

Post-qualifications applications

How we can make it work

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A report for UCU by
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Executive summary

1. BACKGROUND

The government announced in early 2021 that it was undertaking a review of the higher education (HE) admission system in England.¹ This review focuses specifically on whether there should be a move to a 'post-qualifications admission system'. In the consultation document released by the government two models are presented. The first is a 'post-qualifications application' model where students make applications after receiving their A Level/Level 3 examination results in the summer before higher education entry. The second is a 'post qualifications offers' model where students apply to HE in January of the year of entry and receive offers after A-Level/Level 3 examination results have been published.

This report argues that it is possible to deliver a post-qualifications applications model that can support better choice making for students from all backgrounds, minimise additional burdens on school/college staff and maintain the ability of higher education institutions (HEIs) to admit students who fit their courses

It outlines a student-centred model of post-qualifications applications that builds on the principles outlined in the consultation document from Department of Education in January 2021 but introduces a greater focus on information, advice and guidance, an 'expression of interest' point and the potential for HEIs to start the academic year later than they do at present.

2. THE CASE FOR POST-QUALIFICATIONS APPLICATIONS

The case for post-qualifications applications is presented in the report as threefold:

- **Enabling widening access by removing application via predicted grades:** Over 80% of these grades are incorrect leading to students being potentially 'under-matched' to courses they could apply to.
- **Enhanced performance of students at Level 3:** Removing unconditional offers and predicted grades will enable teachers and students to focus more clearly on Level 3 after studies.
- **Improving graduate outcomes and the student experience:** Nearly half of all students who enter HE via clearing or who are from a BAME background are unhappy with their choice of course or institution. This level of dissatisfaction is unacceptable and shows that reform of how students make HE choices is required.

3. THE STUDENT-CENTRED (SC) POST-QUALIFICATIONS APPLICATIONS MODEL

The student-centred (SC) post-qualifications applications model was first outlined in a report released in 2019 by University and College Union (UCU). The SC model describes HE admissions as a three-phase process. Drawing on the evidence regarding how young students make HE choices, admissions is defined as beginning significantly earlier than



in the PQA models outlined in the government consultation document. These three phases are:

- **Phase 1: Supporting choice:** Year 10 to A-Level/Level 3 examination results announced.
- **Phase 2: Application and decision making:** HE application week early August to end September.
- **Phase 3: Entry in HE:** From the first to the final week of October when term starts for year 1 students.

4. HOW THE SC POST-QUALIFICATIONS APPLICATIONS MODEL WORKS

The SC Model has 7 distinctive features that address the challenges associated with moving to post-qualifications applications.

4.1 Strengthened information, advice and guidance (IAG) on HE

Fundamental to making a PQ applications model feasible is a significant strengthening in the IAG offered to learners before they apply to HE. It is proposed in the report that this strengthening would have five elements:

- an entitlement to 10 hours per year of HE IAG from year 10
- in addition to the entitlement, a national student futures week at the end of year 12 when students would focus solely on learning about future post-compulsory education options through visits to HE, sessions with students etc
- revising the present Gatsby Good Career Guidance benchmarks related to HE IAG
- a national collaborative outreach project such as the Uni-Connect programme
- a 'study choice check' where students undertake online course focused questionnaires to better understand course(s) they have expressed an interest in and their fit with them.

4.2 Expression of interest point to engage students/HEIs pre-application

A strength of the current system is that students need to engage with HE choices whilst in school/college in order to apply for HE. To retain this strength students would, via UCAS, 'express interest' in up to five courses in the January of the year of examinations. This information would be passed onto HE providers. Expression of interest would meet the following challenges in a post qualifications applications system.

- **Completion of the application form accurately by students** - at this point students would register with UCAS and upload personal statement, reference and background information reducing the need for support in HE application week.
- **HEIs understanding future course demand** - this will give valuable information to HEIs on potential course demand which they can then use in their planning.



- **HEIs engaging with students who wish to enter their institutions** – enabling greater support for potential applicants in particular those from specific groups e.g. disabled students and refugee/asylum seekers.
- **Making A Levels a less 'high stakes' examination** - transparent use of other assessment mechanisms including references, personal statements and interviews/tests will help alleviate the focus on examinations only that may be heightened in a PQA system.

4.3 Flexibility to allow interviews/auditions before application

Delivering interviews/undertaking auditions is seen as a major challenge in a post-qualifications applications system due to the compressed window available for this activity. This report shows there are at least six options available for HEIs wishing to deliver interviews/ auditions in a post-qualifications applications system. These include:

- delivering interviews/auditions for all students who express an interest in before examination results are announced
- delivering interviews/auditions utilising digital technology after examination results
- using admission tests to either replace interviews or to enable filtering of students who can then be interviewed before examination results are announced. Such additional testing is common in other countries.

For those institutions/courses where interviews are deemed essential, the report illustrates that it is still possible to deliver these before examination results are announced. The report does discuss though the need for a more in-depth discussion regarding the role of interviews in HE admission and the extent to which they may undermine attempts to contextualise admission to high-demand courses.

Another option discussed for policymakers here is to reintroduce AS Levels which to allow prior potential to be gauged more accurately and hence enable filtering for high demand courses.

4.4 A greater focus on transparency

At present the HE admission system does not meet the principle of transparency which is one of the five principles from the 2005 Schwartz review of fair admissions to HE. Students are not systematically informed of the relative importance placed on the different forms of assessment of their potential used by HEIs.

In the SC model students would be told exactly what weight is placed on references, personal statement, interviews/tests/auditions and examination grades in percentage terms by HEIs in deciding whether to offer a place to a candidate.

4.5 More targeted support for widening access students in HE application week

The risks that additional burdens would fall upon schools/colleges to support students, in particular from widening access backgrounds, at the point of final application are real



and must be addressed. Improved IAG and the expression of interest point would help but greater support for students from widening access backgrounds is required. This support could come via an enhanced Uni-Connect programme, personalised contact via email/letter/face-to-face and HEIs using the experience they have gained from delivering clearing to offer support during the final application and decision phase.

4.6 Fewer course applications processed to improve efficiency and choice

In 2019 in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there were:

- 1,965,090 applications made to HE providers via the UCAS main scheme
- 1,444,795 offers made to students
- 428,610 acceptances.

Of these applicants 73.6% of students accepted the offer from their first choice provider. There are over 1.5 million applications that do not lead to any productive outcome in a system where the vast majority of students enter their first choice provider. For administrative efficiency and to aid students in their decision making, in the SC model the number of applications released to HEIs could be reduced to three from the five applications, with the other two only released if candidates are not placed via their first three choices. Alternatively, they could be just reduced to three.

4.7 More flexibility in when the academic year begins

At present the timing of the academic year is not uniform. It can begin from mid-September to mid-October depending on the provider and can finish from late May to early July. The timing of the academic year should remain the decision of HEIs. It is feasible though, as shown in the report, to deliver the academic year beginning with an induction week that starts in late October and finishes mid- June. A late October start is therefore a possible option for HEIs to explore in a post-qualifications applications model to give greater time for HEIs to process applications and students to prepare for HE entry.

5. SUMMARY

The student-centred (SC) model provides a practical road map for the implementation of post-qualifications applications. It shows that it is possible to remove reliance on predicted grades whilst improving the ability of students to make choices and enabling HEIs to support their entry into HE.

For too long the popular opinion has been that post-qualifications applications is desirable but impractical thus it has been placed in the 'too hard to tackle' pile. This paper illustrates that with the necessary political commitment, investment, time and innovation it is possible to introduce a PQA system and give students the power to fully control their journey into HE.



1. Introduction

The government announced in late 2020 that it was undertaking a review of the higher education admission system in England.² This review focuses specifically on whether there should be a move to a 'post-qualifications admission system'. We are unique amongst higher income countries in the world in having a system where students are made offers of places in universities/higher education institutions on the basis of predicted, rather than actual grades.³ The University College Union (UCU) has been an active voice in policy discussions in recent years regarding the case for change to the higher education admissions system. In 2016 it commissioned research which demonstrated how only a minority of the predicted grades used as the primary determinant of higher education entry are accurate.⁴ It then commissioned three further reports which looked at how the admission system in the England and Wales compared to that in other countries; a potential model for a post-qualifications applications system and the views of leaders from schools, colleges and higher education institutions on reforming the admissions system.⁵

This report will build on the contributions that UCU has made to this debate by examining how post-qualifications admissions could work in practice. It focuses on a post-qualifications applications system where students apply after they receive their results as opposed to a post-qualifications offers system where application occurs before exams are taken with offers then made after results are known. UCU has been campaigning for a post-qualifications application system since 2015. 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.⁶

Reforming the admission system has provoked intense debate. An admission system that enables students to make the optimum choices for them and supports participation in all types of higher education institution (HEI) by those from under-represented groups is a shared goal across policymakers, HEIs, schools, colleges and sector bodies. However, whether admissions reform is the correct way to achieve these shared goals is contested primarily because of some of the practical changes that would be required to the present system. The report will address some of these practice issues outlining how a post-qualifications admissions model can be achieved. It will also revisit the case for change utilising different evidence than has been used before to illustrate why reform of the higher education admission system is necessary now.

It will argue that it is possible to deliver a post-qualifications applications model that can support better choice making in progressing to HE, minimise additional burdens on school/ college staff and maintain the ability of HEIs to admit students who fit their courses. It requires a model of post-qualifications applications that builds on the principles outlined in the consultation document from Department of Education in January 2021 but introduces a greater focus on information, advice and guidance, an 'expression of interest' point and the potential for HEIs to start the academic year later than they do at present.



2. The case for post-qualifications admissions

The primary purpose of this report is to examine how post-qualifications admission (PQA) could work and not to explore in the same detail the case for reform. But establishing a coherent case for how PQA could work should flow from what we understand the issues to be here. There are three elements to the case for PQA and they are described below. Two have been outlined extensively before, one less so. Through the report, PQA is used to refer to post-qualifications admission. To refer to post-qualifications applications, the abbreviation PQ applications is used.

2.1 Improvements in widening access

In the government consultation the case for PQA is framed primarily in terms of the benefits in terms of widening access for students from under-represented groups as well as the problematic rise in unconditional offers.

The evidence, quoted in the consultation, shows that nearly 80% of applicants have predicted grades that were overpredicted with this proportion increasing by 63% since 2010.⁷ There is also a specific issue with under-prediction, with high achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to be underpredicted than high achieving advantaged students. This, it has been argued, leads to 'undermatching' as students do not apply or enter courses which their grades enable them to. The implication here is that predicted grades is reducing the numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are entering more selective courses/universities.

Research looking at the present progress toward closing the gap in participation between those from high and low participation areas at selective universities by the Russell Group shows achieving the Office for Students (OfS) targets in this area will be extremely difficult to achieve. While the roots of these difficulties lie in the gaps in attainment between such groups in the schooling system, reforms which may assist in reaching the targets the OfS has set are essential.⁸

2.2 Enhanced performance of students at Level 3

In the present system a considerable burden is placed on teachers/lecturers in predicting grades. Removing this burden would allow them to focus more clearly on teaching. Students also receive confirmation of offers from HE providers at very different times - some within a week of making the application while for others it can take up to 13 weeks. This uncertainty can be distracting for students and may be detrimental to their performance. Finally, the presence of unconditional offers also gives confusing signals to students regarding the expectations regarding their performance in Level 3 examinations. By moving the point of application after examinations this will allow both students and staff to focus more on Level 3 performance.



2.3 Improvements in graduate outcomes

This is an area where PQA may be able to lead to improvements for students which has been considered in less detail but is extremely important. Evidence from the Higher Education Policy Institute/Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey in 2020 suggests that over a third of students are not happy with their choice of course and university. **Table 1** shows that an even higher proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and disabled students and those who enter via clearing are unhappy with their choices. Notably, over half of Black students and nearly half of those who enter via clearing are unhappy with their choices.

Table 1: Students not happy with their choice of course or university⁹

Student type	% not happy with their course or university
All students	36
Disabled students	40
BAME students	45
Students who entered via clearing	46
Black students	55

The need for a change in the admissions system in order to support students to make choices that better meet their expectations appears absent from the present debate. It is a crucial element however of the case for PQA.

Students who are undertaking courses to which they may not best suited may run greater risk of leaving their course before completion and not achieving their academic potential. A move to a PQA system could help students in their choice making and improve the match between student aptitudes/course requirements which is the foundation for positive graduate outcomes. It is well documented that a significant minority of graduates may not be in jobs requiring graduate skills.¹⁰ The reasons for such outcomes are again complex, but admissions reform may be able to contribute to addressing them.

2.4 Improving not 'fixing' the system

It is worth re-iterating here that the present admissions system is not fundamentally 'broken'. It is, however, out of keeping with every other system in the OECD, as well as many outside the OECD, and was designed for a time when only a small minority of young people progressed to higher education. But it still enables large numbers of particularly young people, to progress to a higher education course and has a shared admission service in UCAS which is well respected internationally and every efficient. However, there are elements of higher education progression and outcomes that it is universally accepted could be improved. Reforming the admission system could potentially contribute to such improvements.



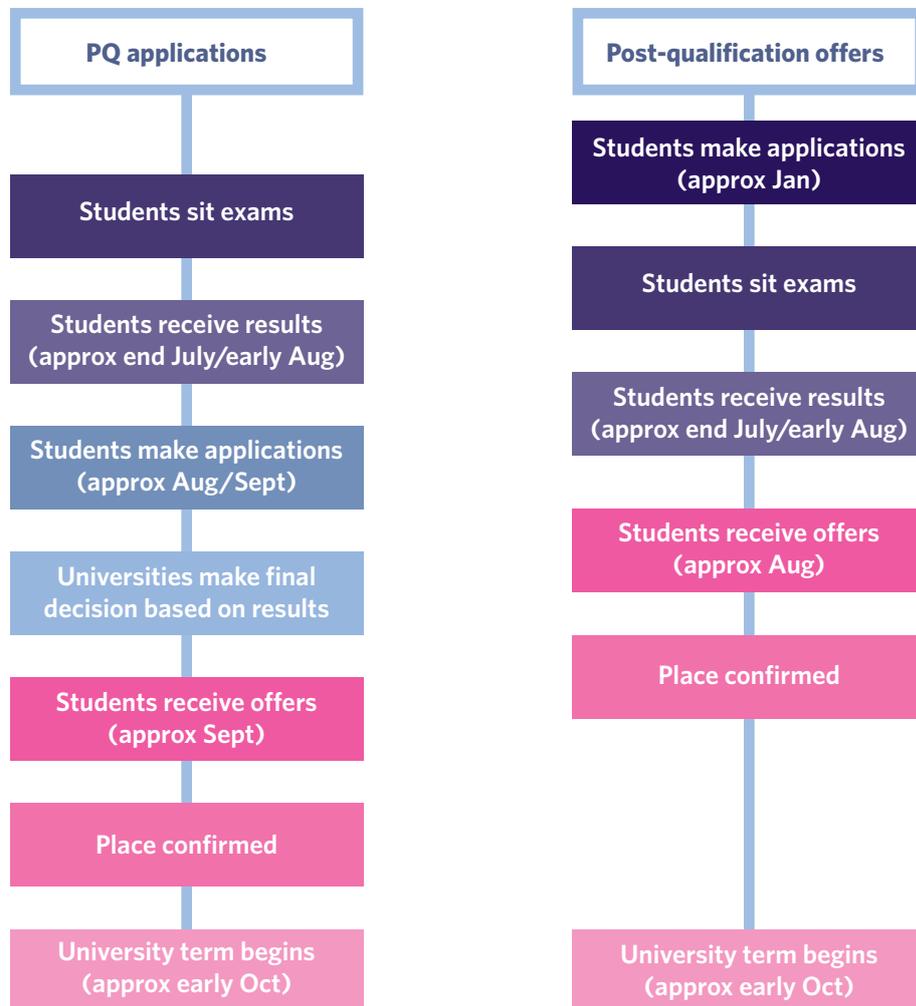
3. Post-qualifications admissions: the different models presented

In this section the different PQA models will be described, starting with those presented by the Department of Education and then the model described in the 2019 paper by UCU.

3.1 Department of Education models

In the government consultation two alternative models of a PQA system are offered. These are reproduced in **Diagram 1** below.

Diagram 1: PQA reform government consultation illustrative models for a PQA system



Key issues with Model 1: Post-qualifications applications

Model 1 allows students to apply with their actual grades. However, as it is presented in the consultation it can appear impractical, placing too much emphasis on choices being made after examination results are received and leaving too much of the selection process to be delivered in too little time. The consultation recognizes the challenges



here associated with supporting students and with timings of the selection process and invites views on how to address them, which this report provides.

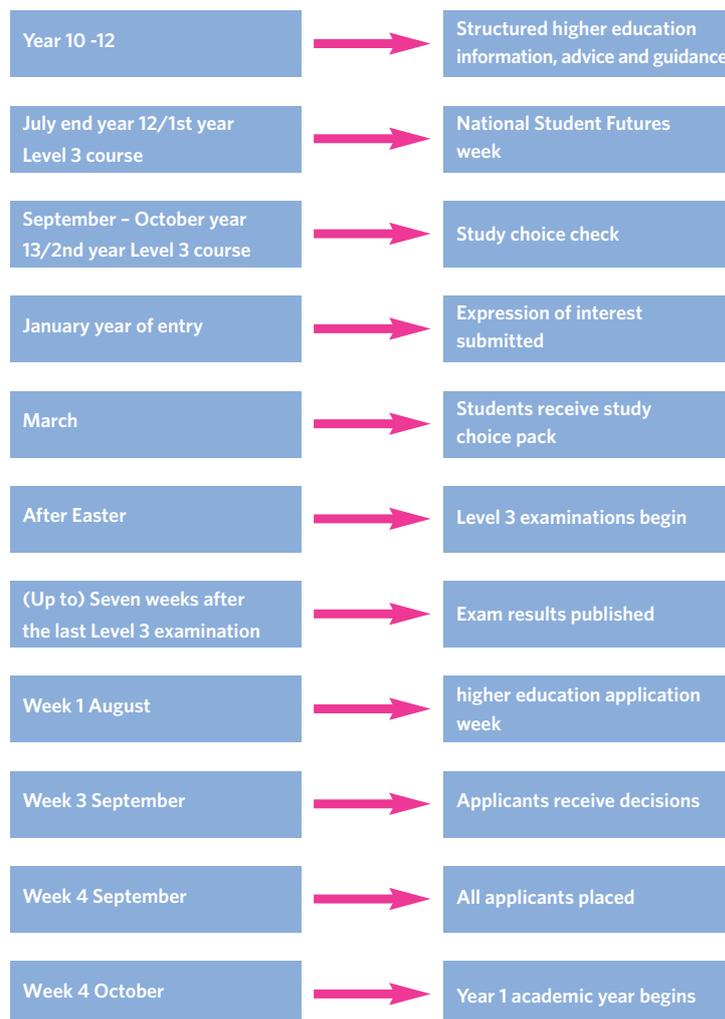
Key issues with Model 2: Post-qualifications offers (PQO)

Diagram 1 illustrates that students apply in January as they do now, but offers are only made when examination results are known in August. The applications themselves would be held by UCAS to ensure no early offer making. In this model predicted grades still have too significant a role to play, hence it will not address one of the most fundamental drivers of PQA. A major risk with a PQO approach is the potential to really enhance choice making for students entering HE by this ‘once in a generation’ reform of the system is not realised.

3.2 The student-centred post-qualifications applications model

The 2019 paper produced by UCU - ‘Post qualifications: a student-centred model for higher education admission in England and Wales’, outlined a model for post qualifications application that was more comprehensive and detailed than those outlined in the government consultation. This model is summarised in **Diagram 2** below.

Diagram 2: The student-centred post-qualifications applications model





4. How the student-centred PQ applications model works

The key elements of the SC PQA are strongly supported by leaders across schools, colleges and HE. The 2020 UCU report 'Higher education admissions: time for change', surveyed over 120 senior leaders and found that over 70% supported the greater emphasis on IAG, the introduction of an expression of interest point and exploring how the academic year can start later if HEIs so choose. This section explores the principles of the model in more depth outlining how they would work in practice while also dealing with some of the key challenges in PQ application system.

Supporting choice making – year 10 to A-Level/Level 3 qualification results

The SC post-qualifications applications model has four key distinctive elements in the Supporting Choice phase and these are described below.

4.1 Strengthened information, advice and guidance (IAG) on HE

The evidence shows conclusively that most students, certainly those from more affluent backgrounds, start making 'choices' regarding HE well before the present admissions cycle in year 13/final year of Level 3 starts. Most recently UCAS released research indicating that a third of students start thinking about HE at primary school, although fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds do so at this point.¹¹ However, while they may be thinking about HE, only just over half feel certain about their degree subjects when they choose their post 16 subjects. A particularly striking finding from this research is that around half of students once they knew about what their degree choice entails would change their choices at GSCE.¹² This evidence shows clearly that there is a need for IAG on HE well before year 13/end of Level 3. It adds to the weight of evidence regarding the need for greater IAG for young people to assist them in making future choices as outlined by many organisations and reports. Most recently over 1000 organisations wrote to an open letter to the government in mid 2020 calling for a careers guidance guarantee¹³ and the Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding in 2019 recommended that 'more young people have access to meaningful careers activities'.¹⁴

A move to a PQA system must include strengthening of the information, advice and guidance available for students wishing to enter HE.

The aim of strengthened IAG should be to 'front load' choice making so that choice can occur over the time that students are in school/college, and when students finalise their applications and decide on offers in August/September they have established clear preferences and have the skills to cope if their results/offers differ from expectations. In order to do this a viable PQ applications model must include:

- an entitlement to HE IAG from year 10 of a minimum of 10 hours per year. This should include in year 13/final year Level 3 all students receiving an agreed level of support



regarding how to complete the UCAS application form, and also one-to-one advice on factors to consider in selecting between their potential course choices.

- a national student futures week at the end of year 12 when students would focus solely on learning about future post-compulsory education options through visits to HE, sessions with students etc. This would be in addition to the entitlement.
- revising the present Gatsby good careers benchmarks related to HE IAG in order to place more emphasis on HE IAG and include the entitlement and National Student Futures Week. Under what constitutes 'Good' at present for the HE related benchmark 7 there is no specific reference to HE related support pre 16. At 16-18, 'good' is defined as two visits to universities.¹⁵
- a national collaborative outreach project such as the Uni-Connect programme to provide focused support for learners from widening access backgrounds.¹⁶

Additional resources to enable schools, colleges and HEIs to deliver the entitlement, National Student Futures Week will be required and adequate funding for the Uni-Connect programme. In the context of post-pandemic recovery it is acknowledged that resources will be at a premium. However, many schools/colleges will be delivering much or all of the IAG described above and there is significant investment available via access and participation plans (APPs) whose utilisation can be considered here. A change in HE admissions of the scale being discussed here will need supporting but the multiplier benefits of improved IAG are well established.

The study choice check

In addition to the elements above, the introduction of an online questionnaire for each course which allows students to explore the fit between their skills/expectations and what the course requires/offers should be piloted. The concept of such a questionnaire is based on the 'study choice check' implemented in the Netherlands in 2017 to address issues in the system with students leaving early or not achieving their potential as they entered courses which did not fit their abilities and ambitions. The study choice check is an online questionnaire which students have to take as part of their HE application process. It is not a test on student's knowledge of course content but looks to identify the level of congruence between the student's motivations and the nature and content of the course exploring the skills they will need to succeed in it. It is mandatory for students applying to HE in the Netherlands to do the study choice check. It is usually integrated with face to face and virtual relationship building/information activities undertaken by Dutch universities with potential applicants. It is not used by HEIs to select applicants. It is used by students to help them select courses.

It is envisaged that such a study choice check would be used in a similar way in England. It could be taken either before or after the expression of interest although prior to the expression would help students refine choice at this point.



The recent research by UCAS outlined above also found that over 90% of students apply for their course before their institution. In this context the value of more course specific information for students is clear and it may prove more valuable to students than generic institutionally focused advertising which is expensive for many HEIs to undertake, but which they feel is necessary to attract students. A further possible advantage of this PQ applications model is that it may reduce the need for such advertising.

A final point to note here is that strengthening this choice making phase will also assist students in considering whether they want to attend HE or not. It will support the delivery of all Level 3 qualifications, including the new T Levels, by aiding students in finding the right post Level 3 route for them. This may not necessarily be HE and it is important that students are provided with the help to reach this decision before they express interest or apply.

4.2 An expression of interest point

A central distinguishing feature of the SC model is the expression of interest point. Students will submit, via UCAS, an expression of interest to enter HE in January of their examination year. It builds a strength of the current system which is that students need to engage with HE choices whilst in school/college in order to apply for HE. Students would submit their personal statement, reference and information on qualifications to date as well as background information related to their socio-economic background, school/college and other agreed protected characteristics. As recommended in other recent papers on admissions reform, such as that by Universities UK, standardisation across the sector in the collection and interpretation of information on proxy measures of socio-economic background and other protected characteristics to enable 'contextualisation' in admissions is supported.¹⁷

The number of HEIs to whom a student can express interest was stated as up to 12 in the 2019 UCU paper on the SC model. Additional consultation with stakeholders in the sector suggests that this number could better be limited to five. The introduction of an expression of interest point in a post-qualifications admissions model would address a number of the practical challenges associated with the post-qualifications applications model.

Challenge 1: Completion of the application form accurately by students

A key concern of colleagues in schools and colleges in particular is the additional support students may need to complete the UCAS form in HE application week. At expression of interest students can complete a substantial section of the UCAS form with their background information and also personal statement/reference, thus reducing the need for external support from teachers or others in HE application week. It does not necessarily remove the need for support for students in August/September but it will significantly reduce it. The additional support needed for students at this stage and how it can be delivered is discussed further in section 4.5



Challenge 2: HEIs understanding future course demand

The expressions of interest will give valuable information to HEIs on potential course demand which they can then use in their planning. The potential reduction in availability of this information within a PQA model has been a concern for HEIs.

Challenge 3: HEIs engaging with students who wish to enter their institutions

HEIs will be able to send tailored information to students who have expressed an interest in their courses. The impact of a PQ applications system on engagement with students has been a concern for them and this engagement is valued by many students. In the SC model HEIs will be able to engage with students who may need additional information and discussions with potential HEIs prior to application and entry – for example disabled students, those who are looked after and refugees/asylum seekers. It is crucial that specific groups of students who are under-represented in HE and/or need additional support are considered carefully when developing any PQ applications system. Moving to a PQ applications system represents an opportunity to enhance and standardise the support/information that such groups can expect to receive when applying to HE that can be developed in consultation with students from such groups and the organisations that represent them.

Challenge 4: Makes A Levels a less 'high stakes examination'

A significant concern in a PQ applications system is the potentially increased importance placed on the university entrance/upper secondary leaving examination. In certain countries with a PQ applications system – South Korea and China for example, the pressure placed on students can be intense with huge negative consequences for these students. There is a risk in moving to PQ applications that additional pressures are placed on students. The transparent use of other assessment mechanisms including references, personal statements and interviews/tests where necessary which are brought into the system at the expression of interest point will help alleviate the focus on examinations only that risk being heightened in a PQA system.

What the expression of interest point is not

It is important to distinguish clearly between the expression of interest and the present system of application in January. Expression of interest is **not** application. It does not lock students, especially those from widening access backgrounds who have the potential to achieve the highest grades, into choices on the basis of their predicted grades as the present system does. When students make their application they will have their actual grades in hand. Expression of interest will help students in structuring the choice process and enable them to better understand what HE options are available.

4.3 Flexibility in Interviewing/auditioning students

A major concern amongst many HEIs and academic staff is how admissions to courses where at present students are interviewed/auditioned or have to submit portfolios or examples of work will be managed in a PQ application system. A precise estimate of the percentage of young students who enter HE at present and undertake such additional forms of assessment would be beneficial to establish. It is recommended that in any



planning for a PQA system the Department of Education undertake such work to fully understand the issues at play here.

There are at least six options available to HEIs with regard to interviews/auditions here in the context of the SC model. They are described in **Table 2** below.

Table 2: Interviews in a PQ applications model

Options	What could be done?
1	Deliver interviews/auditions using present methods/approaches in the application and decision-making phase after examination results are published
2	Deliver different forms of interview/audition in application and decision-making phase
3	Stop doing interviews/auditions and rely on the information provided via personal statement, examination grades and reference
4	All students who express an interest are asked for interview/audition
5	Introduce admission testing to replace interviews
6	Introduce admission testing to allow filtering and interviews/auditions to be delivered in the supporting choice phase before examination results are published

Option 1 is seen by many HEIs as a challenge due to the limited time available. This lack of time to undertake interviews/auditions is one of the main sources of opposition to the PQ applications model as outlined in the government consultation.

There may be potential to address the problem of Option 1 via Option 2, perhaps drawing on some of the different ways in which students have been interviewed in 2020/2021 as a result of the pandemic. However, it is acknowledged that these different forms of interviewing/auditioning are new. Nor can they necessarily be done any quicker from the HEI perspective. Option 3 would be difficult in practical terms for many over-subscribed courses. There are some courses which require evidence of specialist knowledge/ability by nature of the course so there has to be some space in the system for auditions/submissions of portfolios or example of work to be considered. Option 4 may be viable if the demand for courses could be more evenly distributed across the system. Improved IAG and the study choice check may help here. At present, some providers in the arts/creative course field already audition all applicants thus may find this option attractive. For some courses however, there will remain an imbalance between demand and supply.

Options 5 and 6 address this imbalance but in different ways. In principle, interviews have a clear role in a recruitment process. They enable the candidate to understand the nature of the institution in ways only personal contact is able to and they enable the institution to identify in a candidate certain qualities that can't come through on paper, thus better understanding their fit for the course. However, there is voluminous evidence regarding the extent of bias inherent in interviews as a form of selection in both the



labour market and education.¹⁸ Such bias can exist despite the best effort of the interviewer. A transparent, uniform contextual admissions process with relation to examination grades is vital to widen access to more competitive courses. However, such an approach will be of limited value if we persist with using interviews as part of the admissions process for such courses. This is a challenging area and as argued above, interviews have merits and can themselves give context and support widening access. But if a priority in admissions reform is to widen access to competitive courses, serious attention needs to be given to the role of interviews and they need to become part of the contextualised admissions' debate. In addition to the issues regarding the use of interviews and contextual admissions there is also a case for considering the merits of using interviews to gauge future educational performance which is an area of ongoing debate in the academic community. Option 6 suggests using admission tests but continuing to use interviews as well, with tests being used to filter candidates for interview.

Box 1 below describes further how admission testing could work in the current context.

Box 1: Using admissions tests

The need to filter student applications is one that cannot be entirely avoided. Strengthening the supporting choice making phase would, it is hoped, help students to better appreciate the breadth of opportunities available in the system and their potential fit for these courses. But it will not eradicate the imbalance between demand and supply in certain courses. The most common way of addressing this imbalance across systems in other countries is to introduce a specific course/subject related test to allow universities to filter students who may then be either accepted or not on the basis of this test, or the test is used alongside interviews/upper secondary/school completion examination results. In the context of this country there are a number of options in terms of what admission tests could look like:

- subject specific tests set by universities individually, as happens in other countries
- standardised tests across subjects with universities working together to agree the content of the test
- as has been suggested by some bodies in the school/college sector, the re-introduction of the AS Level or equivalent.

Subject specific tests have the advantage that they are only needed in certain subjects and hence less additional work across the system is required. However, there is a case for considering, as other sector bodies have argued, for the re-introduction of AS Levels.

The lack of a form of testing after GCSE and before A Level has, it has been argued, had a very negative effect on the ability to predict A level grades. Abolishing the



AS Level was generally an unpopular move in the education sector. The need for testing within the Level 3 phase to gauge student potential for HE entry has become even more evident in 2020-21 as many schools and sixth form colleges have introduced their own additional tests to help their staff make grade predictions. There is surprisingly little research on how teachers make predictions in normal non- pandemic related contexts but what there is shows that they do utilise test results significantly (Gill,2019). There are limitations in the ability of GCSEs to act as a predictor here. While to an extent GCSE achievement is a predictor of A level achievement, recent research shows that using this information does not assist in making teacher predictions (Anders et al, 2020).

Additional testing for students has its drawbacks. It creates more pressure for students and more work for those who create, administer and mark the test. Additional testing would provide a potential widening access challenge in that students from such backgrounds would not be as likely to be able to benefit from additional support to the test as those from other more affluent backgrounds (many of whom would be taking such tests as they are more likely to apply for the majority of oversubscribed subjects). However, a transparent and rigorous contextualised assessment approach could be used and also some of the significant investment that universities are making in widening access via their APPs could be targeted at supporting students from widening access backgrounds to prepare for such tests.

Gill, T (2019) Methods used by teachers to predict final A Level grades, Research Matters, June 2019 A Cambridge Assessment Publication
<https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/561974-methods-used-by-teachers-to-predict-final-a-level-grades-for-their-students.pdf>

Anders, J, Dilnot, C, Macmillan, L & Wyness, G (2020) Grade Expectations: How well can we predict future grades based on past performance? - Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO - <https://repec-cepeo.ucl.ac.uk/cepeow/cepeowp20-14.pdf>

4.4 A focus on transparency in admissions information

Central to the SC model is enabling students to enter the application and decision making with as clear a picture as possible regarding their chances of entering a particular course. In order to do this they need to know the relative importance that HEIs place on different elements of the admission decision in a much clearer way than they do at present. Students should be told what weight is placed on references, personal statement, interviews/tests/auditions and examination grades in % terms by HEIs in deciding whether to offer a place to a candidate.

If grades or admission tests are used to enable the student to be considered for interview, for example, and a higher grade than that required for the course is not given extra credit, then this should be made clear to applicants.



If tests are to form part of the assessment of students for entry, rather than filtering for interview, they should be told the results of the tests prior to completing their application in HE application week. This is consistent with the need for greater transparency described below.

4.5 Phase 2 application and decision making

HE application week

Both the student-centred, and Department of Education models include a HE application week. The risk with all models is that students need greater support in HE application week than at present and the burden of support will fall on school/college staff. All three models outlined above mean that students will have to decide on which offer to accept thus a further implication is that students will need additional support later in August/early September.

These risks are real and changes in the admission system should not place additional burdens on school/college staff nor leave students who require it bereft of support. Emerging feedback from the schools/colleges sector re-affirm this concern. Hence, the strengthening of IAG described earlier and the expression of interest point are essential if any variant of a PQA approach is to improve choice making for students and not potentially harm it.

How are students from widening access backgrounds supported during application and decision-making?

As outlined in section 4.11 specific IAG should be provided to assist with preparation for this phase but students from widening access backgrounds will need additional support. A concern expressed by school/college staff is that such students may not finalise their application form as they may be working and parents/carers may lack time or capacity to support them at this stage. It must be noted that in the present system there is a risk that such students may not confirm their offer of a place after results are announced thus some support is often required especially for those students whose results vary from expectations. However, there will be more work required if a student has to complete the application form as well (although most of it has been done in the expression of interest point).

This extra support required must not add to the present workload of school/college staff. Hence, a joined up approach involving schools, colleges, HEIs and Uni-Connect partnerships is needed here, underpinned by a principle of personalised support for these learners. Such an approach could have at least three elements:

- additional funding to the government's Uni-Connect initiative focused on support/ advice at the transition into HE for widening access students.
- at expression of interest point, widening access students should be encouraged by their schools/colleges to register for completion reminders in the form of text/



email/letter before and during HE application week delivered centrally. Evidence suggests that previous initiatives where students are contacted directly in this way can have a measurable impact on their behaviour in applying for HE.¹⁹

- HEIs should offer advice for students directly in HE application week and through August as they do now to students in clearing for example.

4.6 How many providers should a student apply to?

In 2019 in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there were:

- 1,965,090 applications made to HE providers via the UCAS main scheme
- 1,444,795 offers made to students
- 428,610 acceptances.²⁰

Of these applicants 73.6% of students accepted the offer from their first choice provider. There are therefore over 1.5 million applications that do not lead to any productive outcome in a system where the vast majority of students enter their first choice provider. The introduction of PQ applications is, then, an opportunity to consider what efficiencies can be introduced into the system.

To guarantee filling their places providers in general will make more offers per course than places are available. But given that the majority of students go to their first choice this means that a lot of work is done applying and making offers which does not lead to students entering that course. The fact that there are courses where demand is higher than supply appears built into the system. However, there is a strong case for exploring whether students need to make five course choices. A smaller number of course choices would reduce the administrative burden in the system. It would also remove some of the additional considerations that students would be forced to make between offers they are very unlikely to take anyway. Wider research from the field of behavioural economics on choice making shows that increasing options available does not necessarily improve the ability of individuals to make effective choices.²¹

In a PQ application system where students know their final grades and there is much clearer information available on both the acceptance rate for specific courses and the grades required for entry it could be anticipated that the percentage of students entering their first choice course would increase from 73%. The possibility of a small number of students not receiving an offer would remain which means reducing the number of applications a student can make, from five to three for example, may imply there is still the need for some form of clearing but it would be a much reduced enterprise than at present. Data from 2019 would suggest that such a reduction could reduce the number of applications that HEIs need to respond to by around 800,000.



To further minimise the need for some form of clearing, a further option to consider is for students to be asked to make two additional choices and this information is held by UCAS rather than passed to providers. Matching is then attempted centrally with HEIs informing UCAS of available places.

4.7 Phase 3: Entry into higher education

In the SC model the entry into higher education phase begins after the students have accepted their offer of a place. It will include information provided to the student by HEIs as well as time for the student to prepare for HE. The timing of this phase will differ for individual students. In the present system, many students receive offers within 2-3 weeks of making their application and sometimes quicker. The potential reduction in the administration resulting from fewer applications per individual may enable this phase to start earlier for many students.

Will students have time to prepare?

The preparations for HE entry can begin before exam results are received before August as they do now to a significant extent. With some flexibility on the part of accommodation providers, students can register interest in their preferred HEI(s) before they receive their results. Registration with the Student Loan Company can also be undertaken in advance of the HE Application Week.

Beginning the academic year for year 1 students

While preparations for entering HE can occur before results are received and many students will receive their offers within a short space of time as they do now – before the end of August in a PQA system, it may still be wise to extend the period from HE application week to HE entry more than is proposed in the consultation. It will give students more time to prepare for entry and HEIs more time to process applications, make offers and put in place timetabling for the academic year.

The proposal in the 2019 paper from UCU was to start the first year later with an induction week at the end of October. To be clear here, the 2019 paper suggested the possibility of a start or teaching in November for year 1 students, not January. Any imposition of a new start date, be that in October or any month on the HE sector for first year students should be avoided. It would feel like micro-management from the government or regulator. HEIs already exercise their autonomy in this area as there is some considerable difference across the sector in terms of when the academic year starts, when it finishes and its overall length. Table 3 presents the results of research undertaken for this report on the nature of the first academic year at HEIs in England in 2020/21. It shows that the academic year starts as early as mid-September but for some in October.

**Table 3: Academic year start date in HEIs in 2020-21²²**

HEI start date	HEIs (%)
September 14th	10
September 21st	40
September 28th	31
October 5th	10
October 12th	8
October 19th	1

Table 4 looks at when the academic year ends. It shows that there is an even larger range here. As there are a far more end dates than start dates the table shows the picture by month; in June alone for example there are eight different end dates. The end date of the year includes the stated time in HEI academic calendars for the marking of end of year assessment.

Table 4: Academic year end dates in HEIs in 2020-21

HEI end date range	HEIs (%)
21st - 31st May	15
3rd - 28th June	73
2nd - 20th July	12

In addition to the different start and end term dates, the length of the academic year differs across HEIs. It is not necessarily the case that those who start the earliest finish the earliest. The reason why these timings differ is because the time within the year allocated to vacation times, assessment, reading weeks and personal study differs across HEIs. It would be quite possible in this context to choose to start as suggested in the SC model in late October and finish in June as the majority of the sector does. Box 2 illustrates how this could work in the year 2020-21.



Box 2: An end of October start academic year model for 2020-21

- 26th October - Induction week
- 2nd November - Teaching starts
- 28th May - Teaching completed
- 18th June - academic year ends

This timetable would allow for:

- 24 weeks of teaching,
- 4 weeks of holiday
- 5 weeks for assessment

For many academic staff (not all of course, some will have other teaching responsibilities in the summer), this academic year model in Box 1 allows 14-18 weeks within which they may be able to focus on research and other work (personal commitments permitting) until teaching begins again for the majority of year 2 onwards students in September.

Opportunity to revisit assessment in year 1

A PQ Application approach as described in the SC model also provides an opportunity to look again at assessment in year 1, in particular assessment at the end of semester 1. Assessment at this point is a mandatory element of some courses (such as some PRSB ones described below). It may also form part of the whole year 1 assessment thus reducing the emphasis on one assessment at the end of the year. However, for some courses it may also be seen as an added pressure for students/staff when time could be deployed in other ways. There is an opportunity here with reforming admission in this way to scrutinise, in consultation with students, how year 1 should be delivered to optimise the academic performance of students whilst enabling them to have a productive HE experience.



5. Ensuring specific groups of students can enter and study

There are several specific groups of students for whom a move to a PQA system may create distinctive challenges. How the SC model would enable such groups to enter HE/begin their studies is discussed below.

5.1 Students on professional, statutory and regulatory bodies- related (PSRB) courses

A number of courses delivered by HEIs are also approved by Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB). Examples of such courses include those in the field of architecture, accountancy and nursing/midwifery. As with the number of courses that require interviews, data should be obtained by the Department of Education in their planning on how many such courses there are. In some of these courses there is a requirement that students undertake a certain amount of contact and placement time. In the example given above there is no reduction in the standard amount of contact time with teaching starting in November. However, it is important that the needs of these students are fully considered. It may be the case that a November start is not deemed practical for such learners if placements are also required to be included in the academic year. Hence, for such groups they may have to start much closer to late September.

5.2 Students requiring enhanced disclosure and barring service (DBS) checks

There are students on a number of courses who come into contact with vulnerable groups via placement aspects of their courses and hence require enhanced DBS checks. Such courses include primary or secondary teaching, counselling, social work, medicine, nursing, midwifery, sports coaching or dentistry. This impacts therefore on a significant number of students. Concerns have been raised whether a PQ applications approach would lead to a logjam in the DBS system with students applying at a very similar time when they have accepted their offers and possibly not receiving them before their course begins.

There is a case here for looking at options which allow DBS checks to be submitted and processed prior to application, however in principle with the standard turnaround of 4-6 weeks and if the late October start was adopted, checks submitted after application would allow most students who were on courses where this start date was feasible to still have clearance by this point.

With regard to prior application options though, in the present system, students have their DBS application checked by their institution where they are holding offers/entering. A PQ application system may present the impetus here to really explore a shared services approach here. There could be significant administrative efficiencies with a single route for students to obtain enhanced DBS via one service that universities engage in collectively.



5.3 International students

The admission of international students in a PQA system would need to be clarified. There is a concern that applying in August may make courses at HEIs in this country less attractive as these students can get earlier decisions on their applications in other countries.²³ The government does have a target to increase international student numbers of 600,000 each year and any PQ application approach should not hinder progress toward this.

It would be possible to exempt international students from the new system and consider their applications earlier. It is common in other countries for the admission arrangements and timetable for domestic and international students to sometimes differ. However, some universities do prefer to admit international and domestic students at the same time so that the whole applicant pool can be assessed to identify the appropriate candidates. There is also an argument that all students from whatever country should be treated equally.

However, as with home-based students the expression of interest point in the SC model does present an opportunity to engage with potential applicants, and for them to become part of the application system earlier than August.

The future of international HE and admission models

There are different options for consideration here then. What would be extremely valuable here is an assessment of the nature of the international student recruitment landscape at present and going forward to really understand the factors shaping student demand and how it is evolving. While there may be evidence that international students look for certainty as early as possible in the application process the relative importance of such certainty needs to be better understood. A combination of Brexit and Covid-19 have acted as a huge external shock to the international student recruitment landscape. Most commentators agree that international higher education will never be the same again. It is important that in deciding where to place international students in a new admission system, (who while representing a sizeable number of students in 2019 represented less than 15% of undergraduate entrants via UCAS in 2019) the best evidence is collected looking at the future of international HE.



6. Conclusion – PQA: a window of opportunity

The government consultation on post qualifications admissions places the autonomy of HEIs in admitting students as one of areas not in scope and they are absolutely correct here. This is why the student-centred model provides greater flexibility for HEIs to select and support students while avoiding the continued reliance on predicted grades inherent in the post-qualifications offers model.

For too long the popular opinion in the HE sector has been that PQ applications is desirable but impractical and placed in the ‘too hard to tackle’ pile. This report shows that it is not too hard to tackle and there are practical ways in which it could be implemented that will not place new pressures on staff across sectors or lead to negative unintended consequences for learners. However, if such pressures and consequences are to be avoided it is essential that the measures described in this report are put in place. To try and implement a PQ applications model without the necessary additional supports for IAG or the security of the expression of interest point represents a major risk that should be avoided.

This consultation represents a window of opportunity for HE admissions in this country. It can contribute to widening access, support attainment at Level 3 and address graduate outcomes as well as strengthen IAG for higher education, introduce greater transparency to the admissions process and revisit the purposes of year 1 of HE. We should not let this window close without making real progress in improving the system. With the necessary political commitment, investment, time and innovation it is possible to give students the power to fully control their journey into HE.



NOTES

- ¹ While the consultation is focused on admissions in England the consultation states it has the backing of the devolved nations.
- ² The consultation can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/post-qualification-admissions-in-higher-education-proposed-changes>
While the consultation focuses on England, it is stated that it has the backing of the three devolved governments.
- ³ Atherton, G. (2018) Post Qualifications Admissions: How it works across the world, London:
- ⁴ Wyness, (2016), Predicted Grades: accuracy and impact, London:UCU
https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec-16/pdf/Predicted_grades_report_Dec2016.pdf
- ⁵ Atherton (2018) Atherton, G. & Nartey, A. (2019) Post-qualification application: a student-centred model for higher education admissions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, London:UCU
Atherton, G. & Nartey, A. (2020) Higher education admissions: The time for change, London:UCU
- ⁶ UCU, (2015), Undergraduate application and admissions survey -
<https://www.ucu.org.uk/thecaseforpqa>
- ⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/post-qualification-admissions-in-higher-education-proposed-changes>
- ⁸ Russell Group (2020) Pathways to Potential, London: Russell Group,
<https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5858/pathways-for-potential-full-report-may-2020.pdf>
- ⁹ Neves, J & Hewit, R (2020) Student Academic Experience Survey, HEPI -
<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2020.pdf>
- ¹⁰ ONS (2019) One in three graduates overeducated for their current role, London (ONS)
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/news/news/oneinthreegraduatesovereducatedfortheircurrent-role>
- ¹¹ UCAS (2021) Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?, UCAS
<https://www.ucas.com/file/435551/download?token=VUdIDVFh>



¹²This research also included students who had studied in Scotland.

¹³HM Government (2019) Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, London: HM

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf

¹⁴FE News (2020) Career Guidance Guarantee: More than 1000 Organisations, MPs and Lords rally together - 7th July 2020:

<https://www.fenews.co.uk/fevoices/50893-organisations-mps-and-lords-rally-for-career-guidance-guarantee>

¹⁵Careers and Enterprise Company (2019) The Gatsby Benchmark Toolkit: Gatsby Benchmark 7 Encounters with Further and Higher Education:

https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/sites/default/files/gatsby_benchmark_7.pdf

¹⁶For more information on the Uni-Connect programme please go to:

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/>

¹⁷Universities UK (2020) Fair Admissions Review, London:UUK

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2020/uuk-fair-admissions-review.pdf>

¹⁸Bendick, M. & Nunes, A.P. (2012) Developing the Research Basis for Controlling Bias in Hiring - Journal of Social Issues, Vol. 68, No. 2, 2012, pp. 238--262

¹⁹Hume, S (2017) The right letter at the right time, and applicant aspirations, Wonkhe 30th June 2017

²⁰Information taken from the UCAS 2020 End of Cycle Data Dashboard -

<https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2020>

²¹Iyengar, S & Lepper, M.R. (2000) When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing? - Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2000, Vol. 79, No. 6, 995-1006 -

²²100 HEIs in England were assessed to produce Tables 3 and 4.

²³UCAS (2021) Reimagining UK Admissions, UCAS



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