Fair access to higher education: a myth or reality? -UK context

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Abstract: This paper examines the disparities in access to higher education in the UK, focusing on under-represented groups. It reviews the concept and implementation of Contextual Admission (CA) policies aimed at addressing these inequalities. Despite efforts to improve access, significant barriers remain, including lower academic achievement, inadequate support, financial constraints, and resource disparities. The CA system, while promising, faces challenges in standardization, data reliability, and comprehensive effectiveness. The paper argues that while CA can improve opportunities for some, it does not fully resolve the broader issues of inequality in higher education, potentially reinforcing structural disparities and limiting social mobility.

Keywords: Higher Education; Fair Access; Contextual Admission; UK Education Policy

1. The Problem: unequal access to higher education.

Equal education access involves increasing aspirations and educational attainment among under-represented groups, such as those from areas with low higher education participation, BAME students, disabled students, estranged individuals, Gypsy, Roma, and Traveler communities, refugees, and children from military families (OfS, 2019). Improving access includes encouraging these groups to apply to and enter higher education, including part-time study, especially in selective institutions.

However, barriers identified in previous research hinder achieving equality in higher education. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often have lower achievement levels, making them less competitive for college admission (Bolton & Lewis, 2023). They often lack sufficient advice and support when applying to university. Advantaged students are 1.4 times more likely to consider higher education in primary school than disadvantaged students (UCAS, 2021). Financial problems also deter young people from applying to university, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, who are more likely to be averse to debt. Since 2002, the reluctance of this group to pursue higher education has increased due to associated costs (Bolton & Lewis, 2023).

This paper reviews England's practice of Contextual Admission (CA) and its role in reducing unequal access to education. While current policies aim to facilitate admissions from disadvantaged groups, the CA system faces practical difficulties, and evidence of its effectiveness is limited, perpetuating myths about equal access to education in England.

2. Why equal access to higher education is hard to achieve?

Educational resources are unequally distributed, with affluent areas having more resources than disadvantaged ones. This inequality is evident in the segregation of private and public education systems. Private schools attract affluent families who can afford qualified teachers, textbooks, and specialized workshops (Books2All Team, 2020). In contrast, public schools in disadvantaged areas often have less experienced teachers, shared textbooks, and fewer resources overall.

This resource gap translates into an achievement gap. Disadvantaged students can be up to 18 months behind their peers by the time they take GCSE exams (Books2All Team, 2020). They often find it difficult to catch up and narrow this gap. Societal forces further exacerbate these inequalities. As university admissions become more competitive, students with fewer resources are at a disadvantage, making equal access to selective universities increasingly difficult. Organizational intervention, such as contextual admission, has been proposed to address these issues.

3. Contextual admission (CA) in the UK

The goal of contextual admission policy is to encourage higher education institutions to admit applicants with potential, despite slightly lower grades. Contextual information is used in admission (Mountford Zimdars et al, 2016). At the individual level, this includes applicants'

socio-economic disadvantage (access to free school meals, low family income), and serious adverse personal circumstances (e.g., having spent some time in care or being interrupted due to serious illness). Individual contextual data is mostly self-reported with some administrative verification. Regional data, based on postal codes, includes local socio-economic disadvantages and higher education participation rates. Contextual outreach is reaching out to disadvantaged groups before application. One example of contextual outreach is the widening access scheme as a background indicator when evaluating admission applications (Boliver et al, 2017).

The University of Edinburgh was the first to systematically adopt CA in 2004, and it has since spread to other institutions. The development of background admissions policies at individual universities is supported by Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which provides additional background information. (Mountford Zimdars et al, 2016). Most universities claim they use background information in admissions, but CA practices vary and are not clearly defined at each institution. Boliver et al. summarized the contextual indicators used by Sutton Trust 30 universities for undergraduate admissions in 2016/17, noting differences in individual, regional, and school-level indicators among schools (Boliver et al, 2017).

4. Contextual admission providing possibilities for equal access.

The contextual admission (CA) aims to reduce the emphasis on prior attainment for disadvantaged students. Studies have shown increased chances of earning a first-class degree for low-income students from 1998 to 2008 (Smith, 2016). Contextual outreach activities, such as the Access and Participation Plans (A&P Plans) introduced by OfS in 2018, aim to increase opportunities for disadvantaged students. Financial support has also helped reduce dropout rates among low-income students since the 2006 student fee reform (Bradley & Migali, 2015).

Evidence shows CA can provide high-potential, low-achievement students with access to universities. For example, students from schools with lower average grades but admitted to Russell Group institutions achieve higher grades at university than those from schools with top grades (HEFCE, 2003).

5. Myth and difficulties in realizing equal access by CA.

5.1 Difficulties in implementing CA

One barrier to implementing CA is the unclear correlation between socioeconomic background, educational achievement, and potential for success in higher education. Research is inconclusive on whether educationally disadvantaged applicants perform as well as their peers at the undergraduate level (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2003). Assessing the potential achievement of disadvantaged students involves evaluating their grades, competition results, practice experiences, and internships. However, it remains uncertain if their potential can be fully realized at university.

Another barrier is the unstandardized and incomplete nature of contextual data, raising doubts about its reliability. Individual family information and regional codes may not accurately represent disadvantaged individuals. The quality of contextual data varies across regions, making direct comparisons difficult and leading to unfair comparisons among applicants. Institutions are often reluctant to use the data available through UCAS due to these inconsistencies (Bridger et al., 2012).

Data readiness is also a concern, as the quality of data from government or UCAS is often insufficient for reliable analysis. Consequently, some institutions develop their own methods and datasets, further complicating standardization and fair comparisons. Achieving higher consistency and integrity in datasets would improve the coordination of using background data in admissions both within and outside institutions (Bridger et al., 2012).

5.2 Areas where CA does not necessarily improve equal access.

Even if CA could be perfectly implemented, limitation of the system itself lead to unsolved issue in equal access to higher education. CA provides opportunities for some disadvantaged students and provide outreach activities for them to prepare for the university. However, the numbers of students can succeed in entering higher education is limited. This selective process may create an illusion of social mobility,

potentially exacerbating structural inequality again and further legitimizing it in the process.

Additionally, students from disadvantaged groups who get into selective universities may not represent the broader underrepresented group that CA aims to help. These students might have secured places at other institutions, so CA may simply move them up without significantly increasing overall participation. Furthermore, CA does not address the impact on students who are encouraged to apply but do not get accepted into selective universities, possibly affecting their confidence and future applications (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2016).

6. Conclusion

Fair access to higher education remains a challenging goal. The effectiveness of fair access policies is uncertain, and improvements in access for disadvantaged groups are hard to measure. Disadvantaged students who enter selective universities may still struggle due to gaps in prior educational resources. Finally, CA does not address inequality that essentially driven by the selective nature of popular universities.

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