



Supporting Professionalism in Admissions

**Contextualised admissions to support access,
admissions, transitions, monitoring and evaluation –
What's the evidence and good practice?**

NEON, Sussex University – 23 June 2015

Janet Graham, Director of SPA

What is SPA and what do we do?

SPA promotes fair admissions and access to higher education in the UK by developing and leading on good practice in the recruitment and selection of students.

- We undertake, evaluate and commission research to support evidence-based good practice in HE admissions in the UK
- SPA is an independent and objective Programme; funded by UCAS, HEFCW/Universities Wales, HEFCE, DELNI, and Universities UK
- **We are not** auditors, regulators, a professional body or membership organisation
- **We are** a small team providing admissions expertise, advice, resources, events etc. generally free at the point of use for HEPs

What services does SPA offer the HE sector?

- Good practice from admissions experts, who have worked in HE
- Advice and guidance on all admissions and related topics, at the request of HEPs and stakeholders, and/or in response to HE policy
- SPA's website has a huge range of free on-line resources, from our good practice to lots of supporting information
- Events: think tanks, conferences, seminars, communities of practice,
- We visit HEPs UK-wide to provide advice/ collect good practice
- Communications: regular emails to HEP admissions, newsletters

What is SPA doing on contextualised admissions?

- One of our main objectives is the development and use of contextualised admissions (CA) as part of fair admissions
- We undertake, evaluate and commission research
- 57 institutions responding to questions in SPA survey (April 2015) are using some form of CA with admissions, 6 want to in the future. *Analysed survey results out soon.*
- SPA ran a Scottish National Expert Think Tank on CA with 10 admissions, data analysts and widening access staff from Scottish HEPs. **Outcomes:** three good practice documents; more universities using CA, increased engagement with the Scottish Government on CA and CfE

Current publications

- [Changes to the UCAS Tariff - SPA considerations for HE admissions](#) to support HE providers in assessing and addressing the impact on their recruitment, selection and admissions policies and procedures, March 2015
- [Using Admissions to Bridge the Gap for Care Leavers](#), April 2015
- [Coordinating the relationship between Recruitment and admissions](#), Jan 2015
- SPA Good Practice on-line Toolkit successfully piloted, March 2015, will now be developed
- Updating the SPA Admissions Complaints and Appeals Good Practice following discussion with the OIA – in progress

What is Fair Admissions?

1. be **transparent**
2. enable institutions to select students who are **able to complete the course** as judged by their **achievements** and their **potential**
3. strive to use assessment methods that are **reliable** and **valid**
4. seek to **minimise barriers** to applicants
5. be **professional** in every respect and underpinned by **appropriate institutional structures and processes**

Contextualised admissions: a major part of fair admissions

What is contextualised admissions?

Contextualised admissions is defined as **contextual information** and **contextual data** used by HE providers to assess an applicant's prior attainment and potential to succeed in higher education in the context of the circumstances in which their attainment has been obtained.

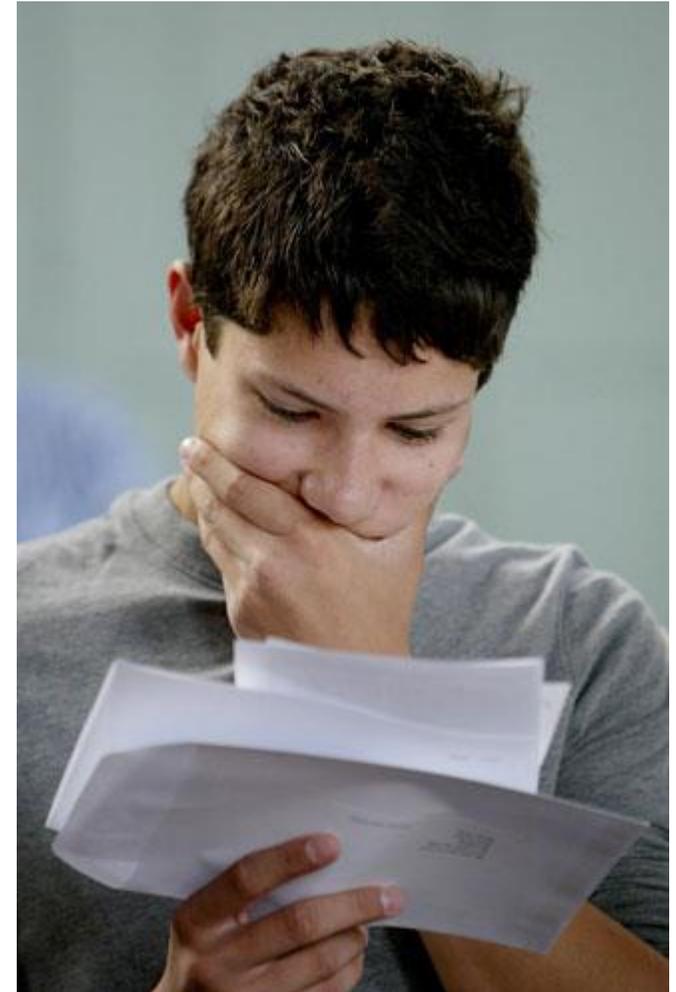
SPA's **Contextualising Admissions: Examining the evidence report** Oct 2013

<http://www.spa.ac.uk/information/contextualdata/spasworkoncontextual/cdresearch2013/>



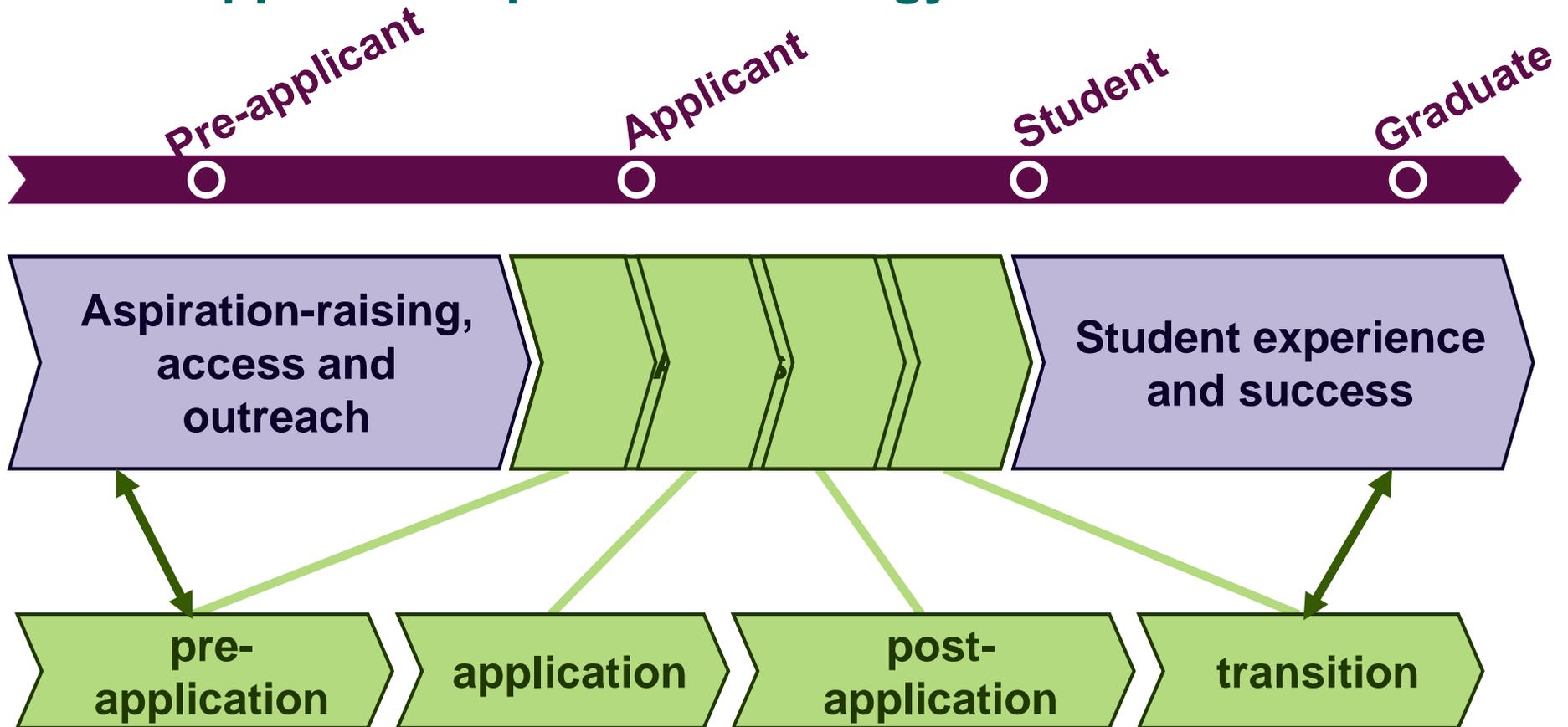
Fair admissions and fair access: what's the difference?

- If fair admissions covers the five principles, is fair access about getting more disadvantaged students into 'top' universities? Supporting the most able but least likely to apply?
- Yes, **but** that's only part of the issue
- Raising aspirations and encouraging and supporting **all** students with potential to aim higher for an HE course that is right for them at an institution that can provide what they need, when they need it - full-time, part-time, flexible or distance learning etc



Fair admissions and fair access: how do they fit together?

SPA's Applicant Experience Strategy



Contextualised admissions and holistic assessment

Contextual Information and Data

- Pre-Application information from outreach/WP
- Historic institution data trends and analysis
- External data matched to the applicant
- Background information submitted in the application

Original Application Data

Qualifications

Personal statement

Reference

Test results taken pre-application

Other

Holistic Assessment

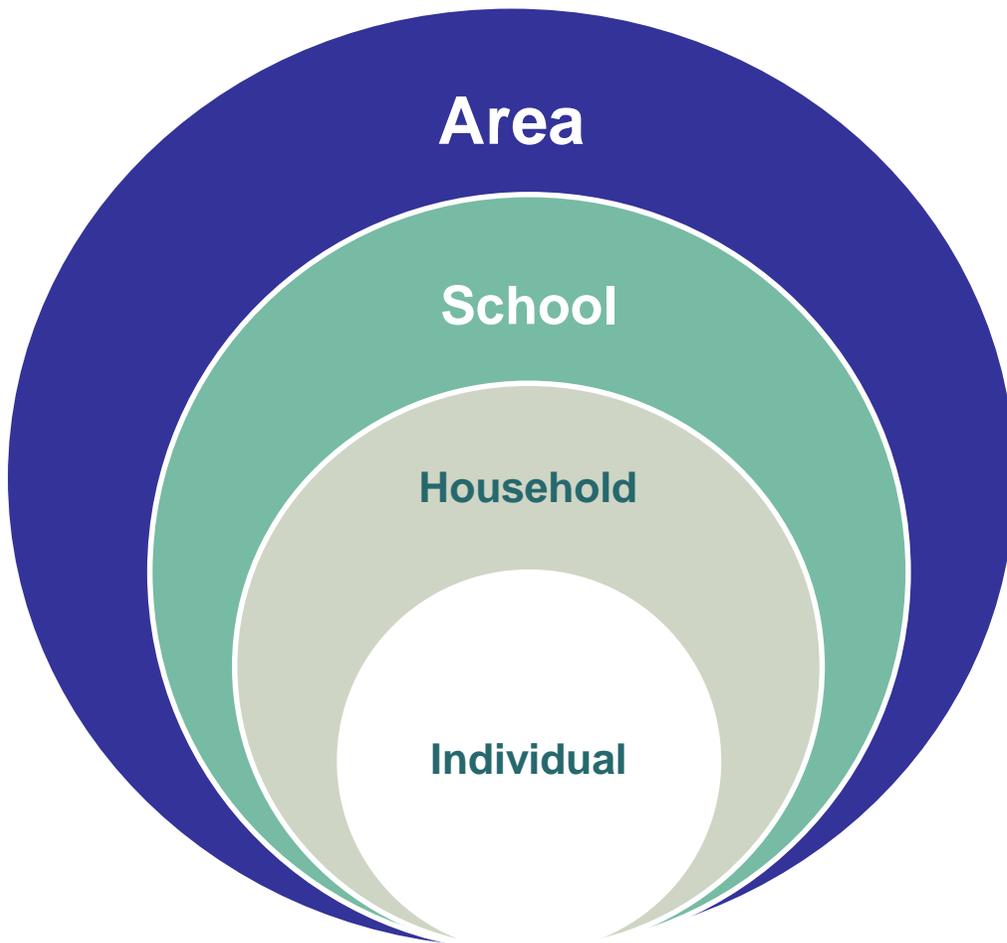
Initial Assessment

Offer Making

Final Decision

Student Support

What matters for measuring academic potential?



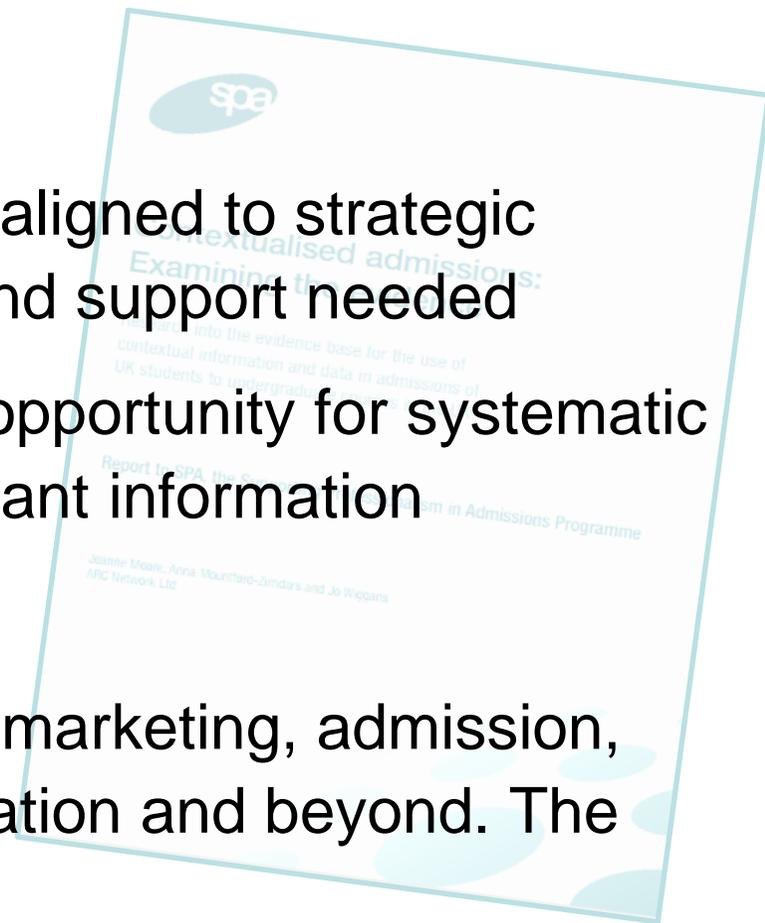
- Scientific 'Gold standard': **good, individual-level data**

Issues:

- Data availability accessibility (matching)
- Relevance of the indicator, reliability
- Coverage (missing data)
- Usage/capacity (expertise and cost)
- Limitations (often young, UK domiciled HE applicants)
- Understanding of it

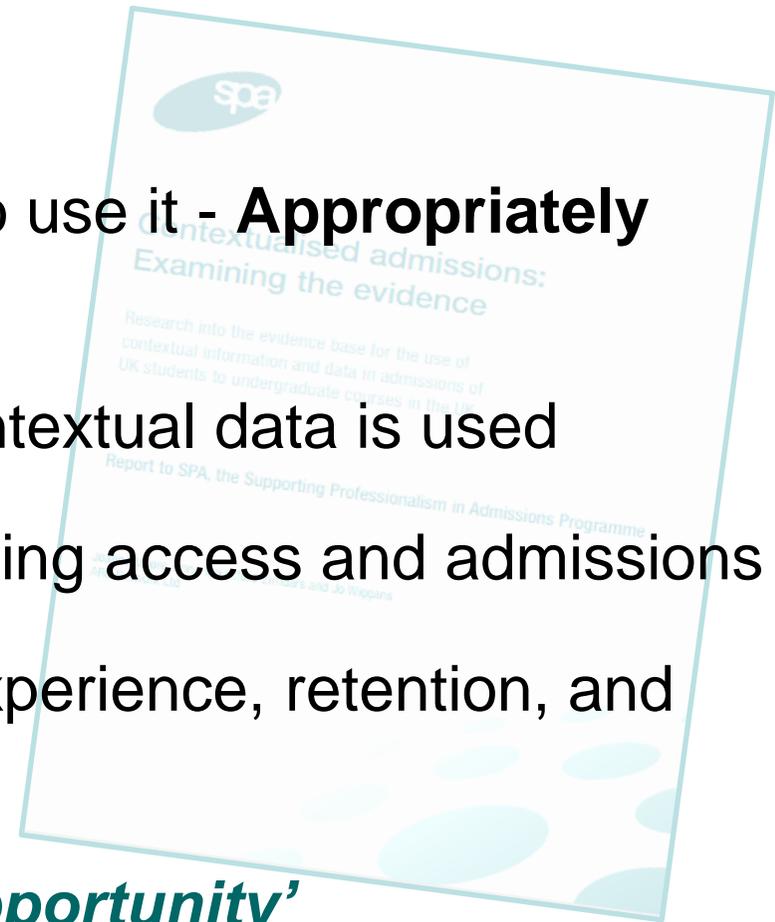
Useful practice:

- Use of contextual data and information aligned to strategic mission – senior management buy-in and support needed
- Contextualised admissions provide an opportunity for systematic and transparent use of additional applicant information
- Good record keeping
 - Linked systems for widening access, marketing, admission, planning, student progression, graduation and beyond. The Applicant Experience
 - Create / use HEP own 'baseline' evidence base – admissions (and other) data analysis – **KEEP IT SIMPLE!**



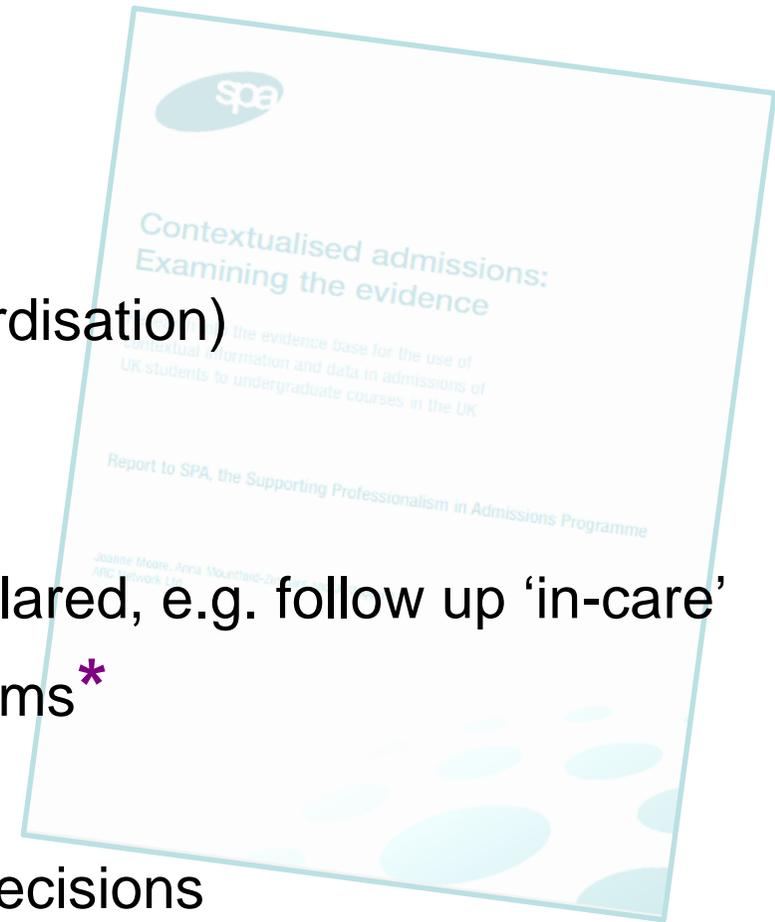
Useful practice:

- Know what data is out there and how to use it - **Appropriately trained staff**
- Transparency about how and when contextual data is used
- Integrated approach to outreach, widening access and admissions
 - and ideally to support the student experience, retention, and graduation
 - ***‘Access without support is not opportunity’***



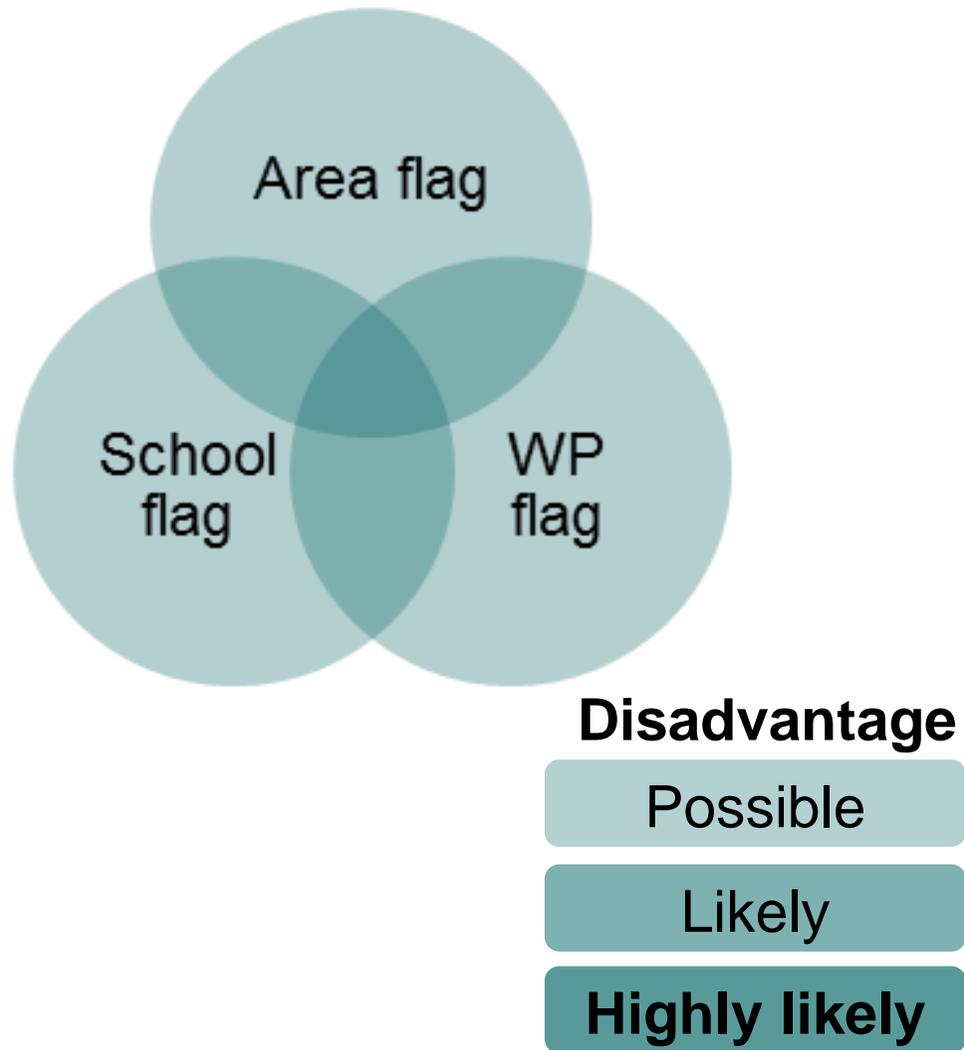
Useful practice:

- Using multiple datasets
 - Dealing with missing data (N.B. standardisation)
- Using multiple indicators
 - Triangulation
- Checking information - particularly self declared, e.g. follow up 'in-care' ticked on UCAS or in-house application forms*
- Using ranked data for decision making
- Using additional information for marginal decisions



*See SPA's Admissions Bridging the Gap for Care Leavers, April 2015:
www.spa.ac.uk/support/goodpractice/care/

Why triangulate? – benefits of multiple measures



- A better sense of how likely actual disadvantage is
- A more tiered effect – how many indicators of disadvantage are there?
- Reduce the risk of missing some forms of disadvantage
- Use “**superflags**” to refine the model
- .. or ranked measures to refine it further. **KEEP IT SIMPLE!**

What did SPA's CA project do?

- Project funded by SFC – HE providers in Scotland use Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation in widening access/ for fair admissions as part of Outcome Agreements etc. **BUT** project outputs are being used UK-wide
- 'Think Tank' brought together staff in admissions, data analysis, and widening access from 8 different universities in Scotland who worked on a number of individual projects at their HEP.
- These mini project outcomes were reported on at a residential workshop and, with SPAs input, used by the HEP staff to formulate three pieces of good practice.

Three pieces of CA good practice

- [Considerations for introducing and implementing contextualised admissions](#) - including questions to consider, guidance on building a case for CA and rolling out a CA process, and FAQs about contextualised admissions.
- [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, *school profile template* with regard to curriculum offering and delivery and other contextual information about the school.
- [Hints and tips for monitoring and evaluating contextualised admissions](#) - for ensuring that all policies and procedures related to a CA process can be appropriately monitored and reviewed.

Strategic importance of contextualised admissions:

Facilitates reaching targets

Helps identify applicants who may benefit from additional support

Supports the applicant experience

Improves calibre of entrants through identifying potential



Widens participation and enhances diversity of the student body

Helps delivery of fair admissions

Helps assess applicants for financial support

Could aid social mobility



Thank you

Questions and Discussion

**More information from: enquiries@spa.ac.uk or 01242 544891
www.spa.ac.uk**