Principles and processes of contextual data at The University of Manchester

1.   Principles

A number of key principles are in place concerning the use of contextual data, to ensure it is:

  i.   **evidence-based** and relevant to the admissions decision making process;

  ii. **individually applied**, where each applicant is considered on their own merit. There are **no quotas** or targets for flagging up/recruiting students from a particular background;

  iii. used **only to complement and enhance existing selection mechanisms** (actual and/or predicted performance; minimum requirements or specified performance in a particular subject at GCSE, A-level or other examination; results from additional tests (e.g. UKCAT); evidence of ability and potential from the personal statement or reference; performance at interview etc.)

  iv. **valid/verifiable and reliable** - some data on the UCAS form is self-declared and not independently verifiable e.g. the question on parental experience of higher education. We instead use only verifiable information such as school/college data and residency as indicated by the corresponding address;

  v.   used to provide fairness and **equality of opportunity** to *all* applicants applying to a course by ensuring that adequate steps are taken to address differences applicants may experience in their educational opportunities;

  vi. **transparent** to applicants and their advisors in terms of
       a. *what* contextual data is used
       b. *how* it will be used
       c. *when* it is used
       d. communicated to applicants in a clear and timely manner

  vii. **professionally applied** – all admissions staff using contextual data in decision making have been fully briefed and made aware of the issues surrounding contextual data;

  viii. rigorously **monitored** and subject to audit trails.

Due to the availability and comparability of data, the use of contextual information will only apply to UK applicants under the age of 21 or those over 21 who have been in-care for more than 3 months.

Flags are based on individual applicant details in relation to various national averages; as a result there is no set proportion of applicants who will be flagged. The proportion of applicants who are flagged will therefore vary from School to School and year to year: there is **no quota** of the number of students who are 'flagged'.

To ensure that the data used to inform the educational indicators is valid and reliable, it is based on three years of school performance data where available.

The University acknowledges that there are methodological challenges in analysing school performance data due to the differences between the countries of the UK and the merging of more than one year of data. The University is committed to constantly monitoring, updating and improving data sources and decision rules.

2.   Processes

2.1   Indicators used

In keeping with best practice at other Russell Group institutions, the following pieces of contextual information are used:

Contextual Data Indicators to generate Flags	Rationale
Indicator 1 Social: Geo-demographic indicator of disadvantage and low progression to HE	Our most recent evidence shows that students from low participation areas achieve *at least as well* as other Manchester students when entering with the same academic performance. They have therefore displayed evidence of *outstanding* performance in relation to their peers that is exceptional among their peer group.
Indicator 2 Experience of being looked after/in care prior to application for more than 3 months	Students from care-experienced backgrounds have the lowest participation in HE and have shown exceptional performance to have met Manchester's entrance thresholds.
Indicator 3 Education: Average School Performance at Level 2 (GCSE or equivalent).	Our most recent evidence shows that students from low performing schools achieve *at least as well* as other Manchester students when entering with the same academic performance. They have therefore displayed evidence of *outstanding* performance in relation to their peers that is exceptional among their peer group.
Indicator 4 Education: Average School/College Performance at Level 3 (A-Level or equivalent).	Our most recent evidence shows that students from low performing schools achieve *at least as well* as other Manchester students when entering with the same academic performance. They have therefore displayed evidence of *outstanding* performance in relation to their peers that is exceptional among their peer group.

Using the HESA[1] data for the University, an extensive longitudinal analysis of student background and degree performance has been carried out. The following key points have emerged:

- when disadvantaged students entered Manchester with the *same* academic entry threshold there is *strong evidence* they performed *at least* as well as students from more advantaged backgrounds, and in some cases better;

- this means there is a strong rationale for processes allowing the 'flagging' of disadvantaged students in the admissions process by complementing applicant information with additional 'contextual data'. Processes for further/additional consideration of 'flagged' students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be agreed with no corresponding diminution of academic quality. This will be kept under review.

- when disadvantaged students entered Manchester with a *lower* academic entry threshold (e.g. 1 or 2 grades at A level or equivalent) there is *inconsistent* evidence of them performing as well as more advantaged students with higher academic performance. This, however, will be monitored in light of continual evidence being produced by agencies such as the Centre for Widening Participation Research at Bristol University and the Sutton Trust, as well as ongoing monitoring of Manchester data.

2.2   Contextual Flags

The Widening Participation Flag is applied where an applicant meets one of the following indicators:
- Indicator 1 = WP Flag
- Indicator 2 = WP Flag (however, applicants who have been in care are treated in the same way as someone who receives the WP Plus Flag)

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[1] The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is the official agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about higher education.

The additional WP Plus Flag is applied where an applicant meets one of the following combinations of indicators:

- Indicators 1 + 2 + 3 = WP Plus Flag
- Indicators 1 + 3 = WP Plus Flag
- Indicators 2 + 3 = WP Plus Flag
- Indicators 1 + 2 + 4 = WP Plus Flag
- Indicators 1 + 4 = WP Plus Flag
- Indicators 2 + 4 = WP Plus Flag
- Indicators 1 + 3 + 4 = WP Plus Flag
- Indicators 2 + 3 + 4 = WP Plus Flag

Where information is missing for whatever reason, this will be clearly indicated.

2.3   Exemptions

Due to the availability and comparability of data, the use of contextual information will apply to UK applicants.

Where an applicant has completed a prior degree they will not be given additional consideration as described above as they are considered to have already overcome the barriers to HE which students from disadvantaged backgrounds commonly face.

Where an applicant is aged 21 or over on 1st September of year of entry, they will not receive the contextual data flags described above and will instead be given additional consideration on the grounds that they have been away from education for a number of years. Educational indicators are based on the most recently available school performance data and are therefore not valid for those who have been away from education for a number of years.

NB. Applicants aged over 21 who indicate that they have been in care for more than 3 months will receive an indicator and will be treated the same as WP Plus flagged applicants.

3.   Further Information

For further information on the University's use of contextual data, please refer to our website: www.manchester.ac.uk/contextualdata

If you have any further questions please email contextualdata@manchester.ac.uk.