

Section A		
Institution: Durham University		
Unit of Assessment: 21, Sociology		
Title of case study: Achieving fairer admission to UK universities		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Between October 2011 and December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Vikki Boliver	Professor of Sociology	Since 2011
Stephen Gorard	Professor of Education	Since 2013
Nadia Siddiqui	Assistant Professor of Education	Since 2013
Tiago Moreira	Professor of Sociology	Since 2006
Mandy Powell	Postdoctoral Research Associate	2015-2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Between August 2013 and December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
Section B		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Research led by Durham Sociology's Professor Vikki Boliver has been used by the UK government to press higher-tariff universities to close longstanding ethnic inequalities in university acceptance rates and to make admissions data available to researchers, policy makers and the general public. Further research published by Professor Boliver and Durham colleagues since 2017 has been used to support reinvigorated national widening participation and fair access policies in England and Scotland, centred on the use of contextual data about the socioeconomic circumstances of applicants to inform admissions decisions. This body of research has helped to bring about a paradigm shift in the way universities assess applicant merit and has helped kick-start a new and sustained trend towards more equitable access to higher-tariff universities for prospective students from different ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Professor Boliver's British Academy funded statistical analysis of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data was the first to show that higher-tariff UK universities remained substantially less likely to admit ethnic minority applicants than comparably qualified applicants from the white ethnic group throughout the decade following the creation of the Office for Fair Access in 1994 (R1). Further research showed that ethnic inequalities in higher-tariff university admissions chances remained substantial into the early 2010s and dispelled the myth that this was simply because ethnic minority applicants disproportionately apply to oversubscribed degree programmes (R2). This latter work highlighted the need to tackle unconscious bias on the part of admissions selectors, potentially through the use of 'name-blind' admissions; called for universities to publish detailed admissions statistics to increase transparency and accountability; and raised concerns about UCAS's decision in 2013 to stop sharing microdata with researchers and policy-makers.</p>		
<p>Subsequent mixed methods research carried out by Professor Boliver and collaborators within Durham's Sociology Department (Professor Moreira and Dr Powell) and School of Education (Professor Gorard and Dr Siddiqui), funded by the Scottish Funding Council, the ESRC, the Sutton Trust, and the Nuffield Foundation, has significantly strengthened the evidence-base and ethical case underpinning the now-widespread use of contextualised admissions practices in Scotland and England. The statistical component of this work, involving detailed analysis of national datasets, showed that disadvantaged learners were being systematically excluded by high and rising academic entry requirements, and that these entry requirements could be significantly lowered for disadvantaged learners without setting them up to fail academically at university (R3, R4). This work also highlighted the need to use individual-level rather than post-code based indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage, notably number of years in receipt of free school meals, to ensure that contextualised offers of university places reach only their intended beneficiaries (R3, R4, R5). The qualitative component of the research, involving in-depth</p>		

interviews with university admissions personnel, illuminated the ways in which elite university organisational identities based on narrow notions of excellence inhibit the development of more progressive admissions practices, and highlighted the scope for universities to lay new claims to excellence in supporting disadvantaged learners to achieve their full potential (R6). This whole body of work also laid out the ethical case for assessing university applicants' prior academic achievements in light of their socioeconomic circumstances, demonstrating that contextualised approaches to admissions can be seen as a vital means of achieving not only wider but also fairer access to higher education (R3, R4, R5, R6).

3. References to the research

The two main outputs from the research on ethnic inequalities in university admissions chances (R1 and R2) were published in two of the leading journals in the field of sociology and have been cited 468 times to date. The research on contextualised admissions includes the four peer-reviewed journal articles listed below (R3, R4, R5, R6) which are part of a larger body of work totalling twelve outputs which have attracted 144 academic citations to date.

R1: Boliver, V. (2013) How fair is access to more prestigious UK Universities? *British Journal of Sociology* 64(2): 344-364. DOI: [10.1111/1468-4446.12021](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12021)

R2: Boliver, V. (2016) Exploring ethnic inequalities in admission to Russell Group universities. *Sociology* 50(2): 247-266. DOI: [10.1177/0038038515575859](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515575859)

R3: Boliver, V, Gorard, S, Powell, M & Moreira, T (2020) The use of access thresholds to widen participation at Scottish universities. *Scottish Affairs* 29(1): 82-97. DOI: [10.3366/scot.2020.0307](https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2020.0307)

R4: Boliver, V., Gorard, S. & Siddiqui, N. (2019) Using contextual data to widen access to higher education. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/13603108.2019.1678076](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2019.1678076). Published initially as a Durham Evidence Centre for Education research briefing in April 2019.

R5: Gorard, S., Boliver, V., Siddiqui, N. & Banerjee, P. (2019) Which are the most suitable contextual indicators for use in widening participation to HE? *Research Papers in Education* 34(1): 99-129. DOI: [10.1080/02671522.2017.1402083](https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2017.1402083)

R6: Boliver, V., Powell, M. & Moreira, T. (2018) Organisational Identity as a Barrier to Widening Access in Scottish Universities. *Social Sciences* 7(9): 151. DOI: [10.3390/socsci7090151](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7090151)

4. Details of the impact

Despite national policy calls for wider and fairer access to UK higher education and the creation of an Office for Fair Access in 1994, students from ethnic minority groups and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds remained strikingly under-represented at higher-tariff universities throughout the 1990s, 2000s and early 2010s. Professor Boliver's work successfully highlighted the role played by inequitable university admissions practices and recommended changes that have influenced both government policies and university practices, resulting in a sustained trend towards more equitable access to higher-tariff universities for those from different ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

Reducing ethnic inequalities in admission to higher-tariff universities

Professor Boliver's research highlighting ethnic bias in admissions decision-making at higher-tariff UK universities began to make an important contribution to the policy discourse when the Social Mobility Commission used it in a series of reports on the issue [E1]. The Commission cited the research findings [R1] in its June 2013 report *Higher Education: The Fair Access Challenge* [E1a] and in February 2015 Professor Boliver presented the research to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community chaired by David Lammy MP in Parliament. In March 2015, another Social Mobility Commission report entitled *Data and public policy: trying to make social progress blindfolded* [E1b] drew on Professor Boliver's research [R1] echoing her concerns about UCAS's decision to stop sharing microdata with researchers and policy-makers, arguing that "*The social mobility implications of this are illustrated by research carried out by Durham University's Vikki Boliver. Using UCAS data, Boliver found that ethnic minority and state school applicants to Russell Group universities have to significantly out-perform their respective white and privately educated peers before they are as likely to be offered places [...] Obtaining a better understanding of social mobility in the UK requires that researchers and policy-makers have access to UCAS-controlled data.*"

The UK government began to take interest in Professor Boliver's research [E2], the then Prime Minister David Cameron citing the research findings [R1 & R2] and championing the call to tackle unconscious bias in an article he authored for *The Guardian* in October 2015 [E2a], stating "...research has shown that top universities make offers to 55% of white applicants, but only to 23% of black ones. The reasons are complex, but unconscious bias is clearly a risk. So we have agreed with UCAS that it will make its applications name-blind, too, from 2017". Professor Boliver was invited to 10 Downing Street in February 2016 to contribute to a roundtable discussion of Social Mobility and Diversity where, drawing on R1 & R2, she called for government to require universities to publish detailed admissions statistics annually to increase transparency and accountability, to challenge UCAS over its withholding of microdata from researchers and policy-makers, and to press universities to tackle ethnic biases in university admissions decisions. Each of these recommendations subsequently featured in the Higher Education White Paper published in May 2016 [E2b], in which the UK government announced its intention to (a) "place a duty on institutions to publish application, offer, acceptance and progression rates, broken down by gender, ethnicity and disadvantage" (b) "legislate to require those organisations who provide shared central admissions services (such as UCAS) to share relevant data they hold with Government and researchers in order to help improve policies designed to increase social mobility" and (c) "consult the higher education sector on the feasibility of introducing name-blind applications for prospective students [which...] will potentially help reduce unfairness and inequality" (p.41).

The key beneficiary of this impact has been prospective students from the Black ethnic group, whose rates of entry to higher-tariff UK universities rose significantly from 4.4% in 2012 to 11.4% in 2020, with a corresponding reduction in the entry ratio for White relative to Black students from 2-to-1 to 1.1-to-1 [E3]. In his testimonial letter [E4], the Chair of All Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community, David Lammy MP, said: "Professor Boliver provided the academic evidence required to underpin the political argument for changes to University admissions policy and practice. Critically, her work helped cement the case for the mandatory publication of annual admissions statistics broken down by ethnic group for every UK university. I have no doubt that through bringing this evidence into the public and political consciousness, Professor Boliver has made a significant contribution to driving the subsequent changes observed within University admissions policy and practice leading to an improved representation of BAME students at the UK's most academically selective universities."

Reducing socioeconomic inequalities in admission to higher-tariff universities

Subsequent research by Professor Boliver and colleagues on the use of contextualised admissions practices has been used by the Scottish Government [E5] and by the English Office for Students [E6] to promote the wider and bolder use of contextualised offer making, which is recognised as a key driver of reinvigorated national widening participation and fair access policies which aim to eliminate socioeconomic inequalities in access to higher education within a generation.

Professor Boliver's research for the Scottish Funding Council [R3 & R6] has been used to support Scotland Government policies requiring the introduction of significantly lower academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged university applicants across Scotland and has spurred the Scottish Government to begin making individual-level rather than area-level indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage available for contextual offer making purposes. This latter research recommendation was endorsed by the Scottish Commission on Widening Access, which in its 2016 report entitled *A Blueprint for Fairness* [E5a] recommended the development of "a consistent and robust set of measures to identify access students" which "take account of the findings from SFC funded research on the use of contextual data in undergraduate university admissions being undertaken by Durham University" (p.66); as well as by the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access who in his 2017 report *Laying the Foundations for Fair Access* [E5b] endorsed the Durham team's "useful distinction between indicators which carry minimal risk of incorrectly identifying an individual as disadvantaged when they are not (such as eligibility for free school meals) [and] indicators that should be used with caution as they do carry such a

risk (such as residence in a SIMD area)" (p.30). A subsequent research report entitled *Identifying Access Students* published by the Scottish Government in 2019 [E5c] builds explicitly on the Durham team's research [R3] to recommend that "[a] *multiple-year Free School Meals registration measure should be included in the set of measures*" used to identify widening access students (p.18). Following the publication of the Durham team's research, Professor Boliver has played a direct role in helping to implement the Scottish Government's ambitious fair access policies, having been invited to serve as the academic expert member of the Scottish Framework for Fair Access Development Group, charged with developing an evidence-based toolkit and community of practice to foster fairer access to higher education in Scotland (2017-2018), and as the academic expert member of the Scottish Government's Access Delivery Group, charged with implementing the recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access including the wider and bolder use of contextualised offer making (2018 onwards).

Similarly in England, Professor Boliver and colleagues' research has been used by the Office for Students to support its advocacy of more ambitious contextualised admissions practices as a vital means of equalising access to higher-tariff universities in England [E6]. The Office for Students' 2019 briefing to the sector entitled *Contextualised Admissions: Promoting Fairness and Rethinking Merit* [E6a] cites seven different research outputs authored by Professor Boliver and her team to argue that "[t]here is a case for rethinking how merit is judged in admissions [since] focusing only on the top A-levels means that the potential of disadvantaged students is being overlooked" supported by a reference to a key finding of the research that "lowering advertised grades at high-tariff providers to BCC, for example, would broaden the pool of available applicants without a marked fall in academic standards." In the same briefing, the Office for Students also acknowledged the limitations of area-level measures of contextual disadvantage including its own preferred measure, the local HE participation rate (known as POLAR), citing the Durham team's research [R3] as showing that "*the most robust measure of disadvantage is whether or not a child receives free school meals for a sustained period of time.*" (p.4). In its subsequent 2019 Annual Review [E6b], the Office for Students drew again on the research to argue that "*access for disadvantaged students, and good outcomes, are not a zero-sum game. Research shows that if students from disadvantaged backgrounds...are given the support they need during their studies – they can end up performing just as well as, if not better than, their more privileged peers.*" (p19). The Access and Participation Plans for 2020-2024 submitted to the Office for Students by higher-tariff universities in England show that contextualised admissions has now become mainstream, with all 25 higher-tariff universities in England now taking contextual data into consideration when making admissions decisions, 20 committing to reducing entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants, and 9 [E6c] citing directly the research by Professor Boliver and her team.

The key beneficiaries of the impact of this research have been prospective university students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds whose school attainment would previously have rendered them ineligible to enrol in higher-tariff universities. Contextualised admissions practices have enabled Scottish universities to make sustained progress towards a more equitable ratio of entrants from Scotland's least-deprived as compared to most-deprived communities, down from 4-to-1 in 2014 to 3.2-to-1 in 2020 [E3]. Similarly, in England, contextualised admissions practices have reduced the ratio of entrants to higher-tariff universities from high as compared to low HE participation area from 6.7-to-1 in 2014 to 4.7-to-1 in 2020, and from non-FSM as compared to FSM backgrounds from 4.3-to-1 to 3.2-to-1 over the same period [E3].

In his testimonial letter [E7], the Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students, Christopher Millward, said: "*When I was appointed in 2018 [... I] visited universities across England to understand and discuss their work, and gave presentations to influential groups of practitioners and senior management such as the Russell Group to set out our emerging strategy for access and participation. As part of this work, I regularly used data and recommendations from Vikki's research in order to define fair equality of opportunity, to demonstrate the current priorities of admissions practitioners and their implications for higher education access, and to show what students from under-represented groups could achieve*

given contextual offers and appropriate support on course. Building on these discussions, OfS [...] published guidance on our new regulatory requirements in 2019. For the most selective universities, the guidance required targets to be set to reduce the gap in access between the most and least represented groups and to set out the measures that would be put in place to achieve this. In order to inform these targets and measures prior to submission of plans, we published an Insight Brief in May 2019 on contextual admissions, drawing extensively on Vikki's research, and we held an event with sector practitioners, to which Vikki gave a keynote speech. We also drew attention to Vikki's research in our guidance on effective practice, which was published alongside our regulatory guidance. As a result of this, all of the selective universities identified how contextual admissions would support the delivery of the targets within 5 year plans submitted later that month and we will be asking them to report on the impact of these measures during the coming years. We anticipate that this could lead to 6,500 more students entering the most selective universities each year by the end of the current plans. [...] Around £1 billion is now invested in this work every year, but the activity has too rarely been based on conceptual clarity about the case for it and the evidence needed to shape, evaluate and improve it. In the case of contextual admissions, the imperative for this is particularly strong because it is controversial and contested by groups representing those who are perceived to miss out. Vikki's research has been central to addressing these concerns, to the extent that contextual admissions are now central to admissions in all of the most selective universities in England."

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[E1] Social Mobility Commission use of Vikki Boliver's research to highlight ethnic bias in admissions decision-making at higher-tariff UK universities

- a) *Higher Education: The Fair Access Challenge*. Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013)
- b) *Data and public policy: trying to make social progress blindfolded*. Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015)

[E2] UK Government use of Vikki Boliver's research to inform Higher Education admissions policy

- a) *The Conservatives have become the party of equality*, David Cameron, The Guardian, 26th October 2015
- b) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching excellence, social mobility and Student Choice*, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (May 2016)

[E3] UCAS (2020) *End of Cycle Report 2020*. Cheltenham: UCAS.

[E4] Testimonial from David Lammy MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Community.

[E5] Scottish Government use of Vikki Boliver's research in reducing inequalities in access to Higher Education

- a) Commission on Widening Access (2016) *A Blueprint for Fairness: The final report of the commission on widening access*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- b) Commissioner for Fair Access (2017) *Laying the Foundations for Fair Access*. Annual report 2017.
- c) Scottish Government (2019) *Identifying Access Students: A report on the work of the Access Data Working Group in response to Recommendation 31 of the Commission on Widening Access*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

[E6] Office for Students' use of Vikki Boliver's research in promoting contextualised admissions in Higher Education and related influence on HEI Access and Participation Plans

- a) Office for Students (2019) *Contextual Admissions: Promoting Fairness and Rethinking Merit*. London: Office for Students.
- b) Office for Students (2019) *Annual review*. London: Office for Students.
- c) Research cited in the Access and Participation Plans for 2020-24 submitted by 9 out of 25 higher-tariff universities in England: Birmingham, Cambridge, KCL, LSE, Liverpool, Royal Holloway, Durham, Manchester and Newcastle.

[E7] Testimonial from Christopher Millward, Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students.