**Contextual Admissions at WGU – a guide for applicants**

If you’re thinking of applying to study at university, you’ll more than likely come across the phrase ‘contextual offers’ or ‘contextual admissions’ at some point, most likely on the websites of the universities that you’re looking at. However, different universities treat ‘contextual’ admissions processes in different ways.

This guide is intended to explain how ‘contextual admissions’ works at Wrexham Glyndŵr University. By understanding the process more, we hope you will be able to take more advantage of the flexibility that our contextual processes offer during the admissions process, and achieve an offer and eventually a place that is more suited to your individual circumstances.

**What is ‘contextual admissions’?**

Contextual admissions involves us taking into account certain circumstances that you may have encountered during your life that may have affected things like your qualifications or your work history. These circumstances are taken into account when we make a decision on your application.

**What circumstances do we mean?**

Usually, the circumstances a university would be looking for in an application to trigger a ‘contextual’ decision would include:

* If you live in an areas with traditionally low progression to university
* If you live in an area of socio-economic deprivation
* If you have ever been in care
* If you school or college falls below the national average for GCSE or A Level standards
* If you would be a mature student when joining

Our admissions processes at WGU take these factors into account, but our contextual decisions are also made based on information available about you on the application regarding things that don’t necessarily fit into these categories:

* What were your circumstances when you last studied? How could these circumstances have affected your performances in assessment?
* What are your circumstances now? Could these negatively affect what you’re currently doing?
* If you’re a mature student, what non-academic factors can be taken into account to strengthen your application? How have your life experiences prepared you for further study?
* Does your reference indicate we should be taking an external factor or factors into account when assessing the application?

**How do I tell you this information?**

The UCAS applications provides us with quite a bit of data to start with; the area of the country you are applying from, for example. However, we find the most useful parts of an application in terms of identifying circumstances where contextual offers are appropriate are the personal statement and the reference.

We encourage you to tell us about your individual circumstances within your personal statement. The ideal statement would still be structured well, and tell us all about your skill and relevant experiences, but it should also allow us to see you as an individual; what challenges have you overcome? What barriers have you broken through to get where you are today? With this information, we can get a much better idea of you as a person, and therefore you as a student. We can then better apply any additional supporting mechanisms we need to, to ensure your experience of the admissions process is as positive as possible.

You’re not responsible for your reference of course; someone else will write that for you. However, the additional information we get from a referee can help us clarify anything you may have mentioned in your personal statement, or back up some of the points you’ve told us about. Therefore, if you’re applying independently (ie, if you’re not applying via a school or college where your reference gets written by one or more of your tutors), make sure you really consider WHO you are asking to provide a reference for you.

Do they know you well enough to understand the challenges you’ve faced? Do they understand the barriers you’ve already broken through? Talk to them about the reference, and make sure they understand how important it is to you, not just in getting a place, but in giving us much needed information that may allow us to put more support in place for you, and be more flexible with your offer when places are being confirmed.

**Why is all this information important?**

As a University with a lot of students from a Widening Access background, we know that not every applicant has had access to the same learning opportunities and support as others. We believe that this should be addressed as part of the admissions process.

**Does this mean if I tick any of those boxes it doesn’t matter what qualifications I have?**

No. A contextual admissions process doesn’t mean everyone with challenging circumstances automatically gets an offer. How likely you are to get an offer depends on a number of other factors, the main one being what course/s you’re applying for and what the specific entry requirements are for that course.

What it DOES mean is that we can apply more flexibility for you at various stages of the process, and use one or more of our contextual offer tools to make the admissions process easier for you.

**So what DOES it mean? How will my application be treated differently?**

When we identify one or more of these contextual indicators in your application, we may do one or more of several things:

* We may make you a lower offer
* We may offer you an interview where, based on your qualifications alone, you would not normally have been considered for one
* We may add a preparatory course to your offer from us, for example our [Confident Learner](https://glyndwr.ac.uk/courses/short-courses/confident-learner/) programme
* We may offer you increased support from our Widening Access team during the admissions process
* We may apply more flexibility than normal to our final decision when we confirm places in the summer (September intake)/winter (January intake)

**How does this work in practice?**

There are several tools we can use during the process to make things easier for you.

* **Making lower offers**

Some universities make ‘contextual offers’ to those who fulfil contextual admissions criteria. These offers are traditionally 1 or 2 grades lower than a standard offer. We do not make this type of offer as standard.

Instead, our offer will still fit into our sliding scale of UCAS Tariff points for that course even if you fulfil contextual criteria. An offer may be at a lower end of the scale than another applicant receives however, if we have identified factors in the application that justify this lower-end offer. This is why you should never worry or be concerned about your offer if you know someone who has also applied who has had a different offer to you; all applications are treated individually and shouldn’t be compared to anyone else’s.

* **Offering an interview**

For our more competitive courses, an applicant may be rejected prior to interview if they do not fulfil standard shortlisting criteria. However, if your application has one or more contextual indicators or mitigating factors apparent, an interview may be offered instead of a rejection.

* **Including a preparatory course as a condition of offer**

We offer a number of short courses that can form part of your offer depending on your personal circumstances. The Confident Learner for example is a popular short course that we use as a bridge into WGU for people who have been out of education for some time or who are making a career change. If you come along to one of our open events you’ll hear a lot mentioned about the Confident Learner in particular, especially if you’re a mature student.

* **Increased support from Widening Access**

We’re really proud of the Widening Access work we do at the University, and Identifying mitigating factors within an application gives us the opportunity to offer you the support of our Widening Access facilities. This can take the form of increased communication during the application process, the organisation of one-to-one discussions between you and our Admissions Team or Admissions Tutor or other services which may assist you if you require extra support to navigate through the application process.

* **Applying more flexibility at Confirmation**

This is the most significant point in the cycle at which offers are reduced based on the circumstances we’ve talked about above. We will take into account your situation during your assessment periods, and any other contextual factors present in your application at this point. We can then reduce the offer requirements for you when results are known and your UCAS tariff point totals are available.

**How will I know if I’m eligible for any of these things?**

In practice, any or all of the above methods can be used during an admissions cycle for those who require them. The Admissions team will advise on individual circumstances as appropriate, and we encourage you to contact the team should you wish to know more.

You can call us on 01978 293439, use our webchat facility at glyndwr.ac.uk or email us at enquiries@glyndwr.ac.uk and we’ll be happy to help

**Case studies**

To give you a better idea of how this works in practice, we’re created the following (fictional) case studies to illustrate how the process works.

**Case study 1**

Jill, who is 18, and an only child in a single parent family, is in the second year of her study at college and has not been doing well.  She was a good student during her GCSE study, gaining A-Cs in all her subjects, but during the summer before her A Levels started her mother became ill.  Jill started to care for her mother, whose condition got steadily worse through the first year of her A Levels, and her grades took a big hit.  When filling in her UCAS application her tutors predict her grades of CDD, which would give her 80 tariff points, missing the standard entry requirements for the course she wants to do by 32 points.  In a predicted-grade-based decision system, it’s likely Jill would be rejected at application stage, or at best offered a course at a lower level.

However, Jill has been honest in her personal statement as part of her UCAS application.  She knows why her grades have taken a hit, and she knows she’s not going to get predicted the grades she needs to do her course and she tells us this.  Her referee tells us the same story: Jill is an excellent student, and she’d do very well at university, but her personal circumstances have meant she’s not been able to concentrate fully on her studies.  Despite her personal challenges we learn that Jill has completed everything asked of her, even if not as well as she could have done, and whilst her attendance has been poor this is because she’s simply had no-one to help her care for her mother to allow her to regularly attend college.

Both the personal statement and the reference are telling us the same story here; this is a talented student who has had a difficult time.  Things are getting better for her though.  Her School contacts us and says that since the reference was written there is more care being put in place at home, and Jill’s attendance has started to improve because of this.  Her last assignment was a big improvement, and by the end of her studies she may have improved those predicted grades.

This contact from the school, combined with Jill’s obvious talent which comes across in her personal statement and is backed up by her referee means that Jill’s application when taken in context is much stronger than it initially seemed.  We invite her to attend an applicant day and we get a chance to talk to her, to discuss her current situation and how she thinks things are improving.  Again, she tells us how things have been tough at home but she thinks they’re getting better.  She’s passionate about the subject she wants to do, and that comes across to the tutors she meets, one of whom is the Admissions Tutor for that programme.  Based on that visit, and all the contextual information we have from her application and from the school’s contact with us means we make her a lower tariff offer than we normally would.  We also ask her to attend our Confident Learner programme.  It’s taught very flexibly over three days which she appreciates, because whilst she lives locally, her caring responsibilities mean attendance at events at the moment can be hard for her.

Jill attends the confident learner, enjoys herself and is happy she’s made the correct firm choice.  The Confident Learner tutor is so impressed they contact us in admissions to let us know (because they know she’s also an applicant) and we’re able to put a further note on her record that, even if she doesn’t quite meet the terms of her lower offer she’s shown she’s capable of studying at level 4 and we should take that in to account.

In the end, it’s not needed and Jill vastly improves on her predicted grades come August, beating her offer by several grades.  But if she hadn’t, the extra context we had at each stage of the admissions process for her meant we could apply flex at key stages, and make an offer that we wouldn’t have done just based on grades alone.

**Case study 2**

Jack has been out of education for many years because he had a difficult school life and didn’t succeed at his GCSEs, so didn’t do the A levels he wanted to and dropped out at AS stage after a year because of this.  His tariff points are minimal, and a non-contextual offer would be a straight reject.

However, as our Widening Access Coordinator brought him to see us one day, we know that since he left college he’s been in the military, and has also enjoyed drawing in his spare time for many years.  He’s built up a strong portfolio of work in that time which he’s very proud of.

Knowing this, we’ve been able to encourage him to think about applying.  We’ve emphasised how he needs to make sure he includes information in his application about his time in the military (we have found that, without this specific advice, many ex-service personnel leave this off their forms to their detriment), and how his obvious passion for his art needs to come through by telling us about pieces he’s done that he’s particularly happy with.

Jack’s more enthusiastic now, but not quite sure it’s for him, so he does the Looking Forward to HE module that is recommend by Widening Access. The support he gets on the course is excellent – now he’s really getting some confidence, and he applies.

We see all the context he’s put in his personal statement about his service record, we see he’s proud of his portfolio and we see that’s he’s already engaged well with us through the LFTHE module; his application has so much more context than his 20 tariff points would alone suggest, and the tutor is keen to meet him.  Jack is invited to his interview, but we’re careful to make sure he knows he shouldn’t be nervous; the tutor loves the same stuff he does, it’s going to be fun to talk about it!  Jack attends, and the tutor is impressed.  He wants to make an offer, but what about his tariff points?

We agree to go for the foundation year, and to ask him to complete the Confident Learner before he starts because Jack, despite all his progress, still lacks a little confidence.  Jack gets his offer, and he gets a call from a current student who was on the foundation year last year and is now part of the Applicant Support Team.  All the little questions Jack has about being a student can be answered by his new friend from the AST; he was a little nervous asking staff those questions because he’s worried the staff will think he’s not good enough, but he’s really happy to talk to a student who he knows was once in the same boat as him.

Jack has a great time on the Confident Learner course when he does it, he impresses the tutor and he makes a friend who’s also going to be studying a foundation year this year.  Together, they decide to attend a Foundation Year Applicant Day, and they meet more people in the same situation who all, previously, thought they were the only ones in their own particular situation.

By September, Jack is fully ready and excited to start, he’s already made connections and he’s there bright and early on the first day of term.

Without context in the admissions process, Jack would be rejected outright.  With it, and with all the extra steps we provide along the way to engage him and reassure him, he gets to be a student.