CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN SELECTIVE ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Name: Julian Skyrme
Institution: The University of Manchester
Degree: Doctor in Education (EdD)
Title: Contextual admissions and social justice in selective English higher education institutions

The policies that higher education institutions (HEIs) operate when choosing whom to select for admission raise profoundly important issues of social justice. Until recently, HEIs in England have selected applicants for admissions offers primarily on predicted and actual examination achievements. However, newer approaches to selection called ‘contextual admissions’ have emerged in some HEIs that attempt to view the examination achievement of applicants in a wider social context. For example, an increasing number of England’s most selective HEIs are prioritising admissions offers to applicants from less advantaged backgrounds, such as state schools students or those living in areas of low participation in higher education (HE).

Despite increasing attention by government and HEIs to enhance ‘fairness’ in admissions through the use of contextual admissions policies, academic studies of this important phenomenon are curious by their absence. Using a policy scholarship approach, this study explores, describes and explains the contextual undergraduate admissions policies of England’s most selective HEIs in relation to the concept of social justice.

Documentary content analysis of the policies of 20 English universities in the Russell Group is employed to originate an ideal-type classification system for how selective HEIs are enacting social justice through contextual admissions. Drawing principally on the work of Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribb, in-depth interviews with senior policy actors and qualitative documentary analysis are used across three purposively selected sites to suggest social justice can be thought about in three ways. Firstly, it is a multi-dimensional concept (having distributive, cultural and associational forms) where different dimensions can conflict with each other. Secondly it is mediated by structural constraints and other norms, which limit the pursuit of justice. Thirdly, it is context- and level-dependent.

This study suggests that no philosophical resolution can be found for what counts as social justice in contextual admissions. Instead, justice in admissions should be understood in its real contexts of enactment and through its propensity to provide empirical outcomes in admissions-offers for less advantaged students that are at least equivalent to their more advantaged counterparts.

A number of macro, meso and micro-level factors, that enable or constrain the pursuit of just outcomes for less advantaged learners through contextual admissions, are suggested. These provide the basis for a fruitful range of new potential quantitative and qualitative studies by scholars of social justice, stratification and mobility to an important but under-researched area of education policy.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis was written during an eventful and busy period of life involving marriage, moving home, fatherhood (twice) and changing jobs. The most significant gratitude therefore goes to my wife, Rebecca, whose practical support, patience and tea-making was unwavering throughout.

I would also like to acknowledge The University of Manchester for funding and supporting this lengthy piece of professional development. I am aware that the opportunity to revisit and further my passion for political philosophy and the social sciences, and apply this to my current professional responsibilities, is an indulgence few other employers would grant.

A special recognition goes to my brilliant main supervisor, Professor Helen Gunter. Helen was a constant source of encouragement and knew when to offer both patience and the push to support me in completing this.

A final acknowledgement must be offered to the natural landscape of Wales, notably the Gower and Llŷn Peninsulas. These provided inspirational and peaceful settings in the summers of 2013 and 2014, when the major progress on this thesis was made.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION: AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The policies that universities operate when choosing whom to select for admission raise profoundly important issues of social justice. Until recently, higher education institutions (HEIs) in England have selected applicants for admissions offers primarily on predicted and actual examination achievements, typically through Advanced Level study or its equivalent (SPA 2014). However, newer approaches to selection have emerged in some HEIs that attempt to view this examination achievement of applicants in a wider social context. For example, in addition to examinations scores, HEIs may look at the type of neighbourhood, family/household or prior schooling of applicants as relevant factors in who they make offers to for admission. This new practice is known as ‘contextual admissions’ (SPA 2014) and concern policies used by HEIs to ostensibly increase the odds of less advantaged applicants being made admissions offers.

The overall aim of this thesis is to explore, describe and explain the contextual undergraduate admissions policies of England’s most selective HEIs in relation to the concept of social justice. The ‘most selective English HEIs’ will be defined in this research as those 20 institutions in England who form part of the 24 strong Russell Group of HEIs in the United Kingdom¹.

Two specific research questions have been identified:

RQ1: What approaches do selective HEIs in England take towards contextual admissions policies and how might these be categorised? This will be explored through the research method of documentary content analysis of undergraduate admissions policies of 20 English Russell Group HEIs.

RQ2: How can the contextual admissions policies of selective HEIs in England be understood in relation to social justice? In particular, what factors enable and constrain the pursuit of social justice through contextual

¹ The methodological issues and rationale for this definition are set out in Chapter Five. The institutions in England forming the Russell Group of HEIs are the universities of: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Exeter, Imperial
admissions? This will be explored through the research method of in-depth interviews with senior policy actors and documentary analysis across three purposively selected sites.

This research is therefore characterised by its specific focus on social justice issues at Stage Two of England’s typical admissions process, denoted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Stages of the English application system

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<th>Stage Two Offer</th>
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<td>Applicants make up to 5 choices, largely by aligning their expected/actual levels of prior achievement with the entry requirements of HEIs.</td>
<td>HEIs use academic and non-academic information on applicants to decide whether to make them an offer of a place. This can include consideration of ‘contextual data’, the phenomenon in this study.</td>
<td>Applicants reply indicating what are first and second (insurance) choices.</td>
<td>Place confirmed by HEI pending the achievement of results outlined in the admissions offer. Contextual admissions processes can be applied where less advantaged applicants miss the grades made as part of their offer.</td>
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(Source: adapted from UCAS 2013)

A number of important facets of social justice determine who applies to HE in Stage One above, where the issue of who is qualified to apply for undergraduate HE “start much further back, with matters of family background and early schooling” (Collini 2012, p. 157). Entrance to the most selective HEIs relies on very high examination scores at GCSE and A level, and there are disproportionate numbers of young people from higher socio-economic groups, in fee-paying independent schools (referred to simply as ‘independent schools’ hereafter) and advantaged areas qualified to apply for entry in the first place (BIS 2014; Cabinet Office 2012b; Cabinet Office 2011; Sutton Trust 2009). Notwithstanding the importance of these “elimination functions” of HE (Bourdieu 1988), this research will place such considerations outside of its boundaries. This study focuses on an emerging and highly interesting policy during Stage Two once applicants with similarly high levels of qualifications have already applied to higher education. Using qualitative and documentary data, I will explore how information on the background of less advantaged applicants is being used by some HEIs to ostensibly increase their likelihood of being made an offer of admission and ask: what does this mean in terms of social justice?
Because of the devolved and increasingly divergent nature of HE policy across the UK, this study focuses on practices in an English setting. It also focuses on the undergraduate context only\(^2\). Informed by observable empirical practices in contextual data (SPA 2011, 2012), social justice issues in this study are also explored through the lens of socio-economic and educational disadvantage rather than, for example, factors such as gender or ethnicity\(^3\). A final boundary concerns this study’s examination of institution-level or ‘corporate’ HE admissions policies, rather than local enactments or responses within particular academic departments\(^4\).

### 1.2 RATIONALE

Three different factors have provided the rationale for this specific focus on the contextual admissions policies of selective HEIs: knowledge gaps with regard to social justice and contextual admissions; my professional practice; and my research to date.

#### 1.2.1 Knowledge gaps

Central to the liberal democratic project is the notion that individuals are ‘born free and equal’ (Berlin 2002; United Nations 1948). Yet in all such societies life chances and resources are, in practice, distributed unequally, with nations such as the UK and US shown to be among the most unequal in the world (Zimdars 2007; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). The moral rationale for such inequalities is most commonly grounded in the liberal, meritocratic notion of justice: that some individuals deserve or earn their greater power, resources and life chances through their higher abilities and efforts, as measured and certified by the education system (Sen 1999; Sandel 2009; Zimdars 2007). This research places the role of England’s most selective HEIs at the centre of such

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\(^2\) For an interesting analysis of widening access issues in postgraduate study see Wakeling (2005).

\(^3\) This is not to say that issues such as gender, ethnicity, age and disability are unimportant, or that these can be reduced to socio-economic factors. For example Boliver (2013) found important ethnic and gender differences in application and offer rates to Russell Group universities that are worthy of further qualitative research. However, there is no evidence to date, perhaps because of legal issues, of any university formally factoring in gender or ethnicity into the way they make admissions offers, whereas there is significant evidence of them doing this in the case of educational and social factors.

\(^4\) A range of evidence suggests that HEIs are increasingly centralising their admissions practices in response to the need for greater transparency and consistency. For example SPA/DIUS (2008) reported that the Schwartz Report has been a significant factor in increasing the centralisation of admissions. This does not mean that local enactments of admissions are unimportant. Rather it reflects a judgment that the ‘power’ to affect change in terms of contextual admissions practice is seen to rest with University-wide central practices.
considerations, by critically assessing how they think about social justice or ‘fairness’ when making admissions offers, through the adoption of contextual admissions policies that ostensibly challenge the conventional notion that those with the highest prior examination grades most ‘deserve’ or ‘merit’ a place.

Access to leading HEIs raises profound questions about justice since HE is a sector that is both educationally and socially important (Gewirtz and Cribb 2009, p. 9). In intrinsic terms, HE is a place that provides opportunities for new generations of students to be inducted into the cultures and practices of knowledge production. It is a site that is concerned with “making, using and sharing the tools that enable us to understand – and change – the world” (Gewirtz and Cribb 2009, p. 10). Importantly, the Russell Group universities examined in this study are distinguished by their ‘research intensive’ nature, where there is a greater focus on the production of knowledge and discovery in comparison to other goals such as teaching\(^5\). However, it is the extrinsic benefits of access to leading HEIs that provide the greater focus for this research. All HEIs are socially important because the academic qualifications they confer on individuals give rise to differential access to a range of ‘positional goods’ (Halsey 1992, p. 103), most notably that of high paid, high status employment. The subject of this study, ‘selective HEIs’, are particularly important because they are widely viewed as gatekeepers to positions of power and influence in areas as diverse as economics, politics, commerce and culture (Giddens and Stanworth 1974; Halsey et al. 1980; Williams and Filippakou 2009). Hence “traditional concerns about access to higher education in general need to be supplemented by questions about access to the UK’s more prestigious universities in particular” (Boliver 2013, p. 345). This will allow my study on England’s most selective HEIs to “take seriously the issue of who goes where and who does what in higher education” (Reay et al. 2005, p. vii) as important facets of social justice.

The concept of contextual admissions – using background information about applicants when making admissions offers – was first brought to the attention of policy-makers and practitioners through a government commissioned review into ‘fair admissions’ known as The Schwartz Report (DfES 2004a, 2004b). This stated that “merit could mean admitting applicants

\(^5\) Other intrinsic benefits are seen to emerge in such institutions through their favourable teaching and learning resources, smaller staff/student ratios and international mix of students (Leathwood 2004).
with the highest examination marks, or it could mean taking a wider view about each applicant’s achievements and potential” (DfES 2003b, p. 5). Yet despite much discussion by government and higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves about contextual admissions and ‘fair admissions’, surprisingly little critical or theoretically-informed academic research has been undertaken to either: i) map out empirically ‘what is going on’ among the contextual admissions policies of selective HEIs; or ii) outline how such policies might be informed by an understanding of social justice and what sort of policies and factors enable or constrain selective HEIs in pursuing such policies.

Issues of social justice following application have been the subject of a range of quantitative studies (Boliver 2013; Zimdars 2007; Zimdars et al. 2009; HEFCE 2003, 2005, 2014). Using data over a ten year period across the Russell Group of HEIs, Boliver (2013) showed that less advantaged applicants were consistently less likely to be offered places, even when prior attainment was controlled for. Interestingly, few studies adopting qualitative approaches have sought to uncover what policies, mechanisms and processes are being applied in the identification and selection of less advantaged students following application (Boliver 2013, cites Zimdars 2010, as a rare exception\textsuperscript{6}). The phenomenon of contextual admissions, where less advantaged applicants are accorded some form of priority in the admissions process, has given rise to frequent media-interest regarding claims of “social engineering”, “positive discrimination” and “dumbing down” by England’s most selective universities (Smith 2010, Skyrme 2012). Despite this tremendous media interest around ‘fair admissions’, no academic qualitative study has, to my knowledge, examined the phenomenon of contextual admissions policies using established philosophical and sociological critical literatures concerning social justice.

1.2.2 Professional practice

That this thesis takes the form of a professional Doctorate, related to the specific knowledge and positionality I have as a senior ‘policy-practitioner’ in the area of higher education, raises important epistemological questions which are outlined more fully in Chapters Four and Nine. The research questions in this study arise, in part, through practical experiences and insights I have made\textsuperscript{6}.

\textsuperscript{6} I would add Burke and McManus (2011) to this.
managing ‘fair admissions’ in the UK’s largest university. I have personally been instrumental in leading, producing and enacting policies that have given additional and special consideration to less advantaged students who then, *ceterus paribus*, have a higher likelihood of being made an offer of a place. In the course of this I have reflected on important questions such as: how did these policies originate? What was my role? How was the ‘problem’ constructed? What factors enabled and constrained what could be achieved? What philosophical and practical questions about justice emerged?

In his work on practitioner forms of research, Winter (1989) notes that “a ‘research’ process must demonstrably offer something over and above this pre-existing level of understanding” (p. 34). Previous empirical and conceptual work developed during three Doctoral Papers (Skyrme 2008, 2009a, 2009b) therefore helped shape the more specific research questions and theoretical tools employed for this thesis, particularly through pilot work in one selective HEI in a Russell Group university (Skyrme 2009a).

### 1.2.3 Research and conceptual development

Two pieces of conceptual development helped shape the focus and theoretical tools employed in this thesis. Firstly, previous pilot work (Skyrme 2009a) highlighted the value of employing a ‘policy scholarship’ approach to fair admissions practices in one HEI. Policy scholarship approaches draw on a rich tradition of literatures largely outside of the field of higher education (Ozga 1987, 1990, 2000; Grace 1995, 1996; Halpin and Troyna 1994; Ball 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 2006, 2012; Olssen *et al.* 2004; Gewirtz 2002; Gewirtz and Cribb 2009; Rivzi and Lingard 2010) and have a particular epistemological, ontological and normative stance towards policy. These approaches lend themselves to qualitative mixed methods approaches to research, that attempt to uncover the meanings and values embedded in the policy process and attempt to link these to wider structural factors at the political, economic, cultural or discursive level (Ozga 1990).

Secondly, this thesis has been informed by a notion of social justice that is contextual and empirically grounded. Given the focus there has been by government and HEIs themselves on issues of ‘fair access’ and ‘fair admissions’ policies, attempts to categorise or map out the actual approaches
of HEIs in relation to the rich philosophies and theories of social justice are conspicuous by their absence. In Skyrme (2009a) an in-depth interview with a policy maker was undertaken to examine how “fairness as justice” (Rawls 1971) was enacted from the point of view of its most senior policy actor. Drawing principally on the policy-scholarship approach of Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribb (Gewirtz 2000, 2002, 2006; Gewirtz and Cribb 1998; Cribb and Gewirtz 2003, 2005), this research helped illuminate ways in which social justice or ‘fairness’, advanced through the contextual admissions policies of selective HEIs, could be understood in real world, empirical contexts that recognised its multidimensional, mediated and level- and context-dependent nature (Gewirtz 2006). These ideas are developed and expanded on in Chapter Three. By employing and developing Gewirtz’s (2006) plural, empirically grounded concept of social justice to the specific field of higher education admissions, I will seek to explore her notion that “it is not possible to resolve the question of what counts as justice in education at a purely abstract level” (p. 69). Rather, it is envisaged that some novel insights and understandings will emerge about the “concrete, practical dilemmas” (Gewirtz 2006, p. 70) faced by senior policy actors in selective HEIs in their pursuit of social justice through contextual admissions and what their likely effects might be in terms of achieving more favourable empirical outcomes for less advantaged groups.

1.3 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The contribution to knowledge of this study is envisaged to be threefold. Firstly, it should make a much-needed empirical contribution to knowledge on this topic. Using documentary analysis from all 20 Russell Group universities in England and in-depth interviews at three purposively selected sites, I will be able to describe and outline new insights, models and categorisations of the ways in which the contextual admissions policies of some of England’s most selective HEIs are being developed in relation to social justice. Secondly, I will make a conceptual contribution to knowledge by developing the concept of social justice used by Gewirtz and Cribb (Gewirtz 2000, 2002, 2006; Gewirtz and Cribb 1998, 2002; Cribb and Gewirtz 2003, 2005) to the field of HE admissions. Thirdly, I hope to make some practical contributions to the field of policy studies of (admissions to) HE. Whilst this study draws on a ‘socially
critical’ (Raffo et al. 2007) policy scholarship approach, the empirical analysis of fair admissions policies and practices in this study seeks to avoid the tendency of many writers in this tradition to work at distance from the realm of practice and/or undertake a “critique from above” (Gewirtz and Cribb 2002, p. 500). Instead, notable and illuminative examples of policies, practices and people in leading HEIs are identified, where conscious attempts have been made to enhance social justice in their admissions practices, either implicitly or explicitly. In so doing, it is envisaged this research will offer some modest policy and political insights about the range of factors that enable or constrain the pursuit of just outcomes for less advantaged groups through contextual admissions policies.

1.4 STRUCTURE

This thesis begins by providing the central research questions, rationale and key contributions to knowledge envisaged. Chapter Two contextualises this study of contextual admissions policies within a prevailing policy context, clearing the key nomenclature and foci of this specific study on ‘fair admissions’ policy processes which are enacted only following the receipt of HE applications. In Chapter Three, the central concept of social justice is developed using philosophical and empirically grounded accounts of social justice, particularly those of Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribb. Chapter Four problematises the notion of ‘policy’ and outlines the distinct theoretical policy-scholarship adopted in this study. This provides a basis for the methodological approach described in Chapter Five, where the specific rationale for adopting a flexible, mixed methods mode of research is outlined, employing documentary analysis and in-depth interviews with senior policy actors across purposively selected Russell Group HEIs.

These first five chapters set up the empirical elements of the study in Chapters Six to Nine. Chapter Six addressed the first research question of this thesis, namely What approaches do selective HEIs in England take towards contextual admissions policies and how might these be categorised? Using documentary content analysis to organise data from the policy texts of 20 English Russell Group HEIs, a way of classifying these into a basic ideal-type
A model of social justice is provided. Three conceptually separate ideal-type positions are identified and in-depth portraits of these institutions are then presented.

Using qualitative interview and documentary data, Chapters Seven and Eight address this study’s second research question, namely: How can the contextual admissions policies of selective HEIs in England be understood in relation to social justice? In particular, what factors enable and constrain the pursuit of social justice through contextual admissions? Chapter Seven uses in-depth analysis across the three sites of this study - Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock universities. These two chapters show how contextual admissions policies can be explained in rich ways with respect to the concept of social justice. Philosophical conceptualisations of justice are outlined and a model is developed suggesting which of these elements enable or constrain the pursuit of just outcomes. In Chapter Eight, the limits of philosophical conceptualisations of justice are developed. Drawing principally on the work of Gewirtz (2006), evidence is presented to suggest that it is not possible to resolve the question of justice in admissions purely at a philosophical level. Rather, justice in admissions is illustrated in three ways through its real context of interpretation and enactment: firstly, by its multi-dimensional nature, with distributive, cultural and associational facets; secondly, as being mediated by structural barriers and the pursuit of other norms; and thirdly, by its level- and context-dependence. The study concludes by summarising the main empirical and conceptual contributions to knowledge, with a synthesis of the different factors that enable or constrain the pursuit of social justice through contextual admissions processes. It also suggests implications for the field of studies into admissions policies in HE and further research questions for scholars of social justice, stratification and mobility in education.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEXTING CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS: KEY POLICY, MONITORING AND PROFESSIONAL BODIES FRAMING THIS STUDY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

To pursue this study’s principal aim of understanding contextual admissions of selective HEIs in England in relation to social justice, it is important that the phenomenon of contextual admissions is itself contextualised within a prevailing English policy context. This short chapter will comprise of two key sections: firstly, it will outline the key policy nomenclature regarding widening participation, fair access, fair admissions and contextual data and reference key empirical studies relating to these phenomena; and secondly, it will outline the key statutory and professional bodies within which HE contextual admissions policies have been framed. This will help set the scene for the development of the key conceptual frameworks employed in this thesis, namely the social justice and policy-scholarship conceptual frameworks outlined in Chapters Three and Four respectively, fully cognisant of some of the key terminology and policy developments that have impacted on selective English HEIs in the past ten to fifteen years.

2.2 POLICY NOMENCLATURE: WIDENING PARTICIPATION, FAIR ACCESS, FAIR ADMISSIONS AND CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS

Selective HEIs in the Russell Group of universities are more and increasingly likely than others to employ contextual admissions practices and policies that take into account the different social and educational opportunities of applicants (SPA 2011, 2012). This phenomena can be understood as part of a much wider and concerted political drive to broaden the social base of HE participants in the past fifteen or so years (Archer 2003). Attention to the question of who participates in HE increased in the 1960s with the publication of the Robbins Report (Robbins 1963). However, it was the publication of the Dearing Report (1997) and the coming to office of the ‘New’ Labour Party in the same year that
widening participation and fair access first emerged as specific policy goals for higher education. Whilst they are certainly inter-related, these twin policy goals can sometimes be unhelpfully conflated in academic and policy literatures.

Since the research questions for this thesis are firmly set within the policy goal of fair access, I shall now define, contextualise and distinguish these important terms. Throughout this thesis I will utilise the following official distinction made in a number of national policies and reports:

Widening participation means increasing the total number of people who progress to higher education, in particular those from under-represented backgrounds. Fair access refers to who gets accepted on those courses – typically at the most selective universities – which have the best outcomes for students (Cabinet Office 2012b, p. 19).

It is possible to critically challenge some of the reasons and assumptions underpinning why the most selective HEIs achieve the ‘best outcomes’ for students and what these ‘best outcomes’, particularly in terms of employment and pay, mean. However important these questions are, it is necessary to place them outside the scope of this more focused study for practical reasons. This thesis can therefore be seen to contribute to knowledge about policy and practice specifically on fair access to the most selective universities. Also, the official distinction above is helpful to employ since it has been reinforced across a range of policy documents, official speeches and papers across both the Labour government (1997 – 2010) and the current Coalition (2010 – ) governments (for example, see DfES 2006; DCSF/DIUS 2008; Denham 2008; HM Government 2009; HEFCE 2009; OFFA 2010a, 2010b; Cabinet Office 2009, 2011, 2012b; BIS 2014). This distinction allows one to view widening participation in terms of participation across the HE sector as a whole, whereas fair access is clearly concerned with participation across a particular institution or set of institutions that are generally more competitive for purposes of entry. This distinction is important because evidence points to there being progress on widening participation into higher education more generally, without a corresponding improvement in fair access to those selective institutions that, de facto, offer the highest financial returns later in life in terms of employment opportunities (Cabinet Office 2012b; BIS 2014).
2.2.1 Widening Participation – entrants to HE

A range of major policy drives by the Labour Party in the 1990s and 2000s (DfEE 1997, DfEE 1999; DfES 2003a, DfES 2003b, DfES 2004a, DfES 2004b, DfES 2006; DIUS/DCSF 2008, DIUS/DCSF 2009) brought together two themes that were seen to underpin the UK and other western economies in their desire to widen participation in higher education: a macro-economic imperative to increase the number of higher skilled workers in the economy seen to be informed by ‘Human Capital Theory’ (Schultz 1960); and, a social justice rationale, typified by a concern to promote some notion of ‘equality of opportunity’, where background should be no impediment to accessing higher education.

A range of evidence on widening participation suggests three things when examining patterns of access into higher education across the England in the past decade or so. Firstly, there has been a remarkable growth in HE participation in the UK. Around 600,000 people attended HE in the early 1970s, compared to some 2.5 million in 2012 (Cabinet Office 2012b, p. 19). Secondly, this growth is different to assessing whether there has been a more even social distribution of these opportunities to participate across different backgrounds. Opportunities to participate in HE are stubbornly correlated to background. For example, Figure 2 from BIS (2014) shows that young people growing up in areas that already have the highest participation rates in HE (Quintile 1) are around three times more likely to progress into HE than those growing up in areas with the lowest participation levels (Quintile 5).

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Thirdly, and importantly, there is a range of evidence pointing to some discernible progress in widening participation over the past fifteen or so years (OFFA 2010a; Cabinet Office 2011, Cabinet Office 2012b; HEFCE 2010, 2013; BIS 2014). The likelihood of those going to HE from the lowest participation areas, where a range of social and educational disadvantages are concentrated, increased by 30 per cent between 2004/05 and 2009/10 and by 50 per cent between 1994/95 and 2009/10 (HEFCE 2010). Also, there is evidence that the participation rates of the most advantaged and most disadvantaged areas has narrowed, both in proportional terms and percentage points terms from the mid to the late 2000s (HEFCE 2013; BIS 2014). Whilst acknowledging the large size of the participation gap, the Office for Fair Access noted that this was the first time in recordable history that such progress had been made (OFFA 2010b).

The focus of the research reported in this thesis has been constructed during a period of changed emphasis on widening participation and fair access, with a more recent shift towards the latter. This is because the focus on increasing and widening participation in HE has been lessened somewhat since 2010, when the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government ended specific targets set by the Labour administration to raise or widen rates in HE towards per cent of the population (BBC 2010). However, a specific focus on
fair access to the most selective HEIs has anything but lessened in this period: each of the major policy documents of the Coalition government (BIS 2011; Cabinet Office 2011, 2012a, 2012b; HEFCE 2013; BIS 2014) have made strong reference to the key domain in this thesis, what is termed ‘fair access’ to HEIs that have the highest entry requirements.

2.2.2 Fair access (as a subset of widening participation) – entrants to selective HEIs

Important as the evidence is regarding widening participation, the research questions for this thesis concern the more specific issue of fair access. Fair access focuses on widening participation to the most selective institutions that tend to offer the highest financial rewards for graduates (DfES 2006; Cabinet Office 2012b). Young people from the most disadvantaged quintile of postcode areas are around fifteen times less likely to enter the most selective higher education than their more advantaged counterparts (Cabinet Office 2011, p. 48). Definitions of ‘selective institutions’ tend to focus on the number of applicants there are per place, or the average prior examination grades needed to gain entry to those institutions. The 20 English institutions in the Russell Group of universities that are used as the basis of this study have been shown to be consistently some of the most selective in terms of entry requirements. Their website notes that they have “an average of around seven applications per place and up to 20 applications per place for some courses” (Russell Group 2013). They also offer a higher wage-premium for their graduates. Studying at a Russell Group university has been show to attract a salary top up of approximately ten per cent over a lifetime compared with other graduates, even when other factors affecting wages have been taken into account such as A level scores or parental background (Russell Group 2013).

The socio-economic base of these most selective HEIs has changed very little in the UK despite a range of policy interventions focusing on this area. For example Figure 3 shows that over a fifteen year period the most disadvantaged 40 per cent of areas (measured by area participation in HE) were able to increase their rate of entrance to HE, but this was mostly concentrated in the least selective third of HEIs in the UK, as measured by entry grade tariffs. Participation in those HEIs within the top third of entry grade tariff
scores remained static for less advantaged learners while at the same time, the most advantaged 20 per cent of young people were able to *increase* their share of entrants to the most selective HEIs (Cabinet Office 2012b).

**Figure 3:** Participation rates by institutional selectivity for the most disadvantaged 40 per cent of young people (Bottom Quintiles 1 and 2)

This is important because all of the ‘leading HEIs’ in this study – those 20 English institutions in the Russell Group – feature within this top third of the most selective HEIs in this research. This means that the phenomenon in this study – contextual admissions practices in leading HEIs – have been developed during a period where more advantaged applicants have actually *increased* their share of places in leading HEIs.

The reasons for these patterns of differential access are manifold. There are the stark differences in prior attainment between applicants from different social and educational backgrounds (Sutton Trust 2007, 2008a, 2008b). When these are controlled for, a range of evidence also shows that less advantaged applicants, particularly those from state schools, are less likely to apply to more selective HEIs such as those in the Russell Group (Sutton Trust 2011; Boliver 2013).
Policies and practices to advance ‘fair access’ to selective HEIs have been pursued by HEIs themselves in many ways. For example, awareness-raising outreach work such as summer schools, taster days and mentoring programmes, ‘compact’/progression accords or achievement-boosting classes are frequently cited as examples of activities that can support ‘fairer access’ to the most selective HEIs (HM Government 2009; Cabinet Office 2012b). There is some evidence these activities can help to boost the numbers and/or proportions of who applies to selective HEIs in the first place (Sutton Trust 2010a; Cabinet Office 2012b). However, many critical commentators have pointed to ways in which such a discourse of ‘fair access’ tends to “place emphasis on individuals from underrepresented groups taking responsibility to change their aspirations, dispositions and values” (Burke 2009, p. 5) and downplays the role of deeper structural inequalities and the role of institutional structures, discourses, and practices that might unwittingly reproduce deeply embedded inequalities within HE contexts (Burke and McManamus 2011, p. 700). However, the focus of this study concerns processes and policies net of application where I will contend that conscious attempts have been made by some HEIs to re-examine and change their practices so that they are more able to recognise the specific challenges and disadvantages faced by applicants through the admissions process.

2.2.3 Fair admissions (as a subset of fair access) – who is offered a place?

Until now, most attention has focused on applicants and entrants. However, there is a conceptually separate phenomenon that forms the focus on this study – and that concerns what happens in-between application and entry: the domain of fair admissions policies, of which contextual admissions forms a key part. I am therefore conceptualising the arena of ‘fair admissions’ as concerning how applications already made to HEIs are handled in terms of offer-making. I agree with Boliver (2013) that it is curious why there is such a dearth of qualitative studies focusing on the practices of HEIs in terms of how they make offers and thereby ‘select’ students, particularly because of the great deal of attention that has been accorded to fair and contextual admissions in many official policy document (OFFA 2011; Cabinet Office 2012b; BIS 2014). Burke
and McManus (Burke 2009; Burke and McManus 2011) and Zimdars (Zimdars 2010) looked at the role of interviewers across single institutions, although neither of these studies specially honed in on contextual admissions policies, a practice which has gained increasing currency since these studies were undertaken.

The emphasis on ‘fair admissions’ as a key element of widening participation and fair access policy came into sharp focus in England following the publication of government-commissioned ‘Schwartz Report’ (DfES 2004b). This made a number of policy recommendations that have largely, since, been implemented across HEIs (SPA/DIUS 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Schwartz defines a fair admissions system as one which “provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations” (DfES 2004b, p. 5). This focus on ability therefore makes an assumption that when this is controlled for, there should be an equal opportunity to progress to university. To this I will return. The report then sets out five key principles that were seen to characterise a ‘fair admissions’ system:

**Principle 1**: a fair admissions system should be transparent.
**Principle 2**: a fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential.
**Principle 3**: a fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid.
**Principle 4**: a fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers to applicants.
**Principle 5**: a fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.
(DfES 2004b, p. 7)

Using this definition, a fair admissions system has a number of different dimensions, not all of which might have implications for social justice and the progression of disadvantaged students in the application process. For example, Burke and McManus (2011) argue that such a notion of fair admissions “conflates transparency and fairness . . . making admissions processes and practices clear and transparent does not render them ‘fair’ if they continue to discriminate against certain class, ethnic and gender groups” (p. 701). However, principles two and four fall very much in the terrain of this thesis – how HEIs
select in terms of “ability and potential” and how they might “minimise barriers to applicants”, particularly those facing social and educational disadvantages.

Using qualitative data to inform understandings of how admissions processes operate following application is important since a range of quantitative studies have demonstrated that, even when attainment/ability is controlled for, applicants from less advantaged backgrounds such as those in state schools are actually less likely to be made offers for admissions than their more advantaged counterparts (Boliver 2013). In her research over the ten year period 1996-2006, Boliver revealed a rather startling finding: “when those from state schools do apply to Russell Group universities they seem to need to be better qualified than their private school counterparts by as much as a B-grade at A-level before they are as likely to receive offers of admission (2013 p. 359). She therefore sets forth an interesting empirical standard by which a fair admissions system might be judged and to which this study would subscribe. For Boliver, a fair admissions system can be judged in terms of whether it “at the very least provides equal access for those who are equally well qualified.” (Boliver 2013, p. 346).

Underpinning these quantitative outcomes are therefore a set of processes that are ripe for the sort of qualitative exploration in this study. Rather than attempt to statistically correlate outcomes in admissions odds, this study will instead employ a largely qualitative policy-scholarship approach that will seek to explore the meanings given by senior policy actors to contextual admissions policies that consciously attempt to improve the odds of those from less advantaged backgrounds being made admissions offers.

2.2.4 Contextual admissions (as a subset of fair admissions) – what background data might inform admissions decisions?

In recognition that there are important issues of fairness and social justice regarding which individuals are made admissions offers following an application, an increasing number of universities now make use of contextual admissions policies as a way of explicitly advancing their fair access goals (SPA 2011, 2012). The idea that selective universities might take “a wider view about each applicant’s achievements and potential” (DfES 2004b, p. 5) when
choosing whether to offer places for admission has now gained some modest momentum. Since the publication of the Schwartz Report, there has been a gradual increase in the number of HEIs who have reported using contextual admissions data to inform their admissions policies (SPA 2011, 2012). Contextual admissions are defined by the UK’s central source of expertise and advice on admissions, Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) as follows:

Contextual data . . . puts attainment in the context of the circumstances in which it has been obtained; currently mainly educational, geo-demographic and socio-economic background data. For example . . . data used may be from publicly available data sets such as government school performance data or young participation in HE rates by neighbourhood data . . . or from commercial datasets (SPA 2014).

To support this, the Universities and Colleges Admission Service has, in recent years, made data available to universities about the average GCSE and A level performance of schools from which applicants have applied, as well as basic demographic information on an applicant’s neighbourhood (SPA 2014). By using such contextual data, it is possible to see that some applicants from ‘disadvantaged backgrounds’ may then be accorded additional consideration that conceivably increase their odds of being made an admissions offer. For example, their application may be given a ‘second look’, they may receive an automatic offer or additional ‘points’, they may be invited to interview, or they may receive a lower than standard offer (SPA 2012).

Drawing on survey research from SPA (2012) it is possible to identify three types of social and educational background factors that have been the primary focus of contextual admissions policies to date:

- **Educational advantages and disadvantages.** It has been demonstrated already that some schools, particularly those in the independent sector, are more successful in applying and being made admissions offers, even when prior attainment is controlled for. There is also interesting evidence that, when prior attainment is controlled for, that: firstly, applicants from state schools tend to outperform those from independent schools in terms of degree classification (HEFCE 2003, 2005, 2014; Ogg et al. 2009); and secondly, that those performing above their school average in lower
performing schools tend to outperform those with similar levels of attainment in higher performing schools (HEFCE 2014; Hoare and Johnson 2011). Some HEIs have therefore chosen to identify applicants from low performing schools and/or those in the state sector for different and more favourable consideration.

- **Neighbourhood/Area advantages and disadvantages.** Where someone lives and grows up significantly affects the likelihood of progression into any form of HE, particularly its leading forms (OFFA 2010a; HEFCE 2013; BIS 2014). Some HEIs have therefore chosen to employ a variety of geo-demographic postcode indicators to highlight those who live in areas with low participation rates for different and more favourable consideration. Recent evidence has indicated that when prior A level achievement is controlled for, there is a slightly higher chance of someone from a more advantaged area gaining an upper-second or higher degree (HEFCE 2014).

- **Socio-economic advantages and disadvantages.** Children nurtured in families from lower socio-economic groups, as measured by their position in the official occupational class structure, are much less likely to progress into HE, and particularly its leading forms, than those from higher socio-economic family backgrounds (HESA 2012; Office for National Statistics 2012). Some HEIs have therefore chosen to try and identify applicants from lower socio-economic groups for different and more favourable consideration when making admissions offers.

In practice these indicators will, of course, overlap. There are also some further differentiations by gender, ethnicity and region - factors that are beyond the scope of this thesis to examine (see HEFCE 2014 and Boliver 2013 for some interesting further analysis of these factors). When reference is made to ‘advantaged’ and ‘disadvantaged’ applicants in this thesis, I will therefore be implying sensitivity to some, or all, of these three educational, neighbourhood or socio-economic factors that strongly influence patterns of representation in our most selective HEIs.
2.3 KEY POLICY FRAMEWORKS ON FAIR ADMISSIONS

Next, some of the important statutory and professional bodies that help frame this empirical study of fair admissions practices to the most selective HEIs will be outlined.

2.3.1 Admissions autonomy? The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, Schwartz and the QAA Code of Practice

The development of the putative autonomy of English HEIs with regard to undergraduate admissions needs explaining, since each HEI has considerable freedoms over whom it can admit to teach. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s it is largely accepted that HEIs in England were subject to a range of policy reforms aimed at making the sector contribute more effectively to the economy (Parry 2001). Like many writers on public policy during this period, Prichard (2000) argues that beneath these reforms lay a neo-liberal emphasis on individual freedom and the “reconstruction of the public as consumers, and the public sector as public enterprises engaged in providing services to meet individual consumer/customer/client needs” (p. 48). This meant that HEIs were subjected to a more competitive environment and made increasingly accountable by government.

The autonomy of HEIs was seen to be affected by the ending of the binary division between polytechnics and universities in 1992. Whereas polytechnics had been more tightly regulated, this had been less the case for the university sector (Scott 2001). The creation of a single funding agency in England, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), brought together two different HE cultures and a quasi-market was encouraged by the then-Conservative government to ensure HEIs were able to compete against each other for scarce resources (Groves et al. 1997). HEFCE was seen to largely function as an “instrument of the state” (Scott 2001) and its role was to “implement the government's predetermined objectives through second-order policies” (Scott 1995, p. 27). So rather than through direct control, the government was seen to exert influence through “steering at a distance” (Ball 1997). The use of accountability frameworks such as teaching quality assessments, the audit of institutional systems for quality assurance and the
evaluation of research activity were examples of ways in regulation and “value for money” were ensured (Parry 2001).

HE ‘autonomy’ over admissions is set within this context. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, which ended the binary divide and increased regulation on HE, placed the consideration of admissions as being outside the government’s legal remit. HEIs are therefore notionally autonomous in who and how they admit students, providing this does not contravene equalities or consumer legislation. They therefore determine their own entry requirements and admissions practices and policies. Consequently, admissions policies, processes and entry requirements differ considerably between and within institutions. There is also no legal requirement for HEIs to publish their admissions policies (Mullen 2011).

In practice, however, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) plays a role in developing and encouraging best practice in admissions through its UK Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher (QAA 2006). This is a set of UK agreed guidelines that cover all standards and quality in higher education.

The QAA Code of Practice, and its antecedent in the form of the Schwartz Review, led to a greater prescription and attempt to ‘professionalise’ admissions. However, there was little attempt to more formally link these largely procedural issues to targets for increasing the entry rates of less advantaged students until the advent of HEFCE Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (HEFCE 2009) and ‘second-phase’ Access Agreements with the Office for Fair Access Agreements (OFFA 2011) following the increase of undergraduate fees to a maximum of £9,000 per annum from 2012.

### 2.3.2 The Office for Fair Access

As part of what many writers view as the wider neo-liberal restructuring of (higher) education, where learners have been reconstructed as ‘consumers’ who ‘choose’ educational products (Olsen et al 2004), the HE Act of 2004 introduced the concept of variable tuition fees for the first time in England. This construction of ‘students as consumers’ was furthered through them being
subject to top-up fees of up to £3,000 per annum in England. It was envisaged this would bring about greater competition, as some HEIs would try to attract such ‘consumers’ at a lower ‘price’ - although in practice this did not happen as most universities charged the maximum fee (Palfreyman 2004). Of key importance for this thesis was that the same Act in 2004 introduced a new body and key condition for being able to charge a higher rate of fees. An “Access Agreement” had to be drawn up with a newly created non-departmental public body, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). As stated in their first set of guidance notes to HEIs:

OFFA aims to ensure that the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006-07 does not have a detrimental effect on widening participation and that institutions are explicitly committed to increasing the participation rates of under-represented groups. Institutions that decide to raise their full-time undergraduate tuition fees above the standard level are required to submit an access agreement to OFFA. This agreement should set out how they will safeguard and promote fair access – in particular for students from low income groups – through bursary and other financial support and outreach work (OFFA 2004, p. 4).

It was also made explicit, in this ‘first phase’ of Access Agreements, that OFFA would need to honour the spirit and law set out in the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act regarding institutional autonomy over admissions:

We also have a duty to protect academic freedom and believe in institutional autonomy. Therefore we do not regulate the content of courses, teaching or admissions policies or criteria. Institutions are not required to address these areas in their access agreements (OFFA 2004, p. 4).

However, fast-forwarding to 2010-2011, it was possible to see OFFA being reconfigured under a new political settlement by the Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition government. A review into English HE funding under the chairmanship of Lord Browne of Madingley was instigated in 2009 in the final year of the Labour administration. The Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finance (2010) reported in the early months of the Coalition government in 2010 and recommended a complete lifting of the cap on undergraduate fees in England. Whilst this specific recommendation was not taken forward, most of the key principles of the review were accepted in what was seen as further neoliberal restructuring of higher education into a quasi-
marketplace, where competition between HEIs would be on the basis of quality and price (fee differentials) and individual 'consumers' would drive up standards through exercising their choices (Thompson and Bekhnadria 2010). Once again, a key condition of this rise was that English HEIs had to have in place an Access Agreement with OFFA for any programme that charged more than £6,000 per annum. Important for the purposes of this study is that this 'second phase' of Access Agreements was where a substantial shift in the focus on OFFA towards admissions could be seen for the first time:

The freedom to admit your own students is an important part of academic freedom. The law puts admissions criteria outside our remit and it is right that it should do so. However, as ministers have recognised in their guidance to us, one way for institutions to make progress in broadening their applicant pool and admitting more students from disadvantaged backgrounds with the potential to benefit from HE is to take into account contextual data in their admissions process; for example, levels of average attainment in an applicant’s school, or other indicators of under-representation (OFFA 2011, p16).

It is also apparent in the updated institutional guidance from OFFA (OFFA 2011) that there will be special expectations on, and attention towards, the most selective HEIs, where OFFA “explicitly endorses the use of contextual data by those selective institutions who wish to do so, in order to admit more students with high potential from disadvantaged backgrounds” (OFFA 2011, p1). This has been further reinforced in government’s National Strategy for Access and Student Success (2014) which stated that “all highly selective universities should consider whether they could make better use of contextual information in their admissions process and critically examine their entry requirements, polices and processes to ensure that they are not unduly disadvantaging certain groups of students that have the potential to succeed on their programmes” (p. 25). Therefore, contextual admissions is set out as one of the key policy vehicles through which selective HEIs can admit a greater proportion of students from less advantaged backgrounds.
2.3.3 UCAS and SPA

The University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) and Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) also have a ‘steering’ role in the use of contextual data in admissions. UCAS is the non-profit organisation through which every potential student must apply for undergraduate full-time level in a HEI in the UK. UCAS is not a government body: it is funded by applicant fees and its governance arrangements are constituted from within the HE, school and college sector. In response to calls for the provision of additional information on the context of applicants from its member HEIs, UCAS provided some contextual information about the social and educational background of applicants for the first time for entrants in 2012. For example, through UCAS it is now possible to know the average level of achievement of an applicant’s school (SPA 2014). Because UCAS have no authority to comment on how universities admit students, they have been clear there is no requirement for HEIs to either receive or use this additional contextual information. It is delivered on an ‘opt-in’ basis and HEIs receiving this information can do so for monitoring purposes as well as helping to inform decisions (SPA 2014).

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) is based in, and part-funded by, UCAS and exists to:

work closely with universities and colleges to enhance good practice, excellence and professionalism in the recruitment and selection of students to higher education. SPA promotes fair admissions by researching and disseminating good practice and advice across the HE sector. The expertise, independence and impartiality in evidence based policy and practice has enabled us to successfully develop the connections and sector confidence to act as a broker between both makers and implementers of policy in UK HE admissions (SPA 2014).

SPA was set up as part of a key recommendation from the government-commissioned Schwartz Report (DfES 2004b). They have produced a number of reports, advised and informed HEIs on the usage of contextual admissions in the UK (SPA 2011, 2012, 2014; SPA/DIUS 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). However, unlike OFFA or HEFCE, they do not have any formal monitoring powers.
2.4 SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The chapter has outlined some of the key nomenclature employed in official accounts of widening participation, fair access, fair admissions and contextual admissions. Given the focus on ‘fairness’, a knowledge gap has been identified in locating these considerations within a wider understanding of the concept of social justice. The practice of highlighting applicants from less advantaged backgrounds for ostensibly more favourable treatment in the admissions process has profound implications for issues of social justice, and these will be explored in the next chapter through locating these policies and processes within a rich set of philosophical and critical literatures, largely from outside studies of higher education.

This chapter has also alluded to a scant amount of ‘official’ research into the fair admissions practices of HEIs by SPA (SPA 2011, 2012). Using surveys sent to universities, they have tended to focus on providing accounts of ‘best practice’ and guidance on its ‘correct’ usage, rather than critically assessing the values and analytical assumptions underpinning how and why contextual admissions policies have been framed in particular ways. In Chapter Four I will therefore contrast these approaches with the policy scholarship approach employed in this research, which will take a distinct epistemological, ontological and normative stance towards policy. In particular, this study will be distinguished from official and academic research to date on contextual admissions through its qualitative approach, where I will be seeking to uncover the meanings and values embedded in the policy process from the perspective of senior policy actors in selective HEIs, and attempt to understand what macro and meso level factors enable or constrain the pursuit of justice through admissions.
CHAPTER 3
SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ADMISSIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It has been demonstrated that the concepts of ‘fair access’ and ‘fair admissions’ have been the subject of increasing attention by government and universities themselves in the way they conceive of admissions, particularly through their employment of contextual admissions practices. Academic research employing quantitative methods has pointed to apparent unfairness, where disadvantaged applicants have been shown to be less likely to gain admission to selective HEIs, even when prior attainment is controlled for (Boliver 2013; Zimdars 2007; Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath 2009). At the same time, it is apparent that an increasing number of HEIs are employing the use of contextual data in admissions to ostensibly increase the likelihood of less advantaged applicants being made admissions offers (SPA 2012). This chapter places these considerations within wider literatures concerning the nature of social justice. In doing so I hope to address Brennan and Naidoo’s argument that “while there is an extensive research literature on social justice and equity in the social sciences, in general this is not fully engaged with by higher education researchers. For their part, social scientists have tended not to give much attention to universities and other higher education establishments in their investigations of equity and social justice” (2008, p. 298). This is particularly the case when it comes to theoretical and qualitative-empirical contributions to social justice considerations following the application process (Boliver 2013).

This chapter on social justice will be split into two key sections. Section One outlines normative/philosophical approaches to social justice using a threefold schema of distributive, cultural and associational justice. These will help aid a more sophisticated understanding of contextual admissions policies and practices than found in official accounts of fair admissions and access. The three-fold schema, will also illustrate a contention in this study that conceptualisations of ‘fairness’ in contextual admissions have implicitly concentrated on the distributive dimensions to justice at the expense of viewing it as plural concept, with cultural and associational elements. Section Two sets
out Gewirtz’s (2006) argument that there can be no philosophical resolution to what counts as justice and applies this to contextual admissions. I draw on Gewirtz to contend that the pursuit of social justice through contextual admissions policies can only be fully illuminated in real contexts of enactment and interpretation by key social actors in HEIs. These will reflect the multi-dimensional/conflictual, mediated and level- and context- dependent nature of social justice (Gewirtz 2006) as applied to contextual admissions.

### 3.2 PHILOSOPHICAL/NORMATIVE APPROACHES TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

There are a range of normative assumptions and disputes underpinning conceptions of social justice in education within and between a substantive body of philosophical and sociological literature in this area. The approach to social justice in this thesis will draw on the work of Fraser (1997), Young (1990), Gewirtz and Cribb (Cribb and Gewirtz 2003, 2005; Gewirtz 2006) who have conceptualised three different dimensions of social justice: i) distributive justice; ii) cultural justice; and iii) associational justice. These three different dimensions form the basis of the first half of this chapter, where contextual admissions practices are analysed according to these criteria. When undertaking data analysis of contextual admissions policies of selective HEIs in the empirical section to this study, I explore how these conflicting notions of justice shed empirical light on the more messy reality and practical dilemmas of ‘doing social justice’ (Gewirtz 2006) in contextual admissions.

#### 3.2.1 Distributive justice

The most common moral rationale for why there are disproportionate numbers of socially and educationally advantaged applicants in selective HEIs is grounded in a particular interpretation of justice: that is, the liberal-meritocratic notion that some individuals merit or deserve access to these greater opportunities and resources through their higher abilities and efforts, as measured and certified by the education system (Young 1958; Sen 1999; Sandel 2009; Zimdars 2007). Hence, if HEIs simply select for admission those individuals with the highest examination achievements, this may be seen as
‘fair’ since, through their greater abilities and efforts, they deserve the benefits that may later accrue.

Underpinning many notions of fairness in higher education admissions, albeit only implicitly, are therefore competing notions of what we might term ‘distributive justice’. This concept is most closely associated with the American political philosopher John Rawls. In A Theory of Justice (1971) he famously describes distributive justice as “the way in which major social institutions . . . . distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the distribution of advantages from social cooperation” (Rawls 1971, p. 7). He suggests we best understand distributive justice by thinking of it as a set of principles or procedures that would be agreed upon by everyone if they had to decide, from behind a hypothetical ‘veil of ignorance’, what would be the rules for distributing benefits and burdens of society. This ‘veil of ignorance’ conceptualises a situation where each individual is unaware of their abilities, race, religion, gender, IQ, nationality etc. Hence in selecting distributive principles from an original position, Rawls posits that one is able to adopt impartial or unbiased views.

Where individuals face the prospect of being ‘propelled’ into any potential position or social echelon in society, Rawls argues they would rationally choose two key principles: i) maximum equal rights and liberties to all, and ii) arrangements of social and economic positions that were “open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity”, where social differences and inequalities would only be tolerated if they were to “the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society” (1971, p. 302). In other words, primary goods would be distributed according to principles of equality unless an unequal distribution would leave everyone, particularly those least advantaged, with more of these goods than they would otherwise have. Discussions about distributive justice have therefore tended to take the form of what Fraser (1997) calls ‘economic justice’ - which she defines by the absence of exploitation, marginalization and material deprivation. From a Rawlsian position, a range of interesting questions can be posited regarding access to selective HEIs: for example, would the current patterns of social inequality that underpin differential rates of applications and offers of admission to selective HEIs be tolerated from behind a hypothetical ‘veil of ignorance’? What does ‘equality’ or ‘justice’ mean
as applied to admissions to HE? What procedures might govern who should be admitted to selective HEIs where there is competition for places and students apply from different ‘starting points’ and social backgrounds? I will now explore these themes.

Sandel (2009) has used Rawls’s work on distributive justice to contrast two rival theories: the libertarian-meritocratic approach, which involves only formal equality of opportunity and the fair equality of opportunity (FEO) meritocracy. Sandel argues that the libertarian-meritocratic notion has prevailed over the previous feudal system, since fixed ascriptive hierarchies are rejected. Under such a system, everyone is legally allowed to compete for more privileged positions. The just distribution of rewards, like university places, are allotted through a system “where individual talent and effort, rather than ascriptive traits, determine individuals’ placements in a social hierarchy” (Alon and Tienda 2007, p. 489). The coining of the term meritocracy, as a way of thinking about distributive justice, was first made by Michael Young (1958) in what was actually a critical satire of society. In such a conception, merit consists of “intelligence plus effort” (Young 1958, p. 94). This appealingly simplified, but highly individualistic version of a meritocracy, has dominated many of the debates on university admissions until very recently (SPA 2011) and deviations away from it are often cast in terms of ‘lowering standards’ or ‘dumbing down’ (Skyrme 2012). In this definition of distributive social justice, admissions places would simply be allotted in direct proportion to ‘merit’: those with highest exam grades will have a correspondingly higher likelihood of being made an admissions offer and vice versa.

I see two key problems with this libertarian-meritocratic definition of justice as applied to HE admissions – one empirical and one philosophical. Firstly, Boliver’s (2013) quantitative empirical research of Russell Group HEIs over a ten year period has shown that even when prior qualification levels were controlled for, students from independent schools were significantly more likely to be made admissions offers than those from state schools. Secondly, from a philosophical perspective, the particular conception of merit in this model is

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8 As Young set out in later work: “it is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on their merit. It is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new class without room in it for others” (Young 2001). For Young, where merit was scientifically measured, elite groups would simply be able to justify their privileges with reference to their higher examination performances, even though these higher examination scores were simply proxies for differing social class privileges.
problematic “since the runners start from different starting points, the race is hardly fair” (Sandel 2009, p. 153). Rawls (1971) himself argues that distributive shares resulting from such a system are improperly influenced by factors that are arbitrary from a moral point of view. For example, no one chooses which family into which they are born, the genes they may be endowed with, or education that they receive. Brink (2008) sums this up eloquently when he says:

It is not uncommon to encounter a line of argument that says admitting students to university solely on the grounds of school-leaving results is nothing more than the implementation of a meritocracy, with the corollary that if the ‘lower social classes’ are proportionately less successful, the only proper conclusion to draw is that they are less meritorious . . . The difficulty arises when such a context-free numbers-based system is called a merit-based system, and the successful and unsuccessful candidates, respectively, thereby included or excluded from a presumed meritocracy. To say that school-leavers whose parents could buy their way into ‘good schools’ are of higher merit that school leavers who struggled in adverse circumstances, on the sole evidence of their respective school-leaving results, seems a peculiarly narrow definition of merit (p. 19).

Given that social and educational background factors are shown to sharply determine who ‘wins the race’ for the offer of admission into selective universities, an alternative conception of distributive social justice has been highlighted by Sandel (2009) and Rawls (1971). This has been called ‘fair equality of opportunity’. This goes beyond the narrow individualistic conception of merit outlined above to introduce social dimensions. Instead of basing justice on the formal legal right to compete and demonstrate one’s talents, Rawls highlights the importance of ‘removing’ obstacles to fair equality of opportunity. Hence for Rawls (1971) “only if everyone begins at the same starting point can it be said that the winners of the race deserve their rewards” (p. 154). In this definition of justice a FEO system must bring everyone to the same starting point so that each has an equal opportunity for their talents to be considered for an offer of admission, regardless of background. This accords with the definition of a fair admissions system advanced by Schwartz, when he says that a fair admissions system should “minimise barriers to applicants” and that universities should “select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential” (DfES 2004b, p. 7).
As demonstrated by SPA (2011) an increasing number of HEIs are examining the social and educational background of applicants, perhaps to enhance some notion of equality of opportunity. Emerging quantitative evidence (HEFCE 2003, 2005, 2014; Ogg et al. 2009) has highlighted an important conceptual difference between past achievement and future potential that is likely to underpin this trend. When prior attainment is controlled for, this has shown that applicants from state schools tend to outperform those from independent schools in terms of degree classification. Also, those performing above their school average in lower performing schools tend to outperform those with similar levels of attainment in higher performing schools (HEFCE 2014; Hoare and Johnson 2011). In these cases, a system of fair equality of opportunity could entail HEIs positing alternative notions of ‘merit’ that are sensitive to the different opportunities applicants may have had to achieve and demonstrate very high examination scores. This could lead to two scenarios, each of which could conceivably have a positive impact on the relative odds of less advantaged being made admissions offers. Firstly, without adjusting for prior achievement, it would be rational for HEIs to prioritise educationally-disadvantaged students for admissions offers if they wished to maximise their intake of students likely to perform the highest in terms of first or upper-second class degrees. Secondly, and more controversially, it would be conceivable for HEIs to adjust for prior achievement by making admissions offers to lower qualified students, providing they were equally likely to achieve a good degree outcome. This also comes close to Rawls’s difference principle, which suggests that opportunities for the least well off in society should be maximised, providing this does not result in a levelling down.

Introducing social dimensions to notions of merit-based distributive justice clearly opens up a new and interesting discursive space for thinking about what justice means in terms of admissions. However, Sandel (2009) makes a point about affirmative racial practices in the US that could equally be made in a UK context for socially-contextual admissions when he says: “this does not challenge the notion that colleges and universities should admit those students with the most academic promise; it is simply an attempt to find the most accurate measure of each individual’s academic promise” (p. 169). Or, in other words, this approach does not ‘throw the meritocratic baby out of the bathwater’. It simply provides a more expansive definition of merit, informed by
sensitivities towards equal opportunities for merit to be recognised within the admissions process.

Despite opening up a new discursive space that moves beyond ‘natural talent’ and social factors, FEO conceptions of justice can still be seen to foreground individuals. It prevents a set of ‘barriers’, such as admissions processes, that if ‘lifted’ would seem to enhance justice. More critical writers like Burke (2009) highlight that “issues of structural inequality and cultural misrecognition become hidden” (p. 5) in such discourses of fair access. Attention to issues of cultural, rather than distributive, justice are therefore handled in the next section of this chapter.

Because of tensions in the notion of FEO, some writers have emphasised the notion of ‘equity’ when thinking about distributive justice. For example, Ainscow et al. (2006) argue equity can mean any of the following i) achieving a ‘common standard’ or ‘floor target’; ii) treating everyone equally; iii) meeting the needs of all individuals; or iv) ‘minimizing divergence’ across social groups (p. 3). The notion of a ‘floor target’ is of little conceptual use to describe access to a scarce social good like entry to a Russell Group university. If we employ the concept of ‘equal treatment’, this is also problematic since “if people begin unequal and are given equal treatment, then they usually end up still unequal (and often more unequal)” (Clark 2006 p. 279). Such a concept may, conversely, draw attention to the need to treat some people unequally (or differently) as a condition of equality – hence the third focus in the definition of equity as being about treating people as individuals, who may have different vantage or starting points in the admissions process. This brings the argument closer to the idea of Rawls’s difference principle: that the least advantaged might legitimately accrue greater resources. However, it is the last conception of ‘minimizing divergences across social groups’, that has piqued most interest in thinking on distributive justice since it comes closer to what Gewirtz calls a ‘stronger’ version of equality (1998, p. 472). Notions of equitable outcomes might be seen to underpin the positive and affirmative action policies of some US institutions (Bowen and Bok 1998, Sandel 2009). Taking a more critical perspective, Lynch (1995) argues that such liberal conceptions of justice do nothing to confront “the fundamental problems of hierarchies of power, wealth and other privileges” (cited in Gewirtz 1998, p. 472). Whilst I would concur with
this analysis in its theoretical form, this study has deliberately honed in on a specific set of empirically-observable policies and processes which have the potential to advance justice in modest ways *whilst these hierarchies of power, wealth and privilege* (including between HEIs in a competitive ‘HE marketplace’) *remain*. This draws on Gewirtz’s (2006) notions of the level-dependent nature of justice: the meso-level of the HEI, and its conception of justice employed in its admission policy, has empirical consequences for opportunities and outcomes of less advantaged learners that are not without significance. For this reason, notions of equity provide an incredibly useful analytical tool because of their empirical focus on *outcomes*, rather than opportunities. They also overcome philosophical relativism by drawing on Boliver’s (2013) empirical yardstick that, *ceterus paribus*, those from less advantaged backgrounds should enjoy at least the same odds of being made admissions offers. This provides a powerful, real-world and outcomes-focused, notion of justice for universities to be judged by when admitting students.

If minimising divergences across social groups becomes an end in itself (rather than the means of achieving a more ‘meritorious’ intake) this also raises an important final notion of justice. This concerns the social *purpose or mission* of universities that go beyond issues of merit, potential and achievement of particular groups. Issues of *purpose or mission* have most commonly been taken up by US universities, drawing on Rawls’s notion of the moral arbitrariness of distributing resources and opportunities on merit. Rawls (1971) and Sandel (2009) have both argued that ability and effort are morally arbitrary. Rawls argues ‘efforts’ are largely shaped by favourable family environments and views academic ability as a ‘natural’ endowment in the same way as being a fast runner. Hence “there is no more reason to permit distribution of income and wealth to be settled by the distribution of natural assets than by historical and social fortune” (Rawls 1971, p. 12). So if Rawls’s argument about the moral arbitrariness of talent is right “this leads to a surprising conclusion: distributive justice is not a matter of rewarding moral desert” (Sandel 2009, p. 160). Hence those with the most ‘merit’ should not be viewed as the most ‘deserving’. Their genetic or social luck does not warrant praise. Or put another way, *no-one deserves their merit*. 
Since the libertarian and FEO conceptions of justice each base the distribution of income and wealth on morally arbitrary principles, Rawls (1971) argues that only his own egalitarian ‘difference principle’ can be considered as just. He argues that the unequal distribution of talents and endowments can be corrected for without ‘levelling down’ or handicapping the more gifted members of society by encouraging people to develop and exercise their talents, but only with the understanding that these talents belong to the community as a whole and are therefore shared with those who lack similar gifts. This would require a radical change to the nature of structured inequalities in society “so that contingencies work for the good of the least fortunate” (Rawls 1971 p. 101-102). Rawls himself noted that advanced market-based capitalist societies were clearly not arranging the distribution of talents and wealth to the benefit of the least well-off. If this is the case, it raises a very practical question for purposes of this research: how should selective HEIs select students in ways that are socially just in the (unequal) meantime?

Building on these ideas, some US universities have developed Rawls’s ideas in more practically interesting ways to emphasise that in any given society, what a University might itself value can also be considered as historically and morally arbitrary (Bowen and Bok 1998). In such models, distributive justice is not about rewarding virtue or desert. Rather it’s about “meeting the legitimate expectations that arise once the rules of the game are in place” (Sandel 2009, p. 161). Whether one’s qualities or skills yield any advantage therefore depends on what a university, or society more generally, happens to value and prize within their current rules and individual missions. Such notions lie behind some of the racial ‘affirmative action’ and diversity policies in the US. According to such policies, admission is less a reward to the recipient and more a means of advancing institutional or socially useful aims. For example, the former Presidents of Princeton and Harvard Universities have argued a university might regard “opportunities to learn from those with different points of view, backgrounds and experiences” (Bowen and Bok 1998, p. 280) as important aspects of who should be regarded as meritorious students to admit. Furthermore, many elite US universities see their role as educating students “who seem likely to become leading and contributing members of society . . .

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9 In a defence of its own policies, Harvard University has argued that “if scholarly excellence were the sole or even predominant criteria [it] would lose a great deal of its vitality and intellectual excellence. The quality of the educational experience offered to all students would suffer” (quoted in Sandel 2009, p. 172).
[and] there is widespread agreement that our country continues to need to help colleges and universities in building a society in which access to positions of leadership and responsibility is less limited by an individual’s race than it is today” (Bowen and Bok 1998, p. 281). So in this conception the mission of a university defines the relevant merits. Accordingly, what ‘counts’ as merit can only be determined once a university defines its mission (Sandel 2009, Fullinwider and Lichtenberg 2004). Whilst critics of affirmative action argue these policies do nothing to address the fundamental structural inequalities that lead to difference in opportunities, they do challenge conventional understandings in the UK of what ‘merit’ can mean. More recent attempts in the UK to link HE admissions to their impact on diversity and access to the professions (Cabinet Office 2009, 2011, 2012a) may open up new ways of thinking about the role and purpose of selective HEIs when they come to develop policies about how they admit students. It will be interesting to explore how such notions about purpose of a university plays out in my empirical analysis.

**Beyond distributive justice**

Understanding how leading HEIs have conceptualised social justice in relation to its potential distributive dimensions will be an important part of my data analysis. However, Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) have highlighted that justice must be viewed as a plural, multi-dimensional concept that extends beyond distributive questions to include issues of culture and association. To these I now turn.

### 3.2.2 Cultural justice

Further to its distributive element, the second dimension of social justice for Gewirtz and Cribb is cultural justice (Cribb and Gewirtz 2003, 2005; Gewirtz 2006). They contend this has been less developed when thinking through issues of educational justice. They draw on Fraser’s (1997) famous distinction between the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition by defining social justice by the absence of features such as cultural domination, non-
recognition and disrespect (1997, p. 13-14). Similarly, Young (1990) views such non-recognition as a form of cultural imperialism:

To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible . . . Often without noticing they do so, the dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity as such (p. 59).

So for Gerwirtz and Cribb, social justice must also concern the “valorization of a range of social collectivities and cultural identities” (Gewirtz and Cribb 2002, p. 499) and “recognizing and respecting different people’s cultures, ways of life and values” (Cribb and Gewirtz 2005, p. 334). This is a potentially neglected aspect in much of the public discourse of ‘fair access’ and contextual admissions, which tends to focus on a more narrow definition of justice as being distributive and based only on the fair distribution on material resources such as “access to top professions” (Cabinet Office 2009).

Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) draw attention to three key areas of cultural (in)justice:

**Cultural domination:** being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communications that are associated with another culture and are alien/hostile to one’s own.

**Non-recognition:** being rendered invisible by means of authoritative representation, communicative and interpretative practices.

**Disrespect:** being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life situations (p. 502-503).

These insights reflect Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of ‘cultural capital’ – particular knowledge, skills and education necessary for obtaining a higher social status, which are are acquired and institutionalised into hierarchical systems (Gewirtz and Cribb 2002 p. 502). Cultural justice therefore draws attention to profound questions about the methodologies of assessment and selection in the admissions process and how these may (mis)recognise different individual and collective cultural experiences.

A good example is Jones's (2013) study of personal statements. Like Boliver (2013), Jones identified how identically qualified applicants from more advantaged backgrounds were *more likely* to receive offers for places in selective universities compared to less advantaged backgrounds. His research
offered one plausible explanation for this. Examining a corpus of UCAS personal statements in one university, Jones demonstrated superior rates of admissions offers of students from independent schools. He explained this by observing measured advantages in non-academic cultural experiences they were able to evidence in their accompanying personal statements, for example through quality of work experience opportunities and family cultural experiences.

Another non-academic form of selection that raises issues of cultural justice is interviews. For example, using mixed qualitative methods including interviews with admissions tutors and observations of selection practices, Burke and McManus (2011) exposed the “subtle and insidious workings of inequality and exclusion” in the processes of selection (p. 699) where the social and cultural experiences of working class and ethnic minority candidates were mis-recognised and devalued in the admissions process. They found these processes were “tied in with ontological perspectives that value certain dispositions and attitudes more highly than others and raises significant questions and poses challenges about the processes of selection in terms of equity, recognition and justice” (p. 706).

These studies highlight the ability of HEIs to impose or define their own definition of a ‘standard’ student, to which those from less privileged backgrounds may be less likely to conform. In this study’s specific focus on the meanings and assumptions underpinning contextual admissions policies, it will be interesting to assess the extent to which senior policy actors are cognisant of cultural injustice. In particular, it will be important to assess whether or not the cultural advantages and differences of some groups are recognised and/or mitigated against through the use of contextual admissions policies.

3.2.3 Associational justice

The third dimension of social justice for Gewirtz and Cribb is that of associational justice. This mode of justice draws once again on the work of Young (1990), who sees “democracy . . . collective discussion and decision

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10 Another example where cultural advantages were examined in university interviews can be found in Thompson's (1997) study of Access to HE students. Using discourse analysis she argued that “the discursive practice of admissions tutors . . . comprises ways of conceptualising and speaking about students, and patterns of behaviour which together produce the outcome of admission (or rejection)” (p. 112). She found that, through the admissions and selection process, the life experiences mature students potentially bring to the HE institution were sometimes ignored in the interview process because these students did not conform to a standard definition of “a younger student who was presumed to be prepared adequately” (p. 121).
making” (p. 191) as key elements of social justice. Therefore merely ‘recognising’ other groups in a model of cultural justice, without them being able to influence decisions that affect them, can be seen as unjust. Associational justice can therefore be defined as absence from “patterns of association amongst individuals and amongst groups which prevent some people from participating fully in decisions which affect the conditions within which they live and act” (Power and Gewirtz 2001, p. 41).

In the case of HE admissions Reay et al. (2005) have pointed to the role of peer groups and parents as ‘associations’ that can provide advantages in terms of access to privileged information, advice and advocacy on access to higher education. Similarly, the Sutton Trust (2010c, 2011) have pointed to ways in which independent schools and teachers play an important ‘associational’ role in access to support systems, ‘insider’ advice and levels of admissions preparation. This is particularly the case when pupils can call on their teachers and advisers to access personal networks, perhaps as a result of being an alumnus of a particular institution such as Oxford or Cambridge. Tentative evidence also was found in previous pilot work (Skyrme 2009a) with one admissions policy leader in a Russell Group HEI. Sam, the Director of Admissions, highlighted the disproportionate influence independent schools had over admissions decisions and outcomes:

The divide between the state and independent sectors in terms of networks is still enormous. Independent schools are absolutely more powerful given their small size and . . . they . . . can advance the interests of their own pupils – it’s quite natural that you’d expect this . . . . I’d say this power comes from the parents . . . . They are networked into all of the important political, social, business networks in the country . . . . They’re also producing the best qualified – in terms of academic achievement – pupils which everybody wants to work with . . . . They can therefore absolutely shout the loudest . . . . They’re the most organised in the way in which they’re structured – they’re able to engage and have the time to get themselves on consultations and panels (p. 31 - 32).

Social justice therefore extends to the ‘democratic forms of influence’ highlighted by Young (1990). Associational justice suggests that, without more equal distribution of access to key decision making and influence, the scope for advancing justice through admissions may be limited. Like cultural justice, it offers a new conceptual lens to be cast over the admissions practices of selective HEIs. Highlighting ways that those with greater resources can
influence admissions decisions will be fruitful to explore in the later data analysis chapters.

3.2.3 Summary of philosophical/normative approaches to justice

It is clear from the first part of this chapter that philosophical/normative approaches to social justice have been under-utilised when thinking about social justice in higher education admissions policies and practices. The material presented on social justice will therefore go some considerable way in providing a sharper analytical lens to the empirical practices analysed later in the thesis. However, in addressing key research questions regarding how the contextual admissions policies of selective HEIs can be understood in relation to social justice, and what factors enable or constrain its pursuit, I will now draw on Gewirtz (2006) and previous work (Skyrme 2009a) to highlight that it is problematic to try and resolve questions of justice in purely philosophical terms.

3.3 CONTEXTUALISED AND EMPIRICAL CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The second part of this chapter on social justice now develops the idea that: “in order to understand the nature of social justice and the possibilities of realising social justice we have to move beyond abstract conceptualisations and pay attention to concrete, real world practices” (Cribb and Gewirtz 2005, p. 327). This has begun through the suggestion that Boliver’s (2013) empirical outcomes-focused approach overcomes potential philosophical relativism in what counts as justice. Developing this further, my employment of a contextualised and empirical approach to social justice will draw on a socially critical, policy scholarship approach that is outlined more fully in Chapter Four. Following Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) I will also seek to avoid the tendency of some writers in the critical tradition to work at distance from the realm of practice and/or undertake a “sociology from above” (p. 499). For example, it might be argued that the different admissions policies in selective HEIs do nothing to address the wider structural inequalities in society or the hierarchies between different types of universities (Gewirtz and Cribb 2002; Gewirtz 2006). Whilst it is important to acknowledge and position the admissions policies of
HEIs within broader structural and discursive inequalities, such critiques offer little guidance about ‘what can be done?’ by admissions professionals whilst unequal power relations exist. In seeking to ground my analysis of social justice in the actual settings and practical dilemmas of senior policy actors I will, instead, be drawn by Gewirtz’s (2006) insight that “what counts as justice in education can not be divorced from judgements about what is possible” (p. 79). This research will be distinguished by its attempt to engage with contextual admissions policies and the senior actors overseeing them, where some conscious attempts have been made to introduce practices to enhance outcomes for less advantaged groups in the admissions process.

This research study will therefore concentrate on the “actual realisations of justice rather than take a transcendental route” (Sen 2009, p. 9). By the transcendental route, Sen is referring to the theories of the ‘contractarian’ approaches to social justice outlined in the first part of this chapter, that re-emerge with Rawls’s idea of the ‘original position’. Focusing on the advancement or retreat of justice, Sen prefers to examine “how would justice be advanced?”, rather than “what would be the perfectly just institution” (2009, p. 8 - 9). I see the practical ramification of this view of justice as one that must engage with practices, however imperfect, that seem to improve the outcomes of less advantaged students in terms of their likelihood of being made admissions offers.

For Gewirtz and Cribb, there is no easy philosophical resolution that provides answers to ‘what counts as justice’ (in this case with regard to access to selective HEIs). This is an important insight: if there are no easy philosophical resolutions, it is perhaps unsurprising that the policy statements and enactments of different HEIs reveal a range of competing, contrasting and conflictual approaches to social justice. This research will therefore avoid the temptation to offer a single or preferred definition of social justice (or the related concepts of ‘equality’ and ‘equity’). To avoid relativism, it will draw on Boliver’s (2013) empirical yardstick about the likely odds of less advantaged applicants being made admissions offers to map out the different positions HEIs Russell Group universities take with regard to contextual admission. Through interviews with senior policy actors, this study will then suggest what factors seem to
enable or constrain the pursuit of social justice through these polices in their real contexts of enactment.

In previous pilot work (Skyrme 2009a) a framework developed by Gewirtz (2006) was utilised and employed in the specific field of social justice and admissions to a selective HEI in the Russell Group. This framework of Gewirtz highlighted:

1. an emphasis on the *multi-dimensional* and *conflictual* nature of social justice – notably its distributional, cultural and associations forms outlined earlier in the chapter and how these may conflict with each other.

2. an attendance to issues of how justice is *mediated by other norms and constraints*.

3. a consideration of the *levels and settings* within which actors operate (adapted from Gewirtz 2006, p. 69).

This approach to analysing social justice in its real contexts of interpretation and enactment will now be explored.

### 3.3.1 The multi-dimensional and conflictual nature of social justice

It has already been noted, in the first section of this chapter, that social justice is a *multi-dimensional* concept with distributional, cultural and associational elements (Gewirtz 2006). As well as being multi-dimensional, these different elements of justice can also *conflict* with one another. In their analysis, Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) draw on the work of Nancy Fraser’s redistribution-recognition dualism, where she outlines how the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition are both necessary, but can sometimes work in opposing ways:

> Recognition claims often take the form of calling attention to . . . the specificity of some group and then affirming its value. Thus, they tend to promote group differentiation. Redistribution claims, in contrast, often call for abolishing economic arrangements that underpin group specificity . . . they tend to promote group dedifferentiation (Fraser 1997, p. 16).

In previous work (Skyrme 2009a) I found evidence for this dilemma. The Director of Admissions I interviewed noted: “we target students from lower achieving educational contexts; first in family to entry and local students . . . but
I think the word 'non-traditional'. . . deprived, disadvantaged etc. can be problematic . . . students do not want to be labelled in such a way – this sort of thing can lead to a lack of sense of belonging” (p. 16). In the data analysis of this study, I will be able to explore whether, by categorising students using contextual data, this might, conversely, lead to similar misrecognition or marginalisation of under-represented students.

3.3.2 The mediated nature of social justice in admissions

Gewirtz (2006) argues that in real settings, justice is also ‘mediated’ by other goals or concerns. This highlights another reason social justice can only be properly understood within real empirical contexts:

Justice concerns are always in practice likely to be mediated by other kinds of concerns that motivate actors. There are two kinds of concerns . . . a) other norms that are not concerned with justice concerns but which might in practice compete or conflict with justice concerns; and b) constraints over which agents have little control, for example dominant discourses or power relations, or legal or economic constraints” (2006 p. 70).

The first of Gewirtz’s points will be rather straightforward to assess empirically across the range of data that will emerge across the three sites of this research. For example, there will be other pursuits such as institutional finances, efficiency and competition that might mediate the pursuit of justice through contextual admissions. However, it is the second aspect to Gewirtz’s notion that will be critical. This will help map address the second research question in this study, which attempts to map out different factors that enable and constrain the pursuit of justice, particularly those factors operating at the macro level outside the HE setting.

3.3.3 The level- and context-dependent nature of social justice in admissions

Finally, Gewirtz (2006) argues “the value we place on different conceptions of justice and how we respond to contradictions between different conceptions or to constraints on just practices will be shaped to a significant degree by the
level and setting at which we are operating. So what counts as justice is level- and context-dependent” (p. 70). In this study, I will be exploring social justice possibilities from the perspective of senior policy actors in HEIs. Conceptions of justice operating at this level are likely to be influenced by conceptualisations of justice at other levels, for example by policy makers/leaders at national level, the media, trade/students’ unions, ‘think-tanks’/lobby groups, political parties and so on. Hence, the social justice pursuits in HE must be understood in relation to what is possible, or within the sphere of influence, of those operating at the meso level of the HEI. As Chapter Four will demonstrate, because of the relative autonomy of HEIs in how they conduct admissions, this is a significant sphere.

The justice pursuits of HEIs in this study are also, from Gewirtz’s perspective, context-dependent. This context might include the prevailing political milieu, the institutional mission or leadership, its financial resources and strategy, or the philosophical basis on which an HEI chooses to construct its admissions aims. For example, Greenbank (2006a) has noted that what can be achieved in terms of social justice will depend on the culture and organisation of an institution, particularly in terms of its senior management leadership. Furthermore, justice will be conceived differently in terms of “what is possible and/or desirable according to different national, regional, and/or local contexts” (p. 70).

3.3.4 Summary of contextual notions of social justice

Gewirtz’s (2006) contextualised conception of justice will be drawn upon heavily in developing answers to the main research questions in this thesis. Her schema will provide: a method of organising data analysis in this research into something coherent across the three different case sites; a way of illuminating different and competing understandings and conceptualisations of social justice in the specific field of contextual admissions; and a means of seeking to understand notions of social justice from the perspective of social actors themselves, their constraints, levels and settings. Ultimately, the framework developed by Gewirtz (2006) will provide a theoretically-informed basis for my qualitative data analysis against the second research aim of this study: to
illuminate the factors that enable and constrain the pursuit of social justice through contextual admissions policies.

3.4 SUMMARY

In seeking to understand how the concept of social justice can help illuminate how selective HEIs take particular positions towards contextual admissions, two different methods of understanding this important concept have been outlined. First, I have outlined some normative/philosophical approaches, which have been absent from most attempts to understand fairness in admissions. These have highlighted that there has been more attention on distributive than cultural and associational aspects to justice. Whilst these philosophical conceptions will be useful to apply across the different sites in this thesis, the central point of this chapter has been that there is no easy conceptual resolution to the normative question of what ‘counts’ as fairness or justice in the admission policies and practices of leading HEIs. Instead, an alternative conception of social justice will be taken which contends that it can only be fully understood in real world, empirical contexts that recognise its multi-dimensional, conflictual, mediated and level- and context-dependent nature (Gewirtz 2006). By drawing on Gewirtz’s plural, empirically-grounded concept of social justice to the specific field of higher education contextual admissions, it is envisaged this will help develop an analysis of social justice that pays attention to factors that enable and constrain its pursuit through contextual admissions policies in actual settings from the perspective of key policy actors.
CHAPTER 4

POLICY SCHOLARSHIP

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Until now, I have referred to social justice being pursued through contextual admissions policies of HEIs without elaborating on the conception of policy that will be adopted in this study. This study will be distinguished from some of the official attempts (SPA 2011, 2012) to analyse contextual admissions policies through my utilisation of a policy scholarship approach. This takes a distinctive epistemological, ontological and normative stance towards the analysis of policy that has informed the research design and methodology of this thesis. Policy scholarship approaches are distinguished by their location within socially-critical theories in the social sciences. They also perform multi- rather than single-level analyses of social processes, where policy is understood in its relationship to and within macro, meso and micro level factors. I will therefore briefly provide an account of the socially-critical ontology within which this policy-scholarship is located.

4.2 THEORIES AND LEVELS: THE SOCIALLY CRITICAL APPROACH

Before introducing the distinctive features of the policy scholarship, the location of such approaches within a rich tradition of socially critical perspectives should first be acknowledged. It is possible to theorise and research the sharp differences in admissions patterns to leading universities from a variety of perspectives. For example, in a previous conceptual synthesis of the policy and research literatures on fair access and widening participation (Skyrme 2008) I employed Raffo et al’s (2007) framework to the field of fair admissions to HE and outlined how the sharp differences in patterns of progression into leading universities operate across: different levels of analysis (macro, meso and micro), and tend to be underpinned (either consciously or unconsciously) either by classical functionalist or socially-critical theories. It should be clear by now that this study is based on a meso-level analysis of the university and approaches this from a socially-critical perspective.
Whereas classical functionalist theories (Durkheim 1997; Parsons 1951; Merton 1957) assume education plays a largely beneficial role in reproducing opportunities and transmitting culture, socially critical theorists “assume education can both challenge existing power structures and enable democratic development. This suggests that education in its current configuration should not be seen as an unproblematic good and that its benefits cannot be taken for granted as neither natural or benign . . . on the contrary . . . education is variously implicated in creating, reproducing and enhancing inequality” (Raffo et al. 2007, p 35). Socially critical perspectives have tended to understand education in relation to its economic role in reproducing class inequalities and ideological functioning in legitimizing the status quo (Althusser 1972; Bowles and Gintis 1976). Bourdieu (1988) has done most in modern educational thinking to debunk the functionalist and liberal idea that education operates as a meritocracy, reflecting differences in abilities and efforts (see Chapter Three). Rather, he sees education performing an ‘elimination’ role for the lower social classes on account of their lesser material and cultural capital, where working class successes in education are “lucky survivors” – the exceptions to the rule. This study of the meso-level acknowledges such wider disadvantages, but narrows its research focus to what happens following application, where a different set of elimination (or conversely inclusion) processes might be seen to take place.

To address some of the structural determinism implied in critically-orientated ‘base-superstructure’ models, where educational inequalities and access are seen as determined by the economy “in the last instance” (Althusser 1972), socially critical writers since the 1970s have been keen to stress the role of human agency in societal change and processes. Hence the HE system, for me, is viewed in a complex relationship within the wider economy and state, but not always being determined or ‘read’ from it. The role of education has also been understood in terms of its relationship to a wider neo-liberal restructuring of the economy and its social institutions, where market forces, competition, consumerism and the decline in the role of the state can be witnessed in HE (Olssen et al. 2004).

This has opened up the field of the meso level of analysis, where there has been a concern to interrogate the complexity of what happens ‘inside
education’, particularly how social actors, their practices, policies, beliefs, cultures, identities and discourses, connect to macro level changes at the level of the state and the economy. In studies of exclusionary admissions processes, Burke (2009) and Burke and McManus (2011) are good examples of approaches that begin at this meso level and then integrate their analysis to other levels in the macro and discursive spheres. In contrast to many socially critical studies of higher education, this study will, however, contend that leading HEIs can be simultaneously implicated in both reproducing and challenging dominant patterns of social reproduction. Findings from previous qualitative work in one leading HEI (Skyrme 2009a) led me to challenge socially critical approaches portraying only a fatalistic role for HEIs in understandings of fair access (see, for example, Leathwood 2004 or Baker et al. 2006 for paradigm examples of this). In contrast the socially critical approach in this proposed study will be distinguished by its attempt to avoid ‘blaming HE’ by examining its policies and practices in isolation from other level of analysis. My use of socially critical theory will therefore suggest that certain HE practices might challenge dominant power relationships and discourses - and thereby disturb patterns of social reproduction as mediated through the admissions practices of leading HEIs. This approach takes up the challenge set by Kettley (2007) for research on widening access in HE to move beyond the concepts of ‘barriers’ towards one of ‘bridges’ where researchers try to empirically illuminate and critically engage with practices that might alter or challenge outcomes for certain individuals.

4.3 POLICY-SCHOLARSHIP APPROACHES

‘critical policy scholarship’ and ‘education policy sociology’\textsuperscript{11}. Whilst they adopt an eclectic range of theoretical approaches, writers within this tradition share a desire to distinguish their work on policy from that of the more positivistic ‘policy science’ approaches, which can be seen to predominate among ‘official’ or government-sponsored research regarding ‘what works?’ (for example, Cabinet Office 2011; SPA 2012; SPA/DIUS 2008a, 2008b, 2009c). From these readings, I will now set about outlining six key features of the policy scholarship approach that will be adopted for this thesis:

• Positionality.
• Epistemology and ontology.
• Distinct research questions.
• Policies as texts and discourse.
• Particular ethical concerns.
• Particular conception of the ‘field’ of HE.

4.3.1 Positionality

I should first state that, like many in this tradition, I will employ a distinction used by Rizvi and Lingard (2010) and others who wish to contrast analysis of and analysis for policy:

The former [analysis of policy] is the more academic exercise . . . seeking to understand why a particular policy was developed at a particular time, what its analytical assumptions are and what its effects might have. The latter, analysis for policy, refers to research conducted for actual policy development, often commissioned by policy-makers inside the bureaucracy within which the policy will be developed, and ipso facto is more constrained as to theoretical framework and methodology and most often has a shorter temporal frame (p. 45).

Olssen et al. (2004) make a similar distinction when they contend that “policy analysis is a form of enquiry which provides either the informational base upon which policy is constructed, or the critical examination of existing policies. The former has been called analysis for policy, whereas the latter has been called analysis of policy” (p. 72). These distinctions are useful to frame this critical and

\textsuperscript{11} Drawing on Fraser and Honneth’s (2003) critique of much of the social justice literature, I deliberately eschew the term policy sociology, since this implies a somewhat artificial separation between moral theory (left to philosophers), social theory (the preserve of the sociologist) and political analysis (for political scientists). Rather than seeing these as free-standing disciplines, the strength and potential of a policy scholarship approach for this research is its possibility in providing better linkages between normative concepts such as social justice to the more practical aspects of its struggle and enactment in actual policies and practices, uncovered through empirical work.
academic study of the contextual admissions policies of selective HEIs from those few that have been attempted inside the policy bureaucracy by Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA/DIUS 2008a, 2008b, 2008c and SPA 2011, 2012). For example, in one piece of research they undertook a quantitative questionnaire survey to the HE sector “to know if institutions had used, currently used or planned to use contextual data” (SPA 2011, p. 1). In another piece of research they sought, more ambitiously, to “gain an overview of the use [of contextual admissions] . . . and impact of its use; where it is being used effectively and to identify transferability of practice . . . this research . . . is intended as an initial resource for institutions in formulating their approach to the use of contextual data in admissions” (SPA 2012, p. i). This is a good example of research that “takes as given the research problem as constructed by those framing the policy, and thus often lacks a critical orientation” (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p. 45). In this latter example, SPA aimed to cite examples of ‘good practice’ and highlight these for others who might wish to ‘follow’ these – what Olssen et al. (2004) call “information for policy” (p.72). In contrast, my own approach will attempt to “set its own research agenda . . and [will] not take for granted the policy construction of the problem” (p. 72). It will be both of and for policy.

To illustrate this further, Ball (1997) has developed a useful ‘ideal-type’ distinction, which also helps to illuminate the key difference between official ‘policy science’ approaches to that used in this thesis.

Table 1: Policy science and policy scholarship approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy scholarship</th>
<th>Policy science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy oriented</td>
<td>Practice oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-focus</td>
<td>Single focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-level</td>
<td>Single level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal</td>
<td>Atemporal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global/local</td>
<td>National/general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked focus</td>
<td>Detached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context rich</td>
<td>Context barren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptually thick</td>
<td>Conceptually thin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>Social efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced</td>
<td>Silent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: adapted from Ball 1997, p. 16)
Whilst some of this typology might unfairly characterise or polarise some aspects of the SPA research cited above, it is possible to draw on this to highlight ways in which the positionality of researchers operating within the policy bureaucracy will tend to operate across detached, single levels of analysis (confined to analyses within HE itself). Hence the question of “who is doing the policy analysis and for what purposes, and within what context, are clearly relevant in determining the approach taken to policy analysis” (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p. 46). The positionality of the researcher therefore matters: be they a doctoral student, policy bureaucrat, academic researcher, consultant researcher or ‘policy entrepreneur’ – and such positionings will frame the sorts of research questions and type of policy analysis that is undertaken. My own positionality as a professional doctoral student will allow critical and qualitative approaches to this research question that are rarely employed in official studies and will resist the more simple appeals to “evidence-based policy . . . and pressures for efficiency and effectiveness” implied in approaches that seek to explore “what works?” (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p. 49).

4.3.2 Ontology and epistemology

The approach to policy in this thesis will also go beyond its narrow understanding of the nature of policy as “a simple expression of the actions of government, aimed at securing particular outcomes” (Ozga 2000, p. 2). Regarding what we consider the nature of policy to be (ontology) HE admissions have to be understood differently to what Evans et al. (2008) call “Big-P policies” which they take to be “formal, state-sanctioned, usually legislated education Policy” (p. 378). This is important because, as outlined in Chapter Two, HEI autonomy over who and how to admit students is enshrined in law. This can lead to a variety of possibilities and practices emerging – three of which will be examined in some depth through the cases analysed in this research. So whilst HE admissions policies are clearly not developed in a vacuum from wider cultural, political, economic and discursive processes, the relationship to government policy must be understood to operate more subtly than in some of the literatures on schooling. This research will, necessarily, need to focus on “little-p policies that are formed and enacted within localities and institutions” (Ball 2006, p. 7). The approach in this research will, therefore,
follow Codd (1988) when he argues policy should be conceived as: “any course of action (or inaction) relating to the selection of goals, the definition of values or the allocation of resources” (p. 235).

Another important ontological distinction is that policy science approaches see policies as ‘social facts’ or ‘things’ – social realities reflected in official written policy documents which define principles, procedures and actions designed to bring about particular goals or objectives. Here, contextual admissions policies can be understood and researched through their articulation in various official written documents. Methodologically, quantitative documentary analysis can also be undertaken to categorize different types of admissions policies and there might be an aim to uncover generalisable laws governing the ‘causes’ or ‘effects’ and ‘impact’ of policies against their stated and intended outcomes. A good example of this can be found in the follow up to the government’s Schwartz Review into admissions (SPA/DIUS 2008a; 2008b; 2008c), which tried to measure the ‘cause’ (the Schwartz Review of Admissions) and ‘effect’ of this policy (what had changed in HE admissions since the review). By studying HE admissions practices in isolation from other levels of analysis, and by drawing on a limited interpretation of how fairness or justice in admissions might be understood, a range of potentially critical insights were lost. These limitations explain why the content analysis in this study is used only as a precursor to more in-depth conceptualisations of policy from the perspective of senior policy actors.

In working across and integrating different levels of analysis, the policy-scholarship approach employed in this research will also follow’s Ozga’s (1990) call for research into policy to “bring together structural, macro-level analysis of education systems and education policies and micro investigations, especially that which takes account of people’s perception and experiences” (p. 359). Epistemologically, knowledge claims about the nature of HE policy is then set in the context of seeing it as a process rather than a product (Ozga 2000, p. 2) – processes that are messy, contested and idiosyncratic rather than the neat, written-down, ‘end products’ conventionally researched as policy. Methodologically, it then follows that research instruments will be deployed to

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12 For example, these could be uncovered in written local admissions policies, ‘Access Agreements’ (OFFA 2011) and ‘Widening Participation Strategic Assessments’ (HEFCE 2009).
13 This used “quantitative survey data and qualitative case studies” (SPA/DIUS 2008b, p. 4) to provide a national overview of the current state of admissions practices.
help uncover the meanings and values embedded in the policy process and attempt to link these to wider structural factors at the political, economic, cultural or discursive level. These are discussed in Chapter Five, where I set out my use of in-depth interviews with policy-leaders in particular.

4.3.3 Distinct policy scholarship research questions

Examining the contextual admissions policies of leading HEIs could take many forms. When thinking through the nature of policy-scholarship research questions, Maguire and Ball (1994) classify qualitative approaches of policy analysis according to three typologies: elite studies (‘situated studies of policy formation’), trajectory studies and implementation studies. It is clear, within this typology, that this thesis takes the form of an ‘elite study’, by interviewing some of the ‘major players’ (senior policy actors) within selective HEIs responsible for the actual policy text production. It also follows what Olssen et al. (2004) calls an analysis of policy that takes into account “the effects of policies on various groups . . . and examines the values, assumptions and ideologies underpinning the policy process” (p. 72).

4.3.4 Policies as texts and discourses

Drawing on Ball (1993, 1994a) a distinction should be made between seeing policies as ‘texts’ and policies as ‘discourses’\(^{14}\). For Ball (1993) these represent “two very different conceptions of policy” where policy should not be seen as a text or a discourse since “both . . . are implicit in each other” (p. 44). He elaborates:

*Policy discourses* (\ldots in the Foucaldian sense, as a regulated practice that accounts for statements, rather than a linguistic sense of language in use) produce frameworks of sense and obviousness with which policy is thought, talked and written about . . . *Policy texts* are set within these frameworks which constrain but never determine all of the possibilities for action . . . . (Ball 1993, p. 10 – my emphasis).

\(^{14}\) This somewhat reflects the structure-agency dichotomy rehearsed so famously by Giddens (1994), since seeing policies as texts addresses agency and seeing them as discourses addresses issues of social structure.
4.3.4.1 Policies as texts

As applied to contextual admissions practices, seeing policies as texts draws attention to human agency in their construction where the “authorial intentions” (Codd 1988, p. 237) and values of those producing them (Hutchings 2003) can be explored with respect to the different notions social actors and organisations take towards, for example, ‘fairness’ and ‘social justice’. Texts refer to the written and spoken elements of policy. But an analysis of ‘policy as text’ sees them as much more than the statements that frame action. For Ball (1993), seeing policies as texts draws attention to their status as being both: “encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actor’s interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context)” (p. 11). Ball (1993) adds that “ad hocery, negotiation and serendipity” (p. 12) are always evident in the process of policy formation, so we must avoid seeing policy as ever being closed or complete. And for me, it is the decoding that becomes important; this can’t simply be read from the policy documents themselves, but must be grounded in an understanding from the perspective of various social actors. This has informed my use of interviews with policy leaders outlined in Chapter Five. It also draws attention to the fact that policy is never ‘delivered’ to a static or quiescent set of social actors. Policy enters into complex institutional contexts and power relations – inside and outside of its immediate context, where it can be adapted, modified or even ignored. For writers like Ball, seeing policies as texts must therefore avoid the temptation to simply ‘read off’ the effects of policy from their written statements. There is instead a complex interplay between constraint and agency that takes place in the encoding and decoding of policy texts (Ball 1993, p. 14) that can be uncovered by drawing on the type of qualitative research techniques utilised in this research.

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15 Similarly writers like Offe (1984) have pointed to how an understanding of the meaning or impact of laws or policies can never be simply determined from the wording of particular statutes. Rather, policies tend to establish the placing and timing of particular objectives – or what he calls the “rules of the game . . . . by differentially empowering or disempowering the relevant social groups” (p. 106).
4.3.4.2 Policies as discourses

Whilst the view of ‘policy as text’ emphasises agency in the development and enactment of policy, writers such as Ball (1993, 1994a), Lipman (2004), Olssen et al. (2004) and Trowler (2001a, 2001b) remind us that we must not lose sight of the ‘bigger picture’ of policies as ‘discourses’. An understanding of policy as discourse has been used to ‘decode’ written education policies by the authors above in various ways, often involving historical and documentary analysis of written texts. This highlights how it would mistaken to reduce admissions policies to the interpretations, utterances and actions of agents within a particular institutional setting. Rather policy must be understood in relation to wider ‘discursive practices’ and ‘dominant discourses’, for example around ‘fair admissions’, ‘meritocracy’ and ‘inclusion’. This approach to policy therefore posits theoretical connections between individual interpretations (micro), institutional settings (meso) and structural (macro) social processes and power relations to allow genuinely multi-level analysis of these social and educational processes.

The word discourse is used in a multitude of ways, ranging from its most limited form - to denote spoken or written language - right through to its most extended form to mean ‘ideology’ or even ‘culture’ (Trowler 2001b). Like Trowler, my own use of discourse will position it between these two extremes and draws on the work of Foucault (1972) and Fairclough (1989, 1992). Foucault used discourse to highlight how knowledge determines and defines reasoning, meaning and representation in the social world. Hence discourse was not simply “irreducible to language and speech” (Foucault 1974, p. 49). Rather, discourses are “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Foucault 1972). Foucault is vehemently not saying that a discourse is a set of true statements. Rather, discourses define “what can be said, and thought, but also . . . who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (Ball 1994a, p. 21) and how they “make particular sets of ideas obvious, common sense and ‘true’” (Ball 2006, p. 5).

16 It is through discourses that social meanings are constructed. And the organisation of discourse is an exercise in power because of the ways in which discourse controls and constrains what can be said or thought in a particular context. Foucault defines discourses as “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (1972).
Hence in his coining of the phrase ‘power-knowledge’ Foucault (1980) stated knowledge was both the creator of power and the creation of power.

These theoretical insights have been developed by only a limited number of researchers within the specific literatures on fair access and admissions. This seems to be something of conceptual oversight since, where applied, they offer potentially new and useful ways in which the debate on contextual admissions can be critically illuminated and allow more sophisticated theoretical linkages to be made between admissions policies and other material, political and discursive structures. Drawing on Foucault’s insight that knowledge and power are interrelated, Burke is one the few examples that attempts to apply such methodologies to this field of study (Burke 2006; Burke and McManus 2011). Using ethnographic research, Burke (2006) argues that there is a dominant, ‘hegemonic discourse’ at play in the debates on fair access to HE and these raise important epistemological questions regarding how we understand the nature of the access ‘problem’ and ‘policy solutions’. Typical of the more integrated socially critical perspectives, she attempts to make connections across different levels of analysis: discourses profoundly shape national (macro) and institutional (meso) practices as well as identity formation at the family (meso) and individual (micro) level. In her work with McManus (Burke and McManus 2011) they found that admissions tutors were themselves implicated, like others, in the hegemonic discourse around ‘fair access’ and ‘meritocracy’ that created possibilities for practice and for a sense of institutional position and legitimacy. They found that educational ability was framed within a psychological or individualised neo-liberal paradigm of ‘natural talent’, ‘potential’ and ‘meritocracy’, which emphasised individual responsibility, rather than being reflective of social, cultural and material differences. In this way, policy actors were able, either consciously or unconsciously, to make inequalities seem just and natural, through a notion of the type of liberal-m meritocratic version of justice highlighted in Chapter Three - the idea that economic and educational ‘rewards’ are the natural result of ability and hard work. This is a good example of the misrecognition of the effects of class differences as the causes of class differences in education outcomes (Bourdieu 1984). This emphasis on ‘policy as discourse’ is important, therefore, because it highlights how individual applicants to HE are implicated in complex sets of power relations as ‘situated subjects’.
4.3.5 Normative/ethical approaches within policy scholarship

Another distinctive feature of the policy scholarship approach is its explicit commitment to normative ends and social justice. As Chapter Three highlighted, conceptualising and advancing justice concerns are of chief importance to this study. Ball (2006) notes that this commitment “provides concepts, ideas and tools for not only describing what is happening and why but also ‘how things might be’” (Ball 2006, p. 4). Rizvi and Lingard (2010) typify this when they state that, in their view, policy analysis should “not only describe relations of power and processes through which policies are developed and allocated, but should also point to strategies for progressive change which might challenge oppressive structures and practices” (p. 51). Writers within the critical policy scholarship tradition therefore reject the contention that analysis of policy can be ‘value-neutral’ as pre-supposed in official ‘policy science analysis’ and the conclusion to this thesis will reflect on some of these conundrums for me as a Professional Doctorate student.

4.3.6 The ‘field’ of higher education

I will conclude this chapter by setting out what a policy scholarship approach implies for my understanding of the field of HE and its relationship to the state. The nature of the relationship between HE and the wider social structure – particularly the state - is complex. Among more critical policy-scholarship approaches there have been attempts to position education, including HE, within a framework of a much wider neo-liberal restructuring of economic, political and social practices (e.g. Olssen et al. 2004; Ball 2006; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). These have emphasised market competition and the privatisation and individualisation of educational processes. However, ‘grand

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17 Writers such as Hammersley (2000) argue there should be a clear demarcation between the researcher and his/her own values as a member of society. However, the policy scholarship approach taken in this research will employ Gerwirtz and Cribb’s (2006) contention that researchers cannot, indeed should not, separate knowledge production from the more difficult and messy issues of “what should or can be done” (p. 147) to improve society for the better. This is because “in the course of research one is constantly engaged in making evaluative and political judgements – in deciding what questions to ask . . . and thinking about the practical and policy implications of the research” (p. 142). The issue of values and social justice are therefore given more prominence than in the ‘detached’ emphasis on social efficiency in ‘policy science’ approaches (Ball 1997). Such an approach has led to an explicit acknowledgement in my research that it will seek to identify and assess policies in terms of their likelihoods of improving the odds ratios of socially and educationally disadvantaged learners in being made offers from selective HEIs to at least the same level as their more advantaged counterparts.
theories’, where attempts to generalise about such relationships, come up against the fact that “we have to acknowledge there are differences country by country . . . and that the [state-higher education] relationship is of some complexity . . . Markets, epistemologies, ideologies, public judgments and institutional relationships” all play an important role (Barnett 2003, p. 37).

Williams (1997) sums up the challenge of positioning HE within any wider structural theory when she observes that “higher education is in a different position vis-à-vis state power . . . it is formally autonomous and independent (by Royal Charters and the 1992 Higher Education Act) in a way that schools are not” (p. 154). Within the specific field of HE admissions, a variety of policies and practices have emerged in a relatively autonomous way from the state since “by law it is for universities to determine their admissions procedures” (Cabinet Office, 2009, p. 42) and admissions selection decisions “are the responsibility of universities and colleges themselves” (DfES 2004b p. 2)\(^\text{18}\). So Barnett (2003) talks of higher education being “in the state but not of the state” (p. 45). As Brennan and Naidoo (2008) state, there is “no single narrative or idea [that can] capture the complex and often contradictory nature of higher education and its relationship with other parts of society” (p. 300).

4.4 SUMMARY

This chapter has placed the study of contextual admissions policies in relation to social justice firmly within a socially critical policy-scholarship theoretical tradition. Whilst the principal focus of the study is at the meso level of the HE institution, I have stated how measures will be taken to integrate analysis with other levels, particularly those at the macro and discursive level. The policy scholarship approach also commits me to particular epistemological, ontological and normative standpoints when examining the study of contextual admissions. These have important implications for this study’s methodology and research design, which will be set out in the next chapter.

\(^\text{18}\) UK universities have come to view freedom over who they admit as a hallmark of their autonomy, but even this is a more recent and local historical phenomenon. In many parts of the European and North American system, admission to a local university is generally open to anyone who has met basic pre-entry qualifications. This was also the case in the UK until after the Second World War, when demand for places started to exceed supply and there was a greater reliance on examination results. So there is nothing precious or inevitable about autonomy over admissions in a UK or English context. It is possible to see that, through a range of new policies on access and widening participation (BIS 2014; OFFA 2011; HEFCE 2009), there has been a creeping influence by government over admissions, but this has, to date, fallen well short of any notion of direct control.
CHAPTER 5
METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will outline and explain the methodology and research design used to explore, describe and explain the formation of contextual admissions policies within selective leading English higher education institutions (HEIs) in relation to issues of social justice. It sets out my rationale for employing a flexible, mixed-methods research design using i) documentary content analysis of the admissions policies of 20 selective HEIs from the English Russell Group and ii) in-depth interviews with senior policy actors across three purposively selected sites, alongside qualitative analysis of their admissions policy texts. The chapter will be outlined in six sections: i. epistemological and ontological issues; ii. research design; iii. documentary content analysis; iv. in-depth interviews; v. data triangulation; vi. ethics, reflexivity and position in the field.

5.2 EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL PARADIGM

This study is based within the policy scholarship tradition, which has its own ontological beliefs about the nature of policy. Chapter Four outlined how theory and empirical work in this tradition (Ozga 1987, 1990, 2000; Grace 1995, 1996; Halpin and Troyna 1994; Ball 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 2006; Ball et al. 2012; Gewirtz 2002 and Gewirtz and Cribb 2009) has stressed the importance of understanding policy as being “little-p” and “big-P” (Ball 2006, p. 7) and as both “texts” and “discourses” (Ball 1993). Seeing admissions policies as texts will involve going beyond their status as mere documents, officially written down. Rather, attention will be drawn to the struggles over how they are “encoded” and “decoded” (Ball 1994a), which can be revealed by senior policy actors in HEIs. Seeing admissions policies as discourses ensures sight is not lost of the ‘bigger picture’. Analysis of written documents and actor definition in interviews could reveal wider discursive practices and dominant discourses that may govern “what can be said, and thought, but also . . . who can speak, when,
where and with what authority” (Ball 1994a, p. 21). Such an approach to understanding HE admissions policies must therefore follow’s Ozga’s call for research to “bring together structural, macro level analysis of education systems and education policies and micro investigations, especially that which takes account of people’s perception and experiences” (1990 p. 359).

Epistemologically, my knowledge about the nature of HE admissions policy is set within the context of seeing it as a process rather than a product (Ozga 2000, p. 2) – processes that are messy, contested and idiosyncratic rather than the neat, written-down, ‘end products’ conventionally researched as policy. Methodologically, it then follows that a mixture of research instruments will be deployed to help uncover the meanings and values embedded in the policy process and attempt to link these to wider structural factors at the political, economic, cultural or discursive level.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) raise the familiar philosophical issue that “questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, which we define as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator” (p. 105). This study departs from the conventional positivist/constructivist dualisms identified by writers like Guba and Lincoln (1994), where opposing ontologies and epistemologies lead to a focus on either largely quantitative or qualitative research designs. This study rejects such distinctions through its employment of policy scholarship approach and instead bases itself within a critical realist framework. Critical realism is described by Robson (2002) as an approach that “provides a model of scientific explanation that avoids both positivism and relativism”. Here, the phenomenon being studied – HE admissions processes – are seen to be shaped by social, political, cultural, discursive and economic values that are “crystallized (reified) into a series of structures that are now (inappropriately) taken as ‘real’, that is, natural and immutable. For all practical purposes the structures are ‘real’, a virtual or historical reality” (p. 110). At the same time critical realism places an important premium on actor definitions and understandings as means of revealing what Sayer (1992) terms “underlying processes, structures and generative mechanisms” underpinning contextual admissions policies. Accordingly, the research design adopted in this study aims to reveal both ‘structures’ and ‘actor definitions’ through its employment of mixed methods.
5.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis is employing a mixed-methods research design that will be undertaken in two key phases denoted in Table 2, which correspond to the main research questions of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Phase</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Research Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>1. What approaches do leading HEIs take towards contextual, admissions policies and how might these be categorised?</td>
<td>Documentary Content Analysis of admissions policies of English Russell Group HEIs (20 cases)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. How can the contextual admissions policies of selective English HEIs be understood in relation to social justice? In particular, what factors enable or constrain the pursuit of justice through contextual admissions</td>
<td>In-depth Interviews with key policy leaders and qualitative documentary analysis across purposively chosen sites (3 sites)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hence, whilst my theoretical conceptualisation of policy from within the policy scholarship tradition has influenced my use of a mixture of research methods, the specific research questions themselves have influenced which particular methods were employed\(^\text{19}\). In attempting to understand the ‘what’ question in Phase One, a ‘quick’ method was needed to cover all 20 English Russell Group HEIs. Surveys would not have ensured a full sample return across all sites. There are also challenges in terms of the validity of the responses these methods yield. So a choice was made to undertake documentary content analysis. In Phase Two, the ‘how’ section, I was concerned to understand the meanings and assumptions underpinning the development of contextual admissions policies. This entailed selecting a smaller sample of HEIs and exploring admissions policies through both interviews with senior policy actors

\(^\text{19}\) By making these assumptions explicit from the outset, it is hoped this will allow the reader to assess the extent to which this may have influenced my research findings and analysis. Hence the research design has been informed largely by the nature of my specific research questions (which have themselves been informed by previous research (Skyrme 2008, 2009), pilot work, existing and adapted theories and my own professional knowledge of the field). Importantly, it also corresponds to the critical realist understandings of the nature of the world (ontology) and the nature of knowledge in it (epistemology). Within this framework writers like Robson (2002) have provided a coherent rationale for the adoption of flexible, case-study research designs employing a combination of methods in order to generate theoretical explanations of social phenomena that are sensitive to issues of social structure and human agency.
responsible for their development and further in-depth qualitative analysis documents.

By opting to combine different methods – documentary analysis and in-depth interviews – I am following in the methodological tradition advocated by Bryman (1988). He points out that in practice there is a greater rapprochement between quantitative and qualitative researchers than their philosophical underpinnings might suggest. Indeed, Robson (2002) prefers to characterise different research designs as being fixed and flexible rather than quantitative or qualitative. In fixed designs such as surveys most, if not all, of the design work is carried out in advance of the data collection. The researcher knows what s/he is looking for by following tried and tested procedures. In contrast, more flexible case-study designs, like that proposed herewith, involve less pre-specification and the design “evolves, develops and unfolds as the research proceeds” (p. 5). The characterisation of this research design as flexible rather than qualitative is important since, in addition to data in the form of words, I will be mapping out some very basic numerical categories in the first phase using documentary analysis. I will now outline each method in turn.

5.4 DOCUMENTARY CONTENT ANALYSIS (DESIGN PHASE 1): METHODS, SAMPLING, DATA ANALYSIS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF DATA

An examination of the admissions policies of 20 Russell Group HEIs in England was used to ask what approaches do selective HEIs take towards contextual admissions policies and how might these be categorised? This phase of the research provides some insights into the empirical question of “what is going on?” with respect to the fair admissions practices in selective HEIs and is largely exploratory and descriptive in nature.

5.4.1 The method of content analysis

For this exploratory aspect of the research, institutional admissions policy documents were examined. Wellington (2000) outlines how documentary research can be employed to “open up an area of inquiry and sensitive
researchers to the key issues and problems in that field” (p. 113)\textsuperscript{20}. From this initial analysis of documents basic descriptive categories can emerge through the construction of rudimentary “ideal types” (Weber 1946/1958) that might help to understand the different ‘positions’ selective HEIs take with specific reference to the use of contextual data in the way they admit students. This approach was been borne out through pilot work developed in previous research (Skyrme 2009a, 2009b) and will be more fully developed and outlined in Chapter Six.

Documents exist in a wide variety of media and modes of delivery and there are copious potential sources of information available in this area of social inquiry – reports, prospectuses, web-pages, speeches, policy statements, press releases etc. (Wellington 2000, p. 110). The documents selected in this study fell into the category of local institutional policy documents, which provided descriptive accounts of the policies of each selective HEIs approach to the use of contextual admissions. To enable consistency across all 20 HEIs, two key and publicly available documents were analysed according to the ways in which they make use of contextual admissions data in their selection processes:

- The **Access Agreement** each HEI in the Russell Group submitted to the Office for Fair Access in 2012 as a condition of charging more than £6,000 per annum for any undergraduate course (OFFA 2011).

- The **Admissions Policy** each HEI is required to produce and reference as part of its Widening Participation Strategic Assessment with the HEFCE (HEFCE 2009).

Wellington’s (2000) schema in Figure 4 was used to classify the documents used.

\textsuperscript{20} Hence, during this initial first phase of the research the use of documents in these 20 sites might best be described as “exploratory” in Yin’s (2003) threefold exploratory/descriptive/explanatory schema. They will aim to provide an overall impression of ‘fair admissions’ policies of leading HEIs and alert me to particular areas for further research in the substantive second part of my research design.
The bold classifications along the x and y axis denote that all of the documents used in this study were freely available on the OFFA webpages in terms of access and were authored at the level of the institution.

5.4.2 Sampling in content analysis

The sample ‘population’ (Cohen et al. 2007, p. 100), for purposes of this research, are the admissions policies in selective English higher education institutions. As Chapter Two highlighted, this can be defined in many ways\textsuperscript{21} and there is therefore a great deal of subjectivity involved in choosing which

\textsuperscript{21} Definitions of ‘selective institutions’ could, for example, focus on the number of applicants there are per place or the average prior examination grades needed to gain entry to those institutions. The 20 English institutions in the Russell Group of universities that are used as the basis of this study have been shown to be consistently some of the most selective in terms of entry requirements. Their website notes that they have “an average of around 7 applications per place and up to 20 applications per place for some courses” (Russell Group 2013). They also offer a wage-premium for their graduates. Studying at a Russell Group university has been show to attract a salary top up of approximately ten per cent over a lifetime compared with other graduates even when other factors affecting wages have been taken into account such as A level scores or parental background (Russell Group 2013).
method to select. I opted to define selective HEIs based on their ‘Mission Group’\textsuperscript{22} - those who belong to the 20 Russell Group universities in England:

- University of Birmingham
- University of Bristol
- University of Cambridge
- Durham University
- University of Exeter
- Imperial College London
- King's College London
- University of Leeds
- University of Liverpool
- London School of Economics and Political Science
- University of Manchester
- Newcastle University
- University of Nottingham
- University of Oxford
- Queen Mary, University of London
- University of Sheffield
- University of Southampton
- University College London
- University of Warwick
- University of York.

\textsuperscript{22} Mission groups are associations of HEIs sharing particular missions and take account of factors such as: the relationship between research and teaching; the profile of applicants and acceptances in the student body; the balance between selecting and recruiting courses offered. At the time of writing the main Missions Groups in the UK are: Million+; Russell Group; University Alliance; and GuildHE.

- the Million+ was established in 2007, formerly the Coalition of Modern Universities and later CMU: ‘campaigning for mainstream universities’. Million+ describes itself as a university think-tank and has 28 member institutions which teach around half of the UK’s higher education students each year. See www.millionplus.ac.uk for more information.

- the Russell Group was established in 1994. It is an association of 24 research-intensive universities of the United Kingdom. In 2010/11, the Russell Group’s then-20 universities were a prominent UK and international industry in their own right, with a total economic output of £22.3 billion per annum; responsibility for supporting 243,000 jobs UK-wide; overseas earnings of over £2 billion per annum. The most recent Research Assessment Exercise found that two-thirds of the UK’s very best (‘world leading’) research took place in Russell Group universities. And on average, twice as much of the research undertaken at Russell Group universities is ‘world leading’ compared to the rest of the sector. More than 90,000 students graduate with first degrees from Russell Group universities each year. Research undertaken by the Centre for Economics of Education has identified an average wage premium of up to 10 per cent for a graduate from a Russell Group university compared to a graduate from a modern university. Russell Group universities also produce 30 per cent of the UK's science and engineering graduates and nearly 81 per cent of doctors and dentists. See www.russellgroup.ac.uk for more information.

- the University Alliance was established in 2006. It was previously convened informally as the Alliance of Non-Aligned Universities, comprises a mixture of pre and post-1992 universities. The 23 member institutions have a balanced portfolio of research, teaching, enterprise and innovation integral to their missions. See www.unialliance.ac.uk for more information.

- GuildHE, a representative group that speaks for HE colleges, specialist institutions and some universities, is not a group which is defined by a shared mission among its members. See www.guildhe.ac.uk for more information.
Cardiff, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Queens were excluded for practical and conceptual reasons: firstly, they do not have to produce Access Agreements and so there was a lack of consistent and comparable documents to analyse; and secondly, the degree of difference in pre-HE schooling systems and qualifications rendered comparisons between the way they considered merit in the admission process more difficult.

In comparison to ‘league tables’ or other seemingly more ‘objective’ measures, it could be argued that such a sample population is arbitrary since it reflects a ‘closed group’ of HEIs. However, there are two main advantages of this approach. First, it is a more stable and recognisable range of institutions than provided by ‘league tables’. Secondly, whilst there are some very selective HEIs not in the Russell Group, this group of HEIs feature consistently in a range of ‘objective’ scoring systems as having “the greatest competition for places and . . . offer degrees that have been perceived as carrying a premium in the employment market” (House of Commons 2009). Thirdly, other research (SPA/DIUS 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; SPA 2011, 2012; Boliver 2013) and newspaper reports have themselves used this group in their own categorisations and found that they were the sorts of HEIs more likely to be using contextual admissions – the key focus of this study.

5.4.3 Data Analysis in content analysis

Attention now turns to how I examined these documents in this phase of the research. Prior (2003) argues that “given the role and significance that written documentation plays in most human societies it is strange to see how little attention has been paid to it by social researchers” (p. 4). Indeed, despite there being a plethora of ‘off the shelf’ guidelines regarding my main method of in-depth interviews, there are by contrast only vague or overly-theoretical guidelines to ways in which written policy documents can be ‘analysed’

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23 These are that they are: research-intensive; have higher than average ‘quality’ students; are popular and more competitive for purposes of entry; contain students from more advantaged sections of society; confer higher economic rewards upon their graduates; feature more highly in the various newspaper league tables. The importance of this grouping has also been corroborated by a recent government Select Committee which concluded that “The universities in the 1994 and Russell Groups have for a variety of reasons had the greatest competition for places and they have the resources to fund intensive and demanding teaching and they also offer degrees that have been perceived as carrying a premium in the employment market” (House of Commons 2009).
coherently. The methodological literatures suggest two contrasting approaches – Documentary Content Analysis and more qualitative modes of analysis, sometimes involving Discourse Analysis.

Both methods will be drawn upon in this research for Phases One and Two of this research design respectively. Design Phase One of this study will examine institutional admissions policy documents and will employ a basic form of content analysis to provide an overview of the policies of 20 English HEIs. Thereafter, Design Phase Two will take a more in-depth qualitative examination of three different HEIs’ admissions policies that draw more on insights from discourse analysis.

Content analysis can be described as a process where “many words of texts are classified into much fewer categories” (Weber 1990, p. 15). Categories are usually derived from theoretical constructs or areas of interest devised in advance of the analysis, although these may be modified by reference to the empirical data. Whilst content analysis can produce quantitative or qualitative data, this phase of the research will seek to “transform the qualitative data into a form which is capable of quantification” (Robson 1993, p. 392) by a process of categorisation of the written statements in the admissions policy documents into a matrix. When developing a matrix the most important considerations will be my particular research questions and theories – these being to describe, compare and contrast different approaches to the use of contextual data in selective HEIs. I am therefore interested in describing and categorising key similarities and differences about social justice in the use of contextual data using conceptually-informed categories. For example, within the published admissions policies I was interested to understand:

i) how does each HEI understand ‘merit’ – was it measured by exam scores alone?

ii) are factors beyond examination scores used to select students and do these involve the use of contextual admissions data?

24 For an analysis of national policy documents, see Chapters Two and Three. Here, key aspects of official, national policy documents were selected to provide a structural overview of the ‘field’ of HE fair admissions (Bourdieu 1984). National policies were outlined in their wider social context, particularly in relation to the changes that have occurred in the political and economic structures of society. This has helped to reveal the “context of influence” (Ball 1993) and framing of the ‘problem’ of ‘fair admissions’ and contextual admissions.

25 I do not expect there to be a neat and logical linear process to the ‘phasing’ of this research design. Indeed it may be that the ‘final’, substantive qualitative analysis undertaken in Design Phase 2 opens up some new and interesting categories to inform further content analysis in Design Phase 1.
iii) what types of contextual admissions data are used?

iv) where contextual admissions is used, what effect does this have on selection and offer making? For example, does it allow variations in entry requirement grades or not?

A matrix will be developed to make comparisons and contrasts between different HEI ‘positions’ and identify “singularities, regularities and variations within the data” (Dey 1993, p. 195). Many forms of matrix are possible and because I will only be ‘displaying’ a small proportion of the data it will be crucial to make my “decision rules” explicit (Robson 1993, p. 392). The full matrix developed for this study is outlined in Appendix 5 and the decision-rules and results will be displayed in Chapter Six. Whilst most of the matrix was developed in advance, some fine-tuning was also undertaken to the categories during the analysis of the documents.

5.4.4 Trustworthiness of documentary content analysis

The major criticism of content analysis is that it decomposes text into individual elements in an asocial, atomistic fashion (Scott 1990). It is also argued that the process of ‘categorisation’ of data is entirely subjective and open to “bias, selectivity, attrition and selective survival” (Cohen et al. 2007, p. 203). Whilst being sympathetic to these concerns if this was to be my only research method, my use of Content Analysis is acting only as a precursor to more detailed qualitative analysis of a fewer number of cases involving qualitative documentary analysis and in-depth interviews. This also helps to address the charge that ‘significance’ in documents may be “a qualitative rather than quantitative matter and the researcher must attempt to grasp the latent, underlying content of the text” (Scott 1990, p. 147). Content analysis is, however, an unobtrusive method that has offered total coverage across every single one of my 20 selective HEIs in the English Russell Group in a way a survey method could not have achieved due to their lower response rates. This has aided the representativeness of this component of the study. I will also be open to the view that different categories or interpretations of the data could be made. So whilst the validity of this method should always be open to scrutiny (in that researchers inevitably bring their own pre-existing theories and
perspectives to the process of categorisation) the transparency of my matrix will hopefully support its reliability since, in theory, it will offer other researchers an opportunity to replicate and produce their own categorisations from the data.

5.5 QUALITATIVE DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS (DESIGN PHASE 2): METHODS, SAMPLING, DATA ANALYSIS and TRUSTWORTHINESS OF DATA

5.5.1 The method of qualitative documentary analysis

Phase Two of the research employs more qualitative techniques and looks in depth at the same two key policy documents across three purposively selected HE sites. In addition to these same policy documents, I was also able to follow weblinks to specific pieces of further information in some cases, and where this happened it is stated in the research findings. I have termed this qualitative documentary analysis, rather than documentary discourse analysis for two key reasons. First it was not intended for this method to be the ‘main’ vehicle through which I was able to uncover the meanings and values about social justice embedded in contextual admissions policies. Rather this method was to help contextualise, sense check and triangulate data from my main method in this phase of the research, which is in-depth interviews. Secondly, I was deliberately constrained from adopting a fuller discourse analysis, where large chunks of text would be subjected to critical scrutiny, due to the need to protect the anonymity of my research sites. This meant that I had to be careful to only use ‘micro-phantoms’ – key words or concepts in the document – rather than be able to quote large chunks of text. However, the approach I have taken to the qualitative data analysis has drawn, to a limited extent, on Ozga’s (2000) refreshingly practical methodological call to researchers to look at policy documents “as carrying particular narratives; that is, they tell a story about what is possible or desirable to achieve through education policy. Thus they are able to be read as any narrative is read: they may be scrutinized for their portrayal of character and plot, for their use of particular forms of language in order to produce impressions or responses; they may have an authorial voice or seek to convey the impression of multiple viewpoints” (p. 95). A key goal in this part of the research design will therefore be to reveal, where possible, how the use of
language in key contextual admissions policy documents rise issues of social justice.

5.5.2 Sampling of qualitative documentary analysis

The ‘population’, for purposes of this research, are the admissions policies in selective English higher education institutions. This method of sampling in Phase Two of my research is clearly not subscribing to positivist goals of achieving a random or ‘probability’ sample. I am opting, in this aspect of the research, to use a non-random or purposive sample which, as the name suggests, are selected for a particular reason of interest to the researcher. Significantly, my ‘units of analysis’ in this study are not the selective HEIs, but moreover the phenomenon: that of contextual admissions policies in selective HEIs that are formed and enacted in particular contexts.

Whilst selecting a smaller number of institutions in this phase of the research has practical advantages in terms of time and money, the rationale for selecting only three HE sites actually arises from conceptual insights made in pilot work (Skyrme 2009a, 2009b). This suggested there may be three important and contrasting ‘ideal type’ positions taken by selective HEIs in how they conceive of the use of contextual data in their admissions policies. These are tested and outlined more fully in Chapter Six, where all 20 HEIs in the exploratory Phase One are classified using content analysis into one of these three positions.

From the 20 possible HEIs, there were more than one available to sample in any of the three ideal-type positions. Because this part of the research entailed a significant commitment in terms of undertaking in-depth interviews, the selection of the specific HEIs were governed by issues of access and convenience: institutions were approached where my own contacts (or colleagues’ contacts) were able to ensure two key policy actors who would agree to provide access. These same three institutions were therefore those where qualitative documentary analysis was undertaken. My own position in this field is covered later in this chapter.

Finally I need to say something about how this study borrows from the case-study approach. Whilst this policy scholarship of three different HE sites does not exhibit the sort of depth to be classed as full case-studies, it is perhaps
useful to invoke Robson (2002) when he observes that “in one sense, all enquiries are case-studies. They take place at particular times in particular places with particular people” (p. 185).

5.5.3 Data analysis of documentary discourse analysis

Analysing documentary data is essentially a qualitative process, but one that develops from the conceptual basis of how policy and social justice are understood within my research questions and its distinctive policy scholarship approach. Employing a policy scholarship approach Ball (1993) and Rizvi and Lingard (2010) have also suggested useful frameworks for thinking about the ‘trajectory’ of policies that can be uncovered using documentary analysis and other qualitative methods within the policy scholarship tradition. These ideas were drawn upon when analysing the documents and the right hand part of Table 3 shows which four conceptually-informed questions were asked when analysing the documents.

Table 3: Research questions employed when analysing policy documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ball’s ‘policy trajectory’ framework</th>
<th>‘policy trajectory’ framework</th>
<th>Rizvi and Lingard’s framework</th>
<th>Specific questions utilised for my own institutional portraits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The context of influence</td>
<td>Contextual issues</td>
<td>Where the issues originate from?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The context of policy text production</td>
<td></td>
<td>i. How was the ‘access problem’ conceived? (or in other words: who was at fault? And what could be done?) What is absent, excluded or silent in this account?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policy and textual issues</td>
<td>i. Who were the individuals or groups being conceived and identified in the admissions process? Are there any polarising icon words (Williams 1997) regarding social justice? What is absent, excluded or silent in this account?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ii. What ‘happened’ to particular individuals/groups identified in the admissions process? What is absent, excluded or silent in this account?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of outcomes</td>
<td>Implementation and outcomes issues</td>
<td>iv. What was the policy trying to ‘change’? What is the purpose and intended outcomes of the admissions policy? What is absent, excluded or silent in this account?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of political strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: adapted from Ball 1993 and Rizvi and Lingard 2010)
5.5.4 Trustworthiness of documentary discourse analysis

In terms of validity, the advantage this approach has over content analysis is its ability to take account of the environment, context and underlying structures of a policy text. As Prior (2003) notes, the contents of documents may not be their most important feature because of their ‘situated’ nature: they can be understood as “drivers, media (channels), mediators (filters) and outcomes of social interaction” (Cohen et al. 2007, p. 204) and have to be interpreted at many different levels of analysis. A major charge against discourse analysis is the near impossibility of this method in achieving conventional reliability: it is perhaps the most subjective of all research methods and it is difficult to conceive of two researchers making a similar interpretation of a given text. This is compounded by the need to retain anonymity of the research subjects (and consequently which institution these documents are located in). Ozga (2000) argues that even positivist ‘hygienic research’ suffers from issues of transparency. She therefore states that we can “move towards a better understanding (more valid research exchanges) if we articulate the principles of choice in policy research” (2000, p. 107). Despite the issues of anonymity, subjectivity and the limited way in which qualitative data analysis has been employed in this research design, I did not choose to steer away from it. Ozga (2000) eloquently summarises my rationale for employing this research technique when she sets out that “This is a form of research on education policy that does not demand much material resource . . . and is one of the most accessible forms of research on education policy [that] helps to generate critical, informed and independent responses to policy. Reading and interpreting texts can be an act of engagement with policy, for the researcher and those with whom she or he works” (p. 107).

5.6 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS (DESIGN PHASE 2): METHODS, SAMPLING, DATA ANALYSIS and TRUSTWORTHINESS OF DATA

The use of documentary analysis is part of a larger mixed-methods approach which also encapsulates in-depth interviews with policy leaders in each of the three HE sites in Design Phase Two. This is because of my ontological views set out earlier about the nature of policy being a process rather than a “thing” that exists in a written document. The dynamic, complex nature of how policy is
encoded, the extent to which it is “top-down” or “bottom-up”, “text” or “discourse” (Ball 1993) and other such important questions will be explored through interviews with key policy leaders in each of my three sites.

Using in-depth interviews across three sites is particularly attractive when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are being posed and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real empirical context (Yin 2003, p. 1). This draws on the realist perspective of Robson (2002) who argues that research within particular sites are particularly useful for establishing underlying structures, causes and effects, with their main strength being that they observe social processes in real settings where a premium is placed on context. This is particularly important for the conception of justice employed in this research that draws on Gewirtz’s (2006) notion that social justice must be understood empirically in real settings due to its context dependent nature.26

5.6.1 The method of in-depth interviews

The in-depth interviews with policy leaders across three sites has major advantages over documentary analysis. As Cannel and Kahn note, in-depth interviews are particularly good at capturing descriptive and explanatory goals since they are “initiated by the researcher for the specific purpose of obtaining research relevant information . . . focused on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation” (cited in Robson 1993, p. 229). The usage of an in-depth interview reflects the ontological assumptions within the policy-scholarship approach where policy is seen as a process rather than a product. Interviews will aim to be “extraordinarily revealing” (Ozga 1987, p. 146) for purposes of exploring the relationship of social justice to the formation and enactment of contextual admissions policies. Also, by seeing policies as being encoded in various ways (Ball 1993) and as a site of struggle, complexity and compromise, in-depth interviews will enable data to be captured that would otherwise remain invisible in a simple analysis of the policy documents themselves.

26 As Miles and Huberman (1994) note “we cannot study individual cases devoid of their context in a way that the quantitative researcher does (cited in Robson 2002, p. 179). Similarly Cohen et al. (2007) remark they can provide examples of “real people in real situations . . . enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply presenting them with abstract theories or principles . . . [and] understand how ideas and abstract principles fit together” (p. 235). In my case, therefore they provide an empirical grounding and application of the philosophical concept of social justice in the ‘real world’ of HE admissions.
Kvale (1996) stresses the centrality of this technique as an *inter-view* - an *exchange* of views between two people on a topic of mutual interest\textsuperscript{27}. The in-depth interview used in this research will certainly not be “unstructured”. In previous research with senior admissions policy actors (Skyrme 2009a, 2009b) a method of interviewing akin to what methodology guidebooks term a ‘semi-structured’ interview was used. Here, a guide or ‘shopping list’ of particular themes of theoretical interest are developed (Robson 2002, p. 278)\textsuperscript{28}. In having an element of structure within the in-depth interview I will be able to elicit key factual information and allow the possibility of comparisons and contrasts emerging within the three chosen sites. This improves the potential for more coherent analysis of interview data. Other practicalities include the need to tape the interview to enable more detailed analysis.\textsuperscript{29} Finally I will ensure that, to the best of my ability, the anonymity of the individual research participants and their institutions in Design Phase Two are protected through the use of pseudonyms.

Appendix 4 outlines the interview schedule that was been developed for this part of the research. Like with documentary analysis, it was deliberately developed to produce answers to specific research questions involving how contextual admissions policies can be understood in relation to social justice.

### 5.6.2 Sampling

Cohen *et al.* (2007) contend that “small scale research often uses non-probability samples because, despite the disadvantages that arise from their non-representativeness, they are far less complicated to set up, are considerably less expensive, and can prove perfectly adequate where

\textsuperscript{27} In contrast to more positivist conceptions whereby the key is to remain ‘neutral’ and ‘detached’ I feel this conception better captures the interview as a social process whereby knowledge is *constructed* between the interviewer and interviewee and data emerges that is neither objective or subjective but *intersubjective*. As Cohen *et al.* (2007) point out they “enable participants – be they interviewers or interviewees – to discuss their interpretation of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view” (p. 349).

\textsuperscript{28} However, it would be misleading to make pretensions that the research agenda will be set completely by the interviewee. Because my research is underpinned by a critical realist paradigm, theory is central to explaining the social reality of how ‘fair admissions’ policies are developed, enacted and conceptualised. The research prompts will therefore be very much linked to existing theories and research from cognate educational studies outlined in the policy scholarship and social justice literatures concerning the way in which fairness in admissions must be understood as a plural pursuit, mediated by other competing institutional and contingent on level and context (Gewirtz 2006). A charge by many social constructionists and those that advocate a ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967) approach is that this leads to imposing one’s own meanings onto reality. However, I would contend that beginning with theoretical ideas and assumptions is an unavoidable, and indeed *necessary*, feature of all forms of natural and social inquiry (Robson 2002, p. 192).

\textsuperscript{29} Some researchers have raised concerns about the impact on validity when a tape reorder is present. However, previous research (Skyrme 2009) and pilot work for this study has suggested that respondents are able to quickly disregard the fact that they are being recorded and the advantages this method has in terms of my own ability to interact, engage and probe respondents have been judged to outweigh any potential disadvantages.
researchers do not intend to generalise their findings beyond the research in question” (p. 113). As outlined in the previous section, this is a useful way to understand the selection of the three HE sites, which were initially identified for conceptual reasons and then paired down more opportunistically to one HEI in each “idea type” category. Save for issues of time, I may have proposed to undertake interviews with every senior policy actor across the whole Phase One sample of 20 Russell Group HEIs. Yet I feel this rather misses the point about what we mean by generalisation. Since I am working within a critical realist framework, my use of an explanatory case/site framework is attempting to provide analytic rather than statistical or empirical generalisation (Robson 2002; Gomm et al. 2000). That is, they help to develop models, processes and generative mechanisms that can aid researchers in understanding other similar cases, phenomena or situations. Additionally the population from which the ‘units of analysis’ are drawn are not reducible to the three case study institutions themselves; they also relate to the phenomenon: the development and enactment of specific conceptions of social justice and ‘fairness’ in the contextual admissions policies of leading HEIs. Hence it is envisaged this study will have wider applicability in understanding issues of social justice in the admissions process across other selective HE institutions.

I also elected to sample particular individuals within these three HEIs. Drawing on insights from previous research (Skyrme 2009a, 2009b) where I interviewed a Director of Admissions and a Pro-Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for Teaching and Learning, I decided the three sites would draw on both of these important institutional perspectives since they reflect the most

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30 Whilst I am attempting to provide a valid and descriptive account of ‘what is going on?’ in my three case study institutions, it is envisaged that the major contribution to knowledge to emerge will be a more general explanation for why particular conceptions of fair admissions emerge in different contexts. It is these ‘theoretical inferences’, where the transferability of the analysis and results to other situations is still possible (Robinson and Norris 2001), that are a major feature of case-study and ethnographic research. Hence, such ‘stand-alone’ pieces of research, when guided by a coherent theoretical framework, mitigate against the risk of producing scattered or isolated knowledge.

31 Previous research and my own professional insights into the nature of policy development and implementation in HEIs suggests that the following perspectives would be gained:

- **the Director of Admissions** (or their equivalent) is typically the most senior administrative policy actor in a HEI. They would be able to talk in depth about fair admissions on account of their leadership responsibilities, which typically include, *inter alia*: coordinating, drafting and updating the admissions policy ‘text’; the public articulation of the policy e.g. speaking at conferences or in the media; overseeing management information such as targets and breakdown of entrants by social group; handling appeals/complaints; managing a large team of administrative admissions staff; overseeing the development of training programmes for academic and administrative staff involved in selection; maintaining expertise in patterns of access to HE, relevant government policy and wider research into qualifications and patterns of access.

- **the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning** (or their equivalent) is typically the most senior academic policy actor with responsibility for admissions. They would be able to talk in depth about fair admissions on account of their leadership responsibilities which, whilst typically much less ‘hands-on’, will tend to involve: chairing the most
senior academic and managerial leadership positions with regard to admissions in the majority of Russell Group universities. A table outlining the institutional and individual pseudonyms is presented in the analysis in Chapter Six.

5.6.3 Data analysis of in-depth interviews

The aim of the data analysis in this part of the research will be to “connect my research orientation to data collection and analysis in a coherent and consistent way . . . make those connections explicit . . . and open up the process to scrutiny and debate” (Ozga 2000 p. 82). Usefully, within the qualitative tradition of employing flexible research methods like in-depth interviews across different sites, writers like Yin (2003), Stake (1995), Robson (1993, 2002) and Stenhouse (1978) have outlined a range of methods of undertaking data analysis that will help to produce the degree of rigour, transparency and trustworthiness most often associated with quantitative techniques where ‘threats to validity’ are taken seriously at each stage (Robson 1993, p. 372). This is important because Bourdieu (1988) argues only someone who hasn’t undertaken qualitative empirical work such as in-depth interviews in the social sciences could make a claim for a perfectly transparent and systematic approach to data analysis that does not involve a proportion of what we might call ‘intuition’ (p. 6) As Cohen et al. (2007) remark, interview analysis is “less a completely accurate representation [and] more of a reflexive, reactive interaction between the researcher and the decontextualised data that are already interpretations of a social encounter” (p. 368).

I recorded the interviews to ensure I was able to draw on a range of accurate quotations from full transcripts, but this does not get around the fact

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Because this is a flexible research design the most important consideration was to ensure that I got to speak to the ‘right’ people and that my interview data allowed me to explore the issues outlined in my research questions. As Cohen et al. (2007) observe, purposive sampling often “reflects the issue that sampling can be of people, but it can also be of issues” (p. 117).

25 In terms of organisation of the case-study data, Stenhouse (1978) has provided a useful distinction between ‘case data’ and ‘case records’. Case data will include information that is usually too lengthy and unwieldy to be open to external scrutiny. These will include all of the national policies regarding access to higher education and the 20 individual HE admissions policies which may include some initial notes and annotations and the tape recordings of interviews with policy leaders. Case records, in contrast, are edited version of the case data and will be open to scrutiny. In Phase Two these will include notes that make up the analysis of the 20 HEI ‘positions’ on contextual admissions data into matrices and interview transcripts and detailed admissions policy documents relating to the my three chosen sites. Whilst these cannot hope to provide a universally accepted interpretation of the ‘truth’, they at least allow many of the decisions I will make along the way about the linkages of my data analysis to explanations more explicit, transparent and thereby open to scrutiny.
that great tensions exist regarding how I should convey the coherence, meaning
and validity of the interviewees’ responses. Miles and Huberman (1994)
suggest no fewer than thirteen sequenced tactics for generating meaning from
transcribed interview data, which provide a useful framework for moving from
the specific through to the general (Robson 2002, p. 480-1). The attraction of
this approach is in its goal: to enable conceptual and theoretical coherence by
moving from data to theories, through analysis and categorisation. This
highlights the importance of coding of qualitative data responses as a way of
reducing what otherwise would constitute data overload (Cohen et al. 2007, p.
369)33. In this study and previous pilot work (Skyrme 2009a, 2009b) the social
justice framework used by Gewirtz (2006) provided a useful mechanism for
coding and ‘conceptually clustering’ large parts of my data34.

Miles and Huberman (1994) see the key advantage of qualitative data
being its offer of explanations that utilise an inductive approach and offer a
generative analysis of the mechanisms governing the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of
patterns in social phenomena like this research. “Qualitative data analysis, with
its close up look, can identify mechanisms, going beyond sheer association . . .
[It] deals with the complex network of events in a situation . . . showing that
‘stories’ are not capricious, but include underlying variables, and that variables
are not disembodied, but have connectedness over time (p. 147). From the
data, I will be able to develop some visual representations such as maps,
479-80). These will help map out the underlying mechanisms that enable or
constrain the pursuit of social justice through contextual admissions policies.

5.6.4 Trustworthiness of in-depth interviews

Asking people directly about ‘what is going on’ through an interview process is
particularly useful for this study since writers like Greenbank (2006a) have
found that “institutional statements . . . may now provide little insight into the

33 In previous research (Skyrme 2009a) I successfully imposed what Miles and Huberman (1994) have termed a
“Conceptually Clustered Matrix” onto my data, which is a simple way of pulling together information that was felt to
‘belong together’ under specific headings. This is even more important when analysing a range of interviews – in the
case of this research six in-depth interviews - from different policy leaders.

34 There is an in-built tension between a realist insistence on the importance of theory guiding the analysis of the data
and the aim in all qualitative research to give voice to social actors and their own interpretations of reality. Whilst I have
made it clear that I reject a full ‘grounded’ approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) because the researcher inevitably
imposes his/her own theory onto the data in all forms of research, I will need to be careful to ensure that my analytical
coding and matrices do not mean I miss sight of important emerging themes or serendipitous findings.
actual policies of HEIs because they have learnt to develop the ‘right’ form of words . . . [that include] ‘spin’ . . . and ‘double-coding’” (p. 209). Yet a central issue for the reliability of interviews is that they must be acknowledged as social, interpersonal encounters. However, what’s lost in reliability is seen to be gained through the enhanced validity of interviews. They offer potentially rich, first-hand insights into the policy development and conceptualisation process that would be impossible to glean from more detached ‘scientific’ methods such as surveys, or even qualitative processes such as documentary analysis35. Sensitivity will need to be given to the well-known phenomenon of policymakers being skilled and sophisticated at providing institutionally and politically acceptable accounts of reality (Greenbank 2007, Ozga and Gewirtz 1994). For example, in previous pilot interviews (Skyrme 2009a, 2009b) it was clear that my interviewees were keen to present a positive image of their institution’s commitment to fair access and admissions36 and this will need to be considered in any interpretation of data if revealed by probing or cross-referencing to other sources of information, e.g. in policy documents.

5.7 DATA TRIANGULATION

As well as helping to address the complementary aims and purposes of my different research questions, an important factor in deciding to employ a multiple-methods approach was to reduce what Robson (1993) calls the “inappropriate certainty” (p. 290) of any given method. This will be particularly important in Phase Two, where the in-depth examination of documents will be undertaken alongside an opportunity to discuss the context and content of these with admissions policy leaders in an interview situation. Writers such as Denzin (1988) have termed this ‘triangulation’, where a ‘fix’ can be brought about between competing explanations due to the use of more than one: i) method ii) source (e.g. an interviewee) iii) investigator or iv) theory. This study benefits from the first two means of triangulation being built into the design –

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35 This said, issues of validity will still need to be carefully handled. For example, practical textbook guides point to my need to, inter alia: avoid revealing one’s own judgements; be thoroughly prepared and knowledgeable; create the ‘right’ atmosphere; carefully steer and prompt where appropriate; pick up on non-verbal as well as verbal cues; and tape interviews to enable ‘true’ and full records to be recorded (Cohen et al. 2007; Robson 2002).

36 Prichard (2000) and Greenbank (2007) were aware of similar processes in their own research, where well rehearsed ‘strategic narratives’ could be found in their interview data. These examples get to the essence of what we call the ‘double-hermeneutic’ (Giddens 1976): I will be trying to interpret interview data, which is already an interpretation of the world. And in the course of this, my interpretation may differ from the interviewee herself, since I will inevitably be trying to give meaning and context to the data I have.
triangulating methods and sources. But, like other researchers, I will be careful to assess the implications on validity and reliability that will be brought about through my own role as a single investigator, who has undertaken research within a particular theoretical, ontological and epistemological framework that employs specific research instruments (which are themselves open to questions of validity, reliability and representativeness).

5.8 ETHICS AND ACCESS

This research proposal was subject to a range of internal checking procedures within The University of Manchester. These took the form of submitting a summary and justification of my research proposal and copies of Letters of Invitation, (Appendix 3), Consent Forms (Appendix 2), Participant Information Sheets (Appendix 1) and Interview Schedules (Appendix 4). These helped outline how I would handle issues such as confidentiality, potential sensitivities, conflicts of interest and data collection and protection. To progress through this process I used BERA (2004) guidelines, particularly regarding informed consent and the right to withdraw.

One of the important issues to arise from this process was the plan, developed from insights in previous pilot work (Skyrme 2009a, 2009b), to protect the anonymity of the three HEIs and six individuals in Design Phase Two. If this study was confined to a simple content analysis of publicly available admissions policies in Design Phase One, no particular ethical issues would have arisen in terms of naming these HEIs in my proposed ideal type schema. However, because Design Phase One was merely a precursor to more in-depth qualitative work, it would have been possible for researchers to more easily ‘narrow-down’ and potentially identify which institutions and individuals were the subject of the three sites explored in more depth in Design Phase Two. So a decision was made to use general rather than specific information (Cohen et al. 2007) throughout the entire research process. This included the avoidance of providing long verbatim extracts of written policy documentation in the qualitative discourse analysis, since these could be subject to look-up from most internet search engines. Whilst this might jeopardise the ability of other researchers to make comparisons or validity checks with this study (Robinson and Norris 2001; Greenbank 2006b), respecting such pledges of anonymity
were important not only for ethical purposes, but also for reasons of access and validity. All methodological guidebooks contend that granting anonymity can help facilitate access in sensitive or controversial research areas like this one, and it is doubtful whether any of my research participants would have agreed to be interviewed without such assurances over their identity. Similarly, the richness, honesty and openness of the research subject is seen to be enhanced through a granting of anonymity, thereby improving the validity of what data is captured.

Further ethical complications were brought about due to my position as a practitioner-research (Robson 2002, p. 535). In almost every piece of methodological textbook guidance on interviews, there is the assumption that the relationships between the interviewer and respondent are anonymous to each other, that they do not belong to the same groups and will not meet again. In my own case these features did not apply and this had the potential to raise a range of ethical questions that needed to be managed carefully.

5.9 VALUES, REFLEXIVITY AND POSITION IN THE FIELD

Writers such as Hammersley (2000) argue there should be a clear demarcation between the researcher and his/her own values as a member of society. Whilst this issue has been covered extensively elsewhere it should be noted that the approach in this study draws heavily on a policy scholarship that foregrounds an ethical commitment to advance justice. Adopting what Gewirtz and Cribb call “ethical reflexivity” (2006, p.142) I have been influenced by their view that researchers cannot, indeed should not, separate knowledge production from the more difficult and messy issues of “what should or can be done” (2006, p. 147) to improve society for the better. This expanded, multi-dimensional notion of social justice, therefore disputes the distinction made between knowledge production and knowledge use (Gewirtz and Cribb 2006). My research questions are born almost entirely from practical/professional and

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37 Whilst I was not interviewing institutional peers, I was interviewing a range ‘similar’ individuals to myself, in similar roles and in similar institutions, to consider them my ‘peers’. I was also reasonably well known in national circles within my professional field, and was interviewing at least some people with whom I had, and would continue to have, an ongoing professional relationship. In Interviewing One’s Peers, Platt (1981) addresses these issues and suggests that whilst the sort of ‘shared community’ she experienced when interviewing her own academic peers was “enormously helpful in some ways”, there were a range of additional ethical issues pertinent in carrying out this type of research.

38 See for example Hammersley (2000) and Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) for their development and critique of Hammersley’s ideas.
political/ethical considerations. Whilst these different terms are disputed, I could variously be described as an educational ‘leader’ or ‘manager’. Gunter (2005, p. 174) argues that the common underpinning assumption of these different models is that they each assume an individual has responsibility for overseeing activity and action within an educational institution underpinned by values and goals. I am located professionally in the ‘field’ of HE and have responsibility for leading an area of work in one of the UK’s leading HE institutions. In this role, and within the boundaries of various structural constraints and opportunities, my work makes important differences to patterns of access to the ‘positional goods’ (Halsey 1992, p. 103) of highly sought after qualifications.

My research questions have also been informed, in large part, by day-to-day practical and professional experience in attempting to address patterns of inequitable access to HE – both to my own HE institution and more broadly within the UK through my involvement in a range of national and regional projects and initiatives. Through this research, I am therefore being ‘ethically reflexive’ in stating that current patterns of access to elite higher education reflect a range of structural, discursive and institutional injustices. Addressing this through policy and practice is an important dimension to my professional identity. Addressing this through research is an important part of my identity as a Doctoral researcher. In Gunter’s (2005) fourfold typology of ‘knowledge and knowing’ my research might be seen as being orientated by two key dimensions: firstly through a desire to understand meanings – where I am interested in bringing greater conceptual clarity to the notion of social justice and ‘fairness’ in admissions; secondly I am also inspired by what she calls working for change – research which makes an explicit commitment to understand how power is exercised and asks “how might structural barriers to improvement be overcome” (p. 172). Hence a policy scholarship approach has been employed because of its potential to help reveal and unlock what I see as problems and opportunities in the current policy formulations to enhance ‘fair admissions’ through the use of contextual data. As outlined in Chapter One I am hopeful this research can, in some modest way, offer some new insights and tentative suggestions regarding how HEI policies can help address and disturb
the inequitable patterns of access to leading HEIs for learners from socially and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds\(^{39}\).

A number of epistemological and ethical issues relating to knowledge use and knowledge production arise due to my particular position in the field as \textit{practitioner-researcher} (Robson 2002, p. 534). Whilst I deliberately avoided researching my own institutional practice, there was still a degree of correspondence between other HEIs and issues in my own professional field that might lead to what Robson (2002, p. 535) calls “insider problems”, where my positioning may lead to various preconceptions about issues and/or solutions. Winter (1989) contends that: “experienced practitioners approach their work with a vast and complex array of concepts, theoretical models, provisional explanations, typical scenarios, anticipation of likely outcomes, etc. . . . A ‘research’ process must demonstrably offer something over and above this pre-existing level of understanding” (p. 34).

5.10 SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

This chapter has set out the rationale for employing a flexible, mixed-methods research design involving documentary analysis and in-depth interviews. Whilst the validity, reliability, representativeness and data analysis issues of each research instrument have been assessed, I have noted that the rationale for choosing these methods have been informed largely by the particular normative, epistemological and ontological features of the policy scholarship approach, which foregrounds attention to the way in which policies must be examined as both texts and discourses. Issues regarding my own position in the field have also been assessed and will be revisited in the conclusion. This methodology section has therefore helped set up the next three chapters (Chapter Six, Chapter Seven, Chapter Eight) of data analysis. Chapter Six will begin by addressing the first research question of this study, namely how contextual admissions policies across each English Russell Group institution can be categorised.

\(^{39}\) See Gewirtz and Cribb (2002, 2006) for an approach to knowledge production and knowledge use advocated in this study.
6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents data for two key purposes. Firstly, using documentary content analysis data from 20 English Russell Group HEIs, it outlines the approaches selective HEIs take towards contextual admissions policies and asks how might these be ‘categorised’ in terms of social justice? Drawing on the notion of “policies as texts” (Ball 1993) and factors pertinent to the concept of social justice, this presents an overall empirical landscape of ‘what is happening’ across the ‘fair admissions’ practices of some of England’s most prestigious HEIs.

Following on from this ‘what’ question, the second part of this chapter develops three portraits of selective HEIs using interview data with ‘policy leaders’ and qualitative analysis of their policy documents. This will ‘set up’ the more in-depth analysis in Chapters Seven and Eight, which aims to explore questions of how their contextual admissions policies can be understood in relation to social justice, and which factors enable and constrain its pursuit.

6.2 LANDSCAPE

The account of the landscape of contextual admissions will examine the approaches selective HEIs take towards these policies and propose a form of ‘categorisation’ based on some rudimentary social justice categories. These are largely exploratory and descriptive in nature. To achieve this, two sources of documentation were used:

- The Access Agreement each HEI in the Russell Group submitted to the Office for Fair Access in 2012 as a condition of charging more than £6,000 per annum for any undergraduate course (OFFA 2011).

- The Admissions Policy each HEI was required to produce and reference as part of its Widening Participation Strategic Assessment with the HEFCE (HEFCE 2009).
Previous journalistic insights and ‘policy science’ approaches (SPA 2011, 2012) found that HEIs in the Russell Group of universities were more likely to be using contextual data. The analysis I present differs in that it is undertaken within a policy scholarship tradition. I will not therefore attempt to understand “where [contextual data] is being used effectively and to identify transferability of practice” (SPA 2012, p. i). Rather, this approach seeks to be an analysis of policy, that seeks to understand “what the analytical assumptions are” (Rivzi and Lingard 2010, p. 45) of policies on contextual data. Secondly, I am employing the specific theoretical lens of social justice to understand policies on contextual data by drawing on some basic distinctions between different modes of justice outlined in Chapter Three. The employment of social justice and policy scholarship concepts will allow some basic classifications, comparisons and contrasts, to emerge prior to the more in-depth analysis undertaken in Chapters Seven and Eight. Whilst these analytical categories were determined largely in advance of the analysis from conceptual constructs within the social justice and policy scholarship literatures, in practice they were fine-tuned in parts during the empirical analysis.

As is common in many forms of content analysis, a matrix was developed to reflect important theoretical distinctions. Many forms of matrix are possible and because I will only be ‘displaying’ a small proportion of the data it is crucial to make my “decision rules” explicit (Robson 1993, p. 392). Examples from the matrix are given in Appendix 5 and a blank version is included in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5**: Content analysis matrix to analyse contextual admissions policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Are they using socially contextual data?</th>
<th>B. Is social/family disadvantage used as a factor?</th>
<th>C. Is educational disadvantage used as a factor</th>
<th>D. Do they discount standard entry grades on the basis of contextual data?</th>
<th>E. Descriptive Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual – Social Axis</td>
<td>E. Descriptive Notes</td>
<td>C. Is educational disadvantage used as a factor</td>
<td>D. Do they discount standard entry grades on the basis of contextual data?</td>
<td>E. Descriptive Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following dimensions were therefore explored through the matrix.

i. **Whether or not applicants were conceived in a social context**
   Where additional contextual admissions data was used to provide a broader framework within which to view applicants, I classified the policy as employing a social dimension - viewing applicants in a social context. Where no additional contextual admissions information was used the policy was classified as employing an individualistic dimension. This is an important distinction derived from different conceptualisations of individuals, merit and sensitivities towards offer-making odds in admissions. Chapter Three outlined how those within the libertarian-meritocratic tradition tended to view educational merit in terms of “individual talent and effort, rather than ascriptive traits” (Alon and Tienda 2007, p. 489). Socially critical writers, in contrast, see individuals and their ‘merits’ as being socially constructed, where the outcomes are deeply influenced by material, cultural and discursive inequalities. In these latter notions, it can be argued there is more congruence with alternative approaches emphasising *fair equality of opportunity* (FEO), equality of outcome, equity and other forms of justice beyond its distributive forms.

ii. **Whether merit [as narrowly defined by past examination grades] was defined in absolute or relative terms**
   Another important distinction is the nature of ‘merit’. In particular I was interested to uncover and classify policies according to those HEIs that defined merit in *absolute* terms (as measured by a specific and rigid threshold of examination score that all applicants have to obtain) and those who appeared to define it in more *relative* terms (which allows the adjustment upwards and downwards of the level of performance needed depending on social and/or educational background of applicants.) These different practices raise important questions for how justice is conceived in admissions. In Rawlsian terms, the first model is closer to the individualistic libertarian model of distributive justice, where HEIs
should simply allot places to applicants who most ‘merit’ a place on the basis of their ‘superior’ abilities and efforts measured by the highest scores in tests, interviews and other methods. By understanding merit in more relativistic terms, this certainly comes closer to the Rawlsian FEO model of justice, which highlights that “the race is hardly fair . . . since the runners start from different starting points” (Sandel 2009, p. 153).” These relativistic notions of merit also open up a potentially new discursive space for thinking about other dimensions to justice that go beyond merit and speak to other purposes of universities when admitting students, such as enhancing diversity or minimising divergences across social groups.

iii. **The types of social model used**

In those HEIs using a social model of admissions and employing the additional use of contextual data, I was also interested to see what types of information were being used. Whilst a wide variety was in evidence, I decided to group these according to whether they were ‘educational’ and/or ‘social’ models. This builds on insights made during the analysis of the documentation and previously by SPA (SPA 2012) that some information was looking at ‘school/college’ information and others at family or neighbourhood background. The former I classified as ‘educational context’ data and the latter as ‘social context’ data, although in practice these advantages and disadvantages of course overlap.

iv. **The types of absolute/relative consideration being employed**

Where a social model of admissions was being employed and certain applicants from less advantaged backgrounds were being flagged in the admissions process, they were invariably accorded different treatment. I classified this ‘different treatment’ in more detailed ways, which emerged naturally from the data. These included: whether the applicant was given a ‘second look’/’additional consideration’; whether they receive an automatic standard offer; additional ‘points’; invited to interview; or if they received a lower than standard offer (SPA 2014).
6.2.1 Results

In the analysis of the 20 Russell Group HEIs it is possible, first of all, to see in Figure 6 that a slight majority of them are conceiving admissions in a social rather than individualistic way, by employing the use of contextual data. This was an unsurprising finding given the evidence gathered by SPA (SPA 2011, 2012) and journalistic insights using Freedom of Information requests (for example, Kenber and Moore 2008). Given that the majority were employing the use of contextual data, attention can turn to what type of socially contextual data these HEIs were using.

![Figure 6: Individual and social models of admissions](image)

Figure 6 shows that, of the 12 HEIs using contextual data, all of them were using educational contextual data and seven were using family/neighbourhood data. This is an interesting finding since it suggests that, of those employing a social model, clear primacy was being given to the use of educational context. Furthermore, of those seven using family or neighbourhood data, not a single one was choosing to use this alone. They were each combining this with the use of educational data. The rationale for the preference of educational over family/neighbourhood data within the social model of admissions is important and was will be probed into further when assessing different conceptualisations of social justice in Chapters Seven and Eight through the interview data.
The other dimension examined through this content analysis was to assess whether the understanding of ‘merit’, as measured by exam scores, was defined in absolute or relative terms. Figure 8 shows that the clear majority were requiring an absolute level of academic threshold to be achieved, with a smaller proportion adjusting this in combination with their employment of socially contextual data.
This is interesting since a large minority of HEIs – 6 institutions – were therefore employing an alternative notion of ‘merit’ that seems to take into account different opportunities applicants may have had to achieve and demonstrate very high examination scores. Whilst these do not ‘throw the meritocratic baby out of the bath water’, these more relativistic notions of merit can be seen as closer to the Rawlsian notion of FEO or attempts to “minimise divergence across social groups” (Ainscow et al. 2006) outlined in Chapter Three. Qualitative data from policy leaders in Chapter Seven and Eight provide opportunities to explore what this might mean for different conceptualisations of social justice.

6.2.2 Ideal type models

Wellington (2000) describes how documentary analysis “opens up an area of inquiry and sensitises researchers to the key issues in that field” (p. 113). From this initial analysis of documents, it is clear that the positions taken up by HEIs have led neatly to the development of some interesting ‘ideal-type’ models for classifying the admissions systems of the 20 HEIs in relation to some basic social justice descriptions.

Ideal types are useful tools for making comparisons or organising phenomena into broad groups and help to systemize certain empirical features. Once classified into some basic groups, the constituent elements of a particular ideal type can be observed and analysed in more depth, which is a key feature of Chapters Seven and Eight, where I delve more deeply into how different factors impinge on the pursuit of social justice in the admissions process. Critically, ideal types gain their validity not so much through their exact representation of ‘reality’ to particular cases, but more in terms of their descriptive adequacy.

In developing these ideal types I was able to accentuate the differences between HEI fair admissions policies along two axes in Figure 9:

i) the individual-social axis (X axis)

ii) the absolute-relative axis (Y axis)
Importantly, whilst being generated by the interpretation of empirical data, positions A-D are not fixed, or indeed even mutually exclusive (for example, Position D is one any HEI can take at times). As Mitchell (1979) argues “a typology is no more than a classification. A classification may be ad hoc... where the categories are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive” (cited in Gunter and Ribbins 2003, p. 258). They should be seen, rather, as tendencies where positions can shift over time. They can enable useful comparisons between institutions – as this study sets out – but might be equally useful in understanding differences within a particular HEI, where different departments or faculties take different approaches to admissions. Resulting from the data, my typologies can be described as follows:

- **Position A:** This represented the conventional or traditional model of admissions among the selective HEIs across my sample, with eight out of 20

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40 The focus of this study is on the corporate, institutional approaches to ‘fair admissions’ policies. This is not to ignore the importance of the ‘policy trajectory’ process within HEIs, particularly with respect to ways in which institutional and local faculty/department admissions processes might differ. However, such issues have been covered elsewhere (e.g. Greenbank 2006d) and fall outside the scope of the defined questions in this research.
HEIs taking this position. Where HEIs were not currently occupying this position, it was clear from their policy documents this was *where they began from*. These selection methods of HEIs in Position A took no account of an individual’s wider social context. Applicants were treated as individuals, without any systematic reference to their social or educational background. There was an absolute level of academic criteria that needed to be demonstrated for purposes of selection. Where applicants did not meet these, they were not considered for entry. This corresponded most closely to the libertarian-meritocratic models of justice outlined in Chapter Three.

- **Position B**: This represented an interesting development to this traditional model and is an important element within the more recent discourse of ‘fair admissions’. Six HEIs out of the 20 sampled occupied this position. The key difference between Position A and B is that the latter take account of social context. The type of contextual data used varied, consisting of a myriad of different educational and social indicators such as school average GCSE or A level performance, different geo-demographic/neighbourhood characteristics and family/socio-economic characteristics. Like those in Position A, there was still an absolute/standard level of academic criteria that had to be demonstrated by all applicants, regardless of their background. This corresponded most closely to the FEO or Equity models of social justice outlined in Chapter Three.

- **Position C**: This represented the most radical departure from the conventional position in Position A. Another six HEIs out of the 20 sampled occupied this position. Like with Position B, conventional information on the individual was supplemented with a range of different socially-contextual data to help inform the selection process. However, the key departure for those HEIs in Position C was that the social understanding about the context of achievement was used to also employ a more relativist interpretation of the academic threshold required for entry. For Position C HEIs, it was common for designated students from less advantaged backgrounds to be offered places and admitted with entry criteria that were lower than the ‘standard’ required for the more advantaged pool of applicants. For example, such applicants might be offered places with grades ABB at A level if the ‘standard’ grades were AAA. This corresponded closely to both the FEO and
Equity models of social justice in Position B, but could also invoke other considerations about the nature, mission and purpose of universities, and therefore go beyond conventional notions of meritocracy. This is discussed further in Chapters Seven and Eight.

**Position D:** Whereas positions A, B and C were deliberately mutually exclusive for purposes of this analysis, Position D is a specific approach that all HEIs could find themselves in at particular periods. It is not, therefore, mutually exclusive to the other three positions. The majority of HEIs that were analysed made reference to occupying this position in relatively rare positions for a very small part of their applicant pool who may be offered a place with lower than the advertised threshold due to extenuating *individual* factors such as an illness, bereavement or unusual qualifications such as work experience or international equivalences. In these cases, adjustments could be made to standard academic criteria, but this would be on the basis of individual rather than social circumstances. This was not a position that I actively explored through the research questions in this thesis because it did not raise profound issues of social justice.

The development of this typology was ‘tested’ in pilot form as part of a wider seminar with admissions policy leaders and presented at two national researcher-practitioner conferences (Skyrme 2009c, 2010). Whilst it is always possible that a researcher’s own interpretation could (and sometimes should) differ from those of the research participants, this brief piloting of the typology was endorsed by key policy actors and conference participants in its ability to summarise, compare and contrast the essential ‘positions’ taken up by different leading HEIs. This gave me early access to the sort of “member check” advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), where researchers feed back to study participants regarding the emerging data and interpretations and obtain participants’ reactions. After considering some of the practical and epistemological dilemmas of constructing typologies and ideal types, I was drawn to work by Gunter and Ribbins (2003) who suggested the need to “strike a balance between the need to respect the complexity and dynamism of the field while at the same time creating a framework that is useful without being too elaborate. . . . typologies have a heuristic purpose and as such their categories
are meant to illuminate rather than stifle . . . to open up rather than create barriers . . . to aid thought rather than replace it” (p. 260).

This first part of the chapter has outlined evidence in support of this study’s first research question: namely, ‘what approaches do leading HEIs take towards contextual admissions policies and how can we categorise them?’ In order to address the second question about how social justice could be understood in relation to contextual admissions policies, a policy-scholarship approach, using in-depth qualitative analysis with policy leaders in three purposively-selected case sites, was undertaken. This second section of this chapter now ‘sets up’ three brief descriptive portraits across each site to pave the way for this more in-depth analysis.

6.3 PORTRAITS

Three universities were chosen for more in-depth policy-scholarship analysis due to the putative differences in how they conceptualised justice in admissions on the basis of their fit into the ideal type schema developed in the first half of this chapter (see Figure 9). As presented in Table 4, one site from each of the three pertinent positions in the ideal-type schema were selected for in-depth qualitative analysis using interviews and qualitative analysis of key policy documents. The institutions (Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock) and senior policy actors (Dave, Olwen, Rod, Nina, Alan and Mel) were each given pseudonyms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEI Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position A (8 HEIs in total)</th>
<th>Position B (6 HEIs in total)</th>
<th>Position C (6 HEIs in total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Models of social justice invoked through the admissions policy</td>
<td>Libertarian-meritocratic</td>
<td>FEO and/or Equity</td>
<td>FEO and/or Equity and/or Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Senior Policy Actor (Pro-Vice-Chancellor or equivalent)</td>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>Rod</td>
<td>Alan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial Senior Policy Actor Leader (Director of Admissions or equivalent)</td>
<td>Olwen</td>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Mel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A model for developing these portraits in these three sites has been utilised from the policy-scholarship schemas of Ball (1993) and Rizvi and Lingard.
(2010) outlined in Table 3 in Chapter Five. These suggest a range of theoretically-informed research questions within the tradition of policy-
scholarship that can be applied when analysing the trajectories of (educational)
policy. Four broad questions were therefore set out and are used to inform the
structure of each portrait in the next section:

1. How was the access problem conceived?
2. Who were the individuals or groups being conceived and identified in the
   admissions process?
3. What ‘happened’ to particular individuals/groups identified in the admissions
   process?
4. What was the policy trying to ‘change’?

6.3.1 Bryn University

Bryn University is a large ‘redbrick’ institution with a strong national profile
across a wide range of its research areas. Of the 20 English Russell Group
HEIs studied as part of this research, it performed above average for the intake
of students from the three access groups measured by HESA: state schools
and colleges; lower socio-economic groups; and low participation
neighbourhoods (HESA 2012) and was higher than that of Tavistock and Ivy.

Four principal sources of evidence were gathered as part of the research
into Bryn University: their published Access Agreement with OFFA; their
published Admissions Policies; an in-depth interview with their Head of
Admissions (Olwen); and an in-depth interview with their Pro Vice Chancellor
for Teaching and Learning (Dave).

i. How was the ‘access problem’ conceived? (or in other words: who was
   at fault? And what could be done?)

In its Access Agreement, Bryn University states that it was “proud” of its “strong
record” on admitting a higher volume and proportion of applicants from less
advantaged than many of its peer institutions. Despite this relatively good
record, there was very little conceptualisation of why less advantaged groups
progressed, or not, into their university. This had to be inferred. In its Access
Agreement Bryn placed some emphasis on “outreach work” to “improve awareness” and “raise aspirations” among local children. They were also delivering and expanding a special outreach and admissions programme for local sixth form students that offered an alternative progression route into the University for applicants from less advantaged backgrounds, who “demonstrated their commitment” by attending and completing activities.

Whilst there was recognition in Bryn University’s Access Agreement that it planned to develop its admissions policies in the future to “incorporate a range of contextual data” to “identify and flag” applicants from less advantaged backgrounds, there had clearly been no progress in this area at the time of the research. As Olwen, their Director of Admissions stated:

Our admissions criteria tend to be applied quite strictly and potentially that does disadvantage people from less advantaged backgrounds because there is no flexibility on the grades . . . Our current admissions policy doesn’t refer to underrepresented groups apart from our Access scheme (Olwen, Bryn University).

By focusing most of their efforts on outreach initiatives on “raising aspirations” and “raising awareness” of higher education, it was clear that Bryn University located the most significant part of the ‘problem’ of unequal access in terms of a lack of aspiration among less advantaged students. As Olwen stated: “For some students, it is a great cultural thing not to appear clever”. Correspondingly, their Access Agreement placed a great deal of emphasis on working with primary and secondary schools to “raise ambition” and improve “information, advice and guidance”.

Like with Tavistock and Ivy, the conceptualisation of the ‘problem’ of access might be seen to reinforce a functionalist model of cultural deprivation (Douglas 1964). A deficit model of access (Burke 2006) was foregrounded, where less advantaged groups themselves were being held to account for what Olwen described as deficit “attitudes”, “aspirations” and “achievement levels”. In contrast, there were few references to wider structural inequalities that might shape educational opportunities and progression.
ii. Who were the individuals or groups being conceived and identified in the admissions process?

Beyond legal compliance issues such as disability and nationality, Bryn University operated no formal system in their mainstream admissions process for identifying students from less advantaged social backgrounds. Their Admissions Policy simply stated that “every student” should “comply” with the entry requirements of the programme of study and that they would operate in a “fair”, “transparent” and “consistent” way in accordance with “the law of the United Kingdom”. The policy’s emphasis on “consistency” was described by Olwen as a “one-size fits all” approach that “doesn’t currently flag up students from disadvantaged backgrounds . . . although we have committed to look into this in the future”. This emphasis on treating all students as individuals, without reference to their broader social or educational context, left Bryn’s policy corresponding more closely to the more individualistic and traditional libertarian-meritocratic version of distributive justice that was outlined in Chapter Three.

iii. What ‘happened’ to particular individuals/groups identified in the admissions process?

In being placed in the Position A part of my quadrant schema in Figure 9, it was clear that Bryn University perceived applicants only in individual terms and did not adjust any academic criteria or threshold for particular social groups. Bryn had no system for identifying less advantaged students. As Olwen noted, there was “no flexibility on grades” by virtue of social background, since they did not collect information on student background in the first place.

iv. What was the admissions policy trying to ‘change’?

By examining Bryn’s admissions policy closely, it was clearly not setting out to ‘change’ outcomes following their receipt of applications. They only set out to influence, in fairly minor ways, who applied in the first place, through their emphasis on local outreach work and the number of people progressing through a comparatively much smaller special admissions scheme. This was reflected in their targets with the Office for Fair Access, where they had not set themselves any measures to increase intake to their own institution for applicants from less
advantaged backgrounds. Once applicants applied, their policy committed them to “identical treatment”. The policy emphasised “compliance” with “the law”, including “specific compliance” with “legislation relating to discrimination” and the University’s own “Charter, Statutes, Ordinances and Regulations”. It was clear that Bryn University was making an important conceptual distinction in where their responsibility for enhancing social justice begun and ended through this policy, although it was emphasised to me several times that they were considering “looking into how we might change this” (Olwen).

6.3.2 Ivy University

Ivy is a research-intensive institution with a national and international profile for much of its research. It had the highest rate of applications per place across the three sites. Of the 20 in the sample, Ivy performed significantly below the average for the intake of students from the three access groups measured by HESA: state schools and colleges; lower socio-economic groups; and low participation neighbourhoods (HESA 2012). Consequently, it was, by some distance, the lowest performer of the three sites examined for the admission intake of students from these less advantaged backgrounds.

Four principal sources of evidence were gathered as part of the research into Ivy University: their published Access Agreement with OFFA; their published Admissions Policies; an in-depth interview with their Director of Admissions (Nina); and an in-depth interview with their Pro Vice Chancellor equivalent for Teaching and Learning (Rod).

i. How was the ‘access problem’ conceived? (or in other words: who was at fault? And what could be done?)

In the Access Agreement, Ivy set out their specific challenge in terms of fair access: that of being a “highly selective” institution where there was a “high ratio” of “very highly qualified applicants per place” alongside there being “significant disparities in attainment” across different school types. This helped them to place their own institutional challenges within a broader social and educational context.
After setting out their own statistical performance, they outlined initiatives to address both widening participation and fair access challenges. They described their commitment to undertaking various outreach initiatives across their region which, like Bryn, aimed to “raise aspirations” through “summer schools”, “workshops” and “taster sessions”. These could also be seen as additional examples of a deficit approach to widening participation, where ‘blame’ might be seen as being placed on applicants themselves for failing to have the characteristics and cultural advantages enjoyed by more middle-class applicants (Burke 2006; Burke and McManus 2011). Ivy also placed a significant emphasis on generous financial support packages and compact arrangements for a partner college, which provided alternative progression routes into the University. Yet, Ivy University’s Access Agreement, and overall strategy, was distinct in comparison to Bryn University. This was because of their significant emphasis on their own responsibilities to ensure that once they received applications from different parts of society, they would proactively aim to spot or ‘flag’ less advantaged ones and find ways to conceive of them in more flexible ways through the use of contextual admissions data.

Both their Access Agreement and Admissions Policy made important and very deliberate conceptual differences between ‘merit’ and ‘potential’. They were also careful to stress how they devoted “significant resource” to providing their admissions selectors with “sharper tools” to identify such students. As their Pro-Vice-Chancellor Rod outlined:

merit is defined clearly – merit being about achievement to date. Whereas potential is about something in the future . . . very simply: merit is what you’ve got already and potential is the grades we think you might get. We don’t get many queries about this – I hope this means it’s because they understand it. We work hard with selectors on this so that they understand this difference internally – not just in theory but in practice – how this can affect their decisions (Rod, Ivy University).

This is significant since there was an explicit acknowledgement that not all problems of access could be laid on putative ‘deficiencies’ in applicants, families and other ‘outside-HE’ factors. There was a recognition by Ivy that they could either mitigate against, or exacerbate, existing inequalities of access through their own contextual admissions policy. This foregrounds the role of institutional agency and policy in addressing issues of participation in HE and provides an
interesting arena in subsequent chapters for examining how these questions relate to the different conceptions of social justice.

**ii. Who were the individuals or groups being conceived and identified in the admissions process?**

Ivy’s Access Agreement stated that it used a “variety of contextual information” to assist in the admissions process, although neither policy spelt out what these were. A separate section to their website contained this information. This stated that whilst their primary assessment method for assessing merit and potential was “prior academic achievement”, potential was defined in terms of “additional contextual information” that provided more information about the “educational journey” of applicants. In addition to standard information from the UCAS application, Ivy used three additional sources of information.

First, they used a commercial geo-demographic tool to assess if someone was applying “from a neighbourhood where progression to Higher Education is low” (Rod). As Rod stated to me: “we know we are not accessing our fair share of talent from lower socio-economic groups, so we are keen to use any mechanism that would allow us to better identify those candidates and their merit and potential.” This was also framed in their Admissions Policy document as something that could allow them access to students from lower “socio-economic groups”. They stated in their Access Agreement that this geo-demographic indicator was used as a “proxy measure for social class”. Secondly, Ivy used an indicator of “average school performance”. As Rod stated, this was because of “a recognition that different types of school can provide different sorts of . . . opportunities or advantages.” Thirdly, Ivy also considered whether or not an applicant had taken part in one of their organised outreach opportunities, such as a summer school.

Ivy were therefore employing a proactive set of policy instruments operating beyond the standard UCAS data. This had additional costs in time and money and recognised that they had certain responsibilities and opportunities to affect who was successful in being admitted following their application.
iii. *What ‘happened’ to particular individuals/groups identified in the admissions process?*

In being placed in the Position B part of the quadrant schema in Figure 9, Ivy were using a social model of admissions, but *not* adjusting their academic threshold for entry. Their Admissions Policy stated that their contextual information was used on a “case-by-case basis” to provide a “context” for helping to assess “merit and potential”. They stated additionally, on their webpages, that “no individual piece” of contextual information would be more important than any other and that they “do not make lower offers” on the basis of contextual information. In the interview with Rod he stressed this point on many occasions, since there had previously been accusations from the press that they were “lowering standards” or allowing people in “through the back-door”. He stated that:

> There is no change to our academic threshold. None at all. And this is a distinctive position I think, as we are one of the few institutions who have said that we will not lower grades as a way of widening access . . . We, by and large, have enough applicants, so the problem isn’t with a supply of applicants. The problem is making decisions that are reflective of diversity. So we’ve got enough people with 3 As. What we are not getting is actually decisions from admissions selectors that are even proportionate – let alone lead to a sort of balanced community across the University. But this is distinctive and what it does do is remove one of the key policy instruments that other universities have used to widen access. That means there is more reliance on the use of contextual information than other mechanisms to widen access (Rod, Ivy University).

We will see next that the additional “policy instrument” of adjusting grades on the basis of contextual information is exactly what Tavistock have employed. Whilst allowing no adjustment for grades seemed clear from both the policy and interview with Rod, it was interesting that their Director of Admissions, Nina, described in slightly more depth what could happen as a consequence of being flagged in their admissions process:

> Only some fall into these categories, so that they warrant a ‘second look’. Once we give them that second look they are treated differently and that is consistent with our policy. e.g. school performance – we say to selectors you need to be aware of this – if they are from a low performing school (Nina, Ivy University).
Ivy therefore maintained a consistent and distinctive approach of employing a sophisticated social model of admissions that articulated clearly the difference between achievement and potential, combined with a view that all applicants had to meet the same high academic threshold.

**iv. What is the policy trying to ‘change’?**

In attempting to address the different starting points of candidates on account of their social and educational backgrounds, Ivy certainly invoked characteristics of the FEO model of social justice. Furthermore, by attempting to *increase* the odds of applicants from less advantaged backgrounds being offered a place of study there are also elements of an equity approach to justice. Nina described as a “tie-break scenario” where, “on like-for-like grades, we would always look to take the less advantaged applicant.” There are clear implications for how this relates to the sorts of empirical test of there being equal odds of admissions offers for equally qualified candidates, set out by Boliver (2013). This also made ‘success’ (or otherwise) in Ivy’s policy easier for them to assess. They provided a useful outcome-focused and empirical measure of success that was more akin to what Ainscow *et al.* (2006) described as “minimising divergences across social groups” (p 3). As Rod explained, admissions offers for those from less advantaged backgrounds were currently “not even proportionate” and they were consequently trying to change this. This was corroborated further by their Access Agreement policy, which formally committed them to a range of targets “to increase the proportion” of offers and entrants from low participation neighbourhoods, lower socio-economic backgrounds and state schools. Chapters Seven and Eight will develop the implications of such policies for our understanding of social justice.

**6.3.3 Tavistock University**

Tavistock is a large ‘redbrick’ institution with an internationally-excellent profile for much of its research. Of the 20 HEIs in the sample, it performed around average for the intake of students from the three access groups measured by HESA: state schools and colleges; lower socio-economic groups; and low participation neighbourhoods (HESA 2012). So whilst it performed better than Ivy University on access measures, it was lower than at Bryn University.
Four sources of evidence were gathered as part of the research: their published Access Agreement with OFFA; their published Admissions Policies; an in-depth interview with their Head of Admissions (Mel); and an in-depth interview with their Senior Director for Teaching and Learning (Alan).

i. How was the ‘access problem’ conceived? (or in other words: who was at fault? And what could be done?)

In the Access Agreement, Tavistock examined the issue of access to HE across the whole of the ‘lifecycle’ – from young people in schools first considering HE, right through to the employability of their graduates. It was clear Tavistock located the most significant part of the ‘problem’ of unequal access in terms of the “aspirations and achievement” of “deprived young people”. Their strategy was to invest in a range of long-term outreach work, particularly in “the most disadvantaged parts of our region”. These included initiatives such as “awareness-raising visits”, “personal statement workshops”, “taster days”, “summer schools”, “masterclasses”, “revision sessions”, “mentoring” and other activities supporting “progression to selective universities”. Significantly, for those applying to Tavistock, their admissions policy stated that it took into account both “school performance” and “socio-economic information”. Their strategy also included “generous bursaries”.

As with Bryn and Ivy universities, such conceptualisations of the ‘problem’ of access might be seen to reinforce a model of cultural deprivation and there were few references to wider structural inequalities that might shape educational opportunities and progression. However, significantly not all problems of access were laid onto applicants themselves: the recognition by Tavistock that they could either mitigate against, or exacerbate, existing inequalities of access through their contextual admissions policy did foreground the role of institutional agency and policy in addressing issues of participation in HE. This is explored in subsequent chapters.
ii. Who were the individuals or groups being conceived and identified in the admissions process?

Tavistock’s Access Agreement stated applicants were considered on the basis of their “merits, abilities and potential”. The reference to “potential” as separate from “merits” and “abilities” was highly significant and opens up the possibility of a different conceptualisation of justice that will be explored in Chapters Seven and Eight. They recognised that past performance might “neither be the fairest or most accurate guide to future potential” (Mel) at University when social background was taken into account. This contention is supported by a range of empirical studies (Hoare and Johnson 2011; Zimdars 2007; HEFCE 2003, 2005, 2014).

A range of social groups were highlighted in Tavistock’s admissions policy. These made reference to using “exam grades” in prioritising applicants, but also, as Mel described, “other things count as well”. The policy made reference to a range of groups, such as “low income”, “deprived”, those from “less advantaged families” in terms of “income, education and experience” and being from a school where high academic achievement “is not the norm”. All of these characteristics could be identified in the standard UCAS reference or personal statement of applicants. Significantly however, proactive policy instruments operating beyond the standard UCAS form were being utilised, where two pieces of information were employed to contextualise and ‘flag’ an applicant further: firstly, whether or not an applicant lived in an (dis)advantaged area using a geo-demographic tool; and secondly, the nature of the educational performance of the school; specifically, how far above or below average levels of performance were being achieved in that applicant’s school or college as some sort of proxy of an advantaged or disadvantaged educational context. In the interview with Mel, he acknowledged that it was family and home background that was really the key aspect they were trying to identify:

“we look at average performance [of the school] if they are performing below the national average. We look at postcode – actually this is the main thing – because people can be disadvantaged and go to a private school on a bursary. We are more interested in the home. Also some schools have pupils there from totally different backgrounds” (Mel, Tavistock University).
It was also apparent that sensitivity towards a wide range of both material and cultural factors that impact on educational preparedness and achievement were being referenced in the policies and interviews with Mel and Alan. These will be explored in Chapters Seven and Eight. It was acknowledged, however, that the tools used to sensitise admissions staff towards material or cultural (dis)advantages were inevitably quite blunt and a lot of judgment was required: “School type, school performance and postcode – you have to remember these are very rough indicators – you have to treat them with caution” (Alan, Tavistock University).

**iii. What ‘happens’ to particular individuals/groups identified in the admissions process?**

In being placed in the Position C part of the quadrant schema in Figure 9, Tavistock were using a social model of admissions and also adjusting their academic threshold for entry for applicants identified as being from less advantaged neighbourhoods or school contexts. Interestingly, information about this was not provided on the main webpages, but found in a separate policy document linked to these pages. This policy stated that if applicants were deemed to have experienced circumstances that may have adversely affected their achievement, they would “consider them” when assessing academic potential. The policy then described how this would work: by making less advantaged applicants automatic standard offers; by making less advantaged applicants offers that were “one grade less” than “the standard offer”; and recognising personal and/or educational circumstances as a “positive factor” when assessing overall potential. Such a conceptualisation of justice, based on different educational opportunities and being concerned with future potential rather than past achievement, therefore opens up a range of important areas of analysis that will be analysed more fully in Chapters Seven and Eight.

**iv. What was the policy trying to ‘change’?**

Like with Ivy, their policy was trying to address the different ‘starting points’ of candidates on account of their social and educational backgrounds. This again invokes characteristics of the FEO model of social justice. Also, by setting out to increase the odds of applicants from less advantaged backgrounds being
offered a place of study there are again elements of an equity approach to justice. The Access Agreement stated how they would “track” less advantaged applicants against their more advantaged peers by examining rates of “applications, offers, accepts”. This had the potential to provide a strong, outcomes-focused evaluation tool that could assess if divergences between social groups in offer-making patterns were being minimised, equalised or enhanced. It will also be apparent in Chapters Seven and Eight that Tavistock drew on other justifications for their admissions policy that related to what they saw as their wider mission or purpose as a university. These go beyond both the FEO and Equity models of justice.

What was less apparent from the policy documents or interview data was the evidence base for their policy of adjusting offers for some social groups. Reference was made many times to the assumed greater potential of applicant who had “achieved highly in more challenging circumstances” (Alan). But there was no reference to data that corroborated this in either the documents or interviews. These were important areas of omission.

6.4 SUMMARY

The first part of this chapter provided a basic analysis of the ‘policy content’ (Olssen et al. 2004, p. 72) of 20 Russell Group HEIs. This helped to reveal some basic descriptive categorisations of how different HEIs are enacting such policies. The important differences in approaches draw, implicitly or explicitly, on different conceptions of social justice. They are also likely to enable different types of outcomes – something that will be reflected on in the next two chapters. The mapping landscape developed in the first part of the chapter set up the selection of three distinct ideal-type ‘positions’: Positions A, B and C. Brief portraits of these three purposively selected HEIs – Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock, respectively – were then described. These now pave the way for a more in-depth exploration in Chapters Seven and Eight regarding how the policies across these sites raise important issues of social justice.
CHAPTER 7
DIMENSIONS OF JUSTICE

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Six outlined some basic descriptive information about what approaches were being implemented by 20 different selective HEIs towards contextual admissions policies by classifying them according to a basic ideal-type model. Using qualitative interview and documentary data, the positions of Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock universities will now be developed further to show how these contextual admissions policies can be explained in richer ways with respect to the concept of social justice. This is necessary because the documentary analysis and interview data across the three sites revealed that not a single reference to the concept of social justice could be found in their employment of contextual data policies. In comparison to the “conceptually-thin” (Ball 1994a) references to ‘fairness’ in much HE and government policy, this thesis employs a ‘thicker’ notion of social justice to analyse the way in which senior actors are interpreting and enacting different definitions of social justice in their contextual admissions policies.

Three key points will be developed. First, insights from Gewirtz and Cribb (Gewirtz 2000, 2002, 2006; Gewirtz and Cribb 1998, 2002; Cribb and Gewirtz 2003, 2005) will be used to outline how different philosophical conceptualisations of justice can be applied across the three sites to reveal ways in which justice in admissions can be seen as multi-dimensional, with distributional, cultural and associational forms. Secondly, a model will be developed to suggest which elements of these conceptualisations appear to enable or constrain the pursuit of just outcomes, by which I will define as those practices that enable equally qualified candidates to achieve at least equal offers of admission (Boliver 2013). Thirdly, the chapter will conclude with some thoughts on the limitations to the extent in which social justice issues can be resolved philosophically. Drawing on Gewirtz (2006) a different conceptualisation of justice, that attends to its real contexts of enactment and interpretation, will then be introduced in Chapter Eight.
7.2 DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Across each of the three sites, there was no way of escaping the concept that applicants – be they from advantaged or less advantaged backgrounds – somehow ‘merited’ or ‘deserved’ their place in a selective HEI due to their greater “talents and abilities” (Tavistock University Admissions Policy). Applying the concept of distributive justice was therefore ripe in understanding how selective HEIs across the three sites managed the distribution of (dis)advantages in competitive admissions scenarios, particularly where applicants from different backgrounds were seen as having different ‘starting points’. Chapter Three outlined four different modes of distributive justice: i) the libertarian meritocratic model; ii) fair equality of opportunity (FEO); iii) the equitable outcome model; and iv) the mission or purpose model. It was possible to see clear variations and tensions across Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock universities in their adoption of these different modes of distributive justice.

7.2.1 Libertarian-meritocratic justice

The libertarian-meritocratic method of distributive justice, outlined by Sandel (2009) and Young (1958), and summarised in Chapter Three, was typical of Bryn University’s approach. Bryn’s admissions policy emphasised how it had established formal equality with their emphasis on “fairness”, “transparency” and “consistency” of treatment that “did not discriminate” against applicants from different social groups. This equal treatment extended to the types of grades they sought from students: “We treat everyone equally at the moment in terms of the grades we ask for” (Olwen, Bryn University). The notion that rewards of places at Bryn were distributed justly according to high individual examination scores was also evident from both of my interviewees: “Our definition of merit is largely made on the grades . . . . on high academic performance to date” (Olwen, Bryn University); “merit has to focus on high GCSE and A level attainment” (Dave, Bryn University).

As Chapter Six demonstrated, this version of distributive justice, based on an individualistic meritocratic model of ability alone, still dominates the way in which many selective HEIs approach admissions. Interestingly, Bryn emphasised the need to admit students with superior individual ‘abilities’, but not a single reference was made to effort. This suggests, like Rawls (1971), that
few meritocratic systems of justice have opted to distribute resources on the basis of efforts alone.

The libertarian meritocratic method is not, however, without its problems. Whilst Bryn recognised that it “treated everyone equally” they also outlined how this “may well change in the future” (Olwen, Bryn University). As was summed up to me:

To date we have not looked at [social and educational] context and this means that we could, by my own definition, be charged with being unfair as we aren’t taking into account people’s different backgrounds and journeys. We are about getting the best students – and if we don’t look at background we may miss out on these best (Dave, Bryn University).

This insight by Dave raises two interesting points. First, he recognises that formal equality of opportunity, in the form of the ‘equal treatment’ to hit a particular ability threshold, may not be the fairest method of distributive justice if it is devoid of any social context about people’s different “backgrounds and journeys”. Secondly, even if the function of admissions is simply to spot “the best” who merit a place, this very aim could be compromised by ignoring social context and seeing applicants only as individuals with particular abilities. For Bryn, this meant they had recently begun to review their policies: “we have not used contextual data in the past, but we plan to change this in the future. We took some proposals to our Senate on this and they were broadly supportive” (Dave, Bryn University). I shall now move to Ivy and Tavistock universities who had gone beyond this individualistic libertarian model of admissions to embrace the notions of what we might call “fair equality of opportunity” and equity.

7.2.2 Fair equality of opportunity (FEO) and Equity models of justice

Rawls (1971) set out how distributive advantages arising from the libertarian model of justice are improperly influenced by factors that are arbitrary from a moral point of view. In the case of admissions to selective HEIs, this might mean the type of family or educational environment one was born into. Both Ivy and Tavistock universities, in their different ways, recognised this key weakness of the libertarian-meritocratic version of justice employed by Bryn and other HEIs, who could be seen to occupy Position A in my ideal-type schema in
It is possible to see many features of the ‘fair equality of opportunity’ model of justice outlined by Sandel (2009) in both of their approaches to admissions. The FEO approach to distributive justice was articulated well to me in one interview:

It is patently obvious that there are winners and losers in society and this plays out not just in who can apply in the first place to leading universities, but also in terms of what happens once a given set of applicants apply. We can’t control the former, but we can the latter. There are a range of advantages people have which result from family and school background . . . After studying at Ivy our students go on to have some of the most privileged economic life chances and opportunities . . . We were concerned we were offering these opportunities to a very narrow social base, unless we tried to conceptualise admissions differently (Nina, Ivy University).

There was therefore clear evidence of trying to adjust for the different starting points of applicants to ensure “the winners of the race deserve their rewards” (Rawls p. 154). Nina expanded:

It was obvious to us all that if we didn’t do something altogether more proactive we’d struggle to draw on talent from a wider section of society. We might even be seen as a ‘finishing school’ for the privileged – a stepping stone to enhancing the opportunities of the more advantaged. In our own small way, we wanted our policies at Ivy to be seen to contribute to an equalising of opportunities; to a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities in society. By factoring in family and school background we are really trying to equalise the opportunities of less advantaged people more (Nina, Ivy University).

This “factoring in” was through their system of “flagging” less advantaged students for additional consideration due to their perceived greater potential. Their admissions policy stated clearly that they wished to “understand” the “educational journey” applicants had taken “since the age of 11” as a way of assessing for “merit and potential”. Rod offered this rationale: “We are trying to change . . . an assumption, or implied behaviour from admissions selectors, that all that matters is grades . . . Grades need to be taken into account in a context to help us understand both merit and potential.”

In a similar vein, Tavistock’s written admissions policy stated that they “recognise some educational and personal circumstances affect achievement” and that this could include factors such as being from a “less advantaged area”, “less advantaged family environment” or being from areas where “high
academic achievement is not the norm”. These factors would be “considered” when “assessing academic potential”.

Both Ivy and Tavistock display powerfully the role of agency by HEIs in exacerbating or mitigating previous advantages and opportunities of some applicants through their admissions policies. Leaving aside how successful these policies are in practice, this is quite a different approach to admissions than found at Bryn University, and opens up a new discursive space regarding the role of HEIs in addressing wider social and educational disadvantages as a legitimate aim within their admissions policies.

Whilst these policy statements sounded straightforward in theory, enacting social justice in practice in admissions is inevitably more “jumbled . . . messy [and] contested” (Ball et al. 2012, p. 2). This is why Gewirtz’s (2006) insight, that social justice can only fully be understood in context, is taken up more fully in Chapter Eight. For example, it was evident across all three HEIs that structural factors performed an “elimination function” (Bourdieu 1988) before applicants got as far as the admissions stage, and that a range of disadvantages outside HE limited what could be achieved:

I would say we are trying to equalise opportunity - we are committed to the idea that the University should be open to all students who have the ability to benefit from the type of education we offer and that family background, school type, ability to afford the education shouldn’t be barriers to that . . . But I’m not sure how useful the metaphor of ‘levelling the playing field’ is though actually . . I suppose because the playing field is never going to be level . . . All we can do is iron out some of the bumps but it is never going to be a level playing field (Rod, Ivy University).

This illustrates how the meso level polices of HEIs are constrained by wider structural factors about the nature of social justice in wider society. It highlights Gewirtz’s (2006) notion that the pursuit of justice is always mediated by other concerns. The need to conceptualise the key structural and discursive factors that constrain the pursuit of justice through contextual admissions policies will be a key feature of Chapter Eight.

Moving beyond notions of FEO, I also found evidence of justice being pursued according to notions of equity – both in terms of treating people as individuals and in attempts to minimise divergences across social groups and achieve more equal outcomes rather than opportunities. It was clear from the
policies of Tavistock and Ivy that there was a clear rejection of the ‘equal
treatment’ model of justice employed by Bryn University:

Treating equally doesn’t mean treating people the same . . . you have to
treat people differently and that is open to interpretation – you have to
take their context of achievements into consideration. We want evidence
that people have taken advantage of the opportunities they have been
given and these opportunities will differ. But with the same opportunities
we would expect to treat people the same (Mel, Tavistock University).

The ‘different treatment’ of less advantaged groups was encoded into the
admissions policies of Ivy and Tavistock in slightly different ways, with Tavistock
operating the more radical interpretation. Ivy were treating one element of their
applicant pool quite differently by “flagging” or “identifying” them in their
admissions process on the basis of their educational and social background.
Whilst this could not be found in their written policy, Nina explained that this
flagged up “around twelve per cent” of their intake. This was encoded in Ivy’s
policy always in terms of “merit and potential”, where those students who had
been flagged in their admissions system were described in terms of their
apparently higher potential. As Rod explained: “merit is what you’ve got already
and potential is the grades we think you might get”. As a result of this flagging,
Ivy were clear in their admissions policy that this did not countenance any
“making of lower offers” on the basis of this contextual information”:

We don’t modify requirements because we choose, instead, for the
context to affect whether they get an offer or not . . . on an individual
basis, as opposed to ‘if you fall into this category’ – it suggests students
have not reached their potential currently and won’t by end of Y13 . . .
Some fall into these categories so that they warrant a second look. Once
we give them that second look they are treated differently and that is
consistent with our policy. e.g. school performance – we say to selectors
you need to be aware of this – if they are from a low performing school –
there is the argument that there has been a more challenging educational
context (Nina, Ivy University).

So it was clear that students flagged for a “second look” were being treated
differently as an aspect of Ivy’s conception of distributive justice: it was to
explicitly increase the likelihood of them being made an offer. This was because
they recognised that “what we are not getting is actual decisions from
admissions selectors that are even proportionate” (Rod). This seems to
corroborate with Boliver’s (2013) insight that less advantaged students were
less likely to receive offers than more advantaged students, even when prior achievement was controlled for. Whilst responsibility for this “second look” was being enacted at the local level where “individual academic admissions selectors are responsible for the judgment of selection” (Rod, Ivy University), it was acknowledged that “in practice . . . [we are] exercising ‘pressure’ on selectors to make offers” (Nina, Ivy University). It is therefore clear that such conceptions are more expansive than merely equalising opportunities and come close to a model of equitable *outcomes*.

Despite their clear emphasis on identifying particular social and educational groups in their admissions processes, Ivy’s written policies emphasised throughout that they assessed all applicants only “as individuals”. My own interpretation contests this discourse: their conceptualisation of distributive justice, that offered different treatment to some applicants, was clearly being made on the basis of membership of *social groups* (e.g. members of advantaged or disadvantaged geographical areas or school performance types). I would argue this conceptualisation by Ivy in their policy was influenced by a wider neo-liberal discourse, expounded within the popular media and independent school sector, that gives primacy and legitimacy to individual over group identities. Chapter Eight develops these ideas further.

I put it to Ivy that some HEIs had taken the approach of adjusting their academic requirements for less advantaged students and they responded thus:

> Everyone needs to get here on merit and they all have to jump through the same hoops and not different hoops with different heights and we see that as an important part of the admissions process and intellectual cohesion of the University. There’s also not enough evidence in our view that would justify lowering grades by, say, one or two grades to make it an absolutely safe policy option – so this is a pragmatic side to this – and the first argument is a more principled one (Rod, Ivy University).

Whilst this seemed, on the face of it, a clear and robust rationale for why Ivy hadn’t sought to adjust their standard academic offers, I was curious as to why they had not undertaken any of their own analysis into whether there was a case for adjusting the entry requirements of some groups. They wanted, on one hand, to foreground the greater “potential” that some of their less advantaged students seemingly displayed as a justification for flagging and offering them a “second look”. Yet they had no firm statistical evidence as to whether such
students might have more, the same or less potential than similar students from advantaged backgrounds. As we have covered elsewhere, research at Bristol (Hoare and Johnson 2011), Oxford (Zimdars 2007) and across England (HEFCE 2003, 2005, 2014; Boliver 2013) has certainly shown that some groups of less advantaged students were able to demonstrate the same potential as their more advantaged counterparts, even when they were admitted with slightly lower grades.

Employing similar socially-contextual flags in their admissions process to accord certain advantages, Tavistock University departed from Ivy’s fixed notion of prior achievement to be more flexible:

The hindrances people may have faced – this means their innate ability may not have been reflected in their grades. The philosophical underpinning is that people with equal potential may not have this evidenced in their grades . . . There are questions to be asked about this but to put it bluntly – someone from a deprived background attending a school where the ability of the school is compromised but gets a grade C we broadly feel their potential is manifestly similar to someone from a public school with a grade B. Also when you are making an offer – you can look at these things in determining who to make an offer to (Alan, Tavistock University).

Tavistock was therefore operating a more radical notion of distributive justice based on differential treatment, where there was an understanding that the prior attainment requirements could be adjusted to select some groups for entry with lower grades. A similar process was identified at the University of Oxford by Zimdars (2010). The written policy of Tavistock stated that this could involve making less advantaged applicants “automatic standard offers”, making them offers that were “one grade less” than “the standard offer” and recognising personal and/or educational circumstances as a “positive factor” when assessing overall potential.

I asked Alan at Tavistock whether they had considered the evidence base for making lower offers to some of their applicant pool: “There are statistics . . . yes . . . our evidence is that nationally state school kids do better. I don’t think we have evidence [at Tavistock] . . . but we do not think it would be different here.” So whilst it was again curious that a policy was being implemented without, what might be seen, sufficient institutional evidence, there was an acknowledgement by Tavistock that there was evidence at a national
level which provided some justification for admitting some parts of their applicant pool with lower grades.

Like with Ivy University there was a concern to emphasise that they were treating applicants individually: “we treat everyone on an individual basis” (Admissions Policy, Tavistock). Again, this is clearly a matter of interpretation and my own reading is that they are very much treating people as members of particular social groups (e.g. members of advantaged or disadvantaged schools or advantaged and disadvantaged postcode areas).

Both Ivy and Tavistock were attempting to select applicants with the highest propensity for future achievement in terms of degree performance (e.g. as the highest achieving 21/22/23 year old graduates). This very much suggested that the meritocratic system was not being fully rejected; it was simply the method of getting the ‘best students’ that had been adjusted. There was a rather happy marrying of all three modes of justice: to identify ‘the best’ individual students (a libertarian-meritocratic aim); to minimise barriers on account of background (a FEO aim) and in some cases to create admissions-offer outcomes that were at least equal for less advantaged students as their more advantaged counterparts (an equity aim). Yet these different modes of distributive certainly conflict with each other (Gewirtz 2006). For example, there is evidence from HEFCE (2014) that equally qualified students from more advantaged postcode areas enjoy better degree outcomes than those from disadvantaged postcode areas. Tavistock flagged up applications from disadvantaged postcodes and this could therefore mean they were admitting students who would perform worse in terms of the libertarian-meritocratic model of justice. There is also evidence from HEFCE (2014) that if HEIs were only pursuing the meritocratic aim of identifying the most talented 21 year old graduates, this could lead HEIs down some interesting avenues. For example, female and white students perform more strongly than male and Asian students on a like-for-like basis (HEFCE 2014). Should the ‘greater potential’ of such students also be recognised by prioritising their entry, perhaps with lower grades? There is not a single university I am aware of that countenances such factoring into their policies, which suggests that the policies of universities like Ivy and Tavistock cannot be reduced simply to a meritocratic aim of achieving
the best outcome grades. Mel at Tavistock offered an interesting additional rationale to me when he said:

We wanted to change the way we view admissions, so that we can understand the full applicant journey . . . and identify those who have overcome the most significant barriers. This is not, therefore, only looking at future potential (although there is some good evidence they will do better) but also affirming and rewarding the exceptional performance to date of some applicants, given the sorts of disadvantages they have successfully overcome. This is what achievement, relative to context, really means (Mel, Tavistock University).

Hence the use of contextual data and differential treatment in admissions, as a way of achieving greater distributive justice, was also being conceived in terms of a positive affirmation of the “journey” an applicant had taken relative to their background. Again, this did not throw the ‘meritocratic baby out of the bathwater’, since applicants would generally need to achieve high grades. However, it did de-individualise what high academic attainment might mean, and gave positive affirmation to overcoming social and educational barriers as relevant factors in admissions. This goes beyond notions of greater future potential or merit to invoke wider institutional values, mission and sense of purpose.

There were also interesting views about the nature of equality of outcome, which Gewirtz calls a ‘stronger’ version of equality (1998 p. 472). As Tavistock explained:

Our admissions policy is about providing equality of opportunity . . . [but] we’ve not gone down the line of engineering a particular quota. We have tried to avoid this and have not attempted to enforce a particular quota of who should apply and be offered a place. We need to look at people as individuals. So you can’t really talk about equality of outcomes . . . In terms of some of our outcomes, though, we have been increasing our entrants from particular backgrounds compared to a decade ago . . . I would agree that one of the measures of success of our work is that we have increased our entrants from less advantaged backgrounds faster than other Russell Group University . . . All of our efforts are only worth it if they achieve better outcomes (Mel, Tavistock University).

A clear tension and contradiction can be evidenced in Mel’s statement. Tavistock were keen to stress they were not trying to “engineer” a particular outcome. Yet Mel rationally judged that a key measure of their success was that
they would increase their intake from less advantaged groups – an outcome measure. Similarly at Ivy, Nina explained: “our policies will ultimately be judged in terms of whether or not they improve the statistical outcomes we agreed in our Access Agreement”. Following application – which is where this study begins its exploration of issues of social justice – she revealed they had set themselves some interesting outcomes measures, which were not apparent from their written policies or targets:

We are now saying that if 60 per cent of applicants are from state sector then we want to see 60 per cent of your entrants from there too (Nina, Ivy University).

Both Tavistock and Ivy had developed clear statistical indicators in their written Access Agreement policies to increase the proportion of state school, lower socio-economic status and low participation neighbourhood groups, incrementally each year. They had also explained to me that behind these targets were monitoring processes looking at the ratios of admissions offers by different social and educational backgrounds. In contrast, and reflecting their lack of the use of contextual data, Bryn had not considered any outcome measure. I questioned what success would look like for Bryn’s admissions processes:

The status quo would be minimum success actually . . . In terms of quotas we don’t look at this at entry. It’s monitoring afterwards rather than identifying who should come here at the point of admissions. We don’t have a target, but maybe we should . . . It’s not being lazy or complacent – we just don’t know what the impact would be (Dave, Bryn University).

Given Boliver’s (2013) insights that state school students were less likely to be offered places than more advantaged independent school students on a like-for-like basis, the metrics employed by Ivy and Tavistock might be seen as interesting measures to overcome or reverse this trend.

As with the preference for a discourse of ‘individuals’ rather than ‘social groups’, there seemed to be more comfort on the part of all my interviewees in adopting a neo-liberal discourses of equal opportunities rather than more equal outcomes, even where their written Access Agreement policies had committed them, in practice, to providing more equal outcomes in terms of their targets.
Equity in outcomes was associated with notions of ‘quotas’ and ‘social engineering’, discourses that had clear pejorative connotations. This also provides evidence for Gewirtz’s (2006) notion that what counts as justice can only be understood in real contexts of enactment, rather than in abstraction from context and setting. By triangulating written policies with spoken explanations, there were clear discordances and a general reluctance to express their admissions pursuits in terms of flagging up members of social groups and trying to achieve more equitable outcomes.

7.2.3 Mission and purpose

The final analytical lens to distributive justice that can be applied across the three sites returns me to Rawls. His notion of academic ability as a product of “social fortune” (Rawls 1971, p. 12) led him to reject the idea of distributing justice on the basis of merit. In Chapter Three I outlined ways in which writers such as Bowen and Bok (1998) had developed Rawls’s ideas to emphasise that in any given society, what a university might itself value could also be considered as historically and morally arbitrary. Accordingly, what ‘counts’ as merit can only be determined once a university defines its mission (Sandel 2009; Fullinwider and Lichtenberg 2004). It was possible to view the approach of Tavistock university, in particular, as reflecting such a different ‘purpose’ or ‘mission’ that went beyond notion of distributive justice altogether. These issues are covered under the next section on cultural justice since, until now, justice has been viewed in an important, but limited, fashion. The pursuit of social justice through admissions must also attend to its other dimensions, namely its cultural and associational forms.

7.3 CULTURAL JUSTICE

Gewirtz and Cribb (Gewirtz 2000, 2002, 2006; Gewirtz and Cribb 1998, 2002; Cribb and Gewirtz 2003, 2005) contend that most conceptualisations of social justice have concentrated on its distributive dimensions at the expense of viewing it as a plural and multi-dimensional concept, with cultural and associational elements. In the interviews and documentary analysis used in this study, I therefore explicitly sought to explore these issues, starting with an exploration of whether or not contextual admissions policies appeared to be
“recognizing and respecting different people’s cultures, ways of life and values” (Cribb and Gewirtz 2005, p. 334). In analysing the different data captured and coded under the area of cultural justice, it was apparent that these issues were being played out across four interrelated areas of cultural justice that occurred through the contextual admissions policies: the personal statement, which accompanied the application form; interviews; ‘labelling’; and with regard to the missions and purpose of HE and how this might incorporate cultural issues.

7.3.1 Personal statements

Strong evidence was found that contextual data policies were being used to ‘sensitise’ some of the HEIs to issues of cultural advantage and difference through personal statements. The use of personal statements as non-academic indicators has been widely advocated as part of a more “holistic” method of selection (DfES 2004b; SPA 2011). However, as noted by Jones (2013) such methods tended to disadvantage students from state schools, compared to those in independent schools, due to measured differences detected in “fluency of expression, quantity and quality of workplace experience, and extracurricular activity” (p. 397) even when prior attainment was held constant. Invoking the work of Bourdieu (2000), he found that a broader range of social and cultural capital was drawn on by independently educated applicants. Critically, this correlated with higher rates of success in the admissions process.

Bryn University had no system of identifying or flagging up disadvantaged students in their standard admissions process. This meant that, although they placed a lot of weight on the personal statement when selecting students, there was no way of admissions selectors taking into account different cultural advantages. Olwen acknowledged that “our admissions policy doesn’t currently touch on cultural factors”, but it was clear they were able to recognise, at least in theory, why they need to be sensitive to these issues:
[in the personal statement] we are looking for, for example, evidence of wider reading in English, or experience of business for business and management. We are not interviewing so we can’t test it though. When people haven’t had the opportunities, how do you balance that out? I’m not sure you can, but this is going on. In our admissions policy people do rely on personal statement and this is a problem . . . An independent head told me “we are paying X thousand per term . . . so of course we write their personal statements”. And we see others that are awful and cannot have even been proof read . . . I’d like to think Johnny’s trip to Gambia was not part of our decision making process compared to others who wouldn’t have this privilege, but it is difficult to tell and we have no way of monitoring this . . . But mostly we want people who are academically prepared to go beyond the confines of their subject . . . (Olwen, Bryn University).

This accords with the findings of Jones (2013), who uncovered stark differences in the level of work experience, foreign travel, positive cultural experiences and wider academic reading between state and independently schooled pupils. The concerning aspect for Bryn’s policy was that there was no way of formally factoring in the acknowledged cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) of some groups into their decision making. Non-academic phenomena like foreign travel, work experience or wider reading were perhaps being unwittingly factored in to the advantage of applicants from more middle-class cultures.

Because of their use of contextual data on the background of applicants, both Tavistock and Ivy, in contrast, seemed more attuned to trying to recognise and address the differences in cultural experiences of applicants.

Yes we are trying to address all of the privileges that people have, including culture. We are trying to mitigate the effects, although I don’t think we are explicit about this . . . Clearly any tendency to look for the kind of life experiences that are dependent on coming from certain backgrounds would lead to inequalities . . . The style and support of a personal statement is also important – if we paid lots of attention to these, that would worry me, but we don’t look into this as much (Alan, Tavistock University).

Hence for Tavistock, being aware of these cultural advantages and disadvantages in the personal statement meant that they did not place a great deal of weight on them when making decisions. A similar trend could be observed at Ivy University:
Issues of advantage and disadvantage are also played out in personal statements. I think all the evidence points to that. And that’s why we think it’s important that academics should assess personal statements in a loose way – for example we don’t privilege unpaid internships over, for example, some paid part-time work. Without having a complete caricature one might assume the middle-class applicant might have access to unpaid internships whereas those from working class backgrounds might need to do more part-time work to earn money . . . those sorts of things are very difficult to put into a system. Contextual data sensitises us to this – the point about contextual data is also about raising and opening a discursive space to talk about potential and bias and to talk about opportunity and how this may not be open to people in the same ways (Rod, Ivy University).

Opportunities are different so these will be reflected in personal statements – we have students who have lots of non-academic opportunities to hone their teamwork and leadership skills. Also the style in which they are written – there is a lot of coaching that goes on. This is not evenly spread – some have more coaching both at school and at home (Nina, Ivy University).

It was clear that the contextual admissions policies of Tavistock and Ivy universities had sensitised them to potentially profound issues of cultural justice in different parts of their applicant pool. This meant less reliance or trust was placed on personal statements as a valid indicator of academic potential. Admissions decision-makers were aware of the social and educational background of each applicant and both institutions made reference to how such cultural differences were acknowledged in their admissions training programmes.

7.3.2 Interviews

There was similar evidence that contextual data policies were also helpful in sensitising HEIs to issues of cultural justice in the interview process. Burke and McManus (2011) viewed the interview as a “technology of assessment” through which “the subject is individualized, categorized, classified” in “the re/construction of unequal classed, gendered and racialized positionings and subjectivities and the marking out of difference” (p. 705).

Bryn University did not employ the widespread use of interviews for selection purposes, but not for any reason of principle:
We do not interview apart from a few subjects due to time and resources . . . but interviews probably hinder the process — students can get different levels of prep for interview practice. Their schools will debrief them. Interviews will reward those who are confident and used to mixing with professional people . . . I know at X University you get mandatory training on things like inappropriate questions and things to adjust for (Olwen, Bryn University).

Bryn University’s approach was concerning in terms of cultural justice because interviewers would not have been given the statistical flagging or sensitising tools to make empirically informed inferences about the different levels of preparation enjoyed by some of their applicant pool. Tavistock expressed similar issues with interviews:

Interviews – yes that could be problematic too – we don’t interview an awful lot, but if we did that would concern me. People tend to pick people like themselves and some people have the sort of culture where they can appear more confident and polished (Alan, Tavistock University).

The most principled stand in terms of cultural justice was taken by Ivy University:

One of the things that we’ve done is that we’ve now removed interviews from any part of the admissions process except where there is an external obligation on us. We’ve done that because all the external evidence tells us they are unsafe . . . unsafe in that people are more inclined to select in their own image and that they aren’t effective in identifying merit and potential … Most of our staff are white – if not from UK then by and large they are from commonwealth or Anglo-Saxon in origin. That’s unhelpful in an interview process . . . The working class example is a sort of invisible issue that’s harder to unpack and I don’t know the socio-economic profile of our staff, but I do look at the ethnicity of our staff. But by inference, it would apply equally to working class applicants as well (Rod, Ivy University).

These insights about the potential cultural biases of interviews is corroborated in research by Zimdars (2010), who found that admissions selectors may be prone to subconsciously recruiting in their own image. Where HEIs used contextual data it was possible, in both theory and practice, for them to be more aware of potential cultural advantages enjoyed by some applicants such as confidence, preparation and knowing how to “play the game” (Bourdieu 2000). These led them to either eschew interviews altogether like in the case of Ivy, or at least moderate and temper their use as with Tavistock.
7.3.3 Labelling

Gewirtz (2006) notes that “in order for resources to be justly redistributed it is necessary for certain individuals and institutions to be identified — and therefore labelled — as in need of additional resourcing. But that process of identification and labelling may result in social marginalization and personal devaluation (p. 77). By statistically ‘flagging up’ students in the admissions processes, I was therefore interested to explore with both Ivy and Tavistock whether this could lead to such problems, where students may be marginalised or devalued within the institution. Alan acknowledged:

This could flag up the idea these students need more support. But the issue is problematic because there is little evidence these students need more support so yes, flagging them up can cause problems. We don’t target provision at certain groups – I think this would be negative (Alan, Tavistock University).

This provides a good example of Fraser’s (1997) redistribution-recognition dilemma and is a good example of what Gewirtz (2006) means by the conflictual nature of justice. Students identified under contextual data for the purpose of distributive justice could, as a consequence, be labelled and misrepresented as being those who are more likely to drop out or underachieve. Ironically, students at Bryn University, which was less committed to distributive justice in their non-use of contextual data, were less likely to suffer from such cultural misrecognitions and stereotypes since there was no system of statistical flagging in operation. It was also acknowledged at Tavistock, that:

There is a ‘working class is thick’ issue too – we can slip from contextual admissions into some giant leap about quality – this is dangerous. It should always be equality – not about letting the less able in. Equality of talent is important. The danger is we confuse background with talent (Alan, Tavistock University).

This again highlights an important point about the conflictual nature of justice and how statistical indicators used in contextual admissions can be used to culturally stereotype or categorise students in quite negative terms. Interestingly, at Ivy they did not perceive such a problem:
It's a gut feeling . . . and I don't have any evidence . . . but I don't think our students identified with contextual data would be seen differently . . . and that is because we are not lowering entry standards so they can look at anyone in the eye and say I got the same grades as you did. So there's no sense that somebody's got a better offer, a lower offer, a harder offer. That could potentially be the case if we did have different grades for some students . . . and this helps with the cohesion of students within the University when they arrive (Rod, Ivy University).

This difference is perhaps explained by the fact that Tavistock was adjusting grades for less advantaged students and Ivy wasn't. This could imply that as an institution pursued more radical and ambitious distributive aims that permitted entry with lower grades for less advantaged applicants, the more concerned one might need to be about cultural mis-recognition and the stereotyping of such groups.

Bryn University also raised an interesting issue that students who had entered their institution by a special local access route were being asked to become ‘ambassadors’ for promoting the entry of other less advantaged students:

I sometimes worry that, by asking our special entrant students to become mentors and work on alumni events etc., I wonder if they feel we are asking them too much and wish we wouldn't bother them to help us promote university access? I wouldn't wish to label people differently. I want to look at everyone and say you have all get here on merit. And that's where equality begins – once you've arrived you are treated equally (Dave, Bryn University).

This is also good evidence of the way in which “redistributive remedies involve processes of categorisation” (Gewirtz 2006, p. 77) and how such labelling of groups can undermine efforts to enhance cultural justice.

### 7.3.4 Mission and the intrinsic benefits of cultural diversity

The final aspect of cultural justice to be examined concerns the way in which the culture of different groups was being positively ‘affirmed’ in the admissions process for intrinsic reasons. At all three sites I found evidence that there might be sound epistemological reasons for leading universities to seek out cultural diversity in its intake of students.
At Ivy this was formally encoded in their written admissions policy where they stated they were “committed” to “increasing the diversity” of their student body. Ivy university also elaborated to me why cultural diversity was an important intrinsic aim of their university:

There is a very strong notion that such students [those from socially and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds] can contribute to diversity. This is an instrumental argument about the benefits of diversity to our students and academics (Rod, Ivy University).

Bryn and Tavistock both acknowledged similar advantages about cultural diversity, although interestingly limited this to the social sciences and humanities:

Our Access students do as well as others. Under-represented backgrounds can be positive – folks on social sciences say diversity helps groups discussions etc as you have more viewpoints . . . It has pedagogic benefit . . . This is less the case in sciences probably (Olwen, Bryn University).

I think there is a sincere view that diversity can enhance our knowledge in the academy, so such groups can be seen positively – but again this might be stretching it. And it would apply in only some subjects rather than all e.g. humanities (Alan, Tavistock University).

These insights were also noted in Brink’s (2008) assertion that “diversity has an inherent education” and that its pursuit can “increase the quality of our core business – which is to learn” (p. 7). Chapter Three highlighted how, in some US Ivy League institutions, “opportunities to learn from those with different points of view, backgrounds and experiences” (Bowen and Bok 1998, p. 280) were foregrounded as important aspects in who they regarded for admission41. It is interesting that such notions of cultural diversity could be seen as enabling the pursuit of distributive justice. However, the notion of ‘other as beneficial’, might, once again, reinforce cultural misrecognition by over-stating the ‘otherness’ of students who just happen to be from a marginally different socio-economic classification or postcode areas.

41 In a defence of its own policies, Harvard University has argued that “if scholarly excellence were the sole or even predominant criteria [it] would lose a great deal of its vitality and intellectual excellence. The quality of the educational experience offered to all students would suffer” (Sandel 2009, p. 172).
ASSOCIATIONAL JUSTICE

The third dimension of social justice for Gewirtz and Cribb is that of *associational justice*. This is because merely ‘recognising’ other groups in a model of cultural justice, without them being able to influence decisions that affect them, can be seen as unjust. Associational justice can therefore be defined as absence from “patterns of association amongst individuals and amongst groups which prevent some people from participating fully in decisions which affect the conditions within which they live and act” (Power and Gewirtz 2001, p. 41).

Like cultural justice this offers a new conceptual lens to be cast over some of the issues highlighted across this study’s three sites. Applied to admissions to HE, associational justice can be seen in terms of the subtle influence and power that advantaged parts of the schooling system and more middle-class parents exhibited over admissions choices and decisions and knowing ‘the rules of the game’ (Bourdieu 2000) in terms of maximising admissions opportunities.

In the case of parents, Dave pointed to the additional ‘know how’ particular parents could use to influence the decisions and outcomes of their children:

Parents . . . are being more proactive in looking at applicant chances of getting into particular universities and choices. Some hold insurance options that are higher because they feel that they might know that whereas you are asking for AAB you will actually get in with lower grades probably. So that kind of informal help, networks, information from other friends etc is going on (Dave, Bryn University).

Similarly, Ivy noted that:

They can help applicants better choose a pathway through GCSEs and A levels. It helps set them up for particular courses and allows them to better make choices that will not exclude them (Rod, Ivy University).

These advantages correspond closely to Reay et al. (2005), who applied Bourdieu’s work to the operation of decision-making in HE, where they noted “parents’ . . . ability to deploy knowledge, skills and competencies successfully is powerfully classed . . . salience of confidence, certainty and sense of entitlement . . . is generated through high levels of cultural capital” (p. 20).

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42 This mode of justice draws once again on the work of Young (1990) who sees “democracy . . . collective discussion and decision making” (p. 191) as key elements of social justice.
In the case of teachers, there was also evidence of ways in which those in more advantaged parts of the schooling system were able to use their greater resources to influence choices, decisions and outcomes. Tavistock pointed specifically to the influence of fee-paying independent schools during the annual round of examination results, where there was frequently a ‘last minute scramble’ for places in leading universities like her own:

We have countless representations from the more advantaged part of our schooling system on A level results day. Particularly those in the independent sector, they seem to get all their teachers into work that day and get on the phones and sort out places on behalf of their pupils. It’s quite understandable really – they are paid on results, their USP is that they get their pupils into universities like mine. I’d like to say this plays no part, but we’re keen to fill our programmes with the best students and time, information and sometime ‘nous’ can come into it in the mad rush for the few remaining places we have on result’s day (Mel, Tavistock University).

This influence of the school on admissions decisions and outcomes also extended to the type of information, support and guidance in advance of applications and results. Tavistock again offered examples:

They are also told that rather than stick to their first choice subject area that might be really hard to get into, they should opt for more unusual courses with less competition . . . and then once they’re in, to change programmes after a few weeks. These are all ways in which being from a school like this gives you a leg up (Mel, Tavistock).

Ivy similarly framed this in terms of the independent school’s greater resources and support. Schools were able to:

Help their students put their best foot forward through, for example, looking more closely at their personal statements, providing advice, from the more detailed information they might be able to provide on a reference. Their staff:student ratios are different so that they have perhaps more proximity to the student (Rod, Ivy University).

Each of my interviewees recognised these associational factors relating to schooling were inherently unjust. As Dave at Bryn University said: “Independent schools do yield a disproportionate influence given their size. Absolutely.” But despite the sensitivity towards these issues at all three universities, there was a sense of fatalism about what could be done. As Rod at Ivy University said, “I’m not sure how we can control for these factors in a really safe way”.

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It is clear from the evidence on parents and schools that the concept of associational justice shines an important light on another facet of justice in admissions: the greater ability to some social groups to influence (admissions) decisions that affect their lives. Pupils in less advantaged family and school contexts were noted to be more marginalised when it came to influencing decisions that affected them. Much of the material analysed under this section on associational justice therefore points to the need to take a much wider view of justice as being mediated by structural factors outside the academy – areas I will be exploring in more depth in Chapter Eight.

### 7.5 ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF JUSTICE

This chapter has focused on conceptual differences in the way social justice can be understood through the use of contextual data. Whilst this study is not an ‘implementation study’ that in any way attempts to ‘measure the ‘effectiveness’ of particular approaches to admissions, it does seek to suggest some enabling and constraining factors on the pursuit of justice. These will be synthesised more fully in Chapter Nine. As already outlined, an outcomes-focused empirical yardstick, which looks at the actual realisations of justice rather than considering justice in abstract terms, has been used. This borrows from Boliver's (2013) quantitative study on admissions applications, offers and entrants across Russell Group universities. Using evidence on the contextual admissions policies across Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock, this will be defined in terms of whether disadvantaged learners have at least the same likelihood of being made admissions offers when prior attainment is accounted for. The evidence built up in this chapter is now summarised in Table 5, which sets out the key features of more constraining and enabling versions of justice in contextual admissions as pursued through contextual admissions policies.
Table 5: Enabling and constraining conceptualisations of justice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model of justice</th>
<th>More constraining conceptualisation of justice</th>
<th>More enabling conceptualisations of justice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Libertarian-meritocratic</td>
<td>Fair Equality of Opportunity (FEO)</td>
<td>Equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions of justice</td>
<td>Distributional</td>
<td>Distributional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conception of individual</td>
<td>Atomised</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification criteria</td>
<td>Absolutist</td>
<td>Absolutist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merit</td>
<td>Past achievement and future potential</td>
<td>Past achievement and future potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Same treatment</td>
<td>Different treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Opportunities-focused</td>
<td>Opportunities-focused and Outcomes-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurements</td>
<td>Achievement personal characteristics</td>
<td>Achievement Potential Cultural differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>Grades</td>
<td>Grades; Personal Statements and Interviews avoided / used contextually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure of success</td>
<td>Offers in proportion to past achievement</td>
<td>Equal ratios of offers:applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At least equal ratio of offers:applications</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Whilst this schema has not been ‘tested’ empirically as part of this research study, it provides a useful heuristic device for thinking about philosophical conceptualisations of justice. The libertarian model corresponded most closely to Bryn, the FEO to Ivy, and the Equity model to Tavistock, although in practice there was a large degree of correspondence between these latter two approaches. From the evidence collected, a model can then be proposed to suggest which conceptualisation of justice seem to enable more or less just outcomes for disadvantaged applicants, defined by their prospect of achieving at least equal admissions offers to more advantaged applicants.

Table 5 therefore summarises, from the evidence in this chapter, that the libertarian-meritocratic version of justice offered the least enabling prospects of equal outcomes being achieved in admissions-offers for less advantaged applicants. This was because the disadvantages faced by applicants were rendered invisible to universities that did not employ contextual admissions. The notion of justice was also constrained by its undue focus on distributive dimensions. In theory the FEO and Equity models both appear to offer more
prospect for the same or higher odds of admissions-offers being achieved for less advantaged applicants. This is because universities taking these positions are able to factor in and adjust for wider dimensions of injustice - distributional, cultural and associational. Evidence in this chapter has demonstrated that being sensitised to issues of cultural (in)justice has a significant impact on the selection and employment of specific selection instruments such as personal statements and interviews. Left ‘unchecked’, these have the potential to reproduce existing inequalities and vice versa. Both the FEO and Equity models of justice were able to take a wider view of applicants’ suitability by not equating past achievement with future potential. The main differences between the models lay in qualification criteria. In this heuristic, ideal-type model of an Equity approach, it is permissible for some students from less advantaged background to progress with lower-level qualifications. As outlined in Table 5 above, such approaches to justice are more likely to create outcome conditions where less advantaged students, like-for-like, can enjoy a higher (rather than merely equal) ratios of admissions-offers for the less advantaged part of their applicant pool.

7.5 SUMMARY OF PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF JUSTICE

The evidence and analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that justice in admissions should be understood as a multi-dimensional concept with distributional, cultural and associational dimensions (Gewirtz 2006). Evidence was also presented for the notion that these elements of justice can conflict with one another. It concluded with suggestions about which philosophical conceptualisations of justice, either explicitly or implicitly being pursued across the three sites of this study, enabled or constrained the ability of admissions to achieve just outcomes. This was defined by their propensity to achieve actual empirical outcomes, where at least equal ratios of admissions offers are achieved for less advantaged applicants. This reinforces Gewirtz’s point that “it is not possible to resolve the question of what counts as justice at a purely abstract level” (Gewirtz 2006, p. 69). For Gewirtz, social justice practices must also be viewed as being mediated by other factors and are level- and context-dependent. To this more contextualised analysis of justice I will now turn.
8.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Seven demonstrated how the contextual admissions policies across the three sites in this research could be understood in relation to the multi-dimensional and conflicting nature of justice. There are two further facets that Gewirtz (2006) argues must be foregrounded in any analysis of justice: these concern what she calls its mediated and context/level dependencies. This chapter will firstly outline evidence for the way justice through contextual admissions is mediated by other factors. Secondly it will explore how the data in this research reveals aspects of the level- and context-dependent nature of justice being pursued through contextual admissions.

8.2 MEDIATED NATURE OF JUSTICE

For Gewirtz (2006) justice is “always in practice likely to be mediated by other kinds of concerns that motivate actors. There are two kinds of concerns I am thinking of in particular here — a) other norms that are not concerned with justice but which might in practice compete or conflict with justice concerns; and b) constraints over which agents have little or no control, for example, dominant discourses or power relations, or legal or economic constraints. Therefore we need to recognize the mediated nature of just practices” (p. 70). Whilst I will examine both of these points in turn, it is this second element, introducing macro level factors outside of the HEI, that represents the most important theoretical departure from the way in which the analysis of justice has been set out thus far.

8.2.1 Justice mediated by other norms

In the interviews across the three sites, it was clear that, in addition to concerns to enhance fairness and social justice in their admissions process, a range of norms and values other than justice had shaped how they were able to conceive of, and enact, their admissions processes. These could often conflict
directly with justice concerns. In my interview with Tavistock this was most apparent in relation to the pursuit of league table positions and international students:

We have world class research and teaching aims and where we are placed in league tables is important. To offer the best education we can to our UK undergraduates we need to recruit as many fee-paying international students as possible. Because international students look at UK league tables we need to ensure we are right up there for quality. This increases the unit of resource we can offer to give a high quality undergraduate education to all students. Where we lower entry standards for contextually-flagged widening participation entrants this reduces our tariff score on entry part of our league table. So there is a tension between these two aims (Mel, Tavistock University).

This was expanded on by Alan when he said:

League tables – yes, that is certainly a factor – we have to consider how this will impact on us and that is why some courses will have a preference for using WP factors to influence who we make an offer to, rather than what the offer is, and I can see an argument for that, yes. It is inevitable and if one factor was to predominate it is probably that league table position – that is key to our overall reputation and ability to attract good students from any background (Alan, Tavistock University).

These facets are revealing since they illustrate other norms that mediate and mitigate against the pursuit of justice. It was also revealing that, whilst Tavistock employed a flexible admissions policy that permitted the entry of some less advantaged students with lower entry grades, the decision about whether this would occur might, *in practice*, be taken with respect to their “overall reputation” rather than with respect to what was the most socially-just thing to do. By adjusting standards for some groups of students, this was seen to affect their ability to pursue other competing aims to attract good quality students. These other institutional norms must also be understood within the wider neo-liberal restructuring of higher education; norms which foreground greater competition and regulatory techniques imposed on universities (Olssen *et al.* 2004; Ball 2006; Rivzi and Lingard 2010).

At Bryn there were also additional tensions between justice concerns and the need to retain and support students following entry:
We can’t adjust grades... we have to admit students we are confident we know can cope with our courses. We have very good retention. We don’t want that to get worse. We don’t think it’s right to let someone else in and they fail (Olwen, Bryn University).

I asked Bryn University what evidence they had for the greater drop-out of less-advantaged students and interestingly they were unable to provide me with any. However, it does display how less advantaged students are being seen to ‘contaminate’ other important aims of universities and reflects earlier points made about cultural misrecognition and injustice.

Both of these competing norms identified in the interviews – the pursuit of high league table positions and good retention rates – therefore acted as constraining influences on these universities in their pursuit of social justice. Later in this chapter I explore other values (as opposed to norms) that might, in contrast, enable the pursuit of justice aims.

8.2.2 Justice mediated by macro level constraints

Until now, analysis of social justice has focused largely at the meso level. The adoption of a policy scholarship approach is characterised, however, by taking a multi-levelled approach – in particular linking the meso level policies of Bryn, Tavistock and Ivy universities to a broader macro level context. This brings us closer to Ozga’s (1990) call to uncover the influence of macro level factors through qualitative data analysis. Gewirtz (2006) recognises this when she argues that social justice must always be positioned in relation to a range of external constraints that inevitably limit what might, in practice, be achievable in terms of social justice. This is the second aspect to what she sees as the mediated nature of social justice.

I have also, until now, been emphasising the idea of policies as ‘texts’ (Ball 1993) by foregrounding the written and spoken elements of policy and how they are encoded and decoded. However, Ball (1993, 1994a) provides reminders that the ‘bigger picture’ of policies as discourses must not be lost. A fuller analysis of ‘policy as discourse’ was deemed beyond the scope of this research. However, Ball reminds one of the need to avoid reducing (HE admissions) policy only to the interpretations, utterances and actions of agents within a particular institutional setting. He locates texts between structures and
human agency by arguing that policy discourses “constrain but never determine all of the possibilities for action” (Ball 1993 p. 44).

Without wishing to position these within any sort of hierarchy, three macro external constraints, each worthy of studies in themselves, arose from interviews across the three sites. Whilst related, these could be grouped under the following headings: political-economic factors; socio-economic education factors; and media-discursive factors.

8.2.2.1. Political-economic factors

Across the critical political and social sciences, there is a consensus that western style democratic societies have witnessed a neo-liberal restructuring of political and economic life (Harvey 2005). Writers such as Barnett (1999), Trowler (2001) and Cribb and Gewirtz (2013) have developed these ideas in relation to the way in which higher education has become increasingly commodified, differentiated and subject to performance management, surveillance and competition. It is also apparent that students have been reconstructed as ‘consumers’, whose choices become financially more important to HEIs. Earlier in this chapter, the role of league tables and ‘competition’ for ‘the best’ students (who, ipso facto, tend to hail from disproportionately more privileged backgrounds) was evident across Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock universities. Further to this, a range of evidence regarding the increasing surveillance and influence of government policy over issues of access to HE was observed.

Part of this wider regulatory system includes the Office for Fair Access, which was examined in Chapter Two. As a public body, OFFA requires institutions to set out targets to increase the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It had also, more recently, positively endorsed the use of contextual data. The regulatory role of OFFA in relation to institutional autonomy came up across all three sites, but in different ways. The most negative portrayal of creeping regulatory influence was at Bryn:

OFFA are having a big impact on our autonomy. We had a discussion of targets [with OFFA] and had to agree to things we weren’t always happy about. I think the idea that HEIs are autonomous is rhetoric. There are increasingly areas where we are losing this control. The situation is getting worse (Dave, Bryn University).
No. We are not autonomous. It’s changed. The government has got more involved. We like to think we are more free than we really are. We had to get our OFFA agreement approved so there was a certain amount of control there, yes. . . . We are only partly autonomous . . . OFFA guidance has meant that we will now have to look at the whole contextual data thing – so yes, you can say the government are forcing our hand to some extent on this (Olwen, Bryn University).

So in Bryn’s case, OFFA’s endorsement of the use of contextual data compelled them into considering how they would identify disadvantaged students in the admissions process in the future. In contrast, both Tavistock and Ivy universities were already using contextual data before OFFA had endorsed this policy instrument in their more recent guidance (OFFA 2011). This led to some quite different insights about the relationship of government policy to HE admissions. For Tavistock:

We have definitely lost our autonomy. Without a doubt our autonomy has diminished since the Coalition government has been in power. And that’s in all areas not just this one. OFFA are just part of that broader reduction in autonomy that we have been a victim of. It would be a real concern if OFFA were really prescriptive. So the fact that the government is interested in this area is both helpful and a concern at the same time. If they wanted to micro-manage this they would be unlikely to get it right. If they did I would have no problems, but they rarely do! It would seem fairly fruitless and unhelpful. Academic freedom is the freedom for them to put into their research what they want – I’ve never thought it was freedom to act in ways that are contrary to the public interest. If universities are being effectively and properly constrained to work in the public interest that would be fine with me. The ability of this government to bring that about for universities is, however, another matter . . . Contextual data is now endorsed by the new government – I’m not sure if this has affected us because we were doing it anyway. Having the OFFA statement is useful – I suppose that gives a rubber stamp for what we are doing (Alan, Tavistock University).

So in the case of Tavistock, there was no objection to the principle of increasing government regulation of access outcomes, providing this was in the ‘public interest’. The fact that his own institution had already implemented contextual data policies, many years ahead of this central guidance, was not viewed as having a negative impact. Quite the contrary, government policy in this area was seen as a positive endorsement for what had been done at Tavistock, providing it did not lead to practical problems of being too prescriptive. This does not, however, resolve complex questions by what is meant by the public
interest, particularly where liberal, democratically-elected governments introduced policies that might lead to a retrenchment of justice concerns.

Ivy University made a similar point about the increasing regulatory role of government:

We were already wanting to diversify our intake. So the introduction of contextual data was off our own back. It helps the internal discussion though and it means we can say it’s not just Ivy who want to do this. There is external pressure to do this. That can help from my position – from my position it’s a lever. It backs up our own agenda (Nina, Ivy University).

However, her more senior academic leader Rod made what was the strongest defence of the autonomy of HEIs against regulatory influence when he said:

Government has shaped what we’ve done in the sense that the new fee regime has broadly required us to spend a particular amount . . . But what it hasn’t affected is how the spend has actually been allocated. That is very much a decision about what is right for Ivy . . . We are autonomous in our judgments of what constitutes merit and potential. Absolutely. The government are more involved now, yes, but it’s more at the aggregate level e.g. OFFA Access Agreements and spend and some sort of ‘climate of opinion’ activity that they are engaged in. It has led to a particular amount of money being spent from our new fee regime in this area. Beyond that, rightly, the government hasn’t affected what we do, and we wouldn’t allow them to, in the decisions we make . . . If the government got more involved we would have an issue with that because we are an autonomous institution and not an arm of government . . . If the government introduced primary legislation in this area – as a good democrat – we would recognise their right to do it, but it isn’t the prudent thing to do. And unless and until that happens, I believe the best way of managing this issue is through the individual institutions and the accountability they have through Senate/Council/their Trustees etc. and then also through OFFA. If the sector went backwards then yes, there is a risk that there could be more prescription or legislation and for those who want to go down a more legislative route that would provide ammunition for that, there’s no doubt (Rod, Ivy University).

These insights reveal two key points. Firstly, it says something about the nature of how policy in HE should be conceived. The evidence gathered here is consistent with Greenbank (2006b), who found that it was a mistake to see government policy as migrating in a linear top-down manner from government to HEIs. There is evidence that government policy had framed a great deal of what should and shouldn’t be pursued in the field of admissions, but there was a great deal of “speaking back” to agencies such as OFFA, as Ivy indicated.
Furthermore, much of the policy and good practice guidance formulated by government and its agencies at the highest levels on contextual admissions (such as DfES 2004b; OFFA 2011; SPA 2011, 2012) is often incomplete or builds on an *ad hoc* range of practices that have originated from within the academy itself (Ball *et al.* 2012; Ball 1994b). This can be seen in the case of Ivy and Tavistock, who were already committed to its use. Secondly, it was difficult to generalise from my interviews on the question of whether government-regulatory bodies hindered or helped the pursuit of social justice in their endorsement of contextual data. A range of government regulatory mechanisms and controls to increase competition, fees and the differentiation of institutions were certainly found to mediate against the pursuit of social justice. There is also strong, principled, opposition to ‘government interference’ in terms of the values placed on institutional autonomy. However, in specific cases like that of Bryn university, where there had been no plans for them to adopt the use of contextual data that would enhance just outcomes, it could be concluded that outside-regulatory pressure was responsible for pointing them in the direction of adopting practices that would seemingly enhance just outcomes for their applicants. The use of contextual data was an innovative practice developed from *within* the academy. And given that eight out of 20 HEIs were taking no account of the social background of applicants to improve their odds of being made admissions-offers, the question arises as to whether one should *in all cases* view regulatory mechanisms, or official ‘signals’ about best practice as *necessarily* being to the detriment of social justice outcomes. This suggests that Gewritz’s (2006) model of the mediated nature of social justice can be augmented, beyond consideration of constraining factors, to take account of instances where macro level forces might, in some cases, be seen to *enable* the pursuit of social justice.

8.2.2.2 Socio-economic education factors

The second mediating factor that transpired from the interview data was the influence of socio-economic privilege and self-interest in parts of the education system. There was a recognition across all three sites that the social justice pursuits within their HEIs were strongly mediated by socio-economic differences. These provided for sharply differentiated levels of educational
experience and influence upon admissions processes and outcomes. These were most manifest when examining the role of the fee-paying independent school sector, although similar forces were acknowledged to exist at the highest achieving end of the state system. The independent school system was found to hold a particularly sharp influence over the ‘policy discourse’ of fairness or admissions – where they were able to strongly frame and influence “what can and can’t be said” (Ball 1993) about admissions. Much of this power was seen to stem from their supply of some of the ‘best’ students to these institutions and the threat that they could use this collective power to damage recruitment to particular institutions. This was most famously pursued by leading independent school lobby groups, the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC) and Girls’ School Alliance (GSA), to publicly boycott Bristol University because of concerns that they were discriminating against fee-paying independent school pupils through their operation of contextual data in admissions (Smithers 2003).

Tavistock acknowledged the importance of the independent school sector: “It would be a concern if they were to kick up a fuss as they do form a big part of our applicant pool in some subjects” (Mel). But it was at Bryn and Ivy universities where some of the most startling examples were revealed to me about the influence independent schools had over contextual admissions policy formation:

There is a concern here yes, that we may get boycotted/blacklisted . . . about 20 per cent of our intake are from these Schools. Would it hurt us if they didn’t want to come here? Potentially it could do. Is that a concern? Yes, although we may not admit so publicly. It has to hurt us – they give us quality applicants who do subjects that are hard to get into to – lots of hard subject like Maths, Languages. If we are bringing in more from disadvantaged backgrounds this is bound to hurt them. They also know how to use their influence better. They are quite well organised and they have a disproportionate impact for their size. Would we be bolder or experiment more without worries about the independent schools? Yes, we would be bolder I suppose . . . we might experiment more, go further, try more radical things. So there are these outside forces that control ‘what is possible’ – I think we’d be more prepared to go further in some areas without worry about the consequences. This isn’t that comfortable but it is true (Olwen, Bryn University).

Here is a clear example of where a small part of the schooling system, representing society’s most socio-economically privileged classes, were able to
exert ‘invisible’ forms of influence over what was possible for HEIs to pursue in terms of policy. In this case it was clear Bryn University wished to be bolder and more radical in its pursuit of greater justice in admissions, but felt prevented from doing so by the “disproportionate impact” of the independent school sector.

At Ivy University, the influence of independent schools and their lobbying group, the HMC, was also felt to be particularly strong. This was so much the case that independent schools had actively campaigned to successfully change one of their policies through media interest and the threat of boycotts. Nina’s description of this was very detailed and revealing of the power they exerted over policy:

They looked at our policy in huge detail [on contextual data] and set out to get us to change it . . . admit we were wrong and that we had changed our policy because of them. They were obviously trying to protect their market of course. In other words if someone from a state school was of equal achievement but could get in above one of their own students this wouldn’t be good. The independent school sector did, therefore, have a big impact on us changing our policy . . . Without this intervention we may still have our old system, yes. They have an interest in protecting their own students. One of my senior colleagues was also spending about 50 per cent of their time on this issue because it was so under the spotlight.

They have a loud voice and this is therefore disproportionate. They have strong political links as well. They have links to the press too. Their voice can therefore be heard . . . This is also very political – there are different views on this – but not everyone understands the issues.

They did threaten to recommend boycott us – they did put that on the table, but it didn’t get that far. In a private meeting they did this. I can’t remember the exact lines – it was along the line of “we’d have to consider whether we could advise our members to consider carefully whether they should apply to you”. They never put it in writing. Of course they did this with Bristol as well in the early 2000s. Actually what happened here was that the independent school applicants went up because there is a mindset that the harder it is to get in, the more people from privileged backgrounds want to get in there!

A very large proportion of our applicants are from independent schools and they also offer us a lot of fee paying international students. So yes, they are an important market for us and they do have a lot of influence to be honest. If they sent us no applicants then we wouldn’t be able to fill our places! (Nina, Ivy University).

This provides revealing insights into how a socio-economically privileged interest was able to exert direct, but invisible, forms of influence over policy. This defies, of course, the notion of associational justice (Gewirtz 2006) outlined
in the previous chapter, which emphasises democratic participation of groups in the decisions that affect them. This also reveals important epistemological and ontological points about policy, in that such revealing insights cannot be researched or seen in their written form.

8.2.2.3 Media-discursive education factors

The third mediating constraint on the pursuit of social justice in HE admissions concerned particular parts of the media and the discourse they employed around the usage of contextual data. It has been outlined by a range of authors (see for example Thompson 1997; Leathwood 2004; Burke 2006; Burke and McManus 2011; Brink 2008) that various ‘hegemonic’ discourses pervaded discussions of fair access such as ‘standards will drop’ or ‘social engineering’. Burke (2006) has outlined how students from less privileged backgrounds had been variously constructed in terms of a ‘deficit’ model and were seen to potentially contaminate the ‘proper’ functioning of selective HEIs. In the interview data of this study, it was clear that a pejorative media discourse, reflecting particular powerful interests, had been able to shape the way in which policy could or could not be pursued effectively to promote social justice:

I think we all know that certain sections of the media will tend to denigrate any attempt for positive political change and term it “political correctness” . . . If our elite HEIs went down the road of affirmative action, then I think the media would be absolutely critical. So there is certainly a view that the media connive with the status quo and therefore make it very difficult to change things (Dave, Bryn University).

They do have power – the newspapers have readership whose kids go to university – their kids will be going to ‘good schools’ – it’s a very easy story to write – it doesn’t take much to write. It’s less difficult to explain than other more meaty difficult subjects. It’s presented as very straightforward (Mel, Tavistock University).

We are more likely to get countervailing pressure from particular parts of the media and independent school system – they want to make sure we’re not going into ‘social engineering’ – and we’ve been able to reassure them about that to date. Many peoples’ belief systems seem sincere at first, but it almost always reflects their self or group interest. There are very few people who hold beliefs that are contrary to their self-interests. They will present their arguments about fairness and equity and so on, but these are definitions that suit them of course – and more likely to be about using exam grades as the fairest way forward (Alan, Tavistock University).
They like to write about this topic and they sell to a particular socio-economic group in which the use of contextual information is thought to be about disadvantaging the children of that particular socio-economic group. And they want to prevent that from happening – for good reasons or bad – and they also see themselves in some sort of campaigning or investigative sense to shine a sharp light in dark corners. And that’s their self-image and I understand that. I’m not saying I agree with it. Or whether it’s a good or bad thing. I think that’s just the world we live in. I would also argue that certain elements of the press explicitly see themselves as self-appointed consumer champions. Indeed they are selling their papers on the back of them being self-appointed consumer champions and have therefore been very interested and invested a lot of resource themselves in really trying to understand, unpick and identify inconsistencies and then try to campaign for changes in general policy terms and specifically in terms of over-turning individual decisions . . . I think we hadn’t anticipated quite how much effort was being invested in this area and the sort of response and time commitment we needed to make as a consequence. The meta-outcome of this for me is that we have to get over it. We are a very competitive university. If we want the very best applicants this is a part of the package (Rod, Ivy University).

I’m trying to think what we could do if the Sunday Times or whatever didn’t exist . . . The thing that springs to mind is that you could more easily consider quotas for school types for example . . . having papers like the Sunday Times might make that harder to do . . . but get rid of the papers and you’ve still got the HMC and those lobbying groups (Nina, Ivy University).

These passages above highlight two profound issues about the mediated nature of social justice in admissions. First, there is clear and compelling evidence that attempts to advance social justice in admissions are severely influenced and constrained by a prevailing media discourse that is seen to prevent the pursuit of policies that might enhance the likelihood of disadvantaged applicants being made offers for admissions. For example, more radical policies to enhance fair access such as outcome quotas or more explicit ‘affirmative action’ were far less likely to be pursued, precisely because of such influence. This has implications, of course, for democracy as much as fair access to HE. Secondly, there was recognised to be some form of ‘alliance’ between particular parts of the right-leaning media and independent schools. This was seen to stem, in part, from the fact that journalists, their readers and these schools could be seen to share a particular ‘class interest’ in actively preventing or undermining attempts for social background to be used as a relevant factor in the admissions process. In this way, such a media discourse
around ‘social engineering’ and ‘dumbing down’ could be seen as materially-grounded in these interests (Fairclough 1995).

By examining three interlocking macro level factors - socio-economic, politico-economic and media-discursive – this has moved the analysis of social justice in HE admissions beyond the meso level and towards a multi-levelled approach. As Gewirtz (2006) sets out, these macro level factors constrain, limit and mediate what might, in practice, be achievable in terms of social justice in admissions. Critically, “external constraints mean we cannot simply think in an abstract way about what is the most socially just thing to do . . . we need to think about what is reasonable given the competing concerns and constraints which help to shape social action in particular instances” (Gewirtz 2006, p. 78).

8.3 LEVEL- AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT NATURE OF JUSTICE

For Gewirtz (2006) the pursuits and constraints on the realisation of justice are “shaped by the level and setting at which we are operating. So what counts as justice is level- and context-dependent” (p. 70). This points to the need to take a contextualized, empirical approach to admissions rather than attempting philosophical generalisations. I will now outline ways in which the pursuit of social justice across the three sites of this study illustrate the need to take into account the levels and context in which actors operate.

8.3.1 The level- dependency of social justice in HE admissions

To conceptualise the pursuit of social justice, Gewirtz (2006) contends that it is “important to bear in mind that different practices are appropriate and possible at different levels” (p. 78). This study has focused on academic and managerial senior policy actors in HEIs who were responsible for writing and implementing policies and had internal/external management accountability for these. In the case of these senior academic policy actors, in each HEI they sat on their University’s senior leadership team or its equivalent ‘top table’ of decision-making. A question therefore arises about what enabling and constraining factors exist for actors operating at this level.

Bryn had not, to date, adopted the use of contextual data but was planning to in the future. The role of their senior policy actors – what they often
termed those who were ‘leading’ and taking ‘leadership positions’ – was seen as critical. For example Dave explained:

We have not used contextual data in the past, but we plan to change this in the future. We took some proposals to our Senate on this and they were broadly supportive. We had a sense that we needed to catch up with other HEIs who had taken a more proactive approach to contextual data. Also I think maybe my own predecessor wasn’t as enthusiastic as me on this, so my own influence has been important. So, yes, you could describe this as a leadership deficit as to why we are where we are . . . The fact we changed our approach from the top has been crucial. Without this it would be almost impossible. Without this we’d only do the minimum – leadership is really important (Dave, Bryn University).

It was clear that, in the future, Dave’s own role in influencing changes in Bryn’s approach to contextual data would be an important micro level enabler to the pursuit of a more just outcome for less advantaged learners.

At Tavistock, where the pursuit of social justice in admissions through contextual data had been established for many years before its current vogue by government, the personal role of key senior policy actors was also cited as a critical success factor:

Attitudes [about contextual data] are now just generally accepted and that comes from leadership, yes. Our University has developed a culture around this – as with anything – if there is firm leadership around applying a certain practice it is something people will come to accept and come to internalise as normal – the expected norm – and people tend to follow the norm. It is a policy that has found favour with the majority of our academic colleagues who are mostly quite liberal leaning (Alan, Tavistock University).

The importance of “firm leadership” was therefore again cited as being important at the micro level. This was also seen to have a strong impact on institutional culture – its norms and values – and it was interesting that a consensus between leadership on the use of contextual data and “liberal-leaning” academic staff was remarked upon. As with Tavistock, Ivy had established its usage of contextual data well in advance of other HEIs or government ‘endorsement’. It had also been in a much greater media spotlight than Tavistock, which had required strong leadership and, at times, personal courage from Rod in particular. Rod had invested the most personal time and credibility on this of all the senior policy actors in this study:
In terms of personal investment I am very involved. Whenever I am available I do all the refresher training which we require annually and we are pretty fierce about the need for training. But I am entirely reliant on senior administrative colleagues... to work out how they can best employ me in circumstances that are positive. I am not by and large the judge of that – they are – and that builds in some failsafe distance so we really can get the best out of me for what I represent in shifting policy in the way that we want and by and large they are the determinants of that and work out when is the right moment to bring me in to bash heads together. To bring an issue up on the agenda of Senate, Council and I think that works pretty well... I’d like to think my interventions are important. But the idea that the heroic leader taking the institution in a direction it doesn’t want to go is probably over-egging the pudding... there are some quite complicated negotiations in the senior leadership team... that end up in the policy place where we are. I would not see what we are doing as pioneering. If others see it like that then so be it. We’ve done it because we’ve got a very particular problem around accessing talent – so that’s our driver, it’s not about being pioneering (Rod, Ivy University).

His senior management colleague Nina had acknowledged Rod’s personal influence on driving through changes in admissions, particularly when it came to convincing some sceptical academic colleagues to take into account disadvantage in their admissions processes:

If someone pushes back against our university policy – the ultimate sanction is that Rod gets involved. And then he tells them you have to do it, shut up and do it. And he has that kind of authority that he can do that. And I think he has got the confidence of our VC to do that... Without this kind of leadership this would make things much harder, yes. The sorts of major developments we’ve been able to push through would not have been possible without this strong leadership. You can clearly see with any disagreeing staff... when you say you’ll have to chat to Rod about it they soon change! He has this reputation! But not because he is a bully – he just has that gravitas and respect and they will not win an argument against him. He will present a stronger argument than they will.

Without someone like him – if you had a consensual process like we did prior to him – things could not work in the same way because we are a university where people have different views! It needs that push from the top. We would not therefore be in the place where we are now without this strong leadership. I don’t know how we would have responded without him to the continual decline in state school students applications and registrations. I think we would have still been in that journey downwards without someone like him.

You could have had a leader also who would have been antagonistic towards the independent school sector and the press and he wasn’t (Nina, Ivy University).
Nina also raises an important dilemma that surrounds the implementation of policies in universities. There can be a trade off between consensus and justice. Clearly there were some academics who were sceptical of Ivy’s approach to pursuing social justice through their ‘merit and potential’ approach to contextual data. It was argued that a fully consensual approach would never move the institution towards policies that were likely to enhance outcomes for disadvantaged learners. Instead, Rod’s ability to forge institution-wide decisions at the highest level of Senate and then “bash heads together” and “win arguments” with opposing colleagues was perceived to be critical in Ivy implementing policies that had improved outcomes for less advantaged learners.

As Rod noted, the model of “heroic leader” is perhaps over-simplifying the role of institutional leadership in pursuing social justice in admissions. However, it has been established that universities are relatively autonomous in the ways they can pursue their policies on admissions and direct significant time and resources to these issues, independent of government policy. Whilst this study focused on the level of senior policy actors in HEIs, evidence across the three sites clearly pointed to a high premium on the micro level, where particular individuals were able to enable or constrain the pursuit of policies that might lead to more socially-just outcomes. Justice therefore cannot be understood as being divorced from what is (and isn’t) possible from the vantage point of the senior policy actors operating at this level.

8.3.2 The context-dependent nature of social justice in HE admissions

Gewirtz (2006) also contends that “what counts as a successful just practice might also differ according to the context” (p. 79). Each of the HEIs in this study were part of a HE system in England where particular forms of autonomy and regulation provided the context. The key contextual factor identified from the evidence in this study was the way in which each institution considered its fundamental mission, role and purpose in relationship to the wider society. This varied quite considerably across the three sites, making sensitivity to this factor critical in any understanding of what enables or constrains the pursuit of justice in admissions.
Across all three sites there was a sophisticated awareness that the major inequities in participation rates of disadvantaged groups could be explained by inequalities in society at large. However, the context in which each of the three universities regarded their own purpose and relationship to these inequalities differed. These differences could be posited along a spectrum, where at one end was Bryn University. Bryn saw itself as existing in relative separation from these wider inequalities, with Ivy in the middle and Tavistock conceiving a much more engaged purpose for itself in helping to address wider inequalities.

Bryn University was clear:

There’s a lot of truth in HEIs reproducing privilege, but so do lots of institutions e.g. museums, other social institutions . . . it’s not a surprise that universities replicate privilege. Universities are part of the lack of social mobility, yes. What Universities are not there to do is to remedy for some social deficit . . . we are not about some sort of social change agenda beyond finding talent. Our mission is to get the best people wherever they come from. As long as we don’t deviate from that I think we can still contribute to positive social change and mobility. But if it becomes an agenda that is simply about replicating some sort of utopian representativeness then we lose what we’re about and lose our kind of economic function because we have a vital economic function to turn out well-trained people to undertake particular jobs. That is our economic function as well (Dave, Bryn University – my emphasis).

The pursuit of social justice was therefore not a primary function for Bryn and they regarded themselves as existing in separation from a wider “social change” agenda.

Ivy outlined an interesting perspective on how the context of its own mission had implications for the way in which justice could be pursued. Its policy text stated it was “committed to increasing the diversity of the student body” whilst at the same time maintaining high entry standards. This sense of purpose, invoking those more typical of US universities (Bowen and Bok 1998), could be seen to enable the pursuit of justice through an intrinsic academic commitment to diversity. As Rod stated:
There is value in bringing diversity to the academic community – that is bringing together largely middle class students mixing with those from very low income backgrounds so they can understand more about the wider society, there is a very strong notion that such students can contribute to diversity. This is an instrumental argument about the benefits of diversity to our students and academics – that they benefit from a rich diversity in our community rather than if there was a homogenous one. I think this stands in our academic departments but also in our Colleges. We set quotas for particular subjects in the Colleges precisely to get a good mix – we feel that's important – and it's as much as valuable in a sociology tutorial that people bring different perspectives that reflect their own lives as it is in Physics (Rod, Ivy University).

Ivy also recognised very clearly where they could and could not influence the achievement of justice, which also revealed a more expansive social role and purpose for them:

Universities can mitigate against reproducing disadvantage but never get rid of it. Ultimately this University is about academic excellence and interprets that in a particular way and one key marker is that we will not drop grades. And actually our purpose is that – is about academic excellence – and is not about solving society’s inequalities. Other universities do and I respect that, but that is not our mission . . . (Rod, Ivy University).

Recognising there were wider macro level factors at play in who applied to Ivy, Nina made an eloquent distinction regarding where her institution’s boundaries of commitment to justice lay:

It is patently obvious that there are winners and losers in society and this plays out not just in who can apply in the first place to leading universities, but also in terms of what happens once a given set of applicants apply. We can’t control the former, but we can the latter (Nina, Ivy University – my emphasis).

The responsibility of the University was therefore clear – to control for advantage and disadvantage once applicants had applied. This is consistent with earlier discussions about the outcome measures used by Ivy, which tried to equalise the odds of those from less advantaged backgrounds receiving admissions offers. For Nina in Ivy University “if we didn’t do something altogether more proactive we’d struggle to draw on talent from a wider section of society”. At Tavistock, I was offered perhaps the most expansive definition across the three sites of the active role played by universities in reproducing (and challenging) wider societal inequalities:
The Russell Group will continue to remind people we can’t remedy all of society’s ills. There are so many people in high positions from Oxbridge - and the notion that we are active in bringing this about is rather unfair. There is a whole chain of events beyond us that cause us . . . But I love the anecdote from Willetts – where he was talking about when he goes to universities and is asked why are you expecting us to solve society’s ills. Then he goes to secondary schools and they say it’s about primary schools and their poor standards. And then you go to primary schools and they say it’s about the home and parenting and nurseries. But somewhere somebody has to do something and I don’t think that is an unreasonable argument to take on this – we just need a sense of perspective. We are expected to play our part (Alan, Tavistock University).

There was strong evidence that Tavistock was “playing its part”. Like Ivy, it was proactively employing the use of contextual data to accord priority admissions for disadvantaged students following application. I have also demonstrated earlier how Tavistock was able, in some cases, to provide entrance to less advantaged students with lower entry criteria than their more advantaged counterparts. Institutional context, through the different missions and sense of purpose of HEIs, was therefore critical to the way in which justice should be understood. These contextual differences between Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock universities are important since they help explain the way in which social justice is likely to be conceived and pursued more or less successfully across each site.
8.4 SUMMARY

Developing the work of Gewirtz (2006), this chapter has set out that justice cannot be resolved in abstraction from its context of interpretation and enactment in real empirical settings. The conceptual differences between its distributional, cultural and associational dimensions (that conflict with each other) have therefore been augmented through the notion that it is also mediated and context/level dependent. The pursuit of justice is mediated by other norms, which in practice compete or conflict with justice concerns. More importantly, justice is mediated by constraints over which social actors within HE have little control. Evidence could be found of social justice being constrained by the neo-liberal restructuring of HE. This involved enhanced competition and regulation, sharp socio-economic advantages and power relations in the independent education system and a media-discursive sphere that seemingly limited the different policy options that could be pursued in advance of more just outcomes. Finally, attention was given to the level- and context-dependent nature of justice. Whilst caution needed to be placed on the notion of ‘heroic individuals’, evidence pointed to the level of key individuals in leadership positions as an enabler to the pursuit of justice, particularly in the case of Ivy and Rod. The converse was true for Bryn University. Finally, justice was also context-dependent. This was most apparent through the different institutional missions and the degree of ‘social purpose’ evident in each HEIs. It was noteworthy that Ivy and Tavistock articulated a wider sense of social purpose in their institutions’ relationship to inequalities in wider society. This was in contrast to Bryn more narrow sense of purpose – and these differences contextualised, enabled and constrained the expansiveness of admissions policies pursued to address issues of social justice.
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSION

9.1 INTRODUCTION

This concluding chapter is divided into four parts. Firstly, it summarises the main empirical and conceptual contributions to knowledge made in the study and uses this to provide an overall “Network” or “Context Chart” (Robson 2002) of factors that enable or constrain the pursuit of social justice through contextual admissions processes. Secondly, some implications for the field of studies into admissions policies in HE are suggested, including the range of further research questions that have emerged from this study. Thirdly, the chapter provides reflections on the implications of this study for myself as a researcher-practitioner. Fourthly, it provides an overall conclusion.

9.2 EMPIRICAL AND CONCEPTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

To assess the empirical and conceptual contributions to knowledge in this thesis, I will return to the two central research questions posed in Chapter One, namely:

• What approaches do selective HEIs in England take towards contextual admissions policies and how might these be categorised?
• How can the contextual admissions policies of selective HEIs in England be understood in relation to social justice? In particular, what factors enable and constrain the pursuit of social justice through contextual admissions?

For purposes of the first research question, the documentary content analysis of undergraduate admissions policies of 20 English Russell Group HEIs were used to empirically map out the contextual admissions policies of England’s most selective HEIs according to basic social justice categories along an individual-social axis and absolute-relative academic performance axis. The threefold descriptive typology of institutions developed out of this data placed HEIs into one of three conceptually distinct positions – ‘Position A’ (8 HEIs), ‘Position B’ (6 HEIs) and ‘Position C’ (6 HEIs) – outlined in Figure 9 of Chapter Six. A major empirical contribution from this study is therefore through the original approach
to mapping out these policies in this field. The typology was intentionally a
heuristic device and will help to “illuminate . . . open up . . . [and] aid thought”
(Gunter and Ribbins 2003, p. 260) on the ways in which researchers can
describe what is happening with regard to the different positions HEIs take with
regard to contextual admissions.

The important differences in approaches to contextual admissions across
Positions A, B and C drew, either implicitly or explicitly, on quite different
conceptions of social justice. The second research question of this thesis
therefore sought to understand how contextual admissions policies could be
understood in relation to social justice, using a policy-scholarship approach of
qualitative documentary analysis and in-depth interviews with senior policy
actors across three purposively-selected case sites in ideal type Positions A, B
and C of the schema. The key conceptual output from this part of the research
was to map out the different factors that seemed to enable or constrain the
pursuit of more socially just outcomes for less advantaged applicants, defined in
relation to a policy’s empirical likelihood of yielding at least the same odds for
less advantaged applicants being made an admissions offer as their more
advantaged counterparts.

To map out these factors, a range of qualitative data was collected and
analysed in Chapters Seven and Eight across three purposively selected sites:
Bryn (Position A), Ivy (Position B) and Tavistock (Position C) universities. In
what Robson (2002) calls a “Network” or “Context Chart” (p. 479-80), an overall
conceptual summary of the underlying mechanisms of the data collected in this
thesis can be presented in Figure 10. This helps to illustrate the different factors
that can enable or constrain the pursuit of social justice through the use of
contextual data – the second main question of this research.
Figure 10: Factors enabling and constraining the pursuit of justice through contextual admissions

Starting at the centre of the diagram, the evidence in this thesis points to the need to firstly understand that there are different philosophical dimensions to social justice implied in HEIs' notions of ‘fair admissions’. Chapter Two identified ubiquitous official rhetoric by governments, government-commissioned studies and HEIs themselves about ‘fairness’ in admissions. Yet no peer-reviewed academic studies have attempted to employ the rich tradition of policy-scholarship, sociological and normative/philosophical literatures about the nature of social justice explicitly to the area of contextual admissions. The educational philosopher Clark (2006) argues that “if policies are to be adopted
which have as their aim the promotion of social justice and require particular strategies designed to achieve this goal then we need to have a very clear understanding of what social justice, as an end, commits us to” (p. 272). The evidence in this research provides rich empirical and conceptual contributions to what social justice, as an end, committed particular HEIs towards in their different adoptions of contextual admissions.

Following from work by Gewirtz and Cribb (Gewirtz 2000, 2002, 2006; Gewirtz and Cribb 1998, 2002; Cribb and Gewirtz 2003, 2005), the evidence presented in this thesis illustrates that justice in admissions is multi-dimensional, with distributive, cultural and associational forms. Conceptualisations of social justice in HE admissions policies across the three sites, albeit only implicitly, tended to concentrate on its distributive dimensions at the expense of viewing it as plural concept, with cultural and associational elements. Examples have also been identified of ways in which different dimensions of justice conflict with each other, reflecting the redistribution-recognition dilemma outlined by Fraser (1997). Using documentary and interview data, a model was therefore suggested in Table 5 in Chapter Seven, which conceptually mapped out particular abstract dimensions of justice that are likely to enable or constrain equally qualified candidates from less advantaged backgrounds being made at least equal offers of admission (Boliver 2013).

However, one of the major conceptual contributions to knowledge in this thesis is the evidence gathered to support Gewirtz’s (2006) notion that “it is not possible to resolve the question of what counts as justice at a purely abstract level” (p. 69). This insight led to the development of an empirical-outcomes notion of justice informed by Boliver. But it also led to the consideration of additional factors outlined by Gewirtz (2006) in the outer squares of Figure 10. This diagram helps summarise the way in which justice in HE admissions has been conceptualised in this study by ensuring it is “understood in relation to particular contexts of enactment” (Gewirtz 2006, p. 69). The evidence collected through interviews and documentary analysis therefore points to ways in which social justice practices in admissions are mediated by other factors and are level- and context-dependent.

Chapter Eight highlighted ways in which the pursuit of justice was mediated by a range of supplementary factors operating at the meso and macro
levels. At the meso level, other institutional norms besides justice mediated its pursuit, for example, through the need to factor in institutional league table positions (and its relationship to ‘reputation’) when assessing flexibility in entry requirements. However, it is the introduction of macro level forces mediating the pursuit of justice that distinguishes the conceptualisation of justice in this thesis from those found in official policy-science studies of contextual admissions by SPA (2011, 2012, 2014), which tend to operate across single levels of analysis in the meso sphere. By employing a policy-scholarship approach, this study was able to identify a range of structural forces that “constrain but never determine all of the possibilities for action” (Ball 1993 p. 44). These mediated the extent to which justice could be pursued. Neo-liberal policy instruments and forms of regulation clearly influenced, constrained and shaped the policy goals of each of the three sites. The influence of socio-economic privilege in education, particularly through the powerful lobbying force of the independent school sector, limited the approach to justice that could be pursued. Additionally, the right-leaning press promulgated a particular view of justice that demeaned attempts to address group inequalities and more affirmative forms of action. These provide examples of ways in which an analysis of social justice is enriched through a multi-levelled approach operating across macro, meso and micro levels of analysis.

The way in which justice has been conceptualised in this study has also ensured it has not been abstracted from setting, through attention to its level- and context-dependence. At the level of senior policy actors, it was possible to find ways in which policy actors in key leadership roles were able to pursue social justice aims to different degrees of effect. However, caution is needed in viewing these as ‘heroic individuals’, abstracted from wider structural constraints. Finally, I considered the context-dependent nature of justice, which was most apparent through the way each university viewed its mission or ‘social purpose’ and relationship to wider societal inequalities. Some HE missions, such as that found in Tavistock, enabled a more expansive notion of social justice that went beyond the gates of the university. This influenced the degree to which wider social inequalities were conceptualised back into their institutional admissions policies and processes through the use of contextual data.
The conceptualisation of justice developed in this study also highlights some of the dangers of purely philosophical conceptualisations of justice developed by some sociologists of education who perform what Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) call a “critique from above. That is the tendency to treat the work of sociological analysis as something that takes place at a distance or above the realm of practice” (p. 500). The conception of justice employed in this study has, I would contend, gone beyond simply “pointing out to practitioners the social, political and economic contexts that shape or constrain their work” (Gewirtz and Cribb 2002, p. 500). Chapter Eight helped frame social justice in admissions within a structural context that has been much-neglected in the policy science studies to date. However, this study helps illuminate why this should never be used as an excuse for ignoring or devaluing some of the messy and complex dilemmas faced by the policy actors in this study in ‘doing social justice’ in admissions. In this way, this study helps to “engage with the burden of responsibility involved in having to make the kinds of difficult choices between different facets of justice or between justice and other concerns that practitioners who are committed to social justice have to make on a daily basis” (Cribb and Gewirtz 2005, p. 328). In particular, the dilemmas I heard from Dave, Olwen, Rod, Nina, Alan and Mel help illuminate Gewirtz’s (2006) point that “what counts as justice in education can not be divorced from judgements about what is possible. Because in the real world principles do not translate precisely into practice, just practices can only ever meet with partial degrees of success” (p. 79).

By avoiding a “critique from above” (Gewirtz and Cribb 2002, p. 500), the conceptualisation of justice in this study has also, I would argue, avoided an overly fatalistic interpretation of what is possible; that is, the notion that it is impossible to change universities “unless the social and economic relations of the wider society are transformed first” (Apple 1996, cited in Gewirtz and Cribb 2002, p. 500). Evidence in this study has demonstrated how a clear spectrum of approaches to social justice can be conceptualised between Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock universities. These highlight the relative degree of autonomy and agency of HEIs to develop quite different policies and processes in response to social injustices. Some illuminative examples of policies, practices and people at Tavistock and Ivy universities, where conscious attempts have been made to enhance social justice in their admissions practices, might therefore point to
ways in which dominant patterns of social reproduction, power relationships and individualistic/asocial discourses about merit and fairness are being challenged through the admissions practices of leading HEIs. This approach also takes up the challenge set by Kettley (2007) for research on widening access in HE to move beyond the concepts of ‘barriers’ towards one of ‘bridges’, where researchers attempt to empirically illuminate and critically engage with practices that might alter or challenge outcomes for certain individuals.

A final conceptual insight, influenced by the policy-scholarship approaches of Ball (1993) and others, has been the evidence gathered for the view that policy-formation in HE is anything but one-directional. Even where HEIs are ‘steered’ regarding good practice over their admissions policies and practices - either within their own management structures or by external policy - Trowler (1998) has raised the point that policy in HE is difficult to operationalise, not least because many staff are able to find ways of ignoring or subverting these. As Ball et al. (2012) found in the schools literature, this study has provided ample evidence of the role of human agency in shaping policy responses and development. Whilst this was not an “implementation study” (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) of how admissions is ‘done’ within a HEI, a key insight has been that any guidance and good practice around admissions from government, whilst influential, cannot be viewed simply as ‘top down’ or linear. This explains the two directional arrows in the summary model of this thesis on Figure 10 between the political-economic and institutional levels. Like Greenbank (2006b) I found HEIs “speaking back” to official agencies: much of the policy good practice and guidance formulated at the highest levels on contextual admissions (DfES 2004b; HEFCE 2009; OFFA 2011; SPA 2011, 2012; BIS 2014) is often incomplete or builds on an ad hoc range of policies, practices and processes that have originated from within HEIs themselves. This was certainly the case with Ivy and Tavistock universities, who were operating contextual admissions policies well in advance of them being seemingly ‘adopted’ in more official policy literatures.
9.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study raises a number of important implications for the research and policy fields of admissions to higher education. Firstly, this empirical study can help to develop and inform theoretical literatures on the nature of ‘fairness’ and merit when considering admissions to HE. Insightful practical examples, among some of England’s most selective HEIs, have been provided where there has been a rejection of the simplistic and individualistic meritocratic notion that some individuals deserve or earn their greater power, resources and life chances through their ostensibly ‘higher’ abilities and efforts. Using the phenomena of contextual admissions, there are clear opportunities for further theoretical contributions by philosophers of justice to the broader questions of what might constitute justice and fairness in admissions system, going beyond that employed in this more empirically-focused study.

Secondly, this study has helped to bridge government policies and statements on contextual data and ‘fairness’ in admissions with theoretically-informed, empirical academic research. Government policies frequently cite ways in which leading universities can use contextual admissions to advance justice and social mobility (BIS 2009a, 2014; Cabinet Office 2009, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). Yet no academic research, to date, has mapped out the different ways in which contextual admissions is being employed in practice and what implications this might have for advancing justice. The ideal-type model developed in Figure 9 in Chapter Six provides a useful heuristic device for future researchers to classify, compare and contrast different positions towards contextual admissions in HEIs in their own research and thereby identify “singularities, regularities and variations within the data” (Dey 1993, p. 195) in comparison to the classification systems proposed in this study. This research has also, building on the quantitative work of Boliver (2013), suggested an empirical definition, or test, of justice in admissions; this being where equally qualified candidates from less advantaged backgrounds are at least as likely to be made offers of admission as their more advantaged counterparts. Whilst this study was deliberately not an empirical ‘implementation study’ (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) about whether policies in this research led to particular admissions outcomes, this definition does offer important opportunities for practitioners, policy-makers, researchers, third parties and government
agencies to undertake empirical analyses and ‘tests’ of the efficacy of particular policies. Such further research could be informed by, and build upon, the conceptual suggestions in Table 5 of Chapter 7, which identified those features of admissions that were more or less likely to improve outcomes for applicants from less advantaged backgrounds. This could certainly be of interest to HE and government policy-makers. It would also require more longitudinal, mixed methods and action forms of research, linking together qualitative insights about the nature of policy with quantitative outcomes data over time. For example, each of the 20 HEI policies in this study could have been classified and correlated with longitudinal data that assessed the extent to which, in practice, they achieved more just outcomes over time.

Thirdly, this research has provided strong evidence for the hitherto narrow way in which justice is conceived in HE in government and official forms of research. A more expansive definition of justice that foregrounds cultural and associational factors opens up potentially new fields of research in the field of admissions to HE. During the production of this research, the UK’s first attempt to explore issues of cultural injustices, as mediated through UCAS personal statements, was undertaken by Jones (2013). That many contextual admissions policies ‘flag up’ issues of cultural justice to selectors and readers of admissions applications is worthy of much further research. Similarly, research highlighting the importance of interviews in perpetuating cultural injustices, such as that of Zimdars (2010) and Burke and McManus (2009) can be augmented by the specific findings in this study, which suggests that some HEIs are using contextual admissions to either not interview at all, or treat such processes with more caution. Furthermore, the strong evidence in this study for the mediated nature of justice, where macro level social practices within the media and independent school system create discourses that help define “what can be said, and thought . . . who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (Ball 1994a, p. 21), is worthy of much deeper and specialised forms of analyses by sociologists. This could use critical discourse analysis about the language used in government policies, particular forms of the media and the policies of HEIs to illuminate issues of social justice.

Fourthly, this study has raised some interesting issues with regard to the social purpose and missions of HE that are ripe for further analysis. Burke
(2009) has argued that for fairness in admissions and access to be advanced, this agenda must move beyond the approaches of individual practitioners and policy makers and be fully integrated into the ethos, principles and values of the institution itself. This study provides some modest evidence for this view. It was evident that the way in which each HEI viewed its mission and sense of ‘social purpose’, particularly through its responsibility for, and relationship to, wider societal inequalities, correlated with a more expansive notion of social justice in admissions. This study used only three sites. Further research could provide models of classifying missions of HEIs in relation to justice in admissions across a much wider sample of institutions. This research has also helped contribute to wider debates about the ‘levels’ at which HEIs operate. Far from the sense of fatalism about the meso level of HEIs found in some critical literatures, this study has (re)asserted the profound responsibility and relative autonomy HEIs have, in practice, over the way they admit students. The clear spectrum of approaches to social justice between Bryn, Ivy and Tavistock universities provides evidence for this.

Fifthly, this study has highlighted a range of new opportunities for scholars interested in the field of social class stratification. This study did not attempt to explore the concept of social class. Yet it is clear, both from HEI and government policies, that different, competing and sometimes contradictory notions of social class underpinned notions such as ‘disadvantage’, ‘under-represented learners’ and ‘state school students’. It is interesting that an applicant’s exact socio-economic status within the official National Socio-economic Classification System (NS-SEC 2014) is not coded and available to admissions selectors at the time of application. This means that a number of proxies are often used such as postcode area and schools type, which imperfectly map onto these. But even if these problems could be overcome, there are different approaches to the study of class that reject such categorist and positivist definitions. For example, Archer (2003) has employed poststructural approaches to point to ways in which class is constantly being produced and reproduced, including discursively, through interactions as individuals, groups, institutions and in relation to various policy texts. The specific topic of HE contextual admissions is ripe for the type of post-structural analysis undertaken by Burke and McManus (Burke 2006, 2009; Burke and
McManus 2011) in their more general examination of admissions and widening participation practices of HEIs.

9.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR MY OWN PRACTICE AND POSITION IN THE FIELD

The research questions in this professional doctoral study were informed, in large part, by my own day-to-day practical and professional experiences in leading an institutional strategy in the pursuit of more equitable patterns of access to HE for less-advantaged learners. As my University’s overall Head/Director on these issues, I have had direct policy oversight for the specific issues examined in this thesis. The opportunity to ‘step back’ from my day-to-day practice and research these social processes from within the policy scholarship tradition has helped position my own personal and professional values, insights, frustrations and successes within a wider structural context. As Bourdieu (1988) inimitably puts it:

“Exoticizing the domestic” has, rather surprisingly, strengthened and reinforced my commitment to achieving change through practice. As a practitioner-researcher (Robson 2002, p. 534) who, whilst not researching my own institutional practice, was analysing directly corresponding areas of professional responsibility in other HEIs, a major theme emerged about the extent to which I could separate knowledge production from knowledge use. As stated earlier in this thesis, I have been influenced by Gewirtz and Cribb’s (2006) expanded, multi-dimensional conception of social justice, which rejects such sharp distinctions. Like Gewirtz and Cribb I found it unhelpful to separate my own knowledge production in the course of this research from the more difficult and messy issues of “what should or can be done” (2006, p. 147) to improve admissions processes for the better. This is because “in the course of research one is constantly engaged in making evaluative and political judgements – in deciding what questions to ask . . . and thinking about the practical and policy
implications of the research” (Gewirtz and Cribb 2006, p. 142). During the collection and analysing of the data in this research, I was conscious that my professional experiences in facing real dilemmas and making practical compromises in the pursuit of justice in admissions might preclude me adopting a more academic, dispassionate and critical account of the process of social reproduction in selective HEIs such as Bryn, Tavistock and Ivy universities. In drawing on a critical policy-scholarship approach, I was concerned that I might interpret the attempts of practitioners across the three sites (and by implication my own) to enact social justice as being rather futile in comparison to much wider systemic inequalities. However, in drawing on Gewirtz and Cribb I have been able to understand better how researchers of justice must engage “in a constructive way with the practical dilemmas faced by those struggling for social justice in and around educational sites” (Gewirtz and Cribb 2002, p. 504). The conception developed in this thesis that “what counts as justice in education can not be divorced from judgements about what is possible” (Gewirtz 2006 p. 79) has therefore led me to understand that the very real compromises and dilemmas faced by practitioners like myself are at the heart of both conceptualising and advancing (or otherwise) its pursuit in real contexts of enactment.

I have also been able to reflect, through my role as a practitioner-researcher, on how contextual admissions policies are important discursive spaces in which HEIs can exert some modest autonomy. They can challenge more individualised notions of ‘talent’ and ‘merit’ that have dominated thinking on admissions for many decades, and have the potential to make some real differences to the admissions outcomes of learners from less advantaged backgrounds. These open up new opportunities for thinking and conceptualising a range of cultural and associational injustices, mediated through admissions policies. And they have allowed me to reflect on the possibilities and limits of my own leadership role and the culture and mission of the university within which I am located.

These reflections accord with the work of Taysum (2005, 2006) who argues that when professional Education Doctorate work is tallied with an understanding and sensitivity to ‘location of self’ issues, the potential benefits of the sort of practitioner research are not only practical (access, pre-existing
knowledge, experience etc.) but can also be profoundly *epistemological* and *transformational*. Using Bourdieuian analysis to reveal the extent to which different types of ‘capital’ may have been misrecognized within HE, Taysum (2005, 2006) argues that the professional Education Doctorate is distinctive and challenges the university tradition through its ability to engage in new and practical ways with issues surrounding social justice. She invokes Barnett (1999) to argue that without the type of knowledge produced by researcher-practitioners like myself, the University is potentially dislocated “from its four core beliefs of the search for truth, to be critical of the self, to be respectful of others and tolerant of opposing views and to be committed to the generation of new knowledge” (Taysum 2006, p. 292). This research has certainly afforded me with opportunities to “shape the processes that structure what . . . [practitioner-researchers] can and cannot know and do” (p. 294). Understanding these processes and structures through practice *and research* has illustrated to me two key dimensions to Gunter’s (2005) typology of ‘knowledge and knowing’: firstly the way in which this research has helped me to *understand meanings* – where greater conceptual clarity to the notion of social justice and ‘fairness’ in admissions has been developed; secondly, it has given inspiration to what she calls *working for change* – research which makes an explicit commitment to understand how power is exercised and asks “how might structural barriers to improvement be overcome” (p. 172).

### 9.5 CONCLUSION

Through a process of categorisation and typology, this research has helped fill knowledge gaps with respect to the different approaches English HEIs take to contextual admissions. It has also outlined how contextual admissions policies are phenomena that can be understood in rich ways through the notion of social justice, a concept that is itself multi-dimensional and conflictual, mediated by structural constraints and other norms, and context- and level-dependent. The research reported in this thesis also suggests a range of factors that *enable* or *constrain* the pursuit of social justice through admissions. It has been suggested that justice in admissions can be thought about in terms of empirical outcomes that ensure equally qualified applicants, from less advantaged backgrounds,
receive at least same odds of admissions offers as their more advantaged counterparts.

In “exoticizing the domestic” (Bourdieu 1988) of my own professional practice, this research has made a number of empirical, conceptual and policy contributions to knowledge regarding the vexed questions of what ‘fairness’ or ‘justice’ might mean in admissions and what factors limit or facilitate its pursuit. It also provides a platform for a number of additional research questions and methodologies that can be applied to this fascinating, but under-researched, policy area. Rather than providing simple answers to “what counts as justice” (Gewirtz 2006), this study has highlighted ways in which philosophical conceptualisations map only imperfectly onto the messy practical realities of how policy actors in selective universities are seeking to conceptualise and enact justice in admissions. In this way, my research and professional experience echoes that of Cribb and Gewirtz (2005) when they conclude that: “practitioners who have a commitment to enacting justice need to be ready to embrace complexity and to live with ambivalences. There are no straightforward maps to follow … We suggest that this conscientious, reflexive but also practical engagement with inconsistency and ambivalence may well be characteristic of the work of people with a commitment to enacting justice rather than just talking about it” (p. 339).
APPENDIX 1 – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Explanations of ‘fair admissions’ policies in leading higher education institutions

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

You are being invited to take part in a research study that is examining explanations for the ‘fair admissions’ policies of leading higher education institutions. This research is part of my Education Doctorate (EdD) Thesis. This research will use documentary analysis of publicly available admissions policies and interviews with admissions policy leaders in three different institutions. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the research?

Julian Skyrme.

Title of the Research

Explanations for the ‘fair admissions’ policies of leading higher education institutions.

What is the aim of the research

The aim of the research is to explore, describe and explain the conceptualisation of particular ‘fair admissions’ policies of leading UK higher education institutions in relation to issues of social justice. It will examine two main questions: i) what is occurring in the admissions practices of leading HEIs? In particular, are there any models or typologies that can be developed to better describe, compare and contrast different approaches to ‘fair admissions’ in leading HEIs? ii) how can the emerging empirical data, theories and concepts be developed into an explanatory model of the different factors that impinge on conceptualisations of ‘fair admissions’ policies in relation to social justice?

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because your institution is classed as one of a group of ‘leading higher education institutions’ and you are personally involved in the formulation of its admissions policy. Two admissions leaders (one administrative and one academic) in three different HEIs are being interviewed as part of this research.
What would I be asked to do if I took part?
You will be asked to be interviewed for 1 – 1.5 hours where you will be asked about how and why your institution’s admissions policy has been formulated in the way it has. You will be asked questions about how your institution understands issues of fairness in relation to this policy.

What happens to the data collected?
The information will be kept secure and used only for purposes of this research. The data will be recorded, transcribed and used for quotations in the research thesis.

How is confidentiality maintained
Personal data and identifiers will be protected by ensuring pseudonyms and pseudo-institutions only are used. Information will be secured on private password protected machines. Information will not be kept longer than is necessary.

What happens if I do not want to take part or change my mind?
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself.

Will I be paid for participating in the research?
No.

What is the duration of the research?
The research will involve being interviewed for approximately 1 – 1.5 hours.

Where will the research be conducted?
The research will be conducted at your institution at a location of your choosing e.g. an office or meeting room.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?
This research is primarily intended to form part of an Education Doctorate thesis. This data may be used to publish findings, for example in a research journal.

Contact for further information
Julian Skyrme, Rutherford Building, The University of Manchester, M13 9PL
julian.skyrme@manchester.ac.uk 0161 275 2050

What if I have a question or if something goes wrong?
Should you have any questions about the conduct of this research please feel free to contact the Head of the Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, M13 9PL
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Explanations of ‘fair admissions’ policies in leading higher education institutions

If you are happy to participate in the research please complete and sign the consent form

1. I confirm that I have read the Participant Information Sheet on the above project and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntarily and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to any treatment/service.

3. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded.

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes.

5. I agree that the data collected may be passed to other researchers.

I agree to take part in the above project.

Name of participant ________________________________

Date ________________________________

Signature ________________________________

Name of person taking consent ________________________________

Date ________________________________

Signature ________________________________
Participant Name
Institutional Position
Address
Date

Invitation to participate research concerning ‘fair admissions’ policies in leading higher education institutions as part of an Education Doctorate Thesis

Dear << >>

I am currently undertaking research for an Education Doctorate (EdD) into the ‘fair admissions’ policies of leading UK higher education institutions. As part of this research I would like to interview both an academic and an administrative leader with responsibility for undergraduate admissions in three different institutions.

I am therefore kindly seeking your involvement in this research, which will entail being interviewed on one occasion for up to one and a half hours.

Further information about the research is included in the accompanying Participant Information Sheet, which details assurances about how the data will be used, confidentiality and the right to withdraw. Please feel free to ask me any further questions about the nature of the research.

I would be very grateful if you would be able to indicate to me, by return, whether or not you would be happy to participate in this research. Should you wish to participate, I will get in touch to arrange a mutually convenient time to undertake an interview, which can take place at your institution.

Yours sincerely

Julian Skyrme
Rutherford Building
The University of Manchester
Manchester M13 9PL
julian.skyrme@manchester.ac.uk
0161 275 2050
APPENDIX 4 - INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Background

1. When was the policy developed?
2. What would you describe as the key factual features of the policy?
3. How was it written?
4. How was it interpreted by different social groups?

Aims / Conceptions of justice/fairness

5. What was the policy trying to achieve? What are its aims?
6. Where you trying to change anything? If so, what? What were you trying to change?
7. Are there particular groups who are targets for differential treatment in the policy? Why?
8. How was it targeted at these groups?
9. Why was it targeted at these groups?
10. Is looking at the context in which achievement takes place an attempt to recognise something you would otherwise miss out on? What is this?
11. What is it about the School context that led to a recognition that such students might face disadvantage?
12. What is it about parents/family background that means students are disadvantaged?
13. What is it about Communities/areas that such students attend that means students are disadvantaged?
15. How legitimate is the different treatment of some students seen? Internally? Externally?
16. Are some groups seen as benefiting at the expense of others? Who?
17. Would you describe this as a policy that is advancing fairness and social justice?
18. (Distributive justice) What would you describe as the ‘things’ you are trying to distribute more fairly? What are the barriers to doing more of this?
19. (Cultural justice) Have there been issue about recognising the achievements of other groups? Valuing their diversity? Labelling other groups? What words do you use to describe these ‘other’ groups?
20. (Associational justice) How were group opinions formed either for or against the policy? Internal / External?
21. To what extent were you guided by a) external agendas b) internal drivers? What were these?
22. How autonomous do you feel HEI is in relation to national admissions agendas?
23. Do government policy frameworks help or hinder you in the pursuit of this policy? Was the policy developed in accordance with the support of government? Or does it challenge government policy?
24. Has leadership been important in your policy being successful?
25. What would you count as success for your policy?
## APPENDIX 5 -
### MATRIX FOR CLASSIFYING CONTEXTUAL ADMISSIONS POLICIES

*(EXAMPLE FINDINGS IN ITALICS)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Are they using socially contextual data?</th>
<th>B. Is social/family disadvantage used as a factor?</th>
<th>C. Is educational disadvantage used as a factor?</th>
<th>D. Do they discount standard entry grades on the basis of contextual data?</th>
<th>E. Descriptive Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual – Social Axis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI 1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>A neighbourhood index of deprivation (the IMD) has been used and where applicants fall into the 25% most deprived postcodes these are ‘flagged’. Applicants are also flagged if they apply from a school or college with below average rates of progression into HE. Where one or more of these ‘flags’ are generated admissions decision-makers reduce their standard offer by the equivalent of 1 entry grade (20 UCAS points).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI 2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Using data on the average UCAS point score of the applicant’s school or college, application are flagged up for ‘further consideration’ although lowering grades is not permitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEI 3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>This HEI admits on the basis of ‘academic achievement’ only. There is no consistent use of socially contextual data but they do note that ‘where the personal statement indicates that barriers have had to be overcome admissions tutors may wish to take this into account’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


DfES (Department for Education and Skills) (2004a), Fair admissions to higher education: draft recommendations for consultation, London, DfES.


