Communicating contextual admissions: Summary of a mixed method study (May 2021)

Executive summary

Focus groups were held with students, parents and staff to gain an insight into how universities can best provide information about contextual admissions and widening participation. Focus group facilitators presented information from a variety of sources for participants to compare and contrast, and the topic guide was used flexibly to gauge participants' preferences about the presentation of information in terms of language, format and location. An additional survey was developed to gain views from staff who could not attend the staff focus group. Participants' views about the concepts and enactment of contextual admissions and widening participation were also discussed.

Findings reflect the complexity of the information, and participants were usually in agreement, both within and between the student, parent and staff audiences. Participants want information to be clear, with difficult terminology explained. They want succinct information that will not lead to confusion or misunderstandings, with access to more detail should they wish to read more. The opportunity to receive personalised information was important. Participants would like to see information that is presented in an attractive way that encourages them to stay engaged. Both online and printed material were deemed important for different audiences. As well as providing information at widely-accepted touchpoints, such as in year 12 when students are making choices about universities, participants felt that information about contextual admissions should be introduced to students at a younger age: when making choices about Level 3 courses, and even younger to reinforce student and family expectations that students can progress to university.

There was not complete agreement, however. There were a few dissenting voices who opposed contextual admissions, and others who, whilst supportive of the concept, felt that the enactment of the process could be improved with the use of non-judgemental language, and support prior, during and after admission to university.

Recommendations relate to the choice and use of language, the format of the information, the appropriateness of targeting, the location and timing of the information, whilst taking into account that there are different views about the legitimacy of widening participation and contextual admissions. The recommendations will be considered by Pathways partner universities, and information about contextual admissions will be amended in response. In the second phase of this study we will convene a second set of focus groups to ask students, parents and school/college staff for their opinions of the new resources and identify effective channels for dissemination.

Recommendations for language, format and location of information about contextual admissions

This section collates and synthesises the findings from the focus groups and survey to provide recommendations for providing information about contextual admissions. Recommendations relate to the choice and use of language, format of the information, targeting of the information, and location and timing of the information, whilst taking into account potentially differing views of the legitimacy of contextual admissions practice. Some of the recommendations are immediately implementable and relate specifically to information about contextual admissions. Other recommendations have wider implications and may not be easily implementable or even feasible; these are indicated by an asterisk (*).

Choice and use of language

1. When using any of the words shown to participants on the PowerPoint slides (see Appendix 7, p59 onwards in the full report), provide an easily accessible key or an easy-to-use clickable/hoverable/pop-up format to explain individual words or terms.
2. *Consider using a term other than 'contextual admission' – it's useful for universities but not for the audiences they are trying to reach. If this is not possible, then refer to point (1) above.
3. Avoid potentially demeaning terms like 'deprivation quintile'.
4. When talking about contextual *offers* and *admissions*, explain the difference.

5. Make it obvious how to see if a student is eligible for a contextual admission and/or provide a form to complete or a phone number to call.
6. Avoid generic statements on websites that may be misunderstood; instead: "And if I put in there yes, I am an asylum seeker and a carer and something else, and they'd say 'you are… You fit three out of our ten criteria, there is a very strong chance that you would be, please e-mail for more details.'"
7. *Enable students to know which universities will give them a contextual offer as it will affect their choice of universities.
8. *Encourage schools to look out for individuals who may qualify and provide early reassurance and prompting to look out for emails from UCAS and/or universities.
9. Whilst the UCAS blog is (necessarily) vague (e.g. 'money is short at home') it can be used to raise awareness.
10. Provide lots of information but in easily manageable chunks.

Format of the information
11. Provide information online *and* in booklet/leaflet form: a paper format will help overcome digital access and digital literacy issues, can be taken home for parents, can be easily referred to, and can lead an audience to a website. Provide the paper leaflet/booklet in both pre-printed format and downloadable and printable from a website.
12. *Provide information via an impartial source (e.g. UCAS, Uni Connect) rather than being university-specific.
13. Consider making an impartial video to explain contextual admissions (or curate those that are already available) and distribute to local schools/colleges. Pathways can develop this.
14. Provide a PowerPoint for teachers/advisors to use during tutor time, PSHE lessons, UCAS talks, etc, including speaker notes to ensure consistent delivery. Pathways can develop this.

Appropriateness of targeting
15. *Consider national schemes rather than local/regional; ensure all individuals with barriers are targeted regardless of postcode or region.
16. Consider targeting community groups, e.g. foster carers, young carers; use existing networks.
17. Consider targeting students when in sixth-form/FE college to help them make decisions.
18. *Target the 'right' students in the 'right' way – those who are academically able enough (those who have the ability to progress; those who will not likely switch off) in an engaging way, e.g. not assemblies but smaller groups and individuals, and parents via schools/colleges.
19. Bear in mind that some audiences may consider postcode targeting as inappropriate.
20. Bear in mind that postcode (or other WP indicator) targeting may overwhelm some students whilst leaving out others who may benefit.

Location of the information
21. Have multiple touch-points with links to information:
    a. UCAS (student and parent strands), Google, individual university websites (make it obvious what contextual offers are near to where entry requirements are located), schools/colleges, Unifrog.
    b. *Explain why WP questions are being asked in the UCAS application form. This may not be possible on UCAS directly, but could be provided elsewhere.
22. *Bear in mind the importance of IAG in schools/colleges, and use language that assumes high aspirations rather than dismissing some students as not capable or as having too many barriers to overcome (https://www.kcl.ac.uk/raising-aspirations).

Timing of the information
23. Provide information to students when they researching universities in year 12 or year 1 of Level 3.
24. Provide information to year 11 when making post-16 choices.
25. Provide information to year 10 and younger when students are taking part in WP initiatives.
26. Provide information to students even younger to set expectations for students and families at a young age.

Legitimacy of WP and contextual admissions

27. Be aware of potentially different views of WP and contextual offers/admissions, in that some will disagree with it, and others will think WP students should have to go the extra mile to prove that they deserve the contextual offer.
28. Ensure clarity of the information to keep misunderstandings to a minimum.
29. Ensure clarity of the information to help audiences understand the rationale rather fostering a sense of unfairness that some students cannot receive the same treatment.
30. Explain why some indicators are used and others are not (e.g. BAME, poor family support, low school attendance, learning disabilities, etc). Appropriate language can also help to prevent labelling or students/families feeling judged, patronised, ashamed, or offended, and may reduce the chance of students/families not wanting to be seen as 'disadvantaged' by the university community. Also take into account that some audiences with a perceived barrier may not view their indicator as a barrier (e.g. caring responsibilities).
31. Take into account that high-quality information can change views – by taking part in the focus group and learning about contextual admissions, one student changed their mind about whether it was appropriate to take personal information into account, other students' understanding increased and they wanted to know more, and staff questioned their own practice.
32. *Consider additional uses for indicators during the application process, e.g. providing support to complete the application form, providing support to attend open days (e.g. travel costs).
33. *Consider additional uses for indicators post-admission to increase social capital and provide support for practical issues, e.g. bursaries, welfare support, childcare, finding accommodation, budgeting.

Conclusion

This qualitative study with student, parent and staff participants has culminated in a set of recommendations for ensuring that information about contextual admissions can be understood and used by the audiences at which it is aimed. Recommendations relate to the use of language, the format of the information, the appropriateness of targeting, the location and timing of the information, and the legitimacy of widening participation and contextual admissions as accepted and desirable practices.