

Contextual data in STEM admissions in elite UK higher education institutions

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Executive summary

This project supported by the UKRI Strategic Priorities Fund involved one-to-one semi-structured interviews with eight admissions tutors and staff involved in department-based admissions decisions in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields at Imperial College London, and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the three most selective higher education institutions in England. Interviews explored how tutors understand, apply, justify and evaluate the consequences of the use of contextual data in admissions decisions. This extends widening participation research which has identified gaps in applications, offers and enrolments in selective universities¹ and offers policy recommendations for broadening the use of contextualised admissions, and explores these practices in STEM contexts, which have more specific entry requirements and a more linear curriculum. This research identifies the misalignment of national and institutional policies with autonomous, localised admissions practices and how such practices exert a conservative pressure to maintain the status quo.

Principles and priorities

- **Priorities.** The top priority was admitting students with the greatest potential to succeed and likely to do well on the course, drawing existing knowledge; problem-solving ability and subject passion. Other priorities included ensuring fair process and outcomes and achieving a balanced cohort within the department.
- **Contextualised admissions.** All participants were supportive of contextualising admissions decisions, showed awareness of issues around underrepresentation and inequalities, and said most of the offers to widening participation students are contextualised in some way. All participants mentioned (1) education/school and (2) socioeconomic background. Several, but not quite all mentioned (3) care leaver status, (4) parents' educational background and (5) postcode/area. One or two mentioned personal characteristics of (6) gender, (7) age or (8) disability.

Recommendation: The use of contextual data should be prioritised in judging potential to eliminate gaps in entry rates across widening participation characteristics.

¹ Boliver, V. (2013). How fair is access to more prestigious UK universities?. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 64(2), 344-364.

Richardson, J. T., Mittelmeier, J., & Rienties, B. (2020). The role of gender, social class and ethnicity in participation and academic attainment in UK higher education: an update. *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(3), 346-362.

Mountford-Zimdars, A., Moore, J., & Higham, L. (2019). What is the current state of debate around the use of contextualised admissions for undergraduate admissions? A review of the current stakeholder perspective. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/13603108.2019.1640802](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2019.1640802)

Admissions processes

- **Marginal cases.** Data is contextualised through centralised flagging systems, additional subject-specific admissions tests, banding processes, interviews and offer making, although it is predominantly used for marginal cases after all of the ‘best candidates’ have been selected for the majority of places.
- **Contextualising process.** Tutors felt that there were limits in the extent to which they should be using their role to address inequalities. They felt there were limits to how much resource could and should be expended on contextualising applications; they were strongly against making lower grade offers to WP applicants, despite a lack of evidence that this would necessarily lower standards; and there was ambiguity about what could count as contextually relevant information, particularly for ethnicity and gender.
- **Limitations of the availability and integrity of data.** Tutors felt that more data should be provided in standardised ways, particularly related to data such as school performance and free school meals, which they felt had potential to be more meaningful than overall school type and postcode data.

Recommendation: Cross-sectoral efforts are needed to standardise data to inform admissions decisions, focusing on greater individual-level data and that which situates the applicant in relation to their school.

Recommendation: There should be greater transparency of the use of contextual data, for staff and students, in elite STEM admissions processes.

Policy and governance

- **Localised autonomy.** Given the focus on STEM departments in elite institutions, our participants enact significant autonomy in the admissions process, and STEM identities influence and mediate their approach to and perceptions of admissions and contextualised data.
- **Lack of policy coordination and evaluation.** Despite huge investment in evaluation of outreach efforts, there was a lack of evaluation of outcomes of specific admissions practices. Tutors thought that data tracking the performance of widening participation students once accepted would be useful, with this data being a noted omission.
- **Conservative ethos.** Localised autonomy created a conservative pressure on driving change, with tutors expressing fears that widening participation students would struggle, had concerns about their sense of belonging and needing additional support. These worries were largely based on supposition rather than evidence.

Recommendation: Greater coordination of evaluation and research efforts are needed across outreach, admissions, progression and outcomes at departmental, college and institutional levels as well as at subject-level nationally.

Context

Higher education is under pressure from government, sector bodies and the public to widen participation and diversify access. National research on the use of contextual data in admissions is generalised across disciplines, and largely draws on national datasets and interviews with heads of admissions². Research has shown the engagement with and confidence of using contextual data varies across the sector³. However, the role of contextualised admissions has different consequences for STEM programmes, which build on previous knowledge in more linear fashions.

A particular feature of admissions at most elite institutions is that admissions is undertaken at the department (or college) level, with disciplinary-based academics leading on admissions decisions. This devolved nature means that it is harder for centralised policies to take effect, but also that the admissions tutors have direct experience of teaching students with different educational backgrounds. This report explores the role of localised autonomy in admissions and how this challenges the efficacy of policy enactment.

On a practical level, over the past few years we noticed incredible efforts being made in outreach activities that were leading to increased applications from a more diverse student body at elite institutions. We also identified numerous interventions, policies and activities designed by the government, the regulator, sector bodies and centralised policy and admissions offices that were not as effective as hoped. These efforts were not translating into proportionally increased offers to students from disadvantaged backgrounds because they often failed to understand the use of contextual data in admissions processes and how admissions decisions are made in elite institutions. This led to our primary research question:

How do STEM admissions tutors in elite higher education institutions understand, apply, justify and evaluate the consequences of the use of contextual data in admissions decisions?

Policy recommendations from widening participation experts suggest greater use of contextual data, contextual offers and grade dropping as ways to substantially make change happen in widening participation in elite institutions, although this is made as a broad suggestion across all subjects. We were interested in exploring the use and understanding of contextual data and response to policy recommendations in STEM settings, where there are strict subject-based entry requirements and a linear curriculum building on existing knowledge. This study targets an area of high policy interest—widening participation in elite higher education institutions, in STEM fields where there is government interest in expanding student numbers and policy pressures to diversify STEM subjects and professions.

Research was undertaken in Spring 2020 amidst numerous institutional and departmental pilot projects to expand access, and tutors reflected on some of these. The Covid-19 outbreak limited data collection and led to policy changes to A level grades, student number capping and international recruitment. This has resulted in broader recommendations from this research for what has become a very precise and fine-tuned process heavily reliant on longitudinal data and statistical analysis.

Research ethics was granted and all interviewees and specific institutional affiliations have been anonymised. This interview data has been compared with institutional policies and plans (e.g. Access and Participation Plans) and data on student performance based on the use of contextual admissions

² Centre for Social Mobility. 2018. *Research into Use of Contextual Data in Admissions: Final Report to the Fair Education Alliance (FEA)*.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/543e665de4b0fbb2b140b291/t/5b4457fb70a6ade52de65f16/1531205646268/Research+into+the+use+of+contextualised+admissions+University+of+Exeter+report.pdf>

³ Powell, M. & Boliver, V. (2019). What do universities mean by 'fair' admissions? Presentation at SRHE Annual Research Conference 12 December. Newport, Wales.

(in one of the institutions). This research informs widening participation policies nationally. Within institutions, this research informs how and why contextual data is used (or not) within admissions.

Definitions and terminology

We adopt the definition of the report by the Centre for Social Mobility⁴ which states:

Contextual data is used to describe data matched to applicants (including through outreach) in order to assess an applicant's prior attainment and potential to succeed in higher education in the context of the circumstances in which their attainment has been obtained.

This view of 'contextual admissions' adopts an individualised and holistic process, as Participant 1 describes "it's the contextualizing each application in terms of the educational and social context in which somebody gained those qualifications." Similarly, 'widening participation' and 'widening participation students' are used broadly to refer to increasing access to disadvantaged students and those from areas with traditionally low participation in higher education. Our research highlights how these are not well-defined terms but instead have varied localised interpretations.

In this study, we are not conflating the use of contextual data with practices of 'contextualised offers', 'grade-dropping' or lowering standards, of which participants were vehemently opposed. This study focuses at the level where admissions decisions are made, and interchangeably uses the terms 'department' and 'college' to refer to the level where subject-based academics make decisions.

Findings and discussion

Admissions priorities

Key points

- The top priority was admitting students with the greatest potential to succeed and likely to do well on the course, drawing existing knowledge; problem-solving ability and subject passion.
- Other priorities included ensuring fair process and outcomes and achieving a balanced cohort, although meanings of these aims varied by context and participant, although these were secondary and did not necessarily mean addressing social inequalities or social justice.
- Participants were aware that it could be more difficult to identify the potential of less privileged or underrepresented applicants, and that some of the very steps taken to judge applicants' potential could also perpetuate or even exacerbate systemic inequalities.
- Although departments/institutions take steps to counter inequalities through admissions, entrenched definitions and measures of potential are likely to limit these efforts.

Recommendation: The use of contextual data should be prioritised in judging potential to eliminate gaps in entry rates across widening participation characteristics.

Tutors' main priority was to attract and admit students who would be most likely to do well and get the most out of the course. Such students are modelled on those who previously have done well on the course. From this standpoint, the main task of the admissions process is to admit applicants who show the greatest 'potential'.

Three main criteria were identified for judging an applicant's potential: existing knowledge and subject aptitude; demonstrably high attainment in relevant skills and problem-solving ability; and

⁴ Centre for Social Mobility. 2018. *Research into Use of Contextual Data in Admissions: Final Report to the Fair Education Alliance (FEA)*, p.5.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/543e665de4b0fbb2b140b291/t/5b4457fb70a6ade52de65f16/1531205646268/Research+into+the+use+of+contextualised+admissions+University+of+Exeter+report.pdf>

passion for the subject. This potential is highly attuned to the course in an elite context, as there is the expectation that students can cope in a highly competitive, fast-paced environment from the first day of the course, without any remedial teaching or additional support. Importantly, though, this construction of potential runs the risk of reproducing social inequalities, through:

- judgements based on prior attainment were said to be undermined by social inequalities in access to good education and opportunities, such as Further Maths at A level;
- more advantaged applicants would be more likely to have received interview guidance and practice, therefore potentially undermining the interview as a tool to judge innate ability, talent or potential;
- more advantaged applicants would also be likely to receive more encouragement and support in participation of extracurricular activities which would demonstrate their passion and motivation.

Another important priority in the admissions process was ensuring that the process was fair. The dominant view linked fairness with equality, drawing on two elements: consistency and transparency in decision making. Some participants emphasised a further meaning to the notion of ‘fairness’ as an admissions priority, one grounded in equity and social justice with three distinct elements. First, participants spoke about trying to contextualise the educational and other attainments of applicants, based on a recognition that educational experiences and opportunities are not equal. Second, participants acknowledged that some young people with the potential to enter these elite programmes may be held back from applying due to a feeling that they are not places for ‘people like them’. Third, some participants spoke about how they tried to change aspects of their own institution’s or department’s admissions processes that may be perpetuating or even exacerbating social inequalities and unfairness.

A third priority of admissions relates to the construction of a “balanced” cohort. This localised aspect of fairness was widely discussed by tutors, covering gender, nationality and home/international student ratios. Widening participation, using the regulator’s definition, was not mentioned by tutors as an aspect of cohort building.

Widening participation through contextualised admissions

Key points

- All participants were supportive of contextualising admissions decisions and showed awareness of issues around underrepresentation, widening participation and inequalities, and felt that they and their institutions could do something to address these issues. Most of the offers to widening participation students are contextualised in some way.
- Data is contextualised at several points from the beginning to the end of the admissions process, although it is predominantly used for marginal cases after all of the ‘best candidates’ have been selected. There is also a lot of ad hoc usage which varies according to different contexts and the individual admissions tutors.
- Tutors felt that there were limits in the extent to which they should be using their role to address inequalities. They felt there were limits to how much resource could and should be expended on contextualising applications; they were strongly against making lower grade offers to WP applicants, despite a lack of evidence that this would necessarily lower standards; and there was ambiguity about what could count as contextually relevant information, particularly for ethnicity and gender.

- Limitations of the availability and integrity of data. Tutors felt that more data should be provided in standardised ways, particularly related to data such as school performance and free school meals, which they felt had potential to be more meaningful than overall school type and postcode data.

Recommendation: Cross-sectoral efforts are needed to standardise data to inform admissions decisions, focusing on greater individual-level data and that which situates the applicant in relation to their school.

Recommendation: There should be greater transparency of the use of contextual data, for staff and students, in elite STEM admissions processes.

Ambiguity around contextually relevant characteristics

We identified eight individual ‘contexts’ that our participants said were considered at one or more of the stages of admissions decision making:

- All participants mentioned (1) education/school and (2) socioeconomic background.
- Several, but not quite all mentioned (3) care leaver status, (4) parents’ educational background and (5) postcode/area.
- One or two mentioned personal characteristics of (6) gender, (7) age or (8) disability.

We reveal ambiguity and variation in practice here. One participant described it as “really controversial as to whether you should put gender or race into contextual admissions”, explaining that they have come across difference in opinion on how we should treat such categories. Another said that they were “very concerned about the bias against women...[but] that’s not something we do anything about because of the Equalities Act, we feel we can’t.” While some participants highlighted ethnicity or race as dimensions of underrepresentation in higher education or inequality more generally, none mentioned it as a factor that they considered when making contextualised admissions. In other cases, the inequalities were more ‘local’, i.e. tied to specific disciplines, departments or colleges (linked with ‘cohort building’).

Sources of contextual data

Despite national policy interest and institutional investment in widening participation, there was a muddled view on sources of contextual data, drawing on different datasets and sources. When it came to making decisions about marginal cases and applying contextual data, participants spoke of using data to situate the student relative to their social and educational setting, including:

- information about the school and its overall quality in terms of the grades and success of its students (drawn from the Department for Education);
- postcode data (from POLAR and ACORN datasets; Output Area Classification (OAC) data)
- data on whether applicants had participated in the university’s outreach work
- whether applicants had been part of national outreach schemes, such as the Sutton Trust
- occasionally, contextual information might come also from UCAS forms, interviews, personal statements, or school references, but these were less systematic, and might be personal extenuating circumstances rather than related to widening participation issues.

Contextual flags at application

The earliest moment at which data is contextualised is the centrally administered stage of ‘flagging’ and ‘banding’ applicants with certain characteristics, although there were three criticisms:

- a lack of transparency of centralised flagging “Because I don't know what [the institution] actually does to flag, I have very little confidence in it at all...because they haven't told us what they're flagging. And it's constantly changing.” (Participant 3)
- data reliability concerns, with a noted lack of consistent longitudinal data to make comparisons; self-reported data, since this could be gamed, inaccurate or missing; and data that related to postcodes, since these were not considered to offer reliable representations of individual circumstances.
- concerns about the efficacy and outcomes of flagging systems.

Assessing and shortlisting process

Our participants explained that most applications could be sorted quite quickly into an ‘offer’ or ‘reject’ pile, based on their school performance. It is therefore in the ‘maybe’ pile that admissions staff expend the most effort and also where most of the department-level contextualisation of applications takes place. All our participants’ spoke about at least some form of additional shortlisting and assessments steps beyond the screening that takes place centrally, such as subject, course or departmental admissions tests, a department-level shortlisting/banding process and admissions interviews. We found that every stage of decision-making can, or conversely could fail to, involve taking applicants’ contextual information into account in some way.

Banding often involved highly complex formulae for weighting and categorising scores on the admissions test. In some cases, colleagues with very high-level statistical expertise were brought in to assist in the process. Students with certain characteristics were given weighted scores (with gender differences often noted, irrespective of A-level score). The resultant bands were used to invite students to interview.

After sorting most students into admit or reject piles, admissions decisions about which applicants from the ‘maybe pile’ to make offers to is a key moment for the consideration of contextual factors. Tutors acknowledged that small proportions of students are admitted based on contextual information.

Entry requirements. Most of our participants described two levels of offer that might be made to an applicant: a ‘standard’ offer (such as A*AA) and a ‘higher’ offer (A*A*A). The levels also took into account the ability to meet the offer requirements, such as an applicant’s school not offering Further Maths at A-level. Tutors stopped short of making ‘lower’ offers for widening participation applicants. The majority of our interviewees agreed with this policy, explaining that lowering grade offers for widening participation applicants might lead to a greater number of students from such backgrounds, but that it could backfire on both the student and the department if they entered the course at a lower level than other students. There was a perception amongst our interviewees that their departments were not necessarily qualified for helping students to catch up if they started the course behind their peers and the high grade requirements were in place to safeguard against that.

Limitations of the availability and integrity of data

All of our participants expressed some scepticism about the data that was available to them, mentioning issues such as:

- lack of transparency, accuracy, and consistency (across the sector) in universities’ system of flagging widening participation applicants,
- issues in the reliability of data, particularly self-reported data that could be missing or gamed,
- inadequacy of area and postcode data, which could often lead to false negatives or false positives,
- lack of detail of and weighting for data about applicants’ schools, and
- lack of consistent applicant-level data, such as Free School Meals eligibility.

There were mixed perceptions of the overall effectiveness of contextual data usage and contextual admissions practices in terms of widening participation admissions outcomes. Given the STEM background of tutors, several drew on their disciplinary background and skills when explaining their sceptical approach to reading and understanding the data, given these participants are well aware of data, analysis and its limitations. Interestingly this has prompted some autonomy, as admissions tutors find their own ways to find data or create new thresholds with data that they do have. However, such activity is largely done within the local departmental or college context and not shared more widely.

STEM identities and autonomous admissions practices

Key points

- Given the focus on STEM departments in elite institutions, our participants enact significant autonomy in the admissions process, and STEM identities influence and mediate their approach to and perceptions of admissions and contextualised data.
- This combination of elite, disciplinary-mediated, autonomous decision-making was seen to motivate and empower admissions decision makers to look beyond the surface-level of applications, which can be distorted by social/educational inequalities, and to seek out the highest-potential scientists and engineers.
- However, it also means practices can be ad hoc and variable rather than co-ordinated and puts a conservative pressure on contextualised admissions.

Recommendation: Greater coordination of evaluation and research efforts are needed across outreach, admissions, progression and outcomes at departmental, college and institutional levels as well as at subject-level nationally.

Autonomy

Autonomy was important to our interview respondents because it empowered them to take risks and find their own ways to identify those applicants with the greatest potential, with minimal oversight from more senior management. It was also important to our participants because it enabled participants to enact their STEM-specific disciplinary identities. This was seen in the strong faith in A-level results, and that these grades were a true representation of students' knowledge and that admissions tests were capturing existing knowledge, problem-solving ability and potential, even if they were devised in-house and not analysed in relation to students' subsequent experiences. The disciplinary curriculum was also seen as a fixed entity, with concern about lowering standards and students not being able to catch up with the curriculum.

With localised autonomy also comes responsibility for the consequences of decisions. It is the admissions tutors themselves, and their colleagues, who will be teaching the admitted students. "I have a real vested interest in recruiting the best students. Because ...it's my colleagues that come back to bite us" (Participant 1). We found evidence that this may be putting a conservative pressure on approaches to contextualising admissions and making offers to widening participation applicants.

Locus of responsibility

The autonomy that tutors have in admissions practices was not fully aligned with responsibilities and outcomes of their decisions, particularly in relation to institutional, regulatory and national strategies and policies. There were various qualifications and limits placed on outcomes in terms of the extent to which admissions could or should aim to overcome inequalities. For example, redressing social inequalities through admissions was described as: resource-intensive; not necessarily an official part of the remit of admissions decision makers; and to be aimed for only if it did not detract from the priority of attracting the best students. In elite institutions, it seems the local autonomy to make

admissions decisions trumps institutional policy (and by effect, national policy enacted by the regulator as well).

Admissions tutors saw senior management as the group setting targets and policies, but without seeking the expertise or experiences of those enacting the policies. “Nobody's ever spoken to me about meeting targets or what the targets are” (Participant 5). Most tutors were only vaguely aware of targets set by the regulator and many were unaware of institutional APP targets.

From the perspective of admissions tutors, different roles were performed across the institution. Senior management was seen to set targets and draft policies, but not influence admissions decision making or follow-up on targets. Central admissions staff oversaw processes of standardisation and automation and were perceived as potential gatekeepers to widening participation through such systems. Local professional services staff were widely praised for their curation and presentation of data. In some cases, they were the driving force behind efforts to broaden the use of contextual data to widen participation. And tutors saw themselves and their academic colleagues as having roles of autonomy and making academic judgements about admissions decisions.

Interestingly, contextual data was used somewhat differently at each of these (and additional) levels: Government/regulatory; institutional; subject; college; faculty; department; and sometimes course-level. This indicates the breadth of use of contextual data, but also the multiple opportunities for it to be mis-represented, mis-understood or ignored. Such practices indicate how persistent gaps in admissions rates continue despite pressures for change.

The OfS has set a target “to eliminate the gap in entry rates at higher tariff providers between the most and least represented groups” (OfS 2020). There is a major gap in the data used to identify underrepresentation at a national level and what is used in the admissions process at the highest tariff providers. The OfS primarily uses POLAR data for their targets, whilst also monitoring data based on ethnicity, age, disability and IMD. However, for admissions tutors postcode data (POLAR and IMD) was the least credible source of contextual data, and not one tutor said it would be used in isolation as a measure of disadvantage. Ethnicity is not considered in admissions, and age was used in an inverse fashion (with older students, often 19 or 20, held to a higher standard). Disability was hardly mentioned in the admissions decision-making process. This signifies a serious misalignment in addressing inequalities in elite higher education. Institutional APPs are designed based on collectively meeting the OfS targets, however these are not the metrics that are predominantly being used by admissions tutors.

Lack of policy coordination and evaluation

There were coordinating groups, both formal and informal, for admissions within the institutions, but not a clear centre of expertise or responsibility for internal coordination across the student lifecycle, particularly linking outreach, admissions and the student experience, or follow-up on the evaluation and outcomes of different practices. “But I think that data is quite thin on the ground. And the numbers have always been very small really” (Participant 2). Overall, there was a lack of data on outcomes, from the perspective of admissions tutors, with a sense that it was not clear whose role it was to follow-up and track the impact of admissions decisions. There is a disconnect between what data is used to select students and what is evaluated in widening participation.

Most tutors felt that widening participation efforts concentrated at the admissions stage were too little, too late and that more had to be done in outreach efforts. However, tutors were broadly critical of current interventions, which were seen as “well-intentioned but they just don't make any difference” (Participant 2) and “when I was going out doing outreach stuff, I think that has minimal impact” (Participant 8) and at “the wrong end of the telescope” (Participant 2) to make up for students' poor schooling. Activities focused at Year 12 were also seen as too late in the process to lead to much change. Departmental and institutional outreach initiatives were criticised for not being joined up.

Conservative ethos

The dominance of local autonomy has allowed existing practices to continue, despite acknowledgement of the need for, and in most cases, the desire for change. As one participant put it, one of their markers of a successful admissions process is if the admitted students give them “an easy life”. It may be this that is partly responsible for the majority view amongst our participants that making ‘lower’ offers to widening participation students is not appropriate. This was despite the fact that most of our participants acknowledged that widening participation students who might not have been offered a place were it not for the efforts to contextualise admission went on to do at least as well as non-widening participation counterparts, which might logically suggest that they had not yet reached the point where increased widening participation admissions were negatively affecting the course or department.

The importance of maintaining the status quo was seen through the pervasive notion throughout interviews of finding students who would be the ‘best fit’ for the existent curriculum versus broadening the notion of ‘best students’ and adapting the curriculum. “The courses really are demanding and if you were to lower the entry level, you would actually be putting disadvantaged people at even more of a disadvantage” (Participant 1).

Despite rhetoric about risk-taking, a conservative ethos pervades the discourse, even among those committed to a widening participation agenda. Many tutors felt it was much better to prevent a disadvantaged student from not succeeding on a course than giving them an opportunity to succeed. Three concerns about widening participation students, largely based on assumption rather than evidence of contextualising admissions practices leading to offers to students who then failed, drove this ethos:

- The assumption of struggle by students, even if they meet the standard offer
- Concern about students’ sense of belonging and ability to engage in the full university experience
- Concern about students needing additional support, and the importance of maintaining perceived ‘standards’ and protection from having to expend extra resource on students without the same prior knowledge and independence as others

Intersectional identities

Only three participants spoke about gender as an access or fairness issue, and only two about ‘race’/ethnicity. Mostly participants spoke of this as an issue which they personally could not do much about in their roles. Gender and ethnicity were once mentioned as being “separate access targets” but it was never mentioned how or when these would factor into the admissions process. There was a sense that for a few participants, they considered broadening the ethnic diversity of their cohorts under the umbrella of widening participation, but there were no actual mechanisms for this to happen. This seemed to be an area with responsibility devolved to outreach efforts.

Conclusion

The lack of definition of widening participation means different levels of policy and practice address different factors of disadvantage. This diffuses the impact of public and policy pressure, as well as internal desire for change, to have an impact. Low confidence in the data and the positioning of widening participation at the margins of admissions decision-making further hinders progress. The lack of joined up analysis at different levels hinders the availability of evidence of impact. The slow pace of change holds back outcome analysis as numbers, even in aggregate, are very small. The subsequent lacking evidence of success allows conservative ethos to dominate.