Perceptions of Fairness Research for the Fair Admissions Review
Objectives and methodology

The Fair Admissions Review sought to ensure that the application process is fair to all applicants. To help achieve this goal, this research aims to:

• Gauge perceived level of fairness of the different stages of the process and requirements;
• Explore level of support at each stage;
• Identify specific elements of the process which could be better supported;
• Highlight any barriers to preferred choices.

SAMPLE
1,499 adults aged 18+ who have applied to a UK university/college/other HE institution between 2015-2019 and have been UK residents at the time of applying.

METHOD
Online survey

FIELDWORK DATES
8th – 19th November 2019

INTERPRETATION
Data were weighted by age, gender and region in order to be representative of all HE applicants between 2015-2019.

Findings marked with asterisk (*) indicate a low base size and should be treated as indicative.
PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS

Seven in ten applicants consider the application process fair - one in ten say it is unfair and one in five say it is neither fair nor unfair;

Those who consider the application process to be unfair, most commonly say this is because:

• The career advice they were given wasn’t very helpful;

• The application process was too long.
MEETING SUPPORT NEEDS

Four in five of applicants say they felt supported by the universities/colleges they applied to during the application process - just one in five say they felt unsupported;

Most commonly used sources of support or guidance include UCAS, parent(s)/guardian(s), and school academic staff.
CHALLENGES DURING AND AFTER THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Most common **challenges** of the application process mentioned are:

- **Feeling unsure** about whether university was for them;
- **Not having exam results** before applying;

Applicants who did not accept any offers or did not start their accepted course say this is because they decided the **timing wasn’t right** for them;

**BAME** applicants are significantly more likely than White applicants to change courses or to not start their accepted course.
Whether offers drive applicants to perform well academically varies based on the different types of offers they received.

Approaching two thirds agree that the application process works well as it is or that it is fine to apply with predicted grades – almost three in ten disagree with each;

However, over half agree that universities/colleges should only make offers after people have received their academic results.
RESULTS IN FULL
Recent applicants are seven times more likely to rate the application process as fair than unfair

Perceived fairness of the university/college application process
(% of all recent applicants who say each of the following)

- Very fair (8-10)
- Quite fair (6-7)
- Neither (5)
- Quite unfair (3-4)
- Very unfair (0-2)

NET: Fair 70%
NET: Unfair 12%

Q10. Overall, how fair or unfair did you consider the university/college application process to be? Base: All respondents (n=1,499)
Those who find the application process unfair most commonly say this is because the career advice they were given wasn’t very helpful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>% Who Consider the Application Process Unfair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The career advice I was given wasn't very helpful</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The application process was too long</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn't have all the information I needed to make an informed choice about what or where to study</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal guidance wasn't given to everyone applying at my school/sixth form college</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance wasn't available for to the course/career I was interested in</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was pressured into applying to university by my school/sixth form college</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wasn't sure how some of the steps in the process worked</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was pressured in applying to university by family or friends</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was pressured into accepting an offer by my school/sixth from college</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was pressured into accepting an offer by a university/college</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was pressured into accepting an offer by family or friends</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q11. You mentioned that your university/college application process was generally not fair. Of the following options, which best explains why? Base: All who consider the application process unfair (n=183)

- State-run non-selective school 45% vs. state-run selective school 28%
- Creative Arts 44%
- Social Sciences 58%
- First in immediate family 40% vs. Not first 24%
- Social Sciences 49%

“"The application process was biased towards upper and middle class applicants"”

“"Due to similar exam results and personal statements offers by universities can be slightly luck based"”
The majority of applicants say they felt supported by the universities/colleges they applied to during the application process.

**Perceptions on the level of support received from universities/colleges**

- **Very supported**: 26%
- **Fairly supported**: 53%
- **Not very supported**: 16%
- **Not at all supported**: 3%
- **Don't know**: 2%

**NET: Supported**: 79%

**NET: Unsupported**: 19%

- **STEM Subject**: 23%
- **Health Sciences**: 23%
- **Did not receive any offers**: 28%
- **Considered the process to be fair**: 85%
- **Selective state school**: 82%
- **Study in Scotland**: 89%

**Did not receive any offers** vs. 18% received any offers.

**Selective state school** vs. 77% non-selective state school.
Applicants rely on UCAS, parents/guardians or teachers for support

Ranking most used sources of support during the application process
(Showing NET: Top 3)

- UCAS: 38% (fair vs. 29% unfair)
- Parent(s)/guardian(s): 35% (fair vs. 30% unfair)
- School academic staff e.g. teachers: 34% (fair vs. 25% unfair)
- University/college: 27% (fair vs. 19% unfair)
- Friend(s): 27% (fair vs. 19% unfair)
- School pastoral staff e.g. form tutors: 24% (fair vs. 16% unfair)
- Online forums e.g. thestudentroom: 18% (fair vs. 12% unfair)
- Careers advisors: 13% (fair vs. 19% unfair)
- Sibling(s): 13% (fair vs. 19% unfair)
- Employer: 10% (fair vs. 19% unfair)
- Private tutor: 10% (fair vs. 19% unfair)
- None of the above: 3% (fair vs. 1% unfair)
- Don’t know: 1% (fair vs. 1% unfair)

Q13. Which of the following sources of support or guidance, if any, did you use during your application process? Base: All respondents (n=1499)
Feeling unsure about whether university was for them or not having exam results before applying are perceived as challenges.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges of the application process</th>
<th>(% who say each are challenges)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling unsure about whether university was for me</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not having exam results before applying</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different parts of the application itself e.g. personal statement</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not knowing where to apply</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being sure which offer to accept</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance or funding not being available</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties applying for student finance</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of help in choosing a subject</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of information about my course</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not understanding the different types of offers</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support from my school, college or employer</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support from universities or institutions</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Female applicants** 34% vs. 28% Male
- **Parents/guardians don’t have a degree** 35% vs. 29% Parents/guardians have a degree
- **Conditional offer** 36% vs. 27% Unconditional
- **Conditional unconditional offer** 36%
- **Parents/guardians don’t have a degree** 28% vs. 22% Parents/guardians have a degree
- **First in immediate family to apply** 16% vs. 9% not first
- **Contextual offer** 27% vs. 12% Conditional and 10% Unconditional
- **First in immediate family to apply** 12% vs. 8% not first
Nine in ten applicants say they accepted at least one of the offers they received, with seven in ten of those who did so starting the accepted course straight away.

8% say they didn’t accept any offers they received vs. 92% NET: Accepted any offers received.

Starting accepted course (% who accepted any offer(s))

- Yes, and straight away
- Yes, and deferred until the following year
- No
- Not yet
- Don’t know

- BAME students are twice as likely as White students to say they have not or not yet started their accepted course (20% vs. 10% respectively).

- Applicants from the South East (21%) and the North West (18%) are the most likely to say they have not or not yet started their accepted course.
Those who didn’t accept an offer or did not start their course most commonly say this is because the timing wasn’t right for them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Base: All who did not accept the received offer(s) or did not start their course (n=156)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I decided the timings weren't right for me</td>
<td>White 29% vs. BAME 14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I changed my mind about wanting to go to university/college</td>
<td>White 24% vs. BAME 11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I decided I'd prefer to take a job</td>
<td>White 19% vs. BAME 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had concerns about financing my course</td>
<td>White 19% vs. BAME 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I decided the course wasn't right for me</td>
<td>White 14% vs. BAME 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I decided the institution wasn't right for me</td>
<td>White 11% vs. BAME 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wasn't happy with the course(s) I received offer(s) for</td>
<td>White 7% vs. BAME 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The application process was too difficult</td>
<td>White 4% vs. BAME 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wasn't happy with the institution(s) I received offer(s) from</td>
<td>BAME 11% vs. White 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wasn’t happy with the type(s) of offer(s) I received</td>
<td>BAME 4% vs. White 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whether offers drive applicants to perform well academically is questionable, with four in five saying their offers motivated them to work harder, while half say they made them complacent in studying for exams.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of received offers</th>
<th>(% of those who accepted their offer(s))</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NET: Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional offer</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional unconditional offer</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual offer</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual offer</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- My offers made me more likely to accept a university or college place
  - Conditional offer 86%
  - Conditional unconditional offer 84%
  - Contextual 77%

- My offers motivated me to work harder
  - Conditional offer 87%
  - Unconditional offer 77%

- My offers made me feel less stressed about the admissions process
  - Contextual offer 78%

- My offers made me complacent in studying for exams
  - Conditional offer 74%
  - Unconditional offer 50%
While the majority say they made the right decision, two in five agree that if they could go back they would make a different decision.
The majority of applicants express satisfaction, although a quarter disagree that the process works well. Half would make a different choice.

Perceptions about the application process and outcomes (% of all recent applicants)

- I had enough time to make the decision about which offer to accept: 69% agree, 23% disagree
- My university/college experience matched the expectations I had from the admissions process: 66% agree, 23% disagree
- I think the application process works well as it is: 64% agree, 28% disagree
- I think it is fine to apply to university/college with predicted grades: 64% agree, 28% disagree
- I think the application process should only begin after people have received their academic results, even if the term started later: 56% agree, 32% disagree
- I think universities/colleges should only make offers after people have received their academic results: 56% agree, 33% disagree

Q18. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All applicants (n=1499)
Those who haven’t received any offers and BAME applicants are less likely to agree that it is fine to apply with predicted grades.

“I think it is fine to apply to university/college with predicted grades”

(Net: Agree)

Total: 64% NET: Agree
28% NET: Disagree

Offer received – any/none

- 65% Received any offers
- 41% Received no offers

Ethnicity

- 67% White
- 55% BAME
Those who were 18+ when applying, those who received a contextual offer, BAME applicants and those who were first in their families to apply are the most likely to agree that offers should be made after people have received their academic results.

**Total:**
- 56% NET: Agree
- 33% NET: Disagree

**Q18. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All applicants (n=1499)**

“I think universities/colleges should only make offers after people have received their academic results”

(NET: Agree)

**Age when applying**
- Under 18: 45%
- 18: 59%
- 19-20: 58%
- 21 and over: 63%

**Type of offer received**
- Conditional offer: 56%
- Unconditional offer: 54%
- Conditional unconditional offer: 56%
- Contextual offer: 71%
- No offer: 57%

**Ethnicity**
- White: 54%
- BAME: 60%

**First to apply / not first to apply in family**
- First: 63%
- Not first: 49%
Applicants are most likely to be split on whether the process should begin before or after people have received their academic results.

“I think the application process should only begin after people have received their academic results, even if the term started later”

(NET: Agree)

**Total:**

- 56% NET: Agree
- 32% NET: Disagree

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**Age when applying**

- Under 18: 50%
- 18: 57%
- 19-20: 55%
- 21 and over: 65%

**Ethnicity**

- BAME: 63%
- White: 54%

**First to apply / not first to apply in family**

- First: 59%
- Not first: 53%

**Type of offer received**

- Conditional offer: 58%
- Unconditional offer: 54%
- Conditional unconditional offer: 48%
- Contextual offer: 66%
- No offer: 46%

**Degree type**

- Business, Management or Accounting: 66%
- Health Sciences: 60%
- Social Sciences: 60%
- Creative Arts: 51%
- Humanities: 48%
BAME, Humanities, Social Sciences or Health Sciences applicants are the most likely to disagree that the application process works well as it is

“The application works well as it is” - significant differences (NET: Disagree)

**Ethnicity**

- **33%** BAME
- **26%** White

**Perceived fairness**

- **21%** Fair
- **57%** Unfair

**Feeling supported**

- **24%** Supported
- **47%** Unsupported

**Degree applied for**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree applied for</th>
<th>Total:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>34% NET: Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>33% NET: Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Sciences</td>
<td>32% NET: Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Arts</td>
<td>24% NET: Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, Management or Accounting</td>
<td>23% NET: Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>19% NET: Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Most likely to NET: Disagree**

- Humanities
- Social Sciences
- Health Sciences

**Least likely to NET: Disagree**

- Creative Arts
- Business, Management or Accounting
- Languages
RECOMMENDED AREAS OF FOCUS
Fairness review and recommended areas of focus

- BAME applicants
- Those who are first in their immediate families to apply / whose parents don’t have a degree
- Explaining the meaning and implications of different offers

- Careers advice – particularly in non-selective state schools and for more subjective courses
- Help determining whether university is the right choice