UCU undergraduate application and admission survey

Foreword

Seven in 10 staff involved with university applications back a complete overhaul of the current system of when students apply to university. The report also highlights problems with the UCAS process. Less than a third (32%) of respondents thought that students understood how their UCAS application would be assessed. Similarly, just 31% said they thought the UCAS process supports students to make the best application decisions according to their potential.

The University and College Union (UCU) believes an overhaul of the system would also address the problem of inaccurate predicted grades and abolish the need for unconditional offers for university places, which are under increasing scrutiny.

Recent research highlights how only half of final A-level results matched estimates made by teachers earlier in the academic year, with almost one in 10 forecasts out by more than one grade.

Meanwhile, the proportion of students predicted to achieve ABB or better who actually achieve that is falling year on year. Just one in five students (21%) predicted to achieve ABB or better in 2014 actually did, compared to almost a third (32.2%) in 2010.

Year	% of English 18 year olds predicted ABB who actually attained those grades
2010	32.2
2011	29.6
2012	25.9
2013	23.2
2014	21.0

UCAS End Of Cycle Report 2014, p.67

The changing face of the sector thanks to higher fees is causing the use of unconditional offers to soar. Private schools have higher accuracy (though still not perfect) – because they predict more As (so these students are more advantaged over others by this process). Unconditional offers therefore facilitate inadvertent discrimination/unconscious bias in the system. Higher grade predictions mean increased chances of getting in.

This also places undue pressure on a young person to accept that offer or feel conflicted. We have heard anecdotal accounts of improper practices – people being phoned up and told that their offer will be made unconditional if they accept it as a firm choice.

It is quite difficult at 17/18 to tell whoever is on the other end of the line that you'll think about it and come back to them. A system where students apply once they get their results would eliminate these concerns. What is the point of published entry requirements if they don't apply to all students?

There is support for an overhaul of the system. Danny Dorling **said recently** that the UK should 'follow much of the rest of the civilised world and make university offers based on what young people actually achieve.' He also made the case that schools' predictions are becoming less accurate and said that 'as schools find it hard to predict how well their students will do, they err towards optimism.'

Both the previous and current heads of the university access regulator OFFA, Sir Martin Harris and Les Ebdon, **support the introduction of a post-qualification admissions system**.

A post-qualifications system would eliminate the need for unconditional university offers. As **recent analysis from the Sunday Times** suggested, the numbers of unconditional offers are increasing as universities seek to secure student numbers. Pressuring youngsters to accept the controversial offers is unethical and there are fears that some students may become less focused on their work once they have a place secured.

Allowing students to apply after they get their results would ensure they can accurately make the most of their potential. It would also remove the pressure on schools to overestimate students' marks in an effort to ensure they do not miss out on the top grades they require.

These changes would also support greater transparency in the application and admissions process – particularly in the light of the relaxation of student number controls and the introduction of higher fees.

Sally Hunt
General secretary
University and College Union

June 2015

UCU undergraduate application and admission survey

This survey was designed to gain an understanding of members' thoughts and experiences of the application and admission processes with the aim of: identifying members' priorities in this area; testing their thoughts on existing practice; and exploring the appetite for a range of policy proposals which could support greater fairness, accessibility and transparency.

The questionnaire was designed for members of the further, higher and adult sections of membership in order to gather the opinions of professionals who work in admissions, with pre-university students and with undergraduates.

The policy paper 'UCU policy on widening participation' which was agreed by the UCU Education Committee in 2014 highlighted a number of widely acknowledged flaws in the fairness, accessibility and transparency of the application and admission process to undergraduate higher education. Examples include the reliance on predicted grades, not all institutions making offers using a gathered field approach and the practice of making unconditional offers to some students. The document welcomed the proponents of a fair admission system as set out by The Fair Admission to Higher Education Group[1] which state that the HE admissions processes should:

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

A link to the online survey was shared with members via the weekly UCU campaigns update and an email was sent from the general secretary to members as a reminder. The survey was available between 5th December 2014 and 5th January 2015, and received 2156 respondents. The results are presented using the framework identified by The Fair Admission to Higher Education Group.

Survey Respondents

Responses were received from a wide range of professionals working in further, higher and adult education institutions, however, the majority of respondents work in higher education institutions.

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[1] Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice (2004)
http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/downloads/finalreport.pdf

Looking at the capacity in which respondents are involved in the application and/or admission process, half (49.33%) of respondents are involved in admission as part of a broader academic role. Nearly a third (28.63%) of respondents work with undergraduates and a smaller proportion (14.62%) teach/advise pre-university students. The remainder (7.42%) report that their involvement with admission is part of a broader administrative role.

Answer Choices	Responses	
I am involved with admissions as part of a broader administrative role	7.42%	160
I am involved with admissions as part of a broader academic role	49.33%	1,063
I teach/advise pre-university students	14.62%	315
I work with undergraduates	28.63%	617
Total		2,155

Responses were received from an even proportion of those with and those without final decision making power in relation to admission. Nearly half (48.36%) of respondents say yes to the question 'do you have final responsibility for making the final admit/reject decision?' the other half (51.64%) say that they do not.

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	48.36%	575
No	51.64%	614
Total		1,189

Responses indicate that the majority (54.49%) of institutions run their admissions systems using a combination of centralised and decentralised (run by individual departments) processes. Just under a third (27.05%), operate to a centralised admission process and 18.46% of respondents say that their institutions run a decentralised admission process.

Transparency

Applicant decision making

Respondents present a mixed response to questions about how the UCAS process supports students to make application decisions. The lack of overall consensus and the high proportion of 'don't know' responses suggest that there may be room for improvement.

40.69% of respondents say that they agree or agree strongly that the UCAS process supports students to make the best application decision according to their achievements, however, nearly a third (30.36%) of respondents disagree. 28.96% of respondents say that they do not know. The ambiguity here adds strength to the idea that there is an overall lack of consensus.

A similarly mixed response was received in response to the statement 'the UCAS process supports students to make the best application decisions according to their potential'. Nearly two fifths of respondents disagree or disagree strongly (39.66%) with the statement compared to one in three (30.69%) respondents who agree or agree strongly. Nearly a third (29.64%) of respondents say that they do not know.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total
The UCAS process supports students to make the best application decisions according to their achievements	3.77% 54	36.92% 529	23.94% 343	6.42% 92	28.96% 415	1,433
The UCAS process supports students to make the best application decisions according to their potential	2.87% 41	27.82% 397	30.62% 437	9.04% 129	29.64% 423	1,427
Students understand how their application will be assessed	3.65% 52	28.82% 411	35.97% 513	12.62% 180	18.93% 270	1,426

Nearly half (48.59%) of respondents disagree or disagree strongly that students understand how their application will be assessed. A third (32.47) of respondents say that they strongly agree or agree. Nearly a fifth (18.93%) of respondents do not know.

> *'It's not just at my institution that students don't understand how their application will be assessed--this is true across the country. It is partly that UCAS is opaque about many aspects of the admissions procedure, but also that schools pressure students to do things (or not do things) which are not in the applicants' best interests. For example, UCAS implies that it is best to get your application in early, before the January deadline, when in fact this makes no difference to an applicant's success. Schools also pressure students to write personal statements early and to decide on their universities early when many might benefit from making a less rushed decision.'*

> *'…From Open Day experience, I know that students think the university and its staff is not interested in them if they do not receive a prompt reply, we (academics) constantly have pressure placed on us to recruit to our degrees and convert students, but the main issue I see at the moment is the Admissions process when students get stuck in our system, wait ages for a response, and give up on us because they've already had offers from other places. It's very frustrating!!'*

Gathered field assessment

> *'…do we start making offers before the 15th January application deadline, the answer is yes. In many ways it would be much easier to operate a gathered field approach but it is also impractical and both applicant and senior management pressure prevent this.'*

At present many institutions make admission offers as applications are received. This has the potential to give the impression that those who apply later can have a lower chance of receiving an acceptance despite submitting their application before the UCAS application deadline. Failure to guarantee equal consideration by virtue of the time at which an

applicant applies before the 15 January deadline would, however, constitute a breach of UCAS regulations. Some respondents used the comment boxes to make their own suggestions about an alternative methodology:

'There's no way we could process all applications between early Feb (When they finally reach our desks) and early March (when we need to get decisions back to central admissions office). If UCAS had a narrower, earlier application window, ending in early December, it might be possible to do it all at once later on.'

Post-qualification assessment

Noting anecdotal concerns about some institutions giving acceptance offers before the UCAS application deadline, the survey asked respondents if they think that a system should be created to allow students to apply for their courses after they receive their examination results. Nearly seven in 10 respondents (69.73%) of respondents agree or agree strongly. 18.31% of respondents disagree or disagree strongly. 11.96% of respondents say that they do not know. The positive response to this proposal suggests that this could be a useful area for further exploration.

The survey also sought views on how a post-qualification assessment process could be implemented. 60.74% of respondents agree or agree strongly that the examination timetable could be made slightly earlier so that students can apply after they receive their examination results, 53.16% of respondents agree or agree strongly that the university academic timetable should start slightly later so that students can apply after they receive their examination results.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total
Create a system which means students can apply for their courses after they receive their examination results	27.41% 307	42.32% 474	12.68% 142	5.63% 63	11.96% 134	1,120
Make the examination timetable slightly earlier so that students can apply after they receive their examination results	22.91% 258	37.83% 426	17.23% 194	7.64% 86	14.39% 162	1,126
Start the university academic timetable slightly later so that students can apply after they receive their examination results	19.56% 220	33.60% 378	24.53% 276	9.60% 108	12.71% 143	1,125

'I believe central Government should insist that UCAS move to a post-qualification entry session, by whatever means are necessary to the timings of A levels, University term dates etc. It is clearly beyond the ability of the sectors to find common consensus on this issue, so it must be 'legislated''

'the MOST important issue that UCU should lobby for is a post-qualification entry system, imposed by central Government.'

'…Failing the removal of tuition fees, and alteration of the A levels exam schedule to make timely availability of results possible, the adoption of standardised admissions tests may be a way forward, as good scores in these may inform financial aid awards to encourage wider participation, as happens, for instance, in the US.'

Not all respondents were in favour of post-qualification assessment:

'Applying after exam results will have a detrimental effect, if exams are brought forward to enable this it means an even shorter academic year at A2 which will affect grades so it would be counterproductive. Raise standards of A level grades to ensure students are prepared for the rigours of academic study, not bring standards down to suit the level of the student. Offering lower grade entrance is nonsense. All for widening participation but it must be on an equal academic ability not an artificially created equivalency based on socio-economic factors.'

Recommendation: UCU should explore international examples of post-qualification application systems for higher education. UCU should test with membership proposals for both a halt to application offers before the application deadline, and explore what a move to a post-qualification assessment process in the UK might look like.

Enabling institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential

Contextualised data

The survey sought to gain an understanding of how widely contextualised data are used in the higher education sector. For the purposes of this survey, contextualised data were described as 'using information and data provided by or matched to applicants to assess prior attainment and potential to succeed in higher education, e.g. mainly educational, geo-demographic and socio-economic background data'.

Half (51.65%) of respondents feel that students do not have a clear understanding of why contextual information is collected and a third of respondents say that they do not know. Similarly, half (49.82%) of respondents say that students do not know clearly if an institution will take their contextualised data into account. A third (35.07%) of respondents say that they do not know. Whilst these questions were not asked of the students themselves, the professional ambiguity around this, suggests that this is likely to be mimicked in student understanding.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total
Students have a clear understanding of why contextual information* is collected	1.05% 15	13.79% 197	38.07% 544	13.58% 194	33.52% 479	1,429
Students know clearly if an institution will take their contextualised information and data* into consideration	1.62% 23	13.49% 192	34.01% 484	15.81% 225	35.07% 499	1,423

Two thirds of respondents report that they don't know if their institution's contextual admissions statement is published on the website.

	Yes	No	Don't know	Total
My institution's contextual admissions statement is published on the website	23.07% 316	9.20% 126	67.74% 928	1,370

In response to the question 'does your institution make use of contextualised information and data when making the accept/reject decision?' over half (55.12%) of respondents say that they don't know, a third (29.77%) of respondents say yes 15.12% of respondents say no.[2] Respondents gave a far more confident response when asked if there should be a common approach to the use of contextual data by all institutions. Two thirds (67.61%) or respondents agree or strongly agree, 14.28% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree, and 18.10% of respondents say that they don't know.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total
There should be a common approach to the use of contextual data* by all institutions	24.22% 273	43.39% 489	10.38% 117	3.90% 44	18.10% 204	1,127

'…we are revising our website to make many things clearer, especially regarding contextual data. My department is unhappy with our university's admissions policies - above all, we would like better contextual data. It is my belief that applicants are not always aware of how to make the best use of the personal statement, and that schools could be given better advice on what to put in references, particularly with regard to contextual data.'

To respondents whose institutions make use of contextualised information and data to make the accept rejection, the survey asked what the responses to this data are. The most common responses (n=303) are 'additional consideration' (66.34%), 'further consideration of an application after the confirmation of exam results' (36.96%), 'adjusted offer' (36.30%), 'making interviewers aware of an applicant's background' (34.65%).

Many respondents used the comment box to state particular responses in their institutions.

'local applicant, children in care leads to interview, mature/returning learner leads to interview, all disability/mental health applicant are interviewed and adjusted offers made'

'I have no idea what the contextualised data are, only that I have to make an offer if at all possible to those flagged as having contextual admissions.'

'There is no 'standardised' response. Such applications are dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and responses made accordingly.'

'Those flagged as WP might be made a 3 A offer'

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[2] n=1,085

It is important to highlight that some respondents did not feel that applicants should receive further consideration in light of their contextualised information and data.

'I think this idea is wrong. If we lower the bar for certain students we are not doing them a favour long term; if they are not intellectually capable of gaining a degree then either we lower our standards or we set them up to fail - expensive and demoralising for them.'

Recommendation: Further work could be conducted to explore appetite and propose a methodology for a common approach to the use of contextualised data.

Targets

Suggestions around the use of targets elicited a mixed range of responses. Nearly half (45.98%) of respondents agree or agree strongly that there should be targets for participation rates by students from widening participation backgrounds. A third (34.60%) of respondents disagree or disagree strongly with the statement. 20.41% are say that they don't know. The majority of additional comments in this section are from respondents who disagree with the principle of target-setting. These objections are largely encompassed within the following examples:

'I feel there is strong pressure on institutions to just take more students willy nilly, simply to bolster income. Some of the students passed to our department have been very poor academically and ill-equipped to deal with statistical training that is a mandatory part of our courses. I strongly feel that it should be departments with subject matter expertise that should determine admissions, not the institution and definitely not the government. Otherwise we are just setting up the students to fail.'

'Targets help nobody. They set people up to fail and are immoral and unethical. Encouraging people to get into debt (i.e. a loan of tens of thousands of pounds) should be based on academic potential ONLY. Demographics should not play a role.'

'There is a fundamental problem here: if a government wishes to keep control of university admissions it needs to fund them properly…'

'There should be no targets at all. Only admissions on basis of ability and merit, regardless [of] background. If state schools don't function, the[n] the government should fix it.'

'University admissions is an act of crystal ball gazing. Anything that can reduce the crystal ball gazing would be beneficial and post exam results admissions is one way of doing that. Setting widening participation targets is not a way forward and smacks of moving the goalposts and could even be counterproductive. More attention needs to be placed on improving schools and colleges in specific areas and improving attitudes to education nationally.'

The survey asked who should be responsible for setting any targets for increasing participation rates by students from widening participation backgrounds, although generally unpopular, respondents were more likely to be in favour of local decision making about targets rather than those imposed by government or a third-party.

Three-fifths (60.72%) of respondents disagree or disagree strongly with the proposal that government should set targets for increasing participation rates by students from widening participation backgrounds. Half (50.43%) of respondents disagree or disagree strongly that HEFCE/Scottish Funding Council or HEFCW should set such targets, and just a third (29.35%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. There was a fairly even split of agreement (44.89%) and disagreement (41.40%) with the proposal that institutions should set targets for increasing participation rates by students from widening participation. Fewer respondents agree or strongly agree (33.71%) with the suggestion that individual departments should set these targets, over half (52.20%) of respondents disagree or strongly disagree.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total
Targets for increasing participation rates by students from widening participation backgrounds should be set by individual departments	7.98% 85	25.73% 274	40.28% 429	11.92% 127	14.08% 150	1,065
Targets for increasing participation rates by students from widening participation backgrounds should be set by the institution	7.14% 76	37.75% 402	30.70% 327	10.70% 114	13.71% 146	1,065
Targets for increasing participation rates by students from widening participation backgrounds should be set by the Office for Fair Access in Admissions (OFFA)	10.34% 110	29.51% 314	25.85% 275	16.54% 176	17.76% 189	1,064
Targets for increasing participation rates by students from widening participation backgrounds should be set by HEFCE/ Scottish Funding Council/ HEFCW	8.84% 94	20.51% 218	31.80% 338	18.63% 198	20.23% 215	1,063
Targets for increasing participation rates by students from widening participation backgrounds should be set by government	7.24% 77	17.67% 188	32.99% 351	27.73% 295	14.38% 153	1,064

One respondent used the comments box to make a statement about the limitations and contradictions of targeting:

'Why does Fair Access not include balancing gender? For instance, in subjects like Engineering it would be nice to be able to allocate OFFA resource in that direction but as I understand it that is not "countable". Given gender is a protected characteristic, I see a contradiction in what Universities are being told by OFFA and by initiatives like Athena SWAN.'

Interviews

Respondents report quite favourably about the use and impact of interviews in the admissions process. There was quite a varied range in how they are used across institutions and departments. For example, courses such as art and design or those which have professional requirements, interviews are often compulsory. Other respondents state that interviews are no longer conducted for admission on to courses in their area of study.

www.ucu.org.uk

'My work to support entry into the fine art subject domain at [institution] values offering face to face interviews to every applicant without exception.'

'some departments make conditional offers without interviewing candidates and some only after having interviewed candidates, even within the same 'institution''

'Intake of students is based mostly on the need to reach admissions quotas. Interviews are not used to select students but to sell the university via personal attention and academic charm.'

'All mature [students] are interviewed in person, by phone or skype'

'We interview for two reasons: 1) to assess borderline candidates; 2) as a conversion activity.'

'My institution has banned interviews as part of the admissions process and has replaced with blanket offers based on predicted grades. Very frustrating and a major backwards step…'

In response to anecdotal evidence about differences in perception by the institution and the applicant as to the purpose of an interview, the survey asked if respondents' institutions undertake interviews which have little bearing on admitting a student. 15.81% of respondents agree or agree strongly, compared to 56.57% of respondents who disagree or disagree strongly. This suggests that whilst not wide scale, this practice does exist.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	N/A	Total
My institutions undertakes interviews which have little bearing on admitting a student	4.60% 55	11.21% 134	31.38% 375	25.19% 301	15.82% 189	11.80% 141	1,195

More than half (56.27%) of respondents agree that more applicants should be interviewed. A third (32.89%) of respondents disagree or disagree strongly with the statement. 10% of respondents say that they don't know.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total
Interview more applicants	15.91% 179	40.36% 454	24.18% 272	8.71% 98	10.84% 122	1,125

There are clearly capacity and workload implications inherent in a recommendation that interviews could be better used as a means of increasing the number of offers to students with the potential to succeed on a course. One respondent highlighted that interview policies require attention to equalities considerations.

I was surprised and disappointed when a colleague of mine, with my encouragement, raised the issue of the equality implications of requiring interview attendance and was told

that nobody had thought about this or saw the problem - this when compulsory interviews are increasingly being used as a recruitment tool.

Recommendation: work with UCAS and Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) to publicise a best practice statement about the use of interviews.

Striving to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid

Qualifications

The survey posed a number of statements in an attempt to gain an understanding of the role and perception of qualification in the undergraduate application and admission process.

The majority, (78.24%) of respondents disagree or disagree strongly that qualifications should be the sole standard of access. Nearly a fifth (18.98%) of respondents agree or strongly agree. These figures were also similar amongst those who teach/advise pre-university students (79.58% disagree or disagree strongly, 19.37% agree or agree strongly, n=191).

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total
Qualifications should be the sole standard of access	5.16% 65	13.82% 174	54.09% 681	24.15% 304	2.78% 35	1,259

The survey asked a number of questions to gain an understanding about perceptions about how different qualifications prepare students for higher education, and how these qualification support progression when courses are oversubscribed. Noteworthy is the number of respondents who report that they 'don't know' in response to these questions across all respondents suggesting that these questions could be further unpacked. The observations highlight that there is a significant disparity between the views of those who work in an admissions capacity and those who teach/advise pre-university students. These differences may work to compound differences between the advice pre-university students receive and the accept/reject decision.

As an overall pattern, on average, those who teach/advise pre-university students are more likely to strongly agree or agree that the specified non-A level qualifications prepare students for progression to higher study as equally A level qualifications than all respondents. Those who teach/advise pre-university students are, on average, more likely to strongly disagree or disagree that students with the specified qualifications have the same chance of obtaining a place on a course when it is oversubscribed as when it is not. This pattern was the same across the full range of stated qualifications, the Access to Higher Education Diploma, Level 3 BTEC and Higher Apprenticeships.

Three-fifths of respondents agree or strongly agree that there are some A level subjects that do not provide suitable preparation for entry into higher education. The pattern was similar amongst 'all' respondents and 'those who teach/advise pre-university students'.

The greatest disparity between 'all' responses and from 'those who teach/advise pre-university students' is observed amongst responses to the question about GCSE-English and maths equivalent qualifications. A third of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these qualifications negatively impact a student's chances of higher education admission compared to two-thirds of those who teach/advise pre-university students.

Answer Options	Strongly agree/Agree (%)		Strongly disagree/Disagree (%)		Don't know (%)		Response Count	
	ALL	Teach/Advise pre-university students	ALL	Teach/Advise pre-university students	ALL	Teach/Advise pre-university students	ALL	Teach/Advise pre-university students
Students with the Access to Higher Education Diploma (Access qualifications) are equally as prepared for progression to higher education as students with A level qualifications	40.74	54.97	32.78	19.37	26.49	25.65	1257	191
Students with the Access to Higher Education Diploma (Access qualifications) have the same chance of obtaining a place on a course when it is oversubscribed as when it is not	28.83	24.47	31.31	38.3	39.86	37.23	1252	188
Students with Level 3 BTEC qualifications are equally as prepared for progression to higher education as students with A level qualifications	30.25	52.38	40.95	28.57	28.81	19.05	1253	189
Students with Level 3 BTEC qualifications have the same chance of obtaining a place on a course when it is oversubscribed as when it is not	27.62	21.47	31.92	43.98	40.46	34.55	1253	191
Students with Higher Apprenticeships are equally as prepared for progression to higher education as students with A level qualifications	15.07	25.27	30.22	18.95	54.7	55.79	1254	190
Students with Higher Apprenticeships have the same chance of obtaining a place on a course when it is oversubscribed as when it is not	11.39	10.53	29.27	32.1	59.34	57.37	1247	190
There are some A level subjects that do not provide suitable preparation for entry into higher education	59.57	57.37	21.13	22.1	19.3	20.53	1254	190
Holding GCSE-EQUIVALENT English and maths qualifications (not GCSE) negatively impacts a student's chances of higher education admission	31.84	62.1	30.75	14.74	37.59	14.74	1253	190

Some respondents used the comment boxes to add further comments about qualifications.

'We admit students via Access routes. I wouldn't say that they are better or worse prepared for HE but rather that they are differently prepared. And they can have a wider range of life skills (e.g. time management) but less self esteem. Our personal tutor set up is essential.'

'In theory, we do consider BTEC qualifications in some instances, but my department is highly competitive (more so than other departments in this university) so in practice, I have yet to see an applicant with BTEC…'

'All BTEC L3 IT students are discriminated against in the application process even when they achieve D*D*D* on courses such as Computing, ICT and Business in [INSTUTUTION] in particular. The do not even offer them interviews.'

'I want to allow students from any background who can pass onto the course to start. I do not want to allow students who will almost certainly fail to start (that would be unprofessional). Many access courses are poorly run and badly sold to students who will not be able to move onto the degree they want. My experience is also that BTEC students are poorly prepared for a technical degree.'

'We are cautious of Access as (having been an Access moderator for 8 years) we know that Access is no longer a true metric to assess a student's potential - you can't fail an Access course any more and so it is no longer a true assessment of whether a student is suited to HE.'

'We have been for a number of years extremely proactive about admitting students with non-standard (e.g. access course) qualifications, for WP reasons. Unfortunately, I have come to realise that most of these courses are not rigorous enough to truly prepare students for a STEM subjects at university. White a few students from these backgrounds excel (arguably justifying the principle of admitting them) many more of them and underprepared and struggle.'

'BTEC students I have known showed a developed capacity for self directed study and independent working.'

'FE and [HE] colleges are fighting for survival and will take students on courses to improve their income given the slightest opportunity so to some extent the type of entry qualification does not matter at all. [A]s long as there is one.'

These responses suggest that there are significant disparities between perceptions of qualifications and the progression opportunities that they offer and that these can vary across institutions, and between high and low tariff institutions in particular. It is noteworthy that there have been a series of reforms to qualifications in recent years, and an analysis of how well these changes have been perceived across the full range of stakeholders could add valuable data to the research field. In addition UCAS data has highlighted the increasing number of applicants with BTEC qualifications, and the relationship between which students take these qualifications and the groups of institutions these qualifications support progression to. The role of qualifications in the application and admission processes is likely to be of increasing importance in the widening participation debate.

Recommendation: Further research is needed to collate professional perceptions about higher education entrance qualifications and the progression opportunities they present. UCU should seek to establish what research is already available in the area with a view to

commissioning new member-based research where necessary and incorporate this learning into UCU policy on the admission and application processes.

Personal statement

Respondents presented a mixed and perhaps contentious range of responses in relation to the reliability and validity of the personal statement as a reliable and/or fair assessment method.

Overall, just over half (52.19%) of respondents agree or agree strongly that the personal statement is a useful tool for distinguishing between students, however, almost two in five (39.11%) disagree or disagree strongly. 8.70% of respondents report that they do not know. A small majority of respondents (51.96%) disagree or disagree strongly with the argument that the personal statement is a fair way for students to demonstrate their competence. Two fifths (39.00%) of respondents agree or agree strongly.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total
Personal statements are a useful tool to distinguish between students	10.23% 147	41.96% 603	24.84% 357	14.27% 205	8.70% 125	1,437
The personal statement is a fair way for applicants to demonstrate their competence	4.76% 68	34.24% 489	35.99% 514	15.97% 228	9.03% 129	1,428

The survey tested thoughts on whether or not the personal statement should be replaced with a structured set of questions. There was no clear consensus on this proposal. 42.74% of respondents agree or agree strongly, however, 39.20% disagree or disagree strongly. Nearly one in five respondents say that they do not know. Given the lack of overwhelming satisfaction with the existing personal statement process, these results suggest that further work could be done to explore the appetite for and appropriateness of alternative mechanisms.

> 'The personal statement retains some value for assessing general language competence but less so for demonstrating competence.'

> 'Personal statements are useful in guiding interviews, but not useful at all as indicators of how good the students are or how well they will do at university (not the same thing, necessarily): most of them are essentially indistinguishable.'

> 'There is still a bias in the system towards public schools. The students get better coaching on statements and advice /[extracurricular]stuff that guides them through.'

> 'When are the scam of admission statements going to be revealed? Everyone in the sector knows the vast majority are never read - certainly not by an academic.'

'I have been involved in several ones and (t)here is a clear mismatch between the personal statements and the interviews. My overall impression is that most students did not write the [statements] themselves. The references from the head teachers are also too exaggerated.'

Recommendation: UCU should explore and test proposals for increasing the reliability and validity of the personal statement, exploring alternatives where relevant. UCU should seek to share any learning with a range of stakeholders including UCAS, SPA and OFFA.

Seeking to minimise barriers for applicants

A number of respondents feel that undergraduate application and admission processes are fair and that any disparities can be attributed to an alternative range of processes. Many respondents referred to the role of government, the school sector and information, advice and guidance.

'I am confident that we have a fair application procedure and that the key thing preventing more people from disadvantaged backgrounds being given offers is that they don't apply in the first place, despite efforts by the University and colleges to encourage them to do so.'

'Better to support schools to prepare students adequately. It is a disgrace that children in many areas have to make do with a restricted curriculum - e.g. no support for further maths. It is too late to make up much of this lost potential by university, and ill-prepared students suffer hugely in the most competitive courses.'

Many respondents point to the relationship between an institution's position in league tables and ever-restrictive entrance qualification criteria as a significant barrier to fair access and widening participation.

'If institutions, driven by league table position, are still concerned about tariff scores as a narrow measure of quality, the WP potential of losing student number control probably won't be realised.'

Offering lower grade requirements for a course, even when these lower levels till reflect the level of performance required by that degree, is seen as damaging my institution's position in league tables/rankings tables, so upwards grade creep continues specifically to favour rankings and ease selection, with the consequence of increasing exclusion to those that cannot obtain such high scores due to their context

Recommendation: UCU should work to highlight the flaws and tensions in the relationship between university league tables and fair access and widening participation initiatives.

The survey asked respondents about their thoughts about the impact of changes to student number controls, specifically, the 2015 changes that will allow institutions to recruit as many full-time students as they wish to.

Responses in this section do not suggest an overwhelming anticipation that the relaxation of student number controls will yield significant improvements to the widening participation agenda from an institutional perspective. Responses suggest that respondents believe that these changes may broaden student choice. On average over 20.00% of respondents in this section say that they 'don't know'.

Two fifths (39.43%) of respondents agree or agree strongly that these changes will allow applications to be given greater consideration, however, a similar proportion (41.80%) disagree or disagree strongly with the same statement. 50% of respondents believe, however that the forthcoming lift of student number controls will allow students to be more flexible about their choice of institution. A quarter, (25.53%) of respondents disagree or disagree strongly with this statement.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total
allow all applications to be given greater consideration	10.47% 115	28.96% 318	30.60% 336	11.20% 123	18.76% 206	1,098
allow greater numbers of students from widening participation backgrounds to be recruited	10.76% 118	34.55% 379	26.44% 290	7.38% 81	20.88% 229	1,097
allow a greater level of flexibility for course requirements	9.13% 100	34.79% 381	27.31% 299	8.22% 90	20.55% 225	1,095
allow students to be more flexible about their choice of institution	10.06% 110	41.90% 458	20.59% 225	4.94% 54	22.51% 246	1,093
encourage students to apply to a wider range of institutions	9.65% 106	40.35% 443	20.77% 228	5.37% 59	23.86% 262	1,098
create more socially mixed cohorts	9.22% 101	25.64% 281	26.82% 294	9.40% 103	28.92% 317	1,096

Respondents using the comment box suggested that the relaxation of student number controls may have a limited impact on widening participation and fair access agendas, particularly across high-tariff institutions.

'It is far too early to tell what will happen. However, league table position will for us still influence offers and therefore will not lead to greater flexibility.'

'Only league table position matters to senior management. "Push for posh" was the phrase they used.'

'In my experience the reliance on academic qualifications and impact of league tables has made it more difficult to encourage widening participation - fewer restrictions on total numbers is unlikely to solve this problem.'

Professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.

Appropriate offers?

The practice of offering unconditional offers to students with predicted grades is controversial amongst respondents. Nearly three in ten (27.25%) respondents report that their institution makes unconditional offers to applicants with predicted grades. A third of respondents say that they do not know. Less than half of respondents (40.8%) report that their institutions do not make unconditional offers to students with predicted grades. Nearly 10% of respondents say that their institutions make telephone offers of unconditional offers to students, whilst just over a third (36.66%) say that their institutions do not do this. More than half of respondents say that they do not know if their institution undertakes this practice.

	Yes	No	Don't know	Total
My institution makes unconditional offers to applicants with predicted grades	27.25% 372	40.81% 557	31.94% 436	1,365
My institution makes telephone offers of unconditional places	9.63% 131	36.66% 499	53.71% 731	1,361

Many respondents referred to the practice of making unconditional offers using the comment box at the end of this section of questioning. Respondents are critical of the lack of fairness and transparency, the inherent advantage this gives to students from advantaged backgrounds. Some suggest that UCAS should ban this practice.

'The [INSTITUTION] unconditional offer scheme is a disgrace. This is a marketing scam designed to attract applicants and has nothing to do with academic merit. The fact the unconditional offer is dependent on students putting [INSTITUTION] as firm choice makes its real intent crystal clear. It is a betrayal of school teachers who are trying to encourage their students to engage with school work. Indeed, unconditional offers are being made on the basis of little more than GCSE grades and teacher's predictions. This is grossly unfair and has resulted in places going to applicants with grades we would not normally accept. This directly works against the fair access agenda by discriminating against applicants with non-traditional backgrounds who are very unlikely to have uniformly high GCSE grades, or who go to schools where teachers are used to the UCAS system and can read between the lines and make predictions accordingly. In the first year of operation [ACADEMIC YEAR] the scheme was introduced in such a rush, and will so little planning, that only traditional students taking A-levels were considered and other students were explicitly excluded from the process.'

'Universities that make unconditional offers to students who have not yet set A-levels are behaving in a way that is irresponsible and puts enormous pressure on institutions such as my own that thus far have refused to do this. Some very large

and well-regarded institutions are converting conditional offers to unconditional ones if a student accepts the offer, which is ethically very dubious and, according to UCAS guidelines, very probably illegal. This is a real problem for the sector and I hope UCU can take this issue up at a national level, including lobbying ministers and UCAS to outlaw this practice.'

'Making unconditional offers to students with predicted grades devalues A levels and the practice should be banned by UCAS'

'We have [deliberately] steered away from the practice of making unconditional offers before results are known on the basis that it is unfair and not transparent. '

'We do make unconditional offers, by telephone, to applicants with predicted grades. I strongly oppose this policy. Final application decisions should be made on achievement, not undetermined outcomes.'

Some respondents held an instrumental view of the use of unconditional offers:

'Outreach is more aimed at optimising recruitment regardless of background. Unconditional offer is a way to secure good students'

Recommendation: UCU should seek confirmation of membership desire for a ban on unconditional offers for students with predicted grades and lobby for a ban if desired.

Some respondents reported a sense of dissatisfaction with the decision-making process for admission decisions. Many respondents used the free-text boxes to raise concerns about who has responsibility for the final application decision.

'… Administration staff are the only ones involved in the admissions process (in my faculty) I, as a Course Director, do not see any part of a UCAS form, and am rarely consulted about suitable prospective candidates. A caveat - it may take place in other faculties...'

'I wish I could be of more use, but in our uni, it is the faculty administration and central planning who handle, make decisions and ultimately make offers for places on courses. In my faculty, academics do not see or use personal statements - as academics are not involved in the admissions process.'

A number of respondents expressed discontent with the funding mechanism. Respondents suggested that funding that is allocated on a per-student basis can work to increase the pressure for institutions to seek to recruit greater numbers of students, sometimes at the expense of a student's preparedness for the course.

'I find the pressure on FE lecturers to 'fudge' results and be 'creative' with their marking, unacceptable because of the change in funding streams. This gives

students false hope of achieving and, on arriving at university, being ill equipped to undertake higher education. The sooner the government change this, the better it will be for students and their own self-realisation and expectations.'

'In some institutions the admissions focus is a business focus - bums on seats and fees paid.'

Some respondents shared their concerns about inappropriate practices.

'university internal progression schemes do not help students into correct courses and often involve kettling into under [subscribed] courses.'

'I have noticed that some universities - for example, [INSTITUTION] is one of them - do not use UCAS in the way they should - they do not notify about interview dates in a timely fashion, or make decisions about places. Instead they use their own email or intranet system to do this way ahead of the information being updated on [UCAS].'

Conclusion

This survey has highlighted a range of members' concerns about areas where fairness, accessibility and transparency can be compromised in the existing process of application and admission to undergraduate study and provide useful steers for future UCU work in this area

This survey focussed solely on the undergraduate admission process. Many respondents report that further work in this area would be welcomed, specifically focussing on post-graduate and mature student admission.

It is useful to note that there is an opportunity for follow-up work with 150 respondents who provided their contact details separately from their main responses giving permission for them to be contacted further in relation to this topic. There is also the option to survey membership perhaps more specifically according to their sectors.