

An aerial photograph of a historic city, likely Oxford, featuring a large blue text overlay. The background shows a mix of stone buildings, a prominent dome on the left, and a large Gothic-style building on the right. The sky is filled with white and grey clouds. The text is centered in the blue area.

Anonymisation of graduate applications

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Aims of today's presentation

- a) present a recent (2024) evaluation of the use of anonymisation in graduate admissions at Oxford
- b) encourage a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of anonymisation as well as of related approaches to improving graduate access



Origins of anonymisation

In 2021, the Department of Chemistry at the University of Oxford was the first department at the University to pilot the anonymisation of applications. The department's push was primarily related to the programme's low rates of **women offer holders**.

Participating Departments	Division	Other 'selection pilots'
Sustainable Approaches to Biomedical Science	Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division (MPLS)	Contextual data
Interdisciplinary Bioscience		Contextual statement
Intelligent Earth		Shortlisting Black British students
Environmental Research		
Chemistry in Cells: New Technologies to Probe Complex Biology and Medicine	Medical Sciences Division (MSD)	

**The anonymisation pilot began in 2021 alongside other selection pilots*

All of the programmes which participated in the pilot were included in the evaluation.

Intended Outcomes of Anonymisation 'Pilot'

1

Improved Gender Balance

2

Improved Ethnic Diversity

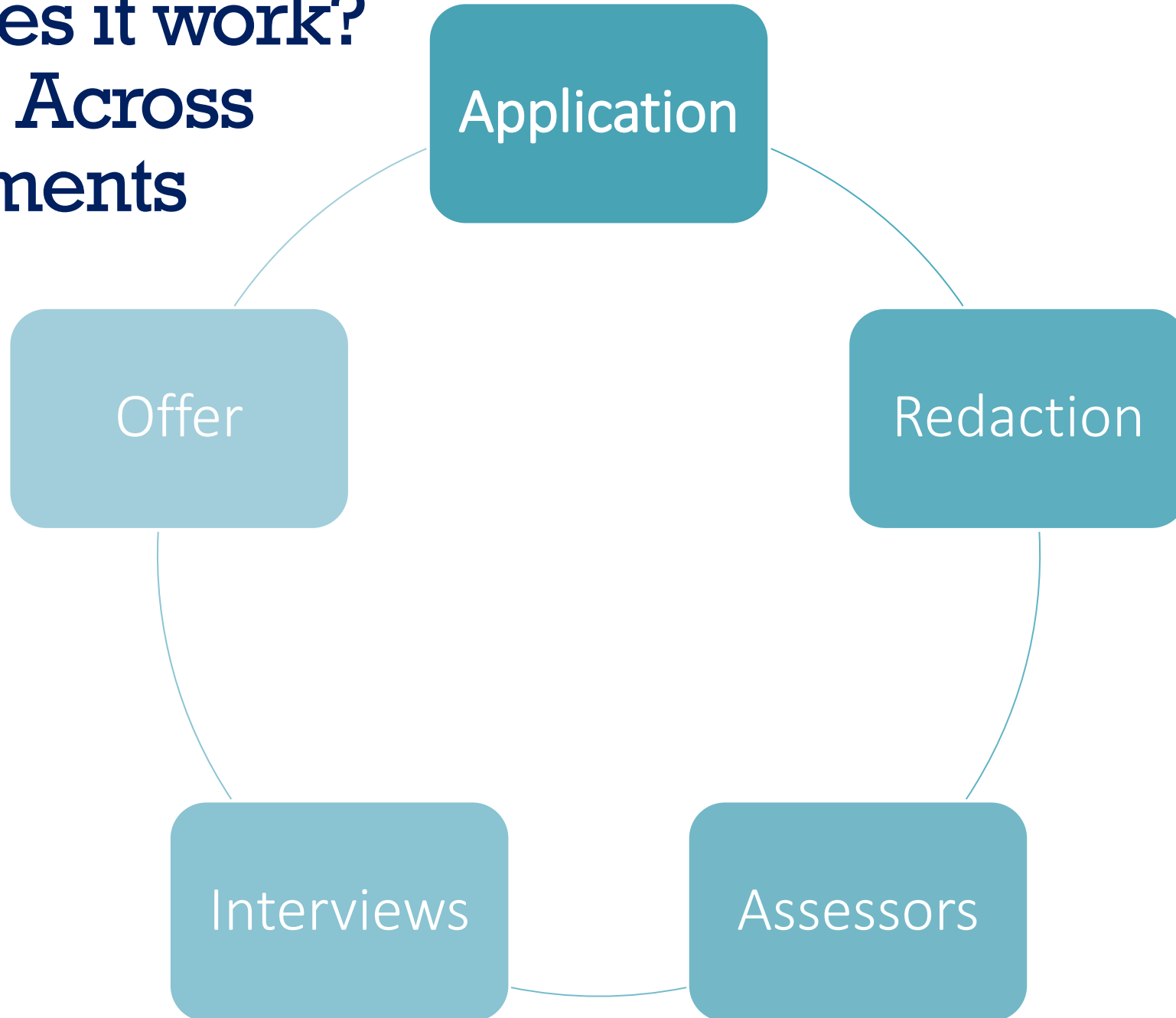
3

Improved Socio-Economic Status (SES) Diversity

4

Potential expansion of Pilot to wider University

How does it work? Process Across Departments



Process Across Departments

Redaction

The redaction stage is the key stage of the anonymisation process. Here, applicant information related to age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and race are removed **manually** by administrative staff. The processes of redaction ranges between **15-45 minutes per applicant.**

Evaluation of the Anonymisation Pilot

The evaluation aimed to answer a key question:

Is anonymisation effective?

Methodology

- **quantitative** analysis of data sets across the division, department and individual courses from the last five years
- the findings derived from a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts with participants (**qualitative**)



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Quantitative Analysis: App-to-Offer Conversion Rate

- Dataset:

- applications and offers for each course and subject area (division), broken down according by gender, ethnic grouping and SES banding

- Analysis:

- app-to-offer conversion rate enables comparison across different course sizes and between cohorts
- comparison can be made between groups (e.g. Black/white candidates)

Quantitative Analysis: Limitations

- All courses that implemented anonymisation also implemented other pilots, including contextual data, making it difficult to isolate the effect of anonymisation
- Data sample sizes are very small in each course, and even at the divisional level they are small when broken down into ethnic groupings

Quantitative Analysis: Findings

Gender: the app-to-offer conversion rates show a small difference in favour of female candidates, but this is not specific to the courses participating in the anonymisation pilot

Ethnicity: due to small sample sizes, a small change of one or two offers in a non-white category is reflected in a very large app-to-offer conversion rate, meaning it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions

SES: there is some positive change to the app-to-offer conversion rate for the most disadvantaged SES grouping, but arguably this change is more likely attributable to the use of contextualised data in a separate graduate access pilot

Qualitative Analysis: Key Themes From Interviews

Overview of Themes	
Administrative Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Manual Redaction- Need for Automation
Mixed Effectiveness of Anonymisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Questionable Impact- Fairness in Assessment
Institutional Support Needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Skeptical about Wider Adoption- Signposting for Diversity
Discipline-Specific Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Variations
Value of Contextualised Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Strong support

Key findings: *"Has anonymisation achieved its intended outcomes in the participating Departments?"*

- there is **not enough evidence to support the statement that anonymisation has achieved its intended outcomes**, or that the reduction of unconscious bias in admissions processes can be solely attributed to the anonymisation pilot
- there is **strong support for the use of contextual data**, which proves particularly valuable in understanding the circumstances that may have shaped an applicant's academic journey, allowing for a more comprehensive assessment of their potential
- the **concurrent use of anonymisation and contextual data requires careful planning** and implementation to ensure that both processes work together effectively and towards similar ends

Recommendations from evaluation

1. that **anonymisation** is not rolled out as a pilot initiative across the University, and this is partly due to the administrative difficulties of anonymisation
2. further resources are put into ensuring the use of **contextual data** is as robust as possible and rolled out as widely as possible

Selection pilots

Oxford's selection pilots:

- **anonymisation** of applications
- use of **contextual data**
- collection of a **contextual applicant statement**
- **common formats** for the statement of purpose/research proposal
- **standardised questionnaires to referees** (in addition to the standard reference request)
- **guaranteeing an interview to Black British applicants** who meet the entry requirements



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Conclusion and ongoing discussion