

Putting fairness in context:  
using data to widen access  
to higher education

July 2018



Centre for  
Social Mobility



The University of Manchester

**ALLEN & OVERY**



# Introduction

Children progressing through education do not all have the same chances of success. It is well-evidenced and widely recognised that parents' income, the quality of school attended and myriad other background factors affect educational outcomes for young people.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are recognising this problem and, since 2008, have been mandated to submit annual plans for how to contribute to solving this fundamental injustice. 'Access agreements' outline how each HEIs are investing in and working on widening participation. This is both to increase the diversity of their own student intakes and to increase the opportunities of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds more broadly.

When it comes to increasing the diversity of student bodies, almost all HEIs have developed outreach programmes to raise awareness and aspirations. At a macro-level, these programmes appear to have had only marginal effects for the most selective universities, partly because such universities tend to have selection processes with high levels of competition and entry tariffs. They face a challenge in the fact that, compared to more affluent applicants, there is a much smaller pool of disadvantaged applicants that fulfil the pre-set expectations, including the required grades.

## SECTION 1

In section 1 of this publication, we set out our recommendations and the supporting evidence from the research report.

To overcome this challenge and to recognise the additional barriers disadvantaged young people face, many universities have undertaken new approaches within their admissions processes through contextualisation of applications.

This year (2018), the Fair Education Alliance has commissioned research into the use of contextual data in admissions. The report 'Research into use of contextual data in admissions', produced by the Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter, seeks to shine a light on how contextual data is used in practice at highly selective universities, and to make recommendations on how to ensure that institutions have access to and use contextual data in ways that will make access to higher education in the UK fairer.

The Fair Education Alliance is committed to closing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their wealthier peers regarding access to selective universities. We have drawn on the commissioned research to make our own calls-to-action for improving use of contextual data. We believe that these recommendations, if implemented, will improve access to university for disadvantaged young people and support the narrowing of that gap.

## SECTION 2

In section 2, we include information on how contextual data is currently being used across the sector and in the case study institutions interviewed during this process. This is designed to be of use to practitioners in higher education admissions seeking to understand and learn from existing practice.

# Overview of key messages

The use of contextualised data in admissions has become increasingly more accepted over the last five years and the practice more widespread. Key concerns are now less around reaching consensus that contextualised admissions can be conducted fairly and to the benefit of universities, but rather creating a shared terminology, a common understanding of good data use, and thereby increase transparency.

While contextualisation has become more accepted, it is applied in a wealth of ways across HEIs and it is often unclear (particularly for applicants) exactly which practices are undertaken. We believe this is impeding the spread of good practice, and is creating an unacceptable position for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds whereby it is likely they will be considered a 'contextual' applicant at some HEIs, and not at others, and will have no way of knowing which universities will take their background into account.

– The Fair Education Alliance is calling for improving the effectiveness of the use of contextual data by:

## Public buy-in and Office for Students (OfS) support for the practice:

The OfS should continue to publicly encourage, incentivise and provide support (eg through Access and Participation plan guidance) to institutions using contextualised admissions to ensure fair access and promote social mobility.

## Improved access to relevant data for institutions:

Alternative and more accurate measures than the participation of local areas (POLAR), such as free school meal eligibility (FSM-eligibility)<sup>1</sup> and the multiple equality measure quintile (MEM-quintile),<sup>2</sup> should be made available to HEIs at the application stage. Evidence shows that these measures are more effective at providing meaningful information about a young person's background and would improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of contextualised admissions practices.

## Accountability for institutions on relevant data measures:

Annual student intakes broken down by the recommended measures (eg MEM quintile) should be made publicly available to hold institutions to account and drive improved use of contextual data.

## Increased transparency for applicants:

1\_The OfS should require HEIs to publicise what kinds of data they use in their contextual admissions processes in locations that will be accessed as a matter of course by applicants, eg stated on the UCAS application page for each individual course.

2\_The most selective universities should continue to publish and increase awareness of joint guidance for careers leaders within schools, outlining which contextual factors they each take into consideration, and update such guidance annually. This kind of guidance can currently be found through the Advancing Access website.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NB – There's a growing school of thought that FSM-eligibility isn't a reliable indicator in isolation but should be used alongside other measures as with the MEM.

<sup>2</sup> The Multiple Equality Measure uses statistical modelling techniques applied to a data set of pupils in all English schools linked to UCAS admissions data, and combines a range of equality dimensions (sex, ethnic group, POLAR, secondary education sector type, and FSM status) within which, pupils are aggregated into five groups by their likelihood to enter higher education.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.advancingaccess.ac.uk/2/content/3>



**Greater consistency around principles and terminology:**

The OfS should facilitate discussions across the HE sector with the aim to settle on shared terminology when it comes to use of contextual data in admissions, to decrease the risk of confusion and misperceptions, eg differential vs contextual offers.

**Shared commitment to measuring impact on student outcomes:**

As the Evidence and Impact Exchange is developed, HEIs should reach a consensus on what information is beneficial to monitor the impact of the use of contextual data and report on this through their Access and Participation Plans.

# Section 1: Improving the use of contextualised admissions

## Contextualised data in admissions: moving to consensus

### IN THIS REPORT, CONTEXTUAL DATA IS DEFINED AS FOLLOWS:

Data matched to applicants (including through outreach) in order to assess an applicant's prior attainment and potential to succeed in higher education in the context of the circumstances in which their attainment has been obtained.

Perceptions of contextualising admissions have changed over time, and the sector has come a long way since Bristol University came under attack for prioritising applicants from lower performing schools in the early 2000s.<sup>4</sup> The authors of the commissioned research report,<sup>5</sup> who also conducted a large research project on contextualised admissions in 2013,

found that resistance has almost vanished over five years. Key concerns are now less around reaching consensus that contextualised admissions can be conducted fairly and to the benefit of universities, but rather focus on creating a shared terminology, a common understanding of good data use, and thereby increasing transparency. As one interviewee put it:

*“If you go back ten years plus, institutions were using it in very pioneering ways, and there were lightning bolts of criticism about the impact it might be having on standards and on potential applicants from more advantaged backgrounds. As contextualised data has been accepted and become more established, the debate has changed to how to do it more efficiently and effectively.”*

While contextualisation has become widely accepted, it is applied in a wealth of ways across HEIs and it is often unclear exactly which practices are undertaken. In the public domain, discussions over contextualised admissions are almost exclusively focused on giving lower offers to disadvantaged applicants, but the term covers a range of practices such as the ‘flagging’ of applicants for additional consideration to such differential offers.<sup>6</sup>

The HE sector is at a point where we need to move beyond the debate of whether or not we should use contextualised data in admissions and focus on how to do it more efficiently and effectively.

### WHY CONTEXTUALISE?

The stakeholders participating in the research, including the nine universities, largely agreed that universities have a role to play in enhancing social mobility, and that contextualisation of admissions is a key tool in this. Moreover, an internal core argument in HEIs concerns the benefits to academic excellence, by identifying talent not immediately obvious in grades achieved and predicted.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2003/mar/10/highereducation.accessstouniversity>

<sup>5</sup> See the full research report by University of Exeter ‘Research into use of contextual data in admissions’, Centre for Social Mobility, University of Exeter May 2018

<sup>6</sup> For further detail see Section 2 and the report in full

*“For these [highly selective] institutions it is about attracting the very best students, wherever they might be and whatever background they come from. To do this they have to appeal to students who have the potential to study with them and this means looking at the individual as a whole to see if they have had the same opportunities as others, and had the kind of opportunities that allow you to be in the best position to gain access to these institutions.”*

HE stakeholder

To some interviewees, the matter was mainly about ensuring fairness of access. Looking beyond the single measure of prior attainment is now relatively well-established as a credible approach to admissions.<sup>7</sup>

External factors have had an impact on this, with stakeholders quoting the impact of Office for Fair Access (OFFA), both in terms of approval and increased fee income going to widening participation, the importance of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) performance indicators for highly selective institutions, developments in the Scottish HE sector,<sup>8</sup> as well as the extent to which the Government has been focused on social mobility.

*“We need to address these easy perceptions of fairness, that fairness is about taking people on the same grades. We need to move to a more challenging measure of equality, we need to change the perceived wisdom and the current narrative and think about more challenging admissions systems.”*

HE stakeholder

---

<sup>7</sup> P. 9

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/publications/working-to-widen-access>



Regardless of motivations, interviewees agreed that the potential of contextualised admissions to increase the opportunities of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds must be harnessed. Several interviewees gave the sense that there currently is a window of opportunity, given the relative enthusiasm and support for contextualised admissions. While this was generally perceived with optimism, it was also highlighted that this trend should be taken advantage of to push progress further, by holding institutions to account effectively on measures of widening participation.

*“Access and progression appear to be in the DNA [of the OfS] and there should be a much greater emphasis on outcomes and on institutions making real progression around this. If we carry on as we are, very incrementally, then it will be over 30 years before we get near equality. If the rhetoric is followed up there will be a greater push for action, more radical action and we will make more rapid progress.”*

HE stakeholder

### **Recommendation 1: Public buy-in and Office for Students (OfS) support for the practice**

The OfS should continue to publicly encourage, incentivise and provide support (eg through Access and Participation plan guidance) to institutions using contextualised admissions to ensure fair access and promote social mobility.

# Improving the use of data in admissions

## Data

The chosen data/indicators used in contextual admissions are critical to its effectiveness and determines to what extent the practice will reach the pool of applicants it is intended to reach. The data used by institutions determines how 'disadvantage' is defined, and a wide range of approaches are adopted. Generally, HEIs have largely split into two diverging trends when it comes to the use of contextual data.<sup>9</sup>

The first is to use 'sector standard' indicators of widening participation, as linked to national monitoring. This is the POLAR measure, which is an area-based assessment of HE progression, and splits young people into quintiles of advantage/disadvantage. When used to assess the relative disadvantage of individual applicants, some argue it is limited as it covers geographical areas and in some cases thereby groups together applicants from significantly different backgrounds. It is, however, the only measure for which information about HEI admissions with regard to diversity is made publicly available, and it is therefore unsurprising that universities would choose to prioritise it.

The second is to adopt increasingly nuanced data sources, gathering as much information as possible on applicants including area-, school- and individual-level characteristics, to get the most accurate impression of an applicant's context.

The universities that are already working with more nuanced data are doing so in a wide variety of ways, each creating their own challenges (**see table below**).

Type of data	Benefits	Issues
Individual-level information	The most important type of contextual information because it is specific to individual circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Self-reported data is unreliable due to problems with misinterpretation or deliberate manipulation by applicants (requires external verification)</li> <li>– Administrative sources of individual-level data such as eligibility for FSM is not currently available as part of the application process</li> </ul>
School level information, eg school performance data for GCSE and A-levels	<p>Much of the information at school level is already in the public domain</p> <p>Can help to identify outliers in performance mapped against their school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Matching of data fields to schools and colleges is resource-intensive due to the variety of different school identifiers used, along with differences in the metrics across the UK regions, plus difficulties in identifying educational history where applicants apply through consortia or have changed institutions</li> <li>– Achievement data is labour-intensive to update annually and can leave out BTEC and IB applicants to HE</li> <li>– School-level information might not be necessary if more individual level data becomes available</li> <li>– Annual performance is subject to fluctuation based on the performance of that year's cohort, therefore using an average across more years is robust. However, the many changes to qualifications in recent years make this a challenge</li> </ul>
Area level information, eg area deprivation, GE progression and geo-socio-economic profiling	<p>Relatively easy to match to applications based on postcode</p> <p>Generally available across the UK (although some area level measures such as Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) are not consistent across the four UK regions)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Individuals may not conform to their area profile, particularly where the units of analysis are wide and based on historical patterns (eg POLAR)</li> <li>– Commercial sources of area level information such as ACORN and MOSAIC allow for disaggregation to a finer level, but incur an ongoing charge</li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> P. 18 (REFERENCE FULL REPORT)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2017/201729/>

The issue of inconsistencies across the UK nations and a problem of missing data have been highlighted as a particular concern for school and college level indicators of educational disadvantage. Using area-based measures potentially offers better coverage but selectors cannot be assured that every applicant will have the same background characteristics as their peers.

Some institutions that use contextual data have sought to test the reliability and accuracy of the data by testing the rate at which the data source throws up 'false-positive' and 'false-negative' flags. It is then up to the institutions to assess what rate of inaccuracy is acceptable, with a suggestion that tolerance of a low rate of potential inaccuracy would be acceptable to many institutions, especially where the existence of disadvantage can be verified using other sources.

The most reliable measure would be an externally validated, individual-level source, such as FSM-eligibility. A proxy for FSM-eligibility is included in UCAS' new MEM measure, which seems to have the potential to act as a potential additional source of contextual information. UCAS is currently running a small-scale trial to understand MEM's potential within contextualised admissions. Evaluation later this summer will inform next steps.

### **Recommendation 2: Improved access to relevant data for institutions**

Alternative and more accurate measures than the participation of local areas (POLAR), such as free school meal eligibility (FSM-eligibility) and the multiple equality measure quintile (MEM-quintile), should be made available to HEIs at the application stage. Evidence shows that these measures are more effective at providing meaningful information about a young person's background and would improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of contextualised admissions practices.

### **Recommendation 3: Accountability for institutions on relevant data measures**

Annual student intakes broken down by the recommended measures (eg MEM-quintile) should be made publicly available to hold institutions to account and drive improved use of contextual data.

<sup>11</sup> (Moore et al, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> The Multiple Equality Measure uses statistical modelling techniques applied to a data set of pupils in all English schools linked to UCAS admissions data, and combines a range of equality dimensions (sex, ethnic group, POLAR, secondary education sector type, and FSM status) within which, pupils are aggregated into five groups by their likelihood to enter higher education.

<sup>13</sup> NB – There's a growing school of thought that FSM-eligibility isn't a reliable indicator in isolation but should be used alongside other measures as with the MEM.

<sup>14</sup> The Multiple Equality Measure uses statistical modelling techniques applied to a data set of pupils in all English schools linked to UCAS admissions data, and combines a range of equality dimensions (sex, ethnic group, POLAR, secondary education sector type, and FSM status) within which, pupils are aggregated into five groups by their likelihood to enter higher education.

<sup>15</sup> P. 25

## Transparency and awareness

In addition to creating challenges for individual HEIs, the variety of contextual data sources and measures used is making it difficult for potential applicants and their advisers to assess where and how their chances might be enhanced, and the benefit of encouraging more applicants from non-traditional backgrounds is lost.

To start with, the sector should make sure that applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds are aware that they may be eligible for additional consideration at institutions they may otherwise think are out of their reach. This could be achieved through a public campaign directed at pupils, but also at the designated careers leaders at schools. Resources available from Advancing Access are a positive resource in this space. Careers leaders need to have the confidence to advise students to reach for more selective universities, and have the information to hand about which background factors matter to which universities.

The report from the University of Exeter demonstrates that this is not the case at present. Schools reported that the admissions landscape is confusing and that wide variability in practices has led to low levels of trust in admissions processes. This also results in low faith in the application of contextualised admissions, making it even less likely that schools will advise pupils in this area. These views were mirrored by HEIs who generally thought the understanding of contextualised admissions at schools was low.

**INCREASING TRANSPARENCY AND AWARENESS OF CONTEXTUALISED ADMISSIONS DOES NOT COME WITHOUT RISK TO THE SECTOR. AS ONE INTERVIEWEE EXPLAINED:**

*“The sector is under huge pressure regarding transparency and fairness and this is the real challenge; explaining what this means to others and getting support for it. You are saying to the parents who have worked hard and paid to put their child through fee-paying education that their child’s A\* is less than that of someone else.”*

HE stakeholder

It is therefore essential that public support from central bodies and Government continue to express endorsements of contextualised admissions practices and that all parts of the sector work in collaboration to overcome the misunderstandings and misrepresentations that persist among the public.

#### **Recommendation 4: Increased transparency for applicants**

The OfS should require HEIs to publicise the types of data they use in their contextual admissions processes in locations that will be accessed as a matter of course by applicants, eg stated on the UCAS application page for each individual course.

The most selective universities should continue to publish, and increase awareness of, joint guidance for careers leaders within schools, outlining which contextual factors they each take into consideration, and update such guidance annually.

#### **Recommendation 5 offers: Greater consistency around principles and terminology**

The OfS should facilitate discussions across the HE sector with the aim to settle on shared terminology when it comes to use of contextual data in admissions, to decrease the risk of confusion and misperceptions, eg differential vs contextual.

## Impact of contextual data approaches

It is difficult for HEIs to produce accurate evaluations of the impact of contextualised admissions policies. In many cases it is hard to say what would have happened to an application without contextual factors being taken into account. For example, cases where applications have been flagged for contextual data and a lower offer made on that basis, could still consequently then meet the standard criteria. Whether or not the contextual data has been used in the decision process to provide an offer may not have been recorded.

Moreover, there is not a single way or point at which the contextual information might be used. It can also come into play at any stage from invitation to interview to offer-making and, finally, to an institution's approach to 'near-miss' students when A-level results are received, again, increasing the complexity on how the use of the contextual information in the process is evaluated.

Some institutions are trying to collect more data on the decision-making factors of admission selectors to understand the role of contextual data, and more broadly the reasons behind prioritising some applicants over others. By monitoring decision-making more closely and using aggregate-level admissions trends, universities are trying to quantify the impact of contextualised admissions. One case study institution found that "the number of widening participation applicants admitted through contextual data doubled in a very short period of time, before plateauing". The challenge now is to achieve more applications from contextually flagged applicants.

Generally, institutions are able to demonstrate increases in the numbers who apply and are admitted from disadvantaged backgrounds, although factors other than contextualised admissions, such as outreach activities, would have contributed to this, too.

HEIs maintain that there has been no associated decline in the 'quality' of their student intakes, but are conducting internal research on the outcomes for WP students to verify this. This will be difficult for the same reasons as above, with a lack of clarity as to who has been admitted due to contextual factors and who would have been admitted regardless. Generally, however, universities are finding that WP students are performing well,<sup>16</sup> and there is optimism among WP departments regarding student outcomes, although there is also a recognition that support throughout university has a role to play for all students.

In order to increase the confidence of selectors and to avoid accusations of 'setting students up to fail', some interviewees argued that it would be helpful to establish a floor standard for success on different courses, by assessing the average prior qualifications of those who complete the degree successfully. Some universities are already doing so internally, such as another case study institution interviewed, who compared the outcomes for disadvantaged students to that of their peers by creating so-called 'equi-potential pairs of students'. These are created by comparing the prior attainment of WP and non-WP students who reach the same degree outcomes, and the university found that applicants from low performing schools raised their attainment relative to their peers with higher levels of prior attainment. This evidence was used to estimate appropriate levels of differential offer-making, guidance which is provided to academic selectors who still have final judgement.<sup>17</sup> If universities pooled this evidence together, a larger evidence-base on the potential for differential offer-making could be created.

### Recommendation 6: Shared commitment to measuring impact on student outcomes

As the Evidence and Impact Exchange is developed, HEIs should reach a consensus on what information is beneficial to monitor the impact of the use of contextual data and report on this through their Access and Participation Plans.

<sup>16</sup> NB – with some exceptions for certain groups of students. For example there are concerns around the BAME attainment gap

<sup>17</sup> In this example relating to students from POLAR3 quintile 1 (areas denoted by postcode with the lowest participation rates into Higher Education)

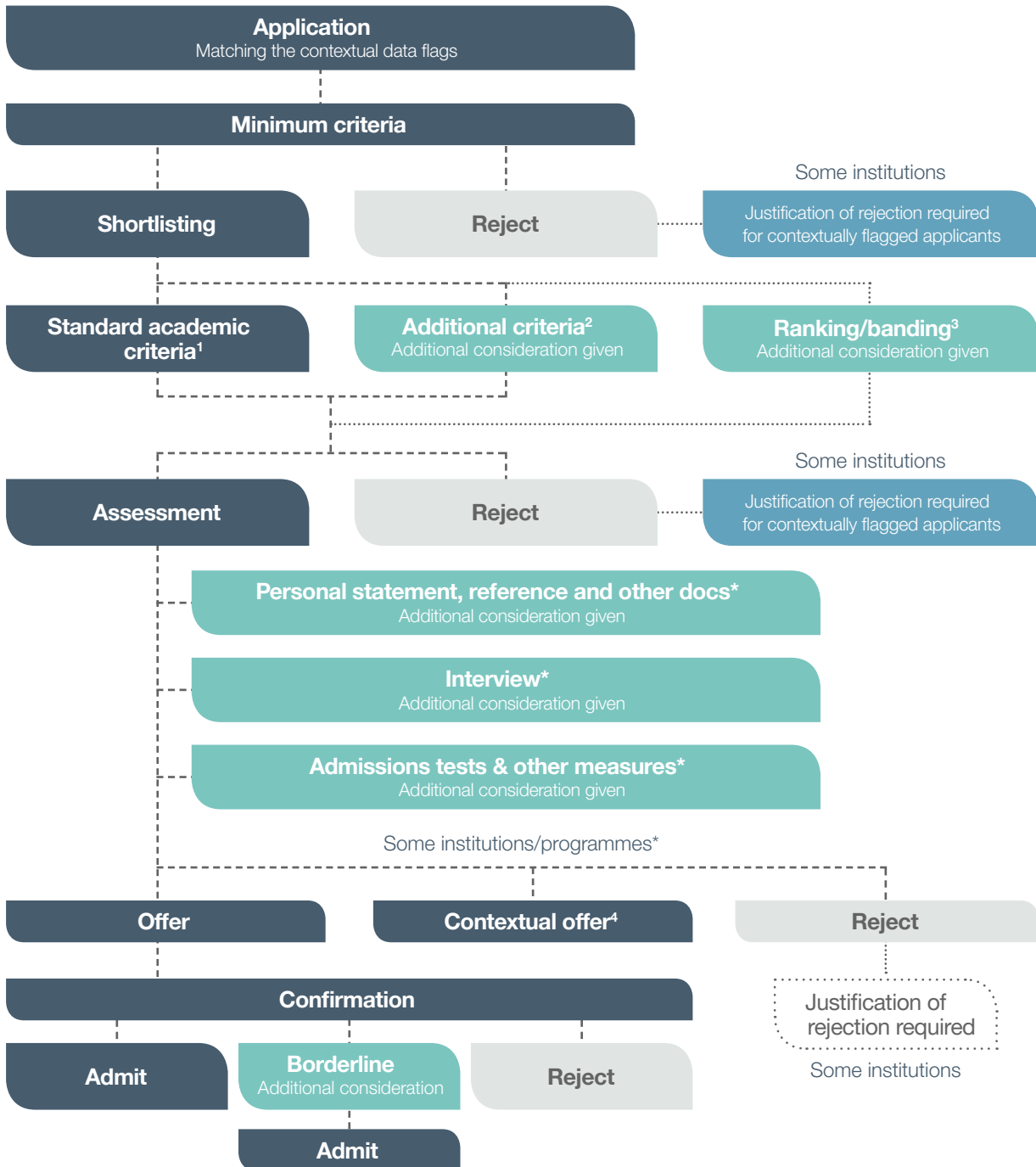
<sup>18</sup> Case study P. 30

## Section 2: Contextual data practices today

This section presents two different models of contextualisation, one that gives widening participation applicants additional consideration (**Figure 1**), and one which allows for differential offer-making (**Figure 2**). It also reflects what the report authors observed as some of the most helpful practices in the use of contextual data across institutions. Together, these can hopefully serve as inspiration to other institutions, as well as to improve broader understanding of the wide variety of practices that are actually undertaken at selective universities.

## Models of contextual data use

Figure 1: Standard route with additional consideration

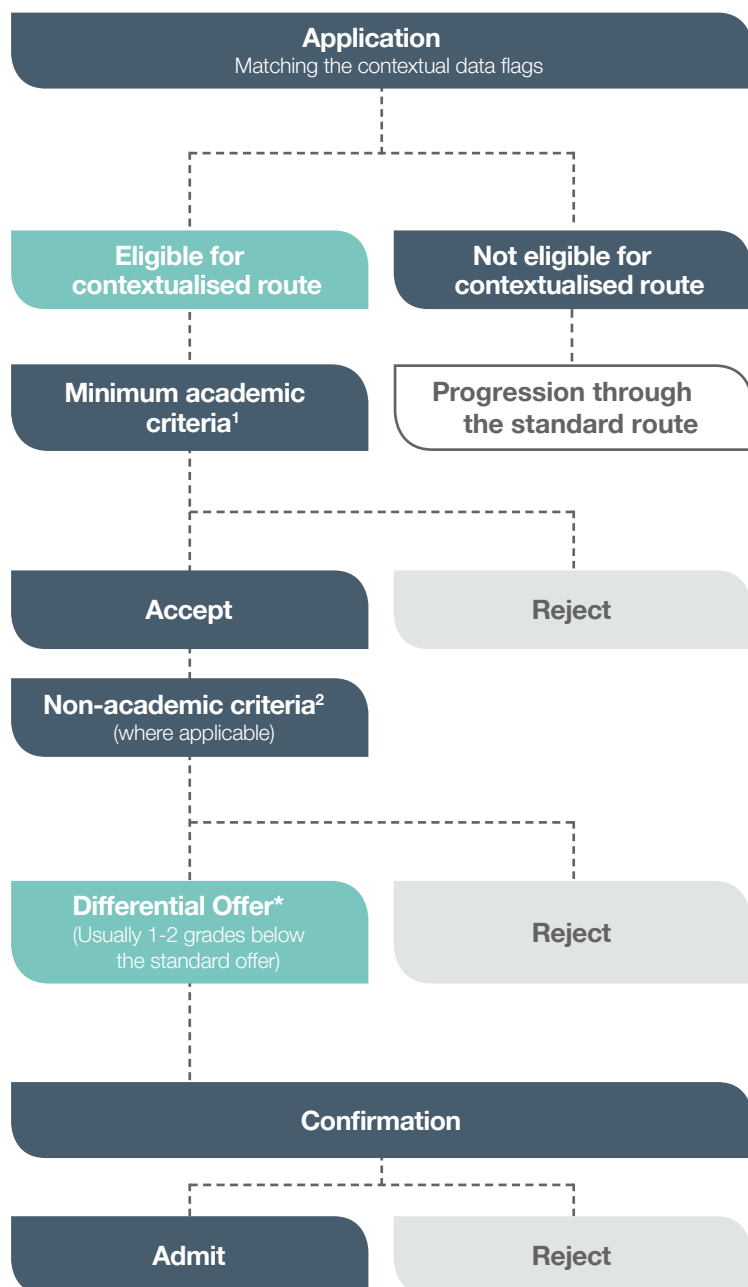


\*Where applicable.

- (1) In some cases selectors could progress WP candidates with predictions below the standard offer in order to make an 'aspirational' offer to WP candidates who perform well at assessment.
- (2) Approach to WP-flagged applicants could include some flexibility within standard offer. For example, WP applicants not required to achieve As in facilitating STEM subjects as long as they receive standard offer overall or, for example, concessions in relation to requirements for work experience.
- (3) Shortlisting could include ranking and contextual data taken into account at this stage, eg through applying an uplift to WP students, or banding based on a shortlisting algorithm.
- (4) Contextual offers made to WP-flagged applicants could include: (i) Lower offers to WP applicants with predicted grades lower than standard offer; (ii) Lower offers to all WP-flagged applicants whether they need it or not (based on predicted grades) where agreed by academic school.



Figure 2: Contextualised route with differential offer



(1) Could include applying an uplift to the contextualised applicants within a ranking process.

(2) Lower offer to all contextually flagged applicants whether they need it or not (based on predicted grades).

## Helpful practices

The nine practices below were singled out in the research conducted by University of Exeter as particularly noteworthy in the application of contextualised admissions.

- **\*Coherence with institutional targets.** Institutions are asked to set targets for widening participation. Coherence between the datasets used for target setting and contextual data use was identified as being useful. At [Case 06], regular and end-of-cycle reporting on the number of applications and offers made, plus replies and acceptances is making the outcomes from the contextual data strategy more visible to senior management. Having a target and being able to show improvement year on year has helped to achieve buy-in across schools and departments.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the measures used for target setting are not always reliable when applied at the individual level, and institutions are developing new measures that can underpin their strategic goals. One example is [Case 08], which has proposed a target relating to students from schools that, in the past, have not been successful at getting students to university or are not applying here.
- **\*Monitoring application decisions.** Collecting clear and robust reason for rejection of contextually flagged applicants at all stages of the application process is important to assist institutional monitoring (and potentially could also help to improve feedback to applicants).
- **\*Developing internal expertise.** As noted above, consistency in the application of the contextual data approach requires expertise to be shared across admissions decision-makers in institutions with devolved decision-making. A case study institution [Case 01] with centralised undergraduate admissions processing took the approach of recruiting to a dedicated post to play an advocacy role for applicants from widening participation backgrounds. Use of electronic admissions software utilising dashboards is an underpinning aspect – helping those involved to record what each recommendation is and giving access to all the underpinning documents online. A dedicated office under-signs decisions relating to contextually flagged applicants; this role ensures there is consistency in approach, and provides the resource to undertake further investigations where appropriate. A similar advocacy role is played at confirmation stage.
- **\*Applying systems to ‘level the playing field’.** Institutions using scoring systems to rank applicants as part of a gathered field have applied an algorithm or allocated additional points to give an uplift to contextually flagged applicants to take account of the likelihood that their ‘raw’ score underestimates their higher education potential. For example, at the University of Bristol, applicants are scored on their academic qualifications (including weightings for GCSE results), with around a fifth getting an uplift at the scoring stage due to having a contextual flag.<sup>20</sup> Contextually flagged applicants might also receive an uplift on the score given to their personal statement (proportionate to the weighting of the personal statement in the admissions process for each course). This approach aims to encourage admissions selectors who are reviewing personal statements to review consistently rather than to attempt to ‘make allowances’ when they allocate a score to an individual.
- **\*Comparing ‘like with like’.** When using scoring across a gathered field by additional criteria following the shortlisting process, for example, ranking applicants by scores achieved during entry examinations, some practitioners have found it helpful to separate the contextually flagged and other applicants. At [Case07] ranking contextually flagged and non-flagged applicants separately according to their scores in entry tests to medical education allowed selectors to consider the relative merits of candidates alongside peers with similar backgrounds, and resulted in slightly more WP applicants being invited to interview than would otherwise be the case (once other criteria such as predicted grades and work experience requirements are taken into account).
- **\*Prioritising flagged applicants for consideration.** Commonly, admissions practitioners spoke about strategies designed to progress applications from contextually flagged applicants where this was the only differentiating factor between applicants with otherwise equivalent achievement profiles at the threshold for entry.

<sup>19</sup> In this example relating to students from POLAR3 quintile 1 (areas denoted by postcode with the lowest participation rates into Higher Education).

<sup>20</sup> The system is based on data modelling which reveals how students are likely to perform in higher education with different levels of prior qualifications.

– **\*Pro-active external communication.** Approaches to external communication of the contextual data strategy to potential applicants (and those who advise them) identified in the research included communication through published admissions statements; general information targeted at applicants on university web pages; dissemination of messages as part of WP outreach activities; and participation in events for advisers giving HE-related careers advice. Information for applicants on websites linking to course information and subject specific entry criteria is thought to be more effective than relying on general information because it is more likely to play directly into applicants' specific HE choices. From an institutional perspective there is an on going imperative to encourage applicants to make best use of their HE choices, including being more aspirational and when there is a real possibility of success in light of contextualised admissions.

– **\*Making contextual indicators accessible.**

Having applicant look-ups was seen as key to universities being able to promote their contextual admissions policy more broadly and directly to applicants in a more meaningful way. The University of Bristol makes available pdf files containing the details of English and Welsh schools and colleges considered to be 'aspiring',<sup>21</sup> and the website contains a link to the Office for Students POLAR postcode look-up facility.<sup>22</sup> The University of Manchester has developed a postcode look-up which applicants can search online to know whether or not their application meets the criteria for a geo-demographic contextual flag, plus a list of schools/colleges is provided which applicants can use to check whether they meet the criteria for the university's WP Plus flag.<sup>23</sup> Most people consulted as part of the case study research would like to see a way of contextualising that focuses on the circumstances of the individual applicant allowing them to see what contextual data will mean to them – including, where relevant, what offer they might be eligible for at those institutions which employ differential offer-making.

– **\*Promoting awareness of contextual data in admissions.** One case study institution [Case 06] is planning to enhance digital marketing activity supporting WP students through the application journey. This will be tailored specifically to students from low participation neighbourhoods in the pre-application stage.

\*Case studies refer to case study institutions in the research undertaken by University of Exeter. See full research report 'Research into use of contextual data in admissions'.

<sup>21</sup> In England these are schools and colleges which fall in the bottom 40 per cent for either: progression to higher education, or average attainment in A-levels, International Baccalaureate, Pre-U and Extended Projects qualifications.

<sup>22</sup> Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/postcode-search/>

<sup>23</sup> These are postcode areas that fall into ACORN categories 4 or 5, or POLAR3 Low Participation Neighbourhoods (Quintile 1). Available at: <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/applications/after-you-apply/contextual-data/indicator/>

---

## GLOBAL PRESENCE

---

Allen & Overy is an international legal practice with approximately 5,400 people, including some 554 partners, working in 44 offices worldwide. Allen & Overy LLP or an affiliated undertaking has an office in each of:

Abu Dhabi	Bucharest (associated office)	Ho Chi Minh City	Moscow	Seoul
Amsterdam	Budapest	Hong Kong	Munich	Shanghai
Antwerp	Casablanca	Istanbul	New York	Singapore
Bangkok	Doha	Jakarta (associated office)	Paris	Sydney
Barcelona	Dubai	Johannesburg	Perth	Tokyo
Beijing	Düsseldorf	London	Prague	Warsaw
Belfast	Frankfurt	Luxembourg	Riyadh (cooperation office)	Washington, D.C.
Bratislava	Hamburg	Madrid	Rome	Yangon
Brussels	Hanoi	Milan	São Paulo	

**Allen & Overy** means Allen & Overy LLP and/or its affiliated undertakings. The term **partner** is used to refer to a member of Allen & Overy LLP or an employee or consultant with equivalent standing and qualifications or an individual with equivalent status in one of Allen & Overy LLP's affiliated undertakings.

© Allen & Overy LLP 2018 | CS1806\_CDD-51625\_ADD-75946