

**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

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

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

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

- > 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

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.

- > 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 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

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

example, changing the timetable for applying to university so that applicants apply only after they receive their final examination results.

1. Research aims and methodology

Aims

1. Diversity within the legal profession is affected by uneven access and opportunity from primary school through to law firms' recruitment and progression practices. Access to university⁷ remains a crucial stage within this journey. Though talent is drawn from a wider student body (and elsewhere), law degrees from university law schools provide the most common route into the profession and the main 'talent pool' from which future professionals are drawn. This is very likely to remain the case, despite recent initiatives such as legal apprenticeships.
2. 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 then explore the admissions requirements, policies and procedures used by these and other selective law schools and how they may influence the resulting student bodies. We also explore the rationale for these admissions arrangements and how they are implemented.
3. To identify the socio-economic make-up of the student bodies, we analyse UCAS⁸ data to show the POLAR⁹ profiles of prospective students across the admissions cycle. (We use POLAR as an indicator of educational disadvantage and a broad proxy for wider socio-economic disadvantage.)

⁷ We generally use the term 'university' to refer to all higher education institutions, as it is more widely understood outside the higher education sector.

⁸ The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) handles applications for full-time undergraduate study at UK universities and colleges.

⁹ The participation of local areas (POLAR) classification is used to group areas across the UK based on the proportion of young people participating in higher education; quintiles 1 and 2 are the classifications for neighbourhoods with the lowest participation. For more information, see: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/polar-participation-of-local-areas/>.

This study also assesses what admissions information is available to prospective students, to help inform their decisions. We ask whether there is an association between the 'inputs' – admissions requirements, policies and procedures, as well as publicly available information about these – and the 'outcomes' – the choices made by prospective students from low-participation areas and their relative rates of success in the admissions process. We consider what changes, if any, our findings might suggest, in order to facilitate more equal access to law schools (and indirectly to the legal profession).

Methodology

Choice of universities

4. For this study, we identified a group of the top 30 law schools in the UK and a subset comprising the top 20 law schools in England. We identified the groups through analysing overall rankings and entry standards from the Complete University Guide¹⁰ for 2015 and 2018, together with data from the Chambers Student report on the most preferred universities for law firms.¹¹
5. We used the two groups for different purposes. Our quantitative analysis focuses on the top 20 law schools in England, allowing us to use directly comparable data for POLAR and applicants' predicted grades.¹² For the interviews, we approached the wider group of the top 30 law schools in the UK. In addition to the top 20 in England, this included three further schools in England, five in Scotland and one each in Wales and Northern Ireland. Our web searches covered the top 20 as well as the four law schools from the top 30 who participated in interviews. This wider group of law schools

¹⁰ For more information, see:

<https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings>

¹¹ For more information, see: <http://www.chambersstudent.co.uk/where-to-start/newsletter/law-firms-preferred-universities>. Although we could have used alternative methodologies to identify the top 20 and 30 law schools, we do not believe our resulting groups would be controversial.

¹² HESA does not calculate POLAR for higher education institutions in Scotland. Level 3 qualifications in Scotland are different.

enabled us to gain a broader understanding of practices and approaches across similar universities and helped to inform our recommendations.

6. The project comprises three areas of enquiry, as set out below.

Quantitative data: UCAS admissions data for law schools

7. We purchased the relevant data (aggregated over three years) under licence from UCAS for
 - > Applications
 - > Offers
 - > Acceptances (using the UCAS definition of 'placed on the course')
8. The variables for our analysis included:
 - > Predicted A level grades (less than AAB, AAB or above)
 - > Other qualifications
 - > POLAR 4 Low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR quintiles 1-2 and 3-5)
9. We used this data to investigate the socio-economic profiles of students applying to study law at highly selective law schools, being offered places and being accepted by them. We calculated offer rates and acceptance rates for the two POLAR groups, for AAB+ and all qualifications and grade profiles.
10. We also obtained data to investigate the application choices of students applying to study law across the higher education sector. This covered students applying to study law in the last five years. We identified the most popular choices for the two POLAR groups and the two A level groups.
11. For a full description of the calculations for each figure, see appendix 2.

Provision of information to prospective applicants: web searches

12. We employed a student researcher to undertake an extensive search of the websites for 24 of our top 30 law schools, within an enquiry framework agreed by the researchers. These comprised the top 20 in England,

augmented by four other law schools in the top 30 who participated in interviews. Most of these additional four are outside England. The student researcher then collated information and assessed it, as below, with input from the researchers. The aim was to evaluate the information law schools provided to applicants in two senses: whether that information met the needs of applicants through providing sufficient guidance, and how easy it was for the applicant to find and understand that material. These web searches also helped us to map the admissions processes used by each of the law schools. This supplemented the information we obtained via interviews.

13. We researched entry requirements by one of the methods most commonly used by prospective applicants: searching university websites. We looked first on the web pages of each law school relating to applying for undergraduate courses, following any links to recommended pages as necessary. If we did not find the required information via law schools, then we used the university's search bar function to find the information. As a last resort, we used Google. Our researcher sent one email to each law school as required to request any specific information that he could not discover from searches.
14. We graded two aspects of the information provided by universities: the quality and clarity of the content, and how easy it was to find (its accessibility). To facilitate consistent grading, we composed a 'grade description' table, setting out the criteria for each rating on a scale of 1 to 5 (lowest to highest). We awarded the highest grade for information that gave the applicant a clear guide on the topic and was visible on the main law application page. We gave the lowest grade, 1, where we could not find the information. We used 'N/A' to indicate where the information was not relevant for a university (for example, information about interviews was not relevant for universities not conducting interviews).

Qualitative data: interviews with admissions personnel

15. We interviewed law school Admissions Tutors and/or staff in similar roles to explore matters such as:
 - > Conceptions of the admissions process and rationale for specific elements

- > What elements are included in the decision-making processes (e.g. qualifications, LNAT, personal statement)
 - > Details of qualification requirements (e.g. grade requirements, qualification types, excluded and preferred subjects)
 - > How additional elements and information are considered (e.g. how contextual information is used, how LNAT scores are used, how interviews are scored)
 - > Use of unconditional, alternative and contextual offers
 - > Participation in widening participation programmes and recognition given to them in admissions
 - > Communication of entry criteria to applicants.
16. We approached all the top 30 schools with requests for an interview. We made initial contacts by email, with follow-ups by email and telephone. We conducted 16 interviews in a semi-structured form (having provided the agenda to participants in advance): 11 with top 20 English schools and five with others in the Top 30 UK schools. Seven interviews were face-to-face at the relevant law school. We conducted six by Skype or FaceTime and the remaining three by telephone. All participants were happy for us to make audio recordings of the interviews. We then used those recordings as the basis for the thematic analysis and to identify illustrative quotes.

Project outcomes

17. We intend to disseminate this report across law schools and actively raise awareness of its findings to stimulate discussion by admissions tutors and other staff responsible for law admissions. We invite a joint reflection across law schools on practice, a sharing of understanding and a discussion of what might constitute good practice in relation to facilitating the admission of students from less advantaged backgrounds. To support this process, we recommend the development of a Law Admissions Network. A likely first step is inviting all interested law admissions staff to attend a workshop to explore the issues and consider the best way forward for continuing discussions. We provide contact details for Laurence Etherington at the University of York for those who are interested in this.
18. We make several other recommendations, focusing on matters that law schools themselves can address. We encourage law schools to consider these recommendations and take action to address them.

19. We believe that this report will also be of interest to a wider audience of policymakers and others concerned with university admissions practices and entry to the legal profession. This includes the Office for Students, which is currently consulting on changes to the university admissions system.¹³ It may also include graduate recruiters within law firms, many of whom are already keenly aware of the need to diversify their intake and indeed have taken measures to facilitate this. We will disseminate the report to this wider audience accordingly.

¹³ For more information, see:

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

2. Context: Socio-economic diversity amongst law graduates and in the profession

20. This section outlines why admission to the top law schools matters, beyond general principles of equality of access to education.
21. The legal profession, especially its most prestigious and highly paid positions, remains dominated by people from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Being a member of the profession confers benefits in itself and provides a pathway to many of our most powerful institutions: both directly (to the judiciary) and indirectly, through for example participation in politics.¹⁴
22. Problems of unequal access to the legal profession are manifest at multiple stages,¹⁵ including professional recruitment (primarily in the form of training

¹⁴ There is a disproportionate presence of people from the legal profession amongst MPs and government Ministers. 14.2% of MPs elected in 2015 were barristers or solicitors, while 16.7% of MPs elected in 2017 had worked in the legal profession. See Lukas Audickas, Richard Cracknell, Alexander Bellis. Social Background of MPs 1979-2017. House of Commons Library. Briefing Paper Number CBP 7483, 5 November 2019. One study finds that MPs with a legal background made up almost one-fifth of the House of Commons after the 2015 election. See 'Legal background is ticket to seat in new parliament' <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/news/legal-background-is-ticket-to-seat-in-new-parliament/5048967.article> (This article uses research compiled by BPP University Law School that we could not locate in the public domain.)

¹⁵ See, for example:

Rolfe, H. and Anderson, T. (2003). A firm choice: law firms' preferences in the recruitment of trainee solicitors. *International Journal of the Legal Profession*, 10, pp. 315-334. Available at: <http://letr.org.uk/references/storage/ARUAKT4B/0969595042000228784.pdf>

Sommerlad, H. et al. (2010). Diversity in the Legal Profession in England and Wales: A Qualitative Study of Barriers and Individual Choices. Available at: http://www.legalservicesboard.org.uk/what_we_do/Research/Publications/pdf/l_sb_diversity_in_the_legal_profession_final_rev.pdf

contracts), and primary and secondary education. University access remains a key factor affecting diversity in the journey to becoming a legal professional.¹⁶ Though talent is drawn from a wider student body (and elsewhere) law schools provide the main route into the profession and the main 'talent pool' from which future professionals are drawn. This is very likely to remain the case, despite recent initiatives such as legal apprenticeships.

23. The introduction of a standardised Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) should, the Bridge Group has argued, help in increasing diversity.¹⁷ However, the increasingly early stage at which law firms recruit trainees (during years 1 and 2 of an undergraduate degree and before they sit the SQE), acts as the most significant 'gatekeeping' to professional qualification. Furthermore, this early recruitment focuses on preferred, highly selective law schools, further limiting the potential for the SQE to help increase diversity.
24. Using data about the law schools of Russell Group universities as a proxy for our group of the top law schools, we note that admission to these confers benefits. These include higher degree outcomes and an increased likelihood of being recruited by one of the leading UK law firms. Unfortunately, only a relatively small proportion of state school students gain entry to a Russell Group university, while students from less advantaged backgrounds comprise a relatively small proportion of graduates from their law schools. This is likely to contribute to the lack of socio-economic diversity within the legal profession.

Ashley, L. et al. (2015). A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions. Available at:
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/434791/A_qualitative_evaluation_of_non-educational_barriers_to_the_elite_professions.pdf

¹⁶ See, for example, Bridge Group (2017). Introduction of the Solicitors Qualifying Examination: Monitoring and Maximising Diversity. Available at:
<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/policy/sqe/research-reports.page> (pp.10-11).

¹⁷ Ibid.

25. Russell Group universities generally have highly selective entry tariffs¹⁸ and a lower proportion of undergraduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Only 14% of students from state-funded mainstream schools and colleges progressed to a Russell Group university and only 7% of those who had been eligible for free school meals while at secondary school.¹⁹ According to the most recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data on leavers,²⁰ 8.1% of law graduates from Russell Group universities were from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN, POLAR4 quintile 1)²¹ compared to 12.4% of law graduates at all UK HEIs, while 19.4% of law graduates from Russell Group universities were from less advantaged social backgrounds (NS-SEC classes 4-7) compared to 27.2% of law graduates at all UK HEIs.²²

¹⁸ For example, 68% of law graduates at Russell Group HEIs met tariffs of 420+ points compared to 32.4% of law graduates at all UK HEIs. For those from low participation neighbourhoods, these figures are 59.8% and 21.5%. Data taken from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey for 2016-17, Undergraduate UK and Other EU domiciled leavers.

¹⁹ Destination year 2016-17. Department for Education. Destinations of key stage 4 and key stage 5 students, England, 2016/17. 16 October 2018. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748199/Destinations_Main_Text_2017.pdf

²⁰ Graduates studying Law (JACSA01: C, Law), at Russell Group institutions n = 2,710; at all institutions n = 10,750. [HESA DLHE data 2016-17.]

²¹ The participation of local areas (POLAR) classification is used to group areas across the UK based on the proportion of young people participating in higher education; quintiles 1 and 2 are the classifications for neighbourhoods with the lowest participation. For more information, see: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/polar-participation-of-local-areas/>

²² The National Statistics Socio-economic classification for social class based on employment relations and conditions of occupations. Classes 4-7 are: small employers and own account workers; lower supervisory and technical occupations; semi-routine occupations; and routine occupations. Classes 1-3 are: higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations; lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations; and intermediate occupations. Class 8 is never worked and long-term unemployed. For more information, see: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticsocioeconomicclassificationnssecbasedonsoc2010>

26. Degree outcomes among law graduates are also higher at Russell Group universities,²³ including for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.²⁴ There is evidence from The Graduate Market in 2019 report²⁵ that the universities targeted by the largest number of top employers in 2018-19 – including law firms Allen & Overy, Clifford Chance, Linklaters, and Slaughter & May – include 22 of the 24 Russell Group universities.²⁶ While individual law firms may increasingly broaden the range of universities they target for attraction activities in order to access more diverse applicants, there is certainly progress to be made against figures from a 2015 Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission report. This report found that Russell Group graduates made up circa 40% of all applicants to graduate roles and over 60% of job offers across ten elite law and accountancy firms.²⁷ To put this in

²³ 88.8% of 2016 law graduates at Russell Group universities achieved a first-class or upper second-class degree compared to 76.8% of law graduates at all UK HEIs. Figures derived from the Student Record and Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey for 2016-17 graduates (the latest and final year of the survey), administered by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), and reflecting undergraduate UK and other EU domiciled leavers.

²⁴ For example, in 2016-17, 82% of Russell Group law graduates from low participation neighbourhoods obtained an upper second-class (2:1) degree or above compared to 89.3% of their RG non-LPN peers. The figure for law graduates from low participation neighbourhoods at all UK universities was 71.5%. HESA. Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey 2016-17.

²⁵ Produced by High Fliers and available here: https://www.highfliers.co.uk/download/2019/graduate_market/GMReport19.pdf. The report is based on the top 100 graduate employers as reported by 19,147 final year students from thirty leading universities. This includes twelve law firms: Allen & Overy, Baker McKenzie, Clifford Chance, DLA Piper, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, Herbert Smith Freehills, Hogan Lovells, Irwin Mitchell, Linklaters, Pinsent Masons, Slaughter and May, and White & Case.

²⁶ All but Queen Mary, University of London and Queen's University Belfast. The top 25 universities targeted by the top 100 employers in 2018-19 also included the University of Bath, Loughborough University, and the University of Leicester.

²⁷ Ashley, L. et al. (2015). A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/non-educational-barriers-to-the-elite-professions-evaluation>. Based on quantitative and qualitative data for ten elite case study organisations based in London: five law and five accountancy

perspective, only 17% of all higher education graduates attended a Russell Group university.²⁸

27. These figures underline the under-representation of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the recruitment pipeline to the legal profession. We cannot assess the profession itself by directly comparable measures – or by using POLAR, the postcode measure used in higher education and this report – because the legal profession does not routinely gather data relating to these measures. Nor does the profession publish an annual analysis of entrants to the legal profession. We therefore refer to alternative measures of socio-economic background.
28. In its most recent sector-wide diversity data collection (2019), the Solicitors Regulation Authority found that 21% of all lawyers attended fee-paying schools (compared to 7% in the general population) and 49% of all lawyers were the first generation in their family to attend university.²⁹ Bridge Group research focusing on a group of eight leading law firms in 2018 found that 28% of early career solicitors (closer in age to the students on which this report focuses) represented the first generation in their family to attend university, while 46% of early career solicitors had attended fee-paying or independent schools.³⁰

firms, selected based on size, turnover and reputation. More recent sector research conducted by the Chambers Student team found that 76.5% of recent commercial trainee lawyers (interviewed between 2016-18) had attended RG HEIs. Available at: <https://www.chambersstudent.co.uk/where-to-start/newsletter/law-firms-preferred-universities-2019>.

²⁸ GOV.UK Department of Education (2012). Government publishes destination data for the first time. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-publishes-destination-data-for-the-first-time>. [Retrieved 13 January 2019]

²⁹ For more information, see <https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/equality-diversity/key-findings/diverse-legal-profession/>. The SRA previously utilised attendance at a fee-paying school and first-generation university attendance as proxy indicators for 'social mobility'. In 2017, 68% attended UK state schools, and 10% attended school outside the UK. 41% attended university but not as the first generation, and 5% did not attend university. For more information, see: <https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/equality-diversity/diversity-archive/>.

³⁰ Bridge Group (2018). Socio-economic Background and Early Career Progression in the Law. Available at: <https://thebridgegroup.org.uk/research->

29. The independently educated are also overrepresented amongst barristers. Of those who provided information, 34% attended a UK independent school.³¹ Moving further along the pipeline to the top judiciary, Hecht et al. found that 67% were privately educated.³²
30. The legal sector must continue its efforts to reform its recruitment and training practices, as well as those affecting progression in the profession. But law schools can contribute earlier in the pipeline: increasing the socio-economic diversity of the intake to the top law schools is very likely to help increase the diversity of the profession.

[and-policy/socio-economic-background-and-early-career-progression-in-the-law/](#).

³¹ Bar Standards Board (2020). Diversity at the Bar 2019. Available at: <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/uploads/assets/912f7278-48fc-46df-893503eb729598b8/Diversity-at-the-Bar-2019.pdf>

³² Hecht, K., McArthur, D., Savage, M. and Friedman, S. (2020). Elites in the UK: pulling away? Social mobility, geographic mobility and elite occupations. The Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Pulling-Away-1.pdf>

3. The UCAS process

31. This section is provided as background information for readers unfamiliar with the current processes of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). Admission to UK law schools takes place within the UCAS application process, which comprises the following stages.

Pre-application

32. For learners considering full-time study at university, UCAS provides information regarding its process as well as general information on types of courses and providers; and summary information on available courses.³³ This augments the information that individual universities provide, which covers, for example, the nature of the programmes available; institution-specific and/or course-specific features of the application process; and information on student life more generally.

Application

33. The UCAS process commences with applicants registering on the UCAS system and then submitting the required information:
- > Personal details: this may include contextual information, such as postcode, whether the applicant has spent time in care, has participated in an outreach programme or special entry pathway,³⁴ etc
 - > Education history: this includes completed and incomplete qualifications. Applicants' schools/colleges will usually provide predicted A level (or equivalent) grades,³⁵ as most applicants apply before having sat their final examinations.
 - > Employment history

³³ The university/higher education institution normally provides the latter.

³⁴ A programme in which students from less advantaged backgrounds may participate to inform and assist their applications to university. Examples include 'Pathways to Law' and 'Realising Opportunities'.

³⁵ These predictions are estimates provided by the applicant's school/college, based on her/his academic performance to date.

- > Personal statement³⁶
 - > Reference (usually from a teacher)
 - > The specific courses applied for (maximum of five)
34. UCAS forwards this information (excluding choices relating to other universities) to each institution selected by the applicant.

Universities assess applicants and make offers

35. Universities assess and select applicants. This selection may be based solely on the information in the UCAS application form or may include additional selection criteria such as the LNAT.³⁷ The universities then inform applicants (through the UCAS system) of their decisions. These include whether they are making an offer, and any conditions they are attaching. Universities make most applicants a conditional offer, which specifies the grades that each applicant will need to achieve for A levels or equivalent to be accepted.

Replying to offers

36. Applicants choose between any offer(s) that they receive and inform UCAS of their decisions. Applicants identify their preferred course, which is likely to be the one imposing the higher offer conditions (often associated with higher prestige), as their 'firm' choice. Applicants also select a backup course (in principle, one with lower grade conditions) as their 'insurance' choice, in case they do not achieve the grades to meet their firm choice. These choices are known as the Conditional Firm (CF) and Conditional Insurance (CI) choices. Where applicants subsequently meet their offer conditions or are otherwise accepted onto a course, these choices become Unconditional

³⁶ This is a written statement by the applicant stating why they want to study the course and why they are suitable for admission. It normally outlines their ambitions, skills and experience.

³⁷ Some law schools require applicants to sit the LNAT (the National Admissions Test for Law). LNAT is a two-part test: multiple choice questions based on passages of text, and an essay. The scores of both parts are made available to the participating universities. These are then used to supplement the university application and show the applicant's aptitude for studying undergraduate law.

Firm (UF) or Unconditional Insurance (UI). Also, universities may choose to accept offer holders who do not meet their offer conditions, on a discretionary basis.

37. If applicants do not receive any offers or do not wish to accept any of those they receive, they can apply for one additional course through the 'UCAS Extra' process.

Confirmation

38. Most offer holders, including those studying A levels, must wait until mid-August, when A level results are released, to find out whether they have met the conditions of their offers and have a confirmed place on a course. This is the 'confirmation' period. Applicants studying some qualifications (such as International Baccalaureate) may receive their final grades earlier. Offer holders are entitled to admission to their chosen course if they meet their offer conditions. That includes CF/UF but also CI/UI if offer holders fail to meet their (higher) CF conditions.

Post-confirmation

39. Applicants without offers and offer holders who do not meet the conditions of their offers and do not have their place confirmed may seek a place on alternative courses through the UCAS Clearing system.³⁸ Those who meet and exceed their offer conditions can seek a place at another (most likely more selective) institution through the UCAS process called 'Adjustment'.

³⁸ A process whereby applicants without a confirmed place may seek places through further approaches to universities/higher education institutions.

4. Who gets in? The socio-economic profile of students accepted to study law at highly selective law schools

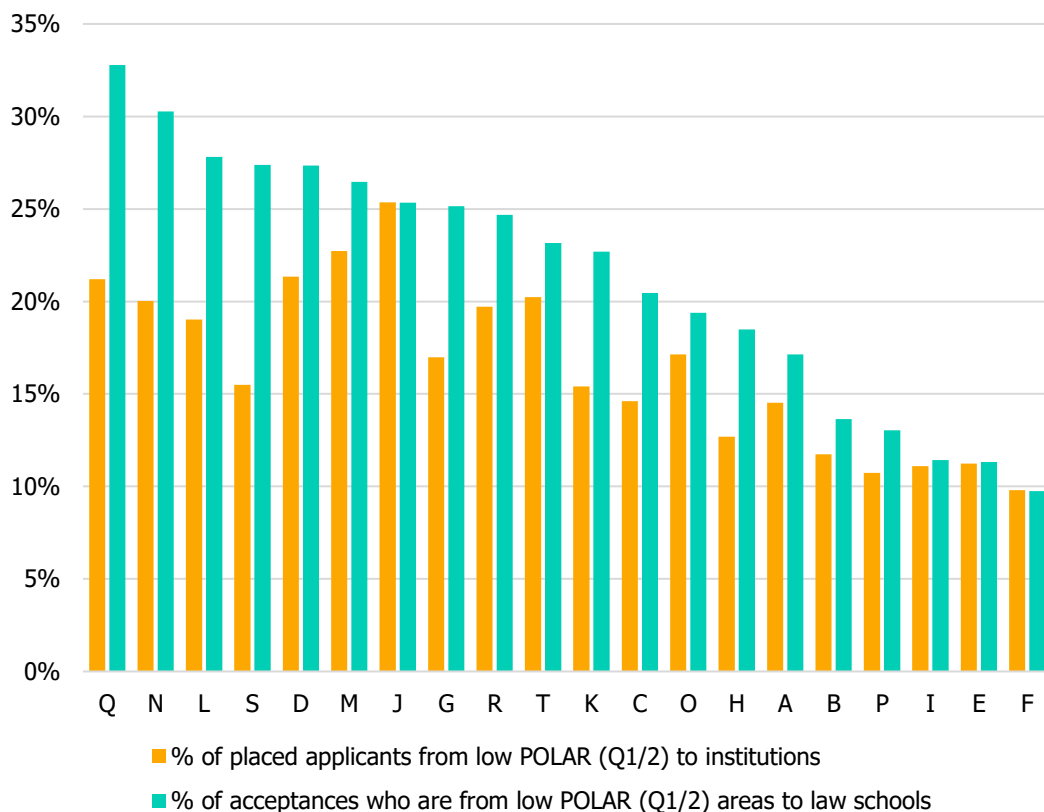
40. We present here an overview of the student body at the top 20 English law schools. The figure below combines university-level UCAS data for the 2016-18 cycle years with aggregated UCAS data for the cycle years 2016-2018 for law schools. In both cases, it shows the percentage of UK domiciled young full-time undergraduate entrants from low participation neighbourhoods. The teal bars give the figures for the law schools, while the orange bars provide the figures for the universities' undergraduate intake across all academic schools. We anonymise data in this and subsequent figures by labelling each university with a letter, which is consistent across all figures. This letter was randomly assigned.
41. The proportions of entrants from low participation neighbourhoods varies substantially across both law schools and universities, with some recruiting more than twice the proportion of others, within each category. Variation across universities may reflect the courses offered, location, entry requirements or other factors. We can see that there is also variation in the relationship between individual law schools and their respective universities, though the law schools of nearly all universities enrol a higher proportion of students from low-participation neighbourhoods than the university as a whole.³⁹ Four of the top 20 universities show a law school intake with the

³⁹ Institution level data comes from annual UCAS undergraduate reports, which report 'placed applicants'. This group is the same as 'acceptances' in the law school level acceptance data. Law school level data is also from UCAS via request. Further details about the UCAS data service and reporting methodologies can be found on the UCAS website. For more information, see: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/data-products-and-services/exact>.

Institution level data is also for a three-year period (2016-2018) and aggregated, in the same way as the law school level data. Details of the institution level data and data file are available from the UCAS website. For more information, see: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and->

same intake of entrants from low participation neighbourhoods as the overall intake; these are mixed in terms of university profile.

Figure 1. Entrants from POLAR quintiles 1-2 as a percentage of the UK intake, top 20 law schools and their universities



42. Students from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 (PQ1-2) – who are by definition underrepresented in higher education overall – comprised only 27% of HE entrants in England on average in the cycle years 2016-18. This underrepresentation is most apparent in higher-tariff universities or higher education institutions (HEIs). The figure above indicates that none of the universities reached this average, while five of their law schools did (Q, S, L, D, and N). The remaining 15 law schools all recruited intakes with a proportion of students from PQ1-2 that is below the national average. While a further four law schools were just a few percentage points below the

[analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-reports-sex-area-background-and-ethnic-group/2018-entry-ucas-undergraduate-reports-sex-area-background-and-ethnic-group.](#)

national average, six law schools were ten percentage points or more below the national average, and most strikingly, there is a 23 percentage point gap between the law school with the highest proportion of PQ1-2 acceptances compared to the law school with the lowest proportion. While it is positive that most law schools are attracting a more diverse intake than their respective universities and our research identifies widespread commitment and efforts to maintain and enhance this, most also have room for improvement.

5. Provision of information to prospective applicants: web searches

43. Given the substantial variation in admissions practice across law schools – which we identify and explore in section 7 on law schools’ decision-making – access to information is key for applicants. In this section, we assess how easy it is for applicants to obtain clear and accurate information about admissions requirements and how they will be assessed.
44. Universities and law schools are very significant sources of information for potential applicants; they seek to support and shape applicant decision-making through various means. Although UCAS provides general information on courses (with other comparative information available on UNISTATS⁴⁰) individual universities and law schools provide the most detailed information: *"We try to have as clear and accessible a web presence as possible, including [a site] for prospective students. We also have a blog for prospective students and a twitter feed, as well as Facebook and Instagram. We have a booklet available at events with a PDF available online."*
45. However, universities and law schools provide information within a much wider context, which we summarise briefly here. Various sources of information may help to determine whether an individual develops from potential to actual applicant, to which course, and to which universities. These include formal measures (such as those included in league tables, considered below) as well as less well-defined indicators of general reputation. Individual advice and support can be beneficial for applicants as they make decisions and progress through the application process. Schools and colleges, family, friends, etc. can potentially provide general information and advice, as well as more specific support with, for example, drafting

⁴⁰ This site summarises data relating to, for example, student satisfaction, continuation rates and graduate salaries. For more information, see: <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/>.

personal statements and preparing for an interview. This will, of course, vary markedly between applicants from different socio-economic backgrounds.⁴¹

46. We note that there is some evidence in the literature that applicants from less advantaged backgrounds may be concerned about and influenced by their social and cultural 'fit' at more selective universities.⁴² We did not explore this issue but noted that broader patterns of applications presented in section 6 did not appear to support it.
47. Universities and law schools may also offer information through school/college sessions, individual applicant visits and other outreach events, some of which may be targeted at participants based on socio-economic background. These latter activities usually combine broad aims of aspiration raising and awareness with encouragement to consider individual universities. To some extent, these seek to address concerns regarding unequal access to support for different applicants. Some of these targeted outreach activities may also have an impact on how law schools evaluate UCAS applications, by being linked to special entry pathways or other

⁴¹ There is evidence that more advantaged applicants receive better support, particularly in relation to the personal statement, and that this can enhance the chances of entry to Higher Education. See, for example: Jones, S. (2012). Is the personal statement a fair way to assess university applicants? Sutton Trust; and Wyness, G. (2017). Rules of the Game: Disadvantaged students and the university admissions process. The Sutton Trust.).

⁴² Harrison, in reviewing the literature, concludes that:

"... many students, and particularly those from lower socio-economic groups and minority ethnic communities, do choose not to maximise university status. (Mangan et al., 2010; Modood 2012; Boliver, 2013; Shiner and Noden, 2014). This phenomenon has had significant attention from sociologists, who find evidence of fears about 'social fit' and dissonance with the 'institutional habitus' of elite universities (Whitty, Haynon and Tang, 2015). Such universities are 'not for people like them', with assumptions about the socio-economic or ethnic mix, as well as the academic standards required."

Harrison, N. (2017). Student choices under uncertainty: bounded rationality and behavioural economics. In: Mountford-Zimdars, A. and Harrison, N. *Access to higher education: theoretical perspectives and contemporary challenges*. Abingdon and London: Routledge and the Society for Research into Higher Education. p. 95.

supported admissions arrangements, including reduced offer conditions. This is discussed below, in relation to contextual information and offers.

48. Further information that might be important for a potential applicant includes bursaries or scholarships that may be offered (by the university or law school), and their eligibility requirements (which for bursaries normally include family income, while scholarships normally include a merit component).
49. The information available to applicants includes promotional material (from law schools and universities) and what may be viewed as more independent information. League tables (such as those compiled each year by the Complete University Guide, the Guardian and the Times) can be especially influential, as prospective applicants consider which law schools to apply to. Universities and law schools are acutely aware of the impact that these rankings may have on applicants' perceptions, and their reputation more widely. A problem that arises here is the direct conflict between institutional or law school efforts to recruit a more socio-economically diverse intake by reducing offers and the average 'entry tariff' measure (meaning the final grades achieved of those admitted) used in league table rankings. Having a high average entry tariff helps to bolster league table position, so presents a disincentive to reducing grade requirements in offers (by even one grade).
50. Together, these various sources of information and experience are likely to have a substantial influence on applicants' choice of course. Crucially, the quality, clarity and accessibility of the information available, as well as the general impression conveyed of the school and its students, may have two further impacts:
 - > Providing guidance to potential applicants on how law schools will assess applications
 - > Shaping the sense that a potential applicant may have of the extent to which they will be a good 'fit' with the particular law school, course and university. This includes confirming whether university study is the right choice for themGiven law schools' individualised approaches to selection, providing applicants with good information about this may be critical to their chances of success.
51. To assess the quality, clarity and accessibility of admissions information, our student researcher undertook an extensive search of the websites for each

of our top 20 law schools and for the four additional law schools from the top 30 that we interviewed. This was done within an enquiry framework agreed by the researchers. The aim was to evaluate the information law schools provided to applicants in two senses: whether that information met the needs of applicants through providing sufficient guidance, and how easy it was for the applicant to find and understand that material. We report on the evaluation for the 24 law schools.

52. The student researcher reached a number of general findings. The first was that universities provided a substantial amount of information at the general university level. Although the researcher considered much of this extremely helpful, applicants would benefit from information that was specific to the law programme(s) and/or appropriate for the law school. This would include guidance on matters such as the personal statement and any criteria used to assess it, and on the acceptability of qualifications other than A levels. Law schools may consider that generic, university-level guidance on personal statements is sufficient because it reflects their requirements. However, if that is the case, it would be helpful to applicants for law schools to confirm this explicitly. And where law schools do take school-specific approaches, they should provide information and advice about this. Subject-specific or school-specific elements, such as LNAT requirements and evaluation and acceptability of qualifications, generate stronger demands for clear, explicit information.
53. A second general finding by the researcher was that universities provided a lot of beneficial guidance and information, but the applicant could find this only after considerable searching: navigating around the institution's website and/or undertaking a general internet search. Direct provision by schools of more of this information (or explicit linking through to other sources) on their websites would assist applicants greatly. A final broader finding by the researcher was that some information was accurate, informative and easily found but not 'accessible' in the sense of being easily understandable by the applicant. In particular, this related to information provided within a lengthy document comprising dense material.
54. On specific elements of the application process, the student researcher's findings were as follows.

Qualifications

- > Only two examples were identified where the relevant information could not easily be found on pages for the law school or the university.
 - > Only four schools did not provide at least the majority of the content desirable for applicants.
55. Examples of information gaps: One very useful table was rendered less helpful to applicants by being hard to find. Concerning BTECs, one school had a very general statement that these would be considered on a 'case-by-case' basis. Another school required 'strong' GCSE performance for applicants with BTECs, without providing a definition. Some schools required a higher LNAT score for applicants with particular qualifications and/or subjects but did not define the required increase in score.

Preferred subjects

- > Six examples were identified where the relevant information could not easily be found on the pages for the law school or the university.
 - > Eight schools did not provide at least the majority of the content felt desirable for applicants. Two of those provided minimal information.
56. Examples of information gaps: It would be helpful to state 'negatives' explicitly, for example, a school should state if it does not have any preferred or excluded subjects. Law schools should also be clearer about preferred subjects, for example, there were statements about essay-based subjects being 'helpful' but not required, leaving the applicant unsure as to how these would affect an application.

Contextual offers

- > Five examples were identified where the relevant information could not easily be found on the pages for the law school or the university.
- > Eight schools did not provide at least the majority of the content that the researcher felt was desirable for applicants. One of those was considered to provide no information of value.

57. Examples of information gaps: The researcher found examples of statements by universities that contextual information would be taken into account and offers adjusted in light of this, but no detail provided on whether this would be automatic, or on a discretionary basis, or what the qualifying criteria were. A further point of uncertainty for many law schools was whether the offer would be reduced by one or two grades.

Personal Statements

- > Eight examples were identified where the relevant information could not easily be found on the pages for the law school or the university.
 - > Fourteen schools did not provide at least the majority of the content felt desirable for applicants. None provided all the desired content.
58. Examples of information gaps: The main issue was the lack of advice specific to writing personal statements for law.

References

- > Eight law schools provided no information at all. This could be because law schools see web pages as providing information for applicants, rather than referees, though this does raise the question of how referees gain access to guidance.
- > Five examples were identified where the relevant information was available but could not easily be found on the pages for the law school or the university.
- > Only nine schools provided at least the majority of the content felt desirable.

LNAT

- > The relevant information could easily be found on the pages for the law school or the university for five of the seven schools using LNAT.
 - > Five of the seven schools were considered to provide at least the majority of the content felt desirable for applicants.
59. Examples of information gaps: The researcher found that some information was confusing for applicants, such as statements that those taking science A levels had to pass the LNAT (when all applicants had to pass it). Some schools did little more than state that the LNAT was required, with no further guidance on how it would be weighted overall or for the constituent parts or the minimum scores required.

Interviews

- > Only two examples were identified from the nine schools using interviews where the relevant information could not easily be found on pages for the law school or the university.
 - > Five of the nine schools requiring interviews were considered not to provide at least the majority of the content felt desirable for applicants.
 - > All three of those requiring interviews for all applicants were assessed as providing information that was complete or nearly so. Where there were deficits, these were unlikely to be detrimental to the applicant.
60. Examples of information gaps: Where interviews were required for only some applicants, the researcher found that it could be difficult for applicants to understand when that might be the case. Examples included what universities might consider as 'borderline' applicants, 'exceptional' cases, or applicants from a 'non-traditional' background. One school stated that an interview might be required, whereas the Admissions Tutor considered it was required. These uncertainties were accompanied by the minimal information noted above regarding the structure, content and criteria for the interviews. One school stated that either an interview or a 'further assessment' may be required for some applicants, without explaining when an applicant would have to undertake one or the other, whether that would be an 'assessment' rather than an interview, or what either would involve.

Outreach

- > Only four examples were identified where the relevant information could not easily be found on pages for the law school or the university.
- > Eight schools were considered not to provide at least the majority of the content felt desirable for applicants.

61. Examples of information gaps: The main information deficit identified by the researcher here was a lack of clarity as to the school's participation in institution-wide activities and entry schemes.

Bursaries

- > All English law schools (where bursaries are particularly important, due to fees arrangements) were considered to provide information in a way that could easily be found on pages for the law school or the university.
- > Only two examples were found where at least the majority of the content felt desirable was not provided.

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

62. In this section, we present data covering applicants' journeys through the UCAS process. We obtained all data from UCAS via a data request. Focusing on applicants to the Law subject group (those with a JACS code beginning M), UCAS provided institution-level data for the number of applications, unique applicants, offers and acceptances to these courses, along with institutional level information about the number of applicants, offer holders and accepted students with a home address in areas of either low or high participation (POLAR quintiles 1-2 or POLAR quintiles 3-5, or PQ1-2 and PQ3-5) and whether applicants had a predicted grade profile of AAB and higher at A level, lower than AAB, or no predicted A levels.⁴³ We chose AAB as a threshold, as an estimated average of actual entry requirements for undergraduate entry to the top 20 English law schools.⁴⁴
63. UCAS provided this data for the cycle years 2016-2018, and we have aggregated the data across all the following analysis. Aggregating the data was necessary to increase the sample size and reduce the chance of small numbers. It also aims to address issues of unaccountable variation between years, for example, if a university experienced an issue with admissions and/or had an above/below average year. Due to limitations on reporting individual, commissioned data points, we are publishing a subset of the full tables and figures we analysed.⁴⁵ We therefore summarise some additional background data. We anonymise data in figures by labelling each university

⁴³ Therefore, all data reported going forward is focused on those applicants who resided in a POLAR area (for example, excluding those from Scotland or whose area has not been assigned a POLAR quintile) and who was enrolled to complete a qualification while domiciled in England, Wales, or Northern Ireland (for example, excluding those studying abroad).

⁴⁴ Standard published requirements are higher in most of these law schools, but we are aware of considerable flexibility in some, for example, through contextual admissions arrangements.

⁴⁵ For UCAS reporting and data methodologies, please see: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/data-products-and-services/exact>

with a letter, which is consistent across all figures. This letter was randomly assigned.

Applications

What proportion of applicants are from PQ1-2 areas?

64. We consider first the general pattern of applications by prospective students from PQ1-2 areas to the top 20 law schools. The figure below presents PQ1-2 applicants (all grade profiles and qualifications) as a proportion of all applicants, ranked from highest to lowest. There is wide variation, with the four law schools at the left-hand end attracting twice the proportion of PQ1-2 applicants of the four law schools at the right-hand end. We observe that those law schools attracting the smallest proportions of PQ1-2 applicants tend to be more selective or based in London, where there are relatively few PQ1-2 areas.⁴⁶ However, this is not a consistent pattern.
65. Additional to the information presented in the figure below, we can report that the top 20 law schools on average received about three times the number of applications from PQ3-5 areas as from PQ1-2 areas. This broadly reflects the finding of earlier research, also using UCAS data, for applicants from less advantaged backgrounds to be less likely to apply to Russell Group universities than applicants from more advantaged backgrounds, even when they had the same A level grades and subjects.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ This suggests some caution in using POLAR as a measure of relative advantage.

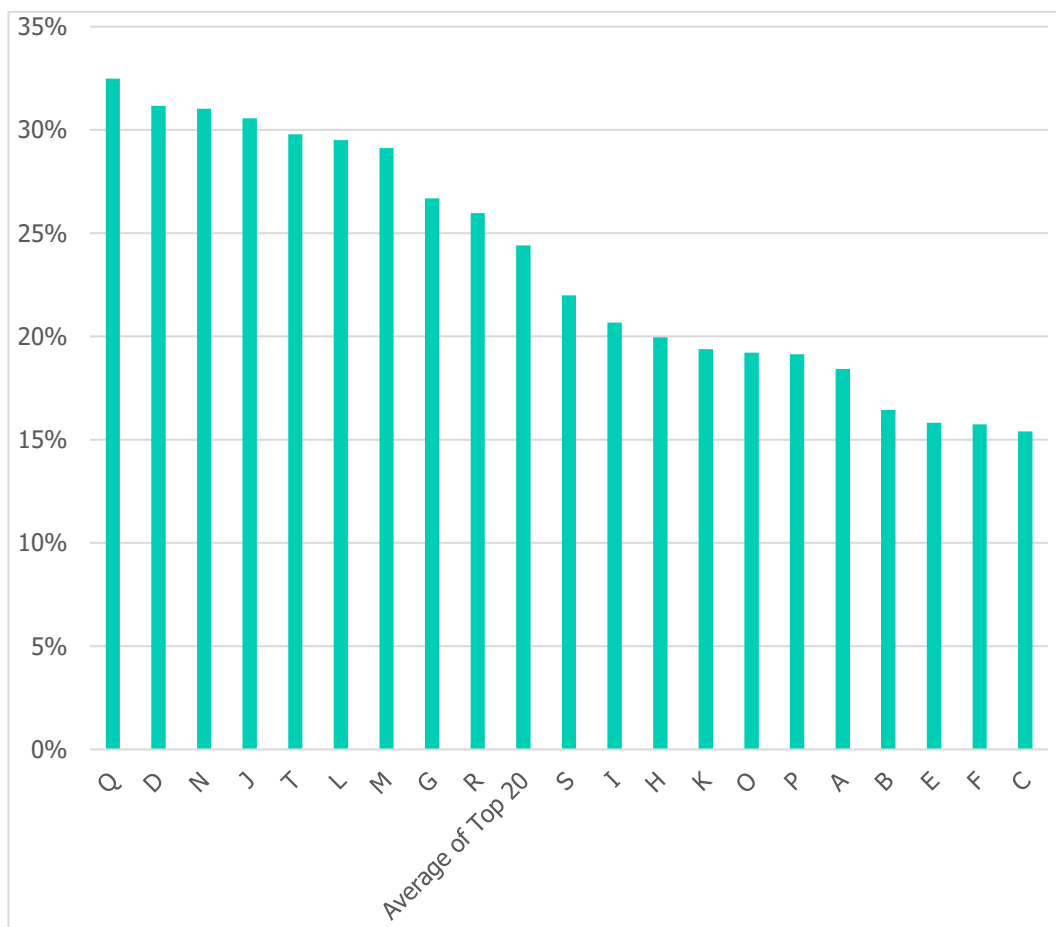
⁴⁷ Boliver, V. (2013). How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities? *The British Journal of Sociology*, 64(2), pp. 344-364.

Wyness, G. (2019). Undermatch in higher education: prevalence, drivers and outcomes. February 2017 - December 2019. Nuffield Foundation. Available at: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/undermatch-in-higher-education-prevalence-drivers-and-outcomes/>

Wyness, G. (2017). Rules of the game. The Sutton Trust. Available at: <file:///C:/Users/griff/Downloads/Copy%20BG/Bridge%20Group%20Oct%202019/York%20Law/Rules-of-the-Game%20Sutton%20Trust.pdf> Additionally, without controlling for subject, Wyness noted that amongst "students with a

66. Comparing Figure 2 below (applications) with Figure 1 (entrants), we see that for many universities, and particularly those recruiting the smallest percentages of entrants from PQ1-2 areas, these comprise a slightly more significant proportion of applicants than of entrants. This suggests that applicants from PQ1-2 areas to the top 20 law schools are slightly less likely than other applicants to achieve a confirmed placed at one. We will explore this further in the discussion below of acceptance rates.

Figure 2. Percentage of unique applicants from POLAR quintiles 1 & 2, all grade profiles and qualifications



point prediction – equivalent to AAB – 52% of high SES students apply to the Russell Group, compared with just 42% of low SES students”. p. 22.

To what extent do the qualifications and grade profiles of applications vary by law school and POLAR quintile?

67. We disaggregated the data in Figure 2 above to examine applications to the top 20 law schools by grade profile, 'no predicted A levels' and POLAR quintile. UCAS's restrictions on publishing their data mean that we cannot include the disaggregated data here. We can see that there are patterns, but also differences. The category 'no predicted' A levels' needs to be treated with caution, as it is a broad category that includes any applicant who has not been predicted an A level. Therefore, applicants in this group could include those who have studied or are studying a range of qualifications, from Access diplomas and BTECs, which only some top law schools accept alone, to (for example) International Baccalaureate, which they all accept.⁴⁸ The biggest proportion of applicants across all law schools is made up of applicants with predicted grades of at least AAB and from PQ3-5. Across applicants from PQ1-2, the biggest proportion are predicted to achieve grades of at least AAB.
68. The law schools attracting the highest overall proportions of applicants from PQ1-2 are those attracting higher proportions with either less than AAB or no A levels predicted. For example, law schools D, P and Q attract similar proportions of PQ1-2 applicants with AAB+, but P attracts a much smaller proportion of PQ1-2 applicants with either less than AAB or no A levels predicted. Hence, its overall proportion of PQ1-2 applicants is lower. The same is true for T and I, which attract similar proportions of PQ1-2 applicants with AAB+, but whose overall proportion of PQ1-2 applicants is very different because T also attracts more PQ1-2 applicants with either less than AAB or no A levels predicted. Interestingly, two of the most selective law schools I and P attract a higher proportion of PQ1-2 applicants with AAB+ than two of the less selective law schools (M and J). The latter two

⁴⁸ UCAS provided data relating to the predicted A level grade profile (rather than a tariff score). This is the predicted A level grade profile entered on the application, and only the highest three grades are considered and provided by UCAS. Data was supplied in four groups and defined by UCAS in the following ways: "AAB+" – those who had a predicted profile of AAB or higher, "other" – those who had a grade profile lower than AAB, "not applicable" – related to applicants outside of the assigned cohort (those who are not 18 year-old applicants and domiciled in England, Northern Ireland or Wales, "no A levels predicted" – related to any applicants who are domiciled in England, Northern Ireland or Wales but who do not have any A level predictions.

law schools do however attract a larger total proportion of PQ1-2 applicants, with the inclusion of those predicted less than AAB or with no A levels predicted.

69. Looking at the average for the top 20 law schools, we see that PQ3-5 applicants included a substantially higher proportion predicted at least AAB than amongst PQ1-2 applicants. Conversely, PQ1-2 applicants included a substantially higher proportion (about 50% higher) predicted less than AAB. (These proportions are calculated as a proportion of all applications from PQ1-2 areas and PQ3-5 areas respectively.) The proportion with no A levels predicted is also about 50% higher amongst PQ1-2. However, as noted above, the category 'no A levels predicted' includes a range of qualifications. We observe a general trend across all subjects for young Level 3 students (in sixth form and equivalent) from low participation areas to be more likely than their peers from other areas to take BTECs, while the converse holds for qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate and Cambridge Pre-U.⁴⁹ This trend is likely to be present amongst applicants to law schools.

⁴⁹ Analysis of HESA data shows that students who take the International Baccalaureate are more likely to reside in high POLAR areas and progress to a RG/highly selective university. For more information, see: https://www.ibo.org/contentassets/d74675437b4f4ab38312702599a432f1/hesa_final_report.pdf

We observe also that nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of non-FSM pupils who achieved Level 3 by age 19 did so through A Levels/International Baccalaureate compared to 45 per cent of the FSM group.

Department for Education, Level 2 and 3 attainment in England: Attainment by age 19 in 2017, May 2018. For more information, see: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/709682/L23_attainment_2018_main_text.pdf

As a more general point relating to the choice of A levels vs other qualifications, we note that students who received FSM at secondary school are less than half as likely to progress on to study three A levels at Level 3 (47% versus 21%).

Social Mobility Commission (2016). Social and ethnic inequalities in choice available and choices made at age 16. London. For more information, see: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/574708/SMC_social_and_ethnic_inequalities_in_post_16_report.pdf

70. There is wide variation across law schools in the proportion of applicants with either less than AAB or no A levels predicted, particularly across PQ3-5. These variations may reflect published entry requirements at the time. We note two trends that are counter to what might be expected. Within the top 20, law schools making reduced offers attract a lower percentage of unique applicants from PQ1-2.⁵⁰ We also note that 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. At these law schools, applicants with less than AAB comprise about twice the proportion of PQ3-5 applicants than of PQ1-2 applicants. PQ3-5 applicants may be applying for these very selective law schools, even if their predicted grades do not match entry requirements, because they are more confident about 'taking a punt', or because their teachers and advisers encourage them to do so.⁵¹

Offers

What proportion of applicants receive an offer?

71. The figure below indicates the proportion of PQ1-2 applicants receiving an offer, ranked from highest to lowest. There is wide variation, from law schools Q and K making offers to almost all their PQ1-2 applicants, to law schools I, F and P making offers to at most about one-fifth of PQ1-2 applicants. The proportion of applicants receiving an offer can be influenced by several factors, including the number of applications per place and the anticipated likelihood of applicants' accepting offers. Some law schools may have been making offers under an 'offer strategy' set by a central admissions department. Typically, academic schools that see themselves as 'recruiting' (actively encouraging students) will make offers to a higher proportion of applicants than academic schools that see themselves as

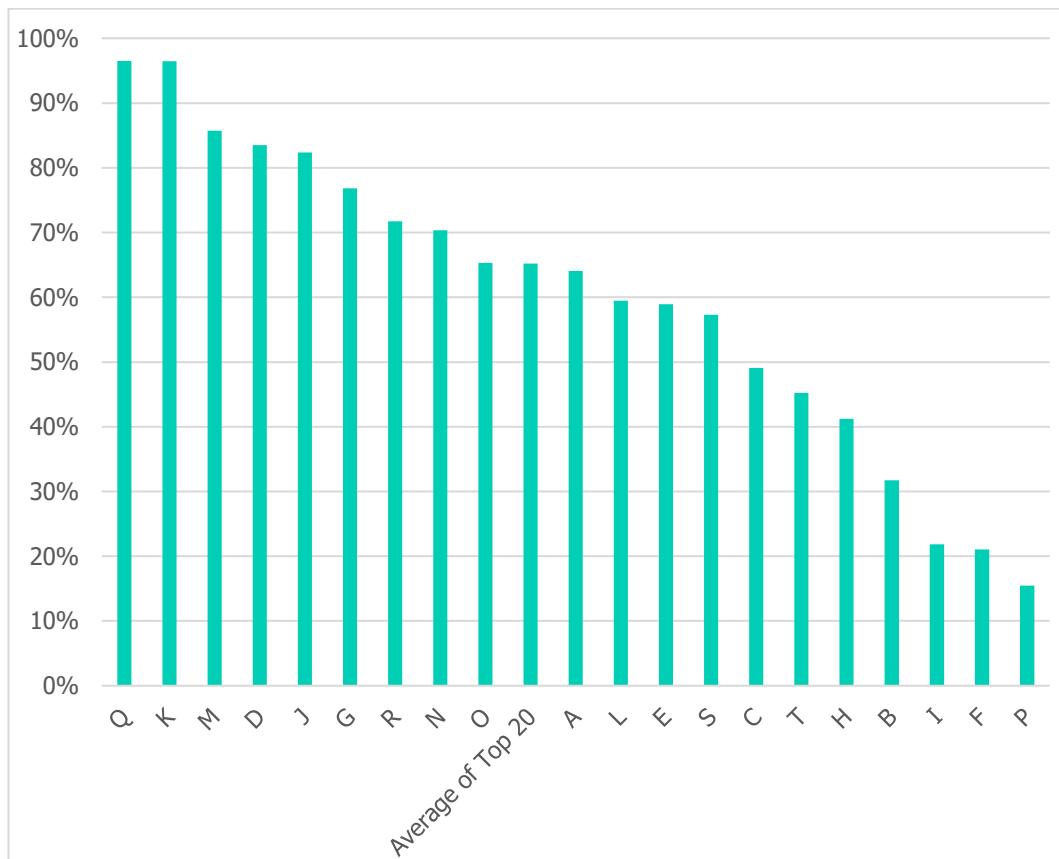
⁵⁰ See the discussion of correlation in the section on acceptance rates below.

⁵¹ It is possible that at least some of these PQ3-5 applicants are in fact from less advantaged backgrounds, not recognised by POLAR, and are applying under the umbrella of contextual admissions arrangements. For a fuller discussion, see below. We note that several other law schools had proportions of applicants with less than AAB and/or no A levels predicted that were similar across their PQ3-5 group and their PQ1-2 group.

selecting from an oversupply of suitably qualified applicants. We have not investigated how the law schools see themselves in this regard.

72. The order of law schools from left to right is different from that above for applications, though most of the most selective law schools are still towards the right-hand end. While there are large differences between the law schools, this may or may not reflect the different treatment of PQ1-2 applicants over PQ3-5 applicants, which is investigated further below. 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.

Figure 3. Proportion of Q1-2 unique applicants who receive an offer, all grade profiles and qualifications



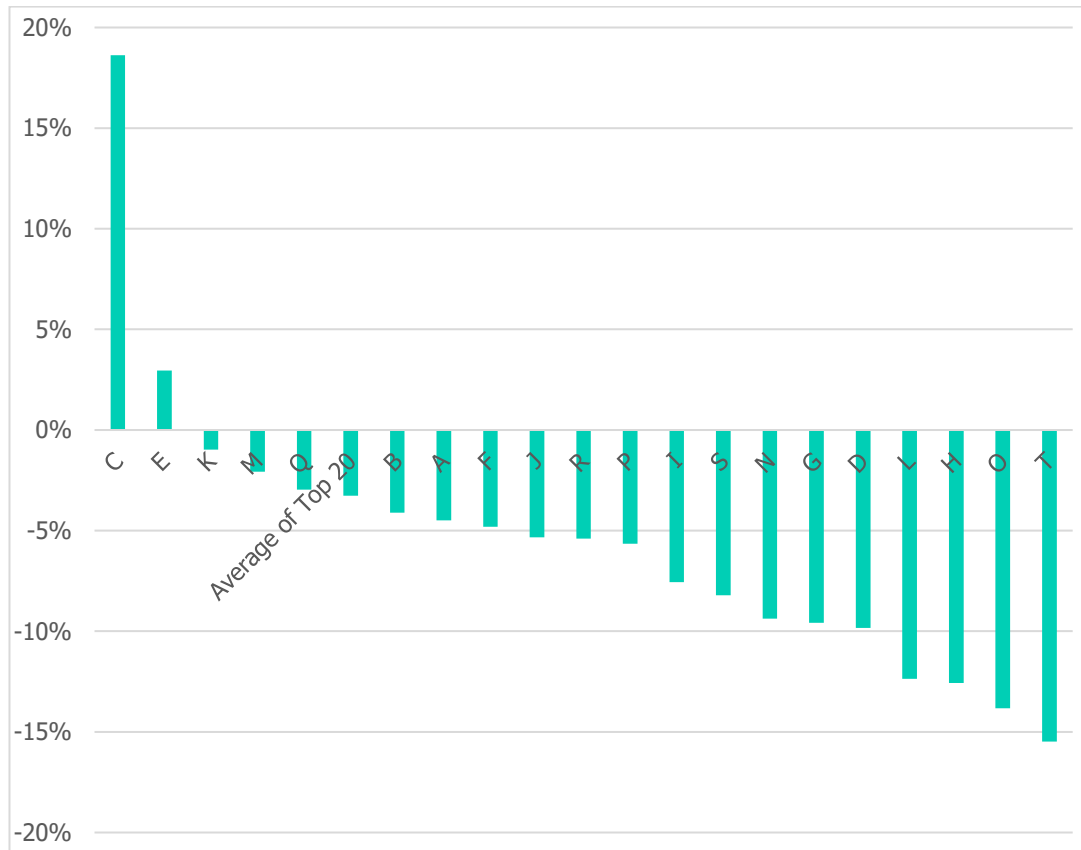
73. Figure 3 above shows the proportion of PQ1-2 applicants who receive an offer. When we disaggregated offer data by qualification and grade profile (not shown here), we found that the law schools making the highest

proportion of their offers to PQ1-2 applicants (about one-quarter or more) all made a substantial proportion of their offers to PQ1-2 applicants with qualifications other than A levels or with predicted grades of less than AAB (<AAB).

Are PQ1-2 applicants less or more likely to get an offer?

74. We then investigated the differential offer rate: the likelihood of PQ1-2 applicants receiving an offer, relative to that of PQ3-5 applicants. The figure below shows that at all but two law schools, PQ1-2 applicants (the less advantaged group) were less likely to receive an offer. (In this bar chart, a value below the zero line indicates a negative percentage point difference between PQ1-2 and PQ3-5.) The law school on the left is unusual in that it is much more likely to make offers to PQ1-2 applicants compared to PQ3-5 applicants. There is no clear association between the prestige of the law school and the likelihood of PQ1-2 applicants' receiving an offer, relative to PQ3-5 applicants, though notably the top six law schools are absent from the right-hand end (where PQ1-2 applicants are least likely to receive an offer, relative to PQ3-5 applicants). Also absent from the right-hand end are those law schools recruiting the lowest proportions of students from PQ1-2. In reading this chart, we should note that the results for some law schools may be skewed by relatively small intakes, particularly for PQ1-2.

Figure 4. Percentage point difference between Q1-2 and Q3-5 applicants in receiving an offer, all grade profiles and qualifications



Does the offer rate vary by qualification and grade profile?

75. Figure 4 above shows that, across the total cohort applying to the top 20 law schools, PQ1-2 applicants are less likely than PQ3-5 applicants to receive an offer. When we disaggregated offer data by qualification and grade profile (not shown here), we found that there were differences. The average differential offer rate across the two POLAR groups and the total cohort is very slightly higher for PQ1-2 applicants with predicted grades of AAB+ and very slightly lower for PQ1-2 applicants with predicted grades below AAB. However, it is eight percentage points lower for PQ1-2 applicants in the category 'no A levels predicted.'

76. The data provided by UCAS does not disaggregate the category 'no A levels predicted' by type of qualification, so we cannot investigate this further. As already noted, given national patterns of Level 3 qualification uptake, it seems likely that PQ1-2 applicants are applying with Access and BTEC qualifications, which are less widely accepted amongst the top 20 law schools, and that PQ3-5 applicants are applying with International Baccalaureate, Cambridge Pre-U and other more widely accepted qualifications.⁵² It is possible that PQ1-2 applicants with Access and BTEC are making ill-informed applications to law schools that do not accept these qualifications – or that law schools accept these qualifications in principle, but in practice prefer others. Both options underline the need for clear and accurate published information about the acceptability of such qualifications. It is likely that the offer-making pattern of C at the left of the chart, which is an outlier compared to other law schools in being much more likely to make offers to PQ1-2 applicants, skews the averages positively for the top 20.

⁵² As noted in the discussion of applications above, analysis of HESA data shows that students who take the International Baccalaureate are more likely to reside in high POLAR areas and progress to a RG/highly selective university. For more information, see:
https://www.ibo.org/contentassets/d74675437b4f4ab38312702599a432f1/hesa_final_report.pdf

We observe also that nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of non-FSM pupils who achieved Level 3 by age 19 did so through A Levels/International Baccalaureate compared to 45 per cent of the FSM group.

Department for Education, Level 2 and 3 attainment in England: Attainment by age 19 in 2017, May 2018. For more information, see:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/709682/L23_attainment_2018_main_text.pdf

As a more general point relating to the choice of A levels vs other qualifications, we note that students who received FSM at secondary school are less than half as likely to progress on to study three A levels at Level 3 (47% versus 21%).

Social Mobility Commission (2016) Social and ethnic inequalities in choice available and choices made at age 16. London. For more information, see:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/574708/SMC_social_and_ethnic_inequalities_in_post_16_report.pdf

Is the offer rate different at the most selective law schools?

77. When we explore the data for the top six law schools, I, A, B, C, P and F, we see more variation. We note that the total cohort of their applicants predicted at least AAB had the same offer rates across PQ1-2 and PQ3-5. However, this was skewed by one outlier law school and did not reflect the situation within individual law schools. At four of the top six law schools, AAB+ applicants from PQ1-2 were several percentage points less likely to receive offers than their peers from PQ3-5. For those predicted less than AAB, the total cohort of PQ1-2 applicants were several percentage points (about a quarter) less likely to receive an offer than PQ3-5 applicants, with applicants to all but one individual law schools less likely to receive an offer. One law school was one-fifth less likely and another over one-third less likely to make offers to <AAB applicants from PQ1-2 than from PQ3-5. This suggests that the greater willingness of PQ3-5 applicants predicted <AAB to 'take a punt' and make a very ambitious application is worthwhile. In terms of numbers, the top six law schools made well over 100 offers between them to PQ3-5 applicants predicted <AAB, but only about one-sixth as many offers to P1-2 applicants with these grades, with four of them making none or very few.⁵³
78. But the biggest difference at the top six law schools is for applicants with no A levels predicted, amongst whom those from PQ3-5 are only slightly less likely to receive an offer than PQ3-5 applicants with AAB+. By contrast, PQ1-2 applicants with no A levels predicted are only half as likely to receive an offer as PQ1-2 applicants with AAB+. PQ1-2 applicants to the top six law schools appear to be disadvantaged by their choice of qualification, while PQ3-5 applicants are not.
79. The data available to us from UCAS does not allow us to investigate these differential offer rates further. As we will see in the discussion of the decision-making process, law schools take various factors into consideration when assessing applicants, so the difference for A level applicants (smaller for those predicted AAB+, larger for <AAB) could be explained by

⁵³ UCAS rounds data to the nearest multiple of five to avoid disclosure of individuals, so it is possible that these four law schools, each listed as making no offers to these applicants, each made one or two offers.

differences in grades (within our grade ranges), choice of A level subject⁵⁴ or performance in additional assessment. As already noted, it is likely that the choice of qualification contributes to the difference for applicants with no predicted A levels. This is discussed in more detail below. We recommend that these law schools investigate these patterns further using their own data, particularly for applicants with qualifications other than A levels.

What impact do predicted grades and qualifications have on the offer rate across the top 20?

80. Returning to the full group of the top 20 law schools, we focus first on differential offer rates for applicants with predicted grades of at least AAB (AAB+). Amongst the total cohort of AAB+ applicants, those from PQ1-2 are on average slightly more likely to receive an offer than those from PQ3-5. However, here too, the rate for the total cohort does not reflect the average of rates across each law school, which is slightly negative for PQ1-2 applicants.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the balance of the bar chart above improves, with applicants from PQ1-2 areas more likely to receive an offer at seven law schools (G, I, M, C, N, Q and J), rather than at only two. At all but one of these law schools (C), the positive difference is very slight. At one law school, offer rates are equal, while at the remaining 12, PQ1-2 applicants are less likely than their PQ3-5 counterparts to receive an offer. The greatest negative difference is less than 10 percentage points.

⁵⁴ Catherine Dilnot finds that large differentials in A-level subject choice exist by social background, particularly for subjects regarded as facilitating access to Russell Group universities. For more information, see:

Dilnot, C. (2016). How does the choice of A-level subjects vary with students' socio-economic status in English state schools? *British Educational Research Journal*, 42 (6), pp. 1081-1106. Available at:

https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/berj.3250?casa_token=7c8o6cR3mKkAAAAA%3AoWYTD-KdPUtexVGWIsUnldQYqW3Te5PJ-Q1_bcdmZ1OfywS-Q_WAzCPIqLSqp6KSXBwTjIGXagAs2a0

⁵⁵ The difference in these two averages probably arises from the wide variation in size of intake and numbers of offers made by universities. It appears that law schools with a larger intake and/or making more offers tend to be more likely to make offers to PQ1-2 applicants, with these large numbers of offers to PQ1-2 skewing the average.

81. The bar chart becomes more unbalanced if we focus on applicants predicted less than AAB, with applicants from PQ1-2 areas more likely to receive an offer than their PQ3-5 counterparts at four law schools. The negative differences are greater than for AAB+ applicants and are more than 10 percentage points at three law schools. Amongst the total cohort of <AAB applicants, those from PQ1-2 are on average slightly less likely to receive an offer than those from PQ3-5. However, the average of rates across each law school is more negative, by a factor of over six.
82. The imbalance increases further for applicants with no A levels predicted, with applicants from PQ1-2 areas more likely to receive an offer at only two law schools. Across the other 18 law schools, the negative differences are more substantial again, ranging from several percentage points to about 30. Amongst the total cohort of applicants with no A levels predicted, those from PQ1-2 are on average substantially less likely to receive an offer than those from PQ3-5. The average of rates across each law school is even more negative.
83. These findings indicate that the overall negative difference in offer rates for applicants with no A levels predicted – and to a lesser extent for <AAB applicants – is not the result of a few outliers but is present at most of the top 20 law schools. We recommend that law schools investigate these patterns further using their own data, particularly for applicants with qualifications other than A levels.

What might contribute to these differences?

84. As already noted, law schools consider various factors when assessing applicants and these factors are likely to contribute to the differences above. PQ3-5 applicants may have had higher predicted grades (within the two grade ranges) than PQ1-2 applicants, and this is particularly relevant for those law schools with entry requirements well above AAB. PQ3-5 applicants may have been taking subjects preferred by the law schools, may have received better support in the admissions process that increased their chances of success or may have performed better in the LNAT or interviews.
85. We should also bear in mind that measures such as POLAR are a broad-brush measure, based on a geographical area rather than an individual, which few elite universities use in isolation (and some not at all) to inform

contextual admissions. It is, therefore, possible that some applicants are flagged by POLAR as PQ3-5 (advantaged) but are flagged by other more geographically refined and complex postcode analysis tools⁵⁶ or individual factors as disadvantaged, and vice versa. The more accurate flags may make applicants eligible for flexible offers through contextual admissions arrangements.

86. We cannot predict whether the factors above would fully account for most of the top 20 law schools' making offers at a lower rate to PQ1-2 applicants than to PQ3-5 applicants. In the discussion of applications to acceptance, we will endeavour to determine whether there is an association between admissions requirements and policies, and acceptance rates.

Acceptance (being placed on a course)

What is the profile of accepted applicants?

87. The figure below disaggregates acceptances to the top 20 schools by grade profile and POLAR quintile.⁵⁷ (We use 'acceptance' with the UCAS definition of an applicant's being placed on a course by the end of the UCAS cycle.)

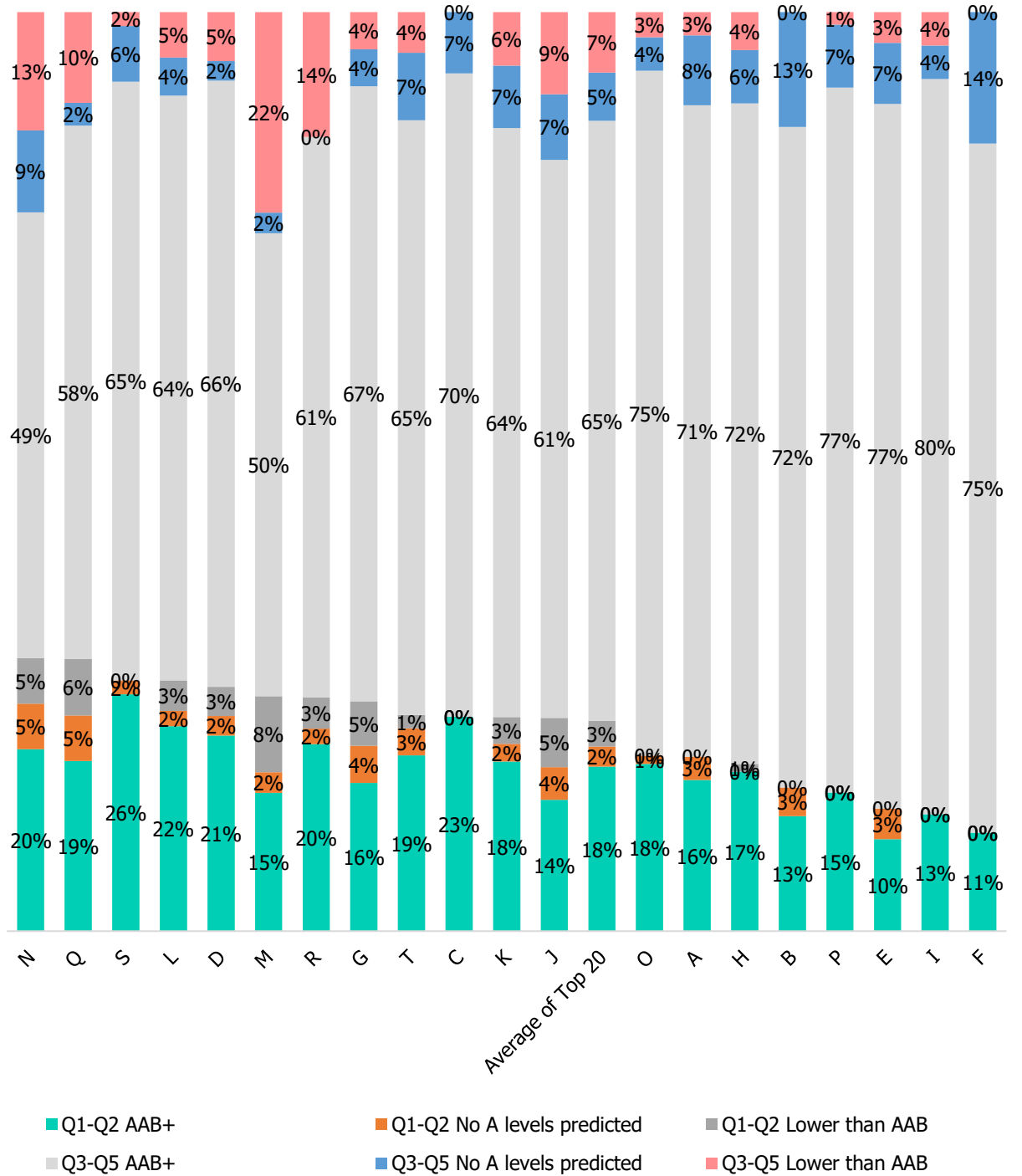
⁵⁶ Examples include Acorn, Mosaic and the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

⁵⁷ There is some variation in the proportion of acceptance by universities compared to Figure 1, showing entrants. This is because this earlier figure included all applicants who were accepted and resided in a POLAR area (which included some applicants who had the grade profile 'not applicable' meaning their qualifications were from outside England, Northern Ireland or Wales). By contrast, Figure 5 above uses applicants who resided in a POLAR area but who had one of the three key grade profiles (which excluded those who had the profile 'not applicable'). This is consistent with the methodology used throughout this section on the applicant journey.

Data on acceptances uses predicted grades, rather than confirmed grades. Our modelling of actual grades resulted in the suppression of too much data, to render this approach useful. The accuracy of predicted grades tends to vary by POLAR group and academic profile, with higher achieving PQ1-2 applicants more likely than PQ3-5 to be underpredicted and lower achieving PQ1-2 applicants more likely than PQ3-5 to be overpredicted.

88. Most of the law schools in the left half of this bar chart – placing higher proportions of PQ1-2 applicants – also placed a larger proportion of PQ1-2 applicants with other than AAB+ than the law schools in the right half. Three of the four law schools at the right end accepted no PQ1-2 applicants with <AAB and other than A levels. However, it is evident that there is not a consistent pattern; and accepting a substantial proportion with <AAB and other than A levels is neither a pre-requisite for placing a large overall proportion of PQ1-2 nor a guarantee of it. There is also variation in the intake of PQ3-5 applicants, with some law schools accepting a substantial proportion with less than AAB and/or no predicted A levels, and others accepting none or few. The law schools in the left half tend to accept a greater proportion of pink (PQ3-5, <AAB) than blue (PQ3-5, no predicted A levels), while those in the right half accept more blue than pink.
89. The top six law schools are spread from tenth place to 20th in terms of proportions of PQ1-2 applicants, with four of them clustered at or near the right end (that is, placing the fewest). The proportion of placed PQ3-5 applicants with less than AAB has fallen at several of these (relative to the proportion receiving offers), reducing the apparent discrepancy with PQ1-2 peers. Two of the less selective law schools are also in the right half, with one of them close to the right-hand end. Relative prestige does not appear to have a consistent association with the proportion of PQ1-2 amongst accepted applicants.

Figure 5. Acceptances to top 20 law schools by grade profile and POLAR quintile



From application to acceptance

90. In this section, we look at the overall journey from application to acceptance (using the UCAS definition of being placed on a course). We use the term 'acceptance rate' to indicate applicants' chance of successfully being placed. We noted briefly in the section on applications that applicants from PQ1-2 areas were on average slightly less likely than those from PQ3-5 areas to be placed at a top 20 law school. Here we explore this further and investigate the likelihood of being placed at individual law schools.

Acceptance rates

Acceptance rates for the total cohort

91. Looking first at the average across all top 20 law schools, we find that the total cohort of applicants from both POLAR groups predicted AAB+ have the same acceptance rate, that is, an equal chance of successfully being placed.⁵⁸ However, applicants with this AAB+ profile comprise a smaller proportion of PQ1-2 accepted applicants than of PQ3-5 accepted applicants. This pattern occurs throughout the cycle, with AAB+ comprising a smaller proportion of PQ1-2 applicants than PQ3-5 applicants. For both POLAR groups, the proportion of AAB+ increases at each stage of the cycle, from applications to offers to acceptances.
92. Still looking at the average, we find that the total cohort of applicants from PQ1-2 areas and with other than AAB+ have a slightly lower acceptance rate than those from PQ3-5. For both POLAR groups, the proportion of applicants with this profile decreases at each stage of the cycle, from applications to offers to acceptances. Across both POLAR groups, those predicted less than AAB have the lowest acceptance rate at top 20 law schools: it is about one-third of the acceptance rate for AAB+ applicants. Also, across both POLAR groups, the acceptance rate for applicants with no A levels predicted is

⁵⁸ This is calculated by comparing the percentage of PQ1-2 applicants who are accepted and deducting the percentage of PQ3-5 applicants who are accepted. When data from the top 20 is combined and analysed in this way, there is no percentage point difference between the percentage of PQ1-2 applicants who are accepted and the percentage of PQ3-5 applicants who are accepted.

about two-thirds that of AAB+ applicants. Predicted low grades are therefore a bigger barrier than qualifications other than A level to being accepted; this is different to the situation at offers, where qualifications other than A level appear to be the biggest barrier.

Acceptance rates at individual law schools

93. The findings above relate to the total cohort and may be skewed by one outlier law school and large numbers of accepted PQ1-2 applicants at some large law schools. There is, of course, considerable variation across individual law schools. Looking first at the acceptance rate for all qualifications and grades at individual law schools, we find that applicants from PQ1-2 areas were less likely to be placed at 16 of the top 20 law schools. Figure 6 below shows the acceptance rates for PQ1-2 applicants, relative to PQ3-5 applicants. Law school C on the left of the chart and law schools J and I on the right are outliers, as they are in Figure 7.
94. The negative differences (at the right side) are larger than the positive differences at the left. Those law schools with the largest negative differences include some of the most selective and some of the less selective law schools. Comparing this figure with figure 3 above, showing the proportion of Q1-2 unique applicants who receive an offer, we can surmise that offer-holders were more likely to decline offers at some universities than others.
95. The second figure focuses on applicants with predicted grades of at least AAB. Within this group, applicants from PQ1-2 areas are more likely than those from PQ3-5 areas to be placed at nine law schools. There is still considerable variation across law schools. Those law schools towards the right include some of the most selective and some of the less selective law schools. The top six law schools are spread across the chart, though with most clustered on the right half, while most of the 'middle third' of law schools are on the left side. Comparing this figure with figure 3, showing the proportion of PQ1-2 unique applicants who receive an offer, we can surmise a tendency for PQ1-2 AAB+ offer-holders to decline offers at less selective law schools, though this is not consistent.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ See Wyness 2019. As noted above, many students, and particularly those from lower socio-economic groups and minority ethnic communities, do choose not

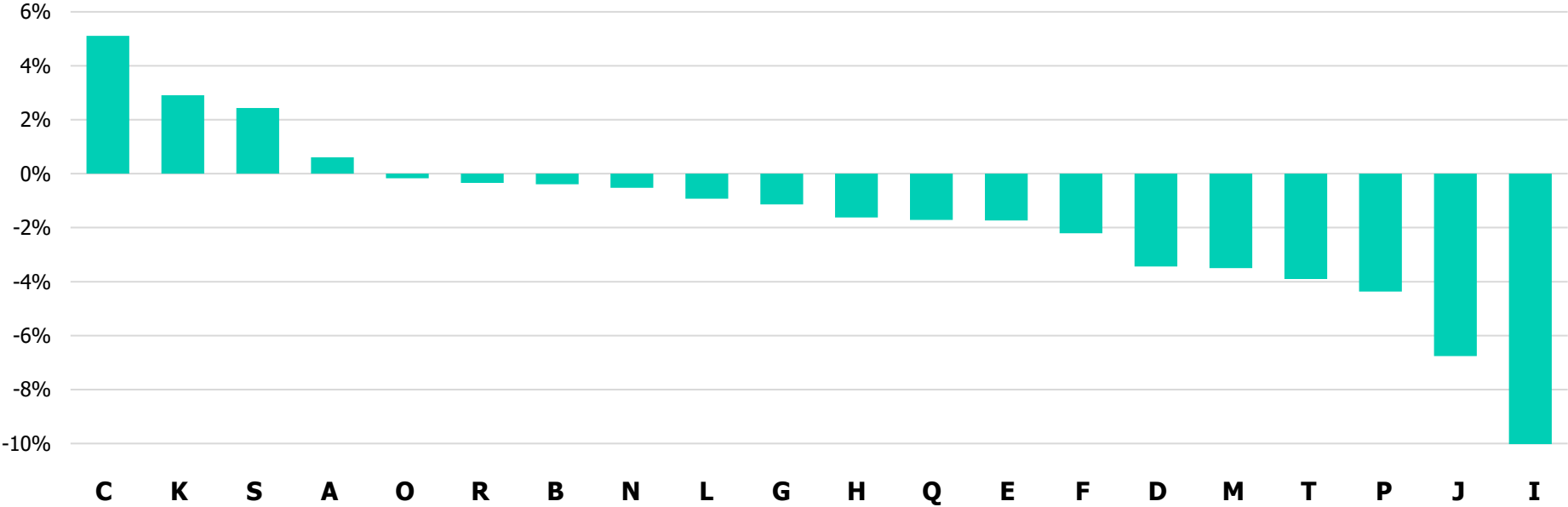
96. We include below each bar chart a grid summarising key admissions requirements to determine whether these could contribute to differences in a law school's acceptance rate of PQ1-2 applicants compared to PQ3-5 applicants.
97. The order of law schools and shape of the charts is quite different across the two figures, though interestingly in both charts, the same three law schools have the highest acceptance rates and the same two have the lowest acceptance rates.

to maximise university status. Harrison (2017). Harrison (p96) also summarises discussion of the role of location:

"Decisions may also be influenced by a desire to remain in the family home for financial or cultural reasons (Holdsworth, 2006), potentially limiting university choices to the local. Mangan et al. (2010) find that where there is a nearby elite university, students from disadvantaged groups are as likely to choose it as other students, but where there is not, they are more likely to seek a local lower status option. Within London, this has the potential to benefit the higher-status law schools within the top 20."

Our data shows that only one London law school in the top 20 appears to benefit from its location.

Figure 6. Percentage point difference in acceptance rate (application to placed) POLAR Quintiles 1-2 and 3-5, all grade profiles and qualifications, for law schools A – T



	C	K	S	A	O	R	B	N	L	G	H	Q	E	F	D	M	T	P	J	I
Stand-alone BTECs accepted		•	•	•		•		•		•	•	•	•		•	•	•		•	
LNAT is used	•			•	•		•				•			•				•		
Contextual - reduced offer		•	•	•		•			•		•	•	•	•	•					
Contextual - flexibility at confirmation	•	•			•		•	•		•		•	•			•	•	•		•

Figure 7. Percentage point difference in acceptance rate (application to placed) POLAR Quintiles 1-2 and 3-5 with an AAB+ grade profile, for law schools A – T



	C	K	S	O	A	R	N	L	H	D	B	F	Q	T	G	P	E	M	J	I
Stand-alone BTECs accepted		•	•		•	•	•		•	•			•	•	•		•	•	•	
LNAT used	•			•	•				•		•	•				•				
Contextual - reduced offer		•	•		•	•		•	•	•		•	•				•			
Contextual - flexibility at confirmation	•	•		•			•				•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•

Is there an association or correlation between specific admissions requirements and acceptance rates?

98. The visual juxtaposition above of admissions requirements and processes with acceptance rates suggests does not suggest an association between them, for the four factors included.⁶⁰ Other factors tend to be used by too many or too few law schools to allow differentiation and do not appear to have an association with the differential acceptance rate.
99. We tested whether there was any statistical correlation between admissions requirements and processes with acceptance rates.⁶¹ As an initial observation, we found interesting patterns in the use of some admissions requirements and procedures. First, there is a significant association between using the LNAT and not accepting BTECs (meaning that if a law school uses the LNAT, it does not accept BTECs). Secondly, there is significant variation in how contextual offers were made: in all but two cases, if a law school made a reduced offer, then it would not be flexible at confirmation and vice versa. This is reflected in the figures above.
100. 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

⁶⁰ The information in our grid about flexibility at the confirmation stage (which some law schools use to admit offer holders who have narrowly missed the grades stipulated in their offers) is mainly drawn from interviews with admissions staff. It may not be accurate for all years in our dataset. It is difficult to confirm this practice through publicly available information, and indeed it may vary from year to year, depending on patterns of applications, conversions and confirmations (see the discussion of decision-making for details).

⁶¹ Associations between the observed and reported practices of Law schools was tested using the above variables and the addition of the percentage of unique applicants who are from PQ1-2, percentage of acceptances from applicants from PQ1-2, and percentage of acceptances who were not predicted AAB+. This was done using correlation analysis (Spearman's Rho). Any significant associations should be interpreted with caution; these analyses were carried out to help with the interpretation of observed differences and to steer findings and recommendations.

likely to have the grade profile AAB+ than those from PQ3-5. This supports our earlier observations in the section on acceptance.⁶²

101. We can see from the correlation analysis that there are several trends which do not reach statistical significance. First, universities that accept BTECs generally have a higher percentage of acceptance from applicants in PQ1-2. Again, this supports trends we have observed in the section on acceptance. Secondly, the data suggests there is a difference in applications from PQ1-2 by the type of contextual offer. Generally, law schools making reduced offers attract a lower percentage of unique applicants from PQ1-2. Many factors could be influencing this trend, but we do not have the data to explore this further.

Shifts in the ranking of individual law schools

102. The order of law schools changed from our rankings of the proportions of applications to the proportion of acceptances (all qualifications and grade profiles). The most dramatic rise in ranking was achieved by law school C, a top-six law school which attracted the lowest proportion of PQ1-2 applicants but placed the 10th-highest proportion. Law school S also achieved a significant rise in ranking, from having the 10th-largest proportion of PQ1-2 applicants to having the third-largest proportion of placed PQ1-2 applicants. Seven other law schools (including one from the top six) achieved positive shifts of between one and three places. The two law schools experiencing the biggest drop in ranking from applications to acceptances (J and I) include one of the most selective and one of the less selective. These shifts upwards and downwards suggest that all law schools have the potential to increase their intake of PQ1-2 students: no law school is trapped by its circumstances.

103. How did the law schools experiencing a rise achieve this? Law school C was the outlier in terms of being much more likely to make offers to PQ1-2 applicants. However, it placed none with less than AAB or qualifications other than A levels. Law school S too placed no PQ1-2 applicants with

⁶² Apart from these points, no other associations were significant. This likely to be due to the size of the sample, the nature of the data and the similarity of processes across law schools.

qualifications other than A levels but did place a small number with <AAB. However, it was less likely to make offers to PQ1-2 applicants.

104. Three law schools start and finish in the top five: N, Q and D. These law schools began with the highest proportion of PQ1-2 applicants. While N was less likely to make offers to them, Q made offers to the highest proportion, with D a few places behind. N and Q's placed PQ1-2 applicants included a relatively high proportion with other than AAB+, with Q placing about half the proportion.

105. However, attracting PQ1-2 applicants is no guarantee of placing them. The two other law schools that started in the top five took different approaches to each other. The more selective law school T had a very low offer rate to PQ1-2 but managed to finish in ninth place, whereas the less selective law school J had a high offer rate but finished in 12th place. It is likely that more PQ1-2 applicants accepted T's offer than J's.

106. Making offers to PQ1-2 applicants is also no guarantee of placing them. Two other universities with a very high offer rate to PQ1-2 applicants place very different proportions. The less selective law school M placed the sixth-highest proportion, but the more selective law school K finished in 11th place. M was more flexible than K in terms of placing applicants with other than AAB+.

107. The bar charts directly above, showing acceptance rates for PQ1-2 relative to PQ3-5, present a ranking order which is different to the bar chart showing differential offer rates. We did not find obvious patterns: being more or less likely to make offers to PQ1-2 relative to PQ3-5 does not appear to determine differential acceptance rates.

108. Law schools do not, of course, solely control whether offer-holders move to being placed on a course: this is determined by which offer the offer-holders choose to accept and whether they subsequently achieve grades in their A level or equivalent exams to meet the terms of that offer.⁶³ It is not possible within the scope of this research and the data we received from UCAS to assess the relative role of these factors.

⁶³ As noted, it can also be influenced by the willingness of a law school to offer any flexibility at the confirmation stage.

109. We can however make the general observation that, when deciding which offer to accept, applicants are likely to consider the content and ranking of the course; the broader student experience; and the potential to receive a return on their investment through for example teaching quality, institutional reputation and graduate outcomes. These latter measures might be seen to favour the most selective law schools and indeed there is some suggestion from shifts in ranking between applications, offers and acceptances 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 law schools ranked less highly. The level of university bursaries (means-tested financial support) may also influence lower-income applicants, where other factors are equal.⁶⁴

110. There have been suggestions that applicants, when choosing which offer to accept, can be affected by an aversion to the risk of not meeting offer requirements, with applicants from less advantaged backgrounds considered to be more risk-averse than those from more advantaged backgrounds. This would mean that applicants from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to accept a challenging offer. We do not have specific evidence for this.⁶⁵

What lessons can we draw from the data?

111. We have already noted in relation to several factors that there do not appear to be obvious patterns. Following on from that, the data does not suggest a set of admissions measures that will work across all top 20 law schools: none that is a pre-requisite for placing a large overall proportion of PQ1-2, none that will guarantee it. Even amongst this selected group of law schools, there are significant variations in profile and location, which certainly affect the applicant pool and we believe also affect the impact of

⁶⁴ An unpublished study by Penelope Griffin comparing a group of similar, selective universities suggests that higher bursaries are associated with an increase in low-income students within the years 2008-9 to 2015-16.

⁶⁵ In principle, this perceived risk may be mitigated by the practice of making slightly lower offers as part of contextual admissions arrangements or making unconditional offers. However, making lower offers may also mean that applicants are more likely to accept them as the insurance choice, which is less desirable for universities.

admissions requirements and processes, including offer-holders' decisions. Section 7 on decision-making processes suggests that there is also likely to be variation within apparently similar processes at law schools, too nuanced to be reflected in a grid. With these caveats, we make the following observations.

- > Accepted applicants from PQ1-2 are significantly more likely to have the grade profile AAB+ than those from PQ3-5.
- > Applicants from PQ1-2 with qualifications other than A levels are much less likely to receive an offer than those from PQ3-5.
- > Accepting a wide range of qualifications and accepting applicants who had been predicted less than AAB helps in placing PQ1-2 applicants.
- > Making offers is a pre-requisite but not a guarantee of placing applicants.
- > Relative prestige does not appear to have a consistent association with the proportion of PQ1-2 amongst accepted applicants.
- > Some of the more selective law schools can convert a greater proportion of their PQ1-2 applicants to acceptances.
- > Less selective law schools appear to be less likely to convert offers to acceptances, as PQ1-2 offer-holders seek to maximise their options. The top law schools compete for a limited pool of high-achieving PQ1-2 applicants.
- > It appears that less selective law schools in areas with a relatively small local PQ1-2 population may struggle to attract and convert PQ1-2 applicants from further afield.

Broader patterns across the sector

Patterns across all law schools in the sector

112. We also investigated patterns across all law schools in the English higher education sector over three years, 2016 entry to 2018 entry. We calculated the average proportion of all applicants, offers and acceptances from low progression areas, grouping universities into three categories: the top 20, comparators⁶⁶ and all remaining universities. We separated prospective applicants by POLAR and by grade profile.

⁶⁶ A comparator group of universities was created, these are universities which are not in the top universities list but are geographically close to a top

113. 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. Even higher proportions of these applicants receive offers and are accepted at the top 20 law schools. This is encouraging, as it indicates that applicants from PQ1-2 areas and predicted AAB+ are applying in line with their predicted grades. However, a significant proportion still apply to other universities, receive an offer and are accepted. If we look instead at PQ1-2 applicants predicted below AAB, we see that a higher proportion apply to comparators or other remaining universities. Here too, most applicants are choosing universities in line with their predicted grades. There has been little noticeable change in the last three years with regards to applications, offers and acceptances.

114. Looking across both POLAR groups, we find that applicants who are predicted AAB+ are more likely to apply to a top university, receive an offer and be accepted, regardless of POLAR group. However, a significant proportion apply to the other groups of universities, receive an offer and are accepted. Again, there is a stable trend over time, with little variation between each year.

Choice of law school (across the sector)

115. We aggregated the three years of data available for applications and applicants. Based on the number of applications (the order remains the same when looking at unique applicants) the most popular law schools are listed in the table below, grouped by grade profile and POLAR group, and listed within groups by numbers of applications. While this indicates the popularity of the law schools, it should be noted that law schools vary in size. Even though there is no limit on the number of applications, it is

university and are sufficiently popular, that is, receive at least 150 applications a year. The comparator group includes: Anglia Ruskin University, Aston University, University of the West of England, Brunel University, Coventry University, De Montfort University, Leeds Beckett University, University of Lincoln, London Metropolitan University, London South Bank University, Manchester Metropolitan University, Northumbria University, Nottingham Trent University, Oxford Brookes University, Plymouth University, Royal Holloway London, Sheffield Hallam University, Southampton Solent University, University of Sunderland, York St John University.

possible that applicants assume a link between the number of places and the likelihood of their getting an offer and are thus more or less likely to apply.

116. 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. These most popular choices include some of the most selective law schools but focus on the larger civic universities. Applicants predicted <AAB also choose similar law schools across the two POLAR groups, with seven out of their ten most popular universities in common. The absence of London law schools amongst the top ten for PQ1-2 applicants of either grade profile could reflect factors such as the high cost of living in London, the relatively small intakes of some London law schools in the top 20 and the relative scarcity of PQ1-2 postcodes in London.⁶⁷ On the whole, however, this table is reassuring in indicating that applicants' choice of law school is not significantly affected by their POLAR group.

⁶⁷ This last point assumes that applicants to law schools will reflect the general trend amongst lower-income students of being more likely to study close to home.

Table 1. The most popular law schools by grade profile (A levels only) and POLAR

	PQ1-2	PQ3-5
AAB+	Leeds	Leeds
	Liverpool	Liverpool
	Manchester	Bristol
	Warwick	Exeter
	Birmingham	Warwick
	Bristol	Manchester
	Exeter	Birmingham
	York	Nottingham
	Newcastle	Durham
	Sheffield	UCL
	PQ1-2	PQ3-5
<AAB	Manchester Metropolitan	Liverpool
	Leeds Beckett	Nottingham Trent
	Nottingham Trent	Manchester Metropolitan
	Sheffield Hallam	Portsmouth
	Liverpool	Leeds Beckett
	Lincoln	City University, London
	Liverpool John Moores	Sheffield Hallam
	Birmingham City	Liverpool John Moores
	Portsmouth	Manchester
	Northumbria	Westminster, London

7. Law schools' decision-making processes: interviews with admissions personnel

Introduction

117. This section is based largely on the 16 interviews conducted with law schools amongst the top 30 in the UK, supplemented by information available online on university websites. The application process for entry to university law schools shares a common system (UCAS) but with substantial individualisation in the way that decisions are made, and any additional selection criteria may be incorporated. This provides substantial autonomy for law schools (as might be expected) and allows for significant variation in how an applicant may be assessed. In principle, law schools can use those processes and selection criteria that they think best suit the needs of their programmes.⁶⁸

118. This raises questions regarding the knowledge that different applicants may have of both the specific process and selection criteria each law school uses (beyond the basic UCAS application form): applicants may or may not know how their applications will be assessed. As we found in section 5 on the provision of information, publicly available information about this may be limited and is variable. One important example of this (explored below) is whether and how an individual applicant's socio-economic background is considered at any stage of the selection process. Another important feature of the process is that, for most applicants, law schools assess applications without knowing actual A level (or equivalent) grades. This creates significant uncertainty for both applicants and law schools.

119. Even amongst the more selective law schools, there is variation in the extent to which each actively seeks applicants of the requisite 'quality'. At one end of the scale, 'recruiting' schools put considerable effort into attracting and

⁶⁸ However, recent research identifies a notable homogeneity across undergraduate law programmes: Vaughan, S. How law schools are (potentially) letting down law students. (Unpublished, copy on file). This suggests the question of how much variation in admissions is required.

admitting sufficient students to meet financially driven student number targets. At the other end, 'selecting' schools attract more than enough quality applicants each year and have the task of choosing between them: *"We don't need to go and persuade people to apply ... it would probably be better for us if less people applied, to be honest."*

120. Many selective law schools lie somewhere in the middle, and their position may vary from year to year. Whether a law school is more recruiting or selecting, it is essential to remember that both the law schools and the applicants make decisions at different stages in the process. (This is evident in section 6 on the applicant journey that tracks changes across the admissions cycle.) This section provides examples of the different approaches that our top 20 law schools⁶⁹ take in using that system, and reflections on these approaches.

Law school decision-making

121. Admissions processes, and the personnel responsible for making admissions decisions, can differ considerably. There are variations when comparing law schools, as well as potential differences between any individual law school and any centralised university admission function. This means that the decision-making structure and process for each law school are unique.

122. Regarding personnel, the main distinction is in the relative roles and responsibilities of academics (such as Admissions Tutors) and professional support staff. In a devolved system, academic schools are involved in developing marketing material, running recruitment events, agreeing on entry requirements and selection criteria; and the decision-making process itself. Within a centralised system, central teams of professional support staff perform these tasks. Many universities and academic schools will use a combination of central and school staff. A further variation of this is the extent to which professional support staff in academic schools (or faculties) make decisions, rather than academics. Related to the question of who is involved, an academic school may have more or less influence over which assessment criteria are used and how they are applied. In summary,

⁶⁹ As identified in section 1 on aims and methodology.

substantive decision-making, as well as administrative tasks, may be more or less devolved and may allow more or less school-specific variation.

The UCAS application

123. UCAS publishes general advice regarding information that applicants must provide, such as the personal statement and references, and individual universities and law schools may provide further guidance. However, a number of these required elements are problematic in some way or another. The extent to, and the method by, which law schools consider personal statements, references, qualifications and employment experience is a matter for each institution, as is the approach to contextual information. This commonly varies between academic schools within individual universities as well as between different universities. There are several examples of such divergence in admissions practice.

Qualification types

124. For law schools, academic performance and qualifications are almost certainly the most important element of the applications they receive. Law schools assume that previous academic achievement is a good predictor of students' ability to deal with the demands of high-level academic study, and there is indeed evidence at the national level to back this up.⁷⁰ The impact of entry qualifications on league tables and the broader reputation of the law school and the institution are also real concerns. Though A levels are the most common post-16 qualifications (in England, with highers/advanced highers most prevalent in Scotland), some applicants present a broad range of alternatives.⁷¹ Law schools generally accept some (notably International Baccalaureate) as A level equivalent (albeit with some variations in

⁷⁰ See, for example: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/degree-outcomes-overview/>

⁷¹ As noted in the Methodology, our quantitative analysis focuses on the top 20 law schools in England, allowing us to use directly comparable data for applicants' predicted grades. However, for the interviews, we approached the wider group of the top 30 law schools in the UK. In addition to the top 20 in England, this included three further schools in England, five in Scotland and one each in Wales and Northern Ireland. This wider group of law schools enabled us to gain a broader understanding of practices and approaches across similar institutions, as well as developing our recommendations.

correlation to A level grades). For other qualification types, law schools often take very different views. This is most notable in the case of Access and Vocational qualifications (in the form of HE Diplomas and BTECs, for example).

125. Our research demonstrates that our top 20 law schools' approaches to Access and Vocational qualifications varied considerably. All 20 accepted these types of qualifications in some way. However, this does not reflect the important differences at a more detailed level. The clearest example of this is that only 13 of the 20 accepted applications from those with BTEC qualifications alone. This means that seven of our top 20 law schools were not accessible to (potential) applicants taking BTECs, unless applicants took BTECs in combination with A levels (e.g. two A levels and one BTEC), or there were particular circumstances. These seven law schools did not accept BTECs as standard in the same way as A levels, or other qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate. Applicants' ability to access our top 20 (even those accepting BTECs alone) could be further limited through limitations on the subjects studied at BTEC, which law schools tended to restrict more narrowly than they restricted A level subjects (see below).

126. This is not merely a question of access to information for applicants. The choice of qualification type and the subject is very often not a free one for potential applicants. Schools and colleges may restrict those choices (for a range of reasons) with the effect of substantially limiting the higher education options open to their students.

127. We observe that law schools tended to assume the suitability of different qualifications, rather than investigating it robustly. Decisions about the acceptability of qualifications were often taken at a centralised or institutional level. This sometimes reflected a lack of knowledge and understanding for law school Admissions Tutors:

"I don't know what an Access Diploma is."

"What is a BTEC?"

128. Alternative qualifications such as BTECs were considered suitable (as a stand-alone qualification) by 13 of our top 20 law schools, so why were they not regarded as suitable by all? There may be good reasons for different views on suitability and variation in approaches. Admissions personnel gave some reasons for excluding or restricting BTEC qualifications in their decision-making, such as their not providing the right preparation for study:

"We tend to tell students that they don't provide the right kind of preparation for the course [...], which is heavily academic."

129. However, none of those we interviewed pointed to a specific evidential basis for this:

"My guess would be that the university has spent a fair bit of time essentially assessing if a student meets a certain level are they statistically likely to go on and succeed."

130. As well as reliance on assumptions, it may also be the case (though was not stated or implied in our interviews) that suitability for study was only one concern for universities, with others relating to perceptions of reputation, and association with vocational qualifications.

Preferred and excluded subjects

131. As noted above, law schools may be concerned with qualification subject, as well as type, commonly excluding certain subjects and preferring some over others.⁷² Law schools may exclude particular A level subjects, and/or prefer some over others, and their requirements for GCSE and especially A level (or equivalent) performance may vary considerably.

132. Twelve out of our top 20 had preferred subjects, in some form or other, when considering applications. Six law schools gave a broad preference to those subjects, and six required a minimum number from a specified list or set higher LNAT requirements where 'non-traditional' subjects were presented. Sixteen law schools excluded specific A level subjects entirely and so did not consider those when evaluating applications. Most commonly, these were General Studies and/or Critical Thinking. At least one law school excluded several subjects completely from consideration (including Art, Photography, Physical Education, and Sharia Law). One Admissions Tutor stated that they did not have any preferred subjects, when the school's website provided detailed guidance on this, including an approved list.

⁷² There is evidence that the choice of A level subjects varies according to students' socio-economic status (even within state schools). See Dilnot C. (2016). How does the choice of A level subjects vary with students' socio-economic status in English state schools? *British Educational Research Journal*, 24 (6), p. 1081.

133. The subjects that law schools preferred did not always reflect the Russell Group's 'facilitating subjects' list. The general tendency was to disfavour practical or vocational A levels. One of the Admissions Tutors interviewed stated that although the university policy was not to have preferred subjects, they were trying to have a list of preferred and non-preferred subjects accepted for the law school.
134. In the same way that our top 20 law schools' approach to vocational qualifications was inconsistent, so too was their approach to preferred and excluded subjects. Importantly, there was also a similar lack of clarity about the decisions made and policies adopted. For example, law schools appeared to favour 'traditional subjects', with some mentions of essay experience and related preparedness for studying law. However, there seemed to be little acknowledgement or recognition that 'traditional' science subjects do not provide significant essay writing experience. Similarly, some law schools may exclude creative subjects, or favoured them less, despite subjects like media studies or cultural studies being grounded in discussion and argument formation.

Predicted grades

135. Given the general lack of final grades until the August confirmation period (in particular in the English system), law schools' evaluation of A level (and equivalent) performance was mainly based on predicted grades (though GCSEs/equivalent might also be considered). A number of the admissions personnel we interviewed demonstrated an awareness that there are substantial differences in approach between schools/colleges in making grade predictions.⁷³ There was also a wide range of views across law schools about how they should approach predicted grades. Some interviewees were very doubtful of the value of these predictions:

"We take predicted grades with a pinch of salt."

"Predicted grades are not good predictions."

⁷³ Some are also aware of independent reports on this issue: see, for example Wyness, G., (2017). Rules of the Game: Disadvantaged students and the university admissions process. The Sutton Trust. This presents data showing that high achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have their grades under-predicted than those from more advantaged backgrounds.

"I don't think predicted grades are particularly accurate. Schools will say what they need to say in order for the offer to be made. I know that about half of our applicants don't get the grades."

"We are very aware of the fact that A level predictions are in many cases a wild guess. We are aware that some independent schools in particular are very aware of how university admissions processes work, and if they predict ever so slightly higher, even if they know that little Johnny has no chance of achieving those grades, that it will put them further up the ranking."

136. Such concerns could lead some law schools to focus on other criteria, such as pre-16 qualifications and additional criteria not provided by UCAS:

"Predicted grades are always going to be an issue. That's why we incorporate other factors. Looking at GCSEs, looking at LNAT."

But some Admissions Tutors recognised that the pre-results application system creates some severe information deficits:

"[Predicted grades] are really all we have to go on. There's nothing else really ..."

Personal statements

137. Although individual applicants submit personal statements, they may receive widely varying levels of support from their schools/colleges, etc. Some law schools recognised this more than others and might reflect this in the extent to which they relied on that information in evaluating applications.

138. Personal statements were considered, in some way at least, by all of our top 20 law schools. However, for the majority of these (13), this was only some form of 'general check', which might be very limited. As with predicted grades, some law schools were more sceptical and took little account:

"... for obvious reasons."

139. Seven law schools did 'score' the personal statement in some way, so incorporating that information into their substantive decision-making. These seven took diverging approaches to assessment. This included checking for command of vocabulary and English language. Many of the admissions personnel we interviewed were aware of the potential for guidance and support in drafting submissions:

"You don't know who's written it, or how much coaching the applicant has received. At best, it can be a secondary tool."

This was the case even amongst those assessing the quality of writing, who also mentioned the potential for plagiarism or fraud. Given the minimal use

by law schools of interviews (see below), there was very little opportunity to check the authenticity of personal statements and their authorship.

140. Further factors that law schools might consider included applicants' demonstrating a real interest in the subject and their activities outside their studies (helping in the community, debating and related experience, etc). All these factors may be problematic in that applicants will have very different access to those valued opportunities, as well as differing levels of understanding as to what to write about (and how to do that persuasively). Our student researcher found instances of law schools that considered specific aspects of personal statements (as described during our interview) but provided only very general information to applicants, merely linking to university-wide and/or UCAS guidance. On the other hand, other law schools provided detailed guidance for candidates that was easily accessible. It also became evident to us in interviews that applicants may face a rather opaque evaluation process in relation to this type of information, due to a lack of clarity or structured approach on the part of the assessor:

"[Assessing] personal statements [is] not an exact science. Some things just jump out at you as interesting."

These less structured systems for assessment leave the door open for subjectivity and bias.

141. There was some broader divergence between the information we gathered during our research interviews and statements on university/school websites. In general, websites gave the impression that the personal statement was more important than admissions personnel told us it was. In particular, nearly half of the admissions personnel interviewed told us that they considered personal statements in only a limited number of cases (e.g. for applicants who are 'borderline').

142. We also found that some Admissions Tutors did not know who assessed personal statements (and how), often reflecting the allocation of decision-making responsibilities across different admissions personnel (academic and administrative support professionals). However, other Admissions Personnel gave us descriptions of detailed criteria for assessment and the training/experience of assessors. A particularly interesting comment from one law school was that it provides every rejected applicant with reasons for their decision:

"... whether it's that the personal statement was [not] good enough [or other elements of the application]"

This seemed to be facilitated, to some degree at least, by having a single decision-maker for all applications to a single programme which provided a foundation for consistency in evaluation.

143. One law school told us that it had very recently stopped looking at personal statements because it had identified a very close correlation between that assessment and LNAT scores. They considered that assessing the personal statement was an unfair and potentially discriminatory method of evaluation. However, another law school told us that it was moving from a broad judgement of personal statements for 'borderline' applicants to considering it for all applicants as a filter in the future. These inconsistencies between schools are a clear indication of institutional admissions autonomy, but also an indication that there is no agreed and/or applied sector-wide best practice. As with the approach to qualifications, the divergence in approach seems hard to reconcile. Few of the admissions personnel we interviewed provided an evidence base for their views.

References

144. Related to personal statements (though much less important factors in law schools' decision-making) are the references provided with the UCAS application (usually by schools/colleges). The admissions personnel we interviewed made similar points about the reliability of references as they did about personal statements. All applicants are reliant on referees for the quality of the reference, with referees in turn reliant on having the time available to the author, knowledge of what is useful to assessors and writing skills. All these points are likely to be skewed in favour of those from well-resourced schools and those with a history of students' progressing to leading universities.

Contextual data

145. The national Schwartz report *Fair admissions to higher education* (2004)⁷⁴ established the legitimacy of 'contextual admissions' or considering information about applicants' personal and educational background as part of the admissions process. Since then, the use of contextual admissions has expanded considerably, but with substantial variation across the higher

⁷⁴ Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for good practice (often referred to as the Schwartz Report). (2004) Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/233136/download?token=Scfuab79>

education sector. The information that each law school considers as part of contextual admissions and how it considers that information (if at all) is a matter for individual universities. Although law schools can base their decisions solely on the information provided on the UCAS application, some require further information, and so these issues are considered in the next section.⁷⁵

Additional assessment

LNAT

146. Several law schools required applicants to take the Law National Aptitude Test (LNAT) before they would consider their UCAS application. The LNAT is designed to test aptitude for the study of law and is in two parts: Section A, which is a set of multiple-choice questions (MCQs); and Section B, which is an essay question. LNAT was used by seven of our top 20 schools. Although this tended to be required by the more selective schools, this was not always the case (with one of the most selective not including the test in its decision-making process). An interesting feature of the approach taken to LNAT by law schools was that one had recently stopped using the test, while another had very recently introduced it. A further law school stated (in a rare reference to evidence-informed decision-making processes) that it was not using the LNAT after some years of doing so because its evidence suggested that those applicants who performed well in the test did not necessarily do well at university. Here too, we can see inconsistency across the sector, with varying views on what constitutes the most appropriate practice.

147. Not only did law schools vary significantly in requiring applicants to take the LNAT, but they also had different approaches to considering the results. Examples include: using the MCQs as a threshold, and then general consideration of the essay element; not setting a minimum score but using LNAT as a more flexible discriminator between otherwise identical

⁷⁵ There are extensive debates about the predictive validity of exam grades and other forms of assessment, as well as the impact of contextual information. In the following discussion we do not seek to contribute to that debate, but to consider practice in law schools in relation to principles of good practice and the impact of socio-economic background on applicants' experience and their chances of success in the admissions process.

candidates; and a highly structured evaluation in which LNAT scores were added to scores for other elements. In the latter case, the MCQs and essay scores were each allocated a specific percentage of the total score, as too were A levels and GCSEs.

148. The LNAT provides a further example of widely varying practice amongst our top 20 law schools, with some taking opposing views as to the value and reliability of the same element.

Interviews

149. A limited number of law schools required all applicants to be interviewed. Others used interviews only for selected (e.g. 'borderline' and/or mature) applicants. Of our top 20 law schools, only three required all applicants to take and pass an interview. A further nine required applicants to pass interviews in some instances, meaning that interviews were an important part of the decision-making process for at least some applicants to 12 out of our top 20 schools.

150. There has already been considerable debate about the validity and reliability of interviews as a means of assessing applicants' suitability for university study, particularly in relation to admission to medicine.⁷⁶ We will not explore these questions here, but will instead focus on how applicants' socio-economic background might affect their experience of interviews and performance in them. We argue that interviews are potentially problematic in several ways. Applicants from different educational and social backgrounds may have very different opportunities to develop skills useful in interviews, including soft skills such as general comfort and ease in formal settings. Applicants may also have different access to interview advice and training – both for interviews generally and about specific formats and contexts. Having access to good advice through schools, family or friends is particularly important, when law schools do not provide it.

"We don't say too much [on the detail of interviews] as much of it is discretionary on the day. I don't set it out in our prospectus or anything like that, but we do talk about it in open days."

⁷⁶ See, for example: Cleland et al. (2013). Identifying best practice in the selection of medical students. General Medical Council. Available at: www.gmc-uk.org

151. Interviewers may be influenced by a range of factors that are not explicitly assessed, likely to fall within the category of 'unconscious bias'. Many universities provide training for admissions staff in recognising and avoiding unconscious bias, though participation may be optional at some. It is also possible that training may not cover broader techniques for making interviews as robust and reliable as possible, such as structured questioning.⁷⁷
152. Equal access for all applicants to information regarding interviews (including purpose, format, evaluation criteria, etc.) is an essential requirement. Our student researcher found that the three law schools requiring all applicants to attend interviews did provide detailed and accessible information regarding the interview structure and preparation. However, those universities interviewing on a more limited basis were inconsistent in the extent to which they provided useful information to applicants. At least five provided no information at all.

Other requirements

153. Finally, law schools may set applicants additional tests such as the school's own 'aptitude' test (sat when attending for interview) or offering an institutionally designed entrance exam (giving applicants from 'non-traditional educational backgrounds' the opportunity to demonstrate their ability). One person interviewed said the latter could be beneficial as:
- "If we didn't have it we would be closing off access ... to lots of people who otherwise wouldn't be able to gain entry."*

Making offers

154. Law schools' main decisions are whether to make an offer to the applicant and, if so, what conditions to set. Universities will often base that decision purely on the information provided through UCAS, comprising an evaluation of qualifications (type, subject, predicted (and any achieved) grades) and potentially the personal statement, reference, etc. A central admissions team may evaluate standard applications and make offers, without the application

⁷⁷ The organisation Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA, now disbanded), produced a guide to good practice in interviews. See SPA good practice on interviews. Updated August 2016. Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/233316/download?token=ldb-5ulk>

being seen by the law school itself. The evaluation may even be "100% on grades", other than for exceptional cases.

155. As law schools usually do not have applicants' final exam results when making offers, they generally set their offer conditions a little higher than they expect the 'target' number of applicants to achieve. Given that applicants also choose between the offers that they receive and those who are academically strong are likely to receive more than one offer, law schools make many more offers than places available. The number of CF/CI offer holders will also often substantially exceed the number of places. The aim for law schools is to make enough offers with the appropriate conditions to ensure that they fill their places with the best suited applicants but without exceeding those places significantly.
156. Some law schools using contextual information to make a lower than standard offer (a contextual offer) may do so on the condition that applicants accept this offer as their firm choice; the aim being to avoid the school being made the applicant's insurance choice.

Standard offer levels

157. Eighteen of our top 20 schools set their standard offer as a minimum of AAA at A level (or equivalent) or higher. There are several reasons for law schools setting high entry requirements and offer conditions. The most obvious is the general belief that those achieving higher standards will perform better as law students. Setting high standards also provides a means of managing applications, limiting the number of applicants who think they can meet requirements and so the numbers that law schools must consider and select from. These standards can also be used as 'benchmarks' in the school decision-making (trying to identify the applicants most likely to meet them). For example, a law school might require applicants to meet minimum predicted grades, before inviting them for an interview.
158. There was wide understanding amongst the admissions personnel we interviewed of the problems that may arise from having such high entry requirements and how they might disadvantage certain groups disproportionately.⁷⁸ As a result, many law schools (including the majority of

⁷⁸ Boliver et al. present recent evidence for the attainment gap in: Boliver et al. (2019). Using contextualised admissions to widen access to higher education: a guide to the evidence base. Durham University Evidence Centre for

our top 20) considered contextual information and/or adjusted offer conditions for individual applicants. We explore the approaches of our top 20 to this in the following discussion.

159. The admissions personnel we interviewed were aware of the tension between their desire to promote diversity through flexibility on offer conditions and the need to maintain a high average entry tariff because this contributes to their standing in league tables:

"The tariff problem is hugely problematic. That's the biggest obstacle in terms of diversity. Universities are incentivised against showing flexibility."

This tension occurs across the higher education sector, with some stakeholders arguing that league tables should adjust their entry tariff calculations to reduce the current disincentive to be flexible.⁷⁹

160. Our interviewees were very focused on issues of access and diversity. However, their views may well not have been representative of all those involved in admissions policy and decision-making. Some other, influential, figures prioritise other concerns:

"There's usually a battle between the WP [team] and [the department], and usually the WP people lose out. The head of school just says 'no, we're not going with [a lower offer]'."

Contextual information and offers

161. Law schools may use various types of contextual information at different stages of the admissions process to adjust their treatment of applicants in several ways. Applicants need to discover this themselves from each law school. This can present a significant challenge for applicants, as clear and detailed information is not always available.

Education. Research Briefing No. 1. Available at:
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/dece/ContextualisedHEadmissions.pdf>

⁷⁹ See for example:

Major, L. E. and Banerjee, P. A. (2019). Social mobility and elite universities. HEPI Policy Note 20. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HEPI-Policy-Note-20-Social-Mobility-Challenge-FINAL.pdf>

Deem, R. and Eggius, H. (2017). *The university as a critical institution?* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

162. Most commonly, law schools used contextual information to inform whether they should make an offer at all and/or whether they should set lower than standard final grade conditions. Ten out of our top 20 considered contextual factors in making reduced offers. Eleven out of our top 20 considered contextual factors in exercising flexibility at confirmation (when applicants have received their exam grades); they used that information in allocating any spare places (available after the places for applicants meeting offer conditions had been confirmed). It is important to note that some law schools only considered contextual information at the offer-making stage and others only at confirmation – the set of ten is not wholly within the set of eleven. Three of the law schools interviewed were introducing, or planning to introduce, contextual decision-making in the following year's admissions cycle. And some did not take account of contextual information at all (at least when making offers):

"We get the flags, but it doesn't really make any difference".

163. Outcomes from this decision-making included: making a standard offer which would not otherwise have been made; reducing the grade requirements in offer conditions (typically one or two A level grades); reducing the LNAT score requirement, so that an offer might then be made; or offering an interview where the applicant would otherwise not have been invited.

164. One particular approach that emerged at interview comprised the law school considering contextual information when deciding to make a standard offer (so increasing the chance of the standard offer being made) and then also taking that information into account at confirmation (so that a discretionary place might be offered if the applicant did not achieve the grades to meet the conditions of the offer). The view was that:

"It really amounts to the same thing because you are still making those allowances to somebody who didn't quite get the grades."

165. The applicant perspective may be very different, of course, as reduced offer conditions may give an applicant the confidence to accept an offer. Offering discretion at confirmation helps only those who were prepared to risk accepting the original offer. The approach had been introduced recently and was a rare example of contextual admissions becoming more limited, in some senses. One of the rationales for this approach also provides an interesting view of equal access:

"We are being completely fair to everyone – everybody gets the same offer, so everybody is expected to achieve the same grades to get a place at the school."

In such cases, there is a conflation of equity and equality, without recognising that the level of support available to applicants through their pre-university education varies hugely and is correlated to socio-economic background.

166. The criteria that made applicants eligible for contextual consideration were also variable. The most common factors that law schools considered were postcode-based measures of relative disadvantage or deprivation (such as POLAR, the Index of Multiple Deprivation, Acorn or Mosaic).⁸⁰ Universities might also consider factors such as the applicant's being care experienced,⁸¹ the average academic performance of the applicant's school, a combination (either school or postcode), or consideration of contextual factors in a more discretionary way (considering applicants' circumstances on an individual basis).

167. Law schools' decision-making processes can be highly structured, with lower offers being made automatically for applicants from specified schools/colleges or postcodes, for example. Though usually based on the information provided in UCAS applications (or derived from that), law schools can allow applicants to provide additional information, for example, through completing a supplementary application form.

168. Applicants' understanding of how their contextual information will be considered by admissions staff is essential. That understanding may influence their choice of law schools, both when applying and when selecting offers (making their firm choice, for example). Although all of our top 20 schools provided information on their approach in some form or other, this was not always as specific as might be helpful to applicants. One example is where the information on a university webpage (linked through from the law school's website) stated that contextual information was used

⁸⁰ These measures are cross-referenced with the applicant's home postcode to produce a deprivation or disadvantage score or yes/no rating. Universities can elect to receive this and other contextual information from UCAS or build one or more of these postcode-based measures into their student admissions system.

⁸¹ 'Care experienced' refers to a young person's having been looked after by a local authority (rather than his or her family).

in different ways, including all of those identified above. However, it did not specify how specific academic schools would use such information, and the law school's approach (discussed at interview) did not include making reduced offers, for example. The information was not misleading but could be much clearer for (potential) applicants.

Data to support and inform contextual admissions

169. The admissions personnel we interviewed expressed a strong commitment to supporting diversity through the admissions process. They demonstrated substantial interest in how to consider contextual information fairly and robustly. A key limitation, however, was the availability and robustness of data to help decision-making. For example, how accurate are postcode measures? Should self-reported factors be considered? And even if contextual data is accurate, do admissions personnel know how to interpret it? Do internal data systems allow them to track the subsequent performance of students admitted with lower grades? On this point too, medical schools tend to collect and publish data assessing the impact of contextual admissions more than other professional subjects.⁸²

170. Our interviewees spoke of a lack of data.

"[The] key focus [going forward] is access and outreach, and are we doing a good enough job to take account of contextualised information. [We] want to gather data, gain a fuller granular picture, and then do something about it."

"Everyone is keen to use access/contextual data, everyone is keen to use it, but it's very difficult to know how much power to give it. One of the things I want to do with statistical analysis is to look at what impact it seems to have over the ten years of data we have."

"I want to see more about how students actually get on during their degree and then feed those lessons back into the admissions process. That, for me, would be really important."

171. There was also some evidence of a lack of understanding of the applicant data available (from UCAS, for example) and how it should be used, which may reflect the relative power and detailed involvement of Admissions

⁸² See, for example: Mwandigha et al. (2018). What is the effect of secondary (high) schooling on subsequent medical school performance? A national, UK-based, cohort study. *BMJ Open*, 8(5). Available at:

<https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/8/5/e020291.full.pdf>

Tutors and admissions professionals in decision-making. Thus, for example, centralised admissions staff might provide contextual information via the 'flags' referred to above, but the Admissions Tutor had the option of ignoring it.

172. A number of Admissions Tutors told us that A levels are a good indicator of success on course – which is indeed generally the case, as an average across all students and courses nationally⁸³ – but did not refer to any evidence that this was the case for the students on their courses. Nor was there always a clear understanding of the impact of context on the predictive validity of grade achievement.

"A levels are a good steer on how people will do on the degree. They are a fairly good indicator of what is going to happen at the end."

"A levels are the best indicator of success and progress on the course."

However, there was recognition elsewhere of the unintended consequence of relying solely on A levels:

"If we simply chose on A levels we would have far more independent school students."

173. One notable feature of our research interviews is a reluctance to consider a change to academic practice to accommodate a more diverse student population. In general, the assumption seemed to be that adjustments should (or could) be made to grade requirements only, rather than the curriculum. Even highly knowledgeable interviewees, with a clear commitment to widening access, took this view:

"[Having the high entry standards] allows us to maintain the quality of the cohort [...] everybody coming in is at that level [a more varied cohort would mean that] the department would need to change their teaching to incorporate that factor and I think at the moment we are not in that space."

174. These views reflect assumptions about A level performance and their predictive value regarding degree success (and paradoxically seem to recognise the reasons behind differing performance at school/college, but not account for that in grade requirements). Interviewees expressed concerns about the risk of 'setting up [students] to fail', but without examining the potential reasons for that failure or ways to avoid it. We acknowledge however that changing the way that law programmes are

⁸³ For more information, see: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/degree-outcomes-overview/>

delivered, structured and assessed would be a major undertaking, in terms of the workload required and potentially too the process of negotiating agreement from colleagues.

Confirmation

175. UCAS provides universities with access to final A level results some days before their release to applicants, so that universities can check how many applicants have met the conditions of their offer and how many have not. Having allocated places to those meeting their offer conditions (including an estimate of likely take up from UI applicants) law schools often have further places to allocate (as a result of their offer condition setting strategies, outlined above). Universities can fill their places by admitting offer holders who have not met their conditions (that is, who have lower than the standard entry requirement grades) or by seeking new applicants through post-confirmation activities (see below). Factors that law schools may consider in deciding whether and how to allocate discretionary places include how close the applicant was to meeting their conditions, and 'mitigating circumstances' explaining the failure to meet conditions. Although some law schools may take contextual information into account at this stage (with 11 of our top 20 stating this to be the case), pressure from the university to maintain a high entry tariff may discourage others:

"We are scared of accepting A level grades that are too low, because it impacts negatively on our standing, our ranking in league tables. So there is a real pressure not to accept [lower than standard offer]. We are totally focussed on grades."

Post-confirmation

176. As noted above, some law schools may seek to fill spare places through UCAS clearing and related processes. For example, applicants may ask to be released to their insurance choice, use the Adjustment process, or change course at their firm choice university. This may result in changes to the actual intake to individual law schools (with movements in and out). Such changes will vary across our top 20 law schools and are likely to be smaller at the more selective universities. UCAS data on acceptances may not account for all these changes.

Completing the student journey and beyond: progression and outcomes

177. Though beyond the scope of this project, it is worth noting that registration and arrival at law school is only the start of the journey through university and onwards to the legal profession. UK students from less advantaged backgrounds, as measured by POLAR, and across all subjects, are less likely to continue to the second year of their course and less likely to be awarded a first or upper-second class degree.⁸⁴ This has clear implications for future prospects, and indeed, they are also less likely to progress to highly skilled employment or further study at a higher level. All this is likely to contribute to the underrepresentation of people from less advantaged backgrounds in the legal profession, as set out in the context.

178. We acknowledge work by universities and law schools to investigate and address any continuation and attainment gaps within their courses. The access and participation plan that universities must submit to the Office for Students and the requirements of the Teaching Excellence Framework have encouraged a renewed focus on these issues. Similarly, we acknowledge work by law firms and regulatory bodies to achieve a more diverse legal profession, at all levels and in all roles. We suggest that collaboration across admissions, teaching, university careers services and the legal profession on socio-economic equality and diversity is likely to be more effective than isolated efforts in any one area.

⁸⁴ Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, there has been a continuation gap between students from POLAR quintiles 1 and 5 (the least and most advantaged neighbourhoods respectively) of at least 4.2 percentage points. Continuation is defined as students continuing their courses following the year of entry. During the same period, there has been an attainment gap between students from POLAR quintiles 1 and 5 of at least 9.5 percentage points. Attainment is defined as achieving a first or upper-second class degree. The progression gap was at least 6.0, with progression defined as progression to highly skilled employment or further study at a higher level. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/>

Closing words

179. Ensuring equality of opportunity to access the top law schools may be only one part of the journey to a career in the legal profession, but it is an essential part. Staff responsible for admissions to these law schools have the potential to make a significant difference to their respective intakes and to the future of the legal profession.

180. We acknowledge that 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.

181. To help achieve improvement, we recommend that law schools share admissions practice. The proposed Law Admissions Network is likely to facilitate this. We particularly recommend that individual law schools work closely with one or more other law schools with a similar profile and location.

Appendix 1: Glossary

We are grateful to UCAS,⁸⁵ from which the following definitions are drawn or adapted unless otherwise indicated.

Acceptances

We use the term 'Acceptances' with the UCAS definition of students' being placed on a course at the end of the admissions cycle.

Adjustment

If applicants have met and exceeded the conditions for their firm choice, they have the option of looking for an alternative course. They need to find a course with a spare place.

Access qualification

The Access to Higher Education Diploma is a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university. Access to HE courses are delivered by colleges in England and Wales and are available in a range of different subjects, such as nursing, social studies, law, and art and design.⁸⁶

A level results day

The day in mid-August when sixth-form students receive their A level results and find out whether their grades are high enough for their firm or insurance university courses to confirm their place. Students doing other qualifications normally receive their results slightly earlier.

BTECs

BTEC Nationals are level 3 vocational qualifications that provide specialist, work-related learning in a range of sectors.⁸⁷

Clearing

For universities, Clearing is a means of filling any spare places they still have on their courses on A level results day. For applicants, Clearing is a way of finding a place on a course if they:

- > are applying after 30 June or

⁸⁵ For more information, see: <https://www.ucas.com/>

⁸⁶ For more information, see: <https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/course-search>

⁸⁷ For more information, see: <https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/btec-nationals.html>

- > did not receive any offers (or none they wanted to accept) or
- > did not meet the conditions of their offers or
- > declined their firm place (because, for example, they changed their mind)

Confirmation

The process within universities of checking whether applicants' actual exam grades are high enough for the university to confirm their place on their firm or insurance university course.

Conditional offer

A conditional offer from a university of a place on a course means that the applicant still needs to meet certain requirements, usually exam results.

Contextual data and admissions

Since applicants' grades can be influenced by a range of personal and educational factors, to make the processes fairer, some universities offer contextual admissions. This is where the university considers any barriers applicants may face and will either reduce its grade requirements or give extra consideration when deciding whether to make an offer. Data can include, for example, information about the applicant's home neighbourhood (generated through the home postcode) and about the applicant's school (typically its average academic achievement).

Firm choice

An applicant's firm choice is her/his first choice amongst any offers of a place on a course.

Insurance choice

An applicant's insurance choice is her/his back-up choice to the firm choice. Often an insurance choice has lower offer conditions. This means that if an applicant's results are lower than expected, s/he might still meet the conditions at the insurance choice.

LNAT

The National Admissions Test for Law (LNAT) is a two-part test: multiple choice questions based on passages of text, and an essay. The scores of both parts are made available to participating universities. These are then used to supplement the university application and show the applicant's aptitude for studying undergraduate law. Only some law schools require applicants to sit the LNAT.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ For more information, see: <https://lnat.ac.uk/what-is-lnat/>

Meeting offer conditions

This usually means that an applicant must achieve the exam grades set out in the offer from the university. For example, if a law school makes an applicant a conditional offer of AAA, then the applicant must achieve AAA to meet offer conditions and confirm her/his place on the course.

Personal statement

The personal statement supports an application to study at a university or college. Applicants are expected to use it to articulate why they would like to study a particular course or subject, and what skills and experience they possess that show their passion for their chosen field.

POLAR

The participation of local areas (POLAR) classification is used to group areas across the UK based on the proportion of young people participating in higher education; quintiles 1 and 2 are the classifications for neighbourhoods with the lowest participation. The government uses this measure (amongst others) to monitor universities' progress in admitting students from less advantaged backgrounds.⁸⁹

Predicted grades

A predicted grade is the grade of qualification an applicant's school or college believes they're likely to achieve in positive circumstances. These predicted grades are then used by universities and colleges, as part of the admissions process, to help them understand an applicant's potential.

UCAS

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service handles applications for full-time undergraduate study at UK universities and colleges. It also provides information and advice to applicants and prospective applicants; and data for universities and colleges.

Unconditional offer

An unconditional offer from a university means that the applicant has a place on a course, although there might still be a few things to arrange.

Vocational qualifications

See BTECS

⁸⁹ For more information, see: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/polar-participation-of-local-areas/>

Appendix 2: Calculations for the figures

Figure 1: Data used for this is applicants who are in a POLAR quintile (have a UK postcode covered by the POLAR data) and all qualification types (includes those with overseas qualifications etc.) but excludes those who did not have a POLAR quintile assigned. This is different to figures that follow (which focuses on specific qualification groups). Still, all qualifications are included here so that the data is comparable with the wider institutional data made publicly available by UCAS. The percentage is calculated by dividing the number of accepted/placed applicants who are from POLAR Q1-2 (PQ1-2) by the total of all applicants with an assigned POLAR quintile. For example, University A has 20 accepted/placed applicants from PQ1-2 and a total of 100 acceptances/placed applicants; therefore, the acceptance rate for PQ1-2 is 20%. This means that the percentage for PQ3-5 can be calculated by simply deducting the PQ1-2 value from 100.

Figure 2: Data used for this is applicants who are in a POLAR quintile (have a UK postcode covered by the POLAR data) and have qualifications that are either A levels or equivalents and similar qualifications. Excluded were those who did not have a POLAR quintile assigned or had qualifications outside of the assigned cohort (those who are not 18-year-old applicants and domiciled in England, Northern Ireland or Wales). The number of unique applicants from PQ1-2 is taken and divided by the total number of unique applicants to that institution to provide the number of unique applicants from PQ1-2. This means that the percentage for PQ3-5 can be calculated by simply deducting the PQ1-2 value from 100.

Figure 3: Same as above for data. The number of unique applicants and offers made for an Institution by the POLAR groupings was then taken and a percentage calculated, for example, University A has 100 unique applicants from PQ1-2, 20 offers are made giving an offer rate of 20% for applicants from PQ1-2, and this value is used for the graph

Figure 4: Same as above for data. The number of unique applicants and offers made for an Institution by the POLAR groupings was then taken and a percentage calculated, for example, University A has 100 unique applicants from POLAR Q1-2, 20 offers are made giving an offer rate of 20% for applicants from

PQ1-2. The same Is calculated for PQ3-5, and then the offer rate for PQ3-5 is deducted from the PQ1-2 offer rate to produce the percentage point difference.

Figure 5: Data used for this is applicants who are in a POLAR quintile (have a UK postcode covered by the POLAR data) and have qualifications that are either A levels or equivalents and similar qualifications. Excluded were those who did not have a POLAR quintile assigned or had qualifications outside of the assigned cohort (those who are not 18-year-old applicants and domiciled in England, Northern Ireland or Wales). The number of unique applicants from PQ1-2 is taken, and the number of acceptances from PQ1-2 is divided by the number of unique applications to give the percentage of PQ1-2 applicants who are accepted. This is repeated for those in PQ3-5 and then the acceptance rate for PQ3-5 is deducted from the PQ1-2 acceptance rate to give the value shown in the figure.

Figure 6: Data used for this is applicants who are in a POLAR quintile (have a UK postcode covered by the POLAR data) and have qualifications that are either A levels or equivalents and similar qualifications. Excluded were those who did not have a POLAR quintile assigned or had qualifications outside of the assigned cohort (those who are not 18-year-old applicants and domiciled in England, Northern Ireland or Wales). The number of unique applicants from PQ1-2 is taken, and the number of acceptances from PQ1-2 is divided by the number of unique applications to give the percentage of PQ1-2 applicants who are accepted. This is repeated for those in PQ3-5 and then the acceptance rate for PQ3-5 is deducted from the PQ1-2 acceptance rate to give the value shown in the figure.

Figure 7: Data used for this is applicants who are in a POLAR quintile (have a UK postcode covered by the POLAR data) and have been predicted AAB+ at A level or equivalents to this grade profile. Excluded were those who did not have a POLAR quintile assigned, have a predicted grade profile or the equivalent of AAB+, or had qualifications outside of the assigned cohort (those who are not 18-year-old applicants and domiciled in England, Northern Ireland or Wales). The number of unique applicants from PQ1-2 is taken, and the number of acceptances from PQ1-2 is divided by the number of unique applications to give the percentage of PQ1-2 applicants who are accepted. This is repeated for those in PQ3-5 and then the acceptance rate for PQ3-5 is deducted from the PQ1-2 acceptance rate to give the value shown in the figure.

Technical notes

- i. UCAS rounds numbers to the nearest multiple of five to avoid disclosure of individuals. This places limitations on what statistical analysis can be done and what can be inferred from it.
- ii. In UCAS terms, 'acceptance' means that the applicant has been placed for entry into higher education, that is, has a confirmed place on a course.
- iii. We have used POLAR4 because this is an updated geographic measure, using more recent HE progression data and has a more refined/smaller geographic methodology, compared to POLAR3.

Appendix 3: About the Bridge Group and contributors to this report

The Bridge Group is a non-profit consultancy that uses research to promote social equality. We do this by supporting organisations of all kinds with independent expertise, research and practical know-how to enable them to make real and lasting impact on socio-economic diversity and social equality.

Our objective is to make real and meaningful change, now. And our vision is a higher education system and labour market where outcomes are determined by competence and hard work, and not by socio-economic background. We do this through research, consultancy, convening and advocacy.

Over the last decade, we have worked with many of the UK's leading employers, government bodies and educational institutions and our impact features regularly in the media and in national publications.

For more information, see www.thebridgegroup.org.uk

Contributors

Dr Laurence Etherington, University of York

Laurence is a Senior Lecturer and Admissions Tutor at York Law School. Having originally qualified and practised as a solicitor in the field of Planning and Environmental Law, he has been in higher education for over 20 years.

If you are interested in joining a Law Admissions Network, please contact Laurence at laurence.etherington@york.ac.uk

At the University of York, Laurence was recently part of the University's Contextual Admissions Working Group. At the Law School, he has been involved in the design and delivery of Widening Access activities, including establishing the school's Widening Participation Champions project which aimed to connect aspiring and current law students from similar backgrounds in meaningful ways. As well as Environmental Law, his teaching and research interests include qualitative research regarding Access to the Legal Profession.

Dr Penelope Griffin

Penelope is Director of Higher Education and Impact at the Bridge Group, leading work relating to the role of higher education in socio-economic equality and diversity. As well as, for example, advising on or evaluating outreach programmes, and researching and reporting on admissions practices, Penelope works with universities at a strategic level to review their whole-institution approach to access and participation.

At the Bridge Group, Penelope has worked with The Sutton Trust, Dublin City University and the Royal Academy of Music (among many others) and also leads on developing methodologies for tracking the impact of the Bridge Group's work. Prior to her appointment, Penelope led the University of Nottingham's access and participation agenda. While at Nottingham, she was a Trustee of the Bridge Group, a role she held for eight years.

Dr Helen Wareham

Helen is a Researcher at the Bridge Group. She is a data specialist, both conducting data analysis and advising on what data should be collected. At the Bridge Group Helen has worked with Access Accountancy, the Civil Service, KPMG, PwC and Grant Thornton, among others, working to ensure that, while recognising no piece of data can be perfect, it is nonetheless used in a robust, evidence-based – and pragmatic – way and that it is collected in ways that are accessible, efficient and useful.

She says: "The Bridge Group has a really mixed-methods approach to research and policy which I really enjoy and also gives our work a greater depth and impact. I love data and a graph, but it is not the whole story, especially when it comes to societal justice/inequality."

Dr Kenton Lewis

Kenton Lewis is an educational sociologist and one of the founding members of the Bridge Group. He specialises in strategic development and policy implementation in relation to diversity, with a particular focus on access to, and progression in, the professions and the development of staff in large and complex organisations. He is an expert in the use of qualitative analysis through in-depth interviewing and data coding, and the triangulation of these data against quantitative measures.

As well as being a Fellow of the Bridge Group, Kenton consults as a Research Adviser for the Bridge Group, working on projects with the BBC, KPMG and the Civil Service, among many others.

Dr Laura da Costa

Laura is a Senior Researcher at the Bridge Group, specialising in the analysis of quantitative data, such as workforce analysis and survey analysis. She has particular expertise in the use of national databases such as those on attainment and progression from the Department for Education and the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

At the Bridge Group, Laura has worked with a broad range of clients, including KPMG, Grant Thornton, Viacom and Police Now, among many others. Laura is interested in issues surrounding social inequality, fairness, intersectionality, and how talent is defined, both in education and employment.

Henry Dyer

Henry is a final year student at the University of York studying an undergraduate law degree, graduating in 2020. He has a particular interest in access to justice and social mobility within the legal profession, mainly in the form of contributing to technology development papers and projects regarding mobility and justice.

