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Increasing Access to Oxbridge #3

Contextual admissions: a method of improving accessibility to Oxbridge?



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Executive Summary:

- Both Oxford and Cambridge recommend their admissions tutors to use contextual data as part of the admissions process. This takes the form of a 'flagging' system, whereby candidates receive flags for each criterion they meet. Criteria focus on the applicant's postcode, their school and whether they spent time in local authority care.
- The Universities recommend admissions tutors to consider applicants in light of the flags they've received. At Oxford tutors are specifically advised to invite these applicants to interview (given their achievements reach a reasonable standard); in Cambridge tutors are advised to give these candidates special consideration.
- Admissions statistics show that, despite efforts made by the flagging process, applicants from the under-represented backgrounds measured by the Universities are less likely to be short-listed for interview or offered a place, compared to non-flagged applicants. This effect exists at both Oxford and Cambridge.
- As a group, admissions tutors have a diverse range of attitudes and experiences with regards to the use of contextual data in admissions. There is some confusion among admissions tutors over the purpose of contextual data, as well as a general ignorance regarding how it could be used as an aide to select a better quality of candidate.
- While many admissions tutors don't view their university as being responsible for the under-representation of certain demographics, a few voiced their concern that more could be done by the University and admissions tutors. Specifically, the collegiate structure at Oxford and Cambridge received attention as a potential barrier to improve access via the use of contextual data in admissions.
- Admissions tutors have some apprehensions about using contextual data as they are unclear of the legal status regarding its use.
- Evidence from UK Higher Education Institutions, aside from Oxford and Cambridge, supports the use of contextual data in admissions. These have been used successfully by a number of institutions, which show that the data not only improve diversity but also the calibre of an institution's student intake.
- Prospective applicants to Oxford and Cambridge are generally unaware of how contextual data are used in the admissions process. They hold a diverse set of opinions and attitudes to the use of contextual data.
- However, being aware of the collection of contextual data makes prospective applicants generally more likely to apply.
- Policies involving the use of contextual data are associated with notions of "fairness" and "diversity" for prospective applicants. Failures in these areas are frequently cited reasons given by prospective applicants when asked what would deter them from applying to Oxbridge. This suggests that contextual data may not only aid applicants in being offered a place, but could encourage further applicants from under-represented backgrounds.

- General overview of policy recommendations:
 - That the Universities review the efficacy of their current contextual flags, as well as investigate the evidence surrounding the introduction of other demographics metrics.
 - That the Universities issue more rigorous formal guidelines to admissions tutors in order to ensure that the use of contextual data is consistent across colleges and courses.
 - That the Universities educate and equip admissions tutors with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand the importance of contextual data, and to put these to use in the admissions process.
 - That the Universities regularly consult admissions tutors on their attitudes and experiences of admissions, so that they can help shape current policy. This is likely to increase tutors' compliance with new policies, as well as provide them with the benefit of "front-line" experience in policy-making.
 - That the Universities publicise their use of contextual data, especially to groups traditionally under-represented in the student intake, as this knowledge is likely to encourage participation and application.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, interest has increased in the use of contextual data in university admissions in the United Kingdom. Analysis of the discrepancies in academic attainment among various demographic groups has indicated that high academic performances at secondary schools often result from contextual advantages as well as academic potential.

Multiple social groups traditionally associated with underprivileged socio-economic status or limited educational opportunities consistently receive secondary school grades lower than those of their peers, undermining the view that intellectual ability alone determines examination performance. For instance, while 10.6% of white students achieve grades AAA at A Level¹ only 4.9% of black students achieve these results.² Likewise in 2009, 13.9% of all students earned AAA compared to 4.1% of students on Free School Meals.³ Independent schooling also provides an advantage: In 2014/15 the average A Level grade awarded to students taught in English independent schools was a B, whereas state school students (including sixth form colleges, local authority schools and academies) only averaged a C grade.⁴ The relative differences in performance by gender is also noteworthy. When considering the proportion of students achieving at AAA at A-level, the gender gap has gradually widened, from 0.5% in 2012 to 1.4% in 2015.⁵

Awareness of these academic disparities with regard to demographics has led to the implementation of an array of policies at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), whereby a candidate's application is considered in the context of various demographic metrics and their educational background. Recently, there is increased pressure on the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to increase their use of contextual data in admissions. Two main over-lapping arguments have been made in favour of using contextual data in admissions policies:

1. That contextual admissions are necessary to improve the diversity of the student intake of a HEI. According to this argument, the merit of a contextual admissions policy is measured by its success in improving the proportion of students who are admitted from under-represented demographics.
2. That contextual admissions have utility in improving the quality of admissions to an HEI. In this regard, the merit of contextual data is found in its ability to act as a predictor of academic potential and as a means to select those applicants with the most potential.

¹ Department for Education, *2012/13 Key Stage 5 attainment data (final)*, United Kingdom.

² Department for Education, *2012/13 Key Stage 5 attainment data (final)*, United Kingdom.

³ Joanne L. Emery, "A-level candidates attaining 3 or more 'A' grades in England 2006-2009", January 2010, p. 11; Russell Group, *Free School Meals*, January 2014.

⁴ Department for Education, *Revised A Level and other level 3 results in England, 2014/2015*, United Kingdom January 2016, p. 10.

⁵ Department for Education, *Revised A Level and other level 3 results in England, 2014/2015*, United Kingdom January 2016, p. 10.

This report will assess the use of contextual data in the admissions policies of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. In public discourse, much of the debate around contextual admissions has centred on this first argument. This report considers the extent to which policies at Oxford and Cambridge have succeeded in improving diversity. However, many of the arguments against contextual admissions rely on the contention that such policies are unfair and prevent universities from selecting candidates with the strongest academic potential. This report therefore also considers this second argument – whether contextual admissions can be used as a method to improve the quality of an HEI’s intake.

Our report begins with an analysis of the evidence from contextual admissions policies used by other HEIs in the UK [**Section 1: Lessons learnt from contextual policies across UK HEIs**]. It will then turn to current policies at Oxford and Cambridge, and how effective they have been in improving the diversity of admissions [**Section 2: Policy at Oxbridge**].

In the third section [**Section 3: Attitudes of admissions tutors**], we consider the attitudes held by those responsible for admissions at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge regarding contextual admissions. Section four [**Section 4: Insights from prospective students and undergraduates**] assesses the attitudes of prospective applicants to contextual admissions. Finally, we summarise our policy recommendations for the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in full [**Section 5: Summary of Recommendations**].

The Research Team:

The research team was made up of 7 undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of Oxford. Research was completed between December 2015 and April 2016. Research methods are outlined in each individual section where appropriate. Researchers were selected on the basis of an open application process and held diverse political viewpoints. No conflicting interests have been declared by any member of the team.

Section 1: Lessons learned from contextual policies across UK HEIs

1.1 Aims

This section sets out to analyse some of the effects of contextual admissions methodologies applied at HEIs across the UK. We then consider what aspects of these results can be applied to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In consequence this report has four distinct aims:

- a) To identify the separate methodologies referred to as ‘contextual admissions’;
- b) To analyse how successfully contextual admissions policies have diversified the student intake of HEIs;
- c) To analyse whether contextual admissions policies affect the academic calibre of a university’s undergraduate intake;
- d) To apply the findings from other HEIs to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and to make recommendations for improving their own admissions systems.

1.2 Using contextual data

1.21 Contextual methodologies

The possible approaches for contextualising admissions can be divided into four categories:

- **Contextual data** – data retrieved from government sources or provided via the candidate’s Undergraduate Courses at University and College (UCAS) application help to understand the wider background of a candidate’s application. An applicant whose socio-economic and educational circumstances are seen as a prominent obstacle to their academic progress can be ‘flagged’ for further consideration.
- **Contextual information** – whilst this mechanism is similar to that of contextual data, contextual information involves sifting through the textual information of a candidate’s application, such as in their personal statement and references.
- **Outreach projects** – some universities employ access schemes which target under-represented groups and assist in preparing students for university applications. In some cases participation in a university’s outreach project involves an assessment of the candidate’s academic potential and can therefore result in a lower conditional offer.
- **Quotas** – a university can set quotas for its undergraduate intake, binding itself to the promise that disadvantaged or minority students must make up a publicly-stated proportion of the annual undergraduate intake. No UK university has put quotas into practice, although some US institutions do so.

The information gleaned from the first three approaches can be employed in many ways. It may be that a ‘flagged’ applicant’s personal statement may be read a second time or a ‘flagged’ candidate can be given a place over a similarly-qualified ‘unflagged’ individual. At

other universities a ‘flagged’ applicant may have their grades artificially inflated to compensate for the educational obstacles they have faced, or they may receive an adjusted offer. Simply put, there is no homogenous strategy used in contextual admissions. The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme produced a 2012 report on contextual data outlining where UCAS member institutions used contextual methodologies during the 2011 admissions period. The following table shows the variations of contextual admissions among 48 institutions which provided specific information on individual courses.

Table 1: Type and extent of use of contextual data across survey respondents, 2011

How data was used:	Extent of use across courses						Total
	All	Most	Some	Few	One	Not specified	
To adjust offers to some applicants	8	5					13
Deciding on offers to applicants who meet academic criteria	9	7	3	2	1	1	23
In deciding whom to invite for interviews	9	5	2	1	1		18
Assessing admissions test results	3	3					6
Considering borderline holders at confirmation	11	6	4	2	2	1	26
Considering applicants in UCAS Extra, Clearing or Adjustment	5	6	3		1		15
Other	4	3	2		1		10

Source: SPA, *Fair Admissions to Higher Education*, February 2012, p. 17.

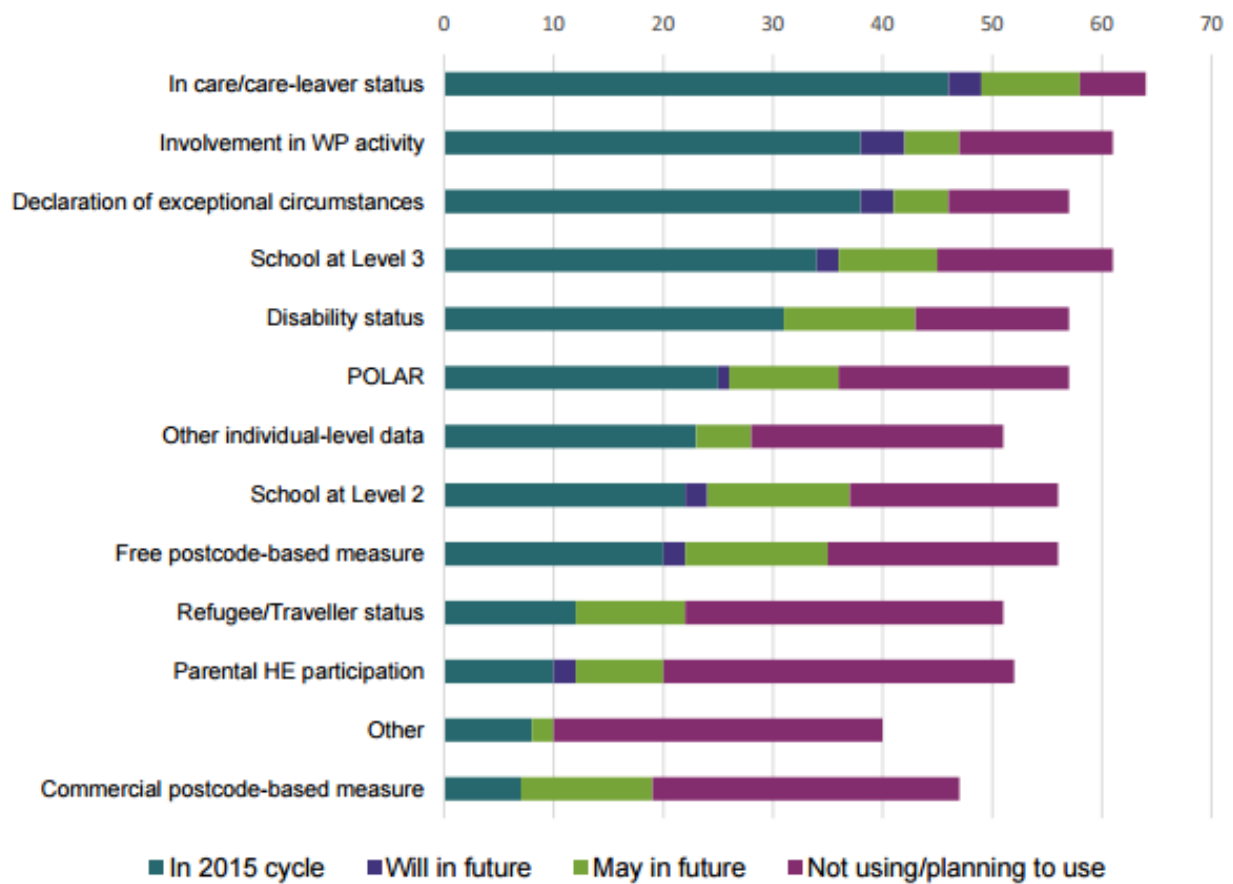
In 2015, the SPA discovered that the application of contextual assessments still differed significantly. The 48 HEIs who specified the ways in which they used contextual data greatly differed: 8 only used these to adjust offers; 12 used these when deciding upon whether to accept applicants who narrowly missed the academic conditions of their offer; 11 employed these for setting safety-net offers; and the remaining 17 used these for a combination of the above.⁶ In addition to these varied practices, most universities purposefully keep their policies vague in order to retain academic discretion over their application processes. This

⁶ SPA, *SPA’s Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*, October 2015, p. 5.

inevitably results in a lack of clarity over where contextualisation is being used and the impact that this may have.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that each university uses different metrics when contextualising applications. This aspect is demonstrated in the figure below, derived from SPA's 2015 study.

Figure 1: The number of HEIs using different types of contextual data, 2015



Source: SPA, *SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*, October 2015, p. 6.

Among universities using various combinations of factors in their assessment of an application, there is no overall consensus as to which metrics together are most effective in identifying obstacles to academic progress. At the same time, given that only 80% of universities use a combination of school, individual, and geographical data to make a holistic

assessment of an application, it is doubtful whether all HEIs contextualise admissions effectively enough.⁷

The final approach of using quotas in contextual admissions is rather controversial and raises some problems of its own. Given that long-term higher education quotas have never been trialled in the UK, it is difficult to assess their efficacy in this context. However, other countries where affirmative action quotas have been used report some difficulties in this approach. In 1979, the US Supreme Court ruled that specific racial quotas were impermissible, a precedent once again cited in the 2003 *Grutter v. Bollinger* case. The concern was that a quota system produces an unfair admissions process which hinders an admissions tutor's ability to evaluate each applicant as an individual. This concern was also expressed in the UK's 2004 *Schwartz Report* (see section 1.23). Based on the lack of consensus on quotas, the Admissions to Higher Education Review recommends that HEIs "*should not seek to establish quotas for applicants from particular groups, backgrounds or schools.*"⁸

1.22 Constraints on using contextual data

Contextual data is not without its faults. As outlined in the previous sections of this report, universities use a variety of metrics to make a holistic assessment of an application, which may produce different outcomes depending on the institution's admission process. Moreover, many of these metrics are often limited in their efficacy. Some factors (such as post-code measures⁹, educational background, and even ethnicity) often indicate educational obstacles, but with many exceptions. Therefore, it is important that any metric used is carefully analysed. Moreover, contextual admissions are likely only effective and fair when all available contextual factors have been accounted for on a case-by-case basis.

Thus, universities must examine the full range of contextual factors relevant to each individual. Nevertheless, inconsistencies can arise when data are missing. For example, whilst a student's income at the time of their application may indicate socio-economic difficulties, they may have spent the vast majority of their education in a more affluent environment. This is an aspect that could be concealed by the limited information available. In order to produce an accurate picture of each candidate's educational profile, UK HEIs must have access to comprehensive datasets.

Compiling comprehensive datasets depends on the availability of university resources. Investigating the socio-economic background of each applicant using UCAS contextual data services, the individual's application, and data on school and geographical performance, is both expensive and time-consuming. In essence, many HEIs do not have the resources to

⁷ SPA, *SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*, October 2015, p. 6.

⁸ Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, September 2004, p. 37.

⁹ Croxford et al., "Widening Participation at the University of Edinburgh: Contextual Admissions, Retention, and Degree Outcomes." *Scottish Affairs* 23.2 (2014): 196.

thoroughly assess each candidate and so suffer from an absence of a centralised contextualising body. In 2013 and 2015, 14 HEIs informed the SPA that they required greater assistance from outside bodies, with the suggestion that UCAS could assist in flagging relevant applications proving most popular and viable.¹⁰

Recommendation 1.1: *Given the uncertainty over which metrics are most useful at identifying a student’s educational disadvantage, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge should take an active role in identifying which contextual metrics are best at uncovering the most severe educational obstacles. They should also explore ways of attaining more reliable data on their applicants, which may involve asking for detailed information on a student’s application, sharing data with other universities, or lobbying for UCAS to take the primary role in contextualising and flagging applications.*

In addition to the practical constraints on using contextual data, it is noticeable that many universities do not clearly outline the details of their contextual admissions policies. There is concern that publishing the exact details of an institution’s contextual procedure reduces the ability of admissions tutors to make individual decisions on an applicant’s academic potential. However, it is unclear whether clarifying an institution’s contextual policy will have this effect. The evidence provided in this report, backed up by numerous studies, suggests that contextual data actively helps the admissions tutors in making decisions, and defining the metrics employed by a university does not prevent tutors from making decisions at their own discretion. On the contrary, a clear contextual policy aids tutors in identifying the best candidates which may otherwise go unnoticed. Furthermore, if the contextual measures used are publically disclosed it becomes easier to analyse which metrics are most effective in identifying underprivileged and talented students across the country. Rather than reducing an admission tutor’s individual discretion, evidence points towards the exact opposite: a firm contextualisation policy informs tutors of the factors they should remain aware of that could otherwise hide the best students.

Recommendation 1.2: *The application processes at Oxford and Cambridge need to incorporate contextual data more extensively whilst also preserving a tutor’s autonomy over making offers. This can be achieved by establishing a uniform contextual policy to be used by all colleges which will assist tutors in consistently assessing the potential of all applicants.*

1.23 Contextual admissions in recent Higher Education policy

Growing attention to contextual data is mostly due to the increased inclusion of this approach in HEI admissions policy. Since the early 2000s, the government has played a prominent role in laying out contextual recommendations and principles for HEIs to follow.

¹⁰ SPA, *Contextualised Admissions: Examining the Evidence Report*, October 2013, p. 51; SPA, *SPA’s Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*, October 2015, p. 9.

For the most part, endorsements of contextual data usage have emerged from extensive government-funded reports, the most influential of which has been what is commonly referred to as the 2004 *Schwartz Report*. In 2003 Charles Clarke, UK Secretary of State for Education and Skills, commissioned Professor Steven Schwartz, Chair of the Admissions to Higher Education Review in the UK, to examine the case for contextual data in university admissions processes and to report on how to increase higher education participation of underrepresented groups. This report is now regarded as the seminal study into contextualising university admissions, and many of its recommendations have formed the basis of subsequent HEI policy. Crucially it concluded that all universities must recognise the socio-economic and educational opportunities of each individual student and should anticipate how their experiences may have formed obstacles in their academic development:

“The Steering Group does not want to bias admissions in favour of applicants from certain backgrounds or schools. The Group does, however, believe that it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners’ opportunities and circumstances. The Group also wants to ensure that the factors considered in the assessment process are accurate and relevant and allow all applicants equal opportunity to demonstrate achievements and potential. This is facilitated by ‘holistic assessment,’ or taking into account all relevant factors, including the context of applicants’ achievements, backgrounds and relevant skills. ‘Broad brush’ approaches are generally not appropriate; applicants must be assessed as individuals.”¹¹

However, the *Schwartz Report* also recommends that each HEI provides greater clarity over its contextual process, informing the public as to which metrics are used whilst examining each applicant’s background:

“Universities and colleges should provide, consistently and efficiently through appropriate mechanisms, the information applicants need to make an informed choice. This should include the institution’s admissions policy and detailed criteria for admission to courses, along with an explanation of admissions processes. It should include a general indication of the weight given to prior academic achievement and potential demonstrated by other means.”¹²

Later studies and reports, carried out by organisations such as the SPA Programme and researchers such as Dr Anna Mountford-Zimdars, have built upon Schwartz’s findings, arguing in favour of improved contextualisation and holistic methodologies in the application process. Following the prevalence of these principles, the vast majority of HEIs in

¹¹ Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, September 2004, p. 6.

¹² Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, September 2004, p. 7.

the UK have recognised that the usage of contextual data is in their best interest and they are employing it more widely to identify candidates with the highest potential.

In 2008, SPA's review of the Schwartz Report found that although 49% of institutions felt it was unfair for a HEI to reduce the offer conditions for some applicants on the basis of achieving a mixed student body, over half of HEIs agreed that an applicant's educational context should be considered.¹³ Moreover, the review discovered that some HEIs were gradually implementing the recommendations of the *Schwartz Report*, and that selective institutions in particular welcomed the report because it underlined their shared principles for fair admissions.¹⁴ Since then the growing awareness of the academic merits of contextual data and a more diverse student body has led to a significant shift, with the vast majority of HEIs employing contextualisation in their admissions process. In 2012, 41.5% of HEIs registered with UCAS stated they had used contextual data, whilst 62.8% planned to use it in the future. By 2015, 84% of HEIs said they were using contextualised admissions during that undergraduate cycle.¹⁵ It is therefore apparent that increasing use is being made of contextual data among UK HEIs, to the extent that it is now constitutes the norm of a university admissions process. To quote Croxford et al. (2014) in connection with the access scheme at the University of Edinburgh:

*"In Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, there is growing recognition that prior qualifications may not provide an adequate indication of the 'potential' of applicants from educationally-disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed at university."*¹⁶

The data collected by SPA evidences that there is now consistent recognition across the UK that contextual data is required to provide this "adequate indication" and contextualising methodologies are now vital to HE admissions.

1.3 Outcomes of using contextual data

1.31 Diversifying the student body

Despite the difficulties of analysing specific contextual data policies, a broad body of evidence upholds the notion that contextual data is having a positive impact by increasing the university participation of traditionally under-represented demographics. The Access Agreements of most UK HEIs state a desire to raise the participation rate of underprivileged groups to be 15% of the total undergraduate body (some universities set this target higher,

¹³ SPA, *Fair admissions to higher education- a review of the implementation of the Schwartz Report principles three years on: Report 1 – Executive Summary and Conclusions*, December 2008, p. 8.

¹⁴ SPA, *Fair admissions to higher education- a review of the implementation of the Schwartz Report principles three years on: Report 1 – Executive Summary and Conclusions*, December 2008, p. 10.

¹⁵ SPA, *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Research to describe the use of contextual data in admissions at a sample of universities and colleges in the UK*, February 2012, p. 18.

SPA, *Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015*, October 2015, p. 1.

¹⁶ Croxford et al., "Widening Participation at the University of Edinburgh: Contextual Admissions, Retention, and Degree Outcomes," *Scottish Affairs* 23.2 (2014), pp. 192-216, (p. 192).

up to 26%).¹⁷ Crucially, the adoption of contextual admissions has improved these participation rates, with universities that contextualise applications far more likely to reach their participation targets. For example, an impact model in 2013 showed that, following an HEI's adoption of contextual data, more applicants whose background warranted a 'contextual flag' were shortlisted for an offer (68%, up from 57%).¹⁸ Furthermore, in 2012 one HEI found that students with a 'contextual flag' are also more likely to accept an offer (totalling 24% compared to the 17% average).¹⁹ It is also important to note that when 'flagged' applicants arrived at university there is no correlation between whether they were 'flagged' and whether they required student support.²⁰ As a result not only does contextual data improve demographic representation at universities, but it also does not add expenses to an HEI in student support services, does not produce a stigma around contextual admissions, and prevents patronizing members of certain demographic groups to the extent that they decline their offer. In terms of widening the university participation of disadvantaged candidates, contextual data has proven highly effective in increasing the offers made and their likelihood of accepting the offer.

The benefits of increasing the diversity of a university's student population are obvious. UK HEIs are places for debate and inter-action for new ideas and a broad range of students attending university increases the variety of intellectual viewpoints to be interrogated both within academic study and in extra-academic experiences. Studies show that by proportionally widening the backgrounds of the student population a university becomes home to a more diverse range of cultural, ethnic, intellectual and social ideas which stimulate cognitive and interactional processes.²¹ These experiences not only inform academic theories needed for a productive and innovative academic environment but also expand the social experiences at universities and make it a more attractive prospect for potential applicants from all walks of life. By playing such an influential role in attaining this diversification of attitudes and lifestyles at university, contextual admissions can move beyond the academic remit of identifying the most talented students and can bring worthwhile cultural benefits too.

1.32 Increasing the academic calibre of undergraduate admissions

¹⁷ SPA, *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Research to describe the use of contextual data in admissions at a sample of universities and colleges in the UK*, February 2012, p. 30.

¹⁸ SPA, *Contextualised Admissions: Examining the Evidence Report*, October 2013, p. 51; SPA, *SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*, October 2015, p. 39.

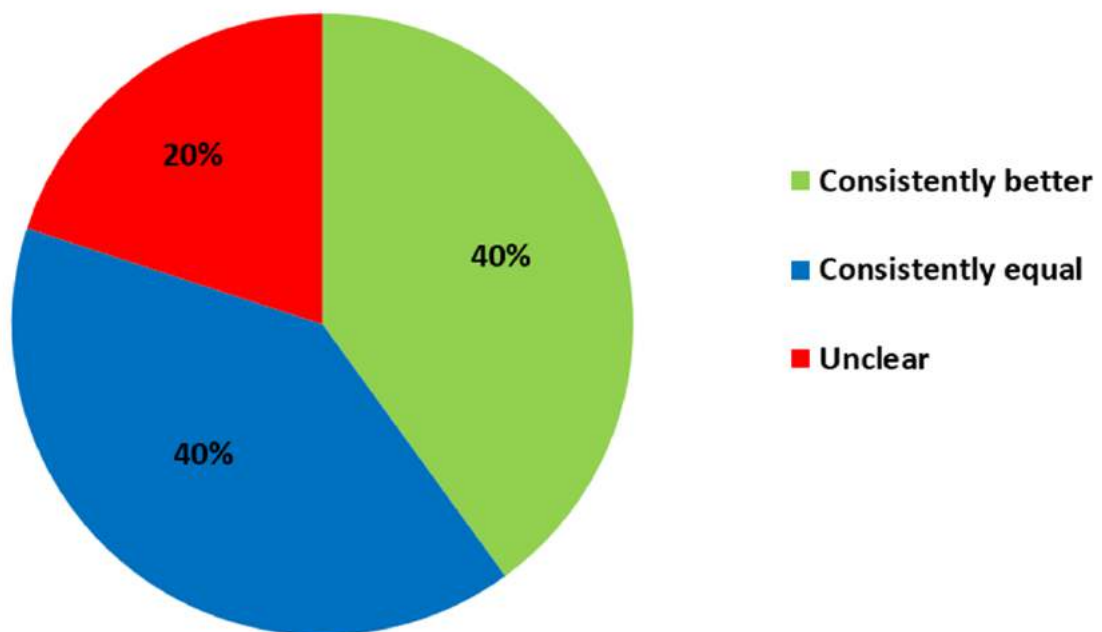
¹⁹ SPA, *Contextualised Admissions: Examining the Evidence Report*, October 2013, p. 51; SPA, *SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*, October 2015, pp. 39-40.

²⁰ SPA, *Contextualised Admissions: Examining the Evidence Report*, October 2013, p. 51; SPA, *SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*, October 2015, pp. 38-39.

²¹ Eve Fine and Jo Handelsman, *Benefits and Challenges of Diversity in Academic Settings*, University of Wisconsin, 2010.

A prominent argument against contextual admissions policies is that their implementation penalises those whose intellectual ability is proven, leading to less academically able students being accepted into HEIs. On the contrary, however, evidence clearly shows that applicants who are accepted through contextual data policies tend to equal, and often excel, their peers in terms of degree performance. There are a wealth of studies investigating the examination performance of demographics and access candidates at a range of universities. The case studies, included below (2.5) also provide examples of this trend, but some pieces of evidence are particularly notable. Annexes 3 and 4 of the SPA's 2012 report contains a summary of each HEI's study into their usage of contextual data and the degree outcomes achieved by contextually-admitted students. The following pie-chart illustrates the proportion of studies which conclude whether contextually-admitted students consistently failed to match, equalled or out-performed their peers who did not require a contextual flag.

Figure 2: Degree performance of contextually-admitted students relative to their peers



Source: Based on data derived from SPA, *Fair Admissions to Higher Education*, February 2012, p. 60-62. Note: In this pie chart, 'unclear' refers to studies which did not directly compare the performance of both sets of students or which contain an indistinct conclusion. Two studies (which concluded that state school applicants to the University of Oxford perform better than independent applicants) have not been included in the pie chart, as their focus was on a specific demographic which is not always in need of contextual flagging. It is also worth noting that the 'consistently equal' dataset includes studies which remarked that underrepresented students seem to perform better than their peers, but to such a negligible extent that the more conservative assessment of equal performance is more reliable.

The clearest outcome of these studies is that no HEI concluded that underrepresented students consistently performed worse than their peers. In contrast, nearly half explicitly stated that these students performed better than average and the remainder agreed there was no academic disadvantage to the acceptance of underrepresented demographics (some tentatively stated that contextually-admitted students performed better, but they lacked the quantity of evidence to conclude this). In one study (carried out by the University of Bristol) contextually-admitted students were outperforming their peers by such a margin that reducing offers by up to 3 A level grades was justified. The outcome of these studies (and a large number of others in this field) is resounding – contextual admissions usually have no negative consequences for a university’s academic performance, and in many cases, they actually help identify those students whose hidden potential allows them to excel at degree level. Newcastle University’s PARTNERS programme, for example, shows that students who have come through their outreach scheme are more likely to achieve a 2:1 and less likely to drop out of their course than the average Newcastle student.²² The growing awareness that contextualised and underrepresented candidates perform well has already impacted the number of universities accepting contextualised applicants with lower exam performances, a pattern likely to continue in the future.

The use of contextual data in HEI admissions has been shown to increase the university participation of traditionally underrepresented groups and there is compelling evidence that it successfully avoids either stigmatising or patronising applicants. Furthermore, it shows itself to be of great benefit to HEIs themselves, raising the academic performance of each undergraduate cohort by bring in students with the highest possible academic potential. Analysis of contextual admissions policies thus indicates that they have been effective in not only promoting diversity and fair representation, but also educational excellence.

Recommendation 1.3: *Both Oxford and Cambridge should commit themselves to a long-term investment in contextualising admissions. Statistics prove that students from under-represented demographics consistently equal or outperform their peers (and rarely, if ever, underperform). Given that UK HEIs aim to secure their status as leading research and teaching institutions, it is crucial that both universities continue to put all available resources into contextualising admissions and identifying the best talents that might not have benefitted from high-level formal schooling.*

Recommendation 1.4: *Based on the successes of other universities, such as the PARTNERS programme, both Oxford and Cambridge University should investigate the feasibility of longer-term outreach projects that assess a deprived candidate’s academic potential before applications are made. Although the universities deserve credit for their outreach efforts, the schemes they run are rarely allied to the admissions process or the future applications made by their participants. Doing so would allow universities to identify and make adjustments in advance for those exceptional candidates that have natural intellectual aptitude, but who,*

²² SPA, *Contextualised Admissions: Examining the Evidence Report*, October 2013, p. 39.

due to educational and social disadvantages, are unlikely to receive the top grades needed for a conventional offer. In some cases, both Oxford and Cambridge should be prepared to lower their conditional offer depending on individual circumstances.

1.33 Selected case studies

To provide specific examples of how different contextual admissions policies have functioned in separate HEIs, three case studies have been selected. These studies are based on the findings of various reports into three Russell Group universities internationally-renowned for their excellence in teaching and research: the University of Edinburgh, the University of Bristol, and the University of Exeter. They highlight how institutions implement contextual measures in different ways (Edinburgh lowered grade boundaries and ‘flagged’ candidates using a range of contextual metrics; the University of Bristol sets itself publicised widening participation targets; the University of Exeter examines school performance when considering applications). Similarly, the case studies have been chosen to reflect the varying levels of academic success that contextual admissions can bring.

University of Bristol

In the wake of the 1997 Dearing Report, in which the University of Bristol was shown to have one of the more elitist images and intakes profiles of all UK universities, the university enthusiastically took up the opportunity to develop a widening-participation strategy. Its first policy – the Participation Strategy – was in place just two years after Dearing (in 1999), and has since been succeeded by two Widening Participation strategies, one from 2004 to 2009 and its replacement (which is to run till the end of 2016). The widening-participation considerations were built into the Admissions Principles and Practices, and eight widening-participation “milestones” were identified (“targets” such as numbers of state school pupils, those from low socio-economic classes, and ethnic minorities). Admission tutors have to take these targets into consideration when making their decisions on which students are to be offered places and what grades they are required to achieve by identifying students who may be suffering educational disadvantage but whose potential to succeed on their chosen course is substantial.²³

Unfortunately, students who have accepted a “widening-participation offer” from Bristol are not marked in the university’s database, which poses a problem for any analysis of the widening-participation policy’s effects. However, by comparing the performance of other criteria often associated with educational disadvantage, it can be tentatively concluded that Bristol’s contextual strategy has worked. Data from the three cohorts that entered the University during the academic years 2002/03 – 2004/05 shows many of the same results generally found at other universities. For example, students from independent schools performed less well than their counterparts from all types of state schools during university

²³ Anthony Hoarea and Ron Johnstona, “Widening participation through admissions policy – A British case study of school and university performance,” *Studies in Higher Education* 36. 1, 2011: 21-41.

examinations, and consequently were less likely to get a first-class degree. Moreover, the superior grades held by independent school students at university entrance did not consistently translate into better degree classes. Those who attended underperforming schools and had lower A-Level grades than peers who went to high-performing schools, performed marginally worse at degree level, but the academic gap between the two demographics closed significantly over the course of their degree. A similar trend could be detected among students who lived in geographical areas with low Higher Education participation rates.

Overall, the aggregated data from Bristol suggests that the contextual methodologies in place are operating successfully, with students from underrepresented demographics usually equalling and in some cases excelling their peers. Although a determinate analysis of widening participation students is impossible, given the university's database restrictions, it would appear that the groups benefitting most from contextual admissions are studying successfully at degree level and that the academic element of the widening participation strategies has been effective.

University of Exeter

The University of Exeter has a long tradition of working at the forefront of the widening participation agenda, particularly in terms of the use of contextual data for admissions and the engagement of people in underrepresented rural communities. They adopted a new institutional Widening Participation Strategy in 2014, which builds on their existing experience, and represents a fundamental shift of emphasis to embrace the whole of the student life-cycle – from outreach to graduate employment. It has, for example, managed to increase its proportion of state school students by 3.6% since 2011/12 and the proportion of lower socio-economic students by 5.9% in the same period.²⁴

Data from around 7000 students who entered the university between 2006 and 2009 shows that students from high performing schools entered with greater tariff points than students from low performing schools, but that they generally graduated with lower degrees. There is around a 3% higher proportion of students from low performing schools that achieve a 1st class award compared to students from high performing schools. This higher proportion is irrespective of the entry grade considered, and across the range a greater proportion of students from low-performing schools achieved a 1st class award. There is approximately an entry A-level grade difference for students attaining same classifications and marks from A and B schools at AAB and below. These results would also seem to support the use of contextual information in admissions, as demographics benefitting from Exeter's Widening Participation Strategy have not only been admitted in greater numbers, but have consistently excelled their peers in their degree programmes.²⁵

²⁴ University of Exeter, "Access Agreement 2015/16".

²⁵ University of Exeter, "Contextual Data – 2012", Freedom of Information Request.

University of Edinburgh

Contextualised admissions have been pioneered at the University of Edinburgh since 2004 to identify disadvantaged students during the admissions process. The new system of admission was first launched within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) and shortly thereafter rolled out to other colleges. In order to attract applications from a wider socio-economic base, the College set lower minimum entry requirements for all applicants than in previous years. Selection procedures were modified to take account of contextual data when considering applications. The University of Edinburgh gave extra credit to widening participation (WP) candidates: applicants from Scottish schools with little or no tradition of progression to higher education, or Rest-of-UK schools with low performance at A-level; those who were first in the family to attend HE; those who has experiences serious disruptions to their formal education. The University further developed a range of initiatives to encourage more prospective students from under-represented groups, especially outreach work with local schools.²⁶

Since then, empirical analysis based on student records for three cohorts of UK-domiciled students (those who began their degree in selected subjects between 2004 and 2006 and had graduated or withdrawn by 2011) has been carried out. While some WP-indicated students had relatively lower prior qualifications, the majority had prior qualifications at similar levels to non-WP students. Almost all WP-indicated students completed their course and the majority achieved Honours degrees or equivalent. However, WP-indicated students were less likely to achieve the top classes of degree than other students. In 10 of the 14 subjects included in the sample, WP-indicated students achieved as good outcomes as their peers with the same levels of prior qualifications. In the remaining four subjects the WP-indicated students has a lower probability of achieving one or two of the four outcomes.²⁷ It should be noted, however, that there is an access programme at Edinburgh (LEAPS), which works to raise the aspirations and attainment of students in local schools (such as those who have experienced difficult family circumstances). Students admitted through this scheme achieve as highly in their degrees as their peers.

These findings are unique in that they present evidence of a negative effect of contextual admissions policy on academic outcomes. Prior qualifications were indeed seen as the main factor determining degree outcomes. The study, however, confirms the findings of other research that students from independent schools generally do not achieve as good a degree outcome as their peers from state-funded schools. No consensus has been reached in terms of why the results differ from other studies, but the case study serves to show that whether contextual admission is effective or not is likely dependant on exogenous factors and the

²⁶ Cree, et al., "Widening participation at an ancient Scottish university," *Scottish Affairs* 56 (2006): 102-130

²⁷ Croxford et al., "Widening Participation at the University of Edinburgh: Contextual Admissions, Retention, and Degree Outcomes," *Scottish Affairs* 23.2 (2014): 192-216.

specific design of the system rather than on the principle of contextualisation itself.²⁸ Indeed, it is worth noting that Edinburgh was the only HEI we encountered which contradicted the trend of students admitted under contextual policies either out-performing or achieving equal grades to their peers.

1.4 Overall findings of this report

1.41 General findings

This report has found that employing contextual data in university admissions is a beneficial policy both for prospective students and HEIs themselves. Although contextual data can only ever form part of a holistic approach and cannot solve the problems of educational inequality which exist long before post-16 education, it can enable universities to identify which candidates' examination performance has been hindered by contextual factors. Moreover, contextual policies have a proven record of widening the participation of underrepresented demographics which in turn leads to improved examination results across undergraduate cohorts as well as intellectual advantages stemming from the diversification of the student body.

With the public image of selective HEIs such as Oxford and Cambridge often centring on elitism and social inequality, it is more important than ever for UK HEIs to not only introduce contextual policies, but also to continually update and improve them, publicise how their contextual admissions processes function, and gather contextual information as early as possible. This approach should not jeopardise the discretion of an individual university or admissions tutor, but instead will assist in assessing the hidden potential of all applicants. Given that contextual admissions usually influence the academic calibre of an undergraduate cohort in a positive way (see 1.32), there appears to be no academic disadvantage that comes from contextualising admissions. Instead, the employment of contextual data in the admissions process of any UK HEI is of great benefit to university teaching and research.

1.42 Applying the findings to Oxbridge

Due to the fact that this section focuses mainly on the nationwide implementation of contextual data policies, it is necessary to remark on how applicable the findings of this report are to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Naturally, the more rigorous application process of these two universities – which includes (amongst other examples) higher grade requirements, compulsory interviews for all subjects, independent examinations and submitted essays – and the higher academic intensity of their courses ensure that no case study can perfectly replicate the same conditions as an Oxbridge degree. And yet, with evidence suggesting that disparities in the secondary school attainment of certain demographics only become more pronounced at the top of the

²⁸ Croxford et al., "Widening Participation at the University of Edinburgh: Contextual Admissions, Retention, and Degree Outcomes", *Scottish Affairs* 23.2 (2014): 192-216

academic spectrum (at grades AAA or higher), and the underrepresentation of social groups all the more severe at Oxford and Cambridge, it appears that the need for effective contextualisation of applications is more pressing for Oxbridge than for other institutions.

Moreover, there is no reason to doubt that the trends identified in this report will be largely paralleled at Oxford and Cambridge. Reports have already shown that state school students at Oxford (who, as found in 2.2, often face more educational obstacles than their independent peers) outperform independent school students and further studies indicate that proportionally underrepresented demographics often excel at Oxbridge.²⁹ As far as data allows, the excellent academic progress made by underprivileged students at other UK universities is seen to be matched by that at Oxbridge. Thus, the academic benefits of contextual data (through raising the intellectual calibre of an undergraduate cohort) are highly relevant to both Oxford and Cambridge.

Some of the idiosyncrasies of the Oxford and Cambridge's admissions procedure are also more conducive to contextual applications than those at other universities. It is commonly asserted that some schools prepare their pupils for Oxbridge interviews much better than others; the resources and connections of a public school, for example, allow for in-depth interview training that state schools cannot match. It is also noticeable that a candidate who has received tutoring on their essay style is also likely to have an advantage in the independent examinations that Oxford run and that Cambridge are planning to introduce. Although the flexibility of the Oxbridge admissions system provides an ideal format for introducing contextualisation, there is a need for a better understanding of a student's individual background.

Despite the differences between Oxford and Cambridge and other UK HEIs, there is no reason to believe that the general success of contextual admissions described above will not be matched at Oxford and Cambridge. This is especially true given that the universities face problems of representation which are often more extreme than other UK institutions, creating an admissions environment which certainly requires greater contextualisation. More importantly, there is room in their admissions processes to accommodate individual contextualisation thanks to the role played by individual colleges in assessing their applicants and due to the multiple stages of the application process. With Oxbridge evidence also supporting the nationwide trend that under-represented demographics are particularly successful in their degrees, the evidence of this report indicates that it would be prudent for both universities to carefully consider the recommendations made.

²⁹ Anna Zimdars et al., *The Oxford Admissions Study*, December 2002.

Section 2: Policy at Oxbridge

2.1 Aims

This section aims to firstly, outline the current admissions policies used by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, specifically regarding their use of contextual data. It then examines the effectiveness of these current policies, and makes recommendations on how they can be improved. This section should be read in conjunction with the report's third section [**Section 3: Attitudes of admissions tutors**], which examines the personal perspectives of admissions tutors at the Universities. Our approach therefore, allows a consideration of both central university policy, and the reality of the admissions policy in practice.

2.2 Methodology

The data and guidance documents examined in this section were obtained by Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to the Oxford and Cambridge University offices. We also contacted the admissions departments at both universities, with limited success. Therefore, the bulk of this section is based on application and admissions statistics, and internal guidance documents circulated by the university to admissions tutors, which were both obtained by FOI requests.

2.3 Current use of contextual data

2.31 University of Oxford

The University of Oxford uses a flagging system to identify applicants from demographics traditionally under-represented in the student intake. These flags were designed in line with the underpinning principles that arise from the university's access agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), to;

- Increase the proportion of learners from under-represented and disadvantaged groups who enter, succeed in and are well prepared to progress from higher education to employment or postgraduate study.
- Make faster progress in improving access to the most selective higher education institutions by students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups.

The criteria which applicants are flagged for are broken down into three categories; 1) Care Status, 2) Prior Education and 3) Residential Postcode. These are detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of the flags used by the University of Oxford in admissions decisions

Flag category	Flag	Explanation
Care Status	Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies the applicant as having been in-care for more than three months.
Prior Education	Pre-16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies the performance of the applicant’s school or college at GCSE (or equivalent level) as being below the national average.
	Post-16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies the performance of the applicant’s school of college at GCE (A-level, or equivalent) as being below the national average.
	OFFA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies the applicant’s school or college as one where there has been limited success in securing either applicants to Oxford, or limited success in converting applicants to offer holders (applies only to England). The identification of under-represented schools is based on the number of AAA+ grade applicants they produce at A-level. In other words, a student from a school with limited success in progression to Oxford and significant limited success in producing AAA+ grade applicants would not receive a flag for this criteria.
	OFFA 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A refined version of the OFFA flag (see above) due to be introduced for the applicants applying for entry in 2017/18. Unlike OFFA, this flagging criteria excludes independent schools. Similarly to OFFA, it continues to exclude schools “where attainment levels at GCSE and A-level are generally insufficiently high to support successful applications to Oxford”.
Residential Postcode	ACORN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies the applicant’s postcode as falling into Acorn groups 4 or 5 meaning that the residents are typically categorised as “financially stretched” or living in “urban adversity”.
	POLAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies the applicant’s postcode as falling into POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 – indicating the lowest rate of young people’s participation in Higher Education.

Flagged applicants are “strongly recommended for interview” by the admissions department when the following criteria are met;

- The applicant has a Care status flag **or** they have at least one Prior Education **and** at least once Postcode flag, and;

- The applicant is predicted to achieve the grades required to meet the standard conditional offer for a place at Oxford **and** performs to an appropriate standard in any required pre-interview admissions test.

If candidates meeting these criteria are not shortlisted for interview, an explanation must be provided to the admissions department. The University makes clear that “flagged candidates are interviewed in addition to students who are short-listed for interview, so they do not displace students”.

In the guidance given to admissions tutors which was provided to us (which we understand to be the entirety of the guidance), there was no other mention of flagging criteria being used beyond the short-listing for interview stage.

Recommendation 2.1: *The flagging criteria used by Oxford doesn’t explicitly compensate for any demographic disadvantage – applicants must still be predicted the same grades, and perform to an “appropriate standard” in admissions test, before benefitting in any way from being a flagged applicant. As described in Section 1 of this report, much of the success of previous contextual admissions schemes have come from these the contextualisation of these factors, especially achieved and predicted grades in secondary school. We therefore recommend that the University extend their flagging criteria to recommend that flagged students be invited to interview, even if their predicted grades do not quite meet Oxford’s standard offer. This would be beneficial, even if only implemented as a pilot scheme, so that the University could track the outcome of these applicants’ interviews before implementing wider policies.*

Recommendation 2.2: *Many of the University’s flags for Prior Education are very broad, and of potentially limited use. Both the pre-16 and post-16 flags denote applicants from schools “below the national average”. We recommend that the University adopts a more sensitive flagging criteria for educational background, to appreciate the significant variety of experience within this current banding criteria. An incremental banding system may be more appropriate, as it seems clear that a school in the 51st percentile should be considered in a different light to a school in the 99th percentile, yet both would receive an equal flag under the University’s current system.*

Recommendation 2.3: *Both the OFFA and OFFA 1 flags apply only to schools in England. We recommend that the University adopts a similar flagging protocol for schools in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as students from these countries are currently disadvantaged by an incomplete flagging protocol.*

Recommendation 2.4: *Both the OFFA and OFFA 1 flags are designed to identify schools where there has been limited success in securing applicants to Oxford. However, the criteria for these flag excludes schools “where attainment levels at*

GCSE and A-level are generally insufficiently high to support successful applications to Oxford". Since candidates from these schools are likely to experience the same, if not greater, challenges (e.g. lack of interview and admissions test preparation) as students from schools which achieve better A-level results, we recommend that the University removes this specification.

2.32 University of Cambridge

The University of Cambridge also uses contextual data in its admissions process. Each year, the central admissions office circulates a range of application information, including contextual data, to admissions tutors in the form of spreadsheet. This spreadsheet contains six flags indicating socio-economic and educational contextual data, which are detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Flagging criteria used by the University of Cambridge in admissions

Flag	Explanation
In Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies applicants which have spent time in local authority care, regardless of duration.
Low Participation Neighbourhood (POLAR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is based on POLAR3 data (see above). Similarly to the University of Oxford, POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 are used.
Socio-economic background (OAC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies applicants who live in a neighbourhood whose characteristics are often associated with relative disadvantage and low Cambridge application rates. This is based on OAC (Output Area Classification) data from the Office for National Statistics.
GCSE performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies applicants from schools which have a capped GCSE performance score below 40. To calculate this score, an average is calculated by considering the top 8 GCSE grades achieved by the school's students.
Entry to Oxford and Cambridge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies applicants from schools where fewer than five students have been made an offer by Oxford for Cambridge over the past five years.
Extenuating Circumstances Form (ECF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies applicants which have completed a form to make the admissions team aware of extenuating circumstances affecting their application.

The guidance that the Cambridge’s admissions office provides to admissions tutors states that “particularly serious consideration ought to be given to making an applicant an offer” if they have a combination of flags and high UMS (AS-level) scores. Applicants are ranked into quintiles based on their UMS scores, and the University guidance to admissions tutors states that:

“We anticipate that applicants in the lowest-ranked quintile will not ordinarily be called for interview unless their applications feature multiple contextual data flags, or where there are other extenuating circumstances. Equally, it is expected that applicants placed in the highest-ranked quintile will usually be offered places – and especially if their applications feature contextual data flags.”

Beyond these occurrences, the guidance does not refer to the use of contextual flags, relying on Colleges to make holistic decisions about applicants: “Having more complete, consistent and better information about all applicants from the start of the process enables Colleges to make admissions decisions that are more likely to align us with our OFFA targets.” Unlike Oxford, there is no suggestion that admissions tutors will have to explain cases where they have not shortlisted a flagged candidate for interview.

Of particular note was how broad some of the above flagging criteria were. Our investigation revealed that 42.4% (2221 schools) qualified as being flagged as low-performing GCSE schools. Likewise, 72.0% (3014 schools & colleges) would qualify to receive a flag for receiving few offers to Oxford and Cambridge. In light of this, we’d like to re-iterate our recommendation 2.2 made in section 2.31. Both Oxford and Cambridge should make efforts to employ more specific flags, capable of recording incremental differences.

The Cambridge admissions team also use contextual data in a number of other notable metrics (see Table 3).

Table 3: Other contextual metrics employed by the University of Cambridge admissions team

Metric	Explanation
School Avg Pts Score (GCSE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This indicates the average GCSE performance at the applicant’s school. It provides the average points per student across their top 8 grades (where A*=8, A=7, B=6 etc.)
School Avg Pts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This indicates the average A-Level performance at the applicant’s school, using a similar calculation to the GCSE score.

Score (A-Level)	
Adjusted GCSE score	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This indicates a candidate’s GCSE performance relative to the school they sat them in. The calculation is based on the number of A* grades the candidate was awarded, weighted to their school’s average points score (see above).

The University guidance notes that these metrics are based on free text entered by the applicant, specifically their school name and postcode. It also notes that sometimes this free text does not match with data in the Cambridge database. Although the University is limited by the data provided to them by UCAS, we hope that they go to all possible lengths to correctly identify these contextual metrics for their applicants.

***Recommendation 2.5:** Cambridge’s decision to provide admissions tutors with adjusted GCSE scores relative to their educational background is welcome, and we recommend that a similar policy be introduced at Oxford. Likewise, we recommend that Cambridge make similar moves to contextualise an applicant’s UMS scores, especially as this forms the basis of their ranking, and quintile position. That Cambridge has endorsed the principle of adjusting an individual’s academic grades to their educational background, we encourage them to do the same for all the academic data they receive.*

2.4 Effectiveness of current policies

2.41 University of Oxford

Our investigation also requested data on the success rates of applicants to Oxford, broken down by the flag they received. This data is useful in assessing whether the University’s flagging system is successfully contextualising an applicant’s background, and whether this contextual information is being considered by admissions tutors.

The data shown in Table 4 is for all candidates entering Oxford between 2009 and 2015. It shows the application, shortlisting, offer and enrolment rate of each of the flags described above.

Table 4: The proportion of total applicants to the University of Oxford, short-listed applicants and successful applicants who received an admissions flag, broken down by flag-type, 2009- 2015

	Applied (% of total)	Shortlisted (% of total)	Offered (% of total)	Enrolled (% of total)
Care	0.12%	0.12%	0.12%	0.11%
Pre-16 (school)	6.53%	6.42%	6.22%	6.05%
Post-16 (school)	13.78%	13.52%	13.19%	12.82%
OFFA (school)	18.18%	17.97%	16.89%	16.56%
ACORN	6.73%	6.55%	6.23%	6.05%
POLAR	8.57%	8.75%	8.67%	8.49%

Source: University of Oxford, admission statistics.

The findings reveal that for every flag (excluding the Care and POLAR flags), a flagged applicant has less chance of being shortlisted than their fellow unflagged applicants. This suggests that the University's flagging system is failing in its stated aims to ensure that applications made by flagged students receive extra consideration in being invited to interview.

Recommendation 2.6: *Given that, despite the University's recommendations, flagged applicants are not as likely to be short-listed for interview as unflagged applicants, we suggest that the University adopts a more rigorous approach to the use of contextual data in interview short-listing. Admissions tutors should be more strongly encouraged to interview flagged applicants and when flagged applicants are not invited to interview, these cases should be followed up and monitored so that an understanding of the reasons driving this trend can be developed. It is especially important that appropriate changes are made to the guidance given to admissions tutors, as short-listing for interview is the only stage at which formal advice is given to consider contextual data.*

Another noticeable trend in this data deserves attention; the apparent disadvantage faced by flagged applicants continues when it comes to offer-making post-interview. For each of the flags (excluding the Care flag), a short-listed flagged applicant is less likely to receive an offer post-interview, compared to their fellow unflagged applicants. This observation informs our next recommendation.

Recommendation 2.7: *As we understand it, the University has no formal guidance regarding the use of contextual flags beyond interview shortlisting. Given that students in certain flagged demographics are less likely to receive assistance with*

interview preparation (especially students from schools traditionally under-represented at Oxford), this is worrisome. We recommend the university extends its guidance to all stages of the admissions process. This should include the offer-making stage, and admissions tutors should be required to provide explanations for not offering flagged applicants a place, in the same way that happens currently when flagged applicants are not shortlisted for interview. This more rigorous process will help monitor the challenges faced by students from certain demographics, as well as potentially improving their statistical success.

The Care flag is the only metric to consistently contradict the trend we have described. Applicants with a Care flag are as likely to receive an offer as an unflagged applicant. We can only speculate why this is the case, however the fact that only an extremely small number of applicants fall into this category (0.12% of applications) may go some way to explain why this flag does not follow the trend exhibited by the others.

2.42 The University of Cambridge

As for the University of Oxford, our investigation included an analysis of the fate of applications of students with various flags. The data is outlined in tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: The proportion of total applicants and successful applicants to the University of Cambridge, by the flag-type, September 2014 – August 2015

	Applications (% of total)	Offers (% of total)	Success rates (%)
In Care	0.2%	0.1%	19.2%
POLAR	8.4%	8.1%	25.6%
OAC	7.1%	6.4%	23.9%
Lower-performing GCSE school	13.1%	13.4%	27.2%
Few Cam/Ox offers	18.4%	12.7%	18.6%

No flag	67.3%	71.7%	28.5%
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Source: University of Cambridge, admission statistics.

Table 6: The proportion of total applicants and successful applicants to University of Cambridge, by the flag-type, September 2014 – August 2015

Number of flags	Applications (% of total)	Offers (% of total)	Success rates (%)
1	22.1%	19.1%	23.1%
2	7.2%	6.5%	24.1%
3	2.9%	2.3%	21.4%
4	0.5%	0.4%	21.5%
0	67.3%	71.7%	28.5%

These data echo the findings from the Oxford dataset; for each of the individual flags, and for students receiving either 1, 2, 3 or 4 flags, their success rate is less than an unflagged student. This is a sign that the use of contextual data is not compensating for any disadvantages faced by these demographics. Based on the number of applicants to Cambridge in the 2015 application cycle, extrapolation reveals that a statistical equivalent of 275 students from under-represented demographics would be admitted each year if these flagged groups were to experience the same success rate as unflagged candidates.

Therefore, our recommendations for Cambridge are similar to recommendations 2.5 and 2.6 in section 2.41. These can be condensed into the following recommendation for the University of Cambridge:

Recommendation 2.8: *Evidence from admission statistics shows that if the use of contextual data is used to address disparities in the application process, more rigorous policies must be adopted. This may involve guiding admissions tutors to interview a higher number of flagged candidates (as in Oxford) or to require them to provide an explicit justification of why they have not offered a flagged candidate a place. Not only would such an approach have potential value in addressing*

unconscious biases, but it would allow the challenges and shortcomings of students from these demographics to be monitored and appropriate action taken.

Section 3: Attitudes of admissions tutors

Introduction

This section of the report focuses on the attitudes and experiences of admissions tutors regarding the use of contextual data at Oxford and Cambridge. The subjective opinions and attitudes of tutors are important because tutors have a significant amount of autonomy in the admissions process. Hence, their attitudes may be illuminating when considering the question of why certain demographics are underrepresented in the undergraduate student body.

This section should be considered alongside Section 2 of this report, where we analyse the official guidelines that the Universities issue to tutors.

We surveyed a sample of tutors involved in admissions at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to gain a snapshot into their attitudes towards representation at their respective institution, as well as their views on the role and value of contextual data in admissions.

Methods

We contacted a total of 743 tutors at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge to invite them to participate in our research. Tutors were selected randomly with the restriction that each college and course would be represented at least twice to ensure a representative sample and to minimise bias.

After selecting the courses for each college, we visited each college website and contacted the tutors responsible for admissions for the course in question. In some instances, it wasn't clear which tutors were involved in the admissions process, particularly at many Oxford colleges. In these cases, we opted to contact all the tutors associated with that subject at the college. However, we made clear in our invitations to these tutors that we were only interested in surveying tutors who had experience of working in admissions. We also contacted the Tutor for Admissions or Admissions Tutor for each college at both Universities.

From Oxford, respondents covered 17 colleges (out of a potential 33) and 22 courses. From Cambridge, respondents covered 10 colleges (out of a potential 29) and 9 courses. Given the large number of tutors we contacted (and proportionally few that replied), we accept that there may be an element of selection bias in our findings. However, we do not think that this renders our findings redundant – all of the tutors included in our pool are actively involved with the admissions process and responsible for decision-making. Furthermore, we believe that we have a large enough pool (40 respondents in total) to make significant observations using qualitative techniques. However, at no point do we claim that all admissions tutors at the universities harbour the attitudes expressed by our respondents. Rather, these attitudes do exist among the tutors we contacted, and so are likely to be shared by other members of university staff.

Analysis

Under-representation

When asked whether they thought that there was a problem with the underrepresentation of particular demographics within the undergraduate student body at their university, most tutors responded that some groups were under-represented. Demographics mentioned by tutors across both universities were state school students, lower income or working class students, and black and minority ethnic students. Tutors at the University of Oxford also mentioned women (for specific courses), UK students from outside of the South or South East (North, North East, South West and South Wales in particular), non-EU students from countries, students from schools with low Oxbridge progression, students from low-participation neighbourhoods, and European students. There were no underrepresented groups mentioned by University of Cambridge tutors that were not also mentioned by University of Oxford tutors.

One tutor responded simply and without caveat that they did not think that there was a problem with the underrepresentation of certain demographics within the undergraduate student body (*"I don't think there is a problem"*). There was a significantly sized group of tutors, however, who suggested that while the undergraduate body did not reflect the UK population as a whole, nor the UK population of 18-year-olds, comparing the student body to the UK population was misleading and not the correct approach. This is addressed in more detail below, in the section titled "Responsibility".

One University of Cambridge tutor expressed the view that *"there are no groups within Cambridge admissions that are demonstrably under-represented"*. However, a more prominent view expressed by admissions tutors was that the unrepresentative nature of the universities did constitute a problem. As one University of Oxford tutor put it, *"I think that people from the backgrounds sometimes described as 'underprivileged' are under-represented, as are people from at least some of what are sometimes described as 'ethnic minority' backgrounds (including people with Afro-Caribbean backgrounds, Travellers, and others), and I think that this is evidence of a problem."*

Another Oxford tutor attributed the under-representation of certain ethnic groups to socio-economic factors: *"A lot of UK demographics are severely under represented, above all, students from families in the bottom three income decile. To some extent our ethnic under-representations (Bangladeshi, West Indian, Pakistani, 'white working class boys') are a by-product of this."* This tutor was also unique in raising another perspective, that they were *"equally worried by the massive over-representation of the top decile."*

A small minority of tutors interpreted our question about under-represented demographics from an internationalist standpoint. *"As a global University it would also be nice if we could recruit a decent number of non-EU students who were not members of the global 1% - but that would require serious funding"*

Demographic	Cambridge	Oxford
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State school students	2	1
Lower income/working class	3	10
BME	2	11
Women	0	2
Regional (N, NE, SW, S Wales)	0	5
Non-EU & not members of global 1%	0	2
From schools with high achievement/low Oxbridge progression	0	1
Low-participation neighbourhoods	0	1
European students	0	1

Table 1: Perceived under-represented demographics, as identified by admissions tutors at Oxford and Cambridge

Therefore, while generally tutors were aware of the statistical under-representation of students from particular demographics, a minority of tutors were reluctant to acknowledge this. Although these tutors did make up a small minority of those we sampled, they are actively involved in admissions to the university and so their attitudes should still be considered as important. These findings inform our first recommendation;

Recommendation 3.1: *That both Universities should go to efforts to educate tutors responsible for admissions on the statistical under-representation of certain demographics at Oxbridge. Our findings show that not only do some tutors fail to acknowledge under-representation, but there is a diversity of opinion as to which demographics are under-represented. The universities should disseminate clear and accessible evidence to equip their staff with this information.*

Responsibility

Our survey also addressed the question of who was responsible for the under-representation of different demographics. This approach was not designed to attribute blame, but rather to understand the extent to which tutors believed their institutions were doing, and how much they could do, to address the problem.

There was a general denial of responsibility among admissions tutors, who generally believed that the universities were doing all they could and shouldn't be blamed for the disproportional nature of their student intake. One Cambridge tutor described how while *"it would of course be good to have more students from disadvantaged backgrounds factors substantially outside the control of universities make this difficult to achieve"*. They continued; *"broadly speaking Cambridge undergraduate admissions reflect the patterns of*

academic performance, as measured by school and college outcomes, in the UK". The tutor suggested that rather than looking to match the proportion certain demographics make up in the general population, the universities should look to match the proportion of demographics adjusted to the achievement of high A-level grades. *"If we were to admit – across a rolling three- or five-year average – more than 64% state-sector students we would probably be guilty of not admitting in line with our aims or in response to objective and valid criteria"* they suggested.

Amongst University of Oxford tutors, similar views were expressed by some (*"the student body reflects our input cohort. We are bound to take students with relevant A-level grades and I believe, our distribution reflects the same."* and *"The student body is unrepresentative of the wider population in many ways, including geographically. This is not necessarily a problem – I'm not aware that tutors are short of good people to teach amongst those admitted"*).

Responses of this type suggest a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose and role of contextual data in admissions, which are often designed to compensate for these discrepancies in attainment. As we explored in section 1, much of the evidence from other institutions' use of contextual data shows that applicants with lower A-level attainment, can, when demographic factors are considered, go on to out-perform their peers at university.

Recommendation 3.2: *Tutors should be explicitly made aware of the purposes of contextual data in admissions, and the universities should issue clear aims for the reasoning and rationale behind its use. Likewise, tutors should be made aware of the evidence taken from other universities' use of contextual data in admissions systems in order to convince them of its efficacy as a tool in improving both the calibre and diversity of their student intake, despite discrepancies in prior educational attainment.*

A minority of tutors also raised concerns regarding the legal status of using contextual data in admissions policies. One commented; *"It's important to appreciate that Oxford is not legally free to practice positive discrimination, nor to operate admissions on a group rather than individual selection basis. Those are big constraints, [but] within them, we do sensible work on the margins."* This finding informs our next recommendation;

Recommendation 3.3: *The Universities should clarify the legal status of contextual data in admissions policies, and communicate this clarification to admissions tutors. If necessary, the Universities should lobby for a change in the law to allow admissions tutors to use contextual data to a greater extent, using the wealth of evidence in Section 1 of this report as justification.*

Also worthy of note is that not all respondents attributed responsibility for under-represented demographics to societal problems or legal restrictions. A minority of tutors suggested that Oxbridge's current admissions process was unfair, with two comparing it to a lottery (*"a lottery would be fairer than the current system"*). Another tutor went further, describing a *"defensive 'arse-covering mentality'"* among senior staff at the universities,

who “refuse to admit they have a serious problem”. These surprising findings inform our next recommendation;

Recommendation 3.4: *The Universities should maintain an open dialogue with admissions tutors about their thoughts regarding the admissions tutors. Among them, they have a wealth of experience and expertise which could prove useful in designing and implementing future admissions policies. Importantly, they hold a diversity of opinions regarding admissions, which all deserve attention and time from the universities.*

Contextual data

Our survey also asked about attitudes to contextual data. Although only one tutor expressed uncertainty of what contextual data meant (“*[I] am a little unclear what you mean by contextual data, but I’ve answered based on my guess of what it means - name of applicant, where they are from, what schools they have been to?*”), there was a variety of attitudes to the use of contextual data.

Several tutors expressed the belief that the current use of contextual data was valuable and useful. One described how “*the question admissions tutors should ask ourselves is not 'How good is this student now?' but 'How good will this student be in a couple of years' time?' To make that judgment, contextual data is very relevant.*” Another described that contextual data, such as educational background, was especially important for admissions tutors, as “*we always have to break through the wall of preparedness with private school students*”.

A number of other respondents described contextual data as complex and potentially confusing. In the words of one tutor, “*The data isn’t easy to understand. At my college we’re looking into procedures in which the college admissions staff advise tutors on this. New interviewers, in particular, find UCAS forms with contextual data boxes difficult to interpret.*”

Others saw this complexity as a reason against introducing any further use of contextual data beyond current policy. As one put it, “*We use enough data already and have a very complex process. Increasing the same will not change the outcome, but will certainly make the process more complex and time consuming.*”

Despite this, some respondents expressed doubt that the Universities were processing contextual data in the best way, stating that existing metrics could be used more effectively. One tutor described how “*the school GCSE data would be fine if used in a simple and obvious way (individual student performance relative to their school average performance) but it isn’t - it is dragged through an absurdly complex algorithm that destroys its usefulness.*”

Other tutors described frustration at the process by which contextual data comes into use. One Oxford tutor said that “*only this past year [were] properly contextualised GCSE scores brought in*” after “*sustained pressure*” from one of the faculties. Cambridge’s Director of Admissions stated in her response that “*the University is always ready to make further use of evidence-based measures that will help us to widen participation*”, and the fact that Oxford is in the process of piloting a new refinement of their current contextual data system shows some evidence that they are trying to improve levels of representation. However, the

tutor who mentioned the “*sustained pressure*” required to create this change stated that “*it shouldn’t have been this hard*”. This view that the universities had not done as much as they should be to widen participation was not unique. One Oxford tutor stated; “*I’ve been involved in undergraduate admissions for twenty years and there is a stark refusal to allow evidence to impinge on decision making.*” They described how “*it was demonstrated 18 years ago in a survey commissioned by the University that ‘additional tests’ can put widening participation students off from applying to Oxford- so what did we do - we began creating additional test. Anyone looking in from outside would think we were deliberately hostile to widening access.*”

Although a slight majority of tutors felt that contextual data was useful, several tutors felt that in its current form, the contextual data used in the admissions process was of limited value because of its generalised nature. Particularly, this concern was applied to the contextual data associated with geographical areas. As one tutor described; “*You can find a vicar’s child living in a vicarage in a flagged postcode area but the child may well have had a very intellectual upbringing. In London, upper middle class people often live in the same street as social housing.*” This hesitancy regarding certain metrics appeared to shape many tutors’ consideration of it. Although stating that it was “*a useful tool in the early stages*” of admissions, they emphasised that it “*is only one element of the package and it is not clear that it should be given any more weight than it is at present.*”

However, there was another, significantly-sized, group of tutors expressed desire for a greater use of contextual data in admissions. One tutor described that “*the contextual data is quite useful for the admissions process. The more data we have to look at, the better decisions we could make. It would be very useful to know much more detail about the quality of the schools the students come from.*”

In conclusion, it is clear that there is a significant diversity in attitudes towards contextual data at Oxbridge. Of immediate concern are the respondents who described being confused by the complex use of contextual data, which informs our recommendation 3.5 (below). We would also like to re-iterate recommendation 3.4 in light of these findings, as tutors are clearly very opinionated on this issue and keen to shape future policy. We believe both they, and the admissions policies, would benefit from greater dialogue with the universities, especially in cases where tutors are requesting access to more forms of contextual data.

Recommendation 3.5: To address tutors’ concerns about using contextual data because of its complexity, the university should offer workshops and masterclasses to tutors on the topic. This could ensure that all tutors are equipped with the skills and knowledge to interpret, and use, contextual data for the purposes that the universities recommend.

The role of colleges

Across both universities, several tutors responded that they did not feel confident enough in their knowledge of efforts being made to widen participation outside of their own colleges, so could only comment on the approaches of the colleges that they were involved with (“*I only really know about what is being done at the college level*” and “*I cannot comment on the University as a whole as I have very limited knowledge of admissions in other colleges.*”)

This suggests that the majority of admissions procedures are influenced by college policy rather than university policy, suggesting they are susceptible to variation and inconsistency.

This view was expressed most explicitly by two tutors in particular. One tutor described how *“the fact that in many subjects, admissions decisions are almost entirely devolved to colleges (rather than faculties) militates against fair representation”* as admissions tutors are given a lot of autonomy over the extent they consider contextual data. Another tutor described an *“unconsciously corrupt relationship between many colleges and Independent schools based on personal and historic links”*. There was a desire by a minority of tutors, therefore, to move responsibility for admissions decisions from colleges to the central university.

Recommendation 3.6: *The Universities should lead an investigation into the diversity of admissions policies between colleges, and where necessary, issue advice and guidelines to clarify these discrepancies. Although making any large structural changes to the admissions process are unlikely to be popular, the central universities should adopt greater oversight in college policies during the admissions process, to ensure that similar guidelines are being followed regardless of college.*

Conclusion

In conclusion, this section explored the attitudes of admissions tutors at Oxford and Cambridge towards under-representation of particular demographics, to what extent the universities are responsible for this, and the use of contextual data in the admissions process. We have also described some noteworthy responses to the role of colleges in the admissions process. The findings have illustrated significant diversity in the attitudes and experiences of admissions tutors, and we encourage the Universities, in a number of recommendations, to develop a greater dialogue with admissions tutors. In particular, the Universities should communicate a clearer message on the aims and evidence behind contextual data, as well as equip tutors with the resources needed to interpret and use this data. We also encourage the Universities to regularly consult tutors on policy, and to investigate the variation of the use of contextual data between colleges.

Section 4: Insights from prospective students and undergraduates

4.1 Aims

This pilot study sought to examine the views and opinions of prospective and current students about the use of contextual admissions policies at the University of Oxford and Cambridge. It aimed to highlight personal perspectives on the potential impact of the use of contextual admissions on student application processes, and more specifically, to ascertain whether the implementation of contextual admissions policies is likely to influence (or has influenced) students' university choices.

4.2 Methodology

4.21 Research Design

The project comprised a small-scale survey. The data collected were predominantly quantitative in nature, with limited qualitative responses. The data was collected using two online questionnaires: one for prospective applicants and the other for current undergraduate students at Oxford and Cambridge.

4.22 Instruments

Survey for Prospective Applicants

The survey distributed to prospective applicants was divided into four sections; background information, academic performance, factors which influence applications to Oxbridge, and knowledge and perspectives of contextual admissions.

Survey for Current Undergraduate Students

The second survey, distributed to undergraduate students at Oxford and Cambridge, followed the same structure and content as the first. However, instead of eliciting hypothetical responses to 'how likely' certain factors were to influence decisions, the questionnaire asked to what extent the students felt those factors would have influenced their decision to apply to Oxbridge. The questionnaire was divided into three sections; background information, factors which influenced applications to Oxbridge, and perspectives on contextual admissions.

4.23 Population and Sampling Methods

The first group of participants – prospective applicants to Oxbridge – was necessarily large, and gaining access proved to be extremely difficult through official university outreach channels. Therefore, prospective applicants were reached through convenience sampling, as links to the survey were shared on Facebook through family and friends. The second group of participants – current undergraduate students at Oxbridge – was more limited in number and access was easier to ascertain. There was a mixture of purposive and convenience sampling as the survey was shared via the Junior Common Room mailing list services at both Oxford and Cambridge.

4.24 Participants

Prospective Applicants

There were 59 responses to the prospective applicant survey. Their ages ranged from 15 to 20, and they were in years 11 to 13 of secondary school. There were 48 females and 10 males in the study. The majority of the respondents (44) were of ‘white’ ethnicity. Twenty-six of the students attended Independent schools, while 22 attended State schools.

Current Undergraduate Students

There were 171 responses to this survey: 123 from the University of Oxford and 48 from University of Cambridge. The respondents ranged from age 18 to 23, with 92 females and 77 males. Overall, 70 of the participants were in their first year, 33 in their second, 49 in their third, 17 in the fourth, and 2 in the fifth year of the degree. With regard to ethnicity, 145 were ‘white’, accounting for 80% of the respondents. Ninety-two of the respondents had attended State school and 54 attended Independent schools.

4.25 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Microsoft Excel and Google Analytics software programs.

4.26 Limitations

The most significant challenge in completing this research project was gaining access to respondents, particularly the prospective applicants. We tried to gain access through the Access/Outreach officers at the colleges at the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge Student Union, however both avenues proved unsuccessful. As such, we were

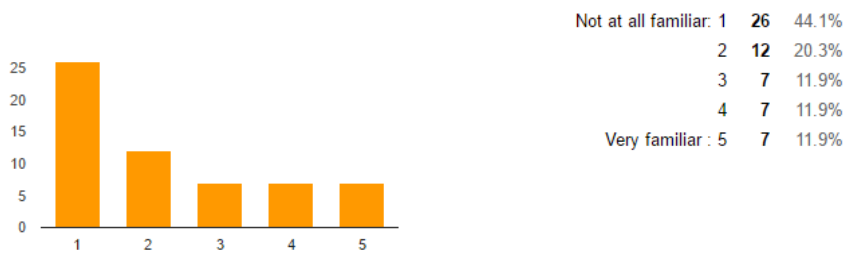
forced to use convenience sampling through friends and family. As a result of this, the representativeness of the sample is limited. Both samples comprised a majority of respondents from White ethnicities, as we were unable to reach many of the ‘non-traditional’ applicants and students from ethnic minorities.

4.3 Analysis of Quantitative Data

4.31 Selected Findings (Prospective Applicants)

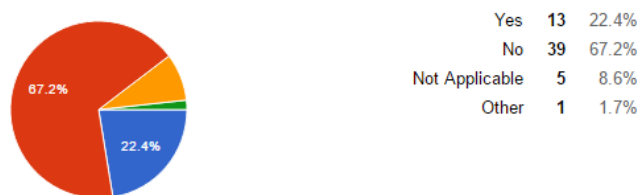
1. More than half (60.4%) of students were unfamiliar with the term ‘contextual admissions’. In fact, 44.1% stated that they were ‘not at all’ familiar. On the other hand, about 12% were very familiar, another 12% somewhat familiar.

How familiar are you with the term 'contextual admissions'?



2. Close to 70% (67.2%) of students had not encountered the term ‘contextual admissions’ when researching university options, while 22.4% had encountered the term.

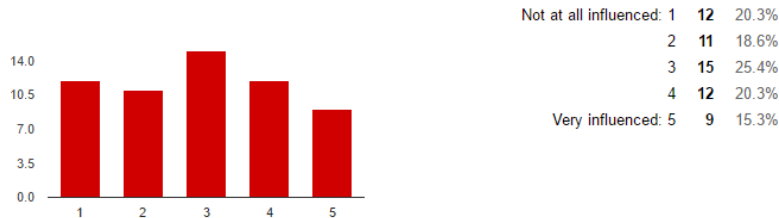
Have you encountered the term 'contextual admissions' when researching university or college admissions?



3. Responses to the question ‘If Oxbridge implemented a contextual admissions policy, how much do you think your decision to apply would be influenced?’ were quite varied. About 20% of students felt that their decision to apply to Oxbridge would not at all be influenced if a contextual admissions policy was implemented. Another 18.6% felt that it would be somewhat uninfluenced. Further, 25.4% had mixed or neutral feelings, 20.3% felt that their

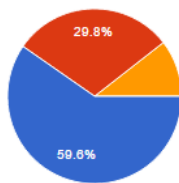
decision would be somewhat influenced, and about 15% stated that their decision to apply to Oxbridge would be very influenced if the universities implemented contextual admissions policies.

Contextual admissions refers to the use of additional information (e.g. school performance and socio-economic background) to provide context for individual applicant university admissions. If Oxbridge implemented a contextual admissions policy, how much do you think your decision to apply would be influenced?



4. When asked whether they felt Oxbridge should implement a contextual admissions policy, close to 60% of respondents answered ‘yes’. About 30% felt that Oxbridge shouldn’t implement a policy, and 10% answered ‘other’.

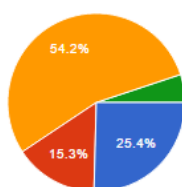
Do you think Oxbridge should implement a contextual admissions policy?



Yes	34	59.6%
No	17	29.8%
Other	6	10.5%

5. More than half (54.2%) of respondents felt that they would be neither more nor less likely to apply to Oxbridge if they implemented a contextual admissions policy. However, about 25% felt they would be more likely, and 15% stated that they would be less likely. Approximately 5% answered ‘other’.

Are you more or less likely to apply if Oxbridge implemented a contextual admissions policy?

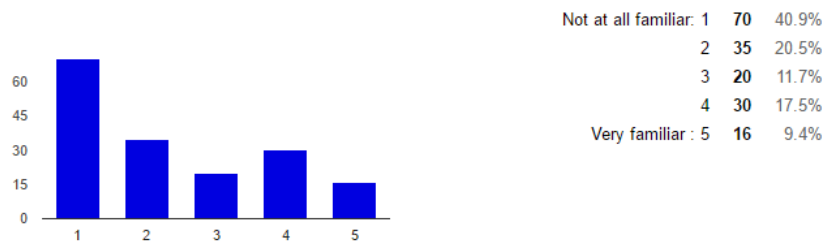


More Likely	15	25.4%
Less Likely	9	15.3%
Neither	32	54.2%
Other	3	5.1%

4.32 Selected Findings (Current Undergraduates)

1. More than (61%) of students were unfamiliar with the term 'contextual admissions'. In fact, 41% stated that they were 'not at all' familiar. On the other hand, about 9% were very familiar with the term and another 18% were somewhat familiar.

How familiar are you with the term 'contextual admissions'?



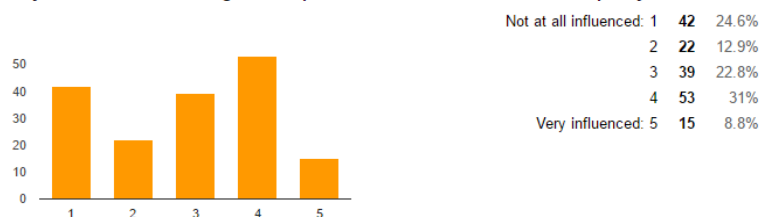
2. More than 76% of students had not encountered the term 'contextual admissions' when researching university options, with only about 19% of respondents stating that they had encountered the term.

Did you encounter the term 'contextual admissions' when researching university or college admissions?



3. Responses to the question 'If Oxbridge had implemented a contextual admissions policy, how much do you think your decision to apply would have been influenced?' were quite varied. About 25% of students felt that their decision to apply to Oxbridge would not have been at all influenced if a contextual admissions policy was in place. Another 13% felt that their decision would not have been influenced somewhat. Further, 22.8% had mixed or neutral feelings, 31% felt that their decision would have been somewhat influenced, and about 9% stated that their decision to apply to Oxbridge would have been very influenced if the universities implemented contextual admissions.

Contextual admissions refers to the use of additional information (e.g. school performance and socio-economic background) to provide context for individual applicants university admissions. If Oxbridge had implemented a contextual admissions policy, how much do you think your decision to apply would have been influenced?



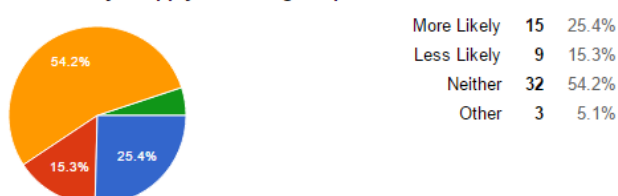
4. When asked whether they felt Oxbridge should implement a contextual admissions policy, close to 60% of respondents answered 'yes'. About 20% felt that Oxbridge shouldn't implement a policy, and close to 20% answered 'other'.

Do you think Oxbridge should implement a contextual admissions policy?



5. More than half (54.2%) of respondents felt that they would be neither more nor less likely to apply to Oxbridge if they implemented a contextual admissions policy. However, about 25% felt they would be more likely, and 15% stated that they would be less likely. Approximately 5% answered 'other'.

Are you more or less likely to apply if Oxbridge implemented a contextual admissions policy?



4.4 Analysis of Qualitative Data

A notable finding of this research project is the lack of awareness, amongst both prospective and current students, of contextual admissions and their implementation as part of university admissions processes. For prospective applicants, knowledge of contextual

admissions appeared particularly sparse, suggesting a lack of awareness of the role already played by the use of contextual data as part of current Oxbridge, and other universities', admissions processes. Similarly, current students at Oxford and Cambridge lacked familiarity with contextual admissions. Responses varied from "cannot formulate an informed opinion due to lack of familiarity" to "still don't really get what it [contextual admissions] is".

Despite the current use of contextual data by both Oxford and Cambridge University, very few respondents highlighted their knowledge of this in their answers. One response, in fact, felt there was a lack of transparency in the Oxford admissions process, stating "as far as I know Oxford doesn't attempt to make it transparent to potential applicants".

With regards to negative responses to contextual admissions, a primary concern, of both prospective and current students, which emerged in responses was that of contextual admissions policies resulting in places offered to students in order to fulfil quotas. One potential applicant stated: "I hope that I will be chosen based on my achievements rather than to fill a quota for a certain category of students needed". A current student further wrote: "I wouldn't have wanted to get in just based on my background or as some kind of 'token poor person'".

It is also worth noting that a few students stated that their reasoning for not believing Oxbridge should implement contextual admissions policies was that it could/could have negatively impacted upon their own application: "I might be negatively discriminated against for coming from a private school". Other students felt that it would not impact upon their own applications, and therefore lacked relevance as to their decision to apply or not.

Positive responses to the implementation of contextual admissions policies in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge highlighted ideas of diversity and fairness. Some prospective applicants noted that they viewed the implementation of contextual admissions positively as it would make Oxbridge "a more appealing place to study", would enable students from disadvantaged backgrounds "a fairer chance" and would enable students to "shine out from their peers". Ideas of 'fairness' and increasing 'diversity' similarly arose from the responses of current Oxbridge students, with responses varying from "this policy would lead to a more diverse student body" and "the policy would help social mobility" to "I firmly believe that the more that is known about a candidate, the fairer the admissions process is".

Further, a notable theme which arose, in answers to 'negative influences' upon applying to Oxbridge, was that of a perceived lack of 'diversity' and 'accessibility' at Oxbridge. Current students claimed to be negatively influenced, when deciding to apply to Oxbridge, by "its elitism", "its whiteness", its "lack of diversity", its "reputation as elitist/being difficult to get into" for "people from non-private school backgrounds" and the fact that "it didn't seem very accessible".

4.5 Conclusions

Despite limitations regarding the sample size and the diversity of the respondents of this study, some conclusions may be drawn regarding the personal perspectives of prospective and current students on the use of contextual admissions. Moreover, findings also provide some insight into the extent to which implementing more comprehensive contextual admissions policies at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge may influence students' university applications.

Firstly, there is a general lack of awareness among prospective applicants and current undergraduate students at Oxbridge about contextual admissions. Most applicants lacked a prior knowledge of contextual admissions when completing the survey, with a handful of respondents stating a lack of knowledge as prohibiting their ability to answer the survey fully.

Recommendation 4.1: *The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge should go to greater efforts to make transparent their current, and any future, use of contextual admissions. The Universities pride themselves on making their admissions systems transparent, however our findings suggest that this is not happening when it comes to the use of contextual data. More focus should be put into this area on open days, outreach events, and in resources given to prospective applicants.*

Additionally, we present evidence that when students are aware of contextual admissions policies, they are somewhat likely to affect their decision of whether they will apply to Oxford. This informs our next recommendation.

Recommendation 4.2: *That both Universities should go to greater efforts to make under-represented groups of students aware of the current use of contextual data in admissions. Our findings suggest that this is likely to increase applications from these groups, which is especially important given that the Universities often cite low application rates as a contributing factor to low admission rates for many demographics.*

The results of this study suggest that both prospective applicants and current undergraduate students at Oxbridge have diverse views regarding the implementation of contextual admissions policies in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Whereas mixed responses were garnered from both prospective and current students regarding the extent to which the implementation of contextual admissions would have personally affected their decision to apply to Oxbridge, the general a majority of the respondents felt that Oxbridge should implement a contextual admissions policy. Some prospective applicants noted that they viewed the implementation of contextual admissions positively as it would make Oxbridge “a more appealing place to study”, whilst ideas of “fairness” and increasing “diversity” arose from responses. A notable theme in deterrents to applying to Oxbridge was a perceived lack of “diversity” and “accessibility” at Oxford and Cambridge and so it

may, tentatively, be suggested that, as contextual admissions were often perceived of as linked to increasing diversity and fairness, the implementation of a more comprehensive, and transparent, contextual admissions policy at Oxbridge may encourage students to apply who may otherwise feel that Oxbridge is 'elitist' and lacking in 'diversity'.

Recommendation 4.3: *As well as making students more aware of current contextual data policies, the Universities should consider the introduction of further contextual admissions policies, as these efforts are likely to have value in encouraging further applications from certain demographics and ensuring the Universities are committed to “diversity” and “fairness”.*

Recommendation 4.4: *The Universities should be encouraged by findings that their current undergraduate student population are generally in favour of an increased use of contextual admissions. Not only have these students been through the admissions process, but they are in a position to comment on the culture and diversity of the student body. Our findings suggest that the value of these factors (and the utility of contextual admissions in achieving them) should be further investigated by the Universities.*

Given the diversity of opinions of contextual admissions policies garnered by this report, as well as the limitations in its sample size, we further conclude by suggesting that greater research ought to be carried out on the attitudes of prospective applicants towards contextual admissions policies. This guides our final recommendation.

Recommendation 4.5: *The Universities should commit more resources to larger scale analysis and studies of how further use of contextual data would be perceived by prospective applicants. This pilot study reveals some interesting trends, which should be further investigated, particularly by studies looking specifically at demographics traditionally under-represented at Oxford and Cambridge.*

Section 5: Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1.1: *Given the uncertainty over which metrics are most useful at identifying a student's educational disadvantage, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge should take an active role in identifying which contextual metrics are best at uncovering the most severe educational obstacles. They should also explore ways of attaining more reliable data on their applicants, which may involve asking for more details on a student's application, sharing data with other universities, or lobbying for UCAS to take the primary role in contextualising and flagging applications.*

Recommendation 1.2: *Oxford and Cambridge's application process must value the usage of contextual data whilst also preserving a tutor's autonomy over making offers. This can be achieved by establishing a uniform contextual policy to be used in all colleges which will assist tutors in consistently assessing the potential of all applicants.*

Recommendation 1.3: *Both Oxford and Cambridge should commit themselves to a long-term investment in contextualising admissions. Statistics prove that students from underrepresented demographics consistently equal or outperform their peers (and rarely, if ever, underperform). As UK HEIs aiming to secure their status as leading research and teaching institutions it is crucial that both universities continue to put all available resources into contextualising admissions and identifying the best talent that has not always benefitted from high-level formal schooling.*

Recommendation 1.4: *Based on the success of other universities outreach programmes (such as the PARTNERS programme) both universities should investigate the feasibility of longer-term outreach projects which assess a deprived candidate's academic potential before applications are made. Although the universities deserve credit for their outreach efforts, the schemes they run are rarely allied to the admissions process or the future applications made by their participants. Doing so would allow universities to identify and make adjustments in advance for those exceptional candidates that have natural intellectual aptitude but who, due to educational and social disadvantages, are unlikely to receive the top grades needed for a conventional offer. In some cases, both Oxford and Cambridge should be prepared to lower their conditional offer given the necessary individual circumstances.*

Recommendation 2.1: *The flagging criteria used by Oxford does not explicitly compensate for any demographic disadvantage – applicants must still have the same predicted grade level, and perform to an "appropriate standard" in admissions test, before benefitting in any way from being a flagged applicant. As described in Section 1 of this report, much of the success of previous contextual admissions schemes have come from the contextualisation of these factors, especially achieved and predicted grades in secondary school. We therefore recommend that the University extend their flagging criteria to recommend that flagged students be invited to interview, even if their predicted grades do not quite meet Oxford's*

standard offer. This would be beneficial, even if only implemented as a pilot scheme, so that the University could track the outcome of these applicants' interviews before implementing wider policies.

Recommendation 2.2: *Many of the University's flags for Prior Education are very broad, and of potentially limited use. Both the pre-16 and post-16 flags denote applicants from schools "below the national average". We recommend that the University adopt a more sensitive flagging criteria for educational background, to appreciate the significant variety of experience within this current banding criteria. An incremental banding system may be more appropriate, as it seems clear that a school in the 51st percentile should be considered in a different light to a school in the 99th percentile, yet both would receive an equal flag under the University's current system.*

Recommendation 2.3: *Both the OFFA and OFFA 1 flags apply only to schools in England. We recommend that the University adopts a similar flagging protocol for schools in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as students from these countries are currently disadvantaged by an incomplete flagging protocol.*

Recommendation 2.4: *Both the OFFA and OFFA 1 flags are designed to identify schools where there has been limited success in securing applicants to Oxford. However, the criteria for these flag excludes schools "where attainment levels at GCSE and A-level are generally insufficiently high to support successful applications to Oxford". Since candidates from these schools are likely to experience the same, if not greater, challenges (e.g. lack of interview and admissions test preparation) as students from schools which achieve better A-level results, we recommend that the University removes this specification.*

Recommendation 2.5: *Cambridge's decision to provide admissions tutors with adjusted GCSE scores relative to their educational background is welcome, and we recommend that a similar policy be introduced at Oxford. Likewise, we recommend that Cambridge make similar moves to contextualise an applicant's UMS scores, especially as this forms the basis of their ranking, and quintile position. Since Cambridge has endorsed the principle of adjusting an individual's academic grades to their educational background, we encourage them to do the same for all the academic data they receive.*

Recommendation 2.6: *Given that, despite the University's recommendations, flagged applicants aren't as likely to be short-listed for interview as unflagged applicants, we suggest that the University adopt a more rigorous approach to the use of contextual data in interview short-listing. Admissions tutors should be more strongly encouraged to interview flagged applicants and when flagged applicants are not invited to interview, these cases should be followed up and monitored so that an understanding of the reasons driving this trend can be developed. It is especially important that appropriate changes are made to the guidance given to admissions tutors, as short-listing for interview is the only stage at which formal advice is given to consider contextual data.*

Recommendation 2.7: *As we understand, the University has no formal guidance regarding the use of contextual flags beyond interview shortlisting. Given that students in certain flagged demographics are less likely to receive assistance with interview preparation (especially students from schools traditionally under-represented at Oxford), this is worrisome. We recommend the university extends its guidance to all stages of the admissions process. This should include the offer-making stage, and admissions tutors should be required to provide explanations for not offering flagged applicants a place, in the same way that happens currently when flagged applicants are not shortlisted for interview. This more rigorous process will help monitor the challenges faced by students from certain demographics, as well as potentially statistically improving their success.*

Recommendation 2.8: *Evidence from admission statistics shows that if contextual data is used to address disparities in the application process, more rigorous policies must be adopted. This may involve guiding admissions tutors to interview a higher number of flagged candidates (as in Oxford) or requiring them to provide an explicit justification of why they haven't offered a flagged candidate a place. Not only would such an approach have potential value in addressing unconscious biases, but it would allow the challenges and shortcomings of students from these demographics to be monitored and appropriate action taken.*

Recommendation 3.1: *Both Universities should go to efforts to educate tutors responsible for admissions on the statistical under-representation of certain demographics at Oxbridge. Our findings show that not only do some tutors fail to acknowledge under-representation, but there is a diversity of opinion as to which demographics are under-represented. The universities should disseminate clear and accessible evidence to equip their staff with this information.*

Recommendation 3.2: *Tutors should be explicitly made aware of the purposes of contextual data in admissions, and the universities should issue clear aims for the reasoning and rationale behind its use. Likewise, tutors should be made aware of the evidence taken from other universities' use of contextual data in admissions systems in order to convince them of its efficacy as a tool in improving both the calibre and diversity of their student intake, despite discrepancies in prior educational attainment.*

Recommendation 3.3: *The Universities should clarify the legal status of contextual data in admissions policies, and communicate this clarification to admissions tutors. If necessary, the Universities should lobby for a change in the law to allow admissions tutors to use contextual data to a greater extent, using the wealth of evidence in section 1 of this report as justification.*

Recommendation 3.4: *The Universities should maintain an open dialogue with admissions tutors about their thoughts regarding the admissions process. Admissions tutors have a wealth of experience and expertise which could prove useful in designing and implementing*

future admissions policies. Importantly, they hold a diversity of opinions regarding admissions, which all deserve attention and time from the universities.

Recommendation 3.5: *To address tutors' concerns about using contextual data because of its complexity, the university should offer workshops and masterclasses to tutors on the topic. This could ensure that all tutors are equipped with the skills and knowledge to interpret, and use, contextual data for the purposes that the universities recommend.*

Recommendation 3.6: *The Universities should lead an investigation into the diversity of admissions policies between colleges, and where necessary, issue advice and guidelines to clarify these discrepancies. Although making any large structural changes to the admissions process are unlikely to be popular, the central universities should adopt greater oversight in college policies during the admissions process, to ensure that similar guidelines are being followed regardless of college.*

Recommendation 4.1: *The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge should go to greater efforts to make transparent their current, and any future, use of contextual admissions. The Universities pride themselves on making their admissions systems transparent, however our findings suggest that this is not happening when it comes to the use of contextual data. More focus should be put into this area on open days, outreach events and in resources given to prospective applicants.*

Recommendation 4.2: *The Universities should go to greater efforts to make under-represented groups of students aware of the current use of contextual data in admissions. Our findings suggest that this is likely to increase applications from these groups, which is especially important given that the Universities often cite low application rates as a contributing factor to low admission rates for many demographics.*

Recommendation 4.3: *As well as making students more aware of current contextual data policies, the Universities should consider the introduction of further contextual admissions policies, as these efforts are likely to have value in encouraging further applications from certain demographics and ensuring the Universities are committed to "diversity" and "fairness".*

Recommendation 4.4: *The Universities should be encouraged by findings that their current undergraduate student population are generally in favour of an increased use of contextual admissions. Not only have these students been through the admissions process, but they are in a position to comment on the culture and diversity of the student body. Our findings suggest that the value of these factors (and the utility of contextual admissions in achieving them) should be further investigated by the Universities.*

Recommendation 4.5: *The Universities should commit more resources to larger scale analysis and studies of how further use of contextual data would be perceived by prospective applicants. This pilot study reveals some interesting trends, which should be further*

investigated, particularly by studies looking specifically at demographics traditionally under-represented at Oxford and Cambridge.