NICHE: Navigating Institutional Constraints in Higher Education – Strategic Admissions, Market Niches, and the Social Dynamics of Access at Durham University

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NICHE: Navigating Institutional Constraints in Higher Education – Strategic Admissions, Market Niches, and the Social Dynamics of Access at Durham University

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Submitted as part of the Doctor of Business Administration

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Durham University Business School

Submitted on 18 June 2025

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Acknowledgements

This journey has had its fair share of wrong turns, frustrations, and the occasional tears—alongside moments of real joy and discovery. Like many doctoral projects, it's been a challenging and transformative process, and I am undoubtedly a different person now than when I began the DBA in the autumn of 2019.

I've been fortunate to receive generous support, guidance, and encouragement from many individuals and institutions along the way. This research would not have been possible without them, and I am sincerely grateful for the role each has played in helping me reach this point.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors Laszlo Polos for his unwavering belief in me from the start of the DBA programme; and Vikki Boliver, for her invaluable guidance, effective feedback and calmness as I navigated the world of contextual admissions. In addition I am hugely grateful to Mohammad Sayari and Sean Muller who have helped me develop the methodological aspects of the thesis and who have both been exceptionally patient as I picked up statistics from scratch. I would like to extend my thanks to a number of staff (past and present) at Durham University, who gave their support, shared their time, expertise, perspectives and data to make the thesis happen: Kate Anderson, Bilal Ashraf, Jon Batty, Lynda Boothroyd, Chris Courtman, Richard Emborg, Michael Gillmore, Kate Hampshire, Karen Jones, Sarah Judson, Natalie Kennedy, Tess Mantzoros, Sally McGill, John Pritchard, Lizzie Ranson, Cat Sellick, Stephen Willis.

On a personal note, huge thanks to my family. To my son, Felix, thank you for reminding me that I really need to finish this thesis so I can get a proper job and earn money so we can save up for a holiday to Japan. To my parents, Jon and Susan, who willingly read more drafts of this than any reasonable person should—your patience has been appreciated, especially as I'm aware that my use of "however" is still often incorrect! To my partner, Chris, for his unwavering support, encouragement, and patience throughout every stage of this process, as well as supplying countless cups of tea. Finally, to Rita Gupta and her team at LGFL Ltd, and to Marcella Sutcliffe at Chapelgarth Writing Retreats, for each—in their own way—providing me with the time, space, and freedom I needed to complete this thesis.

Abstract

This thesis investigates Durham University's centralised undergraduate admissions policy, introduced in 2019 as a strategic response to market and policy pressures for increased widening participation. Framed within theories of Organisational Ecology and The Blau Space, the research explores how elite institutions like Durham are positioned and maintained within a social niche by their audience.

The study analyses 229,217 undergraduate applications made to Durham between 2010 and 2023, drawn from UCAS Provider Extract (PERS) records. These include applicant demographics, contextual flags, predicted grades, and acceptance decisions. Data cleaning excluded incomplete records, overseas applicants, and Covid-affected entry years to ensure comparability. Using multivariate logistic regression and a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) approach, the research evaluates the effects of the 2019 policy on application, offer, and acceptance patterns, controlling for socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and school type.

Findings show that since the introduction of centralised admissions, contextual applicants have become significantly more likely to receive offers and slightly more likely to enter Durham. However, these effects are uneven across departments, and firm-choice acceptance rates remain largely unchanged. Some departments, particularly those designated as "selecting," continue to present barriers for contextual applicants. Moreover, while more offers are made, contextual students are increasingly placing Durham as an insurance option rather than a first choice, limiting the reform's overall impact on the entrant pool.

While centralisation improved procedural fairness and institutional coherence, it did not alter the social forces shaping applicant behaviour. Durham remains a selective, high-status institution that attracts—and is perceived as catering to—students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and independent schools.

Limitations of this research include incomplete contextual flag data, self-reporting errors around socio-economic status, and the subjectivity of departmental classifications. The study demonstrates that although contextual admissions aim to advance social mobility, student choices rooted in unwritten social codes can sustain elite reproduction, counteracting operational reform. It concludes that widening participation policy must address the social logics of choice, demanding a re-evaluation of metrics and genuinely attainable goals.

Abbreviations

Table 1: Abbreviations used in the thesis

Acronym	**Meaning**
ACORN	A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods
APP	Access & Participation Plan
BAME	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DiD	Difference in Difference Analysis
FE	Further Education
FSM	Free School Meals
GATS	Global Agreement on Trade in Services
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Authority
IB	International Baccalaureate
NPD	National Pupil Database
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office For Students
PERS	Provider Exact Record Supply (UCAS Database help by provider)
POLAR4	Participation of Local Area
SES	Socio-Economic Status
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UG	Undergraduate
USS	Universities Superannuation Scheme
UUK	Universities UK
WP	Widening Participation
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

> "University decision making frequently does not resolve problems. Choices are often made by flight or oversight. University decision processes are sensitive to increases in load. Active decision makers and problems track one another through a series of choices without appreciable progress in solving problems. Important choices are not likely to solve problems." (Cohen, March & Olsen 1972 p.11)

UK Higher Education

The landscape of Higher Education (HE) in the UK is changing. From the conversion of polytechnics and other institutions to universities in 1992 through to the Covid pandemic in 2020, there have been many events in the last 30 years which have changed the way HE in the UK is structured. In addition, the growth in number of institutions in the sector and in student numbers (total student population of 2.9m in 2023/24 (HESA 2025a) compared to 1.9m in 2000/01 (HESA 2001)) has fuelled the on-going debate about the purpose of HE both now and in the future, particularly from an undergraduate's perspective.

The first universities, founded by monks, were self-regulating groups of scholars and monks who were engaged in the acquisition of knowledge, not for knowledge's sake, but so that it could be used as a starting point to improve people and therefore the world around them in order that it "may make us good" (Aristotle 2000). This is commonly known as the "search for Truth" (Collini 2012) and effectively the start of academic freedom, which has since driven both purpose and structure in universities to this date.

Until recently the purpose, structure and awards granted by these institutions changed very little from these origins. Humboldt - whose ideas although formulated in the early nineteenth century, were not acted upon until the start of the 20th century (Anderson 2004a p.52) - continued the idea of the search for the truth and for this reason believed that teaching and research were inextricably linked (Anderson 2004a p.56). However, the pursuit of knowledge encouraged in a university environment has moved from reproduction of knowledge (skills-learning) to a productive-thinking approach (Röhrs & Hess 1987 p.20) used for the "transmission

of technically-exploitable knowledge" (Habermas & Blazek 1987 pp.2–3), necessary to meet society's need for skilled-workers. Early on in the UK this Humboldtian idea was fronted by Jeremy Bentham who believed education should be available to all and should have a utilitarian focus which saw the foundation of University College London in 1828 (Anderson 2004b p.193). The juxtaposition of these two purposes (the search for truth and the transmission of technical knowledge, or education as a meritocracy to reward talent, versus education as the practice of freedom (Freire 1976)) has caused an identity crisis for the modern day HEIs (Mulla & Tutt 2021), both in terms of purpose and structure.

As detailed in my publication in 2023, in the last 20 years the changes affecting the sector have been many and varied including:

- "Political shifts from Labour to Conservative Governments bringing with it further changes to the funding structure of HE.
- Increased burden of regulation on the sector through REF, TEF and international university rankings.
- Changes to the composition of the student body through increased visa regulations for overseas students, Brexit and the rise in quality of HE providers in China and India.
- Economic effects including the weak domestic graduate job market, increased student debt, increased cost of living and increased cost of delivering high-quality courses.
- Social and demographic changes including longer life expectancy, the need for life-long learning and in addition a growing 18-year-old population seeking access to HE.
- Technological improvements which have enabled online tuition, hybrid and flexible learning and simultaneously allowed faster and often uncontrolled dissemination of information about HE providers.

Further expansion of these ideas can be found in Scott's book entitled Retreat or Resolution (Scott 2021)" (Ayres 2024 p.183). These recent shifts have moved towards the marketisation of HE and in 1995, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) through the Global Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) turned a degree into a tradable commodity and this led to the rise in the importance of worldwide university rankings (Teachers Institute 2023). With this mindset, course offerings have been updated to make them more relevant to the student's requirements, particularly as regards employment (Taylor 2023). As Marginson puts it HE is now a positional good (Marginson 2016 p.414), so it is not just the skills picked up as part of the degree, but it is where one graduate finds themselves compared to the rest of the graduate-field. In addition,

marketisation has put a price on HE, which brings with it additional challenges as students are demanding not just their positional good of their education, but also value-for-money and a good student experience.

HE Finances

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are now big business generating £23.4bn in income from tuition fees in 2021/22 (UUK 2023). Increased fees and the burden of cost shifting to the student has led to the concept of students as customers who are consequently demanding value for money from their student experience.

This has resulted in capital projects/works across the campuses to upgrade their facilities, but the more money spent on such projects, the more income HEIs need to support them. Particularly since 2014, when the increase of annual undergraduate home fees from around £3,000 to £9,000 led to a dramatic reduction in the teaching grant provided by the then HE funder (in England) The Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE) (Bolton & Lewis 2024), changing the funding balance. While HEIs had always depended on HEFCE allocations linked to student numbers, the shift to a fees-based model made the increasingly reliant on direct tuition fee income to remain financially sustainable. Due to this many HEIs have chosen to grow their student numbers to capture additional income particularly through the international student market. In addition, since 2014, the lack of inflation applied to the tuition fee (apart from one increase in 2017 and an additional increase to £9,535 in 2025), has meant that every year universities have had to create financial plans which address what is effectively a deflation of the fee. Against a backdrop of annual pay awards (determined by collective pay bargaining), plus contractual increments, most institutions have remained financially viable, at least in the short term, by recruiting additional students both home undergraduate and postgraduate taught students but more specifically international students whose fees are not capped. The OfS reported in May 2025 that 43% of UK HEIs were forecasting a deficit for the financial year 2024/25 (Office for Students 2025). Although the media reports that it is the less prestigious universities that are on the brink of bankruptcy, the more prestigious HEIs have had to factor in the long-term effect of borrowing into their financial planning, as many have taken out private loans or issued bonds to enhance their campuses and facilities in an attempt to increase their attraction to potential students, and in fact, the first HEI to receive a Government bailout was Dundee University in March 2025 (BBC News 2025).

Capital expenditure for UK HEIs in 2022/23 was £2.5bn (note that spend in the full financial year before Covid hit the spend was £3.5bn) (AUDE 2024) much of which had been undertaken using financial borrowing facilities i.e. loans. This meant that when a global pandemic came along the major worry was the impact of the loss of income on loan payments and slowdown of progress on various capital projects. Loan payments being a priority, other operating expenses were therefore de-prioritised, capital projects were put on hold and staff furloughed or offered voluntary severance to balance the books.

As detailed in my research design submitted as part of this course, any variation in income could thus expose these providers to the risk of bankruptcy due to the following factors:

1. "Interest payments: Any loan or bond interest will have to be paid which, in the case of decreased income could cause an HEI to cut operating expenses (staff costs, travel, training etc) more than they otherwise would. To counteract a loss of income, higher ranked HEIs could take on more students, but this could affect the reputation of the brand, through the admission of lower-qualified students and hence the lower quality of graduates entering the job market.
2. Interest rates: The impact on reduction in student numbers could also have a knock-on effect on the terms of the loans or bonds and, in particular, the interest payable. With the interest rates likely to be fixed at a time when interest rates were higher, should student numbers decline, this would increase the interest payment and reduce the surplus for the financial year. Terms of these loans and bonds are in the public domain, but for those institutions which opted for a private loan agreement, these terms can be estimated through reading into the financial statements. For example, the impact of student numbers or student income on the interest of the loan would be fairly easy to pick out and compare across institutions.
3. Staff Costs to Income ratio: The income problems will persist as a reduction in income and unchanged staff costs will affect this ratio negatively. Many UK HEIs will be looking to reduce staff costs to prevent this from happening, but without sufficient investment in good IT systems the HEIs may fall apart administratively and consequently their brand and reputation may fail. The newer HEIs are younger, more agile institutions which are more likely to accept the newer technology, which would seem to put the older institutions burdened with inertia at higher risk. However, the older institutions have more reliable and established income streams, so may be at less risk in the first place.

The more highly skilled staff will be confident of gaining employment elsewhere and will put themselves forward for voluntary severance options, which if accepted could put teaching quality and professional support staff quality at risk.

4. Pension Deficits: In the financial year 2018-19 Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS)-member HEIs were forced to make substantial adjustments for the deficit of the pension scheme in cash with an actuarial adjustment appearing on the financial statements. This defined benefit scheme had long suffered from a deficit, which in these types of scheme are often due to people living longer in retirement and therefore drawing more resources than the scheme has saved for. With the economic downturn as a result of Covid-19 it is unlikely that this is the final cash injection that will be required for the scheme as, due to the economic downturn, return on investments are set to be low for a while longer" (Ayres 2022 p.5).

Any loss of income could be the start of a very delicate financial balancing act, from which some HEIs will survive and some will not. Any HEI will, as a line of first defence reduce expenditure, but those with endowments or substantial fixed assets will of course have more of a safety net, though it is unlikely that a Governing Body would approve the latter for such use. With the average endowment and donation income of just under £4m in 2018/19 (HESA 2024a) and the scale of the losses predicted (Durham University predicted an in-year loss of £55.4m in the same year) (Durham University 2019) . it can be argued that some HEIs will be facing collapse.

At the time of writing the financial situation within the sector has reached a crisis point with several universities in the UK making staff cuts and opening voluntary severance schemes. Bangor plans to cut 200 jobs, Cardiff aims to lose 400 colleagues, and the University of South Wales is cutting 90 jobs (UCU Queen Mary University of London 2025). York seeks £15 million in further cuts, while Edge Hill targets a £10 million reduction in staffing costs. Durham University opened its Voluntary Severance Scheme (VSS) on 17 February 2025, and Edinburgh has extended its VSS. Liverpool and Reading have also opened VSS, with Reading focusing on specific departments including biological engineering, environment, English, languages, and education (Ferguson 2025; Manning 2025; UCU Queen Mary University of London 2025).

This precarity across the sector has led HEIs to devote increasing time and resources to strategy development. It has also intensified ongoing debates about the purpose and future of HE. A key

area where this strategic tension is most visible is undergraduate admissions—both a primary income stream and a central mechanism through which institutional identity is reproduced. Questions around what an undergraduate degree should offer in the 21st or 22nd century, how it retains value as a commodity, and how universities remain relevant in a shifting landscape are all deeply tied to who is admitted, and on what basis. Alongside financial concerns, national widening participation (WP) targets and access regulations add further complexity, often creating a tension between regulatory expectations and the market segments within which some HEIs, such as Durham, have historically positioned themselves.

Strategy at Durham University

At Durham University, the foundations of the current Strategy, Planning and Insight Office (SPIO) were set up in June 2004. Prior to this, there existed a modest planning function focused primarily on data analysis for planning purposes, unlike the broader range of Strategy, Planning, and Insight functions now in place. Over the years, the functions of this team have evolved. For example, the project management and process change aspect - now handled by the Strategic Development Unit (SDU) - has been shed, while other areas have been strengthened, such as market-oriented insight, integrated data management, professional strategy support for the Vice-Chancellor and the Executive, and professional risk management. The emphasis on strategy at Durham University in recent years has likely been shaped by a strong interest in this area. Durham had a Strategic Plan for 2010-2020, which was nominally a ten-year plan but became outdated by 2014 due to changes in the HE environment. This first strategy was an aspirational document rather than grounded strategy, but the recent development of the 2017-2026 Strategy and the subsequent strategy refresh exercise has moved towards a more in-depth, formalised process.

Focusing in on the theme of undergraduate admissions, the gateway to any HEI for many and a key primary income stream, the strategy refresh (2017-2026) states:

> “This target is part of our current Access and Participation Plan, and focusses on lowering the ratio of entrants from areas where young people are most likely to go on to higher education (quintile 5) to entrants from areas of least likelihood (quintile 1). Progress can be achieved in two ways: increasing the number of quintile 1 entrants and/or decreasing the number of quintile 5.

Durham University has made significant progress on this metric in recent years, driven by the Guaranteed Contextual Offer scheme for applicants with indicators of disadvantage including low POLAR4 quintile, and by targeted recruitment and outreach activity. The ratio has increased in the current academic year; the number of entrants in quintile 5 has increased, while the number in every other quintile has decreased. To continue to lower the ratio we would need to either increase the number of applications from quintile 1, and/or reduce the number of offers made to quintile 5 which currently would put us at risk of not meeting Home UG recruitment targets" (Pritchard 2024).

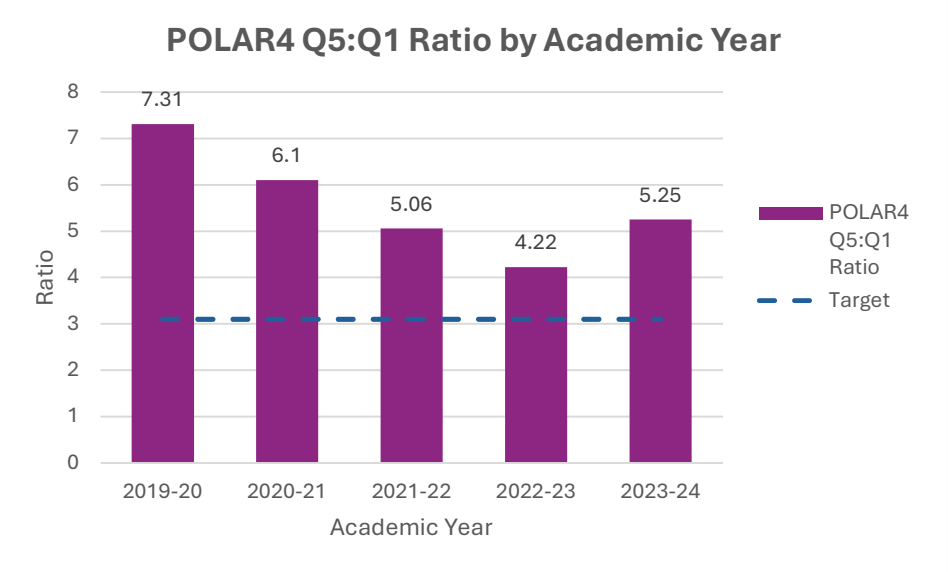

Figure 1:POLAR4 Q5:1 Ratios by Academic Year (Pritchard 2024)

Durham University however, sits culturally within the traditional elite of UK HE—characterised by a predominantly white, middle- to upper-class student intake and strong ties to independent schools (Boliver 2013)—and it remains culturally distant from WP objectives, making these targets difficult to achieve and progress slow.

What this thesis will do

Durham University faces a fundamental management challenge: how to adapt its historically elite and narrowly defined market position to meet contemporary policy demands for WP, equity of access, and long-term financial sustainability. Although government frameworks increasingly

tie institutional funding to the achievement of WP targets, Durham's strategic culture, legacy admissions profile, and institutional identity remain strongly oriented toward a traditional student demographic—predominantly white and privately educated. Despite reputational risk and financial incentives for reform, strategic transformation has been slow, constrained by organisational inertia, resource limitations, and concerns about brand dilution. This thesis investigates the misalignment between external policy pressures and internal strategic capabilities, asking why elite institutions like Durham struggle to enact meaningful change in student composition, even when faced with regulatory and financial imperatives.

To explore this question, the thesis draws on empirical data on undergraduate admissions and applies the theoretical lenses of organisational ecology and Blau Space. Organisational Ecology Theory (OET) frames HEIs as entities operating within a competitive and resource-dependent ecosystem, where survival and adaptation are shaped by environmental pressures and internal characteristics. Blau Space theory, as an extension of OET, enables the modelling of student demand across multiple social dimensions—such as class, ethnicity, and school background—revealing how institutional niches form and persist. This theoretical framework offers insight into why certain institutions, particularly those occupying elite positions, find it so difficult to shift their student body, despite sustained policy intervention and strategic effort.

This thesis is a Durham University case study using only Durham applicant and departmental data because UCAS nationwide data were not accessible to the researcher or supervisors at the time the study began, as none held ONS researcher accreditation, which limited data access. The case study design permits in-depth analysis of local admissions processes and contextual factors at Durham, providing insights for the Durham University Admissions Team and practical recommendations that could inform and improve Durham's contextual admissions strategy going forward. Acknowledging these points, the thesis addresses the following research questions

Did the change to the undergraduate admissions process at Durham University in 2019 increase the likelihood of students with a contextual flag :

- **being offered a place and**
- **accepting a place given an offer for undergraduate study at Durham University?**

If there are any differences between these outcomes, what might be the explanations?

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into seven chapters, each focusing on distinct aspects of the research undertaken. Chapter 2 states the research questions, aims and objectives. Chapter 3 reviews the relevant literature, analysing key theories, frameworks, and previous studies that underpin this research. Chapter 4 details the policy and evidence around widening participation and contextual admissions. Chapter 5 details the methodology employed, explaining the research design, data collection methods, and analysis techniques. The findings of the study are presented in Chapters 6 and 7 with discussion of findings included in Chapter 7. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by summarising the main contributions, limitations, and directions for future research. The bibliography and appendices can be found at the end of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Research Objectives and Justifications

This chapter offers a comprehensive overview of the aim, objectives, and design of this thesis.

Study Context

Historically, Durham University has struggled to meet WP targets and in 2024 was ranked last of all the HEIs in England and Wales in the Sunday Times Good University Guide for social inclusion (The Times 2025). Recent headlines in the national press have included reports of unacceptable, toxic and snobbish behaviour from both staff and students (Fish 2017; Usherwood 2020; BBC News 2020; O'Connor 2023; Chan 2017; Wright 2020; Graham 2020) and with such narratives in the public domain it may be that Durham's reputation is off-putting for applicants from non-traditional backgrounds. Durham however is not alone in struggling to meet these targets show in detail on the OfS Data Dashboard (OfS 2025).

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the impact of Durham University's 2019 centralisation of the undergraduate admissions process on student enrolment patterns. The research is grounded in Organisational Ecology and Blau Space theory, providing a conceptual framework to analyse institutional inertia and student choice.

The primary dataset consists of undergraduate admissions records from 2010 to 2023, sourced from Durham University's records held within the UCAS database. Key variables include applicant demographics, contextual flags, offer rates, and acceptance decisions. The study uses multivariate logistic regression models to estimate the probability of an offer being made and accepted and a student entering Durham University as an undergraduate, controlling for socio-economic factors and predicted A-level grades.

The dataset was downloaded directly from the UCAS system by the undergraduate admissions team at Durham University. It was then cleaned and refined (by me), resulting in a focus on home students holding A-Level qualifications, as socio-economic data for overseas students was missing and qualifications other than A-Levels posed comparability challenges. Variables were reviewed for relevance and completeness, and data from 2020–2021 was excluded due to the Covid pandemic impacts. Standardisation ensured accuracy and consistency throughout. The resulting dataset comprise 229,217 applications over the period 2010 – 2023. Based on the

literature review, the significant variables for undergraduate admissions decisions were used to construct five models that evaluated changes in the odds ratio of contextual applicants at each stage due to the centralisation of admissions. Statistical tests (multivariate logistic regression and Difference-in-Difference analysis) were then undertaken to test the hypotheses.

The research faced limitations due to incomplete contextual flag data in the UCAS PERS dataset and exclusions of overseas applicants due to insufficient socio-economic data. Self-reported variables introduced errors, and department classifications (recruiting versus selecting) relied on subjective historic knowledge. These constraints may have biased the results and underrepresented contextual student applications and this will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

The findings aim to uncover whether policy interventions effectively increase access for underrepresented students and how institutional and social constraints shape these outcomes. The study will provide benefit not only to the academic body of work surrounding OET, but also provide practical implications for Durham University and the broader HE sector.

Research Aims

This thesis aims to explore the market segment that Durham University targets for its undergraduate programmes. It will examine the relevant environmental factors, their interactions, and the changes in the market segment over the study period (2010 – 2023). It explores how policy changes, particularly the centralisation of Durham University's undergraduate admissions in 2019, have shaped the composition of its student body, applying Organisational Ecology Theory (OET) and Blau Space theory to understand why shifts in market segmentation remain challenging despite widening participation efforts. Although these theories have not yet been applied to HE, with the shift in the funding environment towards a more business-like model, their application could provide huge insight into the underlying barriers and drivers affecting the slow pace of change in the sector.

To address these aims, the study analyses the undergraduate admissions dataset from the 2010 to 2023 entry years, using the following research questions:

Did the change to the undergraduate admissions process at Durham University in 2019 increase the likelihood of students with a contextual flag :

- **being offered a place and**
- **accepting a place given an offer for undergraduate study at Durham University?**

If there are any differences between these outcomes, what might be the explanations?

To answer this question, the study will pursue the following objectives:

Research Objectives

Research Objective One

Determine trends in undergraduate admissions data (2010–2023) to understand Durham University's niche.

- Use descriptive statistics to identify key trends in applications over time.
- Review Rate changes for pre- and post- centralisation of admissions to identify changes.
- Use descriptive statistics to identify how contextual student applications have evolved.

Research Objective Two

Assess the impact of the 2019 centralisation of undergraduate admissions on contextual students' access to Durham University.

- Employ multivariate logistic regression to determine whether the centralisation of undergraduate admissions increased the likelihood of contextual students receiving and accepting offers.
- Employ multivariate logistic regression to determine whether the likelihood of admission changed across different stages of the process (offer, firm-acceptance, insurance-acceptance, entrance).
- Employ Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis to determine the direct effect of the policy change on contextual applicants.

Research Objective Three

Investigate the persistence of Durham University's niche through Organisational Ecology and Blau Space theory.

- Using both conceptual and empirical analysis, determine how Organisational Ecology and Blau Space theory be adapted to explain institutional positioning in UK HE.

Research Objective Four

Identify strategies to enhance equitable access and participation in Durham University and the broader UK HE sector.

- Determine how Durham University could strengthen, adapt, or reposition its market niche to support strategic enrolment objectives.
- Explore the role of marketing and engagement strategies in achieving this objective.
- Examine how institutional branding, niche positioning, and social networks influence access and participation.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Management Problem

As detailed in the introduction, Durham University is experiencing significant challenges in adapting its market positioning. Historically positioned within a narrowly defined niche for undergraduate students catering to a selective audience (white, independent school students), the institution is facing increased pressure from government policies aimed at WP and improving equity in access to HE. Despite external mandates to diversify its student demographic and reposition itself within a broader market context, organisational inertia, resource constraints, and the preservation of historical traditions have slowed the pace of change. This misalignment between external policy pressures and internal strategic adaptation raises concerns about the university's ability to meet regulatory demands while maintaining institutional sustainability and reputation. Under the Office for Students' regulatory framework, providers wishing to charge the full ('higher') tuition fee must hold an approved Access & Participation Plan and take all reasonable steps to meet its targets. Office for Students Failure to comply with conditions of registration of an HEI can lead to monetary penalties or even refusal to renew the plan, and in extreme cases deregistration or suspension (Office for Students 2021). As a result, non-compliance with WP commitments may, in principle, reduce a HEI's capacity to charge the maximum permissible fees. So why is progress so hard to achieve for elite HEIs like Durham despite targets, pressure from external bodies and policies?

Participation in Higher Education

The history of participation in UK higher education reveals a complex interplay between social progress, market forces, and state regulation. While policy narratives often portray WP as a linear path toward social justice, this section argues that access to elite institutions like Durham has evolved through cycles of expansion and retrenchment, shaped by shifting political ideologies and economic imperatives. Organisational responses to these pressures have not been uniform; instead, they reflect deeply embedded institutional cultures and strategic positioning within a competitive ecosystem. To understand why access remains unequal—and why adaptation remains slow—this section explores the historical development of participation in HE through three interrelated themes: the evolution of equity-focused policies and practices, the marketisation of the sector and its accompanying metrics, and the ongoing tension between institutional autonomy and regulatory compliance. These themes provide a lens through which institutional adaptation can be more clearly understood.

Equity and Access

Historical Expansion or Participation

Education is key to social mobility (Sutton Trust 2021 p.1) and is seen as a mediator between "social origins and social destinations" (Schindler, Bar-Haim, Barone, *et al.* 2024 p.3). The role of HE is a key part of this process. Young people from less well-off backgrounds who attend university are more likely to move into higher income brackets, compared to their non-graduate peers (Britton, Dearden, Shephard, *et al.* 2019 pp.328–368) and more selective institutions offer the best chance of becoming higher earners. While access to these selective, or elite institutions has improved over the last two decades, more can still be done.

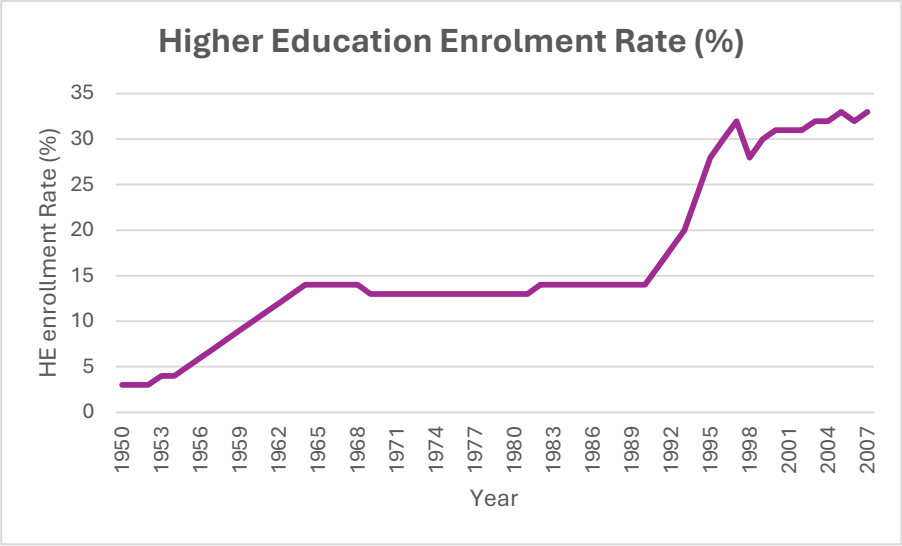

Figure 2: Participation in HE 1950 - 2007 (Boliver 2011 p.232)

Attending an HEI was originally the privilege of the wealthy men, but in the mid-to-late nineteenth century the industrial revolution led to the growing strength of the middle classes. Their bid to increase participation in HE to educate the workforce was successful with new, more utilitarian colleges set up with the aim of educating, as Birmingham University put it in 1900, Captains of Industry (Thompson 2012 p.48). This move started to increase the diversity of participants in terms of class.

A further diversification was emerging concurrently in the participation of women in Higher Education. Girls were not seen as the priority for education within a family, but this trend

changed over time and by the mid-to-late 1800s, many girls' boarding schools were established, and the first women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge were founded in the 1860s and 70s. Although women could attend university during this period, they were only awarded a 'Certificate of Proficiency' instead of a degree. The University of London awarded the first full degrees to women in 1878, while Oxford and Cambridge did not grant degrees to women until 1920 and 1948, respectively (Hillman & Robinson 2016 p.13). This then opened HE up to future generations of women, therefore increasing and diversifying participation.

A further increase in participation occurred in the early 1920s when World War One wiped out a generation of men and consequently potential university students. However, soldiers who did return from the war needed to be rehabilitated back into civilian life and the government offered scholarships to ex-servicemen thus broadening participation in and access to HE. However, this large influx in student numbers resulted in colleges having to turn students away (Brewis, Hellawell & Laqua 2020 p.88) but for those who were successful, most used the opportunity to take up vocational courses such as engineering and teacher training (Brewis, Hellawell & Laqua 2020 p.94) reinforcing the Bentham idea of a utilitarian education (Anderson 2004b p.193). From this point to the end of the 1950s this period of HE expansion was known as the “restricted growth phase” (Halsey & Webb 2000) and most students attended traditional universities to study for a degree. During this period sub-degree programmes were undertaken at other educational institutions.

In 1963, however, the idea of expanding the numbers of 18 year-olds participating in HE emerged as a result of The Robbins Report. This was conceived and completed under the Conservative Governments of Harold Macmillan (1957-1963) and Alec Douglas-Home (1963-1964), the publication of which popularised the term “The Robbins Principle”, which states that all participants with appropriate qualifications should get a place to study at an HEI (Barr 2014 p.35). At the same time 30 polytechnics were founded, and from there began the binary system of Higher Education (Halsey & Webb 2000), that’s to say the research-intensive, or elite, versus the teaching-focused institutions. An elite HEI is typically defined by its longstanding prestige, selective admissions, research intensity, and strong graduate outcomes (Boliver, 2015; Reay et al., 2005). These institutions, including Oxford, Cambridge, and Russell Group universities, are often embedded in networks of privilege and cultural capital that reproduce social advantage (Bathmaker et al., 2016). This elite reproduction goes against the current trend of WP and

access to HEIs which aspires to give everyone an equal opportunity based on academic merit rather than social position (Robbins 1963).

The Robbins Report was written due to the immediate increasing number of 17/18 year olds who were born after the second world war and it advocated for the expansion of HE in the UK. At that time only 4% of people entered full-time courses at university; 4.5% into teacher training and other full-time FE Courses; 5% in part-time FE courses (Barr 2014 p.xvii). Robbins wanted to move participation from 8% to 17% by the 1980s (Barr 2014 p.35) which was funded by the Government and the system of student grants. In addition, extra funding was made available for women wanting to go to university. This expansion was achieved by the construction of new universities over the following decade (Sussex (1961), Keele (1962), East Anglia (1963), York (1963), Lancaster (1964), Essex (1964-65), Strathclyde (1964), Kent (1965), Warwick (1965), Heriot-Watt (1966), Salford (1967), Stirling (1967) and Ulster (1968)) as well as by encouraging established universities to take on more students. However, despite Robbins's aims, in reality, participation only reached 14% by the 1980s (Barr 2014 p.xxii). This has been attributed to the government-funded model of loans proposed by Robbins not supplying sufficient funding for the sector (Greenaway & Haynes 2003 pp.164–165) which decreased the generosity of loans and so demand for places dwindled (Barr 2014 p.xx).

Since the late 1980s participation in higher education expanded markedly after government policy reduced the unit cost of student places, making the marginal funding per additional student lower so institutions could recruit more students within the same overall budget (McLean 1990 p.158); polytechnics were the principal providers that expanded intake in response, driving participation to around 32% by 1995 (Barr 2014 p.35). Participation continued to rise to 45% by 2008/09 and 54.2% in 2019/20 (UK Government 2021). The Robbins principle has been invoked in subsequent government White Papers, including the 2003 paper that framed what is now called Fair Access and led to the establishment of the Office for Fair Access (since replaced by the Office for Students). At the time of writing, progression from state schools to high tariff HEIs in England was 29.8% (2022/23) up from 22.4% in 2008/09 (UK Government 2024b). All these shifts reflect broader societal changes in attitudes toward the value of higher education.

Widening Participation Policy and Regulations

Despite such a large increase in student numbers and a shift in the funding environment over the past 20 years, there are still discrepancies in the backgrounds of students who study and apply for HE and to which HEIs students are applying. Even with the unification of the polytechnics with universities in 1992, the system still has the feel of a divided system with older, research-intensive HEIs (including the elite Russell Group HEIs, formed in 1994) and all the other providers as non-research-intensive, or teaching-focused institutions. The elite providers have always attracted a disproportionate number of applicants from advantaged backgrounds and those from lower social classes have, historically, been underrepresented at these institutions (Boliver 2015a).

It was the move to a single HE system in the UK, however, which really highlighted the access discrepancies by social class and therefore also the relative academic achievement discrepancies . It was the report by Helena Kennedy QC published in 1997 "Learning Works Widening Participation in Further Education" which resulted in the formation of a national strategy to enable everyone of 16 years and above equal access to FE and HE (Kennedy 1997). The Dearing Report in 1997 which followed shortly after made a key recommendation concerning WP stating that Government funds should be given as a priority to those HEIs who can demonstrate a commitment to WP by having a policy in place against which success can be measured. This sowed the seed of a target-setting process around WP.. Nearly 30 years on, the term WP is commonplace and encompasses all initiatives which aim to address the challenges of increasing diversity in HE uptake and to address entrenched inequalities, including the reproduction of elite social networks through education. Policies in this area focus on equality of opportunity by treating everyone the same, masking the historical inequalities and the social differences that are perpetuated through educational systems and structures, as well as the varying familial, social, and cultural backgrounds and capital (Burke 2020 p.61). That's to say making admissions fair. Fair is best defined as Boliver puts it…

> "taken to mean equal rates of making applications to and receiving offers of admission from these universities on the part of those who are equally qualified to enter them" (Boliver 2013 p.344).

Policies in WP therefore focus on access, enabling, and foundation programs aimed at creating more socially just higher education systems (Burke 2020 p.58). Categories that WP initiatives focus on are low-socio-economic status, low-income households, prior educational

background and a variety of other measures which are now used such as having been in care or being estranged from family.

Six years after the Dearing Report, in 2003 the UK Government commissioned a report into HE admission systems and processes known as the Schwartz Report. The findings were published in 2004 (Schwartz 2004) the recommendations of which were that in their admissions processes HEIs should: be transparent; select students who are able to complete their courses based upon achievements and potential; use assessment methods that are reliable and valid; minimise barriers to applicants; be professional; and be underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes. These recommendations had the aim of making the admissions process fair and transparent, which in the context of WP students would be of benefit. However, this benefit did not have to, according to the Secretary of State at the time, reflect directly back on improved admissions targets, but could be shown by aspiration-raising work and outreach programmes which have an effect on the sector as a whole (Adnett, McCaig, Slack, *et al*. 2011 p.30).

An access regulator (Office for Fair Access, OFFA) was introduced in 2004 to assist with the Labour Government's target for 50% participation in HE and the first WP strategies were introduced which focused on benchmarking by school type (Heath, Sullivan, Boliver, *et al*. 2013 p.2). The regulator changed shape in 2010 under the coalition Government to focus on bursaries and the Office for Students (OfS) was born in 2018. Between 2018 and 2021 the OfS has focused on contextual admissions (Millward 2024 p.149). Although the UK Government set targets in 2015 to meet WP targets by 2020 (Connell-Smith & Hubble 2018 p.3), it was not until three years later in 2018 when Access and Participation Plans (APPs) were introduced to demonstrate how providers "will improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education" (Office for Students 2023 p.36). The APP contains measurable targets to reduce the risks of inequality at HEIs for disadvantaged students. These plans, which are only for HEIs who wish to register as an approved (fee cap) provider, are one of the conditions of receiving a grant from the OfS. The grants from the OfS are a valuable source of income to HEIs as they assist in the provision of their courses for supporting high-cost courses (e.g. medical sciences) supporting access and student success and supporting specialist providers (such as music colleges). However, HEIs need to be able to demonstrate effective use of their grants in relation to these categories (Office for Students 2022 p.8) and the APP and associated targets is part of this. Not being able

to meet these targets may jeopardise an HEI's ability to operate as an approved (fee cap) provider by removing the grant income and their approved provider status. This could then have a detrimental effect on demand for courses and income streams.

Persistent Inequalities in elite Higher Education

The division of research-intensive versus teaching-focused HEIs has led to vertical stratification in UK HE, a hierarchical ordering of universities based on such factors, creating clear distinctions between 'elite' and 'non-elite' institutions (Wakeling & Savage, 2015). This brings about the concept of elite reproduction which is the process through which privileged social groups maintain their status and access to power by passing on cultural, social, and economic advantages through education and social networks. The advantages it gives to those who are part of it include access to prestigious educational institutions, high-status job opportunities, influential networks, and continued social and economic privilege, perpetuating their elite status across generations. There is therefore intense national focus and policy around WP, and as stated earlier, individual HEIs are creating strategies around these policies. However, at the time of writing the progression rate to HEIs from state-funded schools for disadvantaged pupils has decreased from 32.5% in 2021/22 to 31.9% in 2022/23 (UK Government 2024a). Despite strategies and policies being in place there is a challenge for many elite HEIs around changing the entrant pool.

Mismatch and Habitus

For students coming from a background where they are the first to go to university from their families might find the traditional setting of somewhere like Durham or Bristol, where there are grand buildings and formal dinners, overwhelming and alienating. This could lead to a sense of not fitting in, or to use the Bourdieusian term "cleft habitus", which could reduce academic outcomes (Abrahams & Ingram 2013; Luai 2012; Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2010). This is known as mismatch, that is to say, getting the match of the HEI and the student incorrect could impact course completion and potential future earnings (UCL Institute of Education, UK, Wyness, Murphy, et al. 2020).

Marketisation and Metrics

Neoliberal Reforms

As student numbers in HE increased, the financial model became insufficient to support the expansion needed to meet demand. The Government did not have enough money to fund it and

a review was imperative. The answer was a system of loans where the financial burden shifted to the student thus repositioning HE as a private good. The basis for this shift comes from neoliberalist politics which was instigated by Regan and Thatcher in the 1980s (Callinicos 2017 p.6) and looks to expand the economy by making a profit out of everything, including human capital (Callinicos 2017 p.8). The more the number of highly skilled humans, the greater return to the economy. These neoliberal ideas have led to the marketisation of HE and HE's key commodity, the pursuit of knowledge.

As time went on, the language used in Government publications around HE became more entrenched in this way of thinking. The only exception occurred when fees were first introduced in 1998 by the Labour government, which regarded higher education as a free benefit for middle-class students, who were then the dominant participants (Heath, Sullivan, Boliver, *et al*. 2013 p.3). After this, by the time of The Browne Review in 2010, these underlying principles and clever use of language were used to attract people to an Utopian vision of HE supporting the idea that tuition fees should be raised to £9,000:

> "Higher education institutions (HEIs) generate and diffuse ideas, safeguard knowledge, catalyse innovation, inspire creativity, enliven culture, stimulate regional economies and strengthen civil society. They bridge the past and future; the local and the global." (Browne 2010 p.14)

> "Over the course of a working life the average graduate earns comfortably over £100,000 more, in today's valuation and net of tax, than someone with A levels who does not go to university." (Browne 2010 p.15)

In reality, however, the labour market returns to HE vary greatly by academic discipline and institutional prestige. The rapid expansion of HE has led to what Brown terms as social congestion—an oversupply of graduates relative to the number of graduate-level employment opportunities (Brown 2013 pp.678–700). Graduates from lower-status disciplines and institutions, often from working-class backgrounds, are worst hit, struggling more to secure graduate-level or any employment (Belfield, Britton, Buscha, *et al*. 2018 pp.19–22; Waltmann, Van Der Erve, Dearden, *et al*. 2020 pp.53 & 55). As a result, the anticipated return on investment in a degree has diminished for many, particularly for those attending lower-status institutions (Vignoles, Dearden, Britton, *et al*. 2016).

Simultaneously, despite the Government theorising back in 2003 that a loan system and better information would improve WP participation in HE (Callender & Jackson 2008 p.408) subsequent financial policy reforms have had unintended consequences. Rather than levelling the playing field, these strategies have contributed to the vertical stratification of the sector (Burke 2020 p.59), whereby institutional hierarchies have been reinforced rather than dismantled. These dynamics have not only deepened inequality within the sector but also contributed to a growing financial crisis across universities, many of which now struggle to balance widening participation ambitions with economic sustainability (McGettigan 2015 pp.107–112).

These issues are rooted in the neoliberal policy agenda of the 1980s that has progressively shifted the cost of HE from the state to the individual (McGettigan 2015), using narratives of fiscal crisis—such as the alleged unsustainability of free tuition in the late 1990s—to justify the introduction and subsequent rise of tuition fees (Willetts 2020). This market-based logic continues to shape policy, embedding competitive, income-driven behaviours into institutional strategy and exacerbating tensions between equity and financial viability.

Performance Metrics and Reputation Management

In the marketised landscape of UK higher education, performance metrics have become central to institutional strategy and reputation management. Universities are now routinely judged by league tables, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), Research Excellence Framework (REF), and graduate outcomes—each acting as a proxy for quality and value. These metrics do not operate neutrally; rather, they privilege certain behaviours, such as maintaining high entry tariffs and maximising graduate salaries, which can directly conflict with WP goals. For example, admitting more contextual students may lower average entry grades, negatively impacting rankings even if it promotes equity. This creates a strategic dilemma for institutions like Durham: meet WP targets to retain fee-cap status and access public funding, or preserve prestige by maintaining exclusivity. Such tensions expose the misalignment between policy ambitions and evaluative frameworks, where compliance with WP regulation risks undermining the very indicators used to measure institutional success.

With regards to the WP policies, taking WP students with contextual offers at lower grades, decreases the average entry grades for an HEI, therefore decreasing the ranking (Turnbull 2018

p.19). HEIs however often want to - or have to through regulatory requirements - achieve both their WP targets and ranking targets even though one has a counter-effect on the other. Although these diametrically opposed targets should be hard to achieve, clever use of terminology and poor data can be used to say both targets are met, or have been progressed when in fact they have not. For WP, for example, simply increasing the offer ratio to contextual students could be used in marketing as a moment of success, but it doesn't necessarily mean that more contextual students are attracted to Durham University, or perhaps more crucially that more contextual students are studying at Durham as undergraduates.

Student as a Consumer

The concept of students as consumers is another key change in the marketisation of HE and is an idea which often does not sit comfortably among academics (Guilbault 2016 p.136). From the perspective of a running business however this idea is important as it defines the terms of interaction of students with the HEI. By enrolling on a degree course, a student is entering into a contract with an HEI involving the exchange of money in return for a service which places them in the role of a consumer. They are also the primary group of people served by an HEI, again another definition of a consumer, and in fact students have become customers, or consumers (Tarabini-Castellani & Ingram 2018 p.185; Bennett 2021 p.419) and acting accordingly (Tomlinson 2017 pp.452–453). Despite this evidence, there is still an on-going debate in some circles about who the customer is for HE (Guilbault 2016 p.132) and some argue that viewing students as customers undermines academic rigor shifting the focus from intellectual challenge to consumer satisfaction (Bennett 2021 p.428). When universities adopt a market-based approach, there is a risk that student satisfaction metrics—such as course enjoyment, perceived fairness of assessments, or employability outcomes—become more important than rigorous academic standards (Bay & Daniel 2001; Albanese 1999). This can lead to grade inflation, softened assessment criteria, and the dilution of challenging content to avoid negative feedback or attrition. Faculty may feel pressure to please students rather than uphold demanding scholarly expectations (Franz 1998), ultimately compromising the depth, integrity, and critical nature of higher education. However students are only buying the rights to an education, not the rights to an awarded degree, and not defining the student as a consumer affects how universities perceive and serve them (Pitman 2000). Not seeing students as customers might indicate a lack of customer orientation (i.e. not understanding who the customers are and what their needs are), which has significant implications for service quality for example and therefore brand reputation (Guilbault 2016 pp.132–139). All said, for the

purposes of this research the student will be considered as a consumer, customer and audience and within the position comes the privilege of choice. Choice was a key factor in the UK Government's white paper entitled "The Future of Higher Education" where they state the importance of offering potential applicants a "well-informed choice" (Callender & Jackson 2008 p.408) when considering HE:

> "The Government believes that student choice will be an increasingly important driver of teaching quality, as students choose the good-quality courses … that … will give them the higher-level skills that they will need during their working life. But student choice can only drive quality up successfully if it is underpinned by robust information." (Department for Education and Skills 2003 p.47)

As a degree will sit on a CV as an "indelible brand" (Walsh, Moorhouse, Dunnett, *et al*. 2015 p.671) and will impact both short and long-term career prospects, due thought, time and care should be taken by a potential student and the more information available around this decision, the better. A good degree from an elite HEI is known to increase chances of a better job and a higher salary which is a key message in the marketisation of HE (Chevalier & Conlon 2003; Bratti, McKnight, Naylor, *et al*. 2004; Power & Whitty 2008).

Organisational Adaptation to Market Pressures

UK universities have had to rapidly adapt to increasingly competitive and volatile market conditions for a long time. Declining state funding, capped home tuition fees, and rising operational costs have pushed institutions toward income diversification—particularly through international student recruitment and capital investment. In response, universities have shifted their focus from primarily academic missions to broader strategic behaviours that mimic corporate practices: branding, data analytics, and strategic planning have all become routine. For elite institutions like Durham, however, adaptation is constrained by cultural inertia and reputational risk. These institutions are often "locked in" to legacy market positions that rely on exclusivity and tradition, making transformation slow and contested. While strategies such as contextual admissions or centralised application processes aim to increase fairness, they are often layered over long-standing practices that resist deeper change. Adaptation, then, is often partial and symbolic, shaped less by mission alignment and more by the need to reconcile external pressures with internal values and audience expectations.

Institutional Autonomy Versus Regulatory Compliance

Organised Anarchies

HEIs were once described as “organized anarchies” characterised by “problematic preferences, unclear technology and fluid participation” (Cohen, March & Olsen 1972 p.1). Strategies are used to organise HEIs and with the sector facing an increasing number of challenges, it has led to an increased focus on strategy development in an attempt to organise the unorganisable, that’s to say the practice of academic freedom. While most HEIs will have had a plan, or general idea of where the organisation is headed in the past, it is not entirely clear for how long UK HEIs have adopted formal strategies. According to John Pritchard (Director of the Strategic Planning and Insight Office at Durham University) in the 1990s, the Scottish Funding Council required all institutions to produce strategic plans as a condition of their grant. He suggests this was likely the case elsewhere in the UK, with similar requirements possibly existing earlier under the University Grants Committee. Nowadays all HEIs have adopted a strategic plan or framework, but the contents of these vary as does the timescale, but most comprise an overarching strategy with mini strategies interwoven throughout. A review of any UK HEI strategy will show that most HEIs in the UK are, on the face of it, generalists trying to grab a bit of many different areas of the market (undergraduates, postgraduates, research). Being a generalist has had its uses as for undergraduate admissions for example, the standard undergraduate fee can be used to cross-subsidise the courses which are expensive to run with the income from those that are cheaper. Other smaller, specialist institutions focus on serving particular market segments, such as music colleges or art colleges and some serve geographically remote areas of the UK such as the University of the Highlands and Islands, but what happens when an HEI is stuck in a market segment and has to move, or wants to move, but can’t? This is a particular challenge for Durham University, for whom, despite efforts, are struggling to change their market segment for undergraduates.

Top-Down Policy Imposition

In business, strategies are about an organisation’s direction, competitive advantage, resource allocation, performance measurement and maximising shareholder value or, return on investment. For an organisation to develop an effective strategy, its governing body—such as a board or, in the case of UK higher education institutions, the Executive Committee—requires clarity and consensus on strategic objectives, as well as a shared understanding of the causal logic linking proposed actions to desired outcomes (Byrne 2025).Policies are then created to follow the strategy making the strategy happen and these policies are implemented by teams

headed-up by senior management. Successful strategies depend on a clear understanding of the organisation's market segment and the values, needs, and preferences of its customers—insights that must be grounded in robust data to drive effective decision-making. As the classical musicians might say, it should be a "Gesamkunstwerk", or total art work, where structure, story, visual design and movement intertwine continuously to create a coherent artistic vision (Levin 2014).

Within HEIs, the situation is different. The data which should be used to underpin a strategy is patchy and not consolidated within one system (within the HEI itself, though external companies such as Data HE do this well but at a cost). HEIs do not usually have the systems or staff to delve into data properly and management appear reluctant to do this also which leaves decisions being made without full understanding of the market segment and target audience. Policies, instead of being made locally, are made nationally and then individual HEIs have to absorb these into their local strategies irrespective of fit within their particular HEI's operating environment. The mis-alignment between national policy goals and local market segments combined can lead to strategy failure. Executive committees are forced to adopt national policies which may be out of line with local strategy, causing a confused strategic picture often resulting in undifferentiated strategies. This works in opposition to one of the key aims of marketisation - to promote institutional differences by allowing consumer choice (Tholen 2022).

Limits of Policy Impact

As mentioned above there is a lot of policy around WP, but what is it and where has it come from? And how can this be used to assess strategic alignment.

Organisational Ecology Theory

Organisational Ecology has its origins in a paper by Hannan and Freeman published in 1977 "The Population Ecology of Organisations" (Hannan & Freeman 1977). The theory has grown over time and focuses on how organisations within a population are created, change and die due to the influence of community pressures. The following are definitions as used in organisational ecology theory.

Organisation

An organisation is a group of people united under a common purpose, who turn inputs into outputs and it is this purpose and the processes within, which create an organisation's blueprint

(Hannan & Freeman 1977 p.935). The blueprint is made up of three parts, the formal structure known as the architecture, the informal structure known as the culture, and the environmental structure (Hannan & Freeman 1977 p.935). The three in combination dictate how an organisation operates and are both specific to the organisation and important underlying factors when looking at how an organisation reacts with its environment and how it makes decisions about its strategy and operations. Although all the organisations within an ecosystem will experience the same environmental factors, their architecture and culture will determine their reaction and no two organisations will react in the same way.

Architecture

The architecture comprises the formal systems, processes, rules and regulations which govern how an organisation operates. These are often written down in statutes and such like, approved by committees and copies kept, often stored in archives both physically and digitally. It is effectively a formal code which directs the organisation's operations.

Culture

The culture comprises informal systems, processes, rules and regulations which affect how an organisation operates. These stem from tacit knowledge from colleagues and peers which is a form of organisational grapevine over which there is no formal control. The culture can be seen as an informal code which directs an organisation's operations (Hannan & Freeman 2009 p.48). Codes are stored locally (often at a sub-unit level), which makes communication and aggregation of these codes complex, leading to information islands and an information hierarchy. The codes also often set an organisation off on the route of path dependence, which states that how an organisation reacts to one event is highly dependent on what has happened in its past history, or "self-reinforcing.... reactive sequences" (Heine & Rindfleisch 2013 p.15). In addition, these historical events are remembered selectively and often inconsistently by organisations and the people within (Levitt & March 1988 p.327) which could have implications for future decision-making.

Environment

The environment structure in which a population of organisations operate comprises various resources: political policies, economic resources such as finance (income and/or borrowing), sociological resources such as customers, technological resources for example up-to-date IT

systems or social media and legal resources such as sector regulations. Organisations may compete for control of these often limited resources (Hannan & Freeman 2009 p.xi).

A population is defined as a group of organisations operating within the same environment (usually demarcated geographically and politically) who have a common form (Hannan & Freeman 1977 p.936), are bound by the same codes and have a similar external identity (Hannan, Pólos & Carroll 2003 p.320). The interactions between organisations and the environment creates a community which is formed through feedback loops. These loops are present in many settings. As an example feedback loops operate in many environments, such as the regulation of body temperature which is affected by the inputs and outputs of the environment in which an animal lives. Bertalanffy describes feedback loops in an open system as:

> "Every living organism is essentially an open system. It maintains itself in a continuous inflow and outflow, a building up and breaking down of components, never being, so long as it is alive, in a state of chemical and thermodynamic equilibrium but maintained in a so-called steady state which is distinct from the latter." (Bertalanffy 2009 p.39)

In organisational ecology these relationships and the feedback loops are shaped by three main influences from the external environment - social, economic and political - reactions to which shape organisational market segments, or niches.

Niche theory

In business terms a niche is a smaller part of a larger market within which the audience has similar needs demands and values (Toften & Hammervoll 2013 pp.272–273). A niche is therefore formed according to an organisation's appeal and its ability to meet the needs of a particular audience segment. It is the result of a web of community interactions between an organisation and its environment and is a specific area within a population, defined by the level of resources available to it. It is in effect a market segment. The interactions and resources include the market, the audience and the impact of their differing demographic positions, other organisations and their offers and identities, economics, politics and legislation. Interactions are all affected by the organisation's structure or form, properties and the organisation's knowledge which all combined create a niche.

Niches

A niche is a market segment i.e. a distinct group of potential customers within a larger market, defined by specific characteristics, needs, or behaviours. This segmentation helps businesses target their products, services, or marketing efforts more effectively. Market segments can be categorised based on various criteria, including Demographics (Age, gender, income, education, occupation) or Geographics (Location, region, climate, population density). These criteria can be then be combined to gain a more detailed picture of the niche using various socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, family background, education and religion (Hannan, Carroll & Pólos 2011 p.175).

By identifying, defining and focusing on these market segments, organisations can tailor their strategies to meet the needs and preferences of their audience, which will drive up customer satisfaction, reputation, demand and therefore secure income. The formation of the niche through organisational interaction with the environment also determines who is attracted to their product or offering, which in the case of HEIs is often an undergraduate programme. In Organisational Ecology theory, the term for the group of customers is an audience. Applied to HE in England, niches are formed initially by entry requirements which influence institutional prestige and student demographics. Universities with higher entry tariffs, such as Russell Group institutions, attract academically high-achieving students, reinforcing stratification within the sector. This automatically forms a group of people, or audience, who are attracted to these HEIs by merit of entry-grades alone.

Audience

As illustrated above, the audience is a group of customers who are attracted to an organisation's product of offering. It is the audience who determine the demand of an organisation's product, not the organisation (Hannan, Carroll & Pólos 2003 p.322). This means that to analyse and forecast demand and therefore determine income streams, knowing who is in control of that demand and what their needs are is essential.

Applied to HE in England, the audience is defined as any person interested in undertaking an undergraduate degree at an HEI within England, irrespective of age, gender, country of birth and prior educational attainment. This is a very broad audience and every HEI will be attractive to a slightly different sub-set within this socio-demographic space. Take for example, a choice for an undergraduate student between Durham University and Exeter University. For a certain

audience segment these are both attractive and provide a very similar offering. Choice in this case will likely come down to personal preference for each individual student which may include family ties to one institution or another, geographic location, extra-curricular offerings, the accommodation offering, the size of the city, assessment methods, league table performance for a particular subject and entry grades for a specific subject (Lazell 2024).

Parts of the niche

In Organisational Ecology this broad audience (all those interested in applying to an HEI at undergraduate level) is known as the Fundamental Niche and it is where an organisation can operate in the absence of any competition (Hannan, Carroll & Pólos 2011 p.171). In this context, the absence of competition refers to the fact that the decision to apply to an HEI has already been made. For the purposes of this research that decision has been taken, as those applying to Durham University have already made that choice.

The fundamental niche is a broad set boundary around which an organisation has potential to develop their offering(s) (Hannan, Carroll & Pólos 2011 p.183) to those to whom it might appeal and where that maximum appeal exists. The fundamental niche can be broken down into a smaller sub-section, called the realised niche. This is where in a competitive environment an organisation thrives and it is determined entirely by audience choice. Choice leads to a consumer choosing a product which they deem as “best in class” (Hannan, Carroll & Pólos 2003 p.322). Applied to undergraduate HE in England the realised niche can be defined by the number of potential students wanting to study undergraduate courses at a particular university, Durham University for example, and it is shaped by potential applicants, the HEI itself and their interactions with the environment. This element of personal choice and preferences will start a process of dividing students between potential HEIs based on their appeal, thus starting the formation of niches for individual HEIs. However, students from different social backgrounds have different ideas about which might be the best HEI for them (Hannan, Pólos & Carroll 2003 p.322) as described earlier. Therefore, it can be concluded that fundamental and realised niches contain distinct market positions shaped by the values, tastes, and needs of their audiences—and that different HEIs are positioned to meet these varying demands and it is meeting those needs which leads to a more satisfied customer and better outcomes.

Choosing an HEI is a decision that prospective students and their families now approach with greater care, especially in light of rising tuition fees, which adds significant financial weight to

the choice. In Organisational Ecology, the factors that make an organisation attractive to applicants are referred to collectively as its appeal.

Organisational Appeal

The appeal of an organisation's offering is key to bringing in income (or returns) from the environment. It was proposed by Bourdieu that social position shapes tastes and values (Bennett, Savage, Silva, *et al.* 2009 p.25), and that individuals are drawn to those offerings which feel most familiar or legitimate within their social group. This alignment between habitus and cultural form is the basis of intrinsic appeal . Intrinsic appeal refers to the inherent qualities or characteristics of an organisation that naturally attract interest and engagement from its audience. These qualities might include the organisation's mission, values, culture, or the unique benefits it offers. Intrinsic appeal is about how well the organisation's attributes align with the preferences and tastes of its audience.

Intrinsic appeal can be turned into actual appeal by engagement which is the actions of the organisation to attract their audience. Actual appeal is the result of the organisation's efforts to engage and convert its intrinsic appeal into tangible interest and loyalty. This involves marketing, communication, and other strategies to highlight and enhance the organisation's intrinsic qualities, making them more appealing to the audience.

Engagement is how an organisation learns about its audience, designs offerings suitable for its audience and establishes an identity relevant to that audience (Hannan, Carroll & Pólos 2003 p.318). In HE in England, the intrinsic appeal of, or to put it another way demand for an undergraduate degree has grown in recent years. As detailed on page 26, much of the major expansion in participation occurred between 1988 and 1992 and participation was already at 42% when in 1999 with the then Prime Minister Tony Blair stating:

> "So today I set a target of 50 per cent of young adults going into higher education in the next century." (Blair 1999)

The target was ultimately achieved under the Cameron government, indicating a cross-party political consensus in favour of growth rather than a single-period policy effect.

In addition there has been and continues to be an increase in the UK population (Office for National Statistics 2025) therefore meaning potentially more 18 year-olds will be queuing up to attend an HEI .Finally, as a result of the funding regime change for UK HE, there is competition for HEIs to attract students to maximise their income. For whichever reason, it is notable however, that there has been increased engagement from HEIs, through events including open days and WP programmes. These have been successful in converting the intrinsic appeal to actual appeal with published statistics showing that numbers of undergraduates have risen 33% over 23 years (1,541,225 in 2000 to 2,056,520 in 2023) (HESA 2025b).
As with intrinsic appeal, actual appeal will vary across different social positions and however broad an organisation makes their appeal, it will only attract those with the greatest intrinsic appeal for that organisation. Intrinsic appeal is assumed to be the same for organisations of the same age within the same population (Hannan, Carroll & Pólos 2011 p.180). So within HE, Russell Group Institutions are likely to have the same intrinsic appeal i.e. they are all established organisations.

Once an organisation's niche and audience have been defined, the principle of allocation states that each organisation has finite resources to engage with its environment and these will be split across all activities. This will lead to trade-offs in engagement decisions and engaging more in one area will lead to a reduction of engagement in another, not all areas of engagement can be maximised at the same time. According to the theory, within a population similar organisations in the same population are expected to carry out the same amount of engagement. For example, applied to the HE-sector Durham and St Andrews (both high-entry tariff, small universities) would engage with their audience to the same extent through similar channels such as marketing. However, if compared to a non-Russell Group HEI the theory of allocation would predict that the level of engagement with the same audience segment would be very different. Engagement is not a straightforward formula for success. Many organisational factors can inhibit the level of engagement such as organisational inertia. The founding factors, which initially shape an organisation enabling it to thrive over time become imprinted and stay within the organisation for many years. These factors soon become less relevant to the changing environment in which an organisation operates but having enabled initial success an organisation is reluctant to let them go. This process which prevents an organisation from changing easily is known as organisational inertia. External forces which cause inertia include legislation and regulation which will be addressed later. Internal organisation pressures which lead to inertia are internal financial constraints, internal political constraints, lack of

information for decision makers and path dependence (organisations making decisions based on their history of how these were made previously). Organisations then encode these experiences into their routines which is defined as “the forms, rules, procedures, conventions, strategies and technologies” designed around an organisation with which it operates (Levitt & March 1988 p.320). These routines are then transmitted by an organisation though movement of people, education and in social settings also (Levitt & March 1988 p.321) and are ingrained within the culture which makes them very hard to shift.

Structurally inert organisations, however, still seem to thrive (Hannan & Freeman 1984 p.163) as they are able to “account for their activities” and reproduce their activities with the same quality with each repetition of the activity (Hannan & Freeman 1984 p.162). It is a sort of quality assurance and an audience chooses those with an established track-record and reputation for quality. So the inertia should not be seen as the direct reason for success.

To compete against the established quality offering, younger organisations generally have less structural inertia which gives them a chance of being faster to adapt to the environment and provide new offerings for their audience, taking up new niches. For example, founded in 1976, The University of Buckingham was established based on the independent American college idea and is private, therefore not bound by government legislation yet is also is not bound by traditions. This “freedom of action” (The University of Buckingham 2025) and ability to start from scratch in a market niche is has meant that the structural inertia which so many UK HEIs are bound by exists to a much lesser degree. The university’s offering is based on getting students educated in a shorter time period by removing the long summer vacation, therefore reducing costs for students by shortening their time to be ready for the labour-market and earn the return on their qualification.

Forming a peak appeal

Organisations within a population can choose to have a broad or narrow niche. A broad niche means organisations have offerings for many different social or market positions and this organisation would be termed as a generalist. Those with a narrow niche are therefore engaging at fewer social or market positions and are deemed a specialist organisation. This breadth of engagement is known as the niche width. The width can be defined in many ways, either for example, by the age of eligible people for a particular product, or in a more multi-dimensional sense combining multiple socio-demographic characteristics such as those discussed above.

However the width is defined, within it there is a point of peak appeal for an audience. An example of product eligibility applied to HE in England would be the differing entry requirements for undergraduate courses. For example, the undergraduate entry offer for undergraduate Law at Durham is A*, A, A at A-Level, and for the University of Sheffield it is A, A, A. The Durham offer will automatically therefore rule out applicants without an A* at A-Level, (unless there are contextual data signalling educational disadvantage which would be considered as part of the admissions process).

As illustrated in this chapter, each HEI occupies a distinct niche, with its own niche width and area of peak appeal shaped by consumer perceptions and underlying social forces. The width can equally be altered, but only slightly, by the organisation by how it engages the wider organisational environment, for example through marketing. Understanding how actual appeal is formed requires examining the mechanisms that influence undergraduate decision-making and drive patterns of institutional choice.

The Blau Space

There are many factors which influence an applicant to choose a particular HEI. There are also risks associated with the choice which as described by Mitra (Mitra, Reiss & Capella 1999) are:

- Performance: Whether the student will complete the course successfully and achieve a good grade.
- Social and Psychological Concerns: The experience of attending a particular institution, including friendships, personal contacts, and the psychological impact of the learning experience.
- Time: University courses typically take 3 to 4 years to complete.
- Financial Risks: The significant costs associated with university, including fees, living expenses, and potential loss of earnings while studying.

As discussed above, an organisation's appeal is shaped by prevailing social tastes, and these tastes are determined by their social networks in which individuals tend to place the greatest trust. These beliefs, transmitted through the social network, are complex and powerful in influencing decision making (Ball, Davies, David, *et al.* 2002). This trust often reinforces existing beliefs and values through a process known as confirmation bias—the tendency to seek out and interpret information in ways that align with preexisting views, while dismissing contradictory

evidence. Such biases can lead to overconfidence in one's assumptions and the persistence of misconceptions, as individuals selectively filter information to support their established perspectives. Crucially, these underlying beliefs and values are often formed early in life, making them deeply ingrained influences on decision-making. Therefore, looking at transmission of information within a social network is important when considering decision-making and the impact this has on HEI selection. In Organisational Ecology, Blau Space Theory explores this phenomenon.

The Blau Space (McPherson 1983 p.519) is a multi-dimensional social co-ordinating system and can be used to measure a population and changes to that population using socio-demographic variables as dimensions (McPherson 2004 p.264). The coordinates given to positions within the Blau Space are used to map a social space where interactions take place. The theory goes on to state that in line with the homophily principle, people who have similar social tastes and orientations are located closer together in the Blau Space (McPherson 2004 p.270) and that these people will have a shared cultural background and such people readily communicate with each other. This concept closely parallels Bourdieu's notion of the "field," which he describes as a hierarchical and relational social space where individuals and institutions compete for resources and status (Bourdieu 2014). Unlike traditional class structures, fields are organised both vertically and horizontally, allowing for a more dynamic understanding of social positioning. Central to Bourdieu's framework is the idea of the field of power, which spans across all other fields and governs the exchange and conversion of different forms of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—effectively functioning as a marketplace. Movement within and between fields involves the strategic accumulation, deployment, and trading of these capitals, shaping an individual's trajectory and influence (Bathmaker 2015). While Bourdieu's theoretical framework provides valuable insights into social structures and capital, this analysis favours the Blau Space due to its explicit focus on structural dimensions and measurable attributes. Blau's approach allows for a more precise mapping of social differentiation based on categorical variables and is already linked to Organisational Ecology Theory.

The Blau Space focuses on the space and distance between these social positions, and as distance from one point increases, social tastes become less homogenous and communication between people declines. Due to the multidimensional model proposed by McPherson, the Blau Space can be used to highlight visually the effect on behaviour of social communication

(McPherson 2004 p.264) and can be demonstrated by readily available social data such as age, gender, level of education and socio-economic background. It is this idea of moving between networks which aids social mobility and contextual admissions is a key part of this process.

Behind The Blau Space are the following key ideas and these have been applied to the idea of the social influences on applicants during the HEI selection process for UK students.

First, applicants have a finite number of options when choosing an HEI. In the UK an undergraduate applicant can only apply to five HEIs, accept one and have one as an insurance choice. This means that upon selection of the firm and insurance choices, the remaining HEIs will be automatically excluded, and therefore an applicant excludes themselves from all other UK HEIs for that year. So, at the start of the process an applicant will co-exist in five HEI applicant pools, but this will narrow down to one as the course start date approaches because eventually a student will only be able to accept one offer.

Secondly, each individual has a limited amount of time (time constraint) to research into and choose an HEI. Students need to do their initial research online, talk to friends about their experiences, talk to their teachers at school and then visit the HEIs they are considering applying to. This is all time-consuming and therefore some HEIs will be automatically excluded as time to explore HEIs is limited, due to school work and other social commitments. As McPherson put it, this is exclusion at a system level (McPherson 2004 p.274).

The third assumption is most relevant to this research, that of transmission of information.

Local Transmission

As individuals within the Blau Space have shared tastes and values, particular HEIs which match the networks tastes will be mentioned more within that social space. This dominance through local communication will mean that other HEIs will be excluded by not being valued by the social network to which an applicant belongs. It is this transmission of information within the socio-demographic clusters which perpetuates the reproduction of elite advantage within the HE environment. Using the framework of the Blau Space the next section will demonstrate how elite reproduction works in HE in the UK and why it is so hard to stop.

Elite Reproduction

According to the Blau Space theory, individuals tend to cluster in socio-demographic spaces based on factors like class, ethnicity, and social background. In the case of UK higher education, students applying to universities often come from distinct socio-demographic backgrounds, and these groups have different networks of information. For example, students from more affluent or middle-class backgrounds are more likely to have access to networks where elite HEIs are regularly discussed, recommended, and validated. These individuals tend to cluster in what we might call the "elite" socio-demographic space. Within this "elite space," recommendations about Durham are common, and the university is perceived as prestigious and desirable. This reinforces its elite status, as individuals within these clusters are more likely to apply to and succeed in gaining admission to such universities. As a result, there is a feedback loop where Durham's reputation is maintained and strengthened within these networks, as it is continually validated by people who are already part of or aspire to this elite socio-demographic space.

In contrast, individuals from different socio-demographic clusters — perhaps those from working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds — may not have access to the same flow of information about Durham or other prestigious institutions. The information about such universities is either unavailable, not shared or not valued within these networks. Consequently, individuals from these clusters may not even consider applying to Durham, perceiving the university as distant, inappropriate, or not a part of their social world, leading to self-exclusion. The problem, therefore, isn't just about access to clear, or transparent information, but more importantly how information is constructed and transmitted within different social spaces. If an individual from a working-class or less-privileged background does not hear about Durham in the same way that someone from a higher socio-economic background does, they are less likely to apply — not necessarily because they are actively excluded, but because they lack the information that makes them feel the university is an option for them, or is not the right fit. This is a classic example of self-exclusion, where individuals do not see themselves in the "elite" space and thus do not pursue these opportunities. We can such social influences these playing out in the HE environment for applicants to undergraduate courses as described by Ball et al (Ball, Davies, David, *et al*. 2002 p.55).

Socio-economic status, family background, and ethnicity are integral aspects of the broader social network in which an individual is embedded, and these factors are known to exert a significant influence on higher education application choices.

Socio-Economic Status

Elite reproduction in higher education is strongly influenced by the aspirations and application patterns of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Research highlights the critical role of parental socio-economic status (SES) in shaping educational aspirations, with Kao and Tienda (Kao & Tienda 1998 p.370) noting that SES significantly influences and sustains students' aspirations over time. However, it should be noted that material poverty and aspirational poverty are not the same thing and should not be conflated (Burke 2020 p.60). Burke argues that students from WP backgrounds are not lacking in ambition or hope. Rather, they often lack access to the social networks, resources, and forms of capital that schools and universities reward. This absence impacts their ability to navigate educational systems—what Sellar and Gale (Sellar & Gale 2011) term a lack of "navigational capacity". As Gale and Parker (Gale & Parker 2013) also observe, students from lower SES backgrounds often have fewer opportunities to develop these capacities, reducing their chances of acting on their aspirations in tangible ways like applying to high-status universities.

Even when prior attainment is equal, the effect of social class persists. Anders (Anders 2017 p.398) found that while young people across all social groups often start secondary school with high expectations, those from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to lower their aspirations over time. They are also far less likely to raise them, even with good academic performance. Conversely, the most advantaged are significantly more likely to move from 'unlikely to apply' to 'likely to apply' as they progress through school. This differentiation in aspirational trajectories, influenced by SES, affects application patterns (Agasisti & Maragkou 2023 p.471). Even when academic achievement is similar, students from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to pursue vocational rather than academic pathways (Agasisti & Maragkou 2023 p.471). This points to structural inequalities shaping perceptions of what is possible or appropriate—often long before UCAS applications are due.

When it comes to success rates, SES remains a strong predictor of outcomes. According to Chowdry et al. (Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, *et al.* 2013 p.431), academic underachievement in secondary school—shaped by SES—is the main barrier to higher education participation.

Around 20–26% of achievement variation is explained by SES only 30% of disadvantaged students achieved a grade 5 or higher in English and maths GCSEs in 2022, compared to 57% of their peers (Harland, Sharp, Flemons, *et al.* 2024 p.15). These early disparities affect later chances of receiving university offers. In investigating this effect, Boliver found that between 1996 and 2006, 74% of applicants from higher managerial backgrounds received offers from Russell Group HEIs, compared to only 56% of those from manual backgrounds. Moreover, lower SES students are far more likely to attend newer universities, reinforcing educational stratification (Boliver 2013 p.351). A more recent study by The Sutton Trust in 2023 shows only modest improvement in representation: the proportion of applicants from lower SES backgrounds at elite universities rose from 19% to 21% between 1997 and 2014, but their share relative to the wider sector declined—from 38% below average to 45% below (Montacute & Cullinane 2023 p.11). This research shows that while the social mobility and diversity offered by elite HEIs are attractive for some SES students (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, *et al.* 2017 p.108), and despite evidence that lower SES students gain higher returns from higher education, access to elite universities remains limited (Shiner & Noden 2015 p.1171), elite institutions (often collegiate in structure) continue to attract a disproportionate number of students from higher SES backgrounds.

It can therefore be concluded that research consistently demonstrates that students from lower SES backgrounds may have high aspirations but face significant barriers in translating these aspirations into actual applications and success in elite institutions. In addition, elite reproduction in HE is deeply entwined with SES-based inequalities in aspiration formation, application patterns, and educational success. Students from privileged backgrounds are more likely to maintain high aspirations, apply to elite universities, and succeed—supported by social capital, cultural familiarity, and systemic advantage. Meanwhile, those from disadvantaged backgrounds often face structural barriers that reduce their chances, not because they lack ambition, but because their aspirations are harder to act on. The result is a continued underrepresentation of lower SES students in elite higher education, sustaining social inequality across generations.

Research on SES and educational aspiration has clear implications for Durham University's organisational niche. Despite evidence that students from lower SES backgrounds are ambitious and hopeful, their ability to act on these aspirations is constrained by structural barriers such as limited social capital, reduced navigational capacity, and fewer culturally

affirming signals from elite institutions (Burke 2020; Gale & Parker 2013). As a result, Durham's applicant base is likely to remain disproportionately composed of high-SES students whose aspirations are reinforced by the communication networks and cultural familiarity described in Blau Space theory. These students are more likely to see Durham as "for people like me," while underrepresented students are often excluded from these networks entirely or perceive the institution as misaligned with their identity and goals. Durham's narrow audience segment therefore is likely to be reinforced, thus narrowing its niche rather than broadening it.

Family Background

The role of the family in shaping access to and success within higher education is central to understanding how social inequalities—and particularly elite reproduction—are sustained. Extensive research confirms that the characteristics, expectations, and actions of families significantly influence young people's educational aspirations, trajectories, and university outcomes (Blanden 2004; Cavanagh & Huston 2006; Bokhove & Hampden-Thompson 2022 p.281). Parental expectations are a crucial determinant of educational aspirations and participation. Families, especially parents, act as key agents in shaping young people's understandings of higher education: advising on choices, interpreting the HE landscape, and instilling values about academic success (Brooks 2003 p.290; Dockery, Koshy & Li 2022 p.618). As such, students whose parents hold strong educational expectations are significantly more likely to apply to university and target more prestigious institutions (Pinquart & Ebeling 2020; Yamamoto & Holloway 2010).

Several aspects of family background shape these influences, notably parental education, wealth, and gender roles within the family. Students whose parents are highly educated are more likely to internalise high educational expectations (Suizzo & Stapleton 2007) with the effect of maternal education, more so than paternal, having a strong positive impact on academic achievement and aspirations (Jin, Muriel & Sibieta 2011 p.73). This is believed to be because mothers tend to play a more active role than fathers in children's educational development (Parental Influence on Children's Academic and Employment Choices). Mothers who return to education themselves also demonstrate a positive effect on their children's academic and language development (Davis-Kean, Tighe & Waters 2021 p.188), again raising their child's educational aspirations. Additionally, a supportive home learning environment (HLE) promotes self-regulation, prosocial behaviour, and educational engagement—leading to improved academic outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford 2010 p.465).

Another factor is that wealthier parents can invest more time and money in their children's education. This concept has been described as the "family investment model" which illustrates how both cultural and economic capital are passed on, enabling advantaged families to guide children through complex university applications and steer them towards prestigious institutions. This contributes to the reproduction of elite status through education. It includes access to extracurricular clubs, better schools, and private tuition—factors that increase educational attainment and shape subject choices. These children from higher cultural status families also tend to be more self-directed and are more likely to pursue intrinsically rewarding career paths. This cultural capital affects both subject selection and attitudes to learning (Keijer 2021 p.9) with such children selecting high-status, high-return degrees (e.g., law, economics), whereas economically disadvantaged students are more likely to rule out longer or costlier courses due to perceived financial risk (Callender & Jackson 2008 p.426; Keijer 2021 p.9). Even when families are not wealthy, higher parental education is associated with greater involvement in enriching educational activities (Davis-Kean, Tighe & Waters 2021 p.188) which foster cultural capital and encourage children to aim for elite universities.

On the other hand, instability within the family—such as single-parent households, relationship breakdowns, or emotional conflict—has a negative effect on academic engagement, school attendance, exam performance, and university participation (Thomas & Maree 2022 p.106; Bokhove & Hampden-Thompson 2022 p.281). Children from such backgrounds, particularly where single-parent households are common, are statistically less likely to enter higher education (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo 2015; Astone & McLanahan 1991). In addition, students whose parents did not attend university—known as first-generation students—face additional barriers, including less access to insider knowledge about university life and admissions. These students are more discouraged by high entry requirements than by perceived institutional reputation (Walsh, Moorhouse, Dunnett, *et al.* 2015 p.679). This is why they are the focus of many WP schemes as they symbolise social mobility (Gofen 2009 p.104).

These structural and relational dynamics within families strongly shape who applies to and succeeds in higher education—especially at elite institutions. Family background is acting as a key mechanism in the reproduction of social elites. From early educational engagement to HEI choice and application success, family background—particularly in terms of education, wealth, and structure—gives some young people a substantial head start. These patterns, reinforced

over generations, sustain unequal access to elite universities and perpetuate intergenerational inequality even long before the UCAS form is completed. The influence of family background is central to understanding how Durham University's organisational niche continues to attract a narrow, high-capital applicant segment. Families with higher levels of education and wealth not only shape students' aspirations but also equip them with the cultural capital, guidance, and resources necessary to navigate elite higher education (Brooks 2003; Davis-Kean, Tighe & Waters 2021). Within Blau Space, this results in communication networks that transmit institutional knowledge and reinforce shared educational values—networks where Durham is routinely discussed, recommended, and normalised as a desirable destination. Conversely, students from families with less educational capital, particularly first-generation applicants, are often excluded from these conversations and may perceive Durham as inaccessible or irrelevant to their aspirations (Walsh, Moorhouse, Dunnett, *et al.* 2015). In Organisational Ecology terms, this is likely to entrench Durham's niche, as the institution remains closely aligned with families whose norms, expectations, and strategies match its historic identity. Meanwhile, the structural disadvantages facing students from lower-SES or unstable family backgrounds limits their knowledge of Durham, potentially reproducing intergenerational inequality thus reducing the likelihood of meaningful niche expansion.

Ethnicity

Evidence also suggests that ethnic minority applicants often prioritise career-focused degree choices over personal interest (Connor et al., 2004, in Boliver, 2016, p.250). Ethnic background therefore also plays a significant role in shaping educational attitudes, aspirations, and achievements. Research has shown that different ethnic groups hold varying perspectives on education, influencing their experiences and satisfaction within the educational system (Mountford-Zimdars, Moore & Graham 2016 p.103). In particular, children from migrant backgrounds often view education as a pathway out of socio-economic disadvantage, a phenomenon described by Strand as the "immigrant paradigm" (Strand 2021; Kao & Thompson 2003). This paradigm helps explain the overrepresentation of certain ethnic groups—particularly Chinese, Indian, and Bangladeshi students—among those studying for A Levels and progressing into higher education (Jin, Muriel & Sibieta 2011 p.77; Crawford & Greaves 2015 p.27). This strategic approach to HE participation is supported by evidence from admission patterns, with higher tariff points recorded for Chinese and mixed-ethnicity applicants in competitive fields such as medicine (Powis, James & Ferguson 2007 p.41).

However, despite the increasing participation of ethnic minorities in higher education, not all groups benefit equally. The disparities in offer rates and institutional destinations by ethnicity are particularly stark. Overall higher participation from ethnic of ethnic minorities does not equate to proportional representation in elite institutions. Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi students remain underrepresented at Russell Group HEIs, a pattern consistent with historical findings (Zimdars, Sullivan & Heath 2009; Shiner & Modood 2002). According to Boliver's analysis, applicants from Indian, Pakistani/Bangladeshi, and Black Caribbean/African backgrounds are respectively two-thirds, one-third, and one-quarter as likely as White applicants to receive offers from Russell Group universities (Boliver 2013 p.354). These inequalities persist even when qualifications and course preferences are accounted for, with ethnic minorities more likely to apply to oversubscribed courses and still face disproportionately low offer rates (Boliver, 2016, p.262). For example, for Chinese students, who saw a 75.7% rise in participation prior to 2022 (Boliver 2018 p.67), this growth has not translated into proportional access to elite institutions. While Chinese and Indian students often outperform their peers, Black Caribbean students continue to experience lower attainment at school and are therefore underrepresented in elite HEIs (Strand 2014 p.133). For instance, in the UK from 1996 to 2006, White applicants received offers at a rate of 69%, compared to just 32% for Black African/Caribbean applicants. Of those admitted to Russell Group universities, 33% of Chinese applicants succeeded, compared to 24% of White and only 6% of Black applicants (Boliver 2013 p.5). Factors contributing to this underachievement of ethnic minority students, particularly Black Caribbean, include structural inequalities, experiences of racism and unconscious bias in schools (Arday, 2020; YMCA, 2020, p.7), and the lack of visible role models in academia.

More recent data confirms that structural imbalances remain. In 2023, Government data highlighted that, although ethnic minority students now enter HE at higher rates than White students overall, they are still disproportionately concentrated in less prestigious institutions and face higher dropout rates (Equality of Access, 2023, p.5). Even when controlling for academic achievement and subject area, students from Black Caribbean, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi backgrounds are significantly less likely to receive offers from elite Russell Group universities compared to equally qualified White applicants (Boliver 2013, 2016; Shiner & Noden 2015). The Sutton Trust reports that despite having lower overall university attendance rates, White students are disproportionately overrepresented in Russell Group universities—a trend that has remained stable since 2010 (Montacute & Cullinane 2023). While the entry rate

for Black students into Russell Group universities rose from 3.5% in 2010 to 10% in 2022, it remains below the level needed to ensure equitable access. In contrast, Asian students now have the highest entry rate into these institutions, followed closely by those identifying as mixed ethnicity.

Ethnic background plays a critical role in shaping access to elite universities and adds further complexity to Durham University's organisational niche. While some ethnic minority groups—particularly Chinese, Indian, and Bangladeshi students—demonstrate high educational aspirations and academic success consistent with the "immigrant paradigm"(Strand 2021), this does not guarantee access to high-status institutions. As Organisational Ecology theory suggests, HEI preference is shaped by social status and cultural capital; even academically successful minority students may operate in networks where Durham is unfamiliar, undervalued, or perceived as culturally alien. For Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi applicants, structural barriers—such as unconscious bias, underrepresentation, and unequal offer rates—contribute to persistent underrepresentation in elite universities, even when academic qualifications are equivalent (Boliver 2013, 2016). Within Organisational Ecology Theory, this highlights how Durham's audience remains both culturally and demographically bounded, limiting the university's realised niche despite a changing national environment. Although participation rates among minority ethnic groups have risen overall, they are disproportionately concentrated in non-elite institutions, suggesting that Durham's appeal and access mechanisms are not aligned with the aspirations or lived experiences of some ethnically diverse students.

Criticisms of the Blau Space

Although Blau Space Theory provides a valuable structural framework for analysing social differentiation and proximity, it faces several conceptual and methodological critiques. While Blau Space offers a compelling metaphor for understanding how social and organisational entities are distributed across socio-demographic dimensions, McPherson (2004) identifies several limitations in its application. A key limitation concerns its reliance on measurable and often continuous variables, which makes it difficult to incorporate categorical attributes such as ethnicity, gender, or class origin. These variables lack ordinal structure, complicating any meaningful calculation of "distance" or "proximity" within a multidimensional space. Relationships observed within Blau Space may therefore reflect spurious associations arising from spatial proximity rather than genuine causal links, as attitudes and behaviours often co-occur within the same social niche. The model also struggles to account for selective exposure, whereby individuals outside a niche remain unexposed to particular ideas or affiliations, and for overlapping niches that produce conflicting or inconsistent attitudes. Large Blau distances generate structural holes that constrain contact across social divisions, and apparent effects of

socio-demographic variables may be artefacts of co-location rather than true influence. Moreover, mapping organisations or populations in Blau Space requires comprehensive demographic data rarely available in practice. Ultimately, while the framework powerfully visualises social structure, it risks abstracting away from agency, meaning, and historical context (McPherson 2004 pp.276–277). In research, these limitations constrain the model's capacity to capture how organisational dynamics intersect with socio-demographic variation; nevertheless, as an overarching conceptual framework, it provides a powerful and intuitive way to visualise these relationships.

Chapter 4: Fair Access

Widening Participation and Centralised Admissions: Distinct Pathways to Fair Access

UK HE policy has increasingly focused on widening access and making it fairer, aiming to dismantle entrenched elite advantages, disrupt the reproduction of social privilege, and reduce broader social inequalities. HEIs can undertake some measures themselves to attempt to counteract the inequality in the system for applicants from non-traditional backgrounds both before and after the application process, to raise aspirations and encourage students from WP backgrounds to apply to university, and in particular elite universities. In terms of Organisational Ecology, these outreach programmes are engagement aimed at increasing and HEI's intrinsic appeal.

Efforts to promote fair access to HE have taken multiple forms within UK policy and institutional practice. Two central mechanisms are WP strategies, to broaden the number of students applying and fair admissions strategies such as contextual offers and centralised admissions systems.

Widening participation encompasses a broad suite of interventions aimed at addressing structural barriers to entry, including outreach to under-represented groups, contextual offers, and targeted support for transition and retention (Gorard et al., 2006; Burke, 2012). These strategies are typically proactive and socially oriented, focusing on the redistribution of opportunity before and beyond the point of application. By contrast, strategies around fair admissions operate as procedural mechanisms within the selection process itself, standardising decision-making and potentially reducing individual discretion or bias (Boliver, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2020). While both seek to enhance fairness, WP interventions foreground equity and social justice aims, whereas fair admissions prioritise consistency, efficiency, and the avoidance of discriminatory practice in selection. Examining how these distinct approaches interact within institutional contexts is therefore crucial to understanding their combined and differential impact on access and representation.

Widening Participation Strategies Outreach Work

Aimhigher was the original Government programme, established in 2003 (JISC 2003) to encourage students from non-traditional backgrounds into Further Education (FE) and HE through links with schools. Since this point many organisations have set up similar programmes. In addition, HEIs run workshops either alone or in conjunction with a WP charity to raise aspirations of potential applicants, but these applicants may not end up applying to the HEI where they attended the course, but to another. This does not mean that the impact was any less, but it was an indirect impact, an impact to the wider HE ecosystem. This idea ties in with the 2003 HE Act where WP targets were suggested with each HEI contributing to the wider picture, rather than playing an individual game (Adnett, McCaig, Slack, *et al.* 2011 p.30).

Foundation Programmes

Many elite HEIs have started foundation courses for WP students as a route to access a degree at that institution. Upon successful completion of the Foundation Year (FY) students are guaranteed an undergraduate place at the same institution for the subject they studied (Sanders & Daly 2013 p.44). The foundation year's purpose is to prepare students for degree-level study by equipping them with essential skills, boosting their confidence, cultural capital and giving them a taste of what to expect at undergraduate level (Sanders & Daly 2013 p.43; Balloo, Heron & Baker 2025). A recent report by HEPI (Freeman 2024) details significant growth for foundation programmes, with over 69,000 students enrolled in 2021/22, eight times more than a decade earlier. These courses are a “powerful tool for access” with nearly 30% of students having no prior qualifications and 64% being mature students: they are particularly popular in Business and Management, studied by 51% of foundation year students. Students who have undertaken a foundation year say that it improves their confidence in approaching lecturers for help; knowing the etiquette; reaching higher levels of confidence sooner; understand what academic level you need to work at; being familiar with the surroundings (Sanders & Daly 2013 p.49), hence removing some of the barriers to entry for applicants from non-traditional backgrounds. However, less than three-quarters (74%) of students continue in higher education after completing their foundation year (Freeman 2024).

Fair Access Strategies

Contextual Offers

Contextualised admissions are part of this process where additional factors are taken into consideration when reviewing an application. It is an operational method aimed at converting intrinsic to actual appeal by breaking down the barriers to entry for applicants from under-represented groups within the HE sector. It is, as the OfS puts it "rethinking merit" (Office for Students 2019) and is just one part of a broader push towards widening participation in HE. Contextual offers is a way of assessing applications from students from differing backgrounds equally and therefore understanding that an applicant's educational outcomes before university could be impacted by their school, social and/or their economic situation. The result of this process where contextual information is reviewed in addition to the application form is often a reduction in the grades required to gain entry to an elite HEI. However, this approach is not mandatory for HEIs.

Although, as discussed later in the chapter there are many influences on educational outcomes, only six flags are used when making contextual offers which highlight a known disadvantage which could potentially affect prior educational outcomes in an applicant in a negative way. While this is not compulsory for the flags to be used in the admissions process, their use varies according to provider and region of the UK. For example, in Scotland, applicants who have care experience and meet the minimum entry requirements are guaranteed a place at university, although in England and Wales this is not the case. Similarly with the first generation student flag, not all HEIs use this category for making contextual offers.

Contextual Offers at Durham University

Durham University finds itself in a challenging position as do many other elite HEIs. As an elite HEI with poor WP figures they are struggling to meet their OfS-set WP targets. But Durham University has been trying to make a change and has a history of taking affirmative action in this area by making contextual offers, initially limited to applicants who successfully completed either the Sutton Trust Summer School or the university's Supported Progression scheme, allowing a reduction of up to three grades from the standard entry requirement. In 2017, some academic departments began offering contextual offers to those who had not participated in these schemes, expanding to all departments in 2018. Initially, these offers included a one-grade reduction, which increased to a two-grade reduction in 2019, contingent upon 'firmly' accepting the offer. Since 2020 the two-grade reduction has applied regardless of the type of

acceptance. For entry in 2019 when Durham University moved from a decentralised to a centralised admissions process, this aided the implementation of contextual offers across the board. As it stands currently, to qualify for a contextual offer, applicants must meet at least two of the following six criteria:

- living in an area with low HE participation (POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2)
- living in an area of high disadvantage (ACORN categories 4 and 5),
- attending a UK state-maintained school,
- receiving free school meals (a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage),
- being care experienced,
- being an estranged student.

Both ACORN and POLAR4 quintiles will be explained later in this chapter.

To understand how contextual offers function in practice at Durham, I will examine each measure outlined above in turn, supported by a review of the relevant literature to highlight why these measures are significant.

School

The type of school a student attends plays a significant role in shaping their educational outcomes and future opportunities. Differences in funding, teaching quality, peer environments, and access to extracurricular activities all contribute to unequal experiences across schools. More advantaged families often secure places at high-performing or prestigious schools, reinforcing existing social inequalities. These schools typically offer better academic support, richer guidance on university applications, and stronger connections to elite institutions. As a result, school type is not a reflection of academic ability but for the independent schools, a powerful mechanism through which social advantage is reproduced in the education system.

Why School Matters: What the literature Says

In whatever way a child is deemed to be (dis)advantaged, achievement levels can be mediated by schooling (Autor, Figlio, Karbownik, *et al.* 2016 p.30). With access to schools being a bit of a lottery, school can be a risk or a benefit to pupils in terms of their educational outcomes (Harland, Sharp, Flemons, *et al.* 2024 p.15).

Schools affect educational outcomes in multiple ways:

- School resources and teaching quality: Well-funded schools with experienced teachers and a broad curriculum tend to produce better academic outcomes.
- Peer effects and school culture: High-achieving peer groups and strong school cultures can boost motivation, aspirations, and attainment.
- Parental choice and social sorting: More advantaged families are better able to access high-performing or selective schools, reinforcing class-based inequalities.

School resources, teaching quality and curriculum

The resources available in a school are key factors shaping educational outcomes for some pupils. Although, spending increase per pupil in secondary schools has a small but insignificant effect on outcomes (Department for Education 2017b p.30), there are specific cases where the additional spend can make a difference. There is evidence that additional spending has a slightly greater impact on the attainment of pupils who qualify for free school meals (FSM) than spending on other pupils, (Department for Education 2017b p.30) and spending more on learning resources (e.g. books, computers) in most cases positively affected attainment. For instance, spending an extra £1,000 would have boosted the test scores of SEN pupils by 6.2% (Nicoletti & Rabe 2012) DfE goes on to suggest:

> "There are only a few research studies on English data sophisticated enough to provide robust estimates of the impact of school spending on attainment. Although they do not specifically look at how the effect changes over time, the weight of evidence from these studies suggests that additional school resources positively influence attainment, although the effects are modest at all Key Stages." (Department for Education 2017b p.4)

Even spending on extracurricular activities also shows a mixed picture on educational outcomes. Some say there are links between extra-curricular activities and positive educational outcomes particularly for disadvantaged pupils, but others say there is no direct link (Raffo & Forbes 2021 p.301).

Regarding spending on capital or infrastructure projects, the impact on educational outcomes are mixed, but mostly slightly positive. "There is a clear link between the condition of school

buildings and levels of attainment" (PWC 2007 p.13). PwC concluded "Newer and better school buildings contribute to higher levels of pupil attainment" and there are studies from the US, Wales and Kuwait which support this conclusion (PWC 2007 p.13). However, Higgins noted that "a recurring question is the extent to which the physical school environment needs to be any more than adequate" (Higgins, Hall, Wall, *et al.* 2005 p.36) and PwC agreed that positive effects are less certain where buildings improve from adequate to excellent. It seems reasonable to draw the lesson that spending on improving the condition of the worst schools will be the most effective" (Department for Education 2017b p.11).

However, when money is spent on human resources, impact on educational outcomes can be measured and teacher quality is one of the strongest in-school predictors of pupil outcomes. Experienced, well-qualified teachers improve attainment, especially for disadvantaged students. The better the quality of the teaching, the better the outcomes for the students (Harrison, King & Wang 2023 p.476). Quality comes from good teacher training and continuing CPD (Stewart 2011). As with any organisation, culture comes from the top.

Effective leadership in any organisation is multifaceted and no single leadership style is universally effective, rather, a wide range of management styles need to be employed and headteachers are no different (Leithwood & Sun 2012 p.403). The combination of transformational and shared instructional leadership have been shown to yield the best results, and instructional leadership (Marks & Printy 2003 p.370; H. Heck & Hallinger 2014), in particular, has been shown to have the most significant impact on disadvantaged students (Tan 2018 p.21). School leaders need a comprehensive understanding of the school context (Cruickshank 2017 p.6), proximity to teaching activities and a focus on staff development in order to maximise pupil success (Robinson 2007 p.21). School leaders have an impact on school culture and climate and are pivotal in driving educational improvement and fostering positive environments for both students and staff which improves educational outcomes (Grooms, White, Peters, *et al*. 2024 p.8). A positive school climate is closely associated with better outcomes for staff and is crucial for raising academic performance, especially in upper primary schools (Amsalu & Belay 2024 p.9).

As the culture permeates through the school, if high expectations are set by the leadership team, high teacher expectations of pupil achievement will follow, which along with support and feedback from staff are proven to improve educational outcomes (Harland, Sharp, Flemons, *et*

al. 2024 p.12). In addition, a teacher's job satisfaction is also linked to better student outcomes (Dicke, Marsh, Parker, *et al*. 2020). However, it is not always straight forward to attract good quality teachers. The rating of a school (which is public knowledge through Ofsted rankings), has an impact on the recruitment of teachers. For the lower ranking schools, attracting good teaching staff is difficult (Harrison, Patel, Francis, *et al*. 2019). It is known that inspirational teachers are a factor in subject choice and success within that subject. For example, for science subjects, research has shown that teachers are more important than the curriculum when it comes to capturing a pupil's imagination (Osborne, Simon & Collins 2003 p.1073). In 1988 a worldwide trend was noticed in the lack of maths teachers (66% between 1984 and 1989) (Straker 1988 p.23) which was in part due to the increasing demand for maths graduates for electronics companies such as IBM and HP (Straker 1988 p.37) and in addition to the better rates of pay those companies offered. This left a dearth of people to teach science in schools and has resulted in scientists teaching outside of their specialist areas (e.g. biologists teaching physics which can lessen the student experience (British Science Association 2020). This could lead to students coming to university under-prepared for undergraduate study and reduce the demand for courses in certain subjects. This then feeds back into the educational system and the science teacher shortage will get gradually worse.

As well as high quality teaching staff, there is evidence to show that support staff can effect educational outcomes. The ability of staff and school to meet a pupil's needs (e.g. SEN), particularly socio-emotionally has been key for improving outcomes (Harland, Sharp, Flemons, *et al*. 2024 p.12). This is thought to improve student outcomes by these staff being able to facilitate open relationships and discussions between teaching staff and pupils therefore removing or reducing stressors (Littlecott, Moore & Murphy 2018 p.308). Spending on support staff has been shown to increase the outcomes to Special Educational Needs, gifted & talented, English as an additional language (EAL), FSM pupils:

> "A £1,000 increase in spending on education support staff would have increased EAL test scores by 12.4%, FSM scores by 7%, and Gifted and Talented scores by 11%" (Nicoletti & Rabe 2018).

Educational outcomes can also be affected by subjects studied and curriculum and these vary significantly by school type (e.g., state vs independent), affecting access to facilitating A-levels and elite universities. For English schools although there is a National Curriculum to follow, its

application differs from school to school and this affects pupil outcomes. Although other curricula and qualifications exist, the National Curriculum remains the most commonly taught school syllabus in the UK. First introduced in September 1989, it creates a base-line standard for teachers and schools in the UK to work from to provide an education to children.

The current version has two main aims:

1. To provide pupils with an "introduction to the essential knowledge they require to be educated citizens".
2. To provide "an outline of core knowledge around which teachers can develop exciting and stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills as part of the wider school curriculum" (Department for Education 2014).

Although it aims to provide a level playing field for pupils, the curriculum can be applied differentially across different schools which can affect the chances of pupils achieving their full potential. Independent schools have the luxury of being able to charge fees which can be converted into additional resources for the school which can aid teaching and therefore impact student achievement. Independent schools are also able to diverge from the National Curriculum and offer other curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) which aims to help its students to:

1. "encourage students of all ages to think critically and challenge assumptions
2. develop independently of government and national systems, incorporating quality practice from research and our global community of schools
3. encourage students of all ages to consider both local and global contexts
4. develop multilingual students." (International Baccalaureate 2025)

The aims are matched by the results. Students taking this programme are three times more likely to secure a place at a top-20 HEI than their peers who took A-Levels (Duxbury, Westlake, Joice, *et al*. 2021 p.45). However, IB students remain a minority when applying to HE in the UK and in 2018/19 only 12,560 IB students were studying at a UK HEI (Duxbury, Westlake, Joice, *et al*. 2021 p.7).

However, most UK schools offer A-Levels, but choosing which subjects to study is fuelled by a combination of factors. The main limiting factor is of course the subjects a school offers which is dependent on school type and teaching staff. After that, subject selection takes the form of personal choice. Wherever children attend school, they choose their GCSE options based on their experiences to date. Influencing factors could include subjects they enjoy, subjects they excel at, their parents' views and wishes, hobbies and their intended career path and of course desired choice of course at an HEI. However, with the HE entry system being based on getting the best grades possible for each student, the reality is that "difficult" subjects are becoming less popular (Cuff 2017 p.28) possibly due to missing a grade could put their HE aspirations future at risk.

Elite schools often offer more traditional A-Levels as their pupils are focused towards the more elite HEIs, whereas non-selective state schools prepare pupils for a broader set of HEIs and therefore offer a broader range of subjects (Shiner & Noden 2015 p.1188), which perhaps takes the elite HEIs out of their focus. To assist the selection process and to breakdown barriers of access The Russell Group HEIs have produced a website called Informed Choices (Russell Group 2025) which aims to assist all potential applicants on A-Level choice by degree course as research shows (Shiner & Noden 2015) that State School pupils lack the guidance to choose the best A Level topics. It has been shown that the undergraduate admissions process is heavily influence by A-Level choice and is therefore a key factor (Vidal Rodeiro & Zanini 2015 p.23). The more "facilitating subjects" taken the more likely the chance of getting into a Russell Group HEI which speaks more towards the approach taken by independent schools. Facilitating subjects are those that keep most degree course options open to applicants such as maths, sciences, history. It is not only facilitating subjects where these schools benefit pupils. Research shows, what has always been assumed, that private school children achieve higher grades that state school children, an advantage of 8 percentage points or AAA instead of AAB at A-Level (Henderson, Anders, Green, et al. 2020 p.295). Many of the reasons for this are resource-based, that's to say, better staff:student ratio and more and higher-quality facilities (Henderson, Anders, Green, *et al.* 2020 p.307). In addition to academic results, selective schools also provide their pupils with institutional capital (Shiner & Noden 2015 p.1188). This means that particular school types (Independent and Grammar) have been shown to influence application patterns more than ethnicity or class, with selective school students being twice as likely to apply to elite institutions than those from non-selective schools. It is also shown to continue post-graduation when research has shown that 60% of independent school pupils secure a

graduate job compared to 47% of state school students (Mountford-Zimdars, Sanders, Moore, *et al*. 2017 p.102). Thus independent education is positive in terms of students being able to reach their potential, but when the transition is made to university these privately-educated students do not out-perform their state-educated peers (Smith 2016 p.986) (Garner 2015) and students from worse-performing schools are more likely to complete their degree than those from high-performing schools (Crawford 2014).

It is worth also considering the impact of single-sex education on educational outcomes. Girls studying at single-sex schools take more risks in the classroom—defined as greater willingness to volunteer answers, tackle difficult problems, and persist in the face of academic challenge—and this has been shown particularly in relation to maths (Pahlke, Hyde & Allison 2014 p.1065). Also, exam results in girls-only schools are higher in maths and science in the USA (Franklin & Rangel 2024 p.97) and in science in Poland (Koniewski & Hawrot 2022 p.919). Although some studies back up these findings, other studies show no difference in outcomes (all in discussion of Franklin 2022), or if there is a difference it is small (Pahlke, Hyde & Allison 2014 p.1064). In addition, the duration of time in single sex education does not make a difference to educational outcomes (Pahlke, Hyde & Allison 2014 p.1065). Interestingly, at co-educational schools there is a long-standing trend that the presence of girls in the classroom has a positive effect on the outcome for boys particularly in science subjects and an Israeli study shows that the more girls study science, the more likely boys are to do the same and it leads to better outcomes for the boys (Lavy & Schlosser 2007 p.26). Although the impact of single sex schooling remains disputed, the long-term outcomes for those who choose non-gender typical careers is better if they have been educated at a single sex school (Sullivan, Joshi & Leonard 2011 p.316). Faith schools are also shown to have better pupil outcomes, particularly Catholic schools (Van Damme p 196).

Peer effects and school culture

School culture—including expectations, norms around homework, discipline, and support—also shapes pupils' engagement and attainment. A favourable school climate has been shown to improve outcomes for pupils with good teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relations being key to this (Opdenakker & Van Damme 2007 p.195). School climate can encompass many aspects of school life including school environment and ethos, levels of deprived pupils within the school, resources, extracurricular activities.

Part of the school culture is the peer group, the composition of which influences attitudes, aspirations, and achievement with high-attaining or highly motivated peer groups tend to raise overall performance (Palardy 2019). Although the information and attitudes circulated amongst peers may come from families, the direct peer influence is bigger (Brooks 2003 p.290). The school year-group or cohort is, though, equally important when considering educational aspirations, in particular in terms of the levels of disadvantaged pupils which has a negative effect on outcomes (Harland, Sharp, Flemons, *et al.* 2024 p.12). This peer influence can affect HEI choice. One study shows students at a state sixth form college taking the school academic hierarchy from previous exam results and on-going assessment, and focus their choice of HEI based on how the HEI league tables overlay with the school academic hierarchy (Brooks 2003 pp.284–285). This occurs organically through discussion with peers. A similar process occurs when choosing a subject (Brooks 2003 p.292) with those who were at the top of the school academic hierarchy choosing medicine and then law. One student interviewed in this study chose to study law as they were not obtaining as high results as their friend who was applying for medicine. But whether it's about applying to an HEI which fits your "sort" academically (Brooks 2003 p.293) or socially, it's a case of figuring out which HEI and which course fit you best. State School students appear to take a much more individualistic approach when applying to an HEI, applying as an individual, not based on the view of the wider student group (Coulson, Garforth, Payne, *et al.* 2017 p.11), particularly compared to independent school students who are more heavily influenced by their peers, aiming to find an HEI where students have a shared or common background, or where pre-existing friends from school attend. These privately-educated pupils are also shown to be more influenced by which university is fashionable at the time (Coulson, Garforth, Payne, *et al.* 2017 p.10). In addition to the choice of HEI, private school pupils also admit to choosing the same, most expensive hall of residence because they expect it to be filled with similar people therefore making it easier to form friendships. Feeling comfortable with others who share a familiar background and having an instant support group of friends was seen as advantageous to enable applicants to develop long-lasting personal relationships (Coulson, Garforth, Payne, *et al.* 2017 p.10). Having shared experiences or interests with other students ties deeply into Bourdieu's concept of "fitting in," highlighting the importance of cultural capital in creating a sense of belonging within an academic environment. This also underscores the role of social networks, where commonalities provide a foundation for conversations and connections. These unspoken social norms significantly influence prospective students' choice of higher education institutions,

shaping decisions based on their perceived ability to integrate into the cultural and social fabric of the university community. The ability to integrate, or fit in at an HEI will affect outcomes.

Parental choice and social sorting

Selective schools and schools ranked "Outstanding" by Ofsted disproportionately admit affluent students, even when nominally open to all. Parents with more cultural capital are better able to "work the system," e.g., moving into catchment areas, paying for tutoring, or navigating admissions. The school-effect is so strong that middle-class parents are buying properties near to the good schools (i.e. OFSTED ranked Outstanding) which increases the competition for houses and house prices rise (Department for Education 2017a). This places the less wealthy families further away from the school with therefore less of a chance to gain entry to the school when the proximity selection criteria is used. As Boliver comments (Boliver & Byrne 2013 p.54) buying a house near one of the UK's top 30 state secondary schools typically costs more and in August 2024 the average house price to be near an outstanding school was £359,000 (Maunder 2024) compared to a UK average house price of £267,027 (December 2024) (UK Land Registry 2025). Although various schemes have arisen to help families get on the property ladder such as 5% deposits, homebuyers will need at least £23k for a 5% deposit and fees and a joint income of £72,000 to qualify for a mortgage, placing them in the top 10% of household incomes (Clark 2025). Some families may have access to family money from parents or grandparents which can assist in the house purchase process, but this is usually only available from families who have, in previous generations, been higher-than-average earners. Parents who can therefore buy their way into a good education for their child by means of house purchase are giving their child an advantage when applying for HE, with more children from these schools attending the elite HEIs (Boliver & Byrne 2013 p.54). Although the Education Reform Act in 1988 allowed parents to choose preferred options (ranked choices between 3 and 6 schools) for which secondary school they would like their child to attend, this has resulted in demand for the top-ranked schools outstripping supply (Singleton, Longley, Allen, *et al.* 2011 p.241). Schools have therefore been forced to select applicants and for the majority of state schools this is usually a distance-based measure which favours offering places to the applicants whose homes are the closest distance to the school (Singleton, Longley, Allen, *et al.* 2011 p.248).

In summary, schools, their resources, their staff and pupils can have an impact on educational outcomes, which affects educational aspirations and exam grades. Those schools with more financial resources can invest in better physical and human resources which advantage their

pupils. Thus this replicates the advantages of the elite through education. Schools with fewer resources fall into a downward spiral of poor reputation, lack of demand for pupils (which attracts less government funding) and challenges employing good quality teachers. As a result, schools become stratified by class, reinforcing wider social inequalities when it comes to applying to HE.

Measures in place to counteract the (dis)advantage

In order to overcome the well-recognised potential disadvantage when applying to an HEI, contextual admissions use the state school categorisation (i.e. non-independent school).

Flagging Tools: State School

Universities use information about school type to assess applicants' achievements and potential in light of their educational and socio-economic background. UCAS categorises the type of school or centre through which applications are submitted, reflecting educational establishment types. Changes, like schools becoming academies post-2012, are retrospectively applied since 2007 for consistency. Each school is assigned a single category, ensuring no duplication. This classification is usually self-reported by the school or centre

However, the school category only applies to the centre type (school or college) an applicant applied from. Many parents have managed to play the game and send their children to private school up until sixth form and at sixth form change to a state school. While there could be a variety for personal and financial reasons for this, some say this is to improve their children's chances of being accepted into an elite HE, however some admissions tutors disagree (O'Driscoll 2023). In addition, this categorisation (state school and non-state school (independent/private)) for admissions also presents a further problem. The term "private school" conflates major public schools with small sectarian ones and ignores the fact that many special schools are private and cater to children with special needs. It also disadvantages poor students attending private schools on scholarships or bursaries. Some fee-paying schools, registered as charities, have increased free places for poorer students since the end of the Assisted Places Scheme. For instance, a child attending a faith-based special needs school registered as a private institution might be misrepresented as socio-economically advantaged despite receiving bursarial support. Using school type as a contextual indicator can therefore be problematic, as it may not accurately reflect a student's background (Boliver, Gorard & Siddiqui 2015 p.316). Essentially, it fails to reflect disadvantage at the individual level, focusing instead

on group metrics, whereas applications are inherently about individuals and their unique circumstances. While this makes it an imperfect measure, it remains the most practical option available given current systems and resources.

Success Rates

Applicants from independent schools are more likely to attend an HEI straight after school compared to state-educated pupils which adds to the under-representation of state school pupils at elite HEIs (Vidal Rodeiro & Zanini 2015 p.24), although Oxbridge are an exception to this. To counteract the systemic inequality of private education, widening participation and contextualised admissions policies are widely used to enable students from less privileged backgrounds a chance to study at elite universities. However, the effect of elite social networks is often insurmountable and the return on investment of a undergraduate degree for these students is often "exceptional" highlighting the persistent disparities in access to opportunities even after graduation (Bolton & Lewis 2023 p.6).

Research by Boliver covering the 1996-2006 admissions period show that 80% of private school applicants to elite Russell Group HEIs receive an offer of a place compared to 65% of state school applicants. Entrants to the elite Russell group universities also differs according to school type with 53% of all private school educated entrants during that period entering a Russell Group HEI compared to 20% of state school entrants over the same period (Boliver 2013 p.348). However, when reviewing the performance of students from Grammar Schools (state selective) versus non-selective state schools although there is a small difference in attainment at KS4, there is no significant difference in pupil attainment within the wider local area in which the grammar school is located (Lu, Anders, Siddiqui, *et al.* 2024 p.1301). Grammar schools in the UK continue to be perceived as elite educational pipelines due to their selective admissions, strong academic outcomes, and disproportionate representation at top universities (Montacute 2018 p.3). This perception often shapes parental strategies, with some families relocating or investing heavily in tutoring to secure a place, viewing grammar schools as a cost-effective alternative to private education. Research has shown that there is no difference in grammar school pupils progressing to HE as compared to non-selective state schools (Capsada-Munsech & Boliver 2024 p.348). However, when it comes to elite HEIs, a 2019 report by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) found that grammar schools significantly increase the chances of disadvantaged pupils reaching highly-selective universities, especially Oxbridge. The analysis showed that 39% of pupils in selective school areas progress from state

schools to highly-selective universities, compared to just 23% in comprehensive areas. Furthermore, a state school pupil from the most disadvantaged quintile is more than twice as likely to progress to Oxbridge if they live in a selective area than a non-selective area (Mansfield 2019).

The disparities in success rates between applicants from independent, grammar, and non-selective state schools reinforce the notion that elite universities—such as Durham—occupy a narrow and highly stable organisational niche. In Organisational Ecology Theory, institutions survive and thrive by maintaining fit with a specific segment of their environment—in this case, high-capital, high-performing students concentrated in selective schooling environments. Offer and entry rates reveal a clear audience concentration, with private and grammar school applicants significantly more likely to access elite higher education institutions (Boliver 2013; Mansfield 2019). Despite contextual admissions policies aimed at redressing systemic inequality, the persistent overrepresentation of these groups reflects ecological inertia—Durham's niche remains dominated by those with the cultural capital, strategic guidance, and institutional familiarity to succeed within it. Even when performance between grammar and non-selective state school students is comparable at the local level (Lu et al. 2024), structural and reputational advantages of selective schools shape university outcomes, pointing to the powerful market signalling effects that guide both applicant behaviour and institutional admissions responses. While grammar schools may boost the likelihood of disadvantaged students reaching elite HEIs, particularly in selective regions, this also demonstrates how educational sorting mechanisms continue to channel advantage into elite institutions.

Region

The UK is said to be one of the "most spatially unequal Western countries" (Jones 2024 p.1) which has been the focus of recent political campaigns such as "levelling-up" which aimed to reduce the variation in (dis)advantage which is rooted within the geography of the country (Manley & Johnston 2014 p.275). The Levelling-up policy aimed to smooth out and standardise regional differences over six key areas (Department for Levelling-Up, Housing & Communities 2024) physical, human, intangible, financial, social and institutional. These broad categories give an indication to the multi-faceted nature of the regional differences in the UK, all of which will have an effect on the life experience and expectations of people growing up in a particular area. Local deprivation can affect the future of children growing up in the area and geographical disparity in educational outcomes is well evidenced. The Children's Commissioner's Report in

2018 found that students in the North of England were both more likely to start school behind their peers and less likely to catch up—despite higher nursery attendance. They face a "double-whammy" of deprivation and poor schools (Longfield 2018 p.9). While there are many neighbourhood effects which have an impact on educational outcomes (poor access to healthcare and poor housing for example), this section solely focuses on the impact of a neighbourhood in relation to schooling and education that will therefore affect decisions about HE.

Why Region Matters: What the literature Says

A student's home region strongly influences their educational journey—through access to well-resourced schools, quality teaching, neighbourhood peer aspirations, and safety. These in turn give (dis)advantage to a generation of children, who then carry these (dis)advantages with them through their education and careers, hence reproducing the (dis)advantages for another generation.

Neighbourhoods affect educational outcomes in multiple ways with the duration of stay in a disadvantaged neighbourhood worsening academic achievement, in particular for white middle class children in inner cities (Strand & Winston 2008 p.264):

- Role-modelling: Children absorb behavioural norms and academic expectations from peers, parents, and educators in their area (Garner & Raudenbush 1991).
- Family ties: Some children wish to stay close to their family network, limiting their access to better education and employment opportunities.
- Neighbourhood safety: Crime and transport issues, especially in urban centres, can limit school attendance and after-school engagement.

Role-Modelling

Role-modelling within the neighbourhood, that's to say ingrained patterns of behaviour, values and attitude exhibited by those in the neighbourhood including at the school as well as within the immediate surroundings can effect educational outcomes and opportunities. The ingrained social patterns within neighbourhoods provide a cultural and visual role-model for children being brought up within them and this has a significant effect on educational outcomes even after accounting for prior academic performance and family background (Garner & Raudenbush 1991).

The educational attainment and aspirations within neighbourhoods vary significantly by gender. For men living in areas where the local labour market is poor, with high unemployment disproportionately affecting the lowest skilled, male students are more inclined to invest in higher education (Meschi, Swaffield & Vignoles 2019 p.1485). Research in the US further highlights that neighbourhood effects negatively impact boys more than girls, starting as early as kindergarten (Autor, Figlio, Karbownik, et al., 2016, p.29). Women's decisions to pursue HE are often shaped by the influence of female elders in their communities. The presence of local women engaged in work—whether in managerial roles or self-employment—while also balancing childcare responsibilities significantly boosts the likelihood of female students enrolling in HE (Casarico, Profeta & Pronzato 2016 p.1037). These gender differences in neighbourhood influence are striking: boys tend to suffer more from local disadvantage (Autor et al., 2016), whereas girls benefit from the positive role modelling of local female professionals (Casarico et al., 2016).

Family Ties

Aspirations can also be influenced by how close to home a student wants to stay. When applying to HE working class students frequently emphasise the significance of the local community in the decision-making process, highlighting the sense of security, comfort, and familiarity this brings to them (Burke 2020 p.60). These students tend to stay closer to home for reasons of reducing the debt associated with undertaking a degree course (Callender 2008 p 409, Mangan 2010 & Sutton Trust 2004 both in Boliver BSJ How fair is access p3) a factor known as "working class localism" (Reay, David & Ball 2005 in Callendar 2008 p 409). This local focus unfortunately means these students are limiting their access to a broader range of high quality institutions (Callender & Jackson 2008 p.409) and therefore are limiting their educational achievement potential. Conversely, those from the more affluent classes travel further which has set up over time established patterns of migration detailed in research by Gamsu & Donnelly (Gamsu & Donnelly 2021). The research applied social network analysis to UK HE undergraduate admissions and have mapped some of these historic patterns of student migration. For example, Northern Irish citizens attending Liverpool University and elite public school pupils attending Durham University because for each group, the target universities would provide a home-from-home and a ready-made community of similar-minded people (Gamsu & Donnelly 2021). These patterns are reinforced year after year by pupils from certain schools feedbacking to the pupils in the years below their HE experiences, acting as a recommendation (or not) for future generations. This feedback forms a self-perpetuating cycle

within the social network which serves to strengthen the unwritten social codes and therefore social reputation of individual HEIs. For some elite HEIs this has a negative effect and leads to applicants' 'self-exclusion' from certain HEIs that is seen at the application stage (Shiner & Noden 2015 p.1187) due to fears over not fitting in.

Crime

For disadvantaged students access to a "good school" is not straight forward, and for some physically getting to any school can be difficult particularly in areas of high crime.
As mentioned earlier, in areas of high crime school attendance can be affected due to fears of gang crime on the route to school which has been a particular problem in parts of Birmingham where pupils have been stabbed on the school run. This fear is shown to limit parental engagement with school and the participation of pupils in extra-curricular activities. While some programmes have been put in place to improve safety on the school run such as the Step Together scheme (West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner 2021), a high local crime rate will impact school attendance and therefore achievement.

In summary, the UK faces significant regional inequalities, with geographical disparities in education and opportunity rooted in local deprivation. Policies like "levelling-up" aim to address multi-faceted inequalities. However, neighbourhood effects, including role-modelling, safety, and limited access to quality schools, perpetuate disadvantage, influencing students' educational outcomes and HE decisions over generations. Students will look at the people around them and use them as a basis for making decisions on their own future including their education.

Measures in place to counteract the (dis)advantage

In order to overcome the well-recognised potential regional disadvantage when applying to an HEI, contextual admissions use the POLAR4 Quintile or ACORN categorisation.

Flagging Tools: ACORN and POLAR4

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK increasingly use regional and postcode-based indicators like ACORN and POLAR4 to flag applicants for contextual admissions. These tools aim to account for environmental factors that influence educational opportunity and performance.

- ACORN (A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods) segments UK postcodes into demographic categories based on consumer and socio-economic data. It is widely used in marketing, but also adopted in education for gauging socio-economic background.
- POLAR4 (Participation Of Local AReas) ranks postcodes by the proportion of young people who enter higher education, dividing them into five quintiles—Q1 being the lowest HE participation areas. POLAR is frequently recommended by the OfS for identifying underrepresented applicants.

Despite their widespread use, both ACORN and POLAR4 face criticism for ecological fallacy: the assumption that all individuals in a postcode area share the same socio-economic conditions (Boliver et al 2020 p123 & Boliver 2021 p9). This leads to both false positives (advantaged students flagged as disadvantaged) and false negatives (disadvantaged students missed due to a high-performing postcode) (Boliver, Gorard & Siddiqui 2015). However, there are educational attainment differences which vary according to geographic region which if viewed at a grouped-level have an effect on progression to and choice of HEI (Manley & Johnston 2014 p.277). Moreover, POLAR4 has been critiqued for its reliance on aggregated higher education participation rates rather than direct measures of socio-economic status, meaning it captures where students live rather than who they are (Harrison & McCaig 2015 p.794). Its regional bias also results in over-identification of disadvantage in rural areas and under-identification in diverse urban areas where participation rates may be high but inequality persists within smaller sub-groups (Harrison & McCaig 2015 pp.797–798). In addition, POLAR4's use of historical data introduces a temporal lag, rendering it insensitive to recent shifts in participation patterns or local economic change. These limitations constrain its validity as a measure of individual disadvantage and may distort institutional assessments of fairness in access. Nonetheless, in lieu of better alternatives, these two flags have been used consistently for many years to indicate potential educational disadvantage.

Success Rates

As part of the move towards improving access to HEIs, the OfS is expecting elite institutions to reduce the gap between undergraduates from areas with the highest and lowest participation rates in higher education (OfS 2019 in Boliver 2021 p7). The POLAR4 quintile measure used for this divides the population into groups according to the local participation rate of young people (under 21 years) in HE between 2009 and 2015. It is categorised by postcode and is only relevant to UK students. The ranking is divided into five groups (20% each) with group 1 being

from the lowest participation areas and group 5, the highest participation areas. The goal of the OfS is to decrease the ratio of students from the highest participation band (quintile 5) to the lowest participation band (quintile 1) from the current 5:1 to 3:1 by 2024–25, and ultimately to 1:1 by 2038–39. Despite work around this quintile measure, wide gaps in HE participation still exist according to a Sutton Trust report in 2023. While the entry rate for POLAR Q1 rose from 11% to 24% between 2006 and 2022, the gap between Q1 and Q5 only reduced from 29 percentage points to 26 points over the same period. At Russell Group universities, access for low participation groups was 35% below the sector average in 1997, increased to 45% in the early 2010s, and improved to 38% recently. Despite progress within the last 10 years, levels are still lower than in the late 1990s (Montacute & Cullinane 2023 p.4).

As well as the neighbourhood differences in educational outcomes, it is known that differing regions have differing uptake to HE. According to research by the Sutton Trust who reviewed 25 years of access in 2023, young people from London are the most likely to apply to and attend HE compared to other regions. In 2006, London had the highest application rate in England at 34%, slightly above the South East (31%) and East of England (29%), with the North East at 26%. Northern Ireland led the UK with 43%. By 2022, London's application rate surged to 60%, Northern Ireland to 53%, and the South East to 46%, while the North East rose to 37% (ref). Entry rate success of HE also unsurprisingly varies by region, with Northern Ireland at 76%, below the regional average. The South West had the lowest success rate in England (81%), and the East Midlands the highest (86%). London also had the highest university entry rate at 51%, followed by Northern Ireland (40%) and the South East (39%). Regions with the lowest entry rates included Scotland (30%), the North East (30%), the South West (31%), and Wales (32%) (Montacute & Cullinane 2023 p.15).

The persistent regional and neighbourhood disparities in higher education access—despite policy pressure from the OfS—further illuminate the ecological dynamics that shape Durham University's organisational niche. The POLAR4 data reveal slow progress in narrowing the participation gap between students from the highest (Q5) and lowest (Q1) participation areas, with the ratio remaining at 5:1 despite OfS targets to reduce this to 3:1 by 2024–25 and eventually 1:1 (OfS 2019; Sutton Trust 2023). Within Organisational Ecology Theory, this reflects the challenge of niche expansion under environmental constraints. While institutions like Durham are expected to diversify their student intake, their historical audience segments—comprised largely of high-participation postcodes and high-performing regions like the South

East and London—continue to dominate their application pools. The ecological fit between Durham's institutional identity and these regional profiles remains strong, while applicants from low-participation or underrepresented regions—such as the North East, where Durham is geographically located—remain less likely to apply or succeed. Therefore due to environmental forces within the education ecosystem, Durham's realised niche will remain narrow, favouring applicants from regions and social environments that already dominate elite university participation.

Free School Meals

Free school meals (FSM) are widely used as a proxy for socioeconomic disadvantage in educational research and policy because they offer a straightforward, measurable indicator of household income and deprivation. Eligibility for FSM is based on a family's receipt of certain income-related benefits, making it a reliable marker of low-income status. Pupils receiving FSM are statistically more likely to face challenges that negatively affect educational attainment, such as food insecurity, limited access to educational resources at home, and unstable housing. Research consistently shows that children eligible for FSM perform less well, on average, in standardised assessments than their more advantaged peers.

Why FSM Matters: What the literature Says

Research has shown that state-educated pupils eligible for FSM do not perform as well as their non-FSM peers at the same schools. This has led to a disparity in A-Level results with FSM-pupils then not as likely to achieve the grades to go on to university (Boliver, Gorard & Siddiqui 2020 p.120) and if they do go to university they are twice as likely to drop out before the second year of study (Bolton & Lewis 2023 p.6). Since 1998/1999, FSM eligibility in England has been used to indicate poverty. Since 1991/92 all schools must report the number of pupils eligible for free meals to the Department for Education. When these census results were merged with the National Pupil Database (NPD) in 2003/4 the link between deprivation and academic achievement could not only be demonstrated, but also tracked over time (Gorard 2012). The eligibility for FSM is therefore now a widely recognised measure of low parental income and is commonly used to indicate potential disadvantage. It is often considered when assessing both individual and school-level performance, as well as school composition and now in addition, entrance to HE. This is the best measure of deprivation which can be used for contextual offers (Boliver, Gorard & Siddiqui 2021a p.12), but it is not easily available and also requires linking the UCAS form to the National Pupil Database which holds these records.

When HE attendance is analysed using the FSM marker, the distribution of students eligible for FSM varies significantly by university type. For 2020 entry pupils in receipt of FSM at secondary school-level were a third as likely to enter a high tariff HEI as their non-FSM counterparts (Boliver, Gorard & Siddiqui 2021a). The 25 most selective universities in England admit only 2% of FSM students, whereas less selective institutions accept up to 25% (Smith 2012). This is therefore a particularly important marker for contextual admissions at elite HEIs.

Flagging Tools: Free School Meals

The flag for FSM can be found on the National Pupil Database and an indication can be made on the UCAS form. Young people in the UK typically qualify for free school meals FSM when their parents or guardians have a low income or receive specific income-related benefits. If an applicant has been eligible for FSM in the last 6 years, the application fee (paid via UCAS) will be waived. It often suffers from under-registration due to stigma and administrative barriers, leading to an underrepresentation of eligible pupils. It does not capture the nuanced levels of deprivation, and families may shift in and out of eligibility over time (Campbell 2025).

In summary, FSM are a recognised proxy for socioeconomic disadvantage, indicating low parental income. FSM recipients face educational challenges such as food insecurity and lack of resources, leading to poorer attainment. They are significantly underrepresented at elite universities, making FSM an important marker for contextual admissions to address systemic inequalities. However, this flag is detailed on a separate system or relies on self-reporting and therefore has challenges as to whether it captures all pupils who are eligible, thus preventing access to contextual offers and social mobility through Higher Education.

Care Experienced

Spending time in care can affect educational outcomes through a lack of support. Limited emotional support, coupled with common social, emotional, and mental health challenges, negatively affects their confidence and academic performance, compounded further by the absence of stable mentorship.

Lack of Support

The lack of uptake is in part due to the stress, trauma and adversity often experience by these applicants early in life (Ellis & Johnston 2024 p.2), low levels of expectation from children with a

care background (Allnatt 2020) and the lack of support from someone who believes in them (Burns & Cassidy 2024 p.316). Children exit the care system between the ages of 16 – 18 even though they can have access to a mentor up to the age of 25 (Burns & Cassidy 2024 p.306), but educational outcomes for these applicants are tied to the support they receive from both birth parents and their foster carers (Ajayi & Quigley 2006). Charities like Become through their Propel website (Become 2025) are able to support applicants from care backgrounds into further and higher education to help counteract these disadvantages and UCAS has recognised being in care as a flag for contextual admissions since entry in 2023.

Students who have spent time in care are more likely to struggle with social, emotional and mental health issues (Department for Education 2018) and are more liable to be marginalised socially which all can have a negative effect on educational outcomes (Burns & Cassidy 2024 p.306). These educational gaps persist into young adulthood and as a result fewer students with care experience apply to an HEI (Burns & Cassidy 2024 p.306) with 6% entering HE ages 18 and 12% by 23 (compared to around 43% of the general population –(Ellis & Johnston 2024 p.2) (Sebba, Berridge, Luke, *et al*. 2015).

Measures in place to counteract the (dis)advantage

In order to overcome the well-recognised potential disadvantage when applying to and HEI, contextual admissions use the "In Care" indicator.

Flagging Tools: In Care Indicator

Universities use this information to assess applicants' achievements and potential in light of their educational and socio-economic background.

In-Care is defined by UCAS as applicants who:

> "have spent time living with foster carers under local authority care, in residential care (e.g. a children's home), looked after at home under a supervision order, or in kinship care with relatives or friends, either officially (e.g. a special guardianship order) or informally without local authority support)"
> (Sutton Trust 2025)

This is a relatively new measure for UCAS applications and as such no data exist on its long-term success.

Estranged Student

The estranged student indicator on UCAS applications is designed to identify young people who are applying to higher education without the financial, emotional, or practical support of their parents or guardians. These students are often navigating the application process independently, having experienced a breakdown in familial relationships that results in a lack of stable home support. UCAS introduced this indicator to ensure that universities and support services can better recognise and respond to the distinct challenges faced by estranged students. Unlike other widening participation markers, estrangement is not always visible through traditional socioeconomic measures, making this flag a critical tool for promoting fair access. It allows institutions to offer targeted guidance, financial assistance, and pastoral care where needed. As part of a broader commitment to inclusion, the estranged student indicator helps ensure that applicants from non-traditional or challenging backgrounds are not further disadvantaged in accessing and succeeding in higher education.

Being estranged from a family can affect educational outcome through unstable foundations. Estranged students often face greater emotional, financial, and housing instability, which can negatively impact their academic performance, retention, and overall wellbeing during their time in education. This is also relatively new measure for UCAS applications and as such no data exist on its long-term success.

Contextual admissions therefore work in a very objective, practical way to counteract prior educational disadvantage. Another way of improving the process of applying to an HEI is, as the Schwartz report recommended, to improve fairness by minimising personal bias through the consistent application of formula-driven decisions (Schwartz 2004), that's to say a centralised admissions system within each HEI.

Centralising Admissions

Admissions in HEIs used to be run within academic departments with academics reviewing each individual application making decisions about who should be offered a place. The academics in charge rotated on a regular basis, but they were advised by a central admissions team within the HEI. The central team would control the deadlines, responses to applicants,

total number of offers to be made and in some cases these teams stipulated other factors, for example, the number of offers to be made to state school students. Since the publication of the Schwartz Report, there has been a move towards centralised admissions processes, with a third of HEIs moving to this method within four years of the report's publication (Adnett, McCaig, Slack, *et al.* 2011 pp.20–22). A centralised process has been found to be quicker and also frees-up academics to work on research, which is one of the key components of their roles. Another reason centralisation works in terms of improving fairness is that it reduces personal bias from the process. Decisions, while still needing some human input, are driven by a formula which is stuck to and applied consistently across all applications. However, it is important to note that no machine-driven decision system will be free of bias. First, decisions of each individual decision-maker may still vary even with the aid of a semi-automated process due to the use of a person's automatic processing decision system. This automatic system is often used to save time and mental energy when making decisions, but this mental automation can be in conflict with our conscious thoughts, hence the potential for accidental discrimination in any process (Kleinberg, Ludwig, Mullainathan, *et al.* 2020 p.30097). Secondly, in addition to this human bias at decision-making, there is human bias already written into the system through the writing of the algorithm to drive the computer-aided, machine-driven formulae for creating admissions targets. This algorithm is known as the screening algorithm and it is responsible for producing a result for a candidate, but it's the training algorithm which informs the screening algorithm where the bias comes in. The training algorithm is based on the analysis of past outcomes based on key variables. So the predictions from the automated system is entirely dependent on which variables to include (human choice) and historic data which is again filled with historic human decisions, which are affected by regulations and policies at the time, the social atmosphere at the time and both conscious and unconscious individual bias. So although an algorithm might speed-up or aid a decision-making process to remove the bias, historic bias is programmed into the system during construction, which could just enhance and prolong bias within the process. The training algorithm will also only look at candidates accepted in one particular HEI which means it's an incomplete dataset (i.e. we don't know what happens to the applicants who don't get an offer, where do they go? How well do they do?) (Kleinberg, Lakkaraju, Leskovec, *et al.* 2017 p.237). The success of the algorithm is also based on the output measure, so while admissions would simply look at admissions, perhaps a better measure would tie this into a broader database of who does well, who doesn't drop out etc after starting their degree. However, if constructed well, algorithms in these decision-making tools can be used as a "force for social justice" (Kleinberg, Ludwig, Mullainathan, *et al.* 2020 p.30098)

not because the bias will no longer exist, but because algorithms will highlight discrimination taking place more easily. All said, most centralised admissions systems at HEIs are not yet this complicated and rely on human-created, rather than machine-driven coding.

According to OET, such operational changes should not influence demand from other social segments. While centralising admissions may enhance efficiency and ensure queries are addressed more promptly, these improvements will likely signal to the market that Durham is modernising and shedding its image of institutional inertia. It suggests the university is becoming more responsive to market pressures for reform. However, issuing offers more quickly could give applicants the opportunity to consider all their options simultaneously—potentially increasing the likelihood of some choosing against Durham due to perceived issues of cultural fit. Thus, although operational efficiency matters, OET suggests it should not affect Durham's cultural image within social networks.

Centralising Admissions at Durham

At Durham University, before the centralisation of admissions, decisions were made by trained staff in departments. This was mostly academic staff, although some departments used Professional Services (Admin) staff as well. Admissions Training was provided to staff making decisions which was delivered by Student Recruitment and Admissions. Attendance on this training was compulsory on starting in the role, as was annual refresher training and it covered University policies and processes as well as regulatory and legal compliance requirements, and unconscious bias. During this time departments were set a target number of offer to make to state school applicants each year.

In addition to making contextual offers, HEIs run outreach workshops during the summer to raise aspirations, but as this can't be captured in the UCAS form it will not be discussed. Some HEIs have also moved their admissions from a decentralised process with decisions made by individual academics in departments to a centralised process run by administrators.

Once centralised, admissions came to be managed by a group of administrative staff who are trained in the process and they work with ratios and targets to make offers to applicants. At Durham University for example, their offer-factor methodology is as follows for each individual departments. Their targets are now focused on POLAR4 quintile and the OfS has set a target of ratio of 3:1 (quintile 5:quintile 1) by 2024-25 and 1:1 by 2038/39 with high entry tariff institutions

such as Durham aiming for an average ratio of 5:1. At the time of writing the Access and Participation Plan (APP) (Durham University 2024 p.1), Durham's ratio was 10:1 likely due to the fact that Durham attracted only a small number of applicants from POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2. The overarching ethos of this process is as follows:

> "We normally look at the previous 4 cycles and weight the data 4:3:2:1, most heavily to the most recent cycles. Because of the instability caused by Covid (in particular on A Level results), we have deviated from that methodology in recent years, selecting data from the years we thought would be the most appropriate fit for the cycle ahead. At the start of the cycle our office analyses the data and makes a recommendation for the method of calculating offer factors and this is then approved at UEC.
>
> We calculate the offer factor by dividing the number of direct offers we made in that cycle by the number of UFAA Active (unconditional firm accepts) that met the conditions of their offer. This takes into account drop-out rates from A Level results day through to the end of the UCAS cycle. In its simplest form, we multiply the offer factor by the places available in each department to work out how many offers we need to make. The places available is the target minus UFAA deferrals from the previous cycle and foundation/international study centre progressions". (Kennedy 2024)

However, despite progress with the ratios (Durham University 2024 p.1) with the pressure on securing income, when making offers these targets are a guideline only and as a consequence, and as detailed in the APP, the institution remains below the OFS targets. Due to the size of Durham University there are physical constraints on student numbers. If more offers are given to Quintile 1, this means fewer offers will go out to quintile 5 applicants, an issue known as displacement. This is a challenge as it's the quintile 5 students who need less financial support and are less likely to drop-out. Quintile 1 & 2 students can be supported by the Durham Grant Scheme which costs around £9m a year to run (and Durham University's OFS grant based on WP target was worth £7.5m in FY 2022-2023).

In the UK, the application process is as follows. First, dependent on predicted grades, an applicant shortlists five suitable HEI and course combinations for their UCAS application form.

Secondly, the selected HEIs decide whether to make an offer or not and the type of offer they make. Finally, the applicant chooses two institutions to accept, one as a firm choice and one as an insurance choice and once an applicant has made their institutional selections, they then are required to meet the grades for entry to confirm their place. Differing social influences create different needs and therefore different social positions within a niche. For each HEI there will be a peak area of demand from certain social groups and this will form the peak of a bell-shaped demand-based-curve, known as the peak appeal.

Theoretical Contribution and Research Gap

Despite decades of WP policy, elite UK HEIs like Durham continue to attract and admit disproportionate numbers of advantaged students (high parental SES, Independent School, white). With on-going intense focus at a national level around WP and increasingly prescriptive nationally-devised policies and targets, HEIs are increasingly under pressure to address inequalities within their entrance pools, or face threat of funding and license withdrawal. The difficulties encountered by elite HEIs in improving WP targets highlights a knowledge gap of policy-setters as to how HEIs operate and what is within their control.

HEI choice is a social construct. As the Blau Space theory shows, HEI choice is not simply about academic performance of an HEI or an applicant's rational decision-making. Choice is filtered through powerful and often invisible social networks. It is an emotional, identity-based decision influenced by familial expectations, school culture, peer networks, and perceived belonging.

While WP policies have been set with reference to the cannon of existing literature on educational inequalities in terms of access to HE, it offers limited insight into how institutional dynamics and institutional positioning within a competitive ecosystem affect the appeal of elite institutions to a wider audience. There is, therefore, persistent misalignment between regulatory frameworks and potential institutional actions, especially in elite settings where organisational age limits responsiveness, through organisational inertia, culture and path dependence. In addition another vital concept is missing when setting WP policies nationally, namely the understanding, as expressed in organisational ecology theory, that demand for a product is determined by the audience is not shaped by an organisation. Therefore an organisation can only have limited effect on their market segment or niche. These factors

combined mean that the translation of WP policies and targets into successful institutional strategies remains challenging.

Organisational Ecology Theory and Blau Space provide a distinctive lens to conceptualise HEIs as entities embedded in resource-dependent environments and structured social space. This enables a macro-structural explanation of elite persistence and lack of progress on targets.

There are no empirical studies that apply OET and Blau Space to UK HE admissions data and this research addresses that gap. This thesis therefore applies ecological theory to elite HE strategy, using a large-scale admissions dataset and quantitative methods (logistic regression, DiD) to examine Durham's centralised admissions policy and its (limited) effects on market segmentation.

With the policy context, theoretical foundations, and existing research on widening participation and elite institutional behaviour established, the focus now shifts to the study's methodological approach. The following chapter details how the research operationalises concepts from Organisational Ecology and Blau Space to investigate changes in Durham University's undergraduate admissions profile between 2010 and 2023. It sets out the research questions, describes the dataset and analytical techniques used, and explains how these methods enable a rigorous evaluation of both policy impact and niche persistence in the context of elite higher education.

Chapter 5: Methods

Research Question

Did the change to the undergraduate admissions process at Durham University in 2019 increase the likelihood of students with a contextual flag :

- **being offered a place and**
- **accepting a place given an offer for undergraduate study at Durham University?**

If there are any differences between these outcomes, what might be the explanations?

Methodology

The aim of this research is to understand the impact of changing the policies surrounding contextual admissions at Durham University and specifically will look at whether the pool of entrants (those offered a place and also those accepting a place once offered) at Durham University has changed due to the centralisation of the undergraduate admissions function. The results of the analysis will inform The University's strategy regarding widening participation in their access and participation plan.

Data and Variables

Dataset

This research uses a secondary dataset from the UCAS database held by Durham University's admissions team. The particular extract is the Provider Exact Record Supply (PERS) and is provided by UCAS to providers for an annual fee with restrictions placed upon what the data can be used for. The research was limited by the data available to the researcher and only access to Durham University's data was possible: this therefore formed the case study focus on one HEI.

The analysis in this chapter, and all following chapters, therefore remains confidential and subject to a non-disclosure agreement unless prior approval sought for publication. The data also remains confidential under a non-disclosure agreement and is securely stored on a server at Durham University. Ethical requirements were met, by ensuring that as no names or identification codes were stored, thereby ensuring applicant anonymity.

The full dataset was downloaded by application year and comprises 267 variables per applicant, detailed in the appendix. The initial dataset was explored by year to identify inconsistencies, anomalies, and missing values. Earlier data from 2004–2006 contained only 46 usable variables, as many of the 267 variables were added later to meet evolving Government/OFS data collection requirements. These 46 variables primarily included categories like age, gender, ethnicity, applicant domicile, drive time to campus, campus and course codes, year of application and entry, and socio-economic status. Between 2010 and 2023, after accounting for entries with insufficient data (rows or variables with more than 20% missing or 'not applicable' responses), the dataset included 229,217 individual applications (Table 2). Each entry represents an application, though a single applicant may submit multiple applications. However, entrants are considered as unique individuals, as each can only accept one offer (definitions in Table 3).

Reduction in size of dataset

The dataset was reduced in size through three major steps. First, the decision to include home students only. Home students are defined as those eligible for government-capped tuition fees and financial support. Eligibility depends on residency, settled status, and being ordinarily resident in the UK for three years before the academic year starts. Specific categories, like refugees, may also qualify. For other applicants, the socio-economic data were missing, which was essential for the research meaning that overseas applicant data for example would not be useable. The second major reduction was due to only keeping applicants who had, or were studying for A-Levels. This was because with the particular dataset used it was hard to compare points predicted at A-Level with points predicted for other qualifications. For example those studying for a BTEC could achieve a distinction as the highest grade which is represented by a letter D not a number. Aligning the BTEC grade scale with A-Levels would have required additional work and, in addition for elite HEIs like Durham, 73% of the home students studied for A-Levels rather than any other qualification within this dataset.

Following on from reducing the observations (rows of data), the variables were reviewed. Many of the variables were similar, such as applicant age grouped in different ways (for example as individual integers, in groups of 3-4 years e.g. 18-21 years and so forth), or there were variables where data was not collected throughout the whole study period. For the latter, those with insufficient data were removed from the dataset. For the former, variables were examined in conjunction with the literature reviewed and prior research in the area, to select those which

were expected to be important in the application process. This reduced the number of variables in the dataset from 267 to 30.

Finally, data from 2020 and 2021 were excluded. These were bumper years for both applicants and entrants to Durham University. Admissions for entry in 2020 commenced in the autumn of 2019 and it was in March 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. During this period (2020 and 2021), A-level exams in the UK were cancelled and instead, students received grades based on teacher assessments, which considered factors like coursework, mock exams, and other evidence. Initially, a standardisation algorithm was used to adjust grades, but it faced backlash for perceived unfairness and was replaced by teacher-assigned grades. This approach led to grade inflation, with higher proportions of top grades awarded compared to pre-pandemic years. This then had an effect on entry to HEIs as more students than usual met the conditions of their firm-choice institution and therefore more students than normal were admitted during these two entry years. This was a trend seen across all high-tariff HEIs in the UK during those years (Staton 2020). The data for these years has therefore been omitted from this study as it is unlikely to be representative of underlying trends within the sector. By 2022, exams resumed, but some HEIs, including Durham, had reduced numbers of undergraduates in subsequent years to counteract the undergraduate-boom experienced for entry in 2020 and 2021.

Data Cleansing

Additional data cleansing included the removal of spurious characters, letters, and spaces. The final selection of variables, detailed in Table 3, underwent further checks for errors, missing data, and standardised responses to ensure reliable and interpretable results. Reference categories for each variable were based on the most common response.

The final number of applications in the resulting dataset and therefore used in the study is outlined in Table 3.

Table 2: Number of Applicants by Application Year 2010-2023

Application Year	Number of Applications
2010	19,847
2011	18,946
2012	18,844
2013	18,381
2014	18,502
2015	19,448
2016	20,170
2017	19,728
2018	19,728
2019	20,122
2020	Omitted
2021	Omitted
2022	17,550
2023	17,591
Total	229,217

Dummy Variables

Finally dummy variables were added to the dataset in order to help create the models. These included:

Table 3: Dummy Variable Definitions

Dummy Name	Definition
Policy Dummy	Before or after centralisation of admissions
School Dummy	Independent school or not
Department Dummy	Recruiting or selecting department
Contextual Dummy	Whether an application was flagged as contextual or not

Department Dummy

In the context of undergraduate admissions, university departments operate under different strategic priorities based on their subject demand, institutional positioning, and financial dependencies. Broadly, they can be categorised as 'recruiting departments' and 'selecting departments', each adopting a distinct approach to student admissions. Recruiting departments are those which struggle to fill their quota of students for each academic year as they receive fewer applications, selecting departments on the other hand have many more applications than places available and have to make decisions as who to make offers of places to. Recruiting departments focus on maximising student enrolment to ensure financial viability and sustain course offerings. These departments are typically found in disciplines where demand fluctuates, such as theology, music and modern languages. To attract students, they may adopt a more flexible admissions approach, offering contextual admissions and lower entry requirements for applicants from underrepresented backgrounds.

In contrast, selecting departments receive application numbers that consistently exceed available places. Their admissions strategy involves making fewer offers to maintain a low acceptance rate and high entry standards. Unlike recruiting departments, selecting departments are less reliant on increasing enrolment numbers for financial stability, as they often benefit from research funding, external grants, and the university's reputation.

At Durham University a department is categorised a recruiting or selecting each year by the admissions team. The department classification is based on prior year's data alongside the number of applications that have come in during the current admissions round up until the

January UCAS deadline. This classification affects the offer ratios as detailed above. For this research, information was given regarding the classification of departments to the researcher via the Head of Admissions for the application years 2017 – 2019, 2022, 2023. These were then reviewed over the 5 years period and those which were 80% or more in one of the categories were assigned to that category, i.e. in the same departmental category 4-5 times during that period. These categorisations were then retrospectively applied to the whole period of the data and then were then mapped onto the dataset using the sub-department variable. Those departments (6 in total) that swung between the two were then omitted from the research for the purposes of Model 5 only.

This dummy variable is used exclusively in the DiD analysis as explained later.

Interaction Terms

Two interaction terms were added to this research to see how the dummy variables interacted. The variable W7 refers to the interaction between Contextual applications and the Policy dummy and is used in four of the models. The variable W8 refers to the interaction between the Department Type (recruiting/selecting) and the Policy dummy used in one model. These are then used to calculate the effect of the change in centralising admissions on these two groups.

Detailed Data Preparation

The reference categories for each variable were determined by the most common response for that variable.

Table 4: Variables used for this research, their definitions, completeness of data and use in models

Dependent Variables

Variable (shortname)	UCAS PERS variable label	Description	Additional Processing and Cleansing	Missing Data	Data Type	Reference Category	Models
Acceptance (acceptance)	Acceptance	These are the entrants to DU after a successful application. This is categorised by application round and not by entry year. Any deferrals are included within the year of application not year of entry. 1 = entrant to D; 0 = not an entrant to DU	N/A	N/A	Binary	N/A	1, 2, 3, 4
Offer (offer)	Offer as-at 30 June	This field indicates whether an application received an offer of a place on a UG course from DU.	N/A	N/A	Binary	N/A	1, 2, 3, 4

Independent Variables

Variable (shortname)	**UCAS PERS variable label**	**Description**	**Additional Processing and Cleansing**	**Missing Data**	**Data Type**	**Reference Category**	**Models**
A-Level Points Predicted (pointspred)	Predicted A level points score	This is the sum of A-Level points predicted where. This variable will be controlled for within the model. Durham University requires that students achieve high grades to gain entry. Literature shows contextual students achieve lower grades, so receive fewer offers. This research looks at whether contextual students still receive fewer offers after accounting for the affects of lower predicted grades.	N/A	N/A	Continuous	N/A	1, 2, 3, 4
Application Round (appyr)	Entry year	The year of the admissions round in which the application was submitted.	N/A	N/A	Numeric	N/A	N/A
Contextual Flag (contextual)	N/A	1 = Contextual Application; 0 = not a contextual application There are several ways an applicant can be considered for a contextual offer if two or more of the following apply • Their address postcode is classified as Quintile 1 or 2 of POLAR4 LPN • Their home address postcode is classified as ACORN 4 or 5 • Their current or most recently attended school is classified as a UK state school • They are in receipt of free school meals • They are care experienced • They are an estranged student	This variable has been added as a dummy variable based on other responses in the dataset. Within the PERS dataset there are only two of these flags available, first the school type and second the POLAR4 quintile classification. If an application receives a positive response to both these dummy variables (CTR1 and PL4), then the Contextual variable field will be equal to 1, for all other applications this field will be equal to 0.	N/A	Binary	N/A	1, 2, 3, 4

Variable (shortname)	UCAS PERS variable label	Description	Additional Processing and Cleansing	Missing Data	Data Type	Reference Category	Models
Department Type (rs)	N/A	1 = selecting department; 0 = recruiting department A department is considered recruiting if there are not enough applicants to fill places on offer, based on predicted grades and previous fall-off rates between offer, acceptance of offer and entering the university. A department is considered selecting if the opposite holds true.	This variable field has been added based on the Subject Group with further information provided by the Durham University Admissions Team. Taking data from the Admissions Team for the period 2017 to 2023 inclusive each department was determined as recruiting or selecting for each entry year. If the department was categorised in one type 80% of the time, for the purposes of this research it would be considered as that category. If a department swung between recruiting and selecting over that period, the department would have no categorisation and therefore be excluded from this section of the research. These categories were then applied retrospectively across the earlier years in the dataset.	N/A	Binary	N/A	4
Ethnicity (ETH1)	Ethnic group (summary level)	This variable is not available when the application cycle is live, but only after the application round closes.	N/A	N/A	Categorical	White	1, 2, 3
First Generation (FIRST_GEN)	N/A	This variable denotes whether an applicant is a first generation student i.e. the first student in their family to attend an HEI. 1 = first generation student; 0 = not first generation student	This variable has been created based on the Parental HE Indicator. This is directly opposed to the Parental HE Indicator and has been added to the model to simplify reading of the output.	N/A	Binary	N/A	1, 2, 3

Home Location (REG)	Applicant domicile (Applicant domicile (high level - 6 levels))	This variable denotes the permanent home of an applicant.	N/A	N/A	Categorical	South East	1, 2, 3
Parental HE Indicator (parenthe)	Parental HE indicator	This field indicated whether an applicant's parents attended an HEI or not. It is self-reported by the applicant and the information is not checked or verified further. 1 = (a) parent(s) attended and HEI; 0 = no previous family history of attendance at HEIs	N/A	N/A	Binary	N/A	N/A

Variable (shortname)	UCAS PERS variable label	Description	Additional Processing and Cleansing	Missing Data	Data Type	Reference Category	Models
POLAR4 Dummy (qunitiled)	N/A	1 = POLAR4 Quintiles 1 & 2; 0 = POLAR4 Quintiles 3, 4, 5	The POLAR4 Quintile variable has been altered to create a new variable PL4, a dummy variable, to highlight those applicants who would be eligible for contextual offer.	N/A	Binary	N/A	1, 2, 3
POLAR4 Quintile (PL4)	POLAR4 quintile	POLAR4 Quintile is based on participation rates in HE of young people between 2009 and 2015 in HE by postcode and is only relevant to UK students. The ranking is divided into five groups (20% each) with group 1 being from the lowest participation areas and group 5, the highest participation areas.	N/A	N/A	Ordinal	Quintile 5	1, 2, 3
Policy Dummy (policyd)	N/A	0 = entry up to and including 2018; 1 = entry 2019 and after.	This is a variable which has been added to divide the dataset into applications before and after the policy change.	N/A	Binary	N/A	1, 2, 3, 4
Policy Dummy x Contextual Flag Interaction (W7_interact)	N/A	N/A	This is the interaction between those with a contextual flag and the policy dummy.	N/A	Binary	N/A	1, 2, 3, 4
Policy dummy x Department Type Interaction (W8_interact)	N/A	N/A	This is the interaction between applications to recruiting and selecting departments with the policy dummy.	N/A	Binary	N/A	4
School Dummy (schoold)	N/A	Independent = 0; All other = 1	This was created by setting all applications from non-independent schools to 1 so it could be used as part of the contextual flag field.	N/A	Binary	N/A	N/A

School Type (CTR1)	Apply Centre Type	This is automatically completed by the UCAS database for the most recent school attended. For those schools that have undergone changes in structure or mergers, this might not be the school type at application, but the school type at the date of running the PERS report from UCAS.	When the school type was not available for the older data, it could be added in by referencing the rest of the dataset. This enabled the school type data field to be extended to the full length of the study. This technique was using the same principles that UCAS use to complete the school type field, with the most recent school type being used, irrespective of year of application.	For 16% of the population, the school type was unknown.	Categorical	Independent	1, 2, 3

Variable (shortname)	UCAS PERS variable label	Description	Additional Processing and Cleansing	Missing Data	Data Type	Reference Category	Models
Socio-Economic Status (SES)	Socio-economic group (2004 - 2014) & Socio-economic group (2015 - 2023)	The categories are aligned with The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) and are used to determine social class by pay grade and managerial level. The question asked to determine this field has remained the same over the period of this research, however the responses from 2015 onwards were generated by the candidate being able to select from 28,000 job descriptions to find the one which most matched the highest earner in their household. These job descriptions were then linked up to the NS-SEC responses. This field is self-declared by the applicant and no further verification takes place.	This variable has two response columns over the period, one used in earlier datasets and one in later. This was due to a change in how the categories were mapped to job types by UCAS as detailed above. The combining of these two columns enabled the socio-economic data to be analysed throughout the whole time series as a single variable.	N/A	Ordinal	Higher Managerial & Professional Occupations	1, 2, 3
Subject Group (subgrp)	Subject group (summary level)	The variable classifies the available courses into 26 subject groups.	Up until 2011 a slightly different categorisation had been used, so in this database the responses are estimated using the post-2011 categorisation.	In line with the UCAS approach when data was missing which was frequent in earlier years, these values were estimated using more recent data. In addition, for those courses which were no longer current, the admissions team at Durham University were able to supply a breakdown of course code and course name. From this the department sub-group could be added into the dataset.	Categorical	N/A	N/A

Models Summary

Model No.	Model Name	Dependent Variable	Purpose / Description	Independent Variables Included	Interaction Terms	Subset / Observations
1	Entrance (not contingent on an offer)	Entrance (entrant = 1, not = 0)	Estimates overall effect of policy on likelihood of contextual applicants entering Durham.	Contextual flag; Predicted A-level points; Socio-economic status (SES); Ethnicity; Home region; Parental HE; Department type	Policy × Contextual	Full dataset, 229,217 applications (excl. 2020–21)
2	Offer	Offer (offered = 1, not = 0)	Estimates odds of contextual students receiving an offer post-policy.	Same as Model 1	Policy × Contextual	Full dataset as Model 1
3a	Firm Acceptance	Firm acceptance	Assesses odds of contextual students accepting Durham as firm choice once offered.	Same as Model 1	Policy × Contextual	Full dataset as Model 1
3b	Insurance Acceptance	Insurance acceptance	Assesses odds of contextual students choosing Durham as insurance choice.	Same as Model 1	Policy × Contextual	Full dataset as Model 1
4	Entrance (conditional on offer)	Entrance (offer-holders only)	Estimates likelihood of contextual offer-holders actually entering Durham.	Same as Model 1	Policy × Contextual	Offer-holders only
5	Difference-in-Differences (DiD)	Offer (contextual applicants only to recruiting and selecting departments only)	Tests causal effect of policy comparing *recruiting* (control) vs *selecting* (treatment) departments.	Predicted A-level points; Department type; Policy dummy	Policy × Department type	Contextual applicants only (reduced N; excludes mixed depts). 92,182 observations.

Logistic Regression

Multivariate Linear Probability Modelling (LPM) was considered initially for this research, but was rejected as it is not suitable for dealing with binary outcomes. In addition, regression analysis as a whole was rejected by the Blau Space theory which favours an approach with less rigidity to represent the fluid interactions in social networks (McPherson 2004 pp.267–270). The Blau Space aims for relationships between variables to be a set of coordinates rather than a direct relationship, however this is difficult to model due to the complexity of social interactions, limitations in available data, and the fluid nature of social networks. For this research in particular the use of categorical and non-ordinal data (e.g. race, school type) is essential, but these data are difficult to fit into available models for the Blau Space and could distort the data (Harder & Brashears 2023). The Hybrid Blau Space (HBS) model (Harder & Brashears 2023) has introduced improvements, such as a cellular framework and probabilistic modelling, to capture these complexities, but this was published too late for this research and is still not without fault (Harder & Brashears 2023). In addition, the Blau Space models a set of organisations and this is a case study of one. In order for the research to continue I had to find another way to demonstrate how the theories contained in the Blau Space could be investigated within UK HE. The Blau Space maps social structures using socio-demographic variables such as education, social status, ethnicity, income and occupation. It shows how these variables interact and how the underlying values of a particular position within the Blau Space are reinforced by local transmission of information. These underlying values within the Blau Space position shape interaction patterns and social life outcomes, with Higher Education being one of those key decision points. Therefore multivariate logistic regression (MLR) was selected as it too could investigate how multiple independent variables (socio-demographic variables) jointly affect the probability of a specific outcome, which for this study relates to applying to or accepting an offer to study at Durham University. Although MLR looks for a direct relationship it focuses on probabilities and odds associated with the variables and outcomes and is based on an s-shaped curve rather than a straight line, allowing a more fluid outcome and range of possibilities. This is more in-keeping with the theories of the Blau Space which resist use of linear probability methods for being overly reductionist. Logistic Regression was therefore chosen for the analysis as the dependent variables (offer and firm-acceptance, insurance-acceptance, entrance). Therefore while analysis draws inspiration from Blau Space (e.g., multidimensional structural variables), it does not operationalise Blau Space formally. The output from the models will be used to predict the outcome for contextual students as a result of centralising the undergraduate admissions process. The choice of logistic regression is in line

with previous research in the field (Capsada-Munsech & Boliver 2021; Boliver 2013, 2016; Capsada-Munsech & Boliver 2024).

Difference in Difference Analysis (DiD)

As well as understanding the social factors that shape the attraction of Durham University's undergraduate programmes to the population of potential students, this research seeks to establish whether centralising admissions made any differences to the chance of contextual students being offered a place. If the policy had an effect, then we would expect that the socio-demographics of the audience would have changed.

DiD analysis has been used for analysing whether a change in a policy is effective and is commonly used in healthcare situations reviewing the treatment effect on patients (for example (Wing, Simon & Bello-Gomez 2024)), but was first used in the mid nineteenth century to show Cholera spreading through water supply (Angrist & Pischke 2009). Many of the DiD analysis papers use linear probability methods whereas other papers (Chaiyachati, Hubbard, Yeager, *et al*. 2018; Dimick & Ryan 2014; Rajbhandari-Thapa, Zhang, MacLeod, *et al*. 2020; Zhou, Taber, Arcona, *et al*. 2016) use logistic regression with a DiD model and this research follows the same methodology.

The output of the DiD analysis is only valid if there are no other changes in the environment which affects the outcome and therefore needs a control group (untreated) and a treatment group who experience the policy change. The output is also valid if other environmental factors affect both the control and treatment groups equally. The difference in odds ratio for each group before and after the treatment can then be compared and calculated using logistic regression. For this research the control group will be recruiting departments and the treatment group selecting departments. Once standard acceptance rates used by the admissions team have been taken into account, the selecting departments are those who routinely have more applicants per place each admissions round in other words, the admissions team has to make offers to applicants on a competitive basis and therefore select applicants based on their application form. The recruiting departments however routinely have fewer applicants per place. With the drive for HEIs to fill places to bring in more income, it is therefore assumed that all students who meet the entry requirements that apply to recruiting departments will receive an offer. Therefore, with all other factors controlled for, the offer rate should not be affected by the policy change: hence these departments can be defined as the control group.

There are two main assumptions underlying DiD analysis: parallel trends assumptions and shocks. Parallel Trends states that the trends in the offer rate for both recruiting and selecting departments would follow parallel paths should no change in policy occur. So, should a change in the offer rate occur after the policy change this difference between them is a measurement of the direct impact of the policy. Using a logistic regression model, this will be calculated using the odds ratio of the interaction term of the policy and the department type in the pre- and post-policy change periods.

The parallel trends assumption appears to hold for offer rates for recruiting compared to selecting departments (figure 3). Before the policy change in 2019 (that's to say the centralisation of admissions) the odds for contextual students applying to recruiting departments (purple) receiving an offer moves in parallel to that of the contextual students applying to selecting departments (green) from 2013 onwards. This means that any effect estimated by the DiD analysis should not be confounded by differences in trends.

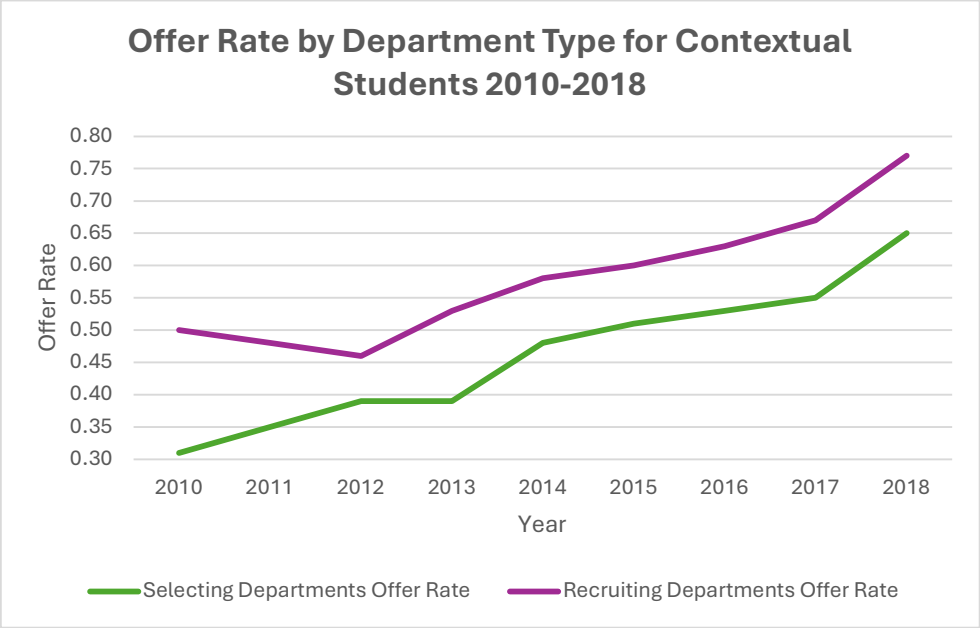

Figure 3: Offer Rates for Contextual Students by Department Type 2010 – 2018 (Parallel Trends)

A shock is an unexpected event which occurs during the period in question such as a rise in tuition fees. For example, in this research the Covid pandemic would be classed as a shock to the environment, however it would affect both groups equally and could therefore be included

in the research. However, as mentioned earlier, the two Covid entry years (2020 and 2021) have been excluded from the study due to larger than usual admissions numbers. This leaves three years post-policy change for comparison purposes.

Regression Models

The following models were formulated using the variables which had significant effect in previous research as detailed in the literature review. The following four models were used to evaluate the change in the odds ratio of a contextual applicant at each stage of admission as a result of the centralisation of admissions. Models used are the same throughout 1-4, simply using a different dependent variable on each occasion:

1) Policy Effect: The chance of a contextual student entering Durham University having submitted an application. Dependent Variable: Entrance.
2) Offer Rate: The chance of a contextual student being offered a place to study at Durham University having submitted an application. Dependent Variable: Offer.
3) Acceptance Rates:
    a. Firm-Acceptance Rate: The chance of a contextual student providing a firm-acceptance response to the offer of a place to study at Durham University having submitted an application. Dependent Variable: Firm-Acceptance.
    b. Insurance-Acceptance Rate: The chance of a contextual student providing a insurance-acceptance response to the offer of a place to study at Durham University having submitted an application. Dependent Variable: Insurance-Acceptance.
4) Entrance Rate: The chance of a contextual student entering Durham University having been offered a place. Dependent Variable: Entrance.

These models seek to determine whether the policy has changed the niche within which Durham sits. They seek to identify whether the acceptance of an offer, or entrance to study at Durham University are associated with the socio-demographic variables, and therefore underlying social values. The models therefore seek to isolate the effect of a specific dimension in Blau Space (being a contextual student) on elite outcomes while controlling for all other variables which are known to effect the HEI-decision (ethnicity, family, SES, region, school type and predicted grades). This will give clarity on how the values which underpin social networks drive opportunity in Higher Education, thus their impact on regulating an HEI's niche width.

Model 5, however, is different as it seeks to isolate the policy effect alone through a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis, which is a more credible method for estimating causal effects. Unlike logistic regression, which shows only an association, DiD approximates the causal impact of a policy by comparing changes in outcomes over time between treated and untreated groups. It helps identify how a policy—and only the policy—has changed an outcome, by controlling for time-invariant differences between groups. This model uses a separate subset of the dataset, contextual students only, again controlling for predicted A-level points, but looking at offers by department type. It also includes the policy dummy to estimate the change before and after the introduction of the new policy.

5) Policy Effect: The chance of a contextual student receiving an offer from Durham University having submitted an application. Dependent Variable: Offer.

Logistic regression alone does not account for unobserved differences—factors not included in the dataset—that may affect both the likelihood of receiving a contextual offer and the outcome of interest. For instance, successful completion of an outreach programme at Durham University (which will lead to a contextual offer) is not specifically recorded in the PERS dataset. If contextual students perform better, the improvement might be wrongly attributed solely to the new policy, rather than to prior outreach engagement—an unobserved confounder in this context.

DiD helps mitigate this issue by assuming that such unobserved differences are constant over time. Therefore, any difference in outcome trends after the policy change—beyond those observed in the control group—can be more confidently attributed to the policy itself. In this study policy effectiveness can be defined by the variables shown in table 6 below.

Table 5: Policy Effectiveness Variables

This Vector	Variables (letter in models)	Stata column header
Individual	School Grades (predicted/actual) (G) School type (C)	Pointspred Ctrtype
Family	Parental Higher Education (F) Ethnicity (E) Socio-Economic Status (S)	Parenthe (first generation) ETH1 SES
Community	POLAR4 (Q) Home Location (R)	PL4 REG
University	Recruiting/Selecting Department (D) Policy Year (P)	Rs Policyd

Model 1

This model assesses the odds of an application with a contextual flag accepting an offer to study on an undergraduate course at Durham University:

Y_1 Odds of entering as an undergraduate at Durham University =

$$\textbf{logit}\left(P_{acceptance}\right):$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{P_{acceptance}}{1-P_{acceptance}}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 S + \beta_2 E + \beta_3 R + \beta_4 C + \beta_5 F + \beta_6 Q + \beta_7 W + \beta_8 G + \beta_9 t + \beta_{10} P + \beta_{11} P * W + Error$$

This model seeks to estimate the overall effect of centralisation of admissions. In other words, whether contextual students are more likely to enter Durham University for undergraduate study as a result of the policy change controlling for socio-economic status, ethnicity, home location, first generation students and A Level points predicted. This sample includes all applicants, whether they are offered a place or not.

Model 2

This model assesses the odds of an applicant with a contextual flag being offered an undergraduate place at Durham University

Y_2 Odds of being offered an undergraduate place =

$$\mathbf{logit}\left(P_{offer}\right):$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{P_{offer}}{1-P_{offer}}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 S + \beta_2 E + \beta_3 R + \beta_4 C + \beta_5 F + \beta_6 Q + \beta_7 W + \beta_8 G + \beta_9 t + \beta_{10} P + \beta_{11} P * W + Error$$

This model will estimate the change in odds for contextual students receiving an offer after the change in policy controlling for socio-economic status, ethnicity, home location, first generation students and A Level points predicted.

Model 3a

This model assesses the odds of an application with a contextual flag firm-accepting a place Durham University at undergraduate level.

Y_3 Odds of firm-acceptance of a place as an undergraduate at Durham University =

$$\mathbf{logit}\left(P_{firm}\right):$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{P_{firm}}{1-P_{firm}}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 S + \beta_2 E + \beta_3 R + \beta_4 C + \beta_5 F + \beta_6 Q + \beta_7 W + \beta_8 G + \beta_9 t + \beta_{10} P + \beta_{11} P * W + Error$$

This model will estimate the changing odds for contextual students providing a firm-acceptance of an offer once received and entering Durham at an undergraduate level. This is the odds of a contextual student firm-accepting an offer once made and entering DU as an undergraduate.

Model 3b

This model assesses the odds of an applicant with a contextual flag providing an insurance-acceptance of an offer of a place Durham University at undergraduate level.

Y_3 Odds of insurance-acceptance of a place as an undergraduate at Durham University =

$$\textbf{logit}\,(P_{insurance}) :$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{P_{insurance}}{1-P_{insurance}}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 S + \beta_2 E + \beta_3 R + \beta_4 C + \beta_5 F + \beta_6 Q + \beta_7 W + \beta_8 G + \beta_9 t + \beta_{10} P + \beta_{11} P * W + Error$$

This model will assess the changing odds for contextual students providing and insurance acceptance an offer once received and entering Durham at an undergraduate level. This is the odds of a contextual student insurance-accepting an offer once made and entering DU as an undergraduate.

Model 4

This model assesses the odds of an applicant with a contextual flag entering Durham University at undergraduate level .

Y_3 Odds of entering as an undergraduate at Durham University =

$$\textbf{logit}\,(P_{entrant}) :$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{P_{entrant}}{1-P_{entrant}}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 S + \beta_2 E + \beta_3 R + \beta_4 C + \beta_5 F + \beta_6 Q + \beta_7 W + \beta_8 G + \beta_9 t + \beta_{10} P + \beta_{11} P * W + Error$$

This model will assess the changing odds for contextual students accepting an offer once received and entering Durham at an undergraduate level. This is the odds of a contextual student entering DU as an undergraduate, conditional on an offer having been made.

Model 5

The odds of a contextual student entering a selecting department at undergraduate level

Y_4 Change in Odds for Contextual students as a result of the policy =

$$\boldsymbol{OR_{Policyd=1,RS=1/\ Policyd=1,RS=0}} = \frac{\boldsymbol{Odds_{Policyd=1,RS=1}}}{\boldsymbol{Odds_{Policyd=1,RS=0}}}$$

The difference between the odds ratios of the two groups will be calculated before and after the policy change and the differences compared. This will result in the impact of the policy change on contextual students.

Limitation of Methods

There are several limitations to the research undertaken. The UCAS PERS dataset only has sufficient data to determine contextual students based on two of the six current flags which makes candidates eligible for a contextual offer. The remaining contextual flags would need referencing from other databases which were not accessible for this research. The current six contextual flags have also been developed over a number of years and even if the databases required were accessible, the data for newer contextual flags e.g. estranged status, would not be available for the whole dataset. This means that the offer rate for contextual students might be under-estimated, which would show the policy to be less effective than it has been.

Due to the poor socio-economic data collated around overseas students as part of the UCAS process, this research only focuses on UK/home students which reduces the dataset size. In addition, to control for the high entry standards required for entry to Durham University and the set-up of the dataset, only A-Level points could be used as predicted grades. However, as the majority of the home student population sit A-Levels, the sample size was sufficient for the research.

The method used to flag contextual applicants is the most commonly applied and is applied across the full dataset in a similar way in line with Durham University's processes. The selection of state school plus POLAR4 Quintiles 1&2 has been used by Durham throughout the years of the study. However, there are now more ways to categorise a contextual student. UCAS did not collect the additional flags for many of the earlier years of the dataset and Durham University only started applying Care Leavers as a flag in 2023. In addition as the research does not link up to the NPD, FSM eligibility cannot be taken into account. This means there may be applications missing contextual flags which might skew the results, by under-representing the number of Contextual students and the effect of the polices on their applications (a lower-bound effect).

Finally, some variables, such as parental SES and parental HE Indicator are self-reported and therefore prone to error. There is no further verification which takes place for these variables and the responses are taken at face value, making it likely that there may be a degree of measurement error.

The definition of recruiting and selecting departments was determined by historic knowledge alone and no written records exist. The head of undergraduate recruitment was asked to recall annual decisions spanning over a decade. The definition therefore has been taken from the memories of the admissions team at Durham University and could be prone to mis-remembering and human error. In addition, the decisions to assign a department as recruiting or selecting could in itself be prone to personal biases as these decisions are made by the admissions team in person. These could affect the outcome of model 5 as department definitions might be incorrectly assigned. In an attempt to counteract this, if there was any doubt in the definition of a department as recruiting or selecting, the department was omitted from the research. If recollections were inaccurate (a misclassification bias), this could introduce a downward distortion in the estimates, meaning the actual effects might be stronger than observed.

Chapter 6: Results: Research Objectives One & Two

Research Objective One

Determine trends in undergraduate admissions data (2010–2023) to understand Durham University's niche.

1. Use descriptive statistics to identify key trends in applications over time.
2. Review Rate changes for pre- and post- centralisation of admissions to identify changes.
3. Use descriptive statistics to identify how contextual student applications have evolved.

Key Trends in Durham University's Niche

The descriptive statistics show that over the period of this research Durham's applicant pool (fundamental niche) and entrant pool (realised niche) are stable and unchanging, that's to say the niche width is stable, despite engagement work (Outreach and marketing) which should have helped move the niche, albeit slightly These two niches of undergraduate students are still dominated by white, independent school students whose families are from high-SES backgrounds and who also have a history of going to University.

Applicant numbers have remained static, averaging around 19,000 applications a year despite an increased applicant pool nationally which has risen 28% from 586,820 to 752,000 over the same period (HESA 2012). Although Durham University's capacity is limited by the size of the campus and city, applications are made by potential students (the audience) free of capacity constraints. While it is known widely that DU is a smaller HEI and this might well affect the number of applicants, it appear from this research that Durham University's appeal has not grown in line with national trends. I will come on to reasons for this in the discussion chapter.

In terms of entrants, with constraints on capacity, Durham are unable to expand the undergraduate offering much more. Therefore, as the national demand grows, their market-share of the undergraduate sector has in fact reduced, meaning that in spite of growth in student numbers nationally, Durham has become an even smaller provider in terms of market share. This adds challenges for strategy creation which will be addressed in the recommendations chapter.

While the number of applications has remained static and the capacity for entrants is effectively capped, the process by which applicants are converted into entrants warrants further

examination. This intermediate space—between raw demand and actual enrolment—is governed by key institutional levers, notably offer rates and acceptance rates. These mechanisms shape the composition of the entrant cohort and ultimately influence the character of Durham's student niche. Understanding how these rates function, and whether they have shifted in ways that either support or hinder diversification, is critical to interpreting the static nature of the entrant pool despite broader changes in the higher education landscape. The next section presents the data on how these conversion dynamics have operated during the period of the study (2010-2023) in shaping Durham's niche. In many areas it has been possible to compare Durham to national trends via the UCAS data and analysis website (UCAS 2024a), however, due to restrictions on how this site operates, details on some national trends are not available.

Mechanics of the niche

Offer rates and acceptance rates play a central role in shaping the pathway from applicant to entrant. As critical points of selection and self-selection, they determine the extent to which the applicant pool is translated into the student body. In the context of static entrant numbers at Durham, despite a growing national applicant pool, any shifts in these rates appear to have produced a neutralising effect. This suggests that institutional changes in offer-making or applicant behaviour have not resulted in a meaningful expansion or transformation of the entrant cohort. In organisational ecology terms, that's to say that the institutional response (increasing offers) has had no effect on shaping the institution's realised niche.

Offer Rates overall are up over the period of the study while acceptance rates show a mixed picture.

Parental Socio-Economic Status

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of applicants across seven parental SES categories from 2010 to 2023 for the 229,217 individuals analysed. Those from households where parents have higher managerial backgrounds formed the largest group, rising from 31% in 2010 to 48% in 2022, then slightly dropping to 45% in 2023. Lower managerial roles remained stable at 28%, declining to 22% by 2023. Intermediate and semi-routine occupations declined, while small employers and lower supervisory roles saw slight increases to 5% in 2023.

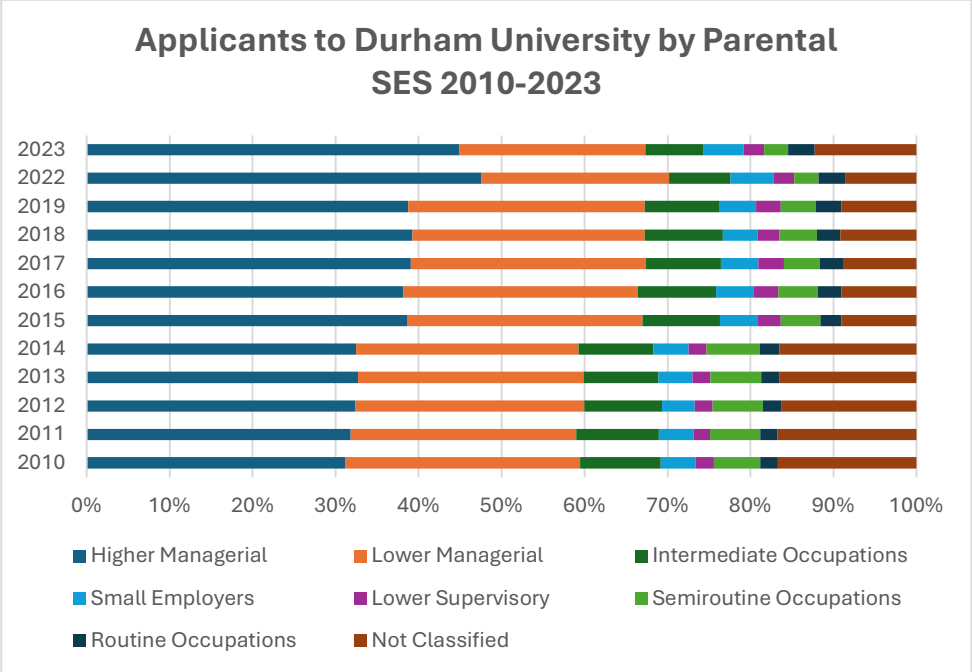

Figure 4: Applications by parental socioeconomic status between 2010 – 2023

While the proportion of applicants not classified for parental SES has decreased slightly over the period—by approximately 1,500 students—this reduction appears to have translated largely into a rise in those identified as top-tier SES. This may reflect improvements in the accuracy of self-reporting or classification processes rather than any substantive shift in the underlying applicant composition. Thus, when viewed through an SES lens, both the applicant and entrant pools have remained effectively constant over time, reinforcing the theories of the Blau Space, that Durham's appeal sits firmly in a particular BS location.

Offer rates are in line with the literature for elite institutions, with applicants who are from the highest parental-SES having the highest offer rates before centralisation of admissions. These offer rates have changed slightly since the centralisation of admissions with the higher managerial category receiving fewer offers.

Table 6: Changes in offer rates by Socioeconomic status between 2010 – 2023

	Offer Rate		
	2010-2018	**2019 - 2023**	**Change**
Higher managerial and professional occupations	0.646	0.627	**-0.019**
Intermediate occupations	0.577	0.659	**0.082**
Lower managerial and professional occupations	0.606	0.655	**0.049**
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	0.558	0.645	**0.087**
Not classified / unknown	0.528	0.604	**0.076**
Routine occupations	0.512	0.639	**0.127**
Semiroutine occupations	0.501	0.647	**0.146**
Small employers and own account workers	0.56	0.619	**0.059**

Acceptance rates by SES have increased most in the Lower Supervisory and Technical category since centralisation, their entrance rate has decreased the second-to-most. This could indicate these students are least likely to accept as a firm choice, and/or obtain the required grades for entry.

Table 7: Changes in acceptance rates by Socioeconomic status between 2010 – 2023

	Acceptance Rate		
	2010-2018	**2019 - 2023**	**Change**
Higher managerial and professional occupations	0.5	0.508	**0.008**
Intermediate occupations	0.517	0.531	**0.014**
Lower managerial and professional occupations	0.504	0.508	**0.004**
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	0.498	0.555	**0.057**
Not classified / unknown	0.521	0.512	**-0.009**
Routine occupations	0.495	0.539	**0.044**
Semiroutine occupations	0.521	0.512	**-0.009**
Small employers and own account workers	0.503	0.526	**0.023**

While entrance rates have gone down across the board since centralisation, although less so in the higher SES categories.

Table 8: Changes in entrance rates by Socioeconomic status between 2010 – 2023

	Entrance Rate		
	2010-2018	**2019 - 2023**	**Change**
Higher managerial and professional occupations	0.546	0.528	**-0.018**
Intermediate occupations	0.551	0.494	**-0.057**
Lower managerial and professional occupations	0.546	0.478	**-0.068**
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	0.534	0.429	**-0.105**
Not classified / unknown	0.545	0.45	**-0.095**
Routine occupations	0.532	0.399	**-0.133**
Semiroutine occupations	0.526	0.425	**-0.101**
Small employers and own account workers	0.524	0.442	**-0.082**

Again, this affects the entrance pool which has seen an increase from 33% to 49% of entrants coming from a family whose parents are in the higher-SES category. Similarly, entrants from lower managerial SES backgrounds made up a substantial proportion, though their share decreased from 28% in 2010 to 22% in 2023.

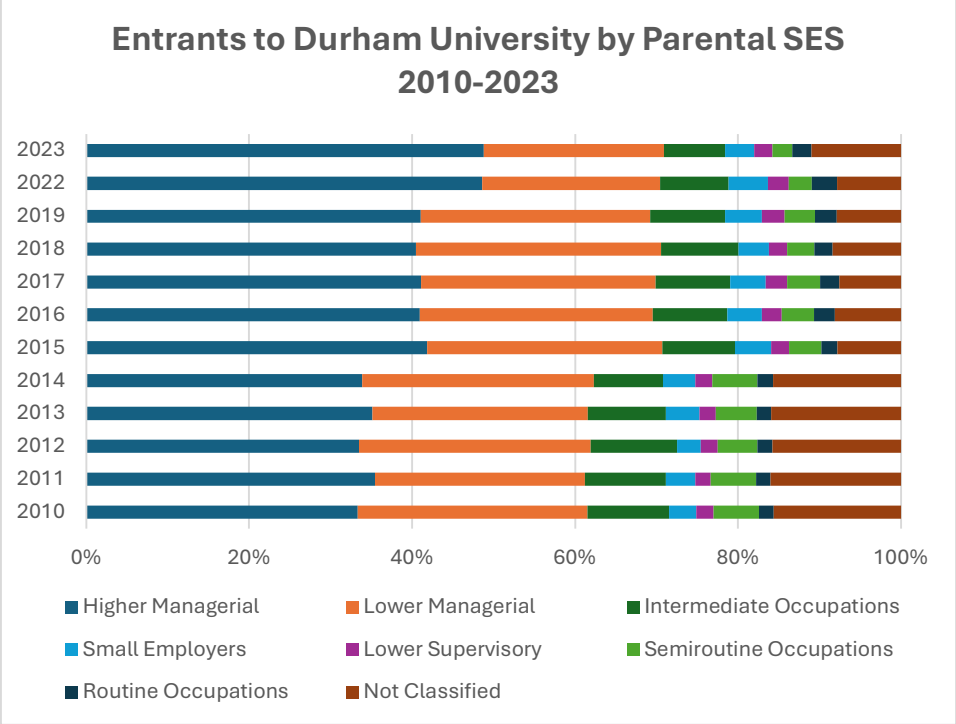

Figure 5: Entrants to Durham University by Parental socioeconomic status 2010-2023

While parental SES is not used as an assessment criteria for admission, it is clear from these results that applicants whose parents are from higher-SES backgrounds favour Durham at all

stages of the admissions process where a personal choice can be made. This ties in with the literature on social networks within the Blau Space sharing similar views and social codes, valuing the same items, in this case a Durham University degree. There is a high demand for Durham from this social segment and these are the students who feel that Durham is the right "fit" for them, or rather the wrong "fit" for those from less-privileged backgrounds, as highlighted in recent report "Belonging @Durham" (Hampshire, Lewis, Marley, *et al.* 2024 p.3).

Ethnicity

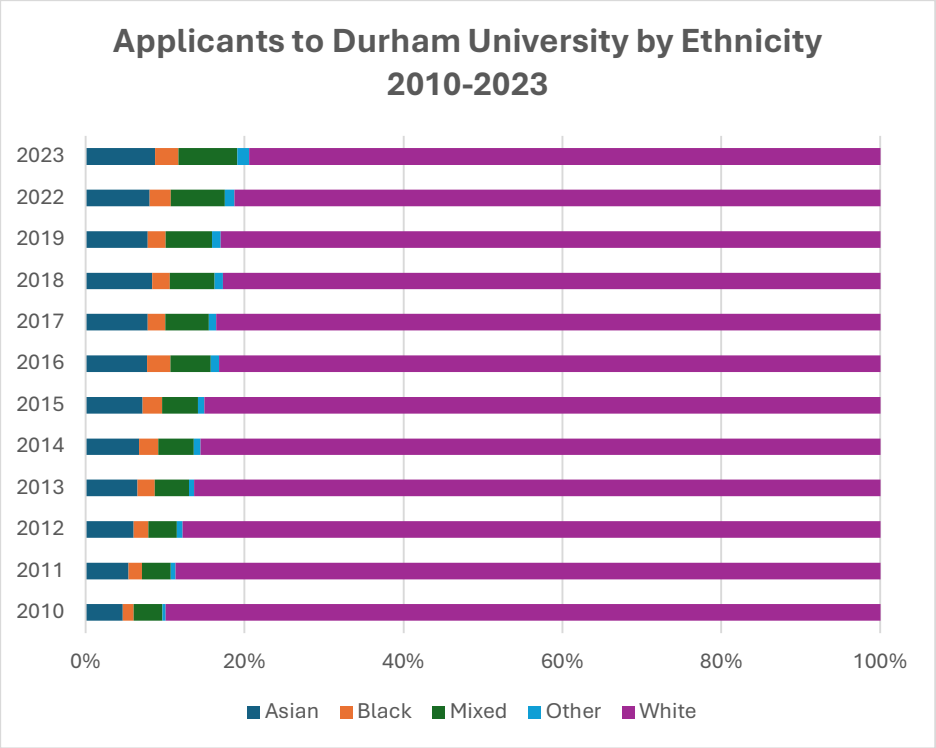

Figure 6: Applicants to Durham University by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023

Durham University's applicant pool (fundamental niche) shows gradual diversification from 2010 to 2023. However, White applicants dominate, consistently forming the majority of applications but has declined from 90% of the applicant pool to 79% over the period. This decline in a white majority is in line with national trends reported by UCAS where between 2015 and 2023 white applicants have reduced from 73% to 63% of the applicant pool[1]. Asian applicants increased from 5% to 9%, and mixed race applicants grew from 4% to 7%. Black

[1] Please note that the data available on the UCAS website is rounded, which may result in slight inaccuracies in reported percentages.

applicants represented 2% on the applicant pool on average. While these are in line with the UCAS trend data, the above statistics shows that white applicants are over-represented at Durham compared to national trends (UCAS 2024b), demonstrating Durham's appeal to White students.

For black students, there is, however, a notable increase in offers after centralisation of admissions. Although UCAS applications are made ethnicity-blind, those who have been on outreach programmes can be identified, specifically those who have been on programmes targeted at black students. For example Durham University's Space to Explore Potential (STEP) programme supports Black-heritage students, helping them discover opportunities at the university (Durham University 2025). Students who successfully complete the assessed summer school project can become eligible for a guaranteed alternative offer, providing them with additional opportunities for admission.

Table 9: Changes in offer rates by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023

	Offer Rate		
	2010-2018	**2019 - 2023**	**Change**
Asian	0.6	0.607	**0.007**
Black	0.436	0.568	**0.132**
Mixed	0.621	0.636	**0.015**
Other	0.499	0.592	**0.093**
White	0.599	0.641	**0.042**

However, again at the entrant pool stage, while again the number of offers are lower across the board post-centralisation at Durham University (to compensate for the bumper covid entry years), the change in offer rates is greatest in "Other" and "Black" categories. White students on the other hand are most likely to enter Durham University having been made an offer and therefore with high applicant numbers, high offer and acceptance rates, the entrant pool is dominated by White students.

Table 10: Changes in acceptance rates by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023

	Acceptance Rate		
	2010-2018	**2019 - 2023**	**Change**
Asian	0.449	0.458	**0.009**
Black	0.519	0.518	**-0.001**
Mixed	0.482	0.483	**0.001**
Other	0.412	0.475	**0.063**
White	0.512	0.552	**0.01**

Table 11: Changes in entrance rates by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023

		Entrance Rate	
	2010-2018	**2019 - 2023**	**Change**
Asian	0.404	0.361	**-0.043**
Black	0.403	0.324	**-0.079**
Mixed	0.494	0.44	**-0.054**
Other	0.452	0.332	**-0.12**
White	0.559	0.511	**-0.048**

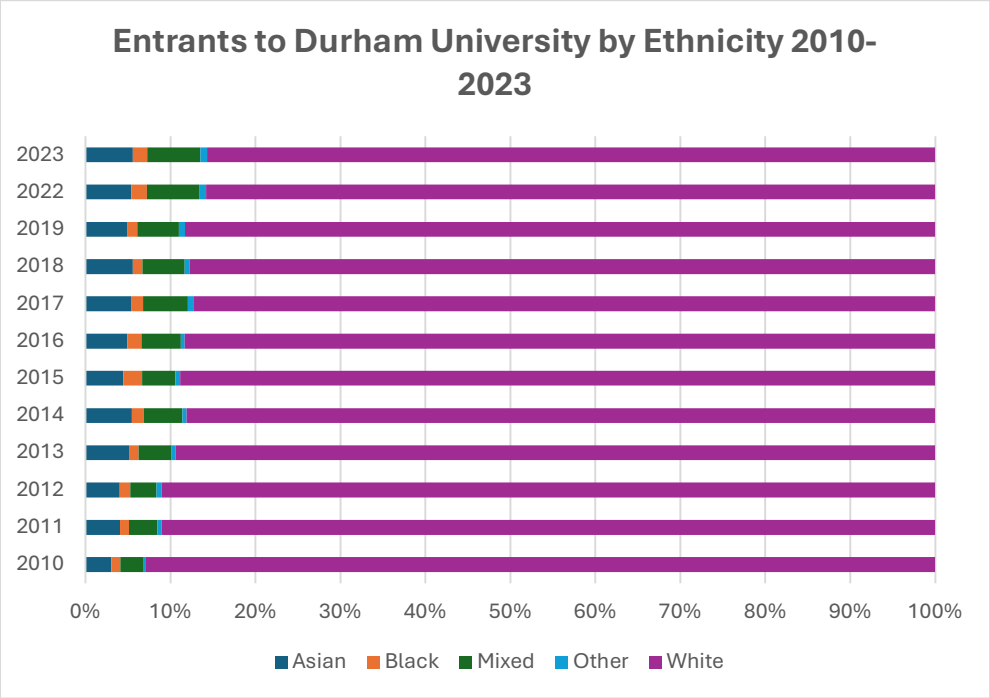

Figure 7: Entrant pool by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023

The results show a clear preference for Durham University from White applicants, again, signally, as with the results for parental-SES, that Durham appeals to this social segment, reinforcing the Blau Space theory around social communication and underlying values.

As mentioned above, Durham University are seeking to address this ethnic imbalance with targeted outreach programmes. However, this research shows, that where there is an element of choice for an applicant, although a Black student might apply to Durham University, Black students are choosing not study at Durham. This will be expanded in the discussion chapter.

Despite Durham increasing the offers to Black students, the choice to reject Durham's offers has a neutralising effect on the efforts to move the shape of the entrant-pool. Over this time period there has been an 187% increase in Black applicants which has translated into a 58% increase (from 1% to 2% by proportion of entrance pool) in Black students in the entrance pool. While those statistics look impressive the numbers themselves are very small (49 Black entrants in 2023), making the change seem insignificant.

School

Figure 10 shows applicants to Durham University segmented by educational institution type. Independent school entrants consistently made up the largest proportion, contributing 33.9% of the total (77,730 entrants), though this share decreased slightly from 34% in 2010 to 32% in 2023. Academy entrants followed, representing 25.3% overall (58,110 entrants), maintaining steady numbers throughout the years.

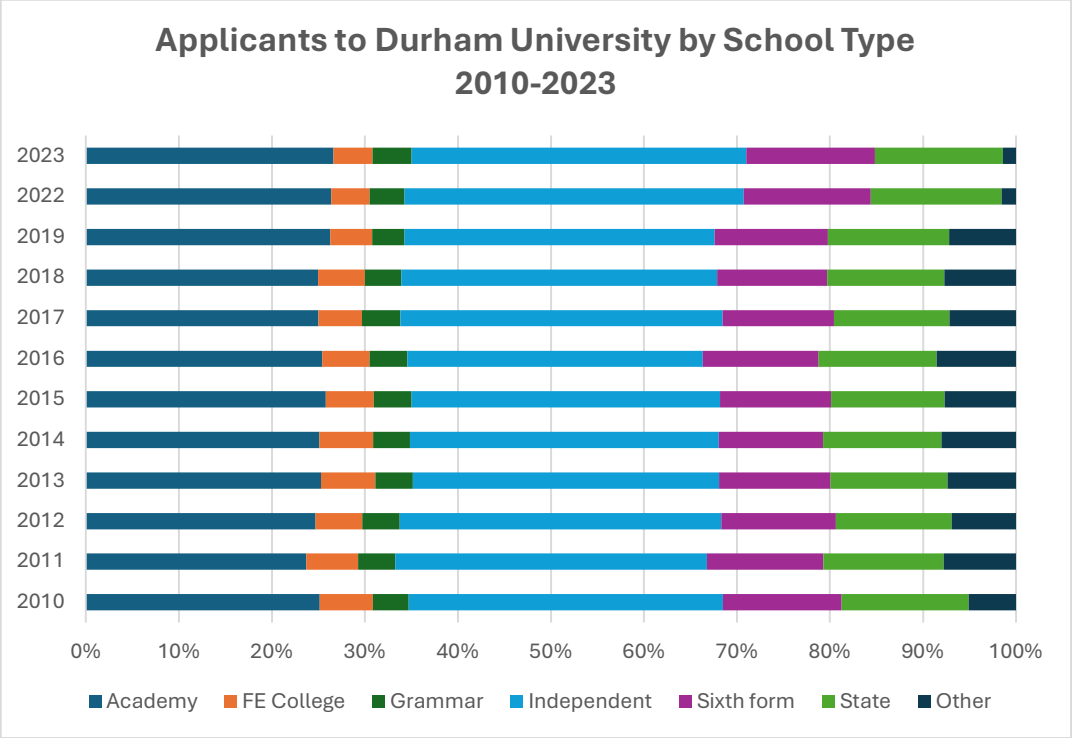

Figure 8: Applicants to Durham University by School Type 2010-2023

Grammar and State school students receive most offers with independent school applicants behind both of these. The data also shows that since the centralisation of admissions offer rates for selective state (Grammar) and Independent school applicants have reduced, with state, academies and sixth-form colleges increasing. This represents a push towards WP and is backed-up by the POLAR4 Quintile data which will be discussed in the next section.

Table 12: Changes in offer rates by school type between 2010 – 2023

	Offer Rate		
	2010-2018	**2019 - 2023**	**Change**
Academy	0.65	0.682	**0.032**
Further education	0.435	0.552	**0.117**
Grammar	0.675	0.67	**-0.005**
Independent	0.625	0.603	**-0.022**
Other	0.368	0.467	**0.099**
Sixth Form College	0.582	0.658	**0.076**
State School	0.602	0.669	**0.067**

Despite decreased offers for independent school applicants, the firm-acceptance rate has increased in recent years and the entrant rate was the only group to increase since centralisation of admissions.

Table 13: Changes in entrance rates by school type between 2010 – 2023

	Entrance Rate		
	2010-2018	**2019 – 2023**	**Change**
Academy	0.538	0.455	**-0.083**
Further Education	0.526	0.428	**-0.098**
Grammar	0.53	0.501	**-0.029**
Independent	0.532	0.538	**0.006**
Other	0.709	0.615	**-0.094**
Sixth Form College	0.53	0.463	**-0.067**
State School	0.547	0.461	**-0.086**

During the period of the study independent school students made up 33.9% of the entrant pool on average each year. In 2023, however, approximately 42% of entrants originated from independent schools, although these institutions educate only around 5.9% of school children (Independent Schools Council 2025b).

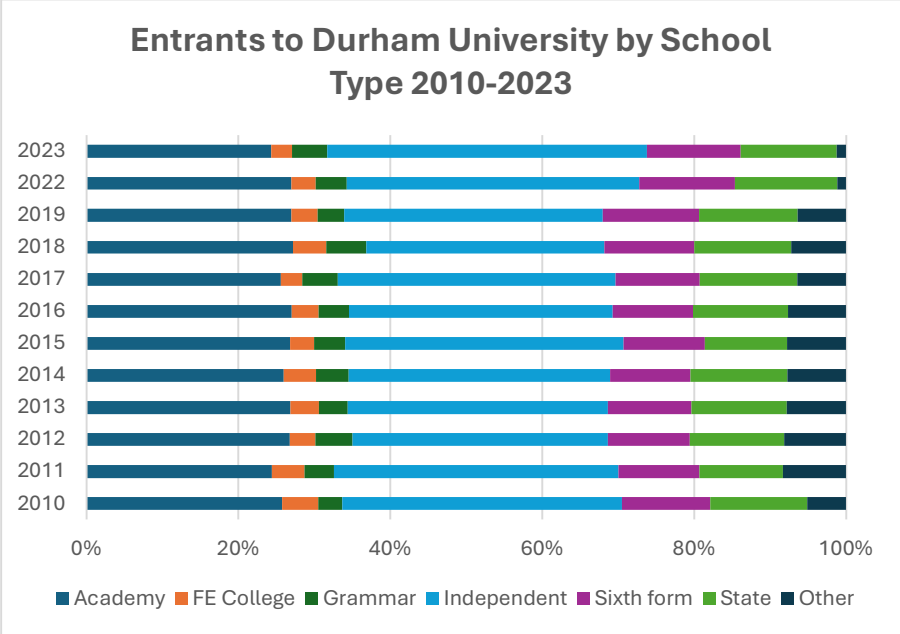

Figure 9: Entrants to Durham University by School Type 2010-2023

The proportion of independent school applicants in the entrant pool is an increase of 5% from 2010. This is likely due to the wider environmental effects of increasing WP targets within the sector. Students from independent schools who enter Oxbridge much more readily before WP targets were introduced now more likely to study at "lesser", but still elite institutions as illustrated in the Independent Schools Council annual census where entrance to Oxbridge has reduced from 6.5% to 4.6% between 2015 and 2025 (Independent Schools Council 2025a, 2015). Durham has in recent years had a reputation for being for "Oxbridge rejects" and hence finds itself culturally aligning with these students, who, now see Durham as their target institution for reasons of social fit, or Habitus, and firmly-accept Durham as their first choice. This moving down the institutional hierarchy is known as displacement. These students from independent schools are more likely to achieve the higher grades at A-Levels and therefore meet the requirements of their DU offer. In reviewing the Independent Schools Council Annual Censuses for 2015, 2020 and 2025, trends show a reduction of independent school pupils going onto Oxbridge from 6.5% to 4% over the period with Durham University accounting for an increase of from 3.7% to 4.8% of the pupils between 2016 and 2025 (Independent Schools Council 2016, 2015, 2020, 2025a), again a likely indicator of displacement.

State school applicants accept Durham more readily as an insurance choice. This indicates that they are looking at a higher-ranked HEI such as Oxbridge, with Durham as (an elite) back up if they don't make the grades. Again, this is an effect of WP policies in the top-tier HEIs, giving offers to those from non-standard backgrounds. Those HEIs hold a huge amount of prestige and better job prospects after graduation, so they are accepted as firm choice with Durham as a back-up.

So again, in spite of increased offers to applicants from state schools, this increase in demand for Durham from Independent School students, along with these applicants almost-guaranteed meeting of offer, has a negative effect on the balance of the entrant pool to Durham. This again highlights the importance of choice and fit for students applying to HEIs, and the particular demand from the Independent school students for Durham degrees. This highlights the limits of the university's agency in shaping its entrant pool, as broader structural inequalities—such as the educational advantages of Independent schools and their alignment with Durham's cultural norms—continue to shape who is most likely to apply and succeed. Even targeted widening

participation efforts can be undermined by these systemic dynamics, which operate beyond the university's direct control.

Region

Applicant trends at Durham University (2010–2023) show regional disparities. Students from the South East and London account for the largest share of the applicant pool throughout the study period rising from 31% to 38% over the period. However applicants based in Northern Ireland and Scotland each account for 2%, highlighting lower interest in Durham University from students resident in these areas. Applicants from the North-East that's to say, applicants local to Durham University, make up 10% of the applicant pool on average.

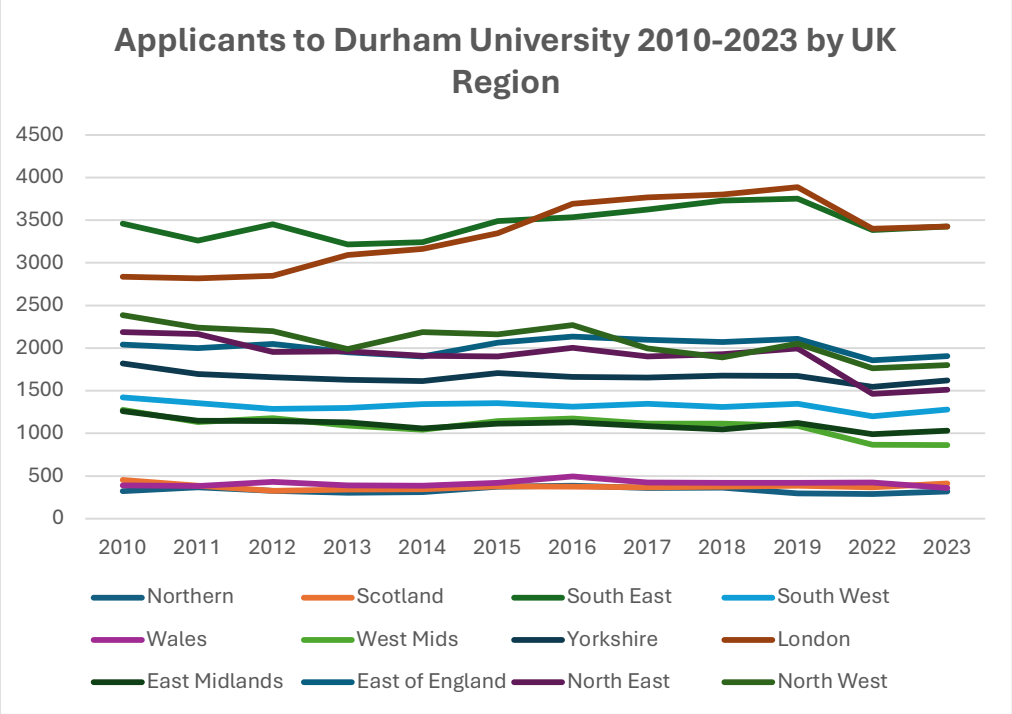

Figure 10: Applicants to Durham University by Region 2010-2023

Regionally, the entrance pool is dominated consistently by students who live in the South East, representing 20% of the entrant pool annually on average. London follows closely, beginning at 13% in 2010 and rising to 16% in 2023. Entrants from the North-East however have reduced in proportion over the same period by 5% (from 12% in 2010 to 7% in 2023).

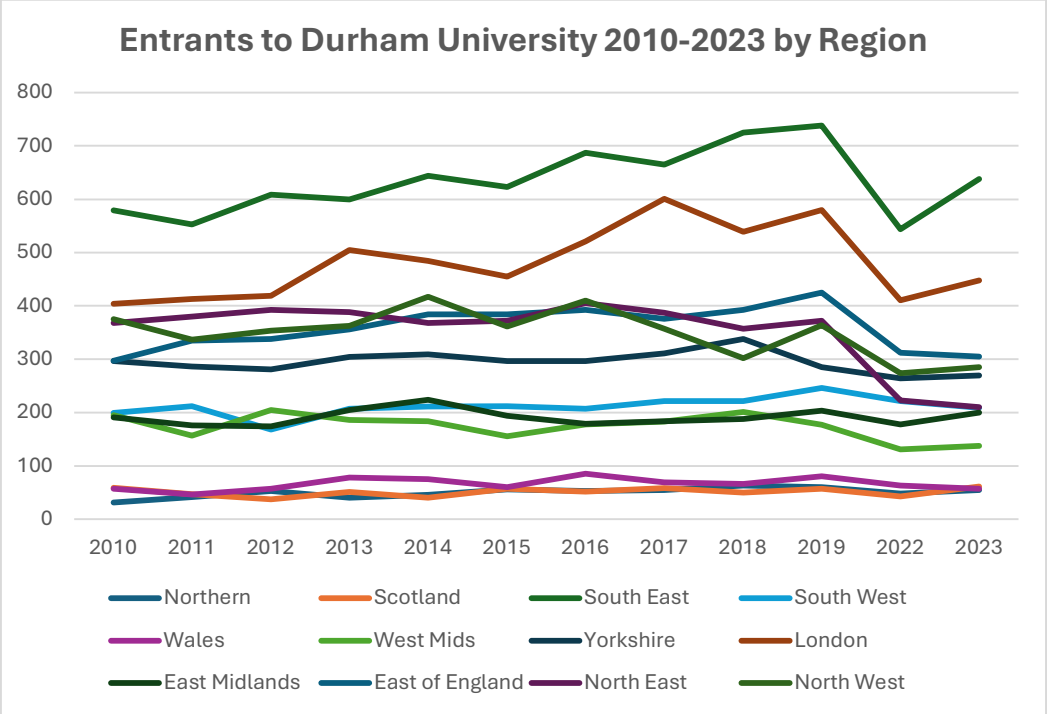

Figure 11: Entrants to Durham University by Region 2010-2023

Regionally, these results speak to the idea of patterns of migration of students from particular areas of the country to Durham as demonstrated in the work by Gamsu and Donnelly (Gamsu & Donnelly 2021). It shows that the culture of Durham University feels like the right "fit" for these students, an idea which was circulated through communication at school and through social networks. These patterns seem to be strengthening with both the South East and London growing their share of the applicant pool and entrant pool, both rising by 6% (32%-38%) during the study period. This reinforces the idea of unwritten social codes and transmission of information between social networks presented in the Blau Space.

POLAR4 Quintile

The applicant pool by POLAR4 Quintile comprises on average 49% from the top Quintile (5) where most students in that area have a tendency to go to on to study at an HEI. Compared to UCAS applicant pool trends this is a significantly higher proportion than the whole applicant pool, which on average between 2015 and 2023 comprises of 29% from Q5 each year (UCAS 2024b) . Applicants from the lowest 2 quintiles (1&2) which are the focus on WP initiatives make up 16% of the applicant pool on average, with a range of 2%, compared to a national applicant pool average of 29% between 2015 and 2023 (UCAS 2024b). This again shows that Durham is

appealing disproportionately to applicants from the highest quintile which again suggests the idea of social fit being important in the HEI selection process.

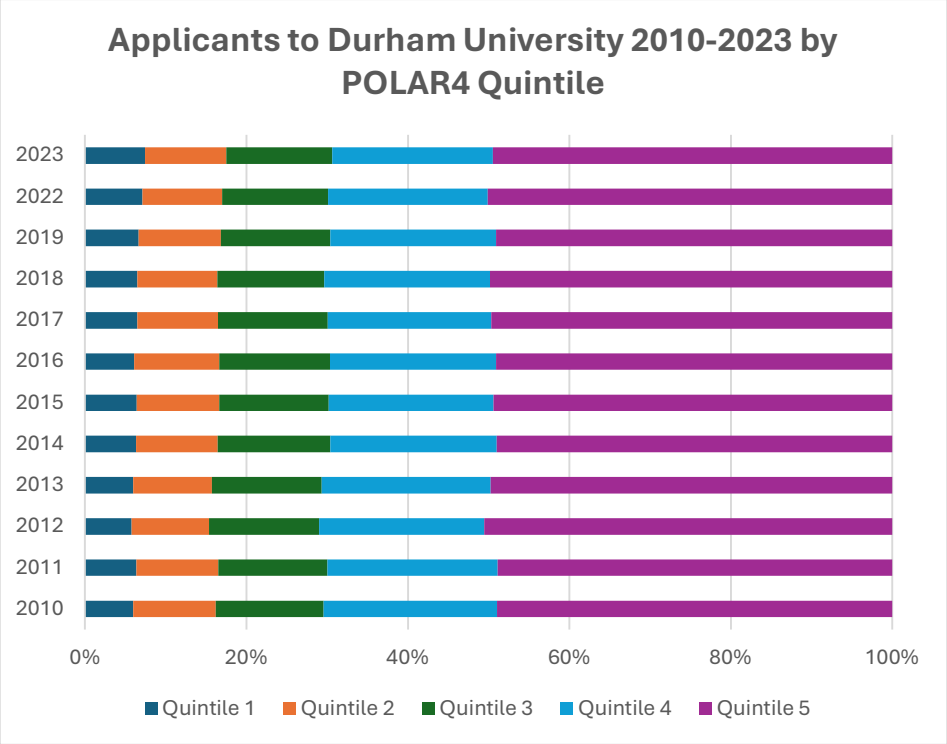

Figure 12: Applicants to Durham University by POLAR4 Quintile 2010-2023

POLAR4 Quintile 5 applicants initially achieved the highest offer rates until 2019, but this trend reversed in 2022 and 2023, as their offer rates dropped to the lowest. Conversely, POLAR4 Quintiles 1 and 2, which started with the lowest offer rates in 2010, rose to the highest in 2022 and 2023.

Table 14: Changes in offer rates by POLAR4 quintiles between 2010 – 2023

	Offer Rate		
	2010-2018	**2019 – 2023**	**Change**
Quintile 1	0.509	0.789	**0.28**
Quintile 2	0.536	0.711	**0.175**
Quintile 3	0.569	0.652	**0.083**
Quintile 4	0.596	0.657	**0.061**
Quintile 5	0.627	0.585	**-0.042**

In addition, the data shows that POLAR4 Quintiles 1 and 2 have the highest insurance-acceptance rates, which means the priority for these applicants is again, not Durham University. While entrance rates have decreased across the board since centralisation of admissions (due to scaling back entrants after two bumper covid entry years in 2020 and 2021) entrance rate by POLAR4 Quintile has decreased more for Q1 & 2 since centralisation.

Table 15: Changes in entrance rates by POLAR4 quintiles between 2010 – 2023

	Entrance Rate		
	2010-2018	**2019 – 2023**	**Change**
Quintile 1	0.545	0.433	**-0.112**
Quintile 2	0.535	0.449	**-0.086**
Quintile 3	0.537	0.484	**-0.053**
Quintile 4	0.548	0.488	**-0.06**
Quintile 5	0.545	0.517	**-0.028**

However, the proportion of the entrance pool by POLAR4 Quintiles is shifting with those students from the lowest two quintiles making up 20% of the entrance pool in 2023, compared to 15% in 2010. The proportion of Quintile 5 students within the entrance pool have reduced 4% over the same period.

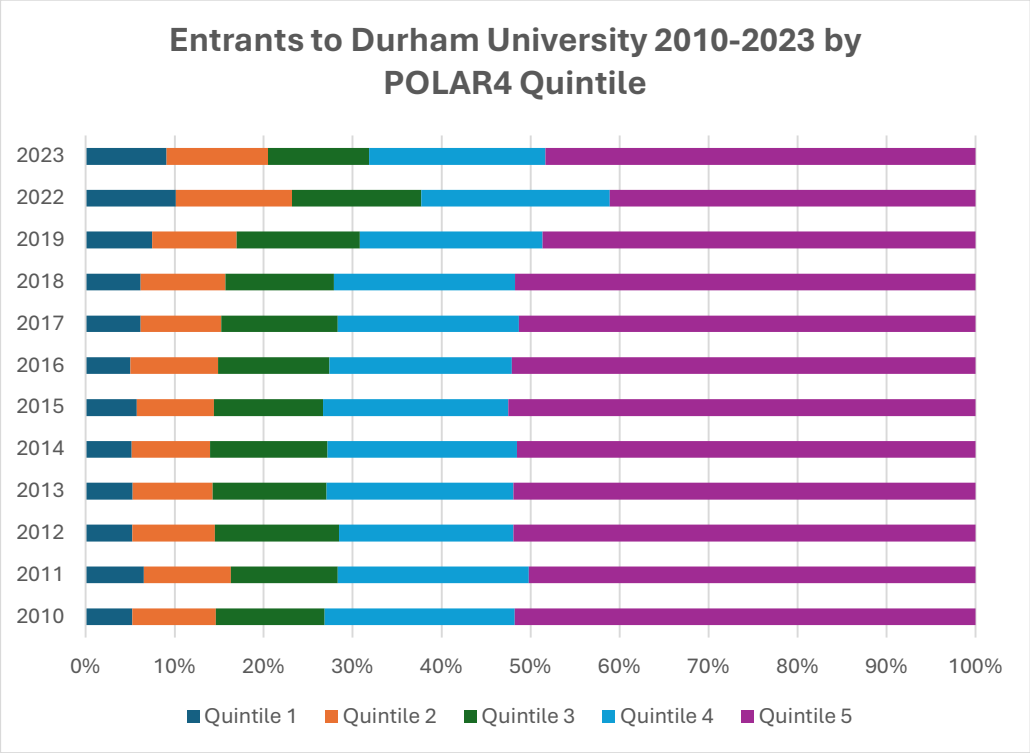

Figure 13: Entrants to Durham University by POLAR4 Quintile 2010-2023

For POLAR4 Quintiles, Durham University's work to re-balance the entrant pool by this factor seems to have worked. Although the applicant pool remains fairly static when reviewed by POLAR4 Quintiles, the offer rate has increased to the lowest two quintiles in line with WP policies, and this has had a small effect on the entrant pool. However, despite increased offers, Quintile 1 and 2 students are less likely to accept Durham's offer after centralisation of admissions. This perhaps speaks to a lack of personal approach to admissions, which might be a negative outcome of a centralised system.

Regional differences in the applicant pool may be challenging to overcome due to the underlying social forces which will likely make re-balancing more challenging. Students who are from less affluent families are more likely to stay closer to home to remain within family networks, so one might therefore assume that these students travelling at a distance are from more affluent homes. However, improvements by POLAR4 Quintile show a strong start to re-balancing the entrant pool, but as Boliver says assuming each student in the same postcode area shares the same economic conditions is falling foul to ecological fallacy (Boliver, Gorard & Siddiqui 2021b).

Contextual Students

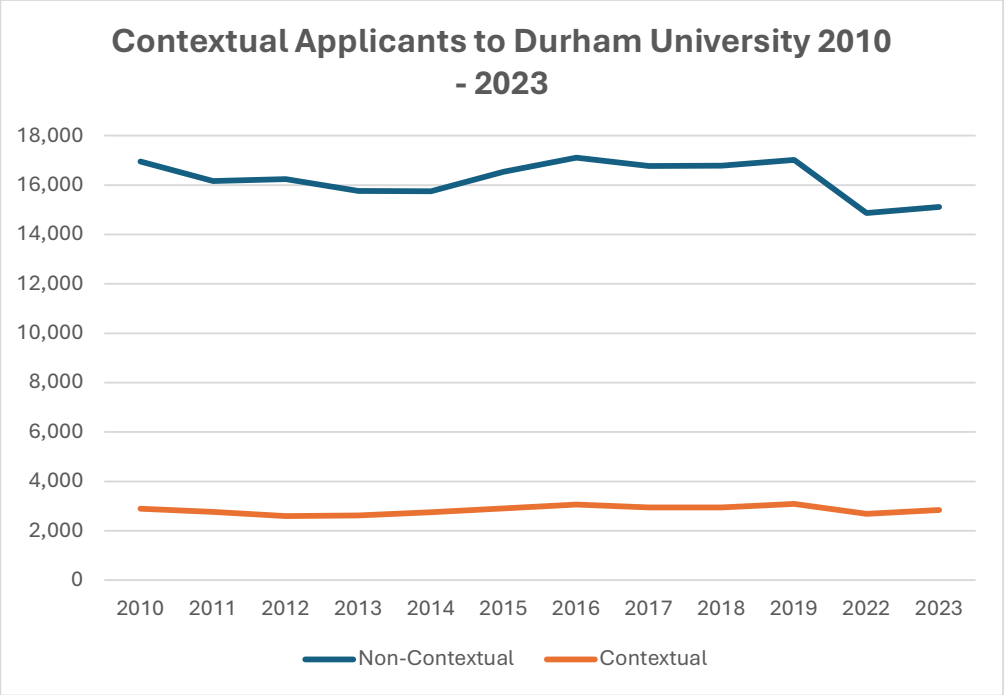

Figure 14: Contextual Applicant numbers to Durham University 2010-2023

For contextual students specifically, application numbers have remained even over the period, making up on average 15% of the entrant pool each year. However, since centralisation of admissions, the offer rate has gone up for these students in line with Durham's WP policies.

Table 16: Changes in offer rates by contextual students between 2010 – 2023

		Offer Rate	
	2010-2018	**2019 - 2023**	**Change**
Non-Contextual Students	0.61	0.616	**0.006**
Contextual Students	0.517	0.742	**0.225**

The entrance rate however has reduced since the centralisation of admissions. Although, across the board entrance rates have dipped as mentioned earlier, the rate has dropped off

more than that for non-contextual students, again hinting at a underlying matter of personal choice in the decision.

Table 17: Changes in entrance rates by contextual students between 2010 – 2023

		Entrance Rate	
	2010-2018	**2019 - 2023**	**Change**
Non-Contextual Students	0.544	0.505	**-0.039**
Contextual Students	0.542	0.43	**-0.112**

The entrance pool is diversifying slowly, with contextual students making up 18% of entrants in 2023 compared to 13% in 2010.

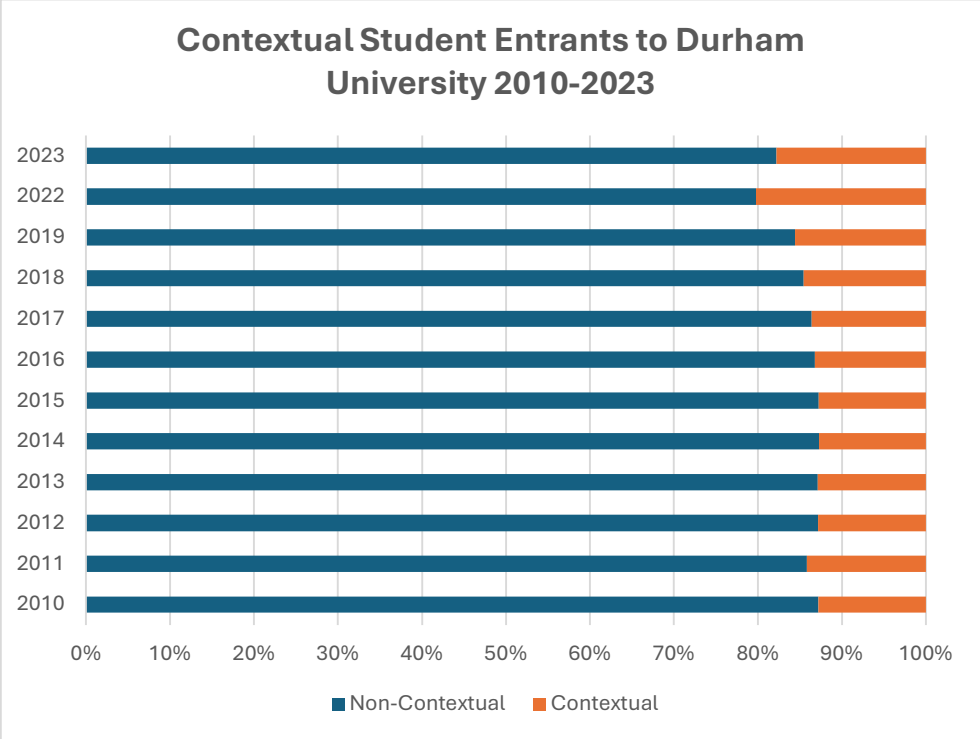

Figure 15: Contextual Student Entrants to Durham University 2010-2023

Contextual Students by Variable

SES

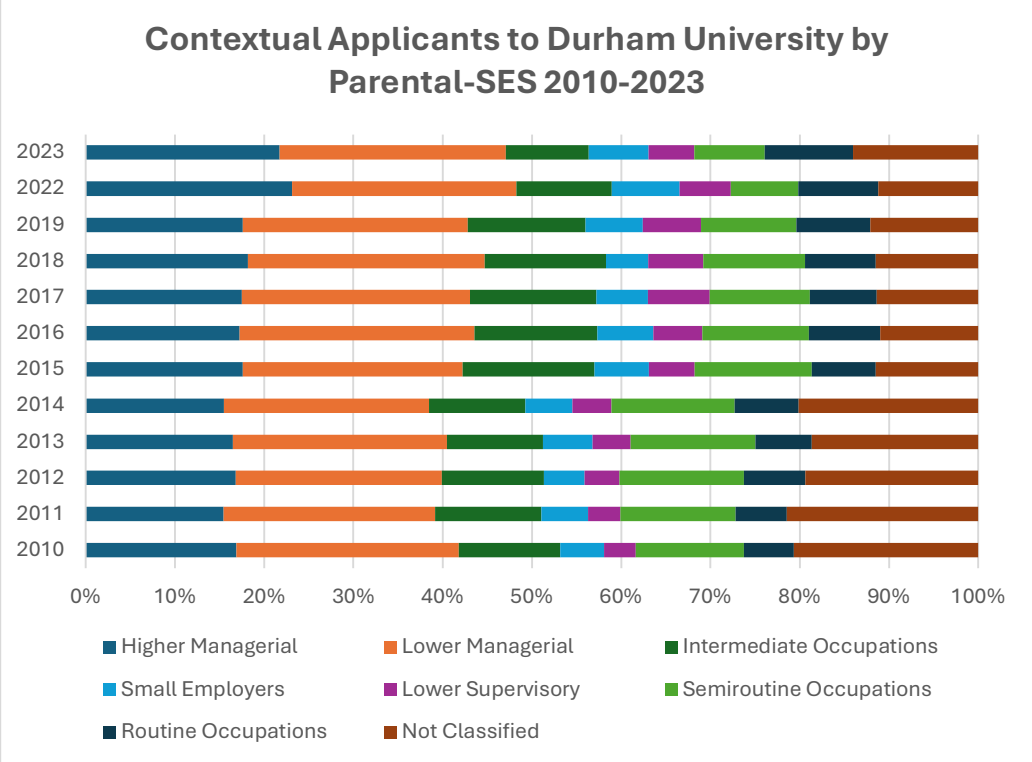

Figure 16: Contextual Applicants to Durham University by Parental SES 2010-2023

Contextual entrants from the highest two parental-SES categories are increasingly dominating the entrance pool of contextual students. This highlights that POLAR4 and State School flags may have a significant error rate in identifying those really in need of a contextual offer.

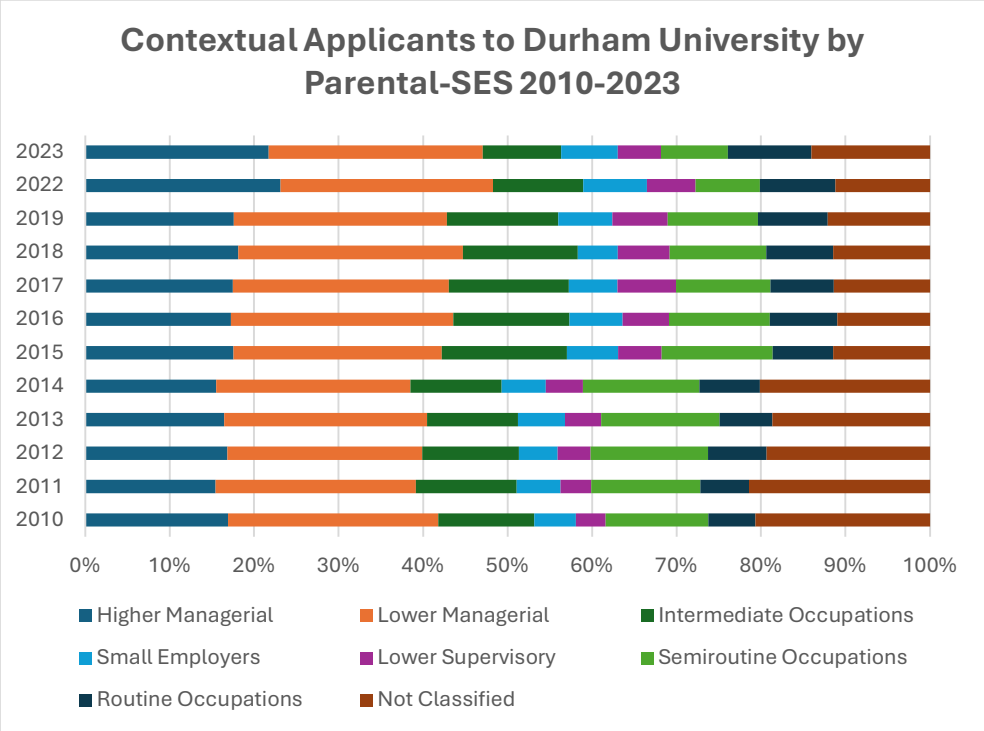

Figure 17: Contextual Applicants to Durham University by Parental SES 2010-2023

Ethnicity

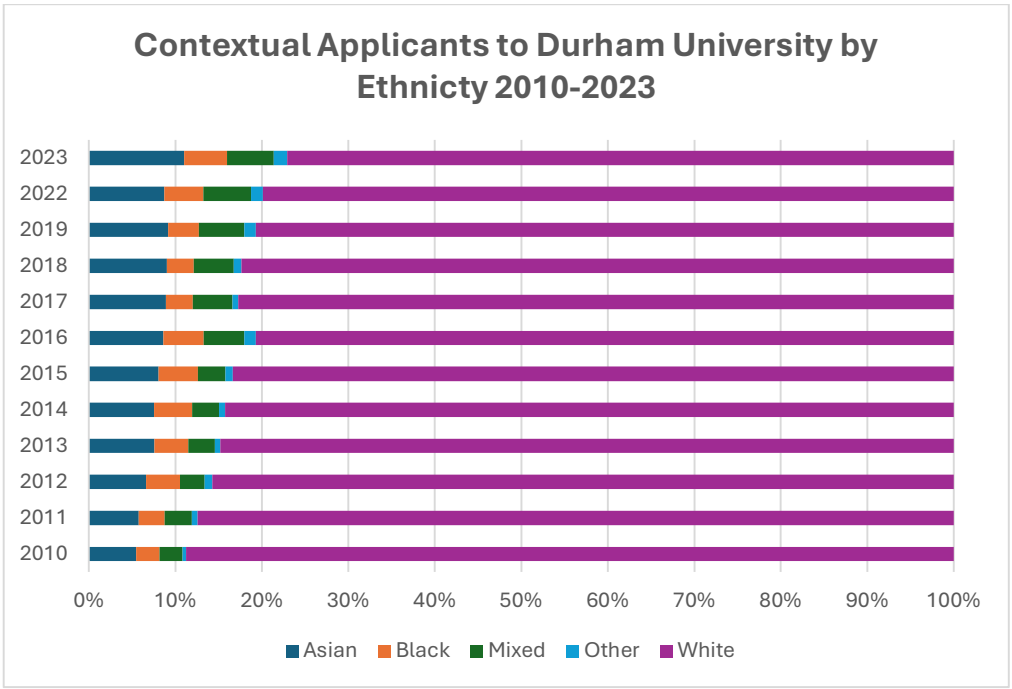

Figure 18: Contextual Applicants to Durham University by Ethnicity 2010-2023

As with the complete applicant and entrant pool data, both are dominated by White applicants, making up 83% on average of the contextual applicant pool and 87% on average of the contextual entrant pool at Durham. This may well reflect the findings of the OfS in 2021 that 90% of students in the lowest POLAR4 quintile are white British (Millward 2021).

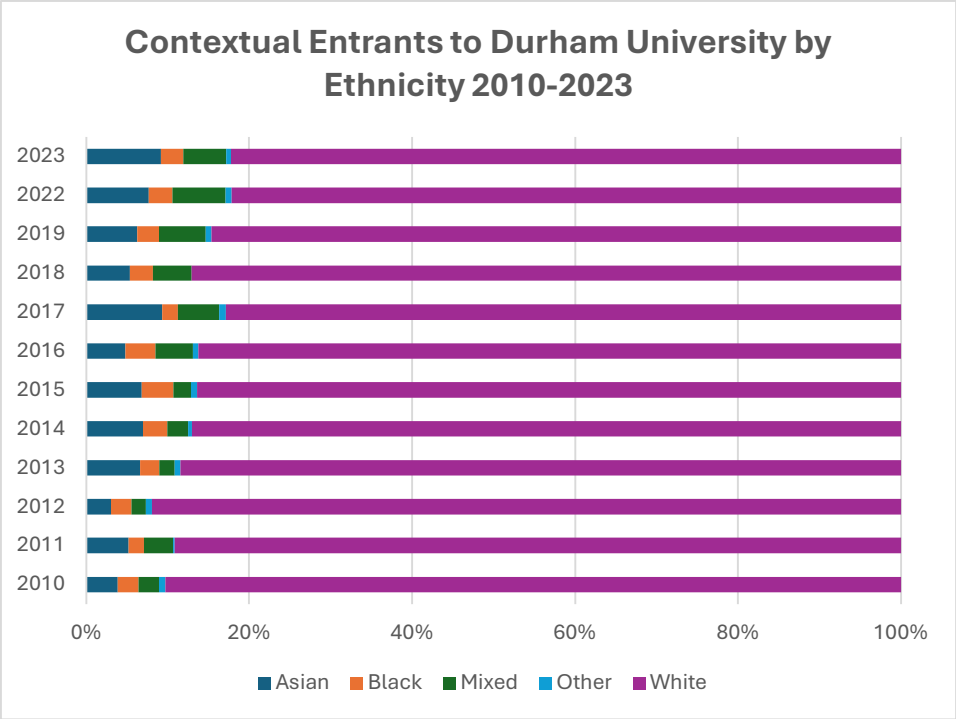

Figure 19: Contextual Entrants to Durham University by Ethnicity 2010-2023

Region

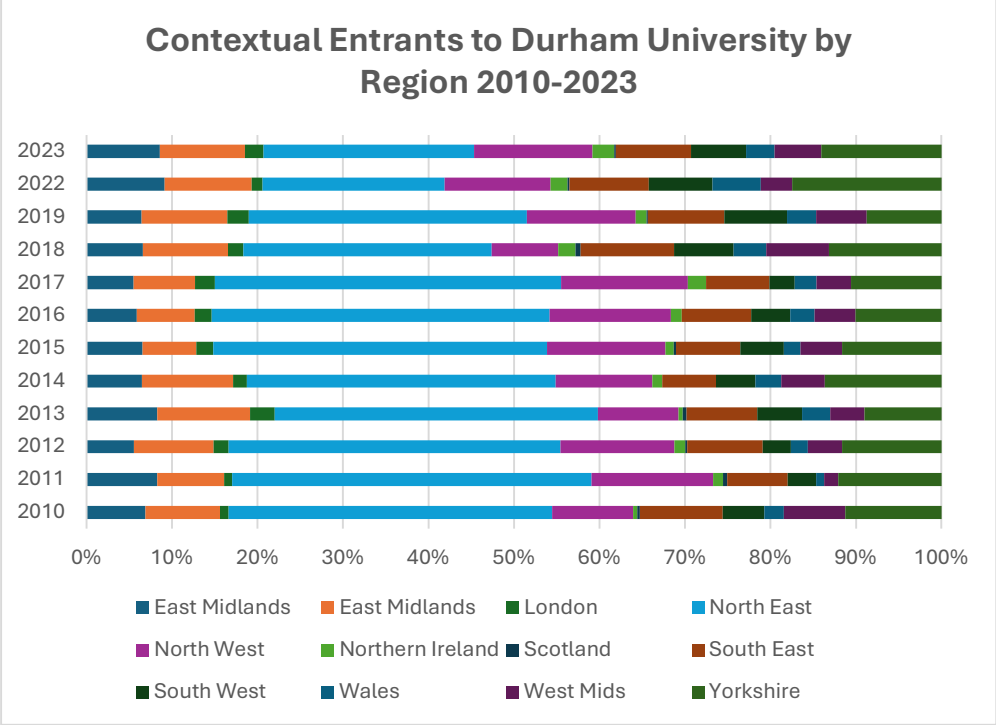

Figure 20: Contextual Entrants to Durham University by Region 2010-2023

The entrant pool shows a decline in entrants from the North-East over the period of the study of 13%. Other regions more local to Durham remain stable over the period with the North-West contributing 12% on average of the contextual entrant pool each year and Yorkshire also 12%.

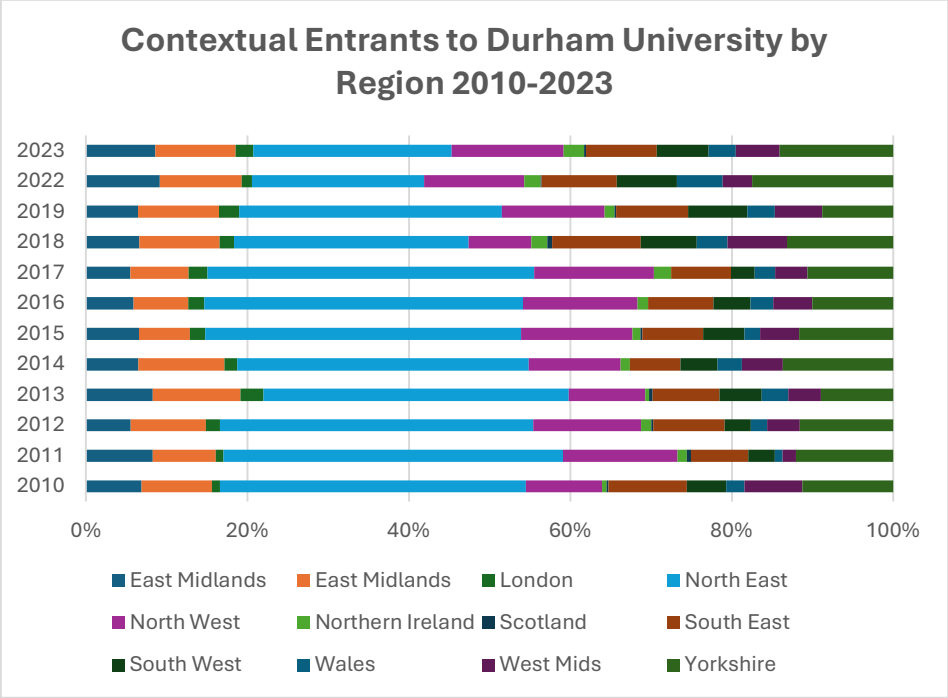

Figure 21: Contextual Entrants to Durham University by Region 2010-2023

The decline in entrants from the North-East is a point to note. While anecdotally, University of Northumbria at Newcastle is seen by local applicants (that's to say those who live in the North-East) as a better fit, between entry in 2014 and entry in 2023 entrant numbers for a first degree at Northumbria have decreased from 7,460 to 7,180 (HESA 2024b). In fact this is in line with a national trend, where applicant numbers from the North-East have declined by 13% between 2015 and 2023 (UCAS 2024b). However, it could again be the idea of "fit" or belonging which may be steering these applicants away from Durham as hinted at through the lived experiences of first generation students in the Belonging @Durham report (Hampshire, Lewis, Marley, *et al.* 2024 p.3). These lived social narratives of current students enter their way back into social networks - local students don't feel like they belong at Durham -and could well affect these figures.

Further exploration of these factors for contextual students by admissions stage will be picked up in the multivariate logistic regression models. These will help to determine the element of personal choice during the admissions process for Durham University and whether increased offer rates for these students has had a significant impact on the realised niche, or entrant pool.

Research Objective Two

Assess the impact of the 2019 centralisation of undergraduate admissions on contextual students' access to Durham University.

- Employ multivariate logistic regression to determine whether the centralisation of undergraduate admissions increased the likelihood of contextual students receiving and accepting offers.
- Employ multivariate logistic regression to determine whether the likelihood of admission changed across different stages of the process (offer, firm-acceptance, insurance-acceptance, entrance).
- Employ Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis to determine the direct effect of the policy change on contextual applicants.

The output of the models in table 19 calculate the odds ratio as follows

= Exp (Log W7 interact + log PolicyD)

Where W7 is the interaction term between contextual students and the policy dummy. The results show the change in odds for each model after the centralisation of admissions.

The sample for Model 5 falls from 145,752 to 92,182 because it restricts the analysis to offer rates for contextual applicants who applied only to departments that were definitively recruiting and definitively selecting.

Table 18: Multivariate Logistic Regression Model Outputs

	Model 1 Entrance		Model 2 Offer		Model 3a Firm Acceptance		Model 3b Insurance Acceptance		Model 4 Entrance Conditional on Offer	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
SES										
Intermediate Occupations	1.019	0.027	0.959	0.029	1.009	0.264	1.029	0.036	1.036	0.294
Lower Managerial & Professional Occupations	0.955	0.017	0.970	0.014	0.985	0.017	1.003	0.023	0.958	0.018
Lower Supervisory & Technical Occupations	0.955	0.046	0.964	0.037	1.021	0.048	0.938	0.063	0.968	0.050
Not Classified	0.915 ***	0.023	0.827 ***	0.016	0.983	0.024	1.080	0.035	0.981	0.026
Routine Occupations	0.904	0.049	1.025	0.043	0.935	0.047	1.059	0.071	0.889	0.051
Semiroutine Occupations	0.939	0.381	0.927	0.029	0.974	0.038	1.050	0.054	0.953	0.041
Small Employers	0.934	0.036	0.898 ***	0.027	1.058	0.039	1.021	0.050	0.964	0.039
Ethnicity										
Asian	0.627 ***	0.021	1.130 ***	0.027	0.057 ***	0.017	1.326 ***	0.045	0.538 ***	0.019
Black	0.642 ***	0.043	0.092	0.040	0.797 ***	0.046	1.205	0.085	0.577 ***	0.042
Mixed	0.086 ***	0.029	1.095	0.030	0.867 ***	0.028	1.120 *	0.046	0.811 ***	0.029
Other	0.575 ***	0.059	0.099	0.066	0.689 ***	0.060	0.981	0.110	0.509 ***	0.056
Region										
East Midlands	0.996	0.032	0.929	0.024	1.012	0.032	0.991	0.042	1.024	0.035
East of England	1.018	0.026	1.035	0.022	1.008	0.257	1.012	0.034	1.009	0.028
London	0.849 ***	0.021	1.110 ***	0.022	0.814 ***	0.019	1.017	0.031	0.805 ***	0.021
North East	1.356 ***	0.043	1.309 ***	0.036	1.326 ***	0.041	0.953	0.042	1.231 ***	0.042
North West	0.982	0.025	0.976	0.026	0.988	0.025	0.951	0.033	0.998	0.028
Northern Ireland	0.801 ***	0.044	1.028	0.045	0.744 ***	0.040	0.922	0.035	0.770 ***	0.045
South West	0.856 ***	0.027	0.959	0.024	0.855 ***	0.026	0.950	0.093	0.859 ***	0.029
Wales	0.896	0.044	0.098	0.039	0.824 ***	0.040	0.897	0.058	0.901	0.047
West Midlands	0.929	0.031	0.975	0.026	0.880 ***	0.029	0.987	0.042	0.929	0.033
Yorkshore & The Humber	1.049	0.029	0.923 ***	0.021	1.107 ***	0.030	0.933	0.035	1.086 *	0.032
First Generation Student	0.975	0.019	0.963	0.015	1.008	0.019	0.934	0.024	0.956	0.020
Recruiting/Selecting Department	0.678 ***	0.010	0.389 ***	0.005	1.122	0.016	0.811 ***	0.015	0.990	0.015
Contextual Student	0.950	0.025	1.061 *	0.022	0.091	0.024	1.007	0.036	0.917	0.026
A Level Points Predicted	1.169 ***	0.005	1.283 ***	0.004	0.951	0.003	1.110 ***	0.006	1.036 ***	0.004
Policy Dummy	0.905 ***	0.016	0.992	0.014	1.044	0.018	0.093	0.022	0.090 ***	0.017
W7 (Contextual & Policy Dummy)	1.547 ***	0.071	3.507 ***	0.157	1.019	0.044	1.663 ***	0.091	1.067591	0.051
Cons	0.023 ***	0.002	0.585 ***	0.003	1.336	0.075	0.036 ***	0.003	0.233 ***	0.015
n	145,752		145,752		92,182		92,182		92,182	
LR chi2(27)	3102.47		15116.9		1181.52		713.26		975.19	
Prob > chi2	0.0000		0.0000		0.0000		0.0000		0.0000	
Pseudo R2	0.0234		0.0789		0.0098		0.009		0.0092	

Legend		
Symbol	**P-Value**	**Interpretation**
*	p<0.05	Statistically Significant
**	p<0.01	Highly Significant
***	p<0.001	Very Highly Significant

Model 1: Entrance

This model will estimate the overall effect of the policy in other words: which student types are more likely to enter Durham University for undergraduate study as a result of this policy change controlling for socio-economic status, ethnicity, home location, first generation students, A Level points predicted. This take into account all applicants whether they are offered a place or not.

Hypothesis 1: The entrance odds have improved for contextual students after the new the policy implemented for entry in 2019.

Result 1: Since the centralisation of admissions, contextual applicants are 16% more likely to enter Durham University as an undergraduate[2]. This increase in the likelihood of contextual applicants entering Durham since the centralisation of admissions suggests a modest but positive impact on actual enrolment. Although the overall number of contextual applicants has not grown, the improved conversion from application to entry may be attributed to the increased offer rates introduced through centralised decision-making. As other variables are controlled for, this effect highlights the role of policy change in shaping access outcomes. However, the limited rise in enrolment also indicates that structural or perceptual barriers may still deter contextual applicants, underscoring the need for broader strategies beyond offer-making alone.

In addition, since the policy change in 2019:

1) Students from all ethnicities are less likely to enter DU as an undergraduate as compared to White students (Asian -22%, Black -7%, Mixed -10%, Other -25%; all 5% Significance Level).
2) Students from London, Northern Ireland and the South West are less likely to enter DU as an undergraduate as compared to students from the South-East (London -11%; Northern Ireland -13%; South-West -11%; all 5% Significance Level).
3) Students from the North East are more likely to enter DU as an undergraduate student than those from the South East (OR 1.09; 5% Significance Level).

[2] = Exp (Log W7 interact + log PolicyD) = 1.157

4) Students applying to a selecting department are less likely to enter DU as an ungraduated as compare to students applying to a recruiting department (-19%; 5% Significance Level).

Overall, from point of application to entrance and for the whole dataset, ethnicity appears to play a significant role as to whether a student ends up entering DU as an undergraduate student. The departmental choice is also a significant factor in determining entrance to DU and the region to a lesser extent.

Model 2: Offer

This model estimates the change in odds for contextual students receiving an offer after the change in policy controlling for socio-economic status, ethnicity, home location, first generation students, A Level points predicted.

Hypothesis 2: The odds of a contextual student receiving an offer of an undergraduate place at Durham University has improved as a result of the new policy implementation in 2019.

Result 2: Since the centralisation of admissions, contextual students are 72% more likely to receive an offer to study as an undergraduate at Durham University[3]. This increase in the likelihood of contextual students receiving an undergraduate offer since admissions centralisation indicates a substantial shift in admissions practices. This significant result suggests that Durham's policy to widen participation through increased offers is being effectively implemented. By improving offer rates, the university is addressing a key barrier to access for underrepresented students. However, while this is a necessary first step, offer-making alone does not guarantee enrolment or inclusion. To convert offers into acceptances—particularly firm choices—Durham must also consider how institutional culture, student support, and perceptions of "fit" influence contextual applicants' decisions.

In addition, since the policy change in 2019:

1) Students whose parents fall under the small employers category were less likely to receive an offer of a place than those who parents were from the higher managerial category (-5%; 5% Significance Level).

[3] = Exp (Log W7 interact + log PolicyD) = 1.718

2) Asian students are 5% more likely to receive an offer of a place than White students after the policy change (5%; 5% Significance Level).
3) Students from London and the North East were more likely to receive an offer compared to students from the South-East (London 4%; North-East 12%; 5% Significance Level).
4) Students from Yorkshire and the Humber were less likely to receive an offer compared to students from the South East (-4%; 5% Significance Level).
5) Students applying to a selecting department are less likely to enter DU as an ungraduated as compare to students applying to a recruiting department (-34%; 5% Significance Level).

Therefore this model also demonstrates that chance of receiving an offer is affected by ethnicity, region, SES and departmental choice and not necessarily just the increased offer rate for contextual students.

Model 3a: Firm-Acceptance

This is the odds of a contextual student firm-accepting an offer once made and entering DU as an undergraduate.

Hypothesis 3a: The odds of a contextual applicant firm-accepting a place as an undergraduate at Durham University has improved since the implementation of the new policy in 2019.

Result 3a: The odds of a contextual student firm-accepting a place as an undergraduate has increased by 18% since the centralisation of admissions[4]. This result however was not significant. The 18% increase in the odds of contextual students firm-accepting places since admissions centralisation suggests a positive trend, but the lack of statistical significance limits confident interpretation. This may indicate modest improvements in perceptions of Durham among contextual applicants, yet not strong enough to suggest meaningful change. It is possible that while more contextual students receive offers, uncertainty about belonging, support, or value alignment persists. The non-significant result highlights the need for further investigation into the qualitative experiences shaping firm choices, and suggests that increasing offer rates alone may not be sufficient to shift firm-acceptance behaviour among underrepresented groups.

[4] = Exp (Log W7 interact + log PolicyD) = 1.180

However, since the centralisation of admissions in 2019:

1) Students from all ethnicities are less likely to firm-accept an offer as an undergraduate as compared to White students (Asian -18%, Black -8%, Mixed -4%, Other -13%; all 5% Significance Level).
2) Students from London, Northern Ireland, South West and Wales were all less likely to firm-accept an offer than applicants from the South-East (London -7%; Northern Ireland -11%, South West -5%, Wales -6%; all 5% Significance Level).
3) Students from the North East, West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber were all more likely to firm-accept an offer compared to students from the South East (North East 15%; West Midlands 1%; Yorkshire and the Humber 6%; all 5% Significance Level.
4) Students applying to a selecting department are more likely to firm-accept DU as an undergraduate as compared to students applying to a recruiting department (23%; 5% Significance Level).

Ethnicity, region and departmental choice all have a significant effect on whether an applicant firm-accepts an offer of a place at Durham University.

Model 3b: Insurance-Acceptance

This is the odds of a contextual student insurance-accepting an offer once made and entering DU as an undergraduate.

Hypothesis 3b: The odds of a contextual applicant insurance-accepting a place as an undergraduate at Durham University has improved since the implementation of the new policy in 2019.

Result 3b: The odds of a contextual student insurance-accepting a place as an undergraduate has increased by 21% since the centralisation of admissions (5% Significance Level)[5]. The 21% increase in the odds of contextual students insurance-accepting places at Durham suggests that while centralised admissions have improved offer rates, perceptions of institutional "fit" remain a barrier. Contextual students may view Durham as academically prestigious but culturally unwelcoming, aligning with theories of habitus and social mismatch. This trend indicates that widening participation efforts may succeed in access but fall short in fostering

[5] Exp (Log W7 interact + log PolicyD) = 1.208

inclusion. Additionally, students may strategically use Durham as a secure backup while prioritising institutions they perceive as more supportive or socially aligned. Thus, offer-making alone does not guarantee meaningful progress in equity or student belonging.

In addition, since the centralisation of admissions in 2019:

1) Asian students are more likely to insurance-accept a place than their white counterparts (10%; 5% Significance Level).
2) Students applying to a selecting department are less likely to insurance-accept DU as an undergraduate as compared to students applying to a recruiting department (-12%; 5% Significance Level).

Ethnicity and departmental choice have a significant impact on insurance choice acceptance at undergraduate level.

Model 4: Acceptance conditional on offer

This is the odds of a contextual student entering DU as an undergraduate, conditional on an offer having been made.

Hypothesis 4: The odds of entering as an undergraduate at Durham University has improved since the implementation of the new policy in 2019.

Result 4: Once an offer has been made, contextual students are 2% less likely to enter DU as an undergraduate since centralisation of admissions[6]. This result demonstrates that despite increased offers for contextual students, these students are not selecting Durham, either as we see through selecting Durham as an insurance choice. That's to say a student will only come to Durham if they fail to meet the grades of their first choice HEI. As contextual students are usually in receipt of lower graded offers at most HEIs and are applying to elite HEIs such as Durham, they are likely to be predicted high grades and meet them. These students will therefore not enter Durham as an undergraduate and despite increased offers from Durham, the entrant pool will not change significantly.

In addition since the centralisation of admissions in 2019:

[6] = Exp (Log W7 interact + log PolicyD) = 0.983

1) Students from Asian, Black and Mixed-race backgrounds are less likely than White students to enter DU as an undergraduate having been made an offer (Asian -27%;, Black -25%; Mixed -13%; all 5% Significance Level).
2) Students from the North East are more likely to enter DU as an undergraduate having been offered a place compared to those from the South East (5%; 5% Significance Level).
3) Applicants from London, Northern Ireland and the South West are all less likely to enter DU as undergraduates having been offered a place compared to those from the South East (London -13%; Northern Ireland -15%; South West -11%; all 5% Significance Level).

Ethnicity and Region have a significant impact on entrance to DU at undergraduate level.

Although each of these models show the impact at each admissions point for Contextual Students, it shows that there are a variety of factors that affect the application which are out of control of the change in policy. By performing DiD analysis, other possible cofounding factors are removed and the policy effect isolated.

Model 5

The odds of a contextual student entering a selecting department at undergraduate level. (DiD).

Difference In Difference Analysis

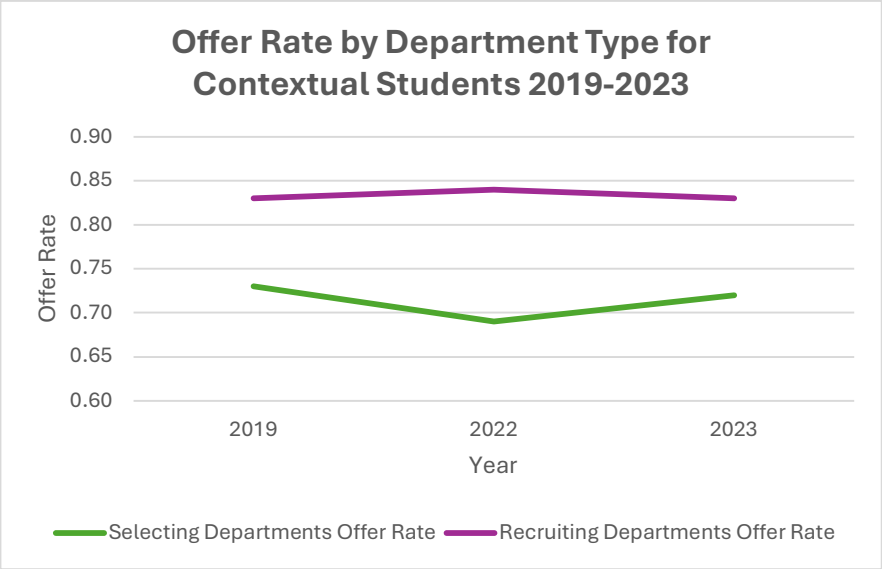

Figure 22: Offer Rate by Department Type for Contextual Students 2019-2023

	Model 5 Offer	
	OR	**SE**
Recruiting/Selecting Department	0.359 ***	0.015
A Level Points Predicted	1.330 ***	0.009
Policy Dummy	5.323 ***	0.454
W8 (Department Type & Policy Dummy)	0.605 ***	0.059
Cons	0.037 ***	0.004
n	18,664	
LR chi2(27)	3374.42	
Prob > chi2	0.0000	
Pseudo R2	0.1407	

Table 19: Difference-in-Difference Model Output

Odds ratio of offer receipt for selecting vs. recruiting departments, among Contextual applicants after the 2019 policy change (Policyd = 1)

$$OR_{Policyd=1,RS=1/\ Policyd=1,RS=0} = \frac{Odds_{Policyd=1,RS=1}}{Odds_{Policyd=1,RS=0}}$$

Hypothesis 5: For selecting departments, the odds of a contextual flag student receiving an offer has increased after the new policy was implemented in 2019.

Result 5: This model uses data for contextual students only. In this subset of data, 83% of these students were white, 30% from the North-East and 60% from POLAR4 Quintile 2. Contextual students applying to selecting departments were disadvantaged by the change to centralised admissions. This DiD result shows that contextual students applying to selecting departments were 40%[7] less likely to receive an offer after centralised admissions, compared to those applying to recruiting departments. This suggests that the centralisation process may have uneven effects across departmental types, reinforcing existing stratifications. While the policy aimed to increase fairness, selecting departments—typically more competitive—appear to resist broad inclusion, maintaining higher thresholds that disadvantage contextual applicants. This highlights a key limitation of centralised admissions: without coordinated equity goals across departments, institutional-level reforms may inadvertently reproduce internal hierarchies that restrict access to high-status academic fields.

It is harder to get an offer from a selecting department because demand exceeds available places. This leads to greater competition among applicants, meaning higher entry requirements and more selective admissions. In contrast, recruiting departments often lower thresholds to fill places, making offers more accessible to a wider range of students. Contextual students may find it harder to gain offers from selecting departments because high demand intensifies competition. Despite universities' commitments to widening participation, admissions decisions in these departments often favour applicants with stronger academic profiles. As a result, contextual factors may carry less weight where entry requirements are especially competitive.

Results Summary

Despite centralising admissions in addition to contextual offers, Durham's fundamental and realised niche both have remained stable. These organisational responses to the WP target,

[7] 1-Oddsratio for W8 interaction term

have been over-ridden by the social values and needs of the audience, with the latter out-powering any effect of the former. Therefore the niche width remains the same.

Applicant and Entrant Trends (2010–2023):

- Despite improved offer rates, contextual applicants remain underrepresented in the overall entrant pool. By 2023, they made up 18% of Durham's undergraduate intake, a modest rise from 13% in 2010. In real terms, this equated to just 512 contextual students, signalling slow progress toward widening participation.
- Asian student representation among entrants doubled from 3% in 2010 to 6% in 2023, suggesting growing ethnic diversity, albeit from a low baseline. However, this group still forms a small minority within the total student body.
- The majority of undergraduate applicants continue to come from high socioeconomic backgrounds. The proportion of applicants from Higher and Lower Managerial occupations increased from 59% in 2010 to 67% in 2023, reinforcing the persistent dominance of middle- and upper-class applicants.
- Familial higher education background remains a key access determinant. The proportion of applicants with one or more parents who had attended university increased slightly, from 79% to 80%, indicating enduring intergenerational advantages in access to elite institutions.
- White applicants have consistently made up 75–80% of successful UK applicants, reflecting a stable demographic pattern and suggesting that widening participation efforts have not significantly diversified the ethnic composition of the entrant pool.
- While Asian applicant numbers have increased, reaching 12% of the applicant pool by 2023, this shift has not been matched by a proportionate rise in successful entrants, indicating a potential offer or acceptance gap.
- The proportion of independent school applicants has remained steady at 34% annually, a figure well above the national average for school type. These applicants continue to demonstrate high firm-choice acceptance rates, suggesting a stronger alignment between expectations, cultural fit, and institutional targeting.
- Geographical concentration of demand has also remained largely unchanged. Applicants from London and the South East of England accounted for 36% of the total home applicant pool each year, highlighting regional disparities in both outreach effectiveness and student aspiration.

Statistical and Model Findings:

- Since the centralisation of undergraduate admissions in 2019, contextual applicants have become 16% more likely to enter Durham University, when considered in terms of raw application-to-entry conversion. This suggests a surface-level improvement in access for disadvantaged applicants.
- A more substantial policy impact is observed at the offer stage: contextual students are now 72% more likely to receive an offer to study as undergraduates. This indicates a significant shift in offer-making behaviour, possibly reflecting institutional alignment with widening participation goals post-centralisation.
- However, the benefits of centralisation are not evenly distributed across department type. Contextual applicants to selecting departments were 40% less likely to receive an offer compared to those applying to recruiting departments after centralisation. This disparity highlights that department-level selection criteria may still act as barriers, even within a centralised admissions framework.
- When examining student choice after offers are made, no significant improvement is seen in the firm-acceptance rate. Contextual students are not more likely to list Durham as their first choice, suggesting issues beyond offer-making—such as perceptions of institutional culture, cost, or fit—continue to influence applicant decisions.
- Conversely, the insurance-acceptance rate increased by 21% for contextual students since centralisation. This indicates that while Durham may not be viewed as a first-choice destination, it is increasingly being considered as a viable backup option.
- Importantly, once an offer is made, contextual students are now 2% less likely to actually enter Durham than before centralisation. This suggests a decline in conversion from offer to enrolment, raising questions about whether admissions policy reform alone can overcome deeper social or institutional barriers.
- While multivariate logistic regression suggests that offer rates for contextual applicants improved due to the centralised policy, the Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis paints a more complex picture, indicating a net negative policy effect on the probability of receiving an offer when comparing across time and departments. This contradiction implies that policy changes may redistribute opportunity unevenly, and improvements in one area may be offset by declines elsewhere.

While the centralisation of admissions has increased offer rates and marginally improved entry rates for contextual applicants, the broader impact on social mobility remains limited. Entrant

and applicant pools still reflect entrenched privilege, with dominance from high-SES, White, and independent school applicants. The policy's uneven effects—particularly at the departmental level—suggest that structural reforms alone are insufficient. Contextual applicants are less likely to accept offers, often placing Durham as an insurance choice. Without addressing perceptions of exclusivity and broader systemic inequalities, efforts to widen participation risk being neutralised by applicant behaviour shaped by longstanding social stratification and cultural barriers.

Chapter 7: Discussion: Research Objectives Three & Four

Research Objective Three

Investigate the persistence of Durham University's niche through Organisational Ecology and Blau Space theory.

- Using both conceptual and empirical analysis, determine how Organisational Ecology and Blau Space theory be adapted to explain institutional positioning in UK HE.

Interpretation

Using the theory of the Blau Space to the UK HE application process provides valuable insight into why some institutions—such as Durham University—continue to face challenges in improving their WP outcomes despite efforts to increase accessibility. Within the Blau Space, individuals who share similar socio-demographic characteristics are more likely to be embedded within communication networks that reinforce common values, social preferences and therefore institutional preferences. Where an HEI aligns with those shared values, it becomes more frequently discussed, recommended, and ultimately chosen—leading to the exclusion of other institutions that do not match the prevailing tastes of that network. The findings from this research clearly show that Durham University is an institution aligned with the values, expectations, and communication networks of higher SES, White, Independent School communities. This is not just about access to better grades or extracurriculars—it's about who talks about Durham, who feels like they belong there, and who sees it as "for them." Blau Space theory helps us understand that these social environments aren't random: people with shared backgrounds circulate the same kinds of knowledge and reinforce the same norms. Durham is a positive, affirmed choice within these networks. However, this creates problems for attracting a different audience, such as WP students, as within their networks Durham may not be mentioned, or maybe mentioned in a negative light, making it unappealing to such students. As mentioned earlier in this research Durham University has made consistent effort to improve access for contextual students. Centralised admissions policies are improving fairness and while policies can fix fairness, thus removing structural barriers to entry, they are the wrong kind of engagement to ange appeal and the niche, and niche width has therefore remained stable. Since 2019, centralisation and contextual admissions have increased offer rates for contextual applicants and also by widening the definition of contextual, it shows that the university is trying

to level the playing field. However, this hasn't translated into more entrants from contextual backgrounds and certain socio-demographic groups remain underrepresented. The gap is widening at the point of enrolment, not narrowing. While the centralisation of admissions at Durham has improved operational efficiency—ensuring applicants receive offers more promptly and simultaneously—this change may unintentionally reinforce existing patterns of choice. Applicants are now better positioned to assess all their options at once, making decisions based not on delays or administrative barriers, but on perceived fit. In this context, social network messages about cultural alignment and belonging at elite institutions like Durham may play an even more decisive role. Although the faster process supports the Schwartz Report's call for greater fairness and transparency, it may diverge from widening participation goals by leaving dominant perceptions of institutional fit—and the social reproduction they enable—largely intact. This reflects the OET and Blau Space literature, that operational changes (such as centralisation of admissions) signal modernisation and responsiveness but are unlikely to shift demand across social segments without a corresponding change in the university's cultural messaging and targeted outreach. This research suggests that getting an offer isn't the issue anymore, but feeling like Durham is "for me" still is. In Blau Space terms, Durham is still outside the cultural orbit of many lower SES applicants, so even when they get an offer, they don't see it as a natural fit. This has been highlighted in the recent "Belonging @Durham" report where first generation students and those from lower parental SES feel less comfortable and less included in a variety of aspects of Durham University life (Hampshire, Lewis, Marley, *et al*. 2024 p.3). For elite HEIs like Durham, a social and emotional disconnection from the institution remains a more challenging issue to overcome. Operational change without cultural transformation has limited effect.

Limited Attraction

Durham University's undergraduate applicant pool has remained remarkably stable over time when analysed through key socio-demographic variables, such as SES, parental education, school type, ethnicity, and region. Despite a succession of WP policies and outreach interventions, the institution continues to attract a relatively narrow audience segment—largely socially advantaged and educationally privileged. In fact, during the period of this study, the proportion of applicants from the two highest SES categories increased, suggesting that Durham's institutional appeal has not only endured among elite groups but may have intensified. A 30% rise in applicants from higher managerial backgrounds, for instance, was almost entirely offset by a 28% decline in lower managerial applicants. This indicates that

Durham's audience space is not expanding evenly, but rather becoming more concentrated—a classic marker of niche reinforcement in Organisational Ecology Theory.

School type offers further evidence of this pattern. Applications from independent schools have increased over the period, as have those from academies—particularly converter academies, which are more likely to be situated in affluent areas and to attract middle-class families via catchment-based residential stratification. As discussed in the literature review, school type functions as a powerful proxy for social class and access to cultural capital. In ecological terms, it reflects the clustering of institutional appeal within a narrow social position within the Blau Space. Durham's niche, as mapped in this social space, remains strongly aligned with high-capital, low-risk applicants who are already predisposed to succeed within elite academic environments.

Patterns of firm-choice acceptance further illustrate this inequality. Applicants from independent, grammar, and academy schools—who collectively represent around two-thirds of the entrant pool—are not only more likely to receive offers but also more likely to accept them as their first choice. This reflects national data showing that such students tend to have higher predicted grades and greater chance in meeting offer conditions (Wonkhe, 2022). This further entrenches their presence at selective institutions like Durham. This trend may be in part due to the emergence of a displacement effect. As elite universities like Oxford and Cambridge face increasing pressure to admit more contextual applicants, some high-performing students from affluent backgrounds are now turning to Durham as an alternative. Durham's visual and structural resemblance to Oxbridge—its collegiate system, historic architecture, and reputation for academic rigour—makes it an attractive substitute for those seeking a similar cultural and social environment. Therefore with cultural similarities, Durham is not too far positioned from Oxbridge in the Blau Space and can be seen as the next best institution for students who have been edged out of other elite universities but still seek a socially and symbolically prestigious alternative where they feel they fit.

There is some evidence of demographic diversification, but it remains limited. While the proportion of white applicants has declined slightly, there has been a modest rise in applications from mixed-race and Asian backgrounds. This reflects broader trends in educational aspiration among minority ethnic groups and supports the "immigrant paradigm" thesis—wherein education is valued as a route to self-improvement and economic mobility.

However, many Asian applicants continue to accept Durham as an insurance choice rather than a firm one, suggesting that while the institution holds symbolic appeal, it is not yet positioned as a primary destination for these groups. The reasons for rejecting Durham University offers is investigated each year by the admissions team. As figure 8 details, the idea of a bad fit accounts as a concern in around 20% of respondents and is the fourth highest category. In fact, it could be taken that it is the key variable which Durham as control over as geography and league table rankings are both out of their control. Clearly "fit" is a key issue for all applicants.

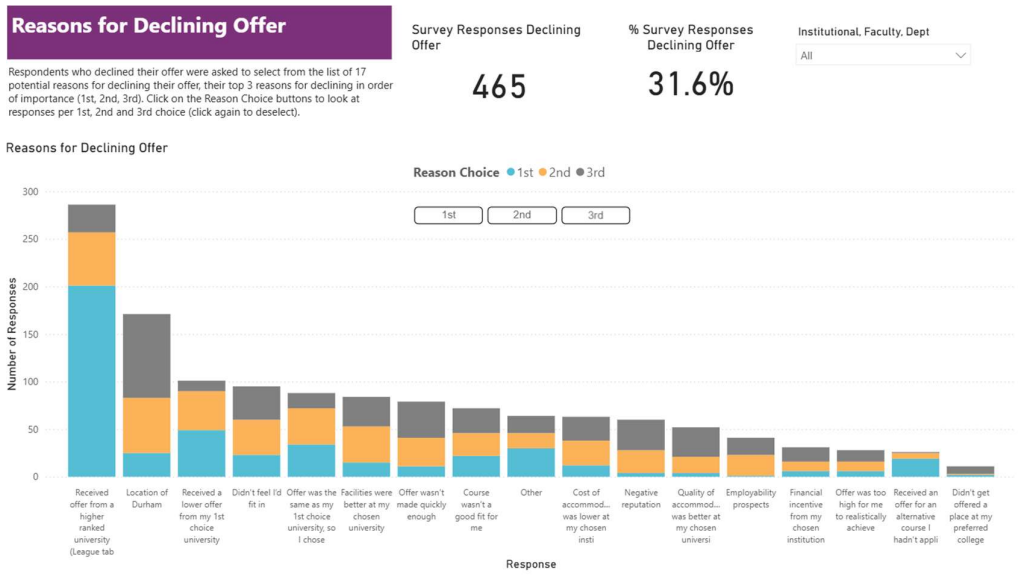

Figure 23: Reasons for declining Durham University by undergraduate applicants 2023

For BAME students, a "lack of fit" with the institution was in the top five reasons for rejecting an offer (17.71%) in the 2022-entry year. Notably this was not a concern for white applicants who turned down places at Durham and did not feature in their top reasons at all.

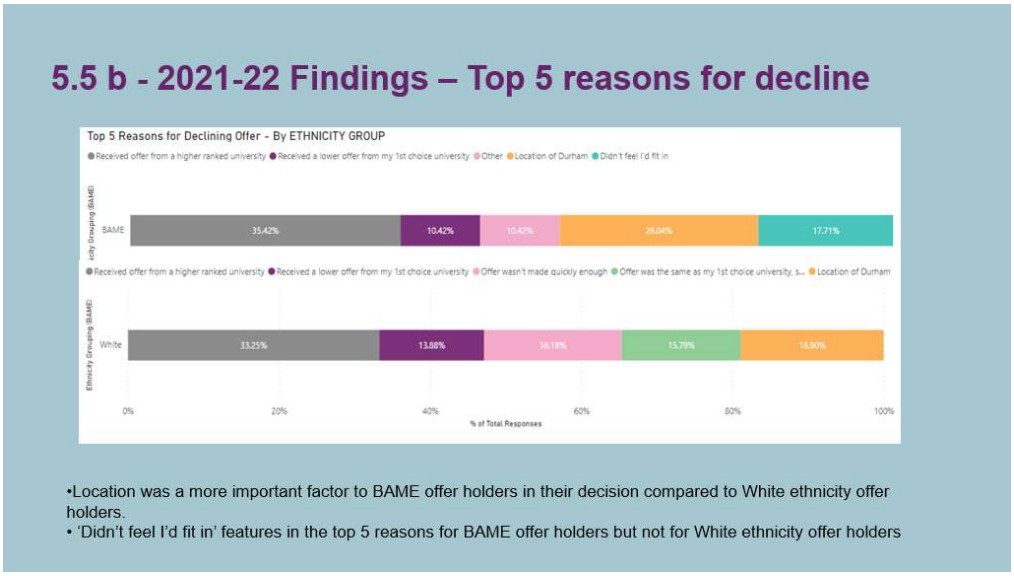

Figure 24: Reasons for declining Durham University by Ethnicity for undergraduate applicants 2021-22

This reveals a layered positionality within the Blau space, where cultural capital is valued differently across ethnic and class groups, but where the perceived prestige hierarchy of institutions remains largely intact.

Even first-generation status—a commonly used WP indicator—shows limited change. The number of first-generation applicants has remained flat, with a slight post-COVID-19 decline. While this may be partially explained by the growth of alternative pathways into higher education, such as degree apprenticeships, it also indicates that Durham has not succeeded in reshaping its image or institutional offer in a way that resonates with students whose families lack prior university experience. Though, to be fair, as HE participation has increased, the number of first generation students will naturally decline.

Taken together, these findings point to a strategic impasse. Durham remains anchored to its historic audience and brand, occupying a highly stable yet socially exclusive niche in the UK HE ecosystem. In Organisational Ecology terms, Durham's survival strategy appears to rely on preserving a stable audience segment with strong performance predictability and low institutional risk—at the cost of broader demographic reach and increasing niche width. In both ecological and spatial terms, Durham's adaptation remains conservative: its audience space is stable, its niche tightly bounded, and its identity resistant to diversification. Meaningful transformation will require more than policy tweaks or marketing campaigns—it demands a fundamental realignment of institutional purpose with societal need.

Low Conversion Rate

The centralisation of undergraduate admissions at Durham University aimed to standardise decision-making and promote fairness. Yet, contrary to expectations, the policy has led to a modest but significant decline—approximately 2%—in the probability of contextual applicants receiving offers. Having confirmed this result through DiD analysis, which aims to isolate the policy effect alone, this decline can be attributed to the policy. From the perspective of Organisational Ecology Theory, this outcome reflects the unintended consequences of an institutional response to the environment, a mis-placed belief that a policy will change audience appeal and broaden the niche. However, rather than broadening the undergraduate realised niche, centralisation appears to have narrowed it, at least in the short term. The conversion rate of contextual students from offer to entrant stage still remains low and operational efforts to shift this dynamic face resistance rooted in the cultural codes and audience expectations that define Durham's niche. Despite extensive engagement activities—such as school visits, access programmes, and marketing campaigns—there is limited evidence that these efforts have translated into substantial increases in applications from working-class or otherwise underrepresented groups. The university's WP initiatives appear fragmented and reactive—characterised more by compliance than by mission-led transformation. If the intrinsic appeal of Durham remains unchanged, then contextual admissions and outreach alone cannot compensate for deeper issues of perception, fit, and accessibility. Without a willingness to recalibrate both strategic priorities and cultural assumptions, Durham is unlikely to alter its audience composition in any meaningful way leaving policy intervention as purely symbolic.

This indicates organisational inertia is present at Durham and decision-making is hampered by complex layers of management, lengthy approval processes, and risk-averse leadership. Durham's brand has made it successful and has kept its products in demand, but equally this prevents social change and progress and could lead to the HEI becoming less relevant to its environment, and ultimately increases mortality hazard. This balancing act of reputation versus relevance will inevitably lead to strategic conflict at senior levels—particularly around Durham's desired image and market positioning—which will hinder consistent policy direction. Indeed, part of Durham's appeal lies in the cultural capital it confers upon its graduates—a form of distinction rooted in exclusivity. Altering the student composition may be perceived as threatening to this dynamic. The fear that admitting students with lower grades (even if

contextualised) equates in some people's minds to lowering standards which could affect brand and reputation. However, this reflects a mistaken but persistent conflation of merit with privilege.

Many of the institution's strategic responses in relation to WP remain short-termist and superficial—often amounting to a tick-box approach to WP, reinforcing it as not a strategic priority for the institution which is further illustrated by the expansion of international applicants at undergraduate level. These students – who pay unregulated fees – illustrate a strategic trade-off, signalling maximisation of income as a clear strategic priority for Durham. In ecological terms this is resource maximisation from the environment, but it is important to be mindful that all resources are limited and each organisation can only control a certain amount of each within their ecosystem. As discussed in the recommendations though, income through a market niche can be secure and it is not targeting every bit of income that is important, but controlling the income from your market segment is. The current rather myopic approach to financing will leave the university struggling when demand from international students decreases as is already being witnessed.

At Durham, these competing internal strategic visions and bureaucratic friction have led to risk-averse decision-making, stalling bold reform. Durham has a choice to make, brand or equity. But, perhaps it does not have to be to one extreme or the other. Expanding access and broadening the niche could well be achieved, but there will be limits and it will be very unlikely that for elite HEIs social equality will truly ever happen. This will be discussed in the recommendations chapter.

Limited Capacity

A third factor influencing the challenges of diversifying Durham University's undergraduate applicant and entrant pool is the limited physical capacity of the city itself. Durham is a small historic city with a constrained housing market and limited infrastructure to support large-scale student population growth. As student numbers have increased nationally, Durham has faced unique challenges in expanding in line with these trends. Local residents have expressed frustration with the growing student population, citing rising house prices and the displacement of long-term residents from the city centre. The seasonal nature of student residency also disrupts local economies—businesses struggle during non-term periods due to reduced footfall, making it harder for them to survive year-round. In response to these pressures, the

local council has introduced planning and housing restrictions, which further limit the university's ability to expand accommodation or facilities. As a result, Durham is unlikely to grow its undergraduate intake significantly, regardless of demand. If demand for university places continues to rise nationally, Durham's market share may actually decline relative to other institutions with greater capacity for growth. Conversely, if national demand falls, Durham's relatively small size means that any increase in market share would be marginal. These structural and spatial constraints complicate efforts to broaden access and diversify the student population, as expanding outreach or offer-making alone cannot overcome the physical limits imposed by the city's size and infrastructure.

Summary

Durham University's challenges in WP are best understood through the lens of Blau Space theory and Organisational Ecology Theory. Within the Blau Space, organisations attract applicants from similar socio-demographic backgrounds, creating clusters in which communication networks reinforce shared values and institutional preferences. Durham aligns strongly with high-SES, independent-school-educated, white applicants whose networks affirm it as a prestigious and fitting choice. For WP students, however, Durham is often absent or negatively perceived within their networks, limiting its appeal even when increased offers are made. This dynamic helps explain the persistently low conversion rate from offer to acceptance among underrepresented groups.

Despite efforts to improve access—such as centralised admissions and expanded contextual criteria—Durham's realised niche remains narrow and demographically stable, dominated by high-capital applicants. Organisational inertia, leadership turnover, and risk aversion have hindered strategic coherence, and outreach has not significantly diversified the applicant pool. Instead, the university has focused on international recruitment, prioritising financial gain over equity—an example of resource maximisation within OET.

Social reproduction is reinforced by Durham's Oxbridge-like identity, making it an attractive fallback for affluent applicants displaced by increasing WP policies at other elite institutions. Meanwhile, structural barriers—like limited city infrastructure and housing capacity—constrain student number growth at Durham and therefore limit diversification efforts. Ultimately, Durham's appeal is culturally embedded within social networks which are out of the control of the HEI itself. Without deep cultural transformation, policy alone cannot shift who feels they

belong at Durham. For meaningful change, the university needs to reimagine its identity, recalibrate its niche, and align strategic intent with long-term societal relevance. Still, the outcome may be a carefully managed compromise—incremental broadening of access that satisfies regulatory expectations without unsettling the social and cultural foundations on which Durham's reputation rests.

Implications

Methodological

The key methodological implication of this thesis is the urgent need for stable, longitudinal datasets to study medium- and long-term causal mechanisms in HE. Robust longitudinal research depends on consistent data collection over time, yet current datasets for undergraduate admissions are often fragmented or inaccessible with the main data holder, UCAS not only withholding detailed analyses but also taking steps to prevent independent researchers from accessing individual-level application and admissions data (Boliver 2015b p.16). In contrast, Scandinavian countries enable research through integrated personal data systems, balancing accessibility with privacy. Denmark and Sweden use central registries; Finland legislated for secondary data use; Norway ensures strict legal compliance, models which support innovation while aligning with GDPR (Slavnic 2017; Lähesmaa 2019). There is also so much to learn from commercial sectors like Tesco or Marks and Spencers, where consumers routinely exchange data for rewards, and businesses leverage this data across repeated transactions to develop long-term strategies. In higher education, however, the relationship is typically one-off— with the total fertility rate in England and Wales being 1.44 children per woman (Office for National Statistics 2024), parents only have a couple of interactions as customers with universities—so institutions are less invested in long-term data insights. Consequently, critical contextual information, such as social background and broader social positioning (i.e. position within the Blau Space), is often overlooked. HEIs must prioritise the collection and integration of consistent social data to better understand student pathways. This necessitates a methodological shift—towards the systematic assembly and long-term preservation of comprehensive datasets—as a foundation for generating meaningful, generalisable findings. This argument aligns with and reinforces the conclusions drawn by Brooks and Timms (Brooks & Timms 2024 p.13).

Theoretical

The findings of this thesis contribute meaningfully to theoretical frameworks concerned with organisational behaviour and social stratification in higher education. Primarily, the evidence supports Niche Theory, demonstrating that Durham University has maintained a stable realised niche despite shifting policy environments and WP initiatives. This aligns with organisational ecology's central premise: institutions occupy and defend ecological spaces defined by both internal characteristics and external selection pressures. Notably, this thesis extends Niche Theory by demonstrating how the realised niche is not solely a product of institutional strategy, but also heavily shaped by audience preferences—specifically, applicants' social and cultural perceptions of fit. This dynamic affirms the importance of the "Fits Like a Glove" (FLAG) framework, as developed by (Allen 2002), which emphasises the subjective sense of compatibility between prospective students and institutions.

Moreover, the findings of this thesis lends support to Blau Space theory, illustrating how classed social networks continue to reproduce elite pathways through informational transmission and spatial proximity. Information about where "people like us" go continues to circulate within high-status communities with little transmission outside, reinforcing Durham's appeal among traditional applicant groups. These findings also echo elements of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, although this thesis does not rely on that framework centrally. Finally, the thesis reinforces the argument that policies alone—without corresponding shifts in cultural signals and institutional identity—are insufficient to dismantle long-standing social processes in elite university access. In this way, the study offers both sector-specific insights and broader contributions to theories of social reproduction and organisational positioning.

Practical

While the centralisation of undergraduate admissions at Durham University has not significantly altered the level of interest from contextual students, it has nonetheless delivered several important benefits. The process has become considerably more transparent, ensuring that policies are applied consistently to all contextual applicants. Furthermore, operational efficiency has improved, with, anecdotally, faster response times to applications and queries compared to the previous decentralised approach. Financially, the admissions process is now more likely to be cost-effective as administrative staff time is often cheaper than Academic staff time. Academics have also benefited from the shift, as they are now able to dedicate more time

to research and teaching, focusing on the University's core mission and leveraging their expertise more effectively.

A key challenge in diversifying Durham University's applicant pool lies in the institution's public image and how it is perceived within social networks. The way in which the University is presented influences communication strategies, shaping its audience and, consequently, determining who finds it appealing. Without addressing this fundamental aspect, even substantial efforts in contextual admissions will struggle to translate into meaningful increases in applicant diversity. The question that arises is whether Durham University can—and should—reshape its intrinsic appeal to broaden participation. This is entirely within Durham's gift. The following section will explore this issue in depth, examining strategies for fostering a more inclusive perception of the institution and assessing their feasibility and potential impact.

Research Objective Four

Identify strategies to enhance equitable access and participation in Durham University and the broader UK HE sector.

- Determine how Durham University could strengthen, adapt, or reposition its market niche to support strategic enrolment objectives.
- Explore the role of marketing and engagement strategies in achieving this objective.
- Examine how institutional branding, niche positioning, and social networks influence access and participation.

Recommendations

For The HE Sector: Aligning Strategy with Reality

The results of this research hold important implications for HEIs far beyond the example of WP detailed in this thesis. While WP initiatives focus on improving access for underrepresented students, the deeper insights uncovered here extend to fundamental concerns about institutional strategy, market positioning, and the financial sustainability of HEIs. Understanding market segmentation, niche appeal, and audience targeting plays a pivotal role in shaping an institution's income generation and expenditure. These factors determine how an HEI sustains itself financially, manages operational costs, and sets priorities for long-term sustainability.
In an increasingly competitive HE environment, institutions must assess their areas of control and influence. While some aspects—such as external regulatory changes or broader sector-wide shifts—are beyond their control, universities can make deliberate strategic choices to

adapt to shifting realities. A more refined understanding of what can be influenced and where universities should concentrate their efforts is essential to ensuring the maintenance of a high quality education along with financial sustainability.

Limits of Control

One of the critical insights from this research is that not all elements influencing an HEI's trajectory are within its control. This is absolutely crucial both for strategy setting locally at HEIs and nationally at a policy-level. National policy changes, government funding allocations, and demographic shifts are forces shaping the sector, but individual institutions must recognise their boundaries and focus their resources on areas where intervention can yield results. Universities must therefore make intentional choices, weighing the benefits and risks of various strategic directions. This includes decisions on admissions policies, programme design, institutional branding, and student engagement strategies. By positioning themselves within a specific market segment, universities can optimise their appeal, improve financial sustainability, and mitigate risks associated with broader sector-wide changes.

Once an HEI has a clear grasp of what is within its control and what is shaped by external forces, it can then position itself within the higher education landscape in a strategic way to make the most of the environmental resource they have access to. Understanding its unique niche allows an institution to refine its offerings, optimise engagement, and proactively shape the sector rather than simply reacting to change. By aligning this niche with audience demand, financial sustainability, and institutional strengths, universities can ensure long-term success while contributing meaningfully to the broader educational environment.

Data-driven Institutional Priorities

A fundamental issue within HE strategy development is that while large amounts of data exist, much of it remains underutilised or disjointed, limiting each institution's ability to make informed decisions. Universities collect extensive datasets on student demographics, application trends, retention rates, and graduate outcomes, yet these data points are often fragmented across departments and underleveraged in forming cohesive strategies. The sector must commit to better data collection and analysis, ensuring institutions have access to reliable insights that can directly inform admissions, recruitment, programme development, and financial planning

Moreover, HEIs must set realistic strategies based on what they can control. Market trends and environmental forces—such as demographic shifts, policy changes, and broader economic conditions—are beyond the reach of individual universities. Rather than reacting to sector-wide transformations in an ad hoc manner, institutions should focus on optimising their internal structures, ensuring they make the most of their niche position in the education market while maintaining operational agility.

A Collective Approach

One of the most critical insights from this research is that not all universities should be competing for the same student demographic in the same way. No two students are alike and this diversity in student needs to be met by a diversity in HEIs. Diversity is the lifeblood of ecosystems, and the HE ecosystem is no different. Every HEI serves a different segment of the HE market, and success depends on embracing institutional diversity to match student diversity rather than attempting to mimic the strategies of competitors.

Current policy on WP mandates that HEIs meet specific targets and criteria to secure government funding. However, this research calls for diversity in institutions to be allowed and this therefore raises concerns about the effectiveness of rigid target-setting imposed by the OfS. Currently and as demonstrated by this research, HEIs are held accountable for objectives they have limited chance of achieving. A more pragmatic approach recognises that each HEI caters for a specific market segment and therefore instead of viewing WP initiatives through a competitive lens, institutions should embrace a collaborative perspective, acknowledging their shared role in fostering greater access to HE. If an access programme at Durham University inspires an applicant to enrol at Newcastle University, this should still be regarded as a success for HE participation. Working together, rather than in isolation, strengthens the sector's social mission—ensuring more students, regardless of background, receive the opportunity to pursue HE in an environment that fits them and their needs, in order to optimise educational outcomes.

The sector is beginning to shift as regional targets are introduced, with, for example, the five HEIs in the North-East (Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside) collaborating on shared objectives, as outlined in Durham's latest APP (Durham University 2024). However, this research suggests that a more effective approach may be for institutions with similar market segments, that's to say audiences with similar needs and values —such as Russell Group universities—need to work together in setting and achieving their WP targets. This

approach would acknowledge the role of the social forces which shape HEI-demand, institutional positioning, and the cultural alignment between applicants and HEIs, allowing for more cohesive and impactful strategies.

For Durham University

Although the following recommendations are specific to Durham University, the principles could be applied to any elite HEI.

Embracing the Niche

One viable strategy for Durham, which suffers from both limited attraction and limited capacity, is to embrace a niche market positioning. Institutions that successfully differentiate themselves by focusing on a specific audience segment can streamline operations and reduce unnecessary expenditure. As shown by this research Durham University operates within a niche for its undergraduate market and other HEIs will have their own niches too. There are advantages to this approach which HEIs should consider which I detailed in my 2023 article *"Applying a data-driven niche market strategy to UK higher education":*

- **"Knowing it's audience better will allow an HEI to provide a better service, increase student satisfaction and create brand loyalty.** In a world with an ageing population and a population which has to up-skill regularly, creating this brand loyalty will result in customers for life. Bringing in one undergraduate and providing him/her with a good experience could mean a secure income stream for the following 40 years to meet their further training needs. Even at £1k every 5 years over a 40-year career that's a potential future income stream of £8k income per undergraduate over their career and when multiplied by the number of undergraduate entrants per year, the potential income stream quickly builds up. Viewed in combination with the Government's Lifelong Loan Entitlement which commences in 2025 (ref) this is a key income stream for HEIs to tap into.
- **If an HEI were to develop an expert reputation in a particular area, demand for places would continue due to the "expert" status and higher fees could also be charged.** Developing and maintaining this expert status will keep demand high and therefore build a reliable stream of income going forward.
- **In addition, a further beneficial effect would be to be able to direct financial spend to the areas which would lead to maximum added value for students.** If HEIs want to provide good value-for-money and good employability outcomes for students, they need to

understand the audience and spot the gaps between their audience's needs and pre-existing skills and what an HEI is offering and invest in the gap. This could be anything, for example enhancing workplace-related skills, building up industry-related networks or additional on-course support, all of which enhance employability. There is no point investing money if you do not know what is missing and therefore needed. This skills-focused approach will put better-equipped graduates into the job market, which among other things will strengthen an HEI's brand.

- **A secondary benefit to this kind of investment is that knowing where to invest will lead internally to a more focused approach to capital investment.** In technical terms this represents a move towards capital rationing, where facility or service improvements can be selected based on potential return. Better facilities and student experience will again increase demand for courses and strengthen the brand in the UK, again leading to a more secure source of income.
- **By serving a smaller audience, an organisation will gain a better understanding of their audience's needs and desires.** This will help to develop a personal connection which will enable the organisation to develop products and services better tailored to their audience's needs (Toften & Hammervoll 2013 p.281). This leads to more satisfied audience, creating brand loyalty and customers for life.
- **The niche approach enables introduction of a 'transition' approach in management which helps an organisation overcome structural issues within society** (Raven, Bosch & Weterings 2010 p.58). Research has shown that this approach combined with Strategic Niche Management can help an organisation address how it can better meet social needs and improve social equality (Raven, Bosch & Weterings 2010 p.59) by providing the right environment for social innovation (Raven, Bosch & Weterings 2010 p.63). Once a transition has been experimented with and reviewed, a cyclical process of establishing the transition area, developing support for the need, carrying out the experiment and reviewing, known as the Transition Management Cycle can lead to compound improvements (Raven, Bosch & Weterings 2010 p.67). This creates an organisation evolving to meet its audience's changing needs, keeping their offering relevant, their services in demand and income coming in.
- **The two-way dialogue between the organisation and its audience enhances organisational learning.** External feedback in combination with internal organisational learning (e.g. by refining internal processes) can prevent an organisation from falling into the competency trap (Levitt & March n.d. p.322) which could enhance an organisation's life expectancy. The competency trap occurs when organisations exhibit inertia, that is to say

they are stuck in a certain way of doing things and are slow to adapt to changes in the external environment. The focus for resources in such cases is on older products which leaves little time and money for the organisation to up-skill and design newer products which in turn can lead to a shorter organisational life expectancy.

- **Niche organisations build skills and specialist capabilities which the rest of the market cannot easily imitate, therefore protecting the niche from competitors** (Toften & Hammervoll 2013 p.281). In the long run smaller organisations are known to have a greater life expectancy (Carroll, Dobrev & Swaminathan 2002 p.261), therefore rendering size and competition irrelevant.
- **By focusing on a smaller portion of the market, an organisation can focus their products and services therefore building a reputation for being an expert in a particular field.** Having expert status is a key ingredient for organisational success as it often leads to increased social recognition and the possibility of charging premium prices (Moser 2017 p.676).
- **By only targeting a smaller section of the market there is less competition and marketing costs will be reduced**. Although this reduction in spend will be a small percentage of operating expenses, the money saved could be used more efficiently by investing in the areas of the organisation which could impact rankings such as NSS more as detailed in research by Langan (Langan & Harris 2019 p.1081).
- **The smaller the organisation, the higher the job satisfaction for employees which can be due to more informal relationships between managers and their staff and less organisational bureaucracy** (Goldschmidt & Chung 2001 p.50). This job satisfaction will in turn keep staff in their jobs for longer periods therefore retaining the tacit organisational knowledge and thus offering a better service to their audience and improved audience satisfaction, which in turn will keep demand and income high.
- **A niche approach brings a higher social status.** Social status in business can be achieved through imitation of a high-status product (Park 2000 pp.379 & 410), which increases demand and builds up a loyal audience. According to research by Podolny, the loyalties are so strong that the link between quality and status is blurred (Podolny 1993 p.835) which therefore means even if quality of the service or product drops, the brand loyalty will provide continued financial stability. This loyalty plays into the idea of Middle Status Conformity, a social concept of perceived quality where providers who are in the top or bottom of their sector can take more risks.

- **Part of the reason behind the success of a niche offering could be conspicuous consumption.** The theory states that an audience member is more likely to buy a niche (or branded) offering in an effort to differentiate themselves from their peers therefore using the offering to gain or strengthen a leadership role in their social environment (schaefers p 1819). Niche (branded) offerings have been shown to out-sell non-branded items within fashion (p340 souiden et al) and technology sectors (Bang & Oulfsen eg in scahefers) to enhance self-image and therefore conspicuous consumption should be considered as a key driver of demand (schaefers p 1085)" (Ayres 2024 p.185).

While moving toward greater control and niche positioning may require a shift toward private organisational models—less constrained by sector-wide regulations and more reliant on philanthropic funding, which is not yet embedded in UK culture—meaningful strategic change remains possible. Once the limits and possibilities of control and niche are understood, institutions can formulate focused strategies around them. But ultimately, effective strategies depend on robust data—without it, the potential for real and lasting change is significantly diminished.

Move the Niche

Beyond defining a niche and adopting it, HEIs could also consider how they engage with audiences to move the niche, understanding how much movement is possible. Taking inspiration from OET and the Blau Space, Durham University will likely have more success on expanding their niche in social groupings on the periphery of the current peak appeal. That's to say that while Durham will struggle to meet its POLAR4 Q5:1 ratio, they could still work to broaden their niche by increasing entrants from Q4 and Q3, or the middle-range of SES classifications. This is because these groups are socially closer to the peak appeal and would therefore share some of the social values with the those for whom Durham has a peak appeal. Also due to the weaknesses with the POLAR4 quintile, Durham could seek to use FSM or IMD measures to give a better picture of their niche which may assist in trying to shift it.

Broadening Durham University's niche in undergraduate admissions could yield several significant advantages. By fostering a more balanced student composition, the institution has the potential to strengthen its reputation as one that successfully combines academic excellence with accessibility. This dual emphasis may enhance its appeal to policymakers, funding bodies, and prospective applicants, positioning Durham as a leader in equitable

admissions without compromising its established standards of academic rigour. Furthermore, expanding admissions to social groups on the periphery of the university's current peak appeal could facilitate smoother integration and higher retention rates. Individuals from these neighbouring social backgrounds, sharing certain social values with Durham's traditional student profile, may experience fewer cultural and institutional barriers. As a result, they are likely to fit more easily into the academic and social environment, fostering a sense of belonging that contributes to student success and institutional stability.

Broadening this niche however, requires translating intrinsic appeal into actual appeal through a strategically crafted marketing approach. This transformation hinges on a bold and cohesive marketing strategy that not only identifies but actively cultivates connections with target demographics. By establishing clear, measurable marketing objectives, the institution can ensure its outreach efforts resonate effectively with prospective students, particularly those on the periphery of its existing appeal. Fundamental to this process is the use of robust data to guide decision-making, ensuring marketing efforts are precise and evidence-based. Data-driven insights allow for the identification of behavioural patterns, key motivators, and communication channels that are most effective for engagement. Additionally, leveraging predictive analytics can help anticipate shifts in applicant demographics and fine-tune messaging accordingly.

Ultimately, a well-executed strategy balancing aspirational branding with targeted outreach could assist Durham University to expand its appeal without compromising its identity or core values.

Marketing Targets

To move the niche, a coherent and data-driven marketing strategy and targets would need to be constructed. The undergraduate admissions marketing process has been updated recently alongside The University's APP to target under-represented groups. The marketing initiatives within the APP are highly focused on engaging specific groups, many of whom may not be effectively reached through conventional marketing channels, such as pay-per-click advertising, digital display campaigns, or targeted social media strategies. Additionally, the institution utilises these channels to celebrate the achievements of its students. A key element of Durham University's approach is the incorporation of diverse student experiences within its marketing narratives. This is achieved through student-generated content, including blogs, TikToks, Instagram posts, podcasts, photography, and videography, which reflect voices of the

student body. By highlighting relatable stories and showcasing individuals who resonate with prospective students, Durham enhances its capacity to inspire and convert interest, particularly among those initially engaged through initiatives such as summer schools. The university also leverages the experiences of alumni, exemplified by its participation in Universities UK's (UUK) '100 Faces' campaign, which celebrated the accomplishments of first-generation scholars nationwide. Durham University also continues to promote scholarships and other opportunities through these broader platforms as part of its overarching student recruitment efforts.

However, these targets are focused on intervention programmes and not specifically on marketing campaigns. In fact there are currently no criteria for success on the marketing front. For example on page 12 of the APP, the Multi intervention KS5 and transition programme has been estimated to cost £510,000 over a 5-year period, based on engaging a total of 750 student during that period (£680 per student), but how are marketing going to ensure 150 students are engaged with the programme through their marketing? The programme's success relies on focused marketing with targets, or the intervention could be set to fail before it starts.

Durham University could consider a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) approach to appeal more to the contextual students. The current CRM system operates through the student recruitment and admissions team and does not link up to the full student lifecycle. Although a new, more integrated system is planned, the full scope is not known and it isn't anticipated to be in place until September 2026 at the earliest. This reflects a broader trend within the sector, where IT systems are often fragmented and lack cohesive management (Velocity Media 2024).

A CRM-approach is backed by thorough analysis of customer data and at undergraduate-level it would collect data from enquiry stage and attendance at open days through to entering as an undergraduate. A CRM approach can significantly enhance marketing outcomes for a UK university by enabling personalised engagement and efficient communication throughout the applicant journey. With a robust CRM system, the university can segment applicants based on their interests, academic goals, and application status, tailoring messages and resources to address their specific needs. For instance, prospective students can receive timely updates on key deadlines, invitations to campus tours, and tailored insights into their chosen courses. The CRM system also allows for detailed tracking of interactions, helping the university identify and address any concerns or barriers that might prevent applicants from enrolling. By fostering meaningful and consistent engagement, a CRM approach builds trust and a sense of

connection with prospective students, ultimately improving the conversion rate from applicants to enrolled on-course students.

If applied to the context of WP, such targets could include:

- **Open Day Attendance to Application Conversion Rate:** Measure the percentage of contextual students who move from attending an open day to submitting an application. For example, aim for a 10% increase year-on-year. While it is good to up the offer rate to contextual students, having more students apply would mean more students getting offers and therefore more coming to study at Durham University. This would need a carefully targeted marketing campaign for contextual students who are within the fundamental niche of the Russell Group HEIs, as this is where there is a chance to change intrinsic interest into applications and increase the application rate.
- **Application Conversion Rate:** Measure the percentage of contextual students who move from submitting an application to formally accepting an offer (Firm or Insurance measured separately). For example, aim for a 5% increase year-on-year. As this research details, there are still challenges getting contextual students to accept DU at any stage of application. The university could therefore seek to create a strategy to increase the conversion rate of offers to entrants.
- **Offer-to-Enrolment Rate:** Track the percentage of contextual students who accept offers (firm and insurance measured separately) and successfully enrol on their course. A target could be set to reduce the drop-off rate by a specific percentage. This will highlight where drop-off occurs and therefore would help target measure to reduce drop-off rates.
- **Retention Pre-Enrolment:** Measure how many contextual students remain engaged in the pre-enrolment phase (e.g., attending induction events, completing necessary documentation) and set a target to ensure a low disengagement rate before the academic year begins.
- **Student Feedback Scores:** Collect feedback from contextual students on the effectiveness of communications and support throughout the application process. A target could be to achieve 90% positive feedback regarding the relevance and helpfulness of the information provided.

Alongside the use of a CRM system, marketing could incorporate social media hit rates into its strategy to assess the impact of advertising on interventions—tracking whether clicks lead to applications and other outcomes.

Understanding student journey data and identifying barriers can inform targeted marketing strategies, helping institutions refine their approach to engagement and accessibility. Beyond strategy, financial investment plays a crucial role in transforming intrinsic appeal into actual appeal, ensuring universities not only attract the right audience but also provide the necessary support for success.

Re-Writing the Narrative

However, no targets will help unless there is a underlying narratives are also re-written. Bristol University has begun to shift its undergraduate niche by doing exactly this – re-writing the narratives circulating within its social networks. This is slow and complex work, but evidence suggests it is beginning to take effect. Over the last decade, Bristol has improved its state school intake to 77%, with its Q1:Q5 ratio narrowing from 16.4:1 to 7.1:1. Contextual admissions remain the clearest and most scalable tool in this shift, underpinned by high visibility and transparent communication of what contextual admissions actually mean. However, it is the reframing of the institutional story—being honest about progress without overstating success—that is helping to reset expectations. Earlier silences around WP created dissonance between internal change and external perception. Recognising that students from WP backgrounds may have difficult experiences while at Bristol and that these negative stories go on to get replicated in their communities, the university has begun investing in the on-course experience itself to change those narratives. By ensuring that students are well-supported and feel they belong, Bristol is working to ensure that more positive messages return to the networks that matter most—gradually reshaping the niche from within (Jennings 2025).

Recommendations Summary

Ultimately what Durham, and other elite HEIs choose to do is up to their Executive Committees. Durham's niche has not moved, but other HEIs have shown success in these areas by re-writing the narrative and lived experiences for WP students. . The comparative lack of funding at DU for this area makes it feel like a disconnect at Executive-level at Durham between maintaining institutional prestige and WP targets. If Durham really want to change their appeal and embrace WP students, strategic alignment and consensus must come from the top and radiate down,

not only by words, but by expenditure. Durham could choose to keep their niche, or move it, but it is unrealistic for Durham and other elite HEIs to meet such strict POLAR4 ratio targets as set by the OfS due to the way social forces attract students to certain HEIs and these forces are out of an HEI's control.

Based on this research the key recommendations for the sector are:

1) **Understand Limits of Control.** HEIs should strategically position themselves by understanding their niche, focusing on controllable factors, optimising engagement, and aligning with audience demand for sustainability.
2) **Understand your niche.** HEIs can strengthen their market positioning by embracing a niche approach, thus ensuring resilience in an evolving higher education landscape.
3) **The important of robust data.** HEIs should leverage data-driven strategies, focusing on what they can control, embracing institutional individuality, and optimising niche positioning to ensure sustainability.
4) **Strategic audience engagement.** HEIs should engage with their niche strategically, through targeted marketing methods and increased expenditure.
5) **Taking a collective approach.** A collaborative, sector-wide approach—rather than isolated institutional efforts—would be more effective in improving access, recognising the role of market dynamics, institutional positioning, and applicant alignment in shaping HEI demand.

The principles outlined above in relation to WP and access extend far beyond these areas, offering a fundamental re-evaluation of strategy formation across all aspects of university operations. By shifting towards data-driven decision-making, focusing on what is truly within an HEI's control, and embracing institutional diversity to reflect student diversity, universities can craft more sustainable, responsive, and impactful strategies. Whether shaping admissions policies, financial planning, or academic programme development, these methods encourage a proactive rather than reactive approach—allowing HEIs to navigate sector-wide changes with greater agility and long-term vision. Recognising the broader relevance of these strategic frameworks is essential in ensuring that universities remain competitive, adaptable, and aligned with their evolving missions in an increasingly complex higher education landscape.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate the implications of Durham University's centralised admissions policy introduced in 2019, using a theoretical framework grounded in Organisational Ecology and Blau Space Theories. The central research aim was to understand how an elite institution responds to pressures for greater WP while preserving its elite position in the UK HE market. Through combining multivariate logistic regression and DiD analysis the study explored the effects of policy centralisation on contextual student outcomes and the university's broader market positioning.

Organisational Ecology and Blau Space Theories were used to frame the HE market as a competitive ecosystem in which institutions occupy and defend, whether intentionally or not, status-based niches. Central to this framework is the idea that elite universities such as Durham must continuously balance efforts to diversify their student bodies with the preservation of their elite identities and institutional brand value. Durham's centralised admissions policy, though intended to demystify decision-making and promote fairness, has ultimately reinforced its existing niche rather than broadening it. While the university has marginally widened access, this has not significantly altered the demographic composition of its applicant or entrant pools, which remain dominated by white, higher socioeconomic status students from London and the South East—many of whom come from independent schools and have family histories of university attendance. In ecological terms, Durham has strengthened its existing niche rather than expanded its niche width by converting intrinsic to actual appeal in new geographic or social groups.

By applying core Organisational Ecology Theory concepts—structural inertia, niche width, and audience segmentation—this thesis demonstrates that Durham operates within a narrow and highly competitive market niche from which it is struggling to move. The findings reveal how institutional characteristics such as historical legacy, governance structures, and embedded cultural norms limit Durham's capacity to shift its audience base, even when formal WP policies are introduced. Structural and cultural inertia are not simply abstract ideas but are evident in empirical application and enrolment patterns, particularly through the concept of "fit"—who feels that Durham is for them. This highlights how institutional transformation is not simply a matter of access criteria, but of cultural alignment between prospective students and institutional identity.

Crucially, the presence of academic opportunity alone is insufficient if the social and cultural environment feels unwelcoming or exclusionary. Students who are academically qualified may choose not to apply or accept offers if they perceive that they will not thrive socially or culturally. Ecologically speaking, as with species that avoid new habitats due to perceived threats, students may self-select out of elite institutions if symbolic or cultural barriers persist. In the context of UK HE, where competition for students is often limited, these social mechanisms play a powerful role in shaping the realised niche of a university. The thesis therefore expands OET by illustrating how social forces—such as belonging, cultural familiarity, and peer influence—shape the realised niche, and determine which students actually convert offers into enrolment.

In addition, Blau Space Theory—used here as a conceptual rather than spatial model—provides a powerful tool for mapping how applicant characteristics intersect with institutional opportunities. Variables such as socio-economic status, school type, ethnicity, and region determine who applies, who is admitted, and who ultimately enrols. The regression models in this thesis demonstrate how multiple axes of stratification interact to influence HE outcomes, reinforcing McPherson's original insights into the structuring of social space. Prestigious institutions like Durham function as magnetic zones within the Blau Space: attracting applicants from socio-demographic areas that align with their perceived brand and culture, while repelling others, even when procedural access barriers such as entry requirements are lowered. In this way, the thesis extends the theoretical utility of Blau Space for evaluating WP policy in stratified and marketised education systems.

Strategic Relevance of Findings

As with any DBA thesis, this research prioritises the practical application of findings to address a specific business challenge and aims to create actionable solutions that benefit organisations or the broader community. In this case, the focus is on HE within the UK. This research advances understanding of how social factors shape undergraduate admissions and demonstrates how aligning organisational strategy with underlying causal mechanisms has the potential to enhance policy effectiveness. There are several key stakeholders therefore for whom this research will be relevant and important:

Sector Policy-Makers

The thesis offers a sector-level perspective by analysing the dynamics of HEIs within market segments, shedding light on what attracts students to specific institutions. It demonstrates, for WP, what is within an HEI's control and what is not. It highlights that the targets set by the OfS for WP are unachievable by many due to the location of each HEI within the HE ecosystem, as determined by the Blau Space, coordinating points of applicant homogeneity by various socio-demographic variables. It calls for a re-think of policy design. HEIs simply cannot move their niches from Q5 to Q1 in the space of 5 years; that would equate in ecology to moving an ecosystem from the Arctic to the Caribbean. There is no room for slow adaptation. While the POLAR4 targets can aid a movement in this direction, a slower adaptation is more realistic and from elite HEIs this might involve working on increasing participation in the mid-quartiles first. These will share some underlying social mechanisms and rules with the Q5 students and would represent a gradual broadening of access by tapping into closer social positions, a technique shown to work through niche width by organisational ecology theory. The findings therefore should be used to foster collaboration between HEIs, regulators, and policymakers, encouraging them to work together to address participation challenges collectively rather than focusing on isolated, institution-specific targets. Addressing persistent inequalities in access requires collective sectoral action. No single institution can shift structural patterns of underrepresentation alone. Universities must collaborate to set national and regional targets, share best practices, and advocate for systemic reforms in breaking down barriers to access.

Durham University

The results of this study offer several key recommendations for Durham University. First, universities must recognise the limits of what institutional policy can achieve in isolation. While procedural reforms are important, they must be part of a broader, coordinated strategy that addresses cultural perceptions, applicant aspirations, and external socio-economic forces. Good data is essential in this process, enabling institutions to track the effects of reforms, identify disparities, and refine interventions. A key to enabling such reforms is a fully-integrated data management system. Durham, like many HEIs, has access to vast data on applicants and admissions, yet historically this has not been used strategically (as demonstrated by this thesis). HEIs should invest in analytical capacity to support evidence-informed decision-making across the board.

This research also offers valuable insights for both the Marketing Department and the Undergraduate Admissions Team at Durham University, shedding light on the social factors influencing student choice and the role of market segmentation. Strategic audience engagement must become more nuanced and intentional. Rather than relying on broad, undifferentiated outreach, institutions should develop targeted marketing and engagement strategies, investing in communication channels that resonate with their core audiences. This more detailed approach could then inform policy decisions and procedural frameworks at Durham University, strengthening institutional approaches to student recruitment and widening access.

Key Takeaways

Durham's Audience Segment Has Remained Remarkably Stable

Durham University continues to attract students predominantly from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, independent schools, and regions with historically high participation in higher education. Despite various WP initiatives and the centralisation of admissions processes aimed at increasing diversity and making access fairer, the demographic composition of its applicant and entrant pool has remained largely unchanged. This indicates that Durham's organisational niche is not only stable but actively reinforced—a pattern that is well explained by Organisational Ecology Theory.

From an ecological perspective, maintaining a healthy higher education system requires institutional diversity. Just as ecosystems require variation to survive, the sector must foster different types of institutions serving a broad spectrum of students. For Durham, this means clearly defining and, where necessary, adapting its niche to align with changing social and environmental conditions. Doing so demands a data-driven approach—one that goes beyond performance metrics to capture the social and emotional factors shaping student decision-making. By understanding not only who applies and enrols, but why, institutions like Durham can better align their strategy with long-term equity and sustainability goals.

Centralised Admissions Increased Procedural Fairness but did not widen participation

The quantitative findings show that centralising admissions at Durham University led to a measurable improvement in procedural fairness for contextual applicants. However, these students were ultimately 2% less likely to enter the university post-offer than before centralisation. The Difference-in-Differences (DiD) analysis reinforces these patterns, isolating the policy's effect and revealing that while offer-making improved, the broader demographic composition of the student body remained largely unchanged. These findings highlight the persistent challenge of converting offers into actual enrolments among underrepresented groups. While centralisation improved fairness and consistency in admissions decisions, it did not address the deeper issues of cultural fit and institutional belonging. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may receive offers but still perceive Durham as culturally distant or unwelcoming, leading them to select other institutions.

Ultimately, the impact of centralising admissions was constrained by perceptions of Durham's exclusivity and by socio-cultural forces outside the university's direct control. Even as more contextual applicants are offered places, they do not necessarily choose Durham as their firm choice. The result is a neutralising effect: policy changes generate more offers, but structural and symbolic forces continue to inhibit substantive shifts in the entrant pool. This disconnect between policy intention and applicant behaviour underscores the limits of procedural reform in the absence of cultural transformation.

The audience maintains systemic Elite Reproduction

Application and acceptance patterns at Durham University reflect broader structural inequalities embedded within the UK HE system. Students from privileged families are more likely to possess the cultural capital, institutional knowledge, and social networks that guide them toward elite institutions. These systemic advantages enable high-SES students to navigate the admissions landscape with confidence and alignment, perpetuating elite reproduction even when academic achievement is held constant. In contrast, WP students often lack the "navigational capacity" to access or feel at ease within institutions like Durham, which undermines their potential for social mobility even as formal barriers to entry are lowered.

The findings of this study reinforce wider sociological critiques regarding the role of elite universities in sustaining social advantage. While Durham has increased its contextual offer rates, it remains symbolically distant for many students from underrepresented backgrounds. Its reputation as an elite, traditional institution—shaped by alumni networks, media portrayals, and institutional branding—continues to signal exclusivity, discouraging applications from students who perceive Durham as culturally alien, academically intimidating, or socially unwelcoming. This contributes to persistently low application rates from contextual students and limits the effectiveness of access initiatives. Even where procedural improvements have been made, perceptions of cultural fit and institutional belonging continue to shape applicant behaviour.

Durham's Niche Could Broaden—But Within Limits

Durham may be able to expand its appeal incrementally, attracting more students from underrepresented groups through improved outreach, targeted support, and rebranding efforts. Taking inspiration from OET and the Blau Space, Durham University may find greater success in broadening its appeal among social groupings positioned at the periphery of its current peak appeal. While the university may struggle to achieve a POLAR4 Q5:1 ratio, it can still progress by increasing enrolment from Q4 and Q3 categories or the mid-range of socio-economic classifications. These groups, being socially closer to the peak appeal, share some of its underlying social values, making integration into the university environment more seamless.

However, broadening this niche necessitates translating intrinsic appeal into actual engagement through a strategically crafted marketing approach. This transformation relies on a bold and cohesive strategy that not only identifies but actively cultivates connections with target demographics. Establishing clear, measurable marketing objectives ensures outreach efforts resonate effectively with prospective students, particularly those positioned on the margins of Durham's existing appeal. Central to this process is the use of robust data to guide decision-making, ensuring that marketing efforts remain precise and evidence-based. Data-driven insights enable the identification of behavioural patterns, key motivators, and the most effective communication channels for engagement. However, truly equal access may remain out of reach unless deeper cultural and institutional changes occur.

Limitations

While this study offers a comprehensive analysis of Durham's centralised admissions reform, it is not without limitations. The analysis is based primarily on quantitative admissions data, which does not capture the qualitative dimensions of applicant decision-making. Limitations of this study include:

- Data Limitations: The PERS dataset used did not fully capture all contextual indicators (e.g., outreach programme attendance), leading to some under-identification of contextual students. This may have introduced measurement error, likely attenuating the estimated policy effects.
- Limited Time-Frame for DiD Analysis: The Difference-in-Differences analysis is constrained by a short post-policy timeframe; additional entry cohorts would strengthen causal inference.
- Single-Institution Focus: Focusing on one higher education institution limits generalisability; findings may not fully capture sector-wide dynamics or institutional variability.
- Cultural Change is Difficult to Measure: While the thesis infers cultural constraints from patterns in the data, it does not directly measure applicant attitudes or perceptions. A mixed-methods design could strengthen future research by combining quantitative analysis with interview or survey data.

Future Directions

This study opens several important avenues for future inquiry, each of which could deepen our understanding of how market positioning, organisational structure, and social mechanisms shape WP outcomes in higher education.

Comparative Institutional Studies

Replicating this analysis across other Russell Group institutions would enable comparative insights into how differing organisational structures, market positions, and regional contexts mediate the effectiveness of WP strategies. Such cross-institutional work could help to identify which features of policy design and institutional culture are context-specific and which may be more broadly generalisable. How do different types of universities – collegiate, urban, specialist – implement WP reforms, and with what results? Such studies could refine theoretical models

of market niche adaptation and inform the development of more effective sector-wide strategies.

Niche Differentiation Within Institutions

Future research could examine the internal ecology of higher education institutions by analysing how niche positioning varies across faculties, departments, or student types. Understanding intra-institutional variation would provide a more granular view of how different academic units engage with WP and attract distinct applicant profiles, thus revealing strategic asymmetries within a single HEI.

Regional Strategy Development

There is also scope to compare the niche strategies of HEIs within specific regions to inform the development of coordinated, regionally tailored access strategies. By mapping the complementarities and overlaps among local institutions, researchers and policymakers could identify opportunities for collaborative approaches that better serve underrepresented populations across geographic areas.

Longitudinal Tracking

Following cohorts of contextual offer-holders throughout their university journey could shed light on how the admissions process influences retention, progression, and graduate outcomes. This would help assess not only access, but also the longer-term efficacy and equity of contextual admissions.

Network Effects and Information Flows

Given the role of social networks in shaping university choice—as proposed by Blau Space theory—future studies could explore how information about HEIs circulates through peer groups, schools, and communities. Investigating how these network effects influence application behaviour and enrolment decisions would offer important insight into the social mechanisms that convert institutional "intrinsic" appeal into actual appeal.

Together, these directions would extend the ecological and sociological dimensions of this study, supporting the development of more nuanced, evidence-informed strategies for widening participation and institutional positioning within the UK higher education landscape.

Final words

The recommendations presented here call for a fundamental rethinking of how HEI develop and implement strategy—extending well beyond the boundaries of widening participation and access. At the core is the recognition that HEIs must acknowledge the limits of their control and focus their strategic energy on optimising what lies within their influence. This includes aligning with evolving audience expectations and leveraging each institution's distinctive characteristics to build a resilient and defensible market position.

Elite universities must balance promoting meritocratic access with continuing to serve their established student market and institutional supporters. Navigating this paradox requires more than technical policy adjustments; it demands a rethinking of institutional identity, purpose, and responsibility as well as understanding what is reasonable achievable. This thesis has shown that even well-intentioned reforms can have uneven and limited effects when implemented within elite institutional ecosystems when strategies and policies are not designed with their niche in mind. Durham's centralised admissions policy reflects a genuine effort to standardise practice and widen access, but its impact has been constrained by cultural inertia, reputational legacies, and institutional stratification within the HE sector. The findings serve as a cautionary tale for policymakers and institutional leaders: equity cannot be achieved through procedural change alone. It requires a sustained commitment to cultural transformation, inclusive messaging, and inter-institutional cooperation, taking small steps at a time. It also requires for regulators as well as institutions to understand that each HEI has a role in the collective effort to widen participation. Each HEI serves their niche and in so doing contributes to a healthy diversity in the sector, reflecting the diversity in the students and diversity in their needs.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Model Outputs

Model 1: Entrance (not contingent on an offer)

```
. logistic entrants i.SES ib6.ETH1 ib8.REG i.FIRST_GEN rs Contextual pointspred policyd W7_interact

Logistic regression                             Number of obs = 145,752
                                                LR chi2(27)   = 3102.47
                                                Prob > chi2   =  0.0000
Log likelihood = -64719.043                     Pseudo R2     =  0.0234
```

entrants	Odds ratio	Std. err.	z	P>|z|	[95% conf.	interval]
SES						
Intermediate occupations	1.019149	.0270542	0.71	0.475	.9674794	1.073578
Lower managerial and professional occupations	.9547001	.016683	-2.65	0.008	.9225557	.9879645
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	.9554495	.046354	-0.94	0.348	.8687832	1.050761
Not classified / unknown	.9150501	.0226589	-3.59	0.000	.8716999	.9605561
Routine occupations	.9035609	.0490059	-1.87	0.062	.81244	1.004902
Semiroutine occupations	.9388258	.0381437	-1.55	0.120	.8669647	1.016643
Small employers and own account workers	.9335748	.0356558	-1.80	0.072	.8662423	1.006141
ETH1						
Asian	.6266369	.0208525	-14.05	0.000	.587071	.6688692
Black	.6418588	.0429949	-6.62	0.000	.5628877	.7319092
Mixed	.8618692	.0293058	-4.37	0.000	.806303	.9212648
Other	.5749529	.0592941	-5.37	0.000	.4697308	.7037452
REG						
East Midlands	.9956695	.0318969	-0.14	0.892	.935075	1.060191
East of England	1.017718	.0264079	0.68	0.499	.9672532	1.070815
London	.8487631	.0206673	-6.73	0.000	.8092074	.8902523
North East	1.355819	.042886	9.62	0.000	1.274316	1.442534
North West	.9818848	.025438	-0.71	0.480	.933272	1.03303
Northern Ireland	.8006542	.0443975	-4.01	0.000	.7181986	.8925764
South West	.8561033	.0270848	-4.91	0.000	.8046304	.9108689
Wales	.8957992	.0442274	-2.23	0.026	.8131771	.986816
West Midlands	.9291123	.0307959	-2.22	0.027	.8706723	.9914747
Yorkshire and The Humber	1.048849	.0290569	1.72	0.085	.9934175	1.107374
1.FIRST_GEN	.9574928	.0188264	-2.21	0.027	.9212958	.995112
rs	.6776069	.0097571	-27.03	0.000	.6587506	.6970029
Contextual	.9500087	.025422	-1.92	0.055	.9014665	1.001165
pointspred	1.168905	.0046032	39.63	0.000	1.159918	1.177962
policyd	.9045439	.0162382	-5.59	0.000	.873271	.9369366
W7_interact	1.547008	.0709707	9.51	0.000	1.413978	1.692553
_cons	.0231591	.001561	-55.86	0.000	.0202931	.0264298

Note: **_cons** estimates baseline odds.

.

Model 2: Offer

```
. logistic offer i.SES ib6.ETH1 ib8.REG i.FIRST_GEN rs Contextual pointspred policyd W7_interact

Logistic regression                                     Number of obs =  145,752
                                                        LR chi2(27)   = 15116.90
                                                        Prob > chi2   =   0.0000
Log likelihood = -88293.107                             Pseudo R2     =   0.0789
```

offer	Odds ratio	Std. err.	z	P>|z|	[95% conf.	interval]
SES						
Intermediate occupations	.9590044	.0208802	-1.92	0.055	.9189408	1.000815
Lower managerial and professional occupations	.969588	.0138878	-2.16	0.031	.9427468	.9971933
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	.964475	.0370648	-0.94	0.347	.8944978	1.039927
Not classified / unknown	.8271344	.016089	-9.76	0.000	.7961941	.8592772
Routine occupations	1.025257	.043307	0.59	0.555	.9437958	1.11375
Semiroutine occupations	.9271875	.0292672	-2.40	0.017	.8715632	.9863617
Small employers and own account workers	.8982809	.0267663	-3.60	0.000	.8473223	.9523041
ETH1						
Asian	1.129674	.0267736	5.14	0.000	1.078399	1.183387
Black	.9211096	.0404118	-1.87	0.061	.8452138	1.00382
Mixed	1.095176	.0296807	3.35	0.001	1.038521	1.154921
Other	.987155	.0661901	-0.19	0.847	.8655879	1.125796
REG						
East Midlands	.9292993	.0242536	-2.81	0.005	.8829585	.9780723
East of England	1.035451	.0223228	1.62	0.106	.9926109	1.080141
London	1.109605	.0216848	5.32	0.000	1.067907	1.152931
North East	1.308902	.0355138	9.92	0.000	1.241115	1.380392
North West	.9761073	.0206469	-1.14	0.253	.9364675	1.017425
Northern Ireland	1.028396	.0450846	0.64	0.523	.9437218	1.120668
South West	.9593147	.0243506	-1.64	0.102	.912756	1.008248
Wales	.981914	.0391205	-0.46	0.647	.9081564	1.061662
West Midlands	.9747021	.0259789	-0.96	0.336	.9250916	1.026973
Yorkshire and The Humber	.9234187	.0210828	-3.49	0.000	.883008	.9656787
1.FIRST_GEN	.963394	.0149381	-2.41	0.016	.9345562	.9931216
rs	.3886021	.0048503	-75.73	0.000	.379211	.3982257
Contextual	1.060921	.0221991	2.83	0.005	1.018292	1.105335
pointspred	1.283087	.0035329	90.53	0.000	1.276181	1.29003
policyd	.9920138	.0141695	-0.56	0.575	.9646272	1.020178
W7_interact	3.507	.1546995	28.45	0.000	3.216532	3.823698
_cons	.0585484	.0027057	-61.41	0.000	.0534784	.0640992

Note: **_cons** estimates baseline odds.

Model 3a: Firm Acceptance

```
. logistic firm i.SES ib6.ETH1 ib8.REG i.FIRST_GEN rs Contextual pointspred policyd W7_interact if offer == 1

Logistic regression                                     Number of obs =  92,182
                                                        LR chi2(27)   = 1181.52
                                                        Prob > chi2   =  0.0000
Log likelihood = -59888.737                             Pseudo R2     =  0.0098
```

firm	Odds ratio	Std. err.	z	P>|z|	[95% conf.	interval]
SES						
Intermediate occupations	1.009113	.0263977	0.35	0.729	.9586783	1.062201
Lower managerial and professional occupations	.9851493	.0167932	-0.88	0.380	.952779	1.018619
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	1.020637	.0476738	0.44	0.662	.9313478	1.118487
Not classified / unknown	.9834055	.0238916	-0.69	0.491	.9376762	1.031365
Routine occupations	.9348258	.047289	-1.33	0.183	.8465876	1.032261
Semiroutine occupations	.9735418	.0380845	-0.69	0.493	.9016875	1.051122
Small employers and own account workers	1.05779	.0387709	1.53	0.125	.9844655	1.136576
ETH1						
Asian	.568828	.0171895	-18.67	0.000	.5361155	.6035365
Black	.7967267	.0456212	-3.97	0.000	.7121457	.8913532
Mixed	.8674109	.0276523	-4.46	0.000	.8148718	.9233376
Other	.6889408	.0598532	-4.29	0.000	.5810747	.8168304
REG						
East Midlands	1.011964	.032077	0.38	0.708	.9510079	1.076828
East of England	1.007567	.0257219	0.30	0.768	.9583937	1.059264
London	.8141952	.0190777	-8.77	0.000	.7776491	.8524588
North East	1.326267	.0414323	9.04	0.000	1.247497	1.41001
North West	.987888	.0251643	-0.48	0.632	.9397778	1.038461
Northern Ireland	.7437074	.0396876	-5.55	0.000	.6698509	.8257072
South West	.8547976	.026271	-5.10	0.000	.8048275	.9078703
Wales	.8241682	.0399	-3.99	0.000	.7495611	.9062012
West Midlands	.8802674	.0286365	-3.92	0.000	.8258928	.9382218
Yorkshire and The Humber	1.106774	.0304742	3.68	0.000	1.048628	1.168143
1.FIRST_GEN	1.007866	.0192838	0.41	0.682	.9707702	1.046379
rs	1.121754	.0158899	8.11	0.000	1.091038	1.153334
Contextual	.9146324	.0239279	-3.41	0.001	.8689166	.9627534
pointspred	.9509476	.0030868	-15.49	0.000	.9449168	.9570169
policyd	1.043804	.0179588	2.49	0.013	1.009192	1.079602
W7_interact	1.019019	.0437628	0.44	0.661	.9367566	1.108506
_cons	1.336005	.0746558	5.18	0.000	1.19741	1.490641

Note: **_cons** estimates baseline odds.

Model 3b: Insurance Acceptance

```
. logistic insurance i.SES ib6.ETH1 ib8.REG i.FIRST_GEN rs Contextual pointspred policyd W7_interact if offer == 1

Logistic regression                                     Number of obs = 92,182
                                                        LR chi2(27)   = 713.26
                                                        Prob > chi2   = 0.0000
Log likelihood = -39058.874                             Pseudo R2     = 0.0090
```

insurance	Odds ratio	Std. err.	z	P>|z|	[95% conf.	interval]
SES						
Intermediate occupations	1.028822	.0359481	0.81	0.416	.9607235	1.101748
Lower managerial and professional occupations	1.002652	.0228916	0.12	0.908	.9587739	1.048537
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	.9838251	.0629602	-0.25	0.799	.8678507	1.115298
Not classified / unknown	1.079626	.0343816	2.41	0.016	1.014299	1.14916
Routine occupations	1.058741	.0706086	0.86	0.392	.9290138	1.206583
Semiroutine occupations	1.049865	.0543692	0.94	0.347	.948533	1.162023
Small employers and own account workers	1.021368	.0503279	0.43	0.668	.9273407	1.124929
ETH1						
Asian	1.326143	.0453941	8.25	0.000	1.240091	1.418166
Black	1.204813	.0850097	2.64	0.008	1.049205	1.3835
Mixed	1.119682	.0455281	2.78	0.005	1.033912	1.212568
Other	.9814886	.1096654	-0.17	0.867	.7884557	1.221781
REG						
East Midlands	.991262	.0421187	-0.21	0.836	.9120547	1.077348
East of England	1.012402	.034449	0.36	0.717	.947085	1.082223
London	1.017067	.0310988	0.55	0.580	.9579049	1.079883
North East	.9528647	.0417401	-1.10	0.270	.8744692	1.038288
North West	.9506026	.0327333	-1.47	0.141	.8885637	1.016973
Northern Ireland	.9218135	.064737	-1.16	0.246	.8032764	1.057843
South West	.9503845	.0390025	-1.24	0.215	.8769346	1.029986
Wales	.8965403	.058322	-1.68	0.093	.7892184	1.018456
West Midlands	.9865843	.0423122	-0.31	0.753	.9070437	1.0731
Yorkshire and The Humber	.9329143	.0351795	-1.84	0.066	.8664501	1.004477
1.FIRST_GEN	.9336297	.0243135	-2.64	0.008	.8871719	.9825204
rs	.810662	.0152858	-11.13	0.000	.7812493	.841182
Contextual	1.007202	.0358142	0.20	0.840	.9393978	1.079901
pointspred	1.110143	.0058207	19.93	0.000	1.098793	1.12161
policyd	.9298046	.0216936	-3.12	0.002	.8882435	.9733104
W7_interact	1.66304	.0913913	9.26	0.000	1.493226	1.852166
_cons	.0353871	.0031945	-37.01	0.000	.0296486	.0422362

Note: **_cons** estimates baseline odds.

Model 4: Entrance Conditional on Offer

```
. logistic entrants i.SES ib6.ETH1 ib8.REG i.FIRST_GEN rs Contextual pointspred policyd W7_interact if offer == 1

Logistic regression                                     Number of obs = 92,182
                                                        LR chi2(27)   = 975.19
                                                        Prob > chi2   = 0.0000
Log likelihood = -52481.412                             Pseudo R2     = 0.0092
```

entrants	Odds ratio	Std. err.	z	P>|z|	[95% conf.	interval]
SES						
Intermediate occupations	1.035666	.029411	1.23	0.217	.9795965	1.094945
Lower managerial and professional occupations	.9577614	.017828	-2.32	0.020	.9234488	.9933489
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	.9682058	.0501399	-0.62	0.533	.8747562	1.071639
Not classified / unknown	.9810087	.0260737	-0.72	0.471	.9312135	1.033467
Routine occupations	.8890377	.0509158	-2.05	0.040	.7946416	.9946472
Semiroutine occupations	.9525548	.0414662	-1.12	0.264	.8746532	1.037395
Small employers and own account workers	.9636791	.0394059	-0.90	0.366	.8894589	1.044093
ETH1						
Asian	.5376032	.0189623	-17.60	0.000	.5016932	.5760835
Black	.5774468	.0415094	-7.64	0.000	.5015612	.6648139
Mixed	.8112621	.0290627	-5.84	0.000	.756254	.8702714
Other	.5092419	.0561338	-6.12	0.000	.4102949	.6320511
REG						
East Midlands	1.023911	.0352157	0.69	0.492	.9571643	1.095312
East of England	1.009329	.0279765	0.33	0.738	.9559585	1.065678
London	.8054925	.0208543	-8.35	0.000	.7656385	.8474211
North East	1.231052	.0417616	6.13	0.000	1.151862	1.315685
North West	.9982382	.0276376	-0.06	0.949	.9455129	1.053904
Northern Ireland	.7698548	.0450713	-4.47	0.000	.6863965	.8634607
South West	.858964	.0289138	-4.52	0.000	.8041229	.9175453
Wales	.9011548	.0471943	-1.99	0.047	.8132445	.998568
West Midlands	.9290559	.0328556	-2.08	0.037	.8668412	.9957358
Yorkshire and The Humber	1.086436	.0323845	2.78	0.005	1.024782	1.151799
1.FIRST_GEN	.9555418	.0202082	-2.15	0.032	.9167441	.9959815
rs	.9900913	.0153284	-0.64	0.520	.9604995	1.020595
Contextual	.9166899	.0262957	-3.03	0.002	.8665734	.9697049
pointspred	1.035919	.0039442	9.27	0.000	1.028217	1.043679
policyd	.9004198	.0171995	-5.49	0.000	.8673327	.9347692
W7_interact	1.067591	.0511989	1.36	0.173	.9718146	1.172806
_cons	.2332908	.0152616	-22.25	0.000	.2052169	.2652052

Note: **_cons** estimates baseline odds.

Model 5: Difference in Difference

```
.  logistic offer rs pointspred policyd W8_interact if Contextual == 1

Logistic regression                                     Number of obs =  18,664
                                                        LR chi2(4)    = 3374.42
                                                        Prob > chi2   =  0.0000
Log likelihood = -10300.956                             Pseudo R2     =  0.1407

------------------------------------------------------------------------------
       offer | Odds ratio   Std. err.      z    P>|z|     [95% conf. interval]
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
          rs |   .3591477   .0146192   -25.16   0.000     .3316077    .3889749
  pointspred |   1.330465   .0092419    41.10   0.000     1.312474    1.348703
     policyd |   5.322624   .4542606    19.59   0.000      4.50277    6.291755
 W8_interact |   .6047864   .0591868    -5.14   0.000     .4992292    .7326626
       _cons |   .0366276   .0038434   -31.52   0.000     .0298188     .044991
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
Note: _cons estimates baseline odds.
```

Appendix C: Additional Ratio Tables

Table 20: Changes in offer rates for contextual students in recruiting and selecting departments between 2010 – 2023

	2010-2018 Offer Rate	2019 - 2023 Offer Rate	Change in Offer Rate
Recruiting	0.582	0.826	**0.244**
Selecting	0.470	0.710	**0.240**

Table 21: Changes in entrance rates for contextual students in recruiting and selecting departments between 2010 – 2023

	2010-2018 Entrance Rate	2019 - 2023 Entrance Rate	Change in Entrance Rate
Recruiting	0.538	0.42	**-0.118**
Selecting	0.544	0.434	**-0.11**

Appendix B: Additional Timeline Graphs

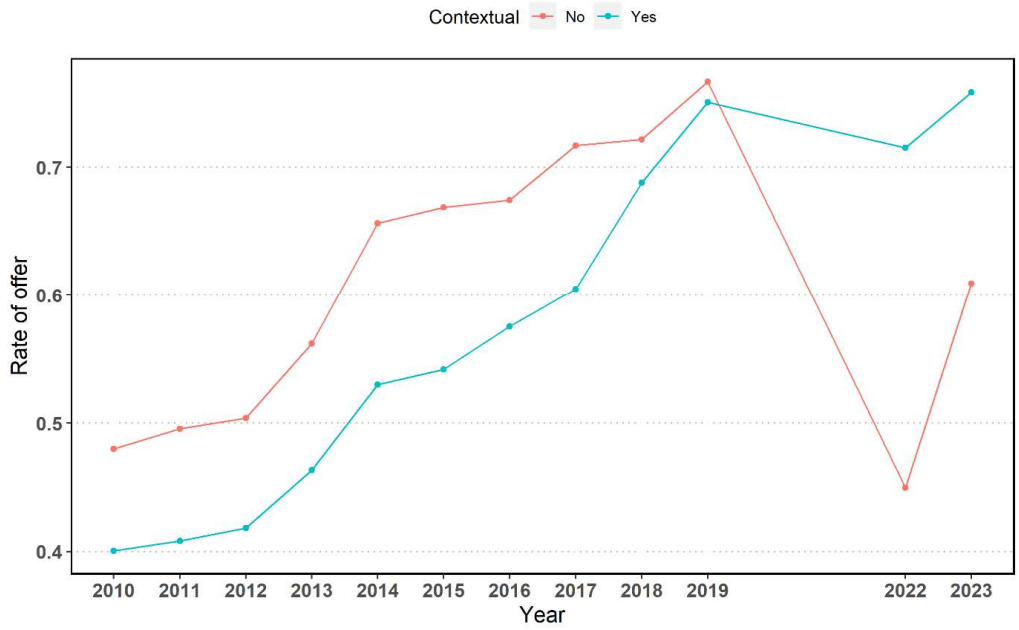

Figure 25: Offer rate by contextual students between 2010 – 2023

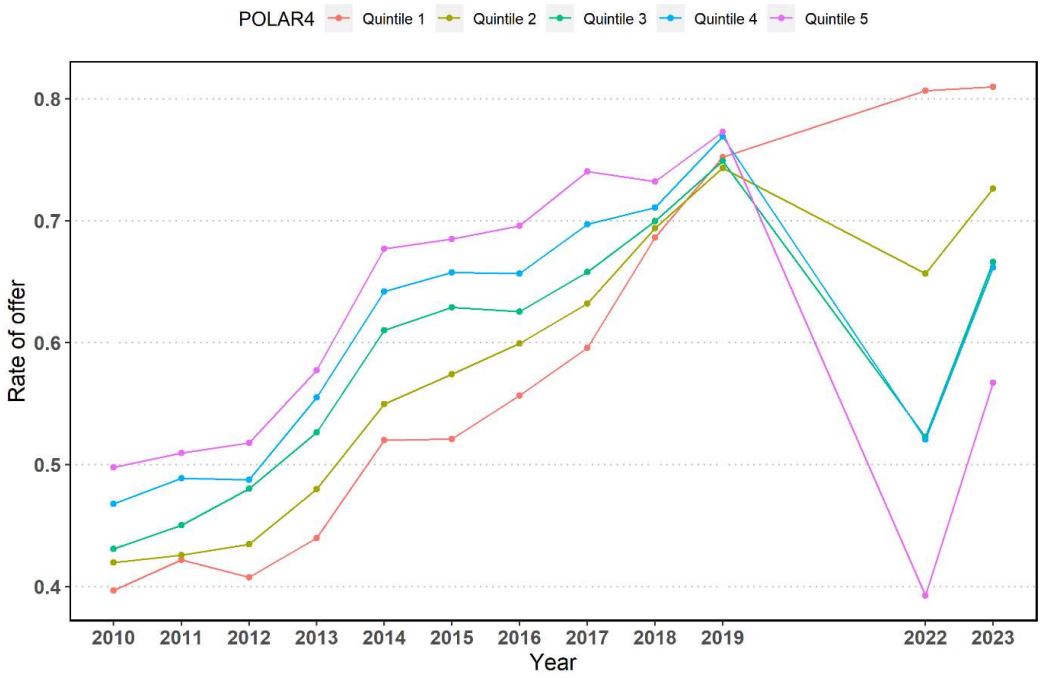

Figure 26Figure 27: Offer rate by POLAR4 quintiles between 2010 – 2023

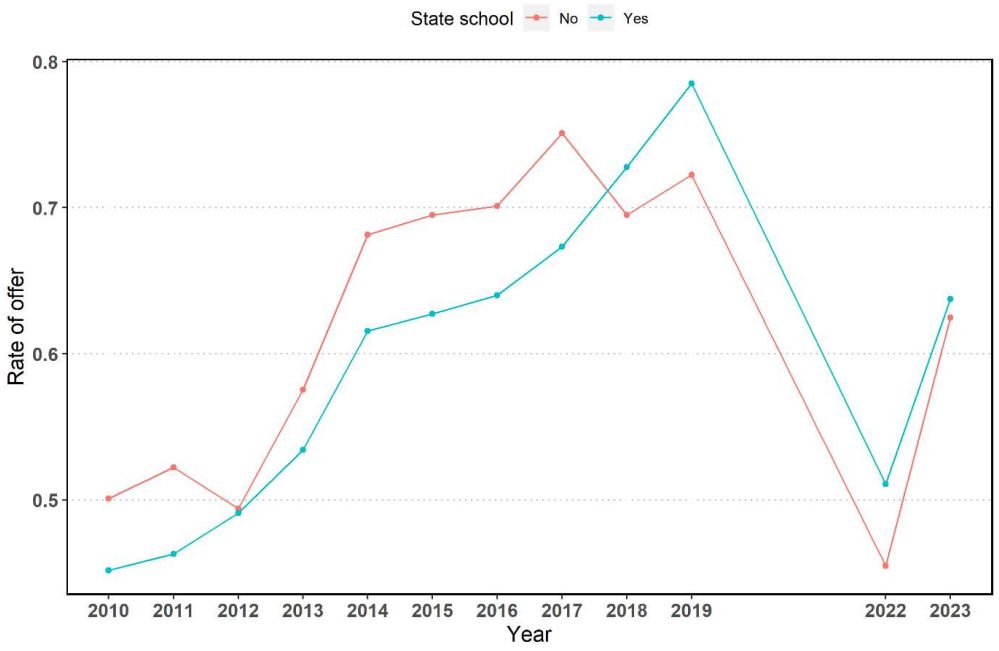

Figure 28: Offer rate by school type (state school or other) between 2010 – 2023

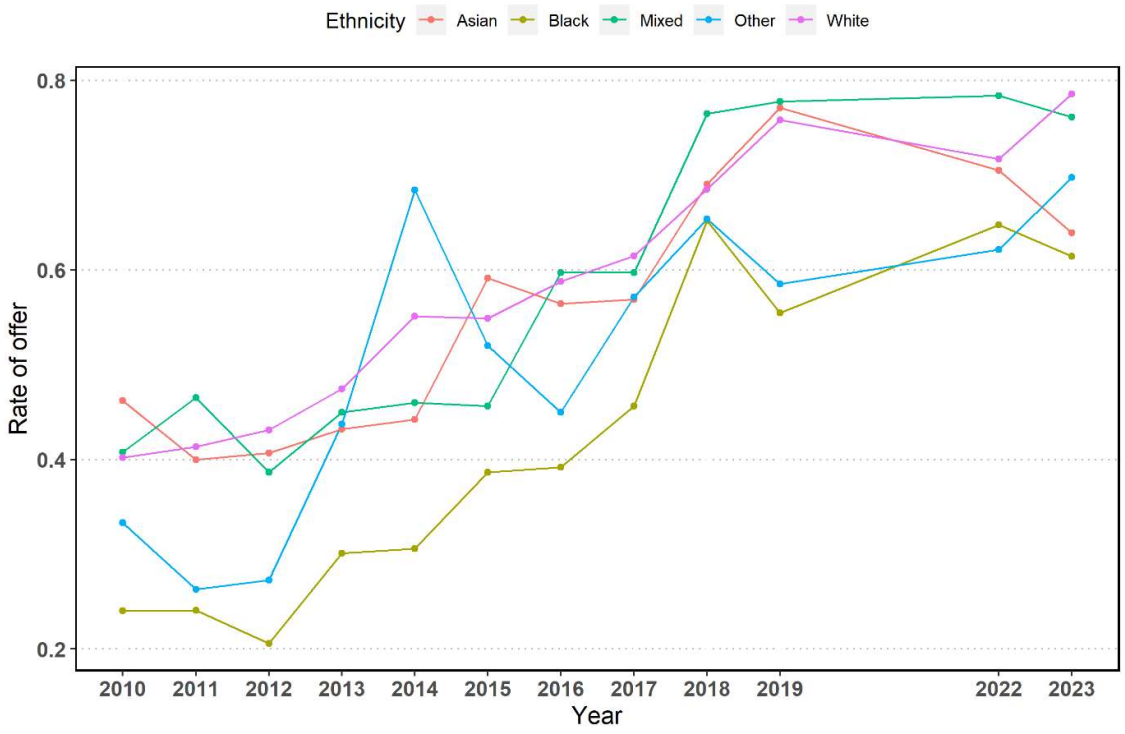

Figure 29: Offer rate for contextual students by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023

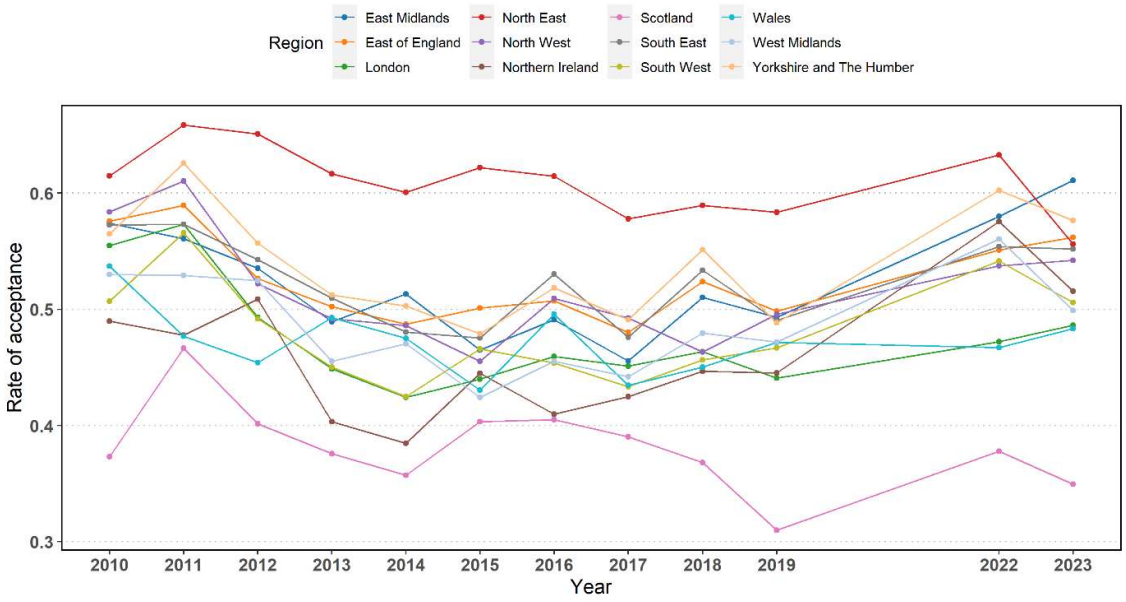

Figure 30: Acceptance rate by region between 2010 – 2023

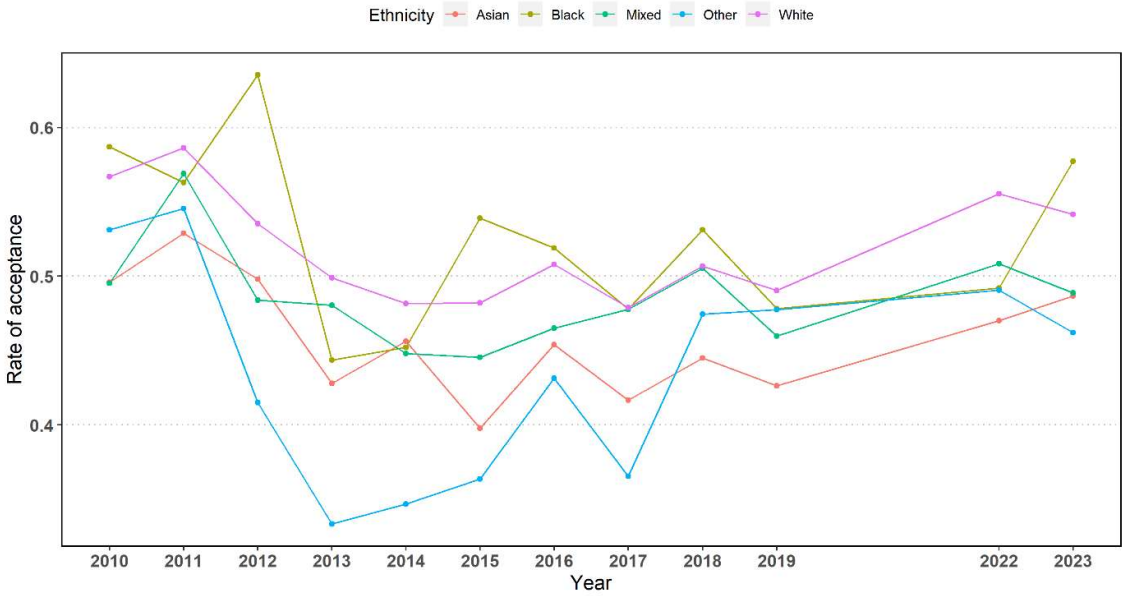

Figure 31: Acceptance rate by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023.

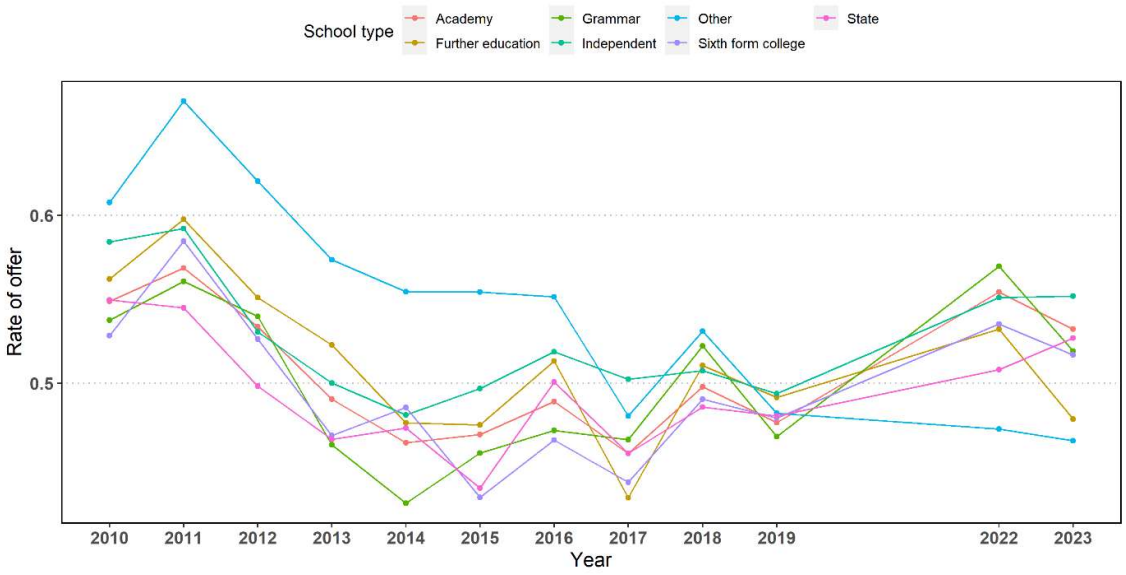

Figure 32: Acceptance rate by school type between 2010 – 2023

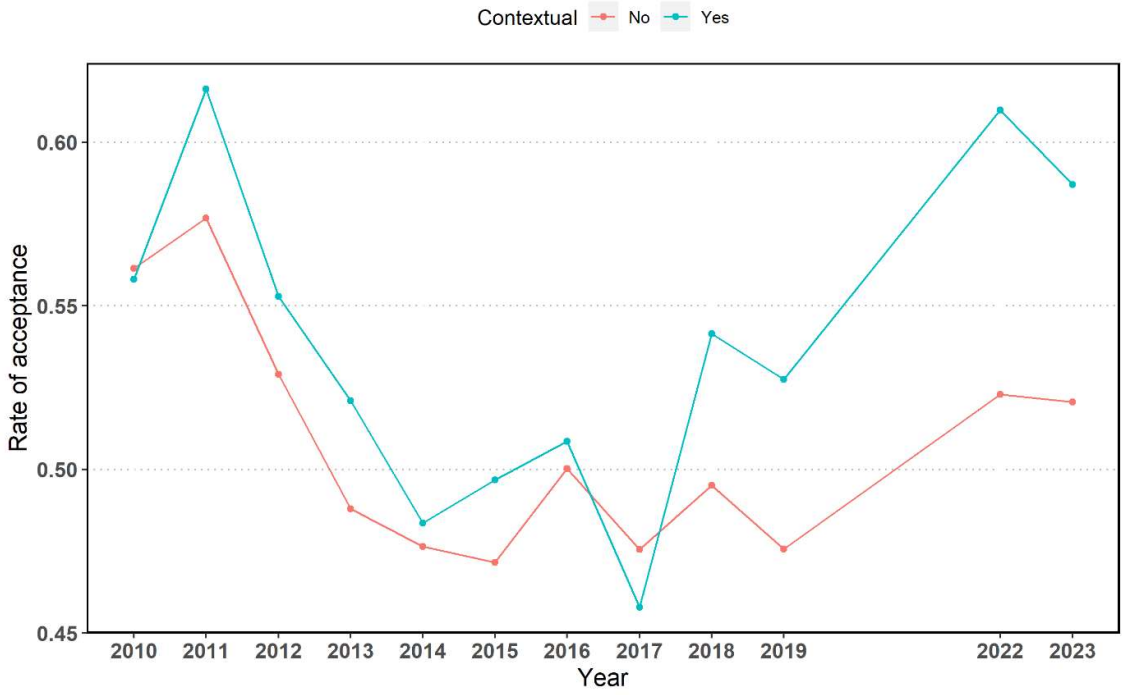

Figure 33: Acceptance rate by contextual students between 2010 – 2023

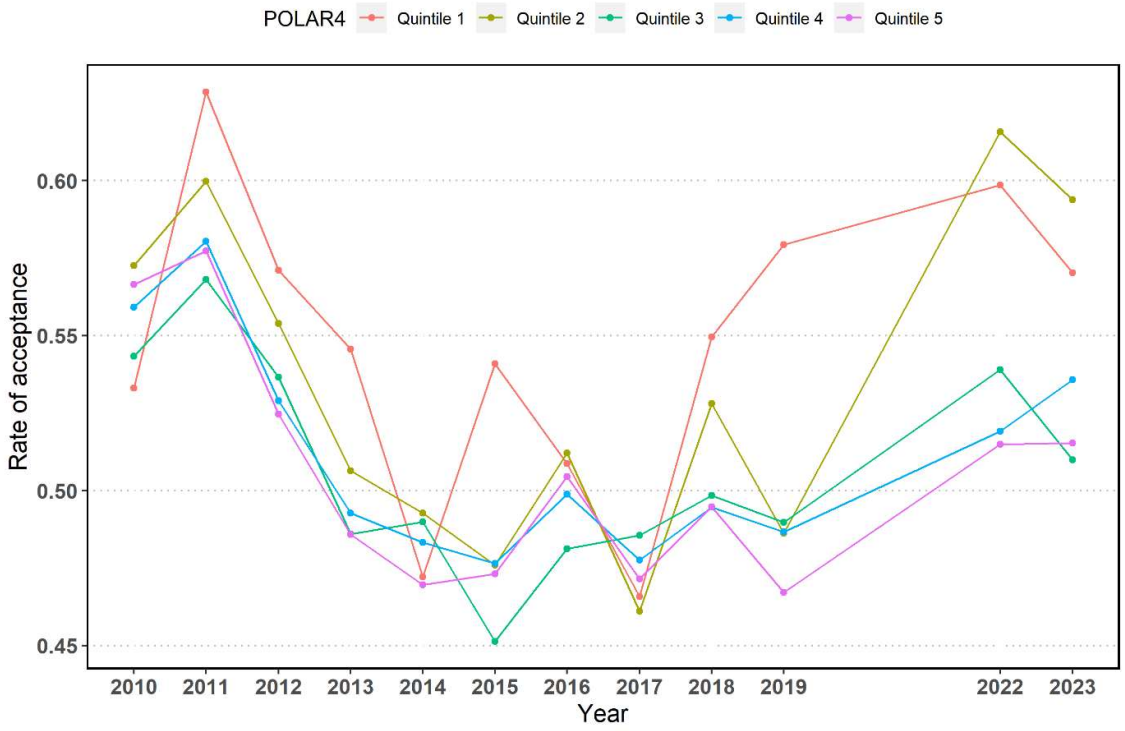

Figure 34: Acceptance rate by POLAR4 quintiles between 2010 – 2023

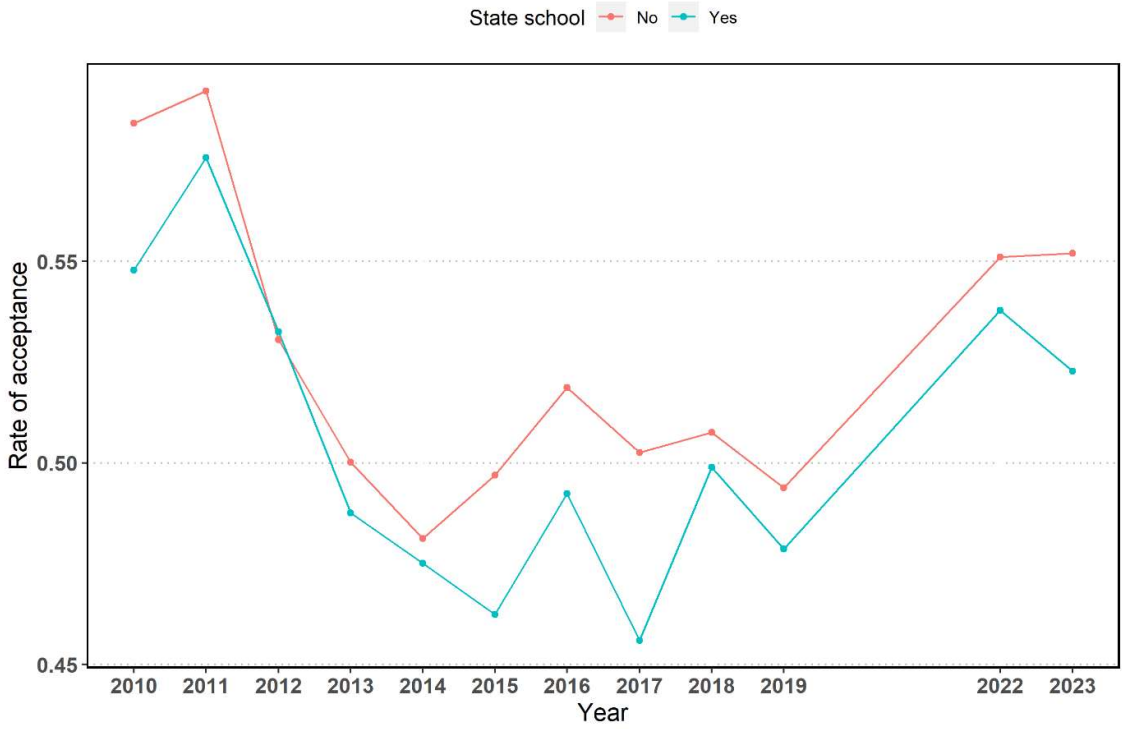

Figure 35: Acceptance rate by school type (state school or other) between 2010 – 2023

Figure 36: Acceptance rate for contextual students in recruiting and selecting departments between 2010 – 2023

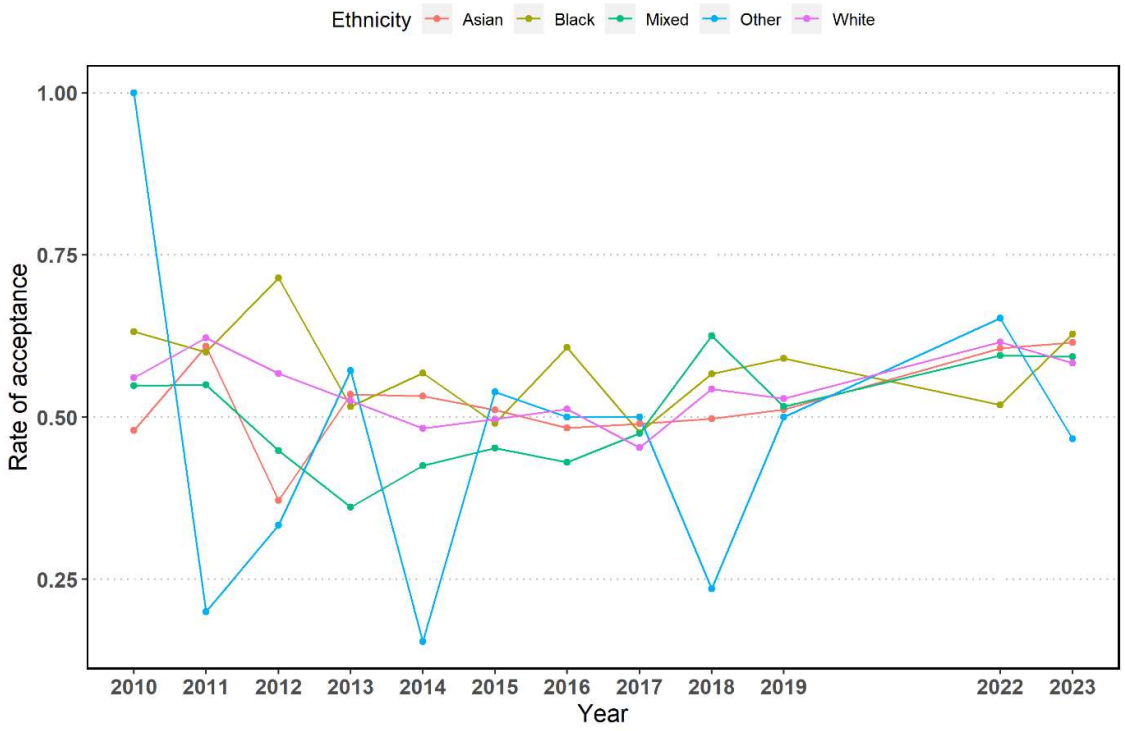

Figure 37: Acceptance rate for contextual students by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023

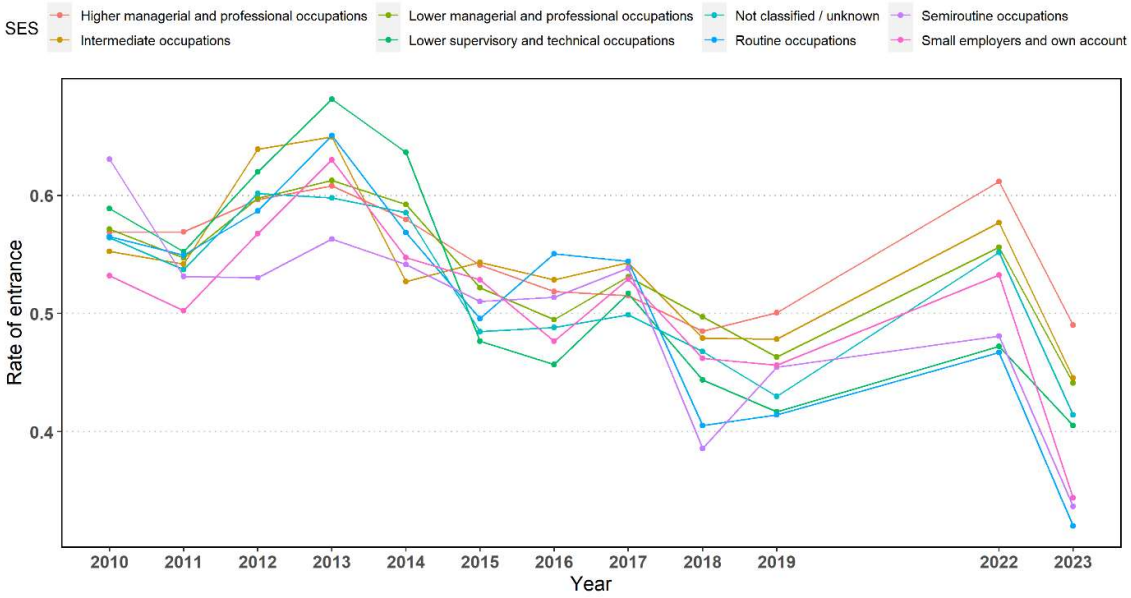

Figure 38: Entrance rate by Socioeconomic status between 2010 – 2023

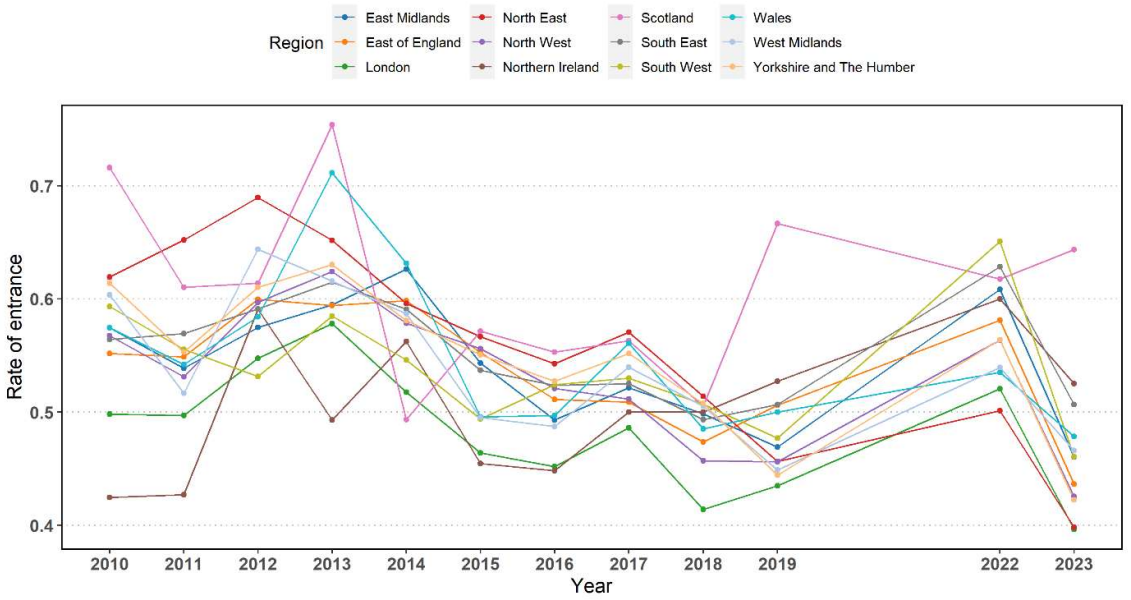

Figure 39: Entrance rate by region between 2010 – 2023

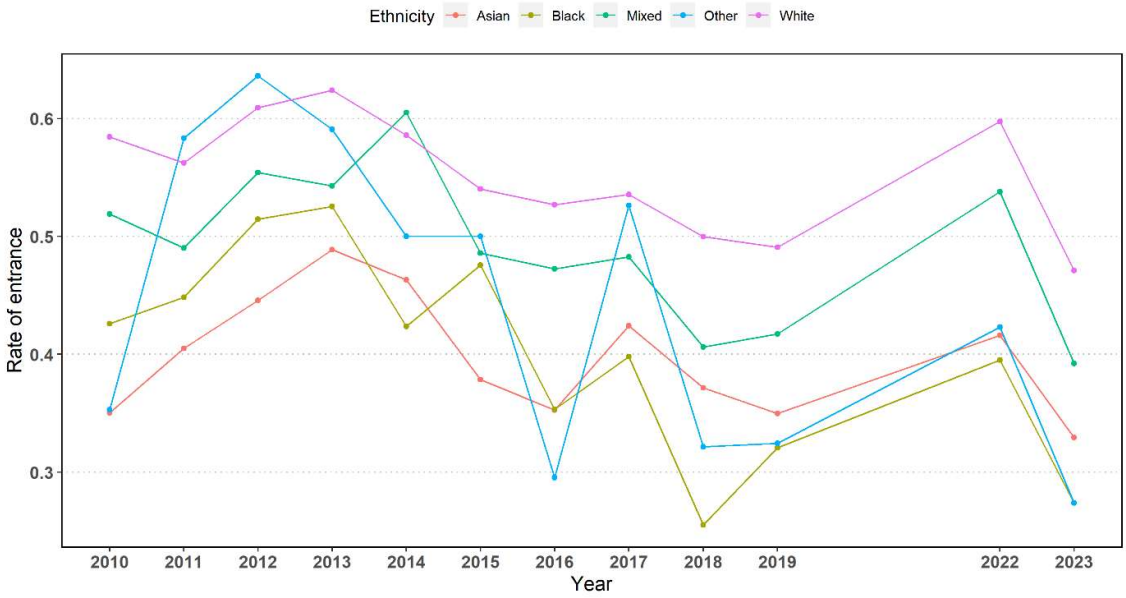

Figure 40: Entrance rate by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023

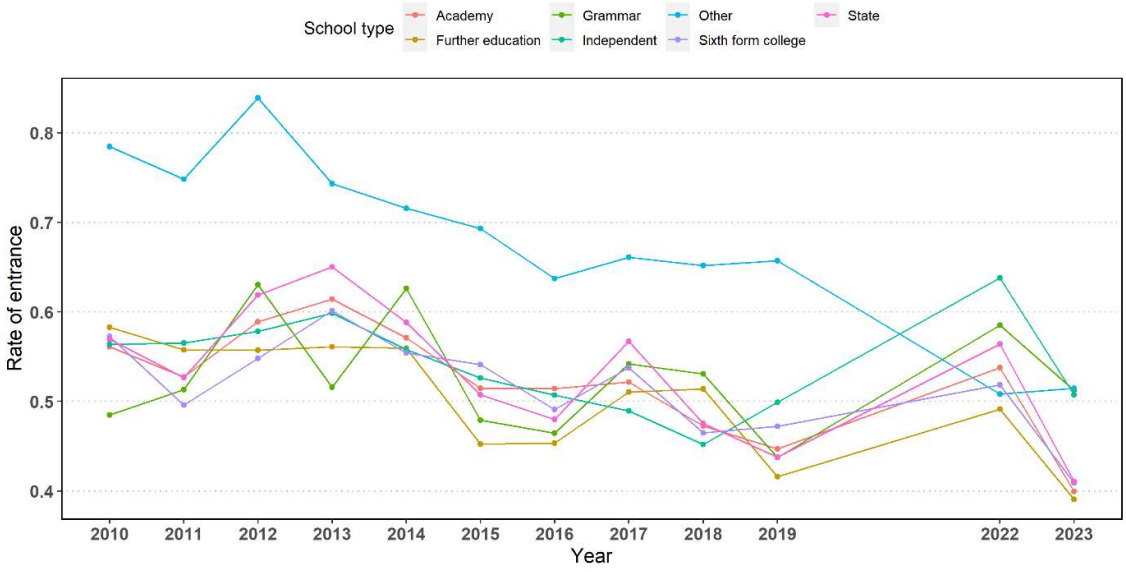

Figure 41: Entrance rate by school type between 2010 – 2023

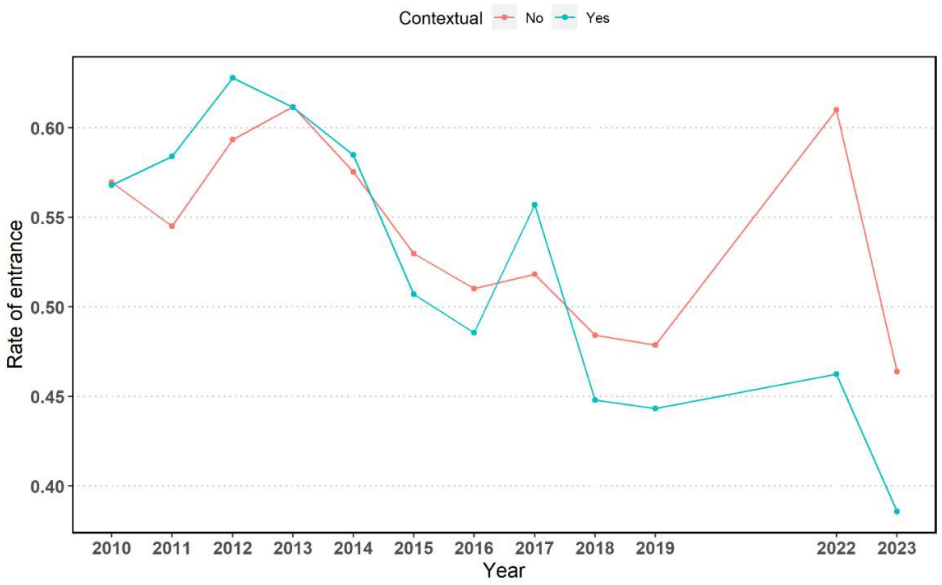

Figure 42: Entrance rate by contextual students between 2010 – 2023

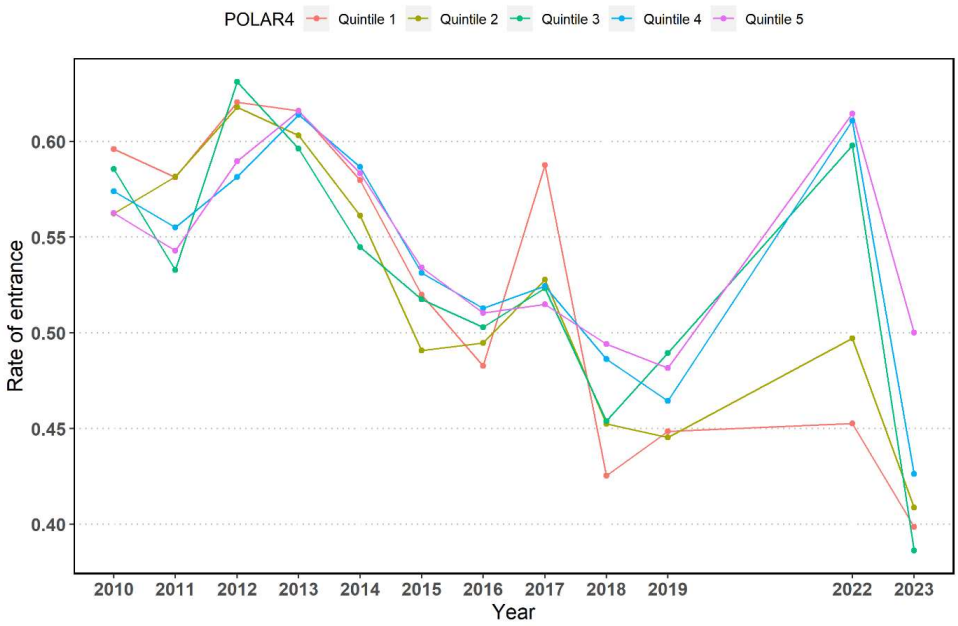

Figure 43: Entrance rate by POLAR4 quintiles between 2010 – 2023

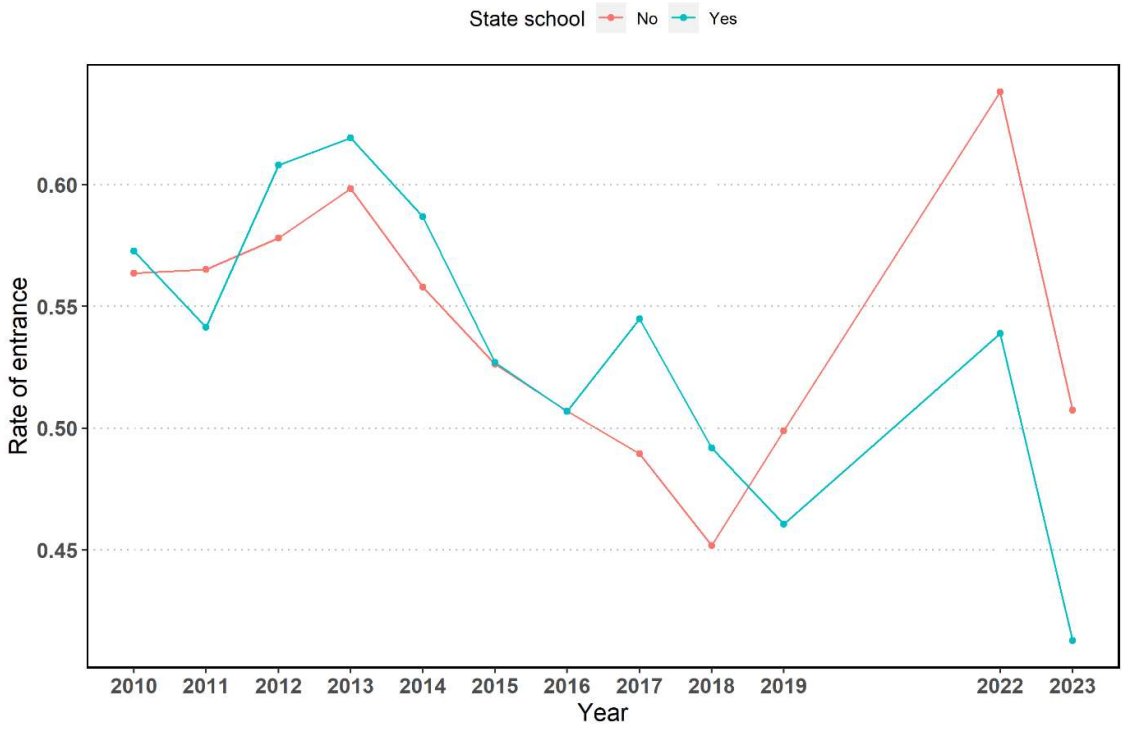

Figure 44: Entrance rate by school type (state school or other) between 2010 – 2023

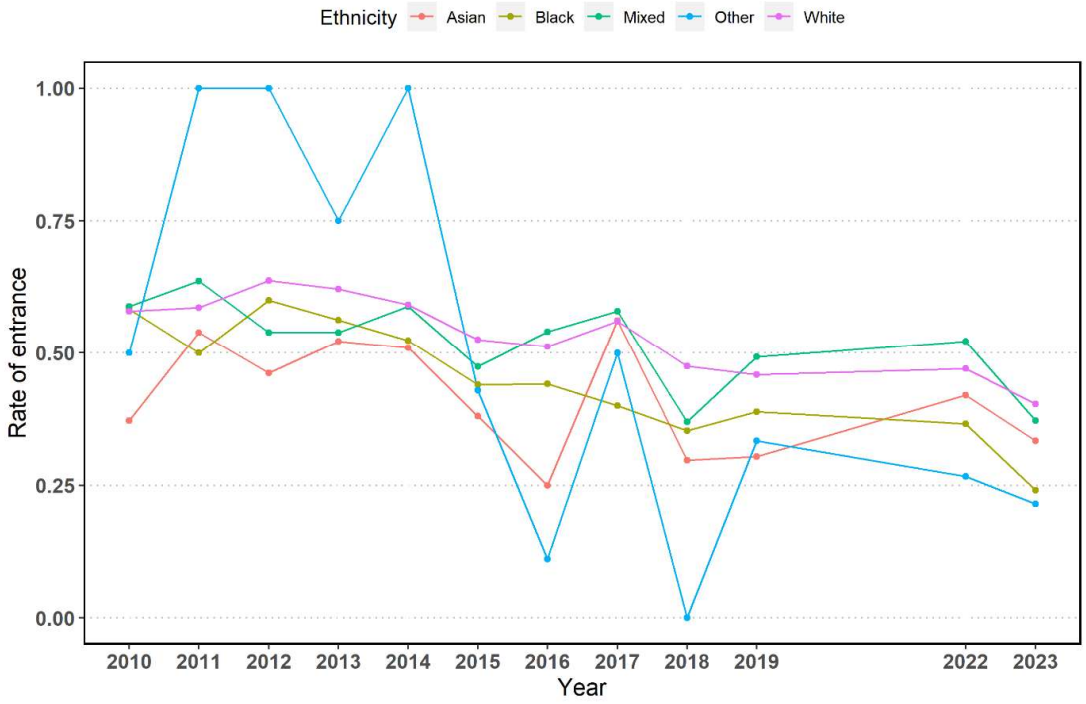

Figure 45: Entrance rate for contextual students by ethnicity between 2010 – 2023

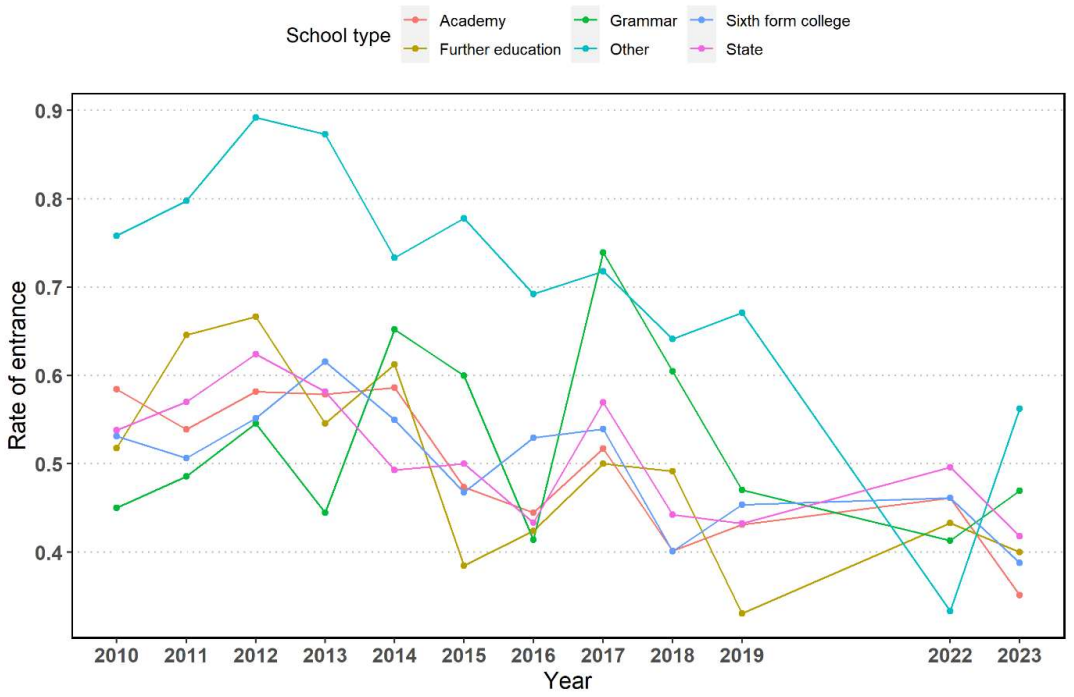

Figure 46: Entrance rate for contextual students by school type between 2010 – 2023

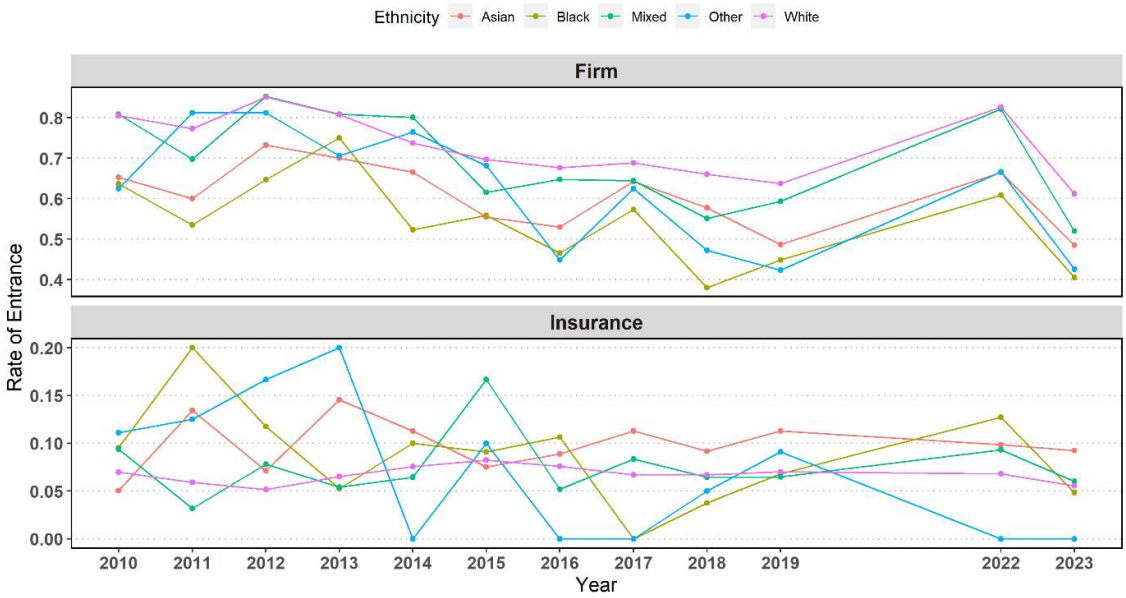

Figure 47: Entrance rate by ethnicity in firm and insurance groups between 2010 – 2023

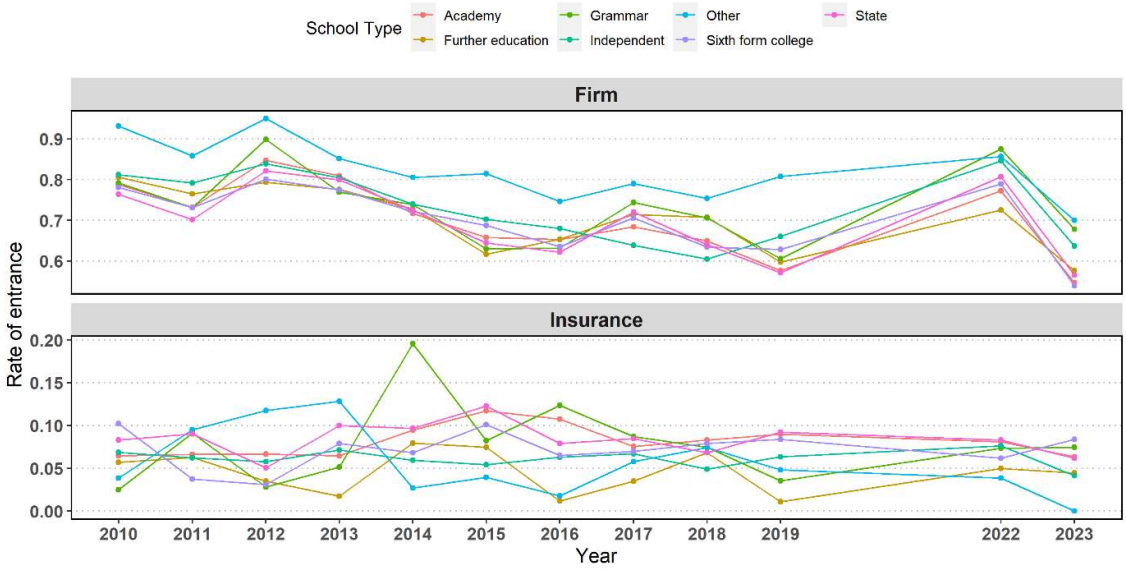

Figure 48: Entrance rate by school type in firm and insurance groups between 2010 – 2023

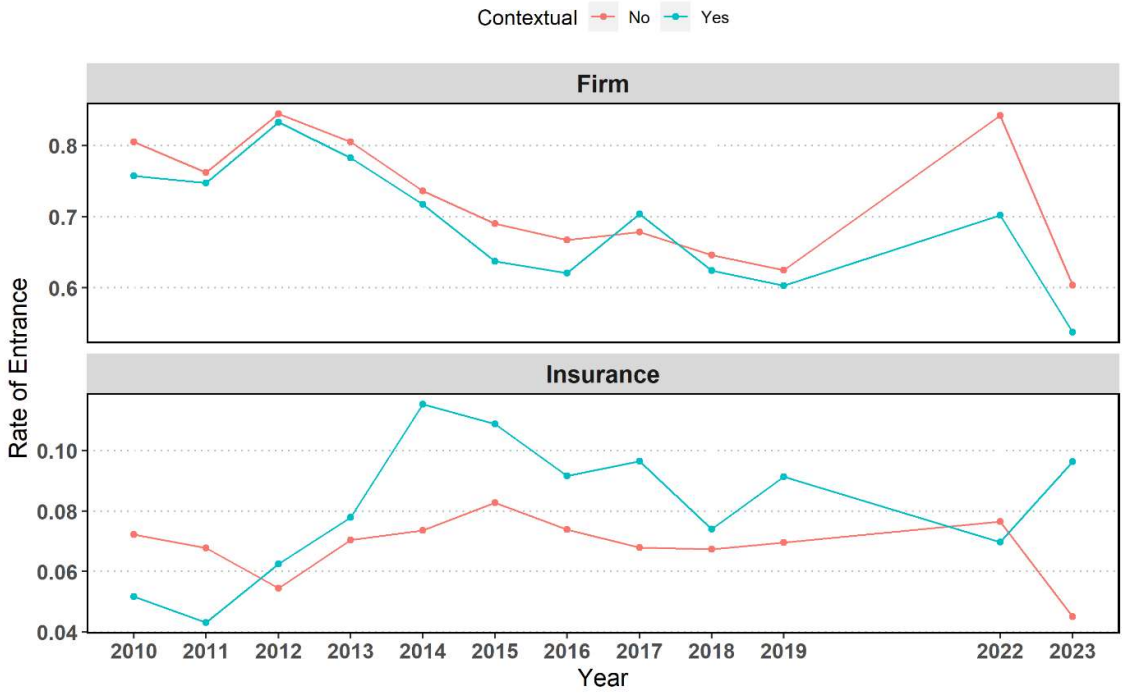

Figure 49: Entrance rate by contextual and non-contextual students in firm and insurance groups between 2010 – 2023