# UK universities to increase lower entry offers for disadvantaged students



Universities across the UK are planning to increase the number of lower entry grade offers extended to disadvantaged students, according to a new initiative unveiled by Universities UK (UUK), the body representing vice chancellors at 141 institutions. The announcement came yesterday as part of an ‘action plan’ aimed at improving access to higher education for those facing significant social and economic barriers.

The initiative focuses on the wider adoption of ‘contextual offers’, a admissions practice that permits universities to reduce standard grade requirements by up to three grades for applicants who have encountered obstacles such as growing up in care, attending underperforming schools, or coming from low-income families. This policy is designed to encourage greater inclusivity across all fields of study, including highly competitive courses such as medicine.

In addition to lowered grade requirements, contextual offers may also include options such as foundation years and guaranteed interviews for disadvantaged students, providing further pathways into university programmes. Many institutions already employ some form of contextual admissions following mounting pressure to diversify student bodies and make university education less exclusive. The Office for Students, the higher education regulator, has mandated that universities set ambitious annual targets to widen participation among poorer students.

UUK’s policy document highlights collaboration with the Sutton Trust charity and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (Ucas) to review and standardise the criteria for contextual admissions. The goal is to create greater transparency and consistency across universities, allowing applicants who meet the criteria to navigate their options with increased confidence.

Professor Dame Sally Mapstone, President of UUK and Vice Chancellor of the University of St Andrews, described the plan as a means to make higher education more accessible. Speaking to the Daily Mail, she said, “People who stand to benefit the most from higher education, such as those from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds, can find it harder to access this opportunity due to their personal circumstances. Higher education should be a realistic option for everyone with the potential to succeed, no matter their background.”

However, the announcement has drawn criticism from some education commentators who question the approach. Chris McGovern, of the Campaign for Real Education, expressed concern about lowering academic standards through such policies. In remarks to the Daily Mail, he warned, “Lowering grades for entry to university courses is dangerously misguided. It will lead to dumbed down professions in the future. We need the brightest and best doctors, engineers, lawyers, bankers, teachers, architects, dentists, and so on. The proposed dumbing down will take away the incentive for schools to raise standards.”

The debate underscores ongoing tensions between efforts to widen participation in higher education and concerns about maintaining academic rigor. As universities move forward with these plans, the application of contextual admissions is expected to expand, with the intent of making university more accessible to those from disadvantaged backgrounds while balancing standards across disciplines.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/campaigns/access-success/unlock-potential-contextual-admissions> - This URL supports the claim about contextual admissions being used to help universities admit students based on their potential to succeed by considering their broader context. It highlights how Universities UK (UUK) is involved in initiatives aimed at improving access to higher education.
2. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/insights-and-analysis/placing-contextual-admissions-context> - This article provides context for UUK's initiatives, including those related to contextual admissions and access programs, such as the Mature Access Pathway at the University of Exeter.
3. <https://www.suttontrust.com/contextual-offers-tool-for-uk-universities/> - This URL supports the collaboration with the Sutton Trust to review and standardize criteria for contextual admissions, aiming to increase transparency and consistency across UK universities.
4. <https://www.ucas.com/applying/applying-university/individual-needs/contextual-admissions> - This resource explains how contextual admissions help students from diverse backgrounds progress to higher education, supporting UUK's efforts to widen participation.
5. <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/apply/offers/contextual-offers> - This URL provides an example of a university's specific contextual offer policy, highlighting the use of programs like Access Plus to support disadvantaged students.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/office-for-students-publications> - While the specific URL related to the Office for Students' targets is not directly mentioned, this link leads to general publications that would include guidance on widening participation targets set by the Office for Students, aligning with the initiative's goals.
7. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14640219/Universities-lower-grade-offers-disadvantaged-students.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data