

**Bridge
Group**
**research
action
equality**

Admissions to selective UK law schools

**Report undertaken in collaboration with York Law
School of the University of York and supported by
Clifford Chance**

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Foreword

Access to the professions is a significant challenge for social mobility. Within that, admissions to the top law schools can be particularly difficult for applicants from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In this study, we explore the admissions criteria and processes employed by a number of the most selective law schools in the United Kingdom and analyse their possible impact on widening access. We make recommendations about how to improve admissions arrangements.

Our analysis raises several questions and includes some critical observations. It is important to set these in context. Our research highlighted a widespread commitment to equality and broadening access to law schools, as well as very substantial efforts to achieve that. Our interview participants included both academic Admissions Tutors and professional admissions staff. Though not necessarily representative of all the law schools included, through an element of self-selection in recruitment, we were tremendously impressed by their knowledge, dedication and hard work. None of the more critical findings and points in our study are directed towards those individuals. Our recommendations are made for consideration within that generally very positive environment, to foster reflection, cooperation, and to assist those looking for further improvement.

Just a few weeks before finalising this study, the extent of the Covid-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic became apparent. At the time of writing, the longer-term effects (including for university admissions) were unknown. However, two immediate changes were very clear: at least one cycle where most applicants would have their final grades awarded largely on the basis of teacher assessments (rather than sitting final examinations) and an increase in the number of places available for home students. Will better-resourced schools be better able to fine-tune their assessments so that as many students as possible meet the conditions of their university offers? Will the pressure to recruit more home students encourage law schools to be more flexible about grades – or less flexible, to maintain league table rankings? And looking ahead to the 2021 intake, the cancellation of this summer's university open days increases the importance of having accurate information about admissions requirements online.

The short, medium and longer-term impacts of the changes forced by Covid-19 raise concerns, but may also present opportunities, regarding diversity and access to legal education. We hope that the commitment to widening access that we identify sustains in such turbulent and challenging times.

Acknowledgements

We would like, first, to express our sincere thanks to those individuals and universities that participated in our research, most of whom are listed below. This is not a complete list of all interviewees, as some preferred to remain anonymous. We gained many invaluable insights from our interviews, as well as a huge amount of data, and are extremely grateful for the donation of time.

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Institutions

University of Aberdeen School of Law
University of Birmingham
University of Bristol
University of Cambridge
Cardiff School of Law & Politics,
Cardiff University
University of Dundee
University of Exeter

University of Glasgow
University of Leeds
London School of Economics &
Political Science
Faculty of Law, University of Oxford
University of Sheffield
University of Strathclyde
University of York

Only some institutions interviewed feature in the analysis of UCAS data and only some institutions featuring in the UCAS data analysis were interviewed.

Executive summary

I. Overview of key findings

Our interviews with admissions personnel highlighted a widespread commitment to equality and broadening access to law schools, as well as very substantial efforts to achieve that. However, our interviews also revealed that some aspects of admissions requirements and processes were likely to present more barriers for applicants from less advantaged backgrounds than for their more advantaged peers. There were also significant differences in admissions requirements and processes, with many lacking an evidence base or clear rationale. Our review of law schools' websites indicated that the quality, availability and accessibility of information specifically about applying to law varies. More positively, applicants from both types of backgrounds were equally likely to apply to the top law schools, providing they had predicted grades of at least AAB.

Our analysis of UCAS data revealed differences in the rates at which applicants from more advantaged or less advantaged backgrounds respectively progress through the stages of the admissions process, with the latter generally less likely to progress. Our data confirms that some of these differences are due to differences in predicted grades and in type of qualifications. Applicants from the less advantaged group are less likely to receive an offer, with qualifications other than A level being the biggest barrier. The biggest barrier to being accepted is predicted low grades and this is the case across both groups. However, our analysis shows that if accepted applicants are from the less advantaged group, then they are significantly more likely to have the grade profile AAB+ than their more advantaged peers. This means that law schools require applicants from less advantaged backgrounds to have higher grades than their more advantaged peers. This is contrary to the intended commitment to access. Our data is not sufficiently detailed to confirm the reasons for this difference.

We recommend that law schools examine their own admissions data to investigate any disproportions in progression and unintended barriers. Since there is wide variation across law schools in the relative likelihood of the two applicant groups progressing, we also recommend that law schools share successful practice to collate evidence of which measures lead to greater success for applicants from less advantaged backgrounds.

II. Executive summary of sections

i. Aims and methodology

This study identifies and analyses the socio-economic make-up of the student bodies at 20 of the most selective law schools in England and how those student bodies are formed through the stages of the admissions process. We explore the admissions arrangements used by a wider group of selective law schools and how they may influence the resulting student bodies. We also explore the rationale for these admissions arrangements; and assess what admissions information is available to prospective students.

To identify the socio-economic make-up of the student bodies, we analyse UCAS data to show the POLAR profiles of prospective students across the admissions cycle. We identified a group of the top 30 law schools in the UK and a subset comprising the top 20 law schools in England.

ii. Context

Admission to the top law schools matters, beyond general principles of equality of access to education, because it facilitates access to the legal profession and particularly to its more prestigious areas. Law schools provide the main route into the profession and the main 'talent pool' from which future professionals are drawn, with the top law firms tending to target the top law schools. The legal profession remains dominated by people from higher socio-economic backgrounds, especially within leading law firms and in the judiciary.

iii. The UCAS process

Admission to UK law schools takes place within the application process managed by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). We provide an outline of the current UCAS process as background information for readers unfamiliar with it.

iv. The student intake to selective law schools

The proportion of entrants from POLAR low participation neighbourhoods varies substantially across the top 20 law schools, with some recruiting more than twice the proportion of others. Nearly all the top 20 law schools enrol a higher proportion of students from low-participation neighbourhoods than their respective university. However, only five law schools reach the English average for higher education institutions in terms of their intake of students from such neighbourhoods.

v. Provision of information to prospective applicants

It is important for law schools to provide clear, accurate and easily accessible information about admissions arrangements to prospective applicants, because the information available to them from other sources – and especially from schools and colleges, family and friends – may vary markedly between applicants from different socio-economic backgrounds. We reviewed the admissions information available on the websites of a group of 24 top law schools. We found much generic information, but less giving guidance on specific details for law, such as preferred subjects, the acceptability of qualifications other than A levels, the personal statement and any criteria used to assess it, the use of contextual data and interviews. In many cases, it was very difficult to find relevant information on law school or university websites, requiring a general internet search and/or searching through dense documents.

vi. The applicant journey: UCAS admissions data for the top 20 law schools

Applications

There is **wide variation in the pattern of applications** by prospective students from POLAR low participation (PQ1-2) areas to the top 20 law schools, with four law schools at one end attracting twice the proportion of PQ1-2 applicants than the four law schools at the other end. We observe that those law schools attracting the smallest proportions of PQ1-2 applicants tend to be more selective or based in London, but this is not a consistent pattern. The **law schools attracting the highest overall proportions of applicants from PQ1-2** were those attracting higher proportions with either predicted grades of less than AAB or no A levels predicted (meaning that they have other

qualifications). Looking at the average for the top 20 law schools, we see that applicants from high participation areas (PQ3-5) included a substantially higher proportion predicted at least AAB than amongst PQ1-2 applicants. However, two of the most selective law schools attract a higher proportion of applicants with either less than AAB or no A levels predicted within their PQ3-5 group than within their PQ1-2 group.

Offers

Offer rates ranged from some law schools making offers to almost all their applicants from PQ1-2 areas, to those making offers to only about one-fifth of them. In general – and as may be expected – the more selective the law school, the lower the proportion of applicants receiving offers. On average, **65% of PQ1-2 applicants to a top 20 law school receive an offer**. This is a very positive message that may be useful in third-party efforts to encourage students to apply to top law schools.

In terms of the differential offer rate between the two POLAR groups, there is much variation. We found that **at all but two law schools, PQ1-2 applicants (the less advantaged group) were less likely to receive an offer than their PQ3-5 peers**. When we disaggregated offer data by qualification and grade profile, we found that the most significant difference was amongst those applicants with no A levels predicted. It is likely that this arises from different choices of qualifications by the two groups: Access and BTEC versus the International Baccalaureate. **The offer rate is more balanced for applicants predicted AAB+**. However, looking at the top six law schools, we find that most of them were less likely to make offers to PQ1-2 applicants than their PQ3-5 peers across all qualifications and grade profiles.

Acceptance and acceptance rates

Most of the law schools placing higher proportions of PQ1-2 applicants also placed a larger proportion of these with other than AAB+. However, this is not a consistent pattern. Nor does relative prestige within the top 20 law schools appear to have a consistent association with the proportion of PQ1-2 amongst accepted applicants.

Looking at acceptance rates (the likelihood of applicants' being placed), we find that on average, across the total cohort, applicants from both POLAR groups predicted AAB+ had the same acceptance rate. When we disaggregate this by law school, we see that applicants from PG1-2 areas were more likely to be

successfully placed at nine law schools and less likely to be placed at 11. The negative differences are more prominent. If we consider applicants with all qualifications and A level grades, then applicants from PQ1-2 areas were less likely to be placed at 16 of the top 20 law schools. **Predicted low grades are the biggest barrier to applicants' being accepted, across both POLAR groups.**

We tested whether there was any statistical correlation between admissions requirements and processes with acceptance rates. Looking at grade profiles and acceptance, we found a significant negative association between the acceptances from applicants who were from PQ1-2 and acceptances with other than AAB+. This negative association means that **if accepted applicants are from PQ1-2, then they are significantly more likely to have the grade profile AAB+ than those from PQ3-5.** This supports our earlier observations in the section on acceptance, where we found that amongst applicants with less than AAB, those from PQ1-2 areas were less likely to receive an offer than their peers from PQ3-5.

However, there is no consistent association between other admissions requirements (for example, using contextual data, LNAT or interviews) or practices (for example, making offers to a high proportion of applicants) and having a higher proportion of PQ1-2 amongst accepted applicants. Nor is there an association between these factors and higher acceptance rates for PQ1-2. The law schools scoring highest on these two measures take a range of approaches.

Law schools do not, of course, solely control whether offer-holders progress to being placed on a course: this is determined by which offer the offer-holders choose to accept and whether they subsequently achieve the grades to meet the terms of that offer. Our data suggests that **PQ1-2 applicants are more likely to accept offers from more selective law schools (within the top 20) and less likely to accept offers from those ranked less highly.** Some of the more selective law schools are therefore able to convert a greater proportion of their PQ1-2 applicants to acceptances, while less selective law schools have a lower conversion. The top 20 law schools are competing for a limited pool of high-achieving PQ1-2 applicants, who seek to maximise their options.

Broader application patterns across the sector

We found that a higher proportion of applicants from PQ1-2 areas and predicted AAB+ apply to the top 20 law schools than to comparators or other remaining universities. This is encouraging, as it indicates that **applicants from PQ1-2**

areas and predicted AAB+ are applying in line with their predicted grades. We see that applicants predicted AAB+ apply to similar law schools, the top seven being the same for each POLAR group, but in a different order.

vii. Key findings from interviews

The aim of the qualitative research was to **explore the admissions processes used** by a group of selective law schools, **together with the underpinning rationales** for their use. This element of the study was based on interviews with Admissions Tutors and/or professional admissions staff at a total of 16 law schools, supplemented by information available online on university websites.

Four main aspects of the law admissions decision-making process were explored: the UCAS application; additional assessment; making offers; confirmation. In summary, our general findings are that: there is a **strong commitment to widening access** amongst selective law school admission professionals; there are **wide variations in the decision-making processes** and **evaluation of applications** employed by law schools; and that the adoption of policies and procedures often **lacks an evidence-base**, or clear justification. These variations in approach and the lack of evidence may well be influenced by a lack of available data and other information, as well as the impact of other concerns that run counter to the aim of broadening access. Amongst the latter, the impact of entry tariffs on league tables presents a substantial inhibiting factor.

Our findings from the four aspects of the decision-making process are as follows.

- > The UCAS application: We find wide variations across law schools in the acceptance of qualification types. Vocational qualifications (in the form of BTECs) were not accepted by more than a third, unless in combination with A levels. Similar differences in approach to preferred and excluded A level subjects are evident. We find that suitability of qualification and subject appears to be based more on assumptions than robust investigation. Some interviewees expressed doubts regarding the accuracy of predicted grades and concerns about reliance on personal statements. However, we find widespread reliance on both elements, with examples of seemingly subjective evaluation.
- > Additional assessment: We find considerable differences in the use of information additional to that provided in the UCAS application. More than

a third of law schools used the LNAT. As well as variations in how the components of the LNAT are assessed, we find contrary views as to its value and reliability. We find greater variation in the use of interviews. This includes whether interviews are required for all, some, or any applicants, and the degree to which they are structured. The provision of information to applicants also varied, with some significant deficits identified, and so we raise equality of access to information as a concern.

- > Making offers: We find a fairly high degree of consistency in standard grade requirements but significant differences in whether and how contextual information may be used to adjust such offers. Our interviewees expressed concerns regarding the availability and robustness of contextual data to help decision-making, as well as their ability to interpret this. This area of discussion also noted some of the influences regarding reluctance to make such adjustments, primarily in the form of League Table rankings, but also ability of students to succeed on the degree programme.
- > Confirmation: We find that the majority of the law schools used the allocation of discretionary places at the time of final A level results as an opportunity to make contextual information into account.

viii. Closing words

This report asks many questions and provides rather fewer answers. We have not identified a clear solution to the issue of the underrepresentation of students from less advantaged backgrounds in the top law schools: there is no magic wand, no one measure that will guarantee a more diverse intake. We have however provided a model for how individual law schools might wish to explore their own more detailed data and we have identified which questions they might wish to ask. We have also shown that some of the top law schools can achieve more socio-economic diversity in their intake than was present in their applicant pool, suggesting that other law schools may also have the capacity to improve. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it is likely to be easier for the more selective law schools to improve than it is for the less selective.

Recommendations

We noted a strong commitment amongst interviewees to recruiting a more diverse student body and to supporting the development of a more diverse legal profession. At the same time, we noted policies and practices that seemed likely to hinder this, and our key finding runs counter to the aim of increased diversity: applicants from less advantaged neighbourhoods (as measured by POLAR) are likely to require higher grades than their more advantaged peers to gain entry to the top law schools. This is despite the widespread use of contextual admissions, which in many cases reduces the entry grade requirements for applicants from less advantaged neighbourhoods. We also found that applicants from less advantaged neighbourhoods with qualifications other than A levels are much less likely to receive an offer than their more advantaged peers. These two findings are likely to be the unintended consequence of certain admissions requirements and processes.

To support the shared commitment to socio-economic diversity in law, we recommend that law schools undertake the following actions.

i. Establish a Law Admissions Network for Law Admissions Tutors and professional admissions staff.

This body would aim to support entry by students from less advantaged backgrounds by providing a forum for:

- > sharing admissions practice, especially between law schools from similar universities
- > sharing research relating to admissions practice
- > identifying questions for new research
- > agreeing, where feasible, common positions on admissions requirements (while preserving institutional autonomy)
- > identifying and addressing professional development needs.¹

¹ If you are interested in joining a Law Admissions Network, please contact co-author Dr Laurence Etherington at laurence.etherington@york.ac.uk

ii. Develop more evidence-based approaches to setting admissions requirements and making decisions about applicants.

We believe that this will allow law schools to make faster progress in diversifying their respective intakes. The Law Admissions Network would support efficiencies in gathering evidence.

iii. As part of developing an evidence-based approach, each law school should review its own admissions data to assess whether applicants from less advantaged backgrounds have an equal chance of success.

We recommend:

- > using the most up-to-date internal data available
- > using our methodology of tracking applicants through the stages of the application cycle and assessing whether applicants from less advantaged backgrounds² progress proportionately across each stage
- > in addition, disaggregating where possible each element that contributes to the assessment process (for example, grades, A level subjects, qualification type, personal statement, LNAT and interview).

This would allow each law school to identify any policies or practices that had a more negative impact on applicants from less advantaged backgrounds.³

iv. Using the results of this internal review, each law school should review any factors within their admissions process underlying unequal chances of success and assess the potential for reducing these barriers.

Reducing barriers may include:⁴

² Law schools are likely to have access to institutional widening participation markers for applicants.

³ For example, if a smaller proportion of applicants from less advantaged backgrounds are receiving offers than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds, and their grades are equal, a law school may wish to explore whether applicants' A level subjects influenced decisions.

⁴ For example, if a law school found that A level subjects did influence decisions, then it may wish to reassess whether it is justifiable to preference some subjects over others. This could include seeking evidence from other law schools for better performance on course by those with specific A level subjects.

- > considering the impact of an applicant's personal and educational context not just on grades, but also on the personal statement and reference, especially where these are scored, and on interview
- > considering all subjects equally
- > accepting qualifications other than A levels.

v. Develop a better understanding of contextual admissions

By collating practice and evidence across law schools, the Law Admissions Network would facilitate this process. Linking in with employers of law graduates will promote greater consistency of approach between higher education and employers. Points to review include:

- > sources of contextual data and identifying eligible applicants
- > the evidence base for using contextual data in admissions in terms of its impact on the predictive validity of A level results for undergraduate performance
- > options for implementing contextual admissions
- > negotiating senior-level agreement
- > being transparent to potential applicants.

vi. As part of addressing the recommendations above, we recommend that law schools bear in mind the following key findings from our research:

- > Accepted applicants from less advantaged neighbourhoods (POLAR quintiles 1-2) are significantly more likely to have the grade profile AAB+ than those from more advantaged neighbourhoods (POLAR quintiles 3-5).
- > Applicants from POLAR quintiles 1-2 with qualifications other than A levels are much less likely to receive an offer than those from POLAR quintiles 3-5.
- > Accepting a wide range of qualifications and accepting applicants who had been predicted less than AAB helps in placing applicants from POLAR quintiles 1-2.

vii. Share admissions policy and practice internally

Law admissions personnel should share policy, practice, internal evaluation and research with colleagues in other professional social science subjects, such as economics and business.

viii. Each law school should consult with university colleagues responsible for marketing and outreach relating to student diversity.

This is particularly important for law schools attracting low numbers of applicants from less advantaged backgrounds or converting a lower proportion of such offer holders to accepts. Each law school should seek to ensure that:

- > full and relevant information is available to potential applicants and offer-holders (for example, about entry requirements and application assessment processes, financial support, other support on the course and graduate outcomes)
- > outreach and conversion activities are designed to be relevant, welcoming and accessible to a diverse student body.

We also propose that the Bridge Group ask third-sector organisations supporting access to law and/or top universities to promote the finding that on average 65% of applicants from less advantaged backgrounds to the top 20 law schools receive an offer.⁵

ix. Each law school may wish to reflect on current course content, teaching and learning

While acknowledging that this is beyond the scope of a review purely of admissions, we ask each law school to consider the potential for enhancements to:

- > induction and early support, where this facilitates the admission of applicants with Access and vocational qualifications
- > the inclusivity of curriculum, teaching and learning, to support the retention and success of a more diverse student body.

The recommendations above focus on matters that law schools themselves can address, but wider arrangements for university admissions also warrant consideration. In our view, adjustments to these arrangements are likely to particularly benefit applicants from less advantaged backgrounds. Our research is published at a time when the Office for Students is reviewing and consulting on the university admissions system.⁶ A number of the issues being considered as

⁵ Such organisations include, for example, the Access Project, the Brilliant Club, the Social Mobility Foundation and the Sutton Trust.

⁶ Office for Students (2020). Consultation on the higher education admissions system in England (Ref: OfS 2020.12). Available at:

part of that review are relevant to our findings, including the use of personal statements and predicted grades. The Office for Students' proposals include, for example, changing the timetable for applying to university so that applicants apply only after they receive their final examination results.

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-higher-education-admissions-system-in-england/>

