

Briefing note: Abertay University's approach to Widening Access

Abertay University is leading the way in widening access to Higher Education in Scotland. We have implemented the 'access thresholds' recommended by the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) three years ahead of the target date set by Universities Scotland, and we are the only Scottish university to have fully implemented the CoWA recommendations.

CoWA recommended that by 2019 all universities should set access thresholds for degree programmes against which learners from the most deprived backgrounds should be assessed. Building on our experience of using 'contextual offers' over many years, Abertay introduced the criteria in November 2016 for the 2017 intake and now has 66 students (5% of our entrants) at the University who would not otherwise have been given the opportunity.

In developing our access thresholds, we decided that a minimum of three Scottish Highers should be required – rather than the usual requirement of four – subject to an appropriate choice of subjects. We then used our academic judgement to set the access threshold, drawing on our experience of supporting students. For example, a programme normally requiring AABB at Higher has an access threshold of BBB.

The University's criteria for what constitutes disadvantage goes well beyond simply using SIMD classifications, with a student qualifying if he or she:

- has participated in a recognised access programme
- has spent significant time in care

or has a combination of at least two of the following factors:

- attends a school where a low proportion of students progresses to higher education
- has parents or guardians who have not previously attended university
- lives in an SIMD20 area

We are currently reviewing the criteria to consider whether they could be expanded to include other relevant indicators to enhance the focus on an individual's particular circumstances. Applicants who met these criteria received an adjusted offer at the access threshold. 10% of our entrants received an adjusted offer in 2017 and over half (66 students) were able to enter Abertay as a result of this offer, as they did not achieve the qualifications required for a standard offer.

This approach is based on extensive evidence that universities get the best students by taking into account social and educational backgrounds and reflects our social mission to 'offer transformational opportunities to everyone who has the ability to benefit from Abertay's approach to university education'. 27% of our entrants in 2017 either met our criteria or came from an SIMD20 area. 37% of Abertay students come to Abertay from college, 75% of whom received full credit for their previous qualification. We also apply our approach to access thresholds to the Scottish Wider Access Programmes (SWAP), and Higher National Programmes (HNC/HND).

Abertay students are offered support before arrival through the confidence-building University Preparation Programme (UPP) and the Abertay College Transition (ACT) programmes. A wide range of support services are available to students, including counselling and mental-health support, learning support and – where required – supplementary financial support (such as childcare).

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