Contextual data and the UCAS contextual data service (CDS)

UCAS offers a contextual data service, which provides data about an applicant’s school or college and local area. This can be used for contextualised admissions – to help assess an applicant’s prior attainment, and potential to succeed in light of their circumstances.

The aim is to help providers form a more complete picture of an individual applicant’s characteristics.

Where does contextual data come from?

There are multiple sources of contextual data, such as:
- the UCAS contextual data service
- commercial sources
- other sources (e.g. direct from government departments/agencies)
- universities’ and colleges’ own data and research

What data is available?

The contextual data service supplies historic data (going back to 2008) about an applicant’s school or college. It also provides local area data in the form of POLAR2, POLAR3, and the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).

We’re currently exploring if we can supply POLAR4 data, but this will not be available for the 2019 entry cycle.

The following 2017 data is available for use in the 2019 admissions cycle:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Wales</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>NI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average attainment 8 score per student</td>
<td>YES*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) points per A level entry (or equivalent)</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average QCA points per A level student (or equivalent)</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average QCA points score for best eight GCSEs</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students achieving five A* – C GCSEs, including English/Welsh and maths (or equivalent)</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td></td>
<td>YES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students entitled to free school meals (FSM)</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students entitled to Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td></td>
<td>YES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average UCAS points for Highers per student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>YES*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average UCAS points score for Highers per entry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>YES*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students registered for FSM</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students receiving EMA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only available in web-link.

For more information about the service, please contact contextualdata@ucas.ac.uk.
When is the data available?

This data, which refers to the previous year’s school cohort, is published by UK education departments in January, and collected and processed by UCAS in spring. This is then made available to providers in early September, ahead of the following admissions cycle. This means that 2017 school performance data is currently available for use in the 2019 admissions cycle.

How do I access the data?

You need to register to use this free service. For more information and to register, please contact contextualdata@ucas.ac.uk.

The data is available through all of the UCAS link products, with the exception of the following measures, which are only available in web-link:

Scotland: Average UCAS points for Highers per student, and average UCAS point score for Highers per entry, as fields labelled 2014+.

England: Average attainment 8 score per student.

Accessing contextual data through odbc-link and xml-link

UCAS Undergraduate
Contextual data is available through odbc-link (cvRefSchoolContextualData), xml-link (getUCASApplicantContextualData), and the reference information in web-link.

UCAS Conservatoires
Contextual data is available through odbc-link (cvRefSchoolContextualData), xml-link (getCUKASApplicantContextualData), and the reference information in web-link.

We’ve created a step-by-step guide on how to access contextual data through web-link – this is available on the widening participation page onucas.com. More information on how to access contextual data through the link products is available in the system guides onucas.com.

What can I use the CDS for?

The CDS facilitates fair and equitable admissions processes, with the objective of widening participating in higher education. However, providers use contextual data differently, and must be transparent about their reasons for doing so.

View additional resources.

What about changes to school performance measures? How do these affect the CDS?

In response to qualification reform and policy changes, school performance measures – which form a significant part of this service – are undergoing change in England and Wales. Similarly, Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland has resulted in changes to the way the data is reported.

This means that care must be taken when making comparisons with past years of data. For example, for attainment 8, the Department for Education (DfE) in England will be transitioning to a new points system different to 2016, due to the introduction of the new 9 – 1 graded GCSEs. You can read more in Annex A of the DfE’s ‘Secondary accountability measures’ guide.

What are UCAS’ future plans?

UCAS continues to engage with its customers to explore how support for contextualised admissions could be improved.

For the 2018 admissions cycle, we worked with a small number of universities to test the feasibility of using a novel means of contextualising admissions. This used the principles behind our multiple equality measure (MEM) to code applications by representation level, and make suggestions about how this might affect predicted attainment. For the 2019 cycle, all providers will be invited to opt in to this service, which will run alongside our existing contextual data service. For more information, please contact mcds@ucas.ac.uk.