UCL, KCL and University of Liverpool require students who meet the contextual admissions markers to participate in an access or outreach programme. These programmes generally require the applicant to partake in a range of activities or courses aimed at supporting their entry into higher education and preparing them for university level study. Applicants who successfully complete these programmes are guaranteed a conditional offer and tend to a reduced offer. Currently, the College does not have the resources to provide pre-College support although there have been initial discussions with Northeastern about how existing teaching could be utilised for the purposes of a contextual admissions process. These discussions are very much in their infancy and no firm plans have been agreed. In the absence of pre-College training, it is recommended that the College's contextual offers scheme should be limited as indicated below.

### **WHO SHOULD RECEIVE A CONDITIONAL OFFER?**

Extensive research carried out by universities and organisations such as Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) shows that 'socio-economic background, where you live, type of school attended, and subject choice can all impact on attainment and therefore progression to higher education.'

Below is a list of factors that are considered by various contextual offer schemes within the higher education sector:

- Geodemographic information: POLAR 4 (Participation of Local Areas), based on the proportion of the young population that participates in higher education, and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) which analyses a post code and takes into consideration income, employment health deprivation and disability, education skills and training, barriers to housing and services, crime and living environment.
- Schooling: If the applicant has attended an underperforming state school. This can include both GCSE and A-Level performance.
- Care: If the applicant has been in local authority care for a specified period of time.
- Disability: Applicant has disclosed having a disability in their application.
- Other social factors including first in family to attend university, receipt of free school meals, local area applicant, and low-income household.

### **THE PROPOSED MODIFICATIONS TO THE COLLEGE'S CONTEXTUAL OFFER SCHEME**

Following the success of the contextualised admissions scheme to increase enrolment of students from underrepresented groups, the Admissions and Widening Participation teams are eager to continue with the contextual admissions policy. It is also planned that the College will

continue to monitor contextual admissions students in order to gain a complete understanding of the impact of contextual admissions on student success and what interventions and support may be needed to enable parity of outcome with their non-disadvantaged peers.

Any contextual offer scheme should ensure that it targets the relevant students. In this regard, it is important that the College reviews all available information contained within the applicant's application. It is also important that the College reviews the criteria used to determine an applicant's eligibility for a contextual offer on an annual basis as part of the College's regular review of admissions processes, together with sector practice. Below are the factors that should be considered within the College's contextual admission scheme for the 2021-22 cycle and to be reviewed in the summer of 2022.

### **POLAR AND/OR IMD**

The most basic measure employed by the OfS in establishing students from underrepresented groups is POLAR4 data.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of the College's APP and widening participation performance, the OfS considers students from the lowest two quintiles (1 and 2).

While POLAR4 data tends to capture the majority of applicants who would be eligible for a contextual offer, a few applicants from low socio-economic backgrounds do not fall in the low POLAR range. For example, one of the College's current offer holders is from an area that has the highest POLAR4 (quintile 5) classification, however, when considering the wider metric of IMD<sup>2</sup> is in the bottom 20% deprived areas in the UK.

As such, it is advised that the College continues its use of both measures with the following relevant criteria:

- **POLAR4 (quintiles 1 and 2) and/or**
- **IMD (for England only)<sup>3</sup> (bottom 20%).**

### **UNDERPERFORMING STATE SCHOOLS**

Applicants who are taking their A-Levels, IB Diploma, BTEC, Access to HE Diploma, or equivalent qualifications at a underperforming state school are flagged in the contextualised admissions scheme. This information is provided on the government website and is used by the College to determine relevant candidates. This information is typically updated on a yearly basis, however, because of the COVID-19 pandemic the recommended list is dated from 2019 and is list that should be used. The College will continue to use the current criteria to assess whether an applicant comes from a low performing school, which is state schools whose average Level 3 results are below the national average.

### **CARE LEAVERS**

Currently, applicants are asked about any care history on the UCAS application form, similar to the College's direct application form, where a question concerning care background was included from 2020 and beyond. For the 2019-20 and 2020-21 admissions cycle, it was

---

<sup>1</sup> The participation of local areas (POLAR) classification groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of the young population that participates in higher education - quintile 1 being the lowest levels of participation, quintile 5 being the highest levels.

<sup>2</sup> Indices of Multiple Deprivation - is a deprivation index at the small area level, created by the British Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). It is unusual in its inclusion of a measure of geographical access as an element of deprivation and in its direct measure of poverty.

<sup>3</sup> The following deprivation indexes will be used for the other devolved nations of the United Kingdom: SIMD for Scotland, WIMD for Wales, and NIMD for Northern Ireland.

recommended that applicants who had been in Local Authority Care for a minimum of three months within the previous two years would be eligible for a contextual offer. Following a review of the Colleges' admissions process from these two cycles, together with sector practice, it was deemed that an applicant who had been in Local Authority Care for any period of time within their secondary school studies would significantly impact an applicant. As a result, for the 2022-23 admissions cycle.

### **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

It is recommended that the following criteria will apply to assess whether an applicant is considered a care leaver:

- **Applicants who have been in Local Authority Care for any period of time within their secondary school studies.**

### **DISABILITY**

The issue of defining specific disability (physical and/or mental) is a sensitive issue. On review of sector practice, universities generally do not include detailed criteria for when disability will be taken into consideration for the purposes of contextual offers. Given this background and a review of the Colleges' admissions process from the 2019-20 admissions cycle, while a student declared disability is noted, such students are not eligible for contextual admissions. This was implemented for the 2020-21 admissions cycle. The College will continue not to consider an applicant for contextual admissions who disclose a disability on their application.

### **ELIGIBILITY FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS (FSM) OR PUPIL PREMIUM**

Following a review of the Colleges' admissions process from the 2019-20 admissions cycle as well as the inclusion of this data for UCAS applicants from August 2020 onwards, it became clear that greater weight should be placed on a student's eligibility for free school meals when assessing a student's eligibility for a contextual offer. To match the inclusion of this data from UCAS, an additional question was added to the academic reference form for direct applicants to ask if the applicant is in receipt of free school meals for the 2020-21 admissions cycle onwards. The College will continue to use the FSM criteria in assessments for contextualised admissions for the 2022-23 cycle.

### **STUDENT ESTRANGEMENT FROM PARENTS/GUARDIANS**

Following a review of the Colleges' admissions processes from the 2019-20 and 2020-21 admissions cycles, as well as sector practice, it becomes clear that student estrangement from parents/guardians should be given greater weight when assessing a student's eligibility for a contextual offer. While estranged students have always been considered (and continue to be) for a full bursary award from the College, it is clear that the impact of estrangement on younger students goes beyond a lack of financial support, but also emotional and family support, to name a few.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

It is recommended that for the 2022-23 admissions cycle, the following estranged student criteria should be used in assessments for contextualised admissions:

- **Applicants under the age of 25 who are estranged from their parents/guardians and are thus independent**

### **FIRST IN FAMILY**

The College will continue with its policy that an applicant who is the first in the family to enter higher education will not be eligible to be considered for a contextual offer.

### **OFFER CONDITIONS**

Regarding the level of offer provided to applicants who qualify for the contextualised offer scheme, the College should continue to be limited to a maximum of two A-level grades (or equivalent). This approach is taken based on the College's current resources and current lack of pre-College support. The College will continue to use the following offer conditions:

1. One grade below standard entry requirement of AAB (or equivalent) to applicants who meet one of the criteria outlined above - equating to an offer of ABB
2. two grades below standard entry requirements of AAB (or equivalent) to those who meet two of the criteria outlined above - equating to an offer of BBB.

**Hayley Pazmino**

Widening Participation Manager

**Mollie Charge**

Head of Admissions

January 2022