

What do students think about contextual admissions?

Foreword

By Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI

Contextualised offers occur when a higher education provider responds to an applicant's personal circumstances by offering a lower entry bar. So, for example, a UK university might reduce the A-Level grades they require for someone from a disadvantaged area.

Until recently, this was very controversial and was regularly caricatured as 'social engineering'. In 2003, leading independent schools thought the practices at one university were so unfair that they launched a boycott – although a lack of evidence meant this soon fizzled out.¹

Some of the heat has dissipated, helped in part by official endorsements of contextualised offers. The 2011 higher education white paper said: 'The Government believes that this is a valid and appropriate way for institutions to broaden access while maintaining excellence, so long as individuals are considered on their merits, and institutions' procedures are fair, transparent and evidence-based.'² In Scotland, Government pressure has led institutions to publish a standard entry tariff and a second for 'contextually flagged' students.³

The removal of student number controls in England after the big increase in tuition fees also removed some of the issue's political toxicity. Enrolling more students from disadvantaged backgrounds no longer had to come at the expense of others – although providing lower offers to certain applicants can still make the front pages.⁴

Despite the importance of contextualised offers, students have been missing from much of the conversation. The regular HEPI / YouthSight Monitor, established in 2015, has a track record of covering topics where the student voice should be important but has not been properly researched or amplified – such as on free speech and institutional failure.⁵ So we have now polled students on the fairness, prevalence and wisdom of contextualised offer-making.

Key points

- Three-quarters of full-time undergraduates (73%) say it is harder to achieve good exam results if you grow up in a disadvantaged area. Only one-in-four (23%) students disagree.
- Most students (72%) think higher education admissions should take account of applicants' backgrounds. Just 23% oppose this.
- Roughly half of students (47%) back making lower grade offers to those from disadvantaged areas, although nearly as many (45%) oppose this.
- Support for contextual offers is stronger among students at the most selective (Russell Group) universities, with 57% in favour and 36% opposed.

- Few students think lower offers 'would make it harder for students like me to get into university'. Just 28% of students agree while a majority (53%) disagree.
- Two-thirds (65%) of students do not know if their university makes contextual grade offers. Just 16% are certain their university makes contextualised offers.
- Most students (54%) think students admitted with lower grades would be able to keep up with the course requirements, although four-in-ten students (38%) disagree.

Background

The Office for Students, which regulates higher education providers in England, has adopted some very ambitious access targets.

In 2018, 18-year olds from the most advantaged areas were 2.4 times more likely to enter higher education and 5.7 times more likely to enter higher-tariff (more academically selective) institutions than those from the least advantaged areas.⁶ For higher-tariff institutions, the Office for Students wants to reduce this ratio from approximately 5:1 currently to 3:1 by 2024/25 and 1:1 by 2038/39.⁷

The Office for Students regards contextual admissions as one important tool for closing this gap. Contextual admissions consider the personal circumstances of applicants that can affect academic attainment, such as:

- being the first in their family to attend higher education;
- low parental income;
- coming from a poorly-performing school;
- living in an area where fewer people reach higher education; or
- specific personal characteristics, such as being a care leaver or a refugee or having a disability.

With contextual offers, the entry offer is reduced by at least one grade in one subject compared to the standard offer for that course, though it may involve several grades across many or all subjects. Scottish higher education institutions,

which are judged against ambitious targets set by the Scottish Government, have adopted separate entry requirements for disadvantaged students from 2020 onwards.⁸

Contextual offers are based on the idea that the context in which people live can mean their qualifications do not reflect their abilities. The 2004 Schwartz Report into university admissions noted 'equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential' and it is 'fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances'.⁹

Vikki Boliver and colleagues from the University of Durham have demonstrated the numerical necessity of contextual admissions if participation gaps are to be closed, given long-standing attainment gaps. In 2017, they showed: 'Just 1 per cent of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieve AAA or better at A-Level (or its equivalent) by age 18, compared to 20 per cent of all other children educated in English state schools.'¹⁰

The same research team has shown that, if higher-tariff institutions wish to admit the top 10 per cent of pupils eligible for Free School Meals, it could require lowering entry tariffs to the equivalent of BCC at A-Level. If medium-tariff institutions were to take the next 10 per cent, then their entry tariff would need to be DDD.¹¹

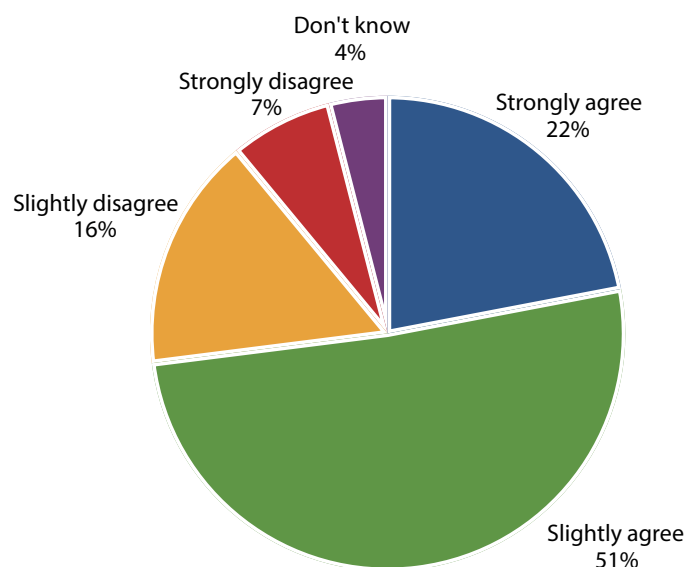
Yet, where institutions are making contextual offers to disadvantaged applicants, the grade reductions are usually fairly modest, at just one or two grades. Boliver and her colleagues argue, in contrast, that 'it is possible to reduce entry requirements significantly for contextually disadvantaged learners without jeopardising their chances of succeeding at degree level'.¹² However, as key measures like non-continuation rates are higher for students with lower entry grades, there remains an important challenge in making sure each university provides the necessary support to help all their students succeed.

To date, little has been known about what students think, with the Office for Students' complaining, 'There has been minimal research on students' views of contextual offers.'¹³ To address this gap, Wave 6 of the HEPI / Youthsight Monitor asked full-time undergraduate students across the UK for their views on contextual admissions.

Results

Achievement in examinations like A-Levels and GCSEs is strongly affected by socio-economic background.¹⁴ **Most students seem aware of the link between background and achievement: 73% strongly or slightly agree that 'growing up in a disadvantaged area makes it harder to achieve good A-Level grades'.** Just 23% slightly or strongly disagree.

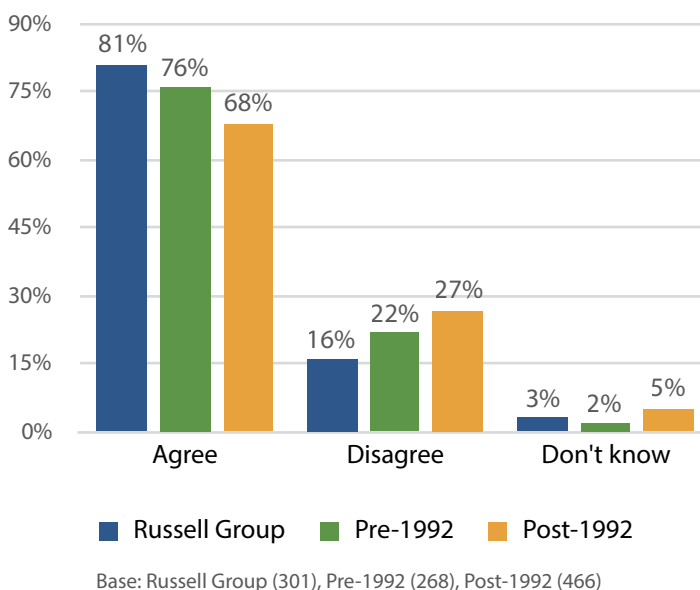
'Growing up in a disadvantaged area makes it harder to achieve good A Levels'



Most students from all backgrounds support this view, but the most advantaged students are more likely to support it: 78% of students from the fifth most educationally advantaged areas agree with the statement, compared to 69% of students from the least educationally advantaged areas.¹⁵

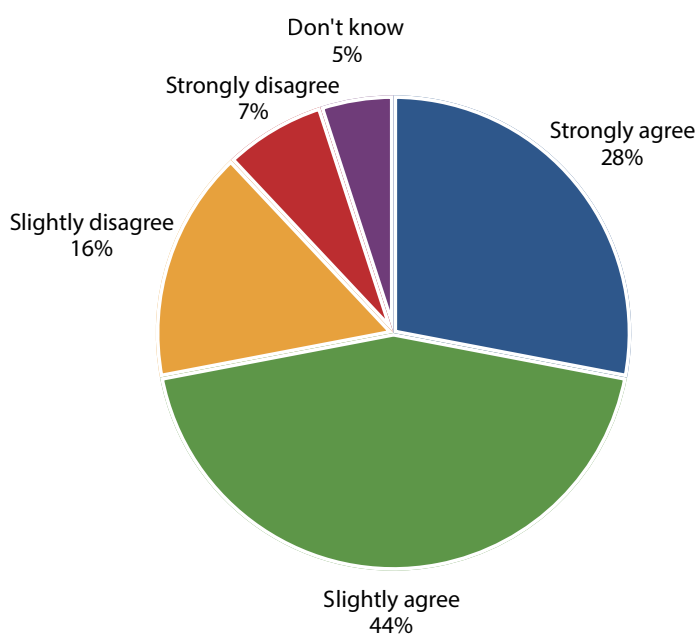
There are also marked differences by type of university attended: 81% of students at Russell Group universities support the statement, compared to 68% of students at post-1992 universities.

'Growing up in a disadvantaged area makes it harder to achieve good A Levels'

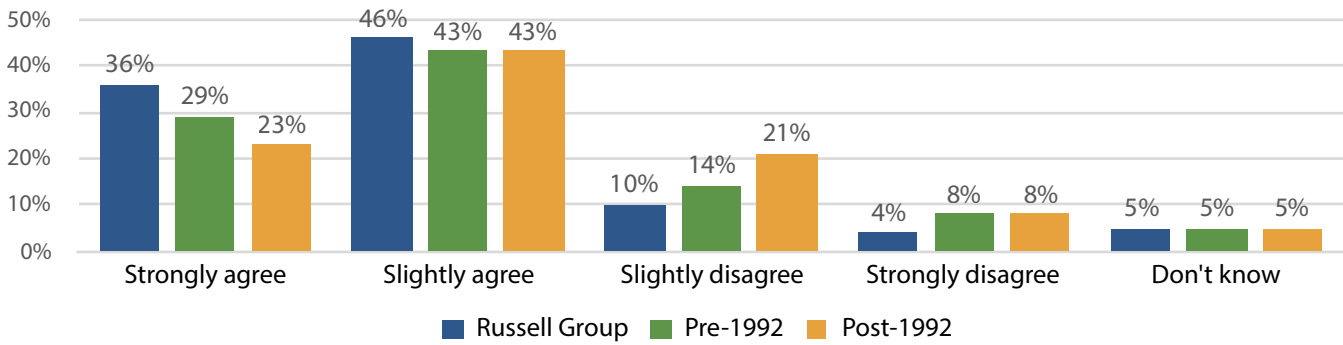


Nearly three-quarters of students (72%) believe university admissions should take account of applicants' backgrounds, while 23% oppose this. The breakdown is strikingly similar to the answers provided to the previous question. So we can say with confidence that most students believe someone's background matters and that most students think this should be taken into account in admission to higher education.

'It is the job of university admissions to think about applicants' backgrounds'



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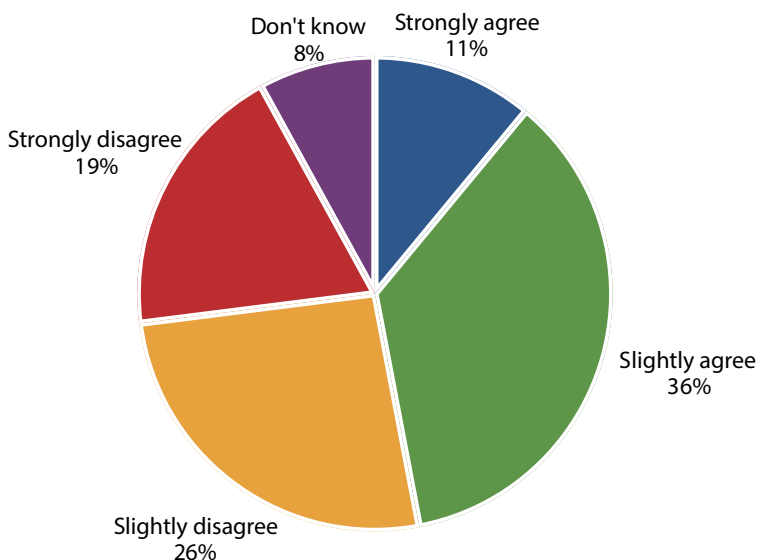


Base: Russell Group (301), Pre-1992 (268), Post-1992 (466)

Students at Russell Group universities are more likely to support admissions staff considering the background of applicants: 82% agree compared to 66% at post-1992 universities. Russell Group institutions tend to be both more selective and less diverse than universities as a whole, meaning they may have a greater need for contextual admissions. It is interesting that students at institutions most likely to be affected by contextualised admissions offer the highest levels of support.

On the specific idea of giving applicants from tougher backgrounds a lower grade offer, support is more balanced. **Nearly half of students (47%) support making lower offers to students from disadvantaged areas but a similar proportion and nearly all the rest oppose it (45%).**

'Students who grow up in disadvantaged areas should be made a lower grade offer than other students'



Respondents could provide text responses to the question 'How do you feel about this specific type of offer?' Some of the responses suggest contextualised offers based on more sensitive criteria than place of residence enjoy support.

This chimes with the wider technical critique of the accuracy of postcode measures of disadvantage.¹⁶

- I feel like individual circumstances should be taken into account, eg; just because the area is poor doesn't mean the person is, each individual should be assessed.*

Female second-year student at a Post 1992 university

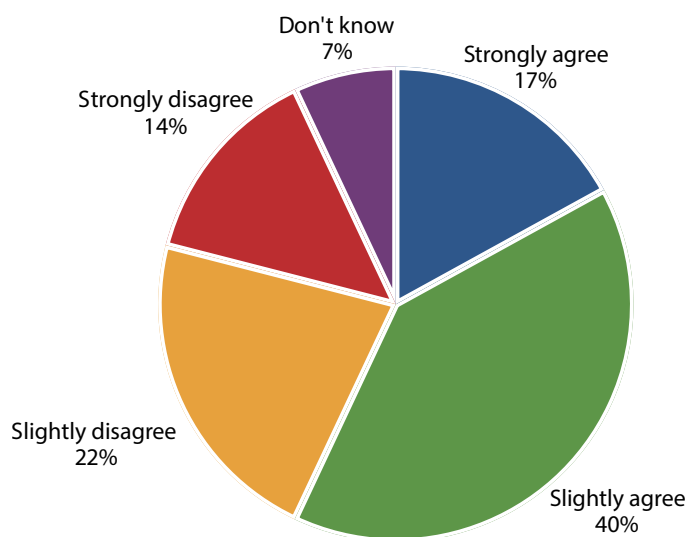
- Ok it's slightly unfair for those who live in poorer livelihoods but live just outside the zone / catchment area*

Male second-year student at a Pre-1992 university

Students at Russell Group universities are more likely to support contextual offers: 57% strongly or slightly agree while 36% slightly or strongly disagree.

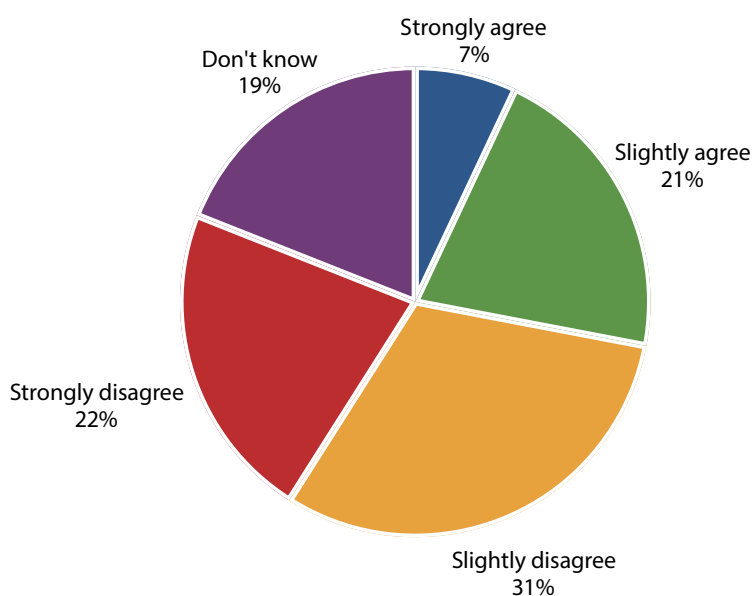
Few students think lower offers 'would make it harder for students like me to get into university'. Just 28% of students strongly or slightly agree while a majority (53%) strongly or slightly disagree.

Russell Group: 'Students who grow up in disadvantaged areas should be made a lower grade offer than other students'



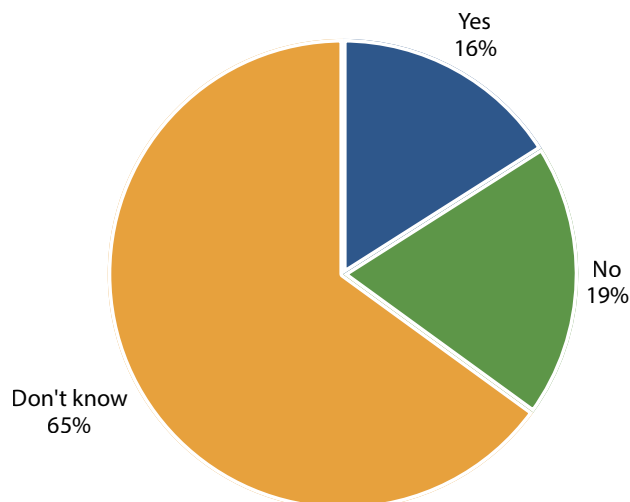
Base: Russell Group (301)

'Making lower grade offers to students from disadvantaged backgrounds would make it harder for students like me to get into university'



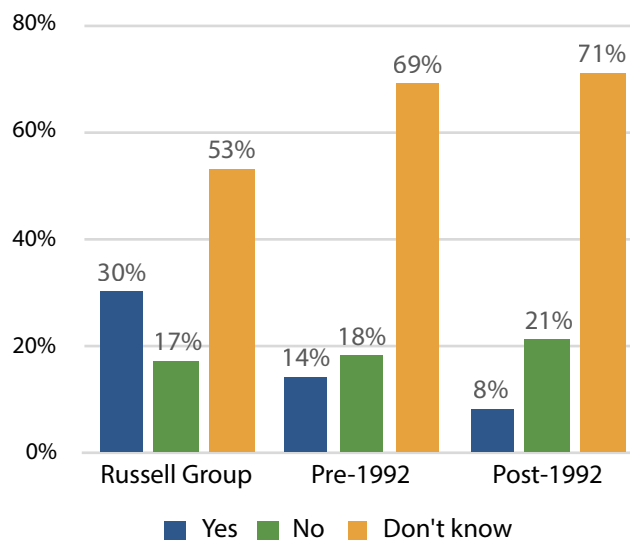
Awareness of the prevalence of contextual offers is fairly low, even among current students, two-thirds of whom (65%) do not know if their university makes contextual offers. Just one-in-six (16%) are certain that it does and one-in-five (19%) are certain that it does not.

Does your university/higher education institution make lower grade offers to some students from disadvantaged backgrounds?



The proportion of students who know their institution makes contextual offers is higher at Russell Group universities (30%) than average. However, even in Russell Group universities over half (53%) of students do not know if their institution makes contextualised offers.

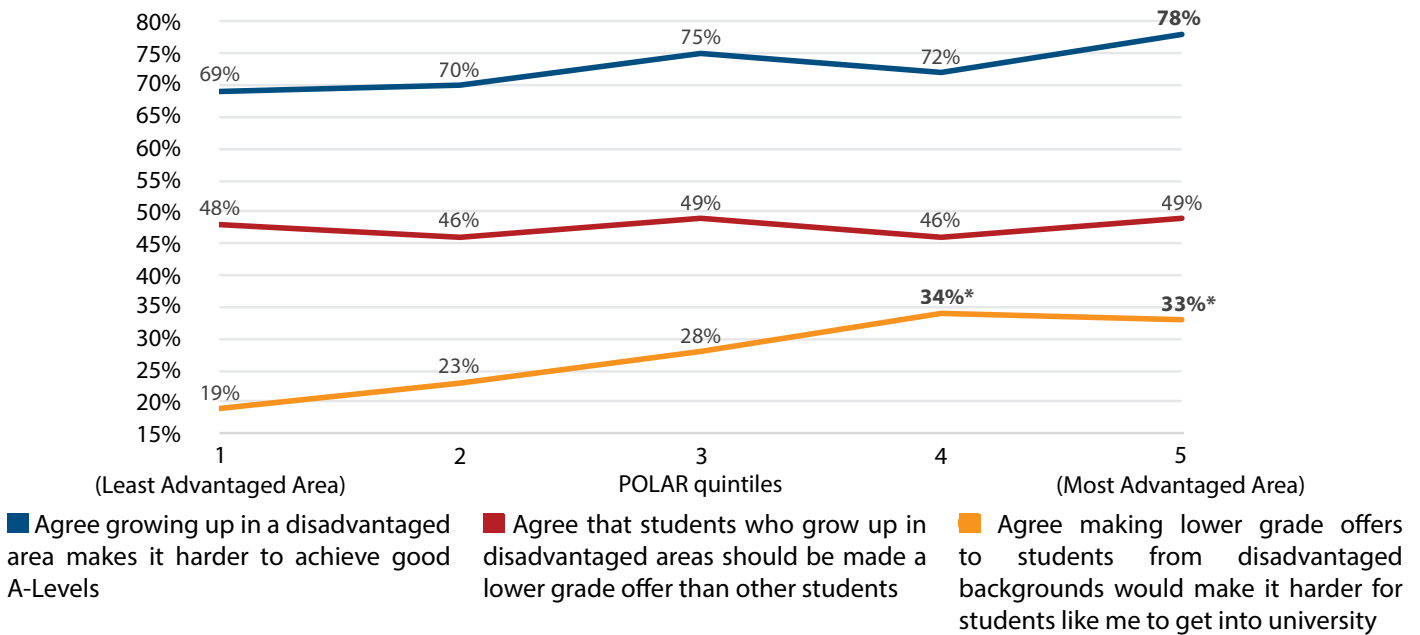
'Does your university/higher education institution make lower grade offers to some students from disadvantaged backgrounds?'



Base: Russell Group (301), Pre-1992 (268), Post-1992 (466)

Although students from educationally advantaged areas are more likely to believe that prior disadvantage makes it harder to secure good A-Levels and to believe admissions staff should consider applicants' backgrounds, they are no more likely than other students to support contextualised offers.

Views of educationally advantaged and disadvantaged students

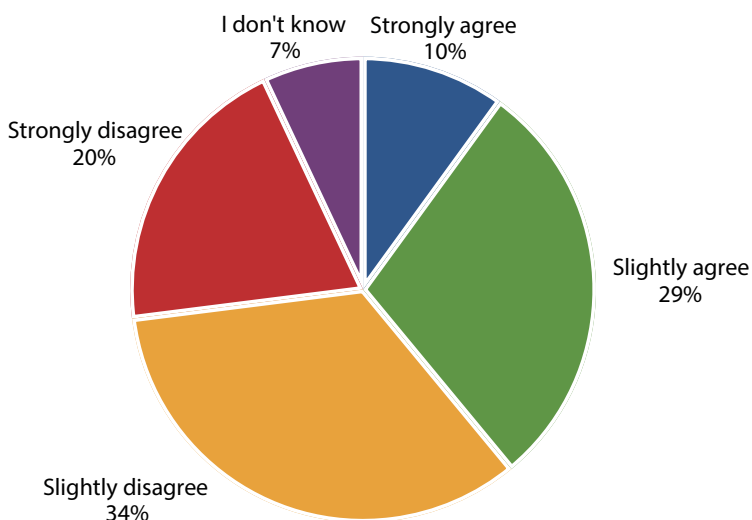


Statistically significant difference to POLAR 1 shown at 95% in bold, at 99% with *
 Base: POLAR 1 (139) POLAR 2 (154) POLAR 3 (181) POLAR 4 (211) POLAR 5 (248)

More advantaged students are more likely to think that contextual offers could make it harder for them to get offers at university, which may explain why they are no more likely to support contextual offers, despite their stronger awareness of educational disadvantage.

Students generally reject the idea that someone admitted with lower grades would not be able to keep up academically: 54% slightly or strongly disagree with this notion, compared to 38% who slightly or strongly agree.

'Students admitted with lower grades would not be able to keep up with my university course'



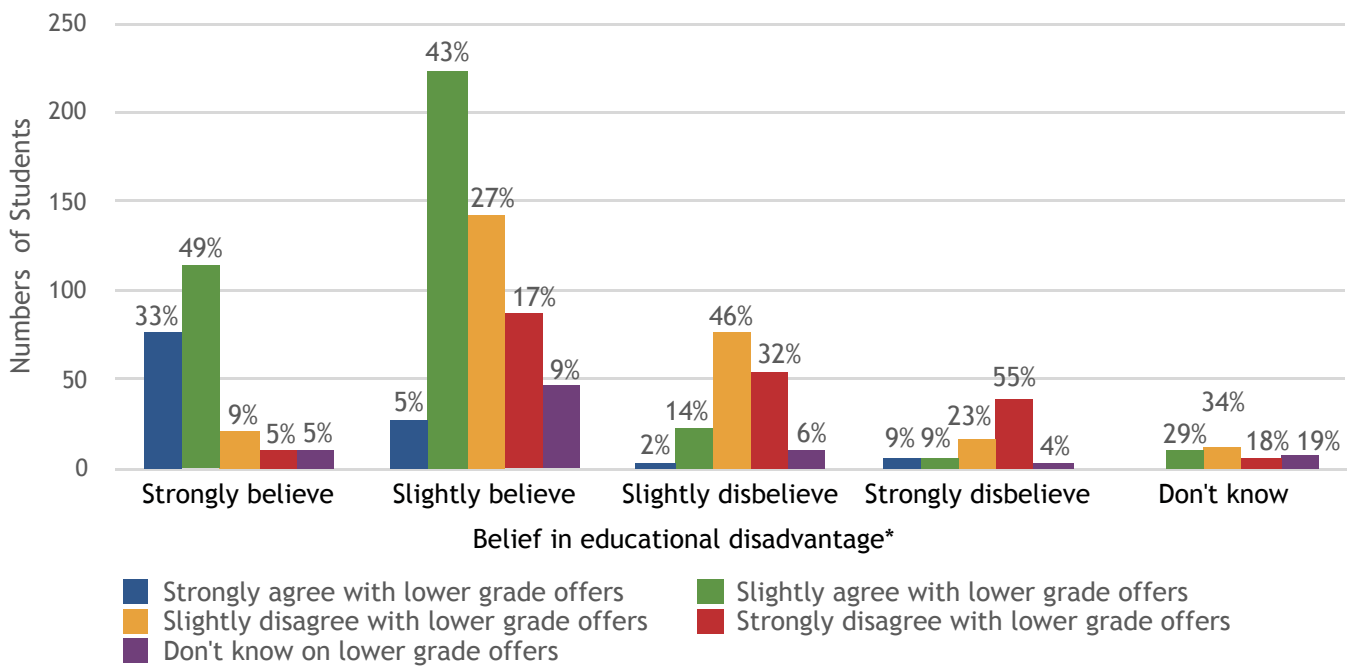
Russell Group students are slightly more likely to agree with the view that students with lower grades would not be able to keep up, with 44% slightly or strongly agreeing and 51% slightly or strongly disagreeing. There is a consensus among a majority of students across different university types that students with lower grades can succeed on their course.

Just one-in-ten students believe they were admitted with lower grade offers, but those in this small group of students are more confident than other students that people entering their courses with lower grades would be able to keep up.¹⁷ Among these students, only 28% think students with lower grades could struggle and 65% think they would not.

For students who are likely to struggle, options like foundation years offer a potential solution. One surveyed student commented: 'I didn't do well with my grades due to family issues but I was able to get onto a foundation year before starting the course properly. If there were lower boundaries I feel these students would really struggle'.

The final chart divides the respondents by their levels of belief in educational disadvantage and then shows the support for contextual offers in each group.

Student belief in educational disadvantage and support for contextual offers



*From agreeing with the statement: 'Growing up in a disadvantaged area makes it harder to achieve good A-Levels.'
 Base: Strongly believe (233), Slightly believe (526), Slightly disbelieve (168), Strongly disbelieve (70), Don't know (38)

Among students who 'strongly' believe in educational disadvantage, almost all (82%) support contextual admissions. Those who 'slightly' believe in educational disadvantage are fairly evenly split between those who support contextual admissions (48%) and those who do not (44%). Few of those who disbelieve in the notion of educational disadvantage support contextual offers (16%).

Conclusion

In text responses to the question 'How do you feel about this specific type of offer?', many respondents raised the issue of fairness.

- I don't think students from disadvantaged areas should get a lower grade offer. It is unfair to students in better areas who have to work just as hard for their grades*
 Female third-year student at a Post-1992 university
- I believe it's fair as everyone deserves equal opportunities. Some people can benefit from private education or grammar schools which undoubtedly puts them at an advantage be it a slight one.*
 Male third-year student at a Russell Group university

- It would be unfair; the challenge of the course doesn't differ for anyone.*
 Female fourth-year student at a Post-1992 university
- If a student comes from a school which has provided fewer opportunities to them (which makes it harder for them to achieve higher grades) it is fair to lower grade boundaries slightly*
 Female third-year student at a Pre-1992 university

As the concept of fairness is central to how students perceive the issue, policymakers and institutions may wish to do more to emphasise that contextual offers are a means of rewarding potential rather than being a form of unwarranted positive discrimination.

There has been a temptation for universities to run systems of contextual offers somewhat under the radar in order to avoid negative reactions. However, meeting the fair access targets set on institutions will likely necessitate significant growth in contextual admissions. So it remains important to earn support among students and the public.

Policy Recommendations

- 1) While most students support contextual admissions systems, especially at highly-selective institutions, there is considerable ignorance about them and a substantial minority oppose them. Institutions should consider ways to engage all students with the positive arguments for contextualised admissions, as contextualisation addresses educational inequalities and is proven to be more effective than grades alone in finding potential.
- 2) Higher education institutions should also build greater confidence in contextual admissions by using a range of individual-level criteria rather than relying on imprecise proxy measures, such as postcode measures or participation in widening access schemes. UCAS could facilitate this by further developing services, using its Multiple Equality Measure (MEM), so that institutions will use it in their admissions decisions.¹⁸
- 3) The higher education sector must continue striving to ensure contextually-admitted students thrive in higher education and beyond. To this end, we recommend that the Office for Students collects evidence on the success, or otherwise, of contextually-

admitted students at different institutions as well as the effectiveness of foundation courses and other interventions for supporting these students. The work should cover the limits on how far grades can be lowered without setting up students to fail across different courses and institutions. Such research would help quantify the extent to which contextual admissions can close participation gaps.

Methodology

Wave 6 of the HEPI/YouthSight Monitor was answered by 1,035 full-time undergraduate students and undertaken between the 28th June and the 1st of July 2019. Weights have been used to ensure the sample is representative by age, gender and university type. The margin of error is +/- 3.09%, based on a 95% confidence level.

Respondents received a £1 Bonus Bond gift voucher for answering these questions and others on a different topic.

Quotas were set to reflect the UK student population in terms of age, gender and university type. Targets for the quotas were acquired using data supplied by UCAS.

Endnotes

- 1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Bristol_admissions_controversy
- 2 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf
- 3 http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Access/Evaluating_contextual_admissions_Executive_Summary.pdf; <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/bf84aeda-21c6-4b55-b9f8-3386b21b7b3b/insight-3-contextual-admissions.pdf>
- 4 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/private-woe-over-rise-of-state-pupils-at-oxbridge-0wz57wvsf>
- 5 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/05/22/3341/>; <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/03/07/students-back-bailouts-new-poll-shows-students-want-government-action-if-their-university-fails/>
- 6 <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/bf84aeda-21c6-4b55-b9f8-3386b21b7b3b/insight-3-contextual-admissions.pdf>
- 7 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/546d1a52-5ba7-4d70-8ce7-c7a936aa3997/ofs2018_53.pdf Page 4
- 8 <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/publications/working-to-widen-access/>; <https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/>
- 9 <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5284/1/finalreport.pdf>
- 10 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/FINAL-WEB_HEPI-Widening-Participation-Report-98.pdf
- 11 <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/dece/ContextualisedHEadmissions.pdf>
- 12 <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/dece/ContextualisedHEadmissions.pdf>
- 13 <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/bf84aeda-21c6-4b55-b9f8-3386b21b7b3b/insight-3-contextual-admissions.pdf>
- 14 <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/Presentations/Family%20Background%20and%20University%20Success.pdf>
- 15 'Educational advantage' is based on the POLAR classification of postcode areas by rates of university participation.
- 16 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/there-are-multiple-ways-measure-equality>
- 17 Of students who said they received lower grade offers, 48% said they did not know if their institution gave contextual offers. These students are not straightforwardly contextually admitted students and may have had reduced offers for other reasons.
- 18 <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-multiple-equality-measure-an-alternative-to-polar/>