

Widening Participation: Guidance for Admissions

Background

Widening participation (WP), or fair access, means supporting those who may be marginalised or underrepresented in UK universities to enter and flourish in higher education. The Government highlights the importance of opportunities provided by higher education for social mobility, professional development, civic engagement and personal growth as fundamental in shaping the economic, intellectual and cultural development of the country¹. Bournemouth University's [Vision and Values statement, BU2018: Creating, Sharing, Inspiring strategy](#) highlights the importance of interventions to raise aspirations of marginalised learners to engage with higher education.

WP students include:

Mature students (over 21 on entry)
Disability
Ethnic origin (BME Groups)
First Generation to attend university
Socio-economic groups
Lower Participating Neighbourhoods
Care Leavers
Leavers of state schools

At BU, we have a diverse student population and the Admissions team as well as Faculty admissions staff have the opportunity to reduce barriers to successful applications for students from a WP background, and to empower them to consider applying to HE. BU's Fair Access Agreement (2016-17) states that BU 'is committed to increasing the numbers of students from...disadvantaged groups' through a 'flexible admissions policy...whereby additional consideration is given to applicants' based on context.

Contextualised Admissions

Some WP students will fall under the criteria for contextualised admissions. As such, knowledge and understanding of the issues surrounding contextual data and information is vital for all staff involved with admissions. Applicants who are Care Leavers or living in an area of socio-economic disadvantage or a low participation neighbourhood (identified on application and through POLAR data) can be offered a lower published tariff score. Further guidance can be accessed here <https://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/how-apply/entry-requirements/what-we-look/contextual-data>. This data should be used as part of the overall consideration of an applicant and not in isolation. This data, alongside the applicant's school reference and personal statement (on the UCAS form) is used to arrive at a holistic assessment of the applicant's potential for the course/programme. This combined approach can then inform the professional judgement which the Admissions or academic team ultimately use to decide whether an offer is made (see the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) report link in the box below).

Interviewing

If interviewing is part of the admissions process in your Faculty, in many ways it can be easier to understand a student's potential through discussion; however the following points are also useful to consider in relation to WP applicants:

- Have a conversation with the applicant to explore their personal context and background which takes note of WP aspects as well as the way a student speaks about their desire/the support they have received to study at university;
- Take note of both the applicant's verbal and non-verbal communication;

¹ Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (accessed January 2017) can be found at www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf

- Be aware of the position of authority you are in, and remain sensitive to the impact this may have;
- Mature students have more life experience but they may also have greater expectations to deal with challenges without asking for or accepting assistance or guidance. Awareness of this can enable you to facilitate support with subtlety.

Making Informed Decisions

Some recommendations from the Independent Review of Admissions to HE (2004) may assist you in making informed, appropriate decisions during the admissions process:

- Transparency and professionalism throughout the admissions process is vitally important. Underpin decisions with institutional processes and policies, to avoid making biased or ill-informed decisions
- The school reference, including levels of attainment and the personal statement, are important sources of information when identifying the needs, achievements and potential of WP students
- Take action to reduce the barriers for applicants from a WP background whose applications show evidence of potential within an academic context
- Ensure processes where student's potential is being assessed are accessible, reliable and rigorous.

Responsibility to the Student; Responsibility to the University

Students with the real potential to succeed in Higher Education need an equal opportunity to access university, whatever their background or life experience. Admissions processes and staff have a key role in enabling this as well as building the success and credibility of the university. Awareness of the individual needs of those from a WP, or any, background will help you to be effective in making the right decisions when making contextualised offers and allocating places fairly, professionally and with equity.

The programme of [Fair Access Research](#), focused on Ways of Working is led by [Dr Vanessa Heaslip](#) and [Dr Clive Hunt](#) with [Dr Maggie Hutchings](#), [Dr Sue Eccles](#), Dr Wendelin Morrison, and Karen Powell. The research aims to establish how to best support students from WP to succeed at BU.

<https://research.bournemouth.ac.uk/project/fair-access-research-and-practice-far/>

Further Reading

HEA Report (2007) on the business case for embedding widening participation and promoting student diversity:

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/finalversionbusiness_case_2.pdf

SPA Report *Contextualised admissions: Examining the evidence*:

https://www.spa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Research-CA-Report-2013-annexB_0.pdf

SPA guidance on Contextualised Admissions

<https://www.spa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Good-practice-entry-requirements.pdf>

<https://www.spa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Briefing-contextualised-admissions-triangulation.pdf>

https://www.spa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Good-practice-contextual-data-principles-2010_1.pdf

Research Paper: *Which are the most suitable contextual indicators for use in widening participation to HE?*:

<http://dro.dur.ac.uk/20937/1/20937.pdf?DDD34+DDD29+hsmz78+d700tmt>