



SPA Principles of the use of contextual data in admissions

June 2010

These principles, produced by SPA in consultation with HE providers, were approved by the SPA Steering Group on the 18 March 2010 and subsequently updated on 7 June 2010 following a meeting of the national Contextual Data Group¹. They were circulated to all HE providers on 24 June 2010.

1. The use of contextual data within a course's entry criteria/ decision making must be
 - research based and justifiable to ensure the use of data adds value to the process and that HE providers adhere to good practice
 - relevant to the purpose for which it is being use e.g. to add context to the admissions decision making process
 - valid and reliable (bearing in mind that much of the data, for example via UCAS, is self declared)
 - used to improve inclusivity, by recognising potential assessed using evidence based judgement (i.e. applicants may not be treated in exactly the same way as different factors maybe be considered, all applicants are individuals with different backgrounds)
 - transparent to applicants and their advisors in terms of what contextual data is used, if any, how it will be used, when it is used and how it was used in the previous cycle. This must be communicated to applicants in a transparent, clear and timely manner via Entry Profiles on UCAS Course Search, widening participation (WP) activities; HE websites, in feedback to unsuccessful applicants etc.
2. Regular monitoring of the use of the data and related audit trails should be an integral part of the admissions process.
3. Admissions staff using contextual data in decision making should be aware of the issues surrounding contextual data. Professional development and training maybe appropriate to ensure staff understand, and can interpret and use the data. Contextual data should be used apart of the overall consideration of an applicant and not in isolation; a combination of various items of contextual data should used in order to arrive at an holistic assessment of the applicant's potential for the course/programme. Contextual data informs the process of professional judgement which ultimately decides whether an offer is made.
4. Applicants needing additional learner support or practical advice during their application, transition or when registered as a student, should receive appropriate transition and in-session learner support to ensure their potential continues to be developed.
5. Whilst there may be shared principles in the use of contextual data, it is recognised that individual institutions are autonomous in the contextual data they use and how it is used within their admissions decision-making process.

¹ This group met four times in 2010-11 and was chaired by SPA. Membership was UK wide and included HE providers using contextual data in admissions and WP; school and college leaders from ASCL, HMC, GSA, GSHA, AoC; and UCAS and Universities UK.