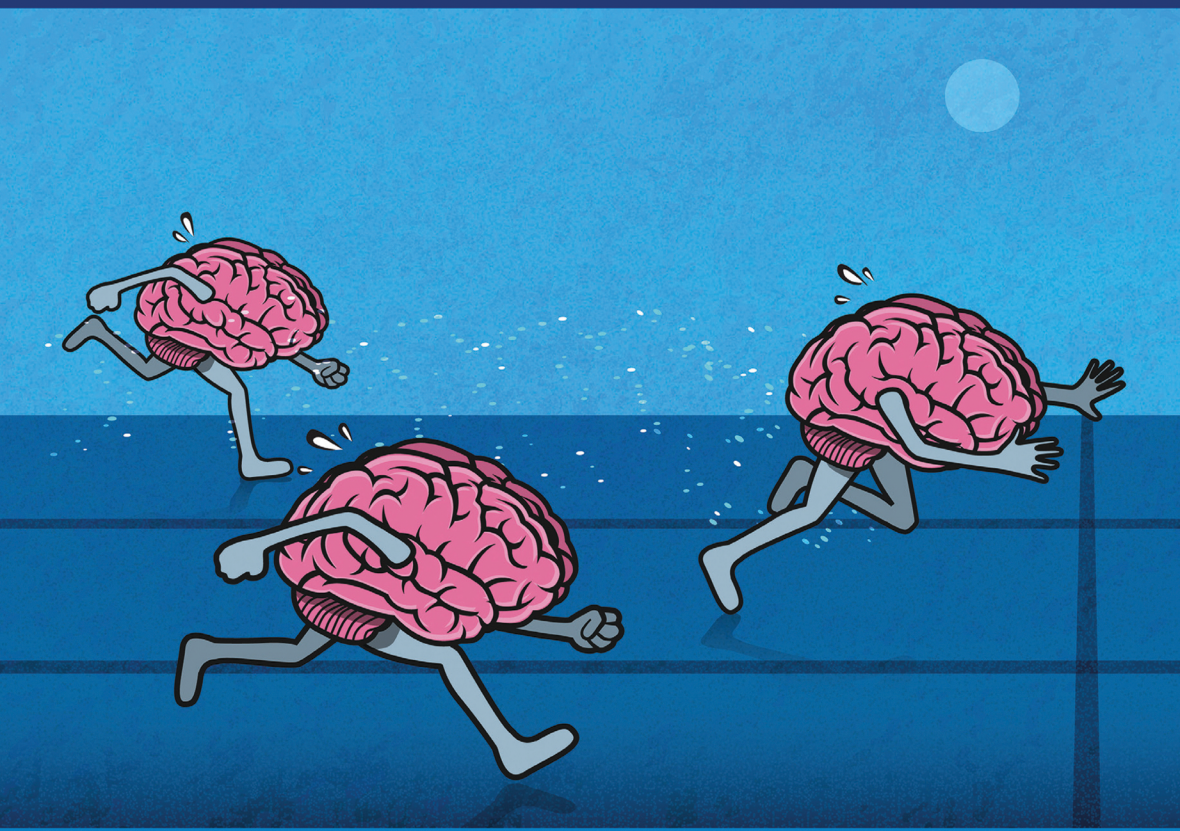
SUPPORTING UNIVERSITY ENTRY IN THE AGE OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION

Helping Talented Learners Overcome Adversity



JOHN R. D. BLICHARSKI

ROUTLEDGE

Supporting University Entry in the Age of Widening Participation

Designed for those working with widening participation students, this key guide provides all of the information needed to support learners from widening participation backgrounds to ensure that fair admission to university can be effectively delivered.

Providing the reader with a theoretical and practical understanding of how to reach non-traditional students, this book addresses the realities of the challenges the modern university widening participation applicant faces. Each chapter offers a fresh and engaging insight into widening participation and explores the fascinating range of factors that determine whether students from non-traditional backgrounds successfully access university and benefit from it. This book systematically considers the barriers, approaches and solutions required to reach university and encourages a 'best evidence' approach that could enable the people of tomorrow to have more equal access to learning and through that, a positive and healthy future on a planet under severe challenge.

Ideal reading for all those working in widening participation or committed to expanding the diversity of their student populations, this book offers the insights, advice and considerations needed when deciding how best to help often highly vulnerable and unsupported students transform their lives through learning.

John R. D. Blicharski has thirty years' first-hand experience of widening university participation policy and practice. His sector-leading work has drawn individual, national and international praise. His most recent recognition was a Heist award for Best UK Widening Participation Initiative 2021, becoming an Honorary Professor the same year.

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For Adam and Anna

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Preface

This book is about many things. It is the culmination of over a quarter century of practitioners, friends and colleagues telling the author he really should 'write a book about that'. My hope is that it allows readers to understand the largely hidden complexity of entry into university and through this, helps more candidates from diverse backgrounds to successfully achieve this.

During the twenty-five plus years this book covers, the widening participation (WP) dynamic has changed from exclusion (individuals from some sectors of society in a sense being unable to enter university) to the new dynamic of non-inclusion (the doors now being open, but individuals themselves requiring to be proactive to enter university). Whilst the birthplace of this book has largely been the Scottish scene, much of the information and experiential enlightenment it contains is truly international and hopefully of interest to all involved in WP, fair admission to university, equality, equity and post-compulsory study. Please enjoy it, challenge it and reflect upon it, as you learn your own lessons about university entry in the age of WP.

The cast of characters behind the book span many institutions, agencies and services and are too numerous to list here. However, the joy of WP (reaching out) or Access (guiding in) – terms which are often used interchangeably – is shared by them all. The author has regularly described what WP does as helping non-traditional learners 'turn their headlights on' so that the potentially daunting 'dark learner journey tunnel' in front of them not only becomes clearer and safer but also more meaningful and enjoyable. These learners each have headlights available to them – they are 'bright' people that just need to be encouraged and supported to use their talents. There is so much hidden ability out there, and much of what you will read is not about deficits and disadvantage, but about developing and enabling opportunity, unleashing the potential that so many future students possess but may, until a critical point, simply not have been able to switch on. Personal enlightenment in action.

In the WP world, early illumination of opportunity is vital in finding your way, whichever side of the classroom desk you sit at. The innate human sense of fairness – wanting to treat others as we would wish to be treated ourselves – helpfully taunts us to deliver fairness in all that we do. Without outreach activity to light up opportunity, history seems likely to repeat itself,

leaving far too many future learners in the dark, talent squandered, our past lessons of how to be more inclusive lost. I hope those who have contributed to and who read this share the warm glow of helping others that is such a proud part of the WP agenda. Taking part generates the passion, pride and commitment at the heart of WP and sustains the small band of WP experts who help transform so many lives and who are the hidden heroes of this part of the education sector. This book is not just about them, but also a tribute to them.

Book aim, mission and scope

This book is aimed at professionals that guide learners from WP backgrounds towards university. It has been written by the author in a personal capacity, with no inference that the content represents other individuals nor organisations. It sheds light on what can often appear to be overwhelming first steps on the journey through WP towards the goal of a graduate job. Whilst the content is designed to appeal to the widest range of colleagues in education, it is written so that parents and pupils will also understand their context, as they support or travel along their own learner journeys. By providing insight into key aspects of the last quarter century of change within the sector, readers will develop a deeper understanding of university WP admissions, right up to and through a time of pandemic.

The book explores the fascinating range of factors that determine whether students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, successfully access university and benefit from it. It systematically considers the challenges, barriers, approaches and solutions required to reach university. It reveals that for many, entry to university is a battle against significant odds that sees only those with the greatest ability, determination and understanding of the system make it. It illuminates how each year the 'funnel' of university admissions converts hundreds of thousands of applicants into a relatively small number of successful candidates permitted to enter degree-level study. It explains the background process that results in the remainder of those trying to enter the admission to university funnel finding it blocked for them, forcing them to reapply the following year, try a different route or simply give up, aiming instead for a different future.

This book outlines how fair admission to university can be effectively delivered by understanding how entry systems have evolved over time and adapting to these changes. By detailing a recent history of WP, largely played out across Scotland and the UK – but which reflects much more widely – readers will see why and how current university entry systems operate as they do. The pages offer contemporary insight, hopefully serving as a guide of lessons learned for the future. They document a tale of the complexity of 'getting into university' and how it fits within the current education system.

A recurring theme throughout the book is that of unexpected and unintended consequences, as key policy and operational decisions do not quite go to plan and when the best laid plans reveal unexpected new challenges. These

moments seem to occur most frequently when we do not adequately think forward and fully appreciate lessons learned from what has gone before. This book also explores questions around who should go to university that appear almost daily in the media. Debate around who should carry the costs of students studying, how much they should pay and even the value of Higher Education (HE) itself are also highlighted by getting behind the headlines to outline the variables that have led to where we were in 2022. Current pandemic challenges around school exams, applicant selection and how to get into university now occupy the thoughts of many within the wider community, noting that at one point or another (consciously or otherwise) all school leavers need to plot the course to their futures.

This book also aims to focus on all aspects related to the challenges non-traditional students face in their race towards their first degree and a graduate job. It deliberately does not directly address issues around WP to second degrees (or postgraduate study) for two reasons. Firstly, this would be a book in itself, although many aspects are common to the barriers undergraduates face. Secondly, there continues to be a view in the academic community that until significant progress in the undergraduate WP pipeline has been made, a focus on the postgraduate (PG) WP pipeline that follows from it is potentially not the best use of resources. This is a valid, if convenient, excuse but with significant progress now being made by many (although not all) undergraduate providers, minds will soon need to focus on the PG need, where struggles to gain funding and some prejudices about 'old school ties' and more may seem to linger. As we shall see, the bigger spectres of cost and opportunity cost also play a crucial role in studying for longer.

Finally, this book is a call for reflection on whether inertia of the status quo the system seems to accidentally or deliberately maintain is actually a good enough outcome for modern society. The book aims to encourage a 'best evidence' approach that could enable the people of tomorrow to have more equal access to learning and through that, a positive and healthy future on a planet under severe challenge. All aspects of this book are documented as perceived by the author, with apologies for any omissions and errors. Respectful debate on topics covered is actively encouraged in a true spirit of wider access to key information and learning that we should all champion. Each future student may be just one learning moment away from having their learning lives transformed, so it is wise to never underestimate the power of a simple intervention taking time to make a learner feel understood, valued, supported and full of potential. The quarter century covered in the book shows that even with the best intentions the rate of change within university entry systems can be glacial. For now, enjoy the journey and sharing your experience with that of fellow travellers. Because wherever WP and Access are going, the one certainty is that we are not there yet.

Book structure

Whilst this text has been prepared to flow for academic readers, individual aspects are considered in isolation, enabling it to be used as a resource to dip

into whenever needed. As stated, understanding then navigating the landscape of university application is key to the success of future students understanding the options, opportunities and obstacles before them as they compete for degree places in our citadels of knowledge that hold the keys to many well paid jobs. Each chapter offers fresh, engaging and easily understood insight into the previously hidden world of how entry to university occurs, including how it has recently become more socially inclusive but at the same time much more competitive. It critically evaluates the range of opportunities open to future students and considers their chances of being successful. The journey through this book enables exploration of the fascinating range of complex factors that determine how easily students from non-traditional backgrounds can access university and sit in these hallowed seats of learning. By doing so it shows the key, sometimes invisible, steps in the process by which our future graduates and professionals are made.

The chapters provide the reader with a theoretical and practical understanding of how applying to university operates. It explains how WP reaches out to non-traditional students to ensure as diverse a pool of future students as possible apply to university and so go on to benefit. It also looks at the Access measures used to support the substantial WP group into their degrees. It describes the challenges the modern university WP applicant faces and the barriers that circumstance may place before them. It highlights the enormous value and joy of applicant success in what is often a very competitive and stressful environment.

To enable readers to see the world of student selection, at the start of each chapter we briefly follow two very different learners. These brief vignettes depict applicants from very different backgrounds encountering the realities of the university application system. Through these typical future students those seeking selection to university can learn much to help them maximise their chances, their potential and talent being recognised. So understanding the rules by which this process plays out is hugely useful. Student selection processes actually use the same routines as many other day-to-day choice-making activities, being a simple series of steps that combine to be much more, in fact in this case, life-changing. The chapters show what it feels like to be an applicant and how different applicants may perceive the application process very differently. Where possible mass media coverage is cited alongside selected academic publications to enrich content and let readers see what kinds of issues those in the sector and those entering study battle with, as well as manage, daily. The pages before you outline how student selection can be done in a fair and consistent way – not that that is easy – also detailing in passing one academic traveller's insight into the history of WP. This book may then serve as a guide of lessons learned for the future through a tale of complexity, life chances and opportunities won and lost.

At a time when numbers dominate our world, with critical budgets, austerity policies and a pandemic, this grounded approach helps us remember that each of the many thousands of annual applications to university are

made by individuals, each with their own range of talents and burdens. Whilst the text celebrates their diversity, it also highlights that a 'one size fits all' approach to student selection by definition has limitations for those on the socio-economic periphery – the surprisingly large group that this book is about – and the talent pool at risk of exclusion from university. The chapters encourage us to realise that if we want to harness the maximum amount of societal potential, we need to look to the whole of society, not just parts of it. We need to become aware of the unconscious bias built into many student selection systems and address this. By attempting to transfer a quarter century of experience in these areas to the reader, it is hoped this book encourages the next generation of those interested in WP and fair admissions to reflect as much on process as on outcome, as this is the path to talent maximisation.

Whilst he has been 'minding the gap' in attainment that so many pupils face, the author has used his career experience to offer strategic and operational insight to take the reader behind the scenes of fair admissions, equity and equality of opportunity. The pandemic has made so many aspects of WP much harder and generated a new set of adverse circumstances that add to those already observed. Hopefully this book is as insightful about these pressures as it was to live through them and the long legacy of damage that follows those neglected by society. It offers insight, advice and a reference toolkit of aspects to weigh up when deciding how best to help often highly vulnerable and unsupported students transform their lives through learning.

Acknowledgements

A long career inevitably involves a lot of contact with a lot of people, all of whom have played their own important part towards this book. Within the space available it is important to give credit to the many staff with whom the author learnt his own lessons.

A special mention must go to a small clutch of professors who have encouraged both this publication and the decades of work it covers. In no particular order, Professors Elisabeth Gerver (who we sadly lost in 2021) and David Swinfen through their enthusiasm in the early 1990s for what became widening Access, changed so many lives, their passion for the new WP area being infectious. A third, Professor Divya Jindal-Snape, offered the confidence to embark on this publication and more, having truly lived up to her reputation as a wonderful, insightful, dare I say magical academic colleague.

Further key figures are Professor Dame Sue Black, with her 'can do' approach – for her, death being the start of her work, not the end – who has been a source of constant warm encouragement and support. Like Divya, her publications are always both fascinating, exciting, in fact a must read. And finally in this professorial list, Professor Dame Ruth Silver's support has been amazing. From the moment we met when Ruth was Chair of the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) we were able to exchange views and information as if we had always known each other, one of Ruth's many gifts.

Many staff from many universities – especially the University of Dundee – have been hugely supportive of this work, especially Dr Shane Collins, who along with others have helped make this book a reality. My thanks also go to the many thousands of students and staff I have had the pleasure of working with during the period this book covers, including the handful sadly no longer with us, but whose legacies live on in what we do. They so enjoyed delivering learning their delight at illuminating knowledge made the many challenging days after their passing easier. Each university application cycle does offer a fresh opportunity to help a fresh cohort, perpetually generating new hope for university staff of more talented students to work with and support. With each year the author has been blessed with a special team of colleagues with whom to share a happy office plus working life, and thanks go to all of them over the years.

WP and Access is a 'Peter Pan' area for staff, with students staying roughly the same age year after year and staff easily forgetting that they themselves age each cycle. Those staff involved long term don't always perceive time as it passes, with little punctuation to mark one entry cycle from another – indeed some annual aspects actually overlap. Keeping with the panto theme, until the 1980s Access really was a 'Cinderella' area, with little media coverage. In a sense it is especially fitting, the Cinderella story of being one of someone from a challenging background being contextually admitted to the Ball (in her case via a glass slipper). An Access parable in our national psyche. So my thanks go to the thousands of students I have worked with over the years and especially to those who continue to send me the most humbling of thank-you messages on a regular basis – simply wonderful.

Being able to approach one of the most highly respected publishers, famed for their professional approach, was made so much easier by the support offered by commissioning editors Sarah Hyde, Zoe Thomson, Justine Bottles and from their New York base Rebecca Collazo and especially Lorraine Savage for her outstanding copy editing – all of Taylor & Francis / Routledge Education. All have given generously of their time and deserve the warmest of praise for the clarity and enthusiasm they brought to this work.

Over the author's career he has been blessed with working with many of the finest minds in WP and often had the now rare privilege of being allowed to select his own staff from those that applied, then help them grow, rather than be given a readymade set from a predecessor. The almost lost art of using daily contact with each and every team member under management to ensure the team performs as well as it can requires as much work as it offers reward, but is worth it. The author set out to never let anyone down and be scrupulously fair even under pressure, appreciating all inputs and rewarding with an open, group approach to achieving success. Since 2010, the Access to High Demand Professions team (currently Helen H., Steve H., Jan M., Amy S. and Chris W.) have comprised the staff reporting to the author, all doing exceptional work. Beyond their brilliance, Diane A. deserves a special mention for being the person able to balance to greatest effect on the Access structural tightrope, her talent and relentless calm determination (plus drive to deliver) helping transform the lives of literally thousands of students.

Finally my deepest thanks go to my family – my wife Dorota, children Adam and Anna, sisters Eilean and Jess, niece and nephew Juliet and Christopher, and closest friends (especially D.M.C., Karl L., Jas N., Steve T., Mark L., Vonnie S., neighbours and further friends) who put up with my busy schedule (and jokes) as I have tried to help the next generation of learners on their journey to success. Fortunately, they understand why widening participation matters, the pressures involved and for that I am very grateful. This book has been a huge undertaking and is particularly dedicated to them.

About the author

Like many in the turbulent 1980s, the author left school with no firm idea of what to do next. Having lost his father, Jan (pronounced 'Yan'), to an accident at work in 1981 when John was aged 15, the author was incredibly fortunate that his own impacted education was significantly supplemented by his sisters – both passionate teachers – and his late mother, Helen, who had an intense sense of compassionate fairness and comprehensively gave her life to her family. All these years on, this proud parental couple who were brought together by a World War (and who with no support learnt each other's languages and cultures) continue to live on through the family they created. They taught those that followed so much, not least that hard work and being willing to give your all was simply, without fuss, the way to live. They showed why it is important not to waste a heartbeat of time, as that amazing generation had themselves learned in the hardest of ways.

Returning to the author's own learning, on completing an HND in Biological Sciences at the University of Abertay he articulated directly into Year Three of a Biochemistry Degree (with Honours) in his old school town of St Andrews. He returned north of the Tay to complete a PhD in Pharmacology at the University of Dundee before realising that it was time to follow the family tradition and teach some of what he had learned. Following a Diploma in Medical Education (also Dundee) he spent four years from 1991 helping doctors develop their learning within Medical Education at the University of Dundee. Whilst there completing a Master's Degree in Education (with Honours) one of his lecturers – the late Professor Elisabeth Gerver – suggested he apply for a role in main stream education that she was keen to develop. It was a single moment of opportunity that led to a career that in turn led to every summer being spent on campus (1995–2019) or online (2020 +2021) with WP students – a choice of vocation over vacation, it might be said. Since being appointed to this role in 1995, the author headed up Access developments at the University of Dundee under a variety of structures and titles including Director of the Wider Access Study Centre, becoming a Senior Lecturer and subsequently a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, then in late 2021 becoming an Honorary Professor. He led a hand-picked talented Access to High Demand Professions (AHDP) team that has gained national

recognition in a complex area during the most challenging pandemic times for the sector and the world.

The author's personal and professional development has always been strongly influenced by his scientific training and the need to ensure each and every approach is firmly evidence based and continuously tested as being fit for purpose. A wise person, their name lost in time, once said that because of the political dimension, WP and Access would always be about 'proving a good thing to be good'. In other words, not just doing good but proving it makes a positive difference through clear, often longitudinal, evidence that requires meticulous planning and lots of analysis and understanding. This approach underpinned the development of a raft of provision the author introduced over the years as detailed below. It demonstrates the growth and evolution of provision as needs changed and demand identified. It hopefully also demonstrates changing perspectives and how change can be managed.

The 'S' prefix for year groups relates to the stage of Secondary School of the intended audience. S1 = First year of Secondary School, and so on:

1995 – introduction of an effective campus-based largescale post-pilot ***Access Summer School*** aimed for the first time at specifically preparing and qualifying students for entry to undergraduate degrees at the University of Dundee. The course at this point was full-time and 10 weeks long but has constantly evolved. Further details appear in Chapter 9.

1997 – introduction of the ***ASPIRE*** Course. A four-week academic preparatory course running immediately before the start of each semester for around 100 candidates deemed likely to benefit from enhanced preparation for degree-level study. The course was withdrawn in 2006, the target audience having reduced due to alternative options offered by the growing College sector.

1998 – introduction of ***Discovering Degrees for Schools*** programme for S3 contextually targeted pupils, enabling hundreds of pupils to each spend their first school day on campus, shadowing mock lectures, workshops and practical classes, accompanied by their teachers (who themselves gained much from time on campus).

2000 – introduction of ***Discovering Degrees for Adults*** using the same format as the Schools version. As with the ***ASPIRE*** Course, the Adults version of the course was withdrawn in 2006, the target audience having reduced due to alternative options offered by the College sector.

2008 – ***Discover Learning at Dundee*** (DLAD). A year-long alternative to ***Access Summer School*** was devised and introduced, removing the need for eligible candidates to wait up to a year for the June start date of ***Access Summer School***, enabling them to study online, all year. The introduction was part of the then 'lifelong learning' drive and had a particular focus on adults returning to study.

2010 – launch of ***Reach*** and ***ACES*** (AHDP) projects (nationally supporting access to high demand professions, medicine, dentistry, law, architecture, art and design) primarily for eligible S4–S6 pupils. The author was a founding member of the establishing group.

2011 – introduction of the ***City Campus*** project aimed at S5 and S6 pupils wishing to study Advanced Highers otherwise unavailable in their Secondary School which was developed with the author.

2015 – due to the limited number of Scottish / EU undergraduate places available as a result of free tuition in Scotland, entry to ***Access and Online Summer Schools*** switched from being 'open Access' where candidates could apply to the programmes, to 'by invitation only', where only those offered the courses as part of their UCAS offer would be admitted to it. High demand meant that candidates were at risk of completing these courses without having an undergraduate place to enter at the end, hence the essential adaptation. At the same time, largely to reduce opportunity cost to learners (many of whom have part-time jobs) the course length was reduced to six and a half weeks, with only four of these (for ***Access Summer School***) being on campus, the remainder being online. This unavoidable development introduced the 'Access application paradox'. Access candidates lacking entry qualifications are arguably the least likely to apply to university – why would they if they think they cannot get in? And yet, if they do not apply they are ineligible for a place at the end of the course. This paradox remains today.

2016 – ***Online Summer School***. An effective online alternative to ***Access Summer School*** was introduced to enable those needing 'lighter touch' support to complete the entire preparatory and qualifying course online over the summer. In effect, the 'DLAD' modules (see 2008 above) were from this point available throughout the year (having not previously been offered during summer months when Access Summer School ran). By 2020 the revised combined approach of the two courses prepared and qualified ~200 contextually flagged candidates for entry each year for degree entry and boosted subsequent progression of this group. These courses provide the earliest possible supported intervention point for them.

2017 – the ***Transformation Trust,*** subsequently ***The Talent Foundry*** picked the University of Dundee as the only Scottish partner to host eligible local S1 and S2 pupils to give them their first real exposure to a university.

2020 – start of the first joint WP PhD student at the University of Dundee, jointly supervised by the author.

2021 – the AHDP Project was shortlisted for the annual Herald Access Awards and the Access Summer School won a silver Heist award for UK Best WP Initiative 2021. Also the first year that entry to all University of Dundee degrees could be secured via ***Access and Online Summer Schools.*** The University of Dundee bestowed the author with the rank of Honorary Professor of Access and Participation in October 2021.

2022 – after thirty years of academic service the author sought early retirement, partly to publish this book.

The above journey provides some context about the author and the breadth of development and experience that plays out in this book.

Development of this provision has provided so many of the lessons learned now shared with you.

Prof John R. D. Blicharski
HND BSc(Hons) PhD DipMedEd MEd(Hons) FHEA Prof
Honorary Professor of Access and Participation

Autobiographical notes

For the last thirty years, Professor Blicharski helped learners successfully enter and progress their university studies, focusing on ensuring the brightest and best students, regardless of background were able to do so. This book distils that experience for all interested in university entry, offering detailed insight and explanation of the ingredients for success.

1 Widening participation hits the headlines

A tale of two talented strangers

> *Peter and Paul don't know each other. They live in different parts of the same town but have never knowingly met. However, they do have two things in common that neither can know about – they both have identical ability and potential and years later, they will both end up next to each other in the same graduating queue on the same day, crossing the same graduation platform, earning the same degree from the same university. Over the coming pages and chapters we will share the factors behind their different learner journeys to illustrate how opportunity and, in particular, educational inequality exists but can be overcome. We will see that addressing barriers to learning is often as much about candidates proving their ability to themselves and developing confidence as it is about proving themselves to exam boards to earn the qualifications required for entry to post-school study. But that is for much later.*

So, who goes to university? Who decides and on what basis? What is their lived experience like? How do applicants, their parents, the wider public and others feel about the huge investment different countries, societies and individuals make to produce graduates able to become the high-quality professionals for the vital and demanding jobs society relies on? And does everyone have a fair chance to benefit from such advanced learning? In this book we will consider these questions and illuminate the answers. Along the way we will ask ourselves many practical as well as theoretical questions about educational equality, equity, widening participation (WP; which we can consider as reaching out to non-traditional future students), Access (which we can consider as supporting non-traditional future students into university), and the many other terms used to describe the reality of the educational opportunity gap that prevails between different parts of wider society.

There are many ways of thinking about university entry and who should achieve it. A cluttered landscape of reports and publications has mushroomed over the last quarter century and some we will touch on in due course. More frequently, applicants and those supporting them will only come across media references to these issues, especially when it involves things like the cost of going to university and challenges facing students, most recently and helpfully

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highlighting issues around mental health. This book aims to explore these issues by shining a light on the processes that can lead to a fair approach to creating a diverse group of future graduates that will be involved in the next great discoveries and the future of our planet. So profound is this that the author will take the position that most readers are likely to be keen for this to go well, for learning to be widespread and not limited by geography or socio-economic factors. The text will presume that equity and fairness are not just aspirational but expected outcomes that are functionally delivered and not just offered as warm words.

For now, let us look at the wider picture. Hardly a week goes by without some coverage of the thorny question of who should go to university being directly or indirectly covered by the media. As stated, the question is profound in terms of the needs of civil society, public and private finance, employment levels, GDP and other measures of national economic health. With between 30% and 40% of UK school leavers aspiring to enter Higher Education (HE) (noting, for example, that in Scotland around a third of Higher Education provision is delivered by Further Education (FE) colleges), this is of huge significance, involving large numbers of individuals and huge levels of resource, as well as opportunity. We might expect that a pilot or an astronaut requires years of expensive training to safely navigate craft around or beyond the globe. But how often do we think that those who designed and built their vehicles, their software and hardware and all the support they need to be successful may require just as much (or even more) teaching and learning to ensure the success of larger endeavours? An extreme example of this would be the Apollo space programme, which allowed 12 men to walk on the moon, but which at its peak is estimated to have employed around 400,000 people and required the support of over 20,000 industrial firms and universities. Such a pyramid of achievement can be largely invisible until one small step becomes a rather big one.

By almost any scale, HE is a huge industry – a stepwise process of selecting those with the most potential and transforming them into graduates highly valued by employers and society. This is especially true for professional degrees, where high starting salaries and long-term prospects are a key attractant. Following from this inclusion, diversity and social mobility are all facets of who should go to university that at the start of this century regularly appear in the news. WP and Access as strategic and operational mechanisms naturally lie within this space and deserve serious consideration by us all. As universities admit new students each year, quietly, behind the scenes, the same core question arises each cycle – how representative of wider society should the new intake be? The demographics of entrants are closely monitored, scrutinised and reported upon. That does not mean that there is a clear answer, as such decisions have political, financial and cultural facets. This is especially true for protected characteristics, (see Chapter 4) noting the issues that exist around positively discriminating in favour (or against) particular groups. It can be argued that in many ways the sole (legal) way in much of

the world to be more inclusive is to simulate demand from underrepresented sectors of society in the hope more and more applicants from these backgrounds will aspire to go on to actually apply to enter such destinations. If that happens, they are admitted and then graduate society and universities would mirror each other. But this is not what appears to happen yet, according to most enquiry reports into the subject. As we will see, the ambition to diversify university intake through the world of WP outreach (with specialist staff informing and encouraging new learners otherwise at risk of exclusion), is one of the key mechanisms to stimulate demand.

However, before we go forward to look at this in detail, we need to glance back and examine how WP got to where it is today. The timeline of this publication spans a period where attitudes towards going to university have changed significantly. Whilst the 1980s possibly marked the end of universities being routinely seen as 'ivory towers' it took until the 1990s and beyond for WP provision to break down many of the myths that had developed over decades. For those involved in spreading the good word that post-school education was available to all who could benefit (so supporting society as a whole) this work became a committed ambition. This possibly peaked during Tony Blair's period as Prime Minister when he launched the 'New Deal' programme that included WP options, launching one of them with the author present. Whether things 'could only get better' as the anthem of that time claimed is another book entirely, but the aim was to be more inclusive and even if a little naive and under-resourced by subsequent governments, it was well intentioned and arguably opened many eyes to what could be. Possibly even more importantly it opened many minds. Why shouldn't all taxpayers who pay for universities to operate have a fair chance to attend one? The Access genie was out of the bottle.

The subsequent 2010–2020 period will probably be remembered for the growth in the supply of undergraduate places not keeping up with demand for them from potential students, specifically those who could cope and benefit personally and as part of wider society. As we will see, different approaches have been used to address this, including encouraging more to consider FE, apprenticeships and employment rather than HE. A consequence (accidental or otherwise) has involved a significant rise in entry qualifications demanded by universities, what some refer to as 'grade inflation'. This essentially works as a filter on numbers (other applicants with lower qualifications turned away), limiting entry to those with the grades asked for. However, at this point in our story we encounter the first of many unintended consequences. The use of grades as a filter does not work evenly across all sectors of society, as it favours those with most opportunity, resilience and advantage. Whilst society might wish those with the most ability, the use of qualifications alone eliminates huge numbers who have different ability levels, including many whose ability is masked by adversity. Recognising this there is regular narrative on who has caused this grade inflation, even in wider media (for example in Yarrow, 2019). Some have strongly criticised HE grade inflation approach,

going as far as suggesting entry tariffs need only be set at a level that sees more than 50% progress successfully through their degree. For more on this see Boliver *et al* (2017) who helpfully both analysed and referenced much of the work to date in this area. This would be a huge change and so met with significant debate. But equally, if nothing changes, by definition nothing will change.

In terms of wider aspects around entry to university and the qualifications needed to prosper there, might the 2020s pandemic come to be seen as almost an accidental experiment? Debacles over a couple of exam cycles resulted in formal school exams not being delivered and led to candidates that might possibly normally be destined for FE (due to not quite meeting university entry requirements) being allocated the extra HE places the chaos led to being created. If they cope as well as hoped, this highly unusual event seems likely to reopen debates around what are the essential knowledge and skills required for entry to specific degrees? Might this unintended occurrence expose further evidence of the negative consequences of grade inflation that have had the unintended consequence of running counter to WP institutional and national desires?

That said, lowering entry tariffs to increase inclusion is controversial, with concerns expressed around reportedly higher discontinuation rates of students admitted with lower academic tariffs. Such an approach also reveals yet another example of an unintended consequence. Higher discontinuation rates for students have multiple domino consequences to the business that is the university sector. For example, if a student leaves mid-degree, their former university naturally loses the recurring fee income previously associated with that student. This is a direct hit to their budget. Compounding this, the departures will appear in surveys on aspects such as student satisfaction, the latter being a component of many league tables. Poor scores in league tables for student progression and satisfaction pushes such institutions down the league table rankings, the latter being crucial attractants to international and other students who use these tables as a quick way to establish where best to study. For institutions in lesser-known cities or parts of the world, this can be part of a spiral of recruitment decline in terms of appearing less attractive and effective to new students, hitting income and making things appear worse each application cycle, especially when year-on-year trends are compared. Who wants to go to an apparently declining university, even if in reality it is a fabulous place to be a student, simply hit by a few league table place drops that may not reflect the true picture? So once again a simple well-intended proposal to increase inclusion can lead over several years to unintended institutional consequences. League tables are precarious, and some may feel they are overvalued, especially if they report on a single year in isolation instead of trend over a more useful period of time. Equally, and for some readers maybe unexpectedly, they influence many WP decisions, so are important.

Returning to our core Scottish worked example of WP in action, the culture and history of learning in Scotland has led to a view, recently restated by the Scottish Government, that the chances of any individual progressing to

post-school study should be based on their ability to learn, not their ability to pay for it. Many readers might assume this was already the case but once again we bump into the starting point of another unintended consequences in this case – the assumption that the most qualified are always those with the most potential. As we will see throughout our journey together, we need to constantly seek to understand and confirm that statements made are actually rooted in fact. So in this case around qualifications, ask if this is true? Might the most qualified also be those who have had most opportunity to demonstrate their ability, rather than those who actually have most ability? Put another way, we have to ask ourselves if we believe that access to opportunity influences the process of learning and awarding qualifications? If the answer is yes, this begs the question whether selection should be based on future potential or (as most education systems do) use past results, the latter not necessarily being the best predictor of the former when access to opportunity varies. This is a complex area that we will return to, but for now the key point is that if we are to use evidence to make decisions it is crucial to understand what the evidence tells us and not just make assumptions that something is a perfect proxy for something else. If we do not take such care during analysis, we face a further cascade of unintended consequences that may get in the way of our ambitions. One of the main aims of this book is to help readers better understand the landscape of WP and Access. So please excuse the mention of unintended consequence appearing so often in the book, as this is arguably a system and not an author fault. Long after this book is closed it is still wise, healthy and probably essential to question assumptions around university entry, not least by looking at what actually happens in terms of output each admissions and graduation cycle and ask: 'is this what we wanted and expected to happen to meet the objectives we set'?

Returning to the detail of WP and especially outreach, it is also important to ask what such work expects to deliver, how it will do this and what the results may look like? Along the way it will become clear that underneath most approaches to encourage learning there is a complex series of interconnected variables that run in a serial manner. What this means is that change to one element quickly transmits down the line, often as we have established in unpredictable ways. One visualisation that used to be fairly prominent – that of seeing universities as 'ivory towers' – seems to have faded from the minds of many, 'Uni' now seems to be seen by many applicants as being a much more open place of learning. In terms of elitism, for example, the days of MI5 visiting Heads of University Careers Services to try to recruit the best university talent to immediately be whisked away to work in espionage have indeed passed. And yes, that really did happen within the period this book covers, although subsequently (as ex-MI5 officer and University of Dundee graduate David Shayler discovered – see Machon (2005) for more on spy recruitment during this period) the Service has moved on to use covert and now overt adverting to recruit, rather than university staff recommendations. Indeed, university staff are now much more likely to be asked to report on future terrorists rather than future spies.

The drive to find the best talent from all sectors of society in a fair and even-handed way is arguably morally and ethically wholesome but does not exist in isolation. Such ambition exists against a background of supply and demand, resource and resilience, motivation and fear of the unknown. When those of us who have worked in Access for a quarter century or more started, there was a genuine belief that target audiences for this work like 'first in family' (to enter HE) would quickly become an endangered species. We were in an era, after all, of 'learning for all' and 'lifelong learning' – an almost magic set of wonderful, optimistic inclusive concepts of making not breaking unions as Brexit exemplified. A generation on, by some measures little had really changed, as the interim CoWA report (2015) and the final CoWA report (2016) for Scotland showed. The near 'flat line' graph (Interim Report, 2015, p. 20) recording WP impact in terms of one measure of social inclusion showed that because of other variables, all the good work conducted in WP outreach had done in the preceding decade had actually not done much more than prevent things getting worse, achieving maintenance of a historically poor inclusion level. On the same page, the CoWA team point out that only ring-fenced extra undergraduate places had actually increased the number of students entering from disadvantaged backgrounds, strongly suggesting the sector could respond when resource was made available but equally that resource (money for universities) was the driver. Despite that the culture of the campus and the entrance gap by postcode has remained stubbornly stable, with only gradual improvement seen. As we will see, the key contextual measure used for this work remains contentious (much more on that later) but the point stands – without change, nothing changes. Repeated years of rolling will not see a six-sided dice generate a lucky seven. Which neatly brings us to the matter than many reading this may empirically feel, namely that fair Access to learning is a social as well as an economic good and to preside over a system that is unfair is maybe an easy (for those who benefit) but not a morally comfortable place, in a world where blocking talent feels like the last thing a struggling planet should be doing. Being fair is (normally) good but just like at Wimbledon ('Hawkeye') and in football ('VAR') being truly fair often requires understanding, close monitoring and fresh investment. In an unequal world, fairness often does not occur spontaneously.

With this in mind, much of the magic of inclusion that WP has delivered has been achieved against a backdrop steeped in educational theory and practice. This is particularly true for the aspects around developing motivation towards student achievement that are required to enable otherwise deterred learners find meaning and value in their own learning (as many such as Brophy, 1999, have noted). The context of learning itself is key here. Over one hundred years ago Dewey (1913) summed it up nicely: "Things indifferent or even repulsive in themselves often become of interest because of assuming relationships and connections of which we were previously unaware." Contextualising this, Dewy (1913) noted "Many a student…has found mathematical theory, once repellent, lit up by great attractiveness after studying some form of engineering in which

this theory was a necessary tool." And so 'turning on learner headlights' as the author terms this – making the connections that make learning relevant – are much more than what some may see as a marketised student recruitment transaction and (should dare we say it) be fun.

Readers may by now have grasped that such is the huge scope and complexity of the WP (and the many other educational fields it touches upon) that our own WP journey in this book would benefit from milestones along the learner journey we follow to help us fully understand the complex landscape. Over time each individual moves from potential WP applicant to graduate employment, which is a significant metamorphosis. Understanding this journey enables us to better understand and so facilitate such travel for others. This is especially important for those future learners reading this book, as all too often WP students report not feeling worthy of the support they are entitled to, largely because they don't understand the learning landscape they are traveling through. The true landscape is not immediately obvious. In fairness, they possibly have never had it mapped for them, until now. They often have little sense of educational entitlement and through often being surrounded by struggle and failure can very easily sink into a similar despairing outcome. However, once they realise otherwise and that, for example, the 'uni' in university can be taken to mean 'universal' or 'for all' who will benefit, there is often no stopping them. Indeed, WP students frequently develop a strong passion to give something back to WP, typically volunteering to help the next generation of WP students. Yes, WP is powerful, enjoyable and highly addictive, as the author can testify over a long career. In many ways this is unsurprising. Transforming anything requires understanding and craftsmanship. But transforming lives takes this to a new level. The future can so easily see history repeating itself and the status quo for those locked out of the light of learning perpetuating itself. Considered this way, with our own individual torches lighting the way, our own journey through this book will hopefully be illuminating and help us help others.

2 A model of widening participation and how it leads to undergraduate entry

What chance does my application have?

Peter and Paul both have the same ambitions but live in quite different worlds. Peter was lucky enough to attend a school where the majority of pupils planned to continue their studies after secondary school. Peter himself had received help from a couple of private tutors who helped him when two of his grades dipped and also guided him on his application to university – they actually reworded aspects of his application for him to boost his chances – so was it really a 'Personal' Statement? Paul's experience was quite different, having more than once moved secondary schools due to family break up. Due to family unemployment he was the only member of his family going out each morning, his weekday alarm reminder on his phone being deeply unpopular domestically. Paul's teachers were really helpful, but with big classes of very mixed motivation and ability levels within them, he did really well to get nearly the same grades on leaving school as Peter. But what would happen next for our two learners?

Approaches to Access vary nationally and internationally, and even seasoned practitioners can sometimes require a little time to understand what, beyond the media narrative, marketing and constant change, individual Access provision elements in different institutions are actually offering to learners. Learners can easily be put off by this wealth and complexity of information and choice before them. Any book on Access written by a Scot will be unashamedly proud of Scotland's real (and mythical) Access tradition. Access predates the nineteenth century Scottish myth of the 'lad o' pairts' – a boy from a humble background, considered sufficiently talented or promising to be financially supported in their advancement through local patronage. Most often, a future doctor or preacher would be sponsored by their community which subsequently needed their services.

Fast forward to the modern era and the political interventions of the last few decades seem in some ways similar, although thankfully the degree range is now much wider and crucially entry is not gender-specific. In the last few years one significant example of this was the decision in 2010 by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to launch the national Access to High Demand Professions (AHDP) Programme in Scotland. This continuing activity (of which

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the author is a founding member) helps learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds aspire to and prepare for entry to some of the most competitive undergraduate subjects, such as Medicine, Dentistry, Law, Art, Design and Architecture. Like the 'lad' back then, today talent needs to be identified and nurtured. Over a decade on the impact of the AHDP work has been carefully documented and analysed, the success clear for all to see. In turn, wider national progress in Scotland is now recorded in the form of Scottish Funding Council (SFC) 'Learning for all' reports (for example, see SFC, 2016, report in the references) which map performance indicators and data in significant detail. CoWA (2016) summed it up perfectly on page 10 of this seminal publication: "All of this, however, will have little impact upon fair access unless we ensure that admissions systems do not perpetuate the disadvantages learners have faced earlier in life but instead provide those with potential the opportunity to succeed." One sentence that explains Access so perfectly. And yet despite understanding, progress elsewhere remains slow.

What became obvious very quickly to the national AHDP team is that clarity of information and outcome at, as well as before, the point of application to post-school study is crucial. Learners must understand the choices before them as a basis for making informed decisions. Deciding to embark on post-school study requires a major lifestyle adjustment. What is equally clear is that whilst broad, general awareness-raising activities for WP audiences can and often are made from a distance, to ensure new students are not just inspired but admitted into our competitive universities, there needs to be a WP locus within each target institution. Frankly it takes inside knowledge to develop individual contacts and relationships that understand the complexity of what it takes for a candidate to be successful and enter degree-level study. In a highly competitive environment, fairness and transparency should always have a place. At the heart of this lie those who make policy and then the individuals who enact it. A sector challenge is that both groups may have members with differing levels of understanding of WP, noting that this may not be an essential requirement for staff recruitment nor something that extensive training is normally given on. Some making these decisions may not have a deep understanding of the individual circumstances some applicants apply from, and if they do, may be limited in how they can reflect this due to tight numbers caps (more on which we will explore later). It may be that staff development in this area will eventually become standard, just as in recent years equality and diversity training thankfully has.

For now, we can distil the normal process to a worked example. If an individual candidate (A) has been judged to have been outperformed during selection by another candidate (B) then (A) should not win the undergraduate place they are competing for. If, however, the full circumstance in which achievements were made are clearly and verifiably articulated to the person making the admission (or rejection) decision, in terms of fairness the binary choice becomes harder to make. Did B really outperform A? Sometimes one helpful approach can be an on-the-spot discussion with outreach colleagues

who may have worked with applicants under consideration, as this can make all the difference to seeing performance in a fair context, provided it reveals the full context. The decision may or may not change, but at least fuller evidence will have been considered, informed by relevant context. And that discussion requires proximity, embedding and co-location of WP staff with those who decide which applicants are offered places and which are rejected. In a sense WP staff in such scenarios can have a God's eye view of the fairness of each decision, and where there is a question to be asked, ask it. They are akin to professional football linemen/women, drawing the referee's attention when necessary to make the event fair for all. But like linesmen/women, they do need to be where the action is, right at the admissions grass roots.

Returning to the applicants themselves, Jindal Snape (2016) in her descriptions of the 'virtual backpack approach' beautifully highlights the "notion of every child carrying a virtual school bag full of knowledge, experiences, and dispositions" just waiting to be unpacked and deployed. Equally she highlights how engaged and positive those at risk of being otherwise disenfranchised can become when their backpacks carefully opened with teaching professionals, the content unpacked and their contents harnessed. This visualisation also helps us understand that each learner may well carry different resources, making a 'one size fits all' approach to learning unlikely to tap into the full scope of resource and potential of all candidates. Jindal Snape also highlights that virtual backpacks can hold the widest of useful items that can extend to cooking, budgeting and social skills, which is a timely reminder that being a student is a way of life and not just a theoretical construct. That said, this complexity means that looking at the broader range of student skills and how to support them (so being fair towards those seeking entry to university) can be sobering. For example, we hear relatively little about the potential inequity of our current grade-led university application systems, where regardless of the level of resource available to them, all applicants are assumed to have the same fair chance to achieve the level set for entry. It's a bit like the assessment cartoon, the origin of which remains contested, in which several creatures – from an elephant to a fish – are set exactly the same assessment (in this case, climbing a tree) to judge their ability. Fair assessment is an art as well as a science.

Other factors also come in to play here. For example, the impact of coaching and private tutoring, which might give a false measure of the future potential of the candidates under examination as it is not available to all. Where such 'extra' activity helps learning, fair enough you may think, but if the 'extra' is not about learning as such but about briefing on how to work the exam system from someone with inside knowledge you might form a different view on this unseen, potentially purchased, potential advantage. Clearly, this is a controversial perspective, but hopefully readers get the point. Constructing fair selection and assessments is as demanding as doing them. As the Principal of the University of Edinburgh stated in 2019: "a reliance on exam grades without taking into account context leads to systematic bias

against less advantaged students and is inherently unfair" (Mathieson, 2019). It is very easy to assume that historic systems are fair, on the basis that 'that is how we have always done it'. However, such approaches can so easily mask what some see as academic apartheid, where the location you were born, not your ability, determines life chances.

This is a deep area for us to consider, with concepts like entitlement and the right to learn often buried beneath systems and processes, many of which are resistant to illumination and reconsideration, largely due to resource aspects. It is not that staff are always fully comfortable with rejecting some marginal applicants and if extra places, time and resource were available, on deeper investigation of context, such applicants might well win a positive outcome. The sad reality is that WP candidates characteristically undersell themselves at application, often not appreciating that something like holding down a 7 a.m. paper round for a period of time can show the same level of determination as other more prestigious recognised awards for consistent commitment, and simply don't report such evidence of endeavour and commitment.

Changing tack, motivational beliefs, values and goals are another key to Access success, as many such as Eccles and Wigfield (2002) have noted in helpful detail. Without motivation, why will a learner learn? Will they apply for post-compulsory education at all if they perceive their chances of successfully entering it to be at best marginal? By way of example, one of the first question many WP applicants ask is what are my chances of getting into my chosen degree through a particular route? Some may pick which degrees to apply to based on which they feel are easiest to get into, becoming a student being their primary objective. Whilst that may sound ridiculous to some, the ability to sometime transfer from one degree to another once admitted to a university may on special occasions make this approach seem inspired, if a little devious.

On 'what are my real chances of getting in?' however the answer, of course, is it depends. It depends on a range of factors including:

1 published entry requirements – often artificially elevated beyond the level needed to ensure candidates are successful, to act instead as a selection filter, so addressing high levels of applicant demand for the limited number of places available. Historically the side effect of selecting by high school grades has been a narrowing of participation, as those with the most resources and most support get the best grades. The political view that the ability to learn, not ability to pay, should govern selection decisions is not necessarily the norm internationally;
2 demand for places – which varies year to year and is especially important where selection is by picking those at the top of a ranked order (the 'gathered field' approach to selection) which is very different to a 'first come, first served' much more 'open Access' approach to HE and WP which some countries, for example Austria, follow (noting high demand course still have key entry requirements). Such methods need scrutiny to see the ranking method is fair, a topic we will return to;

3 contextual factor recognition – see Chapter 8 for much more on this;
4 whether the application is made on time, noting late application often results in automatic rejection;
5 whether the application is made through Clearing – in effect the phase of post-result matching of individuals to any spare places. Over the last twenty-five years, Clearing has morphed from being about filling any vacant undergraduates seats so ensuring institutional income remains high (when supply of places exceed demand) to now when candidates 'trade up' to what they consider are better opportunities at better universities (when demand for places exceeds supply);
6 fee-status (shorthand for who pays for the student to take part in their degree). Options being the student / their family / sponsor, the State or a mixture;
7 statutory entry requirements (most frequently in subjects like English and Maths) set as standards for entry to particular (often professional) degree programmes, where a strong grasp of these core subjects is critical;
8 other selection measures – tests, interviews, portfolios, assignments and so on;
9 other factors (such as the presence of a criminal record, spent conviction or otherwise).

This makes comparing learner opportunities tricky and then of course other factors come into play too – distance of university from home, reputation of the degree and institution, whether friends are going there or family have gone there and so on. Taken together, applicants can and often do feel overwhelmed, particularly if they lack family and other role models to consult and receive encouragement from. This is exactly the scenario that led in 2017 to a drive by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Universities Scotland (US, the parent body for Scottish Universities) to embark on a number of projects to declutter the language of the Access landscape. These developments encouraged providers to be more transparent in describing student chances of entry to each course, partly by using nationally agreed terminology published by all universities in Scotland for the first time for degree entry in 2020.

Becoming more transparent to future learners through using appropriate language will always be a work in progress – not least as meanings change and universities wish to be distinct in their offerings, so may wish to actively use their own distinct terminology. This is part of their competitive business model – but shared core language and approaches have started to bear fruit and it is worth unpacking this a little more.

Access degree-entry interventions can in essence be broken down into one of two categories:

1 recognising adversity by 'lowering the bar' to make entry easier for those deserving this, for example, discounting required entry grades for an Access candidate below the normal level. We can call this the discount model;

2 recognising adversity then supporting candidates to achieve the same or equivalent entry grades as better supported candidates by providing additional support they previously lacked, so raising candidate's performance to the bar. We can call this the support model.

Different universities use one technique or the other, indeed many deploy a mix of both. Most also deliberately reach out into secondary schools to add value long before the point applicants decide whether or not university is for them. They may recognise that even in severely challenged schools the best pupils in that school remains the best in that school, even if their grades do not compete favourably with those from much better supported backgrounds. By way of insight, over recent decades the percentage of pupils leaving Scottish schools to directly enter Higher Education (typically at Scottish Credit Qualification Framework (SCQF) Level 7 – First year at most universities) has been as low as single figures for some Scottish secondary schools, noting the average is now at roughly 40% of school leavers (see Chapter 5 for more). Or they may simply reflect adversity by discounting entry towards meeting stated Government targets, like recruiting candidates from the most disadvantaged 20% of postcodes as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, seeking so-called 'SIMD20 applicants' (not least because since 2013 an element of state funding for universities in Scotland (and elsewhere) has been set based on this measure) and so provide institutional income during UK Government austerity. The 'discount approach' of lowering entry grades for those eligible for this may rely on extensive post-entry support to ensure acceptable progression and retention levels. Where preparedness gaps exist, this is mutually of benefit as it also secures the income universities lose if such students do not continue their income generating studies. What all approaches have in common is the recognition that some applicants have faced additional challenges and need additional support to prepare, qualify, enter and cope with HE, enabling their talent to shine. This is quite a perspective change from previous generations where getting ideas 'beyond their station' was frowned upon, in a time of even more restrictive social mobility.

To aid understanding, comparisons to sport terminology are often used to describe WP approaches, 'levelling the playing field' being the most common. There are also benefits to our own understanding in visualisation of the learner journey we are examining as being likened to a race. Please for now stick with the image of entry to university being a competition – maybe something like qualification for the Olympics – where only the best are selected to take part. We will return to how 'best' is defined later. However, before we set off to the event let us first return to one of the questions most frequently asked by potential applicants (but rarely precisely answered, due to the above complexity). This question is 'so if I apply, what are my real chances of getting into a degree?' This is a genuinely difficult question to answer, not least if a 'gathered field' process of selection is used, putting all applicants into a list, ordered by 'best first' then working down that list until all available places of study have

been allocated. There is no way to predict where in such a 'stack' a particular candidate, nervously asking the question on a visit to campus, will be placed until all candidates that cycle are assessed and placed in rank order. Until that specific point in the process the question is unanswerable. As we will see later, there are many challenges around defining best and also, for good reasons, sometime the number of places can be very limited. Some candidates will also turn down offers at the last minute, so unexpectedly releasing spaces for others who now become 'best'.

It is also worth remembering that even for those who have navigated the challenges they have faced, the track within schools to a degree can be far from equal. In Scotland, consequences of the school curriculum model coupled to austerity and demand have resulted in some schools being unable to sustain a full set of advanced level subjects. Whilst this has occasionally appeared in the media (Davidson, 2018) and elsewhere (Universities Scotland, 2019), the reality is that what many might consider vital subjects are becoming harder to study and qualify in. The University of Dundee has worked with Dundee City Council on exactly this specific challenge since 2015, when the 'City Campus' model was introduced to address this precise need. Pupils from a number of local schools that cannot be viably taught some more advanced qualifications in their own school are brought together onto the University campus, where a teacher from one of their schools delivers the required school subject. The classrooms are provided free of charge by the University, as are access to computing and library facilities, the teachers being given guest associate staff membership. In 2019 (the last time due to the pandemic that the City Campus could safely operate face-to-face), the subjects (delivery of which were supported by the author) were Advanced Higher English, Maths and History. The thought that these would otherwise be unavailable to the brightest and best pupils in these schools across an entire city is a scary prospect.

Returning to communication issues, it is probably fair to say that the jury is out as to whether stating with great frankness the true chances of a specific individual candidate of winning a degree place (where this can be calculated) is a motivational help or a hindrance. Will all candidates react positively if told they have, say, a one-in-twenty chance of getting into their chosen degree? Depending on their attitude, drive and support, this may motivate some to excel in exams but terrify others into not applying at all.

There is of course one way to be certain that you will not be admitted to a particular degree and that is to not apply to enter it in the first place. Put simply, you have to be 'in it to win it', and getting this across to those who may disenfranchise themselves due to receiving poor or confused or just scary messaging is one of the biggest challenges in WP work. The media is unfortunately very willing to publish on the consequences of the supply and demand battle for university places but often do so without context. Add in some inflammatory language and further negativity can emerge, examples including stating "Middle-class pupils banned from clearing" (Sanderson, 2018a) and "Diversity plan 'helps rich pupils'" (Boothman, 2018). It is worth

rereading both these sample headlines and asking what they imply and what is behind them and how they may impact nervous future learners.

So how frank should universities be in their communications to applicants? The last decade has seen increasing use of qualification terms like 'minimum' (meaning that if a candidate has grades below the minimum stated level, their chances of winning a race to a degree place are slim) and 'typical' (meaning this level of grade is typical of the sort of achievement likely to be needed to make a competitive application, noting this means compete for and not be assured of a 'win' as such). However, both have come a little unstuck. Through the recognition of contextual factors (of which there is much more later), those offering contextual discounts might actually offer places to candidates below published minimum grades. This uneasy spiral of consequence may be fathomed by those with supportive parents and guidance teachers (who encourage candidates to 'put in the application anyway') but does seem likely to deter those lacking such insight and help. In direct contradiction of the aim of WP, it seems offering clarity can, if not done well, actually put candidates off. This is one of the reasons why it is really important that each learner understands the rules relating the educational race of their lives. It is core to work such as that of the AHDP projects previously mentioned.

Late 2019 saw all Scottish universities change the terminology they use in this space to those given above. This follows from a long series of discussions involving Universities Scotland and other agencies. One of the key problems of using 'typical' and 'minimum' as descriptors is that many or any candidates may read the 'minimum' entry grade tariff and (as they may have these grades) assume that they will be able to automatically get a place as a result or at least make a highly competitive application. In reality, 'minimum' only applies to those who are eligible for a contextual offer (see Chapter 8) and certainly not the vast majority of applicants. This has led to several problems:

1 non-contextual candidates applying for degrees holding qualification levels below 'typical' but at or above 'minimum' – a grade range that is as a consequence likely to see their application being rejected and them asking why?;
2 rejected candidates (and those who support them) then complaining about their rejection and questioning it;
3 confusion amongst future applicants over whether or not it is worth their while applying to any given degree.

On the topic of rejections from university, aside from the obvious aspects that there are many more applicants than places, making rejection of the majority of applications to many degrees inevitable, there is generally a poor understanding of the likelihood of appeals against rejection being successful. Not in terms of whether a grade appeal via a school or college might see a 'C' grade uprated to the required for entry 'B'. Rather what to do should this occur. Such appeal outcomes being published after all university places have been offered leaves university admissions staff in another really difficult position.

Having successfully appealed in school or college, a candidate may not appreciate that asking for this to be recognised within a tight admissions system means asking universities either to admit more students than they may have places for or alternatively in essence asking someone previously offered a place to be pushed out of the queue for entry they are already in. A 'sorry we have changed our minds' letter to such candidates thereby withdrawing their undergraduate degree place would be a fast route to a court appearance for contractual breach. Thankfully this annual conundrum is often solvable by candidates leaving the entry queue at their own request – to go elsewhere or because their life plans have changed, but this should not detract from the difficulty successful appeals can present so late in an admissions cycle. Some have compared it to being akin to disputing a denied penalty claim in a football match but only after the final whistle has gone. How at that stage can the match outcome be fairly adjusted and a new result declared?

The above again highlights the importance of applicants understanding the rules and elements of the race for degree entry they are taking part in. It also reminds us of the significance of universities using the clearest possible language to support this. To give an example, one outcome across all Scottish universities in terms of describing entry grades that applicants require has been to simply globally replace 'typical' with the word 'standard', which hopefully is much more self-explanatory as the level of grades the majority of candidates will require to achieve. Equally the word 'minimum' has been replaced with the words 'widening Access', followed by a definition of precisely who is eligible for a 'widening Access' offer. The hope is that these two simple terminology switches will make it much clearer to all who need to understand these meanings, reducing misunderstandings and upset. Once again, we have another example of a simple unintended consequence – in this case caused by just two individual words – that in recent years have resulted in significant additional difficulty for applicants and work for universities. Let us now head to the educational 'track' and get racing, as if our future graduate careers prospects depend on it (which they probably do).

3 Visualising Access to university

Entering the race of your learner life

Trying to enter university can be seen as a race, with lots of competitors battling to win each prized university place. Peter looks forward to competing for a degree place. Thanks to where his Mum and Dad work, he regularly attends educational events, ranging from book signings to masterclasses. These involve high calibre ambitious individuals, and this has encouraged him to see university as his default next learning step. For Paul, on the other hand, this is his first time not just racing towards HE, but even really thinking about the race to win a degree place. Until now he has been 'sent' to school, indeed getting into trouble if he skipped it, and now finds he might not even be allowed into his next potential place of learning, which is quite a mindset change. He doesn't have the same understanding, support nor role models as Peter but equally now through WP outreach support sees getting a degree as the best way to get a good job and has a steely determination to succeed, grasping that for him and his family, failure here is not an option.

Both are nervous of what lies ahead but for very different reasons. Peter feels almost entitled to win a university place, with many of his friends racing to do the same. His parents moved home to get him into a 'good school', pay for his tuition and set up a university trust fund to support him. However, he also feels the pressure of destiny on his academic performance in school to not let people down and is unsettled to learn of the number of competitors he is up against in the race to win a university place. He is well aware of the expectations placed upon him by his family, his school, tutors and many others. Paul on the other hand is oblivious to these particular stresses, not knowing or worrying about what he does not know about. Having overcome many life challenges, he plans to give this challenge his very best shot, without any real expectation of being successful. Despite this he does have his own worries and in the back of his mind is daunted by the new learning arena he is trying to enter. He worries about how, with his background, he will be received if he manages to win a university place in such an 'ivory tower' of learning. And then how will he live, moneywise? He is also likely to be the only person from his school year group making it to his chosen university, as well as the first in his family. Will he 'fit in'?

Both Peter and Paul are used to busy schools, but the scale of the entry to the university challenge before them has just been brought home to both of them. Their future university campus (virtual during the pandemic) was thronged

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> *during the recent Online Open Day visit they both attended. This was the first time both of them had really registered the full scope of HE opportunity before them but also the enormity of what becoming a university student means. Gone are school bells and uniforms and in their place an entire new, exciting and possibly overwhelming world awaits. Both now feel under significant pressure to 'get in', albeit for very different reasons, and both may need to seek support to prevent things becoming too much for them. They both find themselves asking the same simple question – just why is getting into university so difficult?*

Let's imagine the learner journey to graduate employment is an endurance race, which in many ways it is. Consider it as a contest, where each competitor knows they are racing against others towards the same finish line of university entry. They then begin a fresh race through their degree and then a third race, competing in the job market. Many Access students gravitate towards Access opportunities to get a job or a better job, whilst wanting to turn their subject interest into an enjoyable career. True Widening Access for them is about access to graduation at the end of a degree and graduate jobs, not just to matriculation to start a degree. For some students Access is about proving themselves right. For the rest it is about proving others – who frequently said they wouldn't make it – wrong. Data from many national reports in the UK, including CoWA (2016), show those applying from the most disadvantaged quintile of postcodes are up to four times less likely to apply, be offered and enter university than those from the least disadvantaged quintile of postcodes. Progress is being made – strong targets being set in Scotland (by 2030) and England (by 2040). But much work remains, including even agreeing on how we define who we are targeting, if and how we support them and, of course, who pays for all this?

As we start to consider this – initially with the race to enter university in our sights – each 'runner' has no idea how many others will be in their individual running lane, all competing to be the first to cross the line to win the same single specific degree place that they all aspire to. For a number of reasons, including fairness and data handling, other runners in their invisible race lane are themselves invisible to one another. Some will realise that per race all but one will ultimately be unsuccessful in securing an undergraduate place and have to reapply again next year, hopefully having added more academic credit and / or work experience in the interim to make them more competitive. Alternately, they will need to find a new destination to spend their next years or career at.

For some races (degree programmes) what an individual racer brings to their individual race may be enough in itself to guarantee they cross their individual race line in first place – in effect they are racing alone, powered to winning success by their ability, qualifications, circumstances, luck or some combination of these. More typically, however, the race for a degree place will be hard fought and go down to the line. As we will see later in this book, the runners are equally anonymous to those making the final university selection of winners and losers, universities going to great lengths to ensure that

selection bias is kept to an absolute minimum by not revealing, for example, age nor gender of any individual applicant.

For our purposes we can consider that each year when the starting gun to apply to university sounds, each applicant unknowingly starts racing with ten, twenty or (for some very high demand degrees) even more invisible candidates in the same race as them, each wanting the same prized undergraduate place in First Year. Racers are generally not known to each other, unless they are school friends who have mutually disclosed that they have applied for the same course at the same university. So each runner can have no meaningful idea of how competitive their application will be, the first they will know will be getting word back that they have either crossed the line first and won a place or (statistically much more likely) not made it to their coveted university spot. Seen this way, the challenge of applying seems pretty daunting, with the final few steps towards the line often feeling like a clip from the *Chariots of Fire* film – a stressful slow-motion period during which the finishing line of winning a degree place is in sight but agonisingly too far away to reach, word from universities and exam boards being tensely awaited.

Considering entry to university in this way – seeing it as a race to success – is useful and helpfully chimes with similar language used in the wider world by those striving to highlight inequality. In a parallel realm, Manchester United football player and food poverty activist Marcus Rashford MBE commenting on his deprived background summed it up nicely, saying "growing up as a kid, I felt like I believe I started 50 metres behind everyone else in a 100-metre race" (Flood, 2020). As we will see, the race to win an undergraduate degree study place can easily leave those from similarly deprived backgrounds feeling exactly the same way about what they may feel is an unfair competition. These feelings and the challenges of what may be seen as the uneven realities of competing for a degree place can, however, begin to be addressed. For these learners to effectively harness their potential and maximise their chances, arguably the first step is for them to understand the way the race they are bravely entering works, often with the help of key educators. Helpfully this is also one of the primary aims of this book and our attempt to appeal to a wide audience.

For readers who have come to these pages to learn how to better support university applicants from non-traditional backgrounds enter university, the first step is for us to examine the 'track' all runners use. We need to do this in some detail, whilst considering what potential each runner brings to it. We specifically need to think about how individual elements combine in such races to make the endeavour of successfully applying for degree entry a challenge that can be met. Essentially, we need to discover the secrets to making a competitive degree application.

We have already touched on the high number of likely competitors all battling for each university place, so will first turn to consider the wide range of other circumstantial factors that influence race outcome, noting that there are lots of these. Take, for example, the race type. Different routes towards

qualification and preparation for degree offer different opportunities and challenges. To be competitive, these elements ideally need to be understood before the race begins or else runners risk a false start of heading for an unreachable finish line. We also need to consider race duration, including the often overlooked opportunity cost of some of the longer routes students can take to degree. Beyond these variables the other factors that play a role in a successful race outcome all merit analysis – familiarity with the track type, the presence of any hurdles, runner motivation when things get even tougher, the conditions and how harsh they may feel they are without adequate training and support, the level of training itself, including who provided it and of course the rules that apply to each race – are they really all applied fairly? Over the coming pages and chapters we will look at each of these in turn in the hope of finding out.

Race type

Embarking on the track to a graduate job is for many as daunting as considering running a marathon against the clock would be. Some potential learners – who are most often teenagers uncertain of many life opportunities – take one look at the long route ahead, littered with negative media stories and are deterred (Denholm, 2018). Some may be put off for life or at least until they gain more independence and resilience to the point where they consider life as an 'adult returner' to study much later in life. For many if not all, studying post-school is a life changing experience with a high opportunity cost associated with the benefits. Determining the best running pace for each applicant is something that secondary school guidance and career staff do day in, day out, increasingly using school data systems like, for example, SEEMIS (https://www.seemis.gov.scot/) as the information storage system for each applicant, their circumstances and school performance data. That does not make it easy. In a world of graduate unemployment and fast changing entry qualifications, providing learners with timely advice on the best ways forward is tricky. The candidates develop at different rates, too, making giving advice that can match runners to races a real challenge.

Some runners of course may choose other tracks to get into a 'good job', including deciding to aim for an apprenticeship instead of gaining more traditional academic qualifications. These are equal in terms of a valuable outcome but also in a sense may commit that learner to a future that is less academically focused and more about the world of early employment. As a result, such a decision to take the apprenticeship track should be the result of careful consideration, advice, guidance and choice. It needs to be the right choice for the right runners. Unfortunately, in the real world such decisions can also be the result of poor advice, lack of ambition and drift, runners being pushed to other paths that lead to other destinations, the doors once open to them being closed until a possible return as an adult. This seems to be a growing trend, especially in schools where university is not just a

minority destination but something that so few pupils race towards that resource to support them goes instead to those aiming for other destinations. The Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC; https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/) approach in Scotland is enlightened but equally functions best when the information used to offer advice is accurate, current and not resource limited. When classroom time or staffing levels impinge on this, minority destinations, which in some schools include most high demand professional degrees, may suffer, much to the frustration of teachers who wish it were not so, with a growing percentage of teachers having benefited from university attendance themselves, teaching now firmly being a graduate profession.

Noting that some potential runners may decide to give up very early in the race towards HE, or indeed choose or be forced not to start it, for now we shall focus on those who at some point for some reason seriously consider starting their own race to university – a group whose size has in many areas doubled or more in the last decade. This in itself is crucial, as when in the past 'runners' were more likely to compete against themselves, seeking personal bests, most current learners face a much more competitive endeavour to win a university place against a huge field of keen and qualified challengers, all running flat out alongside them for that same finish line that only one can cross first to win each place.

Race duration

As mentioned above, journeys and races that learners take part in frequently differ in terms of duration. Some learners aim to complete their studies in the shortest period possible, reducing the opportunity cost of having limited employment and income availability whilst being a student. Some of this group will seek to enter study at university beyond first year – achieving so-called 'advanced entry', also known as 'articulation', which typically requires additional qualifications to ensure they are ready for the rigors of second- or third-year university classes. Others want a fuller, longer student experience and will insist on starting their degree at the start of first year, regardless of holding qualifications that may entitle them to enter later years of study. Many of this group may see first year as a gentle start to their degree, following up to six years of concentrated and continuous school study. In effect, they want something of an assessment holiday before their actions become critical to their futures. They see first year partly in this way. 'Advanced entry' or 'articulation' can be considered as another type of race entirely that prepares learners for degree entry. As the name articulation might suggest, this type of race is non-linear – a race of two halves, if you will. The first will be in a college or possibly a university and in Scotland will often relate to what is currently termed 'Higher National' level study. Examples are Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). Whilst for some areas of employment, both of these qualifications can be considered as largely stand-alone, they are increasingly portrayed as a longer, slower type of race that qualifies candidates for advanced entry to a university degree.

As previously mentioned, the audiences proceeding to HNs as part of what might be seen as pre-race qualifying are diverse. Some want to:

1 progress to university; or
2 get a stand-alone qualification towards a job; or
3 continue studying post-school but have been unable to secure a university place, by reasons of competition, circumstance, maturity, ability; or
4 some combination of all the above.

The 1990–2020+ period has seen a significant growth in all of these groups, indeed in Scotland around a third of HE is delivered within the College (FE) sector. Many (but not all) of these students will have faced the kind of adverse circumstances that might be considered contextual in nature, much more of which we will look at in later chapters. This is why whilst FE has been a powerhouse of widening Access during recent decades, not all FE College students have contextual factors that make them a WP student. The 2010–2020 period may come to be characterised as a decade when many aspired to use the slower, longer via-HN type routes to degree only to never cross the university graduation line they initially aimed for.

In the 1990s this is exactly what the author experienced first-hand – a group of keen learners (42 in all) embarking on a route seen by many as leading to a university degree, from which only a few crossed that particular finish line within the standard time allotted. Now it might well have been the case that a similarly large share of this group would have stumbled had they gone directly to university – that is not the point here. The point is that some learners see slower longer races as easier or more suitable and whilst that may well be the case for some, for others they may be slower than their ability could actually support. Slower routes may also unfortunately become routes that redirect or divert their natural talent onto the non-academic elements of being a student. Space precludes detailed coverage of the distracting delights of student life that can alter outcomes. Clearly however the longer someone studies before reaching crucial degree 'mile markers' – normally successfully passing each year – the longer there is a chance of new factors impacting their future success. Debt can build. Mental and other health pressures grow. Relationships and pregnancies occur and so on. This is the real world of real lives and real opportunity costs. The detail here is widely recognised – readers wishing to know more can start to see how a student might perceive this by, for example, reading the work of Stockly (2018). The psychology of motivation is a fascinating field. Some candidates may just choose or need longer to transition from school to become the fully self-directed learners that universities demand. One of the joys of being involved in university education for so long (beyond that of the many fabulous colleagues you get to work with) is the sense of seeing learners become education travellers instead of just brief passenger as so many feel they were at school, being railroaded along.

Before we move on, it is important for us to briefly consider the ever growing second pandemic of the 2020s of mental health. This has received less publicity than Covid-19 but equally the scale of the problem is much harder to measure. The start of the 2020s had seen good progress in supporting the large number of students facing mental health issues – and at some point in their lives that is virtually everyone – finding it easier to talk about the issue, spurred on by excellent encouragement from a large number of organisations and individuals. Then pandemic lockdown struck, disclosure and support became remote and the pressures caused by the virus gave rise to a new set of pressures. It is easy to forget that in many ways, mental health was the pandemic before the pandemic. Only time will tell how big a setback Covid-19 has been on this front, but at the time of writing it feels like the damage will ripple out for many years to come. Even those who consider themselves to have good mental health have clearly been impacted by the damage to their social support networks, pressure on relationships and the 'cabin fever' of being confined for their own safety. The use of online calling for almost all work and social interactions has added to the drain on mental focus and resource, with the repeated cries of 'you are on mute' and the odd bright background photo bringing the only rare lighter moments.

The Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access in his mid-2021 report made some characteristically clear and powerful points. Sir Peter simply stated that "the impact of the Covid-19 emergency, and of the consequent public health and institutional restrictions, without question represents a setback to achieving fair access" (Scott, 2021). He evidenced this in part by noting that:

> more socially deprived communities have suffered worse than more prosperous communities on almost every dimension – infections and deaths, economic dislocation, school disruption. Students from these communities have experienced more limited access to online learning, more financial hardship and (perhaps) worst mental health. At the same time institutions have found it more difficult to engage with them because of public health restrictions [and other political aspects].

The scale of this list exposes the true potential scope of this setback, which at the time of writing remains speculation but which most in the sector will tell you will either be bad, very bad or worse. Those reading this about to set out in a career in Access (as the author did back in 1995) will at least know of this particular challenge which, in the 1990s, were hidden to those working in the embryonic sector at the time. A time, as the author has semi-humorously reflected, when 'widening Access' was probably a term only heard in the construction industry.

As is the way of Access, it is important to always look on the bright side, and if we look really hard we can see the enforced confinement has possibly had two tangible, if minor, benefits. Firstly, the pandemic has dramatically boosted the need for the general public and therefore future Access learners

to embrace online information and technology, be it for online communication, banking, shopping or work. Whilst this does not translate directly into boosting learning and widening access – and imposed new financial burdens due to the need for devices and broadband contracts – it may help the overall online literacy level going forward. This in turn may make wider society more willing to seek mental health support via this communication medium. The second possible mini-positive is that there are a small group of learners for whom face-to-face and compulsory campus activity is particularly stressful. For this group, lockdown has at least in this regard been almost a positive thing. If you find 'mixing' and big groups difficult, the pandemic enforced a solution. That said, on release from lockdown the previous anxieties can return, so this particular silver lining may revert back to cloud.

From an exclusively student perspective, whilst new students may not realise what the 'new normal' deprives them of, early research is beginning to scope out the mental health, financial, material, study, social, community, health and exercise consequences. One of the most concise to date comes from Butler-Warke *et al* (2021a) in the report "It's different kinds of difficult: student experiences of COVID and lockdown", which over twenty-one pages discusses and lays out these issues in clear lived-experience terms. Butler-Warke *et al* (2021b) in a 'sister' publication, an institutional report, "Student experiences of COVID and lockdown" flag the somewhat underreported aspects of students feeling blamed for the spread of the pandemic, how they coped and can easily be translated into how so many of these new barriers can have had few, if any, positive outcomes for potential Access students and also those who are just reaching into the education system.

Track type

If one hundred people were stopped in the street and asked what they thought was the key determinant of who earns a university degree, many might answer candidate ability (or something similar), some would say competition for places, others might even say how well resourced the learner (or their family) was but few might say the age at which the individual learner will graduate. The reason for noting this rather odd potential answer – graduation age – is that it is all too easy to forget that learning does not happen in isolation. Students want jobs, income, relationships, a place of their own and so on. It stands to reason therefore that the later in life a learner starts their degree, the later they will finish it, making them older when entering the job market. On top of that, the older they are at the start, the greater the likely number of pressures they have to contend with of the sort listed above from the 'real' world beyond study. Now it is clearly the case that for some potential students, it is only when they have the stability that comes with age that they feel able to race towards a degree, this group often referred to as 'adult returners'. But for many, a late or slower start makes crossing the degree finish line into hopefully a graduate job more, not less, challenging. Those in

classes around them will typically be younger, making social and support aspects of study potentially more difficult. Exposure to sudden pressures (like a critical debt or needing to support a family member) grow with advancing age regardless of individual student potential. Ability to study uninterrupted may diminish, so age is actually a key factor that is often overlooked and, as we will see, part of a complex mix that deserves understanding and support.

More hurdles anyone?

By this point readers will have grasped many of the wide range of factors that can make a difference to those applicants facing additional adversity, as well as those who are not. As Drotos and Cilesiz neatly summarised in their 2016 article "Shoes, dues, and other barriers": "economically disadvantaged students face contextual challenges that necessitate additional efforts and resources not required by others, including money, time, knowledge, courage, sacrifice, and taking risks" (Drotos & Cilesiz, 2016). This is a significant list of issues and highlights just how many factors generally invisible and not of concern to those with better support and resource there can be. There are many ways of considering the kinds of further challenge that can act as yet more hurdles to those running towards a degree, but clustering them in small groups can provide a useful perspective for us to both consider and, where possible, address. It is helpful to think of the kind of barrier hierarchy that emerges as being based on the types of circumstance and factors that generate them. These hurdles can be considered by grouping them at different levels:

1 **District-level** zonal factors (such as the prosperity of the general area, infrastructure, ease of travel / distance to HE institution and so on) that generally impact a potential learner;
2 **Local-level** zonal factors (such as the characteristics of the school or college a student attends / attended) that to some extent define past and present learning opportunity;
3 **Street-level** zonal factors (noting most indices of multiple deprivation attempt to 'zoom in' to this level). This may cover housing, noise and wider quality of life issues which all impact on learning;
4 **Family-level** factors (such as low income, the need for free school meal entitlement, access to Wi-Fi and IT equipment and so on) which may deter a candidate from further learning and towards early employment to support their family;
5 **Individual characteristic** factors (such as age, first language and so on);
6 **Individual experience** factors (such as health, having been a looked after person (Care Experienced), the need to care for another and so on).

These six types of potential circumstances go from the broadest (1) all the way down to the most individual (6). If readers are happy to use a different sporting image, these can be thought of as being akin to a series of concentric

rings – a bit like a dart board, the individual learner sitting at the bullseye but surrounded by other factors (darts) stuck to the dartboard that make hitting the central bullseye spot pretty demanding. Which factors impact each individual learner naturally will differ for each individual. And it is certainly possible for a learner to be impacted by factors that apply in all six categories, indeed many of the future students WP practitioners support will have exactly this combination of hurdles (or dart circles and darts) to get past to reach their own target.

Whilst hopefully keen to carefully consider all the above, readers should also consider yet another often overlooked aspect, which can be seen as an alternative way of assessing the challenge of WP. And this one takes a little bit of deeper thought to get our heads around. Much of what we have considered to this point has derived from looking at the demographics of which individuals and groups apply to go to university. This group can be somewhat harshly broken down for our purposes as winners (who get in) and losers (who don't). A lot of energy is spent trying to make these 'race losers' more competitive, so that they might win, albeit at some later point. But there is an argument that actually our focus should start with a third group – those who do not even apply to enter university, a group that is less visible to those tasked with supporting those who do. This third group feel or (at a practical level) possibly are, excluded from university, and due to their large size, this cohort also demands our attention.

Are the barriers this third group of 'non-appliers' face the reason for them not applying? If so, is this fair? Does our wider system of learning result in this group simply not being in a position to apply? If we return to our dartboard image, it seems that many potential applicants who do not qualify to enter university, plus those who do not apply to enter university, have lived lives impacted by some or all six levels of circumstance described above. The total number of these individuals will exceed those who successfully navigate the challenges and win their race to a degree by at least an order of magnitude, which should amplify our interest in understanding the reasons for them not applying and entering (by chance or lack of it) plus their circumstances and then try to address them. Clearly such considerations could generate an entire book itself. The iceberg of talented potential students 'below the waterline' is huge, universities often only encountering them when targeted Access outreach expressly seeks them out. And like a typical iceberg, we cannot appreciate the full dimensions of frozen talent until we really look below the surface.

Before moving on to consider how candidates make the decision to apply (or not to apply) to university in the first place, it is useful to note that being a learner is about much more than simply earning a degree. There is a cohort of students who would argue that the many other benefits that derive from being a student are justification for university study in themselves. Whilst these are predominantly social in nature, meeting new friends and frequently partners, there are financial advantages to being a student, too, such as discounts in some shops and towards travel (student rail and bus tickets being popular).

The sense of achievement and pride of actually being a student also helps make the designation of being a student 'cool' and somewhat aspirational, not least because many former students tell future students that their student days were some of the best days of their lives.

One of the joys of working in Access over an extended period is being able to see how friendships made during Access courses endure. Former Access students that were previously strangers often form a strong learner bond and are subsequently regularly seen on campus together for years afterwards. Indeed at least one UCAS university application seen by the author disclosed that their parents had met on one of his previous Access courses. Such 'second generation' impact is as flattering as it is aging to those who remember the individuals involved as young, nervous students, now proud student parents.

Returning briefly to our 'apply to university' racetrack concept, it is equally true that most students do not start racing towards HE expecting what might be seen as the failure of never crossing the graduation line to become winners in the graduate job market. Yes, they will have doubts and often very real concerns. The challenges, especially the financial and mental health ones, can be enormous. However, in general, applicants are helpfully a keen and optimistic bunch at the start. This is a particular challenge for those guiding potential future students towards university. How do you offer encouragement for the drive and passion they show, whilst also informing them of the real demands, costs and barriers they face? This is a real balancing act that generally comes with experience rather than something novice guidance staff can be taught, although role play and other training methods can be very useful here. You can read more about what is described as 'young people studying for degrees in an increasingly competitive job market' here: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/the-university-of-life-skills-employability-students/.

Linked to this, another dark cloud that has bubbled up recently is the challenge faced by those who don't manage to reach that graduate job beyond the degree finish line – a group that regularly appear in the media – the worlds of graduate unemployment and graduate underemployment. Coverage in the media of this group regularly misses all the other benefits and developed future potential gained by students, but equally the problem of the cliff edge of graduate jobs is real and a shock to many who relied on a degree to automatically generate lots of future income. We will return to this topic later in this book, but for now we will focus directly on aspects of motivation to apply to university in the first place.

Deciding to apply

Whilst applying to university is the expected norm for many school leavers and their families, for others it hardly features in their thinking at all and may be seen as an unrealistic dream or even as an unwelcome diversion of a potential new family income generator who might be able to walk straight into a low paid, but immediate, 'cash on the family table' job. This perspective is not

suggesting which race type and duration each learner should attempt – that should be down to each individual. But what we can say is that those learners that lack role models and advisors may well, as a result, have less encouragement and ambition in terms of pitching themselves into a level of challenge that would get them to their degree finish line faster, with a lower opportunity cost and fewer time hazards that might trip them up. For many potential learners, cohort effects also play a significant role, candidates choosing to go where their friends go rather than where their talent might otherwise take them, had they seen or been encouraged towards different targets.

Returning to the age aspect, the facts speak for themselves – the vast majority of learners who cross the degree finish line do so in their early twenties, having seen the opportunity university offered at an early stage and been able to grab it. Put simply, by 'running faster' it is as if they have lapped those running slower and may win a graduate job faster, with lower opportunity cost through graduating at an earlier age and having a longer career to grow their pensions. And as previously mentioned, those running slower can be at the mercy of being distracted and challenged by circumstance for longer, so at greater risk of being tripped up before they cross the line.

However, there is another side to this. Those coming into university later in life typically have gained valuable world, life or sometimes employment experience if they use their pre-university time wisely, so there is a trade-off. Speak to university academics and some will tell you that some students appear to come to university at too tender an age, having experienced too little of life and developed insufficient motivation and resilience to cope with the challenges of being much more self-directed. This is a challenging narrative, influenced by the chronological, emotional and social age of an individual leaving school or college. In combination, the differences between entrants on these measures can often feel much greater than the one calendar year gap between birthdays. This consideration also touches on the 'are entrants sufficiently qualified and prepared?' debate that is covered more fully in Chapter 4, as well as whether selection processes are set at a level that students need to cope with a particular degree or whether they are simply used instead as a sliding scale for selection decisions to manage demand for places that significantly exceeds supply – a selection tool rather than an essential requirement.

Another aspect to note here is the risk of a student having a so-called 'false start'. This is when a learner realises or decides that the course or course elements that they embarked on are not what they expected and want or need to stop. This can be in terms of the content, volume or level of work expected of them. It can also be about living away from home, budgeting, cooking for themselves and a whole range of social aspects, generally all linked together. In these circumstances students may be able to declare a false start, moving to a different set of learning opportunities, normally after a study pause. It is generally the case that whenever possible such students are not penalised for such track changes. It has cost them time and therefore opportunity cost already. Helpfully this often means the student does not need to return

funding obtained during the false start period, especially if it spans a year or less. After longer periods away, they are less likely to find return so easy; they may have got 'ring rusty' and find solid study hard to get back into. They may also not be funded for the same level should they cease their original course due to a wish to start another course of equal level, rather than be able to progress to a higher level as most funding systems expect beneficiaries to do.

Another occasional occurrence is taking a year out or having a year of study 'discounted'. The latter term is not in the sense of getting a bargain but rather the treatment of the student is as if they had never started that particular year of study, most often due to good cause factors beyond the control of the student. The most common reason for such a requirement is if a student becomes too ill to do themselves justice academically and are too unwell to continue with the course. This again can be a particularly tricky area for those supporting students. If a student continues with study whilst ill, they may be deemed to have declared themselves fit to do so, and therefore not be eligible for significant mitigation later. On the other hand, if they call a 'time out' and suspend their studies for a period due to ill health, there is once again the issue of opportunity cost, as they will often be without another means of support during the pause in their funded studies. The golden rule in any scenario of this kind is for students to seek professional university advice and support at the earliest opportunity and not let any problem develop disproportionately to the point where they cannot continue their studies because they have left seeking help too late. It is rarely a good idea for a student to simply walk away from a course, not least as by doing so they may then be considered a poor future risk and of bad character should a reference be required for a later return to study at the same or at a different university provider. The failure by many students who do leave to complete so-called 'exit surveys' – invitations to tell the university provider why they left or had to leave – can further reduce the quality and quantity of information available to education providers to improve the support they offer, potentially perpetuating the problem. Consequently, encouragement to complete exit surveys is another useful approach.

To end this chapter, another outcome of non-linear study involves the possible need to resit tests, exams or an entire year of study. Again, this typically is a multi-factorial barrier occurrence that is as unpopular with learners as it is with staff. In recent years the powerful drive towards greater quality assurance (QA) has helpfully guided course leaders to reflect on assessment types and pass marks as never before. Has a normal distribution curve of marks been generated – in other words, has the assessment fairly identified those meeting the assessment criteria and those who have not? Have the assessments been spread out fairly over time and over course elements? Were they of a suitable, possibly diverse type? Have any appeals over disappointing outcomes been considered and where upheld, what can we learn from this about that specific assessment and how we assess in general? These examples of reflective practice have increasingly formed part of the normal process of

what educators do, not least as education has moved onto a more business-like, some would say production line, footing. Time will tell the extent to which learners benefit from certain aspects of this occasionally more mechanistic approach, but for now we will move on to consider the key elements that make up a successful Access student, to help us better understand what comprises having what NASA famously called the 'right stuff'.

4 What factors contribute to successful Access to university?

Ready? Steady? Really?

Peter has a sense of destiny when it comes to where he will go on leaving school. Almost all his immediate family have gone on to degree-level study, then smoothly entered their chosen professions. Paul is much less certain, not least as the first in his family (if he makes it) to go to university. He is worried by the opportunity cost of having to undergo many more years of studying before getting a real job that can support his family. He is also worried that few of his friends plan to enter a degree course. He is equally concerned about his ability to cope if he is lucky enough to get in. And will he eventually get a graduate job anyway? Paul previously has only really met professionals whilst they were providing a professional service to him via their work roles – he has never met one 'socially'. For example, he has been a dental patient and met a dentist but as we all know, striking up a conversation whilst in the dentist chair is not the easiest of things to do, even if it is chatting about the fact Paul has considered dentistry as a career. Peter and Paul have very different entry factors influencing them. So how will these play out?

Whilst non-traditional students will have some different characteristics to those who have had much higher levels of support – aspects some might call advantage – both cohorts do share much in common. This chapter will focus on some of the factors that influence Access student success and should be seen in the context of the wider understanding of student progression. There are enormous numbers of papers and textbooks on the latter, the descriptive work largely pioneered by Vincent Tinto back in 1975 having continuously developed ever since. Readers may wish to search online at this point to read more of how the Tinto model arose and has been refined, but for the others here is a short summary.

Tinto's model of why students may not progress from entry to graduation can be considered to break down to six elements, specifically their presence or absence:

1 Pre-entry student attributes;
2 Student goals, intention, commitment and commitments;

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3 How their academic experience progresses;
4 How their personal lives and social experience progress;
5 How on entry to study they integrate into the programme of study and feel part of it;
6 Factors that may combine to result in a decision to leave their studies.

This immediately offers insights into both the factors but also the complexity of student progression and also how the reality for each individual student can be, and often will be, different. Equipped with this knowledge, let us now see the above in a WP context, noting we will break down these elements into key chunks. This will also help readers consider how to address issues they may detect in their own practice, or in the case of student or parent readers, grasp how they can better equip themselves for future success.

Applicant motivation

From topics already covered, it is clear that runners in this learning race towards a degree have to make a major commitment to be competitive for the medium to long term. With recent decades showing huge increases in the numbers of those wanting to race competitively towards a degree, the level of applicant dedication seems to grow annually, as does the pressure on future budding stars. This adds a further barrier to less well supported individuals, as training to run a race is hard work and requires dedication and self-belief.

So how does all this play out for WP learners and is it 'fair'? After all, fair process surely means fair outcomes, so are current processes fair? If we start where many wish to end up – in a well-paid graduate job – we can quickly see that for a decade or more the spectre of there being no prize of a graduate job at the end of degree-level study has been very real indeed. Whilst as we have seen it is true that such a perspective misses all of the other values beyond a degree scroll itself that a degree delivers, the increasing absence of certainty around this ultimate prize can seriously diminish motivation. This takes nothing away from the fact that many of the life skills so prized by WP students have huge value in themselves – developing an understanding of work / study balance, living apart from family, using new learning technologies such as computerised virtual learning environments, budgeting, applying for further financial support, relating well to peers and staff, knowing when and who to ask for help, navigating a new campus, learning to reference and avoid plagiarism issues, living away from home, cooking for themselves, time-keeping and so much more. But all of these emerge once WP learners begin their journey and consequently do not manifest themselves with those who are put off starting this challenge in the first place.

Unlike better supported learners who can fall back on professional parents and the "bank of Mum and Dad" (Office for Students, 2018), WP learners are also characterised by having less resilience than better resourced peers – and this is a key factor. Those deterred lose further opportunity in a self-maintaining

loop. So uncertainty of outcome is a real deterrent to those lacking confidence, as conversations with any bunch of school kids will demonstrate. Many pupils cannot visualise the benefits and opportunities that lie beyond what may be limited immediate family knowledge. This again is the area where WP outreach projects are needed most and can also offer most benefit. An area where 'will I make it?' looms over so many choices and saps energy from potential future learners to the point where they may choose not to even try or if they do try, not have great hope of success and as such underplay their hand. A vivid example of this mindset the author has witnessed was when he gently asked an applicant why they had chosen to apply to study a particular degree – in this case, Psychology? He expected the usual long speech about how the field excited them, etc. The response from this WP applicant however was quite short and unexpected. They replied, "I fancy trying something new that I haven't failed yet." This may be an atypical response but equally may shine a light for us on the mindset of this candidate and possibly others like them. Is this a defeatist attitude or an unthought throw away comment? Either way, it did not inspire the author in the usual way more positive comments encourage recruiters and selectors. It did inspire him to help the candidate understand what a Psychology degree involved, which on further discussion turned out to be helpful to the candidate, as they had not looked into it beyond the entry grades. Applicant motivation, including researching future study area, is always important for future success.

The conditions

Many other diversions that may take learners towards opportunities that do not involve university can emerge. Consequently, a proportion of learners and their talent may leave school at the earliest opportunity, with their talent either deployed in other directions or maybe aspects of it never fully developed. The wish for school leavers to reach 'positive destinations', now renamed 'best destinations' (the change addressing concerns around the risk of railroading pupils to a positive but potentially sub-optimal outcome) can be demonstrated by the launch of new school outcomes such as foundation apprenticeships. Whilst brilliant opportunities for those wishing to enter the world of skilled work, they are not promoted as the best option for all, noting an inexperienced learner may (if not given understanding of the bigger picture) see them as such. Concern exists amongst WP professionals about how the decision to start towards a separate race event like an apprenticeship is made, noting that if some key school qualifications are not taken at key times, this may limit options of switching to some degrees later when the first chance school qualification doors have closed, displacing such learners to the positive new destination of college. We see here another unintended consequence, that of offering wonderful extra choice opportunities that in reality may, for some, simply add further complication to an already cluttered options landscape they are struggling to navigate. This again flags up the crucial role of

informed and highly quality guidance, as more choice in itself may not improve outcomes. Returning to our foundation apprenticeship example, the question becomes how (indeed if) these qualifications will be recognised towards entry to certain courses, including degrees for those who wish to earn them, noting this was not the reason they were established and yet are quite reasonably seen as being on par with some more 'gold standard' qualifications. Expanded choice places a duty of care on those offering it to outline the pluses and minuses.

Negative thoughts may manifest in other ways too. 'Why take secondary school subject x that I will need to qualify for degree y if I may not like it, have few friends in the class and when I can get an apprenticeship without it?' is a real question school pupils raise with staff, not realising doors they may close in the process may be very hard to reopen later. It is important to point out that our consideration here is not a value judgement on different outcomes and races, all of which have their own merit for runners who choose them. The point is a landscape that offers a shorter or different route towards that first pay packet needs to be carefully weighed up against a potentially larger pay packet later. Would further study towards a 'graduate job' be a rewarded choice, where applicant talent exists to reach it? And what of the many professions that require a degree before you can start to practice? Maybe making the positive choice to specifically turn down the race to degree should become the real option open to all, rather than the other way round (where in many communities not earning a degree is the default)?

One aspect of looking at how the university sector has changed over time is the shift from universities being for those destined to go to them to becoming for those who aspire to join them. This is quite a change. Pupils decades ago studied and then some – a small minority – simply 'went to uni'. Now the process is much more stretched and involves multiple decisions, selection steps and choices, with real and opportunity costs. Whilst school pupils still may complete the same number of years at school, more of these years are now key to their chances of making university their next learning destination. For example, in Scotland the subjects chosen by pupils in the third year of secondary school has historically become virtually a point of no return for early direct entry to some degrees like Medicine at some universities, a very early stage for such deep thinking to be required. The race to degree entry now consists of a substantial 'focussing on choices' phase ahead of the key 'decision and apply' phase. Pupils picking their third year of secondary school subjects in their second year of secondary school study are also asked to share their intended post-school destinations, information schools store in school record systems and can use to ration places if, for example, classes that involve pupils taking all three sciences (Biology, Chemistry and Physics which may be essential to enter medical, vet and dental degrees) are full. Funds to create two smaller classes by employing a new teacher typically only can be obtained where class size legislation is breached, which naturally schools have to avoid. This subject choice ask of children aged around 13 – being asked to determine their futures

towards some degrees – seems challenging and disproportionately difficult for those with no family history of university. It is a weakness of this specific system, from a WP perspective, leaving staff attempting to widen access playing catch-up from this early stage of secondary schooling. This in turn has naturally driven outreach staff to need and want to interface with students at earlier and earlier stages, creating something akin to a 'here's help in deciding your future' information arms race – all at a time of diminishing austerity resources, Brexit disruption and a pandemic. Readers hopefully can see how complex and stressful this aspect of the WP field can be for both pupils and practitioners.

The whole area of 'guidance' and how school pupils have the wealth of learning options the world offers placed before them by colleagues within schools and colleges remains of interest to many WP staff. Whilst it is impossible to quantify the prevalence of negativity, some pupils do report being put off certain tracks by some teachers and other coaches in their individual races, who tell them what is 'not for them'. This certainly occurred to the author decades ago, but there is pupil testimony that it is still happening forty years on. Instead of informing and facilitating, for whatever reason offering judgements around 'fit' seem surprisingly common, despite this departing from the guidance wisdom over the last decade of encouraging supported self-determination. 'Your grades are too good for degree x, apply for y instead' and 'you won't cope with a full-time degree (which in Scotland may involve less than 22 weeks of study per year)' are but two examples that are regularly cited by pupils, the latter possibly stated by staff who themselves may have limited recent first-hand experience of life at a modern university. Aiming low is easy. In contrast in the private learning sector there seems to be a sense in which those guiding sometimes steer learners to the course with the highest entry tariff rather than the one they will enjoy and do well in – supporting what we might call the 'pushy parent' effect. The contrast is striking, the attainment and encouragement gaps real.

Real world experience points to another crucial factor here which sometimes can get muddled with concerns around what may look at first glance as duplication of effort, leading to repetition of advice around choice. For simplicity, we can refer to it as the need for a spiral of engagement over time to revisit and reinforce crucial decisions. Most readers will, on quick reflection, realise that a single intervention or training event is unlikely to significantly transform the plans nor prospects of someone competing for a degree place. And yet often that is what those involved in WP, constrained by resource, are forced to offer. Stand-alone single point interventions, no matter how blindingly wonderful, cannot in reality compensate for negative factors and the complex lives that many applicants face. The result is that whatever guidance towards entering university or not is offered needs to be part of a spiral of engagement – first broad and general, becoming destination focussed and ultimately leading to access to the degree chosen if desired. Breaks in this spiral run the risk of learners not reaching their maximum potential, disengaging or making choices they subsequently regret. Consequently, it is important to see guidance on

university entry in the context of being part of a bigger series of interventions, as without these the chances of success diminish. What may at a glance look like repetition can actually help later concrete decision making by building on earlier foundations.

Levels of applicant training to prepare for university

How a school pupil prepares and is prepared for university-level study is an obvious but sometimes overlooked aspect of racing towards a degree. The heart of this element lies in the fact that, generally, universities only admit qualified pupils into their degrees. However, what is equally clear is that not all these pupils go on to cope and graduate, despite on paper being qualified to do so. This brings us to the blindingly obvious conclusion that simply being qualified in itself does not equate directly to being fully prepared for degree-level study. More than exam certificates are needed to cope with the real-world problems all students encounter. And yet being required to gain entry qualifications alone is precisely what many pupils unfortunately interpret from being made conditional and, even more controversially, unconditional university offers (with a swathe of recent media and sector coverage on the demerits of this approach available online). In a sense the logic of such applicants is sound – 'why would a university offer me a place if they did not think I would cope with it?' 'They do want me to do well, right?' What they miss is that at one level, making a pupil an offer to enter a degree is a simple business transaction. Whilst pupils take this personal offer personally, they miss that these 'personal' offers are often sent en masse to many more candidates than there are spaces for. University admission in a sense is like the airline industry – to ensure every seat is filled, more tickets are sold than there are seats, both because it is known some will never turn up at the 'gate' but also because in the UK to maximise their chances, pupils themselves apply to up to five universities each cycle, whilst normally only able to enter one at a time.

The net result of the above process is a scene repeated annually of pupils emerging from being the best in their smaller pool-like schools to find life in the much larger aquarium that is a university to be very different. For many degrees, the fast-learning pace from the start is such that failure to acclimatise and prosper outside lectures – coping with living away from family, often in shared accommodation, budgeting, cooking as well as all the new academic skills around lectures and note taking, etc. – can lead to distress, disillusionment and degree discontinuation. This is partly why data relating to who has started each type of degree is routinely formally reported to bodies such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in the UK two months after course start date. Yes, it takes time to collect and process but there will also be late starts and unfortunately early departures from each course. The delay adds data accuracy but also accidently conceals false starts (yes, another unintended consequence). Equally funding bodies want to reward providers for actual teaching not potential numbers of students some of whom have since left, so the delay in replying works for them.

All of this makes the level of 'training' a pupil has for the world of university crucial. It is why those coached by parents and often in better resourced fee-paying schools can do well – such pupils have been told what to expect and plan for it. Such an advantage can of course be replicated for all, if resource is available – in many ways this lies at the heart of what WP outreach tries to achieve. But if this is not done, with the range of costs of university becoming a barrier, 'uni-versities' run the risk of becoming 'mono-versities' where all the entrants only come from similar well-supported backgrounds and the talents of those from the much larger wider pool are lost. Fortunately, recent decades have seen growth in understanding in the area, particularly amongst teachers and those involved in schools in guiding pupils. There does, however, remain much to be done to ensure that all runners are appropriately and fairly trained for the race. In her 2014 Programme for Government, First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon sought the ambitious goal that: "a child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities." This challenge to all involved in education in Scotland (which arguably is everyone, from taxpayers to teachers) clearly recognises the extent of existing hurdles placed before some and the lack of training and support that accompanies this. Our visualisation is clear – one race, one distance, yet two very different tracks – one with many hurdles for the less advantaged and one without many such barriers. And it is this that all involved in WP aim to address. At the time of writing the child the First Minister referred to is already deep within the Primary School sector, as the years roll by.

As previously mentioned, another form of race is to leave school not to university but first to further education college. Such a route is known in the trade as articulation or advanced entry, because the learner does not begin their degree at the start but carries in credit from their college course to enable entry into Year Two or Three. This option provides a further crucial degree entry opportunity. However, as previously covered, it also can lead to a slower route to graduation. If a three-year college course leads into Year Three of a four-year degree (as can be the case) in effect that four-year degree takes five (3+2) years to complete. Should it lead to Year Two of degree study – which is actually currently more common in Scotland – then a four-year degree takes six (3+3) years to achieve. First-year entry of course is also possible and does happen, often at the request of the learner who wishes a more gradual start, taking the opportunity cost in years to seven (3 +4). It is also worth noting that those entering their degree by any of these options involves students being parachuted into existing university learning and social groups, established over the previous year(s), which in turn present another challenge to the articulating learner. They can, as the author experienced himself, feel somewhat outside the established group, unfamiliar with its history that the group developed previously, their customs and lifestyle.

The need for authentic training

Whilst warm words and encouragement are fabulous, one of the best ways of encouraging new learners to begin the next phase of their leaner journey is to let them see it and experience it for themselves. This again lies at the heart of the world of WP outreach, which in other spheres might be seen as a 'test drive' or 'try before you buy'. In the experience of the author, nothing in outreach is more powerful than having someone who recently won a race – ideally a student or graduate from the same school or street or background – telling a hopefully receptive audience about their experiences. This can switch a 'can I?' candidate mindset to a 'why can't I?' candidate, motivated to give it a go. Role models that pupils can associate with are a key catalyst for change and are a crucial component beyond inputs from generally much older academic and recruitment staff. So training authenticity is key. Those conducting outreach or running WP programmes must make their delivery real and relevant. Thus, for example, an Access Summer School wishing to perform the role of a training environment for degree entrants has to mirror as many first-year university aspects as possible. This means not just the same staff, classrooms, learning technologies and pretty much everything else but also the same levels and types of teaching and support. New students often underestimate the challenges of living away from home, often for the first time, of budgeting and of making new friends (who at one level they are in competition with). Authentic training via courses like Access Summer Schools can be what differentiates generic support and encouragement and the conversion of 'triers' into making our runner truly race ready as a potential 'winner'.

A final aspect that gets much less publicity than it should is the invidious self-inflicted damage caused by failure to disclose positive supporting material circumstances at application that university selectors need to know about to make a fair selection decision. To give but one example, during the pandemic many school pupils have had to become unpaid carers, obtaining essential supplies for family and friends, including those that have had to shield. It is worth asking what percentage of those generous pupils will declare in their university application that their eventual grades may have been impacted by having to spend time caring for others, whilst their more fortunate of better resourced counterparts can merrily use these hours to study instead? Will the referees supporting these applications always verify such disclosures to ensure caring responsibilities that may impact study are given the recognition they deserve? This simple example highlights another 'tip of the iceberg' issues in WP, namely natural reluctance, some might say lack of awareness, around two specific application aspects. Firstly, applicants may assume that universities already know of their personal circumstances, either because their referee will sometimes have noted them or because previously their personal data simply flowed from their primary school to their secondary school. The presence of a 'data firewall' as pupils leave local authority provision to individual independent institutions is generally not well understood by applicants and it is those

with the greatest adversity who may be impacted if they then fail to advise of circumstances they could benefit from support with, that they may assume universities already know or which applicants feel won't make a positive difference if they disclose them. Secondly, some applicants undervalue, underplay or fail to recognise the impact of their circumstances upon their own performance. They do not see the wider pool of which they are part and therefore cannot consider how their individual circumstances compare with other applicants. They may also be reluctant or simply forget to flag up their achievements in context. They may even be scared such disclosure will be held against them, some applicants commenting that they do not want to appear 'higher maintenance' in terms of needing more support due to their circumstances in case this damages their application chances. Applicants need to be constantly reassured by every communication channel available to those receiving applications that disclosing adversity will never negatively impact their chances and that universities do not use this information in a negative way. Disclosure will only ever lead to help. This clear message also needs to be delivered by all entry selection staff, ensuring that the application of policy matches deeds in practice.

The rules of university entry

The rules for entry to degree-level study are couched in language that the general public and visitors to university open days may find alien. There is the need to read a prospectus (course application guide), understand the details of offers (often conditional, but on what?), leading to potential matriculation (joining), progression and retention. As mentioned earlier, 2018 saw a push by Universities Scotland (the parent body for Scottish universities) towards adopting more uniform and clearer language. The author served on the group tasked with this challenge, which has seen new clarity in printed and online materials. What became clear is that the UK-wide application process for universities – the UCAS system to some extent – limits what any one of the four UK nations can do to improve communication on their own and that, for example, Scotland could not unilaterally change national terminology and expect it to appear in other parts of the UK. This limits scope somewhat but equally with plenty of complex language to address should encourage a four nations approach to actively find solutions for their future students.

Another key issue Universities Scotland-led work illuminated that was touched on earlier was the variety of terms used in describing the often narrow range of acceptable entrance qualifications. From 2020 onwards the aim has been to distil language around entry grades down to just two, clear options. The first – termed 'widening access' – means that applicants applying with this level of qualification will be unsuccessful unless contextual adversity factors apply to them. The second level – termed 'standard' – is the level of qualifications that non-contextual candidates need to apply with to make a competitive application. Please refer to Chapter 8 for full details of what

contextual factors are. In this way, the 'standard' level of entry qualifications can generally be considered as 'the going rate' for the majority of candidates, at or above which an application to race should be actively considered and has a reasonable chance of competing, noting the high level of competition likely. Whilst all this sounds like a small step, it is the beginning of a wide range of fiercely independent competing providers allowing users to more clearly see how differences in entry levels compare. The wider question of how valuable and accurate these entry grades are in predicting subsequent success will be a theme we will return to on several occasions later in this book. For now, presenting entry requirements at two levels demonstrates the clear commitment in Scotland to try to 'level the playing field' at the point of applicant selection, recognising that not all runners have had the same opportunities to that point. Unrelated, but for clarity, applications made with qualifications below these stated minima are likely to be rejected – something we will also return to later.

Unfortunately, at this point of considering the rules of entry we also need to consider that rules can be broken. Whilst the UCAS university application process in the UK is robust, it is not a tightly supervised exam. In other words, different candidates will get different levels of help with crucial elements of their applications. Some elements, like Personal Statements, can be downloaded from the internet or 'experts' hired to write them, making them powerful but hardly personal. As considered later under contextual admissions approaches, any process that aims to be fair can be subverted. For example, with applications from specific postcodes being given additional contextual consideration, knowledge of this has given rise to some candidates specifically applying from properties other than their main home, thus gaining unfair advantage. Applying from that second home, Gran's flat or even in effect Post Office mailboxes, may go undetected as time and resource to verify home addresses – for example by visiting them to meet the applicant – normally does not exist. Noting this, if found out the applicant is in deep trouble, their application being deemed null and void, the attempt to cheat being held against them. But being found out is relatively rare especially where assessments are online and unsupervised, although increasingly the issue of candidates seeking unfair advantages is on people's radar (for example, Al-Khalaf and Hunter (2021) "Record number of student exam cheats in Scotland").

Whilst no process will ever be cheat-proof, such underhand approaches are actually potentially self-limiting. If an applicant is willing to cheat to get in, there is a chance they will need to cheat to stay in and in so doing again get caught. Plagiarism detection software can be the academics friend for such individuals, as it can for admissions staff who can check to see if 'personal statements' have been bought online rather than carefully crafted. This may be wishful thinking in terms of time and resource but equally the reality is that applicants who focus on getting into their degree rather than preparing to stay in their degree can come unstuck. There is a 'survival of the truly smartest' at work here and those bending the rules cannot do so forever and

get away with it. If staff in schools have overestimated student potential and predicted stronger estimated grades than the candidate delivers once the actual grades are known, the condition of any conditional offer would not be met and the candidate would not be admitted. Such predicted grade inflation on its own is therefore not a way to cheat entry systems (unless of course it gets a candidate through a preliminary selection round unfairly, should grades then not be returned to for ultimate selection). In a sense, however, maybe even a false confidence boost has some value. Some secondary schools do seem to consistently be overoptimistic about their pupils real abilities, this seeming to be more often the case where parents are paying extra money beyond what a state education offers to achieve. As outlined, any advantage may be fleeting, true talent detection being something universities are good at.

Next, we turn to protected characteristics – a list of circumstances beyond those we have so far considered. The UK Equality Act (2010) considers these to be:

1 age,
2 disability,
3 gender reassignment,
4 race,
5 religion or belief,
6 sex,
7 sexual orientation,
8 marriage and civil partnership,
9 pregnancy and maternity.

Whilst different countries view these criteria in different ways, the UK sees these as aspects to be used to monitor equality and diversity but never criteria used to select an individual student. In fact, these characteristics of each applicant are not normally requested, and if they are, they are normally withheld from those making selection decisions to ensure they cannot be used to discriminate – positively or negatively – for or against any individual. To do so in the UK would be illegal.

Readers will not be surprised to find that we encounter yet another unintended consequence around hidden data being accidentally revealed, which rather bizarrely first emerged before this author due to an empty drink can. The story behind this once again demonstrates how when being fair, the devil is in the details. To understand the specifics we need to understand a little about the concept of 'blind admissions'. This approach and mechanism contends that the best way of preventing any bias in selection – conscious or unconscious –is to not ask each applicant about any characteristic (including protected ones above) that might accidentally influence selection judgement. So, for example, a selector will typically not know the age or gender of a candidate whose application they are reading. The selector has no reason to know such details, so is not told them – indeed the applicant is not asked to disclose them. In the UK the 2018 introduction of the General Data

Protection Regulation (GDPR) has made the collection of data without purpose or permission against the law. From a future student perspective, each applicant is considered as a 'data subject', the law stating that amongst other things:

1 each 'data subject' must give consent to the processing of their personal data;
2 the data collector must fulfil contractual obligations with each data subject, including around storage and processing;
3 and must comply with a data controller's legal obligations;
4 and protect the vital interests of a data subject.

From these perspectives it may indeed be easier for an admissions selector to not request, hold or analyse such data, as to do so requires GDPR requirements to be met. Put simply, so-called 'blind admissions' become less demanding as well as potentially fairer.

But there can be challenges and unintended consequences even here, as we return to the story of our drinks can. In one particular year, state schools in Scotland were, as part of their syllabus, given the subject of a slightly crushed drinks can as an object to be drawn for art portfolio inclusion. Completely innocuous you might think? But of course, when hundreds and thousands of perfectly anonymised GDPR-compliant portfolios arrived for assessment it was instantly clear which ones had come from Scottish state school pupils and which had not – the crushed can was the difference as some schools, including private schools, had the opportunity to utilise different objects on which to muse. Now in the great scheme of things this was maybe a small thing that may have been a once only event, but equally in this example selectors were likely to get bored of crushed cans and might consciously or unconsciously favour portfolios that did not include them. Another unintended consequence that in this case got round what might be considered a fool-proof blind selection system.

Another portfolio-related twist occurred from around 2015 when universities started asking for portfolios to be submitted not in physical form but instead as a digital upload. At face value, the move away from requiring applicants to buy expensive, expansive, heavy (in the past often leather) folio cases that had to be delivered to universities for consideration does seem to be more inclusive and potentially costing much less. However, the move to the digital domain was not trouble free. Several institutions found their upload systems crashed as applicants rushed to upload on deadline day. Other applicants struggled to get access to sufficiently high-resolution cameras and software to manipulate images within the period before smartphones could effectively do this. Then of course they needed speedy bandwidth to upload images, something in 2022 some secondary schools still struggle with. So this positive change introduced further unintended barriers. Universities, partly due to storage volume but equally out of fairness, then had to introduce upload size limits to help senders and receivers manage the situation. Equally,

universities seemed loathed to give worked examples of what a digital portfolio might look like – indeed even today some still do not provide such examples. So even in the wonderfully open world of art, there are barriers that need to be overcome when applying to an art degree.

Finally, in this chapter, before we consider in more detail the key 'players' in the Access world, it is worth pausing to note that at the very least, monitoring measures of diversity amongst university applicants and entrants is both necessary and best practice. Indeed, there are many reasons to monitor if inclusion policy leads to actual inclusive practice and diversity. Might imagery or language used in publicity material be unrepresentative and so discourage or encourage candidates from particular groups to come forward? Might interview waiting rooms that allow candidates to see that they are in a minority be discouraging? By way of example, male applicants to nursing have reported some gender balance unease sitting in a waiting room ahead of an interview. And of course the question then arises what should be done about this? Single gender waiting rooms have been tried, noting that during 'blind' selection a selector will not know who members of any group may be by simply looking at their application form alone, meaning they could not select by this group even if they wanted to (noting the potential legal minefield should they even try). About the only immediate solution is that candidates can be asked to sign up for gender-specific or mixed gender interview days. What can also of course be done – legally – to increase inclusivity is to look at the supply and demand equation around equality. Whilst candidates cannot be selected by protected characteristics, if monitoring identifies imbalances, steps can be taken to grow demand, specifically from the underrepresented group. A worked example the author was involved in demonstrates. How do you ensure more males enter the nursing profession? So few apply. And there is the answer! Stimulate supply. But how? The solution adopted was to run a nurse recruitment stall on Saturday mornings in a local shopping centre staffed mainly or even solely by male nurses. And male applicant numbers slowly grew. Subtle, legal but potentially a talking point and route to future diversity. Comments from passing shoppers were supportive including a few making statements akin to 'I didn't know blokes could be nurses' which in itself may highlight the wider societal view of stereotypes and preconceptions that push against the kind of diversity most would wish for. So, change is possible, as is wider diversity and fairness. It just takes thought and effort and normally quite a lot of each.

5 Who are the key players in Access?

Proving some right and others wrong

> *Like all racers, Peter and Paul both have teams behind them. However, their teams are very different. Peter's team have encouraged him from an early age to follow in their footsteps towards a graduate job and praised his ambition to achieve this. He is keen to prove them right. Paul's team, on the other hand, have been passive or at times negative about his ambition to go to university. His true talents have not yet been appreciated. He is keen to prove his team wrong. The main differences between what these two teams have to offer may be access to information. Both want the best for Peter and Paul but both may not have the same information and experiences needed for both to define 'best' the same way. And yet Peter and Paul are competing in the same race.*

Chapter 4 neatly brings us to the role of schools (both primary and secondary) in providing career guidance – an area of great challenge and opportunity. There was a time (and the author experienced this) when pupils were asked about their interests and abilities at a single meeting which was then used (latterly with some computer help) to determine the job the pupil should aim for. Now in the modern world of facilitated guidance, the mechanisms used to offer advice are much broader and much more frequent. This has not changed the challenge, however. The 2016 CoWA report and more recently the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) through their Access and Inclusion Committee (see references for a link to various dates) have highlighted concerns that many guidance voices now try to be heard in schools, including outreach projects and numerous charities. Real concerns about mixed messages and information overload have been expressed, as have concerns over the poor quality, currency or accuracy of some of the information delivered. These issues are not new. For example, pre-CoWA in 2012 the National Union of Students (Scotland) in their insightful report "Unlocking Scotland's Potential: Promoting Fairer Access to HE" (2012) flagged up many of these precise issues – something that helpfully CoWA then subsequently drove forward and was able to push further into the spotlight. From a historical perspective, it is unfortunate the NUS(S) document appears no longer available online but those readers with access to more seasoned colleagues might find

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that they (like the author) have a print copy on their bookshelves. Regardless, read on as we dive a little deeper.

Something those readers familiar with the sector will often hear is that it takes exceptional individuals to make Access happen. Whilst this may sound like self-aggrandisement, it seems universally true that those WP staff who make a success of working in the sector do so because they have an understanding, passion and talent to do so. Those who enter this field without these skills tend to quickly move on. Most of the staff who make a real difference are not the upper or even middle management but rather the on-the-ground staff who understand the needs of their target audience and stay true to these. It is equally true that this proximity to helping support those with real life issues is also an aspect that has kept many – including the author – engaged with frontline WP work despite the challenges imposed on the sector by austerity and the pandemic (which had a galvanising effect on such stuff, making them keen to do even more). It is interesting that when thanking the NHS during the pandemic, the UK clapped for carers – the nurses and doctors in the main, not the CEOs. The same should be true for the WP sector, as management ambitions risk remaining as wish lists without the hard graft of those on the ground, doing the work day in, day out, often including evenings and weekends to make their availability match that of learners – despite 'overtime' for anti-social hours working not being a thing for most. Might this new societal compassion lead to greater understanding that it is grass roots university WP staff who are the heroes here? We can only wish. Pleasingly more and more senior university leaders have begun to recognise this, which with luck will sustain the WP profession going forward.

The pandemic of course has added another huge layer of complexity to WP outreach. The forced move to online – with the potential to reach more distant geographies and increase scale has had a few plusses, as we will see. However, as Blower and Marsdin (2021) commented, "technology is not a simple fix for complex societal needs, and does not benefit participation by itself". Their short piece in *WONKHE* in March 2021 beautifully summarised the reality that if we ignore the wider societal issues behind under-participation by some groups, we will fail, "the repetitive waving of magical policy wands to conjure up laptops, mentors and days out on campus will only serve to leave us with ever increasing numbers of students and families who are left out and disengaged."

In his December 2020 report, The Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access Sir Peter Scott (2020) beautifully summed up the realities of what can be considered as a pandemic-induced digital divide that links so closely to poverty. He highlighted three keys areas he felt were of concern. The first was computers, commenting, "access to equipment and broadband are the most obvious issues… Arguably they are the easiest to solve" which, finance permitting, is true. Many potential applicants were known to have web-enabled technology already, including computer gaming systems, tablets and smart phones, but as Sir Peter points out, "Using technology for recreation and technology for learning are very different". Early anecdotal evidence suggests

asking children to access learning via PlayStations and Xboxes possibly did not go as well as expected. Equally as the same report goes on to point out, "It's more than digital exclusion – it's loneliness, lack of individual support and while young people may be techie savvy they are not used to being taught online". And this continues to be the experience of many working in WP trying to support learners remotely. The necessity for, coupled to the drive towards, online learning needs to take all learners with it. For insight on how this was seen early in 2021 and more on the topic, the following blog raises many interesting points worthy of deeper consideration: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/events/gravity-assist-a-new-era-for-higher-education/.

The second aspect is around connectivity. More and more modern houses are being built without fixed 'landline' telephones, the assumption being that new owners will want whizzy new fibre broadband or just use the mobile phone network. Equally since the innovation of the mobile phone, many older houses have not had functional landlines for years – there has simply been no need for them. That is until the need for a stable domestic Wi-Fi connection became critical to learning and employment during the pandemic, made worse by the fact that by its very nature, these could not be installed during the lockdown. For many the only and relatively expensive solution was a face-covered trip to an essential shop to buy one of the diminishing number of prized Wi-Fi dongles (computer chip shortage permitting) that utilise mobile phone-type data, hoping that the brand available could pick up a good mobile signal from their home.

The final aspect of the digital divide – and for some the biggest – was learning space. Having equipment and broadband can come to nothing for pupils sharing a room or indeed a house with noisy siblings and parents also working from home. The loss of the silence required by many to fully concentrate – that peace so prized in libraries and reading rooms – seems to have had a big impact, not least that the others in the lockdown household are likely to also want to use the same equipment and Wi-Fi, bandwidth becoming a real issue as school learning materials were downloaded and much sought after live sessions reduced to Dalek-like scrambled voice communication. In summary, lockdown presented many online learning challenges, some less obvious than others.

As we will see, the above chimes with what others are seeing not just around learning but during WP outreach. For example, Blower and Marsdin (2021) highlighted the desperate need post-pandemic to "take the time to engage critically with the complex, numerous and damaging inequalities that working-class young people face". The pandemic has resulted in already hard to reach students becoming yet harder to engage with. The loss of the reassurances and joy of face-to-face outreach has made the essential task of demystifying university much harder than pre-pandemic. Online activities during the pandemic, whilst often superbly produced, do not give true campus, open days and, of course, campus halls of residence experience a physical campus visit can offer. Without these positive delights, nervous potential applicants may lack the reassurance that actually, the university

they are visiting is a safe and exciting place for them to commit a substantial part of their futures and resource to. Fortunately, physical campus visits resumed in late 2021, albeit with restrictions.

Providing the key information applicants need through successful outreach (when it can be achieved) can be a key milestone for many learner journeys. Trying to be objective, universities have been both a help and a hindrance here. Whilst they have in general been very willing to reach out, the complexity of student selection (forced upon them by growth in the numbers of applicants) has led to a complex landscape of grade inflation, coupled to additional selection measures (interviews, pre- and post-application tests / tasks and portfolios, to name a few they may struggle to cope with). It is worth noting again that in Scotland around a third of progression to Higher Education refers to candidates moving from School to FE College, the latter in Scotland offering Higher Education qualifications (such as Higher National Diplomas and Certificates, taught and assessed at the same level as University Year One). So, by offering fairness and choice, new approaches also generate complexity and confusion.

To end this section, one brief final point that may previously not have been obvious to all readers, but which from a tactical application perspective is important. The UCAS system of applying to a fixed number of institutions has resulted in a manageable 'market' of undergraduate places for those running towards them. Application requirements to the same degree types offered by different universities often vary – another aspect those on the outside may not immediately expect. In addition, like any market their supply and demand will be uneven, making knowing how much training is required to run a viable race a tricky and annually changing picture. Which brings us to the coaches in our visualisation of the race to degree.

Professional coaches

The turn of the millennium saw growing recognition that the marketisation of HE had led to institutions competing for survival by increasingly competing for the same students. Very clearly, income derived from students, sitting alongside research and other funding streams is essential to keep universities financially viable as independent seats of learning. Slowly in the following decade it became clear that central bodies with an interest in HE would have to recognise this and incentivise a more holistic, national view of what society needed, in terms of ensuring wider society benefitted from those going to university. As previously discussed, this gave rise around 2010 to national programmes, typified in Scotland by the AHDP programmes Reach and ACES (as touched on in Chapter 2). Essentially what was recognised was that learners making multiple applications to a range of universities were going to get a variety of explanations, insights and offers that may contradict or even conflict. And such complexity might put some off further study. One of the core aspects of the AHDP work over the 2010–2022 period has been to offer

national information in a neutral way, putting the best destination for the student to the fore. This work has been cleverly based within key partner institutions, 'friendly Trojan horses' if you will, taking an approach to ensure the advice is current, relevant and accurate. As AHDP reporting has clearly shown, such crucial ingredients have made a real difference to the chances of candidates and potential candidates who have taken part and gone a long way to levelling this aspect of the uneven playing field in the specific degree areas targeted. The model has merit for significant expansion when economic circumstances permit.

There of course continue to be many approaches to widen participation. Basing broad, generic Access activity outside all universities that applicants might apply to has obvious attractions around impartiality. However, these are often dwarfed by the benefits of being embedded. The knowledge and insight of having advocates based directly at the final barrier can, in a highly competitive environment, be an absolutely crucial final ingredient for success. So, what is more important – inside knowledge or external impartiality? Both have merit but are really mutually exclusive. Some early Access work involving the author almost certainly undervalued this dilemma – a true lesson learned. The margins between an admission and a rejection decision can often be very slim. The ability of a selector to quickly and easily ask for evidence clarification when making a difficult admissions decision can be directly supported if someone who has recently worked with the candidate previously is at the next desk or in the next room. This also harks back to the fact that true fairness requires investment, and it often does not happen spontaneously. Placing 'guardians of fair Access' at the entry 'gate' – such as through work like the AHDP Projects – is a perfect example of how such programmes can be put in a position to recognise the extra commitment an individual applicant makes to a particular future degree leading to a legitimate way of rewarding effort, also giving admissions selectors greater confidence that the person being made the offer represents good use of taxpayers money. Such is the transparency and fairness of process these days that the lay reader can be confident that each and every university selection decision made is based on evidence available at that time and is as fair as possible. If a WP professional can directly furnish the person making the admissions decision with the additional information they require, then so much the better in terms of transparency and taking context into account.

Before we leave the AHDP project for now, a change that began in 2019 and is still rolling out merits a mention, as it reflects a key shift in approach that positive interventions like this project face and have to resolve. Back in 2010 when AHDP started, it was felt that the best way to help the largest number of pupils in need of WP support was to focus activity on the schools where the highest percentage of such pupils could be found. This was a reasonable, if somewhat crude approach that worked well. The author helped lead it. However, once data analysis from several years of work emerged, two problems with the approach became clear. Firstly, it was obvious that in these

target schools, there were some very advantaged pupils who in effect were getting access to additional support they did not need and were actually not entitled to. Special resource was being shared too widely to benefit those most in need and 'level the playing field'. And of course, the reverse was true too – in strongly performing schools that the project was not funded to work with, there were disadvantaged pupils who the project therefore missed entirely. So, false positives and missed positives – hardly ideal, although it was a relatively simple and cheap solution. In pool fishing terms, the work was using a net and catching everyone – including the ineligible – instead of multiple targeted lines to only hook those intended. 2019 saw the start of a shift for the AHDP project away from working with all pupils in some schools to working with some (eligible) pupils in all schools. This was quite a shift, simultaneously involving forming new relationships with 'new' school partners and also explaining to 'old' school partners the need for them to tightly focus on who they put forward for the specialist support, to specifically ensure those who needed and deserved it would receive. A further reality of this switch, which involved a 50% increase in partner school numbers, was that geographical and travel logistics meant that the AHDP project had to some extent switch modes from the project going to the pupils in schools, to the pupils coming to the project, mainly in evenings and weekends. There were just too many schools to visit multiple times each year. This added to costs but did mean that the interventions can be more sophisticated, the added benefit being that pupils get to explore university campuses and meet pupils from other schools. The CoWA report (2016), as we have already seen, hit the nail on the head on the value of campus experiences for those taking part in Access Summer Schools. To quote (p. 31):

> the reason these programmes have such a powerful impact is that they simultaneously address a range of barriers, whilst also providing participants with a clear and realistic pathway to admission. Prospective applicants can familiarise themselves with a university campus and tutors, meet potential classmates and sample the teaching style and academic standards they will be expected to meet.

We could go on (as the report does) to explore the value and benefits of face-to-face on-campus teaching over the online-only world. But their comment on the same page that "given the power of bridging programmes to advance fair Access, we must ensure there is enough of this provision to make a significant impact at national level" sums this up nicely. Campus-based access is powerful, ideally with all eligible applicants getting this opportunity. This is something more politicians might wish to grasp as budget cutting makes campuses less viable and appealing. As some bright spark once pointed out, if you think education is expensive, ignorance costs even more.

One of the challenges and responsibilities that goes with being a professional coach is that sometimes, after considerable reflection, a coach needs to

sit down with an applicant and tell them that at present they are either unlikely to be offered a specific university place or if they are, may struggle to do well post-entry. Again, detailed knowledge of the inside of degree programmes, including curriculum and support, are key here. This may be one of the hardest tasks staff in this area have to perform, noting that in a culture of lifelong learning, there is hopefully always next year and the next to reapply. In a world of loans and fees and debit, there is always a decision each candidate has to make as to whether they are ready. WP coaches can support applicants in many ways as they train but cannot carry individual learners across the line – the learner needs to do that for themselves.

In another ironic twist, there can also be a fine line in making such decisions between a learner not having enough information and actually having too much, so that the whole question of what race to run becomes too daunting and puts them off entirely. Judging the mind set and resilience of applicants is a key WP coach skill that develops over time and required the breadth of that experience. Novice coaches can quickly feel out of their depth if they themselves have been inadequately prepared. To give but one example, over involvement of keen parents can be innocent or a warning sign, as family members will not generally be in class, new learners should really be asking questions themselves rather than via a proxy. And how answers given to questions posed to applicants emerge is also key, again some parents sometimes answering for them. The professional coach does not, in a sense, have an opinion then. Rather they simply offer facts and evidence for others to sift and weigh towards deciding what is right for them at that point. The author terms this 'intelligent signposting'.

Noting this, in recent years secondary school staff have moved to recognise that to deliver the best outcomes for all their pupils, the balance between guidance effort and guidance resource probably had to swing away from university towards FE college, as the former remained a minority destination and the latter was expanding. FE colleges and routes such as foundation apprenticeships opened their doors even more widely. As discussed elsewhere in this book, austerity has seen curricula in many schools narrow and in combination this has resulted in application and entry levels to university from some schools going down as students cannot qualify to get in. This is a contentious topic, and it is made more so by changes in staff attitudes in some schools that have shifted towards entry to university being seen as unachievable for all but a few due to the limited supply of undergraduate places where demand for university places massively exceeds supply. This change of mindset on investing significant resource on preparing candidates for university they are perceived as being unlikely to get in to has been amplified by the resultant large number of rejections of applicants schools consider 'good' future students and yet further compounded by the tough financial climate impacting how many of those who enter university leave before completing their degree as they feel that financially they cannot afford to stay. The attitude change that universities are unreachable becomes a self-

fulfilling prophecy. With FE college being a more accessible race, no wonder they appear more appealing, university being seen as too challenging. Time will tell how many taking this longer, slower learner journey will subsequently graduate from a university and if FE college qualifications will dominate the jobs market.

There is also a different and growing band of professional coaches who offer support on a private, commercial basis. A quick online search will reveal a raft of individuals and organisations more than happy to take payment to improve the Personal Statement section of a university application or help a candidate improve their chances, for example, by developing their portfolio before applying to Art School. From a WP practitioner standpoint, such provision is familiar and valuable, the main difference being that access to it is determined by ability to pay and not adversity level or ability to learn. This is not to take away from some of the excellent provision available, simply to say that there is an argument that it would be fairer if it was offered to all, not just those who can afford it.

In his December 2020 report, Scott (2020) highlighted the new challenges for our coaches, pointing out that online learning in itself was 'not a level playing field'. Remote coaching, as covered earlier in this chapter brings its own challenges, and this type of learning environment is especially hard and possibly less beneficial for Care Experienced and estranged students that arguably benefit most from face-to-face interaction. LGBT+ and minority students can be equally challenged by the online only world, where greater hostility may be voiced in a way it would not be face-to-face and is harder to detect and call out. That said it is true that, as Scott (2020) points out, online outreach and learning "has the potential to produce greater parity of experience among students (especially in rural and remote communities) if they can get online." But as above, for many that can be a big if. The enforced shift to blended learning (typically on-campus classes, mixed with online classes), coupled to interrupted studies, created real challenges, with some anecdotal reports that estrangement has risen due to students needing a safe study space outside what may not always be happy homes, a role once again that campus libraries and halls of residence normally serve out with pandemics.

On the topic of learning modes – where and how students learn – the pandemic once again has had an impact. Both staff and students have, in some cases unwittingly, stirred up a conversation on the benefits of campus learning versus online learning, that pre-pandemic seemed somewhat futile (as university teaching was predominating live in classrooms). There is, at the time of writing, a contest emerging between those who love the flexibility of life as an online learner and those who deeply miss the intense joy of a bustling student campus. The latter possibly more nostalgic approach hopes that post-pandemic things can go back to the old normal, rather than to a new normal, with spacing, masks and vaccine passports. There are equally questions around the future balance of synchronous (specifically live) and asynchronous (specifically recorded) learning, including the quality of what can now be delivered in each mode. More research

and enquiry will undoubtedly take place on the impact of the pandemic on students, early sources of helpful insight being https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/12/03/students-views-on-the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-their-higher-education-experience-in-2020-21/ and https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-the-university-experience-student-life-pandemic/.

We may come to see the pandemic as being a time when we reflected more not just about where people learn but also when they learn – a new academic dimension of space and time if you will – into which the wishes and needs of modern learners need to be met. Does the pandemic accelerate wider learning reform or does it simply serve as a delay in the 'return to normal?' Has the pandemic changed forever students' need for the university campus in the way it seems to have for other consumers who always did their shopping in High Streets, who then move out of town to superstore complexes and increasingly now, shop online? With many more people working from home, will studying from home become the norm too?

With asynchronous learning an issue emerges on recording of teaching materials – the question of who owns such materials? Normally this is the university that employed the person who made the recording, but questions can arise around how others can use such intellectual property. For a time, fear existed that staff might be replaced by recordings once they have transferred their masterclass performance to the digital world. Whilst clearly this would be difficult in some areas, like practical aspects in labs and art studios, teaching almost fully online has been very successfully achieved by the Open University, so it is likely this question will remain open in the background for a good while yet. In some ways their genius in creating live and engaging interaction is the essence of professional teaching staff. 'Bottling it' and making use of it without them present is bound to feel a bit odd.

Admissions staff – more unsung heroes

Quite simply Admissions staff have to make life-changing decisions for applicants. They may receive partial information, will definitely be working to tight timelines and have to be scrupulously fair. This is a serious and stressful business. With most universities having many more applicants than places, rejecting candidates is much more common than accepting them. Put another way, to help you get inside the heads of those making admissions decisions, how many reading this book wake up each workday knowing that ninety out of a hundred of the individuals whose lives will pass over their desk that day are going to be disappointed by their workplace decision? There cannot be many industries where this is the case and there is no alternative in the market situation of demand so hugely outstripping supply. Now of course, the lucky 10% who are admitted is the cohort that admission selectors focus on – there is joy – but equally with regular decision appeals and some complaints (which normally boil down to the fact that there are not enough student places) there are significant challenges of choosing winners and losers.

Key requirements in such decision-making are consistency and transparency. Colleagues will often spend longer explaining why decisions were made to candidates, their families and sometime elected officials challenging them than actually making them. It is another quirk of admissions that many staff will often never directly meet the applicants they reject and only some of those they make offers to. This is quite different to that of the WP coach, who as outlined above, knows the candidate in significant detail, having worked with them in person over time. This can create tension, as Access staff will typically be professionally and (due to the heart rending circumstances their pupils tend to have endured) often slightly emotionally invested in an individual applicant but this cannot colour decisions, which must be based on merit and potential. A healthy partnership of mutual respect between WP advocates and admissions selectors pervades most universities but there can be tension.

One of the interesting things about looking at university admissions and WP over time is that those with this opportunity begin to see that like many organisations, approaches used to react to cyclical change are themselves cyclical. As staff leave the sector to go to others or retire, tried and tested or tried and failed approaches also cyclically re-emerge. This can be subtle and easily missed by a newcomer to the sector, often parachuted into an existing role, almost certainly 'mid-cycle', the latter means during a period when applications that all have to be treated equally are arriving, limiting the opportunity for change, and so quickly finds their ability to innovate tempered by pressing demands to fill the shoes of their departed predecessor. Seeing the longer game and scanning the horizon to be able to deploy innovation in a timely manner may be the stuff of interview questions but equally may be quickly overtaken by the volume of new real future students applying in their hundreds daily who have real lives, real needs and real-world challenges. It is very easy for new staff to become institutional 'cogs' without ever getting the chance to consider the larger 'machine' they are part of or possibly even ask why certain approaches are used.

One rare exception to this has been an unexpected consequence of the pandemic. With staff to some extent having more flexible (generally longer) working hours due to working at home, more staff have had a chance to look more objectively at what they do and how they do it. The world of the admissions officer used to consist of commuting daily to an office desk piled high with printed folded A3 paper application forms (often in 40cm+ bundles, held together by an elastic band). It was as if as soon as colleagues could be seen over a pile of applications on their desk, a new batch freshly printed would arrive for careful consideration. Of course, Covid-19 and issues such as General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) made such approaches impossible. All aspects of applicant selection had to move fully online from around March 2020. Whilst paper forms previously provided a lovely hard-copy record of decisions made that could be checked and revisited as often as staff liked (although the odd form could sometimes be mis-filed) the move online offered much greater electronic scrutiny and the opportunity for the

first time to see if all candidates with the same circumstances were treated equally, something paper piles of application forms previously made invisible.

Whilst it is still too early to tell for sure, there does seem to be emerging evidence that the struggles of WP staff through and probably beyond the pandemic have also been significantly underreported. Pre-pandemic, the life of a WP practitioner was one of commuting to campus, commuting to schools, commuting to workshops not all of which were on campus. Pandemic and lockdown entirely changed that. The new challenges were getting decent broadband at home, getting a decent broadband-compliant reliable device, mastering Microsoft Teams and Zoom and moving all communications and information delivery of all sorts fully online. This was a huge change – the biggest in HE within the lifetime of most staff – and gave rise to some surreal activities. Some staff, weather permitting, could be found sitting outside university buildings or driving to the tops of hills to get acceptable Wi-Fi reception on their mobile devices, home signals being poor. Being honest, most staff were not fully prepared in terms of knowledge, skills nor equipment to instantly flex and work solely from home. WP staff are almost all highly social creatures, this being almost a mandatory recruitment criteria to the field, and forced isolation for them was possibly harder than for some other groups more used to working in the domestic learning vacuum of lounges, kitchens and bedrooms. The initially hysterically funny cry of 'you are on mute' seemed almost to replace normal greetings, although the growing frequency of such occurrences quickly became much less fun.

There has also been a huge increase in the need for these staff to support each other, as well as their students. This 'emotional support' work has been more challenging to some than others, especially those with family at home to generate significant additional caring tasks. Most staff were, maybe unavoidably, left to simply sort out whatever problems they encountered as lockdown struck, from fraudulent data phishing attempts, to passwords, to paying for heating, lighting, Wi-Fi and other home working utilities. For many their normal research and development interests had to be parked in favour of pure teaching-related work. This level of sacrifice has been one of the hidden triumphs of the last period, noting that some less scrupulous individuals have used the opportunity to cold call homes telling them their Netflix or Amazon accounts were frozen or their tax refund was cancelled, purely to try to steal personal data from staff outside the normal protections of their work office. Indeed the pressures on university staff, including on job security, have been immense. Unfortunately, austerity seems to have suggested to some politicians and leaders that fairness and compassion can no longer be afforded, although the pandemic, full of unsung heroes, may have started to reverse this insidious trend.

The pandemic-enforced switch to 'paperless' applicant selection (for those who did not have such systems already) also allowed universities to be more nimble in terms of selection changes, rows in a spreadsheet being easier to reorder than piles of A3 paper. Whilst undoubtedly beneficial at most levels, the move to fully online selection also gave universities the opportunity to

change how they selected, introducing the possibility of greater differences between universities in terms of entry requirements. Printed prospectuses, planned well over a year in advance, could become a website changed overnight. From the perspective of an applicant, this added another unseen layer of complexity. They might reasonably assume all universities were looking for the same fixed thing and whilst this has never been the case, the move to paperless and online created much more variability, as well as speed of change, including as we will see in Chapter 7, the order selection steps are completed in. This in turn changes who will be selected for entry. This acceleration of variability also has placed an added burden on those advising applicants. Previously they could rely on information from previous years on subject and grade requirements for entry to specific degrees, but in our new world this approach is a dangerous one. Programmes now change rapidly, if 'footfall of customers' (entrants) cease to justify offering said route. Degrees with lower levels of application are withdrawn if uneconomic to run. Entry requirement can be changed in a key stroke. In combination, it is really only those insides of institutions that fully understand their process for each specific admissions cycle. For someone outside, making comparisons between universities is likely to now be much less able to do so in advance, even if more able to do so live. This, as we shall see, has given rise to projects like the SFC Reach and ACES AHDP activities outlined above to widen participation to the high demand professions, being embedded within the admissions elements of universities as this is the only way they can read across institutions and offer fair, current multi-institution advice on a national level guiding applicants to the same course, e.g., Medicine, that in Scotland can be studies at five different universities who all select in slightly different ways.

Teachers

Writing this section of this book is challenging, as it requires recognition that teachers are, in many schools, a diverse group often with very different levels of knowledge, experience and opinion. The reality is that a minority feel they need significant help from Access professionals to guide those in their care towards degrees, especially professional degree – a reaching out that WP colleagues welcome and encourage. Others however lack time for this or may feel they know precisely what advice to give, and in a fast-moving world of different, often contextual, offers this as we have just seen can be dangerous. Candidates may by accident be put off applying, blocking their way to Access provision specifically designed for them if staff in schools are not current or don't directly ask providers of learning about their ever-changing requirements. Having a badged 'Head of Access' charged with responding to such queries is now expected and aids communication. Much of this develops from the high workload schools face and the lack of time for teachers to familiarise themselves with what it takes to fairly advocate for every possible learning opportunity in the wider world. The scale of the task pleads for clear

communication. The key thing for individual school staff to recognise is that solo, such a task of knowing enough about all degree destinations is near impossible and that WP professionals are there in the institution to support this need and furnish information as required. Some teachers take up offers of help and advice almost weekly. Others are never heard from, which is a worry. Like all professionals, teachers regularly reflect on their practice and performance and those who see their work as a vocation rather than a job can be very good at doing so, invariably asking for advice often and taking it willingly and supportively in the spirit it is intended. The key message is that it is always wise to speak to those at the 'coal face' of learning early and often – specifically utilising dedicated WP staff knowledge.

One of the further challenges touched on in our own journey is what we might call 'initiative fatigue'. In any country or location, those able to support teachers – like universities and colleges – will not be evenly distributed. There may be two or more tertiary learning providers even in a small city, then nothing for miles. This can result in a 'bunching' of provision, where to save travel costs (but also to ensure support to local teachers), there is over-provision of support in some schools and the reverse in others. In recent years this has manifest itself by well-intentioned supporters finding it increasingly difficult in some geographical areas to get into schools to deliver their support messages directly to pupils. Beyond core subject teaching times, most school curricula are very full at the exact point of future development when an outside speaker revealing their insight into the education 'race' ahead for pupils would be most beneficial. In some schools there is a mad scramble by university and college recruitment teams, WP teams and educational charities all to get into each school to transmit their messages. Some schools now ration pupil availability to some external groups so that they can only take place during timetable personal social education (PSE) slots or similar. Another aspect to this challenge is unfortunately the short-term funding situation of many of the interventions offered, due to the austerity conditions in which they survive. A wise teacher, who may have had their fingers burnt previously, will be understandably reluctant to open their doors to an individual or group who may not have been checked for criminal records, and after all the planning and organising may not be able to offer the same opportunity in future years, their funding having run out. Such short-term interventions may simply not be worth the trouble and risk they represent to teachers and may as a result not be taken up. Initiative fatigue is a very real problem.

Before we move on from considering the proud teaching profession, it would be amiss not to outline the invidious position on assessment that the pandemic placed many in, most acutely in 2020, although also in 2021. Throughout the period that this book covers, exams, traditionally lasting multiple hours in large spaces equipped with squeaky desks, have been seen as the gold standard of assessing learning. A key aspect of this test of ability under pressure is the scrutiny of pupils by others that do not know them. Assessments at the top of the learning scale have always been marked

eternally, specifically by markers – often fellow or retired teachers out with the same school. And then the pandemic struck. Teachers were asked to in effect grade their own pupils.

What happened next is open to debate, so let's start with the positives. If we accept the position that teachers know their own pupils best, so are best placed to grade them, we can see a fairness aspect emerge. However, when this change in assessment happened many more pupils than normal got higher grades than in a 'normal' year. In some schools the rise was over 30%. Were these accurate marks? Had the old system really been under-recording performance to this huge extent? Had some teachers been put under parental or other expectation pressure to mark more generously during the pandemic? What actually happened we may never know, but what we do know is that one of the consequences of internal marking seemed to be that many more pupils qualified for university entry. And in a system where there were limited numbers of university places available, this was a problem. The solution was clearly to 'moderate' the marks, in other words, reduce some to bring down the average to more normal levels. In Scotland, the relevant exam board – the SQA – preceded to try to do this, but unfortunately and totally accidentally actually only made things worse. Hinting that some students may not have qualified for entry after all was always going to be a recipe for disaster, but this was compounded by the method of moderation chosen – looking at how the wider school each pupil attended had previously performed. Whilst well-intentioned and an obvious way to fix the over performance problem, it immediately stereotyped learners by the school they attended whose performance was in turn a feature of the level poverty in each area. Put simply, they were moderating people back into their postcodes, stifling those trying to rise from their circumstances. This was narrowing participation at a national level. The pupil and quiet teacher protests, especially in major cities, that understandably followed saw the policy abandoned. All results sent out would stand and all university places where the new grades had enabled admission would be honoured through the Scottish Government having to step in and create extra undergraduate student places for the extra winners. Ironically what had become a disaster was unexpected turned around to become an unintentional expansion of university places.

Some of course have asked questions around how these 'extra' students (who would not normally have qualified for entry) get on – time will tell – but it does seem even educational clouds can have a silver lining. Noting that, there is a further twist that emerged in 2021. The SQA exam board again suspended traditional exams – the pandemic probably gave them no option – so to let internal assessment run more smoothly in 2021, this time as an alternative approach the SQA gave teachers examples of work they could use to assess. Whilst not intended as such, these quickly became internally marked exam materials, but at least all Scottish pupils would be assessed in the same way. But of course, life in education as we have seen is never that simple. For fear of making these assessments become exams by another name,

different schools were allowed to run the same assessments on different days – something never allowed under a national and secure exam system, where answers could be shared by the unscrupulous. And of course that is exactly what is alleged to have happened in some cases. Friends within and across years, even at different schools, shared answers. Tutors paid to prepare private students seeing a market opportunity to prepare their pupils as well as they could sought out the magic answers. And so the power of wealth and resource again potentially pushed the door of WP a little more shut, by enabling pupils possibly no brighter than their peers to buy an assessment edge. As we have seen throughout this book, the value of deeply thinking through all of the consequences of each change to the educational system is crucial if unintended consequences are to be avoided. The lesson here is that change without a proper and effective impact assessment has the potential to make things much worse. It was subsequently announced that the SQA as a historic and prestigious exam body would be disbanded and replaced.

League tables

Another more unusual player in this realm is that of league tables. Although simply compilations of numbers, these have such a mythical status for potential applicants unfamiliar with the university or city in question that they attract a lot of focus. Data supplied to them is carefully curated and their launch keenly monitored by the media and parents. For more local applicants such tables unavoidably present a 'pecking order' of institutions. Those at the top carry prestige noting WP applicants may have concerns around how they will fit amongst such apparently elevated company. Those nearer the bottom may be more accessible but WP applicants may worry about the employment prospects of their graduates (which is often a league table measure in itself). And just to complicate things further, as a key aspect of such tables relates to entry qualification level (high being often seen as an indicator of better institutional quality) this aspect can in effect be an inverse WP index for those whose qualifications have been impaired by adversity. Institutions towards the top of such tables have to take brave decisions therefore if they wish to be more inclusive, generally as we have seen by contextually lowering entry grades to an 'Access' level below that of 'Standard' admissions offers. This is yet another example of an unintended consequence to wrestle with as league status battles inclusion. As discussed elsewhere in this book, the alternative approach, championed by the author for over a quarter century, is to match any level of qualification required for degree entry through adequate preparation of WP candidates to be on par with whatever is set for all entering that specific institution, so that league tables are potentially unaffected as entry grades in effect are maintained. There are some quirks around how Access entry grades are reported in league tables, but hopefully over time those compiling such lists will address this. By supporting rather than discounting entry grades, some see this approach as 'dumbing up' at a time many institutions are accused of 'dumbing down' as they try to be inclusive.

Non-professional coaches

Whilst school staff and professionals are often cited by pupils as their biggest influencers, parents, siblings and peers have a key role to play here in both providing positive and negative influences. Many WP applicants will be the first in their family to go to university, the consequence being that they lack a way of obtaining first-hand experience of what it will be like. If we take the stance that completing our race is broadly desirable for those able to do so, we have to recognise that not all parents and guardians will share the view that university is the best destination post-school for 'Junior'. Some parents will have other or different ambitions for their children, and in many cases there may not be two parents to bounce ideas with. This can be a major challenge to the 'best destination' ambition of widening Access. For example, the author has witnessed how at some secondary schools less than a third of the pupils have adults attending annual parent evenings, whilst in leafier suburbs, school car parks on these parent evenings need senior pupils acting as traffic wardens, such is the demand to attend.

Siblings and peers

The influence of siblings, classmates and friends in an era of constant social media, coupled to austerity, has ramped up the pressure on future learners who are now very aware of those around them. Meeting pioneer students who have been the first in their school to study a particular degree (or indeed any degree) is humbling and joyous. But it also highlights the pressure on that young person, who has broken the mould and gone out on their own. Some of course will be naturally independent learners and thinkers but others clearly find rejecting the norm and racing into the unknown a huge and challenging decision. And that is just to get into university, never mind stay in university (where stiff competition and the highest standards continue).

Characteristically WP applicants will often lack confidence, resilience and wider support, making them a rare breed indeed when they overcome this and earn a first-class degree. Add in another factor, like coming from a Care background, and the numbers making it into degree study sometimes dwindles to handfuls. This is one of the reasons why almost all early years WP outreach interventions target whole classes or groups so ensuring nobody is missed, leaving one-to-one work (which is also very resource intensive) reserved for those about mid-school who will be given more detailed support to their choice destinations. At that point in a pupil's life what those around them aspire to matters, as does their perspective on their chances of achieving a good outcome. This is a kind of 'Marmite' polarisation – in positive peer settings pupils can encourage each other to study hard and aim high. In groups unsupportive of university as a destination the reverse can very easily become the norm. Comments like 'I won't know anyone' and 'I can't afford it' emerge with uncanny frequency during chats with school pupils who, given

a little more information and support, might reach a different conclusion. That does not mean it will be easy, but equally such support may lead to better informed choices from trusted and informed sources.

The role of siblings and peers can be equally influential, and it is not unusual for older children who have successfully run the learning race to contact WP staff to ask searching questions on behalf of younger family members they are trying to encourage. Helpfully, winning is something most want to share. But why precisely is all of this extra work to support non-traditional students into university necessary? In a word – hurdles. Lots of them, as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter.

6 Examining the 'racetrack' of competitive degree entry – opportunities and obstacles towards success

Getting a head start

> *Peter has rarely faced real hurdles in his life and when he has, they have been removed for him or he has been guided around them by family, his school and others that care for him. In a sense, economic and social hurdles don't really exist for him. He is therefore less used to some of the key challenges students often need to face largely on their own. Paul, in contrast, faces significant hurdles alone most days. For example, he is the only one at home who uses an alarm clock, electricity and Wi-Fi as learning essentials, as other family members are seeking work and do not have to get up for school nor study online from home. Whilst many of the challenges around learning post-school (rather than simply trying to get a job) could deter him – as they have many of his friends – from investing time and resource in studying at school, experience has taught Paul that when it comes to challenges, once he sets his sights on a goal he will go over such barriers, under them, round them and at times through them as he knows he can achieve his objectives when he wants to. Yes, he has worries and concerns, but he also has real world, lived stamina and resilience. So how will Peter and Paul cope with the hurdles they now face?*

In this chapter we will discover more about the racetrack of competitive university entry and consider the opportunities and obstacles towards success. These include factors that can easily be overlooked by those unfamiliar with widening participation (WP) and Access. Readers may also be unfamiliar with what is in effect a tension between how parts of universities can view either applications (the process by which individuals apply) or instead applicants (the individuals themselves). The sheer industrial volume of the university sector ensures that numbers and targets can overwhelm the important focus on each individual applicant as a living, breathing person whose future depends on selectors and their ability to fairly make the right decisions by using as much relevant information as can be shared. To understand these individual applicants and their actual circumstances, we need to consider the hurdles they face.

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Hurdles

If readers to this point still assume that all of our learner journey racers are running the same race, it is time to revisit the realities of applying to university in more detail. As earlier unpacking of a few of the issues demonstrated, different runners can have very different challenges before them. For those runners from non-traditional backgrounds, their race may or may not be of a standard duration, but will almost certainly include significant hurdles. These can be so great that they deter some from even starting to try to race. For others who decide to take on the challenge despite this, these barriers are very real. Some barriers potentially have been with them since they were born and will remain with them for life. It is important, however, not to be too negative here. Those runners who win their race, despite having to cross hurdles, will do so because they are excellent, stronger, fitter and maybe even wiser than others who do not make it. They will have a greater insight into aspects of life that others sheltered from such adversity may lack. They are battle proven academic warriors – no wonder those in the know value them so highly; university Deans and others regularly pointing out how well Access students perform as undergraduates enriching the learning cohort they are part of. We will visit more hurdles in detail shortly, but first let's consider a few tracks they are placed upon.

Even more racing options

To keep our visualisation simple, to this point we have limited our consideration of the many variables that might lie in front of runners, but there are of course variations to all races. Some of these arise due to learners looking at the hurdles only to find that they are in reality (or in their opinion) too great to overcome. An example would be having insufficient qualifications to make a strong application likely to enable competitive entry to university. Other hurdles include overt and covert peer pressure. This can lead to non-traditional students choosing to race with friends rather than strangers who may take up more challenging races. There is often a reluctance to move away from friends and many may chose to ignore more distant options to learn further from home because they need to stay local. Other types of track are, however, very important to many aspiring to earn a degree. These alternatives races to the direct 'from school to university' route include superb college options for those who decide they are suited to them. Such types of track may look like the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), one of the great examples of encouraging learning for those who have been away from school for a few years and, for those not attracted to a bricks and mortar university, the Open University (OU), which serves another crucial role. All such alternatives are highly effective Access routes that help so many. So, our first consideration on this specific aspect is that there are different 'tracks' on which those seeking a degree can 'run'. Not everyone needs to be a sprinter nor a marathon runner. For now, however, let's return to the normally campus-based bricks and mortar university track.

Opportunity costs revisited

Training for and running in our race takes place in the real world, not an imaginary one. As they navigate the longer, slower route to degree many later in life learners will tell you that despite the rich set of life skills that they bring to learning having been in the 'real world', they can have a tinge of regret for not being able to 'stick in' at school and have gained degree entry qualifications earlier in their lives. They later regret the delayed start of paid graduate employment that comes as a result of running longer and slower. There is of course huge merit in running at the pace that suits the runner and longer or later, slower routes are perfect for those who seek them. Some of us are sprinters and some marathon runners. This is welcome, normal and not of concern. The point here is that if someone has the capacity to 'run fast' and complete a direct school to university race, overcoming the hurdles they face doing so, the inclusion of extra time will, by definition, take extra time via a slower route with the opportunity cost that brings. There is potentially no issue of time lost where pure and clear 'articulation' from college takes place. So, if for example, a year of college is accepted by a university in lieu of a year at university, this could result in the learner starting university in second year with no time lost. However, this is rare. Many, after running their college race, find their time there has only got them to the start line of the first year of their degree race or at best to the start of their Second Year of degree study after spending possibly three years in FE college. Few (the author being one) will get the offer of parachuting directly into the Third Year of university study having completed three years of sub-honours degree work (so in effect losing just one year), not least because this poses significant additional learning content (and often many other challenges) to the receiving university. The benefits and challenges of 'advanced entry' and 'articulation' – the process of moving from FE college to university with significant academic credit – are clear to Access professionals, although not always clear to the learner at the time it needs to be. The lesson here is that if a shortcut seems too good to be true, ask lots of questions before taking it. If it works it will then be a welcome earned success.

In terms of progression to university via college during the Covid-19 pandemic period, it is still too early to tell if and how this route has been impacted by the new hurdles it created. There may well be a slight dip caused by the higher number of school leavers who estimated grades and the various assessment debacles have enabled to qualify for university entry, who normally would not have, especially where there is a fixed limit (a so-called 'cap' – a feature we will revisit next chapter) on the number of university places available. As in other competitions where push can come to shove, Access students and those coming from FE colleges are often a forgotten group and may be the least vocal, may have fewer influential friends, complain least and so sadly may be the most likely to be squeezed out.

There may be a further bittersweet pandemic outcome future data sets may reveal. Discontinuation of degree-level study of course opens the spaces left

behind for others wishing entry to college or university, albeit for a very sad reason. Due to the pandemic, some students have not been able to continue or complete their studies, especially where their course included a large practical element closed down due to infection control. A specific example might be those unable to continue their university studies beyond their first year. This potentially opens up places that articulating students could possibly plug into to fill the gaps universities had not expected to have in second year. In time those with access to data on such things will no doubt let us know. That said, meeting the specific needs of college students moving into university may possibly be another pandemic close-down collateral casualty as support systems battled to move fully online. Again, only time will tell. What we do know is that recent years have seen progression of such articulating students to graduation pre-pandemic occur at impressive levels. The academic matching of entry grades to entry need for these programmes seems to have significantly improved recently. Such 'curricular handshakes' to ensure students can safely make an academic journey between providers can hopefully be used to enable other study programmes to roll out articulation routes.

On the subject of grades and qualifying, we need to briefly mention the issue of how grades feature in selection decisions. Whilst some offers of university places are 'unconditional' in nature (essentially an open invitation to join them due to the academic strength demonstrated by the applicant, and so the tariff for entry having been achieved), many offers made to candidates are 'conditional'. In other words, they are a promise to admit an applicant to degree-level study if certain criteria are met. However, the conditional entry criteria universities set are often based on the grade predictions made by school or college staff (for more see Cassidy, 2016). And there are two problems with this. Firstly, these predictions are guesses and we know from published data that it seems that the more supportive the school attended is, the higher the school is likely to guess an individual's exam performance will be. This arguably places already advantaged learners at a further advantage. Equally the reverse is also true, potential applicants from more disadvantaged backgrounds may potentially be put off applying to higher entry tariff institutions, as their underestimated predicted grades may deter them from believing they will get in and if they do get in, feel welcome and cope well. And is a cruel twist of fate by the time their true grades are published later in the academic year, their place at university has been given to someone else in the queue and they will need to wait another year to compete again against a new entry cohort.

The wider question of how useful school and college qualifications are on their own as a predictor of future university success continues to regularly emerge in academic discourse, exposed even more so by estimated grades forced on learning systems by the pandemic. Gaukroger (2021) very insightfully pointing out:

> The experience of the 2020 and 2021 entry cycles demonstrates the limitations of an admissions system dependant on applicants clearing a qualification hurdle, which in many circumstances operates as a crude proxy for ability. The particular skills and knowledge a candidate possesses, which may be evidenced through a variety of qualifications and experiences, will need to be better understood and valued in future.

In 2020 the Scottish Funding Council began a Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability, culminating in a progress update (SFC, 2021) to consider afresh post-16 education in Scotland. How the findings change interactions between schools, colleges and universities will be interesting. The same level of reflection in other nations is also underway.

The second challenge, which links to the first, is grade estimate reliability. In some studies an estimated five out of six A-level grade predictions by teachers turn out to be wrong (Santry, 2016). This adds a steeper tilt to our uneven racetrack and also adds weight to the so far unsuccessful drives (including Schwartz, 2004) to introduce Post Qualification Application (PQA) – the process of only permitting candidates to apply to university once real grades were known, so sweeping away guestimates from the process. The problem with this proposal in 2004 (and each time it has been raised over the decades) is the huge logistical burden of change it would place on schools, applicants and universities. So much of a well-oiled system would need to change that the proposals for PQA have repeatedly been rejected on this basis. The outcome of these discussions was summarised nicely by Catcheside (2011): "Post-qualification applications: good for access but not a practical option". Until this particular logistical nettle is grasped, it seems the existing system with its limitations will remain, stinging some more than others. Interestingly a paper calling for the debate on PQA to be restarted emerged again in early 2019 (see Atherton, 2019) and in 2020 national consultations were mooted by a wide range of parties, including staff unions such as the University and College Union (UCU). By early 2021 this had resulted in a UK Department for Education Government (2021) consultation entitled 'Post-Qualification Admissions Reform', the implementation of outcomes from which are still awaited, largely impacted by the pandemic. The UCU response on PQA (UCU, 2021) is but one example of fresh pressure to seek improvements to the admissions system, in this example, that the UK uses. One of the under-recognised challenges of what would, in effect, be a UK-wide change is that the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) actually serves almost a federal set of unique nations and institutions, each with its own approaches. Holding this grouping together has been as challenging at times as making any changes to it. This is eloquently highlighted by Gaukroger (2021) who points out that the effort involved in any move to PQA might not be merited in Scotland, where many of the issues such a move aims to fix are either already addressed or outside the impact a move to PQA would deliver. Gaukroger goes on to highlight that the existing "increasing of diversity of qualifications and routes may cause universities to think more deeply about their admissions entry

requirements and approaches to selection." Such responses from one of the four UK nations where different educational systems operate highlight a potential weakness of considering the four as one, regardless of the excellent points that can be made by doing so.

Campus types and online study

Those who take the time to stride back into the history of education will notice that universities developed differently in different countries and regions. In Scotland, for example, universities were and are inextricably associated with towns or cities. Not just their names are connected, as their campuses regularly feature land in central locations within large populated areas. Some are of great age and their buildings of great beauty, although sometimes due to this they remain less accessible to those with disabilities. In some other nations, universities can most often be found outside city walls on more sprawling campuses. Huge gothic buildings or more modern multi-floor complexes can be equally scary for new learners coming from much smaller secondary schools. However, such examples of 'town and gown' can with effort significantly increase the availability of learning for local residents as well as the wider world. Bringing the world to your university and your university to the world is a marvellous achievement. With a few exceptions (such as where huge profits that can be made from buying property for use as student rental accommodation result in locals being priced out of the housing market) relationships between host town and student bodies are excellent. Universities provide employment and many other significant benefits to communities well beyond learning, with all the necessary support services for the learning industry benefiting too. For example, in many university cities, taxi drivers rely heavily on students, staff and visitors for income. When terms end, some taxi drivers take their cars off the road until the learning season restarts.

The atmosphere campuses create – whether in town or bespoke learning parks in the countryside – are factors in how comfortable new students feel on arrival. This facet is why attending university events such as 'Open Days' are so important. In a way they are 'try before you buy' opportunities letting new learners sample the campus and establish if it feels like it could be home for the next few years. It is surprising that not all runners choose to visit their future campus before starting study and living life there. Some do not set foot on campus before their first term starts which seems a bit short sighted. Access students, in particular, appreciate a safe campus where they have a sense of 'place' that develops into them feeling akin to being an alternative home; this is why visit days are especially useful to the WP target audience and why getting them on campus as often as practical reaps reward. The proximity and cost of accommodation is often cited as a key factor in choosing where to study and the daily logistics of student life should be carefully considered pre-race by all entering it. In this way, the campus as the physical racetrack for learning is crucial, the study / employment / social

balance integral to being happy and successful. Spread out campuses that necessitate commuting beyond a swift walk bring their own costs and challenges but equally can feel more integrated into the wider population. The variety and choice are well worth exploring on visits.

A variation from campus life arises through the ever-growing use of online leaning, where having a physical campus is potentially less important, provided all learners can access fast IT infrastructure elsewhere. It is interesting that to escape what can be challenging home circumstances, Access students are somewhat more likely than peers to want to conduct their online learning from campus, as on campus they are assured peace and quiet and a warm welcome (in every sense). Travelling to access fast, reliable 24/7 Wi-Fi may be preferable and easier that battling to do so in a noisy home. The current era of 'bring your own device' to campus is the latest variation of this, as learners arrive with electronic technology in all its forms meeting the Access learner's need for a safe, undisturbed place to study. The challenges this brings, such as around fresh teaching and learning approaches, attendance monitoring (which can also now be via a smart device instead of a Biro or quill), self-directed learning and being a new active (rather than passive) student aiming for the best possible grades are all significantly different in the online versus the face-to-face space. For now, however, we shall return to look at the 'pools' of types of students from which applicants may come to better understand what, at first glance, might appear as some hard to understand selection decisions.

Staring into the pools

For many purposes, candidates applying to university are often considered as part of applicant pools. These could be geographic pools, or fee status pools (in some cases a proxy for nationality) or a pool defined by protected or other characteristics, such as those covered in Chapter 4. At this point in our thinking, it is useful to consider the context of an individual applicant within their own pool. Why are they in that pool? How many are in that pool? How many places are there for those coming out of that pool? What are the factors that constrain destinations from this pool?

Noting all these questions highlights an interesting aspect of Access. Some Access activities seek to attract applicants from their specific existing pool. Others (often referred to WP or outreach) attempt to grow a particular pool by attracting new individuals into it. And ultimately Access to university is actually about both widening diversity and actually entering university Access. Applicants allocated to one clearly defined pool are rarely able to move to another pool, which is defined differently. As a consequence and by way of example, much media coverage about international students taking up Scottish student places has no basis in fact – these pools are separate and candidates from one cannot displace those in the other pool.

Funding pressures and austerity in the 2010–2020 period seem likely to see this decade being subsequently categorised as a time when there was much focus of Government funding on the former (reaching into pools and 'fishing' intensively in

them to meet recruitment targets) leaving the much more expensive latter (growing the pools by encouraging and supporting more to enter them) to other organisations, such as charities. By 2020 many universities were running deficits, Governments as funders offering 'flat money' (with not even an inflationary increase on the previous year) that left little new resource to contribute to pool growth. Whilst understandable, the undignified 'bun fight' that at times ensued over everyone 'fishing' in the current overfished pools to catch every last eligible student from, for example, a particular postcode (as has been the case since around 2005 in Scotland) misses the point of Access. Austerity has forced providers to 'follow the money' not the drive to be inclusive per se. The Access measures used to monitor success in this endeavour have become an unintended end in themselves for universities to deliver on. This has led some to increase their level of 'bait', for example evidenced by Sanderson (2014b; "Free year in halls for deprived students") – news greeted with interest by the sector, where sceptics wondered what happens in second year. Should the offer not be extended to enable students to be able to afford to stay on into second year, the impact might be limited. But the wider point here is that 'fishing' requires 'bait'. And who pays to bring on the next generation has become a very political issue.

Even student accommodation can become politicised. In an ironic twist, the pandemic saw some WP and other students flee from what they feared were potentially Covid contaminated halls of residence on some university campuses, increasing their isolation once again. The pandemic also saw staff involved in recruiting new students being unable to use their conventional outreach approaches – typically visiting schools in person, then bringing candidates onto campus – instead having to visit them virtually, limiting their use of many of the interpersonal skills that they excel at and really challenging staff who were all battling to offer the richest and most attractive university application experience possible. Reduced outreach has meant the drive to widen participation to post-school study and Access university have both taken a hit.

'Converting' confirmed applicants (as encouraging them to take up their offers of a degree place is known in the trade) became much harder too. Those institutions attracting applicants by their beautiful buildings and friendly campuses had to try to promote their wares via drone footage and cameos to camera instead of the glorious live sunny campus days filled with rich experiences, sights, smells and tastes (typically hot dogs, coffee and free sweets!). And beyond all this, the pandemic had another potential impact on the WP pool, specifically raising questions again about who widening Access should target? Pandemic lockdown clearly created a fresh batch of individuals and families deprived of resource and drained of ambition, a group some have slightly crudely termed the 'newly impoverished'. Questions around the best measures to use to identify this new WP cohort otherwise at risk of university exclusion will be picked up later in this book, in the contextual admissions section – Chapter 8, so for now we can move from the individual to the state-level impact of the pandemic.

The UK political dynamic on how universities are treated often seems muddled, the pandemic illuminating this once again. For example, when

universities seek extra funding to widen Access, often it is not available to them, as they are considered independent institutions. However, these same independent institutions have targets set for them by Government on which significant funding depends. These can include almost anything from inclusion levels for students with certain markers to gender balance within their internal structures and committees. As a result, the role of Government seems to flex depending on the aspect of university under consideration, an odd relationship to say the least.

On the subject of Government, in the UK the pandemic response from Government has been interesting. The pandemic has hit both individuals and institutions hard, the former being the financial lifeblood of the latter. However, the UK Government and some others too have focussed what support they made available around trying to directly ease existing learner hardship. They have used measures such as low parental income to offer laptops and support. The universities themselves as independent institutions have seen relatively little direct UK Government support. Consequently, the blow struck by the pandemic has fallen on a UK system already significantly weakened by the uncertainty and damage caused by the divisive drive for Brexit, which in itself significantly changed the status, and so income and expenditure levels relating to EU students. And by 2022 no new money had emerged to grow the pool or even maintain it as the pandemic continued to hit future students hard. All this, of course, was preceded by a period of significant Government austerity in the UK which drastically reduced income to universities. In combination, as stated many UK universities are now running at a deficit if they were not already, some substantial, which puts huge strain on their capacity to borrow or raise the new money required for everything from campus maintenance to meeting pension costs to paying for Government tax rises and higher inflation. The combined impact has left the sector in a precarious state, and whilst this matters for many reasons, for our own immediate considerations it means that universities are much more risk averse, including potentially towards students that cost more to identify, enthuse, recruit, prepare and support.

In short, these pressures represent a significant and growing risk to WP. Funding bodies that themselves crave stability have, in some areas, been reduced to receiving annual awards that make long-term planning and the economies of scale that derive from this almost impossible. This in turn has led to contractual instability for staff relying on income from these agencies for employment, which has resulted in staff leaving posts to seek greater stability in other sectors, taking the extremely valuable experience they developed with them, the unused funding they leave behind being insufficient to buy back 'ready-made' new WP staff. The university picture as we move towards the 2025 targets some Governments have set in reality seems mostly about maintaining the current level of WP, which in itself is a challenge, never mind growing from it. And the saddest thing is the level of societal erosion caused by national and political disasters that the damage may not be fully understood until it is too late or too expensive to stop or reverse. WP post-austerity and Brexit-plus-pandemic is a hugely challenged domain where the

voices of those least well-equipped to highlight their challenges are often the hardest to hear. And to this we can add the collateral risks of growing opportunity costs to learners, as we will see next.

How does when you start tertiary learning impact when you finish?

We have already considered some of the costs associated with deciding to become a learner, but of course there are many more peripheral elements that we will now begin to examine. One aspect touched on earlier in this book, recognised but still not really widely researched, is the opportunity cost caused by a delayed start to tertiary study – which for ease we can consider as opportunity cost versus age on degree entry. The general public, and it appears some governments, may assume that learning at any age is roughly equally easy or challenging, picking up on the Lifelong Learning drive that took place over recent decades. However, on speaking to students the reality can often be somewhat different. An analysis of our learner journey timeline illustrates.

In Scotland, a Secondary School leaver completing their entire school programme normally leaves school after S6 (their sixth year of post-primary school study) and will normally be at 17 or 18 years of age. This means that if they directly embark on a degree course (if suitably qualified and admitted) and progress linearly (if suitably prepared and able to excel) they will graduate after their four-year Scottish degree aged 21 or 22. This is the timeline for the majority of Scottish school leavers who enter university. Three-year degrees of course are the norm for those who study in other parts of the UK. Consequently, much of the support available and resources deployed by those supporting entry to university will focus on runners coming directly from a secondary school base camp towards this timeline.

A consequence of this takes us back to an aspect of opportunity cost. It can be argued that a teenager in the above age bracket may have fewer responsibilities than those beyond the bracket. Teenagers are less likely to have mortgages and other responsibilities, will potentially be more geographically mobile, with fewer fixed assets and will on average have younger parents who may be less likely to require care and support from then. Following more years of employment, older parents may of course have more resource for the older student, assuming they are not estranged. They may also place greater value on the investment of time their offspring wish to make to their learning, having themselves got reserves to be the 'bank of mum and dad'. That said, experience indicates that all of these aspects are highly problematic the later in life they are triggered, with many parents of WP students maybe expecting their children to contribute to domestic finances if they stay at home, rather than drain them.

On the subject of age, older students who have secured their way into degree study often find themselves deploying their wider world experience to become pseudo-academic parents, encouraging younger students to fully apply their ability and so not waste a moment of learning – a really good thing. Indeed, the older student is often looked up to, despite them having a

wider range of their own hurdles to cross. And this can become a burden if they disproportionately help others at the expense of their own learning. Older students can also be somewhat isolated, having emerged from a slightly different generation and will generally not arrive on campus with existing classmates making the same transition at the same time. They can enormously enrich class dynamics and often do but can be frustrated by the lack of commitment of younger students emerging straight from a system where engagement required school bells and uniforms as youngsters enter into a world of self-directed learning and careful self-controlled time management.

Taken together, it is hard not to conclude that in terms of advice, support and resource (and the best efforts of organisations like SWAP and the OU) that being an older student creates many challenges and benefits that require different kinds of resilience to be successful. In addition, another aspect of our learner journey racetrack can lead to it feeling like it has a greater uphill gradient for older learners. Specifically, this cohort of learners and the additional responsibilities they carry lead to a need for many potential students to be in graduate employment earning a graduate salary to deliver the quality of life and years of crucial retirement pension contributions they desire – sooner rather than later. They are under fresh pressures to get a well-paid job. Taking all these factors together it is as if there is an invisible barrier at play within the system that asks 'what is the highest level of qualification I can achieve by 21 or 22, as after that it probably becomes harder?' It would be useful to conduct research into whether this perception is widely observed in practice. The 'tapering' of entry with advancing age is easily demonstrated via analysis of student dates of birth on entry but as intake numbers of older learners to many programmes are relatively small, this in turn makes valid statistical comparison more difficult.

Another important issue is around much younger students. Whilst the late teen start learning window applies to most, it is of course possible to qualify for university entry before turning 17. This can be because of accelerated schooling, degree-entry before maximum school age or because the applicant has their birthday at the end of the year group they went to school with and are simply the youngest. For this group the challenges are different again. They are typically supported as well as their slightly older peers by parents. However, the joys of youth carry other consequences. These can be around access to facilities, some of which (depending on age) may even require parental consent, for example, pathology labs and dissection rooms. There can also be issues around signing agreements to stay in student accommodation, not least as they are less likely to have banking and debit facilities all set up ready for use. On the lighter side the author has experience of students who legally cannot buy a drink at the student bar before they are in third year of degree study, something that may actually not be a bad thing. Whilst some of this sounds almost humorous, it does add an additional tier of responsibility to staff charged with supporting students around their care of minors. It also can again lead to isolation of members of this small sub-group due to lack of peers transitioning from the same school class or age group. And naturally there is frequent concern from parents and family around youngsters away from home.

What all the above shows is the rich diversity that can occur within a university learning cohort even when seen by just the measure of age. If we add in all the other characteristics present in an applicant or entrant, it is easy to see the rainbow of diversity that can make learning as a group such an exciting and rich experience. Equally it highlights the many different challenges faced by students, which will each have different needs. Our racers are even more complex than our race. And that poses huge challenges for those trusted with supporting them, of which more later.

7 So who successfully crosses the line and enters university?

Winner takes it all?

In a sealed system where controls exist around how many and which individuals enter university, by definition for there to be different winners, there must also be different losers. Despite many differences, Peter and Paul are both performing strongly at university having won their entry battles. Whilst possibly not the outcome all around them expected, this reality lies at the heart of Access – our focus on getting in often blinds us from really seeing what happens next. For both Peter and Paul, lots of factors will determine their university outcome. So, what are they and how have Peter and Paul successfully navigated their separate ways?

For many inside the world of admissions, degree entry is about the four magic ingredients, each viewed carefully throughout each application cycle to give the slightest hint that intake targets will be met or missed and resultant learning (and income) secured or not. These four in-cycle measures are:

1 who applies to each degree programme in each university – 'the Apps'
2 who universities make offers of a study place to – 'the Offers'
3 which candidates accept their offer (loosely binding them to arrive) – 'the Accepts'
4 and who actually starts their course by matriculating to join their degree– 'the Matrics'

So applications to university may result in offers which may become accepts who then arrive and matriculate to begin their degree. Each of these measures has an important story to tell. Let's dig a little deeper.

1 Who applies quantifies several things – the popularity of the course, the success of marketing and outreach, the appeal of the university in general, the ability to achieve the level of grades stated as required to get in and so much more. In a sense, application numbers per course can be seen as a measure of demand and of course the level of appeal of that option. Courses that do not attract applications normally need reformulating,

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rebranding or both, otherwise they risk being withdrawn as they will become non-financially viable.

2 How many offers universities make per degree place is a function of supply, demand and applicant quality (which can of course in itself be measured in several ways). Seeing all these in context and utilising contextual admissions processes to ensure the fairest possible insight into future student potential will determine who gets made an offer. Resolving who gets an offer where demand exceeds supply is a huge task in itself. The margin between an offer and rejection can be very slim where demand is high.

3 Which candidates accept such offers is a key interim measure of likely entrant numbers, in other words how many will enter their chosen degree and in doing so generate income to the university. If each place has been offered to more than one candidate – as might be the case with a budget airline needing to ensure that on each flight leg the aircraft maximises revenue by being full – if all take up their offer this could result in an institution over-recruiting, which will have serious financial consequences, including potential Government fines as universities cannot spend more taxpayers money that they are contracted to. If too few accept, the reverse occurs and our 'learning passenger jet' burns roughly the same cost of 'academic fuel' but generates less income towards a loss. For some degrees there may be closer to thirty or more applications per place, exposing the profound challenges around how many offers should be made per place available and the consequences of miscalculating that value. Typically, historical data is used to try to give an accurate estimate of likely uptake (called the 'conversion factor') but the attractiveness of courses and institutions can ebb and flow. Of course, accepting an offer does not (unless it is an unconditional offer) guarantee to the university that all the applicants will definitely qualify for entry and separate to this then turn up. Many will not meet their conditions of entry, and this needs to be factored into planning calculations.

4 Of course, it is only once an individual student enrols (matriculates) and studies for a few months that the income associated with them can really be counted upon. Some course joiners could have a 'false start' and leave within hours, days or weeks (taking their financial value with them). But matriculation is a happy and exciting time. The stars have aligned to produce an applicant who, despite having the option of applying to many and any places of study, choses to apply to your institution, received an offer which they accepted, obtained the grades required to meet the conditions of the offer and then turned up to class. This is quite a sequence with many variables.

And of course this is happening nationally on a scale of tens or hundreds of thousands each year. Equally, once the rejoicing around new arrivals has died down, such is the cyclical nature of admissions and Access that it is precisely

time to start again to look for next year's intake. A harsh reality in this world is that the performance of Access professionals supporting university entry is always running off towards the horizon of the next cycle, staff rarely having time to celebrate what just happened, the barriers overcome and the lives transformed.

There is significant literature on how success in supporting an applicant through to successful application, ensuring 'fit' between the student and the course – for more see Tinto (1975) and more recently Thomas (2002). There is much detail and complexity in the Access world, but in terms of fit readers would do well to remember that without a sense of place – specifically feeling that their new university home is 'their' university – many learners can find the intensity of study and wider life asked of them more isolating than inclusive.

Beyond the application process itself, winning a race to degree involves many follow-on aspects once a student starts their degree and we now will turn to academic progression, linear and otherwise. Put simply, whilst some students may pass every assessment placed before them whilst at school (and so win their personal race into a degree), once on a degree course they may fail some elements of their more demanding degree, which is taught and assessed using different processes and then have to pick themselves up and repeat them or take time out before restarting. Naturally the likelihood of this increases for those with less support and resource. Approaches to achieving on-degree success is again the topic of many fine books and other publications, so we won't dwell on that here but for a snapshot of progression issues and solutions from previous decades, see Blicharski (2002).

Turning to those significantly challenged by degree-level study, the motivations and reasons that see students discontinue can be as many and varied as those that brought them to study. As monitoring of the most common current reasons advances, the picture that emerges is that rather than not coping with study itself, students who struggle or leave are often not coping with wider student life. To explain, nobody admitted to the start of the university race should, on paper, not cross the finish line. If they were not deemed ready to start, they would have been sent off for further training (often with the harsh words 'application rejected'). So, although this may come as a surprise to some, the reasons some students fail to prosper are rarely solely academic in nature and where they are, they are often in truth caused by wider life. Highly qualified students do not generally fail assignments for no reason. Their circumstances may have conspired against them in a way that has made the effort they put in insufficient. Examples include part-time work to pay bills leaching time away from study, health problems (including the increasingly visible serious issue of mental health, disclosure of which is mercifully becoming more and more the norm) and social challenges often involving relationships. Through no particular fault, these individuals may lack critical resilience to deliver required assessment results at a critical time. Approaches that combat some of these issues typically involve significant levels of motivation and determination development. Much of this revolves around

supporters – family, friends and, as previously discussed, the opportunity costs of staying in the race rather than pulling up before the finish line. Naturally learners have lives beyond study and these can be complex.

Those trying to help students understand the world of study they are about to enter carry a burden of considering how clearly they can communicate the realities of student life so they inform and support rather than simply shock, as once again the latter is more likely to impact those with lower resilience and reserves, such as WP students.

As investigative journalism probes universities in increasingly forensic detail, new truths appear but such information can lead to worry rather than hope. On illumination and if presented in a certain way, deter an Access learner starting or completing a degree. One small recent example came from McIvor (2019) at the BBC who highlighted how much Scottish students are paying for graduation ceremonies, the National Union of Students (NUS) describing this as a "stealth tax on student success". Might further costs like this deter new learners from even starting tertiary study? Sources of support for such costs do exist, just unfortunately they may not also appear in the attention seeking headlines published to flag the problem rather than the problem and solution. Almost certainly headlines like this can have unintended consequences, despite being factual. Information and how it is presented to undecided applicants is a tricky area.

Looking back at historical support of Access students through the example of a typical Access Summer School

An Access Summer School started at the University of Dundee when a retired Chief Inspector of Schools, the late Bert Johnstone, was asked to scope the challenge Access students in the early 1990s faced. The documents Bert produced were precise and detailed, as was Bert's invaluable way. Content ranged from how to arrange seating for interviews to how the students on the course would be fed. The latter in the early years resulted in great challenge, as the solution was for bread baskets full of packed lunches to be delivered daily to the doorway of the newly launched Access Summer School for students to collect. This example of free school meals back in 1993 worked well, with sandwiches types and fruit being readily swapped once bags were collected. There were a few environmental downsides, the ravenous local seagulls quickly catching on to the routine and sometimes benefitting significantly from items that student left momentarily unguarded. But in the early years of Access, photos and memories of groups of new WP students enjoying lunch together on the front lawn of a university – some playing frisbee and generally having a good time – signalled institutional intent for all passing the campus to see. The students were nearly as diverse as the world and the institution gained media coverage of being seen as being truly inclusive, something that was new at the start of the 1990s.

After a few years numbers grew and the logistics of food basket lunches became increasingly difficult to deliver and it was decided to offer a weekly

payment – in effect dinner money – instead. This system continues today and has generated its own challenges and advantages. A key challenge from the early 2000s was that few of the students had bank accounts. The Royal Bank of Scotland at the time was conducting significant philanthropic work and offered a range of incentives to students to open bank accounts with them. There was a debate over concerns of being allied closely to one financial supplier in a way that might be misconstrued, but such was the scale of support it was felt that on balance the offer of support would be foolish to turn down. And so the Access Summer Schools in this period saw many students open their first bank account – something that actually stood them in good stead later in their careers, when a track record of banking and utilities bills became necessary for anti-fraud identification.

The last decade has seen the amount of bursary typically offered to Access Summer School students frozen, one example being pitched at £60.00 per week, paid fortnightly in arrears. The latter approach of paid attendance gave rise to several positive aspects, including the requirement written into all student handbooks for all students to sign into each class on an hourly basis so a clear and verified record of engagement existed. This monitored approach strongly incentivised attendance at all classes and also had a number of unexpected spin offs. By quickly being able to identify absentees in real time, those who had not checked in could be promptly contacted. Whilst possibly being a bit big brother, this did address concerns around duty of care and student safety, as it was felt that those offering new opportunities and challenges to this group had a responsibility to ensure they did not come to harm in the process. The side effect of the approach was that many who had simply slept in or similar were helped on track as a result.

The number game – assumptions, myths and realities

The true position of universities in terms of how many undergraduate places they can annually offer is one of those issues that keeps coming up in the media. In some countries the limit may only be those of the teaching and student residences spaces available, as students self-fund. The current reality in, for example, Scotland (where entry numbers are fixed or 'capped' by Government) is actually subtly different, with the pay element (at least in terms of paying full course fees) met by Government. However, in its place the number of undergraduate student places in this case is fixed by the Government, as previously stated, to limit taxpayer exposure to what otherwise could become a limitless bill. And beyond both the open and capped models the reality is made even more complex by myth, history and geography, which we will now examine in turn.

There was a time when wearing the right school tie to a university interview was a real or imagined selection factor in deciding who would go to university. The learning world then was very different. Discussion around who did or did not go to university was much more limited – some simply went

and most did not. There was limited media (and back then no social media) coverage of the issue, inequalities hard to quantify and communicate. In 2022 things are very different, selection of students having become a mini-industry rather than a virtual private members club. But back then the spotlight on universities was much dimmer and the reality was that the number of applicants and the number of undergraduate places could be relatively easily reconciled, as demand and supply were close. Stories of universities making their selection choices in an afternoon cause modern day selectors to smile, the process in some institutions now spanning months but those 'in pile' 'out pile' within an afternoon of paper forms did happen.

Then suddenly in the 1980s things began to change. Candidates from all schools and backgrounds began to be aware that actually, university might just be for them too. Of course, they would need to meet entry requirements but once they had, the level of financial grants available were almost sufficient for degree survival. Those students with wealthy families could even take their grants and invest them to provide a nice graduation financial launch pad to the future. Most found the grants were enough to cover those expensive artefacts that students in these days often needed to buy – books.

As the 1990s dawned the picture changed again as being a UK student became almost 'cool'. TV shows such as the 'Young Ones' featured university students who to that point had been a largely hidden species. One of the only ways of identifying this rare type back then was to spot their proudly worn long, multi-coloured university scarfs that denoted which faculty they were part of. And they were having fun, although the scarfs did make them a bit of a target for those looking for trouble. Other TV series emerged, like the BBC relaunch of a bigger brighter format 'University Challenge' programme in 1994 that put a more intellectual spin on what real students were like and brought them into every living room that had a TV. It was fun to watch and engage with. The concept of graduate jobs blossomed (as periodically did unemployment) as degrees were seen as a route to a job or a better job. What was not made clear to the public was that over this period the number of undergraduate places did not increase at anything like the same rate as demand. Competition for university places rocketed. There was pride in being a student.

One novel example of student selection which was developed at the University of Dundee was the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE). Like all the best ideas, it was elegantly simple. Once candidates have achieved the standard of academic qualifications required, part of the next selection step became the OSCE, more broadly known as the Multiple Mini Interview (MMI). The author is very proud of the MMI approach, which was developed by colleagues led by Prof Harden in Medical Education as the author arrived to work in this department for his first full-time job. The MMI sprouted many different versions still in use to select doctors, dentists, nurses and police officers. At its heart it is a

'speed dating' process – candidates being challenged against the clock with scenarios that are representative of the profession they wish to eventually enter. These are rapid, sophisticated tests to see if apprentices are made of the right stuff and so merit the taxpayers investment in years of study. Seeing students in action had the potential to level the playing field as this process was live, fair and hard to cheat at. The confounding factor of course was that under some systems, applicants required elevated entry qualifications before reaching the MMI stage, our first visit to the challenging issue of selection step order, to which we will return shortly.

What this also illustrates is the rapid but largely invisible creation of our current higher education market. A market that, as we have seen, can by accident disproportionately trip up Access students. Let us consider another example. Many Access students will come straight from school, where uniforms and bells govern the day and in recent years they may have been paid to 'stay on' in school through things like the Educational Maintenance Allowance system introduced (amongst other reasons) to encourage pupils not to leave secondary school before reaching their full potential. If that is the 'carrot', truancy officers hired to monitor compulsory attendance is the 'stick'. This all is in sharp contrast to the self-directed learning approaches used post-school. And yet the school leaver may not rapidly see all these differences. There was no question of there being no place for them in a school, so why would there be no place for them at the next level? Why would there not be a guaranteed university place for all who want one? Getting a place simply must be easy, right?

Whilst this may sound naive, it is always an interesting exercise to ask lay people and parents how many candidates they think apply for each individual place in any named degree. Few offer figures as high as the reality, growth in the age of WP being largely invisible to the public (and so most applicants).

This brings us neatly on from competition for places to competition between universities. With demand for places massively exceeding supply, even the arrival of new universities in the early 1990s could not meet demand from all who apply, so as outlined study places became more and more rationed, not least as otherwise the percentage of GPD spent on education would have mushroomed, along with taxes. The creation of this market led to all universities wishing to recruit the 'best' students. But this leads to the crucial WP question of how should 'best' be defined here?

For many universities best initially related solely to school or college qualifications. There were some exceptions that assessed other aspects, art portfolios for example, but largely it was about school grades and, in a sense the system assumed all pupils had identical opportunity, coming from identical schools, supported by identical families. Hopefully by this deep in this book all readers will have spotted problems with such a simple but faulty assumption. In reality it took until around 2000 (when a raft of new Access work emerged) before it became widely recognised that

the chances of any individual obtaining the stipulated entry grades depended on at least two key overarching factors: their ability and their opportunity to demonstrate it. It was the emergence of research on the unevenness of the later that led to the growth of national, regional and local widening Access activity on a scale previously not considered necessary. There had been no need to fix an invisible problem that many staff were not even conscious of. Whilst advising on a speech for the then University of Dundee Principal, the author coined a phrase (not copywritten and now widely used) that the university "sought the brightest and best, regardless of background". These last three words were recognition that opportunity was uneven and pleasingly their use have had positive consequences. Indeed, the University of Dundee now describes its role as being to transform lives through diversifying their learning community to the benefit of all. Comparing this to previous mission statements gleaned from around the globe enables interesting comparisons for those happy to search online. But deeper discussion on what universities are 'for' is a discussion for another book.

So far so good, readers might think? Apply and cross your fingers. Well not exactly. Earlier we touched on the fact that universities compete for students. A consequence of this, as with any market, is that comparisons will be made between suppliers of education, giving rise to ways of making comparisons, which in the case of universities (and in sport, football clubs) largely involve league tables. These, as previously touched upon, are useful at one level, made up of scores for the kinds of features future students may value. They have become key attractants for some types of students, for example international students looking to come to the UK and attend the 'best' university in a city far away that some may not have heard of. However, there is a catch. Unavoidably such tables will contain a measure of the level of qualification typical students enter each institution with. This is a useful measure of demand – higher demand pushes up grades to help control applicant numbers within manageable limits (more candidates consequently being rejected due to being underqualified) so facilitating easier selection, in the same way that different airlines generally price seats on flights by demand. But this has a deeply unfortunate WP consequence – it assumes that every applicant has the same chance to buy a seat or enter our race with the same level of training and resource. In a sense it assumes all opportunities for all applicants are equal. And as we know, they are not. Background makes a huge difference, as reports like CoWA (2014) and many others have made clear and have done so for decades, as the rise of entry grades inexorably continues, raising the entry bar higher and higher. This potentially shuts more and more WP candidates out.

At this stage there are a couple of other aspects we need to consider that emerge from supply / demand issues. The first touched on earlier is around university education being 'free'. Current UK administrations take very differing views of how university education should be paid for. This is not the

place for significant detail on this – many others have already provided that – but in the decision to apply for a degree topics such as tuition being paid for by taxpayers or students, graduate contributions once in employment and so on are key considerations. Many elsewhere may be envious of the 'free' university system in Scotland, where the tuition costs of students are met through taxation and not direct payment prior to learning, the latter being feared as a deterrent to non-traditional students. However, going to university (even in Scotland) is not, of course, 'free', as there are many real and opportunity costs, plus the cost to the taxpayer (who stand to benefit from their investment). There can be sobering debates here around the cost of subsidising education towards improving health and life outcomes as a way to also ensure the young do not become disillusioned young offenders. Such analyses often make education look like especially good value to society.

One specific unintended consequence of the 'free' approach is highly relevant. Where tuition costs are reduced, the taxpayer generally does not write a blank cheque to meet tuition costs for unlimited numbers. And so as previously mentioned into the already competitive market we need to consider a further market factor, known in the trade as 'caps'. Put simply, caps are the annual number of student places that Government will pay for. Consequences arising from this are, however, far from simple. For example, in 2019 in Scotland each university had a Scot / EU cap – in other words the maximum number of students from these domiciles that each university is allowed to admit to study. This required all applicants to be categorised by their 'fee status', examples being Scot / EU, RUK ('Rest of United Kingdom') and International. If we focus back on the Scot / EU cap – so critical to the aspirations of those Scots wishing to study in Scotland – we can visualise our academic airline once again. Each university is given a jet with a fixed number of seats. Overfill the jet and there are penalties – in the real world, fines from government plus the costs of teaching students who do not bring the teaching fee associated with each authorised learner with them. Under fill the plane and the university is running inefficiently, with the combined income potentially not covering the costs of running the plane. It becomes very clear very fast that 'free' tuition has a 'price' to learners and society, and that is a tight limit on the number of 'free' places – the cap. A consequence of this cap is a significant shift in the entire Access mission in Scotland, which quickly became to find the brightest and best regardless of background to fill each annual cap. There is a numerical limit as opposed to what some refer to as 'open Access' where there is none. And as touched on previously, applicants cannot move between 'caps' unless their fee status changes (which it rarely will do unless, for example, they permanently change their home country). Members within one cap do not compete for places with members within another different cap.

Brexit saw EU students move from their 'Scot / EU' category into the 'International' category. If the 'Scot / EU' category subsequently remains the

same size (with no cutbacks) on paper, the removal of EU competitors could leave more spaces available for otherwise displaced Scots, but data to demonstrate whether this is happening will take a few further years to show a trend. Whilst mentioning the EU it would be wrong not to pass a little more comment on one of the damaging impacts of Brexit, the loss of the Erasmus scheme. This has been at the heart of international Access for so long it has been a huge wrench to many in the sector to see it being removed by a UK Government determined on a 'better apart' approach. Whilst there is no doubt that the 'Turing scheme' touted as a replacement has some potential, the political vandalism of Erasmus withdrawal, blocking the rights of learners to travel, study, live and love where they choose smacks of a 'little Britain' 'we are better' mentality that many have worked tirelessly to overcome. Time will tell if those committing this cultural vandalism get away with it.

Selection revisited

One of the joys of academic life is that each year is somewhat predictable. New students arrive, they are taught, they are assessed and hopefully progress. After a period of time the vast majority graduate and leave. There is something reassuring and classically satisfying about time passing in this metronomic way.

Noting this, there are a few further aspects worthy of our deeper consideration. In a world full of targets, the harsh reality is that those involved in Access are perpetually chasing the next target to ensure it is met. There can often be a false view from those less familiar with the complexity of the university system that if a target was met last year then it will automatically be met again this year and next year. This of course is a deeply dangerous assumption. The reality is that each annual cycle is unique, with almost every factor able to change and therefore no certainty of outcome. More (or fewer) may apply. More (or fewer) applicants may decide they like the option offered to them. More (or fewer) may be impacted by WP factors such as the wider world of austerity, minimum wages and other external factors. Put together it is actually remarkable that variations in entry numbers between years are sometimes small. This can be due to the luck of larger factors neutralising each other, negating a change in outcome or it can be down to the sheer professionalism of those involved. Often it is both.

Before ending this chapter we need to take a deeper dive into one specific aspect of selection, specifically the order in which elements used for selection occur. It is important that colleagues new to the field see the wider significance of what they do in this regard. It is worth taking a moment to consider selection sequencing. As we go about our daily lives, we are constantly making choices. We know that the same steps, if taken in a different order, are likely to produce different outcomes. So, taking your coat off (1) before or after getting into your car (2) and putting on your seatbelt (3) will make a

difference in terms of outcome and ease of outcome. Some combinations will be slower than others. 3, 2, 1 is impossible. 2, 3, 1 is uncomfortable. And so on. The point is selection sequencing step order matters. And exactly the same is true of university selection steps. As we touched on with discussion of OSCE and MMI, a different step order results in a different outcome. Let's look at an example of some factors that might be involved in a typical selection process where only those passing the previous step progress to the next step:

1 Consider the candidate's grades;
2 Interview the candidate;
3 Confirm their applicant status (their nationality and so fee status, for example).
4 We could go on …….

It becomes rapidly clear that the order these steps are delivered in matters. If we interview (2) first, we may encounter great talent that the grades alone (1) did not reveal on paper had we looked at grades first and rejected some potential interviewees. We would meet student applicants considered via step 2 before step 1 criteria were applied that we would not have seen if step 1 preceded step 2. We might even want to offer the talent we interview a university place, despite their lower grades so leading to a different outcome. However, if we look at their grades alone (1) first we may be unlikely to invite them to interview, and so miss their talent.

As we can see, the order of these steps is therefore crucial, to the extent that it is very wise to look back from the intended selection outcome you seek when sequencing selection steps that precede this. What was the objective of your selection process – find the most qualified (step 1 before 2) or the candidate with most potential (possibly step 2 before 1)? Picking one selection process over another is a choice that will impact the outcome in terms of life chances changed, or not. Such processes are often historical or at least inherited from predecessors. It is well worthwhile taking a moment to examine such best laid plans to see precisely what outcome they derive and if it is what the modern university seeks. For more on this, a useful starting point is the QAA "Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education" (QAA 2014). To give a flavour, they comment:

> Where the selection of students uses information not captured on the application form, such as interviews, auditions, additional tests, or portfolios, higher education providers explain openly to prospective students what these selection tools entail, why they are being used and the contribution they make to the selection decision, while maintaining the right to exercise academic judgment in selection.

So selection methods, sequencing and delivery all matter – a lot. And yet the impact of sequence order may not be something that those delivering

processes will always have time to consider in detail, not least because many selection processes are inherited and the impact of alternatives not investigated due to lack of resource or understanding of the need for it. Staff are generally given instructions to follow and may not get the opportunity to question the process nor outcomes. The ends justifying the means is often a dangerous approach, but thankfully the university sector has started to recognise problems around selection, which neatly brings us to Chapter 8.

8 Contextual admissions

The saviour of Access?

> *Peter and Paul had little idea of what was going on behind the scenes when they both applied to become university students in 2022. How could they – it is a largely closed world obliged to protect private, often sensitive data. They had not appreciated that where they went to school and where and how they lived were factors considered in their selection. Whilst we can only speculate as to what they knew, we can be certain about why the contextual factors applying to each of them mattered. Our certainty comes from the recent history of universities recognising that potential to do well is determined by circumstance as well as ability. This fundamental truth at the heart of contextual admissions (and now WP) helps ensure that as much as possible university applications from Peter and Paul are seen and assessed as individuals and not rejected without full and fair consideration – which after all is exactly what Peter and Paul expect.*

Dedicating a chapter to contextual admissions would simply not have happened had this book been written a decade ago. However, the modern university world has championed this new approach towards fairness, which is specifically designed to create different and more positive outcomes for those facing different but very real barriers that would otherwise mask their potential. This development has, as we will see, had profound consequences for education and as its impact grows, society.

Contextual admissions is the new tool universities use to improve admission to degree fairness. The view, aggressively promoted by some elements of the media, that universities remain ivory towers has somewhat inflamed the atmosphere around the introduction of this brave new approach to fairness. In contrast it is tempting to see the contextual approach as akin to 'I'm not a celebrity, get me into here.' Contextual admissions is about factoring in circumstances likely to reduce achievement brought about through no fault of the learner. Contextual admissions is about seeing which (if any) of a basket of contextual factors apply to each and every applicant.

It is useful to consider in detail the basket of measures that have been considered to be the best indicators of adversity and so are seen as the best

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contextual factors against which academic performance can be fairly viewed. Let us examine some of the most common contextual factors in turn:

1 SIMD20. Introduced as a measure of adversity in Scotland in 2015, 'MD20' as it has come to be known was launched as the 'dip stick' to check if the Access 'engine' of fairness was performing well in Scotland. Simply defined, the MD20 cohort are candidates from the most deprived twenty percent of Scottish postcodes, as defines by a basket of national adversity measures. To incentivise the use of this as a local measure of adversity (it is as specific as one side of a street), it was also adopted as the determinant of additional bonus income by the Scottish Funding Council, the Government funding body responsible for HE in Scotland. As a result, MD20 very quickly became much more than just an indicator of change, as yet another unintended consequence emerged. The payment element, at a time of austerity, resulted in a sharp focus by universities on ensuring this measure was met – as significant income depended on it – arguably skewing the use of the index from being a measure to becoming instead a lever for some and a possible barrier for everyone else. We can debate whether this was a price worth paying for change as, changing metaphors, the MD20 tail rapidly began wagging the Access dog. At the point this became obvious more widely (remember the need for new losers as well as winners in a sealed 'cap' system) pushback against using this single measure grew to the point where complaints about its use became a standing university Access meeting agenda item. In recent years the use of MD20 as a measure is possibly one of the best examples of a well-intentioned but unintended Access consequence arising from well-intended Government policy, and in terms of implementation it remains a controversial measure. Although itself (as noted) is a combination of measures, many Access practitioners prefer to have a combination of measures that are independently verifiable and based on each individual applicant rather that the cruder measure that assumes everyone living in half of the entire street has identical life chances. A quick look around your own neighbourhood will spot the problem with this. In finding an effective solution to identify eligible candidates hidden behind adversity barriers, there is an argument to see targeting as being akin to a navigation problem, where GPS map triangulation needs three reference satellites (not one data source) to be fully accurate. The same theory applies in zooming in on which individual applicant really deserves additional support. It is hard to do this accurately where the ultimate resolution is a street not a student, even if this is devised from a multi-factor set of adversity information. So whilst MD20 (and similar street-level measures we will look at shortly) have merit, as we will see their use requires careful understanding and application to be as fair as intended.

2 The next set of potential contextual measures involve those that assess 'progression' from school to university and those that reflect school 'attainment'. Both offer a wider zonal or 'whole school level' measure by which entire year groups of applicants potentially held back by adversity can be identified. These indicators both require averaging over at least three years, as annual school cohort performance variations between years can be large and without averaging, the meaning of these measures can be misconstrued. Taken in combination with other measures, such as MD20, school attended can provide a useful combination of evidence that corroborates adverse circumstances both local and zonal rather well, especially if school performance by these measures is first placed in rank order. This is because whilst progression to post-school study is a life choice (and so influenced by a range of factors), school attainment levels show school-level performance as well as trends. As we will see a little later, a measure closer to individual learners, rather than at the whole school level, seems to be the future for this kind of approach. That said, our consideration here needs to be of all measures currently in use, and these whole school measures currently feature in some contextual approaches.
3 Free school meals (FSM) is the first of our individual contextual factors so far in this list. A measure with great promise, it is considered in a section of its own in more detail later in this chapter.
4 Care experienced is the second of our individual contextual factors so far in this list. It zooms in beyond zonal or local measures. The challenges faced by care experienced (also known as Looked After Children (LAC)) continues to be an important focus for interest and research. Historically and in general their outcomes for even the most talented have been disappointingly poor due to society and their education systems failing to adequately address the barriers this group face. The development of multiple local, regional and national charities to address this frankly embarrassing indictment on society has at last begun to give this underrepresented in universities group of innocent individuals a voice and a future that fate, until recently, denied them. Ability and talent should be about much more than who brings up a child, and the subsequent success of students from this group is not just fair but particularly empowering for staff too.
5 Carer status is a new UCAS declaration category and is another individual measure defining a group which is typically more numerous than former LAC applicants. Over recent years a hidden iceberg of young carers has come into view, and the pandemic has sadly added many more to this category. This group – often looking after parents and siblings who would not cope without them – have emerged as a huge element of invisible social support in the UK that meets needs that would otherwise fall on the already stretched NHS and Social Services. Equally, the opportunity cost for this group in delivering support needed by those in

their care places them at a significant disadvantage to peers who do not have the practical and emotional stresses of providing such aid.

6 Refugee / asylum seekers are another group of individuals facing barriers that like any other contains nuggets of genius that without careful identification and encouragement will remain lost to wider society. Meaningful support of this group has also only relatively recently emerged, as the plight of those forced to flee their homes hits headlines. Again, their talent and potential is at risk of being masked unless recognised by the education system. And what talent and passion many bring with them.

7 Estranged students are another relatively new UCAS application category – one many practitioners warmly welcomed to the list of contextual issues that might impact students. By definition, this group often struggle to provide standard information relating to things like parental income, as their relationship with their parents has fractured or broken entirely. Many, if not all readers, will agree this is not a good reason to penalise such applicants, as many non-contextual systems assume school grades are not disrupted by domestic life – an optimistic assumption. Sadly, the pandemic has also seen significant growth in this group, as family tensions led to domestic evictions of future and current students from family homes, sometimes in the most acrimonious circumstances. Recognising the needs of this group, like the others, is easy to justify but evidently and evidentially harder to do.

8 Disrupted education (as exemplified by children of military families being frequently moved due to Service commitments). This group once again face adversity out of their control, a function of their parental employment. Other forms of disrupted study can also be acute. For example, two of the eight secondary schools in Dundee have had major fires in recent years, one requiring a total rebuild. Books, projects, art portfolios – all were lost. Teaching year groups in their own classrooms was replaced for years with displacement to other host schools and portacabin use. This trauma clearly disrupted study but equally it is almost impossible to accurately compensate for this at the level of individual impacts come exam time. Hopefully few readers will have experienced the shock of a pupil jumping from their desk in fear as a fire alarm test sounds, conditioned by previous fire trauma. It is very real, almost a primal instinct and distressing to witness. On a just slightly more positive note, the author was present at one of the fire scenes on the evening one of the schools was fully ablaze, the extremely distressed pupils and teachers standing together in tears. Whilst horrifying as a spectacle, the light, smell and sounds of a huge building fire horribly memorable, the fire galvanised both groups to rebuild with an unstoppable determination that saw that school rise from the ashes even better than before. Another lovely example of barriers being overcome at the most challenging of times that impacts learners in hard to measure ways.

9 'First in family' is a contextual category, initially championed by the author and others, as trying to get to the route of inter-generational educational exclusion. Whilst it is still quite widely used, some (including the author) have retreated from using it. The main reasons for this is that there is no widely held agreement on the definition of family nor of study. If it is a generational thing then the author and many others would be eligible for this marker. Another crucial disadvantage of this measure is that it is very difficult to verify. How certain would a university be, for example, that a signed statement that neither parent of an applicant had attended university was accurate, them potentially conducting study at the same level in an FE College? The category as is often used can be extremely broad and, as some will argue, widening Access for all actually is not widening Access at all. It is raising attainment for all rather than targeting the support at a defined, verified subsection that has been demonstrated to be at risk of exclusion.
10 There are many other groups that could (and probably should) be contextually considered, with further policy announcements expected as knowledge and policy evolve. The reason I add this group is to remind us that we need to identify and remain open to new forms of adversity.

As we have seen, to generate new winners, in a sealed system of limited study places there must (by definition) be new losers. Consequently, contextual admissions as a process is in effect a displacement reaction. Gaukroger (2021) points out that as a result "the consequences of the focus on widening access have not been universally welcomed" and that "despite contextual admissions policies that recognise other under-represented groups, entry to Scottish universities has remained highly stratified" by socioeconomic group. As the author has also frequently stated over the last two decades, Gaukroger (2021) insightfully also notes that "without more places, equalising access between the least and most deprived areas is likely to suppress participation by those in between" noting also that of course "more places would obviously come at a cost to the Government". Some academic colleagues might not shed too many tears if contextual admissions approaches were solely to remove candidates who apply to their chosen degree only because they have the right qualification to do so (rather than a true passion for the subject). However contextual admissions can and has led to much more than this stratification. Distortion to the chances of candidates just below contextual thresholds – the so-called "squeezed middle" (Scott, 2017) is an important example of another unintended consequence. It represents a real challenge to contextual approaches, especially when the 'middle' tend to have loud voices, influential friends and litigious parents (see Woolcock, 2019a). This saga seems set to continue, with attempts to rebalance existing social engineering are themselves described as social engineering (Woolcock, 2019b). Is it reasonable to describe contextual admissions as social un-engineering, in other words correcting a largely hidden systemic bias?

Targeting those in need of Access support using contextual approaches

When discussing targeting Access individuals, it is quite useful to visualise what such processes attempt to do by seeing the objective as being a bit like a target – maybe a dart board of concentric circles. Each contextual approach can be considered as throwing a dart. Some approaches / darts will hit the outer bands – an area representing the use of broadly zonal targeting (such as focusing on all pupils who attend a particular school). Some will land closer into the bullseye – an area representing more local targeting (such as SIMD, where a postcode covers just one side of a street). And some will be very close to the bullseye (such as identifying individual care experienced candidates – factors unique to that individual). Unlike in a real game of darts, hitting local, zonal and individual targets are all approaches used to widen Access, noting of course that the further the dart falls from the bullseye the more false positives it may also identify, as not all within a zone (such as a school) may be equally impacted by the wider school performance.

Trying to weigh up different contextual factors is especially challenging as barriers change over time and are unique to each applicant. So much so that some universities do not publish what is in effect the algorithm behind their contextual calculations, preferring a 'black box' approach. Others who use less complex methods may be able to explain to a lay audience how such targeting works – helpful as we have seen, in a sealed system of limited undergraduate places 'new losers' will wish to understand why they have lost what they might feel was 'their' place at university. To help explain and express this, some universities as part of their selection processes assign points for each adversity factor, which are tallied up. Candidates can ask for their individual adversity score but how this relates to other applicants is to a large extent not disclosable under data protection legislation, making it difficult for individual candidates to determine whether they were next in the queue to be picked or much further down the line – the latter possibly softening the blow of rejection. Whilst having merit, adversity scoring is tricky as it is difficult to determine the impact of the same kind of adversity (for example, a bereavement) on different individuals who may have experienced it differently (for example, during exams or after exams) with differing impacts. Whilst the consequences of the loss of immediate family members can be imagined fairly easily, the loss of, say, a grandparent (unfortunately a more likely scenario) may also vary in terms of impact with the type of family unit of which they were a part. As a consequence, to provide greater granularity establishing the full facts around individual adversity can be very labour intensive as well as very intrusive, especially if further verification is needed at a time of acute distress. And the need to verify all contextual claims is a theme we will return to. A brief worked example of contextual flags and how they may be reported in a simple way appears at the end of this book in Appendix 1. The process by which and weighting for each flag matters as those applying them need to agree and be comfortable with the outcome being as intended.

An alternative approach is to use flags. These markers are deployed when a particular Access factor applies to a candidate. Then all candidates with this flag are treated equally. Whilst less precise, flags are normally only offered to those with very significant adversity, again preferably with verified evidence, ensuring that fraudulent advantage is not being sought. The downside of the less granular approach of flags is that those who do not get a flag get no recognition of the factor(s) disclosed. In this sense flags are binary, an on or off switch. Applicants with several smaller measures of adversity which might add up to hit a contextual action threshold under a scored system get no recognition via a series of flags they do not get allocated. It is of course possible to compromise slightly – flags can be added up, too – but the detail of all this begins to reveal that just like in any other walk of life, being scrupulously fair involves a lot of careful consideration, process design, testing and constant re-evaluation. And being fair also requires substantial resource, training and professionalism.

If the above can sound complex and (for those tasked with delivering it) rather daunting, take a step back for a moment to consider how it is perceived by applicants unfamiliar with the process. The benefits such diversity-protecting measures offer are clear and valuable. But they are far from easy to deliver. An example illustrates. A specific part of a university approached the author and asked for help. They had discovered that few of their graduates wanted to work in either deprived inner city or rural areas, despite these being the locations which most needed these graduates (as coincidentally is the case with many high demand professions such as Medicine and Dentistry). This was worrying and apparently inexplicable to them. The author, in a rare spark of insight, asked what he felt was an obvious question – how many of their graduates came from inner city or rural locations in the first place? The answer was, nobody knew, as they had never looked, but they would try to find out. Following permission gained to look at such data, lots of further digging was followed by analysis, it was discovered some time later that few if any did come from those areas. So, a theory emerged that graduates were attracted back to work in the communities from which they came, potentially depriving other communities they had little or no experience of (nor affinity to) of their skills. Now whilst this alone is not a reason for widening Access and whilst we must never make the mistake of assuming nor insisting that graduates 'go back to their roots', the point stands that familiarity and diversity have value for society not just the individual. Just as having Bjorn from rural Norway present may possibly be useful in a Geography class when the topic is fjords, having a student present who understands the impact of say, rurality, is equally valuable. Whether it is designing a new housing estate or planning what transport links it needs or addressing and meeting community pandemic needs, imagine the insight students from an inner city are able to bring to classes in Medicine, Dentistry, Law, Town Planning and Social Work, noting that inner cities are where the highest densities of these professionals can be often found at work and yet often the lowest density students

for these degrees apply from. Now imagine the impact of having a graduate from such a background choosing (and of course this is a choice) to return to where they were brought up to now serve it. This takes us back to the Scottish tradition of the 'lad o'pairts' we considered earlier. Education from communities to communities.

This slight digression highlights another key function of Access that is often overlooked. It is not about 'dumbing down' or being 'politically correct' or 'social engineering'. It is about being fair and open and inclusive to the many to the benefit of all. It has social purpose. It is about recognising that not all who embark on a learner journey have the same skills or knowledge or baggage. And it is about recognising that this is a good thing. Diversity brings strength in depth. In the UK, universities are at least in part paid for by taxpayers who come from all sectors of society, death and taxes remaining life's two certainties (as Daniel Defoe pointed out some three hundred years ago!). For society to open its most prized doors to just a subset of society seems unfair unless talent is indeed genetically allocated by postcode. Access is not, as some elements of the media might have you think, about giving candidates side or back doors to further study. Access for many is not a 'second chance' but actually a first real chance, due to the circumstances they grew up in. Such perspectives on Access are motivating and some might say obvious, but they have to be highlighted in the face of the extra effort needed for fair admissions to be delivered against the background of the overwhelming levels of work and most institutions face. Dangerously it is much easier to just continue the approaches taken decades earlier for a different, in some ways less equal, world. As is true in so much of life, fairness does not just happen. It needs to be planned, funded and fostered.

Unpaid carers and care leavers need to be verified and recognised

Since providers identified both the above very different groups of applicants as meriting additional application and ongoing support, there has been a steady, overdue and very welcome growth in applications by students from care and carer backgrounds. This has been assumed to be the result of specific outreach, especially by the many charitable organisations that have sprung up, leading to enhanced awareness and disclosure around the care experienced and carer groups. The background number within these categories may also be rising, in other words societal change has led to more care and carer individuals. Unfortunately, in parallel there has also been growth in the number of applicants making 'false' disclosures relating to these groups. Mercifully only a few seem to make the claim fraudulently to gain unfair advantage, the larger number simply not reading the guidance notes associated with the disclosure, resulting in them disclosing in error. Whilst such inattention to detail does not bode well for someone seeking a degree, the larger issue is around what happens if this is not detected and addressed. The problem highlights why verification of evidence that may change a life path is

crucial. Those making claims in error will often state, 'yes, I have worked in care' (meaning care sector employment) and so consider themselves 'care experienced' or a 'carer' noting that to Access professional employment in these sectors is not a disadvantage and so does not merit extra support. To be fair to all who apply, checking and verifying all claims made is crucial, but equally requires significant resource.

Helpfully over recent years there has been strong awareness raising of the challenges faced by carers, all of these being amplified by the pandemic. More and more key figures, such as Chris Millward (formerly from the UK Office for Students), have outlined the growth of pressures on carers in detail, how it impacts their lives and state of mind, whilst many battle to cope with life on limited Government benefits. There is a real 'iceberg' of need here, of which only part has been visible for so long, a hidden extra burden for so many on learner journeys. That said, for some carers the enforced pandemic leap to online asynchronous learning has actually made their studies more not less achievable as experts such as Mary Larkin (Professor of Care, Carers and Caring at the OU) has pointed out. Raising the profile of underrepresented groups can make a real difference to them, and awareness of the needs and indeed vital societal role that carers play helpfully continues to grow.

Other measures of adversity

Whist SIMD is used exclusively in Scotland, other parts of the UK in part rely on a similar but different measure, POLAR (the Participation Of Local Areas), which, like SIMD, makes inferences from the postcode in which an applicant lives, and used as such, so far so good. However, POLAR can and is used by some organisations to identify individuals who may have faced difficulty beyond their control, which is not a purpose it was designed for as the creators of POLAR clearly point out. By using POLAR alone (as is the case with using SIMD alone) this measure assumes that everyone in the same neighbourhood has exactly the same disadvantaged circumstances. This may or may not be true, hence the criticism such zonal measures draws when used in this way. Of course, if used in concert with individual measures, this issue is mitigated – it is using the measure in isolation that can lead to 'mis-coding' of the circumstances that may impact an individual learner. The strength of such zonal measures lies in looking back to see if candidates in the first place from these zones are admitted, rather than using them to admit candidates in the first place to a degree. They are at best used to assess progress rather than create progress. In summary, the use of POLAR or SIMD to identify individuals, rather than report on a group, is likely to be a controversial proxy for local adversity at best. The lesson here is that to address gaps using data-driven approaches, it is important to understand the data – how it is constructed and what it means. Without this it is easy to create another unintended consequence in the highly interconnected world of Access.

From district to local to individual – improving targeting of WP

As we saw previously, identifying who most need WP support has taken a 'dart board' like approach over the years. Firstly, working with anyone in a challenged school was fine, even if not all were equally challenged. As the use of such district zonal metrics declined, they were replaced by local measures such as postcode, noting not all on any given street face the exact same level of adversity. By the 2020s we had moved on from local to looking at individual personal circumstance, partly because it was the right thing to do but also because post-austerity / Brexit / pandemic resource only existed for those with the most acute need. This has seen a drive towards such measures, the most promising of which is free school meals (FSM).

Whilst the pandemic has arguably delayed national adoption of FSM as an important contextual selection measure, its day does seem to be coming. When it becomes a funded reward measure – in other words when universities are paid or punished by their success or failure in recruiting FSM students – the measure seems likely to become as important as SIMD or POLAR, just with a sharper focus that 'means tests' each given the recognition. There are a couple of twists, however, before we get to that point.

Free school meals explored

So, what's not to like in using FSM as a contextual measure or even the sole measure? Those children from families with the lowest incomes get free meals at school. This measure can then be used to identify those with the greatest individual need and hopefully level up support given to them. Simple. But actually, like with so many WP situations, it is actually complex. The first issue is that to benefit, the parents of such pupils need to reveal their financial circumstances to a Government agency, something that they may be reluctant to do or where lives are more chaotic, be unable to do. The next is that like with all state handouts, there can be stigma attached to making such claims. Some schools, realising that they too may be rewarded by bonus payments if a higher percentage of their pupils become FSM candidates, have actually hired staff to attend events such as school parent evenings to encourage potentially eligible families to apply for FSMs. If they do, the family and the school both benefit, although sadly as discussed earlier, WP parents may be the least likely to attend such parent events in the first place. Returning to issues around stigma, smart solutions already exist to effectively conceal which pupils get FSM. They can either be issued with meal bands or have credit added to their smart cards, both of which are then used to buy meals. The result is that at the point of sale there is no stigma for the end user, the fact their parents did not buy the band or card being effectively concealed.

An interesting aspect to consider here is the difference between eligibility and take up. The latter may be impacted by stigma or other factors if, for example, going out of school for lunch is 'cool' and the local supermarket or

fish and chips shop does not accept bands or school payment cards, just cash. It is important therefore when referring to FSM data to, whenever possible, identify whether what has been measured and reported on is eligibility or up take, as these figures will not be the same, complicating comparisons if the basis on which they have been reported is different or not clear. FSM uptake will clearly have been reduced to near zero when schools were closed during the pandemic. For the purposes of WP, eligibility for FSM is actually what those targeting future WP students probably want to focus on. It is the larger number and if compared to up take may evidence the level of stigma (or appeal of a local to school burger van). Helpfully FSM eligibility is information that many schools store on their confidential Education Management Information System (EMIS) pupil record systems, an example of which is SEEMiS (https://www.seemis.gov.scot/) that is used extensively in Scotland. This and similar EMIS systems offer those wanting to target support at this group much easier access to future students, provided the data can be shared in some way by the school or local education authority. Failing that other solutions can be deployed. For example, in the Dundee City local authority areas, anonymous data is shared. This allows external outreach staff to contact individual schools, stating something like: 'we don't know who they are, GDPR prevented you from telling us, but we know you have x final year pupils all eligible for FSM, and based on this they would therefore be for our additional support. Please can you advise these specific individuals of this?' By taking this clever approach, no identifiable information is disclosed, and yet at the same time support can be effectively targeted.

More on pandemic impacts

Most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has created a number of new unintended educational side effects. They require us to briefly visit secondary school exam delivery during the pandemic. Despite everyone's best efforts, the assessment methodologies deployed during the pandemic did contain flaws that resulted in various changes and eventually a switch closer to a no detriment approach, involving internal only and no genuinely independent, externally moderated assessment. This resulted in many more students meeting the university entry requirement set for them than would normally happen. What this and wider assessment aspects delivered were three new entirely unexpected educational experiments.

The first aspect relates to enforced gaps in the learning year. Educators would normally expect a widening of the attainment gap between the most deprived and the most supported school pupil cohorts over the normal summer holiday period when pupils are out of school, those with resources may still benefiting from formal or informal learning, often funded as learning extras by their parents such as summer camps. There seems to be a strong likelihood this aspect of the attainment gap between those with and those without the necessary disposable resources may have been made much worse

by the much longer pandemic shutdowns and intermittent and very part-time attendance at school. Negative perceptions of the year ahead amongst batches of future school leavers may further compound this, so at the time of writing there are real and potentially growing equity of learning issues for educators, pupils and parents to take on board. And the resulting gap in life chances arising from consequent lower school qualifications is being highlighted, for example, in McEnaney (2021): "Poorer pupils 'more likely to fail Highers than get an A'". The pandemic has created the conditions for an unfortunate experiment to see if breaks in compulsory face-to-face learning impact all types of pupils equally.

The second accidental experiment relates to the fact that by the mid-2020s, the UK and some other countries will have a couple of cohorts of learners entering university with little or no experience of sitting formal exams at the end of school, these having been cancelled due to the pandemic. How will this impact their success in university, especially at institutions that still use such systems for core assessments? The jury is still out on the accuracy of internal only teacher-led pupil assessments used for these cohorts. Teachers clearly are the people who know their pupils best, but might they inflate or deliver bias, unconsciously or otherwise?

The third accidental experiment relates to how these newly unexpectedly qualified learners fare once they are deeper within university study. As covered in this publication, being qualified to enter university and being prepared / ready to cope with university are two very different things, the latter sadly all too often overlooked. Quite by happy chance, monitoring how the unintended cohort of unusually qualified entrants cope will provide an extra insight to understanding whether contextual admissions could be bolder, entry grades lower and Access wider as this is what this unintended experiment has delivered – an entry cohort that may on paper be less qualified. Of course, understanding how these pupils get on is not a single factor analysis. There are many other aspects that may make this unintended social experiment harder to interpret, including what level of support they required, whether they received it (or not) and as some might see it whether they were simply admitted to fail? The answers are likely to vary between universities and depend on their support detection and delivery systems. But each of these issues merits further research as these individuals run their learning races in coming years.

Dealing with difficult conversations

Without taking too sombre a tone, it is important to remember another responsibility that goes with being part of a WP team. The educational career fates of those you aim to enthuse, inspire and support are at times in your hands. This is not just a huge responsibility but equally one that needs to be recognised as such, as to do otherwise puts those who share their often-challenged lives and insecurities with you at risk. It is important to

take a few moments to consider what this means when, for example, a clearly distressed future student is standing (in person or virtually) in front of you. They will not know many of the realities outlined in this book (which is maybe a good thing?) but will be scared as a result of potentially offering themselves up to the great thing that is university. It is tempting in such situations to become instantly parental, but telling such individuals that 'it will all be okay' is often neither true nor the best approach. In the heat of such moments it is hard for staff to quickly assess what their role is in the situation before them, but if possible that is exactly what they must do. Their role as a member of staff within the system the candidate hopes to enter requires that they answer questions as effectively as they can and all that starts with remembering what their role is, in what can be a crisis situation.

Unfortunately, there will be candidates who unintentionally make this extra difficult. Some, as discussed elsewhere in this book, may have set their sights on goals that may be distant without them realising this, or even, sadly, totally out of reach due to, for example, not sitting exam subjects, passes in which are mandatory for admission to some specific degrees. It is of course good that as awareness of adversity has grown in recent years, there is a greater willingness to disclose the horrendous circumstances some applicants face. Equally, there are some who feel they can only share their past on the promise of confidentiality. This is another area where those offering support must be ultra-careful and ideally should seek professional advice and training. When faced with 'I will only tell you if you promise not to tell', the correct staff reply is maybe not the natural one but rather 'I can't promise you that until I know more', as staff can otherwise get themselves into a position of being aware of a high risk or criminal situation to which they have bound themselves to silence – a horrible scenario. The reality is that the upset candidate will probably provide you with the information regardless of promises you may later regret making. For the uninitiated staff member, such conversations are really very demanding indeed and it is important to prepare for them, maybe even through role play.

As above, staff must remember what their role is in such situations and not get sucked in to being too parental. As touched on earlier, a phrase the author developed in the 1990s that has served well is for staff to see themselves as 'intelligent signposts'. It is impossible and probably not appropriate for an individual staff member to try to know every answer to every question. Rather their role here is often to be the eyes and ears of the system that can detect issues and rapidly refer those needing support to the expert professionals whose job it is to provide it. These support services are crucial and generally not all staff members are trained to their standards. In such situations staff are often best served by becoming active listeners to a distressed candidate explaining their circumstances. This role of being a sounding board is often overlooked and undervalued, yet being listened to may be a relatively new opportunity for such candidates and doing so is an undervalued gift to those needing to unload their worries. This can play a key role in lowering the

fury and temperature of, for example, a candidate that has just been rejected but who now wants to disclose new circumstances that they feel led to their underperformance. That said, once staff have heard information – which as we said may be very serious in nature – they have a duty to record it in note form, ideally (and this is really hard) to get applicant permission – ideally in writing – to share it with a trusted support official. Candidates can be asked 'what needs to happen next for you?' towards helping them focus and cope with coming minutes, hours and days. Depending on the level of immediate distress, even simple things like pausing the discussion or breathing calmly with them as they hopefully calm can be crucial. It is important not to box such individuals into a corner, for example, 'threatening' not to do something unless they agree to do or not to do something. Those in distress will have their own coping strategies, and blocking these may actually be counter-productive. It's much better to displace the conversation to other aspects rather than directly confront a statement of what they will do next if something they want doesn't happen. Hopefully the above gentle introduction will encourage many readers to consider embarking on professional training to enable them to better support those in challenging situations, including themselves. It would be nice to think one legacy of the pandemic might be a new era of compassion and caring, noting actions in this area require care and understanding of what the situation is. Staff can each individually only do so much, and it can be helpful to think that things for that candidate will be alright in the end. If it isn't right yet for them, it probably isn't the end of this part of their learner journey. Ultimately staff need to trust their own decisions. In difficult situations staff need to learn to be themselves (after all, everyone else is taken!) and crucially to seek professional help themselves when overloaded.

Measuring the impact of contextual admissions

It is all very well for universities to take every reasonable step to be fair in terms of their widening Access policy but it is equally fair for those on the outside – applicants, parents, teachers, society in general – to ask 'so is it working?' Answering this question is difficult. One approach comes down to what is known within admissions circles as the 'basis of offer'. The basis of each offer made to each candidate is a note or statement of the reason or reasons that resulted in the individual candidate being offered a university place as opposed to be declined one. For WP impact to be measured, all these individual accept or reject applicant decision reasons need to be recorded so that a simple further question can be answered – how many candidates would not have been offered an undergraduate place had it not been for their contextual circumstances? What this might look like on the ground is that a selector has one seat to fill and ten applicants for it, all with exactly the same grades and other factors. However, one of the ten also has faced verified contextual factors. This candidate has, arguably, demonstrated greater long-term potential as they have achieved the same grades as the others despite

their adverse circumstances. They have won their sprint race despite the hurdles unique to their bit of track.

The net result of this – and the subject of many Freedom of Information requests – is to try to understand how the contextual basis of offer made a difference as to who was offered a degree place. By slicing such data by degree subject, gender and any other number of characteristics it becomes possible to see the extent and impact of contextual processes at as granular a level as desired. This approach can be used to see compliance and a further level of fairness that provides helpful insight. One of the realities of any attempt at being fair – whether university Access or world cup football – is that there is a satisfaction in knowing what is actually happening (not just what we think is happening). To continue this comparison, this lets us see contextual basis of offer as equivalents to Video Assistant Referees (VAR) at a football match or the Hawk-Eye line detection system at Wimbledon. It is satisfying and for many a relief to see fair policy deployed in practice making a real and fair difference. It is also professionally important to be a reflective practitioner in this and many other ways.

Reflecting on contextual admissions

Before moving on to examining individual Access course elements, it is worth briefly returning to the thorny subject of inherited inertia – just making decisions in a particular way because they have always been made that way in the past. If fairness requires change, it is obvious that different approaches will be essential to delivering this. The lesson to learn here is to reflect on the desired outcome afresh and on a regular basis and then maybe just find and try a different, hopefully fairer approach if the previous one hasn't worked. The challenge is to resist inertia and become 'future target' not 'past outcome' driven. Contextual admissions policy and practice should never be seen as an alternative to novel approaches to raise aspiration, participation and Access. Were it to do so, it would perpetuate the group it tries to help. In a sense, contextual admissions is the last gasp surgery to help improve the quality of life of our Access audience, when of course preventative medicine that addresses the socioeconomic factors that have blocked their development is arguably a far better remedy for politicians and others able to intervene in life stories, from (or even before) birth.

9 Exploring an Access course in detail

Making the magic happen

> *Degree entry achieved! Progression through first year going well. Whilst Peter qualified for degree entry via his very supportive school, through contextual recognition of lost opportunity Paul was eligible to attend a very supportive Access Summer School, his secondary school simply not having enough time, resource and capacity to give him the same opportunities Peter enjoyed. Paul had not heard of Access Summer School before it was offered to him, but quickly realised that it was his best chance to see for himself if he was ready to embark on a degree. And if he was, ensure he was as well prepared as candidates like Peter had been. And it worked. Paul dazzled university staff with his determination, commitment and endeavour, winning a degree place via Access Summer School and a new future. So how do such Access courses achieve such things?*

One of the questions the author is asked most frequently about qualifying and preparatory Access provision is what are the ingredients that make up a successful Access Summer School? The fact that the word 'ingredients' is plural is the first clue to the answer – there are lots of individual components that deliver the magic of Access over the summer when Access Summer Schools operate. This chapter will examine these factors individually, noting that they appear in no specific order but are all inextricably linked. The sum is much greater than the parts and many are the result of a lifetime of testing their value in challenging circumstances. Readers wishing more on the evolution of Access Summer Schools will find many references to them. For an independent view, 'From elitism to inclusion' (Woodrow et al, 1998) offers a good overview, including a survey of the author's work to that date published as Case Study 2. A further short overview of what many may consider the key rationales and components appears in Blicharski (1998) and further detail from over a decade after the Woodrow work (yet still over a decade ago) appears in Blicharski (2009). What follows in this chapter hopefully brings information on the Access Summer School approach up to date in 2022.

The role of Access Summer Schools is about much more than being what some term 'learning bridges' – getting candidates safely from learning place A to B. They are deeply personal, human and in some ways intimate interfaces,

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as learners build confidence in themselves as students. This lived experience aspect can easily be missed, especially by those who have no first-hand knowledge of such courses, and readers able to would be well-served by trying to see such a course in action. From a managerial perspective, each day of these courses feels like being responsible for a simmering cauldron rich in opportunity and risk, potential and vulnerability. Once underway, they have in this sense a momentum, life and frequency of events all simmering on their own. After a few summers of running these (or twenty-seven summers in a row in the case of the author) typically the patterns outlined below emerge, these having been witnessed at several such courses the author has externally examined as part of their quality assurance processes. The campus element of Access Summer Schools (pre- and post-pandemic) is an especially empowering, embedding and equalising one, where all are treated equally, with fair opportunity, for some students for the first time. This is especially true for those who have been in care (as looked after children) and those who are estranged from their parents. Their circumstantial instability can be reduced by free on-campus accommodation giving them fresh independence to live and study. This is equally true for those going through other personal transitions. So, let's begin to look at the detail of the key components of a typical Access Summer School.

Money and how Access students support themselves

This might be a surprising starting point, but as previously covered Access students can often be defined by lacking the level of financial resilience enjoyed by others. Indeed, money is such an issue that the use of measures (like entitlement for free school meals (FSM) and other social support) can be used to identify Access candidates. Whilst taking part in Access provision, student capacity to earn income from work – both part-time and full-time – is generally greatly restricted, making the need for awards, grants and bursaries crucial. This is why, for example, the University of Dundee Access Summer School now offers cash bursary, generously supported by two Local Education Departments, a charity and donations from the university itself and others. These small payments are made in arrears, subject to full attendance at every session of the course each week and go towards mitigating living costs. Although the amount is small (currently £60 per week) it does, students report, make a significant difference to their ability to stay on course.

Equally importantly, Access students are, from day one of their course, encouraged to actively seek additional financial support if required, the main route being via university Student Funding Units. These fantastic teams offer access to hardship and other cash payments, but equally are the gurus for advice on how to budget and economically function as a student. This can vary, for example, from landlord advice to examining the cost of bottled water (over refilling an otherwise disposable single use plastic bottle). The moral of the money story, as in all aspects of success, is to plan. And if the

plan fails, recognise this, act accordingly and swiftly. Few magic money trees grow near where Access students typically live. However, many major cities do host Educational Trusts that students can apply to for financial support if they have a strong connection to that city or region. The author has chaired such an Educational Trust for many years and similar organisations exist around the country. Do you know how to contact your local Educational Trust should the need arise and a candidate needs such help? It is worth finding out. Unfortunately, it was normal before the Covid-19 pandemic to hear of such funds being used to pay for food, but lockdown has seen utilities including Wi-Fi (as well as electricity and gas) going up the list of essential living costs. Some of the saddest reasons given for requesting funds involve paying for family funeral costs. Thankfully more frequently the pandemic reasons have been to supplement or replace lost income caused by lockdown, especially for those working in the gig economy. Once again there has been the odd silver lining out of this horrible Covid cloud – on the gig front, a few learners have been able to get work income from the boom in home delivery, others at Covid test sites, which has added some extremely useful flexibility of work / study pattern to their lives.

Attendance

On starting an Access course, students are advised which timetabled sessions are compulsory for the learning stream they are following. The combination of subjects will be bespoke to each learner. Students may be expected to sign into each and every session they are due to attend, and failure to do so results in a bursary deduction, as there is no need for travel / attendance money if there is no travel nor attendance. This approach sets up a high level of rewarded attendance as the norm just as exists in secondary schools via Educational Maintenance Allowance monies and other school-based financial support. Placing a money benefit for attending each class ironically in a way also challenges academic colleagues to ensure that each and every session they deliver is of high value and quality, and that they too attend. Staff typically have busy summers preparing for each new autumn intake, conducting research and just on occasions taking rare annual leave. Access Summer Schools compete for time and space with these needs but equally if well planned can use campus facilities at the precise time their occupancy is at its lowest, full-time students being away on holiday. That said, summer is also a time of conferences on campus as well as building maintenance – both essential for income generation – and so Access summer provision competes for facilities with these too. A summer of Access teaching without being gazumped by other institutional room booking is rare. Through taking part in learning as a group, students find learning cohort form, nervous learners realising that their concerns may be widespread and certainly not unique to them. This is a powerful bonding mechanism that generates peer support that often prevails long into undergraduate study. It is one of the most talked about aspects of such courses, as ex-students will retell, often many years later.

Residential student accommodation

Accommodation for students can vary in price and quality but inevitably becomes a major cost for those not living with family (and even for those living at home may be expensive if they have to contribute). Many landlords understandably want to rent for all 52 weeks in the year, despite students often having two eleven-week semesters – leaving 30 weeks of costly accommodation potentially unnecessary for our learners. To address this, during Access Summer School, students applying from a significant distance away are typically offered free self-catered accommodation on campus. This reflects elements of adversity that include rurality and travel times that over significant distance are likely to involve both lost expense and time, connections between trains and buses often being an issue. Self-catered accommodation also provides a significant new element to those eligible for it, with advantages and challenges. New students need to be able to cook and co-exist. Many are away from home for the first time. This is another strong cohort-forming factor that adds amazing resilience and often long-lasting peer support, once they progress past the Pot Noodle level of catering

The need for accommodation during (and provided by) the course also places a significant additional level of risk on all involved. It means that students are on campus 24/7 and as a result, access to help and support, particularly if a crisis develops, is needed around the clock. Fortunately, there are ways of providing this although this aspect remains a constant concern to staff for the course duration. In some years staff or previous students who have attended the course have been hired and 'lived in' with Summer Access students, being on hand to pastorally observe and support. Equally all halls of residence have professional out-of-hours support mechanisms that provide similar over watch. What is certain is that with students in class during the day where help is instantly available, student problems that do emerge often tend to arise in evenings and at weekends, mandating proper risk assessments and a clear support and rules policy. It is worth remembering that in halls of residence / student accommodation the full richness of modern lives plays out. Of course, there are parties and alcohol and young people. So also joy and risk. False fire alarms and damage to safety equipment are normally met with suitable fines to help these lessons be learned. As we will see in the next chapter, the Fire Service require and deserve our full respect but with care can be pacified when another regular false call out happens due to excessive spray deodorant application (the most common cause) triggering smoke sensors.

Transferable skills

Through any Access course a diverse group of students will arrive on campus with a diverse set of learning and coping skills, which is part of the joy of working with such groups. Equally, no individual at the start is likely to possess all the skills they will need by the end. Over the decades Access Summer Schools have run, the methods used in this area have consistently involved a

'checklist-type' approach to establishing which student skills each individual holds and which they need to add. This is complicated by the fact that transferable skills in isolation are hard to identify and hard to teach, requiring where possible an integrated approach of skills within subject matter. The resulting portfolio of work is something that students repeatedly report returning to throughout their degree – they use their notes on this special area of study as a resource and reference during their course, for everything from referencing systems to how to construct revision notes. These benefits also highlight why it is important to create an integrated approach to delivery, as Access students early on in their learner journey may literally not know what skills they are missing until they are asked to apply them. Identifying and supporting any and all student skills gaps in the first few weeks of an Access course is crucial and near universal when different Access course designs are compared. The need for this may be hard to put across to students as discrete skills but worth sticking with. The tale used to be told by a retired Careers Advisor colleague of an alien landing on Earth looking for intelligent life and leaving disappointed. He had happened to go to a place called a 'gym' and reported back that the life forms were primitive, just running in circles and lifting then dropping bits of metal. Unfortunately, this alien had not appreciated that humans do not run in circles and lift then dropping bits of metal to get good at running in circles and lifting then dropping bits of metal. They do this to train for when skills of strength and endurance are needed. Exactly the same applies to transferable academic skills – on their own they are training aids, preparing the user to deploy them in real situations later. But this 'race fitness' is absolutely essential for future winners and having a strong transferrable skills staff team is a real blessing.

Recommending how we learn

Whilst there are huge numbers of books on this subject, it would be remiss not to mention in passing that different learners (be them students or staff) learn in different ways and it is always useful to remember this when trying to ensure what is transmitted is received and understood. The four stages of competence (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence) offer a useful insight into widening Access (as well as many other areas). To paraphrase from those listed on the website, we can develop this helpful perspective:

1 **Unconscious incompetence** will typically involve a WP student not realising they may have an understanding or knowledge gap, but to progress requires to grasp this. This was mirrored in another sphere entirely when in 2002 the then US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, amazed a media audience by referring to 'unknown unknowns' (as well as unknown knowns, known unknowns and of course known knowns).

2 **Conscious incompetence** is hopefully arrived at fairly swiftly, as the learner recognises their needs and begins to address them.
3 With time this gives rise to **conscious competence** – the ability or skill to be able to achieve something new.
4 And with sufficient practice **unconscious competence** develops, where the learner can perform the aspect in question without full effort also, being able to explain the aspect to others – in other words they can even teach it.

Thinking this way allows us to see learners as each potentially being at a different stage as they develop. The same of course is true for staff, many finding it equally hard to be reflective learners. This of course is not new – Robert Burns writing in Scots around 1785:

> "O wad some Power the giftie gie us,
> To see oursels as ithers see us!"

A two-hundred-fifty-year-old call for self-reflection. It is crucial that periodic checks are made on the fitness for purpose of approaches are made. The author was fortunate some years ago to be part of a Universities UK Access team established for just this purpose – to provide an external opinion on how Access courses worked and advise on any potential improvements.

Authentic subject study

Another key element that links from the last is the need for students to be able to tackle known and new subjects that they will encounter in first year. These are typically and often best delivered by the same university staff that work with first-year students, so ensuring the content is authentically taught at first-year university level, whilst enhancing preparedness for study at this level. In Scotland this means teaching and assessment at the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) Level of Seven. There are several reasons why this is important:

1 by tackling multiple subjects at once at first-year level, students experience authentic materials and workload levels, key to understanding what their future studies will be like;
2 all students have an equal challenge, enabling performance within the group to be fairly and objectively assessed;
3 each subject places multiple demands via different learning and assessment approaches, again authentic to first year;
4 a wide spread of assessments over time means that should a student become unwell or has to otherwise miss part of the course, there is sufficient evidence in their bank of marks on which to judge their readiness to cope with first year and so not otherwise delay their entry to their degree by a year (as would otherwise harshly occur due to their temporary ill health during such short courses).

The main aspect of university learning that may be less authentic than true first year will be the size of class Access Summer School students encounter during their course, as these on summer Access are almost always smaller than during degree courses. Typically, up to thirty students (the maximum number for some activities, such as 'at the bench' lab science or art portfolio work) may be normal for some subjects, although others may be able to accommodate much large student numbers. Of course, first-year classes are typically much larger. Access Summer School cannot mirror this but equally the less daunting class scale is exactly what many Access students need and also reflects the lower student-to-staff ratios those from better resourced schools have already benefited from.

Noting all the above about authenticity, there are a few unexpected aspects to be aware of. Over the years as curricula have changed, a few Access subjects have stated that they would actually prefer candidates who had not studied their particular university subject before, as how some topics are covered within schools and college can be significantly different to degree-level content and approaches. So whilst Maths at school is a great precursor to Maths at university, Psychology (for example) and even some aspects of Biological Chemistry are much less beneficial. For example, having studied aspects of secondary school Psychology, pupils may not see a Psychology degree as a data driven social science, which at many universities it is. Equally, Art portfolio development in restricted school environments can be very narrow compared to that of the many specialisms within a degree. So the work of Access Summer School to provide another magic ingredient – that of authentic degree subject content exposure and support – is clear. This is almost a 'try before you buy' opportunity, available to deserving learners before they fully commit to years of a subject, potentially very different to their expectations.

Making the grade and qualifying via Access routes

Most undergraduate offers from universities will ask candidates to achieve stated entry requirements, such as four or more Scottish Qualification Agency (SQA) 'Highers' (or equivalent) at a stated grade level. Highers are assessed at SCQF Level Six, and so a strong performance shows readiness to cope with Level Seven (first year in most universities). By teaching and assessing at SCQF Level Seven, Access Summer Schools can therefore offer an alternative assessment as to whether a student is already ready for such a step. Returning to what we previously termed the 'support' model of Access, the model of students spending their Access Summer School taking four academic subjects at SCQF7 (that together yield four assessment marks) has an additional advantage. It allows colleagues in admissions departments to make offers via the University and Colleges Admissions System (UCAS) in the format 'Achieve AABB via Highers or via Access Summer School'. Both will equally demonstrate preparedness to cope with first year. This simple offer approach is transparent and helpful to applicants, who can find the myriad of offers

made by the five universities that typical UK applicants will have applied to (and their associated conditions) confusing and intimidating.

One of the questions that regularly arises from those trying to understand Access Summer Schools is 'how can Access Summer School deliver four Scottish SQA "Highers" via the course in just four weeks?' The answer, as detailed above, is of course that they don't. These courses are not about 'Highers' or any other pre-university exam system but rather establishing if candidates perform as if they already have the measure of ability they require for first year success. The follow-up question is usually something like 'goodness, why do kids need to go to school / finish school if they can do the Access Summer School and get in that way?' Once again the devil is in the details. Evidencing equivalence does not offer the depth of a 'Higher'. It does not offer a significant volume of transferrable credit, like a 'Higher'. So this particular type of Access course is a student potential check rather than a substantial knowledge booster. Their short duration to reduce opportunity and other costs gives no other option. This particular approach naturally offers a fraction of notional credit of a year-long course.

Appendix 2 at the end of this book offers a worked example of typical notes offered to candidates to guide them on which Access Summer School Modules to pick towards the destination or destinations they seek. This aspect can seem complex to new learners, especially those who may not be familiar with the sometimes cryptic detailed offer conditions that some universities may place upon them. Consequently it is incumbent on Access course staff to ensure that students pick appropriate modules for all the destinations they have an interest in. Some, of course, may not have a fixed degree in mind, whilst others may want to change track once they have had exposure to learning at university level of subjects that they may not have studied before. As readers will see in Appendix 2, the nature of entry to some degrees and their respective degree entry requirements may result in students having some or all compulsory modules to meet those requirements.

Finally, one other interesting twist follows from the fact students finish their Access Summer Schools in July each year. However, SQA results do not appear until August. The wise student will spot and appreciate this time gap. In essence, it means that students will not find out if they qualified for degree entry from their school studies until a month after Access Summer Schools end. As a result, rather than encouraging Access students to consider 'throttling back' at school (knowing Access may 'save' them from universities rejecting them) offering Access Summer School to those eligible for it should have the opposite effect. To use another image, if students wish to enter their chosen degree, they need to back both runners, their Access course and their main, study course at school or FE College as they have no way to know until race end which will get them across the line. On this last point, there are a handful of students each year who qualify for their degree in August (via school or college) having also done so a month earlier via Access. Might attending Access Summer School be a waste of resource for them? The

answer is normally no – as we established earlier being qualified is not the same as being prepared, so these learners still could benefit enormously from attending an Access course (noting at the time they attend it they will not know that they will not need it to qualify). Helpfully most learners are not so short sighted as to see the aim of Access course as being simply about getting into a degree. Most if not all want to stay on beyond degree entry and progress well to get the highest level of qualification, a challenge that requires all the preparation they can get. So, Access and preparatory summer schools add key 'bridging' ingredients of reliably offering preparation and resilience building from a stated start point to a guaranteed destination year after year. Anything less may be a wonderful university 'on ramp' or similarly badged experience, but if it does not take a learner safely from their start point into university ready for what lies ahead, it probably cannot fairly be described as an Access 'bridge' to university, functional bridges having two defined ends, not one.

Returning to time lines, Access Summer Schools need to fit into a relatively narrow time window to avoid clashing with secondary school / FE College exams being sat but equally also enable admissions decisions to be made before results from these same secondary school / FE College exam results emerge, so ensuring places won by Access students are not accidently allocated to others first, for example via the Clearing process universities use to fill any recruitment gaps. This currently ties much Access provision of this type to a June and July timeframe but for reasons already discussed this also has additional benefits. The one perennial problem is that these are also the months when pupils and parents (and even some staff) may wish to go away on holiday, a challenge around 'availability to study' we will return to.

A further word on SCQF Level 7

One of the beauties of the modern educational world is the number of choices open to learners. They can choose where, how and when they learn. The last quarter century has seen an explosion of such opportunities, but herein lies another unintended consequence. By way of example, let's look a little deeper at the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Created in its present form in 2006, the SCQF has 12 levels and allows all educational provision to be placed at one of these levels, allowing equivalence to be quickly established. The level we will focus on here is again Level 7. This level of qualification can be achieved in three principal ways, by completing:

1 an 'Advanced Higher' (AH) – generally in the final year at a Scottish Secondary School (S6); or
2 a 'Higher National Certificate' (HNC) often at an FE College;
3 a first year at university, and being awarded a 'Certificate of Higher Education' (Cert HE).

Those readers following the unintended consequence theme running through this book will quickly ask – 'so what is to prevent someone completing an AH in, for example, Psychology, then completing and HNC in Psychology and then a Cert HE in Psychology?' In other words, completing three qualifications all at the same level and all in the same subject? The current answer in Scotland is very little, and when this does occur it taxes the system and politicians literally and financially. Despite us living in a time of limited educational resource, it is possible for a young person to use up the same level of resource that three other learners might use without adding any progression to their qualification. Whilst this rarely happens due to the opportunity cost to the student, it is possible and highlights the unintended consequence of providing more and more choice. Provide too little and it can exclude. Provide too much and it can be unfairly distributed. The solution? It is likely that a brave future Government may introduce mandatory progression in the sense that funding will only be made available for someone advancing up through levels. In other words, a learner could choose to use their gift of learning from the taxpayer to gain a Level 7 qualification at School or College or University – but certainly not all three and maybe not even two out of three. So we observe the challenge of choice and the unintended consequences that arise when it is created. Maybe too much of a good thing is not good. Or maybe it just places a burden on the choice givers to fully scope out what the outcomes in the real world may be, including the unintended ones, before adding yet more pathways?

Managing time when under pressure with vulnerable students

As this heading suggests, part of any good course design is ensuring capacity is available when the unexpected arises, as inevitably it will. This requires careful prioritisation and use of time. Some standard approaches to academic time management can, if not carefully thought through, not work. For example, can and should staff who have worked an eight-hour office day be easily contactable outside office hours when trouble strikes? The immediacy of need of Access students make it essential that staff designing and running such programmes acknowledge the limits of what the resources open to them will enable them to do and then channel this resource to the areas of maximum need and value. Smart working in Access or many other spheres is actually about making the best of the limited available time, as to do otherwise leads to burnout and mental health deterioration, as what should be a satisfying role becomes a seemingly impossible one. We all need to find approaches that offer mental health protection around overload generated by things like 'to do' lists. The 'working day' for Access staff may simply have to start and end at points other than nine to five.

One approach, that the author has regularly championed to those he line-managed, is to always try to work within your limits, so keeping a reserve of time for those emergencies those working in WP know will arise. This means that a hint of a student in distress is less likely to be missed and can ideally be

instantly responded to, something that may make all the difference to their future. Taking this approach is challenging, not least as it requires recognition and acceptance that at some point – typically the end of the normal working day – no matter how fabulously efficient you have been, your email inbox will not be fully empty and overnight will refill regardless. It sounds paradoxical but surrendering control actually helps staff stay in control, being able to lead when a crisis rocks up. Try it! There is also need for care here so your reserve capacity is not misunderstood. If you maintain an 'inbox zero' approach and respond to every message in real time, you may quickly find more work arrives from those who mistake your industry for you having time on your hands, as you develop a reputation as the go-to person that can instantly solve everything – a lovely reputation to have but one that can lead to burn-out. By contrast, setting a firm end of work deadline or by only dealing with messages that must be replied to the same day – those ones that have 'urgent' in the subject line – may be the approach needed. There is an interesting phenomenon many academic colleagues encounter whereby if they revisit email messages after a period of time, they find some have magically self-resolved in the intervening period, but that is probably for a different book.

Making the best use of time requires us to accept we cannot do everything but rather should focus on the most important aspects and do them really well. Becoming a proficient juggler does not start by launching every ball in sight skyward. Rather than focusing on a perfect future many may never reach it is also important to live in the moment and enjoy it. If we do everything for tomorrow, how will we remember today? Most likely we will miss it entirely and the day will pass in an unsatisfying blur. Please do not think that the author is immune to this – indeed he regularly falls into the trap of trying to do everything live, instead of the tasks that must be given priority – but awareness of the issue is the first step to working smarter in this specific regard. Helping those in need is challenging but persistence is rewarded. It can sometimes feel like trying to move a large object with an elastic band – you add more and more effort and yet nothing happens until suddenly, often at a surprising moment, the object moves and change rapidly occurs. The person is helped and grateful. It is important to maintain capacity to get to that key point of making a positive difference.

Administration and administrators

Ask any Head Teacher who runs a school and in a quiet moment of honest modesty they will confess that the school office is where much of the life of a school or course develops. One of the challenges Access delivery faces is that those who have not experienced the complexity of Access course administration presume it to be simple and near instantaneous. In fact, it often takes a whole year to fully prepare an Access Summer School on a significant scale, as will be laid out below. The complexity is such that timelines must be met, any slippage being almost impossible to recover from once the course is underway.

Structurally, experience has shown that a 'triangular' staffing approach of keen colleagues who cross-brief daily is needed for critical tasks to achieve this, with three staff sharing key roles. One to be office based, one to be roving on campus (for example, to check if lecturers fail to turn up to take a class) and one to act as back up, covering emergencies, leave and illness. In such short courses if disaster strikes and processes fall behind, recovery without student detriment may be impossible. There is simply no time to train new staff if one departs. So, building resilience into planning is essential and a bit of an art form, that makes the smooth running of the course look deceptively easy. A quick look at a typical year as appears on the next pages demonstrates why a year-long 'triangle' of administration involving as few single points of failure as possible is advised.

Student mentors

An essential piece of the 'magic' in many university Access and Preparatory Summer Schools is the utilisation of volunteers or their paid counterparts who have previously completed the same Access course. This allows them to transfer their learning and so mentor new intakes. Their voice and credibility is far stronger and relevant to the new class than that of a (generally) much older course core staff. They can very much place themselves in the shoes of the new intake, having sat in the same seats as little as a year before. They understand the real-world challenges and the academic pressures and crucially the full magnitude of opportunity that Summer Access offers, including the significant post-entry benefits.

Mentors do need to be carefully selected and trained. Their session plans may be passed from year to year but kept current and updated annually. Each weekly mentor session with small groups of Access students begins with the Course Director welcoming each sub-group of students drawn from the entire Access cohort, introducing the Mentors and then, after a briefing covering any course 'news of the week' (which generally takes less than half the session), leaving the room. This allows frank discussion between the small group of mentees – typically six to fifteen per group – and the mentors, at least two of whom are always present at all sessions so providing safe working arrangements. Each Access student has one mentor session per campus week, noting they can also contact mentors at any time, and regularly do via lunchtimes at the Student Union etc. For large Access courses to fit everyone in, there may be up to ten parallel Director/Mentor sessions per week, which also provides choice of slot for those students with fixed commitments.

A surprising amount of thought and planning is needed in terms of allocating students to fixed tutorial sessions for Mentors to meet with smaller groups of students. By way of a bit of a worked example of the complexity – which can be greater or less when delivered online instead of face-to-face – here are some of the factors to consider.

The challenge: 400 WP students, following a 'column based' timetable involving 24 different online modules. All need timetable guidance slots, but how? Possible solution options on how to allocate each student to one of ten or so weekly slots include:

1 Offer students open slots they can sign up to, scattered amongst days and times to maximise the chance each student can attend one. But some groups may quickly fill via this free for all approach with some students missing out;
2 Offer students fixed slots they can swap with other students. But is it reasonable to leave vulnerable students on a short course with the responsibility to somehow negotiate session swaps with other students they hardly know, should they be unavailable for the slots given?
3 Open just a few self-booking for the slots. But this requires, like the above options, significant administrative 'policing' to check that all students take up the help they are offered. Failure to do so will put the students who miss out at a disadvantage that they may be unable to recover from in time during a short course. We are back to students not knowing what they don't know;
4 Something else.

So, whilst there are options, even a simple task like allocating each student to suitable weekly tutorials requires careful thought and planning, a need amplified by the fact the course is short and that WP students can be reluctant or even embarrassed to take up help. Returning to the concept of triangles of staffing, student mentors (and indeed all teams) often work best when the robust structure of having at least three individuals assigned to a role is used. Allocating a 'prime', a 'backup' and a 'safety' may not always be possible, but as the safety person – the third member of the triangle – can serve as backup for more than one group, the approach can actually be fairly resource efficient. Having a backup is especially important where the risk of failure or error may have a high consequence and vulnerable students may go unsupported without them realising the full significance of what they are missing. Not taking such an approach typically either results in irreparable academic damage or in terms of meeting degree entry requirements, requiring costly remedial steps to try to fix the 'breakage' – both justifying the use of preventative resource early, over remedial resource later.

A further word about the working Access day required to meet Access needs

One of the more unrecognised aspects of Access is that the vast majority of the work goes into preparation. This is true in terms of the years, months, weeks and days it takes to make such courses work so well. Turning to the latter first and communication with Access audiences, schoolteachers nor their pupils – in school

classes from nine to around four weekdays – is not going to be easily contactable during those hours. Consequently, it is custom for the Access day to shift from nine to five to eight to five, mirroring when audiences are available (an hour before and after the secondary school day) compensating for the otherwise longer day where possible via taking time back in lieu. This has the bonus advantages of making better use of university facilities such as office space, copiers and the like, as well as commuting all at quieter times. What is equally true is that if a student is in crisis – and whilst we always hope for the best we must prepare for the worst – the day goes on as long as there is an unmet need. And as we have discussed, that regularly includes evening and weekends. To cope with this, comprehensive time planning is essential. Time once again can be taken back post-crisis.

Disability support

The smooth operation of Access Summer Schools in June and July each year means that all student support services get little or no break over the summer. One that deserves a special mention is Disability Services (DS) provision. This service provides key support to those with additional requirements, and candidates are always strongly advised to seek this help at the earliest opportunity during Access courses or ideally well before them. For each such candidate, a record of 'reasonable adjustment' required due to the circumstances presented is prepared by the DS experts and (via the Course Director and Access School Office) passed to all the necessary Access course staff who need to know in real time to ensure that they in turn provide whatever help is advised. So if a student studies four modules, four teaching teams need to be updated for that candidate. It is equally important to guide learners that such disclosures of circumstances will only ever be used to help a student and never have any negative consequences for them. Equally, if students do not disclose, colleagues will not know to offer support. With DS appointments taking time to arrange, especially where external specialists like scribes may be needed, the sooner students ask for this legal entitlement to such help the better. The huge increase in disclosures around mental health in recent years has been especially welcome, not least as the author has first-hand experience of three former students who years after their Access success separately (over a number of years) took their own lives. These three wonderful students, unknown to each other, often pop into the authors mind when issues around vulnerability emerge, together with the lessons they left for us. Staff in such situations always wish they could have done more.

Now let us see how all the aspects we have just considered fit into the academic Access year.

An example of an academic Access year, focusing solely on delivery of an Access Summer School

January & February (or sooner) – support offer making, noting that some universities make Access offers as part of UCAS conditions of entry, whilst

others make them independent of any UCAS offer. This stage is crucial to ensuring the right candidates are made the right offers at the right time and are clear to each applicant on the value (in terms of preparation and qualification) of taking part. This is a significant task that requires one-to-one communication between providers and future students. It is also crucial that students understand their obligations with respect to the course they are embarking on, especially around time commitments and availability throughout all course dates.

March – final Access planning Board meeting to confirm which modules are running, the course timetable, teaching rooms and other facilities and staff required, indeed all other logistical arrangements. Invite future students and parents if possible to student and parent information evenings by a highly visible postcard (not a sealed letter nor email) so encouraging whole family involvement from an early stage. Conduct further 'conversion' activity to ensure as many students as possible take up the opportunity. Such work typically involves former Access students who are now successful undergraduates being hired to make one-to-one contact with their potential successors. This harks back to earlier comments that candidates who are or feel they will be qualified assume (often wrongly) that this qualification alone fully prepares them for the emersion experience that is university. Where given a choice through their individual offer, future students will be invited to pick which modules they wish to study over the summer, informed by module descriptors published by individual module leaders through the Access School office. A crucial period of ensuring opportunities are clearly understood.

April & May – ensure all logistics for each taught module are in place, from future students encouraged to open bank accounts (to enable bursary payment during the course) to card ordered to print course end certificates. Roll over virtual learning modules to the new academic year 'occurrence' to allow the right students to be individually attached to the right learning modules as per their individual module selection requests. If time permits, grab annual leave (as it is not possible during June and July).

June & July – deliver the course. That means ensuring handbooks are online, modules go live (and stay live) on the right days, methods to contact staff and students in emergency situations (which can and do arise suddenly and frequently) are put in place, room bookings work and are not double booked, movement between classes go smoothly (typically classes starting at five minutes past the hour and ending at five minutes to the hour to allow commutes between rooms which themselves need reset), hourly class attendance sheets collected (noting the unusual use of one of these in Chapter 10), analysed and missing students immediately followed up, emergencies handled, visitors hosted, late joiners accommodated, early leavers supported, all disability adjustments enacted, all mitigating circumstances and good cause scenarios offered by candidates assessed, deal with any rule infringements, plagiarism or on-the-spot support needs, marks checked and reported accurately to the Exam Board.

At this stage we can return to a very useful aspect of how assessments are viewed that we touched on earlier. Sitting at an Exam Board trying to convince colleagues from other parts of a university that they should admit a student who, on their degree application form alone looks weak, sounds like a challenge. However, if we return to our model and recall that the entire Board will normally be presented with evidence from no less than four academic teams (who have themselves taught and assessed each student), the situation suddenly becomes information rich, with more data on which to base entry decisions than for a conventional candidate, who supplies more limited data and is typically supported by a reference from one teacher, who despite their best intentions may be unfamiliar with the precise needs to be successful in first year – evidence that via Access is of course obtained first hand, in house, by trusted and familiar colleagues. No member of academic staff will wish to admit a candidate to a first-year class they themselves will have to teach that they feel will not cope with their course. A further late July task is to ensure admissions teams are clear on who has met the entry conditions set for them through the course. Teaching staff need to be issued feedback on how students perceived their modules through students completing an online anonymous comprehensive course evaluation. And, of course, students and staff must ensure a 'Graduation Event' is delivered to celebrate success and introduce the new students to their new seat of learning for years to come.

A worked example of what a typical day-to-day Access Summer School may look like appears at the end of this book in Appendix 2. Whilst simple, it deploys all of the experience covered in this book and has been shown to work over multiple years of testing, delivering strongly when used in a fully face-to-face and also in a fully online format. One of the potentially under-appreciated aspects of the model is that it is designed to be scalar. In other words, the modules as formatted and paired can be scaled up or down in terms of how many students attend each module, within the institutionally agreed minimum of six and maximum of thirty students per module, with no cost impact. Only beyond these limits is funding made available to staff delivering these modules adjusted, via a pro rata approach. So, there is real depth in design behind what at first glance looks like and functions as a simple approach. Further development of the example will be necessary as the factors that impact on the course audiences and those who deliver the programme change, noting that (as per the theme running throughout this book) it will be important to fully scope and model the potential consequences of change and then monitor whether any unexpected consequences arise.

August, September, October – are the months to document outcomes, analyse feedback, take 'summer' leave avoiding Clearing (the last round of recruitment), and new student arrival and induction dates when Access staff may be needed.

November – run the next Access Board meeting to wash up previous and start planning for next course. Promotional material can now be issued. One concept – admittedly never tested due to lack of resource but hopefully none-the-less of merit for readers to try – is to advertise an Access opportunity website

on local buses or billboards. On the advertised webpage, future learners are asked to put in their postcode which becomes a discreet way of offering context appropriate information in a targeted way. Potentially simple and effective. The approach could offer valuable information to all who visit the page, without telling those from ineligible WP postcodes that they are getting different information from those with greater need who get offered more support.

December – issue first year study continuation bursaries where available to the most deserving former Access students, hopefully enhancing their ability to progress without insurmountable financial barriers into their second semester. Take annual leave and enjoy Christmas.

Recognition of the above approaches

When the late and much missed Maggie Woodrow described in 'From elitism to inclusion' (1998) and its successor 'Social class and participation' (2002) the above approaches, she referred to Access work conducted by the author as one of the "best buys" in terms of effectiveness found during her research. She went on to describe the relevant course as a "full-blooded model of a summer school", complementing its "irreproachably thorough monitoring and tracking systems". The approach Maggie took – to document effective case studies in detail was not especially novel – but the clarity and focus of how it was done make her work one of those most frequently recommended to newcomers to the Access field. It is presented as clear, comprehensive common sense. For further reading Thomas (2005) provides a very useful excellent follow up. Learning lessons is not just a theme of this book but also hopefully a pathway to a better future. For more on tracking and evidence around the need to monitor and improve (to ensure strong progression by Access students), publications that cover this period of longitudinal work from a couple of decades ago still hopefully offer some useful insight including Allardice and Blicharski (2000), Blicharski (2000) and Blicharski (2009). Tracking research by definition takes time, which is why it is especially challenging to do.

As if to highlight this and wider Access challenges around making an impact and measuring it. Butcher (2020) provided a frank, some would say blunt, but accurate summary of the situation. It is worth quoting the views in full, as follows, due to the power of this assessment:

> I conclude, regrettably, that twenty years of research on WP and lifelong learning revealed a significant truth – despite all the efforts put in by practitioners and researchers over the 20 years, little has actually changed in relation to the inequitable gaps between access to higher education for the least and most privileged groups in societies across the world:
>
> - there are still gaps in the extent to which students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds persist and succeed in their higher education studies;

- there are still potential students excluded from learning in universities because of inflexible institutional systems;
- there are still university teachers who resist the implications of teaching a more diverse student body; and
- there are still students who are forced to bend themselves to fit archaic university systems because institutions are unwilling or unable to become more inclusive.

This mirrors the findings of the Commission of Widening Access (CoWA) in 2016 who evidenced WP in Scotland had 'flat lined' in the previous decade. Both these views seem negative, so if we are optimists, it may be better to view these realities slightly differently – if all of the WP work of recent decades had not occurred, Access would almost certainly have narrowed. Austerity-led politics made investing in a fairer race a luxury fewer institutions could afford. This is no reflection on desire to be inclusive and fair, rather a recognition as per our recurring theme throughout this book, fairness requires focus and resource as well as goodwill, all of which need to be sustained over a significant period.

The course elements outlined above chime with many approaches to empowerment of learning, the most obvious being Nottingham's (2017) "Learning Pit" theory. Specifically, one of the key ways to build learner confidence and resilience is to challenge them and let them discover that they can 'dig themselves out' of challenges, earning a huge sense of reward in the process. Although Access provision at many institutions predates the 'pit' publication, the core elements are helpfully the same in terms of fostering critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinking. Equally, as supported by Student Mentors, it is about enabling learners to evaluate and communicate their own learning to peers and teachers. Importantly this additionally adds what Nottingham notes as an 'expectation of success' – a superb concept of Access student futures. In ending this chapter, a short quote from Brené Brown (https://brenebrown.com/) who offers some sage advice on resilience and much more seems most fitting. "Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change." These learners are being forged into something stronger, using much more than just heat and light. They are being prepared for whatever they chose to tackle next in their lives. This is both a huge task and a huge responsibility. It is also hugely rewarding and very humbling.

10 Reflections – and now for something completely different

Our insight into the lives of Peter and Paul unfortunately ends before they graduate – maybe we will learn more in a future book? The point is that their individual races to enter their chosen degrees were both successful, if very different. We have also learned that despite coming from very different backgrounds, having been supported in very different ways, both Peter and Paul have had the opportunity to develop their potential at university, in Paul's case facilitated through Access support. Before we turn to some lighter moments in the quarter century life of an Access professional, we need to reflect on how we feel about what we have covered so far, indeed how we feel about Access. Should the Pauls of this world be given the same kinds of opportunities as the Peters? Does such fairness matter? How much in the latest century of human learning are we willing to invest to deliver such equality of opportunity, noting both students and taxpayers' foot the bill? Can we afford a diverse graduate-rich society? Indeed, with such huge levels of need for qualified talented staff globally, can we afford not to deploy the required resource to have an educated population?

Life within any university inevitably results in meeting lots of interesting people, and it is fair to say that for the author for over twenty-five years, Access work has delivered on this. To give the briefest insight into how political the Access field can be, over the years the author oversaw, politicians meeting himself, students from his Access Summer School (both on campus and elsewhere) included six MSPs (several whilst serving as Scottish Education Minister or Scottish Party Leader), an MP and a Prime Minister. In addition, he was invited to the Palace of Westminster to present on WP-related work at a committee. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair (just as 'New Deal' that included an educational option was launching in the UK) met some of the author's students, all the above taking great interest in all things WP. This cross-party support has continued throughout the period the book covers, the author continuing to serve on the Cross-Party Group on College and Universities at the Scottish Parliament.

University of Dundee Rectors have also played a prominent part, most notably Lorraine Kelly and the fabulous Stephen Fry, who when introduced to the author who was then titled as "the Access Summer School Director", commented: "Oh how wonderful. And what do you do the rest of the year?". MI5 whistleblower David Shayler became another friend of the course as he

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stood for Rector of the University. He had gained so much from his student days – getting into bother for illegally publishing extracts from the then banned *Spycatcher* book (written by ex-spy chief Peter Wright) in a university student magazine. David's tales around the Lockerbie plot were equally amazing. David's own time imprisoned in Paris on terrorist charges, in a cell next to 'Carlos the Jackal' were straight out of a thriller – but were real and appeared in the book his then partner Annie wrote with him (see their book *Spies, Lies and Whistleblowers* for the full extraordinary tale).

The security world emerged on one other occasion during the years this book covers, when officers involved in relocating a trial witness turned up on campus and asked the author and the then University Secretary not to pry too deeply into the credentials of a particular Access candidate – the reason being that they were a manufactured 'legend' created for the witness and family safety. It is never nice to know the person in front of you has a price on their head and potentially a hit squad on their tail due to them being in an international witness protection programme. Sobering and of course top secret at the time. Suffice to say that was a tense summer, which ended without incident but was then also kept quiet during their degree study – another few years of secrecy in the interests of justice.

Staying with matters legal, another memorable occasion was an hour spent in the company of a Law graduate who decided to use his many talents in a special direction and, his modesty aside, has become one of the most exciting television directors currently practicing. Michael Keillor generously gave up his time to inform a group of school pupils considering post-school study how personal growth and development could occur through studying for a Law degree. Naturally he was also asked questions about his work with the hit TV series 'Line of Duty' (especially as 'H' had not yet been revealed!) and 'Roadkill' with the brilliant Hugh Laurie – both suspenseful triumphs with fantastic casts.

Overt policing also has featured in the author's time in post, not least as those coming from often troubled pockets of society can attract or bring issues with them. A prime example was the occasion on which uniformed police officers turned up to question, probably under caution or arrest, a pupil attending one of the Access courses. In the modern GDPR compliant world, they probably would not have said what they did to the author, but did disclose that the accused was suspected of committing a crime some miles away at a particular place and time. Noting the author was trained as a scientist, his first reaction before taking the officers to where the student should have been was to open the ring binder of attendance registers on his desk. There, in black and white, was the signature of the accused sitting in a History class at the precise time he was supposed to be somewhere else committing the crime. On the strength of this the officers realised the candidate appeared to have a watertight alibi and they almost certainly had a case of mistaken identity, with further enquiries were needed elsewhere. Who would have thought a class register would perform this role.

Other contacts made during the author's time in Access have been literally out of this world and included Commander Dave Scott (one of the twelve men (so far) who have walked on the moon) and Commander Chris Hadfield (the 'singing astronaut', who sent his best wishes to those completing the course). Both offered similar advice to Access students, with some classic comment and quotes, the best being around (rephrased just slightly) "when your teachers tell you that 'the sky is the limit' tell them not to be so pessimistic." Just wonderful from an astronaut. Completing the space theme, in the summer of 2019 the author caught up with British astronaut Tim Peake who was generous in his time in discussing the value of learning. Tim had never expected to become a pilot, never mind a helicopter test pilot and certainly not an astronaut when he left school. His secrets to success he said was to 'sweat the detail' giving key tasks the attention they deserved, all done with cool, calm determination and a sharp focus on the moment before him. He was inspirational in what he wished to pass on to future students and his wish to return to space.

Sticking with the travel theme it is worthwhile remembering that without Access approaches and outreach so much talent is likely to remain hidden. The author recalls a telephone call from a clearly very smart individual asking about the Access courses at the University (I will offer fewer details here to preserve their anonymity). They wanted to study Geography – yes, both physical and human geography please – and were clearly very knowledgeable on many subjects despite what they described as having to leave a 'dead-end job'. Having given what advice he could, the author remained intrigued and asked why this person had developed this interest and how a dead-end job had generated this? The caller then revealed their life story – they had left school at 15 – had no paper qualifications but had seen almost all of the world as they navigated around it – they had just left the Armed Services where they had a very senior and significant role that had taken them around the world, many times on live conflict operations that understandably frowned on geographical and navigational errors. Now, however, as the weapon system they were expert in was retired, they had been put on gardening leave and were incredibly bored. Suffice to say the story had a much happier ending, to the benefit of the learner, Geography and beyond.

The terribly sad twenty-year anniversary in 2021 of 9/11 in the United States served as a reminder of that grim day – one the author can remember vividly, a colleague calling him over to watch the horrendous evolving scenes in stunned silence on a TV screen on campus. For a period a disaster movie became real life and being in a ten-storey building even thousands of miles away from the USA felt like a bad idea. Over a year after the day, the author was fortunate to host a private visit to Dundee of one of the heroes of that day, William Rodriguez, who bravely unlocked internal security doors in the Twin Towers that let many more people escape the attack. Whilst myths and speculation around 9/11 continue, with lots of wild theories still emerging, meeting someone who was actually verified as being there and who helped so

many others was a special moment that frankly felt a little religious. Not least as whilst WP is about helping individuals change their lives, meeting someone who had saved so many lives was extraordinary. You can read more about William here: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Rodriguez

Whilst on his travels early in his career, serving as an external examiner at a university that best remain nameless, the author encountered a fabulous if bittersweet bit of WP in action. The university in question had set up a new outreach and Access Summer School programme with elements akin to those the author had developed, so it was natural for them to ask the author to cast his eyes over how their new programme was doing and maybe spot areas for further work. Those were the days when local newspapers rather than social media tried to outrage the local populous to make news. So on that particular day, some bright spark in one of the less recognised publications decided to go with the headline "Scum kids go to university." Not only was this insulting and inappropriate but it clearly had not considered how the students involved would feel should they have the misfortune to read it. Maybe the publisher had meant to write 'scheme kids', as in those from local council estates, but regardless the final print edition was a shock to all who saw it. However, in the true underdog spirit of Access, the students who did read it fought back rapidly in a way only they could. One of the more enterprising had a load of t-shirts printed up, selling them to classmates the next day, resulting in a batch of students turning up for class with t-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "We are the scum kids" and the university crest proudly upon them. We said at the time it was so surprising you couldn't have made it up, so I am rather glad that all these years on I am now able to tell the tale. I do wonder where the t-shirt idea originator is now – maybe running a very large innovative opportunity enterprise? A highly unusual unintended Access consequence that one, which also highlights one of the slightly disappointing aspects of work in WP. Just as it is extraordinarily satisfying to be able to identify student talent before they become students, helping them on that journey, it is a shame that only occasionally do staff get to glimpse all of their subsequent success long after they have graduated. It would be amazing to have a full picture of what became of every student that staff worked with. Of course some former students do contact their alma mater, and a small sample of their comments appear at the end of this chapter to provide readers with a flavour of how the students feel and how that makes those working in the WP field feel. And of course, cohort reunions when they take place and the work of colleagues who keep up with Alumni add to this.

In Chapter 9 we looked at the fact that students and their parents may inadvertently be away on holiday at the same time they need to be studying on campus for Access Summer School. Over the years a number of innovative approaches emerged to address this challenging issue, without losing deposits on holidays and the like. Some years ago, a student in this situation broke their arm just prior to travel, turning up to class (rather than holiday) wearing a suitably huge plaster cast and brandishing a note from their GP and a

holiday insurance refund. Whilst it was never established whether the injury was real or not – the cast did disappear after a somewhat rapid two days – the outcome was a win for the student, who earned an undergraduate place and a better value late summer holiday funded by the refund. Exactly how the cast was created remains a mystery. Many other successful approaches have generated the same result, but it is probably unprofessional to list more here. Some of the resourcefulness of 'street fighter' students is at times equally horrifying and innovative, with magnificent determination demonstrated. It is hard not to smile when a new ruse emerges, noting that 'the dog ate my homework' doesn't play well in the digital age of online backups.

In Chapter 9 we also touched on the joys of having the Fire Service called out on a 'false shout' as they term it – an alarm set off by someone accidently leaning on the alarm button, pressing it when somewhat unfit to walk in a straight line or, as more often happens in residences, triggered by smoke detectors where the fine smoke-resembling mist of deodorants, perfume and hair spray are the culprits. There was a time when such sprays were limited to the female floors of the buildings but times change and we are all the better for it – except possibly the Fire Service when falsely called to a spray event. One of the most productive, if that is the right word, occasions when a false alarm was actually helpful in improving relations occurred when the author was supervising an international school on campus, comprised solely of Italian pupils. The fire alarm sounded but the author was not joined outside by anything like the number of pupils expected. On arrival the Fire Service were very alarmed to hear the building had not been fully evacuated and rushed in. When they did not return for some time, the author felt a professional and moral duty to investigate, not least as absolutely no smoke nor injury could be seen. Once inside, the scene that met him rates as one for the most unexpected in a long career. Fireman had quickly identified the tripped sensor and on investigation found said sensor – in a kitchen area – surrounded by pupils who were all taking part in a very special cooking process. As is traditional for our younger Italian cousins, they were having a spaghettata – a spaghetti party – and chose not to leave the building when the alarm sounded as the spaghetti was almost ready and would be ruined if over-cooked (al dente or bust, apparently). The angry fireman were quickly offered some of the now perfectly prepared pasta with just a hint of the best sauce Mama would be able to make and presumably felt it impolite to decline. Whether they learnt Italian or the students learnt English will never be known, although food is probably one of the best international languages. So, the scene that greeted the author was one of pupils and fireman scattered around the room sat on the floor and worktops tucking into enormous piles of steaming pasta. To make the scene even more bizarre, having run out of bowls some of the firemen had repurposed their inverted Fire Service helmets (minus liners) as makeshift bowls now full of spaghetti from the massive industrial double handled cooking pot used to make the many kilos of pasta – presumably this helmet functionality is covered in training. A quick rinse and helmets were

donned, their normal purpose utilised. And so international relations were more than restored, with much talk of football and the joys of Italian youth. The firemen left happy and full. The author for at least a few rare moments was speechless.

And talking of Italian youth, two other tales merit an airing, both having a romantic thread through them. The first involves the author supervising a group of students on a field trip to Scotland from all across Europe, housed in a distant hired college facility. As the college had two wings, the author allocated one for the boys and one for the girls, as space was limited it made sense for the author to bed down in a sleeping bag in the sole corridor that joined the two, having previously warned that no pasta was to be cooked and no cohabitation permitted (a general rule being that when older students visit, the number of students returning home should not be fewer nor more than those arriving). Sleep around midnight was literally shattered by a loud crashing noise followed by the emergence of a male student from the central toilet area with a significant head wound, shedding a fair amount of blood. After an ambulance trip to A&E, after which the author, through hastily provided latex gloves helped hold the wound closed, whilst the on-call doctor stitched it, a slightly stunned young man was brought back to campus having been given a good telling off. It was only then, when a hero's welcome awaited him, that the full story emerged. Conscious of the author on guard in the common hallway, the guests (who were meant to be asleep) took to communicating from the windows above said hallway using various forms of sign language. These were in the days before phones could send photos or swiping a screen in a particular direction might find a mate. When one of the more adventurous young ladies decided to flash at the boys window one of the more adventurous young men thought it only respectful to hop out of their window onto the roof of the corridor to obtain a better view and maybe a visit. Jumping onto a raised platform to achieve this was literally his downfall, as it was actually a plate glass skylight above the toilets. His cushioned bent knee landing on the pane which had not been designed for impact by an amorous Italian possibly saved his life, as he crashed through the glass he was already braced for impact which promptly occurred with a wash hand basin below, which he smashed on landing, partly through impacting it with his head (hence the significant wound). No amount of telling off however impacted the young man, as it transpired that the one thing more attractive to a bunch of Italian students than another bunch of Italians is of course another Italian with a highly visible scar received on a mission of love. He was a hero and the author was relieved that the worst outcome was completion of an accident form and a bill for glass and porcelain. The risk assessment completed before departure had not included nocturnal roof exploits but clearly should have. Lesson learned.

Staying with love and Italians, international relations can and do develop, although recent debates over free movement around Europe had a different meaning on this occasion. The author had been asked to show a typical

student room to a group of visitors to campus, the guests including a senior nun. The author made the cardinal (sorry, not sorry) error of not checking the room before proudly showing it to the guests. On opening the room door using his master key, it was quickly discovered that the empty room wasn't, one of the guests having not gone to class but stayed in bed instead with a local boy she had met the previous evening. Confronted by the visiting party – including a nun – the boy fled the room grabbing what clothes he could find – whilst the nun asked many questions of the guest student at a speed and volume well beyond normal linguistic ability and certainly a challenge to non-native speakers. Much waving of Italian hands and arms sufficiently conveyed the views of said nun. The young lady was told to get dressed and go to class, whilst the author was virtually frog marched to the Mother Superior who was visiting elsewhere on campus. A formal report had to be filed on the sinful nature of recent activity. On arrival, said Mother, decided it was her moral duty to meet with the young lady and discuss the value of virtue, so the now expanded party marched back to the scene of the crime. Finding the door locked, the author made his second mistake of the day and used his master key once more. The previous scene then repeated with a very embarrassed young lady covering up in bed and a semi-naked male again fleeing the room. A hurried conversation then took place between the nun and her Mother Superior, along the lines of 'you said it was pupil X who had sinned, this is pupil Y'. It transpired that, finding the room empty after our first visit after which pupil X left for class, during the time we had been away from the room, commuting, discussing and commuting back pupil Y (and her new local boyfriend from the previous night) could not believe their luck and were just about to improve international relations as pupil X had been earlier when we had all turned up for our second visit to the same room. With inter-nun conversations continuing the author was able to depart to rapidly supervise classes, only later to be asked just how predatory the local boys were, something he was unable to really answer on. From that point on, for the remainder of the visit, random room sweeps by the nuns ensured the rest of the stay was much more uneventful, noting all of the interrupted action happened in less than 30 minutes. So yes, another unexpected consequence and also probably a lesson in not making assumptions without testing them. Hard to categorise that particular lesson, however.

To conclude the montage of the unplanned, a memorable reminder of why the detail always matters came when the author was asked to host a visit and dinner for the creator of Dolly the Sheep – the first cloned and much celebrated mammal. Whilst the visit by Sir Ian Wilmut was a great success, nobody except the author and catering staff knew of the last minute horror of them realising that having lamb as the main course whilst media were present was probably unwise, it being swapped for something more appropriate just in the nick of time. Another example of check everything then check it again. Fine details matter and to the unprepared the unintended happens more than you might imagine.

This book ends with a collection of comments from the most important people in it – the runners themselves – former Access Students and those around them. The quotes are unsolicited and anonymised, genuine messages shared with the author and provide a flavour of the emotions around Access success. It is hoped they inspire those wishing to understand more about the lived experience of WP and Access. Students from the course have gone on to almost every walk of life, with at least a few now holding senior posts in local schools and colleges, others running a local council, significant businesses and more – all giving back from their lessons. They are published with permission in this spirit, to record that lessons can be learned to great effect, whilst supporting university entry in the age of WP and to demonstrate the joy of such work. Enjoy learning your own lessons as you help others learn theirs.

From Access graduates

> "Just wanted to drop you a quick email after getting my honours classification yesterday. Delighted to be graduating with a first class (!!!) but I wouldn't be here if it hadn't all started with Access Summer School – I'm so grateful for the course and all you do for it to allow the likes of myself to come and study here!"
>
> "I left the RAF with hopes of moving into a career in IT. Unfortunately, as I had no A level qualifications I didn't have any luck applying to universities until I applied to Dundee, who suggested the Access Summer school. I used the last of my leave to attend the six-week course which, whist hard work was great fun and I was able to start a degree in Applied Computing that September and also met my partner on the course. … The other day we both received the good news that we will be graduating this month with first-class honours degrees in Computing Science and Mathematics, respectively. We wanted to share this good news with you and also to thank you for giving us the opportunity to study through the Access Summer School. Without the Summer School's help we would both have found it much harder to gain a place on a degree course and may not have been able to study at university level at all. As it is I will be starting a new job as a Software Developer in Edinburgh soon and my partner will be going on to study for a PhD in Maths also here. The Summer School has allowed us both to achieve our goals and gain positions we would not have otherwise been able to, not to mention meet each other! Our most sincere thanks."
>
> "I graduated high school without acquiring the necessary grades to enter any of my five choices for University. Unfortunately, due to family problems in my senior year I did not do as well as I hoped in my final exams. Luckily a neighbour told me about Access Summer School. … I then went on to graduate with a 2:1 in English and History MA Honours. I will be doing my PGDE in August of 2016. Without Access Summer School I do not know if I would have accomplished my goals."
>
> "I was extremely fortunate to secure a place on Access Summer School. I was passionate about studying social work but without this course I would not have had the relevant qualifications to gain access to University. To undertake Access Summer school I had to give up my full-time employment which meant, financially, this was difficult. However, whilst I was attending summer school I was offered a £60 per week bursary making it possible for me to attend and succeed in my studies. After completing summer school, I went on to study an

undergraduate degree within social work. This was a fantastic course and everyone within the academic team were very supportive. During my four years, I had part-time jobs to support my studies, however, I also relied very heavily on my loan and tuition fees. Without this funding, university would not have been possible for me, and I am glad to say that I graduated last year with a first-class honours. Throughout my time at university, I also worked on the Access Summer School as a mentor as widening access to education is something I am incredibly passionate about. This gave me the opportunity to support other students who were also trying to gain a place within the university through the Access summer school route. This was an excellent opportunity giving me the relevant skills and qualifications to secure my current job. Attending university has really been the best decision I have ever made."

"I attended summer school several years ago and was admitted to a joint honours in English and Philosophy. I just wanted to thank you and the summer school team for having faith in me as I have just received my degree classification. I am delighted and surprised to have achieved a first-class honours. If there is anything I could do as a mature student, even talking to summer school candidates on one of your open days, I would be happy to help. I feel the summer school process was invaluable to my enjoyment of the degree process."

"Participating in Access Summer School was by far the best decision I've ever made. Such a great opportunity for people to reach their full academic potential and get a taste of their future in education! I met some of the craziest people on my journey, who I fully intend to keep in touch with. The Access Summer School is genuinely an amazing opportunity that I totally recommend! :-)"

"If I could sum up summer school I would describe it as being the fastest few weeks of my life! I've learned a lot about myself and have thoroughly enjoyed everything about it. From the individuality of each lecturer to the talented students I have learned alongside. I was naturally apprehensive when I gave up a long-term stable career to attend university. Summer school has gone a long way to allaying such fears."

"An amazing intense experience that gives you all the tools and support you need for university while giving you an insight into university life – not forgetting the friends for life you make."

"I know because we often use the phrase 'Thank you' so often its true meaning has been lost in effect but honestly I want to say **Thank you** for the summer school experience, although I did not get my original course, it was a unique opportunity, and when this success story will be told your effort will not be forgotten."

"I wanted to take this opportunity to give you thanks for accepting my application and allowing me the chance to flourish. I have recently graduated with a 2:1 degree in MA Geography and couldn't be happier at this moment, if it wasn't for outside stress, I may have managed a 1st, however, I am extremely happy with my degree and hope to go onto further education. If it wasn't for Access Summer School and the opportunities given to people like me, I'd more than likely be stuck in a dead-end job with nothing to look forward to. So, again many, many thanks and best wishes. Access-graduate!!"

"I participated in the programme last summer and really feel that it helped me get to terms with what university life entails and cannot recommend the programme enough. I would like to thank you for the opportunity given to me

during summer as, though it was hard, I now realise how much I gained from it and knowing an additional hundred people and now considering some of the people met during summer school to be some of my best friends, I really can't thank you and everyone else that helped out enough."

"I just wanted to say a massive thank you to yourself and everyone else behind the scenes at Access Summer School. Roughly a week ago right now I was on the phone to my parents telling them the great news that I would be returning in late summer as a full-time student. It still hasn't sunk in yet and it is really weird being back home after living up here for four weeks. I cannot thank you enough for the opportunity that was presented to me, giving me the chance to get into university, without it I would be college bound for at least the next year. I have met some great people, both students and those working at the university as well as knowing what is expected of me as a first-year student. I look forward to coming up in late August, to once again see all the people I met through Access Summer School but also meet the thousands more who I will be studying alongside for hopefully the next four years. Once again thank you for the opportunity."

"Just wanted to thank you both for all of the hard work that you have done for us all as I feel it put me at ease with the whole process and I now feel far better equipped for when I start in September. It's been one of the best experiences of my life and I have thoroughly enjoyed it. I really appreciate everything you as well as everyone else on the Access Summer School team have done, and have made some friends that I feel will stay with me for life. Thank you for everything."

"I'd really like to take this minute just to say thank you for giving me the opportunity to attend summer school this year. It's been an unforgettable experience and I've loved every single minute of it. I've also made so many great friends who it feels like I've known a lifetime! I thoroughly enjoyed the whole course and I think summer school is a brilliant idea, I didn't even know it existed until I got my conditional through the door and I was extremely wary about summer school, but as soon as I arrived I felt instantly at home. Thank you again, summer school has been brilliant!"

"Throughout high school for one reason or another I did not achieve the grades I know I am capable of, and on leaving school my options were limited. I had heard from a friend that there was an Access Summer School course I could take which would enable to me to reach my potential, become accepted into university and continue with my education. Luckily for me the Access team saw something in me. This gave me immediate belief in myself and I completed the summer school course successfully. I went onto get a 2.1 undergraduate degree in Geography and successfully completed a Master's in Hydrology. This has now given me several opportunities to take my career forward, whether that be a PhD, teaching or a job relating to hydrology/geography. I would not be where I am today had it not been for the opportunity I was given at Summer School and I am extremely grateful. Although Access Summer School gave me a chance in education; I also had the chance to meet some wonderful people, some of which are my very close friends today. Summer School is an amazing opportunity, a great foundation to build confidence and belief in yourself, and ultimately gives you a platform to fulfil the potential you knew you had."

"I graduated this summer with a MA(Hons) geography and History with an upper second. What the summer school did for me was prepare me for the rigours of university life and to help me achieve something I did not think was possible. I was the first in my family to go to University and to achieve a degree. The summer school helped me prepare for this and as a mature student who before had lacked the self-confidence to do so, the summer school instilled into me that anything was possible if I worked hard but especially if I enjoyed myself also. The five years I spent studying for my degree will forever be in my memory and especially for the friends that I have made that I can now class as lifelong friends. To me university and its summer school will always have a special place in my heart and it is with this that I have been spreading the word as to the benefits of the summer school and to those that want to go to university but do not have the confidence or courage to do so. I say to those that if I can do it then anyone can and this I feel is the spirit of the university."

"I was lucky to get the opportunity to participate which allowed me to attend Town & Regional Planning degree, without the summer school this would never have been possible… I am eternally grateful for the opportunity and hope that others get to benefit from this."

"Access Summer School was not only the best opportunity I've ever had, but also the best possible preparation for starting my academic journey. Every time another student falls behind because they haven't been keeping a diary, taking key notes and checking their emails regularly, I'm filled with an almost guilty pride. The Access Summer School experience has proved invaluable to my continuing studies and I am eternally grateful. Keep up the good work."

"Access Summer School is very competitive. Having had to leave school to support my ill Mum, without it I would not be here now. I am very proud to be one of the students to benefit from Access Summer School since 1993. It is a credit to the university."

"Best weeks of my life."

"Brilliant preparation for study – soooo useful now I have made it into First year."

"Graduation day has been great. I have a degree and a bright future! But Access Summer School is where it all started and I will never forget that."

"I found my experiences during Access Summer School to be very valuable and I draw on the skills and knowledge I gained even now as a postgraduate."

"I can't stop smiling!! Can't wait to get started in September now!"

From a mum

"I just wanted to let you know how much the opportunity of attending the Access summer school has been appreciated by my son. He has always found social interaction difficult, and it was extremely challenging to be away from home out of his comfort zone – it was exactly what he needed! We are so grateful that he has gained his place to study this autumn through attending the summer school, and he is feeling so much more confident now that the knows what to expect. A huge thank you also to the young man who called us to alert us to the opportunity, as without this call we may well have missed it! The University is doing a fantastic thing with the summer school, and you should know what a difference it makes to your future students."

Looking back

"We were the first year to try Access Summer School in 1993. I remember it as a really good experience. It gave me an indication as to what university life would be like and what was required to a certain extent. I met some amazing people and still keep in touch with some of them to this day. It was really different from school and that was one of the things that I liked about it. You were treated as an adult experiencing new things and learning at the same time. I still use some of the skills gained from my time at the summer school in my current positions."

"I thought I should share with you some success stories of previous Access Summer School students that I've recently found out about. I bumped into xx (Summer School '95) a few weeks ago. She is working as a clinical psychologist and doing really well for herself. Xx (also '95) received her PhD from the University of x this summer and is working as applied computing lecturer at the University of xx. Closer to home, xx ('94) is now a senior lecturer at College. So much for 'setting these kids up to fail'!"

"I can't quite believe it is 20 years this year since I was a fresh face school leaver joining the Access Summer School. The Summer School for me was a great bridge to the opportunities I have been given in my career and for that I will always be extremely grateful. I studied abroad at the University of Oklahoma in my second year at Dundee, I graduated with an Honours degree in English Literature and Education and went on to do a Postgraduate Diploma in Information Technology. I then was lucky to secure a position in HR Development and have worked in Learning & Development since 2001 and in the last six years I also specialised in Organisational Behavioural Safety. I was very lucky to rejoin the University as a member of staff. Twenty years on I still have fond memories of the Summer School and the doors it has opened for my own career."

"Just a short note to let you know that I have passed my degree in nursing and await my graduation in November! I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to attend the summer school, as without this I would never have been able to achieve this accomplishment. The skills I learnt during summer school have been invaluable to me over the last three years, and I feel that I have managed to achieve far better grades due to the excellent tuition I received whilst on your course. Thanks for giving me this initial start at University and I will always be grateful to you."

"Being dyslexic, I wouldn't have got into University without the incredible support here that started from the moment I started the Access Summer School programme."

"I'm writing to you guys to personally say a massive thank you to you both for helping me reach this far into my dream. I realised that it only took for someone to give me a chance and I'm so grateful you guys were there to answer my call. When I'm working I will love to sponsor a summer school student. Thank you so much for everything you have made one girl so so happy. P.S. Keep up the amazing job you do."

Appendix 1

An example set of a typical set of contextual criteria and how they may be grouped into the highest (Category1 or 'super flag') and next highest (Category 2) priorities. One approach is to treat applicants with multiple Category 2 flags as if they had at least one Category 1 flag.

Category 1 Flags – letters result in immediate intervention (offer or interview)

Flag	*Description*
A	Home Postcode in SIMD Q1
B	Free School Meals
C	Care Experienced
D	Unpaid Carer
E	Refugee/Asylum Seeker
F	Estranged

Category 2 Flags

Flag	*Description*
M	Home Postcode in SIMD Q2
O	Participation in AHDP (Reach and ACES) Project
P	Mental Health Issues (also can appear elsewhere as code F)
Q	Other Disability Declared
R	SWAP
S	Transgender
T	Estranged
U	Adult Returner
V	Disrupted Education: assessed as attending five or more Primary / Secondary schools or residing more than 40 miles from their Secondary School
Z	Other (e.g. assessed criminal conviction, children's panel enquiry)

Example: If an applicant was SIMD Q1, with verified mental health issues and had applied via SWAP, then their student record codes for contextual admissions would be: 'APR'.

Appendix 2

Example: Access Summer School Timetable
Induction Wednesday: One day induction on campus

0845–1015 Matriculation
1015–1045 Welcome from Course Director
1045–1100 Short Campus Familiarisation commute, identifying Accommodation, Library, etc.
1100–1130 Relax in Student Union and informal introductions to key staff
1130–1200 Introductory talk: Supporting Your Needs: How the Library can help you to study
1200–1300 Lunch Student Union
1300–1400 Induction to transitions: Academic Skills for University
1400–1415 Introductory talk: Support available from Disability Services
1415–1530 Open question session followed by Student Mentors led session
1530– OnwardsRelax in Student Union

Students who were unable to matriculate in the morning session may do so after presentations conclude.

Phase 1: 12 working days plus six weekend days

Online – Transitions: Academic Skills for University 'Academic Orientation week'. Must complete to progress. Those who do not complete will not join Phase 2.

Sunday 1400–1600 Move into Residences for those staying on-campus during four teaching weeks.

Phase 2: Graded modules run for four identical weeks

	Monday	*Tuesday*	*Wednesday*	*Thursday*	*Friday*
0900–1000	Step up to Uni Skills module	Step up to Uni Skills module	Step up to Uni Skills module	Step up to Uni Skills module	History Global Citizen & Health Art & Design 1
1000–1100	Film Genre Intro Mathematics Town Reg Plan&Env. Sustain	Psychology Applied Computing	Geography & Env Sci Discovering Enterprise & Entrepreneurship American Studies Orientation Medical Studies Orientation Dental Studies	Film Genre Intro Mathematics Town Reg Plan&Env. Sustain	Physics Philosophy Globalisation Art & Design 2 Understand Your Professional Self
1100–1200	Geography & Env Sci Discovering Enterprise & Entrepreneurship American Studies Orientation Medical Studies Orientation Dental Studies	Psychology Applied Computing	Physics Philosophy Globalisation Art & Design 2 Understand Your Professional Self	Physics Philosophy Globalisation Art & Design 2 Understand Your Professional Self	Physics Philosophy Globalisation Art & Design 2 Understand Your Professional Self
1200–1300		LUNCH or working lunch – Finance Capability Student Funding	LUNCH	LUNCH	LUNCH or Moving to 1st Year. Bring your own lunch
1300–1400	History Global Citizen & Health Art & Design 1 Life Sci Practical	English Literature Mathematics for EPM Spanish French	Geography & Env Sci Discovering Enterprise & Entrepreneurship American Studies Orientation Medical Studies Orientation Dental Studies	Physics Philosophy Globalisation Art & Design 2 Understand Your Professional Self	Film Genre Intro Mathematics Town Reg Plan&Env. Sustain

	Monday	*Tuesday*	*Wednesday*	*Thursday*	*Friday*
1400–1500	History Global Citizen & Health Art & Design 1 Life Sciences Workshop	History Global Citizen & Health Art & Design 1 Life Sci Practical	Geography & Env Sci Discovering Enterprise & Entrepreneurship American Studies Orientation Medical Studies Orientation Dental Studies	Geography & Env Sci Discovering Enterprise & Entrepreneurship American Studies Orientation Medical Studies Orientation Dental Studies	Film Genre Intro Mathematics Town Reg Plan&Env. Sustain
1500–1600	English Literature Mathematics for EPM Spanish French	History Global Citizen & Health Art & Design 1 Life Sciences Workshop	Psychology Applied Computing	Psychology Applied Computing	English Literature Mathematics for EPM Spanish French
1600–1700	Geography & Env Sci Discovering Enterprise & Entrepreneurship American Studies Orientation Medical Studies Orientation Dental Studies	Film Genre Intro Mathematics Town Reg Plan&Env. Sustain	English Literature Mathematics for EPM Spanish French	English Literature Mathematics for EPM Spanish French	Psychology Applied Computing Final check-out of all Summer School students staying in University arranged accommodation

Marks and graduation non-teaching week

Monday	*Tuesday*	*Wednesday*	*Thursday*	*Friday*
Students are not required to attend				1300–1400 Graduation Ceremony 1400 Buffet for Students, Staff & Family
1300 – Deadline for all Module Coordinators to submit single overall module grade per candidate	1400–1600 Admissions Meeting	1000–1400 Exam Board	Results become available via Student Portal	

Example of the kind of notes course leaders need to prepare for candidates to assist them in picking appropriate Access Summer School Modules

1 Students should consider the relevance of their module selection to their substantive degree area.
2 Students **cannot** choose more than one subject from the same column.
3 Introductory Maths, Introduction to Life Sciences and Orientation Medical or Dental Studies are reserved exclusively for students required to take these modules by their UCAS offers.
4 Students wishing to study Art and Design must take both Art and Design 1 and Art and Design 2. These two modules partner each other.
5 French and Spanish modules are introductory modules, and cannot be taken by students who hold SQA Higher (or equivalent) qualifications in these subjects.
6 Students not required to take Advanced Maths and/or Physics but who wish to do so are advised that they should hold at least a C pass in the relevant SQA Higher (or equivalent) qualification, or be predicted to achieve this grade in the upcoming results period.
7 Medical and Dental Students have four compulsory modules: Skills, Understand Your Professional Self, Orientation Medical or Dental Studies Introduction to Life Sciences.

Access Summer School Module selection list						
	All students pick THREE subjects to study, a maximum of one per column (e.g. from columns 1, 3 and 6)					
Skills – taken by all students	1	2	3	4	5	6
16 hours	20 hours	20 hours	20 hours	19 hours	19 hours	20 hours
-	English Literature	Physics	Psychology	Geography and Environmental Science	Film Genres	History
-	Advanced Maths	Philosophy	Applied Computing	Discovering Enterprise & Entrepreneurship	Town Planning and Environmental Sustainability	Global Citizenship and Health
-	French	Art and Design 2		American Studies	-	Art and Design 1
-	Spanish	Globalisation	-	Orientation Medical Studies	-	-
-	-	Understand Your Professional Self	-	Orientation Dental Studies	Introductory Maths	Introduction to Life Sciences

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