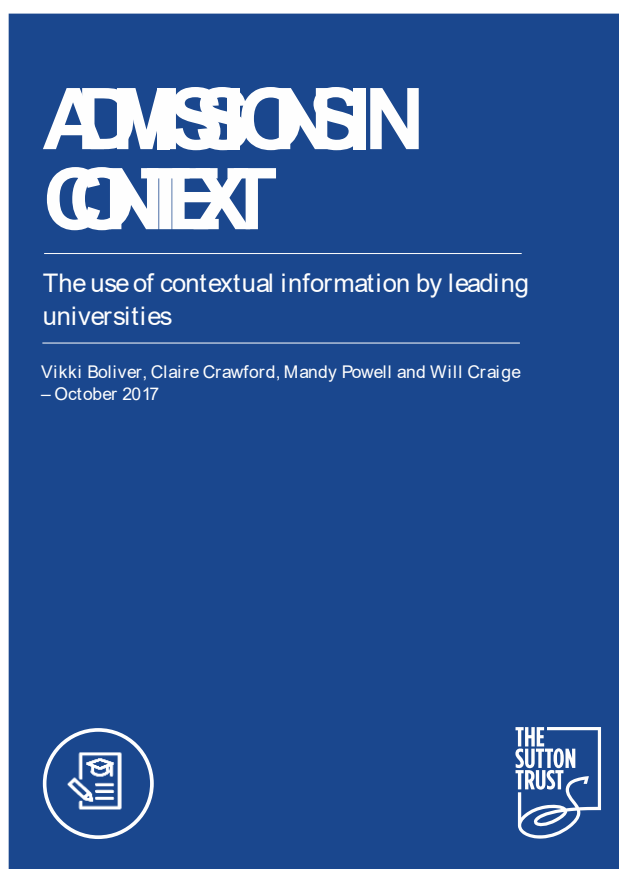


Contextual data in university admissions.



A recent [report from the Sutton Trust](#) looks at how universities are using contextual data in the admissions process to widen access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The authors identify a number of ways in which universities do this – using individual level, area level and school level indicators of disadvantage and participation in outreach programmes. In the thirty universities studied by the Sutton Trust the use of the latter method seems to be the most popular with potential candidates being enrolled on programmes which are designed to supplement their school work and increase their A level performance, or onto Foundation Years or University programmes that address specific knowledge gaps. Many of the institutions also indicated that, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the required A level grades for entry may be lowered. However the authors note that how this is done is far from transparent and very often no information is provided on how the various indicators of disadvantage are used to result in a lower offer – which presents a significant barrier to access. Overall the report calls for an increase in the number of students admitted through the use of contextual data; the greater use of individual indicators as well as school and area indicators; greater transparency in how the various indicators are applied; and a lower threshold for students to enroll on outreach programmes to broaden the pool of potential students.

Whilst there is much in the report that is to be welcomed, I want to argue in this blog post that it does not go far enough. But first a few personal thoughts. I used,

until about four or five years ago, to be strongly opposed to the use of contextual data in admissions, and saw the issues of low academic performance as something that the school system needs to solve. Whilst action is undoubtedly needed in that area, I have changed my views radically over the last few years, and now see the skewed university intake towards the well off middle classes as an enormous waste of talent that the country cannot allow to continue; a major barrier to social equity and social mobility; and something that university admissions systems can actually do something about.

My basic argument is that any use of contextual data in admissions needs to be made clear and transparent across the sector, as well as for individual institutions. To this end I believe some sort of common, national, points based scale is needed that awards students points for various levels of disadvantage, based on specified and easily quantifiable individual, school and residential level indicators. If the number of points exceed a threshold, then the entry requirements for all courses across the sector will be relaxed by a specific number of A level points. Participation in outreach programmes should be broadened significantly to capture a wider cross section of potential students, and the points based contextual system should still apply. Such a simple scheme would provide a transparent, easily understood mechanism that could be applied nationally.

But I would go further – and this is likely to be the controversial part. One major point that I believe is missing from the Sutton Trust report is the pernicious effect of private education on the University admissions process. Private education, often specifically aimed at university entry through undoubtedly high quality teaching, skews university admissions significantly in favour of those who can afford it. I would thus propose that those that receive a private education, or indeed have highly positive school and residential area indicators, should be required to obtain enhanced A level points above the normal admissions level. This would result in parents being forced to question the viability of private education – should they pay for their children to receive enhanced offers of university admission; and if such a proposal were widened to include school and area indicators for non-fee paying schools, this might reduce the pressure on the housing market in the areas around “good” schools, and allow such schools to broaden their admissions profile.

Such a proposal is of course highly political, and would no doubt be dubbed as “social engineering” if any group or political party cared to take this forward. To that I would counter that the major “social engineering” that takes place in our society is the ability of those who can afford it to pay for enhanced educational provision. The current state of our society, the widening gulf between the metropolitan middle classes and much of the rest of the country, and the terrible waste of talent that this represents are a set of issues that such a proposal could begin to address.