

The case for post qualification application to higher education
with results from the UCU undergraduate application and admission survey

Introduction

This paper sets out the case for a post qualification application system for undergraduate higher education using results from a survey of 2,156 admissions staff undertaken by UCU and concluded in early 2015.

The survey sought to gain an understanding of staff views on the transparency, fairness and accessibility of the higher education application and admission processes.

The critical finding

UCU research found that seven in 10 staff involved in the university application process back a move to a post-qualification application (PQA) process.

Create a system which means students can apply for their courses after they receive their examination results	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
Further education staff	27.17%	47.28%	8.70%	4.35%	12.50%
Higher education staff	27.66%	40.61%	12.82%	6.73%	12.18%
Total FE & HE	27.42%	43.95%	10.76%	5.54%	12.34%

The accuracy of the predicted grades system

One of the most significant factors taken into account in the application process is predicted grades. Recent UCAS data reveals that only half of final A level results match the predictions made by teachers earlier in the academic year.¹ Almost one in 10 forecasts are out by more than one grade.

In 2014, 58 per cent of 18 year old applicants were predicted ABB or higher, just 63 per cent of those predicted those grades achieved them and yet the current system overly favours those who are predicted to do well. The applicants most likely to receive five offers were those predicted AAB (62.6 per cent with five offers) or ABB (61.9 per cent).² BIS last published detailed analysis of the accuracy of predicted A level grades by a range of socioeconomic factors is taken from 2010 data.³ In light of significant reforms, there is a need for this data to be updated and published.

Students make their application decisions on the basis of these predictions and apply to a range of institutions either arising from their own or parents' research or advice received at school or college. If a student's predicted grades are lower than those eventually achieved, they can only apply to alternative institutions through what remains the stressful and chaotic process of clearing or adjustment.

Admission tutors' ability to navigate the information provided on a UCAS application form will be complicated further by reforms to A level qualifications for the cohort of 18 and 19 year olds applying from

¹ <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2014-end-of-cycle-report-dec-14.pdf>, pp. 67

² <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2014-end-of-cycle-report-dec-14.pdf>, pp. v

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32412/11-1043-investigating-accuracy-predicted-a-level-grades.pdf

2016 onwards. Potential students, their teachers and advisors have no clear understanding of how parity between applicants with and without AS level will be assessed. A sole focus on GCSE attainment could have a negative impact on widening participation particularly as we know that young people from widening participation backgrounds are often on a faster upward trajectory during their final year of Level 3 studies. This fails the requirement that the admission process should allow students to be judged by both their achievements and their potential and calls into question the reliability and validity of the assessment methods.

Is the current process clear and well understood by students?

In September 2010, UCAS initiated a review of the application and admission process. Key findings were that: the UCAS admissions process is complex and many applicants find it hard to understand; operational practice and admissions strategies employed by HEIs are varied and not transparent to applicants; and UCAS is a 'one-size-fits-all' system which does not optimise the process for non-traditional applicants such as international, part-time, and mature applicants⁴. Our survey asked members whether they felt students had a clear understanding of the admissions process:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
The UCAS process supports students to make the best application decisions according to their potential	2.87%	27.82%	30.62%	9.04%	29.64%
Students understand how their application will be assessed	3.65%	28.82%	35.97%	12.62%	18.93%

The growing use of unconditional offers

PQA would eliminate the use of unconditional offers for students with predicted grades. Their use has increased by a factor of four to 12,000 offers in the last year alone.⁵ Their use favours students with higher predicted grades even if they are eventually achieved and does not challenge unconscious bias towards students in selective schools which generally predict more A grades.

Our members are concerned that these offers devalue level 3 qualifications by encouraging students to 'coast'.

We have anecdotal evidence of poor ethical practice including staff being encouraged to telephone children and seek an acceptance over the phone in order to secure an unconditional offer. Anecdotally unconditional offers are also less likely to be offered to non-A level students. There is poor transparency here and a challenge to the professionalism of those working in admission roles.

⁴ <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/apr-consultation.pdf>, p5-6

⁵ <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/2014-end-of-cycle-report-dec-14.pdf>

UCU survey:

	Yes	No	Don't know
My institution makes unconditional offers to applicants with predicted grades	27.25%	40.81%	31.94%
My institution makes telephone offers of unconditional places	9.63%	36.66%	53.71%

The Personal statement, coaching and a bias in favour of the already advantaged

Although perceived to be an opportunity for students to demonstrate their potential aside from academic indicators, our members are concerned about the bias in the experiences and opportunities that advantaged students are able to set out. A number of respondents have concerns about plagiarism, and concern about the fact that very few are read in detail. Concerns about reliability are mirrored in Sutton Trust research which found that independent school applicants are more likely to submit statements that include high-status relevant activities written in an academically appropriate way. *'By contrast, state school applicants appear to receive less help composing their statement, often struggling to draw on suitable work and life experience'*.⁶ By nature interpretations of the personal statement are subjective and subject to unconscious bias.

With increased student numbers from more diverse backgrounds and greater applicant numbers, the reliability and validity of the personal statement can be called into question – particularly when considered alongside increasingly inaccurate grade predictions.

UCU survey:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
The personal statement is a fair way for applicants to demonstrate their competence	4.76%	34.24%	35.99%	15.97%	9.03%

How PQA would help to widen participation

The 2011 UCAS Admissions Process Review stated that widening participation could be accelerated in the context of a fair, more transparent and simple PQA system where applicants are clearer at the point of entry whether they meet the minimum academic requirements of a course. Applicants and their families would also have longer to learn about and inform their university choices.

Technological advances would make fair and consistent analysis of contextualised admission data much easier. Algorithms could quickly and effectively analyse the contextual data included in the application forms. PQA could support widening participation by enabling institutions to more effectively match students

⁶ <http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/JONESPERSONALSTATEMENTS-2.pdf>

by their achievements and potential using reliable and valid assessment methods that minimise barriers for applicants.

Unequal access to information, access and guidance

Recent research conducted for UCU by Comres⁷ found that almost one in five (17%) pupils in social grade DE reported receiving no advice or guidance about the different options available to them when they leave school or college, compared to just one in 10 (9%) pupils in social grade AB. Those who said they received no advice or guidance are most likely to attend state school (15%), compared to 5% at private schools or sixth form colleges and 7% of college students.

Black and minority access

Nodem, Shiner and Modood (2014)⁸ research identified that applications made by candidates from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, black African, Indian, black Caribbean, Chinese and various 'other' groups are all less likely to yield an offer than applications made by white British candidates even when controlling for a range of relevant variables including academic attainment. Their research shows that ethnic and social class differences in offer rates cannot fully be explained by differences in academic attainment or patterns of application.

Furthermore, despite being more likely than their white British counterparts to apply to HE, British students from black Caribbean, black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic background are underrepresented in the UK's most prestigious universities. Vikki Boliver has published research to show that whilst it is true that there is a greater tendency for ethnic minority students to apply to numerically competitive degree subjects, this only partially counts for their lower offer rates from Russell Group institutions relative to white applicants with the same grades and 'facilitating subjects' at A level.

Despite ethnicity not being revealed to selectors on the UCAS application form, a number of other proxies are, including surname, nationality and address. Boliver concludes that the possibility of direct discrimination resulting from unconscious bias cannot be ruled out. UCU believes that PQA and the trial of a name blind application process could support fair access, by creating appropriate institutional structures and processes could support professionalism.

The stigma and stress of clearing

In 2014, the total of students placed through clearing routes was 61,300, an increase of 4,200 (7.4 per cent) from 2013 and the highest number ever placed through clearing routes. PQA would support the elimination of the stigma attached to clearing and support all students to have more time to compile and add experiences and achievements to their applications.

Conclusion

This note has focused upon the main reasons why the current admissions process is not fit for purpose:

- Poor accuracy of predicted grades;
- poor student understanding of how to make the best application decisions:

⁷ <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=7317&from=7305&start=11>

⁸ http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/BMEaccessHE_FINAL.pdf

- the increase in unconditional offers;
- poor reliability and validity of the personal statement when accompanied by predicted grades;
- potential for improving widening participation and fair access; and
- the removal of the complex and hectic clearing period

We believe changing to PQA would be a significant step forward in addressing continuing inequalities in access to higher education.