

Universities 'cutting entry requirements' for poor students

Top universities are secretly admitting poor students with lower entry grades amid growing political pressure to boost access to higher education, a report has suggested.



A report by Supporting Professionalism in Admissions backed the use of "contextual data" during university entry but said it had to be more "transparent". Photo: Alamy

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor

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Rising numbers of institutions are cutting entry requirements at the last minute to allow students who "miss their target grades" to get a place, it emerged.

Researchers found that only a minority of universities make lower "upfront" offers to teenagers from deprived backgrounds in advance, instead choosing to "reassess" these students if they fall short of entry grades after A-level results are published.

Other universities are using data on applicants' social and school background to flag them up to admissions tutors or give them guaranteed interviews, it emerged.

The disclosure will spark renewed concerns that universities are attempting to "socially engineer" the admissions process to hit new-style targets designed to create a more balanced student body.

It follows claims from Prof Les Ebdon, head of the Government's Office for Fair Access, that leading universities are making "little or no progress" in recruiting more students from working-class

families on to degree courses

Today's study backed the use of "contextual data" – information on students' family background, parental education, social class, ethnicity and school performance – and suggested it should be employed as a routine part of all universities' admissions to ensure talented applicants with the most "potential" are recruited. .

It reiterated controversial claims that state-educated pupils benefited more from taking a degree and gained higher marks than similar candidates from private schools.

But the study warned that universities had to be more "clear and transparent" about their use of data on students' background as part of the admissions process.

The conclusions were made in 90-page report by Supporting Professionalism in Admissions – a university advisory group set up in light of a major review commissioned by Labour into entry policies across the higher education system.

A survey by SPA last year found that 37 per cent of universities were employing contextual data as part of their admissions and a further 57 per cent planned to do so in coming years.

It was most likely to be employed by top universities with the highest entry requirements.

The system was seen "as a way of discerning potential in a competitive applicant pool and ensuring the diversity of student intake", the study said.

Today's report was based on an in-depth analysis of the system at eight universities. It found that five used contextual data to adjust entry requirements or make poorer students a "guaranteed offer" of a place. One more used it to fast-track students into an interview.

But the study found that universities were often waiting until the last minute – after students get their A-level results – to admit students with lower grades.

"Only a minority of the providers covered by the research used contextual data to make differential offers," it said. "More frequently, higher education providers reassess contextualised applicants who miss their target grades at confirmation stage and some individuals gain entry with grades below the standard entry level at this point."

A SPA survey of universities published earlier this year suggested that 27 out of 38 universities had used this data "when considering 'near miss' offer holders at confirmation" in 2012. Some 34 were planning to do this in the future.

The Office for Fair Access has repeatedly criticised top universities for failing to admit enough poor

students, warning that institutions must be more “ambitious” in their efforts to create a diverse student body.

For the first time in 2012, they were required to set targets for the number of students admitted from disadvantaged families, deprived postcodes, poor performing state schools or other groups such as children in care.

It represented an escalation of the current rules that merely require institutions to generate more applications.

The report strongly backed the roll out of contextual data across all universities but added: "It is important for providers to be clear and transparent about their rationale for using contextual data in different ways... It is essential that applicants, and those who advise them, understand what is meant by contextualised admissions, and specifically how information and data will be used in relation to offers of a place."

Paul Clark, director of policy at Universities UK, which represents vice-chancellors, said: “University can be a life-changing experience. Contextual data is one way of ensuring that anyone with the ability and desire to go to university has the opportunity to do so.

"As the report concludes, it is also important that universities are open about their use of contextual data and information. There is a need to have an informed public debate about the merits of using this additional data in the university admissions process.”

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