

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Warwick		
Unit of Assessment: C - Economics and Econometrics		
Title of case study: Widening Access to Higher Education		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 - 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Claire Crawford Robin Naylor Jeremy Smith	Assistant Professor Professor Professor	January 2014 - July 2018 1986 - present 1991 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – ongoing		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Claire Crawford's research on the determinants of participation in higher education (HE) has been central to the debate and policy development on reducing inequalities in HE access and attainment across different socioeconomic backgrounds. Research commissioned by the Office for Fair Access has informed how universities evaluate widening participation activities, ensuring they are more effective in increasing access to HE for disadvantaged students. Work commissioned by the Sutton Trust on the use of contextualised admissions has been widely cited in HE policy discussions and reports and has informed guidance given by HE-sector bodies to make admissions systems more inclusive.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Crawford's established body of work has focused on the role of higher education in social mobility, shedding light on how personal characteristics and family background can determine an individual's chances of accessing and succeeding in higher education. Her findings show, for example, that young people from poorer backgrounds are less likely to attend university than their wealthier peers, and even those who do are less likely to attend the highest-status institutions and achieve the highest-degree class. The research indicates that more can be done by universities to reduce gaps in entry and success by family background. [3.1, 3.2]</p> <p>Based on her expertise in higher education access, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) commissioned Crawford, Dytham and Naylor in 2016 to investigate how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England currently evaluate their widening participation activities, and to provide guidance on best practice evaluation methods. The research, led by Crawford, found that there was confusion about OFFA's stance regarding evaluation, what would constitute a 'good approach' to evaluation and what the minimum requirements were. It identified current practices and challenges in outreach evaluation work and areas where more guidance is needed, leading to the development of proposed standards of evaluation. [3.3, 3.4, 3.5]</p> <p>Crawford, along with co-authors at the University of Durham, was also commissioned by the Sutton Trust to conduct research into the use of 'contextual admissions' among the more selective universities in the UK. Contextual admissions criteria (such as type of school an applicant attended, their socio-economic background, or their personal circumstances) are considered by some HEIs as part of the admissions process. Based on this information, HEIs can reduce grade requirements or give special consideration to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The research report [3.6] offers insights into the difference that greater use of</p>		

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contextual data could make to the numbers of disadvantaged students entering HE, as well as recommendations for practice.

Crawford led on the quantitative elements of the research, which analysed administrative data to understand how widely contextual admissions are used and the effect on students. Findings include:

- While the gap in university access between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers has narrowed in recent years, the gap at the most selective universities remains stubbornly wide.
- Greater use of contextual admissions could result in a substantial increase in the numbers of low-income students at the UK's most selective universities.
- There is little evidence that applicants from contextual backgrounds are being admitted to selective universities in large numbers or with substantially lower average grade requirements than those applied to their peers from non-contextual backgrounds.
- There is little evidence to suggest that universities that practice greater contextualisation see significantly higher dropout rates, lower degree completion rates, or lower degree class results.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1 Crawford, C., Gregg, P., Macmillan, L., Vignoles, A., and Wyness, G. (2016). "Higher education, career opportunities, and intergenerational inequality." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, Vol. 32(4), pp. 553-575. doi:[10.1093/oxrep/grw030](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grw030)

3.2 Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Micklewright, J., and Vignoles, A. (2016). *Family background and university success: differences in Higher Education access and outcomes in England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. eISBN-13: 9780191003165. doi:[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199689132.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199689132.001.0001)

3.3 Crawford, C., Dytham, S., and **Naylor, R.** (2017). *Improving the Evaluation of Outreach: Interview Report*. [https://pure.northampton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/6246046/Crawford Claire 2017 Improving the Evaluation of Outreach Interview report.pdf](https://pure.northampton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/6246046/Crawford%20Claire%202017%20Improving%20the%20Evaluation%20of%20Outreach%20Interview%20report.pdf)

3.4 Crawford, C., Dytham, S., and **Naylor, R.** (2017). *The Evaluation of the Impact of Outreach: Proposed Standards of Evaluation Practice and Associated Guidance*. [https://pure.northampton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/6246443/Crawford Claire UoN 2017 The Evaluation of the Impact of Outreach.pdf](https://pure.northampton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/6246443/Crawford%20Claire%20UoN%202017%20The%20Evaluation%20of%20the%20Impact%20of%20Outreach.pdf)

3.5 Smith, J., and **Naylor, R.** (2001), "Determinants of individual degree performance: Evidence for the 1993 UK university graduate population from the USR." *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 63, pp. 29-60. doi: [10.1111/1468-0084.00208](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0084.00208)

3.6 Boliver, V., **Crawford, C.**, Powell, M., and Craige, W. (2017). *Admissions in Context*. The Sutton Trust. https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Admissions-in-Context-Final_V2.pdf

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)Informing outreach evaluation guidance and practice

Every year around GBP1,000,000,000 is invested in outreach work to improve fair access to higher education, but there has been a lack of evaluation activity to understand the impact of this work and ensure value for money. Warwick research on the evaluation of HE outreach activities [3.3, 3.4, 3.5] has increased awareness of the importance of evaluation activity and helped to inform a step-change in evaluation practice in the HE sector in recent years.

Crawford spoke about the research at the Office for Students (OfS) launch event in February 2018. Writing in a Wonkhe article in March 2018, Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS, said: "One of the key messages from Claire's speech at the launch conference that really struck home with me, was the role that the OfS can play in driving evidence-led practices. So, I will be looking for all providers to improve their use of evidence and evaluation so that we can make sure that investment is being focused on the activities that are most effective." [5.1]

Crawford also gave oral evidence to the House of Commons Education Committee's 'Value for money in higher education inquiry' (February 2018). The Committee's report to Government (November 2018) quotes Crawford in saying there is not robust evaluation of HEIs' widening participation work and recommends a rigorous evaluation process. In its response to the report, the Government confirmed that it has asked the OfS to focus on evaluation as a matter of priority, to ensure that spending on access and participation activities by the HE sector is having maximum positive impact. [5.2]

Crawford's research has informed advice given to HEIs by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and its successor, the OfS, on evaluating outreach. Millward confirms that "The research had a significant impact, producing a set of Evidence Standards, which, for the first time, provided clear guidance on the claims that can be made from evidence produced using different evaluation methods. The publication and the subsequent OFFA guidance led to improvements in evaluation practice." [5.1]

As Millward testifies, a second phase of the work was taken forward by the OfS and the resulting evaluation guidance was a key element in the regulatory requirements published in 2019 to provide guidance to HEIs on preparing their access and participation plans. He said: "Dr Crawford's research played an important role in enabling the OfS to give clear advice about what good evaluation practice looks like and to identify areas where the sector needed to improve." [5.1]

Millward also confirms the impact of Crawford's wider body of research into the link between socio-economic background and HE participation [3.1, 3.2]. He said: "Dr Crawford's research has influenced access and participation policy for a number of years. Prior to the establishment of the OfS, both HEFCE and OFFA drew on Dr Crawford's research [...] This research was often cited in OFFA access agreement and HEFCE student opportunity funding guidance and highlighted the importance of working with young people from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds from an early stage in their educational journey." [5.1]

In addition, Crawford was one of two academic partners who helped to develop the Scottish Toolkit for Fair Access (underpinned by 3.3 and 3.4), commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council on behalf of the Commissioner for Fair Access. The toolkit is one of two pillars of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access, launched in 2019, and provides evidence on the effectiveness of outreach activities, supporting education practitioners to design successful interventions. [5.3]

Shaping debate and guidance on the use of contextual admissions

Admissions in Context [3.5] has raised awareness of the role that contextual admissions can play in increasing access to HE for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, informing public and policy debate. Following publication of the report, Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust and the Education Endowment Foundation, called for top universities to make contextual admissions a 'central element' of their admissions processes. [5.4] The report received widespread media coverage, including The Guardian, The Sun, The Times, BBC News, The Independent, Evening Standard, Irish Times, BuzzFeed, TES, Wonkhe and BBC Radio 4's Today Programme. It was also discussed in a number of comment pieces including in Times Higher Education, the LSE Blog and Advancing Access. [5.4]

Crawford drew on the report's findings in her oral evidence to the Education Committee's 'Value for money in higher education' inquiry. The Committee's report to Government cites her evidence and makes a recommendation to support the use of contextualised admissions. [5.2] The Government's response to the report acknowledges that contextual admissions have a role to play in widening access to HE. [5.2]

Admissions in Context was also cited in the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access 2017 annual report and feeds into the report's recommendations, including for universities to make bolder use of contextual offers. [5.5] In a ministerial statement at Holyrood, then-education minister Shirley Anne Somerville gave her support to the Commissioner's recommendations on contextual admissions. [5.5]

A number of sector organisations responded to the report and used it to inform their guidance to universities. Universities Scotland issued a formal response welcoming the report, confirming that Scotland's universities "intend to take bold new steps on the consistency, transparency and promotion of our contextualised admissions" and that "our actions will directly address many of the Sutton Trust's recommendations." [5.6] The Medical Schools Council published a report on good practice in contextual admissions in 2018 and endorses the Sutton Trust's recommendation that HEIs make greater use of contextual measures. [5.7] The OfS also encourages HE providers to consider the use of contextual data, referencing the report on its webpage on contextual admissions. [5.8] Its May 2019 Insight brief calls for more radical use of contextual admissions, citing the report's finding that universities are too conservative when making contextual offers. [5.8] In addition, the report is cited in policy briefings published by the Higher Education Policy Institute: the 'Manifesto for the new (OfS) Director of Fair Access and Participation' (May 2018), and Social mobility and elite universities (December 2019). [5.9]

The report has been the basis for the Sutton Trust's policy work on contextual admissions, including discussions with the Department for Education, UCAS and the OfS on making Free School Meals data available to universities. The Sutton Trust is also in discussions with its partner universities on whether Sutton Trust summer school participation could be recognised across universities as a marker for contextual admissions. [5.10]

Admissions in Context has been central to the debate on contextual admissions and the role they can play in making the HE admissions process more inclusive. As Sir Michael Barber, chair of the OfS, commented, February 2020, on the launch of a major review into the HE admissions system, there is now "widespread recognition that certain aspects of the current admissions system are not working, and may be especially unfair on students from disadvantaged backgrounds". [5.11] Ultimately, the OfS and other key organisations in the HE sector are now taking action to reform the system to address these inequalities. The role of contextual admissions for students from disadvantaged backgrounds will be one of the key issues considered. Separately, a 'Fair Admissions' review is also being carried out by Universities UK. [5.11]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1 Supporting Statement letter from Chris Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students. Combined with Wonkhe article by Chris Millward (26th June 2020).

5.2 House of Commons Education Committee Report: *Value for money in higher education*, (November 2018). Combined with **Government Response to the Committee's Report**, (January 2019).

5.3 Scottish Framework for Fair Access website confirming Crawford's contribution to the development of the Fair Access Toolkit.

5.4 Media Coverage of the Sutton Trust Report (2017).

5.5 Annual Report of the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access 2017, page 44 and 48. Combined with **Official Report of the Meeting of the Scottish Parliament, 6th March 2018** (transcript of Shirley Anne Somerville's ministerial statement supporting the Commissioner's recommendations), page 73 of PDF.

5.6 Universities Scotland Response to Sutton Trust Report (2017).

5.7 Medical Schools Council Report (2018).

5.8 Office for Students webpage on contextual admissions combined with **Insight brief** (May 2019) on contextual admissions.

5.9 Higher Education Policy Institute briefings: *Reaching the parts of Society universities have missed; A manifesto for the new Director of Fair Access and Participation* (May 2018) and ***Social mobility and elite universities*** (December 2019).

5.10 Supporting Statement: email from Ruby Nightingale, Communications and Public Affairs Manager at the Sutton Trust (21st February 2020).

5.11 Sir Michael Barber quoted in **FE News article** 'Reviewing the admissions system' (February 2020). Combined with **Universities UK press release** (July 2019).