

Anna Mountford-Zimdars<sup>1</sup>, Janet Graham<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>King's College London, UK, <sup>2</sup>Supporting Professionalism in Admissions, UK

Can contextual data aid 'fair admission'? (0162)

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Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

### **Fair admission:**

The report on Fair Admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice, referred to as the 'Schwartz Report', set out the parameters for the development of systems of fair access, including the use of contextual data (Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, 2004). The report put the spotlight on the notion of 'fairness' in HE admissions and was a driver for HEIs to develop their admissions policy and practice according to agreed principles (whilst recognising the autonomy of institutions and their 'legitimate aim' to recruit the most able students on the basis of merit). In order to recruit on the basis of merit and at the same time have 'fair' admissions, given that each applicant will have different experiences and opportunities afforded to them, the review showed a need for HEIs to consider not only formal educational achievement, or examination grades, but also contextual factors which can indicate potential and ability as part of a more holistic approach. The review recommended institutions should explicitly look at "the background and context of applicants' achievements" (ibid p24), including 'hard' quantifiable measures and on qualitative judgements.

SPA, Supporting Professionalism in Admission, was established in 2006 to provide a central source of expertise, good practice and advice on admissions for institutions in delivering fair and professional admissions. This presentation discusses the evidence-base for using contextual data in admission that was undertaken by the presenter in collaboration with Joanne Moore and Jo Wiggans for SPA, Supporting Professionalism in Admissions.

### **Contextual data**

The use of contextual information and data in undergraduate admissions involves universities and colleges assessing the prior attainment of applicants in the context of the circumstances in which it has been obtained. In addition to the information supplied on the application form, HEIs apply educational, geo-demographic and socio-economic background data, as declared in students' applications, in institutions' own data, supplied by UCAS or from publicly available data sets or from commercial sources. This data and other contextual information could relate to the individual applicant (individual-level data), their school or college context (school-level data) or the characteristics of their socio-geographic context (community-level data). It enables institutions to review applicants' potential in the light of evidence about whether their achievements may have been affected by relative disadvantage in their educational or community context or their individual life situation.

As a concept, contextualising applicants in admission to higher education is not new. However, the move from an ad hoc approach to the contextual information supplied as part of the application form, to the systematic assessment of information and application of additional data, using agreed criteria, as part of the admissions process is a relatively recent development.

## **Methodology:**

The findings from the presentation are based on:

- A search of academic databases to identify key academic studies and texts relating to the use of contextual data.
- A publicised scoping survey to capture potentially unknown uses of contextual data in university admissions. Invitations to participate in this survey were circulated on list-servers for professional service staff in admission and amongst academic researchers. Only seven responses were received.
- In-depth research in several institutions, to clarify the methodologies and applications of contextual variables with researchers, analysts, academics and senior staff who undertake or commission the research. The in-depth research focused on institutions which have well-developed approaches to contextualised admissions, underpinned by research. These institutions have tended to be highly selective partly because issues of identifying potential in admission are particularly when there are many more applicants than places for study.
- Analysis of the - frequently in-house and unpublished - research within HEIs on contextual information and data use in undergraduate admissions and the rationale for this, research methods used, content and quality of the evidence, and findings of research on the outcomes and impacts of the application of contextual variables to undergraduates.

## **Findings:**

The presentation will offer an opportunity for a discussion of the findings from this research project.

In thinking about the implications of this work for admissions practices, the presentation will also highlight the link between the research for SPA and the QAA Code of Practice (section 10: recruitment and admissions). The revised QAA Quality Code that is currently available for consultation makes explicit reference to the use of contextual data by giving the guidance that ‘higher education providers that use contextual data in recruitment and admission processes are open and transparent about what data are being used, for what purposes and with what intended outcomes’’. (QAA consultation draft; <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Newsroom/Consultations/Pages/recruitment-admission.aspx>, p.4).