



Contextualised admissions

What it means for your students

What is contextualised admissions?

Contextualised admissions is defined as information and data used by universities and colleges, to assess an applicant's prior attainment and potential, in the context of their individual circumstances. The aim is to form a more complete picture of the applicant.

What is contextual data and information?

Contextual data includes educational, geo-demographic and socio-economic background data, such as historic data about an applicant's school or college.

Contextual information relates to individual applicant circumstances, such as if they have been in care, or involved in widening participation activities.

Where does contextual data and information come from?

There are multiple sources of contextual data:

- the UCAS contextual data service – from public sources such as government school accountability data, or young participation in higher education rates by neighbourhood data (POLAR3 and the Scottish Multiple Index of Deprivation (SIMD))
- commercial sources (e.g. companies that specialise in offering these services)
- other sources (e.g. direct from government departments/agencies)
- universities' and colleges' own data and research

Applicants declare contextual information as part of their UCAS Undergraduate application. Crucially, the personal statement and reference also contain contextual information.

What's my role in this?

As a teacher or adviser, it's important to be aware of this practice, so you can give the best advice to your students. Contextualised admissions encourages aspirational applications, and may also help explain why a student has received a certain offer.

What practical steps can I take to help?

- Encourage your students to complete all the relevant application fields in full. The contextual information submitted on the UCAS application is critical to facilitating contextualised admissions.
- Use the reference to indicate any further contextual information which might warrant special consideration. This could include individual circumstances – e.g. mature student, disability, widening participation activities, or information about your school which may affect performance, such as significant staff changes, or damage to buildings.

We take our responsibilities around data seriously, and fully comply with the requirements of the [Data Protection Act](#). We only share personal information if an applicant has actively confirmed they are happy for us to do so.

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UCAS



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What might this mean for my students' university applications?

Contextualised admissions can be used at different stages of the application process, as part of holistic assessment to:

- target students for widening participation activities
- inform a decision, including inviting for interview, contextual offers, and 'near miss' applicants at Confirmation
- identify applicants who may need additional support
- help assess applicants eligibility for financial support

Will students who benefit from contextualised admissions do worse at university?

Evidence shows, students from disadvantaged backgrounds do at least as well, and sometimes better, in degree attainment, than comparable groups of more advantaged students.

What are contextual offers? Are these linked to unconditional offers?

As part of their contextualised admissions policy, universities and colleges may make contextual (lower) offers to flagged students. These are not connected to, and should not be confused with, unconditional offers, where an applicant's results will not affect their acceptance. The applicant will still be expected to meet the conditions of their contextual offer.

Why do universities and colleges use contextualised admissions?

Higher education (HE) providers have been using contextual data and information for fair access, and to maintain academic excellence, for many years. This practice was given further impetus with the publication of the Schwartz Report [Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for good practice](#) in 2004. More recently, policy initiatives from UK governments, such as the [Social Mobility Advisory Report](#), have supported greater use of contextual data.

Extensive research shows that socio-economic background, where you live, type of school attended, and subject choice, can all impact on attainment and, therefore, progression to HE.

Contextualised admissions is used in an attempt to mitigate these factors, by using a wider range of indicators to identify who 'merits' a place, rather than attainment alone. Applied robustly and within a holistic process, the use of contextualised data and information in admissions can be an effective tool in identifying applicants with the greatest potential to succeed in HE.

Do all universities and colleges use contextualised admissions?

Not all universities and colleges use contextualised admissions, but it is becoming increasingly widespread. A [survey](#) by [Supporting Professionalism in Admissions \(SPA\)](#) found that 57 participating universities and colleges (84% of respondents) were using contextualised admissions in the 2015 entry cycle. A 2016 UCAS survey found 31 providers have produced, or are in the process of developing, a contextualised admissions policy. These can be found on university and college websites.

Providers who want to use UCAS' contextual data service have to register with us, make it clear to applicants they are accessing this data, and how it is used in the admissions process.

How is contextual data and information used?

Universities and colleges use contextualised admissions differently, and must be transparent about their reasons for doing so.

Most commonly, and to help ensure applicants with contextual factors are not missed, flagging is often employed by universities and colleges. This practice involves identifying applicants for additional consideration, as a result of contextual data or information. Universities might also combine data from several sources to build-up a richer picture.

For more information about how a university or college might undertake contextualised admissions, please consult their individual policy, or contact them directly.