

ADVANCING  
ACCESS

24 leading universities  
working together with  
schools and colleges

MANCHESTER  
1824

The University of Manchester

# Contextualised admissions – what does it all mean?

Huw Peters and Paul Martin

16 / November / 2018



## Contextual Data in use:

- What do you see as the Pros and Cons of contextual data?

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

## Contextual Data in use – Differential Offers:

- What do you see as the Pros and Cons of contextual data being used to make differential offers?

## Contextual Data in use – 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

# What does a 'traditional' admissions process look like?

---

In a more traditional admissions process, only the following factors are typically used to make admissions judgments:

- Predicted or actual performance in examinations
- The quality of the candidate's personal statement, including work experience completed etc.
- The teacher's reference
- Performance in an interview or in an additional admissions test



# Contextual admissions

---

- “Contextual admissions” practices involve using the same factors in the traditional process but with some extra factors included to build up a more holistic picture of a candidate
- Contextual admissions are not new, they have been used to a varying extent for at least 15 years but the use of them is becoming increasingly common
- Each university has the freedom to make its own judgment about their own contextual admissions policy, and research and debate around these policies is ongoing



# The history of contextualised admissions

## Determinants of degree performance in UK universities: a statistical analysis of the 1993 student cohort

JEREMY SMITH and ROBIN NAYLOR<sup>†</sup>

University of Warwick

### I. Introduction

This paper presents the results of an analysis of the academic performance of undergraduate students at 1993. The analysis is based on a unique data-set of representative records of the full cohort of students at 'O' information on the characteristics of the last school prior to university entrance. The data also includes prior qualifications and on their social class background.

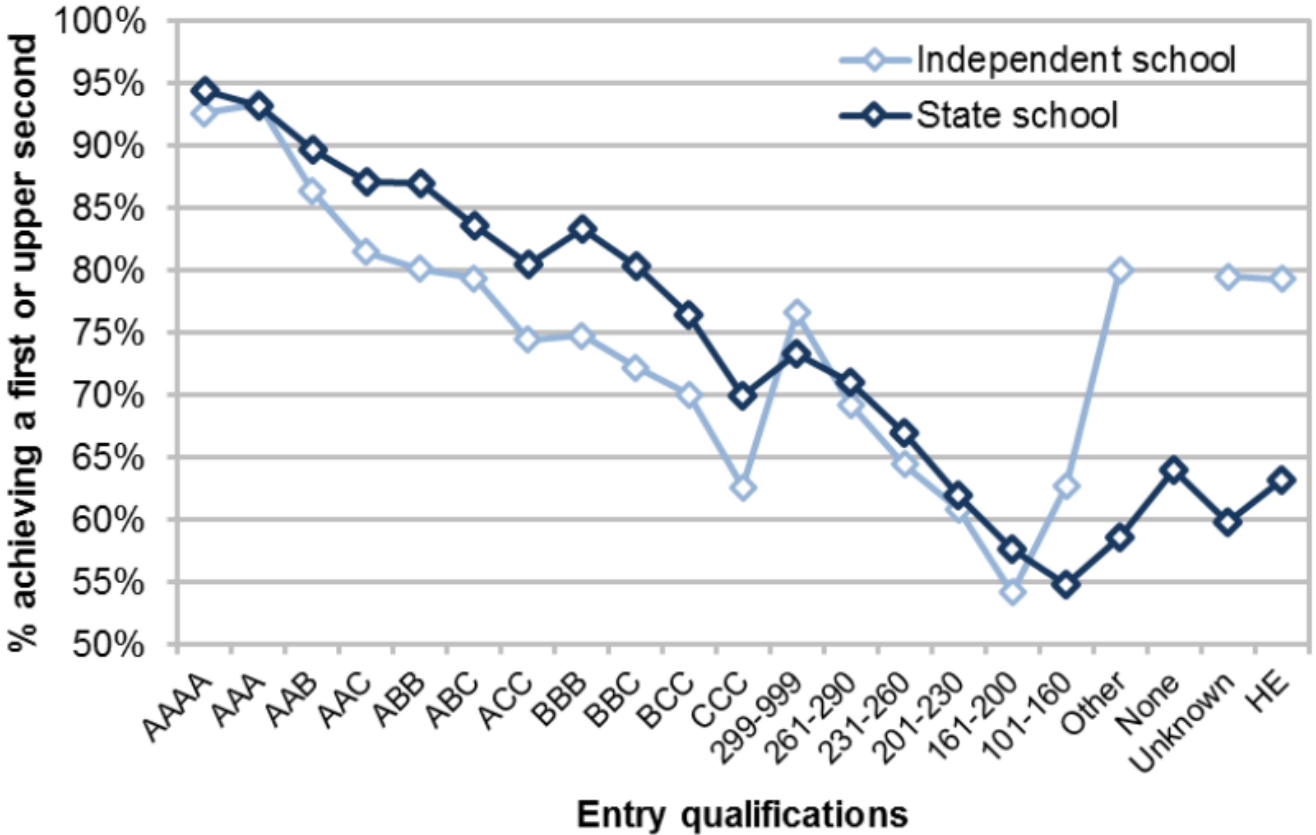
The screenshot shows a BBC News article from Tuesday, 4 March 2003. The main headline is "Private schools 'boycott' Bristol". The sub-headline reads: "Head teachers at independent schools are to discourage sixth-formers from applying to Bristol because of claims the university discriminates against private school pupils." The article text states: "A group which represents the heads of public schools says it is advising its members not to encourage children to apply for Bristol. The Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) and the Girls' Schools Association (GSA) are stopping short of a boycott, because they say their members cannot stop children from applying where they want to. But their advice signals an attempt to increase pressure on..."

Navigation and sidebar elements include: BBC NEWS, BBC NEWS CHANNEL, News services, Last Updated: Tuesday, 4 March, 2003, 16:50 GMT, Email this to a friend, Printable version, Navigation menu (World, UK, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Business, Politics, Health, Education, League Tables, Science & Environment, Technology, Entertainment, Also in the news), Video and Audio, Have Your Say Magazine, In Pictures, WATCH AND LISTEN, The BBC's Mike Baker, "Independent schools think Bristol is discriminating against those from good schools", VIDEO, BBC BRISTOL, BBC Bristol Sport, travel, weather, things to do, features and much more, SEE ALSO: Bristol denies admissions bias 26 Feb 03 | Education, University aims to be less elitist 20 Feb 03 | Scotland, Widening access is university priority 18 Dec 02 | Education, Fee-paying pupils 'gain worst'.



# More recent data...

**Figure 14: 2013-14 graduates by previous school, entry qualification and degree classification**



# Contextual admissions stories appear regularly in the news

Family & Education | School Report | Global Education

## Cambridge plans to recruit poorer students

2 October 2018

f m t e Share



**Cambridge University is to open its doors to students from disadvantaged backgrounds who show great potential but have not met the entry grades.**

Vice-chancellor Prof Toope said it was time to dispel the stereotype of the highly selective university as a "bastion of privilege".

Under the plan, some students who have faced "educational challenge" will be asked to join a transition programme.

Presently, entry to Cambridge requires at least three As or A\*s at A-level.

MANCHESTER  
1824

The University of Manchester

# Contextual Data in Admissions

## 2019 Entry – What are Universities using?



**Huw Peters**, Student Recruitment and Widening Participation Officer

# Introduction

- Contextual data in context
- What is contextual data?
- How we use it
- Advice and guidance for applicants
- Questions

# The un-level playing field



# Rationale for differential offers

The drivers leading to the use of contextual data by the University to make differential offers to WP students are:

- to increase intake of WP students
- the system of predicted grades disadvantages students from WP backgrounds who are more likely to be under-predicted
- to remain competitive



## What is contextual data?

Data which helps us to consider a candidate's application **in the context of their educational and socio-economic background** and their corresponding advantages and disadvantages.

The University of Manchester contextual data indicators are based on:

- **Postcode** (ACORN & POLAR)
  - proxy for social disadvantage/ lower socio-economic group
- **In-Care**
- **School performance** at Levels 2 & 3
  - proxy for educational disadvantage

## Other indicators

- **IMD – Index of Multiple Deprivation**
- **Household income**
- **First generation in HE**
- **Disruption to studies**
- **Disability information**



# Which factors are 'contextual'?

---

## 1. Individual level:

Receipt of free school meals, first generation at university, in care or carer, household income, disability, refugee, asylum seeker, traveler

## 2. Area level:

Postcode used to either estimate socioeconomic status (Acorn, Experian etc.) or determine rate of HE participation in the area (e.g. POLAR4)

## 3. School level:

Attainment at KS4 and/or KS5, school type, progression rate to HE, average economic circumstances of pupils

## 4. Participation in outreach

Summer Schools, Widening Participation programmes linked to universities (not always transferrable)

Source: The Sutton Trust



# Contextual factors might play a role in determining...

---

Whether an applicant receives an offer

The grades asked for in a conditional offer

Whether to invite a candidate for an interview

Entitlement for scholarships and bursaries

Entitlement to apply to certain courses (e.g. foundation years)

Whether to provide further consideration at clearing / prioritisation for near misses

# What can you do to support your students?

---

- Encourage students to start thinking about taking part in outreach activity at an early stage (end of Year 11 onwards)
- Make sure students factor in potential grade reductions when making their five UCAS choices
- Students can mention contextual information in their personal statement
- Teachers can corroborate this in the reference, and provide contextual information about the school too



# Where is the best place to get further information?

---

- There is no substitute for going straight to the horse's mouth by looking at websites and sending emails if you're unsure
- There is a summary of contextual admissions at Russell Group universities on the Advancing Access website
- The Sutton Trust has produced a detailed report called "Admissions in Context"
- Keep your eye on the news!



## How we use it – from E2019\* the contextual data flags

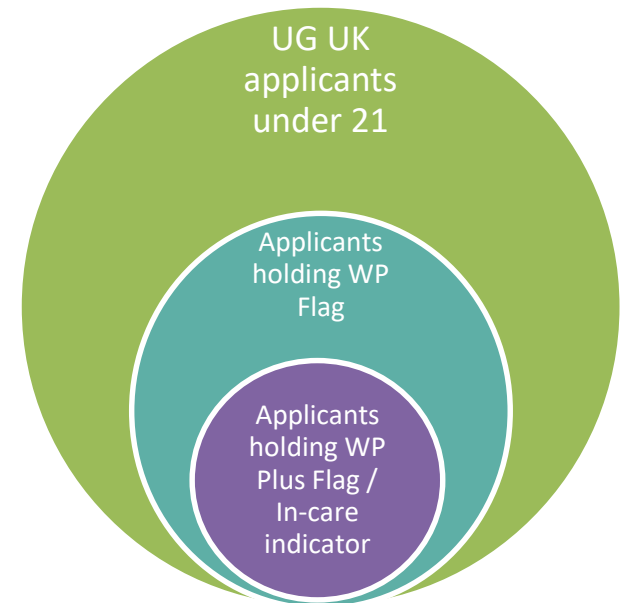
Postcode = WP Flag

Applicants holding the WP Flag are to receive additional consideration

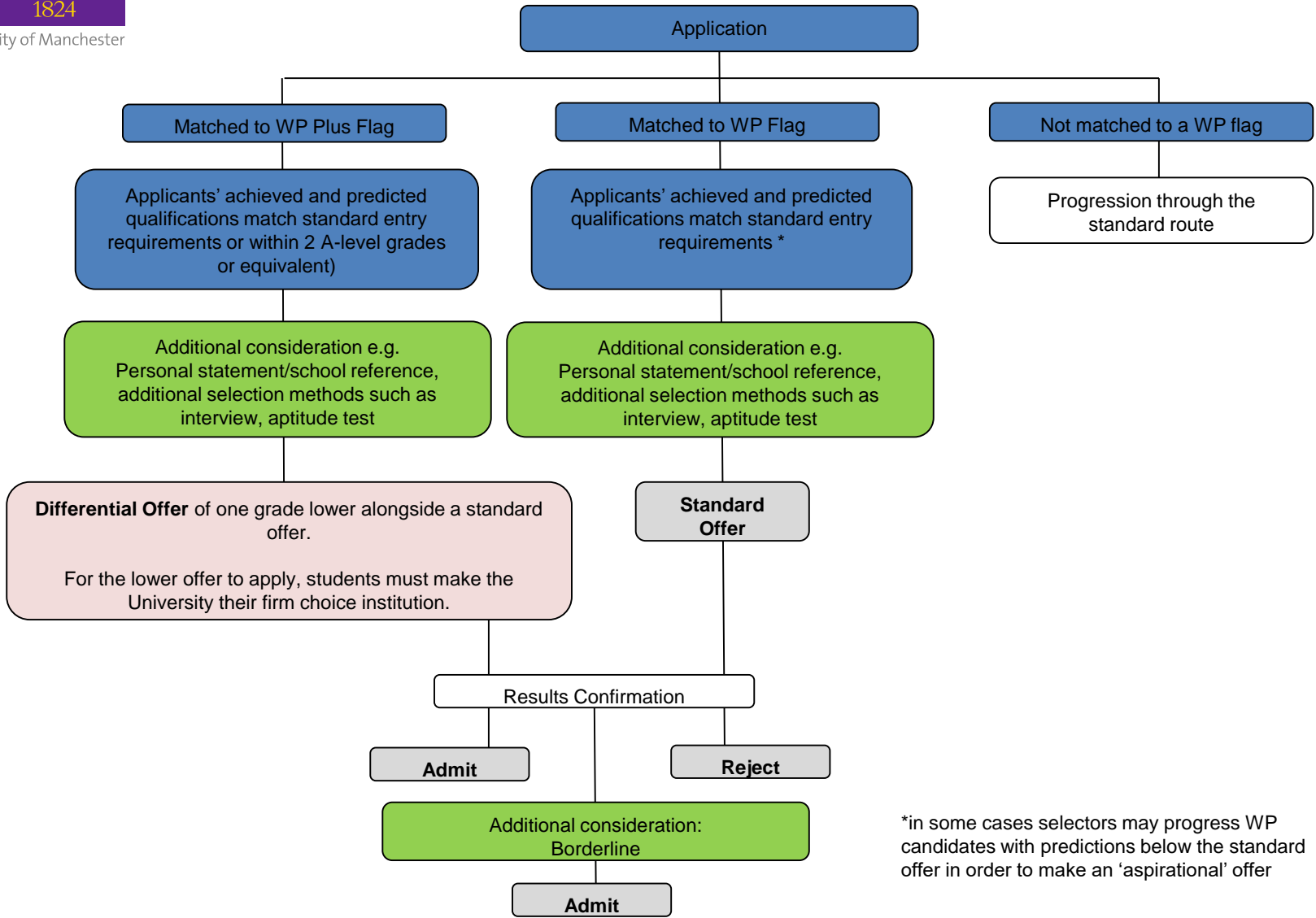
WP Flag + education indicator = WP Plus Flag

In-Care Indicator

The WP Plus Flag or In-Care Indicator indicates a candidate who has faced further disadvantage and are eligible for an offer one A-Level grade (or equivalent) below the standard offer should they choose Manchester as their Firm choice.



*\*applies to all courses with a minimum ABB standard offer*



\*in some cases selectors may progress WP candidates with predictions below the standard offer in order to make an 'aspirational' offer

# Contextual Data alongside other access initiatives



## Your Path to The University of Manchester

Are you in Year 12 or 13? Have you considered whether you want to go to university when you leave school or college?

If so, you may be eligible for our Access Manchester schemes.

### What is Access Manchester?

We offer a range of access schemes aimed at talented students from backgrounds that are currently under represented in higher education. The schemes give you a taste of the university experience and help you take the first steps towards higher education.

### What's in it for you?

Benefits of participating in an Access Manchester scheme may include:

- A reduced offer in the A-level grades required to study at The University of Manchester
- Receiving advice and guidance for applying to university
- Completing a piece of university style academic work
- Becoming familiar with university life and study

[HOW IT WORKS](#)

# Other Universities – a few examples

## Differential offers

- Birmingham – 1 or 2 grade reduction
- Queen Mary, UoL – 1 grade reduction
- Edinburgh – 2 grade reduction
- Southampton
- UCL – 2 grade reduction (must complete study module).

## Additional consideration

- Leeds
- Liverpool
- Sheffield
- Nottingham



Mock-ups of how the 'Typical Contextual A-level Offer' field will appear in the Fact File of the course listings.

[Home](#)

[Study](#)

[Undergraduate](#)

[Courses](#)

2019 entry

[Apply through UCAS](#)

UCAS course code: H610

UCAS institution code: M20

[Attend an open day](#)

# BEng Electronic Engineering / Overview

Year of entry: 2019 [View tabs](#) [View full page](#)

[Overview](#) [Entry requirements](#) [Application and selection](#) [Course details](#) [Careers](#)

<b>Degree awarded:</b>	BEng
<b>Duration:</b>	3 years
<b>Typical A-level offer:</b>	AAB including Maths and either Physics, Electronics, Further Maths or Chemistry.
<b>Typical Contextual A-level offer:</b>	ABB including Maths and either Physics, Electronics, Further Maths or Chemistry.
<b>Typical International Baccalaureate offer:</b>	Obtain 35 Points at International Baccalaureate Diploma, including 6 Points in Mathematics and Physics OR Chemistry at Higher Level and 5 points in one other Higher Level subject.

[Full entry requirements](#)

**How to apply:** Apply through [UCAS](#).

## Course overview

- Strong industry links with companies such as Siemens, Rover, National Instruments, BP and Texas Instruments.
- Student satisfaction scores consistently over 90% in the last 5 years.

This will link to the Contextual Data webpage where full details will be given around how flags are calculated and the eligibility criteria for a differential offer.

# FAQs for applicants and advisors

## Use of contextual data: 2019 applicants

If you are a UK applicant under the age of 21, we will use contextual data alongside your undergraduate application in order to build up a full and rounded view of your achievement and potential. The University wants to ensure that all applicants with the potential to be successful students here have equal opportunities through our selection process.

- + What constitutes contextual data?
- + Explaining contextual flags
- + WP Flag
- + WP Plus Flag/In-care Indicator and differential offers

If you have any queries relating to contextual data, please email: [contextualdata@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:contextualdata@manchester.ac.uk)

### Eligibility

Find out if you are eligible.

[Read more >](#)

### Frequently asked questions

Find an answer to some of our more common queries.

[Read more >](#)



The University of Manchester

## Final thoughts/questions

**Contact:**

[huw.peters@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:huw.peters@manchester.ac.uk)

[paul.martin@advancingaccess.ac.uk](mailto:paul.martin@advancingaccess.ac.uk)