

# Post-qualification application: a student-centred model for higher education admissions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales

A report for UCU by Dr. Graeme Atherton,  
National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)  
& Angela Nartey, UCU

*January 2019*



# Contents

Executive summary	3
<b>1</b> Why we need a new higher education admissions system	5
<b>2</b> Higher education application in England, Northern Ireland and Wales at present - problems of market failure	5
<b>3</b> Higher education application in England, Northern Ireland and Wales - contextual parameters	9
<b>4</b> Creating a higher education admissions system	10
<b>5</b> What could a new higher education admissions system look like?	11
<b>6</b> Creating a new higher education admissions system - dealing with challenges	15
<b>7</b> Alternative approaches to designing a higher education admissions system	16
<b>8</b> Next steps in building a higher education admissions system	17
<b>9</b> Why build a new higher education admissions system - the benefits of change	18
Appendix 1	20
Notes	21



## Executive summary

### 1. The case for reforming higher education admissions

Higher education admissions have increased in complexity in recent decades as the number of students entering higher education has risen and their backgrounds have become more diverse. Higher education admissions need to be reformed and updated to better support students in an era where around half of young people enter higher education as opposed to less than 5%. At present, we have a higher education application cycle, which is little more than a set of dates where students have to complete the process of application to higher education. A higher education admissions system should be more than a cycle. It should be a set of support structures that enables students to make decisions about their higher education course and institution. It begins well before any application is made and includes preparation for as well as induction to higher education study.

At the moment, there are number of failings in the way we support students to progress to higher education:

- student decision making is based on a poor proxy for final achievement
- the system is poorly understood by students
- advertised grade requirements for courses do not always match the grade profile of students admitted
- clearing has too important a role
- there is unequal access to information, access and guidance
- unconditional offers are rising.

### 2. Reimagining higher education admissions

This report describes a student-centred higher education admissions system which enables students to make the best decisions possible about their higher education destinations. UCU has been campaigning for such a system since 2015. At its centre needs to be a change to post-qualification application (PQA) whereby students apply to university after they have received their Level 3 qualifications. A UCU survey of members in 2015 found that seven in 10 respondents said that they would like to see a system in which applicants apply to university after they have received their grades.<sup>1</sup> Having published research outlining the case for post-qualification application, the accuracy and impact of predicted grades, and a comparative international study, this report proposes a model for a post-qualification application system.

### 3. What could a new higher education admissions system look like?

While the shift to post qualification application is a central feature of the changes to higher education admissions proposed, it is not the only innovation. It sits at the heart of a more systematic approach to higher education admissions which better supports student's decision making.



It is proposed here that the system is divided into three phases described below.

**Diagram 1** in the report illustrates how the system operates.

#### ● **Supporting choice making**

This period would run from year 10 to up to and after final examinations prior to higher education application. It would include a minimum of 10 hours per year of higher education related information advice and guidance over each of years 10 to 13 and a Student Futures Week at the end of year 12 which would be a designated period in the school calendar for consideration of future education (including L4/5 and apprenticeships) and employment choices in addition to the 10 hours per year described above.

In the January of year of application applicants would be able to make 'expressions of interest' to up to 12 universities. The aim is to create a point where students can refine their choices, and higher education providers can understand the potential level of demand for their courses. After their expression of interest, students will receive information in the form of 'study choice packs'.

#### ● **Application and decision making**

There will be a higher education application week in the first week of August, and students will receive their decisions in the third week of September and applicants will be placed by the end of September. Students will be able to apply for up to 8 courses. It is anticipated the combination of admissions based on actual rather than predicted grades and a larger number of courses selected should reduce or possibly eliminate the need for a 'clearing' phase.

#### ● **Entry into higher education**

The start of academic year 1 will be the first week of November. This later start brings with it a number of advantages:

- It would allow a closer focus on the registration of year 1 students as existing students will already be mid-way through their new term.
- Academic staff will be able to focus exclusively on enabling those in years 2 and above to start these crucial years well.
- The period from students receiving the offer to starting year 1 can be used to enhance how prepared students are for higher education study by seeing the period from mid-October as a 'pre-reading period'. All students could be given introductory reading and associated tasks they are expected to complete for when the academic year begins for year 1 students.

#### **4. Next steps in building a new higher education admissions system**

The creation of a world leading higher education admissions system will take time and require the engagement of stakeholders from across the education system and beyond. To move this work forward we recommend the government establishes an independent review of the admissions system which can advance the ideas outlined in this paper.



## 1. WHY WE NEED A NEW HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS SYSTEM

Higher education admissions are increasing in complexity. The number of students entering higher education in England is predicted to increase significantly by 2030<sup>2</sup> and these students are coming from a more diverse range of backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

There is a need for a higher education admissions system which can enable students to make the choices that maximise their chances of success in an increasingly competitive higher education sector and graduate labour market. At present a system such as this does not exist. Instead we have a higher education application cycle, which is little more than a set of dates where students have to complete the process of application to higher education. A higher education admissions system is more than a cycle and a process of application into higher education. It is a set of support structures that enable students to make decisions about their higher education course and institution which begins well before any application is made and includes preparation for and induction to higher education study.

Aside from the lack of this systematic support, the process itself is also outdated. It has remained largely unchanged in England, Northern Ireland and Wales since the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Much effort is made trying to explain this process to potential students. However, as the process has developed in order to meet the wider requirements of an increasing number of students, a number of incremental changes have led to it becoming complex, harder to understand and lacking transparency. In the era of mass higher education, what is now required is more than a process designed for a time when less than 5% of young people progressed to this level, but rather an admissions system that is based around supporting students to make the best decisions for them and having the structures in place to make this happen.

UCU has been campaigning for such a system since 2015. At its centre needs to be a change to post-qualifications application (PQA). A UCU survey of members in 2015 found that seven in 10 respondents said that they would like to see a system in which applicants apply to university after they have received their grades.<sup>5</sup> Having published research outlining the case for PQA, the accuracy and impact of predicted grades, and a comparative international study, this report proposes a model for a PQA system. It is based on stakeholder consultation and a re-imagining of higher education application and progression. This report will describe a student-centred system which enables students to make the best decisions possible about their higher education destinations.

## 2. HIGHER EDUCATION APPLICATION IN ENGLAND, NORTHERN IRELAND AND WALES AT PRESENT - PROBLEMS OF MARKET FAILURE

The continued entrenched inequalities in higher education admissions, a rapid rise in unconditional offers and evidence that the higher education admissions process in much of the UK is out of step with our competitor countries in enabling successful transitions through post-secondary education have all led to increased policy attention on PQA, including at ministerial level, throughout 2018. This is not the first time that PQA has been mooted as a potential alternative. In 2004, the Schwartz Review<sup>6</sup> called for a move



to a PQA system and in doing so identified five principles of fair higher education admissions:

- be transparent
- enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course, as judged by their achievements and their potential
- strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
- seek to minimise barriers for applicants
- be professional in every aspect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.

At the moment, there are number of failings in the way we support students to progress to higher education:

- student decision making is based on a poor proxy for final achievement
- the system is poorly understood by students
- advertised grade requirements for courses do not always match the grade profile of students admitted
- clearing has too important a role
- there is unequal access to information, access and guidance
- unconditional offers are rising.

In 2011 UCAS, the body which operates the application process for British universities, conducted an admissions process review which advocated a move to a post-qualification application system whereby students apply to university after they have received their Level 3 examination grades. On both occasions, whilst deemed 'a logical and desirable goal', the associated methodologies did not receive stakeholder approval. Our research leads us to believe that the current design of the application system results in market failure and requires intervention. The interests of students, staff and wider society in this process are no longer well protected. This failure is manifesting itself in a number of ways which are described below.

- **The rise in unconditional offers**

In 2018, higher education institutions made around 68,000 unconditional offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales.<sup>7</sup> UCAS statistics show that between 2006 and 2013 the number of unconditional offers made to 18 year olds



from England, Northern Ireland and Wales ranged between 3,000 to 7,000. This represented less than 1 per cent of all offers to this age group. The share of unconditional offers increased to 7.1 per cent in 2018<sup>8</sup>

The rationale for unconditional offers for students with predicted grades lacks rigour and undermines the professionalism of the undergraduate admissions process. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the exponential growth in these offers is driven by a marketised approach to increasing student recruitment rather than genuine educational aims.<sup>9</sup> Unconditional offers for students with predicted grades:

- have seen uncontrolled growth since 2013 suggesting a distortion of original intent
- unethically sway the student decision making process
- are associated with poorer student outcomes
- do not necessarily reward 'academic excellence' as often stated
- are based upon predicted grades which are poor indicators of final exam performance, and
- fail the principles of a fair and transparent admissions process.

In a post-qualification application system, unconditional offers become defunct. It is recognized here that the security of an offer into higher education removed from examination performance has its merits. As one university vice chancellor argued recently, such offers can 'reduce stress levels and improve their mental wellbeing'.<sup>10</sup> However, they do not fit well in a system where examination performance is the entry norm. If removal of the stresses accompanying the examination system is the policy goal this should be done for all students and entry into higher education becomes open to all in the way that secondary education is, as has been suggested.<sup>11</sup>

#### ● **The anomaly of clearing**

Clearing matches applicants to university places that are yet to be filled. Last year nearly 65,000 applicants applied via clearing and the number of applicants applying via clearing

is increasing.<sup>12</sup> The process is a complex one and in 2011 UCAS described clearing as 'a sub-optimal admissions process that puts both applicants and HEIs (higher education institutions) under severe pressure'.<sup>13</sup> However, despite the acknowledgments in the sector of the problems that clearing brings students are told:

*Courses in Clearing aren't just the ones nobody wants – there are many reasons why courses are still available. It's an opportunity for those who have missed their conditions, or had a last minute change of heart about the university or course they want to study.*<sup>14</sup>



Clearing is another feature of higher education admissions which, whilst appropriate for a time when higher education entry was an elite concern, has grown to a major anomaly in the current context. A higher education admissions system based around post-qualification application could eliminate the need for clearing.

- **International comparisons show we are out of step with the world**

Recent research commissioned by the University College Union (UCU) looking at higher education admissions systems in 30 countries showed that England, Northern Ireland and Wales are the only ones where admissions to higher education are based on predictions of achievement rather than actual performance. The report found that there is global evidence to support the view that a move to a post-qualification application system could enable England, Northern Ireland and Wales to better achieve the major goals associated with higher education. Several leading nations are also undertaking reviews and reforms of their admissions systems to ensure they are fit for purpose in the early 21st century. If our higher education system is to remain world leading, it is vital that we do the same.

- **Predicted grades are inaccurate and place unnecessary pressure on teachers and lecturers**

Research by Wyness (2016) highlighted the majority of predicted grades as estimates which are not fit to be the basis on which young people take key decisions about their futures. The research found that the impossible process of grade prediction could exacerbate social stratification in higher education as the most able young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are discouraged from applying to institutions for which they may have the relevant grades to enter.<sup>15</sup> The research found that:

- just 16% of applicants' grades were predicted correctly
- 75% of applicants are over-predicted
- 9% were underpredicted
- 21% of AAB applicants have their scores under-predicted compared to 9% of all applicants
- 24% of AAB applicants from lower income backgrounds are under-predicted compared to 20% of AAB applicants from the highest income backgrounds
- a greater proportion of over-predicted students went through clearing to obtain their place
- under-predicted applicants are 10 percentage points more likely than applicants whose grades were accurate or over-predicted to have applied to a university for which they are overqualified





- a greater proportion of over-predicted students went through clearing to obtain their place.

A move to a post-qualification application system would remove the need for predicted grades and allow for an admissions process which more accurately reflects the potential of all applicants.

### **3. HIGHER EDUCATION APPLICATION IN ENGLAND, NORTHERN IRELAND AND WALES - CONTEXTUAL PARAMETERS**

In devising a higher education admissions system with post-qualification application at its heart, our consultation identified a number of parameters that such a system would need to be cognisant of in order to be effective within the context of the broader educational system. These parameters are not necessarily immovable ad infinitum but in the short to medium term some do condition the level of change which would be feasible. These parameters are outlined below:

#### **● The examination system**

- Awarding organisations have indicated that the marking period could be shortened by up to one week within current constraints but the examination period cannot get shorter without recruiting more examiners.
- The general shortage of teachers and wider problems around retention mean that shorter marking time could be difficult, particularly in the critical subjects.
- Examination reform means that Level 3 examination content is larger than in the past.
- Changes to Level 3 qualifications given recent reforms to A Level and BTEC qualifications, could lead to greater pressures on schools, colleges, lecturers and teachers.

#### **● Higher education institutions, colleges and schools**

- The time period for the processing of applications differs somewhat both between and within institutions.
- The funding methodology for universities is such that income can vary year-on-year, as such, institutions benefit greatly from having early information about the number of applicants.
- Some courses have professional requirements for an interview and/or Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks.
- Examination results need to be authenticated to enable higher education institutions to make valid admissions decisions.



- The school sector at present lacks a professionalised and independent information, advice and guidance (IAG) workforce.
- Higher education providers have a responsibility to support particular groups of students who have additional, specific requirements with regard to funding, accommodation and learning needs. These include those who are:
  - disabled
  - mature
  - estranged
  - under the care of local authorities
  - international.
- **Student funding**
  - At present the Student Loan Company requests significant information in advance of examination results in order to provide student funding applications in time for entry to higher education.

#### **4. CREATING A NEW HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS SYSTEM**

As argued above, the present higher education admissions process falls short of what we would expect from a successful admissions system. A fairer and more developed system would focus specifically on higher education admissions and how students are supported to progress, recognising explicitly that this process begins for young students some time before any application to higher education is made. At present this does not happen, rather, higher education admissions are squeezed between the need to accommodate other priorities in the broader education system, in particular:

- an academically rigorous A level at upper secondary level which requires a minimum level of teaching hours
- a final upper secondary academic programme which is assessed by a content heavy examination in comparison to other countries
- the need for almost all students to apply for funding to cover tuition and maintenance costs
- a higher education funding system based on student numbers which means providers depend heavily on understanding future student flows in advance
- a system that supports and enables mature and international students to participate

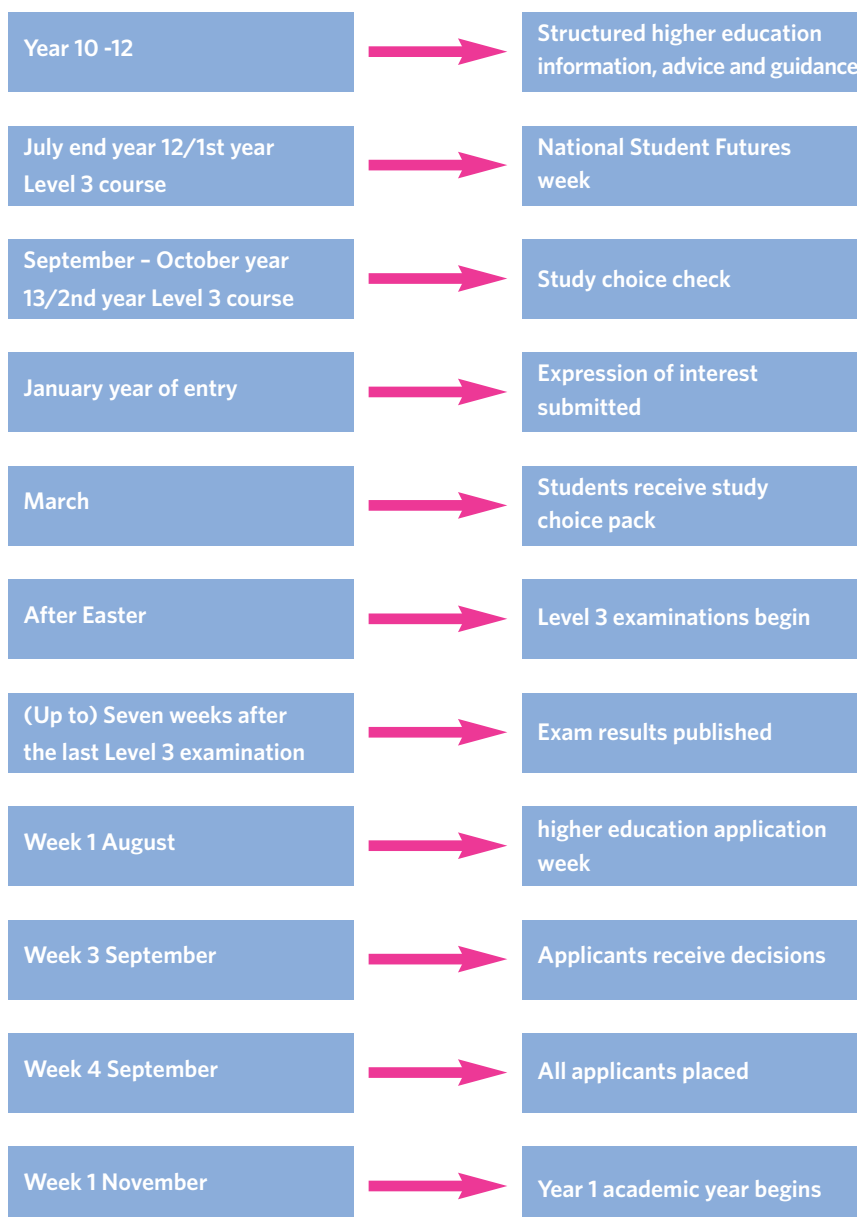


A more systematic approach to higher education admissions would respect the priorities above but also give admissions a more prominent role than at present.

### 5. WHAT COULD A NEW HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

Diagram 1 below outlines the features of a new proposed admissions system which would better supports students to select the course and institution which fits their aspirations. A central feature of it is that application for higher education is now made after students receive their Level 3 results.

Diagram 1: A new post-qualification higher education admissions system





While the shift to post qualification application is a central feature of the changes to higher education admissions proposed, it is not the only innovation. It sits at the heart of a more systematic approach to higher education admissions which better supports student's decision making. The key features of the system are described below:

- **Better information, advice and guidance (IAG) for students**

It is proposed that all students from years 10 to 13 receive a minimum of 30 hours of information, advice and guidance related to future learning opportunities (10 hours per year)<sup>16</sup> including further and higher education and employment. The admissions system needs to recognize and promote the idea that higher education choice is a long term process. This means strengthening the information, advice and guidance that young people receive regarding higher education entry before Level 3 study is under way. A target such as this should be readily achievable. It would be a powerful way of bringing together the work of the careers community including the Careers Enterprise Company and higher education institutions as well as providing a tangible outcome measure for any regional widening access outreach hubs such as those proposed in the second phase of the Office for Students funded National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP).<sup>17</sup>

- **A National Student Futures Week**

The purpose of the Student Futures Week is to create a designated period in the school calendar for consideration of future education (including L4/5 and apprenticeships) and employment choices in addition to the 10 hours described above. Higher education providers could also focus some outreach, recruitment and marketing resources on delivering activities during the week, alongside as open days. At present, schools, colleges and higher education institutions spend a lot of time attempting to schedule activities and creating a designated period will help to streamline this process. It would also encourage joining up activities such as open days with more focused work on future choice-making.

- **Help to match courses to students - study choice check<sup>18</sup>**

Based on the model in the Netherlands, all students would be able to take an online questionnaire related to a course(s) of their choice looking what they know of and expect of the course in respect of its:

- content
- learning and teaching experience
- likely graduate outcomes

The result would help students understand how their expectations and preferences fit with the nature of the course. It is proposed that the study choice check is piloted in a number of institutions and subject areas in the transition period to the new admissions system.



### ● **Building the choice process – an expressions of interest phase**

This is a crucial part of the new system. The aim is to create a point where students can refine their choices, and higher education providers can understand the potential level of demand for their courses. Applicants are able to make ‘expressions of interest’ to up to 12 universities. This would include a personal statement, reference and qualifications to date along with an agreed set of contextualised information, some of which is provided by the school and some by the student.

After their expression of interest, students will receive information in the form of ‘study choice packs’. It is important that whatever information they receive is not perceived as an offer. It may be best seen as a bespoke prospectus which includes information personalised as far as possible for that student covering:

- student finance support options
- accommodation options
- study choice feedback check
- likely grade offers for the selected courses
- information about the selection criteria that an institution will use.

If students give permission, UCAS could also enable higher education institutions to send information to students based on their subject choice, expressions of interest and/or student characteristics. UCAS already has this capacity however, take-up has been low.

### ● **Streamlining the application process**

In the proposed system, students will be able to apply to any eight choices of higher education course with personal statement, reference and qualifications to date and an agreed set of contextualised information some of which is provided by the school and some by the student.

We propose to allow students to apply to a greater number of courses to ensure that they are placed at an institution that they have given full and prior consideration too. We believe this to be a better option than the current clearing process which while necessary in the present system, is a sub-optimal product of a system designed for elite participation which is now coping with mass participation in higher education. The combination of admissions based on actual rather than predicted grades and a larger number of courses selected should reduce or possibly eliminate the need for a ‘clearing’ phase. However, it is also imperative that if there are students who are unplaced and courses available, that students should in principle be able to consider these courses. Hence, further consultation and modelling will be needed to establish whether in the new system a final application window will be needed to cater for



these students. It is the position here that such a window as far as it resembles clearing would not be an optimal solution but further research is needed here.

In the proposed model there is a slight move to exam results being released earlier. At this point in the present arrangements many teachers and lecturers support students to make decisions when they receive their results. The need for this has been important, often because of the differences between grade predictions and actual results. Moving this window earlier may make it more difficult to do this, but the greater focus on decision making as a process underpinned by a more comprehensive approach to information, advice and guidance should reduce the pressure on teachers and lecturers at this time. We have deliberately not proposed moving this point any earlier because our consultation with stakeholders suggests (as outlined in the parameters in section 3) that it is not feasible to teach A levels with fewer contact hours than we have at present, nor mark examinations any quicker than proposed here. It must be noted though that in principle the final year of A-level could finish earlier if adequate funding was provided to allow the numbers of hours teaching per week allocated to each individual course to increase.

The window for higher education providers to process applications is clearly shorter in this model. It is understandable that admissions staff may be apprehensive regarding this change. However, as students' offers currently emerge within a window broadly similar to that proposed here, we believe it is achievable. The challenge is how to scale up this time efficiency and not compromise efforts to identify student potential. This challenge will be particularly acute for those subject areas and institutions where interviews are used as standard such as medicine, dentistry and portfolio-based subjects. However, a move to a system where students apply to university after they have received their choice also allows the opportunity for a reimagining of how student potential is assessed – as discussed below.

#### ● **Improving retention and success – strengthening the entry phase**

Across the higher education sector, greater attention is being paid to supporting students in their preparation for entry to higher education, in the knowledge that issues with retention and success often originate prior to entry. The kind of system proposed here aims to embed such work within the overall higher education admissions system and create the opportunity for development and innovation. The later start date for year 1 students would bring several advantages in this regard:

- It would allow a closer focus on the registration of year 1 students as existing students will already be mid-way through their new term. It is well documented that the stress associated with registration can affect students at risk of non-completion including those from widening access backgrounds.
- Academic staff will be able to focus exclusively on enabling those in years 2 and above to start these crucial years well rather than balancing competing demands of different year groups.



- The period from students receiving the offer to starting year 1 can be used quite effectively to enhance how prepared students are for higher education study. One way this could be done is by seeing the period from mid-October as a 'pre-reading period'. All students could be given introductory reading and associated tasks they are expected to complete for when the academic year begins for year 1 students.

The later start date for year 1 students would have inevitable implications for when they complete their first year of study. Higher education institutions could choose to end the year later or re-profile their reading weeks to the period before study comments. Reading weeks do though benefit mature learners with children if they are scheduled to coincide with half term, so the impact of changes on this group in particular would need to be considered. The later start in the academic year provides higher education institutions with an excellent opportunity to try innovative new approaches to preparing students for higher education study.

## 6. CREATING A NEW HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS SYSTEM - DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

There are a number of particular challenges that the new system will need to address which merit further discussion.

### ● Supporting mature and international student entry

The new system will need to ensure that it can support admissions for mature students, in particular those who wish to enter courses associated with professional standards such as nursing. Mature and international students are more likely to welcome early information about where they will be placed and higher education institutions may also seek to assess the appropriate support necessary to ensure that transition arrangements can be put in place for these students. Any new system will need to ensure that the needs of these students are recognised, and that priority areas such as the expansion of the nursing workforce and growing internationalisation in higher education are supported. There is the potential for a separate application window for students with existing qualifications early in the calendar year of entry for these students.

### ● Assessing potential

There is a strong case for re-examining how potential is assessed in the new system. This has two elements. Firstly, developing a coherent sector wide approach to the use of contextual information in assessing applications. Secondly, reviewing the role of the existing additional tools used to assess potential to see if they are fit for purpose.

On contextual information, it is proposed that UCAS could share 'contextual recruitment' information with higher education institutions providing algorithm based scores in relation to applicants' relative disadvantage and their academic performance in relation to this. UCAS has already developed a contextual data service based on a multiple equality measure<sup>19</sup> which could support this. System-wide take up could mean that there is a universal understanding of a student's merit and potential.



There are long standing concerns regarding the role of personal statements and interviews in higher education admissions. The evidence suggests that these methods often benefit candidates who get intensive coaching and also have been able to experience richer extra-curricular activities. A well-documented risk is that over-reliance on these methods can exacerbate patterns of under-representation and exclusion.<sup>20</sup> If the desire is to look beyond just examination results to assess potential then other approaches could be piloted. Any such approach would need to be underpinned by a number of principles:

- It could be assessed more objectively than personal statements and interviews.
- It could be contextualised.
- Assessment could begin before students apply for higher education or be able to be assessed in an efficient way.

Potential approaches here include aptitude testing or subject-related exercises that could be marked in an automated way, online interviewing or the use of alternative media for personal statements (eg short video presentations). These approaches will each have their own merits and drawbacks. Aptitude testing or subject related exercises in particular may add to the assessment pressures on students (although preparing personal statements is also a pressure given the time that students are encouraged to spend preparing them). However, innovation in the assessing of potential is possible and adhering slavishly to the present approach should be questioned.

- **Securing accommodation and financial support**

These processes could continue to begin earlier before exam results are received as at present, but would need to be completed in the period after acceptance which is shorter in the proposed system. It should be possible though, for instance, for students to submit background information to the student loan company before they receive their examination results and register with accommodation providers as well as looking for accommodation. The extent to which students in England leave home to study reinforces that way in which accommodation is secured must be addressed in the new system. It should be possible for students to make provisional arrangements for accommodation at their preferred institution prior to application.

## **7. ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO DESIGNING A NEW HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS SYSTEM**

Other ways of reforming how students enter higher education to those outlined above exist, but they either need further development or come with potential negative consequences which may outweigh any benefits they may bring.

- **A separate university entrance examination**

14 countries analysed in the 2018 report on international higher education application written for UCU had specific examinations to determine higher education entry, either





used instead of or alongside upper secondary schooling performance measures. Such an approach could potentially support a higher education admissions system with post-qualification application as a central feature by enabling a longer window for institutions to assess applications where entry is decoupled from the Level 3 examination timetable. However, there is considerable evidence of the detrimental effects that such high stakes examinations have on student well-being and they would add to an already considerable testing burden on students.<sup>21</sup>

- **Ballot forms of entry to higher education**

Such an approach has been mooted mainly as a way of opening access to certain competitive courses at research intensive universities.<sup>22</sup> However, introducing such an approach would move in an opposite direction to those countries which currently use balloting as part of their systems as they are generally trying to eradicate it. Balloting would be compatible though with the system outlined here if applied to competitive courses.

## **8. NEXT STEPS IN BUILDING A NEW HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS SYSTEM**

The creation of a world leading higher education admissions system will take time and require the engagement of stakeholders from across the education system and beyond. Huge efforts are put into ensuring the best transition possible into higher education at present and this work and the views of those who undertake it must be respected. The case for the reform of the higher education admissions system is compelling though. To move this work forward we recommend the government establishes an independent review of the admissions system which can advance the ideas outlined in this paper. The review would need to be wide ranging. In order to move forward the process of creating a student centred higher education admissions system it would need to include in its remit the following issues:

- **Timeline and process of admissions reform**

There is a need to ensure the student interest is protected in any transition process and initial cohort(s) of students progressing through any new system are not unduly advantaged/disadvantaged compared to those in the existing system. In addition, the need to change existing IT support systems would have to be factored in as would the case for piloting aspects of reform and any unintentional side-effects of such piloting. There is also a need to examine carefully how parts of the present higher education admissions infrastructure which have grown up around the present arrangements can be made to work efficiently in a new system such as accommodation and student finance. The need to recognize how different groups of students such as those who are international, mature and entering highly competitive courses and institutions will need to be considered in the review as well.

- **Maximising the potential role of technology**

The role of technology in enabling the system would need full and detailed exploration. Such enabling could occur in a number of ways, for example, as suggested above the use of algorithms for processing contextual admissions data.



A further way in which technology could really enable this system is through the development of individual higher education admissions portals for each student. Such portals would be personalised platforms where students could collate information they have gathered on different providers and courses, as well as information, advice and guidance work they have undertaken. It could be the location to which their study choice packs are sent. These portals would provide continuity for the admissions choice process and could, if combined with face to face support, significantly increase the support that students receive.

A final area to explore would be how higher education admissions considerations feed into the discussion regarding the merits of on screen examinations and automation/semi-automation in the marking process. This could speed up the examination and marking processes and increase the time available for the overall process.

#### ● **Extensive and systematic consultation**

Any changes to the timetable would require extensive consultation within and across each of the sectors who play a role in higher education admissions, and would also need to incorporate the perspectives of students. In particular, workforce consultation in relation to the impact of reform on terms and conditions would need to be a priority. In addition, the extent of commitment and effort required to reform higher education admissions while by no means an insurmountable barrier, is considerable and the review needs to fully account for this. While reform is clearly necessary, it cannot be rushed and the placing of additional pressures on already heavily worked staff across sectors must be minimized.

#### ● **The role of existing sector bodies**

The potential for stakeholders such as UCAS, school and university groups, trade unions and widening participation organisations to play a role in the review of a new admissions system should be fully explored. The move from an admissions cycle to system creates opportunities for organisations who are already doing much to support students to take on an enhanced role. The changes suggested here are not a threat to the role that existing organisations play, but quite to the contrary, they represent the chance to build on existing good practice and internationally recognised structures. There will be need for new services to be offered in a reformed system but we enter this from a strong position as there are organisations well positioned to do this.

### **9. WHY BUILD A NEW HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS SYSTEM - THE BENEFITS OF CHANGE**

Any change to higher education admissions would require time and resources but it would bring considerable benefits, creating for the first time a genuine system to support the hundreds of thousands of students who progress to higher education every year. These benefits include:

- Students who are properly supported through the decision making process with increased information, advice and guidance.



- The pressure and burden on teachers/lecturers to make unreliable predictions is removed.
- Students who are assessed objectively on their actual achievements reducing the subjectivity inherent in a system based on predictions.
- Opportunities for higher education providers to support better preparation for higher education study being enhanced.
- Contextualised admissions being built into the system enabling students from widening access backgrounds to enter a wider range of courses and institutions.
- The prevention of negative impacts on Level 3 performance caused by unconditional offer making in the present system.

This paper puts forward a model for what a post-qualification application system could look like. It has been developed in consultation with a range of organisations and individuals in order that the ideas put forward consider the perspectives of the relevant stakeholders. We now call for government commitment to a review of the higher education application and admissions process in order to improve transparency, fairness and validity. The current system can no longer be viable because it fails to enable students to make the best decisions for themselves, and can no longer be said to meet the five principles of fair higher education admissions.



## Appendix 1

We would like to thank individuals at the following organisations for agreeing to be part of the consultation process informing this report. We would like to state clearly that these organisations have not formally endorsed the proposals in the report:

- Association of Colleges
- Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- AQA
- Guildhigher education
- Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)
- Million Plus
- National Education Union (NEU)
- National Union of Students (NUS)
- Pearson
- Russell Group
- UCAS
- University of Leeds
- University of Nottingham
- University of Oxford



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>pp. 6, UCU, (2015), Undergraduate application and admissions survey, available at: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/thecaseforpqa>

<sup>2</sup>pp. Bekhradnia, B & Beech, D (2018) Demand for Higher Education to 2030, Oxford: HEPI

<sup>3</sup>ibid

<sup>4</sup>pp. 10, UCAS, (2011), Admission Process Review consultation, available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/956/download?token=y8EovXLo>

<sup>5</sup>pp. 6, UCU, (2015), Undergraduate application and admissions survey, available at: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/thecaseforpqa>

<sup>6</sup>An independent review group about fair admissions to higher education in England. See <https://www.spa.ac.uk/resources/schwartz-report>

<sup>7</sup>Pp. 6, UCAS, (2018), End of Cycle Report 2018, unconditional offer making, available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/196151/download?token=jzRAy4kS>

<sup>8</sup>pp.18, UCAS (2017) End of Cycle Report 2017, offer making, available at: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports/2017-end-cycle-report>

<sup>9</sup>[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7330/UCU-undergraduate-application-and-admission-survey-Jun-15/pdf/ucu\\_undergraduateapplicationandadmissionsurvey\\_jun15rev1.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7330/UCU-undergraduate-application-and-admission-survey-Jun-15/pdf/ucu_undergraduateapplicationandadmissionsurvey_jun15rev1.pdf)

<sup>10</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/nov/29/one-third-18-year-old-university-applicants-get-unconditional-offer>

<sup>11</sup>See <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/how-to-overcome-the-stratification-of-higher-education/>

<sup>12</sup>pp. 12, UCAS, End of cycle report, available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/196141/download?token=7YGpHk71>

<sup>13</sup>pp.6, UCAS, (2011), Admission Process Review consultation, available at: <https://www.ucas.com/file/956/download?token=y8EovXLo>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.ucas.com/connect/blogs/clearing-what-you-need-know>

<sup>15</sup>Wyness, (2016), Predicted grades: accuracy and impact, available at: [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec-16/pdf/Predicted\\_grades\\_report\\_Dec2016.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec-16/pdf/Predicted_grades_report_Dec2016.pdf)



<sup>16</sup>This commitment would support the delivery of careers work within the framework outlined in the recent careers strategy which is based on the Gatsby Good Career Guidance benchmarks

<http://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/focus-areas/good-career-guidance>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-ncop/how-ncop-works/>

<sup>18</sup>For more information on study choice check and higher education admissions in Europe please go to: <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9cfdd9c1-98f9-11e7-b92d-01aa75ed71a1>

<sup>19</sup><https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-analysis-reports/equality-and-entry-rates-data-explorers>

<sup>20</sup>Burke, P.J, and McManus J., (2009), Art for a few, Exclusion and Misrecognition in Art and Design Higher Education Admissions, available at:

[https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/naln\\_art\\_for\\_a\\_few.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/naln_art_for_a_few.pdf)

<sup>21</sup>For an insight into some of the pressures on students in Singapore see:

<https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/families/article/2111822/downsides-singapores-education-system-streaming-stress-and>

<sup>22</sup>Elliott-Major, D. and Machin, S, (2018), Why we should select students by lottery, available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/why-we-should-select-students-by-lottery/>