

The Telegraph

Universities making 'background checks' on applicants

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor - 21 Feb 2012

The number of institutions carrying out checks on candidates' social class and school performance is set to increase by more than 50 per cent to coincide with a sharp rise in tuition fees this year, it was revealed.

In most cases, admissions tutors are relying on so-called "contextual data" to review borderline candidates from deprived backgrounds who narrowly miss out places.

Some universities are also using information to make lower grade offers to teenagers from poorly performing schools or fast-track disadvantaged candidates into interviews.

But researchers warned that "relatively few" universities were fully disclosing to applicants how they employ the information for fear of attracting negative publicity or even being sued by those who fail to get in.

It was also claimed that some of the information used was around 10 years out-of-date –creating serious concerns over its accuracy.

The disclosure will alarm many headmasters who fear the use of data on pupils' personal backgrounds could penalise teenagers from private schools.

It comes after the Government warned that universities –particularly elite institutions – had to be more ambitious when it came to creating a diverse student body.

For the first time this year, they are being required to set targets for the number of disadvantaged students being admitted to ensure the imposition of tuition fees of up to £9,000 do not deter the poor.

Prof Les Ebdon, the Government's new university access regulator, warned earlier this month that he would "not be afraid" to impose "nuclear" penalties on universities that consistently fall short of admissions targets.

This week's report, by the organisation Supporting Professionalism in Admissions, which advises

universities on admissions policies, said the need to hit targets was a "strong driver" behind the use of applicants' personal data, particularly among top-ranked universities.

"There was evidence that the use of contextual data in admissions was supporting the delivery of widening participating policy and strategy and the meeting of nationally required targets and benchmarks," said the report.

The study – based on an in-depth analysis of 17 universities and a survey of 93 admissions tutors – found that 41 per cent of institutions used contextual data during undergraduate admissions in the past but 63 per cent "plan to use it in the future". It represents a rise of more than half.

Researchers warned that some universities were failing to properly disclose how this information was used for fear of attracting negative publicity.

Some institutions had faced complaints from "representatives of independent schools", it said, while others "had been engaged in legal action by applicants who had not been offered a place".

One academic from a leading university told researchers that contextual information was "down played" and not used "on the front page of the website" because it was too easily misunderstood.

In some cases, universities rely on "POLAR" data –participation of local areas –to flag up applicants from areas that traditionally send the smallest number of students to higher education.

But the study suggested that that some of this information was now "very dated".

The conclusions come after one leading headmaster criticised attempts to massage university entry policies.

This week, Anthony Seldon, the master of Wellington College, called on independent schools to sponsor and run state academies to help boost education standards nationally, adding: "Both sectors have so much to learn from each other. Making it artificially easier for state school students to enter university, as Prof Ebdon is seeking to do, is not the way to have a fair education system.

"Having independent schools working with their partner academies offers the best route to social justice and a fairer Britain."