



The use of Contextual Data in Higher Education Admissions

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University admissions spark fury

Social engineering, political correctness, class warfare - these cries of outrage greet any suggestion that university admissions should take account of a student's school or family background.

They were all trotted out again this week after the Business Secretary, Lord Mandelson, called for universities to look beyond raw exam results when selecting applicants. "Higher Ambitions", the government's vision for the future of universities, said "much more" needed to be done to ensure that entrance to university is fairer for all students, whatever their background.

It proposed that instead of relying on A-levels, universities should also take account of "contextual data", such as applicants' school or home neighbourhood.

This was translated by one newspaper into this headline: "Middle class students face university place struggle as Mandelson backs giving poorer students two-grade 'head start'". That was enough to trigger a flood of angry e-mails to the newspaper's website complaining about the "dumbing down" of universities.

But it was a gross over-simplification of what is actually being proposed. For a start the government made it quite plain that the universities themselves would always, in the end, decide admissions.

Mike Baker, Former BBC Education Correspondent

The admissions process at Oxford

- 15 October application deadline
- 17,000 applications
- 80% of applicants take a pre-interview test in November
short-listing process in November (2 November 2011)
- 10,000 applicants called for interview in December
- 3,500 offers made for 3,200 places
- All decisions are made by academics in Colleges according to Departmental guidelines
- Undergraduate Admissions Office works in an advisory capacity on admissions policy

Why collect contextual data?

- Changes to the data collected by UCAS
- Work done at other institutions
- Internal pressure for centralised guidance
- Changes to our own application forms
 - some contextual information collected on Oxford Application Form (OAF) and special Oxford Access Scheme form, both now obsolete
- Development in conjunction with paperless admissions
 - copy forms no longer used; all applicant data held on web-based customisable system (ADSS)
 - users can print batches of applicants according to subject, college etc
 - system includes the contextual data we collect

What we decided to use initially...

Each applicant is flagged according to five individual criteria:

1. School GCSE profile (where student took these qualifications)
if less than UK average achieving five A-C grades*
2. School/College A-level profile
if less than national average of QCA points per qualification
3. Postcode data
*if in lowest two groups of ACORN data
(‘Moderate Means’ or ‘Hard-Pressed’)*
4. Participation in a Sutton Trust Summer School or the Oxford Young Ambassador scheme
if participated in either (or both)
5. Looked-after children
if identified as in care for three months or longer

This was subsequently revised to....

Each applicant is flagged according to four criteria:

1. School GCSE profile (where student took these qualifications)
if less than UK average achieving five A-C grades (inc English & Maths)*
in Scotland, if HE participation rate is below national average
2. School/College A-level profile
if less than national average of QCA points per qualification
3. Postcode data
if in lowest two groups of ACORN data
(‘Moderate Means’ or ‘Hard-Pressed’)
4. Looked-after children
if identified as in care for three months or longer

... and how we decided to use it

- Individual flags are collected on ADSS
- An applicant receives an overall flag if they have ...
 - the care leaver flag
 - the postcode data flag **AND** one of the school performance flags
- An overall flag means the applicant is “strongly recommended for interview” ... provided that they:
 - are predicted the minimum entry requirement of AAA or equivalent
 - perform well in the appropriate pre-interview test
- If a tutor wishes not to interview a candidate fulfilling these criteria, they are obliged to provide clear justification to the subject coordinator

Example of ADSS-produced pdf

C700: Molecular and Cellular Biochemistry			
Title:	Miss	Application No.:	
Surname / Family Name:		Personal ID:	
First/Given Name(s):		Date Applied:	01-10-2008
Address:		Application Source:	A
	Syston	Fee Code:	02
		Student Support Arrangements:	Leicester
	Leicester	Domicile / APR:	Leicestershire
Postcode	LE7 2EP	Residential Cat.:	UK Citizen/EU National
Country:		Route B:	N
Gender:	F	Criminal Convictions:	N
Date of Birth:	12-02-1991	Disability/Special Needs:	0: No disability
Age at 1st September:	18 years, 6 months	Country of Birth:	United Kingdom
Mobile Number:		Nationality:	United Kingdom
Home Number:		Entered UK:	
Email:		School:	Wreake Valley College
In Care:	Unanswered	Last Education:	14676

COURSE DETAILS							
Course	Campus	College	Short Name	Further Details?	Entry Point	Home	Entry Year
C700		MAG	BIOC		1		2009

SCHOOL, COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY EDUCATION					
Name	From	To	PT/FT/SW	UCAS Code	
Wreake Valley College	9 / 2002	6 / 2009	FT	14676	


ACTIVITIES IN PREPARATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION					
Start Date	Duration	School Year	Location	Sponsor	
01-07-0008	5	12	University of Cambridge	Sutton Trust	
01-07-0008	31	12	Other	Other	

CONTEXTUAL DATA					
Care	Sutton/OYA	GCSE	A-Level	ACORN	Overall
N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y

QUALIFICATIONS COMPLETED OR CERTIFIED						
Date	Body	Level/Qual	Subject	Grade	Result	Centre
8/2007	OCR	GCSE	Design & Technology: Graphic Products	A		25172
8/2007	Edexcel	GCSE	English Literature	A		25172
8/2007	AQA	GCSE	Mathematics B	A*		25172
8/2007	AQA	GCSE	Geography A	A*		25172
8/2007	Edexcel	GCSE	English A	A*		25172
8/2007	OCR	GCSE	French	A		25172
8/2007	AQA	GCSE	History B	B		25172
8/2007	AQA	GCSE	Humanities	A*		25172
8/2007	AQA	GCSEDA	Science	A*A*		25172
8/2007	WJEC	GCSESC	Religious Studies A	A*		25172
8/2007	AQA	GCSESC	Information & Communication Technology A	A*		25172
6/2008	OCR	A Sub (AS)	Physics :- Title: 2821 Grade: A Title: 2822 Grade: A Title: 2823	A		25172
6/2008	OCR	A Sub (AS)	Chemistry :- Title: 2811 Grade: A Title: 2812 Grade: A Title: 2813 Grade: A	A		25172
6/2008	OCR	A Sub (AS)	Biology :- Title: 2801 Grade: A Title: 2802 Grade: A Title: 2803/A Grade: B	A		25172
6/2008	Edexcel	A Sub (AS)	Geography B :- Title: 6471 Grade: C Title: 6472 Title: 6473 Grade: A	A		25172
6/2008	AQA	A Sub (AS)	Mathematics :- Title: MPC1 Grade: A Title: MPC2 Grade: A Title: SS1B Grade: A	A		25172

QUALIFICATIONS NOT YET COMPLETED OR CERTIFIED						
Date	Body	Level/Qual	Subject	Predicted Grade		Centre
6/2009	AQA	A	Mathematics	A		25172
6/2009	OCR	A	Chemistry	A		25172
6/2009	OCR	A	Physics	A		25172
6/2009	OCR	A	Biology	A		25172

Example of ADSS web view



ADSS

by OCAO

Logged in as user: [admst12](#) | [Log off](#) | Subject: [Admissions](#) | [Switch Subject](#)

Use detailed filter

College 1 (Clear) STJ

College 2 (Clear) All

Joint School All

Flag Widening P

[Apply Filter](#)

Widening Participation Flags

[Save My Changes](#) [Export to Excel](#)

Records 1 to 21 of 21

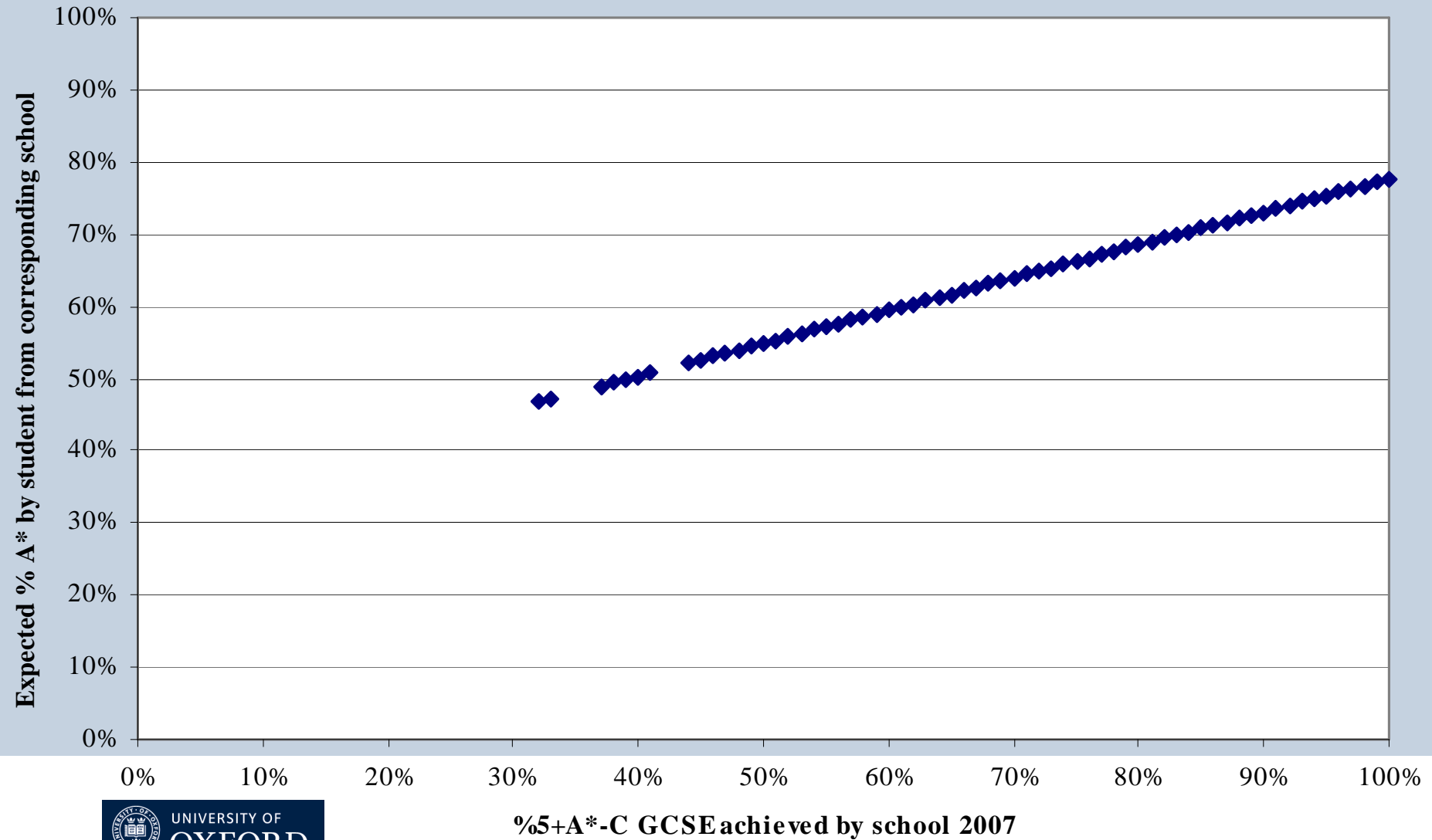
Records per page : [15](#) [30](#) [45](#) [60](#) [All](#)

Surname	UCAS	WP Care	WP Sutton Trust	WP Acorn	WP GCSE	WP A-Level	WP Overall	School GCSE Score %	School A-Level Score
		N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	52	166.7
		N	Y	NA	NA	Y	Y	66	202.5
		N	N	NA	NA	Y	Y		206.8
		N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	58	206.6
		N	N	NA	Y	NA	Y	54	
		N	Y	N	NA	NA	Y	-2	-2.0
		N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	38	188.4
		N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	51	196.6
		N	N	Y	NA	NA	Y		
		N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	40	205.0
		N	N	Y	NA	NA	Y	-2	
		N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	48	178.0
		N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	52	206.0
		N	N	Y	NA	NA	Y		
		N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	52	201.0
		N	Y	N	NA	NA	Y		
		N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	50	202.1
		N	N	Y	NA	NA	Y		
		N	N	Y	NA	NA	Y		
		N	N	Y	NA	Y	Y		203.1
		N	N	NA	NA	Y	Y		191.3

[Save My Changes](#)

Additional contextual aspect for Medicine

expected proportion of A*



Impact modelling and validation

- We analysed 2008 entry data to see the predicted impact:
 - 14,109 applicants; 411 (5.7%) would have been overall flagged
 - 177 of the 411 (43.1%) had not been short-listed for interview
- 2009 entry applicants – what actually happened:
 - 15,277 applicants; 510 (6.4%) were overall flagged
 - 165 of the 510 (32.4%) had not been short-listed for interview

Ucas Cycle	Score	Deselect	Reject After Interview	Missed Offer	Placed	Withdrew	Grand Total
2009	4	7	9	1	5	0	22
	3	48	91	1	34	2	176
	2	34	38	4	7	3	86
	1	55	72	3	17	7	154
	Totals	144	210	9	63	12	438
	%	32.9%	47.9%	16.4%		2.7%	
2008	%	43.1%	37.2%	16.3%		3.4%	

Data sources: positives and negatives

- Looked-after child status

- ☑ *self-identified by applicant on UCAS application, but doubled checked by Oxford*

- Postcode

- ☑ *ACORN classification of postcodes checked against home address*

- GCSE and A-level school and college profiles

- DCSF data (for GCSE year, e.g. 2007 for 2009 entry)*

- ☒ *Data incomplete for schools offering IGCSE*

- ☒ *UCAS school code & DCSF school code do not always match*

- ☑ No input at all required from the applicant (or tutors!)

- ☑ No applicants disadvantaged – supernumerary exercise

- ☑ http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate_courses/finding_out_more/contextual_data.html

Overall conclusion on Oxford's approach

- System designed to have low impact
- Use of many criteria allows better evaluation
- Contextual data informs *short-listing*, not *offer-making*
- Other institutions may feel a different approach is more appropriate for their applicant pool

Approaches by other universities

Educational Background 'Hard data'

Progression rates to higher education (percentage determined by cohort size) from school/college
School performance - Average (mean) school GCSE performance for 5 A*-C GCSE (including English/Welsh and Mathematics)*

Average (mean) school 'Best Eight' GCSE performance

Progression from Year 11 to further education

Average (mean) of QCA points per qualification (per entry and per student)*

* Require national average

Socio-Economic Background 'Soft data'

In receipt of (or entitled to) free school meal (school rates and individual)

In receipt of (or entitled to) an Educational Maintenance Allowance (including levels)

Lives in a low progression to higher education neighbourhood

Socio-economic class IIIM-VII

Have been in care for greater than six months

Approaches by other universities

Manchester – see next slide

Newcastle - Considers average school achievement, whether applicants have been in care and postcode data (since 2004). Allows lower grade offers to be made "if in [the tutor's] judgment the typical entry requirement would not be appropriate because of the particular circumstances of an applicant".

Nottingham - Considers average school achievement and whether or not applicants have been into care. Allows lower grade offers to be made flexibly depending on a student's background.

Oxford - Considers average school achievement, whether or not applicants have been in care and postcode data when selecting candidates to interview.

Queen's Belfast - Does not use contextual data when considering applications.

Sheffield - Admissions tutors "may give special consideration" to students from under-represented groups.

Southampton - Does not use contextual data when considering applications.

UCL - Considers average school achievement when selecting candidates to interview.

Warwick - Considers contextual information raised in the statement/reference, including "existing academic achievements and the context within which they have been achieved".

Some variation in practice – but suitable

University of Manchester

Collating contextual information to supplement undergraduate applications for 2011 entry onwards. This will apply to UK applicants under the age of 21 only. No decisions will be made on the basis of this information alone and all undergraduate applicants must meet our standard academic criteria. Four pieces of contextual information are supplemented to academic Schools where available:

The educational context of the applicant's school or college where they undertook GCSE or equivalent level through performance data;

The performance of the applicant's school or college at A-level or equivalent level; In both instances a candidate will be flagged if their educational establishment performs below the national average across multiple years (where data is available);

The postcode that an applicant gives as their home address, assessed using ACORN information. ACORN is a system that associates specific geo-demographic profiles to individual UK postcodes. It is widely recognised and used by public and private sector organisations to assist in the effective targeting of policies, services and communications. Where a candidate's postcode falls into an ACORN group underrepresented in leading research-intensive universities, they will be flagged;

Whether a candidate has been looked after/in care for more than three months - this is determined from the UCAS application;

An overall flag is only produced if a candidate meets at least one of the educational indicators plus the geo-demographic indicator.

They also receive an overall flag if they have been in care for more than 3 months.

Where applicants are predicted to achieve our standard academic entry criteria, contextual data is considered alongside information on the UCAS form to provide a fuller picture of the applicant. Where candidates with an overall flag meet standard academic entry criteria, they are recommended for further consideration by admissions tutors.

This further consideration does not result in either an automatic offer or a lower offer to candidates but can include, among other things:

Additional examination of the personal statement;

Making available information about an applicant's background to interviewers;

Further consideration during confirmation of final results.

You can also look up contextual flags by postcode using our [geo-demographic indicator](#).

<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/undergraduate/howtoapply/generalentryrequirements/#contextual>



Some variation in practice – but suitable

University of Edinburgh

- * uses contextual data in admissions

The Colleges of Humanities & Social Science and Science & Engineering and the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies consider the academic attainment of applicants in the context of the performance of their school or college.

- * makes differential offers

The Colleges of Humanities & Social Science and Science & Engineering make differential offers. This means that entry requirements are expressed as a range (e.g. ABB-AAA). All offers are made within the range. An offer made to an applicant who has faced educational disadvantage - as identified by the contextual data used in admissions or by participation in one of the University's widening participation projects - may state conditions at the lower end of the range than those of offers made to applicants who have not faced such disadvantage.

Some variation in practice – media effect?

University of Durham

**University points
formula penalises
students at best
schools**

School performance information has been provided by the Department for Education, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The measurement of applicants' GCSE grades with a modifier based on the average capped GCSE scores of the school. The University will calculate a standardised GCSE score for an applicant as follows: Each A* at GCSE scores 0.6 points, the A scores are added to the A scores to give the applicant's GCSE score. This is based on the average capped GCSE scores of the school. This means only the best 8 GCSE results for each student are used.

introduced by Durham in October 2008 and is a piece of information made available to the University of Durham. The data about school performance at GCSE that has been provided by the Department for Education (DfE), the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The University will calculate a standardised GCSE score for an applicant as follows: Each A* at GCSE scores 0.6 points, the A scores are added to the A scores to give the applicant's GCSE score. This is based on the average capped GCSE scores of the school. The score is then used as part of the information provided about the applicant.

**Durham University
admissions system
'discriminates against
middle class pupils
from good schools'**

In addition to the contextual information provided to us by UCAS, which includes the educational journey since age 11, an indicator of whether the applicant has spent time in care, and contextual information contained in the personal statement and reference, the University will also provide our selectors with the following contextual information when assessing applications from September 2010 onwards:

- if an applicant is from a neighbourhood where progression to Higher Education is low;
- if an applicant has participated in a significant outreach activity organised by the University e.g. a Summer School; and
- replacing the GCSE Standardisation Measurement Score (the Modifier), with an indicator of whether the average school performance where the applicant took their GCSEs is above or below the national average.

Conclusions

- The use of contextual data is not necessarily hard to agree with from a Social Mobility context....

..... the harder question is what to use

..... and to what extent

- Difficulties in consistency between nations (Wales and NI)
- Difficulties in consistency between GCSE/IGCSE and IB/GCE
- Better quality data... linking UCAS with Exam boards with DCSF

• <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/academicregistry/raa/wpur-office/seminar/programme/uob-tony.ppt>

Any questions and comments?

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