

Research into use of contextual data in admissions

Final report to the Fair Education Alliance (FEA)

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

The Fair Education Alliance (FEA) commissioned the Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter to undertake this study into the use of contextual data in university admissions. The research was aims to:

- provide examples of practice and lessons learned that might be of practical use to admissions teams;
- to support awareness raising amongst teachers, advisers, parents and students about the existing practice and its potential as a tool to promote social mobility; and
- to promote coherence/complementarity of approach with other work undertaken in this area.

This study was designed to take account of:

- Current practice in the use of contextual data in admissions in English universities, and views on this;
- Evidence of whether use of contextual data in university admissions is effective in promoting both widening participation (WP) and fair access and findings on the performance once at university of students admitted on a contextual basis, mapping of progression after undergraduate degrees and differences by subject and institution;
- The opportunities for and concerns and/or barriers against extending the practice of contextualised admissions further.

1.2 Context for the research: Inequality in educational progression

There are clear differences in rates of progression to higher education drawn along socio-economic lines. For example the latest Government figures on widening participation in higher education shows a gap by Free School Meal (FSM) status of 15 year old state funded pupils who entered HE by age 19 of 18 percentage points (24% of FSM pupils compared to 41% of non-FSM pupils) (SFR 39/2017). The differences are apparent across various measures of socio-economic disadvantage (Table 2.1) and the difference in entry rates by level of disadvantage is particularly high when looking at progression to the providers with the highest entry requirements. For instance the share of young people progressing to HE at a high-tariff provider who were on Free School Meals (FSM) is four times lower than the rate for non-FSM students. This gap is even more pronounced when multiple equality factors are considered simultaneously, as in UCAS' Multiple Equality Measure (MEM), where the most disadvantaged young people are 9.8 times less likely to progress to higher tariff providers than the most advantaged.

The on-going persistence of differences in educational opportunities between students from lower and higher socio-economic group backgrounds raises issues for social mobility and social justice. Differences in progression to higher education can mainly be explained by lower general levels of attainment associated with low socio-economic group students, and to a lesser extent differences in the type and range of qualifications held. Moreover, even among high achieving students who do attend university, the relatively small group of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who get the highest grades are less likely to attend a high-tariff university than their more privileged peers even after qualification levels are taken into account (*Chowdry et al, 2013*).

Research with young people highlights that cultural and educational background affects their higher education choices and opportunities. Geo-demographic or 'neighbourhood' effects have also been shown to affect young people's progression to higher education, i.e. the chances of young people progressing to higher education depend on where in the country they have grown up (*Dorling and Corver, 2005*). Family background in particular, especially parental experience of HE has been shown to have a major influence on educational outcomes (*Sutton Trust, 2010*), plus access to careers advice has long been shown to affect choice of HE institution (*Reay, David and Ball, 2001*). The University of Bristol's 'High Potential Learners' project looked at various different influences on KS5 student's decision-making on Russell Group university participation. The research highlights that choice of

Table 1.1: Gap in HE entry of young people by various measures of disadvantage

	HE entry				Entry to high tariff providers (1)			
State school pupils on Free School Meals (FSM) 18 year olds entering in 2017	FSM	Non-FSM	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)	FSM	Non-FSM	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)
	16.9%	33.8%	17pp	2.00	2.5%	10.0%	7pp	4.00
POLAR3 measure (3) 18 year olds entering in 2017	Q1 (dis-advantaged)	Q5 (advantaged)	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)	Q1 (dis-advantaged)	Q5 (advantaged)	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)
	20.4%	47.1 %	27pp	2.31	4.0%	22.0%	18pp	5.5
UCAS' multiple equality measure (MEM) (4) 18 year olds entering in 2017	Group 1 (dis-advantaged)	Group 5 (advantaged)	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)	Group 1 (dis-advantaged)	Group 5 (advantaged)	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)
	13.8%	53.1%	39pp	3.84	2.4%	24.1%	22pp	9.84
	HE entry				Entry to most selective providers (5)			
BIS's progression by age 19 by FSM status measure Free School Meal Aged 15 in 2009/10 entering HE by age 19 in 2013/14	FSM (dis-advantaged)	Non-FSM (advantaged)	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)	FSM (dis-advantaged)	Non-FSM (advantaged)	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)
	22%	39%	17pp	1.77	-	-	-	-
BIS's Progression by age 19 measure Progressed to HE by age 19 in 2013/14	State school (dis-advantaged)	Independent school (advantaged)	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)	State school (dis-advantaged)	Independent school (advantaged)	Percentage point (pp) gap	Difference (2)
	62%	85%	23pp	1.37	23%	64%	41pp	2.78

Source: SFR 39/2017 and UCAS End of Cycle Report

(1) UCAS groups institutions based on their average level of attainment of their accepted applicants. High tariff providers are those with the top third of all UK 18 year old acceptances with highest attainment.

(2) The difference denotes how much more likely the advantaged group is to enter HE compared to the disadvantaged group, i.e. a difference of 3.5 indicates that the advantaged group is 3.5 times more likely to enter HE compared to the disadvantaged group.

(3) POLAR3 is area-based measure of educational disadvantage based on the geographical variation in participation by grouping small areas across the UK by the level of young HE participation.

(4) The MEM 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, POLAR3, secondary education sector type, and FSM status) in model, pupils are aggregated into 5 groups by their likelihood to enter higher education.

(5) The most selective are defined as the top third of HEPs when ranked by mean UCAS tariff score from the top three A level grades of entrants.

facilitating subjects at A level and grades achieved account for much of the socio-economic gap between high-potential learners in different Russell Group institutions, suggesting there is a need for greater understanding of how and why learners choose A level subjects, and how this relates to university choice (Tikly et al, 2016).

Concerns about under-representation of disadvantaged young people in higher education are long-standing (Dearing, 1997). The patterns in higher education suggest that student diversity is not widespread, with broadly three groups of institutions: those which have 'traditional' student profiles (i.e. despite increases in numbers have similar students to those before mass higher education); those with profiles which show clusters of particular types of diverse student groups; and other institutions that have managed to increase the diversity of the student body. In terms of social class, the limited diversity in student population is most obvious amongst 'elite' institutions. In 2015 the (then) Prime Minister set a goal to double the rates of students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education between 2009/2010 and 2019/2020 (BIS, 2015).¹ Whilst entry rates at age 18 for young people in quintile 1 (the most disadvantaged) in England have risen to 20.4% (from 13.6% in 2009/2010) the rate remains below target and well below the proportion in quintile 5 who progress to HE (47.1%) (UCAS, 2017a). In Scotland expectations have been set by the First Minister for the Scottish higher education sector (to increase student representation among full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities from the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods on the Scottish Indexes of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD20) to at least 20% by 2030.

1.3 Description of the research method

The interest in contextual data aims to support higher education providers to add value in admissions decision-making. The research included three inter-related lines of investigation:

- In-depth interviews with sector stakeholders including a range of perspectives including those representing policy makers, institutional interests, and education;
- Carrying out case studies with a sample of ten HEIs, focusing on their current practices in contextual admissions and the application of contextual data. The case studies were built through in-depth interviews and reviews of materials and evidence;
- A small scale review of recent literature on contextual data in university admissions in the UK, including published reports, academic articles and policy documents.

1.3.1 Stakeholder research

Stakeholders consulted during the research were drawn from HE representative bodies, policy making organisations, third sector bodies and organisations representing the voice of schools and young people. 15 individuals contributed to the study, drawn from the following organisations: DfE, OFFA, UCAS, UUK, The Russell Group, The Sutton Trust, the former director of SPA, ARK Schools Network and Teach First. Overall, stakeholders were drawing on very different experiences of HE admissions; some were involved in developing national fair access policy or conducting related research, others were data specialists working on the development and analysis of contextual data and a small number offered support (and challenge) to the sector to develop a contextual data policy. The majority of stakeholders had been engaged in the use of contextual data as a mechanism to increase student diversity for a number of years, with several describing how they had been working in this field since the 1990s. One stakeholder identified their involvement in progression accords when working as a Director of Admissions as an early example of contextualised admissions practice: having a progression accord allowed the university to provide recognition of completion of progression activities through a lower offer. Other stakeholders had come to contextual data more recently and for some it was very much on the periphery of their day-to-day work or they were discussing issues around the '*edges of their knowledge*'. Two stakeholders represented the views of schools and drew on the experiences of teachers and applicants who navigate through the HE admissions process.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-told-to-reach-out-to-students-from-poorest-neighbourhoods-under-new-guidance>

1.3.2 Institutional case studies

The institutional case studies focused on high-tariff HEIs and included nine institutions in England. These institutions share characteristics: in most cases being long-established higher education providers (pre-92) with strong demand for places, and international research records. Competition for places and high entry standards imply these institutions are more likely to be prohibitive for educationally disadvantaged students who are less likely on average to reach the required entry level in terms of qualifications, who may be deterred from applying due to a reputation for exclusivity and may lack the social and cultural capital to compete with more advantaged applicants with greater access to different life experiences, academic coaching, and better higher education related careers advice. Table 1.2 reviews the profile of institutions included in the research by entry standards, levels of recruitment of young full-time UK domiciled first degree undergraduates, and the shares of these from under-represented groups. Over half of the sample were below the location adjusted benchmark² for entrants from state schools and colleges in 2016/17 academic year.

We are extremely grateful to the institutions for agreeing to participate in this project and would like to thank the staff members for their support in taking part in the research interviews and data collection.

Table 1.2: Overview of case study institutions

	Average UCAS score of new students entering the university	UK domiciled young full-time first degree undergraduate entrants 2016/17		
		Total	% from state schools & colleges	% from Low Participation Neighbourhoods*
The University of Bath	186	2,575	72.6 (-)	5.6
The University of Bristol	184	4,205	64.5 (-)	3.7
The University of Cambridge	226	2,505	62.6 (-)	3.0
The University of Exeter	176	4,155	69.4 (-)	5.3
The University of Liverpool	147	4,800	88.4	9.6
London School of Economics and Political Science	200	715	68.4	6.1
Loughborough University	162	3,155	84.1	6.8
The University of Manchester	169	5,240	82.8	7.9
The University of Oxford	217	2,575	57.7 (-)	4.6
All providers (England)	-	-	90.0	11.4

*Using POLAR3. (-) denotes share significantly below the institutions location adjusted benchmark. Sources: Complete University Guide; HESA Performance Indicators

1.3.3 Review of the literature on contextual data in admissions

The literature on contextual data use in admissions comes from a range of sources. During the current review particular attention was paid to:

- **Theoretical work on admissions.** There is a rich theoretical literature on social mobility in general and social reproduction. These works highlights the importance of social, cultural and economic capital and information, advice and guidance in applicants' decisions to pursue and to be successful in higher education. The models of effectively and maximally maintained inequality have been put forward as theoretical tools for understanding the continued dominance of more privileged students in higher prestige strata of education, postgraduate study and graduate-level jobs (*Raftery and Hout, 1993, Lucas, 2001*). There is a comparatively smaller literature focusing specifically on admissions in the UK, although admissions books are so manifold in the US that they could be called a genre (*Stevens, 2007, Posselt, 2016*).
- **Reviews of admissions in practice** across the sector, including recent reports by UCAS that have found no evidence of bias within the admissions process at sector level (*UCAS, 2016, 2017b*).
- **Reviews of practices towards contextual data.** Sector-wide research into contextualised admissions previously included an annual survey by Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) in the years to 2015. More recently, *Boliver et al (2017)* reviewed the practices to contextual data in admissions by thirty Sutton Trust institutions through a desk research exercise. There have

² HESA calculates a location adjusted benchmark to take into account some of the factors which contribute to the differences between providers since due to location and other variability the average values are not necessarily helpful when comparing providers.

also been a series of in-depth case study research reports albeit on a relatively small number of exemplar institutions (*Bridges et al 2012, Moore et al 2013*).

- **Research evidence of the outcomes for contextualised students.** There have been a number of studies using institutional level data, as well as studies based on longitudinal tracking of participating students (e.g. *Jones et al, 2017; Smith, 2016; Taylor et al, 2013; Hoard and Johnson, 2010*). In addition there exist a number of multi-institutional (*Sutton Trust, 2017*) and national level analyses (*HEFCE, 2005, 2014, Crawford, 2014*). There is little analysis by subject although this dimension makes a difference to outcomes (where subject level studies exist they tend to confirm indications of differences by subject but the sample sizes make research problematic).
- **Policy papers addressing issues of social mobility.** Contextual data in admissions has featured in a number of policy documents by governmental bodies making recommendations for policy and practice (*Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013; All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, 2017*).
- **Technical reports.** Conceptual work is going looking at the data quality issues and assessing suitability of different sources of contextual information (e.g. *Gorard et al, 2017*). Information on data challenges in contextualisation and comparing students has also arisen as a by-product of other process in English universities, for example, the TEF benchmarking process.

Previous authors have identified conclusions for policy and practice along with suggestions for further research to confirm the conclusions. There would appear to be fertile potential for further research into contextualised admissions. Gaps are evident in the literature in relation to specific groups of students. In particular, there does not appear to have been much research on mature learners (defined as aged 21 or over). Overall in UK mature students accounted for 31% of full-time undergraduate enrolments in 2015/16 and so they are by no means a peripheral group.³ Part-time learners are also an under-researched group in this regard with analyses complicated by their lower prevalence, making robust granular comparisons difficult.

1.4 Definition of contextual data in admissions

A key finding from the stakeholder research was that the term contextual data holds a number of different meanings, and 'contextual admissions' and 'contextual data' tend to be used interchangeably. For the purposes of this report the term contextual data is used to describe ***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.***

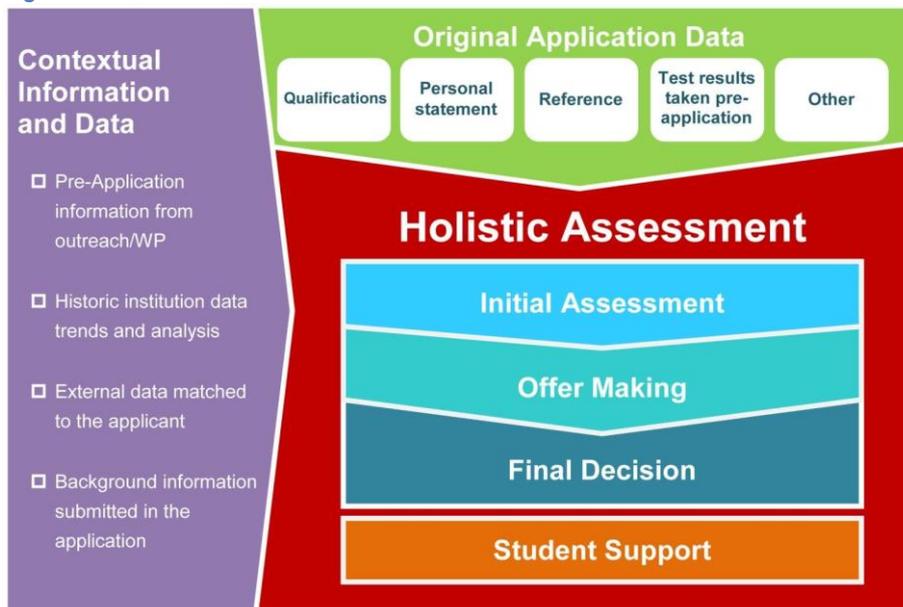
Contextual information can be contained in personal statements or school references or extenuating circumstances forms where universities use them. This is information that is not based on the metrics or indices indicated above and often relate to family context (e.g. experience of bereavement or divorce, taking on caring responsibilities) or illness. Having a refugee or migrant background could also be highlighted here. The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) programme worked to define how contextual information and data is used during higher education applications and admissions processes as part of holistic assessment (illustrated in Figure 1.1). Contextual information and data can be applied at different stages of the application and admissions process, including:

- for targeting of widening participation and fair access activities;
- to establish who to interview;
- in decision-making on an application;
- to identify applicants who may need additional support or advice during application, transition or entry to higher education;
- monitoring and reporting.

³ HESA yearly overviews <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/overviews?keyword=All&breakdown%5B%5D=582&year=620>

The focus of this research is on the use of contextual data to inform providers' decision-making on applicants throughout the undergraduate admissions process.

Figure 1.1: Elements of contextualised admissions



Source: SPA, taken from Moore et al (2013) p. 12

1.5 This report

The findings of this research are of interest to higher education providers seeking to develop effective contextual data approaches, and to sector bodies and stakeholders with an interest in fair admissions, widening participation and access in undergraduate admissions. This report is structured as follows:

- Section Two reviews the arguments for and against the application of contextual data in university admissions, and the evidence on the current practice towards contextual data use within highly selective institutions in England, and discussion of the evidence on the impact of contextual data and student outcomes. It concludes with a review of the current admissions landscape and a discussion of the data sources for contextual data. This section also contains the perspective of stakeholders, described against each of the key themes identified in the literature.
- Section 3 describes the use of contextual data in practice based on the research with the case study institutions. It focuses on different aspects of contextual data use, with a particular emphasis on learning from the case studies in relation to the selection of contextual indicators and the ways in which contextual data is being applied within the admissions process.
- Section 4 provides some conclusions and recommendations to support the future development of contextual data in admissions in England.

2 Key themes in the literature on contextual data and in current debate

The rationale for contextualised admissions draws on ‘fairness’ research and ‘excellence’ research, and is linked to the UK policy agenda of increasing the number of disadvantaged students who apply and succeed in higher education. This section brings together an overview of the literature with the views and perspectives of the sector stakeholders involved in the research.

Key findings

- Perspectives on contextual data use are underpinned by value positions which reflect wider debates around the principles of higher education. From a meritocratic perspective education is a moderator of inequality, whilst social reproduction theories contend that power relationships drawn along social class lines regulate opportunities in education.
- Stakeholders suggest that thinking holistically about an individual’s application and looking beyond a single measure of prior attainment, had on the whole been relatively well established as a credible approach in admissions to ensure fair treatment and improve access.
- A key argument internally in institutions is recruiting for academic excellence, however, the evidence base is still relatively weak and at risk due to changes in young people’s qualifications.
- The current metrics used to contextualise are imperfect and not well understood outside of institutions: there needs to be increased access to reliable individual level data. Policy designations particularly use of the POLAR classification has affected the choice of indicators of disadvantage.
- The lack of progress in raising attainment of disadvantaged young people adds weight to the argument for making differential offers, although contextual data can be applied at different stages in the admissions process, with it’s use institutionally determined.

2.1 The arguments for and against contextualised admissions

From a meritocratic perspective, education is a moderator of inequality – and it has been observed that both Labour and Conservative government policy positions traditionally appear to draw on meritocratic value positions (*Boudon, 1979, Themelis 2008*). However, addressing the differences between privileged and non-privileged applicants to higher education has many characteristics of a ‘wicked problem’ – i.e. categorised as being difficult to resolve for several reasons: incomplete or contradictory information, changing requirements that are often difficult to recognise, complex interdependencies with other problems (most notably inequality in compulsory level education). The application of contextual factors in admissions is contested and raises ideological, theoretical and practical questions, linking to the debate on the objectives of higher education policy. It has been argued that directing institutions on offer-making contravenes the notion of academic freedom (*Palfreyman, 2012*).

Different perspective on contextualised admissions are summarised in Table 2.2, and discussed below, which attempts to unpick the underlying value basis of different positions towards contextualised admissions. Perspectives on contextualised admissions and contextual data use reflect wider debates around the principles of fairness and equity in higher education. In particular, the issue of contextualised admissions goes to the heart of the discourse around higher education’s contribution to social mobility and the desirability of positive action aimed at reducing inequalities in education.

Table 2.2: Perspectives in support of and against contextualised admissions

Supportive of contextualisation	Against contextualisation
Social reproduction perspective: unless addressed wider social inequalities are reproduced within higher education systems	Social engineering perspective: systematic application of contextual information and data is interventionist and prejudices other groups of applicants
Social justice perspective: interventions in education are an important mediator of social mobility	Academic freedoms perspective: HEIs are independent entities and it is not their job to address inequalities in society
Potential-based perspective: qualifications of educationally disadvantaged backgrounds under-state their academic potential to succeed at university (therefore students with genuine potential to succeed in HE and beyond may be missed) A university place is not a prize for how well you’ve done in the past but recognition of what you are likely to do in	Prior credentials perspective: prior qualifications are the best predictor of success at university - prima facie case that widening participation students suffer from educational disadvantage and ‘catch up’ at university is not proven

Supportive of contextualisation	Against contextualisation
the future	
Diversity perspective: diverse enrolment profiles benefit the academy and raise academic standards by drawing on a wider range of individuals	Elitist perspective: the use of contextual admissions has negative unintended consequences (i.e. 'setting students up to fail')
Professional practice perspective: Reliance on narrow assessment criteria which relies solely on grades without reference to context restricts the pool of potential students to the institution	Individualistic perspective: Rigid application of contextualised assessment criteria undermines an holistic academic judgement process because interpretation of the meaning of the data is subjective, and might lead to issues of unconscious bias between groups

Recruiting students on the basis of merit and at the same time achieving fair admissions creates tensions, since each applicant will have been afforded differing experiences and opportunities. Within the contextualised admissions discourse, there is ongoing debate about how to assess applicants. The Schwartz report noted: *“Everyone agrees that applicants should be chosen on merit: the problem arises when we try to define it. Merit could mean admitting applicants with the highest examination marks, or it could mean taking a wider view about each applicant’s achievements and potential”* (Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, 2004, p.24). Traditionally most UK higher education providers assess merit with reference to achievement of academic qualifications, which remain the single largest ‘predictor’ of success in HE. However, with the contextualised admissions discourse there is an argument based on consideration of past achievement plus future potential – since the evidence base tends to suggest that the prior attainment of educationally disadvantaged students under-represents their HE potential (see discussion of the evidence base in section 2.4). If the evidence holds true then there are clear incentives for institutions for contextualise applicants in order to select the students with the best potential for success. Contextualisation of applicants in admissions helps to bring in a wider group of students with HE potential to the attention of selectors than might otherwise be the case, benefiting social mobility and social justice. The additional consideration afforded disadvantaged applicants is designed to allow them to be assessed on a similar footing to those other applicants who had benefitted from social, economic and educational advantages.

Social reproduction theories contend that unless addressed power relationships in society, drawn along on social class-based lines, regulate access to economic opportunities and life experiences such as education. In particular, the relationship between social class and higher education participation is well documented and HE policy social class differences have continued to sustain over time (Boliver, 2013). From a social mobility perspective, contextualised admissions can be seen as part of a range of initiatives to widen participation in HE. The lack of progress in equalising the performance of learners in the state and independent sectors adds weight to the argument for using contextual information to reduce the grade requirements in conditional offers to disadvantaged applicants in order to bring more disadvantaged learners within the admissions criteria for highly selective degree programmes.

Although it could be argued that the origins of contextual data lie firmly within fair admissions objectives and drawing on the affirmative action tradition, the application of data has tended to be about equalising competition in the application process for university places rather than one of eliminating the hierarchies, i.e. used as a tool to identify those relatively disadvantaged applicants amongst the advantaged, with a focus squarely on the merits of individuals and using contextual data on a case-by-case basis to help to assess merit and potential. Use of contextual data in admissions is not un-contentious since there is the potential for less disadvantaged students that have benefited from a supportive family and school background to consider they would be penalised in an admissions process that factors in existence of disadvantage. A fear of challenge in the media from their ‘traditional’ constituency of students and those that support them may have meant institutions proceeded only cautiously in the past.

Recognition that socioeconomic differences in school achievement result from structural causes, raises issues for institutions where the primary focus of undergraduate selection is on grades, as highlighted by Boliver et al (2017). This report also suggests that further use of contextualised admissions is limited by ongoing uncertainty about what constitutes and indicates potential and about whether disparities

between potential and formal academic achievement can and should be addressed at degree level. Given the diversity of the higher education sector, there cannot be an assumption of one universal approach to contextualisation or contextual data use, although there is scope for greater focus on approaches that are most effective at achieving a wider range of entrants. It is likely to be the case that contextualised admissions is not a stand-alone measure (or 'silver bullet') to address social mobility (Bridger et al, 2012, p.39).

Stakeholder perspectives

The questions raised by the use of contextual factors in admissions, and the arguments for and against its use, were routinely identified during stakeholder interviews. It is clear that interviewees brought very differing perspectives, linked primarily to aims and objectives of their own institution but also to their own professional background. There was a general consensus that institutions had a role to play in social mobility and that contextualised admissions could support this. For some interviewees social mobility (and also the fostering of economic prosperity) was a core objective for the HE sector and these individuals spoke passionately about the need for the sector to step up and respond to this:

"At the end of the day contextual data is about social mobility but it is not just about this, that suggests that it benefits individuals but it is also about what kind of society we want, what we want from our economy. It is important that people contribute back to society and to the economy. On an economic level it is ludicrous waste of talent if you think that only a few people who have had an expensive education can actively contribute."

Although all interviewees saw the link between the sector and social mobility, some stakeholders were less concerned by social mobility as a driver and linked contextual data to delivering a fair and effective admissions service for the benefit of the institution, and a small number of interviewees felt contextual data was specifically addressing the issue of fair access, with one drawing a distinction between this and widening participation:

"it is more than just linking to the WP agenda, it falls to fair access. They may have gone to HE, but would they have gone to the right one?"

Stakeholders identified differential levels of prior attainment as a key barrier to ensuring a diverse student body, and the use of contextual data was considered by most to be a powerful mechanism for addressing these differences. There was a collective understanding that thinking holistically about an individual's application and looking beyond a single measure of prior attainment, had on the whole been relatively well established as a credible approach within the access community. Some stakeholders were keen to highlight the importance of continued work by HE institutions in attainment raising activities as part of their widening access efforts.

Higher education providers' rationales have been found to be driven by external and internal factors: a key argument internally centres on the benefits of contextualisation for academic excellence. Providers have sought to build the evidence base for contextualised admissions by looking at the relative success of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. A number of studies, which differentiate success in undergraduate education by school type, have shown that students from state schools overall gained better degrees than independently educated candidates with the same A-level grades on entry (Taylor et al, 2013; Ogg et al 2009). Research from The University of Bristol is widely quoted to justify differential offers (Hoare and Johnson, 2010). Tracking studies show that grades achieved by educationally disadvantaged applicants can mis-represent their potential in higher education, i.e. they have experienced education inequality for example because their school is poor. Mountford-Zimdars' work on elite admissions in the US and England argues that whereas US universities apply a compensatory sponsorship logic in admissions decisions, English universities apply *adjustment sponsorship* (Mountford-Zimdars, 2015). The US compensatory sponsorship serves to compensate for prior disadvantages – including historic disadvantages by race – English adjustment sponsorship is a way of adjusting admissions decisions by acknowledging that the same prior attainment can indicate different academic potential to achieve at university. Based on research that state-school educated students achieve more highly in higher education than private school educated students, adjustment sponsorship allows selectors to contextualise potential and admit students with different grades as equi-potential groups to use a phrase coined by Anthony Hoare.

The literature on contextualised admissions tends to find that whilst prior qualifications remain the single largest predictor of HE attainment, the idea of a cause and effect relationship between prior attainment and degree outcomes is not automatic. Instead, the focus is on the potential of students with lower entry attainment for 'catching up' (e.g. Crawford, 2014). However, the evidence base is still relatively small in terms of numbers of published studies and some results are contradictory (often depending on what measures of educational disadvantage are used). The results from institutional level studies tend to be useful internally but there are issues of transferability to other settings, coupled with other changes (e.g. changes in qualifications) mean it is hard to draw general conclusions from the evidence. The HEFCE publication on Schooling Effects on Higher Education Achievement (HEFCE 2003/32) was one of the first reports based on statistical modelling of a large dataset to determine whether the characteristics of an applicant's school or college can be used in an assessment of his or her potential in higher education. This used school type (state or independent) and school performance (based on average performance in examinations), and restricted to those entering at age 18 with A level qualifications. The effect of school performance on HE achievement was found to be inconsistent however school type makes a difference: students from independent schools appear to do less well than students from other schools and colleges, all other things being equal. At highly selective HEIs, students from LEA schools were found to do better than similar students from independent schools (although the effect of having been to a further education college or grant maintained school was unclear). HEFCE subsequently widened the analysis to include 'gap year' and other students entering at age 19 and found very similar schooling effects as found for the 18 year old entrants (HEFCE 2005/09). Results indicating untapped potential of disadvantaged applicants in relation to differences by school type were confirmed in the most recent large scale study (HEFCE, 2014). Controlling for prior attainment, the research found significant variation in degree outcomes: state school pupils get better grades. However, turning to socio-economic status, the results showed more privileged students from wealthier backgrounds do best. Within the state school category there is some evidence that students from selective state schools make better progress in HE. Taking into account subject choices, gender, ethnicity and mature student status complicates the picture as these factors interact with attainment, progression and graduate outcomes.

Crawford (2014) found that schools with the highest rates of free school meals (FSM) generate better degree outcomes than students with lower shares of FSM students. Linked individual-level administrative data was used to explore the relationships between school characteristics and HE participation and outcomes, with a view to unpicking different hypotheses (differences between types of schools; whether some schools achieve better grades in more-highly-regarded KS4 subjects/qualifications; or are more successful at encouraging pupils to stay and achieve in education; or whether they encourage their pupils to progress to certain types of university/certain subjects). Gaps in HE participation were largely explained by secondary school characteristics particularly the effect of schools on Key Stage 4 attainment and progression. The authors concluded that widening participation at secondary level should focus on ensuring that pupils from all schools make the right choices over the subjects and qualifications they take at Key Stage 4, and that maximising pupils' chance of getting good grades at this level. The results imply that *"Interventions targeted at students beyond the end of compulsory education are unlikely to be able to eliminate the differences in HE participation that we observe between pupils from different types of schools."* (Crawford et al, 2014, p.10).

The issue of young people's expectations of higher education are in the forefront of recent research. For example, the application of duration modelling techniques to the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, showed that there is a transition in young people's expectations between 14 and 16 years from being 'likely to apply' to being 'unlikely to apply' and vice versa, which has a significant association with socioeconomic background (after controlling for prior academic attainment and other potentially confounding factors). The findings suggest that more is needed to ensure the educational expectations of academically able young people from less advantaged families are maintained over time, especially providing guidance on how to view their academic results (Anders, 2017).

Differences by type of school are a key aspect of the literature on progression to selective institutions. A joint BIS/Sutton Trust report undertaken by UCAS tracked the decision making of high achieving HE

applicants explored the application behaviours of 'equally capable' higher education applicants at an individual level, considering the interaction of structural contexts and individual attributes before and during the decision-making process. Independent schools had the highest application rate to the most selective HE (73%), followed by grammar schools (53%) and state schools (42%). The findings suggest that high achievers applying to the most selective HEIs have a broader awareness of the diversity of higher education available to them, implying that more needs to be done to inform applicants and the need to work with applicants to improve their self-efficacy and remove constraints on their decision-making to ensure they have *"the same opportunities and decision-making skills as their peers"* (BIS/Sutton Trust 2012, p.7). Participation differences, by school type have been largely explained by differences in the number and patterns of applications (high attaining young people from independent schools applying to academically demanding degree courses, have been estimated to have a 79% chance of entering a highly selective degree course, compared with 70% for a similar student attending a state maintained school (BIS/Sutton Trust, 2009).

The research and policy emphasis in the last few years has put a spotlight increasingly on aspects of cultural disadvantage (linking to values, outlook and access to higher education related advice and guidance, e.g. in the context of debates about higher education participation by White working class males). Protected characteristics such as gender and ethnicity are not characteristics that are usually considered during admissions decision-making. A focus on these factors arguably moves the debate away from the application of data to contextualise relative levels of prior attainment and potential to succeed in the context of the circumstances in which an applicants attainment has been obtained, and more into the wider discourse around holistic admissions decision-making. However, it is also highlighting the role that cultural and aspirational factors play in higher education progression, plus showing up the issues relating to access to good quality higher education related careers advice, and support regarding qualification and subject choices, as part of an applicant's journey to higher education.

On balance the view is that the evidence base supports the use of contextual data but the evidence is perceived as relatively weak because of the varied methodologies and definitions of disadvantage, data and approaches employed, lack of clarity on the success factors and issues of transferability of results across entry years or institutional settings. The number of individual studies are small and the universities vary in the data they consider, the ways data is used in admissions, making it difficult to collate findings to get a bigger picture. The inconsistencies in the pattern of results relating to how disadvantaged students fare in higher education reflects a wider discourse around what constitutes a 'level playing field' and the social reproduction versus equalising effects of educational participation. The fact that some groups might not achieve so well during their higher education experience raises issues around how higher education understands how different people learn and develop – putting the focus on delivering equity by responding to that. The link between fair admissions and improved student experience was identified by some stakeholders, with interviewees highlighting the 'knock on' effect of admitting a diverse student body and the contribution this makes to all students. A small number of the stakeholders interviewed identified diverse enrolment profiles as a benefit to the academic standards of the institution, suggesting that a more representative student body could enhance the quality of the *"academic discussion"* and impact positively on the student experience overall.

One of the ongoing tensions in the discourse on contextualised admissions is that the value positions of social mobility and social reproduction, whilst both supportive of contextual data use as positive action to address inequality, are not aligned – i.e. there is a lack of consensus on whether education offers social mobility or reproduces inequality. Importantly, Crawford and van der Erve (2015) looked at HE as a route to social mobility in terms of whether it levels the playing field between the earnings of graduates by socio-economic group. Significant differences between the earnings of graduates from lower and higher socio-economic backgrounds remained, even after accounting for a range of prior characteristics, skills and experiences and subsequent labour market experiences. The findings suggest that going to university and getting a 'good' degree (at least an upper second) is not sufficient to ensue social mobility – policy makers also need to focus on what happens to graduates once they leave university.

Stakeholder perspectives

Overall, stakeholders did provide support for the potential-based perspective, with all interviewees acknowledging that the sector was no longer best served by an admissions process that was purely based on prior qualifications and that using contextual data was considered desirable by all, despite different drivers for its use:

“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, had the kind of opportunities that allow you to be in the best position to gain access to these institutions.”

“There is evidence to suggest that just relying on A levels isn’t necessarily the best way to identify the right students.”

“If you recognise that people are very bright but very underserved why would you not want to tap into the potential of those you are not reaching? How does it feel comfortable to leave it to the schools, to the other parts of the system to solve this? Does this not need a radical rethink?”

In order to move to a more potential-based system several respondents highlighted the need to challenge the widely held belief that fairness requires institutions to apply the same criteria to all applicants, an argument that appears to have been used by those within the sector to push back against contextualisation:

“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.”

“Saying you will treat everyone the same, that you will find excellence wherever it exists doesn’t really recognise the context, the differences between applicants. It does not assure fairness.”

When asked to describe the types of challenges faced by institutions some stakeholders suggested there were few barriers to using contextual data, other than possibly a willingness to do so. Other stakeholders felt there were multiple challenges to the use of contextual data and described these in detail. Primarily these related either to data (both in terms of access to data and the skills to use it effectively) or to the fact that the argument for its use had not yet been won. One of the biggest arguments against the use of contextual data identified by stakeholders was the element of risk; there was acknowledgement that the battle had not yet been won both within the HE sector and with external stakeholders, including schools and parents. Although ‘backlash’ from the media was thought to be less of a concern than it has been in the past, there was still a belief that arguments against contextualisation could be used with great effectiveness by the press, with one interviewee noting the enduring risk of negative publicity from the “*daily mail bogeyman*”.

2.2 Arguments for and against application of contextual data

It is clear that different HE providers apply contextual data differently within the application cycle, with differences across the sector in the types of data as well as how it is used (*Crawford et al 2017, Boliver et al 2017, Moore et al, 2013*). There can also be differences within institutions by programme area and faculty. The degree of discretion that admissions decision-makers have varies, notably in some institutions the offer-making policy is institutionally-set. In some departments and faculties offer-making is driven by the priorities of programme leads. The degree of centralisation of admissions functions partly underpins differences between institutions across the sector. Overall the research highlights that institutions are seeking to resist being shoe-horned into a single pattern of working and that there is recognition of autonomy of institutions and of the range of requirements for admissions to different providers and courses within a diverse high education sector.

The use of data to contextualise disadvantaged applicants is driven by the assumption that these students might not otherwise make admissions selectors fully aware of the extent of their ability (or admissions selectors may not be able to fully appreciate the persons potential without further information and guidance). Contextual data use tends to be focused on young home applicants to undergraduate courses, at least in terms of full-time undergraduate programmes which constitute the bulk of provision. Since 2011 the UCAS application facility has allowed providers to receive data from some of the main

contextual sources matched at the level of individual applicants. UCAS offers the shared service of transferring third party data to providers. Data quality issues have been raised and overall it is not clear the extent to which the sector utilises the UCAS contextual data service. Indeed, a series of in-depth investigations with a selection of providers that apply contextual data in undergraduate admissions have suggested that institutions tend to prefer to source and process their own data in order to ensure it meet their specific institutional needs and requirements (Moore et al, 2013).

The inclusion of metrics from contextual datasets in the applications process is designed to facilitate holistic admissions by providing additional data that can then be taken account of by decision-makers. Consideration of an applicant's context has always gone on, although since the Schwartz report there has been an emphasis on making the basis of decision making more transparent. Using data arguably offers some advantages for contextualisation in terms of transparency although there are also associated practical and data quality issues which need to be considered.

Admissions decision-makers regularly use contextual information in their decision-making and are advised to ensure that applicants are aware of how their data is being used. The QAA Quality Code states that in using contextual data in recruitment and admission processes, providers should be “open and transparent about what data are being used, for what purposes and with what intended outcomes” (QAA, 2013, p.4). Arguably the application of contextual datasets is objective and provides transparency since the datasets can be specified and shared. Offers based on professional judgement informed by contextual data, are therefore preferable to subjective decision-making by admissions officers. At the least, contextual data use tends to be underpinned by discussion amongst admissions decision-makers across an institution, and research suggests that talking about their approach to contextualisation has benefits for institutions in bringing admissions decision-making more ‘into the light’, and can be accompanied by moves to ensure better consistency in decisions, including the development of a shared language and documentation across institutions (Moore et al, 2013). At the same time, whilst the application of data may support greater transparency on decision-making processes there is still a way to go and several reports have focused on the lack of general information and awareness of what and how contextual data is being applied.

Stakeholder perspectives

There was some concern amongst stakeholders that the use of contextual data may make the system fair for some at the expense of others (or at least it may be perceived this way), and there was apprehension that institutions adopting a contextualised approach may be accused of social engineering, particularly by academics not convinced by the arguments, but also by the media. Several stakeholders talked about the potential risk associated with contextualised admissions, although one interviewee felt the risk of not acting on fair admissions was more of a risk than using contextual data:

“There is a risk to providers in using contextual data, people perceive its use as disadvantaging the opportunities of others who would naturally progress but the fact that we are not operating in a capped market means this is less of an argument. It is more really of a reputational thing, but the risk in not undertaking contextualised admissions is much more of a risk for many. The important thing is that it is done with transparency, with consistency and with the evidence.”

“We need to deal with the fee paying schools and the media, although you run the risk of getting into cultural wars. What we don't need is the OfS getting attacked by a minister as they are getting flack from the independent schools. Because the rhetoric will be you are no longer focused on academic excellence, you are social engineering. Essentially, we can be signed up but not everyone is.”

“There are barriers, concerns over dumbing down, concern over unfairness elsewhere and there is also the belief that the problems lies elsewhere in the system.”

Overall there was support for the use of contextual data, although the strength of support varied considerably: some believed passionately that contextual data was pivotal role to ensuring fairness within HE admissions. Others identified contextualisation as one important element to enhancing equality of higher education opportunity.

“I think contextualised admissions, using an integrated approach of information and data, enhances equality of opportunity

for students and addresses fair admissions. Using a range of information and data can aid social mobility but it is only one of the tools in the box, it is not a silver bullet. It is about achieving a more diverse student body and a better student experience for all students as a result.”

The main criticisms of the use of data/metrics to contextualise applicants relate to issues concerning the reliability of accurate proxy measures of disadvantage (Section 2.4 discusses the issues and Section 3.7 explores how institutions are approaching the data quality aspects).

Table 2.3: Pros and Cons of contextual data application in admissions

Pros	Cons
A way of discerning potential in a competitive applicant pool. Otherwise hard to differentiate when there is a large pool of applicants with homogeneous prior attainment levels.	Need to guard against admissions decisions based on data being formulaic and metric based rather than based on a holistic assessment of an individual applicant (an important principle of Admissions Policies).
Application of well considered contextual data is objective and criteria can be shared with applicants	Judgements based on the basis of contextual data are still subjective and in the light of data quality issues could be unreliable and may not improve the system
Data potential perspective: the development of ‘fit for purpose’ datasets relating to HE applications is not an insurmountable challenge	Data risks perspective: data quality flaws mean admissions decision makers lack access to the correct information, and their interpretations of the data can lead to questionable admissions choices and introduce another type of unfairness that might be hard to defend legally (if required to do so)
Use of metrics is part of the process of predictive analytics which support academic excellence and reconcile definitions of merit by building the evidence to show the relationship between past achievement and future potential	Comparing performance based on context implies a deficit model which is not usually applied to other students whose results may be below average
Datasets can be evidence-based through research on outcomes and therefore help to sustain academic excellence by highlighting the groups that have been shown to have good potential for success in HE.	Difficulty in establishing the evidence base: The analyses of patterns is based on past conditions which might be hard to replicate, especially as the factors involved are complex and association of certain groups with success does not prove causality. Students should be judged by the success they achieve in the light of their own ambitions and their performance outcomes should not be judged against average performance
Internal WP Monitoring perspective: application of data in decision-making is part of the process of ensuring the diversity of the student intake	Concerns about external perceptions: basing decisions on the application of data is insulting to hard-working applicants who merit consideration in their own right
Data can be applied systematically in a consistent way across institutions (rather than relying on admissions decision-makers to pick up clues on background)	Pragmatic perspective: applying the data to applicants, monitoring data use and evaluating outcomes has resource implications for institutions and associated costs. Plus there are complexities in identifying and implementing use of contextual criteria in admissions, and issues about managing the programme of work alongside other admissions initiatives

Stakeholder perspectives

The pros and cons of using contextual data were described by many, although most argued in support of its use, with general agreement that data could provide an important additional source to be considered during admissions decision making, allowing for holistic examination of an individual’s application. It was also argued that the data could be research driven, thus allowing institutions to be more responsive to inequalities present:

“If you want a focused definition of contextual data then you get into what data? And this is a big issue, you have to debate how accurate the data is and how granular it needs to be. And this is where the challenge lies, it’s about what data you need to identify potential whilst trying to strip away the disadvantage”

“So for us it is about social economic group or background, it could be around inequalities around income, around ethnicity, around sex and also the interdependencies of these different characteristics. In relation to admissions specifically then we also looking at the school environment, the type of institution. When you start to look at some of

these groups then the disparities are huge.”

However, it was noted by a small number of stakeholders that providing more data at the point of application might lead to subjectivity and possibly increased bias, essentially because the data still needed to be interpreted:

“With these things its invariably about the availability of the data, about the comparability of the data and the interpretation of it, the judgement is pushed onto practitioners, who as we know are largely white, middle class, and we then start to run into issues of unconscious bias.”

There was a further suggestion that use of data may make admissions decisions less transparent to external stakeholders and certainly interviews with school representatives indicated that introducing more variables into the admissions process had the potential for a negative impact.

For some there were important caveats to the use of contextual data. Primarily, institutions should retain autonomy for how data should be applied (at what stage and to what extent) and that data should be used as part of a professional judgement and should therefore not become too prescriptive. Although, most interviewees felt that becoming more consistent in the application of contextual data across the sector was priority. Beyond this the biggest drawback to applying contextual data identified by stakeholders was being able to identify and source reliable data for which evidence of impact was available. There was also concern to ensure a coherent approach across the whole student lifecycle was in place when contextual data was applied.

Overall stakeholders felt the greatest potential for use of contextual data was in the undergraduate admissions space and some interviewees felt that its current use was perhaps too restrictive and that it may be applied more widely, particularly to mature students and to the postgraduate sector. There was agreement that the data needed to underpin contextualised admissions at postgraduate level would be very different to that at undergraduate level, and that contextualisation was possibly of less importance than providing financial incentives and improving application rates through better information and advice.

2.3 Arguments for and against differential offer making

Prior attainment remains the key entry criteria for UK higher education.⁴ The lack of progress in terms of raising attainment of disadvantaged young people at GCSE and A level reinforces the case for making differential offers to students from disadvantaged backgrounds that acknowledge their barriers to attainment. At a policy level there has been a shift from use of contextual data as part of holistic consideration of applicants to more directive recommendations to institutions to consider differential offers to contextualised students (BIS guidance to OFFA 2011, *paragraph 5.3*)⁵. However, UCAS data suggests that the use of contextual offers has been limited to date, particularly in terms of making differential offers to students from disadvantaged backgrounds: The UCAS provider undergraduate reports by sex, area background, and ethnic group show that across all UK providers, offers are made to pupils from all backgrounds at a rate that is to be expected based on their predicted attainment and course applied to. *Boliver et al (2017)* found that some 18 universities mentioned that contextual applicants could be prioritised for a reduced grade offer at one or more grades below the standard offer (mostly at discretion of departments or restricted in other ways⁶). An analysis of the most selective institutions found only four automatically applied a reduced offer to contextually flagged applicants (*Crawford et al, 2017*). This research for the Sutton Trust concludes that the lack of consistency in contextual data use and poor transparency accounts for the lack of success in contextualised admissions and argues that a decrease in entry criteria would open up places to more disadvantaged students. According to the Sutton Trust modelling, a reduction of two grades could generate a 50%

⁴ The Open University is the only institution that does not establish grade ranges for entry to courses. Alternative application systems have been tried elsewhere (e.g. assessing some applicants outside of the competitive application system) but the numbers are very small.

⁵ BIS (2011) *Guidance to the Director of Fair Access issues by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and Minister for Universities and Science*, London: BIS.

⁶ For example conditional on successful completion of a widening access programme. ^{SEP}

increase in the number of disadvantaged students to the 30 most selective institutions (based on FSM eligibility)⁷ (Crawford et al, 2017).

Table 2.4: Arguments for and against differential offers

Pros	Cons
Proposals could help admissions staff to ensure applicants with potential from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds who do not attain as well as their advantaged peers get the chance of a place	The view that educationally disadvantaged applicants admitted on lower grades out-perform their relatively advantaged peers is contested
Grade requirements are inflated above the course requirements (i.e. entry criteria may exceed the level needed for success on the course plus institutions may in practice be happy to admit student on lower grades post hoc if they do not meet their predictions or enter through the clearing process)	Institutions risk potential damage to league table rankings if they systematically admit students on relatively lower grades, or other types of reputational damage associated with 'dumbing down' their entry criteria such as affecting applicants' perceptions of the quality of the provision
As a group educationally disadvantaged students require reduced offers because otherwise they would not gain entry to the most highly selective courses even though they have the potential to succeed at university	Admitting students on reduced grades is patronising to high achieving disadvantaged students who do meet the grade requirements
Putting it out that applicants might still have a chance of an offer despite falling below the standard criteria is desirable to ensure that relatively high achieving disadvantaged applicants consider making an application in the first place	Admitting students on reduced grades exposes them to feeling stigmatised once admitted
Applicants from lower performing schools are further disadvantaged in admissions by inadequate information advice and guidance, and the potential for under-prediction of grades (whilst advantaged applicants have access to advisers who employ strategies to facilitate access to selective courses)	Applicants who receive a low offer may be dis-incentivised to do well in exams

Institutions have raised concerns about reputational damage from making reduced offers, including institutional positioning in the university league tables. The lack of sector wide movement on differential offers may limit institutions' willingness to act uni-laterally towards adjusting their grade criteria (and depending on the strength of their internal and external drivers). The issue of league tables and the "perverse" effect this has on institutions, was identified as a risk to reduced grades cited by many stakeholders, although a number of stakeholders highlighted that more consistent sector-wide use of differential offers would reduce the potential impact for individual institutions.

Rising numbers of applicants for limited places over the last ten years saw entry requirements rise as universities sought to manage the demand and supply for places. This trend is in reverse and the latest data suggests that the average tariff points on entry has declined recently at high tariff institutions, although the entry grades set may be above the level required for success on those programmes which remain highly selective (Commission on Widening Access, 2016, p. 10). Clearly the potential benefits of contextualised offers for diversifying the intake of students relies on getting applicants in the first place, as well as the offer making practices (and indeed the subsequent conversion of offers to places). Several highly selective institutions have focused on strategies to increase the number of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, plus affording them additional consideration in the application process. However, such an approach might not go far enough to generate the volume of applicants required to shift the profile within the most selective institutions. Furthermore, decisions to admit are finalised once exam results are announced, usually only a few weeks before the start of the university year – at this stage applicants might be admitted to places having failed to meet the criteria - raising issues of fairness and transparency since applicants with similar or better grades would have been ruled out, or put off from applying, along the way. Relatedly, confirmation and clearing presents a great challenge to fair admissions because competition between applicants for places and between institutions for the 'best' students is at a peak. Therefore there are arguments to be made for institutions to consider adopting a

⁷ The Sutton Trust 30 are a group of universities identified by the Trust as the most highly selective, comprising mostly Russell Group universities, plus other similar institutions.

strategic approach to differential offer making so that practices can be applied consistently and communicated in line with institutional policy.

Stakeholder Perspectives

The majority of stakeholders felt that the use of contextual data could apply across the whole of the admissions process and that institutions were best placed to make decisions about where the use of contextual data would best enhance their admissions processes. They therefore saw differential offers as just one potential solution. For many this perspective related to the issue of maintaining institutional autonomy, but for some it was also about acknowledging the other important challenges in relation to fair admissions, such as increasing aspirations and improving access to information and advice. These stakeholders were keen to ensure that that contextualised admissions, and indeed the fair access agenda, was not reduced to a debate about lowering grades:

“It isn’t just about lower offers, data can be used at other stages in the admissions process. Learners and advisers need to understand that they will not always get a lower offer, it might be that they advanced through stages in other ways. It is important that we ensure there is not just the perception that contextualised admissions is just about lower offers.”

Other interviewees felt that differential offer making had the potential for the most impact and were keen to see more work on this across the sector, with increased transparency in which institutions were operating “*grade breaks*”. The work of the Sutton Trust was quoted by some stakeholders in describing the importance of differential offers and others cited the approach of Scottish universities on minimum entry tariffs as an example of good practice, and a possible model for the English sector moving forward. One stakeholder described the action taken by Stellenbosch University in post apartheid South Africa where black pupils without the requisite qualifications in maths and science were admitted at scale but were then supported to achieve.

“Contextualised admissions is still key at all stages and throughout all processes, but the use of information and data during the interviewing and short listing process and in differential offer making has the biggest potential. This is the easiest way for admissions to make a contribution to fair access. It is the easiest way operationally to make a difference to students. This is a good way of using the data, after all the work undertaken in WP, outreach you don’t want admissions processes to be a barrier it needs to be a facilitator. Institutions need to be transparent about how they are using data and using data in this way can be transparent.”

There were a number of barriers identified to institutions developing differential offer making policies. As described earlier there is a element of risk associated with contextualised admissions and particularly the use of differential offers; the risks of being accused of dumbing down or of social engineering and the risk of admitting students and failing them in some way:

“My own view is that institutions need to think about the impact on students and understand the issue more from a student perspective. Applicants may or may not be aware of contextualised admissions and this might have an impact on their motivation and also think about whether students experience any challenges following a lower offer to getting settled into an institution. An institution doesn’t want to create a minority group within an established culture.”

2.4 Data for contextualisation of applicants

The Schwartz report set expectations for contextual data: the factors considered need to be relevant, accurate, and allow all applicants equal opportunity to demonstrate their potential (*Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, 2004*). Current sources of metrics on disadvantage used by providers include Government, administrative and commercial sources. Policy designations affect indicators used across the UK. Not all data are external, sources will exist in the application form (e.g. personal statement and reference). The indicators chosen tend to be a proxy for the nature of the disadvantage which admissions teams identify as the key barrier to success in the applications process/the offer of a place. The data reflects universities’ concern to identify disadvantage due to family circumstances including growing up in a disadvantaged neighbourhood and lack of tradition of HE progression, and/or due to the educational circumstances. The type of indicators used reflect the value position on the purpose of the contextualisation and the nature of disadvantage that it seeks to address. For some these are defined by knowledge of existing inequalities (across the sector and within an institution), for others the issue of social class was paramount and therefore proxies or indicators for low social class were priority, and for others contextualisation was about holistic understanding of an individual and therefore softer

information about life experiences was paramount. These differing starting points appear to make the notion of agreed data upon which the whole sector can rely a complex one. However, many interviewees in this research were keen for more consistency in the data being applied, to promote greater transparency and support individual decision making.

Table 2.5 runs through the main source identified as being in current employment as contextual flags, the nature of the disadvantage(s) implied, and the pros and cons in relation to data quality. There is a clear imperative to be assured that the use of any particular contextual indicator will not lead to unfairness for other groups of applicants or create the risk of lower student outcomes for universities.

Table 2.5: Contextual data sources

Type of data	Benefits	Issues
Individual-level information	The most important type of contextual information because it is specific to individual circumstances	Self-reported data is unreliable due to problems with mis-interpretation or deliberate manipulation by applicants (requires external verification) Administrative sources of individual level data such as eligibility for FSM is not available as part of application process
School level information, e.g. school performance data for GCSE and A-levels	Much of the information at school level is already in the public domain Can help to identify outliers in performance mapped against their school	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 Achievement data is labour intensive to update annually, achievement data can leave out BTEC and IB applicants to HE School level information might not be necessary if more individual level data becomes available
Area level information, e.g. area deprivation, GE progression and geo-socio-economic profiling	Relatively easy to match to applications based on postcode Generally available across the UK (although some area level measures such as IMD are not consistent across the four UK regions)	The ecological fallacy argument shows that individuals may not conform to their area profile, particularly where the units of analysis are wide and based on historical patterns (e.g. POLAR) Commercial sources of area level information such as ACORN and MOSAIC allow for disaggregation to a finer level (although these sources incur and ongoing charge)

A wide range of datasets have been identified: a scoping paper by Durham University found some 28 categories of indicators (*Gorard et al, 2017*). Debates about contextual data indicators are ongoing and it is generally accepted that all currently available indicators suffer from data quality issues. In choosing which data to use to contextualise applicants universities often have to balance pragmatic considerations of timeliness in terms of availability during the admission process and issues of data quality (particularly accuracy, completeness, validity and consistency). The issue of inconsistency across the UK nations and problem of missing data is a particular drawback of school and college level indicators of educational disadvantage. Area-based measures potentially offer better coverage but selectors cannot be assured that every applicant will have the background characteristics as their cohort (the ecological fallacy argument). Some institutions 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 might then be a matter of taking a view on what rate of inaccuracy might be acceptable within the decision-making processes at the application stage, with a suggestion that tolerance of a few percent potential inaccuracy would be acceptable to many institutions, especially where the existence of disadvantage can be verified using other sources (*Moore et al, 2013*).

Two diverging trends were found amongst the case study institutions involved in this research. On the one hand some institutions were seeking to use increasingly nuanced data at as granular a level as possible, in order to increase assurance of reaching target groups, for example, but drawing on small-area statistics such as ACORN, or looking at applicants for which there is an inter-section of data. On the

other hand, other institutions were moving more in a direction of using 'sector standard' indicators of widening participation, which linked to national monitoring. Notable here was the use of POLAR data (which one case study interviewee described as "a self-fulfilling prophecy"). POLAR is flawed not only because of the ecological fallacy argument, but also because it could be argued that it does not make sense to base identification of relative disadvantage on a measure of HE progression that uses historical patterns of progression applied to a person who has risen above their background characteristics to the extent that they have made an application to be considered for higher education.

There are currently gaps in the data accessible to institutions for admissions purposes and potentially useful individual level data such as data on FSM status and family income is not made available at the point of application. The HEDIIP Blueprint Report (July 2015) identified the need for a UK-wide solution that includes the use of the Unique Learner Number (ULN) in higher education.

In a 2015 survey undertaken by SPA, the main data limitations identified as impacting on the use of contextualised admissions included insufficient resources to process data and/or apply it to their applications; technical/systems issues (i.e. making the contextual data accessible to assessors); incomplete and/or unreliable datasets; lack of cross-border comparison for schools (and quality of the UCAS schools data in particular, although subsequent progress has been made); lack of proxies for socio-economic classifications and concerns about unreliability of self-reported data; and the risk of inaccurate inferences about an individual based on the group to which the individual belongs. A key premise in how contextual data is applied as part of the admission process is in allowing applicants to be considered relative to others with similar characteristics. For example, *Mullen (2011)* defined the concept of contextualised admissions as identifying potential by putting the individual "into context, relative to the overall attainment level of the school at which the individual attended" (*Mullen 2011, p.3*). Valid individual level data is more accurate of a person's background characteristics than data relating to a cohort or neighbourhood (although self-reported individual level data is less robust due to the dangers of unintentional or intended data errors). In the 2015 cycle, while a small proportion (around 20%) of respondents reported that they used individual-level data only, no respondents reported that they used school or area-based information in isolation (*SPA and HEDIIP, 2015*). The Sutton Trust study and current research however demonstrate that some institutions are moving more towards these.

Stakeholder perspectives

Overall, stakeholder interviewees varied in their understanding of data issues. Some relayed provider concerns with POLAR data, particularly in relation to rural areas, and with FSM. Others had greater depth of understanding and suggested how the data might be enhanced: improved access to the National Pupil Database and to parental income data (via the HMRC) was considered of most benefit and this reflected an overall desire for more individual level indicators or using a range of information to get a robust measure.

School representatives agreed that the datasets currently used were not always the correct ones from their perspective: POLAR does not provide a good measure when applied to a cohort of students and was not always understood by staff in schools. There was interest in the use of FSM and Pupil Premium as indicators of educational disadvantage, and also the first generation criteria, although it was noted that this is information is not readily available. Strong messages from the school sector were that they "*felt done to*" and desired a more collaborative approach to agreeing the measures. This included collaboration between HE providers and collaborative between schools, colleges and HE institutions. It was noted that there appeared to be few opportunities for schools and access professionals to meet on this topic:

"There are not many forums where schools and universities can actually look at this together, but schools need to be asked which data is best to use? Schools are thinking about every child and schools are saying that the same kids get targeted time and time again and that there may be others with even more potential if they could be supported."

For some stakeholders the issue of risk related to maintaining confidence in the admissions system and evidence from school representatives confirmed that this was a justifiable concern:

"There are also arguments that you shouldn't be using certain data, like ethnicity and some students and parents may question the use of this, they are not necessarily convinced this will be used in the right way. So there are challenges

therefore around trust and confidence in the system.”

“Social mobility is a key priority for institutions but we need to manage that in a way that maintains students’ confidence in the system.”

2.4.1 Contextualisation through widening participation initiatives

There is ongoing debate around the contextualisation of applicants through their earlier participation in outreach. The advantages are in building more coherent and holistic institutional approaches to working with widening participation groups. Plus there has been some research to suggest that applicants with prior participation in institutional widening participation are relatively more likely to take up an offer of a place and do better than average on retention and course performance measures. However, there are downsides in terms of consistency of application of contextual criteria at application stage. For example, one highly selective institution stopped using participation in a Sutton Trust Summer School as a contextual criteria because of concerns of ‘double-counting’ because the participants got the advantage of having participated in the programme as well as being counted in admission whereas others with a similar profile might have just missed out on participation in the summer school and would then be double-disadvantaged (*Moore et al, 2013*). However, it makes sense intuitively to join up pre-entry widening participation activities and the contextual data use in admissions as part of a student-lifecycle approach. At least one case study institution would like to see recognition for its work in undertaking outreach with widening participation groups through the admissions processes in other institutions.

Several institutions have a long-standing approach that offers applicants grade credits on application in recognition of completion of academic project work through widening participation outreach initiatives, as is the case with the multi-institutional Realising Opportunities programme. Such an approach of facilitating entry below the standard is often attractive to admissions selectors who are re-assured that applicants’ potential in higher education has already been tested through an academic assignment. However, the approach may be inconsistent with differential offer-making as part of a contextual data strategy since applicants qualify for entry below the standard offer regardless. It was notable that a case study institution which operates differential offer making, and contextualises applicants through outreach (as well as other criteria) has moved to remove academic project work from outreach provision.

Stakeholder perspectives

There was a desire to ensure synergy between outreach activities and admissions processes and some concern that use of contextual data in admissions was not always joined up with access provision. In part this was about ensuring information about the use of contextual data is being shared with potential applicants during outreach activities, but it was also about access programmes not using a contextualised approach. For example, one interviewee spoke about how the use of estimated GCSE grades to target learners for outreach was a barrier and that should be flexed, or indeed other measures should be considered that did not relate to academic attainment.

3 Contextual data practice

3.1 Introduction

This section starts by exploring what is known about contextual data use across the sector, within the current admissions landscape. The section goes on to explore the different practices within the case study institutions related to contextual data use, and offers a model of some aspects that need to be considered when embarking on a contextual data strategy, and highlighting the emerging lessons and recommendations.

Key findings

- Clearly all institutions are committed to fair admissions, and it is recognised that this should include being fair to candidates who have lacked the same opportunities as their more advantaged peers to develop the skills and achievement profiles sought by competitively driven providers, and/or required to cope with the pace and nature of the higher education offered. For institutions with the furthest to travel in achieving representative student bodies that cut across all sections of the population (accounting for attainment), widening access is an underpinning driver for contextual data use.
- Governance structures for contextual data use are important since contextual data in admissions requires a high level of forward planning, extensive resource commitment and collaboration between different parts of institutions.
- In choosing which data to use to contextualise applicants, universities balance pragmatic considerations and data quality issues. Institutions apply techniques to tackle the problem of poor quality of proxy indicators of disadvantage. Most would like more access to reliable comprehensive individual level data.
- There are significant differences in how contextual data is applied at different points in the admissions decision-making process, with some evidence that each have made a difference to the likelihood of educationally disadvantaged applicants taking up a place. Use of differential offers are considered to have potential for most impact in institutions which have the furthest to go in terms of achieving a diverse student body and has the potential advantage of giving greatest encouragement to educationally disadvantaged applicants to apply.
- Practices identified as being helpful in relation to supporting contextual data use at institutional level include: coherence with institutional targets; monitoring application decisions; building the evidence base through internal research; developing internal expertise; applying systems to 'level the playing field' or 'compare like with like', prioritising contextually flagged applicants for consideration; proactive external communication; making contextual indicators accessible to applicants; promoting awareness of contextual data in admissions amongst target groups.

3.2 Use of contextualised admissions

There is currently no comprehensive overview of contextual data use across the sector. Data from SPA relating to a subset of 68 institutions found that 84% were using contextualised admissions in the 2015 entry cycle (*SPA and HEDIIP, 2015*). However, a range of approaches can be taken to how and when contextual data is applied, as summarised in Table 3.1 and discussed below. Some ingredients for the use of contextual data in admissions, identified by previous case study research, included: 'buy-in' at a high level within senior leadership, admissions professionals who have skills and knowledge of data, appropriate admissions systems and structures capable of integrating data as part of the admissions decision-making process (*Moore et al, 2013, p.4*). The 2015 survey of HEIs highlighted the potential for internal debate to limit use of contextual data, particularly concerns about misunderstanding/ disagreement by academics over how to use contextual data/information; perceived/actual unfairness on selective programmes of reducing grades; and concern that the quality of information, advice and guidance might be impacted by advisors and teachers not being fully aware of how contextual factors could be used to support applicants (which might affect eligibility for contextualised admissions considerations). The practical barriers to implementation around data availability or resourcing within admissions teams include the costs involved which can be substantial, including the time and resources to develop and evidence the strategy, work with the data, and to provide adequate information and training to all admissions decision makers involved.

Table 3.1: Different types of contextualisation and implications for applicants

Type of contextualisation	Rationale	Implication for applicants
Contextualisation of personal statements and references	Recognising disadvantaged applicants who have less access to targeted application support and expertise, plus lower 'cultural capital' on which to draw on in their application	Application of an uplift in scoring processes for personal statements (for example)
Contextualisation of interviews	Recognising disadvantaged applicants who are less open to interview coaching	Trained interviewers who are alert to potential background factors which could affect performance at interview
Contextualisation of application test results	Recognising disadvantaged applicants who are less likely to have received practice etc	Separation of different groups of applicants by background when ranking performance in tests to enable closer 'like with like' assessment
Contextualisation of predicted grades	The educational attainment of disadvantaged applicants under-represents their potential relative to other applicants	Uplift to contextually flagged applicants in the ranking process within a gathered field Use of admissions algorithms which take account of additional potential 'Aspirational' offer ⁸
	On average state school applicants are disadvantaged due to relatively poor grade predictions	
	Educationally disadvantaged applicants have ability to succeed academically on programmes even if they present with predictions/ achievement below the standard offer	Differential offer

Stakeholder perspectives

Overall interviews revealed that the use of contextual data was not equally well understood across sector stakeholders, and although most interviewees believe that the use of contextual data admissions had been rising, there were diverging views as to the extent of its current use. A small number of interviewees felt that most universities were actively engaged in some form of contextualised admissions (particularly highly selective institutions) whereas others were less positive regarding current levels of use, suggesting it was limited overall. Some were concerned over restricted use in middle tariff institutions. The perspectives of some stakeholders were informed by recent research, for example findings from Sutton Trust research, with others drawing their conclusions more as a result of their on-going conversations with institutions:

"I think overtime there has been noticeable movement in the number of universities who've used contextual data. Now all of them do to a greater or lesser extent, although some have been using it since the early noughties."

"..all these institutions have a policy, in some shape or form, on contextualised admissions and the use of contextual data and have agreed standards that have been assessed internally as needing to be met, with differences obviously between different institutions and different courses."

"There is still a long way to go but there is evidence that certainly in the Sutton Trust 30 nearly all are using contextual factors in some way. So the use has improved but perhaps it is not transparent."

"I am not close enough to understand the take up, but my sense is that the debate has been around for a while and it is growing in its traction, but its use is not consistent. SPA and UCAS have offered greater support to institutions around this of late, but obviously in 2016 the SMAPG called for more use of contextual data which would imply there is not consistent, massive uptake."

There was a sense from some that although more providers were engaged in contextualised admissions, few were using contextual data at scale, with many institutions more engaged in the initial stages of exploration and research. A sense of frustration with the slow pace of progress was expressed by some:

"My personal view is for some time providers have been quite reluctant about moving into the contextual data space with any real ambition, there has been a perhaps a bit of toe dipping or at least a little nervousness."

⁸ None of the case study institutions were making aspirational offers, although previous work suggests that is an option where it takes place the offer letter might indicate encouraging practices at confirmation so that the applicant can take this into account when considering the offer.

"I think there has been a change over time, I think around 40% of the most recent access agreements referred to contextualised admissions in some way which has been a shift upwards, although it is probably true to say they are not all are using it, many are researching or exploring. So it has been moving in a forward direction but more impetus is needed."

The nature of the UK undergraduate admissions system overall was perceived by a small number of stakeholders as a potential challenge to the widespread use of contextualised admissions:

"There are around 180 institutions and the sector will get bigger, in total we are probably talking about 700 to 800 thousand students so there are a lot of decisions being made. We have a very distributed system and change can be slow and complex. This is not only about getting awareness of data and practices amongst admissions staff, and although we have moved to more professionalised admissions, academic staff are still involved and therefore there is a lot of change to try and push through. Raising awareness is an ongoing investment and institutions need support."

"The UK system of entering university contrasts with other countries where there is more direct involvement [of the government], it is more competitive here and the institutions have freedom which is laid down in the law. This actually supports the diversity of institutions and allows us to serve a diverse range of students but there is a knock on, it impacts on the processes and the rate of change. You are pushing up a hill."

3.2.1 Policy drivers

Long standing policy guidance has identified a role for contextualised admissions in promoting fair admissions.⁹ Government endorsement of contextual data in HE admissions came in 2011 (which also commended the practice of making lower offers)¹⁰. It is perhaps fair to say that the arguments for contextualisation of applicants to higher education have been gaining increasing sway, not least as a result of high profile policy reports which support the approach such as the influential 'Milburn Report' which endorsed the use of contextual data in university admissions (*BIS, 2009, p.42*) and more recently the DfE social mobility action plan which emphasises the need to *"expand access to the best universities for young people from less advantaged backgrounds"* as one of its ambitions (*DFE, 2018, p.8*).

In addition to the fair admissions agenda initiated by the Schwartz Report, Stakeholders described a range of drivers for this perceived increased use of contextual data: the work of OFFA and its endorsement of a contextualised approach; increased funding for widening participation through fee income which has enabled institutions to invest in contextualised admissions; importance of HESA performance measures in relation to highly selective institutions; the work of SPA and UCAS in providing support to the sector; research and lobbying by third sector bodies such as the Sutton Trust; developments at both policy and institutional level in the Scottish HE sector; the work of the Social Mobility Commission and increased emphasis by government on social mobility; equalities organisations including the Equality Challenge Unit and Third sector interest groups such as Standalone, Unlock and the Buttle Trust. Amongst most stakeholders there was also a belief that the use of contextual data had increased in part because there was less likely to be a backlash against its use, something that had been previously experienced by "trailblazing institutions".

There are policy and funding incentives for institutions to promote widening participation. Through the Access Agreement process institutions have to demonstrate how they are using fee income to support widening participation cohorts, and the Performance Indicators in HE put the spotlight on performance against a 'benchmark' target for enrolment of widening participation groups. The emergent Office for Students (OfS) and associated regulatory framework has objectives around access to higher education and the current guidance on Access and Participation Plans makes a short reference to contextualised admissions, encouraging providers to use contextual information: *"...so long as you consider individuals on their merits and your procedures are fair, transparent and evidence-based"* (*OfS, 2018, p.32*).

⁹ *Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group (2004), Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice (referred to as the Schwartz report).*

¹⁰ *BIS (2011), Guidance to the Director of Fair Access issues by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and Minister for Universities and Science, London: BIS.*

Stakeholder perspectives

In general, stakeholders felt that the use of contextual data was increasing over time, and several interviewees noted that interest in contextualised admissions had been given extra impetus in the last two or three years and there was a sense that the current high level of interest had to be harnessed:

“Things come in waves and we need to catch this one in order to really move contextualised admissions forward”.

“I think the public backlash has reduced since it was first used about 12 years ago and we are winning the argument for its use, we are showing that it is not about giving some groups a leg up at the expense of others. Perhaps the change is that there is an increasing willingness to use it.”

“If you go back 10 years plus, institutions were using it in a very pioneering ways, 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.”

A number of stakeholders felt that explicit encouragement from government to use contextual data was fundamental in moving its use forward, and some interviewees reported feeling positive about the potential impact of the changes in HE regulation and the potential for more explicit encouragement from Government to institutions to use contextual data:

“They need to publish data that doesn’t just flatter universities, we need to compare what institutions are doing to encourage disadvantaged learners and be a bit stronger about ensuring there is strong accountability in the system. They need to ensure that the resource already available is being used and they are spending it effectively.”

“The OfS founding documents, the green and white papers and the statements that have been issued, all point towards a very outcome focused organisation that will hold institutions to account. Access and progression appear to be in the DNA 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.”

3.2.2 Current admissions trends

Institutional autonomy in admissions practices and processes is enshrined in law, and subsequent Higher Education Acts have reinforced a general statutory duty to protect institutional autonomy over academic judgment, and admissions.¹¹ The issue of institutional autonomy within the admissions process was a regular feature of interviews with most stakeholders, although not for those representing the school perspective; for whom a consistent approach was a key priority. For some stakeholders, autonomy was viewed as a potential barrier to ensuring contextualised admissions was embedded across the sector, for others it was a feature of the HE sector that need to be protected and for one stakeholder it was viewed as a contributory factor to ensuring a diverse sector capable of meeting the needs of all different students.

The entry route for most full-time undergraduate courses is through open competition via the UCAS applications process. More people are taking up higher education: UCAS key statistics for example show that the number of applicants in 2017 was 7.1 per cent above the 2012 figure, and the number of acceptances was 14.8 per cent above. Recent developments affecting the HE admissions landscape include the ‘free market’ in student numbers. Just over 1.9 million offers were made in 2017, a slight fall of less than 0.1 per cent compared to the number of offers made in 2016. Between 2012 and 2016, offer rates increased across all age groups. 18 year olds had an offer rate of 77.3 per cent in 2017, a 1.2 percentage point increase compared to 2016, and the highest on record for the fourth cycle in a row. As such, 18 year olds were 1.6 per cent more likely to receive an offer than in 2016. Despite the slight overall fall in offers this year, the number of applicants who received 4 or 5 offers increased by 1.1 per cent (UCAS, 2017a). The huge growth in offers means that using contextual data is likely to have more limited application outside of highly selective HEPs and programmes. Participation by disadvantaged young people is seen to be widening overall and within the most highly selective institutions (based on

¹¹ Higher Education Act (2017), Section 2.8.

the FSM measure), driven by improvements in young people's educational attainment, and a trend to diversification of entry qualification requirements to include different types of qualifications such as BTECs and other applied general qualifications. Stakeholder interviewees included in the research suggested that higher education providers, including highly selective institutions, were influenced by recruitment objectives at a time when the demographic trend means fewer young people are coming through the education system, and that offer-making is an increasingly complex business. Most institutions continue to apply conditional offers (94.7% of offers made to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales were conditional offers in 2017). The number of unconditional offers has increased in recent years (with large variations according to where applicants live and their predicted grades), although unconditional offers remain a small minority of all offers (between 1-5% at the largest 140 UCAS providers) (UCAS, 2017a). There was low enthusiasm for unconditional offers from the case study institution interviewees because of the problem of incentivising students to drop their grades in their final school/college-leaving examinations.

Stakeholder perspectives

Some stakeholders felt that changes in the overall admissions landscape are providing additional impetus to contextual data use. Interviewees referenced the removal of the student number controls and demographic changes as potential reasons for increased interest in use of contextualised admissions, and some were concerned that the approach might fall out of favour in future, as trends in admissions shift:

"If you were cynical you might also think the recent increased interest is a result of the demographic downturn in 18 year olds and the increased competition for some to recruit. But now we need consistency and a determined push forward. Contextualised admissions shouldn't now fall by the wayside, it should remain important for all types of institutions. Not just the selective institutions but the middle ranking ones as they are called. These are the ones that need to do just as much, the ones that have had less attention paid to them."

Although most stakeholders felt contextual data use had increased, two school representatives were less sure and certainly one felt that any increase had not led to significant changes in relation fair access. These stakeholders felt that the HE admissions landscape had increased in complexity in recent years and made particular reference to practices that were affecting school and learner confidence in the process, with one interviewee commenting:

"There lots of things going on in universities that mean trust in the sector is very low, particular unconditional offers, very low offers and also offers outside of UCAS track. Contextualised admissions has lost its place and its value as the whole of the admissions process is confused."

As well as the admissions system feeling complex to schools, these stakeholders said that decisions appear inconsistent and this potentially adds to lack of trust. One interviewee described how they had analysed university offers for learners from a number of schools to try to establish patterns in offers but this had simply confirmed "a very scattered picture". There was a sense in this instance that schools were unsure if students are being offered lower grades due to contextual data or because of active recruitment. School representatives agreed that staff and learners had a relatively poor understanding of where and how contextual data was being applied. One interviewee suggested the practices of the most selective universities, particularly Oxford and Cambridge, were better understood, partly because there is more attention paid to the decisions made within these institutions, but also because their policies are more longstanding. Other universities were perceived as having policies that changed year on year.

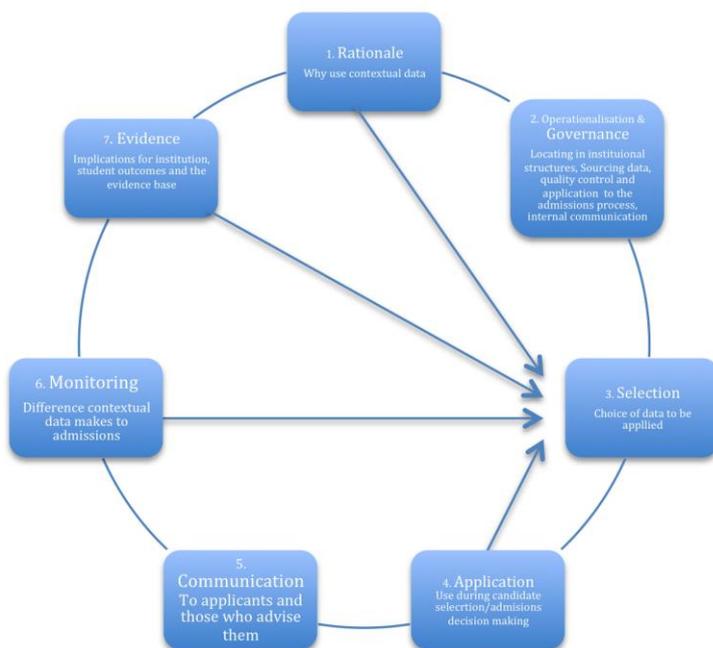
3.3 Learning from the case studies

This section explores different aspects of contextual data use in admissions at the case study institutions. Taken together these aspects could be conceptualised as a model of contextual data use, as illustrated in Figure 3.1. The discussion below draws on the institutional case study research and stakeholder interviews in order to develop ideas and recommendations for future developments relating to different aspects of contextual data use in practice.

Increasingly rich data on which to make decisions is becoming available to admissions selectors, linked to improved availability of student data (associated with improvements in data management) and data

exchange between agencies (for example HEFCE’s work to map patterns of HE progression by local areas). These trends have seen institutions seeking to be increasingly nuanced in their admissions decision-making. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that different institutions have chosen differing measures of contextual data, applied differently, which reflect how they wish to define and progress their institutional higher education offer.

Figure 3.1: A model of contextual data use



3.4 Rationale for using contextual data

The cases have in common some broad objectives underpinning the use of contextual data, coupled with institutional specific drivers linked to strategic objectives, the nature of the recruitment processes, and the make-up of the student body. These may not always be made explicit in admissions policies or in terms of admissions targets. In a general sense, contextual data is a way of “levelling the playing field” for certain groups of applicants, although entry barriers can vary depending on admissions practices. Prohibitive academic criteria is a major barrier to entry, although other barriers to admissions success for educationally disadvantaged applicants may exist.

Having clear objectives for using contextual data (or not) is a first step that all institutions could take, and if progressed consistently could promote more systematic general understanding of contextual data use across the sector, and greater transparency in the data and how it applies in different admissions environments. In some institutions the rationale might vary between programmes, depending on how the barriers to entry for disadvantaged applicants are perceived to affect admissions. In most cases a key premise of the use of contextual data is boosting the numbers of target applicants who are offered places (and ultimately within the student population), and this applies to both ‘recruiting’ and ‘selecting’ courses, since educationally disadvantaged students from priority target groups can be under-represented in both types of admissions contexts. Aligning the contextual data strategy to institutional targets appears to support the approaches, as illustrated by the case studies, and institutional targets can be based on sector level indicators or self-defined. For example, one institution had set a target to increase the percentage of UK undergraduate students entering from state schools and colleges that

historically have had limited progression to the institution, despite high attainment at GCSEs and A-Levels.¹²

At Loughborough University the introduction of contextual data in admissions five years ago sought to identify overlooked potential to succeed academically, and tackle student diversity issues linked to entry requirement barriers. Expressing the objectives within the institution's Access Agreement commitment helped to ensure that the work was prioritised, which was important since decision makers were facing competing priorities – to increase the 'quality' of the student intake - which might run against student diversity objectives. Winning the argument for contextual data use depended on addressing how entry qualifications relate to league table position, and tackling internal perceptions around the academic implications in terms of supporting 'non-traditional' entrants. In this context, using contextual data as part of admissions decision-making enabled a pro-active approach to giving additional consideration to students with potential to succeed, whilst balancing out competing institutional priorities. Selectors have to specify their reasons in each case for not taking forward an application from contextually flagged candidates who meet the entry standard. They also have the opportunity of making 'concessionary offers' to applicants who demonstrate potential to succeed.

Loughborough University has set targets linked to contextual data based on LPN (POLAR 3 quintile 1). Regular and end of cycle reporting on the number of applications and offers made, replies and acceptances is making the outcomes from the contextual data strategy more visible to senior management. Getting buy-in is considered an important achievement as there was some trepidation across schools and departments - having a target and being able to show improvement year on year has helped to stem potential objections to the contextual data approach.

The interviews with representatives of case study institutions were notable in highlighting how far the arguments for contextual data use in admissions have become embedded within institutional cultures. For example one person noted how different the current climate is from 10 years ago because there is no question of not using contextual data in decisions. It is generally accepted that in the current HE environment institutions must be nuanced in their decision-making, and that a range of considerations need to be taken into account, including application of appropriate metrics identified within institutions. This later point has implications for widening participation monitoring and target setting, and it was also evident that several of the case study institutions had already or were moving to achieve coherence between contextual data used in admissions and their internal widening participation target measures.

Stakeholder perspectives

Although stakeholders overall described the primary purpose of contextualised admissions in a number of different ways, the overall notion of improving 'fairness' was consistent across all interviewees. For some this was about fairness in the widest terms, with interviewees relating contextualised admissions to social justice, for stakeholders representing the views of schools contextualised admissions was more a mechanism to ensure students were judged on a level playing field and that they would be treated with empathy within the admissions process. Stakeholders closest to individual HE institutions, saw the use of contextual data as contributing to a fair undergraduate admissions process and enabling individual institutions to recruit the 'best' students, i.e. those with the greatest potential for success. One stakeholder described the need for institutions to identify an admissions 'business case' for use of contextualised data:

"The purpose of contextual data is broadly to support an effective admissions process for institutions and therefore it relates back to the mission of different types of institution. For some institutions it is about identifying those who are qualified and coming from diverse tracks, so it can be about assessment of different routes, different prior learning and ensuring the institution offers the right fit for them. Those institutions talk about wanting to up the tariff of their students but really they are talking about increasing the quality of the student base and the student experience. On the flip side, talking about selective institutions, the middle tariff and the higher tariff institutions, they are interested in identifying the most talented that they can recruit. So, contextual data links to an institution's social mission and although there is a regulatory

¹² Research by the Sutton Trust has shown students at universities with the highest entry requirements are drawn from a disproportionately small number of schools (Sutton Trust, 2011). This is likely to be due to patterns of GCSE and A-Level attainment data, but nevertheless it is also clear that students benefit from teachers and peers with experience of the admissions process.

requirement through the OFFA access and participation agreement there also needs to be a business case. And there is evidence to suggest that just relying on A levels isn't necessarily the best way to identify the right students. I am not underplaying the social mobility, social justice dimension but it is primarily about the business case."

3.5 Governance, operational issues and internal communication

A key point emerging from the case study research was that using contextual data in admissions requires a high level of forward-planning and extensive resource commitment. There was no single approach to how and where contextual data sits within institutional operations and governance structures. Examples were found of decisions being made through line management arrangements, through existing admissions governance structures, and through the establishment of cross- institutional working groups to oversee or advise on the strategic aspects of contextual data use. Case study interviewees stressed the need for admissions professionals to cut across different institutional structures and the role played in promoting dialogue between different parts of institutions (e.g. between academic teams and central services, and across different teams such as student services, widening participation, recruitment/marketing and data/MIS).

The research highlights the very great lengths some institutions go to to maximise the coverage and reliability of the data, including: employment of data techniques to make sure data is relevant to the target groups (e.g. using averages across years); dealing with missing data (e.g. sourcing data across UK regions, or consulting other multiple sources to assess school factors); and also in the time taken to check individual responses. It is clear that institutions have very high standards in terms of the data they wish to use to contextualise applicants. The current shared service provided by UCAS is designed to transfer third party data and relies on this being fit for purpose, which has meant that many institutions have chosen to source the data directly and implement data quality checks and measures institutionally.

At The University of Manchester a small operational group meets four times a year to prepare for contextual admissions, including drawing up the timeline for making use of published data, planning for data cleaning and agreeing the flagging approach. Regularly meetings are important in order to enhance the capabilities to deal with the challenges to the flagging processes including building understanding of changes to qualifications, and making recommendations on how to approach new types of qualifications data. Strategic direction for the policy is led by a Widening Access Working Group and regular updates are received by this group, where possible taking account of practices at other institutions. The VP for Teaching and Learning chairs the group and plays a role in encouraging admissions staff to use data, and enhancing its visibility across the institution and senior teams.

At The University of Exeter changes in the internal structures has seen the admissions office move several times between different teams (student services and recruitment/marketing), with little perceived impact on the day to day work. Here a cross-institutional "Data Group Meeting" every month helps to promote a joined up approach.

Interviewees spoke positively about the attitudes of staff members to the use of contextual data in admissions - in general admissions colleagues are reported as being supportive of the principle of contextual data in admissions, however it is clear that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in relation to the practicalities of contextual data, i.e. how to use it and understanding of what the data signifies. For example, some interviewees in institutions that are aiming for holistic admissions decision-making reported challenges from admissions selectors who would prefer to apply contextual data mechanistically. Institutions that use a range of contextual metrics and nuanced datasets have a particular need to put in place effective internal communication to admissions decision-makers. As well as written information, the interviewees spoke about regular training sessions on an on-going basis.

The cases demonstrate the need for joined up approaches across institutional teams. Regardless of the way widening participation, recruitment, and admissions functions were organised internally, there was a common need for teams to communicate effectively, and ideally have integrated targets. Not least, because those who engage with potential students pre-application will effect who applies. Admissions teams draw on widening participation practitioners in terms of sharing of expertise and understanding of contextual datasets, and one admissions practitioner asserted that synergy with widening participation was *"the way [selectors] got to understand the reasons for under representation and disadvantage"*.

LSE, which has been seen to have considerable success in taking forward contextualised admissions, demonstrates how the drivers for contextual data came from the most senior staff, and has been embedded within the management ethos. This has fed through into increased investment in widening participation (via Access Agreement commitments). Competition for places at this institution is particularly intense (with around thirteen applicants who meet the standard requirements per place). There has been a longstanding commitment to holistic admissions, coupled with processes and systems that aim to minimise bias, plus the use of dedicated admissions staff with time and specialist expertise to undertake the task of selection decisions. This approach has facilitated admissions procedures that involve relatively in-depth assessment of each applicants' information allowing for more holistic admissions-decision making. Selectors are required to give clear reason why any flagged candidates were rejected. A key element of the success of the contextual data approach in improving participation was identified as linkages between admissions, widening participation professionals and data analysts. The institution keeps records to capture potential WP applicants before they become an applicant, and there are good lines of communication between the widening participation and undergraduate admission teams, formalised through a steering group which meets termly involving the PVC Education and Heads of student services including careers. So the key players are discussing the strategic approach regularly. Here a proposal has been made to set up an operational group involving school and college staff and students who have been on widening participation schemes to get their input into shaping and influencing the work.

3.6 Evidence base for contextual data

Use of data to unpick student context has been a key aspect in developing institutional level strategies, to explain the factors that affect the student journey to and through higher education. The research highlighted how contextual data use is located within a wider discourse of the achievement and success factors in their higher education offer. This is an important point given that it has been argued that admission models aiming to achieve equity in higher education should be more outcomes-based (e.g., increase success) rather than process-based (e.g., increase participation) (Wang and Shulruf, 2013).

Approaches to evidencing potential to succeed in HE usually involve statistical studies with an experimental design, requiring large sample sizes. The case study institutions gave examples of varying extent of work to build an evidence base for contextual data use, in terms of identifying the thresholds that give the best chance of academic success in undergraduate provision. These included a range of analytical techniques such as binary logistic regression analysis (as in the case of research to compare 'equi-potential' groups); and multivariate regression analysis. In general the sense emerged that making progress on the application of contextual data in admissions often involves going beyond the approaches for which there may be supporting evidence over the long term. One example of this is from an institution which has recently extend the policy on differential offers to contextually flagged applicants from one to two grades. In this case the strategy is to make progress first, which will provide the students with which to build up the evidence over time (bearing in mind the need to manage the risk to the students).

A key dilemma exists in that it may be hard to identify appropriate research subjects to evaluate within the existing student body until the contextual data strategy gets underway: the data to identify student factors may not be in systematically in place and the numbers meeting the criteria may be initially small. There are also difficulties in terms of joining up the analysis across different metrics, especially as measures of disadvantage have tended to change over time, and putting the findings back into practice (i.e. understanding how the research evidence can be used). Research into contextual factors and student success is complex: factors such as subject and mode of study affect the outcomes observed, and student success studies struggle to take account not only of context but also demographic characteristics and confounding factors such as entry qualification type. Changes in the compulsory education system qualifications and reporting present a major challenge to the efforts to contextualise student potential as part of admissions decisions. External developments in qualifications, along with internal changes in delivery can also undermine selectors confidence in the historical patterns.¹³ There was some appetite amongst those involved in the case study research, especially amongst those

¹³ For example one case study was moving from regular modular assessment practices to end of semester group work with a consequent need to refresh their understanding of the student success factors.

institution which have only recently implemented contextual data in admissions, for more sharing of approaches and indicators of performance in relation to progress of contextually flagged students.

The University of Bristol's Widening Participation Research Cluster has been a vehicle to undertake research to build the evidence base for contextualising applicants. The analytical method identifies students who are likely to have experienced education disadvantage compared to their peers (those from low performing state schools). Student data is used to examine whether the differential between the attainment of WP students at A level and final degree, when compared with 'non-WP' students. Statistical evidence was found that the low performing school students raised their attainments relative to their 'high performing' peers, and the differences were calibrated based on 'equi-potential' pairs of students (Hoare and Johnson, 2010). The "equi-potential pairings" were given to admissions tutors who could then take note of the differentials as part of holistic decision-making (for example, where 'poor performing' students with BBB or better at A Level achieved the equivalent final degree attainment as those from 'high performers' achieving AAB or better at A Level). The equi-potential WP/non-WP pairing which best represented the University's current overall admissions profile was used to calculate an evidence-base for differential offers (specified in the OFFA Access Agreement). The definition used to identify 'poor performing' schools is multi-faceted being based on measures of school attainment and progression to HE, and relative to the national distribution, and therefore capable of revision on an annual basis. The approach has some merits in that it is relatively easy to implement in practice through flagging the applications, however, it is based on a simplification of outcomes (i.e. two groups of schools only and dividing candidates based on performance just above/ below the cohort median on entry and on exit). Based on the evidence the university has directed admissions teams to consider making reduced offers to candidates from WP backgrounds including those with lower predicted or achieved grades than normally considered (the decision making in relation to individual candidates remains in the judgement of the selectors).

Research into university outcomes at The University of Manchester was designed to inform how university applicants are selected and also how students are taught. Regression models were used to identify variables underpinning 'good' degree outcomes when controlling for prior attainment and other explanatory variables (including subject areas) so that comparisons could be made on a like-for-like basis. School type was found to have a significant effect on degree outcomes, giving an advantage to students from comprehensive schools. The research confirms the hypothesis that the potential of state school pupils is not always realised until they reach university. However, patterns were less pronounced looking at other variables like income and LPN status, which are less reliable indicators of degree-level performance. Significant interactions were identified between gender and ethnicity, and socio-economic status indicators – which have implications for teaching and learning. For example White female students do better than minority ethnic females (Jones et al, 2017).

Stakeholder perspectives

Commonly interviewees were keen to ensure that contextualised admissions would not set students up to fail, although overall the tone was a positive one and stakeholders stressed the need to make adjustments across the whole institution to ensure support was in place to maximise student outcomes. One stakeholder argued that research to assess a 'threshold' level at which students were likely to succeed was particularly helpful:

"It is often argued that we are setting people up to fail so we need evidence that they aren't. For example at St Andrews, they have identified the threshold level that, with the support available, there is no difference in drop outs and although the graduate rates are a little bit lower this is not significantly so."

Stakeholders expressed mixed views as to whether the available evidence was clear regarding the outcomes for those admitted through a contextualised approach, with some feeling research provides some evidence in its favour but others were less sure and felt the evidence was contradictory in places. Almost all commented that the evidence base could be strengthened, although the difficulty in creating a sound evidence base was raised and there was particular concern that lack of understanding over where and how contextual data was being applied and the different approaches used made it difficult to draw conclusions across the sector as a whole. Some stakeholders emphasised the importance of institutional level piloting and research in order to create the evidence needed to justify and win support for a contextualised approach within an institution:

"Institutions do fear centrally mandated initiatives that lack evidence of tangible impact. So our approach is that there

needs to be more use of contextual data, but this needs to be led by evidence and institutions have a role in creating this.”

“We do need increased sharing of practice across the sector, it would be good to have the evidence about what happens to students admitted through contextualised admissions, both across the sector but also at institutional level as this is what is needed before you use contextual data in a significant way. I think the research could be clearer, some of it has been conflicting.”

3.7 Selection of data to contextualise applicants

The case studies took different approaches to data (Tables 3.2 and 3.3). Decisions on which data to select within a contextual data in admissions process come out as being a balance between three key considerations: the factors which the contextual data approach is seeking to identify as part of the admissions process (linked to conceptions of applicant disadvantage); the availability of the data for use as part of admissions decisions (i.e. factors of accessibility, coverage and timeliness); the level of confidence that decision makers have in the data quality and reliability in identifying the student groups the institution is seeking to target (often tested through internal research). Providers’ face fundamental challenges in squaring these considerations in practice, and the relatively wide range of metrics currently used across the English higher education sector is a result of the different ways in which providers have addressed these key data challenges, whilst also paying attention to the constraints and opportunities within their own particular institutional context. Even where institutions were using the same data source, the definitions used for contextual data flagging might differ (e.g. several utilised POLAR data, but the threshold to identify applicants from areas with poor tradition of higher education varied). Decisions of this type are underpinned by the institutional rationale for contextual data and also pragmatic considerations in terms of the share of applicants being flagged. In general the metrics (excluding time in care) and flagging process used should be capable of identifying sufficient numbers of candidates to be meaningful, but not such high proportions as to skew the profile. For the case study institutions in the research a workable share was 10-20% of applicants.

Table 3.2: Types of data in use by case study institutions

Level/Type	Number of cases
<i>Education (schooling) level:</i>	
Measure of low general attainment	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶
Measure of low historical higher education progression	▶▶
<i>Geo-demographic (area) level:</i>	
Measure of low higher education progression (POLAR)	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶
Proxy measure for low socio-economic group (ACORN)	▶▶▶▶▶
Proxy measure for relative disadvantage (Output area classification (OAC) and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD))	▶
<i>Individual level:</i>	
Time in care measure	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶
Disability	▶▶
Widening participation scheme participant measure	▶▶▶
Extenuating circumstances form	▶▶▶
Mature applicant	▶

Changes in the data being applied over time illustrate institutions’ desire to improve the quality of the data as new insights or information become available. In this context it is also important to acknowledge the challenges presented by a shifting data landscape to providers that use contextual data. For example, analysis at The University of Bath has suggested that shifting from a definition of disadvantage based on POLAR3 to one based on POLAR4 will result in a significant shift in which applicants are flagged in the contextual admissions process, with consequent knock-on effects for admissions objectives and comparison of data year-on-year.

The following techniques have been applied with a view to tackling issues relating to the poor quality of the proxy indicators currently available.

Table 3.3: Contextual data indicators at case study institutions (correct at May 2018)

HEI	Criteria for contextualisation*	Education (school/college) level	Geo-demographic (area) level	Individual level**	Implications for applicants
The University of Bath	Up to six flags	Below national average performance at GCSE. Below national average performance at A level	POLAR3 (quintiles 1 & 2) ACORN (groups 4 and 5, excluding 4k)	Care Disability Widening access programme participant Extenuating circumstances	Eligible for additional consideration during application process
The University of Bristol	Any of the following	Schools in the bottom 40 per cent for either progression to higher education, or average attainment at A-levels (or equivalent)	POLAR3 (POLAR4 for 2019 entry)	Completion of University of Bristol outreach programme Time in care	Eligible for differential offer
The University of Cambridge	Up to seven flags	Average capped GCSE performance per pupil below 40 points (English schools only). GCSE performance against own school cohort Lack of successful application history to Cambridge or Oxford	Output Area Classification (OAC) POLAR3 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)	Time in care Extenuating circumstances	Eligible for additional consideration during application process; eligible for additional consideration if a near miss at confirmation stage
The University of Exeter	Flagged on area and education criteria	NOT in the top 20% of schools <u>and</u> bottom quintile of POLAR3 <u>and</u>	Bottom quintile of POLAR3 <u>and</u> NOT in the top 20% of schools	Time in care	Eligible for differential offer
The University of Liverpool	Scoring process which includes requirement for points over different measures	Below average performance at GCSE across multiple years Below average performance at A level across multiple years	POLAR3 (quintiles 1 and 2) ACORN (groups 4 and 5)	Time in care Declared disability	Eligible for additional consideration if a near miss at confirmation stage
London School of Economics and Political Science	Any of the following	GCSE school/college below the national average A level school/ below the national average	POLAR3 (quintiles 1 and 2)	Participation in LSE WP programme Extenuating circumstances Time in care	Eligible for additional consideration during application process
Loughborough University	Any of the following		POLAR3 (quintile 1)	Time in care Declared disability Mature applicants Extenuating circumstances	Eligible for additional consideration during application process and possible concessionary offer
The University of Manchester [^]	A geo-demographic indicator generates WP flag. Addition of education indicator generates WP Plus Flag	Below average performance at GCSE across multiple years Below average performance at A level across multiple years	POLAR3 (quintile 1) ACORN (groups 4 and 5)	Time in care	Eligible for additional consideration during application process and if a near miss at confirmation stage
The University of Oxford	At least one prior attainment measure and at least one postcode measure	Below national average performance at GCSE Below national average A level performance Schools judged to have reasonable proportions of well-qualified students but poor rates of successful applications to Oxford	POLAR3 (quintiles 1 and 2) ACORN (groups 4 and 5)	Time in care	Eligible for additional consideration during application process

*The individual level data usually automatically leads to a flag.

**There is some interest in the use of non-standard application forms as an opportunity to collect more individual level data from applicants, however the opportunities for this depend on the institutional practice. The University of Cambridge is using additional forms to collect information on Free School Meals.

[^] In June 2018 The University of Manchester approved the use of contextual data to make differential offers to students flagged as WP Plus (See: <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/applications/after-you-apply/contextual-data/contextual-data-2019/>).

3.7.1 Multiple data sources

Most institutions have shied away from simple ‘yes/no’ definitions of disadvantage, in favour of the using differing sources as part of holistic assessment process (i.e. including at school, area and individual level) to reflect the nuanced nature of disadvantage that contextual data strategies are seeking to address. The complexity of the issues involved is demonstrated by the attention given to choosing data. Analysis of existing students has been used to calculate how different indicators map together in order to make sure that any of the measures used are not redundant (i.e. measuring the same thing).

In relation to school factors, some institutions apply data at Level 2 and Level 3 to capture disadvantage at different phases (i.e. applicants attending a school with effective A level teaching leading to grades that are a true reflection of their potential, may not have achieved as highly at GCSE as other candidates if their pre-16 teaching was less effective). This increases the pool of contextualised candidate either because of educational disadvantage at the GCSE, or the A Level stage, or both. Furthermore, increasing diversity of school-leaving qualifications along with grade inflation is undermining the value of A levels in discriminating among the group of high-achieving candidates, resulting in GCSE grades getting attention as a way of discriminating amongst otherwise equally-qualified applicants.

Rather than relying on a single HE participation based single metric, LSE is taking an approach of using a ‘basket’ of measures in conjunction with POLAR data, in order to get closer to identifying socio-economic deprivation and the nuances of the background applicants are coming from. Achieving quality and consistency of the data is the biggest challenge (and at a time when curriculum is changing). Another problem for this institution is that because the undergraduate intake is relatively small, there is less scope for recruiting large numbers of widening participation students.

The complexity of issues relating to the geo-demographic indicators, even at small units of analysis, is highlighted by work at The University of Cambridge. A review of the student body was used to inform the use of OAC categories to contextualise, focusing on those categories with low progression to the university and using socio-economic and household income data to make sure indicators of disadvantage were being interpreted correctly. It was identified that in some geographical areas under-representation was probably down to the population demographics (e.g. non-student age - such as retired communities) rather than progression issues. The principle of focusing on areas of under-representation of students was maintained but the methodology was improved. At The University of Bath, analysis of students by ACORN categories was undertaken to underpin decisions on which categories of disadvantage to use. Subsequently, further work revealed inclusion of some areas of student housing were potentially giving advantage to applicants transferring from other universities. The current approach now excludes these areas.

3.7.2 Triangulation of data

At institutional level the issue of ‘false positive’ flagging (i.e. where an applicant appears to be disadvantaged when they are not) has been a bugbear, particularly for geo-demographic flags, as this type of indicator, in the words of one interviewee, “...don’t by themselves tell you what you want to know about the candidate”. Internal research can be used to test the rate of ‘false positive’ flags post-hoc (e.g. comparing contextual flags with individual level data which becomes available over time such as income data). POLAR data is particularly unreliable because of the unit of analysis used in this measure, however, it is a measure which institutions have privileged because of its importance as a sector benchmark. Therefore, triangulation of POLAR flags with other data sources considered to have greater reliability, finer-grained focus or more nuance has been a feature of the approach to using data.

Institutions use different complementary data sources as this helps to give assurance that the contextual information is pointing to genuine disadvantage. However, some commentators contend that it is not clear that combining indicators leads “to the advantages rather than the deficits of all” (Gorard et al, 2017, p.3). A recent report by the Medical Schools Council (2017) led by Professor Jen Cleland to look at how contextual data is used in medical school admission found that there is no evidence to suggest that using a range of different measures of social disadvantage is effective. The team concludes: “A combination of several weak CA [contextual admissions] markers does not automatically improve reliability and accuracy, nor does availability equate with usefulness and robustness.” (P.40). (Note:

instead they recommend comparing an individual applicant's academic performance to that of the average performance at their secondary school because this indicator is considered more useful in *predicting success on a medicine course*).

Institutions which use multiple sources independently tend to be notable in terms of the high degree of scrutiny afforded applications and the extensive use of interviews. Selectors are presented with a wide range of indicators as part of holistic decision-making, and in these cases it is perhaps fair to say that weaknesses in data are less noteworthy since the process is working towards drawing out the relative individual merits of applicants which can then be assessed at interview. The function of the data is to prompt selectors to consider applicants who might otherwise be overlooked.

3.7.3 Estimation of relative position of applicant to peers

A couple of the case study institutions were exploring or implementing approaches which sought to locate the attainment of an individual relative to their school/college peer group. The approach is intuitively appealing: in schools where high grades are unusual an individual applicant's achievement stands out as being more impressive than in a school context where high achievement is the norm.

The University of Cambridge uses a relatively wide range of indicators with a view to understanding what difficulties or restrictions someone might have encountered in personal and educational background that's made it harder to achieve results compared to someone from a more privileged background. Internal research has shown that performance at AS level is a good predictor of relative achievement and traditionally AS level performance was emphasised in admissions. With the phasing out of the UMS, more attention is being paid to using GCSE performance data. A new approach is being used looking at candidates' GCSE attainment in their own school context, using schools data sourced from the NPD (Key Stage 4 tables). The work aims to put applicants' GCSE performance on a level playing field regardless of their type of school. A disadvantage is the time taken to request and receive the NPD data.

The approach at The University of Liverpool up until 2017 included looking at whether an individual was performing above the average level in their school, and awarded addition points in the admissions scoring system for candidates who were out-performing the norm at A level. This approach however has been undermined by changes in the reporting of school qualifications as a result of the introduction of the Progress 8 measure (which does not allow for individual level relative to school level comparisons to be made).

3.7.4 Inter-sectionality

Since 2017 the definition for contextualisation at The University of Exeter is applicants found to be in the lowest quintile of POLAR3 AND not in the top 20% of schools, giving increased confidence as an identifier of genuine disadvantage. The contextual offer threshold has been increased from 1 to 2 grades below the standard. Previously applicants from a school in the bottom 40% on three indicators were flagged, and could qualify for a 1 grade reduction in the offer (resulting in an increase in the share of intake from state schools). However, in reviewing this school measure, it was concluded that school was too broad a measure since the institution was not meeting targets on other WP indicators. It also generated false positive flags and queries from applicants who were confused as to why their offer was lower than that received by friends. The downside of using a combination of metrics is that fewer candidates benefit.

A key challenge in taking forward contextualisation based on data inter-sections is that the approach potentially limits the pool of applicants to a smaller group, thereby reducing the pool from which selectors can draw and limiting the extent to which contextual data can make a difference to overall recruitment patterns. The different approaches to data across the case study institutions also demonstrate the opposing directions in terms of on the one hand the benefits of having a high degree of flexibility in terms of the relevance given to the contextual factors and other factors within an application which admissions practitioners refer to as part of an in-depth holistic consideration of the person, and on the other hand the benefits of having a rules based approach to the application of contextual data which reflects the institutional objectives and assessment of applicant potential in relation to institutional targets.

The University of Manchester has moved to a two-step flagging process (whilst maintaining the previously agreed contextual indicators). The initial binary approach highlighted relatively many applicants for additional consideration. Currently area-based measures linked to postcode are a first step (leading to a WP flag). School/college data is then applied (leading to a "WP Plus" flag). The approach allows for both a broad and narrow definition of disadvantage to be taken into account by admissions selectors to help them build up a holistic view of the applicant. One interviewee described the process as providing a 'sense check', especially in programme areas where a large share of applicants is highlighted: the WP Plus flag allows selectors to identify students likely to be amongst the most disadvantaged groups and the approach helps to prioritise places by giving additional detail on an applicant's background factors drawing on a different data set.

3.7.5 Development of composite measures

UCAS has led an initiative to develop a composite measure of relative disadvantage, a Multiple Equality Measure (MEM), which is currently used to analyse applicant data. This measure is designed to more accurately identify those 18 year olds most and least likely to go into HE. As such it shows a different pattern to many other measures used for measuring equality of representation in HE, in that it suggests no progress in reducing inequality in HE since 2014.¹⁴ Amongst the stakeholders included in this research there was particular support for the work UCAS has undertaken in the last few years in developing MEM, which stakeholders thought had allowed for a more sophisticated analysis of UCAS applicant data at national level, and there was interest in how it might be developed further. For example, one stakeholder said: *"We are very interested in the MEM and the ability to map the profile of different groups by a number of different characteristics."* However, institutional contacts appear less convinced about the usefulness of these types of measures. Although the prospect of individual level data is attractive they are concerned that any measures used need to fit their institutional objectives, be transparent in terms of sources and methods, and readily available without resource implications. At least one case study institution is planning to undertake analysis to test the value added by assessing whether the current contextual data measures capture the same students as signified by the MEM.

Stakeholder perspectives

All stakeholders felt that access to reliable data was one of the biggest practical barriers to the widespread use of contextualised admissions. Beyond a general desire to improve the data landscape, the most consistent message heard from stakeholders was the need to move beyond the use of single indicators to a more nuanced approach, with a call for improved access to data based on multiple sources:

"Institutions need data that relates to the multi-dimensional nature of disadvantage. Research is increasingly suggesting that unless you look at the interactions between different characteristics then you don't really get to understand who is most disadvantaged. This kind of data needs to be accessible but the analytical skills needed to use it are also needed."

A number of stakeholders echoed the institutional interviewees in stressing that ensuring data was accessible to individual practitioners was key (i.e. direct to their desktop and linked to the UCAS application where appropriate). A small number saw a need for institutions to understand what lay behind any data and to influence the development of any sector wide approach to contextual data. Issues of affordability of data were raised by stakeholders, as well as institutional interviewees.

3.8 Application during admissions decision making/candidate selection

There are a number of possible ways in which contextual data can be used as part of decision making/candidate selection. In general, institutional approach can be distinguished into two main groups:

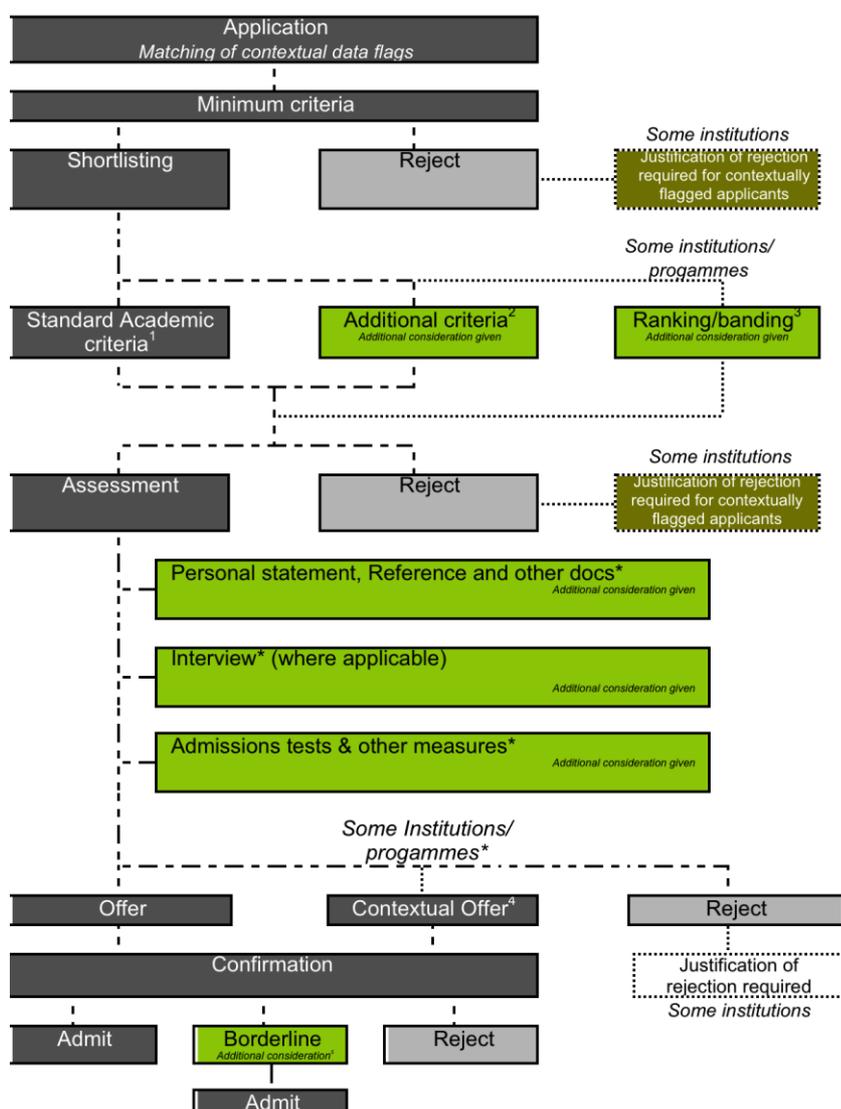
- Those institutions which maintain the standard academic entry criteria and use contextual data during candidate assessment as a way of giving additional consideration to contextually flagged applicants or flexing their thresholds for entry on a case by case basis;
- Those institutions that progress contextually flagged applicants via a route for which a differential offer applies (usually at least one and could be two grades below the standard offer criteria for

¹⁴ UCAS intend to publish an indepth report on the MEM in Summer 2018 that will provide more information on data sources and methods.

admission). The advice to the sector from SPA contends that differential offers are recommended as long as supported by appropriate empirical evidence and not used mechanistically to the wholesale advantage of one group of candidates over another, but as part of a holistic assessment.

Within these categories, there may be differences in the role played by contextual data, depending on the selection processes adopted by different institutions. Figure 3.2 summaries the points at which during a standard application process the contextual data could come into play to affect a change in decision-making for contextually flagged applicants at institutions who afford them additional consideration.

Figure 3.2: 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, e.g. through applying an uplift to WP students, or banding on the basis of 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 offer to all WP flagged applicants whether they need it or not (based on predicted grades) where agreed by academic school.

(5) Depending on availability of places.

The case studies suggest that progressing contextually flagged applicants via a standard application route might be favoured by institutions with devolved admissions decision-making, because it allows for more flexibility in approach at the level of academic programmes. Plus, institutions that are in a position of affording applicants a high level of individual scrutiny including use of in depth assessment procedures (e.g. courses use interviews and admissions tests) might favour using contextual data in order to contextualise the relative merits of applicants with differing life experiences and influences on their performance as an applicant. The processes adopted at one case study illustrate how the benefit to applicants of contextual data in generating additional consideration during the main admissions process works in practice. The Undergraduate Admissions Office collates contextual information centrally for UK applicants who have been educated in the UK secondary system and disseminates this information to admissions decision makers in the departments. At the pre-interview stage, applicants are ranked using a composite score made up of marks from the application form (including examination marks and predicted grades as well as the personal statement and school reference); submitted written work; and admissions tests results where used. In arriving at a score, contextual data may be taken into account using an algorithm. Candidates who showed low scores in some of their application will only have been invited for interview with special consideration of other factors. When an applicant is flagged under the contextual data system it is strongly recommended that they are invited to interview.

The downside of the additional consideration approach is that it may only influence the profile of admissions decisions at the margins. One of the case studies, Loughborough University, has made provision for selectors to make differential offers to contextually flagged applicants that are usually one grade below the standard (known as concessionary offers). The University of Manchester is moving from using contextual data for additional consideration purposes towards a framework by which decision makers at programme level will be able to flex offers made to some applicants (at the time of the research it was unclear how far the approach will be at the discretion of individual selectors or through a blanket approach).

A key issue for communication to applicants is that decision-making on individuals is not in isolation from other candidates, and an individual's chances of success not only depends on how they assess against the objective criteria but how they perform relative to other applicants (i.e. when looking at applicants across a gathered field or series of gathered fields during rolling decision-making). One case study interviewee highlighted that this type of approach was working and suggested it is more robust to apply contextualisation at different points in order to “*get away from crude labelling of applicants*” – i.e. to make sure there is a human judgement element rather than simply data being applied. However, depending on the processes employed and the academic and other entry criteria applied in each case there is potential for the barriers to contextually flagged applicants to remain high, and the impact of contextual data use in terms of incentivising eligible applicants to make an application may be low.

Institutions which do not use differential offers might still admit students on lower than standard grades, perhaps through having the opportunity for a small number of concessionary offers, however more commonly this occurs when contextually flagged applicants who miss their grade predictions are admitted at confirmation stage on lower grades. Clearly admitting students on lower grades at confirmation stage whilst helpful to the individuals involved, could be criticised for lacking transparency to the many applicants who might have got a place but were not encouraged to apply. Increasing the pool of applicants is the key challenge for institutions seeking to use contextual data to attract from a more diverse pool of applicants with potential to succeed. Generally, the application of contextual admissions is too late if there are few applicants to draw on and unfair to those who might have been eligible but were not encouraged to apply.

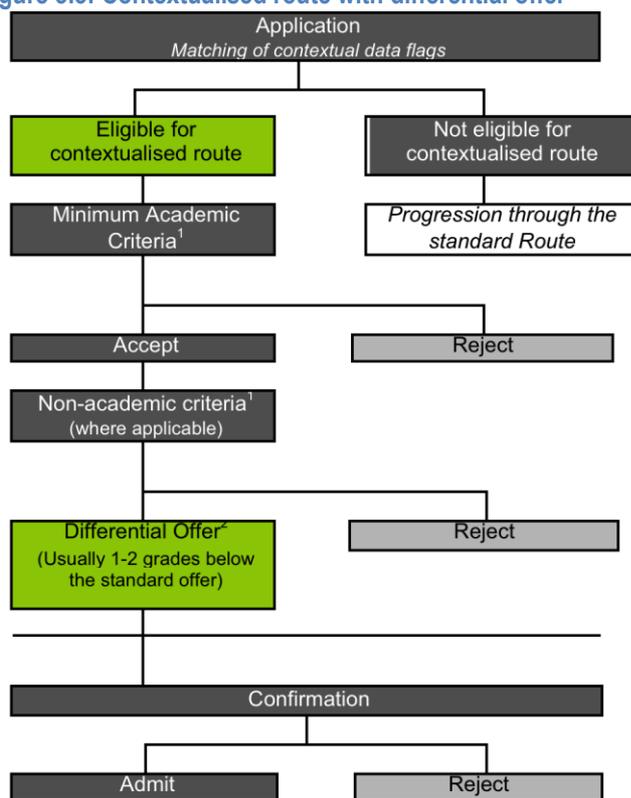
The University of Manchester has been using contextual data for a number of years with the aim of “shining a light” on applicants that through background and educational experience may have had less access to less opportunities. Seeing applicants achievement in context provides a framework to encourage admissions selectors to give educationally disadvantage applicants a close look: the degree to which the data is applied, and when in the application process, will depend on the course requirements and recruitment profile. This case study institution currently does not recommend to selectors to make lower offers however some courses might invite people just

below standard to an interview – and if the person performs well at interview they could receive an aspirational offer. Other selectors, depending on the nature of the application process, use contextual data in reviewing personal statements or the results of additional tests including the UKCAT for medicine. The data suggests that ranking contextually flagged and non-flagged applicants separately according to their scores results in a slightly more widening participation applicants being invited to interview (once other criteria such as predicted grades and work experience requirements are taken into account).

At The University of Liverpool contextual data plays into the decision-making at confirmation stage and is a key discriminator amongst candidates who have missed their predictions competing for places at the point. The contextual data strategy identifies around 10% of the cohort, who have priority if they narrowly miss the criteria for a place. It is estimated that approximately 80 borderline students are flagged and admitted each year who might otherwise not achieve a place.

Figure 3.3 gives an overview of a typical process involved for a contextualised route. Contextual data mainly falls within scope of ‘assessing potential’. Having a contextualised entry route with differential offer-making could be an effective way of expediting the application process for contextually flagged applicants where the application process is centralised and/or where the academic entry criteria is the decisive standard to be applied to assess an applicant. The approach can send a clear message to target applicants that they have a good chance of success. However, there is some criticism that making lower offers to all applicants from widening participation groups may dis-incentivise some people to perform at their maximum in their pre-university exams, or lead to applicants opting the offer as their insurance rather than firm choice.

Figure 3.3: 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).

Stakeholder perspectives: institutional approaches to using contextual data

Overall stakeholders agreed that different approaches would be required by different institutions, informed by their institutional mission and by their current strengths and weaknesses in relation to student diversity, and for

some stakeholders the notion of institutional autonomy was stressed:

“We think there are benefits to using it at every stage in admissions and individual institutions have autonomy but we would encourage them to have clear and transparent policies. Different providers will have different successes with it.”

“Institutions need to make their own decisions about how it best fits, but if you look at the evidence then it is clear that different approaches work for different institutions.”

“Sharing what institutions are doing is important and this is helping to spread the word, although the caveat is that what works in one institution doesn’t necessarily work elsewhere. Institutions need to think about the type of organisation they are, their demographic, their size.”

Whilst recognising the need for different approaches, stakeholders identified challenges as a result of this, and some interviewees felt a more consistent approach to the use of contextual data would be of benefit to the sector itself, not just to schools; a consistent approach would allow for improved gathering and sharing evidence, and would enable clearer communication within the sector and to other stakeholders:

“The first challenge is about getting consistency across the sector, you don’t want just a small number of institutions working on this. For the sake of students it has to have a more sector wide approach. Secondly, it is about making the use of data transparent, potential students need the information on how it might be used. But also institutions need a better understanding and we need to build a better evidence base, a consistent approach will help us to understand any positive and negative effect of its use.”

The requirement to provide a clear and robust reason for rejection at all stages of the application process is important for institutional purposes, and can also help to improve feedback to applicants and potentially improvement of information, advice and guidance (IAG).

The University of Bath, with centralised undergraduate admissions processing, took an approach of recruiting to a dedicated post to play an advocacy role for applicants from widening participation backgrounds. This has been seen to be a successful strategy, and a further appointment has recently added additional advocacy support (both posts are known as the progression team). In this model dedicated admissions selectors within the admissions team take responsibility for selection to particular programmes, and applicants who present with contextual data factors receive additional specific attention from the progression team to make sure candidates with potential are not rejected. Entry and selection criteria are set each year collaboratively between the admissions team and academic departments, and applicants receive consideration on a rolling basis as they apply and are ranked according to the particular selection criteria. When admissions selectors make their recommendations, another selector has to agree and sign, using the same material to make an assessment. Use of an electronic admissions system allows all decisions and recommendations made to be easily recorded. The progression team sign-off decisions on contextually flagged applicants who are academically more borderline (or senior management in the most complex of cases). The progression team ensures there is consistency in approach, and provides the resource to undertake further investigations if required (e.g. getting additional information from the applicant, contacting the school for additional reference or discussion of school predictions). At confirmation stage a similar advocacy role is played. This approach is considered to be a very effective way of allowing contextual data to be embedded in the process of holistic assessment, and it is considered that it has led to people getting offers who would not otherwise get a place.

Issues to do with the reliability of predicted grades provide a back-drop to the approach to entry grades taken by institutions since it is well known that the translation of predictions as proxies for actual performance can be problematic. Research by Wyness (2016) for the UCU found that whilst overall three quarters of applicants have predictions above their level of actual achievement, at the top of the attainment distribution, grades are slightly more likely to be under-predicted, and among these high-attaining students, applicants from low income backgrounds are significantly more likely to have their grades under-predicted than those from high-income backgrounds (p.3). This gap in predictions and results may be detrimental to those applicants who might potentially qualify for additional consideration or a differential offer because of the deterred from making an application to a highly competitive course with the highest grade requirements. A minority of case study interviewees were in favour of post-

qualification admissions as a potential solution, although UCAS research in this space flags the significant barriers that such a system might pose for WP students' progression to HE (UCAS, 2012). In the meantime, at some case study institutions there has been a shift away from reliance grade predictions as a means of assessing the group of candidates: at some institutions for example increasing emphasis is being placed on Level 2 results, particularly where there is evidence of high performance within a low performing educational context. However, changes to the system of qualifications in compulsory will undermine understanding of the implications of different levels of prior performance for higher education potential, which will provide a dilemma for assessment of forthcoming cohorts.

Stakeholder perspectives

There was significant difference in how ambitious stakeholders felt the sector should be in relation to contextual data, some clearly indicated a desire not to stray too far away from current entry requirements, otherwise there was a potential "misfit" between entrants and the educational experience on offer by a particular institutions. Other stakeholders were keen for providers to adopt a more inclusive approach through differential offers. A small number of stakeholders were keen to see institutions developing admissions policies with significant reductions in the required grades, and this was seen as an opportunity to greatly increase the applicant pool but was also as a mechanism for raising the aspirations and confidence of potential applicants:

"The most radical and important use of contextual data is in undergraduate admissions and in the lower offers space and this is not just about lowering one or two grades, we need to be more radical... Setting out minimum requirements says to these learners you are good enough, you are bright in your context. If you start to contact these students and say you are bright, you are in the top 5% of your cohort, you can have a real impact."

Many of the stakeholders felt that increased use of contextual data in offer making across the sector had the potential for the most impact and also had the potential for ensuring a more consistent and transparent approach. One person described the specific approaches taken by individual institutions and the positive impact this was making, and pointed to institutions with different approaches which are building up an evidence base for their particular approach:

"You can see the different approaches taken by institutions, so Bristol have gone for reducing offers and they have got good data on who that has helped them and they are using this as a basis to expand its use across the institution. They think this is an approach that works for them, but if you look at LSE, they have not got reduced offers. They are using data to look at how applications are considered, a kind of flagging system and this helps them to decide who makes the cut. Again they have got real, good evidence that this has been effective."

Contextual data practices were aligned with student support aspects to greater and lesser extents across the case study institutions. Rather than a focus on tailoring/targeting some institutions were focusing on understanding which students are engaging with the support that is there. Other institutions were aiming to use data to identify students for greater support, particularly in the first year. The institution with a dedicated staff members advocating for contextualised applicants was using this role to make direct links between applicants and available support services where appropriate on an individual basis.

Stakeholder perspectives

Although stakeholders acknowledged the importance of ensuring appropriate support was in place for students to succeed once admitted, their views about how to use contextual data in relation to the student body was mixed. Some felt that the same data considered during the admissions phase could be used to identify those with potential support needs moving forward:

"We would encourage universities to use data that follows an individual all the way through. Say for example at the outset, they might want to provide support to people from different ethnic or social backgrounds as there is evidence that these are the groups that might be less likely to develop a sense of belonging. We are not tip toeing around this."

Others felt that institutions were using different data to drive forward their support strategy. For some this was about responding to established patterns of differential outcomes observed at institutional level, for example at particular course level or for different student groups (such as commuting students). For other stakeholders it was more about identifying individual students through for example, non-attendance or poor academic

performance. Some of this discussion was concerned with ensuring students are not labelled. Overall however there was a desire to see a more data driven approach to supporting student outcomes and progression and a particular desire to see contextual data more closely aligned with support strategies.

3.9 External Communication

For a number of reasons, not least lack of a consistent approach across the higher education sector, it is generally thought that applicants and those who advise them are ill-informed about contextual data use and how information is used in relation to HE offers. A number of recent commentators have made recommendations to institutions and sector bodies to improve the availability of external information on contextual data use, for example, the DFE Social Action Plan calls on selective universities to “...be more transparent about the use of contextual data to inform undergraduate admissions decisions, after the Sutton Trust found that one in five students from higher participation areas are being admitted with reduced grade offers” (p. 28).

Communication with teachers and parents was identified by the case study interviewees as an area of development, and one institution had made commitments to this in their Access Agreement statements. Approaches found to external communication of the contextual data approach to potential applicants and those who advise them included:

- Inclusion in admissions statements: seen as a first step in putting information on contextual data use in the public domain.
- General information targeted at applicants on university web pages: approaches ranged from fairly vague general statements about contextual data to detailed explanations of the methods used. Having look-up facilities where applicants can test whether they are eligible or not is seen as being really important although not all institutions have been able to achieve this as the method for deciding can be complex.
- Information for applicants on websites linking to course information and subject specific entry criteria: this was seen as potentially more effective than relying on general information because it is more likely to play into applicants' higher education choices. However, it is harder to achieve as the information needs to be more tailored.
- Dissemination of messages as part of widening participation outreach activities: an effective way of providing more tailored and detailed information, along with higher education IAG, although tending to be limited to local schools and colleges. Messages on implications of contextual data also, potentially problematic depending on the contextual data criteria applied which might mean that the implications could differ for different individuals in the same class.
- Participation in events for advisors giving HE related careers advice appears to be an aspect of dissemination. However, there would be limitations because representatives might not be from disadvantaged target schools. From an institutional perspective there is an on-going imperative to encourage applicants to make best use of their HE choices, including making aspirational choice(s).

There is an argument to be made that contextual data can be an effective strategy that is potentially undermined by weaknesses further up the applicant journey, due to a general lack of understanding of institutional approaches at IAG stage. Allowing potential applicants to see that they will be given consideration in admissions might do more to increase the pool of disadvantaged students who apply – a big issue for some institutions which due to entry criteria coupled with issues to do with external image or locational factors might not be considered by a large swathe of educationally disadvantaged candidates.

Staff at LSE have a perception that some teachers advise students not to apply to their courses, because they believe applicants don't have a chance of a place. Therefore, admission staff are keen to communicate that educationally disadvantage applicants have a reasonable chance of an offer. Conversations with advisors in schools take place as part of outreach activities, however, the team find some difficulty in explaining the use of POLAR3 because this measure is not well known or understood outside of the HE sector.

Attracting widening participation students is an ongoing challenge at Loughborough University, although solid

progress is being made towards achieving its Access Agreement milestones. The institutions' enquirer dataset identified that just 9% of total enquirers in 2015-16 were from quintile 1 areas (POLAR3). The rate of conversion from enquirer to applicant of quintile 1 students was lower than those from higher quintile areas. In response, the University plans to enhance digital marketing activity supporting WP student through the application journey, tailored specifically to LPN students in the pre- application stage. Conversion rates post-application for LPN and other disadvantaged students are higher than the institutional average. LPN students who have not met the entry requirements for the programme applied for get additional consideration in terms of concessions and/or change of course offers at confirmation stage.

Most people consulted as part of the case study research would like to see a way of contextualising that focuses on the individual applicant allowing them to see what contextual data will mean to them (including what offer they might be eligible for at those institutions which employ differential offer-making). However, an interviewee at an institution that currently makes differential offers to contextually flagged applicants noted that, because of the complexity of the data, many applicants are unlikely to know when they apply whether they are eligible. Having sector-level tools such as applicant look-ups are seen as key to individual universities being able to promote their contextual admissions policy more broadly directly to applicants in a more meaningful way. However, even where data look-ups are available nationally (e.g. HEFCE has published a POLAR look-up tool) it appears that applicants are unlikely to know whether they will be assessed as disadvantaged by an institution. Of course, setting specific criteria for differential offer making helps to communicate to potential applicants a clear message about what the benefits of contextual data are to them, and in institutions that use contextual data more generally as part of holistic decision the implications for individuals are often considered to be too complex to give individual potential applicants clear messages relevant to each persons situation.

Examples of contextual data being made available to applicants:

Downloadable school and college tables

The University of Bristol makes available pdf files containing the details of English and Welsh schools and colleges considered to be 'aspiring'. 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.

Look-up facilities

The University of Bristol website contains a link to the Office for Students POLAR to postcode look-up facility. Available at:

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

The University of Manchester have developed a postcode look-up which applicants can search on line to know whether or not their address meets the criteria for a geo-demographic contextual data flag. These are postcode areas that fall into ACORN categories 4 or 5, or POLAR3 Low Participation Neighbourhoods (Quintile 1). A list of schools/colleges that applicants can use to check whether they meet the criteria for the university's WP Plus Flag is also provided. Available at:

<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/applications/after-you-apply/contextual-data/indicator/>

Stakeholder perspectives

A small number of interviewees felt unable to comment on the extent of current usage and reported being unclear over where and when contextualised admissions was being applied and these individuals would welcome improved clarity over which institutions were using contextual data and the approach they were adopting. This clarity was in part about improving the sharing of practice across the sector but it was also about individual stakeholder organisations being better able to understand the current admissions landscape. Although the vast majority of stakeholders overall saw transparency and information sharing as a priority moving forward, a small number felt that institutions had been making positive strides in this regard and that policies were clear for many, suggesting the issue was around ensuring use of the information that was available:

"Some of the criticism is in terms of transparency, I am not sure is right. Most of these institutions have quite a lot of detail

publicly available and they have worked together to develop resources to explain contextualised admissions to schools and to students”.

Giving clear messages was recognised by some as desirable but complex in the current, competitive undergraduate market and others highlighted that transparency had the potential to bring unwanted criticism of the approach:

“The lack of transparency is perhaps related to competitiveness in the sector and institutions being concerned by competition law, legal issues in general.”

“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 your A is less than that of someone else.”*

The need for improved clarity for schools and colleges was highlighted by many, suggesting that continued or expanded use of contextual data in future would require a step change in the information available to those advising potential applicants and certainly school representatives were in agreement with this, with interviewees suggesting that schools and learners did not have a good understanding of how contextual data was being applied within decision making processes. One interviewee acknowledged that information was available but that:

“Trying to unpick this for every child is a real challenge, so what happens is teachers revert to the universities they know – the university they attended or they have seen in the media or perhaps the universities that other students have gone to. The support they provide becomes based on personal knowledge, personal experience.”

School representatives therefore felt strongly that a more consistent approach to contextualisation would be of benefit to schools and applicants, and that there should be a more centralised approach to informing schools about contextual data and how it is applied. Some stakeholders suggested the transparency needed by schools and students should be extended to other groups, for example directly to parents and to the wider public and several suggested a high profile public campaign by the sector would be of benefit.

3.10 Monitoring contextual data in admissions

Monitoring of the outcomes of contextualised admissions in terms of the implications for the student intake is somewhat problematic as in many cases it is hard to say what would have happened without contextualisation (as often educationally disadvantaged applicants will meet the standard criteria). Furthermore, the share of applicants/short-listed students that are flagged by contextual indicators tends to vary depending on the data used. At the level of individual applications, the monitoring of the results from a contextual data strategy in admissions is complicated, mainly due to the nuanced range of outcomes that could occur and difficulty in capturing these as part of admissions data processes. For example, in relation to a positive outcome (i.e. an offer of a place), there could be a range of possibilities resulting in an offer:

- Contextually flagged applicants could apply with the attributes and grade predictions to secure a standard offer. The contextual data may or may not have been used depending on how a candidate ranks against others in their application cohort (and whether the approach to the application of contextual data improves their position in the ranking of applicants, according to grade predictions, or in relation to the personal statement);
- Contextually flagged applicants could meet the entry criteria and be invited to attend an interview or sit an entry test or other type of admissions process. At this stage contextual data may or may not come into play depending on the applicants’ relative performance during the process.
- Contextually flagged applicants could apply with the attributes and grade predictions to secure an offer, could miss their predictions, and be admitted with lower than standard grades on entry. Although contextual data is likely to play a part in the institutions approach to ‘near-miss’ students, other factors especially availability of places may have been influential in this scenario;
- Contextually flagged applicant could receive a reduced offer (where differential offer-making is in place) or be made an offer at the lower end of a grade range where offers are usually at the upper

end. The applicant's grade predictions and final achievement could be in line with standard entry requirements in which case the reduced offer may not have been pertinent, or may be below the standard requirement in which case the contextual data approach played a role.

The analysis of the various permutations is further complicated where there is additional qualifying criteria for courses, such as GCSE requirements or work experience which applicants need.

Some institutions are collecting data from admissions selectors with a view to unpicking the role of contextual data. Loughborough University requires admissions selectors to provide reasons for their decisions. Some fourteen different codes are in place (which could include a concessionary offer or offer at lower end of grade ranges, or direction to Foundation Year provision) and these are gathered as part of the online admissions system.

In the absence of individual level information with which to judge the impact of contextual data use, institutions have tended to rely on measures of success relating to their overall profile of applications, offers, and acceptances/entrants. The results are positive and those interviewed for this research suggest they have confirmed the effectiveness of the contextual data use. Overall, within the case study institutions there is a clear sense that contextualisation of applicants is making a difference to student diversity and is impacting on the performance indicators for widening participation (and/or institutionally defined targets expressed in their Access Agreements). *Moore et al (2013)* gave some examples of evidence from providers to the effect that the share of offers to contextually flagged applicants had increased as a result of contextual data policy (p.39-40). However, at sector level there is also a sense that contextualised admissions is only currently making a difference at the margins in relation to decisions regarding equally well qualified applicants. *Boliver et al's (2017)* analysis of the 25 ST30 universities in England reveals little difference in the entry requirements of courses studied by students from different backgrounds (the differences are small – less than half an A-level grade on average). This has resulted in calls to extend differential offer-making practices.

All of the case study institutions have seen the numbers applying from widening participation groups increase over time, although the figures varied – linked to the definitions used and annual admissions trends. Figures quoted by interviewees indicate that having a contextual data policy, regardless of the policy on offer-making, has meant disadvantaged applicants who apply and meet the criteria (including any qualifying criteria) have increased likelihood of receiving an offer due to the contextual data strategy.

The most common approach was to use the aggregate level admissions trends to monitor the implications of contextual data use. The case study institutions were able to demonstrate positive increases in the numbers who apply and are admitted from contextual backgrounds. Moreover, the cases maintain that an increase in widening participation applicants has not been associated with a fall in 'quality' of candidates. Widening participation outreach activities are likely to have contributed to the overall picture.

Following the introduction of contextual data at LSE the number of widening participation applicants admitted doubled from a low level in short time period, although has since plateaued. In order to continue to make progress to diversifying the student body more applications are needed from educationally disadvantaged students.

The UCAS Equality datasets published in recent UCAS cycles demonstrates that, at The University of Bath, the thresholds used to define disadvantage potentially affect the level of impact of any contextual data policy. The UCAS dataset showed that there was a significant improvement in the differential between offer rate and average offer rate to applicants from POLAR3 quintile 1 areas (the most disadvantaged) when the contextual data strategy was introduced using quintile 1 as the sole criteria for additional consideration. In a recent cycle, this differential decreased slightly when a full basket of measures (those listed on page 32) was introduced to the contextualised admissions process, rather than quintile 1 being the sole measure. However, the differential between offer rate and average offer rate for applicants in quintile 2 areas improved slightly. This shift is not necessarily a bad thing given that the institution is looking to make progress across a broader range of measures that capture disadvantage more accurately. However, it does demonstrate that institutions need to be clear about the specific groups they are aiming target through their contextual data approaches.

Admissions professionals at The University of Bristol said the strategy of differential offers is encouraging

applicants from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds to apply across different definitions of disadvantage (figures were not available to show the numbers applying with qualification grades below the standard entry criteria). This institution had recently extended the differential offer from 1 to 2 grades below the standard offer in order to go further in terms of attracting more applicants and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Communication of the contextual offer is clearly a key issue, and in a competitive higher education environment institutions may be competing for the same group of highly performing widening participation candidates: a situation which highlights the need for applicants to have access to appropriate careers support and advice to help them to use their UCAS choices to best effect.

The datasets underpinning undergraduate admissions decisions are coming under increasing scrutiny, as a result of policy drivers, both nationally through the UCAS end of cycle report (which includes equality measures), and institutionally. In general there may be a tension in relation to choosing definitions and thresholds which fit with nationally identified or institutionally driven measures for higher education monitoring. The definition of low participation neighbourhood (LPN) used across the sector encompasses the areas in the lowest 40% of young HE progression (quintiles 1 and 2), which may or may not fit with institutional imperatives regarding addressing the situation for applicants least likely to apply and get accepted. However, using measures that fit with external and internal targets is clearly an advantage in terms of driving forward a coherent contextual data approach that directly supports institutional imperatives. The increasing focus on the development of institutional led targets may however be a helpful development in order for institutions to define institutionally relevant target groups.

Stakeholder perspectives

There was a concern about the importance of ensuring a coherent approach across the whole student lifecycle was in place when contextual data was applied. This was about monitoring the outcomes for different student groups but also ensuring the appropriate support was in place for individuals as needed:

“If you have invested in widening participation and contextualised admissions you need to be able to track and monitor their progress throughout. Some may also need extra support but not all of them. For example care leavers which have been in the spotlight for some time, they are given support through the application process and beyond. The same type of support, including bursaries, are important to other types of student groups. And also, there might be a need for transition support. In terms of academic support this needs to be decided on an individual basis.”

“I hope contextual data is used in retention, to provide support. But I am never sure if it informs a student’s support plan when at university. You don’t want to stigmatise or label and some of them are very literature in talking about their disadvantage but then you do worry about it becoming a self perpetuating thing. But if you are using school performance to make lower offers or accepting people with lower grades then their background just doesn’t go away when they get to uni. If you don’t think about it that is problematic.”

4 Key Findings and Recommendations

- Overall, increased use of contextual data across the sector is a positive development, firstly as a way to progress fair access objectives and secondly, increasingly widespread use of contextual data is creating momentum for changes in practices which benefit social mobility, countering negative arguments voiced in the sector and in the public domain. There is clearly potential for contextual data to be used more by institutions moving forward.
- Views are divided about whether differential offers represent the most important application of contextual data, and whilst grade decreases do seem to be required by those institutions or programmes with the most work to do to demonstrate a diverse study body, some institutions are showing positive results without a wholesale approach to reducing offers.
- More consistency between universities is helpful to assist general understanding of contextual data use. Consistency could include developing and agreeing a limited number of sector wide measures for use by institutions, but may also be about formalising different models of application of data in admissions. Use of contextual data in itself is likely to be only a small part of the access solution.
- Stakeholders were keen to see the work started by OFFA to increase transparency of contextual data use continued by the OfS, with a desire amongst most to see more accountability form part of the new regulatory framework for higher education. It was clear that different parts of the higher education sector have a role to play in working towards a more coherent position on contextual data use across the HE sector, as indicated in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Suggested roles and measures

Bodies	Role	Measures
Policy makers:	Strategic direction	Policy steer regarding data sources for contextual data and models Support the sector in relation to implications of qualifications reform on the evidence based for admissions decisions Support the sector in accessing more individual level student data
UCAS:	Support efficiency in contextual data use Data capture through application form Promote understanding	Ongoing development of the UCAS contextual data service in response to customer feedback Consider additional data collection through application process to improve the availability and reliability of individual level indicators, Raise awareness in relation to opportunities for providers to contextualise using information on participation in outreach Support information provision to applicants and those who advise them
Providers:	Developing the capabilities for application in admissions	Continue to develop expertise amongst admissions selectors Take forward monitoring and evaluation aspects Continue to build and share the evidence base for contextual data use
Sector representative bodies:	Promoting common terminology and models of contextual data use	Agreement of terms and models to be applied to contextual data use (building on work of SPA)
Schools and college reps:	Developing general understanding	Information provision to applicants and those who advise them (with a focus on the groups who benefits from contextualised admissions). This should include defining the key messages and making information relevant to schools and colleges (i.e. understanding what they need to know in order to support students within contextualised admissions processes)

- The current research echoes previous studies in identifying weaknesses in the current position, and the need for:
 - **Agreement of common terminology.** Overall, stakeholders referred to contextual data as “hard numbers” that provide information about an applicant that is wider than attainment data. A small number of stakeholders made a clear distinction between contextual information and contextual data, although again the term contextual information was used in different contexts; for some contextual information was the detail that was self declared by an applicant (for example, disability or experience of care), for others factors, such as prior participation in outreach. The distinction between data and information is an important one and applicants and those who advise and support applications could be encouraged to offer more in terms of contextual information relating to educational disadvantage in their applications. For example, teacher references making clear any factors such as FSM or being part of targeted widening participation cohort. A first step to more collaborative action on contextual data is probably work on getting a shared terminology across the sector that is also accessible to schools and students.
 - **Improvements in data:** The current measures used by institutions are imperfect, and collaborative action is needed to improve. Data providers especially the DfE are crucial partners in ensuring improved access to reliable data sets, and there needs to be more focus on individual level data. The potential for using multi dimensional indicators also needs further exploration. This cycle, UCAS has been working with a small number of universities to test the feasibility of using a novel means of contextualising admissions, using a Multiple Equality Measure (MEM). Development of the MEM is ongoing, with a view to publication in Summer 2018, and UCAS are looking to understand outcomes for applicants from different MEM groups, which will add to the evidence base. Overall, there is a need to manage the tension between achieving more consistency in which measures are applied and balancing institutional autonomy. However there are tangible efficiency gains to be made because currently the amount of duplication of effort at institutional level is large. Our research has identified that schools representatives are keen to make sure they were also involved in crafting measures. Institutions could do more to contextualise those students who have taken part in outreach, within the application process, and some providers would like their outreach efforts to have more recognition within other institutions’ admissions processes. Measures need to be capable of being applied across the UK nations since local difference in data is problematic for higher education providers that have applicants from across the UK regions.
 - **Improvements in the evidence base:** Continued work is needed to gather and share evidence, in part to negate the arguments against contextual data use and in part to identify the most effective practices. The need for investment in both institutional and sector wide research was identified. Stakeholders said the OfS will be crucial, particularly in making public the information and analyses available through the monitoring of Access and Participation Agreements. Many stakeholders felt that continued or increased use of contextual data should be supported by a highly visible campaign to promote the potential positive impact on fair access. The evidence base may need to be improved to do this, however there is a sense that institutions should be approaching the use of contextual data with pride rather than being concerned by the risk of reputational damage. Given the changes in qualifications, the clarification of the impact of qualification reform on educational indicators is an urgent priority.
 - **Sharing practice across the HE sector:** There is an on-going need for sharing of practice and research around contextual data (difficulty of achieving this in a competitive admissions environment aside). The development of an Evidence and Impact Exchange is a potential mechanism for improved sharing in future and the OfS has a role in encouraging increased reporting of the impact of contextual data use and implications for student outcomes.
 - **Improve understanding of the use of contextualised data in schools and colleges:** The general belief is that advisers in schools and colleges working with target applicants do not have the knowledge of the contextual data needed to work effectively with potential applicants and this

is limiting the ability of students to make fully informed decisions. Lack of widespread understanding of contextual data use is decreasing the confidence and trust schools have in the HE sector. This is not necessarily a matter of more information (although for some institutions this may be important), it is about making this information widely accessible and encouraging its use. It is also about ensuring the language is understood by those outside of HE. Although individual institutions will want to continue to promote their own use of contextual data a more joined up approach to improving levels of understanding appears to be of importance. UCAS has a role here, and can build on joint UCAS-FEA work to date.¹⁵

- **Increased transparency on contextual data.** Institutions should make efforts to make explicit their agreed rationale for contextual data use in such a way as to underpin future direction and communication across the sector. Statements on contextual data should be included on applicant information repositories such as UCAS website and the Key Information Set (KIS).
- **The whole institutional approach to the use of contextual data needs to be applied:** Intuitively it make sense to join together the efforts made in outreach, admissions and student support. Stakeholders believe that UCAS, DfE and OfS are integral to moving the use of contextual data forward at pace and it is argued that their approach needs to ensure the implication of contextualised admissions policies (at both sector and institutional level) are considered across the whole lifecycle. There is probably more scope to identify WP outreach participants in the application process, which would enable this information to be taken into account by admissions professionals as part of holistic assessment practices. Individual level data on WP participation is being collected as part of the UCAS application form. UK applicants are asked if they've participated in the 'Activities in preparation for higher education' field of 'Additional information' in Apply and the Apply help text advice on [ucas.com](https://www.ucas.com) was recently revised to allow Applicants to use their personal statement to include more details about these activities. Research into how applicants are using this field may be needed to assess whether the current arrangements facilitate admissions decision makers fully understanding what participation in outreach involves, and usefulness in informing decisions on individual applicants.

¹⁵ <https://www.ucas.com/files/contextual-data-factsheet>

Annex 1: Recommendations emerging from previous research

Recent research reports on contextual data use have identified a number of ways in which contextual data use in admissions could be enhanced across the sector:

- **Enhanced consistency**
The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2012, 2013) suggested it would be better if the approach was relatively uniform across the sector, which involves a more collective effort than currently. *Boliver et al, 2017* recommends that institutions across the sector should work together to develop a common nomenclature to be used when describing contextualised admissions policies to prospective applicants.
- **Differential offers**
Boliver et al (2017) recommends that highly selective universities, where low and middle- income students are substantially under-represented, should make greater use of contextual admissions, including reduced grade offers, to widen access.
- **Data quality issues**
Gorard et al, 2016 highlights that research is needed in relation to the contextual data sources in a number of respects. Firstly, to examine the extent to which different individual-level, neighbourhood-level, and school-level contextual indicators are correlated and to identify which ones represent the most valid and reliable measures of the socioeconomic circumstances of individuals. Secondly, more systematic work is needed to determine how well different contextual indicators (or combinations) predict success at degree level for comparatively disadvantaged students to help identify which students are likely to succeed and which are likely to need additional support (taking account of subject patterns etc). Thirdly, work to establish ways of measuring impact and how much impact different contextual admissions policies can be expected to have on widening participation in higher education at sector and institutional level. The role of the OfS was highlighted in the report by *Sundorph et al, (2017)* which suggests that the OfS should all evidence related to contextualised intakes and commission teams of academics to conduct analyses of anonymised datasets, and feed into advice on best practice.

In relation to improving the availability of more accurate contextual data, greater use of individual-level contextual indicators is recommended (such as previous eligibility for free school meals), as well as school-level and area-level criteria (via the UCAS application service) (*Boliver et al, 2017*). This report also suggests that more use could be made of information on applicants' participation in outreach programmes as a contextual indicator across universities (i.e. so participation in another university's outreach programme would be taken into account). *Crawford (2014)* suggests that universities may wish to take into account a measure of school value added or school performance as well when making their admissions offers. The University and College Union (UCU) Charter 2015 says that publishing the percentage of students at an applicant's school who achieve five GCSEs or more at grades of A* and A, including English and maths, could enable admissions officers to identify higher-performing students at weaker schools.

- **Student support aspects**
Universities practicing contextualisation should provide additional support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those who have been admitted with lower grades, in recognition of the additional difficulties such students may face (*Boliver et al, 2017*). [L_{SEP}] This report also suggests that Foundation year provision should be increased, with greater targeting of those from disadvantaged backgrounds (to help to bridge the attainment gap).
- **Transparency**
Several reports agree there should be greater transparency from universities when communicating how they're using contextual data. *Boliver et al (2017)* recommends that universities should publicise the criteria for contextual admissions clearly on their websites, along with how and when they are taken into account. The Reform report (2017) has called for the OfS to manage a public database of

different institutions' headline approaches to contextualised admissions together with publication in a standard format on institutional websites, and for use by third party information providers (*Sundorph et al, 2017 p.6*).

- Accountability

The Commission on Widening Access (2016) recommended that by 2019 all universities should set access thresholds for all degree programmes against which learners from the most deprived backgrounds should be assessed. These access thresholds should be separate to standard entrance requirements and set as ambitiously as possible, at a level which accurately reflects the minimum academic standard and subject knowledge necessary to successfully complete a degree programme (*CoWA 2016, p.15*). The Reform Report (*Sundorph et al, 2017*) suggests the OfS should have the powers to challenge institutions that fail to make progress to adopt more or other contextual measures (with a risk of losing the right to charge maximum tuition fees if they refuse to adjust).

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