

Minimising the risks of unconscious bias in university admissions

2017 update on progress



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Executive summary

Social mobility and participation in higher education continues to be an area of widespread debate and scrutiny. Universities and colleges can ‘act as an engine for social mobility’¹, and it’s important all students can be confident they have an equal opportunity to access higher education, no matter what their background.

This report provides an update on the continuing efforts of the higher education sector, and UCAS as part of this sector, to minimise the risks of bias in university admissions. It provides updated analysis, drawing on the 2016 undergraduate admissions cycle, information about the extent of training of admissions professionals, and the outcomes from a number of projects which have tested the feasibility of masking information about students’ names, during the initial stages of the admissions decision-making process.

While UCAS’ analysis² suggests that broadly, admissions to university are fair, concerns were raised in 2015 about the risks of unconscious bias, particularly in relation to Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students.

UCAS’ admissions data³ shows that, among English state school 18 year olds, the Chinese ethnic group has the highest entry rate to higher education (57.9%), and the White group the lowest (28.7%). The entry rate for the Black group was 37.5%, reflecting the year-on-year growth in entry for this group, which has increased from 20.9% in 2006, a proportional increase of 79%. However, despite the positive national picture, the differences seen in offer and entry rates to individual universities, particularly higher Tariff providers, raises questions about offer-making and entry rates for Black students, in comparison to other ethnic groups at these providers.

The government asked UCAS to work with the higher education sector to explore the feasibility for introducing name-blind applications, given that this approach had yielded positive outcomes for underrepresented groups when applied to recruitment for employment. The results of this work – which included analysis of admissions data, the policies and approaches used by universities to minimise the risks of bias in the UK and internationally, and the findings of a consultation with a range of technology suppliers and over 120 universities and colleges to examine the feasibility of using a name-blind approach – were published in August 2016⁴.

The 2016 report found that universities and colleges are highly aware of the risks of unconscious bias, and employ a number of strategies to respond to this. Providers did, however, raise concerns about UCAS centrally masking students’ names prior to initial

¹ [Social Mobility Commission - Time For Change: An Assessment of Government Policies on Social Mobility 1997-2017.](#)

² www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-reports-sex-area-background-and-ethnic-group

³ [UCAS End of Cycle 2016 Report – Figure 60](#)

⁴ [UCAS – Unconscious Bias Report 2016](#)

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decision-making. These concerns included the potential adverse impacts on widening participation, relationship building with applicants, and counter-fraud and verification activities, as well as significant sector technology challenges. As a result, it was determined it would not be viable for UCAS to centrally mask names, or other information, from universities and colleges. The report also made seven recommendations for further action, including additional training for those involved in admissions, further analysis and research, and inviting universities to devise, implement, and evaluate pilot projects to test the feasibility and impact of introducing a name-blind approach at a local level.

In the 2017 entry cycle, six universities volunteered to run pilot projects to test name-blind applications. These covered a range of different kinds of universities in different parts of England, running their admissions services on different models and software systems. The subjects included medicine, sciences, humanities, and social sciences, and altogether, the project encompassed 24,000 applications.

None of the six projects produced conclusive evidence that masking applicants' names led to significantly different admissions outcomes – for example, more offers, or interviews being made to different ethnic or underrepresented groups. In two of the projects, the universities found that masking applicants' names appeared to have a negative impact on initial admissions outcomes, particularly where this prevented the linking of the application to information about involvement in widening participation programmes. Action was taken to ensure no applicants were disadvantaged. On this basis, it is unlikely that providers will wish to pursue a name-blind approach, due to the lack of benefit to the applicant.

What the projects did highlight, however, was the value of having a second check on applications – both to act as a quality assurance mechanism to ensure decisions are correct, and to minimise risks of unconscious bias in individuals. This, alongside an annual review of admissions data and outcomes, should be widely adopted as good practice.

During the year, new training materials were developed about how to address and minimise unconscious bias. These were accompanied by two training events and a number of conference presentations to admissions professionals, and those involved in admissions. To date, over 110 universities and colleges have taken part in these events, or used these resources. This work will continue through the Higher Education Liaison Officers Association (HELOA).

In terms of analysis and insight, UCAS has published a second tranche of equalities data, allowing universities to explore and benchmark their performance in offer-making and decisions on acceptance by sex, age, ethnic group, and area-based background measures. In addition, authorised researchers can now access a wealth of detailed admissions data through the Administrative Data Research Network, to explore progression and admissions issues.

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While there is no room for complacency, the work undertaken this year provides further reassurance to students that admissions are fair, and demonstrates the commitment of the higher education sector to raising awareness of, and tackling the risks of, unconscious bias in admissions.

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Introduction

In October 2015, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, raised concerns in a Guardian article about the disparity in university offer rates to black and white applicants. He noted: ‘The reasons are complex, but unconscious bias is clearly a risk’.

UCAS was asked to work with the higher education sector to explore the feasibility of introducing a name-blind application system for undergraduate admissions to higher education.

Subsequently UCAS undertook a number of pieces of work to:

- examine the undergraduate admissions market, and the latest evidence of any bias in admissions to higher education
- describe the approaches used by universities and colleges to seek to minimise the risks of bias in admissions
- look at how universities in other countries seek to minimise risks of bias in admissions
- compare university admissions with graduate recruitment practices, where there is evidence that using a name-blind approach can deliver different outcomes
- consult with the higher education sector about the feasibility of introducing name-blind applications – either with UCAS masking this information centrally until a decision is made, or using local options where universities or colleges mask names from decision-makers

The resulting findings and recommendations were published in August 2016 in our [Unconscious Bias 2016 Report](#).

The report identified key findings, which informed seven recommendations for further work and ongoing improvements. The key findings are summarised below.

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The undergraduate admissions market, and the latest evidence of any bias in admissions to higher education

Higher education providers (HEPs) are increasingly operating in a competitive market for full-time undergraduate students. The removal of student number controls in England has allowed HEPs the freedom to grow their student numbers, and falling numbers of UK 18 year olds means there is increasing competition for well qualified students. HEPs are therefore incentivised to make more offers. Equally, the imperative to recruit students with the ability to succeed reduces the likelihood of bias.

In 2015, over 1.9 million offers were made to main scheme applicants (those who applied before 30 June), marking the fourth consecutive cycle the total number of offers made has increased. 93% of main scheme applicants who made five choices, received at least one offer, and 56% of these applicants received four or five offers. Further increases were seen in the 2016 cycle, with the total number of offers being made to applicants increasing by 24,000 (1.2%), and 94% of main scheme applicants who made five choices receiving at least one offer. This has led to an increase in entry rates for learners from all backgrounds.

However, large differences in entry rates (the proportion of a population admitted to higher education) continue to persist by applicant characteristics, including ethnicity. UCAS' End of Cycle 2016 Report showed that, for English 18 year old state school pupils, the entry rate for the Black group was 37.5%, and for the White group, 28.7% – the latter having the lowest entry rate of all ethnic groups.

In 2016, UCAS published a set of equalities data for 130 of the UK's larger HEPs. This examined differences in application, offer, and acceptance rates by applicant characteristics, including ethnicity. UCAS' equalities analysis enables a comparison between the actual offer rates to different ethnic groups, and the offer rate which might be expected given applicants' predicted grades and the course(s) applied to. Observed differences between the actual offer rate for a group, and the average offer rate, represent a difference in offer-making specific to that group, which cannot be accounted for by the choices made by the group, and the strength of their predicted grades.

The results showed, while there are significant differences in observed offer levels to different groups of applicants, once we control for predicted grades and course, differences in offer rates between ethnic groups are small. This indicates the offer-making process operated by universities is broadly fair.

However, more often than not, offer rates lower than what might be expected are seen in the offers made to the Black and Asian groups. It is important to emphasise that variation in offer rates outside of what might be expected is not in itself evidence of bias. There are other factors which may be taken into account when deciding whether or not to make an offer to an applicant – for example, the subjects and subject combination of their A levels or

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other qualifications, interviews and admissions tests, and prior experience or contextual factors. These factors are not controlled for in UCAS' analysis.

In addition, universities cannot make offers if students do not apply, and UCAS' equalities data shows certain ethnic groups are more likely to apply to some HEPs than others – geographical proximity appears to be a major factor.

Approaches used by universities and colleges to seek to minimise the risks of bias in admissions

UCAS' survey⁵ showed HEPs were very aware of the risks unconscious bias could pose to fair admissions, and were employing a range of measures to minimise these. Examples of activities include the consistent application of HEPs' admissions policies, use of predefined selection criteria, cross-checking of decisions, staff training related to equality, diversity, and unconscious bias, and the use of contextual data.

How universities in other countries seek to minimise risks of bias in admissions

The kinds of practices used in the UK are mirrored internationally. For example, the University of California employs a system where there is mandatory annual training for all staff and reviewers involved in admissions, including on unconscious bias, and all applications are considered by at least two people. However, UCAS did not find any examples of universities outside the UK using a name-blind approach to admissions.

How university admissions compare with graduate recruitment practices

Name-blind recruitment has been shown to deliver positive results in an employment context. Research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions⁶ found that applicants with typically white British names were more likely to be shortlisted for jobs than those with names associated with minority ethnic backgrounds. Employers such as the BBC, Deloitte, KPMG, and HSBC are introducing the use of name-blind recruitment practices to minimise the risk of unconscious bias.

However, there are significant differences between recruitment for employment, and admissions to higher education. For example, employee recruitment is usually focused on a single vacancy, or a small number of vacancies. It is a highly competitive process between individuals. Where there is competition among HE applicants, this is typically for one of a large number of places. Equally, employee recruitment and student recruitment are subject to different legal considerations, with students viewed as consumers by the Competition and Markets Authority. However, student recruitment and employee recruitment are both subject to the Equality Act.

⁵ www.ucas.com/file/74801/download?token=M80wi05k

⁶ Wood M et al. (2009) A test for racial discrimination in recruitment practice in British Cities, Department for Work and Pensions

Consultation with the higher education sector about the feasibility of introducing name-blind applications – either with UCAS masking this information centrally until a decision is made, or using local options where universities or colleges mask names from decision-makers

UCAS surveyed HEPs, and engaged with the technology companies that facilitate the transfer of information between organisations, and offer student records systems, about introducing a name-blind approach.

In their feedback, HEPs expressed concern that, if UCAS was to mask names centrally, this could affect their ability to develop and maintain relationships with prospective students, hamper verification activities, and undermine efforts to widen participation. It was concluded it was not viable for UCAS to centrally mask information from HEPs.

A localised approach to masking information was preferred. This would enable applicant communications, verification, and widening participation support activities to operate effectively, while withholding names from those individuals involved in admissions decision-making. However, as with a central solution, it's also likely there would be significant technology challenges for vendors and the sector, which would need to be factored into any benefits assessment.

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Progress against the recommendations made in the Unconscious Bias 2016 Report

Based on the evidence-gathering work and conversations with HEPs, technology providers, and stakeholders, UCAS agreed seven recommendations. These were to develop the evidence base around unconscious bias in admissions, promote good practice, and encourage HEPs to undertake name-blind admissions projects to better understand its applicability and potential use in admissions. The recommendations were as follows:

- Recommendation one: HEPs should run name-blind admissions decision-making projects at a local level
- Recommendation two: Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) should take the lead on the development of good practice and enhancement of unconscious bias training for those involved in admissions
- Recommendation three: HEPs should regularly monitor and review their admissions data and address any unexplained differences in offer-making or admissions outcomes
- Recommendation four: HEPs could consider introducing a review of applications marked for rejection
- Recommendation five: There should be further research into understanding if there is bias in HE admissions
- Recommendation six: UCAS should improve support for HEPs using contextualised admissions
- Recommendation seven: Those responsible for fair access and widening participation should consider what further actions could be taken

The progress on these recommendations is outlined below.

Recommendation one: HEPs should run name-blind admissions decision-making projects at a local level

UCAS invited HEPs to devise and evaluate pilot projects to test the feasibility and impact of introducing a name-blind approach at a local level. Six universities volunteered to participate in these projects:

- University of Exeter
- University of Huddersfield
- University of Leeds
- University of Liverpool
- University of Manchester
- University of Winchester

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The participating universities were geographically dispersed, and included a mix of providers who operated centralised, decentralised, and mixed economy admissions processes (often dependent on the course). Full-time undergraduate intake ranged from 4,000 to 6,000, and applications received from 12,000 to 41,000.

The scope, design, and methodology of projects was entirely at the discretion of the participating university. Courses selected for the projects included some which were interview only, and covered a range of subject areas, including physics, business management, primary education, and law.

As a minimum, providers included in their projects all applications received before the 15 January deadline. In some instances, the projects included all applications received until the 30 June deadline.

Overview of projects

An outline of each project can be found below.

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Project A	Courses	Number of applicants
<p>Project A took place at a provider that has a mixed admissions model – some courses rely on centralised offer-making, based on criteria provided by academic staff, and some have all applications passed to academic staff for consideration.</p> <p>The provider developed a computer algorithm based on certain criteria and qualifications being studied, to suggest applicants who could be made a standard offer. The automation of the process removed any visibility of the name. The applications were then cross-checked manually before offers were transmitted to UCAS. The cost of development was approximately £10,000.</p> <p>Those applicants who ‘fell through’ the algorithm – i.e. did not match the specified criteria and qualifications – were then reviewed by staff in the student recruitment team, against the criteria set by academic staff.</p>	<p>141 courses across a range of different subject areas, including business, computing, English, and history.</p>	<p>9,000</p>
<p>Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A total of 3,214 offers were made to applicants using the algorithm. On checking, each of these offers would have been made under a named system. • The provider did not observe any difference in the composition of applicants who were made offers as a result of introducing the algorithm. • The project suggested that, in certain circumstances, a more automated system could be implemented to support the admissions function. While this led to a reduction in resource required, staff were still required to review qualifications and applications that did not match the criteria in the algorithm. 		

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Project B	Courses	Number of applicants
<p>Project B took place at a provider with a centralised admissions structure.</p> <p>The project masked the following data received from UCAS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • forename(s) • surname • previous surname • preferred first name • home email address • contact email address • nominated name • nominated relationship • names in the body of the application reference <p>Following the assessment of an application, the applicant is graded 1 – 3. Applicants graded 1 and 2 have showed potential to be a teacher, whereas those graded 3 are unsuccessful. This assessment is based on both academic and non-academic requirements. Providing an applicant meets, or could meet, the minimum requirement, the application is referred to an academic tutor, who decides whether to shortlist for interview.</p> <p>The implementation of a technical solution cost £3,660.</p>	<p>Health and social care studies</p> <p>Primary education</p>	<p>870</p>
<p>Findings</p>		

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- The provider changed admissions processes between 2016 and 2017, as a result of under-recruiting against National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) targets.
- 866 applications were received for primary education in 2017, compared to 980 in 2016. Overall, there was no significant difference in the number of individuals shortlisted in the 2016 and 2017 cycle, with 80.71%, and 83.49% of applicants shortlisted respectively.
- Reduced offer rates were observed in male applicants and applicants over 21 years of age (both male and female, although the difference is widest for mature male applicants).

Project C	Courses	Number of applicants
<p>Project C was undertaken at a provider that has a fully centralised system for undergraduate, postgraduate taught, and PGCE programmes. Interview decisions (where there is a requirement) are made by the academic staff who conduct the interviews.</p> <p>For the project, the provider removed the name, title, age, gender, and disability from the application electronically.</p> <p>The first administrator would review a name-blind application, and log the decision in line with their standard criteria. This decision was then passed to a second administrator, who would input the decision into the university's system.</p> <p>Offer rates were compared to previous years.</p>	<p>Business management</p> <p>Physics</p>	<p>2,650</p>
<p>Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The total number of offers made to candidates in the 2017 entry cycle declined by 1.25% for physics courses, and 6.4% for business management courses. However, this was linked to a decline in demand for these courses, as opposed to the name-blind process. 		

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- The provider observed no difference in the offer rates made to specific cohorts of applicants, compared to previous years. All offers were made in line with the advertised entry requirements.
- Processing decisions using the name-blind methodology increased the resource required to process decisions. If the methodology was to be rolled out further, a technical solution would need to be found.

Project D	Courses	Number of applicants
<p>Project D took place at a provider that operates centralised admissions for non-clinical undergraduate programmes, with admissions officers applying academic decision-making criteria that are agreed annually.</p> <p>The provider restricted the information available to admissions officers to the UCAS Personal ID, course code/title, point of entry, age on entry, application date, late application indicator, and qualification information. This meant associated information, such as whether the applicant had been part of a widening participation programme, was also excluded. Reporting software was used to extract data items from the student records system, without names or other personal information being displayed.</p> <p>Project D considered both masked and named versions in parallel. The admissions officers working on the project did not process the named versions. The outcomes of these two processes were compared.</p> <p>Admissions officers compared the name-blind and live decisions to identify matches and discrepancies, drilling into the latter.</p>	<p>Law</p> <p>History</p> <p>Physics</p>	<p>4,000</p>
<p>Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of the 3,898 applications reviewed, 90.8% of decisions matched, with variation depending on the subject area. 		

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- There were 336 discrepancies. On examination of the discrepancies, the reason for a name-blind decision not matching a live decision can be categorised into three main groups: information not available on the name-blind application, admissions officer error, and misinterpretation of decision-making criteria.
- Around a third of these discrepancies can be accounted for by information available on the application that was not visible due to the masking. This included information on participation on a recognised widening participation programme, or declared time spent in local authority care, which would typically lead to a reduced offer. But the name-blind offer was at the standard level.
- However, around two thirds of discrepancies were a result of an error by the admissions officer, or as a result of misinterpreting the assessment criteria. Errors were mainly differences in how offers were made, for example, not making dual offers where applicants were taking a combination of qualifications, and did not necessarily result in a different outcome for the applicant (offer or unsuccessful decision). Errors were more likely when an officer was managing an unfamiliar subject. Where errors were identified in the project in live processing, these decisions were corrected where it did not disadvantage the applicant.
- The remaining discrepancies were as a result of the applicant withdrawing from the process.

Project E	Courses	Number of applicants
<p>Project E took place in a medical school. Admissions decision-making is decentralised. As with the majority of medical schools, admissions tests such as UKCAT are used in the process.</p> <p>The application process in the medical school is threshold-based on pre-determined rules. The process is semi-automated, and there is no academic flexibility. The name of a candidate is not visible at this point. The project did not mask fields in the UCAS application, because it is not normally used in selection – fields from the application are imported individually into offline systems.</p> <p>The medical school also supplements the personal statement with an online questionnaire. Questions focus on an applicant’s work experience, motivations, and interests. For the 2017 entry cycle, an applicant’s name was not visible to academic staff. A technical change was implemented to ensure the</p>	Medicine	2,100

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name was not imported into the offline system, and therefore not viewed as part of the pre-interview assessment.		
Findings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The provider did not observe any statistically significant differences in interview offer levels to specific cohorts of applicants as a result of adopting a name-blind approach. • There was a small increase in the resource required to process admissions decisions. • The provider observed that the name often appeared at a number of different points throughout the application process, not just in data supplied by UCAS. 		

Project F	Courses	Number of applicants
<p>Project F took place at a provider where undergraduate admissions are managed in faculties, with communications to and from UCAS coordinated by a team.</p> <p>As part of an existing IT project, functionality was added to enable name-blind assessment until the primary decision point. In schools that made offers directly following receipt of the UCAS application, this was a committed decision to make an offer, or reject the applicant. For schools that used interviews as part of the offer-making process, the application was kept name-blind until the decision had been made to invite the applicant for interview. The name was removed from all persons assessing the application, including professional admissions staff, and academic admissions tutors.</p> <p>A dictionary was developed to remove names, and associated names, from the reference. For example, if the applicant's name is 'Benjamin', they may be referred to as 'Ben' in the reference. However, this</p>	<p>Mathematics</p> <p>Chemistry</p> <p>Physics</p>	4,500

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failed on occasion, for example, where international applicants had a preferred or western name that did not link to the name listed in the legal or preferred name fields.		
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Findings

- The provider did not observe any differences in the type of applicant receiving an offer as a result of their names being removed. The provider encountered challenges when seeking to link application data with their own datasets and/or correspondence. This affected the provider’s capacity to consider contextual information collected in-house, alongside that declared on the UCAS application form. Initially, this affected such applicants’ likelihood of receiving an offer.

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Findings

The pilot projects took place at a variety of HEPs, and examined the impact of name-blind applications on both invitation to interview, and offer-making. None produced conclusive evidence that masking applicants' names leads to a significantly different admissions outcome – for example, more offers or interviews being made to different ethnic or underrepresented groups.

In two cases, masking applicants' names had a negative impact on initial admissions outcomes. In one project, the lack of a name meant it was not possible to identify or verify which applicants had taken part in a recognised widening participation programme, or had been in care, initially preventing these applicants from receiving special consideration and additional support. In the other, there were indications of lower offer rates to mature and male applicants. Actions were taken by both universities to ensure individual applicants were not disadvantaged.

This indicates there is value in a provider having access to an applicant's name to allow for internal and external data linkage, and to allow for the development of a relationship with the applicant to aid transition.

The projects employed a range of technical and non-technical solutions to deliver the name-blind functionality. In almost every project, this resulted in an increased cost to maintain current levels of service. This suggests that introducing a provider-wide name-blind process could incur significant cost, which may be difficult to justify given the lack of evidence about its value in widening participation and access.

What the projects do highlight is that double-checking of decisions can act as a quality assurance mechanism to ensure decisions are correct. This is explored further in recommendation four.

Recommendation two: SPA should take the lead on the development of good practice and enhancement of unconscious bias training for those involved in admissions

During 2016/17, actions included:

- creation of an online toolkit module to aid HEP training in unconscious bias. 188 practitioners have completed this toolkit
- development of [toolkit materials](#) for HEPs to use as part of their own internal training
- production of an [instructional video on unconscious bias, hosted on YouTube](#). To date, this has been viewed over 850 times
- two events on unconscious bias: one in London and one in Manchester. On average, over 90% of delegates found the event useful or very useful.

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Feedback was positive, with many participants stating they would use what they had learned to develop internal training, or to discuss with senior managers to investigate further action. In addition to these bespoke workshops, sessions were held at the UCAS Annual Admissions Conference, Higher Education Liaison Officers Association (HELOA) national conference, and AUA national conference. In total, over 80 higher education providers had representatives at SPA-led workshops on unconscious bias, with many sending multiple members of staff from across the provider

All this work complemented the [existing good practice produced by SPA in this area](#).

To date, over 110 higher education providers have engaged with resources on unconscious bias.

Although UCAS has subsequently taken a decision to withdraw funding from the SPA programme, all the resources on minimising the risks of unconscious bias remain available online, and will continue to do so.

HELOA is now looking at how it can take this work forward in the context of student recruitment. As part of this, HELOA aim to convene a sector-wide working group and UCAS will continue to support HELOA with this work. In addition, the Social Mobility Advisory Group has encouraged providers to consider the introduction of unconscious bias training for staff involved in admissions.

Recommendation three: HEPs should regularly monitor and review their admissions data, and address any unexplained differences in offer-making or admissions outcomes

It is widely considered to be good practice for HEPs to regularly review their admissions data, to evaluate the efficacy of their admissions policies and procedures, and to ensure they remain fair and consistent. Good practice on monitoring and using admissions data to evaluate the fairness of admissions policies and criteria in the context of progression, retention, and outcome strategies is [available online](#) for use by practitioners, and HEPs are encouraged to engage with these resources.

In addition to the recommendation made in the Unconscious Bias 2016 Report, the Social Mobility Advisory Group recommended that HEPS ‘scrutinise their admissions, retention, attainment, transition to postgraduate study, and graduate employment data to identify where there may be gaps – particularly in relation to race, socio-economic status, gender, or disability – and explore how these gaps can be addressed⁷’. To this end, UCAS supplies the Group with a range of data that allows

⁷ Working in Partnership: Enabling Social Mobility in Higher Education: The final report of the Social Mobility Advisory Group. Recommendation 14.

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them to analyse their own performance, and benchmark that against other providers.

For example, each cycle, UCAS provides HEPs with a range of data about their applicant cohort, including a comprehensive, provider-specific extract from our EXACT⁸ service. We encourage HEPs to analyse and interrogate this data to understand their cohort better, assess the impact of any changes that may have been introduced, and offer support in interpreting the data.

In addition, as outlined above, UCAS publishes an annual equalities data release. These reports include data on the number of applications, offers, and acceptances from UK-domiciled students by sex, ethnic group, and area background (POLAR3 and SIMD quintile for providers in Scotland).

The sector has welcomed the publication of the UCAS equalities release, and the additional context the data provides – both through understanding the expected offer rates of a particular cohort of learners, and being able to benchmark themselves against other providers. A number of providers have used the data to conduct self-assessments of their practices, and identify areas where further investigation may be required.

Recommendation four: HEPs could consider introducing a review of applications marked for rejection

As noted in our Unconscious Bias 2016 Report, at its simplest, initial admissions decision-making resolves applications into one of three groups: those to whom the university wishes to make an offer, those whose applications are rejected, and those whose applications require further consideration. Eventually, all applications result in either an offer or a rejection.

While many HEPs will have processes in place for double-checking application decisions, this process is not universal across the sector. Having applications reviewed independently by multiple members of staff helps minimise the risk of bias. Equally, having processes in place to ensure applications from applicants with specific characteristics – such as being in care, or from a POLAR3 quintile 1 or 2 area – are also reviewed by specialist staff, can help enhance a provider's efforts in widening participation.

⁸ EXACT is a service that can create new data sets to a particular specification. It is based around a growing set of over 90 variables, covering applicants and provision from our published datasets. Statistics including number of applicants, applications, offers, replies, and acceptances, can be requested for the chosen specification. Data from EXACT is aggregated and anonymised, and can be supplied in a number of different file formats.

Case study: University of Bath

Since the centralisation of admissions activity in 2010, the University of Bath has employed a uniformly thorough process for reviewing applications. All admissions decisions are independently assessed by two trained admissions practitioners, to ensure any risk of conscious or unconscious bias is removed. They work to a set of criteria agreed on an annual basis with the relevant subject discipline. Where admissions staff have made conflicting decisions, consideration is escalated to a senior manager for final decision.

Where the applicant presents an agreed contextual flag, such as being in care, the application is also referred to the Admissions Progression Team for further consideration. This additional step to the process has contributed to an increase in POLAR3 quintile 1 applicants placed at the university, and has informed the development of additional contextual flagging of applicants, and targets for the Access Agreement.

These processes can also offer an important quality assurance mechanism. As seen in some of the name-blind admissions projects, disparities between decisions can often be explained due to misinterpretation of admissions criteria, or genuine human error. Introducing a review of decisions minimises the risk of error.

When a mistake does occur, we would encourage universities and colleges to follow [good practice guidance on managing mistakes](#).

Recommendation five: There should be further research into understanding if there is bias in HE admissions

Evidence-based decision-making is at the heart of fair admissions. UCAS supports this through our published analysis and research, as well as our equalities data release, and data supplied to providers. To date, all analysis conducted by UCAS has indicated there is no evidence of systemic bias in the admissions process.

The continued enhancement of our own releases, such as the introduction of the Multiple Equality Measure (MEM), allows us to further understand how different types of learner progress to HE. MEM brings together information on several equality dimensions, for which large differences in the probability of progression to higher education exist – including sex, geography, ethnic group, secondary education sector, and income background – and combines their effects into a single measure. This allows for multiple dimensions of equality to be considered simultaneously, and avoids the challenges associated with the use of single measures that may lead to ‘blind spots’.

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UCAS makes a range of data available to allow third parties to conduct their own research and analysis. We have made over three million data points freely available on ucas.com in an open data format. This is the most extensive and timely programme of public benefit releases within the sector.

To support the research community, in October 2016, UCAS placed nine years of admissions data with the Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN). This allows verified researchers to access individual-level data, and link to other datasets (such as the National Pupil Database), to undertake research into progression and admissions to higher education.

Recommendation six: UCAS should improve support for HEPs using contextualised admissions

The Schwartz Review in 2004 established a set of principles for fair admissions, including the concept of contextualised admissions, which has since become a persistent feature of the widening participation debate – for example, the Social Mobility Advisory Group, Commission on Widening Access, and Sutton Trust have all advocated this in the last year. Moreover, the government’s guidance to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) includes explicit endorsement of the use of contextual data, and OFFA permits contextual data as permitted outreach spending.

During 2016 and 2017, UCAS hosted a number of workshops and discussions to explore how support for contextual admissions could be improved. For the 2018 admissions cycle, we will be working with a small number of universities to test the feasibility of using a novel means of contextualising admissions, using our Multiple Equality Measure (MEM).

This pilot will run alongside UCAS’ existing [contextual data service](#), which provides data about an applicant’s school or college, and local area.

UCAS has also undertaken activities to improve the understanding of contextualised admissions among students and advisers, as well as raising the profile of the current service. To this end, we produced a [factsheet](#) in conjunction with the Fair Education Alliance (FEA), to explain what contextualised admissions might mean for students’ applications. This is in addition to the new [contextualised admissions content](#) on ucas.com, and workshops held at our teachers’ and advisers’ conferences.

Recommendation seven: Those responsible for fair access and widening participation should consider what further actions could be taken

In our previous report, we invited those responsible for the regulation of HE to consider whether there would be value in establishing a requirement for regular training on unconscious bias, for those involved in admissions decision-making. Since

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the publication of this report, the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) has launched a consultation on a future UK quality code. UCAS invites the UKSCQA, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and the wider HE sector to consider what role training in unconscious bias could play in the revised quality code. Equally, the Office for Students may also wish to consider how such training could form part of access agreements in the future.

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Conclusions and next steps

As highlighted in the 2016 report, universities and colleges are highly aware of the risks unconscious bias poses to effective and fair admissions decision-making, and they employ a variety of strategies and processes to minimise this. UCAS' January 2017 equalities data release continues to show that broadly, university admissions are fair.

The work undertaken during the last year demonstrates where there is the potential for good practice and training to be embedded further. While the six name-blind pilot projects did not provide evidence that masking applicants' names leads to different admissions outcomes, they did highlight the importance of being able to use an applicant's name as a means to connect to other information, allow consideration of individual circumstances, and offer extra support. The pilots also highlighted the value of having a second person consider admissions decisions, to minimise risks of bias, and act as a quality assurance mechanism.

The last year has also seen the development of good practice training, toolkits, and resources, to help admissions teams and those involved in admissions decision-making recognise the risks of unconscious bias, and take active steps to minimise this. It is positive that over 110 providers have already used this material, and we would encourage all to do so. We will continue to ensure all the resources developed by SPA are freely available online, and promoted through our events and newsletters. We will also support HELOA's ongoing efforts to provide training and resources.

We will continue to support the efforts of the sector through the provision of contextual data services, the publication of the annual equalities dataset, and the deposition of data with the Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN). In particular, the equalities dataset makes a significant contribution towards the new transparency duty set out in the Higher Education and Research Act (2017).

It is recognised good practice for HEPs to have an annual review of their admissions processes, in an effort to minimise any potential risk of bias throughout the application process, and ensure there are sufficient quality assurance mechanisms in place. We will engage with the QAA and UKSCQA to draw attention to this work, and how it can continue to be supported.

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