

# Cylchlythyr | Circular

## Fair admissions in higher education: contextualised admissions

**Date:** 24 January 2022  
**Reference:** W22/01HE  
**To:** Heads of higher education institutions in Wales and  
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in  
Wales  
**Response by:** Friday 1 April 2022  
**Contact:** Jane Johns; Amanda Phillips  
[jane.johns@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:jane.johns@hefcw.ac.uk); [amanda.phillips@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:amanda.phillips@hefcw.ac.uk)

This circular reaffirms our position on fair admissions in higher education and requests that fair admission information, as it relates to contextualised admissions, be submitted to us, including links to web-based information on contextualised admissions.

If you require this document in an alternative accessible format, please email [info@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:info@hefcw.ac.uk).



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## Introduction

1. This circular reaffirms our position on fair admissions in higher education and requests that fair admission information, as it relates to contextualised admissions, be submitted to us, including links to web-based information on contextualised admissions.
2. We are aware that admissions is an area of institutional autonomy. We respect this position. HEFCW's role in fair admissions, as set out in our [Corporate Strategy](#), is to challenge and support higher education providers to deliver accessible and inclusive education and training to all who could benefit from it. We are committed to ensuring: fair admissions to higher education; equity and equality of opportunity; high retention rates; student success in higher education; and Wales as a study destination of first choice. Contextualised admissions and responsible and transparent contextualised offer making is part of a fair admissions system.
3. Contextualised offer-making relates to all means and modes of admissions and is widely used by higher education providers.

## Background

4. The report on *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice* ('Schwartz report', 2004) identified a fair admissions system as:  
*'one that provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations. Everyone agrees that applicants should be chosen on merit: the problem arises when we try to define it. Merit could mean admitting applicants with the highest examination marks, or it could mean taking a wider view about each applicant's achievements and potential'. (p6)*
5. QAA published [Admissions, Recruitment and Widening Access](#) in 2018 to advise providers on assuring quality across the multiple and varied pathways open to students to enter higher education. The report identifies six guiding principles which underpin the successful delivery of admissions, recruitment and widening access processes and activities throughout the higher education sector. The principles encompass and build on the foundations laid by the Schwartz report, and are aligned with the Core Practices of the Quality Code<sup>1</sup>. Higher education providers are encouraged to implement the QAA principles across the full breadth of their provision.
6. In August 2021, UUK published [Fair Admissions Review](#). The review includes eight recommendations for fair and transparent admissions building on the Schwartz review.

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<sup>1</sup> The core practices include that 'The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system'. This forms part of the baseline of the [Quality Assessment Framework for Wales](#)

7. In previous years, in the context of fair admissions, HEFCW has reviewed higher education providers' positions on offer-making, including 'conditional unconditional offers', the subject of the UUK report recommendation two. We consider this form of conditional offer unhelpful for students and the wider education system. We have written to higher education providers asking them to refrain from making 'conditional unconditional' offers (see circular [W21/10HE](#)). We are satisfied with the responses we have received. Separately, we support reasonable and proportionate contextualised admissions and contextualised offer-making which is fair and transparent and in the interests of applicants and students.

8. The UUK report, recommendation three, states that universities should:

*'Be ambitious in ensuring that admissions practices address inequalities in access and participation, including greater transparency in the use of contextual admissions. This includes universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: providing clear, consistent messaging on what contextual offers are and their purpose; using standard indicators to support contextual offers (Free School Meals and Index of Multiple Deprivation data, and care experienced status); developing minimum entry requirements for contextually-flagged applicants; and making guaranteed offers for care experienced applicants who meet minimum entry requirements.'*

### **HEFCW review of contextualised admissions**

9. We have recently carried out a desk-based review of higher education providers' published web-based positions on contextualised admissions. We found that across the Welsh sector this information could not be found and, among other issues, where available:

- i. offer information was sometimes difficult to locate;
- ii. contextualised offer criteria differ between providers;
- iii. offer information available to applicants is neither consistent nor transparent;
- iv. web-based conditional offer information is sometimes general and not specific enough to be helpful to applicants;
- v. some providers' information sets out the grade offer range within which a contextual offer may be made, but most do not.

10. As a result of our review, we consider that contextualised offers and information about contextualised offer-making by higher education providers in Wales should be improved further to ensure this element of the admissions process is fair and transparent. Wales has the opportunity to take a lead on fair admissions and implement effective conditional offer-making processes to support widening access, a positive applicant and

student experience and progress towards the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) 'More Equal Wales' goal.

11. Given evidence that students from under-represented backgrounds also experience disadvantage in progressing to postgraduate study, we consider that higher education providers should also review whether appropriate use is made of contextual information at this level.

### **Action required by higher education providers to improve fair admissions as it relates to contextualised admissions**

12. Higher education providers should confirm to us that they:
  - i. have undertaken a review, summarising any changes made/to be made, to improve the accessibility of, and information about, contextualised offers and related offer-making processes since the last admissions round, taking account of UK recommendations and effective practice information;
  - ii. have ensured that conditional offer information is available and easily accessible on their websites;
  - iii. have considered, since the last admission round, whether contextualised admissions practices are consistent across the institution and across all levels and modes;
  - iv. confirm the governance processes used to review regularly admissions practices, including contextualised admissions processes;
  - v. submit to us links to published, web-based contextualised admissions information in English and Welsh.

### **Timetable**

13. We encourage higher education providers to ensure that contextualised admissions processes are fair and transparent for applicants applying for entry in 2022. Please submit the information set out in paragraph 12 above to Amanda Phillips ([amanda.phillips@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:amanda.phillips@hefcw.ac.uk)) by **Friday 1 April 2022**.

### **Further information / responses to**

14. For further information, contact Jane Johns ([jane.johns@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:jane.johns@hefcw.ac.uk)).

### **Assessing the impact of our policies**

15. We have begun an impact assessment screening to help safeguard against discrimination and promote equality. We also considered the impact of policies on the Welsh language, and Welsh language provision within the HE sector in Wales and potential impacts towards the goals set

out in the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 including our Well-Being Objectives. Contact [equality@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:equality@hefcw.ac.uk) for more information about impact assessments.

16. In drafting this guidance we considered the importance of admissions systems and procedures supporting fair admissions and equality of opportunity. We took account of references to effective contextualised admissions systems supporting people to and through higher education, including people with disabilities and people from diverse backgrounds. Contextualised admissions could support applicants wishing to study in Welsh, or continuing to study in Wales, thereby making Wales a study destination of first choice for them. Fair admissions contributes to several of the Well-being of Future Generations' goals including, but not limited to an Equal Wales and a Healthier Wales.