

## Forward thinking

### Promoting social mobility through university admissions – is PQA the only answer?

#### Overview

Improving social mobility is sometimes cited as a reason for changing from the current university admissions process based on predicted A-level grades to post qualification admission (PQA) based on actual achievement. This paper proposes an alternative: the development of a national system for ranking university applicants that takes account of both achievement and education context. These rankings would form the basis of universities' longlisting, allowing applicants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to compete fairly for university places.

#### Grass roots initiatives

As part of initiatives to widen participation in Higher Education, some individual institutions and departments have begun to evaluate applicants' academic achievements in the light of the education context in which they occurred. For example, St George's Hospital Medical School, in London, operates an Adjusted Criteria policy, through which it offers places in medicine to applicants with lower A-level grades (down to 'BBC') than the standard offer of 'AAB' or above, providing they are at least 60% better than their school average. The scheme is open to students from schools whose A-level average is 'CDD' or below.

St George's reports that students from poorly performing schools who are accepted into medical school with lower grades do just as well as their peers with higher grades. This strongly suggests that students admitted through the Adjusted Criteria scheme learned enough at A-level, and are able enough learners, to compete successfully with students who achieved higher A-level grades under more favourable conditions. Demonstrating such predictive validity justifies evaluating applicants' achievement within their education context. This route has shown far more promise than aptitude testing, including a recent National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) trial of the SAT Reasoning Test<sup>1</sup> used in the US to determine college admissions.

#### A pragmatic approach

There are two ways in which to propagate such practice. The first is for individual departments or institutions to develop their own adjusted criteria. An advantage of this system is that the adjustments can be tailored to the particular course, whilst a disadvantage is that there is replication of effort when candidates apply for multiple courses, as most do. The second approach is to use the existing infrastructure – UCAS – to create a score that accounts for both the grades the applicant achieved and the education context in which he or she achieved them.

One possible method of combining information about achievement with information about education context is as follows. First, rank order at a national level all applicants to UK universities based on points awarded for their (estimated) exam results, most likely based on their three best A-level (or equivalent) grades. This rank order can then be broken down into bands of (approximately) equal size, for example deciles (ten bands). Within each band, a measure of education context – based on, for example, deprivation indices or free school meals data – could be used to rank order applicants. This would give substantial weight to actual exam outcomes, but allow for a reordering of applicants within bands. Within each band, which should contain applicants with comparable absolute achievements, priority could be given to applicants who had the least favourable education context. Putting applicants into bands effectively replaces candidates' existing grades with a single grade based on performance across subjects. Applicants with the same new grade will then be rank ordered according to the favourability of the context in which they were educated.

<sup>1</sup> Kirkup, Wheeler, Morrison *et al* (2010) Use of an aptitude test in university entrance: a validity study. NFER.

The proposed ranking system is illustrated using a simple example in Table 1. The original ranking shows candidates in order of exam score. The scores are placed in bands within which performances are considered comparable; precisely the same way exams are graded. Within those bands, the education context score can be used to rank order applicants from worst context to best context, producing the contextualised ranking.

## Table 1

### Illustration of the proposed ranking system using a single exam

#### Original Ranks

Applicant	Exam Score	Score Band	Education Context (Worst -3 to 3 Best)
Evie	40	8	1
Thomas	39	8	3
Harry	38	8	1
Chloe	37	8	2
Sophie	36	8	-2
Mohammed	35	7	-1
Dylan	34	7	2
William	33	7	0
Summer	32	7	3
Emily	31	7	-3
Joseph	30	6	-3
Lucy	29	6	0
James	28	6	-1
Jacob	27	6	-3
Charlotte	26	6	1
Grace	25	5	3
Amelia	24	5	1
Joshua	23	5	0
Alfie	22	5	1
Benjamin	21	5	-3

#### Contextualised Ranks

Applicant	Exam Score	Score Band	Education Context (Worst -3 to 3 Best)
Sophie	36	8	-2
Evie	40	8	1
Harry	38	8	1
Chloe	37	8	2
Thomas	39	8	3
Emily	31	7	-3
Mohammed	35	7	-1
William	33	7	0
Dylan	34	7	2
Summer	32	7	3
Joseph	30	6	-3
Jacob	27	6	-3
James	28	6	-1
Lucy	29	6	0
Charlotte	26	6	1
Benjamin	21	5	-3
Joshua	23	5	0
Amelia	24	5	1
Alfie	22	5	1
Grace	25	5	3

## Conclusion

The proposed system would not encourage or require universities to relinquish control of their admissions systems. It is not an issue of allocating students to universities on the basis of their respective rankings: admissions tutors would remain free to make decisions. What it would do is provide every UCAS applicant with a ranking that could form the basis of the initial sift of applications, whatever universities they applied to. It would provide a single piece of information that takes into account both academic achievement and education context.

If you would like to discuss the issues raised in this paper or any more information, please contact:

#### **Dr Neil Stringer**

Senior Research Associate

AQA Centre for Education Research and Policy

nstringer@aqa.org.uk