

How admissions reform can address five big challenges for higher education

*A report for UCU by
Professor Graeme Atherton
Head of the Centre for Inequality and Levelling Up
and Director, National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)
University of West London*

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Note: The views expressed in this publication are the those of Graeme Atherton and not of NEON or the University of West London.



1. Introduction: the key challenges facing higher education and the role of admissions

The choices that young people take when they are approaching the end of compulsory education can have a powerful influence on the rest of their lives. For those thinking of entering higher education (HE) they face an increasing number of differing options of courses and providers. In order to enable those entering HE to make the choice that enables them to achieve the best outcomes when they leave HE they need an admission system that prioritises choice making.

In early 2021 the government published a consultation looking at the case for a shift to a post-qualifications admission system. This consultation followed a series of publications from UCU which helped move the case for admissions reform back up the policy agenda. These reports covered the international context in which higher education admissions system in England, Wales & Northern Ireland sits;¹ what a model for post qualifications applications based on enabling student choice could look like;² (this model can be found in Appendix 1) the views of leaders from schools, colleges and higher education providers on admissions³ and a response to the consultation which addressed some the key challenges associated with a shift to a post-applications admission system.⁴ The consultation led to a range of published responses including from key stakeholders such as Universities UK, UCAS, the Sutton Trust, AQA and others. These responses differ. The majority, with the exception of the Sutton Trust, favour either a retention of the fundamentals of the present system or a move to some form of post qualifications offers system where the majority of students would still be required to apply well in advance of examination results. The summary of responses from the Department of Education when published will give a fuller picture of how the broader community of education stakeholders view admissions reform.

The case for HE admissions reform has been perceived by many as centring on mainly or solely on the lack of accuracy where predicted grades are concerned and the impact this has on the ability of students to access the full range of courses and institutions that they are able to. As important as this issue is, it should not narrow the debate here. Nor should examining the case for reform be seen as arguing that we have a failing admissions system. Rather, the argument here is that we should raise the bar where our ambitions in terms of supporting our students to enter and succeed in HE is concerned. Instead of settling for a situation where we know that more students could do better if they were enabled to make better choices that meet their needs, there is a generational opportunity here for a government to seize the chance for admissions reform.

1.1 ARE WE REALISING THE POTENTIAL OF ADMISSIONS REFORM?

The full potential of admissions reform to help meet the major ambitions for higher education policy is at risk of not being realised. The present debate has yet to connect



admissions reform with some of the big challenges facing the higher education system overall i.e. improving graduate outcomes; enabling choice in a more diverse higher education system; boosting progress in widening access and building a tertiary education system. As the government approaches the point where they will decide on any potential reforms to the system and a move to post qualifications admissions (PQA), this paper will examine the relationships between admissions and these challenges arguing that a move to a post-qualifications application system underpinned by a much enhanced system of HE information, advice and guidance support remains the best way to help address them.

There are a range of challenges facing the higher education systems of England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the 2020s. Admissions are not directly pertinent to all of them (academic freedom and free speech etc.), nor is it a silver bullet where some of those it does relate to are concerned. But there are five key challenges facing higher education where admissions reform could have an impact. These challenges and their relationship to admissions are described below.



2. Enabling a lifelong learning system

There are now more than 400 providers on the Office for Students register. While the most of these are very small, and the majority of students in England are concentrated in around a quarter of this number nevertheless they represent a proliferation of choice which potential students have to navigate. At the same time, the demand for higher education is set to increase over the decade. As work from HEPI predicts 300,000 more higher education places will be needed in England by 2030 to keep up with demand.⁵ The government may be looking to introduce minimum number thresholds which could dampen considerably the numbers progressing to higher education. But at the same time, regardless of what you think of that direction of travel, it is vigorously looking to expand the number of students at Level 4/5 through their polices on higher technical qualifications⁶ with the first such qualifications launched in September 2022. These qualifications sit alongside the introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement from 2025 with the aim being to challenge a situation where, as the Minister stated in November 2021 *'for too long HE has been predominantly undertaken between the ages of 18-22 and our system has not supported or developed a culture of lifelong learning'*.

The Minister is not the only one to argue that the model of higher education in England is predicated too much on young students entering higher education at 18/19 to study full time for three years. If we are to move to a more flexible system, where learners from across age ranges can access higher level learning to undertake courses of differing lengths, entering at more than one time in a year and holding as argued below a more diverse set of entry qualifications then an admission system that can support this goal will be required. The desirability of this aim for a flexible lifelong learning system is supported by strong evidence⁷ and exists across parties.⁸ It will require though a system of admission that can support potential students to choose between a greater range of both course and delivery options and be designed not with just 18 year olds in mind (although they will continue to represent a major portion of those entering HE).

At present admissions predominantly mirrors the HE system itself, in being based around entry of young students for whom grades to enter HE can be accurately predicted. Other direct routes of entry into HE exist often favoured by older learners and those not entering via A-Levels but they are for the minority. Such routes could remain and potentially grow in the future if a more flexible system can develop. However, a true commitment to lifelong learning would not place those who wish to enter whilst older, or who may wish to only use some of their Lifelong Learning Entitlement whilst young, as a lower priority than traditional students. The presence of UCAS is a globally recognized strength of the admission system. It's strengths therefore should be available to all students no matter what age and course they are looking to enter. The system at present, dependent as it is on prior grade prediction and the selection of multiple course options most of which are spurious (over 80% of



applicants are entering their first choice so making five choices seems too many) does not look like the best way to help learners who are older or younger enter a more flexible higher education system. A clearer approach where students enter better prepared for HE study and make choices with full knowledge of what they have achieved may be a better way to harness the power of UCAS in this context.

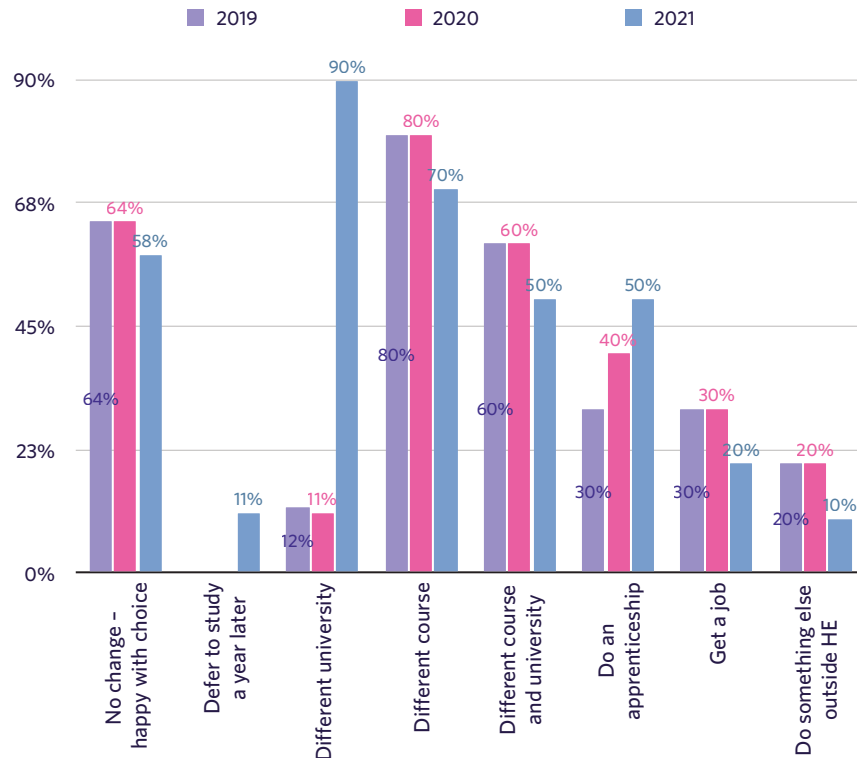
The challenge of developing a genuinely lifelong learning system cannot be underestimated. The precipitous decline in part-time students since the early 2010s shows for example how dependent lifelong learning is on financial support and the Lifelong Learning Entitlement is a watered down commitment compared to that articulated by others who argue for a stronger right to learn approach.⁹ Thus, it will require all the elements to be in place that can enable what the Minister described in her 2021 speech *'the vehicle technician who has worked building and fixing diesel vans for 10 years... to move to a higher wage, higher skilled job in a growing part of their sector like electric vehicle production.'*



3. Improving graduate outcomes

The government has made improving the economic outcomes of graduates a centrepiece of its higher education policy. Its importance is a thread that has run through Ministerial speeches on higher education since 2019. In early 2022 it was given more substance when the Office for Students¹⁰ announced a consultation on the introduction of minimum student outcomes where 80 per cent of students should continue into a second year of study, 75 per cent should complete and at least 60 per cent should go into professional employment or further study. Such new regulation should prompt both policymakers and HE providers to look seriously at the role that student choice and higher education admissions have on graduate outcomes. The evidence suggests that a significant minority of students may think they have made inappropriate course or provider choices. Using data from HEPI Student Experience Survey,¹¹ Diagram 1 shows that over 2019 & 2020 around a third of students have consistently felt that they would have rather chosen another course or institution or not entered HE at all. As can be seen in 2021 the percentage of students who are not happy has fallen. This may be a temporary downturn due to the pandemic but it now means the percentage who are happy with their choice is only just in the majority.

Diagram 1: Exploring whether students would have made the same choice of course and HE provider again



This survey has provided more detailed information in its 2020 edition regarding the views of students from particular groups regarding whether their HE choices and this is shown in Diagram 2 below.



Diagram 2: Students not happy with their choice of course or university in 2020

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

Higher Education Policy Institute/Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey 2020

It is striking that, as Diagram 2 demonstrates, more than half of Black students would make different choices regarding higher education if they could. Why Black students, or those from any background, may be dissatisfied by their higher education choices is complex and it must be remembered that overall a majority of students are happy with their choices. Nevertheless, these findings should make policy makers and HE providers look at what action could be taken to support these dissatisfied students make better choices. Why students may not achieve their full potential, measured by retention, completion, graduate employment or more holistic metrics is equally complex. It is also important not to reduce a positive graduate outcome down to crude employment related measures alone. More research does need to be done though looking at the relationship between choice and outcome.¹² We need to understand in much greater detail the characteristics and experiences of students who have not maximised the value of their HE experience and the relationship with subject and institutional choice. Students who have made what they see as sub-optimal choices may see their outcomes impacted. Certainly, it can be argued that their choice making needs better support.

3.1 A CONSENSUS FOR BUILDING A STUDENT CHOICE FOCUSED ADMISSIONS SYSTEM

Better support for student choice making and HE related Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) was an area of consensus across the stakeholders in the admissions debate. It needs to be populated though by strong, realistic proposals which articulate what such support could look like. The importance of IAG to policymakers has been reiterated by the announcement of a recent Department of Education Select Committee Enquiry into IAG and careers advice.

As is argued in both the 2019 & 2021 UCU reports HE choice should be seen as a process that begins well before Level 3 study. UCAS for example in their 2021 report which informed their consultation response found that *'more than three in four students first realised HE was an option for them before they started post-16 education, and one in three first realised this when they were still at primary school'*.¹³



The admissions system needs to be seen as beginning at year 10 at the latest for young people. In the UCU post-qualifications application model an entitlement to HE IAG from year 10 of a minimum of 10 hours per year was recommended. A further step to strengthen engagement here would be a duty on schools to enrol all students in the UCAS system from year 10 onwards who express an interest in HE progression. This would link well with the greater commitment that UCAS has expressed to contribute more to the provision of information and support on HE progression and would emphasise to students (particularly those from under-represented groups) that HE choice is something to engage in earlier than Level 3.

Such steps, as well as the Student Choice Week for year 12, suggested in the UCU reports and piloting of the Study Choice Check¹⁴ would build into the admissions system greater active engagement and support for choice making thus helping to address the problem of significant numbers of students who are making the wrong choices for them and hence likely improve their graduate outcomes.



4. Accelerating progress in widening access

The last 10 years have seen steady, if slow, progress in widening access to higher education. There are more students from free school meal (FSM) backgrounds entering HE than ever before¹⁵ and more from low participation neighbourhoods.¹⁶ However, the gaps between students from different groups as measured by proxy indicators of socio-economic background remain. By some calculations it could take, at present rates of progress, over 300 years for gaps in progression to more selective universities over 300 years to close.¹⁷ There are also significant issues with the progress into HE for those from numerically smaller groups who are hugely under-represented groups in higher education including white males from lower socio-economic groups; those in Gypsy, Romany, Traveller, Showmen community, care leavers and young carers. Increasing the rate of progress in widening access is crucial because as more younger students enter HE at under-graduate level over time, then those from more affluent backgrounds especially, will seek new ways of differentiating themselves from others via postgraduate education, employment experience, international higher education experiences etc. Hence, by the time those from less affluent backgrounds reach HE the bar has been raised again.

The government has recently proposed a 're-focusing' of widening access to higher education work. This is couched less in terms of the need to address entrenched inequalities via more rapid progress than a concern regarding the graduate outcomes described above. In addition, this re-focusing includes a greater emphasis from universities in their outreach work on attainment raising as well as providing broader IAG to enable those they work with make informed choice that may involve non HE, as well as HE progression. Whether these kind of reforms, alongside the greater flexibility in the HE offer described above will lead to an acceleration in HE participation amongst those from under-represented groups, is open to debate (while universities can contribute they are not the main engines of raising attainment in schools). However, what is clear is that accelerating or enhancing progress in widening access will be challenging and require a higher education admission system to support this goal which may differ somewhat from what is available now.

4.1 LOOKING AT ADMISSIONS THROUGH A WIDENING ACCESS LENS

A starting point here would be to rather than consider admissions reform via the lens of minimum disruption which seems the default position of some stakeholders, asking what kind of admissions system would best serve widening access goals. Given that the HE system remains profoundly unequal despite the work of the last 20 years and admissions is part of that system it needs to share some of the burden and responsibility here. If HE needs to change, perhaps fundamentally, to enable those who have never been able to access it before to do so, then so does the part of it related to admissions. It is clear that re-focusing widening access must also involve re-focusing the admissions system.



Looking to 're-focus' the admission system this way implies four changes that need to be made:

- **making admissions as much about provision of IAG HE as administrative process**
- **giving students the maximum amount of time to make HE choices** rather than force them to do it 8-10 months earlier than they need to because it suits universities and others in the system
- **putting the responsibility on the stakeholders in the system to provide information** to prospective students from under-represented groups rather than on the students to find out what they can
- **reducing selection related barriers to entry** – either through lowering/contextualising A grades, reducing the importance of/abolishing personal statements and undertaking review of the use of interviews and how they, as with grade offers, can be contextualised if they need to be used at all.
- **reviewing the importance of high stakes examination in facilitating entry to HE** – More than two-thirds of colleges in the United States no longer require candidates to provide standard aptitude tests (SATs) as evidence of their suitability for HE. It is the impact of SATs in re-inforcing gaps in participation between those from different socio-economic/ethnic groups that is driving these changes. Prospective HE students are now much more likely to submit evidence of their school performance gleaned from continual assessment of their performance. It is worth noting here that such a change in this country would not be inconsistent with a post-qualifications application model indeed would support its implementation.¹⁸



5. Helping learners with vocational qualifications enter higher education

Alongside the provision of a greatly enhanced offer at Level 4/5 the government has undertaken considerable reforms in terms of the qualifications available at Level 3. These reforms announced in July 2021, aim to make A Levels and their new technical alternative, T Levels, the main further education qualifications at age 16 in England - sitting alongside apprenticeships. The intention is for funding for 'applied general qualifications' including many BTECs, to be removed although a number of organisations are actively campaigning against this. In 2020 over 45000 students with BTECs entered higher education.¹⁹ In 2020 the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) looked at the potential impact of defunding of BTECs on widening access to higher education. The research shows that around a quarter of students entering HE from the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods (the POLAR quintile 1 areas) were in 2020 either taking solely BTECs or A-Levels and BTECs.²⁰ Table 1 taken from that report, shows both the numbers of students entering HE from low participation neighbourhoods since 2011 and the percentage of these students who enter with BTECs and A levels/BTECs.

Table 1: Students from POLAR 1 quintile entering HE via BTEC or A level/BTEC 2011-2020

Year	No. of students entering HE from POLAR 1 quintile	No. of BTEC or A level/BTEC students	% of BTEC or A level/BTEC students
2011	21540	6145	28
2012	20230	4915	24
2013	20845	5495	26
2014	23225	6830	29
2015	24730	7430	30
2016	24980	7445	29
2017	25800	7545	29
2018	25310	6800	27
2019	26445	6660	26
2020	28885	7400	26

It is not only those from low participation neighbourhoods who are more likely to enter HE with BTECs. It appears that those from non-white backgrounds are more likely to enter HE with BTEC or A-Level/BTEC. Table 2 below shows that nearly a



third of all black students entering HE in 2019 did so with at least one BTEC. The proportion of black students entering HE with BTECs alone is nearly twice that of white students.

Table 2: % of students entering HE in 2020 by ethnic group and qualification

Qualification	Black students	Asian students	White students
A Level	67	76	79
BTEC	21	14	11
A Level/BTEC	12	10	10
Total	100	100	100

5.1 THE IMPORTANCE FOR HE PARTICIPATION OF T-LEVELS

Any reduction in BTEC provision will clearly have a major impact on how learners progress to HE and in particular those from lower socio-economic groups/non-white ethnic backgrounds. It will place an additional burden on A-Levels as students who previously entered HE holding BTECs will take this route and T-Levels will also absorb some of those who wish to enter HE. The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) undertook research with over 80 universities in early 2022 to gauge how they are responding to the introduction of T-Levels and their implications for access and admissions.²¹ This research showed that T-Levels will be an important route into HE for some learners. It found that:

- over 80% of the universities who responded were intending to admit students with T-Levels;
- as the previous work by NEON referred to above also found, in some areas of the country BTECs are the only provision available for learners wishing to progress to HE thus T-Levels will undoubtedly have to plug some of the HE progression gap here
- many learners taking T-Levels have strong prior academic qualifications and aspirations to enter HE at some point
- links were being made by both providers and students between T-Levels and the new kinds of post Level 3 qualifications being championed by the government described above i.e. HTQs and degree apprenticeships.

The admission system will need to be sufficiently flexible to enable learners taking T-Levels to progress to HE – especially if HTQs and degree apprenticeships are to be successful. It also needs, as argued above, to integrate IAG into it in a much



more significant way than at present. One finding of concern from the NEON research was universities encountering students who believed that T-Levels offered a route into a much wider spread of courses and institutions than was the case at present.

This new evidence on the delivery and take up of T-Levels provides further support for the argument that the admissions system must integrate within it more comprehensive and better HE related IAG. The kind of reforms suggested in the UCU PQA model – for example piloting of the study choice check model that has been developed in the Netherlands where universities have to support students to undertake pre-entry questionnaires to help them understand course content better as well as Study Choice week look even more necessary for students who may be pursuing T-Levels.

This evidence also suggests that the present anachronistic pre-qualification offer system may fail any fairness test where T-Level students are concerned. Asking them to make decisions regarding higher education entry 8-10 months earlier than they need to when they and their lecturers may not be able to foresee what they achieve as easily due to the nature of their course may put them at a distinct disadvantage compared to A-Level students. Building an uneven playing field in from the outset is not the best way to launch a new qualification to learners and parent/carers.



6. Building a genuine tertiary education system

The Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding produced in 2019, while still at the time of writing to be replied to by the government has exerted its influence over the direction of higher education policy since its publication.²² Underpinning much of its approach was the view that a removal of structural and cultural barriers that characterised the provision of education and skills in post compulsory education and the formation of a 'tertiary' education system was required. This call for a more tertiary system has pointed in particular to the perceived weaknesses in higher technical education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland compared to other countries.²³ The government's policies to increase provision of HTQs and other shorter course forms at Level 4 and above are in part an attempt to move to this more tertiary system.

However, the formation of a more tertiary system is not reliant just on strengthening technical routes, it also depends on addressing in built hierarchies within post compulsory education. At present such hierarchical practice is evident in the admission system debate. Higher education admissions should be a genuinely cross sectoral concern but it is the interests and views of HE that dominate. The UCU survey in 2019 of 128 university vice chancellors and secondary school head teachers across the United Kingdom and college principals in England, Northern Ireland and Wales²⁴ found that:

- while more than 80% of school leaders and 70% of Further education and sixth form colleges leaders think the present admissions system is not fit for purpose only 40% of HE leaders do
- nearly 70% of school leaders think that students should make admissions decisions later than they do at present compared to less than 40% of HE leaders
- less than 15% of Further education and sixth form colleges leaders felt that the government is doing enough to support fair admission to higher education nearly 50% of HE leaders do
- over 90% of school leaders and over 80% of Further education and sixth form colleges leaders think students would make better choices if they knew their grades when applying to university compared to over 40% of HE leaders.

The survey clearly shows that there are differences in the views of leaders across sectors and a greater concern about the functioning of the current system amongst those who lead schools and further education colleges than universities. Developing a true tertiary system would mean breaking down hierarchies and building structures that reflected the views and needs of all stakeholders. Until this kind of cultural



change can be enabled post-compulsory education will remain sectoral rather than tertiary. The fact that more leaders from schools/further education support a form of admissions reform in this survey should not, of itself, mean that admissions reform must take place. Where post-qualifications applications are concerned for example, bodies representing those in schools/further education were concerned about the possible additional workload on their members caused by students applying in August. However, these issues can be dealt with as the 2021 paper from UCU showed.

If a tertiary education system is real goal for this or any other government then an admission system to learning after Level 3 that is jointly owned by those within this system must be a pre-requisite. Hence, it is imperative they give equal weight to the views of schools and colleges where admissions reform is concerned as HE.



7. Conclusion

One of the accusations levelled against those who advocate for a more student-centred higher education admission system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is that the case for change is not strong enough relying too heavily on the evidence that points to inaccuracies in predicted grades. This paper shows that the case for admissions reform goes beyond this important issue. Improving the admissions system is crucial to addressing a range of challenges facing higher education at present and represents a 'gateway' reform that can enable students from a wider set of backgrounds to enter HE in the future.

Realising this potential though requires policymakers who are able to see that this debate does not actually centre on whether it is workable from the point of view of universities to process applications and make offers in a shorter time window than at present whilst leaving the rest of the system unchanged. It should focus, as demonstrated above, on how students from different backgrounds, entering a broader range of courses, across their lives via new technical & academic routes can be supported to make the choices which lead to the best graduate outcomes for them. All other considerations regarding institutional convenience, political cycles or changing practices that have been in place for many years should be secondary. A tertiary system that provides this wider set of opportunities will not be achieved until there is an admissions system underpinning it that can enable these choices.

Finally, it is the source of frustration to some that the question of post qualifications admissions reform seems a recurring one with serious consideration given to it two times previously in the last twenty years. As the decision regarding reform is approached again it is worth pausing to consider why it is such a recurring question? As higher education evolves and participation increases the drawbacks with a system designed for when only a small elite of the population went on to higher education become more and more stark. If we do not change now then it is almost certain we will be back again to these issues within ten years and many learners who have passed through the system will have done so doing course they would not have and many others will have not made it at all. For their sake, it is time to address them now.



NOTES

- ¹ Atherton, G. (2018) Post Qualifications Admissions: How it works across the world, London:UCU
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- ⁷ Government Office for Science (2017) Future of Skills & Lifelong Learning London: Government Office for Science
- ⁸ Labour Party (2019) The Future is ours to Learn: Final Report of Labour's Lifelong Learning Commission - <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Lifelong-Learning-Report-2019.pdf>
- ⁹ Ibid Labour Party 2019
- ¹⁰ Office for Students (2021) Student outcomes and teaching excellence, Bristol: Office for Students - <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/>
- ¹¹ https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SAES_2021_FINAL.pdf
- ¹² Some work was done on looking at the experiences of nearly 30 European countries in the late 2010s suggesting that there may be a link between how open admission to higher education is and the employment outcomes of students - the full report European Commission (2017) Study on the Impact of Admission Systems on Higher Education Outcomes (SASH) - <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9cfd9c1-98f9-11e7-b92d-01aa75ed71a1>
- ¹³ UCAS (2021) Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make? Bristol:UCAS - <https://www.ucas.com/file/435551/download?token=VUdIDVFh>



- ¹⁴For further details on Study Choice Check please go to Atherton (2021)
- ¹⁵Department of Education (2021) Widening participation in higher education, London:Department of Education - <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2019-20#dataBlock-77f28985-6623-410f-6802-08d92a65bd1d-tables>
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- ¹⁷TASO (2020) UCAS report: 300 years to close HE access gap - <https://taso.org.uk/news-item/ucas-report-300-years-to-close-he-access-gap/>
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- ¹⁹UCAS (2020) UCAS Undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020 - <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2020>
- ²⁰Atherton, G. (2021) Will abolishing BTECs mean reversing widening access to higher education?, National Education Opportunities Network - <https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/BTEC-report-FINAL.pdf>
- ²¹The full report associated with this research will be published in Spring 2022.
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Appendix 1: The student centred post-qualifications admissions model

