

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

'I Shouldn't Really Be Here': University Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Transitioning to University With a Contextual Offer Admission

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Received: 29 July 2024 | **Revised:** 14 December 2024 | **Accepted:** 22 December 2024

Funding: This work was supported by Higher Horizons. And an acknowledgement to Ant Sutcliffe..

Keywords: adjusted offers | contextual offers | multi and multi-dimensional transitions | transition to university

ABSTRACT

Universities may offer students from disadvantaged personal or socioeconomic contexts a lower threshold for entry compared to students from a more stable or affluent background; this is termed a contextual offer. Examples may include having a health condition, disability or living and going to school in a less affluent area. While there has been extensive debate on how to enact these offers, the experiences of students who attend university with a contextual offer have been lacking in the literature. In this study, we interviewed five students from two UK Universities to explore their experiences of transitioning to university with a contextual offer. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Our findings suggest that students felt that their offer had given them opportunities they would not have had, which not only raised their ambitions and expectations but also negatively impacted their self-belief as many students worried about their academic abilities. Students also discussed how their contextual offer had negatively impacted their sense of belonging, both academically and socially, at university, leading to feelings of difference and lower self-efficacy; however, these feelings were ameliorated by knowing others with contextual offers. Finally, students felt that there was a need for greater awareness of contextual offers to reduce stigma and ensure that others could benefit from them. Implications for research, policy and practice are discussed.

1 | Background

Contextual or adjusted offers consider the context of an applicant's attainment. This means that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may offer a student who has experienced difficult circumstances a lower threshold for entry to a course than a student from a more stable or affluent background. Contextual offer information is available through an applicants' personal statement, school references, additional admissions questionnaires, local knowledge of schools and colleges, and participation in outreach programmes (which signals that an applicant is identified as disadvantaged before applying for HE as they have

met the inclusion criteria for targeted outreach). Contextual offers are based on four levels: area (e.g., where the applicant lives), school (e.g., if the academic performance of the applicants' school is below the national average, or a small proportion of students go on to HE), individual (e.g., if the student has a disability, health condition, has spent time in Local Authority care) and participation in university outreach programmes (the most common contextual offer indicator) (Sutton Trust 2021). The aim of the current paper is to explore the experiences of students who come to university with a contextual offer to better understand their perspectives. We root our discussion primarily in a UK perspective but draw on examples from other countries

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to illustrate that increasing access to HE for underrepresented groups is an international concern (Mountford-Zimdars, Moore, and Graham 2016).

Fair access to HE for different social groups is a key challenge, as 'equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential' (Schwartz 2004, 5), as 'a learner who achieves good grades in a significantly more challenging context, without the advantages of a more affluent background, is likely to be especially bright and well-motivated' (Commission on Widening Access 2016, 36). Thus, contextual offers aim to recognise the context of the student's achievement and therefore allow admissions teams to identify applicants with the greatest potential to succeed in HE. This links to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. When universities focus solely on grades, they may replicate social inequalities which unfairly discriminate against learners from disadvantaged backgrounds; they may also fail to recruit the best talent (CoWA 2016).

The use of contextual data in HE admissions has been endorsed by the UK government since 2011 and has featured in a number of policy recommendations, including the Department for Education social mobility action plan, which emphasised the need to 'expand access to the best universities for young people from less advantaged backgrounds' as one of its ambitions (DfE 2017, p.8). A similar goal was highlighted by the HE regulator for England, the Office for Students (OfS 2018). Recently, following two decades of slow progress towards closing the socioeconomic gap in rates of access to the most academically selective universities, the Office for Students has set a target for the most academically selective universities to equalise the ratio of entrants from areas of the country with high and low rates of participation in HE, from a baseline of 5:1 in 2017 to 3:1 by 2025 and to 1:1 by 2039 (Boliver and Powell 2021).

In order to meet these ambitious new widening access targets, the HE regulator has encouraged the most academically selective universities to engage in a process of 'rethinking how merit is judged in admissions' (Office for Students 2018, 8). The call to 'rethink merit' is shared by critics of other highly selective admission systems, including that of China (Liu and Helwig 2020) and the United States. Techniques such as 'holistic assessment' of applicant merit for socioeconomically disadvantaged applicants, and the use of affirmative action policies for members of disadvantaged ethnic minority groups (Liu 2011) have been used to do this.

However, the UK's HE sector is deeply stratified, and the evidence base is still quite small and not examined systematically (especially given that there is no independent and comparative monitoring/evaluation of outcomes across universities), nor transparently (usually measured 'in house' and not from the perspective of students [which this study aims to address]). Outcomes can thus vary depending on which of the four levels (outlined above) of educational disadvantage are used (which is also context dependent at the level of the institution and therefore not necessarily transferable), the contextual offer applied (e.g., reduced grade offers, conditional offers) and how they are evaluated (e.g., dropout rates, degree completion rates, degree

class results) (Boliver and Powell 2021, Boliver et al. 2022). In line with the latter, much of this research has also used quantitative data focusing on the potential for students with lower entry attainment for 'catching up' (Crawford, Macmillan, and Vignoles 2014), tracking the performance of students with adjusted offers compared to other students, and there is limited research exploring student voice and their lived experiences, the foci of the present research study.

Furthermore, the application of contextual admissions raises ideological, theoretical and practical questions, which to date have not been fully explored, and (1) there are arguments for and against contextual admissions (Centre for Social Mobility 2018), as outlined below. In addition, to (2) significant differences between HEI's in how contextual data are applied at different points in the admissions process, for example, which students they should be offered to, what level of grade reduction is appropriate and then develop robust systems to ensure that these processes are fairly enacted. Integral to both are complex interdependencies with other societal problems, for example, social economic status and inequality in compulsory level education, as well as changing requirements of HE's admissions that are often difficult to recognise (CSM 2018). We root our discussion primarily in a UK perspective but draw on some examples from other countries to illustrate alternative approaches to increasing access to HE for underrepresented groups; this is an international concern (Mountford-Zimdars, Moore, and Graham 2016).

1.1 | Arguments for and Against Contextual Offer Admissions

Those who argue against contextual offer admissions typically align with a social engineering perspective, adopting a deficit-model, arguing that it is not the role of HEIs to address inequalities in society, and doing so can prejudice other groups of applicants, for example, applicants who were not eligible to participate in an outreach programme and benefit from the enhanced support (Centre for Social Mobility 2018). Furthermore, it is argued that prior qualifications are the best predictor of success, so taking on students with lower grades may set students up to fail, as outlined by admissions selectors within the Boliver and Powell's research, where the need for strong A-level grades was discussed as paramount to cope with the rigours of degree-level study. Moreover, there is limited and contradictory evidence (often depending on the measure of social disadvantage used) that students who experience educational disadvantage 'catch up' with their peers at university (CSM 2018). Furthermore, research has shown that students with lower entry grades are more likely to drop out of university (voluntarily and by being withdrawn by the university due to poor performance) than those who have higher entry grades (HEPI 2019; Voelkle and Sander 2008). Finally, it is argued that contextual data is subjective and therefore admitting students based on this may lead to unconscious bias in admissions, undermining a holistic academic judgement process (CSM 2018). This criticism has been raised from within the practitioner community in admissions and outreach, pertaining to concerns regarding the complexity of these cases. In the United States, holistic admissions approaches are used which are more flexible to complex individual circumstances of individual differences than data-driven

contextual flagging used in the United Kingdom (Mountford-Zimdars, Moore, and Graham 2016). In addition, schoolteachers have highlighted the importance of maintaining confidence in the HE admissions system and stated that some students and parents question the use of contextual offers, not necessarily believing that this data will be used in a fair way (CSM 2018).

Those who argue for the use of contextual offers state that a key role of universities is to create opportunities for social mobility and reduce inequalities (Sutton Trust 2021). This is important as only 1% of school pupils who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieve AAA at A-level compared to 20% of other pupils. This impacts applications to university and the type of university applied to, with attendance at high-tariff HE providers being four times lower for students who received FSM when compared to non-FSM students. This increases when multiple inequalities are considered (Garner and Bagnall 2024). Pupils' attending non-selective state schools, in receipt of FSM and living in areas of high economic disadvantage are 9.8 times less likely to progress to higher-tariff providers than the most advantaged pupils (Centre for Social Mobility 2018). Furthermore, research has shown that students who have been disadvantaged but achieve reasonable grades are likely very capable and have a genuine potential to succeed in HE and 'a university place is not a prize for how well you have done in the past, but recognition of what you are likely to do in the future' (CSM 2018, 7) and such economic and social-mobility-based arguments have cross-party political support in the United Kingdom and are the dominant way of framing the use of contextual admissions, which contrasts with other countries, such as the United States and Germany, where other contextual factors are prominently supported, like having overcome adversity (the United States) or disability and having a caring responsibility (Germany) (Mountford-Zimdars, Moore, and Graham 2016).

1.2 | Students' Experiences of Contextual Offer Admissions

While there has been some research exploring how stakeholders such as university admissions teams and teachers view the contextual admissions process, and extensive debate on how to fairly enact these offers, the voices of students themselves have been lacking. Instead, much of the literature exploring the impact of contextual offer admissions has used quantitative data, as discussed above. In the limited research exploring student experiences of contextual offers, their views have been sought on whether they can easily understand if they meet eligibility criteria for contextual admissions (Mountford-Zimdars and Moore 2020). While this is important, as these students may lack informed support and guidance on the admissions process, this is only one aspect of the transition to HE to consider. A much greater depth of understanding and psychological insight into the lived experiences of the students' in receipt of contextual offers is required. Anecdotally, it appears that contextual offer applicants are concerned about being treated differently to other students (OxPolicy 2016) while more traditional students fear that they will be displaced by those with contextual offers (Johnson 2019). This may mean that those who come to university with an adjusted offer may experience challenges over and above the typical challenges of transitioning to university.

This perspective aligns with Jindal-Snape's (Jindal-Snape 2016; Jindal-Snape et al. 2021) *Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory (MMT)*, which conceptualises the challenges students negotiate in navigating simultaneous psychological, social, environmental, personal and educational adaptations as 'transitions' in their own right (Bagnall and Jindal-Snape 2023). These 'transitions' can be longitudinal, complex and simultaneously exciting and worrying for the individual and significant others within their ecosystem. For example, university affords exciting opportunities for independence (e.g., leaving the family home and encountering new responsibilities, e.g., budgeting), while also establishing new social connections and familiarising themselves with new academic structures, providing opportunities for intellectual growth (Davies and Bagnall 2024; Tate and Glazzard 2024; Winstone and Hulme 2019).

Research, theoretically underpinned by Jindal-Snape's (Jindal-Snape 2016, 2023) *MMT* theory, has shown that there are complex individual differences in how students adjust to transitions, and university transitions are no exception (Jindal-Snape 2016; McMillan 2013). In line with research, which has examined the context of other educational transitions, such as pupils in receipt of pupil premium funding over primary-secondary school transitions (Garner and Bagnall 2024), or pupils transitioning to alternate provision (Dunnett, Fielding, and Bagnall 2024), it is likely that students in receipt of contextual offers over the transitions to HE may find adjustment more difficult, and as a result be more susceptible to poor mental and physical health (Davies and Bagnall 2024; Tate and Glazzard 2024). A synthesis of the literature demonstrates that possessing superior academic skills may lead to better alignment with academic demands of university (Gale and Parker 2014), and social competence may support positive social integration, including peer relationships at university (Erzen and Ozabaci 2021; Shu et al. 2020). Therefore, students transitioning to university with a contextual offer admission may be more concerned about the academic side of university as they may feel that their lowered offer suggests that they do not have the ability to perform at the required level. They may also struggle with social integration if they feel that they are 'different' to other students on their course. This may make their experience of transitioning harder, leading to feelings of lowered self-belief, confidence, belonging and even imposter syndrome (Holden et al. 2021; O'Sullivan et al. 2019). For example, Rowbottom (2017) found significant differences in academic confidence and deservingness between contextual offer students (studying accounting and finance) who exceeded their entry grades, and contextual offer students who did not exceed them.

Holden et al. (2021) describe imposter syndrome as someone who has achieved well failing to recognise that their achievement is earned rather than down to external factors. People who experience imposter syndrome do not feel confident and competent, regardless of their achievements, and worry that their inadequacy will come to light. Holden et al. (2021) investigated imposter syndrome in first- and continuing-generation university students. Although the experience of imposter syndrome was similar in both groups, it was more strongly associated with stress in first-generation students than in continuing-generation students. These findings suggest that while both groups of students find the high expectations and demands placed on them during their first year of university

stressful, being the ‘first in the family’ to go to university increases these expectations, as they have less prior evidence that they can succeed in university, which in turn may increase feelings of self-doubt, unworthiness and subsequent stress. Furthermore, lower self-belief and confidence has also been shown to impact academic performance (Flood and Wilson 2008) meaning that students who have low self-belief may perform worse than those with greater confidence.

Similarly, it is possible that, by not entering university through traditional routes, contextual offer students may also feel a lower sense of belonging. Hoffman et al. (2002) defined belonging as a subjective sense of identification or affiliation with a group and that an important aspect of this is feeling valued by others. It is possible that awareness of having a place at university based on lower grades in comparison to others could hamper students’ feelings of being valued. Ahn and Davis (2020) highlighted the importance of a sense of belonging in facilitating positive experiences at university, socially, psychologically and academically. Therefore, it is important to learn more about how students with contextual offers experience a sense of belonging at university, which the present study aims to do.

Nonetheless, it is important not to focus solely on the negative elements of transitioning to university with a contextual offer. This supports a negative discourse, which is common within transitions research (Jindal-Snape and Bagnall 2023; Symonds et al. 2023), and can perpetuate a deficit narrative (Bagnall, Jindal-Snape, et al. 2024). Furthermore, as Glazzard, Jindal-Snape, and Stones (2020) argue in their paper exploring transitions of students who identify as LGBTQ+, there is sometimes a danger of presenting tragic narratives where students are portrayed as victims rather than active people shaping their experiences. This is also in line with the core tenants of *MMT* theory, which presents the need to follow a balanced discourse in the way in which we conceptualise and operationalise transitions experiences, for example, ‘creating excitement about the good’ in comparison to ‘worrying about stopping the bad’ (Bagnall, Cookson, et al. 2024).

There is a growing body of research with a clear shared contemporary conceptualisation of transitions as a multi-dimensional ongoing process which spans across multiple domains and contexts (Jindal-Snape 2023), which the proposed research shares. Consistent conceptualisation within the field has, and will continue to have, significant implications in enabling clear benchmarking of findings across research studies, to more robustly inform policy and practice (e.g., when HE transitions support is offered, for how long and what it looks like) and further develop theory (Hannah et al. 2023). In line with the latter, the present study offers a new consideration for Jindal-Snape’s (2023) *MMT* theory, by considering the ‘context’ of educational transitions offers to HE for students in receipt of contextual offers.

1.3 | The Current Study

In sum, there is limited research exploring student’s lived experiences of transitioning to university with a contextual offer. This is vitally important as it may be that those receiving a contextual offer admission may enter university feeling less confident in their abilities. They may experience psychological challenges such as

lower self-efficacy (i.e., feeling less competent) and feelings of imposter syndrome (feeling that your successes are due to luck rather than your abilities and fearing being unmasked as a fraud). Furthermore, students from less traditional backgrounds are less likely to feel that they belong in university (Christie 2007), and transitioning to university in receipt of a contextual offer is likely to compound these feelings. This may in turn make university more challenging for these students and perhaps even increase the risk of dropping out and underperforming (Davies and Bagnall 2024). Therefore, the aim of the current study is to better understand students’ lived experiences of transitioning to university, following receiving a contextual offer admission and whether they believe this impacted their early experiences of university. This insight will help inform empirical and theoretical work in the area, in addition to having direct applied implications for university practice and policies which will support current and future students. To do this, we interviewed five students (across two universities) who transitioned to university following a contextual offer admission.

2 | Method

2.1 | Participants

Five university students (2 males and 3 females), aged between 19 and 22 years (*M* age: 20.4 years, *SD*: 1.52), participated in an interview (See Table 1). Sampling represented students across first, second, third and fourth year of study, from two UK universities, studying a range of single and dual honours academic and professional courses. All students had received a contextual offer admission on entry to university; reasons included socioeconomic status (e.g., postcode, school ranking, family income), disability, carer; and four students had two or more of these. Opportunity sampling was initially used, followed by a snowball sampling approach.

2.2 | Materials

A semi-structured interview guide was designed to support the interviews, which included 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix 1), to give participants autonomy to answer each question freely as well as the opportunity to explore issues relevant to them (Kallio et al. 2016; McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl 2019). Prompts and follow-up questions were used where necessary.

2.3 | Procedure

Following ethical approval, information was communicated to two universities’ outreach teams, who disseminated an invitation to students who were in receipt of a contextual offer. Participants were asked to contact the researcher (who worked at neither university) if they were interested in participating. The researcher sent out a pre-interview questionnaire to ensure participants met the study inclusion criteria (e.g., were a current student at the university and in receipt of a contextual offer). Following this, information sheets and consent forms were emailed to students, and a convenient time for the online interview was arranged. To maintain consistency, all interviews were facilitated by the same researcher. Students were asked to select a quiet, private, and comfortable environment where they

TABLE 1 | Participants demographic characteristics and contextual offers.

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Year of study	University category	University course	Contextual offer
Mary	Female	22	4th year	Russell Group	Medicine	Postcode; school ranking; income; single parent family
Daniel	Male	22	4th year	Russell Group	Finance and statistics	Postcode; school ranking
Ben	Male	19	1st Year	Red Brick	Environmental science and physical geography	Physical disability
Ellie	Female	20	3rd year	Russell Group	Economics and business and management	Postcode; school ranking
Daisy	Female	19	2nd year	Russell Group	Music	Postcode; carer

Note: The United Kingdom has different types of universities, which differ in their entry requirements. Russell group universities have the highest entry requirements and a strong focus on academic research. Civic or 'red brick' universities also have high entry requirements and a strong focus on research. Plateglass universities tend to have slightly lower entry requirements. Post-92 universities are former polytechnic colleges and tend to have lower entry requirements. Russell group and red brick universities tend to have the least economically diverse student bodies and as they have high entry requirements may use contextual offers more. As Post-92 universities already have lower entry requirements, they may not need to use contextual offers. This was our rationale for selecting both a Russell group and Red brick university in the present study.

were unlikely to be disturbed to participate in the interview. At the end of each interview, the students were debriefed, thanked for their time, given the chance to ask any questions, and were signposted to support services.

3 | Results

3.1 | Data Analysis

Transparency, consistency and congruence between philosophical perspectives, conceptualisations, theoretical frameworks and methodology are paramount to determine the robustness of a study and interpretations drawn. This is vital to advance transitions theory, research, policy and practice, as outlined by Hannah et al. (2023). Epistemologically, we adopted a social constructionist lens, assuming that individuals construct their own reality based on their unique experiences of the world and their relationships within it, which is based on multiple contextual factors and individual differences. This paradigm is congruent with our conceptualisations and theorisation of transitions in line with *MMT* theory (Jindal-Snape 2016), in addition to the exploratory, inductive nature of our present study (Patton 2014), and our analytical framework, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

IPA was selected as the analytical framework because it seeks to explore the lived experiences of participants. Furthermore, as outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), through exploring the lived experiences of participants, underlying cognitions such as beliefs and attitudes can also be accessed, which also aligns with the aims of the present research. IPA acknowledges that analysis is a double-hermeneutic process where the lived experiences of participants are interpreted by the analyst (Willig 2017). IPA is thus appropriate for the present study, as this interpretivist approach makes it possible to draw together students' experiences of transitioning to university when in receipt of a contextual offer admission with extant literature.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) six stages of IPA were followed, which consisted of first reading and re-reading the first transcript, making initial commentary on the dialogue, links to experience and initial basic interpretations. This stage ensured familiarity and enabled identification of any biases at this early stage (Smith and Dunworth 2003). This stage was followed by initial exploration and detailed noting on this same transcript, which was conducted line by line; notes were both descriptive and conceptual. Two researchers conducted this stage as a form of inter-rater reliability. The next step consisted of identifying and developing superordinate themes and sub-themes within each transcript, in addition to noting down relevant quotes to ensure credibility and that they could be easily traced back through the analytical process. To capture the idiographic nature of participants' experiences, where possible, superordinate and sub-theme names were words or phrases the participants used. The whole process was repeated for each transcript separately, treating each transcript individually, 'on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 100). Finally, superordinate themes were reviewed, and connections were drawn across each of the transcripts to determine master themes, which are presented in Table 2.

3.2 | Aspirations and Self-Belief

It was clear across all interviews that students in receipt of contextual offers had high aspirations, and their offers provided additional opportunities for them that would not have otherwise been available: 'I don't want to say ambitions are low, but chances maybe hang on things like this' (Daniel). While, prior to university, their reduced offers provided something to aspire to, once at university knowledge that their place at university was a result of receiving a reduced entry impacted their self-belief, and many students worried about their academic abilities. As a result, participants felt that additional support was needed for students in receipt of contextual offers both prior to and during the transition to university.

TABLE 2 | Master and superordinate themes identified through IPA analysis.

1. Aspirations and self-belief	2. Feelings of belonging	3. Awareness and stigma
1a. Additional opportunities	2a. Feelings of social disparity	3a. Perceived reasons for contextual offers
1b. Worries about academic abilities and self-belief in being able to succeed	2b. Feelings of unworthiness and imposter syndrome	3b. Stigma about disclosing contextual offers
	2c. Feelings of low self-efficacy	3c. Need for promotion of contextual offers
	2d. Knowing others with contextual offers	

3.2.1 | Additional Opportunities

Receiving a contextual offer admission was discussed across all interviews, as providing additional opportunities for students to get onto their dream course: 'I was applying and I thought there's no way I'm going to get into medicine school like it's just not happening it's not a possibility for me, and it wouldn't without a contextual offer' (Mary) and into the university they wanted: 'it had an immediate impact to what university I applied for because I knew if I didn't have adjusted entry I probably would have not gotten into [named University]. But I knew with adjusted entry, I could probably make it, and so I applied for there and that's where I wanted to go, you know, so it made a difference' (Daniel). As discussed within the above two quotes, contextual offer admissions, provided an additional opportunity for students, that would not have otherwise been possible: 'I feel like I wouldn't be at this uni if I didn't receive an adjusted offer. So, my whole, like, everything would have changed' (Ellie). The opportunity of also getting into university through a contextual offer admission provided aspiration, encouraging students to push themselves to get the grades they needed: 'contextual offers give the student who receives an offer a chance to push themselves and get in' (Ben).

3.2.2 | Worries About Academic Abilities and Self-Belief in Being Able to Succeed

Once at university, students' knowledge that they had only got a place on their course because of reduced grades, impacted their feelings of academic competence, and students worried about their academic abilities: 'my results were nowhere near that of the people who I spoke to on the course. I was like scraping by at the level below and I was just like I really don't think I can keep up because I'm only here because probably to fill a certain amount of people who come to uni through these programs, so yeah it kind of affected my mindset quite a lot' (Mary). As discussed in the quote, students' worries about their academic abilities impacted their self-belief in being able to perform at the same standard as their peers, and as a result they expected less of themselves: 'yeah I mean I guess the first official test I did at uni I failed it, but to me that was I guess as to be expected, because I'm not on the same level as everyone else I'm only here because of you know of my offer' (Daniel).

3.3 | Feelings of Belonging

Feelings of belonging, both academically and socially, were discussed in each interview, as being especially important for

students in receipt of a contextual offer. There appeared to be differences in feelings of belonging between the students' who were attending the Russell Group University and the student who was attending the Red Brick university, which is discussed further below.

3.3.1 | Feelings of Social Disparity

Feelings of social disparity were discussed by all participants attending the Russell Group University: 'it's always coming back to background. But I feel like it does depend on your background because if your parents or family are quite affluent, then naturally you're going to hang about with more affluent people in comparison to, you know, being more normal. So, I do see sometimes that there is that divide' (Ellie). As discussed above, such feelings of social disparity meant that many students felt different from their peers, as discussed by Mary: 'Most people came from like decent like backgrounds, and it was just like is there anyone here, you know, like me' (Mary).

Feelings of social disparity and not feeling as though they belonged were discussed as not impeding students' ability to get on with other students but did impact their ability to relate to their peers: 'but when I got here, I didn't feel I couldn't get on with anyone really. I got on with everyone, so that didn't really change that much, and I think it's quite normal like for people not to relate but I wanted to go to uni' (Daniel). Feelings of social disparity and not being able to relate was shown to be particularly apparent, when considering the financial cost of socialising, such as going out: 'people who maybe come from normal backgrounds and you know work and have to pay bills and don't get anything from like their parents. You know, they might be oh, I can't go out. I can't do that; I can't afford that. If somebody, you know, has come from a more affluent background they might be able to do that because their parents might be fortunate enough to give them some extra money that other people can't get' (Daisy). This suggests that while students felt that they could form relationships with others, there were still some divides, for example, around money for socialising.

3.3.2 | Feelings of Unworthiness and Imposter Syndrome

All students' attending the Russell Group university discussed feelings of unworthiness and imposter syndrome, during their first year of university following receiving a contextual offer. This impacted students' feelings of academic belonging, with students' discussing how they had only got into the university

by chance: ‘when I first got here, I was looking at all these other people with straight As and I was like okay, I just got in here by luck and I found that really quite difficult’ (Mary). As a result of this, one student discussed feeling as though they shouldn’t be there: ‘I feel what they call imposter syndrome, like when they say like I shouldn’t really be here, I think that may be me. It plays on people’s mindsets’ (Daniel).

For all students, this impacted their mindset at university: ‘it kind of affected my mindset quite a lot and I was just basically thinking, yes I shouldn’t really be here’ (Daniel). As a result, students discussed the need to work harder, just to keep up: ‘I feel like I put a lot of effort in because I had to basically learn everything from scratch. There was some stuff that everybody knew that I didn’t know because they came from different backgrounds and you know, could do that sort of stuff’ (Daisy).

In fact, it was not until the end of students’ first year when results came out, that these concerns diminished: ‘I just studied all of last year and then, when results came out I started realizing okay, maybe I do deserve to be here because my results are actually good and I was like okay I’m actually doing okay here, I’m not scraping by’ (Mary), and students reflected on these initial feelings of deservingness: ‘I can realize it was just all in my head that I didn’t deserve it (to be at university)’ (Daniel).

3.3.3 | Feelings of Low Self-Efficacy

Feelings of low self-efficacy, particularly lack of confidence, were particularly striking among the students attending the Russell Group university, as outlined by Ellie: ‘I think it does affect your confidence a bit knowing that there are people that are a lot smarter than you and you know, haven’t had an adjusted offer’ (Ellie). In addition to this, feelings of self-doubt were also a concern, as outlined by Daisy: ‘From my experience and with being friends with people that got into university for what they got, they didn’t get any adjusted offers, I feel like they don’t have as much self-doubt. I would say I lack confidence, quite a lot in certain courses and compared to friends you know, they’re quite stress free, no worries. Whereas I think. I have to put in that bit of extra effort to get up to their level sometimes’ (Daisy).

For one student attending the Russell Group university, feelings of low self-efficacy were so strong that they impeded social opportunities: ‘I was so panicked that I was going to fail first year and couldn’t keep up, I didn’t go out at all during first year because I was so panicked, I just revised’ (Mary). In comparison, for the student attending the Red Brick university, contextual offers were discussed as irrelevant once students were attending the university: ‘I would say there are no hard feelings, people forget A levels when they get here, it didn’t really affect me socially’ (Ben).

3.3.4 | Knowing Others With Contextual Offers

One student who attended the Russell Group university discussed finding it harder to make friends. This was shaped particularly by feelings of social disparity between herself and

her peers, a lack of confidence and not knowing anyone else in receipt of a contextual offer, which could have helped: ‘I think with socializing and uni it was easier for (friend) and I don’t know if it’s a confidence thing again that she was able to find more friends, get along with people, whereas I struggled to find friends, only got a few friends in my course. Again, I think you gel with people that have similar experiences to you. I don’t know anyone else in my course that’s had an adjusted offer. I don’t believe I’m the only one but yeah, I don’t know anyone else. So yeah so, it’s, I think it’s been hard to make friends just based on the fact that sometimes you stick to people that have similar, you know lifestyles or backgrounds to you’ (Daisy).

Knowing others with contextual offers was discussed as being important across interviews, in creating a sense of belonging: ‘She had the reduced entry offer. So, she attended the summer school with me. I think, you know, it was good to have someone from a school that was going through the same experience’ (Ellie). In addition, students discussed how raising awareness of the importance of contextual offers could help increase feelings of belonging: ‘For example, if I was looking at the prospectus for [university] and I saw a contextual offer student that would make me feel a sense of belonging you know. Raising awareness can help with a sense of belonging and feeling deserving to be there’ (Daniel).

3.4 | Awareness and Stigma

Among all interviews, there were mixed feelings about the perceived need for contextual offers, which for some students led to feelings of stigma about disclosing their contextual offer admission once at university. There was agreement that more work is needed to promote the importance of contextual offers, during the application process and once students are at university.

3.4.1 | Perceived Reasons for Contextual Offers

Among all interviews, there were mixed feelings about the perceived need for contextual offers. Perceptions ranged from views that contextual offers try to encourage equity within society and level the playing field: ‘I think they have them because you know, everybody, not everybody is equal. You know, there’s obviously differences and they want to make it as equal as possible because it’s getting harder and harder to get, you know, like a well-paying job without going to university’ (Ellie). There were also more cynical views that contextual offers were a public relations (PR) stunt by universities: ‘I mean, to a certain extent it’s good PR, it meets quotas. I mean this is my honest thoughts about it, I think that’s why we do it’ (Daniel).

Throughout the interviews, there was a perception that Russell Group universities are elitist: ‘I don’t know if that might be a specific thing to Russell Groups, the perception everyone is from stellar backgrounds’ (Daniel) and less open to using contextual offer admissions: ‘Russell groups might give less of a chance to people with contextual offers and I think from my experience with that, if you get offers like ours, you can come to places like ours’ (Ben). Students felt that contextual offers were less appealing to Russell group universities: ‘Russell groups don’t want

contextual offers, they want all A's and A*s they don't want frills and ridges' (Mary).

3.4.2 | Stigma About Disclosing Contextual Offers

There was a common understanding across interviews that: 'other people don't necessarily know what your results were and how adjusted your offer was, and people weren't always able to make that distinction whether I did an additional thing before coming here because I was from a bad area' (Mary), and as a result, there were mixed feelings pertaining to disclosing their contextual offer to other students and tutors. Some students were very open to sharing their contextual offer, especially if they already knew other students at the university from their college/high school: 'I was quite open about it with a lot of my friends. Again, most of my friends I went to high school with, or I know from other high schools in the area' (Ellie). In comparison, other students felt stigma in disclosing their contextual offer admission at university: 'I guess at the time having a contextual offer was kind of embarrassing, but you just kind of got over it right' (Daniel). This view also extended to students' perceptions of their parents' behaviour: 'I don't think my parents would have told or thought to have told any of my family that I got into university because of my contextual offer because they are proud' (Mary). This suggests that the student believed that her parents felt that if they shared her contextual offer with others, it would somehow lessen her perceived achievement of getting into university.

3.4.3 | Need for Promotion of Contextual Offers

All students in receipt of a contextual offer discussed needing greater support than their peers during the transition to university, from submitting their university application to the end of their first year. Prior to university, students discussed the need for greater awareness of the existence of contextual offers: 'There is little awareness in high schools, especially deprived areas or areas where kids don't traditionally go onto university, I think there would be a lot more applications coming from those areas, a lot more, you know, students coming from there and more qualifications, if there was awareness. And I think it would just help people's careers long term' (Daisy). Students also discussed how contextual offers could be advertised more clearly on university admission websites, to help prospective students know about their existence: 'It's quite hard to find on the websites from my experience. There's a lot of spreadsheets and to try and find out what adjusted offer you could get wasn't easy' (Ellie).

Once at university, students discussed how greater awareness of contextual offers, among other students, could be helpful, especially in alleviating feelings of stigma: 'I remember a girl sitting in front of me in a lecture, rambling on about how her brother didn't get into [named university] but people who got lower scores did because of the adjusted entry programs, and she was going on about why that is not fair and I ended up having to walk out and come back because I was offended' (Daniel). Students also discussed how greater awareness of contextual offers, amongst tutors, and their understanding of potential challenges more disadvantaged students face, such as imposter syndrome,

could support them, both pastorally: 'I guess having that support network where if you want to chat with someone about how you feel, like I would talk to them about like this is how I felt, you deserve to be here sort of thing' (Ellie), and academically: 'there's a different level to it, a different sort of language that I wasn't familiar with, which they [tutors] could help with' (Daisy).

4 | Discussion

Entrance into HEIs is not equally distributed among social groups, and contextual offers can make a key contribution in enhancing access for disadvantaged students. However, insights into the first-hand lived experiences of contextual offer students are limited, which the present study overcame by interviewing five university students, representing two HEIs, who received a contextual offer admission. Our findings suggest that (1) students felt that their contextual offers had given them opportunities to attend the university and course of their choice, which may not have been possible otherwise. Many students felt that the possibility of the contextual offer pushed them to do their best to achieve the grades they needed. However, their contextual offers also led them to feel more negatively about their ability to succeed at university. (2) Participants also discussed how contextual offers impacted their sense of belonging. Many felt that there was a disparity between more traditional students, who may have more social and financial capital than those with contextual offers. This led some to feel a sense of unworthiness and imposter syndrome and lower self-efficacy; however, these feelings were somewhat ameliorated by knowing others who also had contextual offers. (3) Students felt that universities gave contextual offers to create equal access, but there was also a feeling that it was good for PR to be seen to have students with contextual offers. Some students therefore felt embarrassed to admit they had received a contextual offer. (4) Finally, participants felt that schools and universities could do more to promote contextual offers, both to schools and on websites but also within the university to reduce this stigma. These findings will be discussed in more detail below, drawing on existing literature, in addition to implications for further research, practice and policy.

Our findings demonstrate that contextual offers were seen positively by students, leading to additional opportunities to attend the university and course of their choice, which may not have been possible otherwise. Our findings provide support for Rowbottom's (2017) findings, where accounting and finance students in receipt of a contextual offer admission felt that their reduced offer decreased their anxiety about their school exams and, as a result, many of them exceeded the contextual offer. These findings provide further evidence for Oyama, Manalo, and Nakatani's (2018) assertion that a challenge (e.g., entrance into HE) may need to be perceived as achievable for it to be motivating as opposed to threatening.

However, as shown in the present findings, contextual offers are not just important in providing students with a route into HE, but also there needs to be consideration of supporting students during their course, which is in line with policy recommendations, including the DfE social mobility action plan, and those by the Office for Students (Boliver et al. 2022). While contextual offers can help with the former, students with contextual

offers may feel concerned about their ability to achieve academically during their course. For example, we found that students' knowledge that they had only got a place on their course because of their circumstances, impacted their feelings of academic competence, and students worried about their academic abilities in comparison to their peers. These findings, further support, Rowbottom's (2017) longitudinal study and apply these findings to a broader range of subjects. Rowbottom (2017) found significant differences in academic confidence and deservingness between contextual offer students who exceeded their entry grades and contextual offer students who did not exceed them. Students who met the contextual offer and did not exceed it felt more concerned about their ability to succeed at university and questioned whether they 'deserved' to be at university. This implies that the students felt that a contextual offer was in some way invalid. The idea behind a contextual offer is that grades alone do not tell us the future potential of a student, and considering the context of their achievement will give us a clearer sense of their future potential, which is in line with the Commission on Widening Access core principles (2016).

Extending on Rowbottom's (2017) findings, and more recent findings by Davies and Bagnall (2024) which examined the views of admission disability support staff, in the present study, feelings of academic disparity between themselves and peers who transitioned to university without contextual offers, impacted students' mindsets, with almost all students reporting a sense of unworthiness, imposter syndrome and lower feelings of self-efficacy. For some students, this pushed them to work harder to keep up. One student highlighted that the pressure they put on themselves to work hard and achieve meant that time to socialise and meet others was limited. Similar findings were shown by Holden et al. (2021) in first-generation university students, where they reported needing to work harder than other students. Thus, if students who are in receipt of contextual offers feel that they lack potential, leading them to experience self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., poor performance as an inevitable outcome), greater support is needed at the university level. A greater awareness of contextual offers within universities could lead to increased pastoral and academic support for these students being made available. If this support is timely, but also sensitive, this could help to foster feelings of belonging (Davies and Bagnall 2024; Sharp, Wray, and Maxwell 2020) and help contextual offer students feel that they have equal value and potential as students who entered university with the traditional tariff.

However, it is worth noting that two factors ameliorated feelings of 'deservingness' amongst contextual offer students: (1) receiving a good grade and (2) knowledge of others who also had transitioned to university following a contextual offer admission. In line with the former and drawing on Jindal-Snape's (2016) *MMT* theory, transitions are an ongoing, dynamic, but also nested (e.g., recognising the role of significant others, also negotiating transitions at the same time) process, and transitioning to university is no exception (Tett, Cree, and Christie 2017). In the present study, in circumstances when students found out that they had achieved good grades matching, and in some cases, exceeding their peers, initial mindset concerns and feelings of 'deservingness' were ameliorated, and they recognised that previous feelings of not deserving their place were not accurate. Thus,

the present research provides further support for *MMT* theory, recognising that conceptually transitions are an adaptation to a change, not the changes in themselves (Bagnall and Jindal-Snape 2023). Furthermore, the present study extends theoretical understanding by considering the 'context' of educational transitions offers to HE for students in receipt of contextual offers as an ongoing process of adaptation over time (Jindal-Snape 2016). It overcomes shortcomings in previous cross-sectional and snapshot designs, which measure outcomes pre and post the 'move' to university (Rientes & Jindal-Snape 2016). Through capturing students' retrospective transition experiences, this study provides a more holistic understanding of the transition, informing the development of more effective support interventions, which should also take a longitudinal approach (continuing throughout students' first year), and not end once students are at university.

Ahn and Davis (2020) suggest that feeling a sense of belonging to a HEI can be key to having a successful experience across different aspects of university. The present findings echo this and indicate the importance of providing opportunities for developing students' social capital. For example, O'Sullivan et al.'s (2019) comparative study of the university experiences of both foundation year students and contextual offer students found that while the experiences of foundation year (an extra year of study at the start of a university course to allow students who do not meet the entry requirements an opportunity to enter the course following completion of this year) helped increase foundation students' sense of belonging, this was not the case for contextual admissions students, who felt isolated, different, intimidated and inferior to other students. It may be that the foundation year, where the student is in a class with others who did not make the original grade tariff, helped them to make friends. It may also be that the extra year of academic support and learning more about university systems helped them to feel more like they belonged when they entered first year. Thus, given that within our data, students felt that there was a disparity between more traditional students who may have more social and financial capital than those who received a contextual offer admission, opportunities to meet and socialise with other contextual offers students could be a recommendation for universities when considering how to support students to develop relationships with other students.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that many of the students reported feeling embarrassed about their offers and some of these students perceived that being a 'widening participation student' was stigmatising. Therefore, opportunities to bring together students in receipt of contextual offer admissions will need to be managed sensitively. For example, in the present study, students reported feeling stigmatised and not always comfortable disclosing their contextual offers to others. These findings provide further support for Johnson, Richeson, and Finkel's (2011) research, which investigated feelings of stigma in lower socioeconomic status students at an elite university in the United States and found that students were both aware of and sensitive to their differences, in comparison to higher socioeconomic status students, and were more concerned about their academic achievement. Thus, in terms of recommendations for universities, changes are needed both in terms of increasing awareness and in increasing support for students in receipt of contextual offer admissions. This should begin before students arrive at university, through promotion and communication with schools and

colleges to ensure appropriate knowledge in teachers and other relevant staff and through HEIs providing easily accessible information on relevant webpages. Ultimately, this may lead to a greater number of students transitioning to university following a contextual offer admission, which may assist in decreasing feelings of difference or isolation.

However, while many students felt that universities gave contextual offers to ensure equal access, there was also a feeling that it was good for PR to be seen to have students with contextual offers to make the university appear more inclusive and to meet perceived quotas. For some students, this contributed to feelings of stigma and embarrassment to admit that they had received a contextual offer. Thus, a significant focus is needed to raise awareness for the importance of contextual offer admissions by universities, especially given that research has shown that the majority of students believe that it is harder to achieve higher exam grades if you grow up in a disadvantaged area and a similar percentage agree that universities should consider applicants' backgrounds (HEPI 2019; Kam and Prihadi 2021). However, only around 50% agree that lower grade offers should be made to those from disadvantaged areas and students in the most selective universities were most likely to back contextual offers (57%) (HEPI 2019; Penn 2024). Taken together, our findings suggest that students are open to the idea of contextual offers, but these offers need to be explained to reduce anxieties about fairness. This again may help students in receipt of contextual offer admissions feel more like they belong at university.

5 | Limitations

The present study is not without limitations. First, while extensive efforts were made to recruit a larger number of participants, the sample size for the study remains small. The researchers spent extensive time advertising the study in various channels, both online and in person, and through University Services, and yet uptake was much lower than in other studies that worked with university students. This could indicate a real reluctance in participants to discuss their experiences of transitioning to university with a contextual offer. This suggestion is supported by our data, where students discussed stigma around entering university with an adjusted offer. This therefore highlights the value of this study in providing the insights of such a hard-to-access group, and also further applies the considerations noted in Giner-Sorolla et al.'s (2024) review pertaining to the importance of considering the study aims, the level of sample specificity, and the quality of dialogue when determining the generalisability of findings. Secondly, our sample mainly represents students who were attending a Russell Group university. Future research should also explore how students from different types of universities experience contextual offers. While many post-92 universities often draw from more diverse groups of students and often do not have contextual offers, Russell group universities may draw from more traditional pools of students and may therefore have less diverse student bodies. This might impact feelings of academic and social relatedness, in addition to mindset concerns, as outlined above. Finally, future research on contextual offer admissions may want to consider not just the type of university, but also the subject area that students are entering as this may have a strong impact on their feelings about themselves

and their sense of belonging and community. For example, Fay and Skipper (2022) explored how students studying law and psychology developed a different sense of community and academic identity. While psychology students were shown to report a strong sense of community with their peers, law students reported feeling in competition with their peers. It was suggested that psychology students chose the subject because they wanted to help others, and that through the course they are taught skills (e.g., empathetic listening) which help them to build positive relationships, whereas law students often choose to study law as they are motivated by money, and through the course they learn skills which can make it more challenging to build positive communities. Therefore, future research should explore experiences across different universities and different subjects.

6 | Summary

In sum, the United Kingdom is perhaps unusual in an international context in terms of the extent to which policy makers see universities as change agents in overcoming inequality in access to HE, and the English regulator for HE, the Office for Students, has set a target to eliminate 'the gap in entry rates at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups' (OfS 2020). Proponents of contextual offers argue that grades alone do not tell us the future potential of a student, and considering the context of their achievement will give us a clearer sense of their future potential (Boliver and Powell 2021; Commission on Widening Access, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars and Moore 2020). However, evidence for the application and efficacy of contextual offers is limited. The present study makes several original and significant theoretical, empirical and practical contributions. First, the findings have advanced empirical understanding in providing first-hand insight into the transition experiences of students in receipt of contextual offer admissions, which to date has been limited. Second, the findings have provided further support for *MMT* theory, extending theoretical understanding pertaining to university transitions as an ongoing process of adaptation over time. Finally, our findings provide practical implications for the need for universities to increase awareness and support for students in receipt of contextual offers, to help contextual offer students to feel a sense of academic and social belonging, and overcome feelings of unworthiness and imposter syndrome.

Author Contributions

Charlotte L. Bagnall: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, project administration. **Lucy A. James:** data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. **Yvonne Skipper:** funding acquisition, project administration, conceptualization, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Ant Sutcliffe and Higher Horizons for their support in funding and recruitment for this study.

Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

- Did you know what a contextual offer was before you started applying for University? How did you find out about contextual offers?
 - Was the information helpful?
 - Did it make a difference to which university/course you applied for?
- Did receiving a contextual offer impact how you felt about coming to university before you came?
 - How did you feel?
 - Do you think you would have felt different if you did not receive a contextual offer? Why?
- Did receiving a contextual offer impact how you felt in your early days at university?
 - How about academically?
 - What about socially?

4. Did receiving a contextual offer impact how you felt when you received your first marks at university?
 - Would this have been different if you had not received a contextual offer? How?
5. Did you tell anyone that you got into university on a contextual offer admission?
 - Why/why not?
6. Do you think people who receive contextual offers have different university experiences to those who get in with typical offers?
 - If so, how are experiences different?
7. What could universities do to better to support students with contextual offers at every stage (e.g., application, before arrival, upon arrival)?
 - Did you receive any extra support with your contextual offer?
8. Why do you think universities use contextual offers?
9. What language is being used? And what should be used? Adjusted? Minimum? Contextual? Alternative? Does the language matter?
10. How is awareness of contextual offers, prior to and at university? Do you think there needs to be more/less of this?