



Supporting Professionalism in Admissions

UK Perspectives: Contextual data and admissions policy

Fair Admissions Conference, Manchester 7 - 8 July 2011

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What is SPA?

- SPA - the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme
- Established in 2006 following the Schwartz Report, *Fair Admissions to Higher Education 2004*
- Small team, with over 75 years strategic, policy and practical experience between us in the HE admissions sector
- UK's independent and objective voice on HE admissions, reporting to the SPA Steering Group



What have we been doing?

- A free, impartial, central shared source of expertise and advice on strategy and policy on admissions and student recruitment issues
- **Good practice** statements and check lists - see www.spa.ac.uk
- Research and evidence base from: visits to over 140 institutions; events, activities and surveys. **207 different institutions have attended SPA events**
- SPA worked with all UK administrations to get agreement on initial range of publicly sourced contextual data items, to be delivered free, via UCAS

What is Fair Admissions and Access?

- Getting more disadvantaged students into top universities? Supporting the most able but least likely to apply?
- Yes, **but** that's only part of the issue
- Raising aspirations and encouraging and supporting **all** students with potential to aim higher for an HE course that is right for them at a institution that can provide what they need, when they need it - full-time, part-time, flexible or distance learning etc
- Schwartz Report: **“Equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations.”**

What is Fair Admissions?

Schwartz recommended 5 principles for fair admissions:

1. be transparent
 2. enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential
 3. strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid ◇
 4. seek to minimise barriers to applicants
 5. be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes
- ◇ *Some of these maybe 'hard' quantifiable measures, while others rely on qualitative judgements. In Schwartz both legal and lay opinion placed value on the use of discretion and the assessment of applicants as individuals.*

What is contextual data?

- In the UK for full-time UG: data that maybe part of, or additional to, that on UCAS application that sets the application in its educational and/or socio-economic context
- Can be self declared e.g. illness, looks after others, in care, disability
- Other contextual data: interviews, auditions, portfolio, admissions tests
- Increasingly from publicly available data sources - educational and socio-economic e.g. DfE, HEFCE, DENI, WAG, Scottish Government
- More to do: progression to HE stats, more qualifications and part-time/mature, but its a good start.
- See also **UCAS:** www.ucas.com/about_us/stat_services/ **and** www.ucas.com/he_staff/statusreports/statistics

Initial basket of data for HEIs, free, via UCAS

Educational Background

- School performance – Average (mean) school GCSE performance for 5 A*-C GCSE (including English/Welsh Maths)
- Average (mean) school “best eight” GCSE performance
- Average (mean) of QCA points per A level entry or equivalent
- Average (mean) of QCA points per A level student or equivalent

Socio-Economic Background

- Percentage of students entitled to free school meals (by local authority)
- Percentage of students entitled to an Educational Maintenance Allowance and percentage of students registered for an EMA (for one year only in England)
- Lives in a low progression to higher education neighbourhood (POLAR 2)

All being supplied by UCAS for 2012 at time of application, if universities and colleges sign up to take it. This is work in progress.

Contextual data – How can HEIs use it?

- Data, including ‘contextual data’ underpins successful policy, targeting, planning, marketing, widening access, admissions decision-making and monitoring
- Contextual data information and examples on the SPA website www.spa.ac.uk
- Data, via UCAS, linked to applicants and/or will be available as generic data sets to HEIs
- SPA survey of all HEIs on their contextual data use/planned use, is underway, 81 responses so far.

How is contextual data use within admissions and access?

- for widening participation – to target aspiration raising and WP and fair access activities
- to inform the decision as to who to interview
- to inform admissions decision making to enable the “best students” to be admitted and retained (as defined by the HEI)
- to identify applicants who may need additional learner support or practical advice during their application process, transition or when registered as a student
- to help assess applicants for financial/ in-kind support - NSP in England
- for statistical and qualitative monitoring and reporting purposes.

Principles of using contextual data developed by SPA 1

1. The use of contextual data within admissions decision making/ a course's entry criteria must be:
 - research based and justifiable to ensure the use of data adds value
 - relevant to the purpose for which it is being use
 - valid and reliable
 - used to improve inclusivity, by recognising disadvantage using evidence based judgement
 - transparent to applicants and their advisors in terms of what contextual data is used, if any, how it will be used and when it is used.

Principles of using contextual data developed by SPA 2

2. Regular monitoring of the use of the data and related audit trails should be integral to the admissions process.
3. Admissions staff using contextual data in decision making should be aware of the issues. Internal communications, professional development and training
4. Applicants needing additional learner support or practical advice should receive appropriate transition and in-session learner support to ensure their potential continues to be developed.
5. Individual institutions are autonomous in the use of data and how it is used within their admissions decision-making process.

Progress and Issues

- Research being undertaken at many universities both operational and academic, needs to be brought together for peer review and discussion
- Details of research in the public domain and good practice to go on SPA website
- Need to know, and demonstrate, that contextual data adds value for institution
- This academic research conference, **Fair Admissions**, July 2011 in Manchester is supported by SPA and UUK
- SPA research project with sample of HEIs using contextual data to examine what used, methodologies employed, what adds value, what can be transferable across the sector. To be completed by end 2011
- SPA aim to initiate a longitudinal contextual data study from 2011-12



Thank you

**More information from: enquiries@spa.ac.uk or 01242 544891
www.spa.ac.uk**