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**What is the current state of debate around the use of contextualised admissions for undergraduate admissions? A review of the current stakeholder perspective.**

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**Abstract:**

Higher Education Institutions in England are an integral part of the government's social mobility strategy. Contextualisation of undergraduate admissions decisions has emerged as a key tool towards progressing social mobility objectives. The present paper builds on our previous 2013 research by describing findings from 15 qualitative interviews with stakeholders in contextualised admissions. Stakeholders were drawn from government, non-governmental and third sector bodies including those representing the voice of schools and young people. We find that data challenges continue to be a main barrier to the application of contextual admissions. Respondents thought that more consistency and transparency between universities would be helpful to assist applicants and those who support them to better understand contextual data use in undergraduate admissions. Views are divided about whether differential admissions offers represent the most important application of contextual data. Respondents saw potential for using contextual data beyond admissions for supporting students at university and into further study or employment.

**Keywords:** undergraduate admissions, fair admissions, access, widening participation, contextual data

**Introduction**

*"Social mobility is a key priority for institutions but we need to manage that in a way that maintains students' confidence in the system." (Stakeholder respondent)*

The Fair Education Alliance commissioned the Centre for Social Mobility at the University of Exeter to conduct research into the current state of play regarding the view of stakeholders on the use of contextualised admissions practices. The research also covered a deep dive into the contextualised admissions practices at nine selective higher education institutions. The present paper summarises the

stakeholder research, a full academic and one policy report are available (Moore et al. 2018; Fair Education Alliance, 2018).

Traditionally most UK higher education providers assess eligibility for admission with reference to the achievement of academic qualifications, which remain the single best 'predictor' of success in HE. The on-going persistence of differences in educational opportunities and attainment between students from lower and higher socio-economic group backgrounds then continues to be the core driver limiting diversity of student populations in 'elite' institutions with the highest entry requirements (*Chowdry et al, 2013, Boliver, 2013*). This raises issues for social mobility and social justice. One way to address this issue is considering academic potential to succeed at university rather than achieved grades as part of under-graduate admissions (*Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, 2004*) as a way to broaden those potentially eligible for admissions to highly selective institutions.

Contextualised admissions then is the use of contextual data and information about applicants' context to assess whether there is undeveloped potential that could be nurtured for success at university even when achieved grades are perhaps not as high as those of some other applicants (*SPA, 2015*). Contextual information - e.g. provided in references and personal statements – can be used as a further source of information for contextualising applicants. A drawback to using information rather than data that it relies on applicants' and those supporting them knowing how to argue the case for contextualising achievements and potential. In contrast, using data allows contextualisation of large numbers of applicants without relying on applicants to make their own case for having untapped potential.

The use of contextual data in HE admissions has been endorsed by the government since 2011 (*BIS, 2011*) and has featured in a number of policy recommendations (*Milburn, 2012; All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, 2017*). Most recently, the DfE social mobility action plan emphasised the need to "expand access to the best universities for young people from less advantaged backgrounds" as one of its ambitions (*DFE, 2017, p.8*) and the Office for Students (OfS) encourages providers to use applicants' context: "...so long as you consider individuals on their merits and your procedures are fair, transparent and evidence-based" (*OfS, 2018, p.32*). In terms of actual use of contextualised data and admissions across the sector, a 2015 survey of 68 institutions found that 84% were using contextualised admissions (*SPA, 2015*).

The aim of the current project was to explore the current state of play regarding the use and potential of contextual admissions through exploring stakeholder perspectives in order to help HEIs to develop effective contextual data approaches.

## Method

We conducted qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 individuals representing the government, university interest groups, teachers, and third sector organisations representing the views of applicants and those who support them. All interviews occurred in spring 2018 and all stakeholders were located in England. The interviews began with an exploration of what participants understood by contextual data, how contextual data is present in their work context, perceptions as to its use and the opportunities and limitations to the use of contextual data, and perceptions on changes over time.

## Findings

### *Rationale for using contextualisation*

First, we found that there was consensus among stakeholders that using contextualisation was a good thing. However, there were differences regarding the rationale for applying contextual data. These related to fairness and social mobility as well as discourses of effectiveness and the business case for excellence as illustrated by these three quotes (emphases added by researcher):

*"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."*

*"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... 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 requirement through the OFFA access and participation agreement there also needs to be a business case"*

*"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**."*

The removal of the student number controls and demographic changes were also cited as potential reasons for increased interest in use of contextualised admissions. Some respondents were concerned that the approach might fall out of favour in future, as trends in admissions shift (emphases added by researchers):

*"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 [institutions] 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."*

Respondents voiced some important caveats to the use of contextual data. There was agreement that institutions should retain autonomy for how they applied data, including at what stage in the admissions process and to what extent, and that data should be used as part of a professional judgement and that data use should therefore not become too prescriptive.

#### *Challenges in achieving contextualisation*

Although all respondent supported the use of contextual admissions in principle, there was debate as to how contextualisation could be achieved.

First, stakeholders identified a tension between wishing to have different approaches by different institutions, informed by their institutional mission and by their current strengths and weaknesses in relation to student diversity, but there was a tension with the desire for a transparent contextual admissions landscape for applicants to HE:

*"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."*

*"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."*

These views contrasted with desires for more consistency:

*"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."*

Beyond the tension between consistency and institutional autonomy, there were different views on the actual data and information useful for contextualisation. Indeed, stakeholders identified the biggest practical challenge to contextualisation as being able to identify and source reliable data for which evidence of impact was available.

*"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."*

Respondents highlighted the need for granular data:

*"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"*

However, it was noted by three stakeholders that providing more data at the point of application might lead to subjectivity and possibly increases in bias, essentially because the data still needed to be interpreted as illustrated by this quote:

*"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."*

Strong messages from the school and FE sector were that they "felt done to" and desired a more collaborative approach and agreeing measures of education disadvantage in partnership:

*"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."*

School representatives voiced concerns as to whether the data currently used for contextualisation were

the best ones: a commonly used source of relating to data on HE the patterns of participation by young people in local areas (POLAR) does not provide a good measure when applied to a cohort of students, and this measure was not used in the school sector and therefore was not always understood by staff in schools. Schools preferred the use of Free School Meal eligibility, Pupil Premium and first-in family in HE as indicators of educational disadvantage but currently this information is not readily available to universities.

*"There are also arguments that you shouldn't be using certain data, 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."*

#### *Impact of contextualisation on applicants and students*

While the aim of contextualised admissions is to make higher education more accessible to a wider group of potential learners, the lack of a unified policy across HEIs made it challenging for those supporting students to provide advice. School representatives argued that that schools and learners did not have a good understanding of how contextual data was being applied within the decision-making processes. The more data were used in admissions processes, the more complex it could be for schools and advisors to understand what universities were looking for.

One school representative 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*" in terms of the offers received by applicants from different institutions. Schools were also unsure if students are being offered lower grades due to contextual data or because of active recruitment.

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 were more changeable and could change year on year.

Another stakeholder from HE acknowledged that information on contextual data use 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."*

Most stakeholders interviewed said that the use of contextual data could apply across the whole of the admissions process:

*"It isn't just about lower offers, data can be used at other stages in the admissions process."*

There was also some concern that institutions may use contextualisation to lower offers and fill places – especially, potentially in the Clearing Period - but without an evidence base on the minimum preparedness students would need to succeed in HE:

*"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."*

## **Discussion**

This paper summarizes the views of a range of government, university body and third sector stakeholders regarding the current state of play of contextual data use in undergraduate admissions.

Our results suggest that stakeholders generally endorse contextualised admissions, if for different reasons (social mobility, effective admissions, recruiting student with potential). Beyond the general endorsement of contextual admissions, there were challenges in operationalizing contextualised admissions. These challenges related to desires to have agreed standards but institutional autonomy and access to reliable and robust data and evaluations of impact.

Our research also suggests that advisers in schools and colleges working with widening participation students do not have the knowledge of the complex contextual data admissions frameworks used by different universities to always support applicants in navigating the admissions maze.

In terms of the impact of contextual data use, we observed that government and HEI stakeholders saw an increased use of contextualised admissions, however, the school representatives were rather doubtful as to whether the increased use had led to significant changes on the ground with regards to increasing access for disadvantaged applicants.

In terms of next steps, the research highlighted that more consistency between universities in data used to contextualise applicants and approaches to how data is applied would help those advising students understand the implication for admissions decisions. Efforts are also needed to increase general public awareness of contextualised admissions. Moreover, there is currently a lack of sector-wide evaluation of the impact of contextual admissions in supporting greater diversity at higher education entry - and beyond admissions how institutions are drawing on contextual data for supporting student success and progress for all. The new Evidence and Impact Exchange<sup>1</sup> has potential to enable sharing and exchange of knowledge in this field and to enhance the evidence-base for what works in using data to enhance access, success and progress.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/new-what-works-centre-to-help-universities-cut-equality-gaps/>



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