THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Student Recruitment & Admissions

Briefing: contextual data in undergraduate admissions at the University of Edinburgh

1.   Background

The University of Edinburgh is one of the most popular universities for undergraduate study in the UK. In 2015, only one UK university received more 'on time' UCAS applications than Edinburgh. Entry to the University is highly competitive, and the admissions process highly selective. Amongst the 24 Russell Group institutions, only one other received more applications per acceptance in the last admissions cycle.

Whilst prior academic attainment is the most important single factor determining whether or not an applicant will be offered a place to study at Edinburgh, no applicant will be admitted to the University on the basis of grades alone.

2.   Admissions Principles

The University of Edinburgh's admissions principles set out the University's commitment to admitting the very best students, who demonstrate the potential to benefit from, and contribute to, the academic experience we offer.[1]

We recognise that not all applicants have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their full academic potential via their school leaver qualifications alone. To this end, all applications are given careful individual consideration and a holistic decision is made with regard to an individual's academic achievements, taking into account the context and circumstances of their pre-university studies.

3.   Contextual data in admissions

The University was one of the first in the UK to introduce the use of contextual data in admissions when it did so for the first time in 2004. This coincided with the publication of the Schwartz report on Fair Admissions to Higher Education, which advocated the use of contextual data in order that universities might identify "latent talent and potential which may not fully be demonstrated by examination results".[2]

The use of contextual data in admissions is now commonplace in institutions across the UK, as demonstrated by the recent report on the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) use of contextualised admissions survey.[3]

4.   The data

We use data sourced from each of the four UK administrations, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, CACI Ltd., partner widening participation programmes, UCAS and applicants themselves. All datasets are updated annually.

4.1   Educational

Educational data is considered in the context of the centre where the qualifications relevant to the application were achieved.

- **SQA Higher attainment by SQA centre**

This measure enables the identification of applicants whose individually strong performance is achieved whilst attending a school/college with low attainment. The measure identifies applicants attending a school/college in Scotland where the 3-year average percentage of students attaining AAAA or better by the end of S6 (or equivalent for colleges) is:

  - in the lowest 45% nationally, for allocation of the Context Edu flag;
  - in the lowest 35% nationally and combined with low ACORN or SIMD, for allocation of the Context Plus flag.

- **Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) schools**

The applicant attends a SHEP school. SHEP is a project funded by the Scottish Funding Council which targets schools with low rates of progression to HE.

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[1] The University of Edinburgh Admissions Principles: http://www.ed.ac.uk/student-recruitment/admissions-advice/admissions-policy/principles
[2] Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice (2004), pp.5-6: http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/consultation.html
[3] Report on the SPA use of contextualised admissions survey (2015): http://www.spa.ac.uk/documents/ContextualData/spa_contextualised_admissions_survey_report_final_12_oct2015.pdf

- ### GCSE (or equivalent) attainment by centre
The applicant took their GCSE or equivalent qualifications at a school in England, Wales or Northern Ireland where the 3-year average attainment of students is below the national average.

The inclusion of this data recognises that many students move schools following their GCSEs. By considering this data we are able to identify applicants whose individually strong performance is achieved whilst attending a school with below average attainment.

- ### Level 3 (A level or equivalent) attainment by centre
The applicant attends/attended a school or college in England, Wales or Northern Ireland where the 3-year average score per entry is below national average.

This measure enables the identification of applicants whose individually strong performance is achieved whilst attending an institution with below average attainment.

4.2   Geo-demographic

- ### ACORN
The applicant's home postcode on application is category 4 or 5.

This data identifies applicants who live in postcode areas with the highest levels of disadvantage in the UK according to the ACORN classification (http://acorn.caci.co.uk/).

- ### Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)
The applicant's home postcode on application is within Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 20/40 datazone (2012 SFC-defined quintiles).

This data identifies applicants who live in postcode areas with the highest levels of disadvantage in Scotland according to the SIMD.

4.3   Personal

- ### Widening participation programme
The applicant has participated in a recognised widening participation programme:
- Lothians Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS)
- Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP)
- University of Edinburgh Credit for Entry course
- University of Edinburgh Access course

This data identifies applicants who have participated in a widening participation programme supported or run by the University of Edinburgh.

- ### Care leaver
The applicant is a care leaver. This data is provided by the applicant in the UCAS application and verified by the University.

A care leaver is defined by the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 as someone aged 25 or under who was looked after by a local authority and who ceased to be looked after on, or at any time after, their sixteenth birthday. In addition, under the Aftercare (Specified Persons and Eligible Needs) (Scotland) Order 2015, any person aged 25 or under who between their eleventh and sixteenth birthdays was, but is no longer, looked after by a local authority for periods of time which, when aggregated, total not less than 2 years, will also be considered a care leaver.

We do not consider:

- Whether an applicant attends a state or independent school
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Parental occupation

5.   How we use the data

These contextual factors are used on applications from applicants domiciled in the United Kingdom, to generate contextual data flags, which highlight applications that will receive additional consideration in the selection and, in most subjects, offer making processes.

Contextual data flag	Contextual factor combinations
Context Plus	Care leaver Widening participation programme (LEAPS, SWAP, Credit for Entry, UoE Access) SQA Higher attainment by centre is in the lowest 35% nationally + Low ACORN SQA Higher attainment by centre is in the lowest 35% nationally + Low SIMD Low ACORN + Low Level 3 (A level or equivalent) attainment by centre Low ACORN + Low GCSE (or equivalent) attainment by centre Low ACORN + SHEP Low SIMD + SHEP
Context Edu	SQA Higher attainment by centre is in the lowest 45% nationally SQA Higher attainment by centre is in the lowest 45% nationally + Low ACORN SQA Higher attainment by centre is in the lowest 45% nationally + Low SIMD SHEP Low Level 3 or equivalent attainment by centre Low GCSE attainment by centre
Context Geo	Low ACORN Low SIMD

- Where an application with a 'Context Plus' flag meets or is predicted to meet all minimum entry requirements, then wherever possible, an offer is made based on the minimum requirements;
- Where an application with a 'Context Edu' flag has achieved, or is predicted to achieve, at the typical offer rate for a degree programme, then wherever possible, an offer will be made at that level;
- Where an application with a 'Context Geo' flag meets or is predicted to meet all minimum entry requirements, the flag may be considered alongside other information in the application at the discretion of the admissions selector.
- For programmes requiring a portfolio as part of the application, applications with a 'Context Plus' flag will receive additional credit at the portfolio assessment stage. Where an application with a 'Context Plus/Edu/Geo' flag meets or is predicted to meet all minimum entry requirements, and where the portfolio grades (including any additional credit) meet the threshold offer rate, then wherever possible, an offer will be made. All offers to these programmes are based on the minimum requirements.
- For Medicine, applications with a contextual flag will receive additional credit in the application process depending on the type of flag. The admissions team also reviews applications with contextual flags where these are at the borderline of receiving an offer.

Our use of contextual data is referred to explicitly throughout the undergraduate prospectus and on the University's website.

6.   Maintaining high standards

It would not be in a student's interests – or the University's – to admit them knowing there was a high chance that they would fail to complete their degree here. Therefore, all offers are made at or above the minimum entry requirement, given that this is the level of attainment we deem necessary for a student to successfully complete a degree programme.

We have seen no decrease in retention rates since the introduction of the use of contextual data in 2004. In fact, retention rates have improved over this period, as has the proportion of students achieving First and 2:1 degrees. This reinforces our firm belief that our use of contextual data alongside other information contained within the UCAS application has enabled us to identify those students who best demonstrate the academic ability, resilience and commitment to succeed at Edinburgh.

7. Impact

As was the case prior to 2004, when the University first used contextual data in admissions, the vast majority of applicants and entrants remain those from traditional backgrounds and high performing schools. This reflects the composition of the cohort of students who achieve the qualifications and grades necessary to meet our minimum entry requirements.

However, we recognise that attendance of a university like Edinburgh can be a transformative experience for individuals, families and whole communities, and we take this responsibility seriously. Alongside innovative and sector-leading outreach projects such as Pathways to the Professions, and needs-based bursaries, the University's use of contextual data has enabled a gradual increase in the diversity of educational and socio-economic backgrounds from which students come to Edinburgh.

For further information, contact:

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