



## SPA report: The existing evidence base and considerations for 'name-blind' applications to higher education

December 2015

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### Executive summary

#### *Purpose and scope*

1. The Government's proposals within the BIS Green Paper and in a Guardian article by the Prime Minister suggested that UCAS should consult with the sector on the feasibility of implementing so-called 'name-blind' applications from 2017. The suggestion from Government is that this approach may reduce the risk of unconscious bias in admissions decisions, particularly with regard to an applicant's ethnicity. This proposal came alongside announcements that several large graduate employers had pledged to implement 'name-blind' staff recruitment.
2. 'Name-blind' in the Government proposals refers to removing the applicant's name from the application before the HE provider does an initial 'sift' and/or makes an initial decision on any application, such as invitation to interview or make an offer/rejection.
3. Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences.
4. As the UK's independent programme for good practice in higher education admissions, [Supporting Professionalism in Admissions](#) (SPA) has prepared this report in response to a request from UCAS and demand from higher education providers and other organisations, to support senior managers and admissions practitioners when considering their response to the [UCAS survey](#) and the [BIS Green Paper](#).
5. Given the time constraints, this report is not exhaustive, but aims to provide stakeholders with a good starting point from which to develop their thinking around this issue. We have considered relevant evidence, both from academic research and existing practice, on 'name-blind' applications and the wider context, and set out in some detail the implications of withholding an applicant's name throughout various stages of the 'applicant experience'.

#### *Summary of key findings from the evidence base*

- **In this paper we consider the issue of unconscious bias in admissions to higher education in the UK, and provide a summary of the key differences between staff recruitment and student recruitment.** We urge caution when applying parallels between the two and highlight several key differences: unlike student recruitment, staff recruitment usually selects for a single, or very small number of vacancies. Whereas an interview tends to be the

final stage of the staff recruitment process, this is not the case in student recruitment where an interview (if held) makes up one element of the holistic assessment of an applicant. Employers usually have human resource departments who administer the initial stages of staff recruitment, for example filtering applications. Admissions professionals may often undertake both the initial stages of applicant selection, filtering applications in the first instance, and the subsequent stages including offer-making. In addition, the legal considerations for staff and student recruitment are significantly different.

- **We present a short literature review and a sample of the research and evidence on ‘name-blind’ application for employment.** We find that there is a body of evidence that points towards the existence of bias in recruitment practices – both in terms of disadvantaging applicants based on their ethnicity and on their gender. Evidence also suggests that while anonymising applications is likely to limit discrimination where it already occurs, it cannot in and of itself resolve discrimination. Furthermore, some evidence highlights that anonymising applications may have unintended consequences – such as reducing the likelihood of certain applicants receiving a ‘call-back’. In an anonymised process contextual factors cannot easily be taken into account, and corresponding positive action be taken.
- **We summarise evidence on participation in higher education by ethnic group, and in particular offer-making to ethnic minority students.** Evidence shows participation in higher education by ethnic minority groups continues to rise, but the overarching progress masks variations between different ethnic groups, subjects and institutions which cannot wholly be explained by attainment gaps. Evidence also points towards small differences in offer-making patterns for white and ethnic minority applicants which, again, appear not to be wholly explained by differences in attainment or other contextual factors.
- **We present a short literature review on ‘name-blind’ approaches to application to higher education.** SPA was not able to identify research that investigated the extent to which higher education admissions is specifically at risk of biased practices with regard to applicants’ names, or any evidence of the prevalence of this issue. We also find that there is little recent evidence of a ‘name-blind’ approach being piloted, successfully or otherwise. However, a 1995 trial at Leeds medical school established that anonymising application forms was largely ineffective; even when names are removed, it may be possible for admissions selectors to infer ethnicity from other areas of the application form. Furthermore, even when application forms were successfully anonymised at Leeds medical school, the lack of difference between open and blinded overall scores suggested that disadvantage did not result from direct discrimination by selectors. The researchers suggested that anonymising application forms may be burdensome for staff within higher education providers, unless this is administered at a national level, through UCAS.
- According to other research, in the case of social class, direct discrimination on the basis of names is not considered by the researcher as a ‘convincing explanation’ for differential offer rates, so caution should be applied when considering whether discrimination based on names is an explanation for differential offers between ethnicities. The researcher finds that there are many other elements on an application form which may provide ‘clues’ as to an applicant’s ethnicity – for example, the school attended, subjects studied, home address, interests and personal beliefs expressed in a personal statement and teacher reference. The researcher concludes that editing out all ‘clues’ of ethnicity risks losing evidence of an applicant’s personal attributes and so may serve to disadvantage these individuals.
- SPA has also identified arguments by academics that suggest withholding an applicant’s name is not enough to rule out unconscious bias in admissions, and other factors such as applicants’ personal statements are more likely to be a risk area.

## ***Analysis of the impact of withholding an applicant's name on the applicant experience***

SPA has undertaken a broad mapping exercise which identifies where an applicant's name – or 'clues' towards it – might appear or be used by HE providers during the [applicant experience](#). We have identified a significant number of areas, as outlined in the table below.

### **Where an applicant's name – or 'clues' towards it – might appear or be used by HE providers during the applicant experience:**

- During the targeting, marketing, administration, and monitoring of outreach and student recruitment activities.
- Within information received by HE providers during an applicant's initial research/decision-making – for example requests for prospectuses and other materials, registration for open day or other events, and in enquiries over the phone, in person, via email and social media.
- During the administration of some admissions tests (where these are not already 'name-blind').
- On the UCAS application in the following places (the same may apply on providers' direct applications):
  - name
  - email address
  - reference (where a referee may refer to the student by name)
  - nominated person to act on applicant's behalf (for example a parent's name)
  - name given if requesting further information from passport, qualifications, or Unique Learner Number
  - information included in the personal statement (for example, a URL to an applicant's blog or online portfolio of work, mention of a prize win)
- In applicant enquiries relating to their application.
- In responses to HE providers' enquiries relating to missing information, e.g. qualifications.
- In applicant portfolio work or additional written work.
- In information about disability or support needs.
- In other requirements, e.g. admissions tests or interviews.
- In visa arrangements for applicants attending interviews or verifying an individual's identity for videoconferencing interviews.
- During the administration of interviews or post-application visits to providers.
- During interviews and visits themselves.
- In post-application enquiries, feedback and complaints.
- During communications in Confirmation and Clearing.
- In CRM communications e.g. offer letters (contracts) and booklets.
- In joining/enrolment instructions.
- In communications about student support and transition arrangements, e.g. regarding accommodation.

- In addition, we have identified the possible impact of removing the name (or clues towards it) during the applicant experience. We identify overarching possible benefits, including that the risk of unconscious bias based on an individual's name, where it might exist, would be removed. It may also be the case that applicants are more likely to disclose their support needs on their application if, initially, this is not linked to their name.

- However, we also identify a number of risks and implementation issues related to ‘name-blind’ applications. In summary these include:
  - a) The potential for making mistakes in offer-making may be higher without a name to refer to (see also (c) below).
  - b) Identity checks and verification, e.g. with regard to qualifications and visas, may be more challenging in a ‘name-blind’ environment.
  - c) Compliance with consumer protection legislation where a name is not used, for example in any communications that are considered contractually binding, may be problematic and warrants further consideration.
  - d) There is a clear impact of removing an applicant’s name on engagement with applicants – the perceived ‘friendliness’ and personalisation of written communications and other interactions. As well as being a marketing concern in a broad sense, this may be particularly of concern for HE providers seeking to engage with potential students from widening participation backgrounds who may already be less confident about higher education.
  - e) As an overarching point, it seems unfeasible that applicants themselves will not use their names in the interactions they initiate.
  - f) While much contextual information is not linked to an individual’s name, identifying whether an applicant has previously taken part in an HE provider’s outreach activities would be more difficult in a ‘name-blind’ environment. It could be to the applicant’s disadvantage if their involvement and success in the outreach activities was not considered as part of the holistic assessment.

### **Next steps**

We hope this paper provides a useful starting point for HE providers to consider their position on ‘name-blind’ applications and to:

- Initiate internal discussions about the feasibility and desirability of introducing ‘name-blind’ applications.
- Support colleagues in their continued enhancement of professionalism and to review their strategies for minimising the risk of unconscious bias and illegal discrimination in admissions.

We encourage colleagues to respond to the [UCAS survey](#).

In addition we would encourage colleagues to get in touch with SPA with any research, intelligence or good practice you have or are aware of in this area that may be of wider benefit to the sector. Please feel free to contact SPA if you have any questions or comments about this paper [enquiries@spa.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@spa.ac.uk).

## 1. Introduction

So-called 'name-blind' applications to higher education have been the focus of considerable and renewed attention since the Prime Minister announced<sup>1</sup> on 26 October 2015 that a range of organisations will pledge to recruit on a 'name-blind' basis to address discrimination. In a wide-ranging article for the Guardian<sup>2</sup>, the Prime Minister referred to 'quieter and more subtle discrimination' and the 'disappointment of not getting your first choice university place'.

The article alluded to research from one academic, Dr Vikki Boliver,<sup>3,4</sup> in which she shows that British ethnic minority applicants to highly selective universities are less likely to be offered places than white British applicants. The Guardian article states, 'The reasons are complex, but unconscious bias is clearly a risk', and the Prime Minister went on to propose that UCAS should ensure applications passed on to higher education providers should be 'name-blind' from 2017.

SPA is not aware of any evidence which demonstrates higher education admissions as specifically at risk of biased practices with regard to applicants' names. 'Name-blind' is clearly one possible approach to addressing the risk of unconscious bias leading to discrimination based on race and a wider range of protected characteristics including gender. However, it is important to consider the wider implications surrounding this risk in order to reach an informed, constructive decision on whether or not 'name-blind' constitutes a sufficient response. 'Name-blind' should not be considered in isolation: HE admissions is a highly involved and increasingly complex process and HE professionals take the role they play across the entire [applicant experience](#) very seriously. That experience is not limited to the selection process alone, so any solution needs to be mindful of the impact on, and any unintended consequences for, the entire process.

In the November 2015 higher education Green Paper<sup>5</sup> in England *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* the Government reasserted its aim to double the percentage of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education by 2020, compared to 2009, and increase the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students going into higher education by 20% by 2020. The Green Paper made specific reference to 'name-blind' applications, stating:

"...UCAS is consulting with the sector on the implementation of name blind applications to higher education. This will help to ensure that everyone – from whatever background – is treated equally when they apply to higher education. UCAS will be consulting with the sector on the feasibility of introducing name blind applications from September 2017. This will mean that an applicant's name would be hidden until such time as it needs to be revealed, for example to invite to interview."

It is important to note that the question relating to ethnic origin completed by applicants in the UCAS application (in Apply) is provided to HE providers only **after** the applicant has been

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<sup>1</sup> See: [www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-time-to-end-discrimination-and-finish-the-fight-for-real-equality](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-time-to-end-discrimination-and-finish-the-fight-for-real-equality) accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See: [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/26/david-cameron-conservatives-party-of-equality](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/26/david-cameron-conservatives-party-of-equality) accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.dur.ac.uk/resources/profiles/9700/Areuniversityadmissionsfair.pdf](http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/profiles/9700/Areuniversityadmissionsfair.pdf) accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The Prime Minister's article alludes to Boliver's research only. In the evidence base section of this SPA report we present evidence from several researchers whose interpretations lead to a range of different conclusions.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/higher-education-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice> accessed 26 November 2015.

unconditionally accepted and has a firm place on the course ('UF' in UCAS terms) and the application process is complete.

This means that for direct discrimination on the basis of an applicant's ethnicity to operate, their ethnicity would have to be deduced by other means. The suggestion is that an applicant's name is used by admissions selectors as an indicator of their ethnicity.

The 2014 UCAS End of Cycle report<sup>6</sup> showed that entry rates to higher education for young students from black and ethnic minority groups have increased since 2006. The entry rate for English 18 year old state school students recorded in the black ethnic group has increased from 20.9% in 2006 to 34.3% in 2014, a proportional increase of 64%.

UCAS has agreed<sup>7</sup> that it will consult with those HE providers that use its undergraduate admissions service on the Government's proposal, as well as on a range of other changes as part of the wider redevelopment of their application management service.

As the UK's independent programme for good practice in higher education admissions, [Supporting Professionalism in Admissions](#) (SPA) has prepared this report in response to a request from UCAS and demand from HE providers and other organisations to support senior managers and admissions practitioners when considering their response to the UCAS consultation survey and BIS Green Paper.

SPA reports to a national independent steering group, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Winchester, Professor Joy Carter. This group shapes SPA's work in providing services and support for staff in HE providers responsible for managing the recruitment, selection and admission of students to higher education.

SPA promotes fair admissions and access to higher education in the UK by developing and leading on good practice in this area. The principles of fair admissions SPA promotes are those identified by a Government initiated independent group reviewing admissions to higher education, in the report [Fair admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for good practice](#). This was published in 2004, and known as the Schwartz Report, as it was chaired by Professor Steven Schwartz.

A fair admissions system should:

- be transparent
- enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course, as judged by their achievements and their potential
- strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
- seek to minimise barriers for applicants
- be professional in every aspect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.

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<sup>6</sup>See: [www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2014-ucas-end-of-cycle-report-v2.pdf](http://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2014-ucas-end-of-cycle-report-v2.pdf) accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>7</sup> See: [www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/name-blind-applications-higher-education-%E2%80%93-comment-ucas%E2%80%99-ceo](http://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/name-blind-applications-higher-education-%E2%80%93-comment-ucas%E2%80%99-ceo) accessed 26 November 2015.

SPA has produced this report to provide timely background information for HE providers to consider when reviewing the BIS Green Paper and the UCAS survey. As such this paper is intended to initiate further discussion and we would welcome feedback and additional evidence.

Please feel free to contact SPA if you have any questions or comments about this paper [enquiries@spa.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@spa.ac.uk).

## 2. What is unconscious bias?

The basis of the Government's proposal that UCAS should make its applications 'name-blind' is rooted in concern that unconscious bias during the admissions process is a risk which may lead to discrimination against applicants from BME backgrounds. While UCAS already withholds the applicant's stated ethnicity from higher education providers until after an applicant accepts an offer, in most cases, other elements of the application are not currently anonymised. The suggestion is that applicant names could be used as a proxy for race by admissions decision-makers, although it is not the only piece of information supplied that could be used to infer race or other protected characteristics.

It is useful to set out briefly what is meant by the term 'unconscious bias'. According to the [Equality Challenge Unit \(ECU\)](#):

**Unconscious bias** refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences.

As we become aware of our biases they surface from our unconscious and we are able to recognise them and find ways to minimise their impact on our behaviour and decisions.

**Implicit bias** is used to signify this move from the unconscious and to remind us of our increased responsibility to be proactive in identifying, acknowledging and managing our biases so that they do not compromise our behaviour.

Higher education staff strive to remain as objective and as consistent as possible in their procedures for the recruitment and admission of students, but like all of us, are not immune to unconscious bias. It is important to note there are many decisions in the admissions process that are justifiably subjective, and it is important to remember all those involved in the admissions process (applicants, their peers, parents and carers, advisers and HE staff) make judgements. Indeed a key attribute of institutional autonomy in admissions, as affirmed in the Higher Education Act 2004<sup>8</sup>, is that of academic freedom and the rights and responsibility of academic judgement in admissions.

Subjective decisions that are *based* on unconscious biases (those we are unaware we have) or implicit biases (those fundamental to misconceptions we are aware of) can lead to unfair discrimination, would interfere with identifying the 'best match' and perpetuate barriers to higher education. While the focus of the Government's proposal appears to be on the risk of

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<sup>8</sup> See: [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/8/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/8/contents). Accessed 26 November 2015.

discrimination based on an applicant's ethnicity, it is important to remember that there are many other factors – including sex, disability, age and social and educational background.

SPA has produced a [summary document](#) detailing where there are potential areas for unconscious and implicit bias in admissions and a template for a review and action plan which staff in higher education providers may find useful.

### 3. Differences between staff recruitment and student recruitment

It is highly encouraging to see the recent positive action taken by several large companies and public organisations to improve representation of a diverse range of backgrounds in the employment of staff. The Prime Minister highlighted some of these, including: the Civil Service, BBC, NHS, local government, HSBC, Deloitte, KPMG, Virgin Money, and learndirect. Much of the evidence base SPA has identified, and indeed much academic research, addresses unconscious bias in staff recruitment. There are clear parallels with student recruitment, so it is hoped some of the lessons learned may be transferable. However, there are a number of distinct differences that should be borne in mind when considering such evidence in the context of HE admissions. Considerations include, but may not be limited to:

- Staff recruitment usually selects for a single, or very small number of vacancies, so all applicants are directly competing for the same place. Student recruitment usually selects for a large number of places per course, so applicants may be competing for one of hundreds of places.
- Although there are many variations, staff recruitment would typically involve an interview, conducted by more than one interviewer, which normally constitutes the final selection stage prior to appointment. Only a minority of HE courses require interviews for student recruitment. Where they do take place, they usually constitute only a proportion of the selection judgement and may only involve one interviewer. Final selection may take place several months after an interview and may be based on judgements made entirely separately to any success at interview (e.g. confirmation of A level results).
- Large employers, such as those cited by the Prime Minister, will have substantial human resource departments, typically staffed by professionally-certified staff (e.g. CIPD accredited) who will perform administrative, verification and initial applicant filtering duties, wholly separate to the individuals responsible for selecting shortlisted candidates. Many HE providers have wholly centralised their admissions functions, merging these duties. In some small HE providers, such duties may all be carried out by the same person. There is no professional body or national accredited qualification for the work of HE admissions professionals.
- There are very different legal considerations governing the recruitment of employees to those concerning student recruitment. Critically, students are viewed as consumers, according to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), and although there are some instances that are linked to employment, the vast majority of student recruitment is not subject to employment law. Both, however, are subject to the Equality Act.

### 4. The evidence base

#### Literature review

This section takes the form of a short literature review which discusses existing evidence that 'name-blind' applications may help to reduce bias in higher education admissions. In order to



provide some context, we also consider the wider evidence around unconscious bias in staff recruitment, and around student participation in higher education by ethnic group.

It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive or critical review of the available evidence, rather we hope this summary acts as a starting point, bringing together some of the key evidence and signposting stakeholders to it.

As previously noted, there are fundamental differences between staff and student recruitment that limits the transferability of practice between the two. These should be borne in mind when considering how applicable evidence from the field of staff recruitment can be. However, given the limited research conducted on 'name-blind' student admissions, and the lack of examples where this is currently practiced, the larger body of evidence from staff recruitment may provide a useful context.

### ***Unconscious bias in recruitment for jobs***

There is a growing body of evidence of bias in the recruitment and selection of staff and corresponding recommendations for mitigating this risk. The ECU's 2013 report<sup>9</sup> *Unconscious bias in higher education: literature review*, for example, brings together a large body of evidence and sets out a series of recommendations to reduce the impact of unconscious bias in higher education.

The report cites evidence which points to the existence of bias in staff recruitment. For example, research by Wood et al (2009)<sup>10</sup>, commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions, 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. Similarly, research by Carlsson and Rooth (2007, 2008)<sup>11</sup> demonstrated the reduced likelihood of being shortlisted for jobs in Sweden with a Middle Eastern name as opposed to a Swedish name. They also demonstrated the added discrimination of having foreign qualifications as well as a foreign name in shortlisting decisions. Further research into bias in recruitment practices highlights a gender dimension. For example, research by Moss-Racusin et al (2012)<sup>12</sup> showed that staff in a science faculty rated male applicants for a laboratory manager role as more competent than equally qualified female candidates. They also chose a higher starting salary for male candidates.

One of the ECU's recommendations for recruiting staff is that 'wherever possible, HEIs should consider anonymous shortlisting of candidates'. According to the report, human resources processes within higher education providers could be adapted to remove information such as name, school, university, all monitoring data, and anything else that is irrelevant to the application.

The Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA), based in Germany, has conducted extensive research into anonymising job applications. One article on *Anonymous job applications in Europe*, in 2012<sup>13</sup> examined field experiments in Sweden, France, the Netherlands and Germany. The findings broadly indicated improved equality in call-back rates where applications were anonymised, especially on gender. However, although most findings also indicated improved equality on race,

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<sup>9</sup> See: [www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/unconscious-bias-in-higher-education/](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/unconscious-bias-in-higher-education/). Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2196761](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2196761) Accessed 26 November 2015.

the results from France showed reduced call-back rates for migrants and residents of deprived neighbourhoods when applications were anonymised. There may be numerous national and cultural reasons for such different results between countries and so caution would be advised before assuming comparability with the UK. One possible reason cited by the authors was that anonymising applications may inhibit any existing measure to take context into account, thus reducing any existing positive action measures, 'This information cannot be taken into account to explain, e.g., below-average education outcomes, labor market experience or language skills.' The researchers assert it is vital to understand the full nature of any discrimination before applying measures which may have unintended consequences:

“Firms cannot hire the most qualified workers and simultaneously increase diversity if minority groups have on average lower education outcomes ... if discrimination in other instances leads to differences in this regard, solving this problem is beyond the scope of anonymous job applications.”

These findings conclude that anonymising applications is likely to limit discrimination from unconscious bias where such discrimination already occurs, but it cannot resolve discrimination where there are other factors involved. Many employers, such as [Google](#), have chosen to tackle unconscious bias through increased training, safeguards and additional checks, in order to raise awareness. This can be characterised as moving unconscious bias into the realm of implicit bias – where staff can identify and remove discrimination. Such training has become increasingly common within employment practice in UK HE providers. For example, one institution has implemented mandatory attendance at unconscious bias training for all academics and professional services staff above a certain salary grade.

A desk-based research exercise conducted by SPA found that while there is a growing body of evidence about participation in higher education by ethnic group, in comparison there is much less evidence about the merits or not of anonymising higher education applications. The key findings of the available evidence are presented below.

### ***Participation in higher education by ethnic group***

The 2014 UCAS End of Cycle report<sup>14</sup> shows that the entry rates for 18 year olds who were formerly in English state schools varied by the ethnic group recorded in pupil data sets. According to the analysis, former pupils recorded as being in the Chinese ethnic group have the highest entry rate (56% in 2014) and those recorded in the White ethnic group had the lowest (27% in 2014).

The entry rates for all ethnic groups increased in 2014, reaching the highest recorded values for each group, except the Chinese ethnic group (where entry rates in 2011 were higher). For the White ethnic group the entry rate was 27.2% (+ 1.1 percentage points), for the Asian ethnic group 38.7% (+0.8 percentage points), for the Black ethnic group 34.3% (+ 0.9 percentage points), for the Mixed ethnic group 30.6% (+1.6 percentage points), for the Chinese ethnic group 56.1% (+1.6 percentage points), and for the Any other ethnic group 33.4% (+2.2 percentage points).

The analysis shows that young people recorded in the Black ethnic group have the largest increase in entry rates over the period, increasing from 20.9% in 2006 to 34.3% in 2014. This is a proportional increase of 64%.

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<sup>14</sup> See: <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2014-ucas-end-of-cycle-report-v2.pdf> Accessed 26 November 2015.

Modood highlights in a 2012 article<sup>15</sup> that all ethnic groups, with the possible exception of Caribbeans, have ‘increased their share of admissions since [the 1990s].’ The researcher found that ethnic minority groups as a whole are ‘much more successful’ in achieving university entry than their white peers but that there are important differences between ethnic groups, institutions and subjects.

Similarly a 2015 study<sup>16</sup> by Crawford, C., and Greaves, E. found that all ethnic minority groups in England are now, on average, more likely to go to university than their White British peers. That is, the *proportion* of students from an ethnic minority background getting a place at a UK university is higher than the *proportion* of White British students getting a place. The researchers found that this is the case even amongst groups who were previously under-represented in higher education, such as those of Black Caribbean ethnic origin. This, researchers found, is a relatively recent change.

The observed differences in participation also varied by socio-economic background. For example, Chinese pupils in the lowest socio-economic quintile group were found to be, on average, more than 10 percentage points more likely to go to university than White British pupils in the highest socio-economic quintile group. By contrast, White British pupils in the lowest socio-economic quintile group were found to have participation rates that are more than 10 percentage points lower than those observed for any other ethnic group. The researchers found that the differences in attainment at school can help to explain some but not all of these participation gaps.

The researchers examined participation at highly selective universities and found that most ethnic minority groups are, on average, more likely to attend these institutions than their White British counterparts. The researchers found the differences are smaller than for participation at all universities, and could generally be better explained by differences in school attainment.

It is important to note that the researchers highlight that their results do not necessarily contradict recent evidence from Boliver, which suggests that ethnic minorities are less likely to *receive offers* from selective universities than their equivalently qualified White British peers. The findings are not mutually exclusive because Crawford and Greaves’ research focuses on participation – those who go to university – whereas Boliver’s research is on the decision to offer a place and is based on a subset of UCAS applications data. The researchers suggest that:

“If ethnic minorities are even more likely to apply to university than their White British counterparts, then it would be possible for them to be offered proportionately fewer places on average than White British students, but still go on to be relatively more likely to attend.”

Noden et al’s 2014 paper<sup>17</sup> examined two research areas: whether candidates from BME groups are less inclined to apply to ‘higher status’ universities than White British candidates, and whether BME candidates are less likely to receive offers from universities (in particular high status ones) than White British candidates.

The researchers found that the extent to which candidates targeted their applications at high status universities varied between ethnic groups. Candidates from several ethnic minority groups applied to high status universities at a greater rate than White British candidates, with Chinese, and mixed

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<sup>15</sup> Modood, T. (2012) ‘Capitals, ethnicity and higher education’. In: Basit, T.N. and Tomlinson, S. (eds) Social Inclusion and Higher Education. Bristol: The Policy Press, pp. 17–40. Accessed via Google Scholar on 26 November 2015.

<sup>16</sup> See: [www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8042](http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8042). Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>17</sup> See: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/58570/1/NuffieldBriefing.pdf> Accessed 26 November 2015.

White and Asian groups doing so at the highest rate. Candidates from Black Caribbean and Black other groups were the least likely to target high status universities, followed by those from Pakistani, mixed White and Black Caribbean, and Bangladeshi groups. However, once socio-economic status, schooling, qualifications and whether they applied only to local universities was controlled for, there was very little evidence to suggest that candidates from BME groups were reluctant to apply to high status universities.

The researchers concluded that in and of itself, ethnicity does not appear to be a barrier to applying to a high status university. For those ethnic groups who tend not to apply to high status universities, the barriers appear to lie elsewhere. Factors identified by the researchers were type of school attended, the number of A levels taken, subjects studied, and social class background.

### ***University offer-making to ethnic minority students***

In terms of offer-making, Noden et al's 2014 paper<sup>18</sup> finds evidence that some black and minority groups appear to be disadvantaged in receiving offers. The researchers also found that the probability of receiving an offer was significantly linked to social class, the type of schools the candidates attended, and their A level subjects.

The results of the study showed that applications from 12 of the 14 minority groups were significantly less likely to result in an offer compared to applications made by White British candidates. Applications from Chinese and mixed White and Asian candidates were the exception to this pattern – the only groups for whom the probability of receiving an offer was not significantly lower than that for White British candidates.

After controlling for variables including the 'academic characteristics' of the application, the difference in probability of receiving an offer for most ethnic minority groups compared to White British candidates was much reduced, apart from for Chinese candidates. Once the academic characteristics of the applications were controlled for, Chinese candidates became significantly less likely to receive offers compared to White British candidates. The researchers suggest that, for Chinese candidates, their high attainment masks their reduced offer rate.

After controlling for social factors including social class, sex and school attended, to see if ethnic differences persisted, the researchers found that differences between the non-mixed minority ethnic groups and the White British group remained statistically significant. However, none of the differences between 'mixed' minority ethnic groups and White British groups were significant. The researchers concluded that:

“The pattern of disadvantage highlighted by our analysis might be thought to be consistent with previous suggestions that direct discrimination on the basis of candidates' names could explain differences in offer rates. While this remains plausible, the difference in offer rates across social class groups suggests that we should be cautious when considering this potential explanation: that is, in the case of social class, direct discrimination on the basis of names is not a convincing explanation. There may be other differences between applications, including the perceived quality of personal statements and the apparent 'fit' between the applicant and the course, which may be relevant. The key finding from our

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<sup>18</sup> [Ibid.](#)

analysis, however, is that ethnic and social class differences in offer rates could not be fully explained by differences in academic attainment or patterns of application.”

In a 2015 article<sup>19</sup> for Runnymede, Dr Vikki Boliver examined ethnic disparities in offer rates at Russell Group universities. According to the researcher, disparities hold even after taking into account applicants’ A level subjects (which the researcher controls to some extent by identifying whether applicants have studied any of the eight ‘facilitating’ subjects<sup>20</sup>), and even after taking into account how many other applicants were competing for places on the same course.

Boliver infers that:

“Since admissions selectors receive non-anonymised application forms containing applicants’ names and other personal details (but not their stated ethnicity, which is concealed until after admissions decisions have been made), the possibility of direct discrimination, perhaps resulting from unconscious bias (ECU, 2013), cannot be ruled out.”

In the article Boliver called for serious consideration that applicants should be identified by their UCAS Personal ID, rather than their names, while admissions decisions are being made.

In a more recent comment article<sup>21</sup> responding to the Government’s proposal, Dr Boliver states:

“Admissions selectors will still see each applicant’s home address, the school they attended, what they have written about themselves in their personal statement and what their teacher has written about them in their reference. All of this may provide subliminal clues as to an applicant’s ethnic and social background. Where applicants are interviewed as part of the selection process, the scope for unconscious bias becomes wider still. So simply removing names from UCAS forms will not be enough to safeguard against the risk of unfair admissions decisions...”

Similarly, Dr Steven Jones who has previously undertaken research for the Sutton Trust on the link between school type and the quality of the UCAS personal statement<sup>22</sup>, cautioned that anonymising applications alone does not address the issue of unconscious bias in admissions – and highlighted that the sector must think about ‘more systemic issues’ such as why offers are made on predicted rather than actual grades, contextualising candidates’ attainment appropriately and the personal statement<sup>23</sup>.

Recent analysis<sup>24</sup> conducted by UCAS into offer rates to different ethnic groups showed that the offer rate from higher Tariff universities<sup>25</sup> to White applicants is higher than to applicants from the Asian, Black, Mixed and Other ethnic groups. The analysis also showed that the offer rates vary widely by the predicted grades held, the subject applied to, and, in particular, the university applied to. Taking these factors into account and calculating an ‘expected’ offer rate, the UCAS analysis

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<sup>19</sup> See: [www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/187/32.html](http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/187/32.html). Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>20</sup> See: <http://russellgroup.ac.uk/for-students/school-and-college-in-the-uk/subject-choices-at-school-and-college/>  
Accessed 26 November 2015

<sup>21</sup> See: <https://theconversation.com/will-name-blind-ucas-forms-make-university-admissions-fairer-49822>. Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>22</sup> See: [www.suttontrust.com/research-author/dr-steven-jones/](http://www.suttontrust.com/research-author/dr-steven-jones/) Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>23</sup> See: <https://hewatch.wordpress.com/>. Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>24</sup> See: [www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/gbanalysis\\_note\\_2015\\_05\\_web\\_0.pdf](http://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/gbanalysis_note_2015_05_web_0.pdf). Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Note: The analysis excludes Oxford and Cambridge applicants, and those applying for subjects with an October deadline (including competitive courses such as medicine).

showed that the 'expected' offer rate to Asian, Black, Mixed and Other applicants is lower than to White applicants. According to the analysis note, this reflects that (for the same strength of predicted grades) Asian, Black, Mixed and Other applicants are more likely to apply to those higher Tariff universities and courses that have lower offer rates – in other words universities or courses that are more competitive.

According to the analysis, most of the difference in actual offer rates between ethnic groups is accounted for by these different application patterns. The analysis note concludes that actual offer rates to Asian, Black, Mixed and Other applicants are close to what would be expected (from the predicted grades they hold and the courses they apply to), ranging from two percentage points higher than expected, to two percentage points lower than expected.

### ***Anonymous or 'name-blind' university applications***

In the limited time available to conduct desk-research, SPA has not been able to find any evidence which demonstrates higher education admissions is specifically at risk of biased practices with regard to applicants' names. However, the available related evidence is summarised below.

A 1995 analysis<sup>26</sup> into medical school applications by McManus et al found that applicants from ethnic minority groups (constituting 26.3% of those applying to medical school) were less likely to be accepted. This was partly explained by them being less well qualified and applying later. However, after taking educational and some other predictors into account, applicants from ethnic minority groups were found to be 1.46 times less likely to be accepted.

The researchers found that having a European surname predicted acceptance better than ethnic origin itself, implying direct discrimination rather than disadvantage secondary to other possible differences between White and non-White applicants. The researchers concluded that people from ethnic minority groups applying to medical school are disadvantaged, principally because ethnic origin is assessed from a candidate's surname, and selection would be fairer if applications were anonymous.

The researchers go on to suggest that:

“...the process would be fairer if application forms forwarded to universities were anonymous and identified only by arbitrary code numbers, with universities being informed of a candidate's name only for the purposes of interview.”

(McManus et al, 1995)

A study by Lumb, A., and Vail, A., published in 2000<sup>27</sup>, assessed the feasibility of anonymous shortlisting of applications for medical school and its effect on those with non-European names. The context for this study, which references McManus et al's earlier work, is that it is during shortlisting that students from ethnic minority groups are believed to be disadvantaged. As the application contains no explicit reference to the applicant's ethnic background, the researchers suggest it seems likely that any discrimination must be based on the applicant's name.

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<sup>26</sup> See: [www.bmj.com/content/310/6978/496](http://www.bmj.com/content/310/6978/496). Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>27</sup> See: [www.bmj.com/content/320/7227/82](http://www.bmj.com/content/320/7227/82). Accessed 26 November 2015.

The researchers considered the feasibility of assessing (then paper) forms anonymously within the (then) current UCAS admissions system. In addition, the researchers assessed the impact of doing so on the shortlisting system they used at Leeds medical school.

To anonymise the application forms, an admissions clerk – who played no part in the assessment of applicants – deleted the full name, email address, country of birth, applicant's signature, and all references to the applicant's name found in the personal statement or confidential reference sections from one version of it. Versions with this information were retained so selectors received a mixture of 'open' and 'blind' forms (with care being taken to avoid any selector assessing the same applications twice). Selectors always read alternate open and blind forms, of different applicants, and each form was assessed both open and blind by two different selectors. When assessing forms blind, selectors were asked to indicate whether they had identified the applicant as being from an ethnic minority group from information provided on the form.

The process of anonymising the application forms (which then would have been paper-based) is described by the researchers as 'cumbersome as some were repeated up to 15 times'. Anonymising the forms was also found to fail to achieve their aim, with one assessor able to identify nearly 50% of those deemed to be from ethnic minority groups. This was mostly inferred from information in the personal statement, in which many applicants write about cultural activities and beliefs, and from GCSE examination passes in Asian language subjects. However, researchers also suggested that a more thorough anonymising of application forms, such as deletion of cultural activities, would edit out some personal attributes and may disadvantage candidates.

The study found that applicants from ethnic minority groups scored less well than European applicants. Another key finding from the study was that even when application forms were successfully anonymised, the lack of difference between open and blinded overall scores suggested that disadvantage did not result from direct discrimination by selectors.

Indeed, the only statistically significant difference between blind and open assessment on any component of the total score pointed to positive discrimination, with more than anticipated of the ethnic minority group identified, having better blind than open scores. The researchers note that this would not be sufficient to make a practical difference in the applicant's total score.

The researchers concluded that for applications to be anonymised on a national scale UCAS would have to delete names. In addition, applicants and schools would have to avoid referring to names and other markers of ethnicity throughout the form. If this resulted in exclusion of outside activities and some GCSE subjects for applicants from ethnic minority groups it would clearly increase disadvantage.

Overall, the researchers concluded that anonymising application forms cannot be recommended.

***Do any higher education providers already carry out anonymous shortlisting in an admissions context?***

As well as conducting a literature review of academic research on the topic, in the time available SPA carried out desk-based review to ascertain from the HE admissions community whether there is any existing practice of anonymous shortlisting of applicants. While there are anonymising practices in other areas of higher education (for example the marking of exam papers and some admissions tests), SPA found very limited evidence from HE provider websites and discussions

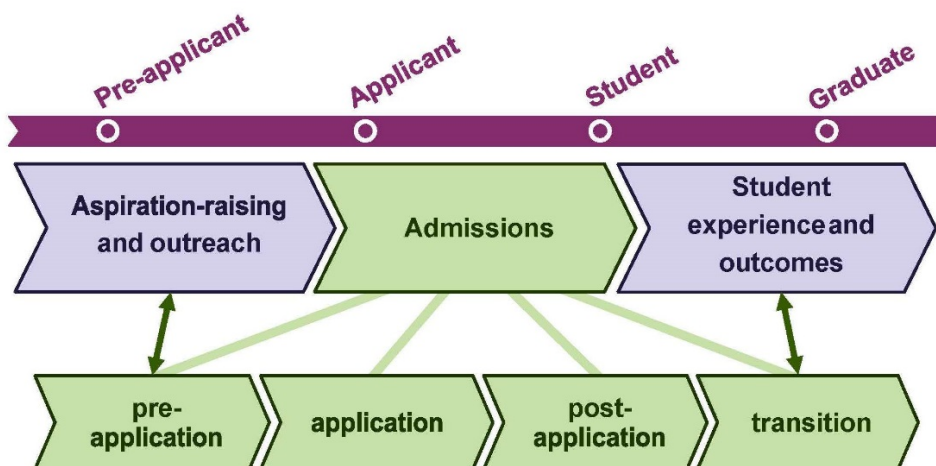
with colleagues at HE providers that this practice is widespread in applicant shortlisting. However, there were indications some personal information, including applicant names, is not always passed to interviewers, such as for Multiple Mini Interviews (MMIs).

## 5. 'Name-blind' applications and the applicant experience

### The applicant experience

Learners' first interactions with higher education providers are not, of course, limited to the UCAS admissions service. In fact, prior to admission, a potential student may have many different opportunities or points interactions with a higher education provider. This is defined by SPA as the '[applicant experience](#)'. This experience can affect whether or not an individual becomes a higher education student, and indeed whether or not an individual chooses to apply to higher education.

The applicant experience is divided into four stages:



- **Pre-application:** refers to individual consideration of higher education study and all activities prior to any commitment to commence an application for the given admissions entry cycle.
- **Application:** refers to all activities from the point a learner has committed to start an application for the given admissions entry cycle up to the point that application is considered by the HE provider(s) applied to.
- **Post-application:** refers to all activities concerning a HE provider's consideration of a submitted application; from the point of initial assessment through to when the applicant has been confirmed or guaranteed a place.
- **Transition:** refers to all post-confirmation activities, from the point of confirmation of an applicant's place to the commencement of study and continuation through the student experience.

It is worth noting that the stages outlined above are not intended to be definitive. We would encourage higher education providers to consider the applicant experience, and the activities associated with each stage, within the context of their own university or college to ensure an integrated approach and to identify all areas that would potentially be impacted by 'name-blind' applications.



In the following table we use the four stages of the applicant experience as the framework against which to analyse the potential impact of removing the applicant's name. In the left-hand column we set out when and where across the applicant experience an applicant's name may feature. In the right-hand column we set out the possible implications of removing the name in this particular area. Although UCAS is gathering evidence about the use of a 'name-blind' approach only during the initial stages of the admissions process i.e. in advance of an initial decision about an offer, interview or audition for main scheme applicants, this assessment considers potential impacts across the entirety of the applicant experience.

In developing this analysis, SPA identified two key potential and overarching positive impacts of removing the applicant's name from HE applications. To avoid repetition, the two potentially positive impacts are set out below:

- Reduces any potential for an applicant's name to influence decisions, for example in the selection of students onto outreach/access programmes, invitations to interview and making offers.
- Individuals may be more likely to disclose personal information such as a disability or whether they have been in care if it is not attributed to their name. This may aid an applicant's transition into higher education further down the line as HE providers are better placed to facilitate student support when this information is available, assuming it can be appropriately matched to the student at a later date.

When is a name used within the applicant experience?	Possible implications of 'name-blind' in this area
<b>Pre-application</b>	
<p><b>1. Outreach and student recruitment activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeting, marketing, administration of outreach and student recruitment activities.</li> <li>• Monitoring and evaluation: matching demographic data to participants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Risk of losing personalised contact with students, including widening participation students, and conveying an 'unfriendly' impression of higher education.</li> <li>- More difficult to match data, e.g. matching an individual against widening participation criteria.</li> <li>- Greater risk of error in recording success/progression from an access programme where it counts towards entry to the provider, e.g. where alternative offers/guaranteed interviews are given.</li> <li>- Risk that any bias linked to a name is simply pushed back onto schools if they are choosing who to nominate for an access programme.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Applicant research and initial decisions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Names are required for postage of materials.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prospectus requests.</li> <li>• Open day registration.</li> <li>• Enquiries via phone, email, social media.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unless open days are simply 'drop-in', HE providers may need to capture names for registration and any follow-up communication.</li> <li>- Applicants are unlikely to refrain from using their own name in enquiries.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Applicant testing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission test registration and link to later application</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Follow-up queries regarding missing results and other outstanding information would be challenging without a name to refer to.</li> <li>- There may be more of a risk of mismatching an applicant's admissions tests results with their application without a name.</li> </ul>

## Application

<p><b>4. Application (UCAS, direct, part-time, postgraduate etc.)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name.</li> <li>• Email address.</li> <li>• Reference (where a referee may refer to the student by name).</li> <li>• Named contact (nominated person to act on applicant's behalf).</li> <li>• Name given if requesting further information linked from: passport, qualifications, or Unique Learner Number.</li> <li>• Information included in the personal statement (for example a URL to an applicant's blog or online portfolio of work, mention of a prize win).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identity checks made more difficult, i.e. verifying an individual is who they say they are, verifying that qualification transcripts match up, fraud detection, visa checks.</li> <li>- Need applicant's name for enhanced DBS checks verification.</li> <li>- Discussions with third parties, e.g. local authorities, schools, colleges, parents and guardians and probation services made more difficult.</li> <li>- Unlikely that applicants will refrain from using their own name in emails or phone conversations.</li> <li>- Email addresses often give away an individual's name.</li> <li>- An applicant may have applied to the HE provider previously and so it may already have a record of their name.</li> <li>- An overall less personalised applicant experience.</li> <li>- Potential communications challenge to convey to applicants they must provide their name on a UCAS application, but that it will not be used by the HE provider.</li> <li>- For colleges that facilitate internal progression (i.e. FE to HE in the same college), selectors and other staff may already know the applicant very well.</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Applicant enquiries relating to their application</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It is unlikely that applicants will refrain from using their own name during enquiries.</li> </ul>

<p><b>6. Applicant enquiries in Extra</b></p> <p>(If applicants don't use all five HE provider choices, were unsuccessful in obtaining a place or declined all offers made to them, they can add more choices in Extra.)</p>	<p>After searching for available courses with Extra, applicants would get in touch with the university or college to check they can consider them and ask any questions they may have. It is unlikely that applicants will refrain from using their own name during phone calls and enquiries.</p>
<p><b>5. Adjustment</b></p> <p>(Applicants who meet and exceed the conditions of their firm choice offer can hold that place while attempting to secure a place elsewhere through Adjustment)</p>	<p>- It is unlikely that applicants will refrain from using their own name during phone calls and enquiries.</p>
<p><b>6. Clearing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone calls, emails, texts, social media interactions.</li> </ul>	<p>-Applicants are encouraged to talk to any universities or colleges they are interested in and provide them with their Clearing number (located on the welcome and choices pages in Track), and their Personal ID, which allows the university or college to view the application.</p> <p>- Applicants are advised to ask if the HE provider would accept them and get informal offers over the phone – maybe from a variety of universities and colleges – then decide which one they want to accept.</p> <p>- It is unlikely applicants will refrain from using their own name during phone calls and other interactions.</p>
<p><b>7. Record of Prior Acceptance (RPA)</b></p>	<p>- The Record of Prior Acceptance (RPA) process, as it currently stands, would be incompatible with a UCAS-managed 'name-blind' approach – as UCAS is not involved in the process until after the final decision from the provider and acceptance by the applicant is complete.</p>

## Post-application

<p><b>8. HE provider follow-up regarding incomplete applications</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For example, missing qualifications, fee status query, missing background information, query raised from personal statement, missing/need for alternative reference.</li> </ul>	<p>- Unlikely that applicants/referees will refrain from using their own name or applicant's name during exchanges over missing information.</p>
<p><b>9. Interviews, portfolios, post-application visits to providers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invitation to interview, practical arrangements including visa arrangements, during the interview itself (whether via video-conferencing or in person).</li> </ul>	<p>- Impractical to have face-to-face discussions without use of name.</p> <p>- Interviews only form part of holistic assessment of an applicant. Once a name is gleaned from an interview, selectors cannot 'un-know' this information when making any decisions about offer-making.</p>

<b>10. Enquiries, feedback and complaints</b>	- Unlikely that applicants will refrain from using their own name in any exchanges.
<b>11. Confirmation</b>	- Greater chance of mistakes when linking results to offers if no name.
<b>12. Customer relationship management and other tailored communications</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E.g. offer booklets, letters, emails.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Less personalised communications.</li> <li>- Risk of unintended consequences for HE provider's consumer law compliance if name is not used in contracts.</li> </ul>

## Transition

<b>13. Joining/enrolment instructions including information about accommodation</b>	- Less personalised communications.
<b>14. Student support arrangements</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disability, bursaries.</li> </ul>	- Without a name it may be more difficult to put support measures in place, although students may be more likely to declare support needs in an application if it is not connected with their name.

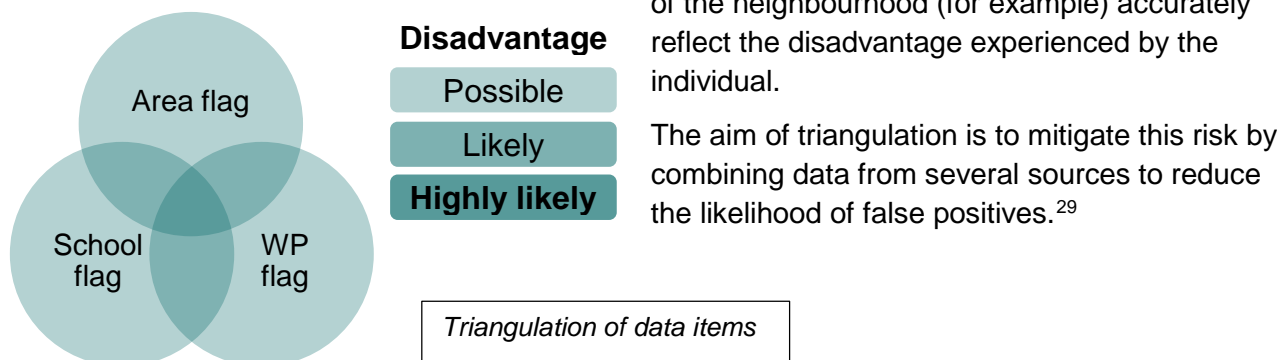
## Contextualised admissions in a 'name-blind' environment

Contextualised admissions in the UK is the use of:

“...contextual information (normally meaning information collected via the application process) and contextual data (normally meaning data matched to applicants, including through outreach)...as part of the undergraduate admission process, in order to assess an applicant’s prior attainment (academic or otherwise) and potential to succeed in higher education in the context of the circumstances in which their attainment has been obtained.”<sup>28</sup>

The aim of using contextual information and data in admissions is to form a more complete picture of the characteristics of an individual applicant. The ‘gold standard’ will therefore be data that relates directly to the individual. However, the data that is actually available during the admissions cycle is often less granular, relating to the individual’s school or area/neighbourhood.

Using this less granular data runs a risk, however – we cannot be certain that the characteristics of the neighbourhood (for example) accurately reflect the disadvantage experienced by the individual.



The aim of triangulation is to mitigate this risk by combining data from several sources to reduce the likelihood of false positives.<sup>29</sup>

This type of contextualisation has been used by a number of HE providers for over ten years – mainly but not exclusively for high demand courses where attained grades on entry are high. Contextualised approaches to the recruitment and selection of staff – similar to that of contextualised admission in HE – are only now being considered by some of the large employers referenced by the Prime Minister. Employers are speaking to HE staff in admissions and widening participation about good practice in this area.

SPA has undertaken and commissioned extensive research on the topic of contextualised admissions. As part of this work, SPA has carried out a series of surveys to capture information on the developing use of contextual data in admissions. The most recent survey findings<sup>30</sup> (2015) act as a useful barometer<sup>31</sup> for the nature and prevalence of contextualised admissions in the UK HE sector. Of the 68 complete or partial responses to the survey:

<sup>28</sup> Contextualising Admissions: Examining the evidence. Moore, J, Mountford-Zimdars, A and Wiggans, J, for SPA (2013). Report of research into the evidence base for the use of contextual information and data in admissions of UK students to undergraduate courses in the UK.

[www.spa.ac.uk/resources/spas-work-contextualised-admissions](http://www.spa.ac.uk/resources/spas-work-contextualised-admissions) Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>29</sup> SPA’s Scottish National Expert Think Tank: [Contextualised admissions: What are the data needs in HE providers?](#) - outlining what data is available and who’s using it, approaches to missing data, the benefits of triangulating data (revised February 2015). Accessed 26 November 2015.

<sup>30</sup> See: [www.spa.ac.uk/resources/spas-work-contextualised-admissions](http://www.spa.ac.uk/resources/spas-work-contextualised-admissions) Accessed 08 December 2015.

<sup>31</sup> It is important to note there are some limitations to the survey. As those responding were self-selecting, it is possible that those with the ‘most to say’ about contextualised admissions were more likely to respond. It is less likely that an institution who makes very little use of contextual data would respond to a detailed survey about contextualised admissions. Therefore the results in the survey may be skewed in the direction of those institutions who do, and the sample cannot be considered representative of the UK sector.

- 57 HE providers (84%) were using contextualised admissions in the 2015 entry cycle.
- 5 HE providers (7%) reported no use of contextualised factors in undergraduate admissions, and no plans to do so.
- In care or care-leaver status is the most commonly used piece contextual information in the 2015 cycle, with 46 respondents reporting its use.
- 51 respondents (75%) use contextual data/information to target widening participation and outreach activities, with a further ten planning or considering doing so in future.

In terms of offer-making specifically:

- 8 respondents use contextual data/information to make reduced offers only.
- 11 respondents use contextual data/information to make offers to applicants who would otherwise be rejected – ‘safety net offers’ only.
- 17 respondents use contextual data/information to make both reduced and ‘safety net’ offers.
- Of the 32 respondents who do not currently use contextual data/information to make reduced or ‘safety net’ offers:
  - 12 indicated that they did consider contextual data/information for ‘near-misses’ at Confirmation.
  - A further 10 were considering using contextual data/information for offer-making and/or Confirmation in the future.
  - 10 had no current or planned use of contextual data/information for offer-making.

SPA has identified two potential areas where a ‘name-blind’ approach may hamper HE providers’ work in strengthening fair admissions through contextualisation.

Firstly, HE providers are keen to ensure that contextual information provided by an applicant or their referee, such as whether the applicant has been in care and for how long, is verified. In such cases the HE provider would usually contact the applicant for confirmation and at the same time offer the applicant support throughout the admissions process and often beyond. Verifying this information and establishing a relationship with the applicant would be much harder without the name.

Secondly, contextual data relating to an applicant’s participation in institutional outreach activities such as master classes, progression programmes or summer schools may be significantly harder to identify and match to individual applications in a ‘name-blind’ environment. HE providers may have built up a relationship with an individual over a number of years, and so the applicant would already be known to widening participation and possibly other subject-specific staff. It could be to the applicant’s disadvantage if their involvement and success in the outreach activities was not considered as part of the holistic assessment of the applicant because they were unidentifiable in a ‘name-blind’ environment.

There are other areas where a ‘name-blind’ approach may not prove so problematic. Other contextual data about the individual could be accessed without the name, for example how the applicant’s performance at GCSE and predicted grades at A level compare to the school average and the national school average.

More generic information such as geo-demographic data on whether the applicant is from a neighbourhood where young participation in HE is low, or the lowest quintile in a multiple index of deprivation, also does not need a name (only a postcode).

## Key findings from the analysis

SPA's mapping exercise to determine where an applicant's name may appear or be used by HE providers in the admissions process has shown how complex implementing 'name-blind' applications – whether centrally by UCAS, or locally by providers themselves – could be. This is not least because an applicant's name, or 'clues' towards it, may appear multiple times and through multiple different channels.

SPA's analysis of the potential impact of removing an applicant's name at various points across the applicant experience has uncovered a number of potential practical challenges. Some may be relatively straightforward to overcome, while others are more fundamental.

SPA has identified possible risks associated with removing the name from the application. In particular it may be the case that the potential for making mistakes in offer-making is higher without a name to refer to.

Similarly, the issue of identity checks and verification, e.g. with regard to qualifications and visas in a 'name-blind' environment, is one that warrants detailed consideration, as does any potential impact on compliance with consumer protection legislation where a name is not used, for example in any communications that are considered contractually binding.

An overarching issue identified is the impact of removing an applicant's name on the perceived 'friendliness' and personalisation of written communications and other interactions. As well as being a marketing concern in a broad sense, this may be particularly of concern for HE providers seeking to engage with potential students from widening participation backgrounds who may already have misgivings about higher education providers as 'intimidating' places.

SPA has also identified a possible misunderstanding in the suggestion that names could be concealed up until the point of an invitation to interview<sup>32</sup>. Unlike in a job recruitment setting, in university admissions an interview does not represent the 'final' stage. An interview makes up one part of a holistic assessment, and so once an interviewer is made aware of an applicant's name it seems unlikely the name could reasonably be 'forgotten' in other areas of selection.

Moreover, while HE providers or UCAS may be able to put mechanisms in place to conceal an applicant's name in various places it seems unfeasible that applicants themselves will not use their names in the interactions they initiate.

While some aspects of contextualised admissions could operate without knowledge of an applicant's name, it is important to note that SPA has identified possible negative implications of a 'name-blind' policy on contextualised admissions. In particular there is a risk that in a 'name-blind' environment it would be harder for admissions staff to identify applicants who had previously taken part in the HE provider's outreach activities. It would be counter to the proposed policy's objectives – to improve representation of students in HE from a wide range of backgrounds – if applicants' involvement and success in the outreach activities were not considered.

While we have considered in detail the potential impact of removing an applicant's name at various points across the applicant experience, it is important to remember that HE providers work in

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<sup>32</sup> The BIS Green Paper notes: 'This will mean that an applicant's name would be hidden until such time as it needs to be revealed, for example to invite to interview.' See: [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/474266/BIS-15-623-fulfilling-our-potential-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice-accessible.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/474266/BIS-15-623-fulfilling-our-potential-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice-accessible.pdf). Accessed 26 November 2015.

different ways, within different admissions office models. Therefore the potential impact of a 'name-blind' approach will inevitably differ between providers.

## 6. Next steps

We hope this report provides a useful starting point for HE providers to consider their position on 'name-blind' applications, and we encourage colleagues to respond to the [UCAS survey](#).

It is our intention that this report helps colleagues to initiate internal discussions about the feasibility and desirability of introducing 'name-blind' applications. We hope it will support colleagues in their continued enhancement of professionalism and to review their strategies for minimising the risk of unconscious bias and illegal discrimination in admissions.

We encourage colleagues to get in touch with us with any research, intelligence or good practice you have, or are aware of, in this area that may be of wider benefit to the sector.

Please feel free to contact SPA if you have any questions or comments about this paper [enquiries@spa.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@spa.ac.uk).