FAIR ADMISSIONS REVIEW

JUNE 2019 – NOVEMBER 2020

Universities UK

Contents

Executive summary

A fair admissions process is central to higher education and core to universities' missions to widen access. In the 2019 admissions cycle, 541,240 people were accepted through UCAS for a place on a full-time undergraduate course in the UK, with a record entry rate among UK 18-year-olds of 34.1% (UCAS, 2019a). In recent years, substantial progress has been made in widening university access to under-represented groups, including a narrowing of the gap in applications and admissions between the most advantaged and disadvantaged in society.

There has been growing public scrutiny of admissions in higher education – from applicants, the education sector, politicians and the media. Recent calls for change have centred on a variety of issues, ranging from transparency and specific offer-making practices through to the admissions cycle and exam timetabling.

Numerous changes across education sectors in recent years mean it is timely to reconsider (or reaffirm) what 'fairness' and 'transparency' in admissions look like both in principle and in practice. This includes updating the existing Schwartz principles on fair admissions (2004) to ensure that fairness remains truly central in admissions for today's applicants.

Universities UK (UUK) launched a fair admissions review in July 2019 to:
- identify the main challenges linked to 'home' undergraduate admissions and offer-making practices
- review the 2004 Schwartz principles on fair admissions
- propose changes that will improve fairness and transparency, and ensure that admissions work in the best interests of applicants.

The review was mindful of which issues or challenges linked to admissions were of UK-wide relevance and which were not, including with regards to diverging policies across the four UK nations.

The review has been informed by stakeholders – namely higher education applicants themselves, as well as school, college, student and university and UCAS representatives – to help identify a series of changes that, together, set out a clear path to a fairer, more transparent and applicant friendly admissions system. These changes are applicable UK-wide, with the exception of recommendations to contextual admissions where several of the proposals are already in place for the Scottish sector.

Please note that recommendations three and eight will be the focus of ongoing stakeholder consultation led by UUK.

The review recommends that universities and colleges should:

1. **Abide by a set of updated admissions principles on fairness and transparency** (from the 2004 Schwartz Review), centred on the applicant's interest.

2. **Ensure that admissions and offers are made in the best interests of students, without limiting ambition or adversely influencing course choices**. This includes ending 'conditional unconditional' offers, restricting the use of unconditional offers to specific circumstances, and ensuring that incentives are clearly published and do not place pressure on applicants.

3. **Be ambitious in ensuring that admissions practices address inequalities in access and participation, including greater transparency in the use of contextual admissions**. This includes universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: providing clear, consistent messaging on what contextual offers are and their purpose; using standard indicators to support contextual offers (Free School Meals and Index of Multiple Deprivation data, and care experienced status); developing minimum entry requirements for contextually-flagged applicants; and making guaranteed offers for care experienced applicants who meet minimum entry requirements. These recommendations on contextual admissions will be part of a wider UUK consultation with the sector now the review has concluded.

4. **Improve the level of transparency of information and guidance for applicants to support aspiration-raising.** As part of this, universities and colleges should publish historic, actual entry grades (including through Clearing entries) alongside advertised entry requirements to improve transparency and raise aspirations. Schools, colleges and universities should collaborate to ensure that careers advice is joined up to better support applicants' aspirations This includes activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college.

The review also recommends:

5. **UCAS should progress with a series of planned reforms to improve fairness and transparency in admissions**. This includes a pilot adviser tool to drive greater transparency around qualification accepted on entry; and revising guidance on references and making enhancements to the adviser portal to deliver efficiencies for schools; a new 'My Application' student interface, which will provide a clearer and more engaging experience for students alongside enhancements to Clearing Plus, a data driven tool for unplaced applicants to be matched to personalised Clearing opportunities.

6. **Governments must support fairness and transparency in admissions**. This includes the Westminster and devolved governments facilitating access to free school meals data at the point of application, and providing continued funding to support school-FE-HE collaboration.

7. **The higher education sector should take a more proactive approach to identifying and addressing key admissions challenges and criticisms**. This includes: developing a 'code of practice', with consequences for breaches of the code; and convening a forum for applicants, schools, college and university representatives to assess where further action is needed to uphold fairness and transparency in admissions. In 2021, this forum's focus will include key admissions challenges throughout the pandemic.

8. **Further consideration should be given to a reformed undergraduate admissions system based on a Post-Qualifications Admissions (PQA) model whereby applicants do not receive offers until their exam/assessment results are known**. Stakeholders have raised concerns about the use of unconditional and conditional unconditional offers; the use and accuracy of predicted grades and the fairness of predictions; and the use of incentives to encourage early applicant decision-making. Further, the review's student polling identified that 64% think it is fine to apply to university/college with predicted grades, while a majority would prefer offers to be made post-results. This review has explored whether a change to the admissions system could address these concerns. This recommendation on PQA will be part of a wider, UUK-led sector consultation now the review has concluded.

The recommendations outlined above will be implemented in stages, some over the short term (within one year) with others over the long term (within 3-4 years). Those recommendations beyond the short term will be the subject of ongoing consultation with stakeholders, led by UUK, ahead of implementation. The higher education sector is committed to continuous improvement in admissions and will work with UCAS to evaluate, share, and implement good practice.

Introduction

The overarching aim of the fair admissions review has been to propose changes that will improve fairness and transparency and ensure that admissions work in the best interests of applicants.

Over the past few years, several challenges and concerns have been raised about higher education admissions by different stakeholders within and outside the education sector. Key issues have included, but have not been limited to the:

- growing use of unconditional and '**conditional unconditional' offers**
- use and accuracy of **predicted grades** and the fairness of these predictions
- increasing role of **Clearing** and associated decision-making timescales
- **use of incentives** to encourage early decision-making by applicants
- transparency and quality of **information, advice and guidance** available to applicants

There have also been developments in the use of contextual admissions to level-up opportunity and support applicants to achieve their potential, but it is not always clear how and why these types of offers are used. More broadly, the suitability of wider system reform for admissions continues to be widely discussed, including Post-Qualifications Admissions.

In order to best identify where fairness and transparency can be improved, the review undertook the following activities:

1. **Set up a cross-sector group to steer the review**: An advisory group was formed of higher education, further education, school, student and UCAS representatives to determine the scale and scope of the review, and to agree priority activities in relation to the most substantial challenges linked to admissions and offer-making. The advisory group was chaired by Professor Paddy Nixon up to February 2020, and by Professor Quintin McKellar from February 2020 onwards. In addition, Professor Sally Mapstone and Professor Mary Stuart CBE have acted as deputy chairs. A full list of Advisory Group members can be found at the end of this report.

2. **Consulted with those working in education:** Calls for evidence were launched in October 2019 to help identify key issues and possible responses to these (UUK, 2019b). Three separate calls for evidence were issued in total, one for higher education staff, one for school and further education staff, and one for current students/applicants/recent graduates. These surveys received 179 responses in total (including 89 for the higher education staff survey, 43 for the school and further education staff survey and 42 for the student survey). The calls for evidence sought stakeholders' views on making informed choices, assessing and supporting applicants, offer-making, pre- and post-qualifications admissions systems and processes, and key admissions principles.

3. **Consulted with applicants:** Opinion polling was carried out among 1,499 individuals aged 18 and over who had applied to a UK university, college or other higher education institution while a UK resident, between 2015 and 2019 (UUK, 2020). The polling was used to evaluate views on the strengths and weaknesses of the undergraduate applications and admissions process. The findings from this polling were released publicly in February 2020 and sought views on: individuals' experiences of the application and admissions process; the impact that any offers they received had on them personally; what barriers they experienced while applying or considering to do so; whether applying with predicted grades was a challenge.

4. **Evaluated different admissions reform options**: A stakeholder workshop was held to assess the suitability of three different post-qualifications admissions models:
   - post-qualifications decisions, where applicants apply and offers are made by universities before results are received, but student acceptance of any offer comes after they have achieved their qualifications
   - post-qualifications offers, where applicants express interest in the university, and offers are made to applicants after they have achieved their qualifications
   - post-qualifications applications, where applicants apply and offers are made by universities after applicants have achieved their qualifications.

This workshop involved representatives from universities, colleges, schools, exam regulators, UCAS and student representation.

5. **Identified how to further boost social mobility through admissions**: A contextual admissions working group was created to discuss options for improving the transparency and consistency of contextual admissions to level up opportunity and support students to achieve their potential. This group was formed of university, sixth-form college and UCAS representatives.

What stakeholders told us

The fair admissions review has been driven by what stakeholders deem to be priorities and issues of concern. A summary of evidence gathered from universities, colleges, schools and applicants as part of the review is provided below.

A full breakdown of the evidence gathered is available on the UUK website in the following locations:
- [Opinion polling of applicants (UUK, 2020)](#)
- Call for evidence findings (forthcoming)

Recent applicants

Opinion polling of recent applicants to higher education produced the following findings:
- Seven in ten (70%) applicants think the current applications and admissions process is fair, although more than one in four (28%) disagree that the application process works well in its current state.
- The majority of applicants (79%) feel very or fairly well supported by universities and colleges during the applications process.
- Those who find the application process unfair most commonly say this is because the careers advice they were given was not very helpful, with 34% of those who labelled the process unfair naming this as the main reason
  for it being so.
- 'Feeling unsure about whether university was for them' is perceived as a challenge.
- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) applicants are significantly less likely to describe the admissions process as fair compared with white applicants (62% vs 73%).
- Unconditional offers are less motivating than conditional offers, with 87% of those receiving conditional offers saying these acted as a motivator to work harder, compared with 77% who received an unconditional offer.
- Those receiving contextual offers are twice as likely to say they do not understand the different types of offers made (27% vs 13% overall).
- Almost two-thirds of applicants (64%) think it is fine to apply with predicted grades, and more than half of those polled (56%) feel that universities and colleges should only make offers after people have received their academic results.
- BAME applicants and those who were the first in their immediate family to apply to

university are more likely to agree that offers should be made after receiving academic results (60% BAME applicants vs 54% white applicants; 63% first in immediate family vs 49% not first).

- 56% also think that the application process should start after exam results are known. Further, one in three (29%) applicants described not having exam results before applying to university as a challenge.

Higher Education Providers

Consultation with staff at higher education providers (via the call for evidence) found the following main insights:

- The Schwartz principles are broadly still valid but need to better protect and prioritise applicants' interest. (Admissions to Higher Education Review, 2004).
- 'Conditional unconditional' offers create unfair pressure on applicants to accept offers for providers or courses without being able to make informed decisions.[1] The other main concern is that these offers can disincentivise applicants to maximise their pre-higher education attainment.
- There is a high degree of support for the use of contextual offers to improve equality of opportunity. However, more needs to be done to support the use of contextual offers. This includes better access to data, clearer guidance and more consistency to improve applicant understanding.
- Incentives should prioritise access and raising aspirations and avoid creating undue pressure. It was also suggested that incentives should be published clearly, consistently and transparently.
- Publishing actual entry grades (as well as advertised entry grades) would boost transparency.
- There is no consensus on what type of admissions system should be adopted (eg a particular type of PQA).

School staff

Consultation with staff at schools (via the call for evidence) produced the following findings:

- The Schwartz principles are generally still valid, but university admissions are not always fair or transparent, including around decision-making processes and the use of incentives.
- Unconditional offers can be entirely appropriate in certain circumstances, but they can demotivate applicants, which in turn might affect their preparedness for university and future career opportunities. Several respondents also noted that the criteria for receiving an unconditional offer are not fully transparent across providers.
- Admissions processes, on the whole, encourage applicants to have high aspirations.

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[1] A 'conditional unconditional offer' is one for which the applicant is offered a place, regardless of their grades, on condition they make the university their firm first choice.

Updating the fair admissions principles

The Schwartz fair admissions principles were published in 2004, since when there have been fundamental changes to different parts of the education sector, and subsequently in applicant behavior and university admissions practices.

Based on feedback gathered through this fair admissions review, it is recommended that the principles, while remaining broadly fit for purpose:

- must better reflect (and be guided by) the applicant interest, not the interests of the university/college
- must be strengthened in their expectations in areas such as:
  - enhancing transparency on why types of offers are appropriate
  - providing information on how entry qualifications compare with entry requirements, and how these requirements change throughout the cycle[2]
  - ensuring staff have access to applicant data and other evidence to inform decision-making
  - ensuring assessment methods are explainable
  - providing clear messaging through the application process on why work is being undertaken to improve access, and how this is being achieved
  - ensuring that interventions to address inequalities are evaluated and form a clear component of wider organisational objectives for eliminating barriers to equality[3]
  - monitoring and evaluating admissions data and practices and sharing good practice.

An updated and revised set of principles is provided in the next section, with substantive revisions and additions that have been made to the original principles clearly marked. The fair admissions review recommends that these updated principles replace those compiled in 2004.

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[2] This review considered the introduction of minimum entry requirements for all courses. The review has not made specific recommendations but acknowledges UCAS' reform work. Through this work, UCAS is exploring how to create greater transparency around the level of attainment students are accepted with as a means of supporting more informed advice and decision making.

[3] This review considered the use of anonymisation in admissions. In 2016, UCAS examined the potential for introducing name-blind applications using two models: a model where UCAS withholds information such as applicants' names centrally; and a model where
providers can mask information locally from individuals involved directly in admissions making decisions. Providers preferred option two, allowing them to mask names while building a relationship with the student if necessary, e.g. in widening participation teams. In 2017, six universities ran pilots to test a 'name-blind' application process. None of the projects produced conclusive evidence that masking applicants' names led to significantly different admissions outcomes, while two of the projects suggested a negative impact on initial admissions outcomes. Consequently, this Review has not made recommendations on this issue.

Principles for fair admissions to UK higher education

In the revised principles below, changes from the 2004 Schwartz principles are highlighted in **blue.**

A fair admissions system should protect and prioritise applicants' interests
The system should prioritise applicants' interests and deliver the best outcomes for these applicants, regardless of the interests of universities and colleges. As part of this, universities and colleges should ensure that practices support student choice and do not create unnecessary pressure. Applicants must be able to make informed choices based on clear evidence of their strengths, capability and potential, and on comprehensive and consistent information about how courses, universities and colleges will meet their expectations, both as students and for their future aspirations beyond graduation.

Based on this, universities and colleges should adopt the following principles of a fair admissions system:

a) A fair admissions system should be transparent

Universities and colleges should provide, consistently, **clearly** and efficiently through appropriate mechanisms, the information applicants need to make an informed choice. This should include the institution's admissions policy and detailed criteria for admission to courses, along with an explanation of admissions processes **and why types of offers are appropriate**. It should include a general indication of the weight given to prior academic achievement and potential demonstrated by other means.

Universities and colleges should provide the latest available information about the entry qualifications of applicants accepted on each course, **how these compare with entry requirements, and how these requirements change throughout the cycle.** There should also be information on, and procedures for complaints and appeals. Institutions should conduct and publish a periodic analysis of admissions data and provide feedback on request to unsuccessful applicants.

b) A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential

Ability to complete the course must be an essential criterion for admission. In assessing applicants' merit and potential, universities and colleges may legitimately consider other factors in addition to examination results, including: the educational context of an applicant's formal achievement; other indicators of potential and capability (such as the results of additional testing or assessment, including interviews, or non-academic experiences and relevant skills); and how an individual applicant's experiences, skills and perspectives could contribute to the learning environment. However, applicants should be assessed as individuals: it is not appropriate to treat one applicant automatically more or less favourably by virtue of his or her background, school or college. At any stage in the

admissions process, all applicants should be given an equal opportunity to provide relevant information or demonstrate relevant skills.

Admissions criteria should not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit: for example, universities and colleges should not give preference to the relatives of graduates or benefactors. Admissions staff have the discretion to vary the weight they give to examination results and other indicators of achievement and potential and therefore to vary the offer that they make to applicants, providing this is done in a way which is consistent with the principles of fair admissions. **Further, it is vital that admissions staff can make informed decisions by having timely access to relevant applicant data and drawing on additional obtainable evidence where certain data sources are not yet available.**

c) A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable, valid and explainable

Assessment can legitimately include a broad range of factors. Some of these factors are amenable to 'hard' quantifiable measures, while others rely on qualitative judgements. This should continue: both legal and lay opinion place value on the use of discretion and the assessment of applicants as individuals. Admissions policies and procedures should be informed and guided by current research and good practice. Where possible, universities and colleges using quantifiable measures should use tests and approaches that have already been shown to predict undergraduate success. Where existing tests are unsuited to a course's entry requirements, institutions may develop alternatives, but should be able to demonstrate that their methods are relevant, reliable and valid. Universities and colleges should monitor and evaluate the link between their admissions policies and undergraduate performance and retention, and review their policies to address any issues identified.

d) A fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers for applicants and address inequalities

Admissions processes should seek to minimise any barriers that are irrelevant to satisfying admissions requirements. This could include barriers arising from the means of assessment; the varying resources and support available to applicants; disability; and the type of an applicant's qualifications (e.g. vocational or academic). **Universities and colleges should ensure there is clear messaging throughout the application process on why work is being undertaken to improve access, and how this is being achieved. Where inequality in access remains evident among applicants with protected characteristics, universities and colleges should consider how individual steps such as unconscious bias training are put into practice and evaluated, and ensure that such interventions form a clear component of wider organisational objectives for eliminating barriers to equality.**

e) A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes

The structures and processes of universities and colleges should be designed to facilitate a high-quality, efficient admissions system and a professional service to applicants. Structures and processes should feature: clear lines of responsibility across the university or college to ensure consistency **(guided by relevant training and/or support)**; allocation of resources appropriate to the task; and clear guidelines for the appointment, training and induction of all staff involved in admissions. **Universities and colleges should also monitor and evaluate admissions data and practices, share good practice and identify what works well and what does not work well in terms of serving the interests of students of all backgrounds.**

Recommendations for enhancing fairness and transparency in UK undergraduate higher education admissions

Informed by stakeholder opinion, as well as a revised set of admissions principles, the fair admissions review has identified a series of specific recommendations that together could constitute a significant change in improving fairness and transparency for future applicants.

Realising this change requires actions from multiple parties. With this in mind, the review makes specific recommendations for universities, UCAS, UK governments, higher education representative bodies, and those advising future applicants.

The Fair Admissions Review recommends that:

1) Universities and colleges should abide by a revised set of admissions principles centred around applicants

Supporting information
A key concern about admissions at present relates to practices that are deemed not to place the applicant at the heart of decision-making.

2) Universities and colleges should ensure that admissions and offers are made in the best interests of students, without limiting ambition or adversely influencing course choices

This means universities and colleges:
- **should not make 'conditional' unconditional offers**
- **should restrict the use of unconditional offers to specific applicant circumstances (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland).[4]** Universities and colleges should only make unconditional offers when the applicant:
    - already holds the required grades for the course
    - applies to a course where admissions decisions have been informed by an interview, audition or additional application procedure (such as a submission of a portfolio or skills test)
    - requires special consideration due to illness or disability
    - is applying to a university/college with an established and long-standing policy regarding non-selective admission to undergraduate programmes.

- **should ensure that the use of incentives does not place undue pressure on applicants.** All incentives should be published clearly, consistently and accessibly and communicated to applicants in a timely manner. This includes in relation to aspects of an offer communicated to applicants within or outside of UCAS that are tied to accommodation and other material and financial inducements. Universities and colleges should review their use of incentives against the revised principles set out in this report.

Supporting information

Stakeholder feedback on the use of conditional unconditional offers has been overwhelmingly negative, and their use has affected trust in higher education admissions processes. UUK's Fair Admissions Agreement from May 2020 recognised the risks to stability of this practice continuing through the pandemic and, in July 2020, the Office for Students also prohibited their use in England until September 2021.

While unconditional offers are made for a wide variety of reasons, their use has grown substantially in recent years. UUK's polling showed that, on the whole, applicants who received unconditional offers were less likely to report feeling motivated to perform well at school or college than those who received conditional offers. UCAS (2019b) analysis found that applicants holding an unconditional offer in the 2019 cycle were, on average, 11.5 percentage points more likely to miss their predicted A-level grades by three or more grades. Other evidence (OfS, 2020a) suggests that, in England, those entering higher education with A-levels and an unconditional offer are slightly less likely to continue into year 2 of their

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[4] There is a different context to unconditional offers in Scotland, where many students have already attained SQA Highers and met the academic requirements to enter higher education before applying.

degree than those entering with conditional offers.

Stakeholder feedback has found that incentives that are used to support access, raise aspirations or encourage higher performance are viewed much more positively than those that are designed to influence decision making. Schools were particularly likely to report a lack of transparency around the use of incentives. Concerns were also raised about incentives where a time pressure is involved, which were overall deemed not to support the student interest.

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3) Universities and colleges should be ambitious in ensuring admissions practices address inequalities in access and participation including greater transparency in the use of contextual admissions (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Universities and colleges should provide greater transparency on how contextual admissions are used, underpinned by:
- a sector-level explanatory statement on contextual admissions to improve applicant and adviser understanding of how and why they are used. This statement should be published on university/college websites
- greater consistency in the data used to inform contextual admissions. The review recommends the use of a 'basket' of contextual indicators by universities and colleges consisting of: Free School Meals (FSM) status, Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) data, and care experienced status[5]
- the development of minimum entry requirements for students that meet one or more indicators within the 'basket' of indicators
- provision of guaranteed offers to care experienced applicants if they meet the minimum entry requirements as referenced above, (as is already the case in Scotland).

Further details on the above proposals can be found in Annexe 2.

Universities and colleges should also:
- further explore how contextual admissions could support access to higher education for other students without family support, such as estranged students, refugees and asylum seekers.
- take further efforts to address racial inequalities by eliminating unconscious and implicit bias in admissions decision-making.
- ensure that efforts to address inequalities are regularly evaluated.

In addition to the recommended actions outlined above to address racial inequality, UUK should ensure its upcoming review of the higher education sector's efforts to eliminate the BAME student awarding gap (UUK, 2019c) also captures efforts to remove racial

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[5] 'Care-experienced status' refers to anyone who has been or is currently in care or from a looked-after background at any stage of their life, including adopted children who were previously looked after.

inequality within admissions practices.

Supporting information

Higher education entry rates still differ substantially between individuals of different socioeconomic or disadvantaged backgrounds, and contextual offers can form a key role in levelling up opportunity and supporting students to achieve their potential. However, UUK's applicant polling shows that those applicants who receive contextual offers are more likely to say that navigating and understanding offer-making is a challenge when applying. In addition, evidence from UCAS (2019c) has shown that the most disadvantaged students are less likely to be aware of contextual offers than the most advantaged. Too often, the mechanics behind these offers are not visible enough, meaning the very people who could benefit from them may be unaware of their existence. On the variability of transparency around contextual offer practices, research has found that general information targeted at applicants on university web pages ranges from fairly vague general statements about contextual data to detailed explanations of the methods used (University of Exeter, 2018).

UUK's polling showed that BAME applicants are less likely than white applicants to think the application process works well. BAME applicants are also more likely than white applicants to be dissatisfied with the set of higher education providers they receive offers from (11% vs 1%). HESA data shows that students of certain ethnicities, particularly Black students, are underrepresented in some providers, and efforts to address these inequalities through admissions must be enhanced.

In the coming months, UUK will explore developments on contextual admissions through wider consultation with schools, colleges, universities and government.

4) Universities and colleges should improve the level of transparency of information and guidance for applicants to support aspiration-raising

As part of this, universities and colleges should publish historic, actual entry grades (including Clearing entries) alongside advertised entry requirements to improve transparency and raise aspirations. Schools, colleges and universities should also collaborate to ensure careers advice is joined up to better support applicant aspirations. This includes activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college.

Supporting information:

Stakeholders noted that any discrepancy between advertised entry requirements and the grades that providers ultimately accept hinders efforts to improve transparency in admissions. Concerns have also been raised about the impact of recruitment performance on criteria and offers, including through Clearing.

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criteria and offers, including through Clearing.

5) UCAS should progress with a series of planned reforms to improve fairness and transparency in admissions

This includes: a pilot adviser tool to drive greater transparency around qualifications accepted on entry; and revising guidance on references and making enhancements to the adviser portal to deliver efficiencies for schools. Additionally, the new 'My Application' student interface, which will provide a clearer and more engaging experience for students – is due to launch next cycle alongside enhancements to Clearing Plus[6].

UCAS is continuing to deliver incremental and impactful enhancements to its services, intended to add value both within the current system and in any reformed model, building on the success of the UCAS Hub, 'self release' functionality and Clearing Plus. Future plans include the launch next year of a new student interface that brings together UCAS Apply and Track to make the process of applying more accessible and intuitive. They are also creating a pilot adviser tool this cycle to drive greater transparency around the level of attainment students are accepted with as a means of supporting more informed advice and decision making. Feedback from this adviser pilot will be used to understand how it could be rolled out to support applicants directly in making choices and decisions.

Additionally, UCAS will launch revised reference guidance in order to make it more relevant to the student, and to deliver efficiencies to schools and colleges. The updated guidance provides a transparent view on where advisers' efforts have most impact and will expedite the reference writing process during this challenging cycle. Again, this work paves the way for further reform, with the sector primed for further revisions for 2021.

Furthermore, UCAS continues to develop Clearing Plus, an advanced matching tool, which enhances providers ability to target different groups, including those who are underrepresented, and to present relevant options to students that they may not have previously considered.

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[6] Clearing Plus is a data driven tool for unplaced applicants to be matched to personalised Clearing opportunities

6) Governments must support fairness and transparency in admissions

This includes the Westminster and devolved governments facilitating access to FSM data at the point of application and providing continued funding to support school-FE-HE collaboration. In England, this will require continued government funding for FE-HE-school partnerships once the OfS' Uni Connect programme comes to an end in 2021.

The government should also engage with league-table providers to consider and address any measures that may discourage providers from widening access through admissions.

7) The higher education sector should take a more proactive approach to identifying and addressing key admissions challenges and criticisms

This includes UUK:
- developing a 'code of practice' comprising the review's agreed principles and recommendations, with consequences for breaches of the code. Ownership of the code will sit with UUK (in partnership with other representative bodies, such as Guild HE and the Association of Colleges), while UCAS' terms of service could clearly state that its customers must abide by the code. This code will further support behaviour prioritising applicant choice
- convening a forum for applicants and representatives of schools, colleges and universities to assess where further action is needed to uphold fairness and transparency in admissions. This forum will address emerging issues and challenges, and support universities and colleges to develop their monitoring and evaluation of admissions practices. In 2021, this forum's focus should include key admissions challenges throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

8) Further consideration should be given to a reformed undergraduate admissions system based on a Post-Qualifications Admissions (PQA) model in which applicants do not receive offers until their exam/assessment results are known

This PQA system should be implemented for the 2023-24 academic year, subject to further consultation across the education sector.

The fair admissions review has identified a workable, implementable PQA system that would enhance transparency and fairness for applicants. Under this system, universities and colleges would not make offers to applicants until after they have received their results, and the applicant then decides which offer to accept. In the coming months, the model will be developed further, through wider consultation with schools, colleges, universities and government.

Post-Qualifications Admissions

Stakeholders have raised concerns about the
- use of unconditional and conditional unconditional offers
- use and accuracy of predicted grades and the fairness of predictions
- use of incentives to encourage early applicant decision-making.

Further, the review's student polling identified that while 64% think it is fine to apply to university or college with predicted grades, a majority would prefer offers to be made post-results. This review has explored whether a change to the admissions system could address these concerns.

At a review workshop on PQA in February 2020, stakeholders considered the risks and opportunities linked to three possible models for reform:

(i) Post-qualifications decisions, where applicants apply and offers are made by universities before results are received, although applicants acceptance of any offer comes after they have achieved their qualifications.
(ii) Post-qualifications offers, where applicants express interest in the university and offers are made to applicants after they have achieved their qualifications.
(iii)Post-qualifications applications, where applicants apply and offers are made by universities after applicants have achieved their qualifications.

The workshop itself did not result in a consensus around one preferred model. However, it was agreed that simply preserving and advocating the status quo was not a realistic option given the extent of admissions-related challenges.

Other observations from the stakeholder group were that:

– **'Post-qualifications decisions' would not address the key issues of predicted grades and conditional unconditional offers.** For applicants, delaying decisions until qualifications are achieved could reduce pressure and allow sufficient time for an applicant-provider relationship to develop. For schools and education providers, it could be implemented fairly quickly. However, it privileges applicants who already hold their qualifications and would create substantial time pressure for higher education providers in the summer months. It would not necessarily reverse the growth in unconditional offers and would not address criticisms of predicted grades. It could also create more emphasis on exam results and create applicant anxiety as certainty would be provided later than at present.

– **'Post-qualifications offers' would broadly align with applicants' preferences, although challenges would still exist, not least in the availability of information, advice and guidance**. For applicants, there would be greater transparency over entry requirements. They would have more choice for a longer period and the process would be less distracting in the lead up to exams. Post-qualifications offers would also reduce the importance of predicted grades and end the need for unconditional offers. However, it might be challenging to structure the admissions process for courses that are highly selective, and challenging to arrange interviews. There may be fewer teachers available over the summer, with applicants having less time to respond to offers over this period. There could be an increase in admissions tests.

– **'Post-qualifications applications' has the potential to increase fairness but would represent a possibly unmanageable overhaul to secondary education timetabling, exam sitting and exam marking, and possibly result in later starts for higher education courses**. It could prevent applicants from applying to courses based on an under-predicted performance. Conversely, it could also encourage more aspirational choices, particularly for high-achieving disadvantaged students who research suggests are more likely to be under-predicted. It could also end the practice of unconditional offer-making, preventing applicants from losing exam motivation. However, it would require significant changes to timetables, processing of applications and transition processes. It could also cause a lack of connection between applicants and institutions until the results are received. Shifting the start of the academic year to January could have implications for the UK higher education sector's international competitiveness.

Of the three options considered, a 'post-qualifications decisions' model was ruled out as being insufficient a level of reform to both address admissions challenges and enhance fairness. Meanwhile, notwithstanding its merits, concerns were raised about the impact a 'post-qualifications applications' model would have in terms of the level of disruption at a time when education has already been severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Informed by this feedback, UCAS supported the UUK review in further developing a proposed 'post-qualifications offers' model, where offers are not made to applicants until results are known (see Annexe 3 for more details). Although not as radical a move to reform as shifting applications until after results day, the proposed model represents a fair and

workable option for applicants. Overall, this model would involve the following steps:

- An applicant researching choices and creating a profile in UCAS Hub from Year 11 or before.
- From September to June of the last academic year before starting higher education, the applicant curates initial university and course choices. At this point providers will undertake assessments and auditions before either rejecting an applicant or internally recording the findings of the initial assessment. Applicants can either replace a rejected application or swap an outstanding choice.
- In August, UCAS confirms verified grades to providers. Providers have a one-week window to validate decisions ahead of 'offer day' and applicants have a one-week window to respond.
- In late August, an additional summer recruitment period will operate, where unplaced applicants can seek places through a Clearing-like process.
- A separate route may be desirable for applicants either qualified at the point of application, or whose results are published before August, such as international students.

Benefits of this model for students could include:

- ability to change application choices easily
- no requirement to decline offers before grades are known
- not at the mercy of advisers' and providers' guesses on likely grades
- retains the ability to meet individuals' specific needs
- protection from 'respond quickly' tactics
- national offer day levelling access to Clearing opportunities

However, such a model of reform would risk creating several unintended consequences that could negatively impact applicant choice and ultimately fairness in admissions. This applies in particular to the window of opportunity that would be available for advisers to give information, advice and guidance around 'offer day'. Therefore, while the review recommends that further consideration is given to this PQA model, UUK

plans to consult with wider stakeholders about the model over the next 12 months to ensure that any future system is fair for applicants and workable for education providers.

Consultation questions will include the issues of:

- access to support, information and advice for applicants
- practical implications for scheduling interviews and auditions, or securing relevant clearance to train in certain professions (for clarity, the intention is that this would run as currently but without predicted grades)
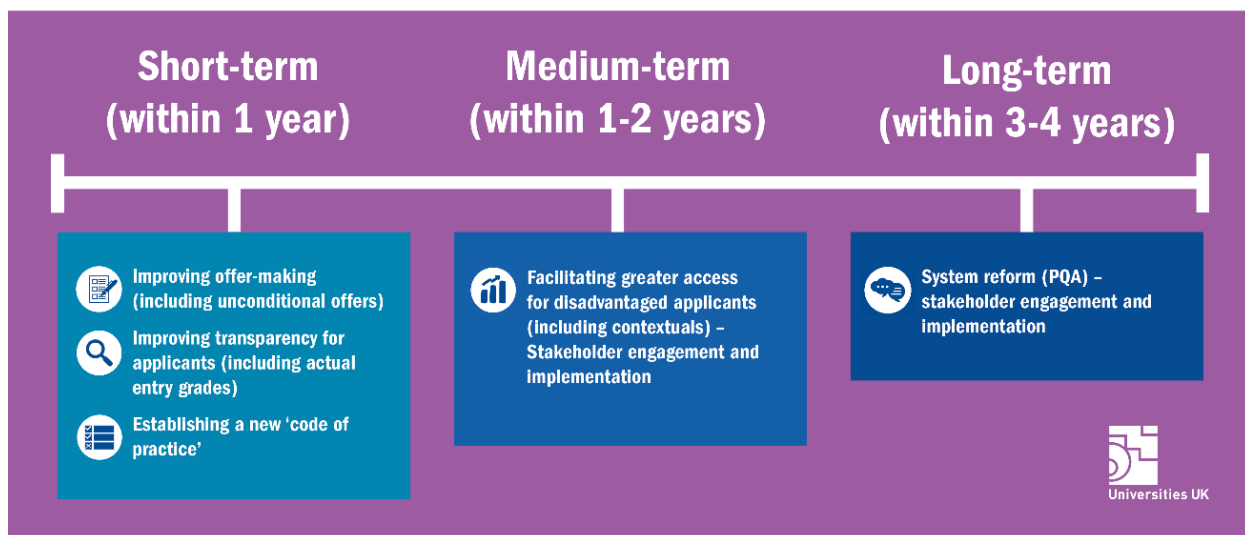- other unintended consequences.

Next steps and implementing the recommendations

Although the fair admissions review has been informed by extensive engagement with different stakeholders, many of the proposals in this report will require further detailed consultation across the education sector and with students if they are to be workable and, ultimately, improve fairness and transparency. This applies in particular to recommendations made on contextual admissions and on PQA.

In more recent months, the Covid-19 pandemic has limited the scale and scope of engagement opportunities with wider stakeholders and, while this is expected to continue at least in the short-term, this review proposes a stakeholder engagement plan ahead of any implementation of the proposed reforms due over the medium- and longer-term. Details of this plan are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Proposed timings for implementing the recommendations

Fair Admissions Review — **Timeline of recommendations**

Short-term (within 1 year)
- Improving offer-making (including unconditional offers)
- Improving transparency for applicants (including actual entry grades)
- Establishing a new 'code of practice'

Medium-term (within 1-2 years)
- Facilitating greater access for disadvantaged applicants (including contextuals) – Stakeholder engagement and implementation

Long-term (within 3-4 years)
- System reform (PQA) – stakeholder engagement and implementation

Universities UK

Annexe 1: Advisory group membership

Professor Quintin McKellar CBE, Vice-Chancellor, University of Hertfordshire (Chair, February 2020–)

Professor Paddy Nixon, Vice-Chancellor and President, Ulster University (Chair, July 2019 – February 2020)

Professor Sally Mapstone, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of St Andrews (Deputy Chair)

Professor Mary Stuart CBE, Vice-Chancellor, University of Lincoln (Deputy Chair)

Professor Stuart Corbridge, Vice-Chancellor, Durham University

Debra Gray, Principal, Grimsby Institute

Professor David Green CBE, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of Worcester

Caroline Hoddinott, Headteacher, Haybridge High School and Sixth Form

Tracey Lancaster, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Resources), Leeds Beckett University

Beth Linklater, Assistant Principal, Queen Mary's College, Basingstoke

Clare Marchant, Chief Executive, UCAS

Mike Nicholson, Director of Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach, University of Bath

Professor Edward Peck, Vice-Chancellor, Nottingham Trent University

David Ruck, Head of Higher Education and Careers, Bristol Grammar School

Lee Sanders, Registrar and Secretary, University of Birmingham

Claire Sosienski Smith, Vice-President for Higher Education, National Union of Students

Professor Rama Thirunamachandran, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Canterbury Christ Church University

Professor Elizabeth Treasure, Vice-Chancellor, Aberystwyth University

Jo Wilson, Head of Sixth Form, The Pingle Academy, Derbyshire

Policy support

Dan Hurley (Policy Manager, UUK)

Daniel Wake (Policy Analyst, UUK)

Amy Dicks (Policy Researcher, UUK)

The principles and recommendations set out in this report represent the consolidated views of the group.

Annexe 2: Contextual admissions proposals – further details

This annexe provides further detail on the review's recommendations on contextual admissions. These recommendations do not apply to Scotland as several of the proposals are already in place for the Scottish sector.

The review's recommendations on contextual admissions will need to be part of a wider, UUK-led sector consultation once the review itself concludes. A stakeholder engagement exercise would be needed with schools, universities, colleges and government across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, ahead of implementation.

Greater transparency is needed from universities and colleges on how contextual admissions are used. There is significant room for improvement in ensuring that applicants and advisers understand how contextual admissions work, which should be addressed through greater consistency in the language used by universities and colleges, including in the way contextual offers are made. It is also important to ensure applicants are aware of the benefits of disclosing contextual information. A sector-level 'explanatory' statement on contextual admissions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, drawing on what is already set out in Scotland, would give prospective learners and their advisers clear and consistent information about universities' admissions policies (Universities Scotland, 2019a). The agreed statement should be consistent and visible in key admissions and course pages on all university websites. The statement would need wider stakeholder testing and accompanying guidance may need to be developed on its use and placement.

A statement for England, Wales and Northern Ireland could look like this:

> *"Going to higher education can transform a person's life. We use contextual admissions to make sure that we are accessible to everyone who has the potential to succeed. Qualifications and grades are important, but they are considered alongside other information that helps universities to identify potential and widen access to university level study.*
>
> *For some individuals, the disadvantages they have experienced in their life mean that they have not been able to demonstrate their full academic potential. A person's socioeconomic background, where they live and their personal circumstances can all affect their educational attainment. Universities take this context into account and look for an applicant's potential when making admissions decisions.[7] Universities will work with applicants who have alternative qualifications to the standard entry requirements stated on university websites."*

The statement would also need to include a reference to how contextual information will be taken into account for applicants for example through a minimum entry requirement offer, if implemented.

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[7] Universities Scotland (2019a) *Guidance and common text for prospectuses.*

Efforts to boost transparency for applicants should be underpinned by consistency in the use of contextual indicators by universities and colleges.

There are several measures which are already used for contextual admissions. No single dataset or indicator is perfect: some measures are not collected by UCAS or HESA, some are not well-used by schools, some rely on self-reporting by applicants and some are easier to communicate publicly than others.

UUK has evaluated the range of indicators currently used to inform contextual admissions activities. Any 'basket' of indicators must strike a balance between their applicability across the sector (noting the variety of social mobility priorities that exist between universities) and how easily they can be communicated and understood by applicants and their advisers. With this in mind, (and after evaluating a wide range of contextual indicators already in use) the review proposes that a 'basket' should consist of three core contextual indicators for universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, (while acknowledging the position in Scotland):

i.   Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). IMD is an area-based measure of relative deprivation of neighbourhoods that combines information on multiple indicators to provide an overall score. There are distinct methodologies for England, Scotland (SIMD), Northern Ireland (NIMDM) and Wales (WIMD), which are updated on different schedules. SIMD20 is already used in Scotland as a core contextual indicator (Universities Scotland, 2017).

ii.   Free school meals (FSM) status. FSM status is an individual based measure of whether the applicant received free-school meals aged 15. It is linked to disadvantage in HE, with lower entry rates for those in receipt of free school meals. There are some differences in eligibility across UK countries. Previous research has highlighted the importance of using individual measures in contextual admissions such as FSM status (Boliver, Crawford, Powell & Craige, 2017). However, it is not available at an individual-level for applicants or students without access to the National Pupil Database or disclosure in a UCAS personal statement or reference. Recently, the UCAS Contextual Data Service provided information on the percentage of students entitled to FSM (UCAS, 2020a). The Westminster and devolved governments will need to enable greater access to FSM data for schools and universities.

iii. Care experienced status. Care experienced status is already used in Scotland as a core contextual indicator. Care experienced applicants who meet minimum entry requirements are guaranteed undergraduate offers at Scottish universities (Universities Scotland, 2019b). However, it is a self-reported optional question on the UCAS application form, meaning that some applicants do not disclose the information (UCAS, 2020b). There are also differences in terminology and definitions used (eg 'care experienced' and 'care leaver').

FSM data is not currently available to all universities and colleges and governments across the UK have a role to play in facilitating access to this information. Any delay in accessing FSM data should not prevent the implementation of contextual admissions for the sector using IMD and care experience indicators.

1. **Access for applicants meeting the contextual criteria in IMD and/or FSM should be facilitated through the creation of minimum entry requirements**. As part of sector efforts to embed contextual admissions within an institutional approach to widening participation, universities and colleges should commit to developing and implementing a minimum entry requirement contextual admissions system for students who have one or more indicators within the 'basket' outlined above, drawing on learning from the approach already in place in Scotland.

2. **Universities and colleges should go further in ensuring fair access for care experienced individuals.** Higher education entry rates for care experienced students are substantially lower than for those without care experience and contextual offers can form a key role in levelling up opportunity. In 2017–18 only 12% of pupils in England who were looked after continuously for 12 months or more entered higher education compared with 42% of all other pupils (OfS, 2020b). Universities and colleges should recognise the context in which these students have achieved their entry qualifications to support them in reaching their potential when making offers. Universities should ensure that care experience is a contextual flag in their admissions processes and promote this clearly to applicants and their advisers. Students with the care experience flag should be guaranteed an offer if they meet the minimum entry requirements as referenced above, and as is already the case in Scotland.

Annexe 3: Post-Qualifications Admissions model for consultation

This annexe contains a post-qualifications offers model developed by UCAS. This is the review's preferred model. UUK will consult on this model with relevant stakeholders.
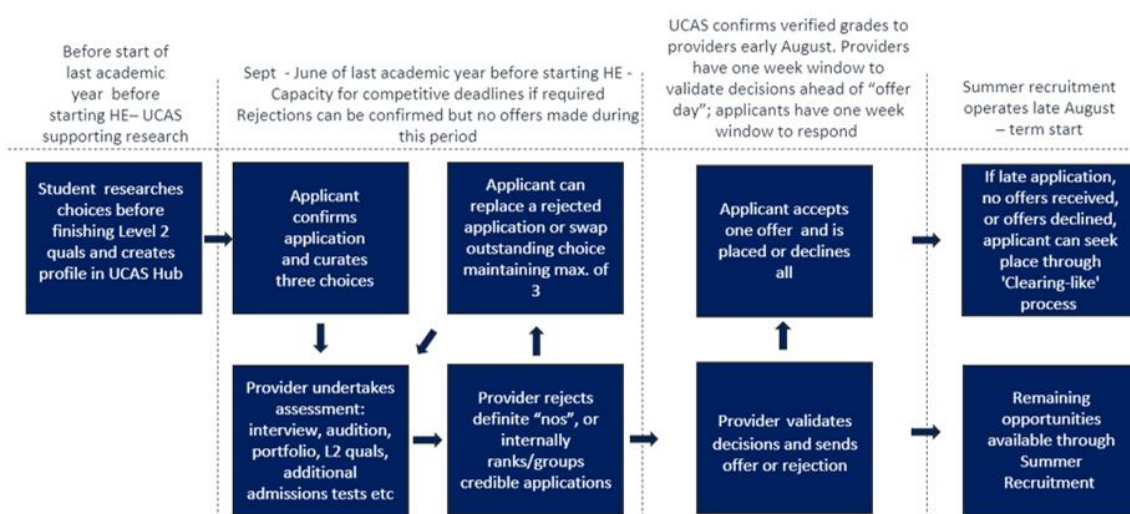
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