

Student Learning Experience Committee

Policy on Contextual Admissions

Introduction

In response to the University's Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council (signed in August 2012), Recruitment and Admissions has been developing a revised strategy on widening access. The implementation of this strategy is being progressed in a number of ways, for example, additional funded places and the identification of increased resources to provide essential academic and pastoral support. As part of the strategy, a new Policy on Contextual Admissions has been developed. The Policy on Contextual Admissions is integrated with the wider University Admissions Policy.

The Policy on Contextual Admissions adheres to the University's Outcome Agreement with the Scottish Funding Council and follows established practice across the Scottish Higher Education sector, as well guidance from *Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA)*.

Purpose

The Policy on Contextual Admissions aims to underpin the University's widening access strategy by supporting Schools in using contextual data and information to make offers to specific categories of applicants. The categories of eligible applicants for whom a contextualised offer should be considered are specified in the *Procedures* Appendix to this Policy.

Policy Statement

In accordance with the University's strategy to increase the number of widening access¹ students, specific categories of applicants will be identified as being eligible for admission using contextualised offers. The Admissions Office within Recruitment and Admissions will highlight eligible applicants to School Admissions Tutors, who will in turn use a range of information and data to determine whether a contextualised offer should be made.

Although the University encourages the admission of wider access students, contextualised offers cannot be made to every applicant in the defined categories. The basis on which contextualised offers can or cannot be made is specified in the *Procedures* Appendix to this Policy

Developed by Recruitment and Admissions, Academic Registry and the Student Learning Experience Committee, December 2012.
Approved by the Undergraduate Studies Committee, 9 January 2013

¹ The term "widening access" is not intended to be pejorative; it is used here merely as a collective term for the various categories of applicants to whom contextualised offers should be made.

Contextual Admissions Policy: Implementation Process

1. Categories of Applicants

The Contextual Admissions Policy applies to the categories of applicants specified below. Applicants who are identified by the Admissions Office (via SAS-Banner) as being within one or more of these categories should be considered by School Admissions Tutors as being eligible for admission on the basis of a contextualised offer.

- 1.1. Applicants' home postcode is within the SIMD² 20/40.
 - 'Flag' appears at the top of the application which states e.g. 'SIMD 20'.
- 1.2. Applicant is at a low progression school that is part of the Scottish Funding Council's 'Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP)'.
 - The school that an applicant is attending is marked on the application under 'Education > Establishment'. Admissions Tutors are provided with a list of SHEP schools for cross referencing with applications. Applicants from SHEP schools in south east Scotland (as part of Lothian Equal Access Programme for Schools – LEAPS) will also be flagged 'LEAPS Eligible' at the top of the application.
- 1.3. Applicant is a mature SWAP (Scottish Wider Access Programme) applicant.
 - The qualification is listed as 'SWAP Access Programme' or 'Access Programme' on the application under 'Qualifications > Type'.
- 1.4. Applicant is an HNC/D applicant.
 - The qualification is listed as 'Higher National Certificate' or 'Higher National Diploma' on the application under 'Qualifications > Type'.
- 1.5. Applicant has spent time in care/being 'looked after'.
 - Information contained on the application in OBI³ under 'Personal Statement' and 'Reference'.
 - Guidance from the Admissions Office who run a report in OBI on a weekly basis to check and alert Schools to applicants who have ticked the 'care' box on the UCAS online application.
- 1.6. Applicant has been a carer for a long-term ill or disabled parent which has had a demonstrable impact on their studies.
 - Information contained on the application under 'Personal Statement' and 'Reference.'
- 1.7. Applicant has suffered from an illness or disability which has had a demonstrable impact on their studies.
 - Information contained on the application under 'Personal Statement' and 'Reference.'

2. Use of Contextualised Data/Information

As indicated in Section 1, the Admissions Office will liaise with School Admissions Tutors in identifying categories of applicants eligible for consideration under the Contextual Admissions Policy. The Admissions Office will provide advice to School Admissions Tutors on relevant matters, such as factors to be considered in relation to specific cases, any student numbers constraints or externally set quotas.

Information in relation to HNC/D or SWAP and Highers/Advanced Highers applicants is provided below.

- 2.1. Applicants studying for an **HNC/D or a SWAP** course will be assessed out-with the wider applicant pool for special consideration with the aim of meeting predetermined, ring-fenced targets agreed early in the admissions cycle. The Admissions Office will liaise with Admissions

² "SIMD" is the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, with 40 being the lower 40% in this index and 20 being the lower 20%.

³OBI (Oracle Business Intelligence) is the University's central reporting function, utilising SAS-Banner data.

Tutors in Schools prior to and following the annual planning meetings to set and monitor progress against targets.

2.2. Applicants studying **Highers/Advanced Highers** may be given a measure of flexibility in the offer-making stage and/or at confirmation. Flexibility in considering Higher and/or Advanced Higher results may take one or more of the following forms:

- Making an offer of, or accepting a student at confirmation with, up to two grades lower than the standard requirements.
 - Example AABB would be BBBB, AACC or ABBC.
- Making an offer of or accepting a student at confirmation with, one less Higher than the standard entry requirements.
 - Example AABB would be AAB or ABB, BBBBC would be BBBB or BBBC.
- At the offer or confirmation stage, counting one Advanced Higher taken in S6 as additional to the Higher taken in the same subject in S5, (as opposed to current practice where Advanced Highers cancel out the same Highers). The practice of double counting one Higher and the same Advanced Higher has been adopted at the University of Glasgow and has been welcomed by schools, the SQA and the Scottish Government.

Note of Entry Qualifications for Essential/Named Subjects

Discussions at the Student Learning Experience Committee, the Learning and Teaching Board and the Planning Rounds and comments from the consultation on the Policy on Contextual Admissions revealed a variety of views as to whether entry qualifications could be lowered for essential/named subjects.

On the one hand, it was highlighted that the background factors which might have affected and applicant's prior academic performance were equally applicable to core and non-core Highers/Advanced Highers. On the other, it was emphasised that additional resources would be needed to support students in reaching the required standard in core subjects (eg via a summer school), but more fundamentally, there was also a recognition of the need not to overburden students admitted through widening access routes.

Therefore, the proposal made by the Student Learning Experience Committee at its meeting on 20 November 2012 has been implemented, namely:

Flexibility in entry requirements should not be restricted to non-essential subjects: Schools have the option to decide whether or not to accept applicants with lower grades in essential/named subjects.

3. Restrictions on Contextualised Offers

The introduction of the University's Contextual Admissions Policy does not mean that all applicants in the defined categories must be made a contextual offer, or indeed an offer of any kind. The reasons for this are:

- a) The applicant may demonstrate strong academic performance in their achievement to date and the capability to meet the standard entry requirements. For motivation, the applicant should be encouraged to achieve at the level of the standard offer with flexibility at confirmation to admit at the level of a contextual offer should the final exam results not be as expected.
- b) A combination of the academic attainment to date and subject choices going forward, as well as information contained in the personal statement and reference, may provide evidence that the applicant is not suited to the particular degree programme, even with the flexibility that a contextual offer provides. In such cases a 'reject' decision can be given with an explanation of why the application has been unsuccessful. If appropriate, it is good practice to offer advice on what the applicant can do to improve their chances of submitting a successful application in the future.
- c) The constraints of the Cap on Scottish/EU places – albeit with some flexibility for SIMD 20/40 intake via the SFCs 'additional funded places' - means that Schools should place an upper limit on the number of contextual offers they make in an admissions cycle.

4. Interactions with Applicants in Making Contextualised Offers

As agreed, the standard published entry requirements will not be lowered. To encourage 'non-traditional' applicants to apply to Heriot-Watt, the University will make it clear in its publications – undergraduate prospectus, website and Undergraduate Admissions Policy – that it is committed to widening access and will make contextual offers for those who are from communities and/or schools with a low progression rate to higher education.

The Admissions Office will also write to head teachers in Scottish secondary schools on an annual basis to advise and update them of our policy. Entry for applicants from SWAP access programmes and HNC/Ds will be managed through organisational and college partnerships.

The Admissions Office does not propose to notify applicants who receive a contextual offer in any way that is different to the offer notification for all applicants. Just as it is planned at HWU to increase student support for mainstreaming for *all* students (and by virtue of its availability will be accessed the most by those with the greatest need), the Admissions Office proposes to communicate offers to all applicants in a uniform way.

5. Academic and Pastoral Support

At the meeting of the Student Learning Experience Committee on 20 November 2012, where the proposed approach to contextual admissions was initially presented, it was agreed both academic and pastoral support was integral to the successful implementation of the University's Policy on Contextual Admissions. Such support should be sign-posted as being available to all students, and not just those admitted through particular routes although it was recognised by Learning and Teaching Board as its meeting on 13 December 2012 that there was a need to ensure that contextually admitted students engaged with the additional support.

The need for additional staff, rather than providing this support from existing resources, has been widely recognised and agreed.

All Schools were encouraged to raise in their November/December 2012 Planning Round meetings the need for additional staff resource to provide the required pastoral and academic support in support of the Contextual Admissions Policy.

A process for identifying and approving additional support requirements was agreed by the University Executive at its meeting on 13 December 2012, namely:

- The Student Learning Experience Committee would discuss support requirements at its meeting on 31 January 2013 and make a recommendation to the Learning and Teaching Board, based on the collective responses from Schools, Professional Services and the Student Union.
- The Learning and Teaching Board would consider these recommendations at its meeting on 14 February 2013, with a proposal being submitted to the University Executive on 28 February 2013.
- Subsequent to consideration by the University Executive, the key points emerging from the Planning Round discussions would be embedded into the finalised, agreed additional support resources, which would specify the number of extra staff and their location; ring-fenced funding would be utilised to provide this support.

**TALENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME
APPROVED BY SENATE 2014**

We have also adopted a contextual approach to considering applications from student athletes recommended for inclusion in the University's Talent Development Programme, for whom the same degree of flexibility in offer making can be used by University admissions staff to that provided for applicants in the above groupings. This is in recognition that student athletes have additional pressures on their time and have the dual goal of pursuing excellence academically as well as in their particular sport.