

# Post Qualifications Admissions

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**How it works across the world**

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*This study will compare how the organisation of the system in England, Wales & Northern Ireland compares to that in 29 countries across the world with particular reference to our reliance on 'pre-qualifications' admission.*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Background**

Higher Education admission is increasing in complexity. The number of students entering HE in England is predicted to increase significantly by 2030, these students are coming from a more diverse range of backgrounds and the admission system needs to enable them to make the choices that maximise their chances of success in an increasingly competitive graduate labour market. This study will compare how the organisation of the system in England, Wales & Northern Ireland compares to that in 29 countries across the world with particular reference to our reliance on 'pre-qualifications' admission. It will argue the global evidence supports the view that a move to post-qualifications admission (PQA) would enable England, Wales & Northern Ireland to better achieve major goals associated with HE.

The report also undertakes an in-depth examination of countries who are attempting to reform their admission systems to deal with increasing complexity. These countries are France, Singapore, Australia and Austria. It also looks at HE admission reform in a number of other countries including Japan, China, Finland and in particular the Netherlands

### **Key Findings**

#### **PQA IS THE GLOBAL NORM**

Every country in the study has a system of post-qualification admission whereby students are offered a place after their qualifications are awarded. England, Wales & Northern Ireland are real outliers in terms of their reliance on predicted grades to determine how prospective students are offered HE places in comparison to the diverse range of countries featured in this study. Of the 29 countries surveyed, students in 21 apply to HE before their final upper secondary examinations and 8 after but in none of the 29 countries surveyed are HE places offered on the basis of predicted grades.

#### **PQA WORKS IN LARGER SYSTEMS**

Amongst the 12 systems in the study who have over 1 million students England, Wales & Northern Ireland is the only one which has a pre-qualifications admission system.

#### **PQA SUPPORTS 'HIGH PERFORMING EDUCATION SYSTEMS'**

Nine of the 10 countries in the world with the best performing graduates have PQA. High performing systems are willing to try and overcome system inertia in order to remain high performing with four out of five of the countries with most able graduates presently undertaking/considering HE admissions reform.

#### **PQA COULD ENABLE MORE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HE**

The reasons for differences in performance globally in this area are complex and multiple but there is no evidence to suggest that PQA is hampering equitable access.

#### **AS HE ADMISSION BECOMES MORE COMPLEX, PQA BECOMES MORE IMPORTANT**

HE admission systems are increasingly dealing with complex multiple challenges. PQA, by making the admissions process more transparent, can aid in dealing with this complexity.

*A key goal for the HE system is to improve student success amongst all groups of learners and in particular close gaps in student success by social background.*

### **Realising the potential of PQA**

This report shows that there are alternative ways to organise HE admission than that which has been in place for a long time in this country. HE admission systems reflect the historical, social and cultural approach to HE itself and are unique to each country. The present system has strengths and any changes to the system need to avoid some of the problems that can be seen in other countries – for instance very high pressure university entrance examinations in Asia. However, most of the higher performing systems are reviewing their admission systems and trying to improve the faults that exist within them. It is important that England, Wales & Northern Ireland do the same.

PQA can act as a catalyst to enable the HE admission ‘process’ to evolve into one that builds statutory support for learners to make HE choices, prepare for HE study and make HE decisions. This could be done in a new PQA system for England, Wales & Northern Ireland by seeing HE admission as a three step process and constructing support for learners at each stage.

#### **STAGE 1: SUPPORTING HE CHOICE MAKING**

At present many schools/colleges offer HE visits etc. at the end of year 12 to help students make HE choices, but they do not engage all year 12 students. As part of a new PQA package this offer could be formalised and enhanced via a National HE Choice Week in July of year 12/first year Level 3 course.

#### **STAGE 2: SUPPORTING PREPARATION FOR HE SUCCESS**

A key goal for the HE system is to improve student success amongst all groups of learners and in particular close gaps in student success by social background. Adjustments to the HE admissions timetable as a result of PQA could free up space to better prepare students for HE. Earlier examinations as part of PQA would allow the delivery of a HE preparation week in June/July of year 13. A week focusing on study skills, financial education and independent learning techniques would be a huge benefit in a new PQA system.

#### **SUPPORTING HE DECISION MAKING**

HEIs in England, Wales & Northern Ireland invest significant time and effort in competitive practices after A-Level results are released via clearing. PQA would allow this clearing phase to be re-purposed as an advice phase to ensure that students make the right choices for them after they receive their results.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Higher Education admission is increasing in complexity. The number of students entering HE in England is predicted to increase significantly by 2030. Recent work from the Higher Education Policy Institute suggests that by 2030 demand for HE may increase by up to 350,000 places.<sup>1</sup> These students are coming from a more diverse range of backgrounds and the admission system needs to enable them to make the choices that maximise their chances of success in an increasingly competitive graduate labour market.

Given this increasing complexity it is essential that the HE admission system in England, Wales & Northern Ireland<sup>2</sup> is able to support students to enter the provider that best fits their abilities and aspirations. Recent years have seen questions raised regarding

*Those working in HE are acutely aware of these failings and there is evidence of support for change from parts of the HE community.*

how HE admission in this country is constructed and whether it is placing unnecessary pressures on students and staff as well as systematically placing many students at a disadvantage.

This study will compare how the organisation of the system in England, Wales & Northern Ireland compares to that in 29 other countries. Across the world other countries are also facing the challenge of how to admit greater numbers of students from a diverse range of backgrounds whilst ensuring as many as possible finish their studies and enter graduate employment. The study looks at how different countries are meeting this challenge. There will be a particular focus on how different countries organise the 'admissions timeline' and a detailed look at how countries are trying to improve their HE admission systems.

The report shows that England, Wales & Northern Ireland need to examine whether the HE admission system is fit for purpose and in doing so it argues that part of the necessary reforms involve a move to 'post-qualifications admission' (PQA system).

## **2. ADMISSION TO HE IN THE ENGLAND, WALES & NORTHERN IRELAND**

In England, Wales & Northern Ireland it is the norm to offer HE places to students before they have undertaken examinations which facilitate entry into HE.<sup>3</sup> This approach relies upon predictions of grades in such examinations, in the main the A Level, on the basis of which mainly HE providers offer places to potential candidates. However, recent evidence has shown that the vast majority of these predictions are wrong.<sup>4</sup> These errors impact particularly on students from more disadvantaged backgrounds who are far more likely to be predicted grades lower than they achieve thus affecting their chances of receiving offers from more research intensive universities.<sup>5</sup> Those working in HE are acutely aware of these failings and there is evidence of support for change from parts of the HE community.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the consequence of this pre-qualifications admission system in combination with the intensification of the competition for students amongst HE providers has been an increase in the use of 'unconditional offers'<sup>7</sup> to students. There has been an increase in over 40,000 in such offers from 2008 to 2015.<sup>8</sup> The impact of this approach it is argued is to both negatively affect the performance of students who have received such offers and also to enable HE providers with relatively more prestigious reputations to capture students.<sup>9</sup>

## **3. WHY DO WE HAVE 'PRE-QUALIFICATIONS' ADMISSION IN ENGLAND, WALES & NORTHERN IRELAND?**

There are a number of arguments presented to support the 'pre-qualifications' admission system in place in England, Wales & Northern Ireland:

- **It has been in existence for a long time** – the HE admissions system based on predicted grades has been in existence since the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore well established and understood by all stakeholders.
- **It aids students from under-represented backgrounds** – evidence shows that the majority of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are predicted higher grades than those they achieve.<sup>11</sup> Such 'over-predicting' it is argued encourages aspirational behaviour and HE provider choice making amongst such students.

*England, Wales & Northern Ireland are real outliers in terms of their reliance on predicted grades to determine how prospective students are offered HE places in comparison to the diverse range of countries featured in this study.*

- **Change would have a negative impact on the final pre-HE year** – given the time needed to mark examinations a PQA system may mean earlier examinations in the final pre-HE year and thus the time for teaching is reduced which may have a detrimental effect on attainment in these examinations and preparation levels for HE.
- **PQA would restrict HEIs ability to select students** – a PQA system may mean that HE providers have less time to make student admission decisions if they rely only on actual grades.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

To gain a better picture of the dynamics of HE admission across the world a short online survey of national experts in 29 countries was undertaken. The questions are outlined in Appendix 1. The survey was supplemented by background research on HE admission processes and examination systems across the world on the countries included in the survey. In particular, recent work by Orr et al (2017) ‘Study on the impact of admission systems on higher education outcomes’ for the European Commission was drawn on to inform this report. The report is a detailed investigation of how HE admission works in a holistic fashion in 29 European countries.<sup>12</sup>

The survey includes countries in the main drawn from Europe, but includes countries from every continent in the world. They include countries with very differing educational systems in terms of size and nature.

#### 5. KEY FINDINGS

##### **PQA is the global norm**

No country in the study, with the exception of England, Wales & Northern Ireland, has a system of pre-qualification admission where the offer of a place in HE is based on the results the student are predicted to achieve. England, Wales & Northern Ireland are real outliers in terms of their reliance on predicted grades to determine how prospective students are offered HE places in comparison to the diverse range of countries featured in this study. This includes the countries policymakers those in England, Wales & Northern Ireland often choose to benchmark against when it comes to educational performance – such as Germany, Singapore, Australia and the USA.

##### **Table 1 below shows**

- when students apply to HE
- when final examinations are taken in the pre-HE year
- when they are offered a place in HE
- the time they have to decide
- the overall number of HE under-graduate/Bachelor's degree students in that country.

Table 1: The HE admission journey across the world <sup>13</sup>

	Country	Undergraduate/ Bachelors degree students (000)	When students apply	When are upper secondary final examinations taken	When offered place	Acceptance time
1	Australia	951 <sup>16</sup>	Sept - Nov	Nov	Jan	2 months
2	Austria	184	March - May	May	Before end Sept	n/a
3	Belgium	366	Varied. No set time for students to apply in final year. There is an open access system of HE	No examinations for access to HE. Except for specific fixed space courses eg medicine	Students may be admitted by HE all the time. Even after start of academic year	n/a
4	Brazil	8100 <sup>19</sup>	Sept- Nov	Last 2 weeks Nov	Feb - March	3 weeks
5	Canada	1109 <sup>23</sup>	March - May	No final exams	March - May	n/a
6	China	26,906 <sup>28</sup>	July	June	July – August	2 -3 weeks
7	Croatia	101	March - May	June	July	5 days
8	England	1760	October – January	May – June	March - April	4 weeks
9	Finland	219	March - May	March	July	2 weeks
10	France	991	March - May	June	July	2-3 weeks
11	Germany	1792	May to July	March to June	August – Sept	2 weeks
12	Italy	1077	June - August	June	Sept	Few days – weeks
13	Ireland	161	Jan - Feb	June	August	1 Week
14	Japan	2567 <sup>20</sup>	Dec - Feb	Jan - Feb	March	1-2 weeks
15	Lithuania	108	June - August	Jan - May	July	Less than a week
16	Malaysia	1289 <sup>26</sup>	Jan – April	May	By end August	June - August
17	Mexico	3493 <sup>18</sup>	March - May	May	2 weeks after examination	Can decide until semester starts but need to register as soon as results are published
18	Netherlands	647	March - May	May	May	Until 1 Sept
19	New Zealand	145 <sup>17</sup>	Sept - Nov	Oct - Nov	Immediately from Oct onwards	Open beyond the start of each course (approx Feb 20)
20	Portugal	204 <sup>27</sup>	June	June - Sept	June – Sept (depends on when university entrance exam taken)	June – Sept
21	Republic of Korea	2550 <sup>22</sup>	Dec - Feb	Nov	Feb	3-4 days
22	Romania	354	June - August	June - July	July	Until 1 Oct
23	Russian Federation	4766 <sup>21</sup>	Varied	May - June	July-August	Before start of academic year on 1 Sept

24	Serbia	195	March - May	June	June/July	One Week
25	Singapore	141 <sup>25</sup>	March	May - Dec	March Dec	March - Sept
26	South Africa	804	June - August	November	Given conditional offer in year before final exam	n/a
27	Spain	1204	June - August	May	July	3-4 days
28	Sweden	246	March - May	None	July	2 weeks
29	Switzerland	195	March - May	June - August	Varied. Students apply after receiving exam results	n/a
30	US	20400 <sup>24</sup>	Nov - Jan	March - Dec	Dec - April	Dec - April

**Table 1** shows clearly that in virtually every country the timeline to HE admission from application onwards is different, albeit only slightly in many cases. This demonstrates that the admission process cannot be separated from the historical, social and political context in which it sits. In addition, in certain countries there is actually not a final examination as such. There are also quite fundamental differences across systems in terms of routes into HE from schooling – in particular the level of streaming in the school system and how this limits routes into HE and types of HE from different countries. Examinations also differ between countries. In the USA for example, aptitude testing rather than content based examinations play a key role in HE admission.

The above analysis emphasises that any changes implemented in the HE admission system in England, Wales & Northern Ireland must also fit in the particular context of this country. Nevertheless, despite the differences across systems **Table 1** shows that in one area there appears almost universal commonality: students do not receive offers of HE places before they undertake examinations which facilitate entry into HE.

#### **APPLICATION BEFORE OR AFTER EXAMINATIONS**

In eight of the countries surveyed, students apply to HE after they have received their examination results. There has been considerable debate about how a PQA system should work in this country. For some PQA should mean applying to HE after examinations results have been received.<sup>29</sup> The countries who do have application after examinations are a varied group. They are listed below.



**Table 2: Countries where students apply after upper secondary examinations**

Country	Student Numbers (000)	When upper secondary examinations are taken	When students apply	When offered place
Romania	354	June - July	June - August	July
Italy	1077	June	June - August	Sept
Finland	219	March	March - May	July
Lithuania	108	Jan - May	June - August	July
Republic of Korea	255 <sup>30</sup>	Nov	Dec -Feb	Feb
Spain	1204	May	June - August	July
US	20400	March - Dec	Nov - Jan	Dec- April
China	26906	June	July	July - August

In terms of what can be learnt regarding how to practically deliver PQA in this country, looking at the countries above **Table 2** re-inforces the view that HE admission systems are grounded in particular individual country circumstances. In the US aptitude testing features heavily in how students are selected to enter HE providers. These tests are marked electronically and administered by private providers. They can be taken more than once to enable the learners to get better marks and are combined with evidence of school performance and sometimes interviews/teacher recommendations. In China and Korea in contrast, there are very high pressure national university examinations delivered annually on one day/two days of the year which determines HE entry for the vast majority of learners. In Korea the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), is deemed so important as to lead to planes being grounded so as not to disturb the English-language listening section of the test and businesses adjusting opening hours.<sup>31</sup> Both the CSAT and the Gaokao in China combine written essays and multiple choice questions. The marking of these examinations is a major undertaking, in particular to produce the results in time to allow students to then apply to HE.

In the five European countries in **Table 2** the situation differs again. There are separate entrance examinations administered by the HEIs themselves in certain 'high demand' subjects which are combined with measures of school performance to decide on entrant admission. In Spain and Italy there is also an element of entitlement to enter HE if students are in possession of particular upper secondary qualifications.<sup>32</sup>

The above discussion shows that PQA can be delivered in systems of very differing natures.

For the key findings that follow, a particular country from the survey is selected which is in the process of reforming its HE admission systems. These examples add to our understanding of how the challenges around HE admission are being met in different countries. The aim is not necessarily to undertake policy borrowing ie picking one part of another system and transplanting to another country but to highlight how different countries are looking to improve their own systems to meet priorities similar to those in this country.

### PQA works in larger systems

Of the countries examined in the survey, the HE system in England, Wales & Northern Ireland is relatively large. It has the 8th largest number of under-graduate students in the survey.<sup>33</sup> It might be argued that larger systems need particular admission systems where the process is more drawn out to cope with the larger number of decisions to be made. Certainly, the US has an admissions process which occurs over a fairly long period. In **Box 1** France is examined. It is a larger system that is grappling with how to balance accessibility to HE with good graduate outcomes.

#### **Box 1: France: Increasing participation & addressing retention**

##### *How students enter HE*

Upper secondary education in France takes place in institutions known as lycées. Students will typically spend three years at one of three types of lycée each leading to a different type of Baccalauréat (BAC). These are the 'BAC' leading to HE, 'BAC T' with more applied subjects still leading to HE, and the BAC Pro which is meant to steer graduates straight into the labour force. However, by law all three types of BAC allow admission to HE.

Students are assigned to a BAC route via the "conseil de classe". This is a group made up of the head teacher, the school's academic staff, plus some representative students and parents. Admission to HE is processed via a web portal known as Admission Post Bac, or APB set up in 2008. Students can assemble portfolios to submit to higher education institutions and make up to 24 ranked program choices. The APB system assigns students to programs and institutions based on their desires, BAC stream, and the availability of places. With a non-selective programme, students tend to get their preferred HE choice. Where demand exceeds supply, then students are prioritised first by their BAC program and second of all by their ranking.

##### *The challenges the system is facing and what is being done*

The number of students passing the BAC is now very high – with over 70% now having the right to enter HE. This is seen as a success by French policymakers and they are wedded to the concept of students having the right to HE entry. However, it is also contributing to high levels of non-retention in French HE with only 40% of students completing their studies in four years.

France is trying to manage the challenges its HE admission system is facing with a new 'Student Plan' or Plan Étudiants launched in late 2017. The plan is an attempt to enable HE participation to increase but not to introduce widespread selection by HEIs which is opposed by students groups and trade unions. The plan includes the introduction of two form teachers, instead of one, to give students individual help in constructing their study plans, and two weeks will be devoted during the school year to helping them choose the right studies.

In addition a more user-friendly website with more information about institutions and courses, together with admissions procedures, will replace the existing site.

- Lycée students will be able to make up to 10 course applications, which will not be ranked in order of preference
- Each education authority will have a new commission for access to higher education to supervise improved contact and dialogue between lycées and higher education institutions
- Schools will prepare reports and recommendations for each student, to which higher education institutions will have access.

##### *Insights for HE admission in England, Wales & Northern Ireland*

The reforms are controversial. They have come under criticism for restricting the principle of student choice, running contrary to the egalitarian principle in France and not providing enough support for more HE places. They are an example though of how France is attempting to reform the process of HE admission and in particular improve the support available for students.

*There is no evidence to suggest that a small reduction in teaching time at upper secondary level would feed through to poorer graduate performance.*

### **'High performing education systems' are PQA based**

Improving the comparative performance of the English education system has been a major policy priority in recent decades. This section considers the relationship between HE admissions and high performance in educational systems.

#### **PERFORMANCE AT UPPER SECONDARY EXAMINATION LEVEL**

There could be a concern that by reducing teaching time and removing the potential extra motivation provided by having a place at a HEI guaranteed by a set level of Although it must also be stated that it not necessarily the case that a move to PQA would reduce the teaching time available at upper secondary level.

The most generally accepted measure of comparative system performance are the PISA tests delivered by the OECD. They however test 15 year olds. Ideally for the purpose of this debate a measure of the performance of 17/18 year olds would be better. On the basis of PISA the leading countries featured in the survey are Singapore, Japan and Finland. Interestingly, Finland and Singapore take their final upper secondary examinations earlier than average as **Table 1** shows – and significantly earlier than in the UK. In the Finnish case examinations take place in March of the final upper secondary year and with Singapore over a seven-month period.

Data, from Europe only, shows there are not huge differences between countries where the overall amount of teaching time in upper secondary education is concerned.<sup>34</sup> Pre-examination teaching time in school does not on the face of it appear to make a significant difference to examination performance. In addition for 15 countries in the survey, students can enter HE from the age of 17 as opposed to 18 as in England, Wales & Northern Ireland – a whole year earlier.

#### **PERFORMANCE OF GRADUATES**

Where HE admission systems are concerned a key question is the extent to which they can enable better graduate outcomes. Data in this area is not as extensive as with PISA, but work has been undertaken by the OECD in 2016 to rank countries by graduate literacy skills.<sup>35</sup> The top 10 countries in this ranking are listed below. Again, the countries above England contrast in their approach to levels of teaching time with Japan favouring more hours and the Scandinavian nations less.<sup>36</sup> But there is no evidence to suggest here that a small reduction in teaching time at upper secondary level (if it was even necessary) would feed through to poorer graduate performance.

**Table 2: The OECD's top 10 highest performing graduates**

Country
Japan
Finland
Netherlands
Sweden
Australia
Norway
Belgium
New Zealand
England
United States

In terms of admission reform what is particularly important to the argument in this report is that, of the top five countries with best performing graduates, four are undertaking or considering undertaking changes in their admission systems. Japan is reforming its university entrance examination in 2020, to encourage greater thinking, judgment and expression which it is hoped will in turn lead to changes in high school teaching methods.<sup>37</sup> It is argued in Japan that students need such skills to thrive in 21st century economies. In Finland, university entrance examinations are to be diminished in importance to reduce pressures on students and facilitate greater progression to HE by making HE entry easier.<sup>38</sup>

Changes in the Netherlands, or prospective changes in Australia are discussed below.

One message from the above may be that high performing systems have to be prepared to change and evolve to remain high performing.

The following case study looks at Singapore. While not featuring in the top 10 countries for graduate skills it does rank highly in PISA and is undertaking interesting work with regard to its HE admission system.

### **Box 2: Singapore and meeting the needs of the 21st century economy**

#### **How students enter HE**

The Singapore-Cambridge GCE A-Level examination is a national university entrance examination held annually in Singapore. It is distinctly different from A-Levels in the UK. Students are evaluated based on individual grades obtained in four content-based subjects, as well as a general critical thinking subject, and an extended group learning project. For admission to HE, some faculties have additional requirements such as interviews or aptitude tests. Each university publishes an indicative grade profile which students can use as a reference in selecting their courses. The indicative grade profile shows the range of grades that the previous year's successful applicants achieved for each of the core subjects. The average grade (from A to E) for the bottom 10 per cent and the top ten per cent of entrants to that course in the previous year is provided (eg 10th percentile BCC/C and 90th percentile AAA/B).

#### **The challenges the system is facing and what is being done**

One of the acknowledged drawbacks of the Singaporean educational system is the high pressure nature of it. This leads to high levels of stress amongst students, and fuels a private tuition industry that embraces nearly all Singaporean young people. Such stress is also experienced by students hoping to enter HE. The source of the stress is the importance placed on educational achievement in Singapore, which is in turn a result of the perceived importance of education and knowledge capital to economic performance in Singapore.

This central concern for economic performance is impacting now on how the education system is viewed. In early 2018 the Education Minister argued that the system now must focus on achieving and measuring learning outcomes and avoid over-emphasising the importance of academic grades, in order to cope with a scenario where the nature of work in the future is uncertain. He suggested that this will mean:

- pathways into HE need to be diversified for learners to reflect not just the academic grades of the applicant and career guidance improved.
- a systemic Education and Career Guidance programme, starting in secondary schools, to help students get a better sense of where their interests and their strengths lie is being implemented.

#### **Insights for HE admission in England, Wales & Northern Ireland**

What is of particular interest here is the way in which broader policy aims/contexts in a high performing system frame policy changes in HE admissions. It suggests that in England, Wales & Northern Ireland the nature of the HE admission system should be a product of a vision of the bigger picture regarding where higher education sits in the context of the challenges facing this country in the 21st century.

### **PQA enables equitable access to HE**

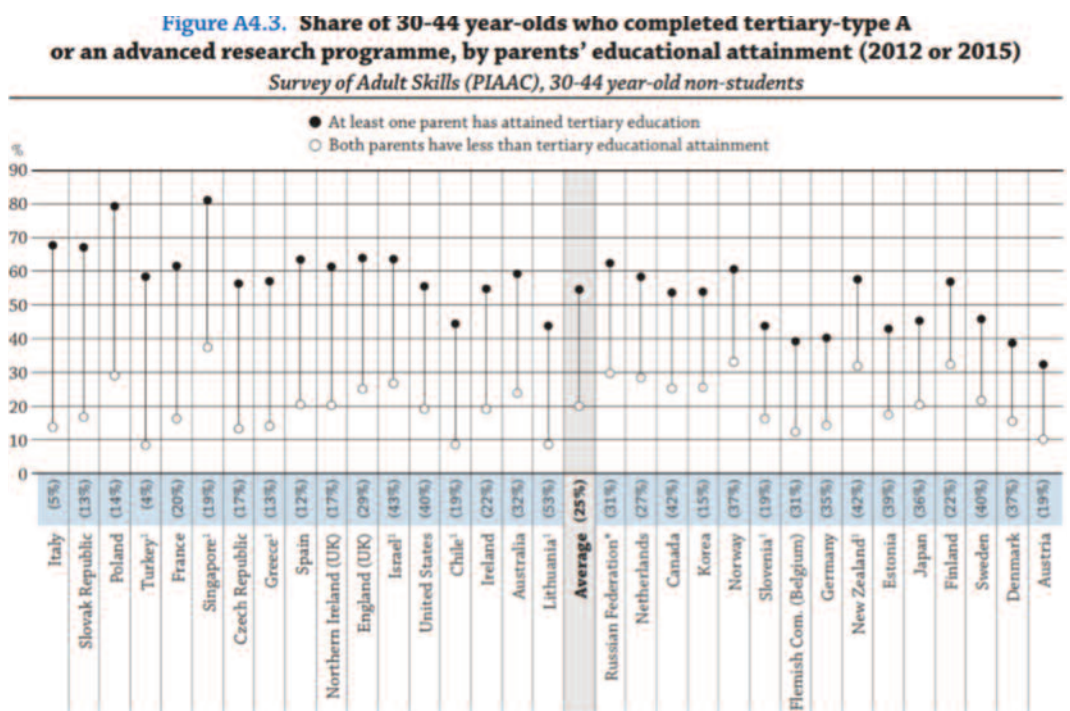
A major part of the HE admissions debate centres on the impact of admissions systems on equitable access to HE. Cross country comparisons in terms of the extent of equitable access to HE are notoriously difficult.<sup>39</sup> What is meant by equitable access is contested as the priority groups where such access is concerned differs

Any benefit that pre-qualifications admission is making appears marginal at best, and there is no actual evidence as yet of it.

across countries. What the data does show is that using the most commonly available metrics of proxy measures of socio-economic background and gender, participation is unequal across all countries in the world where data is available.

Looking at the best available data from the OECD and EC suggests that the less unequal countries are drawn from different parts of world and in the European case across the continent (although Scandinavia generally does well as does Korea and Japan). **Diagram 1** is taken from the 2017 publication by the OECD: Education at a Glance. It shows the gap in participation amongst adults by parental background.

**Diagram 1: Equitable Access to HE in the OECD**



The reasons for differences in performance globally in this area are complex and multiple. The UK, despite being one of the global leaders in prioritising this issue and the recent progress made in extending access to HE for younger learners, is a below average performer on global metrics.

Any benefit that pre-qualifications admission is making appears marginal at best, and there is no actual evidence as yet of it. It is hard to establish exactly what does make certain countries perform better where equitable access is concerned and as argued above comparisons are difficult. However, none of the work that has been done with regard to comparative performance here suggests that shifting admission to pre-qualification as in England, Wales & Northern Ireland would be beneficial. Rather the extent of selection of students, the extent of inequality in society, and the focused support for students from under-represented groups may be more important.<sup>40</sup> Focusing on pre-qualification admission as widening access to HE tactic only risks diverting attention away from more these fundamental issues.

The case study selected here is Austria. It has recently launched a new national strategy to support more equitable access and success in HE which includes changes to the admissions 'process'.

**Box 3: Austria – reforming the system to widen access****How students enter HE**

In Austria there are 4 types of Higher Education institution.

- public universities (the biggest sector)
- universities of applied sciences
- private universities
- university colleges of teacher education

Each type of HEI has different laws, funding mechanisms and steering instruments. Admission to a bachelor's (diploma) degree programme requires possession of the Austrian higher secondary school leaving certificate (Reifezeugnis), or the successful completion of a special university entrance

qualification examination (Studienberechtigungsprüfung). This form of HE admission system based around the possession of a school leaving qualification tends to lead to higher levels of HE entry but then more student non-retention. The selection in the system is found only really in certain courses such as Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine and a select number of humanities subjects.

Most students enrol at public universities and there is a relatively high share of mature (second chance) students. Despite Austria performing well in comparative surveys as shown in Diagram 1 above, looking at HE participation by social background data collected in the country itself shows inequalities across social background.

**The challenges the system is facing and what is being done**

In 2017 the Austrian government published the first national widening access strategy. The strategy has nine elements each with quantitative targets. The first four in particular, focus on HE admissions and are outlined below, but there are targets related to student success and progression as well.

- Improving the quality and availability of information
- Outreach activities and student counselling taking into account students' heterogeneity
- Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal skills
- Supporting new entrants

To address the points above, in particular the first two, a new national programme of pre HE support and information activities have been introduced. At the centre of the initial reforms is 'Studieren Probieren' or Study Try. With Study Try, students have the opportunity to participate in a range of introductory courses accompanied by a student. There is one central national portal through which young people and schools can find out about and organise participation in such courses ([www.studierenprobieren.at](http://www.studierenprobieren.at)). It is the expectation that all students will participate in Study Try.

**Insights for HE admission in England, Wales & Northern Ireland**

There are two notable features here where PQA and England, Wales & Northern Ireland are concerned. Firstly, achieving equitable access and outreach is being addressed through a co-ordinated national approach. Secondly, HE admissions changes are being linked, via this co-ordinated approach, to student success goals.

The pre-qualifications system adds more uncertainty to an already complex situation. The reforms examined thus far seek in many ways to reduce complexity not add to it.

**As HE admission becomes more complex, PQA is important**

As HE participation expands globally, HE admission is becoming more complex. As argued above, coping with more students following different entry routes, and trying to enable those students to follow courses that will minimise their probabilities of dropping out whilst maximising their chances of graduate employment is a challenging task. The pre-qualifications system adds more uncertainty to an already complex situation. The reforms examined thus far seek in many ways to reduce complexity not add to it.

There is no objective measure of the ‘complexity’ of a HE system as such. It could be argued though that the UK is a relatively complex system. Where HE admission is concerned it could be seen as complex in two related ways. The analysis by Orr et al (2017) of HE admission in Europe classified systems into four types assessing the relative influence of the schooling system and the HE system in structuring paths into HE for young people. Along with eight other countries the UK was described as a country where there was double selection ie the compulsory education system created HE and non HE pathways (A level and non A level routes) and HEIs selected students themselves. The classification of all countries is shown below:

**Table 3: Admission systems in Europe by selection and streaming**

SELECTION STREAMING	Nearly all HEIs can select with additional criteria	HEIs cannot select with educational criteria (in normal) circumstances
At least one pathway through the school system does not lead to a qualification enabling higher education entry (to some part of the system)	<b>Type 4: Double selection</b> Czech Republic, Iceland, Montenegro, Norway, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, United Kingdom	<b>Type 1: Selection by schools</b> Austria, Belgium Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia
In general, all pathways may lead to higher education entry (in some part of the system)	<b>Type 2: Selection by HEIs</b> Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Portugal, Lithuania, Latvia	<b>Type 3: Least selection</b> Albania, France, Greece, Ireland, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Sweden, Turkey

Australia is one country that has been looking recently at how its HE admission system can deal with complexity. As with England, Wales & Northern Ireland there are elements of double selection combined with relatively high levels of university autonomy. The priorities around HE admission in Australia appear to closely resemble those in England, Wales & Northern Ireland ie enabling system growth, managing cost and balancing equity. It also has an entry system based on content examinations rather than aptitude testing. Finally, admission is organised regionally which adds another level of complexity.

**Box 4: Australia: Balancing fairness and efficiency****How students enter HE**

Admission to HE is organised on a federal basis via the 9 states in the country. At the centre of the system is the ATAR. The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student's position relative to all the students who started high school with them in Year 7. So, an ATAR of 80.00 means that you are 20 per cent from the top of your Year 7 group (not your year 12 group). ATARs are calculated in each state to reflect a student's rank against other students in their state. The ATAR is a rank that combines together the individual results from different subjects. However, even though the ATAR exists universities use their autonomy to set their own admission criteria and standards. By 2017 more than half of offers to students are being made on criteria other than the ATAR as can be seen below:

**Table 3: Admission to HE in Australia****Basis of admission for undergraduate commencements 2016**

Secondary education with ATAR	26%
Higher education course	26%
Other basis	17%
VET award course	12%
Secondary education without ATAR	11%
Mature age special entry provisions	4%
Professional qualification	1%

Source: Department of Education and Training

Above table is taken from:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-21/university-admissions-atar-is-outdated/9567862>

**The challenges the system is facing and what is being done**

This construction of a single rank order of all students seeking entry to a university course is something that is as unique to Australia as pre-qualification admission is to England, Wales & Northern Ireland. There is debate under way at present regarding the use of the ATAR. It is argued that the advantages of the ATAR are that it is transparent, fair, commonly understood and allows admissions decisions to be made efficiently. However, it is also argued that a ranking that masks performance in specific subjects should not be used for all applicants for all courses as this does not aid students being matched to courses which suit their aptitudes. Also, HEIs were 'gaming' the system to their own advantage as happens via the current admission system in England, Wales & Northern Ireland. Significant numbers of students are being admitted to courses with ATARs below advertised 'cut offs' which is compromising transparency. This could be contributing to inequity and missed opportunities across the system as a whole.

**Insights for HE admission in England, Wales & Northern Ireland**

Despite the problems with the ATAR, there is not a clear consensus on how to deal with them. A recent report by the Mitchell Institute (a leading Australian think tank) in 2018 outlined the case for reform but argued that changing the ATAR may also require broader changes in the relationship between secondary education and HE. The ATAR debate is analogous to that regarding PQA here. There is evidence that an aspect of the HE admission system may not be working but inertia combined with a lack of clarity about reform options is preventing progress.



*The evidence from the more forward-thinking countries in the survey shows that, in the era of mass HE participation, support for learners needs to be more formalised and integrated as a key part of the admissions process.*

## 5. REALISING THE POTENTIAL OF PQA

Organising efficient, equitable and effective HE admission is an increasingly challenging task across the world. The analysis above shows that while there are differences across the world in how these challenges are being addressed in the midst of these, post qualifications admissions is a common factor.

This report also shows that a range of countries, especially higher performing ones, are looking at whether their HE admission systems are fit to meet the needs of their economies and societies. The same needs to happen in England, Wales & Northern Ireland. Inertia and long standing practices should not be a barrier to changes that can improve the system for students. There are other ways of organising HE admissions. Reform to the admissions process based around PQA, could help better meet three of the aims of the new Office for Students:

- Helping students to get into and succeed in higher education
- Helping students stay informed
- Making sure that students get a high-quality education that prepares them for the future

PQA can do this by acting as a catalyst for changing how we think of the HE admission 'process'. At present the process constitutes students taking decisions at particular points of time with the support to make these decisions varying according to the resources available to them from their schools/colleges/families, and their ability to access online information. The evidence from the more forward-thinking countries in the survey shows that, in the era of mass HE participation, support for learners needs to be more formalised and integrated as a key part of the admissions process. This could be done in a new PQA system by seeing HE admission as a three step process and constructing support for learners at each stage.

### Stage 1: Supporting HE choice making - National HE Choice Week

Where England, Wales & Northern Ireland have something in common with the HE admission systems of other countries is in the weakness in guidance and support offered to young people from across social backgrounds in making HE choices.<sup>41</sup>

The introduction of PQA could be a catalyst for reform in HE guidance in this country. At present many schools/colleges offer HE visits etc. at the end of year 12 to help students make HE choices. However, such activities don't reach all prospective students, nor are they always part of a coherent HE choice offer. As part of a new PQA package this offer could be formalised and enhanced via a National HE Choice Week in July of year 12/first year Level 3 course. HE providers could focus some of the outreach/recruitment/marketing resources on delivering activities in the week and students wishing to apply to HE given a full week away from their subjects to learn more about HE.

Such formalisation in HE advice is happening in other countries, as was illustrated in **Box 1** on France, and **Box 3** on Austria. A further example of such reform is provided in **Box 5** below.

**Box 5: The Netherlands and supporting choice**

In 2017 the Netherlands introduced Studiekeuzecheck, or 'Study Choice Check'. Every student applying to HE must undergo a "check" to evaluate their fit with their selected study programme. The idea is to improve student-programme matching so as to reduce the number of drop-outs in the Dutch higher education system. The result is meant as guidance. The purpose of the Study Choice Check is to help students get a better understanding of their own interests and abilities and to obtain a more realistic picture of the course of training and the career opportunities associated with it. At some HEIs and programmes this is done through a direct interview; elsewhere it is done through a digital questionnaire administered on the internet. Based on the results, HEIs make a recommendation to the student about their suitability for their chosen programme. HEIs may, on the basis of the results, recommend to students that they re-consider their programme choice and offer suggestions about how to find another one. The choice, however, remains with the student; a HEI may not reject a student because of a perceived bad fit.

Participation in National HE Choice Week could be a similar compulsory part of HE application in the future in England, Wales & Northern Ireland with all year 12 students intending to apply for HE engaging in activities over the week to help them make better HE choices.

**Stage 2: Supporting preparation for HE success – HE Preparation Week**

Adjustments to the HE admissions timetable as a result of PQA would also free up space to better prepare students for HE. As Finland and Singapore illustrate, learning does not have to stop because examinations are completed. Earlier examinations as part of PQA would enable a HE preparation week in June/July of year 13 (although the present timetable would also allow such a week). There is much concern about how unprepared many students are for the differences between HE and pre-HE study, and the consequences for students' attainment and potentially their non-continuation.<sup>42</sup> A week focusing on study skills, financial education and independent learning techniques would be a huge benefit in a new PQA system.

**Stage 3: Supporting students to make decisions**

Table 1 shows that the window in which potential HE students have to make decisions across the world is small. It could be argued that in fact England, Wales & Northern Ireland invest more time and effort than most other countries in engaging students in this narrow window than many other countries do, only much of this energy is devoted to meeting the needs of HEIs before those of students. PQA would allow the clearing phase to become re-purposed as an advice phase where HEIs focus on deploying their academic staff to advice students regarding the offers they have received rather than acting as de facto recruitment agents. This would strengthen the new PQA system and reduce the pressure that many staff deployed in clearing are placed under by the clearing system.

**PQA – helping the UK meet 21st century admission challenges**

PQA can unlock ways of improving how prospective students make choices about HE entry and how prepared they are to enter HE. These changes could happen without PQA but it is less likely they would. Across the world countries are grappling with these questions as the case studies show. By reforming this out-dated aspect of our admission system we have the opportunity here to try and answer them.

**APPENDIX 1: INTERNATIONAL SURVEY**

1. In the final year of upper secondary education when do students apply for HE in i.e. in/over what months?
2. In what month in the final year of upper secondary education are examinations taken?
3. In what month are students offered a university place?
4. Is this after they have completed their examinations on the basis of the grades they achieve in the upper secondary examinations?
5. How long do students have to decide if they wish to accept this place?
6. Is there a central agency that co-ordinates applications to HE? If so what is it called?

**NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Bekhradnia, B & Beech, D (2018) Demand for Higher Education to 2030, Oxford: HEPI
- <sup>2</sup> In Scotland students are aware of their grades when they apply.
- <sup>3</sup> While it the norm, a significant number of students are offered places when they have results of end of Level 3 examinations via clearing for example.
- <sup>4</sup> Wyness, G. (2016) Predicted grades: accuracy and impact, London:UCU
- <sup>5</sup> Wyness, G (2017) Rules of the Game, London: Sutton Trust
- <sup>6</sup> UCU (2015) The case for post qualification application to higher education with results from the UCU undergraduate application and admission survey
- <sup>7</sup> Unconditional offers are an offer of a place at the HE provider, which is offered unrelated to the examinations results the candidate obtains.
- <sup>8</sup> UCAS (2017) End of Cycle Report 2017, UCAS: 2017
- <sup>9</sup> Guardian, (19th August 2017) Secret Teacher: unconditional offers give students no incentive to work hard
- <sup>10</sup> Wyness (2017)
- <sup>11</sup> Wyness (2017)
- <sup>12</sup> Orr, D. et al (2017) Study on the impact of admission systems on higher education outcomes, Brussels: European Commission
- <sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise stated the data is taken from: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Number\\_of\\_tertiary\\_education\\_students\\_by\\_level\\_and\\_sex,\\_2015\\_\(thousands\)\\_YB17.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Number_of_tertiary_education_students_by_level_and_sex,_2015_(thousands)_YB17.png)
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.chet.org.za/data/sahe-open-data>
- <sup>15</sup> This offer is based on the academic performance of the student in upper secondary education
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/ArticleDocuments/169/Data%20snapshot%202018%20web.pdf.aspx>
- <sup>17</sup> [https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/182296/2016-pt-provider-based-enrolments-part1b.pdf](https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/182296/2016-pt-provider-based-enrolments-part1b.pdf)
- <sup>18</sup> <https://wenr.wes.org/2013/05/wenr-may-2013-an-overview-of-education-in-mexico>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/705795/university-enrollment-brazil/>
- <sup>20</sup> <http://rihe.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/en/statistics/synthesis/>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://studyinrussia.ru/en/why-russia/russian-education-in-figures/>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://wenr.wes.org/2013/06/wenr-june-2013-an-overview-of-education-in-south-korea>
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.univcan.ca/universities/facts-and-stats/enrolment-by-university/>
- <sup>24</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>
- <sup>25</sup> [https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/publications/education-statistics-digest/esd\\_2017.pdf](https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/publications/education-statistics-digest/esd_2017.pdf)

- <sup>26</sup> <http://www.mohe.gov.my/en/download/awam/penerbitan/pppm-2015-2025-pt/5-malaysia-education-blueprint-2015-2025-higher-education/file>
- <sup>27</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Number\\_of\\_tertiary\\_education\\_students\\_by\\_level\\_and\\_sex,\\_2015\\_\(thousands\)\\_YB17.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Number_of_tertiary_education_students_by_level_and_sex,_2015_(thousands)_YB17.png)
- <sup>28</sup> <http://www.stats.gov.cn/>
- <sup>29</sup> See Clarke, P & Beech, D. (2018) Reaching the parts of society universities have missed: A manifesto for the new Director of Fair Access and Participation, Oxford:HEPI
- <sup>30</sup> [http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HEPI-Brightside\\_WP-Manifesto-for-OfS\\_FINAL-Report-106.pdf](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HEPI-Brightside_WP-Manifesto-for-OfS_FINAL-Report-106.pdf)
- <sup>31</sup> <https://wenr.wes.org/2013/06/wenr-june-2013-an-overview-of-education-in-south-korea>
- <sup>32</sup> For more information please see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/11/south-korean-seniors-have-been-preparing-for-today-since-kindergarten/508031/>
- <sup>33</sup> European Parliament (2014) Higher Education Entrance Examinations in Europe; A Comparison, Brussels: European Parliament
- <sup>34</sup> Ideally the number of enrolments per year would be compared to gauge system size in Table i.e. the flow of students, rather than the total number i.e. the stock. But data on enrolments is more difficult to find and stock numbers will reflect the essential argument here.
- <sup>35</sup> See [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/news/annual-eurydice-report-instruction-time-in-full-time-compulsory-education-in-europe-for-201617\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/news/annual-eurydice-report-instruction-time-in-full-time-compulsory-education-in-europe-for-201617_en)
- <sup>36</sup> BBC (2016) Which country really has the cleverest students? – October 2016 - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-37649892>
- <sup>37</sup> OECD (2014), “Indicator D1: How much time do students spend in the classroom?”, in Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing
- <sup>38</sup> For more information: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2017/11/06/language/lets-discuss-entrance-exam-reforms/#.Wvq-EYgvzD4>
- <sup>39</sup> For more information: [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/poll\\_clear\\_majority\\_of\\_youth\\_object\\_to\\_phasing\\_out\\_university\\_entrance\\_exams/10124852](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/poll_clear_majority_of_youth_object_to_phasing_out_university_entrance_exams/10124852)
- <sup>40</sup> Atherton et al (2016) 'Charting Equity: Drawing the Global Access Map
- <sup>41</sup> See Atherton , G, (ed) (2016) Access to Higher Education: Understanding Global Inequalities, London: Palgrave MacMillan and UNESCO (2017) Six ways to ensure higher education leaves no one behind, Policy Paper 30 - <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002478/247862E.pdf>
- <sup>42</sup> BBC News ( 4th July 2017) New students 'unprepared for university' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-40481748>