

### **UKRI policy fellowships 2025: fellowship position**

**Fellowship title:** Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education contextualised admissions in higher education fellowship

**Fellowship type:** What Works innovation fellowship

**Host organisation:** [Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education \(TASO\)](#)

**Host team:** Research and Evaluation team

**Summary:** opportunity to improve evaluation of activities to address inequalities in higher education

**Policy topic:** Opportunity for All

**Research Council:** ESRC

**Academic discipline(s):** economics, sociology, evaluation, education, politics and public policy

**Research career stage:** open to all career stages

### **Fellowship structure**

#### **Inception phase:**

**Estimated start date:** February 2026. Exact date to be confirmed by the host depending on onboarding and security clearance requirements

**Duration:** three months

**FTE:** 0.4 FTE

#### **Main placement phase:**

**Duration:** 12 months

**FTE:** 0.6 to 1 FTE

#### **Knowledge exchange phase:**

**Duration:** three months

**FTE:** 0.4 FTE

### **Work arrangements**

**Location requirements:** we would prefer the fellow to attend our office in person one day per week, if possible, with the possibility of attending two to three days. Our office is in London, in the Blackfriars area. We have a bi-weekly team meeting, and a bi-weekly research and evaluation team meeting, both of which the fellow would be invited to join. We plan for all staff to be in the office together one day a month, and would invite the fellow to join this meeting as well. We are a small and friendly team of 17 people, with around half working directly on research and evaluation, and we anticipate the fellow also contributing to the learning and development of this wider team

**Hybrid working:** during the inception phase, we would seek to ensure the fellow meets key staff face to face in the office, notably their organisational contact, Deputy CEO Dr Eliza Kozman. Other key contacts at the organisation include the Head of Evaluation Dr Paul Fenton-Villar and the CEO, Dr Omar Khan, who are both committed to supporting the fellow and ensuring the learnings inform our work and strategic direction. Eligible Travel and Subsistence costs are supported in the main UKRI grant. Please see full call text and guidance for more details

**Security clearance:** there is no security clearance needed for TASO

### **Fellowship description**

Assessing the impact of contextualised admissions in higher education:

The fellowship addresses the policy challenge of widening access to higher education. Due to gaps in prior attainment, many universities employ 'contextualised' admissions so that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have increased opportunities to attend higher education. For example, very few children on free school meals attain grades of 3 Cs or equivalent at A-level, meaning that widening participation requires using contextual factors in response.

There is increasing commitment to contextualised admissions, both among higher education institutions and in government. At the same time, there is less evidence on whether contextualised admissions work, or what works best in implementing contextualised admissions. Many higher education institutions are presently implementing contextualised admissions; the fellowship will inform how such practices can be evaluated and designed, ultimately ensuring better outcomes for disadvantaged people in higher education.

While contextualised admissions are widely applied, there is less evidence on their effectiveness. Research questions include:

RQ1: How are contextualised admissions currently applied in higher education? What are the criteria, how are they applied, and how are they communicated?

RQ2: What is the current policy and public debate on contextualised admissions?

RQ3: How should we measure the effectiveness of contextualised admissions, and what data or other infrastructure is required to do so?

The first period (lasting three months) of the fellowship would be a scoping phase. During this period, RQs one and two above would be the main focus, and result in a publication that would be suitable for academic journals as well as a policy briefing.

During the second, main phase of the report the fellow would consider RQ3, identifying the best way of measuring the impact of contextualised admissions. In particular, the fellow will consider which medium- to longer-term outcomes should be a focus for assessing the effectiveness of contextualised admissions. This could include degree awarding, retention, wellbeing, belonging or labour market outcomes. In addition to identifying the best measures for these outcomes, the fellow will be tasked with assessing how higher education institutions gather data on contextualised admissions, and the scope for analysing their outcomes.

Following on from these tasks, the fellow will be tasked in determining how we can establish the most robust ways of assessing the effectiveness of contextualised admissions. This will include scoping a possible impact evaluation method, by identifying comparator groups of students. The final stage will include a pilot evaluation testing the approach with one or more higher education institutions, who we will facilitate a partnership with for the project, or a quasi-experiment using data already collected by highlighting the expected outputs from the main stage meaning that both stages two and three (Design and Evaluation stages) could result in a output and publication, but could also be packaged into a single output or publication (provided where this is feasible).

TASO is well placed to support the fellow in achieving wider impact. We are funded by the Office for Students, the regulator for higher education, and have met with their senior leadership team to discuss contextualised admissions. We have also discussed the issue with officials in the Department for Education, as well as with university leaders, and we would introduce and support the fellow in building on these relationships. Our work on building the evidence base is seen as authoritative, and we have partnered with the Sutton Trust to deliver a conference on fair admissions policy and we have participated in an expert roundtable at LSE on the topic.

Building on these relationships, and working with the fellow's networks and experience, we would seek to ensure a number of high-impact and robust outputs.

We anticipate that both stages two and three (Design and Evaluation stages) could result in an output and publication. For a wider policy audience, these could also be packaged into a single output or publication. In the final months of the fellowship, we would work with the fellow to ensure the findings are effectively disseminated to decision-makers, to ensure the greatest possible impact on admissions policy and practice. These would include meeting with officials at the Office for Students as well as at the Department for Education. We would also seek to disseminate the findings through our various higher education sector networks (our mailing list reaches over 2000 people). This would include a briefing for Universities UK (UUK), an influential sector organisation whose membership include Vice Chancellors, and to a coalition of organisations working on access to higher education. Given the current appetite for further learning and application of contextualised admissions, there is a clear opportunity to inform policy and practice, and ultimately to improve the lives of disadvantaged students in higher education.

### **Person specification**

Applications will be assessed by UKRI panel assessment against the following essential opportunity-specific requirements in addition to the generic eligibility and call criteria:

**Essential criteria:**

- Proven academic track record in a relevant discipline (such as education, public policy, economics)
- A good understanding of the UK higher education sector and Equality of Opportunity regulation
- The ability to collate, synthesise and analyse large volumes of quantitative and qualitative data from higher education providers
- The ability to coordinate a large number of project stakeholders, communicating persuasively to ensure smooth implementation of research and evaluation projects
- Proven track record in reviewing published and grey literature to assess and summarise policy debates in higher education
- Proven track record in managing research projects, including scoping, delivering and reporting

Applicants shortlisted from the panel assessment will be assessed at the host led interview selection process against the following desirable opportunity-specific requirements:

**Desirable criteria:**

- Experience in accessing and analysing largescale quantitative datasets, particularly higher education institutional data
- Ability to design and conduct impact evaluation studies, including experimental or quasi-experimental methods
- A track record of convening stakeholders in higher education, across a range of roles and responsibilities
- Commitment to eliminating equality gaps, a passion for the mission of What Works Centres and the broader agenda around evidence-based policy and practice in public services

**Processing personal data**

If applicants are shortlisted by the UKRI assessment panel UKRI will need to share the application and any personal information that it contains with the host for the host led interview selection process.

Your personal data will be handled in line with UK data protection legislation and managed securely. If you would like to know more, including how to exercise your Rights, please see the UKRI [privacy notice](#).

TASO's privacy notice can be found here: [TASO privacy notice](#) and Hosts will delete your data at the end of the selection process unless you are successful, in which case we will retain your data as an independent data controller.