

Where next for university admissions?

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About the editor

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Introduction

Rachel Hewitt, Director of Policy and Advocacy, HEPI

UK undergraduate university admissions play a significant role in our education system, particularly given the number of students who now go through the process. In 2020 (an unusual year, but with comparable admissions data to previous years), there were 728,780 applicants to higher education, of which 570,475 students were accepted (70 per cent of those accepted applicants were under 20). Given this, it is not surprising that the mechanics of the current admissions system are commonly debated, generally focusing on ensuring the system is fair for all. However, in recent months this debate has sped up, due to a number of factors. The impact of COVID-19 on the 2020 A-Level results and university entry process was radical. Across the UK fierce debates raged around the way grades would be allocated, dominating newspaper headlines for a number of weeks. As well as the challenges of the 2020 admissions cycle, the closure of schools through the pandemic has raised concerns around how existing educational inequalities will be further deepened through lost learning time, with worries for the futures of those currently going through the school system.

Despite the pandemic, the Government has not lost focus on looking to reform the higher and further education systems, as seen by the release of wide-ranging policy documentation in late January 2021. This included a consultation on moving to a model of post-qualification admissions, which is still open at the time of this report being published and we hope the ideas included throughout will help feed into the debate. However, the ownership of admissions does not sit solely with the Government. Universities are autonomous institutions and their right to choose who they admit to study is enshrined in

legislation. Most undergraduate students apply for university through UCAS, who therefore also play a pivotal role in the admissions process (although less so both in Scotland and for part-time students). This lack of clarity over ownership has led to a turf war, which involved the Government, Universities UK and UCAS all publishing – in late 2020 – their individual intentions to consider post-qualification admissions. Additionally, the Office for Students was due to conduct its own work on admissions reform, which has stalled in the meantime. It seems the debate about who owns university admissions is set to rage on. There is also debate about which model of post-qualification admissions would be most suitable: we have defined the terms below in the way in which they are used throughout this report.

Defining post-qualification admissions

Post-qualification admissions	Overarching term used to refer to any or all post-qualification models.
Post-qualification applications	Applicants do not start to apply to higher education institutions until after they have received their A-Level (or other Level 3 qualification) results.
Post-qualification decisions	Applicants apply to higher education institutions and receive university offers before receiving their A-Level results but do not choose their higher education institution until they receive these results.
Post-qualification offers	Applicants can build relationships with institutions but offers are not made and accepted until applicants have received their A-Level results.

Of course, education is a devolved matter and much of the current debate is focused on England. But any changes to the system will have wider ramifications across the UK and also to the way we recruit international students, both of which are explored in this collection. Moving to a model of post-qualification admissions is also not the only way to adapt the current system. Greater use of Clearing, contextual admissions and Adjustment (an optional service where students who exceed the conditions of their firm choice can reconsider where and what to study, without losing their secured place) have been brought in in recent years to ensure greater fairness in the system. As you will see throughout this report, there are mixed views about whether these developments have been, or can be, enough to mean a fair admissions system.

In considering the big debates around our admissions system, the essays that follow consider:

- Should we move to a model of post-qualifications admissions and if so which: post-qualification applications, decisions or offers?
- What other initiatives could make a difference to fairness in the admissions system?
- Will reforming university admissions establish a fairer system, or should we be looking at earlier stages in the education system?
- Should universities be bolder in their role in delivering change across the education system?
- What would the impact of admissions reform be across the UK and for attracting international students?
- What does polling data show about students' and university leaders' support for moving to post-qualification admissions?

- Are predicted grades the problem, or would using achieved grades make the system less fair?
- Is this the optimum moment to change the admissions system, considering the impact of the pandemic on the education system?
- Are comparisons to international systems helpful and / or possible?

As well as considering these issues the authors make a number of recommendations and ideas for change, including:

- Provide greater guidance around the university admissions process at an earlier stage in the school system.
- Reverse changes to A-Levels, which place a greater stake on final exams and leave teachers with less information to make grade predictions.
- Broaden 'predicted grades' to provide either a range of expected grades or to group predictions into 'high' 'medium' or 'low' tariff categories (with students encouraged to apply beyond their allocated group).
- Further expand Clearing to provide a post-qualifications option for those who choose it.
- Utilise an 'admissions code of practice', where universities agree to scrap conditional unconditional offers, tighten the use of unconditional offers, review the use of incentives and provide greater transparency of the grades students are admitted into higher education with and in the use of conditional offers.

This collection of essays is longer than a usual HEPI report, as we have tried to cover a range of perspectives on the debate, and yet, there are still omissions remaining. This report does

not look in any detail at non-A-Level entry routes to higher education, nor does it look beyond undergraduate admissions (debates on postgraduate admissions could perhaps make up a paper on their own). Yet we hope, at such a critical moment in the debate, this report will help to shape and influence what the future of university admissions could look like.

1. Predicted grades and university admissions

Dr Mark Corver, Founder, DataHE

The largest group of applicants to UK universities are UK 18-year olds, some 290,000 in 2020. Though they have several options, the large majority of them – over 97 per cent in 2020 – apply ahead of results to obtain conditional offers for entry. This long-standing system is underpinned by predicted grades provided by teachers. They serve to calibrate applicant and university decisions with the aim that students can end up holding a firm offer for somewhere they want to go without excessive risk of not getting in.

When policymakers think about where next for the university admissions system, their proposals tend not to feature this system of predicted grades. Quite the opposite. The motivation for redesign often seems to ditch them. Two problems are frequently cited. First, that predicted grades are damagingly inaccurate. And, secondly, they are bad for equality because their inaccuracy disproportionately hits those from under-represented backgrounds seeking entry to the most selective universities.

Published data on predicted grades are not as rich as they should be given their importance. In particular, the cross-tabulation of predicted by achieved A-Level points, the Rosetta Stone of the issue, remains unpublished. But there are sufficient data available to demonstrate that these two supposed problems with predicted grades for university admissions are very likely false.¹

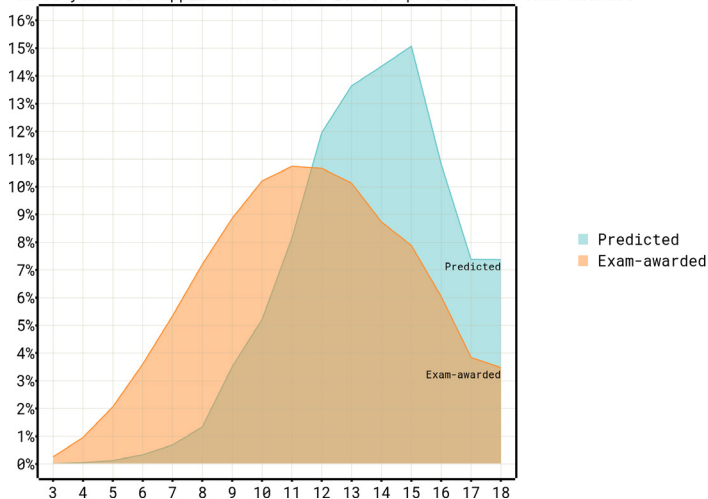
1 This analysis uses the summary distributions of predicted and achieved A-Level points in UCAS *End of Cycle* data resources <https://wwwucascomdataandanalysisundergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2020>

Accuracy

Predicted grades certainly look very different from exam-awarded grades. Figure 1 summarises the best three A-Level grades to points (where a single grade is a point, so AAA is 15, BBB is 12 and so on) to compare predicted with exam-awarded. Predicted points are higher than exam-awarded points. They are also more compressed in their range, squashed up against the A*A*A* (18) limit. Given these differences it is unsurprising that an applicant rarely gets exam-awarded points that equal their predicted points. Just 16 per cent of the time between 2012 and 2017 (before unconditional offers started to affect the patterns), and the exact grade-by-subject profile match would be lower still. The pattern for other qualification types differ, but the poor reputation of predicted grades for accuracy stems from these A-Level properties.

Figure 1 Predicted and exam-awarded points

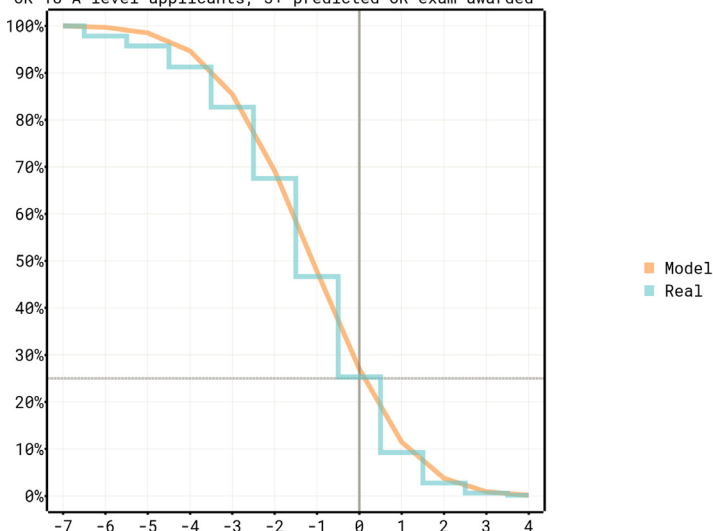
Predicted and exam-awarded (2019)
UK 18 year olds applicants with at least 3 predicted OR exam-awarded



But this perspective does not reflect the role that predicted grades serve in the university admissions system or the realities of exam assessment. Predicted grades are better seen as a reliable estimate of the highest grades an applicant might realistically get through intrinsically uncertain exams.

Figure 2 Probability of getting exam-awarded points relative to predicted points

Probability of these points or higher, relative to predicted, 2012-2017
UK 18 A level applicants, 3+ predicted OR exam-awarded



In recent years predicted grades have acted in just this way, communicating the best exam-awarded grades that an individual might realistically get, with realistic equating to a 25 per cent, or one-in-four, chance. This is illustrated in Figure 2. Here the probability (0% to 100%) of an applicant getting exam-awarded points at a certain level is on the vertical axis. The different levels of exam-awarded grades form the horizontal axis, where they are shown relative to the predicted grades. So, zero on this axis represents the applicant getting grades equal or better than their predicted grades. Minus one on this axis

means the applicant gets exam results that are at least equal to one grade below their predicted grades. And so on.

The stepped line tracks the actual properties of predicted grades in this period. It shows the predicted grades an applicant has (0 on the horizontal axis) are the exam grades the applicant will reach or exceed around 25 per cent of the time. The applicant will get exam results at least one grade better than their predicted points (+1 on the axis) only around 10 per cent of the time. They will get exam results at least equal to three grades below (-3 on the axis) their predicted grades around 80 per cent of the time.

The model line on the graph is a simulated distribution of what we would expect to see if predicted grades did indeed work as an upper estimate and the variability of the exam-awarded grades was related to that of the normal distribution. It is consistent with what is observed. There is more complexity to the predicted and exam-awarded relationship than the public data and this illustration can show.² But predicted grades acting as an estimate of the upper quartile of likely grades, with a more reliable distribution either side of that, holds across some very much more detailed analysis.

So predicted grades are not really a poor estimate of average attainment, more a reliable estimate of something like the upper quartile. They are saying: this student has a realistic chance of doing this well when it comes to exams. If you had to choose a single statistic of potential to underpin good matching of university offers then this would probably be it. That predicted grades are higher than exam-awarded grades is often taken as evidence of their inaccuracy. This is equivalent to saying that an average is not the same as an

2 Who you get an offer from and what the conditions are, for example, together with censoring effects at the limits of the points scale. The relationship has also changed through time for a number of reasons, possibly including the deflation of exam awarded grades (<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/grade-inflation-run-wild/>).

upper quartile. This is true, but it is not an issue of accuracy. Nor is it a problem for university admissions.

But this does leave a wide range of possible exam-awarded points. Predicted grades are saying: the exam-awarded grades could realistically be this high, but will most likely be a grade or two lower, and could quite possibly be a grade or two lower again. Exam-awarded grades then could range over four points. Not good enough, many might conclude. But this applies all of that uncertainty to shortcomings in the predicted grades. It is unlikely to be this simple.

In 2020 Dame Glenys Stacey, then Acting Chief Regulator at Ofqual, observed to the Education Committee: 'It is interesting how much faith we put in examination and the grade that comes out of that [...] they are reliable to one grade either way. We have great expectations of assessment in this country.'³ She probably had in mind here various uncertainties in marking the scripts. But there are other ways that exam-awarded points can fluctuate which have nothing to do with the underlying ability they are trying to measure. You might feel unwell on exam day, for example. But just the supposed marking uncertainty alone puts the random variability of exam results into the territory of plus or minus two points over three A-Levels, similar to their difference around predicted grades. Exam-awarded grades themselves are likely not particularly good at predicting exam-awarded grades.

It is not clear whether the range of exam-awarded points seen for each level of predicted points is due to uncertainty in the predicted grades, the exams, or (most likely) a mixture of different kinds of uncertainty in both. The variation of exam-awarded points about predicted points does not demonstrate predicted grades are inaccurate. It points to the difficulty of capturing what is being measured.

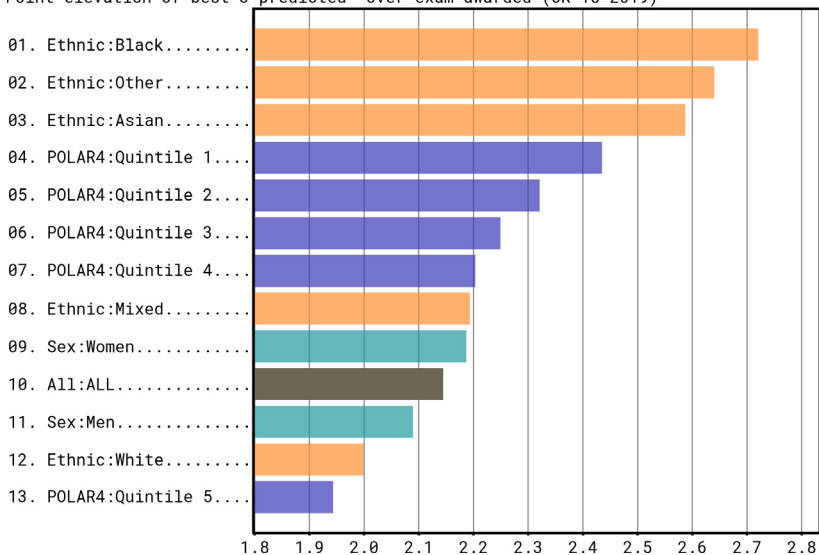
3 See <https://committees.parliament.uk/event/1755/formal-meeting-oral-evidence-session/>

Equality

Even if it seems that, overall, predicted grades might actually be accurate and reliable they could still be an unsuitable basis for admissions if they are damaging to equality. The core concern is that groups who are under-represented in the most selective universities (where predicted grades matter most) might be more likely to have their exam grade potential understated by predicted grades. Such differentially lower predicted grades would deliver a double blow: deterring aspiration in university choices and reducing the chances of getting an offer. This is the reasoning for supposing that switching to an admissions system based on exam-awarded grades only would improve equality. But the data indicates this is unlikely to be the case.

Figure 3 Predicted points minus exam-awarded points by equality group

Point elevation of best 3 predicted over exam-awarded (UK 18 2019)



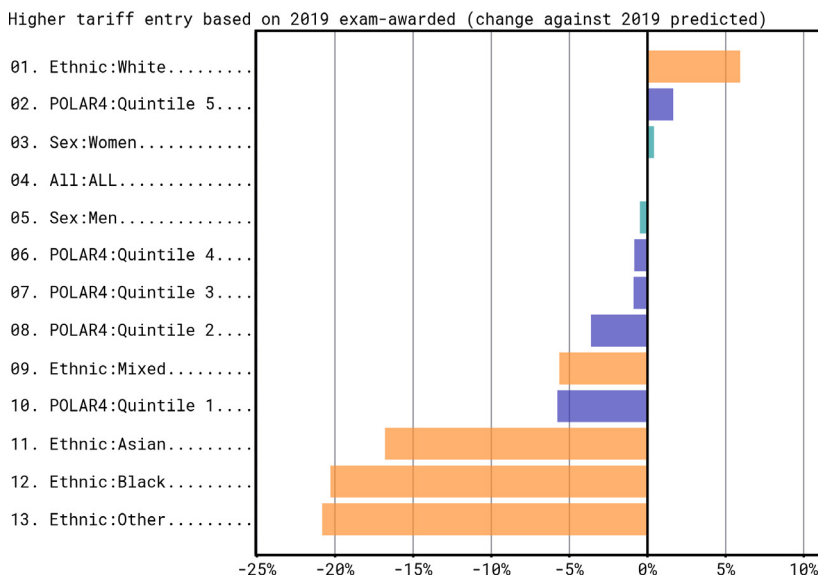
The most under-represented groups in higher-tariff universities across the three readily available equality dimensions are POLAR Q1, men and the Black ethnic group. Figure 3 shows how much higher predicted points are over exam-awarded points across these groups.⁴ The larger this value the more favourably predicted grades position applicants relative to using exam awarded grades. Two of the most under-represented groups, POLAR Q1 and the Black ethnic group, have substantially larger values than average. So, it is unlikely that they would have more favourable admissions outcomes in an exam-awarded only system. Men, the third under-represented group, are slightly below average and so might have a small benefit from discarding predicted grades.

But averages can be misleading. The grade distribution is important too. To account for this, imagine a simplified admissions system where higher-tariff universities admit the 30 per cent of 18-year old A-Level applicants who have the highest points. How would the chances of getting in for different groups vary if predicted or exam-awarded points were used as the basis for admissions?

Figure 4 shows how the entry chances for different groups change when the basis for admissions is switched from predicted to exam-awarded points. Two of the most under-represented groups would see their chances of getting into higher-tariff providers fall if exam-awarded points were used instead of predicted points. By around 5 per cent for POLAR Q1 and around 20 per cent for the Black ethnic group. The entry rate chances of men are similar under the two models.

4 These differences are influenced by a complex series of factors, including attainment distributions and application choices, beyond the scope of this note but the general pattern of elevated predicted grades for POLAR Q1 and the Black ethnic group holds in more detailed analysis (for example, <https://www.ucas.com/file/71796/download?token=D4u-uSzur>).

Figure 4 Change in entry chances on switch from predicted to exam-awarded admissions

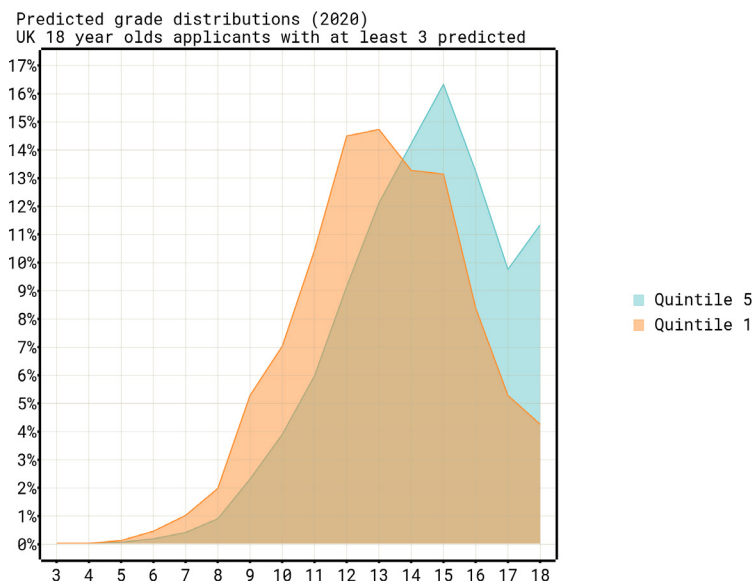


Perhaps predicted grades do not hold overall detriment for equality but might still give small pockets of unfairness that hit some groups harder than others. One concern raised here is around the small number of applicants who are ‘under-predicted’. Specifically, whether some systemic unfairness in predicted grades means those from under-represented backgrounds are disproportionately likely to be in that group.

Analyses which claim to demonstrate this generally take a subset of students who end up with very high exam-awarded grades, and then look at their predicted grade background. If their predicted points are lower than the exam-awarded points, the student is said to be under-predicted. Typically, under-represented groups, like POLAR Q1, are found to have larger proportions of high-exam-grade students who are from

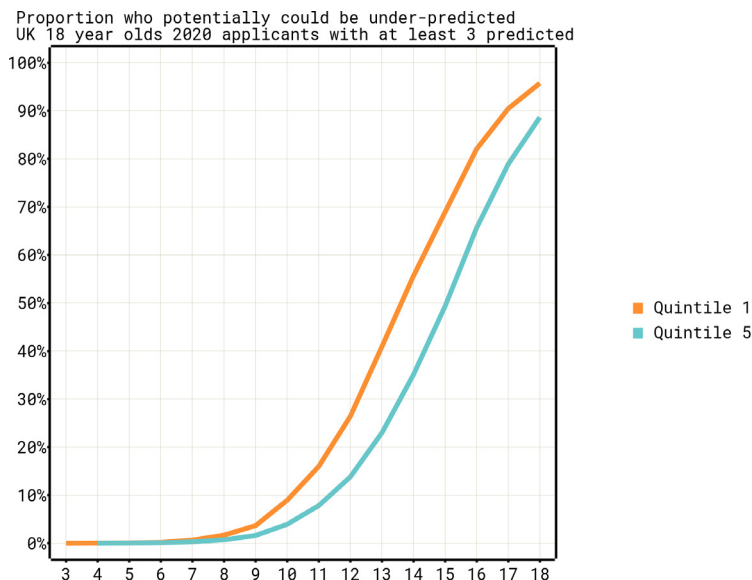
low-predicted-grade backgrounds (under-predicted) than over-represented groups (like Q5). This drives the conclusion that predicted grades are differentially damaging to under-represented groups.

Figure 5 Predicted point distributions Q1 and Q5, 2020



But these conclusions are very likely wrong. The reason is that the under- and over-represented groups have different predicted grade distributions which are not accounted for. The predicted point distribution for Q1 is shifted towards lower points relative to Q5 (Figure 5). So, for a grouping of high exam-awarded points there will be a greater share of Q1 applicants who can potentially get there by under-prediction than there is for Q5 applicants. For example, up to 55 per cent of Q1 applicants could be under-predicted if they obtained 14 points (ABB), whereas only a maximum of 35 per cent could be under-predicted from Q5 (Figure 6).

Figure 6 Maximum possible proportion of under-prediction by exam-awarded points of applicants



With these distributions, and the inherent random noise in exam results, when looking at just high-exam-grade students it is inevitable that more of the Q1 group will have got there through under-prediction. It is simply reflecting that there are more Q1 students with lower predicted points than Q5. This will be the case even if predicted grades have exactly the same relationship to exam-awarded grades for every group. That is, they are fair in that respect.

In practice the actual distribution of predicted grades near to the high-grade threshold and the assumed exam variability drive the patterns. Simulations of this indicate you would generally expect to see 40 to 80 per cent higher levels of 'under-prediction' for Q1 compared to Q5 among those with

higher exam-awarded points. Such results say nothing about the fairness of predicted grades.

All of these equality analyses are approximations in one way or another. But the data do not provide any reason to suppose the use of predicted grades in the admissions system disadvantages under-represented groups. The opposite is more likely to be the case for the most under-represented group, POLAR Q1.

Predicted grades and admissions

If you view predicted grades as an estimate of how well someone might realistically do, and recognise that exam-awarded grades themselves have random noise, then there is no accuracy reason not to use predicted grades in university admissions. Teachers are often implied to be incompetent or scheming when it comes to predicted grades. The data says they do a difficult job well. Perhaps clarifying the nature of predicted grades by expanding the current single value to a likely upper and lower level of attainment would help this be more widely understood.

Omitting predicted grades from admissions would result in a poorer matching of potential to places. It would reduce the amount of measurement information about the underlying potential-to-flourish that universities are really looking for, and so increase the influence of random noise in exam results.

The belief that predicted grades harm equality is not supported by the data. The pattern is mixed across under-represented groups, but overall predicted grades are probably more an aid than a hinderance. Many obstacles stand in the way of under-represented groups getting to more selective universities, but the use of predicted grades in the admissions system is not one of them.

More widely, predicted grades enable an admissions system that affords more time for decision-making and provides structure and security to the process. They also support an orderly and managed process from the university perspective, maximising intakes and letting students commence their studies without undue (and unfunded) delay. It seems reasonable that all these properties are particularly helpful to those from backgrounds with less familiarity with higher education as well as fewer resources. We would not really know until the system was gone. Policymakers who plan to take this risk on the basis of failings in predicted grades should take care the problems they want to solve are in fact real.

2. Rethinking merit in pursuit of fairer university admissions

Professor Vikki Boliver and Dr Mandy Powell, Department of Sociology, Durham University

The call to 'rethink merit'

The Office for Students has recently encouraged England's most academically selective universities to engage in a process of 'rethinking how merit is judged in admissions'.⁵ This is seen as a vital means of achieving ambitious new targets for fairer access, which aim to eliminate area-based inequalities of access to higher-tariff universities within a generation.⁶ Achieving these targets will require a shift away from the traditional 'meritocratic equality of opportunity' model of fair admission, which holds that university places should go to the most highly-qualified candidates irrespective of social background, towards an alternative 'meritocratic equity of opportunity' model, which holds that prospective students' qualifications should be judged in light of the socio-economic circumstances in which they were obtained. More concretely, higher-tariff universities are being encouraged to develop bolder contextualised admissions policies involving significant reductions to academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants.

In this piece we draw on data from a recently completed research project funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which

- 5 Office for Students, *Contextual Admissions: Promoting Fairness and Rethinking Merit*. Insight Brief No. 3, May 2019, Bristol: Office for Students <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/bf84aeda-21c6-4b55-b9f8-3386b21b7b3b/insight-3-contextual-admissions.pdf>
- 6 Office for Students, *A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education: Consultation Outcomes*, 13 December 2018, Bristol: Office for Students https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/546d1a52-5ba7-4d70-8ce7-c7a936aa3997/ofs2018_53.pdf

set out to examine how selective universities in England conceived of 'fair admission'.⁷ The first phase of the research involved in-depth interviews with 78 admissions personnel at 17 selective universities in England during 2017/18. The second phase involved an analysis of the Access and Participation Plans for 2020/21 to 2024/25 subsequently submitted to the Office for Students by England's 25 higher-tariff universities, including 11 of the institutions included in our interview sample. These two data sources shine a light on conceptions of fair admission at selective universities before and after the call to 'rethink merit'.

The traditional 'meritocratic equality of opportunity' model of fair admissions

Our interviews with admissions personnel conducted prior to the call to 'rethink merit' showed that fair admissions were framed principally with reference to the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity model. Academic entry requirements were set very high in order to identify students who were most likely to succeed in higher education under their own steam, to reduce the burden of too many applications and with a mind to university league table position. Universities relied heavily on predicted A-Level grades as an indicator of applicant 'merit', despite knowing that grades were often over-predicted and that a substantial number of offer-holders would ultimately be admitted without having achieved the required grades. Only half of the institutions studied routinely reduced academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants, typically by just one or two grades.

7 Vikki Boliver and Mandy Powell, *Fair Admission to Universities in England: Improving Policy and Practice*, Nuffield Foundation, January 2021. Available online at: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/fair-admission-to-universities-in-england-improving-policy-practice>

When asked explicitly about what constituted fair admissions, the admissions personnel we interviewed spoke first and foremost about the need for admissions criteria to be transparent to applicants. Moreover, that they be applied consistently by admissions decision-makers in accordance with the principle of procedural fairness interpreted to mean equal treatment. Our interviewees were sympathetic to the alternative meritocratic equity of opportunity model which calls for applicants to be treated differently depending on their socio-economic circumstances, in order to achieve a greater degree of distributive fairness with respect to the allocation of university places. However, the pursuit of distributive fairness was perceived to be hampered by resistance from some academic staff to reducing academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged students, for fear of setting them up to fail. Moreover, many of the admissions personnel we interviewed recognised that existing pedagogical practices and academic support structures were inadequate to the task of ensuring that contextually admitted students would be sufficiently supported to fulfil their potential. They saw the value of transforming as-yet-unmet potential into achievement at degree level, but knew that the necessary academic and social support structures were not in place.

A shift towards the 'meritocratic equity of opportunity' model of fair admissions

Our analysis of the Access and Participation Plans subsequently submitted to the Office for Students by England's 25 higher-tariff universities revealed there has been a shift in institutional thinking on fair admissions following the Office for Student's call to rethink merit. All 25 universities had committed to much more ambitious widening access targets than ever before and were more willing than

previously to publicly acknowledge the major role they could and should play in achieving wider and fairer access.

Most universities explicitly acknowledged the impact of socio-economic inequality on prior attainment, with 21 of the 25 universities reporting they would be reducing academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants. For 10 of these universities, this represented their first foray into contextualised admissions. For others, pre-existing contextual admissions policies were being rolled out more widely, in some cases with further reductions to academic entry requirements for contextually disadvantaged applicants.

Crucially, all 25 universities acknowledged they had a major role to play in ensuring the success of their students at degree level, committing to a range of new initiatives designed to significantly improve the social and academic inclusion of students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. Taken together, these developments represent the beginnings of an important shift towards the meritocratic equity of opportunity model of fair admissions.

Next steps on the path to rethinking merit

Our research evidences the distance already travelled by higher-tariff universities in response to the Office for Students' call to 'rethink merit'. However, the journey towards meritocratic equity of opportunity and a correspondingly greater degree of distributive fairness with respect to the allocation of university places does not end here. In order to ensure that contextually disadvantaged students fulfil their as-yet-unmet potential at university, it is vital higher-tariff universities deliver on currently nascent plans to provide students with better academic support and a more inclusive teaching and learning environment. This will require a cultural shift away from a deficit model of student under-achievement

towards a model which recognises and celebrates the fundamental role universities have to play as teaching and learning institutions.

As higher-tariff universities become more academically and socially inclusive, they should aim to become progressively bolder in their use of contextual data on the socio-economic circumstances of applicants to inform admissions decisions. Universities that have pioneered contextual admissions practices have increased their ambition over time, progressing from the initial use of contextual data to give extra consideration to disadvantaged applicants subject to standard entry requirements, to the introduction of reduced academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants. In some cases, these universities have subsequently increased the size of the reduction in academic entry requirements for such applicants, or rolled out contextual offer making previously limited to widening access programme participants to contextually disadvantaged applicants in general. However, many universities have only recently begun to dip their toes in the water. It is understandable and appropriate that universities should engage with contextualised admissions in a somewhat cautious manner given that systems to support the learning of contextually disadvantaged students are still being developed. But it is equally important that universities set an intention to become progressively bolder in their use of contextual data to inform admissions decisions over time in the pursuit of distributive fairness goals.

Finally, higher-tariff universities have an important role to play in making the case to prospective students, and the wider public, for a conceptualisation of fair admissions that emphasises distributive fairness and the goal of more equitable access to and achievement in higher education.

By proactively communicating their commitment to contextualised admissions policies and to supportive and inclusive teaching and learning practices, these universities have the opportunity to forge new reputations for excellence in promoting social mobility and in supporting all students to achieve their full potential.

3. What lessons are to be learnt from 2020's A-Level results and the role of teacher assessments?

Louise Benson, Angela Hopkins and Jude Hillary, National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

The global pandemic that forced the extended closure of UK schools for the majority of students in spring / summer 2020 also led to the national cancellation of A-Level examinations for the first time in living memory. More recently, schools have once again been forced to move to remote learning in the spring 2021 term, leading to the Department for Education scrapping examinations for a second successive year in favour of teachers making assessments. What lessons can be learnt from what happened in 2020 so as to improve what happens in 2021?

Comparison of teacher assessment and examinations

Teacher assessment is often described as having formative or summative purposes. Formative teacher assessment is ongoing and is crucial in helping teachers determine next steps for teaching and learning for students, which is a fundamental aspect of education. Summative teacher assessment, conversely, is used to evaluate whether students have achieved some standard or benchmark at the end of a period of study. It was summative teacher assessment that was used in 2020 in place of examinations, which is the other main form of summative assessment.

How do these two summative assessment approaches compare? Summative teacher assessment can have considerable breadth, as teachers can base their assessment on both coverage of the whole curriculum and learning over time. It is personalised, such that the teacher can take into

account what an individual knows / can do. However, it can suffer from a wider range of uncertainty as it involves a degree of subjective judgement on the part of the teacher. There are also concerns that teacher assessments can have a positive bias, especially where used for other higher stakes purposes (for example, assessing school or teacher performance). Further, there can be difficulties moderating teacher assessments both within and between schools.

Exams, conversely, are an objective means of assessing hundreds of thousands of students who have been taught by tens of thousands of teachers in several thousand schools across the country. Students take the same exam paper, which is anonymised and assessed by a large group of markers, who undertake extensive training and whose marking is continually monitored to ensure quality. Grade boundaries are set objectively, taking into account various factors to maximise fairness across different cohorts. However, exams can only test a representative subset of the curriculum. Further, much of the marking of written answers requires subjective human judgement and even well-trained markers will have different views. Exam performance is therefore dependent on all sorts of factors, including how students feel on the day, specific questions selected for inclusion in an exam paper and the judgement markers make on each answer.

Ultimately, examinations create as level a playing field as possible across all students and institutions, not just within a cohort but across multiple years. This is crucial for national qualifications, whose currency depends on robust assessments, administered and graded consistently, so the outcomes are both meaningful and can inform decisions made by further education, higher education institutions and employers.

What happened in 2020?

Summative teacher assessments were used in 2020 by necessity due to the cancellation of A-Level examinations. It was announced that an algorithm developed by Ofqual would be applied to the initial teacher assessments (so-called Centre Assessed Grades – CAGs) to ensure alignment with previous years' outcomes. On publication of these Ofqual algorithm-adjusted A-Level results, there was a slight overall increase, but there was also a differential change depending on centre type; independent schools fared proportionately well while sixth form colleges and secondary selective schools fared less well.⁸ The algorithm came under intense criticism from candidates, parents, teachers and MPs, and was abandoned shortly after the A-Level results release. Instead, Ofqual announced students would be awarded the higher of their original teacher assessed (CAG) grade and their post-Ofqual algorithm adjusted grade (hereafter referred to as 'final grades').⁹

So what happened to the overall national A-Level results when these final grades were awarded? According to the Department for Education's statistics, the proportion of students achieving top grades (A* / A) rose dramatically, from 26 per cent in 2019 to 38 per cent in 2020.¹⁰ The proportions awarded a grade B or C were broadly unchanged, but the share obtaining a grade D or lower fell from 24 per cent in 2019 to 13 per cent in 2020. Although 2019 was the last year of rolling out reformed A-Levels, which may have suppressed previous results slightly, the Department for Education's

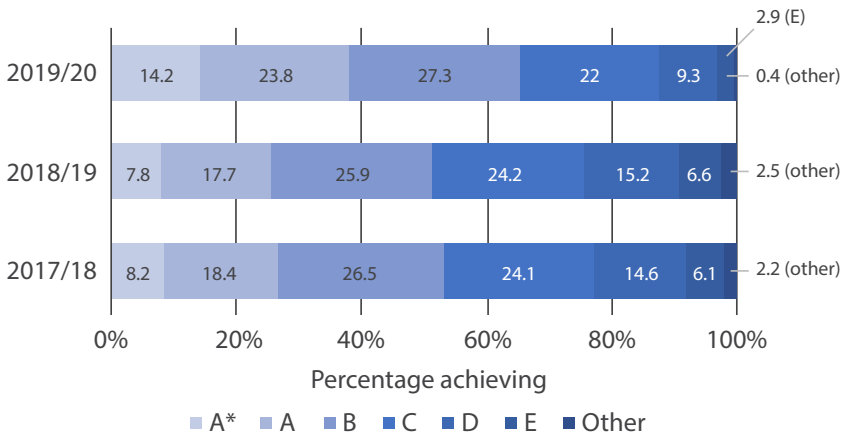
8 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909368/6656-1_Awarding_GCSE_AS_A_level_advanced_extension_awards_and_extended_project_qualifications_in_summer_2020_-_interim_report.pdf (page 136)

9 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-from-roger-taylor-chair-ofqual>

10 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results>

statistics suggest there has been significant grade inflation across the board in 2020.¹¹

Figure 7 Distribution of A-Level grades, 2017/18 to 2019/20



Source: Department for Education – A-Level and other 16 to 18 results 2019/20

The Department for Education’s statistics also reveal that some groups fared better than others. While male and female students were both more likely to obtain higher A* / A grades, increases were larger for females. Similarly, independent schools saw higher increases in A* / A grades compared to state-funded schools. However, the method of awarding grades did not lead to a notable change in the disadvantage gap, which is consistent with Ofqual findings.¹²

Much of the immediate fallout following the Government’s decision to withdraw post-Ofqual algorithm adjusted grades and replace them with final grades fell on the higher education sector as students tried to secure previous offers

11 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guide-to-as-and-a-level-results-for-england-2019>

12 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/summer-2020-outcomes-did-not-systemically-disadvantage-students>

made.¹³ According to UCAS, there were also around 1,000 additional late deferrals in 2020 compared to the 2019 cycle.¹⁴ This may impact on the availability of places open to 2021 applicants this summer at some institutions.

What is happening in 2021?

There are two substantial issues related to assessment in 2021: the method by which students will be assessed and grades awarded, and the extent of students' learning loss when they transition from school into higher education in autumn 2021.

i) Method of assessment

The Department for Education initially announced that students would have to take exams in 2021, albeit with some easements to allow for lost learning (for example, students / schools getting advance notice of some topic areas that would come up in exams, and more generous grading in line with 2020 national outcomes).¹⁵ However, following the announcement of a further national lockdown at the beginning of the spring 2021 term, the disruption in learning from previous lockdowns in 2020 and uncertainty about when face-to-face teaching might resume, the Prime Minister announced that A-Level exams would not go ahead in 2021.¹⁶ The main rationale was that exams could not be held in a way that would be fair to all students, as some will have covered less of the subject curriculum due to no fault of their own.

13 Martin Belam, 'How will the A-level U-turn affect UK university admissions?', *Guardian*, 19 August 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/aug/19/how-will-the-a-level-u-turn-affect-uk-university-admissions>

14 <https://www.ucas.com/file/396231/download?token=qcQL7Fyy>

15 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-support-the-summer-2021-exams/guidance-to-support-the-summer-2021-exams>

16 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-statement-to-parliament-on-national-lockdown>

In place of exams, it was announced that teacher-assessed grades would be used instead. The Department for Education and Ofqual issued a rapid consultation, setting out proposals about how this might be conducted.¹⁷ These proposals suggest that some lessons have been learnt since 2020. For example, schools and colleges are required to assess the standard at which students are performing rather than deciding on the grade a student would most likely have received had the exams taken place. There is to be no ranking of students or algorithm-generated moderation. Teacher assessments will need to be based on clear evidence of the level at which a student is performing. Exam boards should provide guidance and training to assist teachers to make objective decisions, which includes making a set of papers available which teachers can use as part of their assessment. Changes to teachers' grades will be made by exception, for example, where the exam boards' requirements have not been met by the school.

In the absence of exams, these are sensible proposals which seek to make teacher assessments as reliable as possible. However, there are concerns over the additional burdens and responsibility being placed on schools, and questions over whether all of the proposals can be implemented in practice.

ii) Learning loss

Given the amount of disruption to students' education and lost learning time, the consultation suggests it would be best for students to be taught for as long as possible so they can cover more of the curriculum. The consultation proposes a delay to when teachers make their assessments and seeks

17 <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-how-gcse-as-and-a-level-grades-should-be-awarded-in-summer-2021>

views about when this should be, bearing in mind the higher education admissions process. However, a few additional weeks of learning time is unlikely to fully make up for the learning lost over this last year. It is probable that the majority of students transitioning into higher education this autumn will still have large knowledge gaps. If grades are awarded based on what students have been taught, rather than the full curriculum, these learning gaps may be harder to identify by looking at students' grades alone.

This is likely to present a significant issue for the higher education sector, as both the nature and depth of knowledge gaps is likely to vary between students. However, it is imperative that this learning loss is identified and addressed as soon as possible, otherwise it may hinder some students in their higher education studies, prolonging and deepening the impact of COVID well into the future.

Conclusion

There was never going to be an easy solution to addressing the challenges at this extraordinary time. At the time of writing, we are awaiting the Department for Education's response to the consultation, so we should soon have a clearer picture of how students will be assessed in 2021. However, whatever the arrangements, with so much lost learning for the current exam cohort and future cohorts, it is clear that the impact of the pandemic will continue to be felt for some years to come and the higher education sector will have a big role to play in trying to fill the resulting knowledge gaps.

4. What next for admissions in Scotland?

Rebecca Gaukroger, Director of Student Recruitment and Admissions, University of Edinburgh

How relevant to Scotland are proposed admissions reforms?

The calls for reform to the UK-wide admissions system have their roots firmly in England.¹⁸ The sharp-edged recruitment and admissions tactics that have developed as a consequence of the quasi-market conditions in England are largely unseen in Scotland.

Relatively few Scots apply to university prior to receiving any SQA Higher grades. Many offers made to Scots are unconditional, on the basis of Higher grades achieved the summer prior to application.¹⁹ Even conditional offers are generally informed by qualifications achieved in the previous academic year. So, applicants are able to make informed application choices on the basis of their results, and universities make offers on the basis of achieved, rather than predicted, grades.

Where this pattern is changing, it is not among the school leaver cohort, but among students pursuing higher education qualifications in colleges. A growing number of these students are on formal articulation routes from college to university or have Associate Student status at the university they will ultimately attend. In these circumstances, and unless a student decides to change their plans, the UCAS process is a formality.

18 Department for Education, *Post-qualification admissions in higher education: proposed changes*, January 2021 <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/post-qualification-admissions-in-higher-education-proposed-changes>

19 UCAS has excluded applicants from Scotland from its analysis of unconditional offer-making, because the basis of unconditional offer-making to Scots is different from the now dominant practice in England. Frustratingly, though, it means no sector-level data are available on the conditional / unconditional offer-making split in Scotland.

Scottish Clearing remains quiet, with few places advertised, and very few Scots choosing to trade a main scheme Firm choice for a place elsewhere come August. Around 500 Scots were placed at a new choice having 'self-released' from the main scheme into Clearing in 2020 (1.3 per cent of all accepted Scotland-domiciled applicants against 4.7 per cent of all England-domiciled).²⁰

Most obviously, student number controls have kept a lid on the participation rate in Scotland and meant, even with the 'demographic dip' in 18-year olds, demand has broadly exceeded supply. Pre-Brexit, EU students were treated on the same basis as Scots, competed with Scots for limited funded places and like Scots had no tuition fees to pay. In 2020, 14 per cent of all applications to Scottish universities were from the EU; twice the rate in the rest of the UK.

The interests of applicants in Scotland are distinct from 18-year old applicants in England. From the perspective of most Scottish applicants to Scottish universities – approximately 95 per cent of Scots who go to university do so in Scotland – a greater concern is not the opacity of the market, or the machinations of the UCAS process, but straightforwardly how to get in to university at all.

Widening access through admissions

The focus across the Scottish education system – and the Government – has been squarely on closing the attainment gap and widening access to higher education.

In May 2016, Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, announced:

20 UCAS, *UCAS End of Cycle Report 2020* <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-re-sources-2020>

*A child born today in one of our most deprived communities must, by the time they leave school, have the same chance of getting to university as a child of the same ability from one of the most well off parts of our country. This is a fundamental part of what I mean by a fair and equal society.*²¹

This pledge has driven university access and admissions policy in Scotland in the years since, and there is no sense it will abate in the near future.

The Commission on Widening Access (COWA)'s *Blueprint for Fairness*, adopted in full by the Scottish Government, provides the framework to realise the First Minister's ambition.²²

The importance of progress against the COWA milestones and targets is now embraced almost universally by university managers, if not the academic higher education policy community.²³ Key among these milestones is participation by students from the most deprived communities according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), representing the lowest quintile of the measure: SIMD20 or SIMD Q1.²⁴

Scottish universities have agreed a common approach to contextual admissions, with clear blue water between 'minimum entry requirements' for widening access applicants

21 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/first-minister-speech-priorities-for-government/>. Subtly different versions of this ambition were articulated by the First Minister between 2014 and 2016.

22 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/>

23 For example, Lucy Hunter Blackburn, *How good is SIMD as a basis for setting HE access targets?*, 2016 <https://adventuresinevidence.com/2016/09/07/how-good-is-simd-as-a-basis-for-setting-he-access-targets/> and Laurence Lasselle, *Barriers to higher education entry – a Scottish rural perspective*, 2016 <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/9782>.

24 Scottish Government, *Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation*, 2020 <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/>

and 'standard entry requirements' for others. Universities have pledged to guarantee offers to care experienced applicants.

The number of articulation routes between college and university has grown steadily, with every university in Scotland now offering access on this basis. Graduate Apprenticeship opportunities are increasing, too, though the impact of COVID-19 has temporarily reduced opportunities.

These changes to progression routes, the mainstreaming of guaranteed and widening access offers, enhanced funding for care experienced and estranged students – all make the PQA reforms largely irrelevant to widening participation in Scotland. The interests of applicants who historically have been poorly served by university admissions are already to the fore.

The intake of SIMD20 students has increased markedly. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of 18-year olds from SIMD20 areas entering Scottish universities increased by nearly 26 per cent.

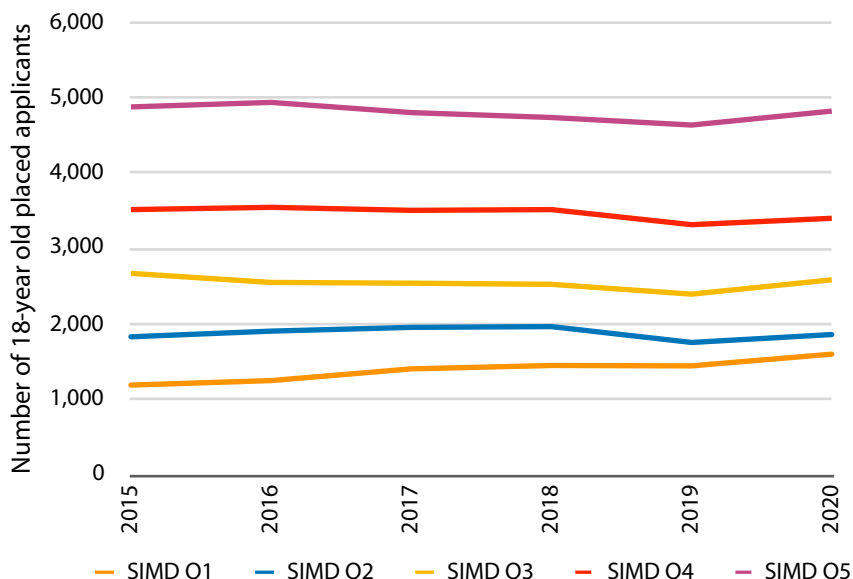
However, in a closed system with student number controls, the consequences of the focus on widening access have not been universally welcomed. Despite contextual admissions policies that recognise other under-represented groups, entry to Scottish universities has remained highly stratified by SIMD. It is not only SIMD 20 students who are under-represented.

Without more places, equalising access between the least and most deprived areas is likely to suppress participation by those in between. More places would obviously come at a cost to the Government.

There is a chance a solution will come from an unlikely source: Brexit. In 2020, 4,110 EU students were accepted onto

undergraduate courses at Scottish universities.²⁵ If the number of funded places previously filled by EU students is retained in the system post-Brexit there are significant opportunities to increase the participation rate in Scotland, and to equalise access across the board.

Figure 8 18-year old placed applicants, by SIMD quintile, 2015-20²⁶



25 UCAS, 2020 End of Cycle Report, 2020 <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2020-end-cycle-report>

26 UCAS, 2020 Entry UCAS Undergraduate Reports by Sex, Area Background, and Ethnic Group: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2020/2020-entry-ucas-undergraduate-reports-sex-area-background-and-ethnic-group>. Changes to postgraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) admissions in England have meant that applications to postgraduate ITE programmes in Scotland are processed via the UCAS undergraduate scheme. An unfortunate consequence is that published UCAS undergraduate admissions statistics for Scotland includes these postgraduate courses. Filtering reports by age excludes these courses, but also excludes mature students and adult returners to undergraduate courses and understates undergraduate entry.

Offer rates would be likely to increase, giving more Scottish applicants more choice and more power in the system.

It could also give the system the capacity to take collaboration to another level, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects that have been sustained at undergraduate level in many Scottish universities by EU students, with limited unmet demand from Scotland. Established partnerships with colleges and industry could be seized upon to develop a Scottish STEM pipeline – which would surely be welcomed by the Government, in the context of moves to make tertiary education in Scotland more coherent and integrated.

The Scottish Funding Council's *Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability*, commissioned by the Scottish Government in June 2020, presents an opportunity radically to change the delivery and experience of post-16 education in Scotland.²⁷ Relationships between schools, colleges and higher education institutions are already strengthening through the growth of articulation routes and the six City Region Deals in Scotland. The outcomes of the Review could deliver much more.

A more integrated system will need to balance student choice, institutional distinctiveness and autonomy on the one hand, with strong regional partnerships and seamless and certain transitions on the other.

This means portable qualifications and credit, and requires a significant enhancement of information, advice and guidance to enable people to navigate a complex landscape of qualifications, providers and funding.

The development of bridges and pathways into and through

27 Scottish Funding Council, *Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability*, 2020 <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/review/review.aspx>

tertiary education is unlikely to shake the dominant demand for on-campus, full-time study. The proportion of higher education students in Scotland studying on a full-time basis continues to increase.²⁸ One-in-three (30 per cent) of undergraduates at Scotland's universities are from outside Scotland, applying with a range of qualifications. Some gain advanced entry, but most choose to study for the full four or five years of an undergraduate degree.

This increasing of diversity of qualifications and routes may cause universities to think more deeply about their admissions entry requirements and approaches to selection. The experience of the 2020 and 2021 entry cycles demonstrates the limitations of an admissions system dependant on applicants clearing a qualification hurdle, which in many circumstances operates as a crude proxy for ability. The particular skills and knowledge a candidate possesses, which may be evidenced through a variety of qualifications and experiences, will need to be better understood and valued in future. In the face of pressure on resources and calls for more automation of administrative processes, more nuanced and sensitive judgments may need to be made in admissions decision-making. This is not a future imagined by the admissions reforms currently under consideration.

28 Scottish Funding Council, *Infact* <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications-statistics/statistics/statistics-colleges/infact/infact-database.aspx>

5. Comparisons to international admissions systems

David Hawkins, Founder, The University Guys

When considering the ins and outs of a university admissions process, we can often apply one context to another without examining the complexity. At The University Guys, we use an analogy to help explain this: football. If you ask a Brit to describe what the sport of 'football' is, they are likely to describe a different sport than an American would be considering: the same word, many different meanings. The same is true for university. 'University' is a word which means different things to people in different parts of the world – how an American family might think about the experience of studying at university and how one applies is vastly different to how a British family might think about it. In my career to date, I have supported applicants to universities in 27 different countries. As we consider the future of UK admissions, it is vital to look beyond the surface of how other countries run admissions. It is not different systems for the same university experience; it is different systems created to serve the needs of very different university experiences.

With this knowledge of international admissions, from the perspective of applicants and their advisers, we see that the nature of an admissions process is impacted by two key factors: the nature of the secondary school system students apply from and what they are applying for.

Any university admissions process needs to look at what is happening within the system students are applying from. Indeed, the two will likely have evolved over many years with changes in one influencing the other. Too often when comparing UK admissions to other countries we miss this fact – the very nature of the evolution of UK secondary education

with A-Levels, GCSEs and the various other initiatives over recent years has created a highly-specialised educational experience, with most students focusing on a narrow range of options for their last two years of schooling. We also run a mostly comprehensive system, with students able to access a range of different options, all of which lead to an externally-validated qualification. Therefore, it is not surprising that the UK admissions system seeks to decide entry based on an 'offer' of achievement in these qualifications.

The Netherlands provides a good contrast. At age 12, students are admitted to different types of school: typically, either 'Pre-University Education' leading to the award of a VWO diploma, or 'Senior General Secondary Education' which grants a HAVO. VWO allows some choice of subjects for the last two years and follows the 'gymnasium' academic culture typical of other northern European countries, including a focus on the classics. HAVO starts with a common curriculum before students choose one of four pathways. Thus, students in the Dutch school system have already been put onto a stream a long way before getting anywhere near university admissions: where they are applying from impacts the admissions process.

The Dutch admissions process builds on this system. Dutch Research Universities offer direct admission to students with a VWO, apart from in very few circumstances where extra selection procedures exist for heavily over-subscribed courses or those that are 'small-scale and intensive', like the range of University Colleges. With a HAVO, you cannot go to a research university, but instead, have direct entry to a University of Applied Science. When at university, the Dutch then describe their selection system as selection 'after the gate' – open access (on the whole) to start university, but high marks are needed in the first year to stay on the course. Here, *what* you are applying for is different: a large, open-access university

experience with selection yet to come – the needs of the system (which mostly involves no predicted grades, no references and no statement) are thus very different to UCAS.

A second example worth considering is the United States, perhaps the world's most complex university admissions system. So much is written in the UK media about US admissions which misses this complexity, and to delve fully into it would need more space than this entire report would allow for. Here again, however, we see how the link between secondary school and the university experience is very strong.

The United States and UK university systems are sometimes described as like comparing apples to oranges, but it is more like an apple pie versus an Apple iPad – the same terminology – but a very different meaning. The big point that is often missed is that students applying to US universities are usually not applying to study just one subject: you are admitted to the university, not a course of study. Thus, the application is not about a candidate's suitability to excel in Maths, or French, or Literature but in their ability to succeed in the academic and social culture of that university. Given this, universities cannot solely focus on achievement in external exams, academic interviews or entrance tests – a student admitted to major in History could graduate four years later with a degree in Physics with Greek. The US process – with three references required from school, multiple application essays specific to each university, SAT / ACT (in pre-pandemic times) to show a general level of ability and four years' academic grades from high school – reflects the experience at university.

When we delve back into the US high school system, we can understand why this is so. The USA has no national curriculum. There are no two-year-long exam systems. Assessment for GPA (Grade Point Average) is highly varied,

school-to-school and state-to-state. What a student graduating from a high school in New Jersey will have studied – and the level to which they studied it – could be very different from what a peer in Iowa studied. US admissions have to be holistic to take into account this variation. An often-overlooked part of US admissions is the role a High School Profile plays. The Profile is a document giving information and data about the school a student has attended – in many ways, it is the lens through which the application is read, providing context to everything else. So as in the Netherlands, the school system that students are applying *from* impacts the admissions process that has evolved.

When we start to look at international comparators, from Ireland to Japan, Germany to Hong Kong, it is all too easy to look solely at the admissions process detached from the cultures that created them. As we consider the future of UCAS, it is essential to accept that our method has evolved based on the very specialised nature of both our secondary and university curricula and the fact that performance in national, content-based exams is so embedded in our culture. With post-qualification admissions, post-qualification offers or something else on the horizon, it is important to look beyond the pure mechanics and instead focus on the educational culture that created our system which – to my eyes – is world-leading and in precious little need of change.

6. Reflections ten years on from the last PQA review

Mary Curnock Cook, Non-executive director across the education sector and former Chief Executive of UCAS

University admissions involve multiple players in the education ecosystem – not just aspiring students and the institutions that want to admit them, but also schools, colleges, teachers, advisers, parents, private exam candidates, exam boards and markers and of course ministers and regulators. Then, assuming a UK-wide system is still desirable, multiply it all by four for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland whose schools, universities, exam systems, timetables and policy environments all operate in slightly different ways.

In thinking about reform of the admissions system, a good place to start is to examine some of the positive things about the current system so we avoid throwing any babies out with the bathwater.

- The UCAS admissions service is known, trusted and used for the vast majority of full-time undergraduate applications; it is a single process for all courses with a single fee covering five applications – more if candidates also use the ‘extra’ service and / or Clearing. Schools and colleges can support their students through a process which is widely understood and on a timetable which is familiarly embedded in the academic calendar.
- It works well for the majority of students: over 90 per cent of applicants get at least one offer and nearly three quarters are confirmed at their first-choice university and course. For those who do not get their first choice, they can use an efficient, well-resourced post-results application service called Clearing.

- Applicants go into their examination term with confirmed offers, usually conditional on achieving certain grades. This generally motivates them with a focus on the required grades and the sense of a known destination post-school. Older applicants who already have their grades have the certainty of a confirmed, unconditional offer shortly after applying, even quite early in the cycle, leaving plenty of time to plan their new student lives.
- Universities have a good idea of the demand for their courses and the likely number of recruits several months ahead of registration, allowing them to plan their resources and ensure that students have a well-ordered start to their courses.
- The system has worked well across the four parts of the UK, in both capped and non-capped student number regimes, and in cycles where the supply-demand balance is flipped either way.

But is it enough that it works well for most people? Especially when the minority for whom it does not work so well are likely to be outliers in terms of disadvantage, disability, advice and support and educational attainment. That surely is at the heart of calls for reform – can we improve the system to ensure that *everyone*, whatever their background, has the best possible chance of making the right choices for their higher education?

The assumed villain of the piece is the predicted grades on which the majority of young school-leavers base their applications. Less than 20 per cent of predicted grades are spot on; about 60 per cent are over-predicted (often by several grades) and some 20 per cent are under-predicted, mostly by only one grade across three A-Levels. The over-predicted grades provide little to worry about since this

expected over-prediction is priced into the application system by universities.

Paradoxically, these 'unreliable' predicted grades are highly predictable in their unreliableness. Indeed, there may well be more unfairness inherent in awarded grades which the exams' regulator, Ofqual, has admitted are only correct to within one grade either way.

The evidence that unconditional offers made on the basis of predicted grades on average slightly depress grade achievement means we can also surmise that the predicted grade / conditional offer model will, in aggregate, see students achieve slightly better grades.

But it is the under-predicted candidates that commentators are most worried about lest the low grades predicted by their teachers funnel them into less stretching courses, perhaps forever charting an under-par course for their lives. What could be done to improve their aspirations and life chances?

The debate about PQA anticipates that some form of admissions system using actual rather than predicted grades will improve fairness for these candidates but, as Mark Corver's paper on page 11 points out, this might be far from true and such a system might damage the prospects of more students than it improves.

Supporting teachers to reduce under-prediction of grades might be easier, cheaper and a lot less risky than upending the entire university admissions system.

Or could you run the system completely as-is but simply eliminate the predicted grades from the system? Same application form, same timetable, just without predicted grades? Schools would still have to give their students some kind of expectations about their grades so that they could

direct their research, plan their open day visits and make realistic applications. But this could be much broader (and therefore easier to get right) – for example predictions could simply be for ‘high’, ‘medium’ or ‘low’ tariff grades. Students could be encouraged to apply to universities in their predicted tariff band and to some in a higher (or lower) band too. In addition to the ‘firm’ and ‘insurance’ choice, students could be allowed (and encouraged to make) a further ‘stretch’ choice with the same contractual obligations from universities. This could mitigate well for under-prediction.

Another option would be to take further steps to cement Clearing as a viable and fair post-results application window. This would require applicants to register for the early or the post-results process. Universities would have to ring-fence places for the late application window, with some mechanism to ensure that the application windows do not become easier or harder to secure a place through. This model has the benefit of giving choice and agency to students and could also presage a more gradual market-driven change in favour of a post-results system, avoiding the highly risky big-bang change approach.

Finally, I have always wondered whether it would be possible to flip the system entirely so that instead of students applying for places, universities apply for students. This would need students to state some preferences about courses, universities and location and, in effect, advertise themselves to universities prepared to make them an offer.

These ideas are not proposals. But they are encouragements to think widely about if and how to change a system that on the whole works well for students and universities. Many students want and need known goals to power them through their final year at school; universities need to be able to plan their resources. Wholesale change to a post-result system risks

removing much of what is desirable in the current system for the majority of students, while providing only unproven benefits (and possibly new risks) for the minority for whom change is thought to be desirable.

Back in 2011/12, when I led a major review of the university admissions process as Chief Executive of UCAS, I was still relatively new to higher education. Now I fear that I am too inured in the thinking of nearly a decade ago to be able to see clearly what could work with this year's louder calls for a post-results university admissions system. Now I encourage policymakers to bring outsiders to the table because those of us who have been close to this debate for years may have run out of original thinking. Perhaps it is not the admissions system that needs to change so much as the secondary assessment system (A-Levels and so on) upon which it rests. Are there better ways to prepare students for a successful higher education and on which to base admissions decisions?

There also has to be a question mark over the timing of an admissions reform agenda when the whole education system is under such stress from the COVID crisis. As well as bringing outsider thinking to the issue, we need to make sure that the insiders have the capacity to give wholehearted consideration to any new proposals. The price for getting things wrong in the higher education admissions system is far too high to rush.

7. Post-qualification admissions: Should we be careful what we wish for?

Dr John Cater, Vice-Chancellor, Edge Hill University

I type to a recording of Joe Biden's Inauguration, to the (sometimes literal) strains of Lady Gaga, but, my earworm is channelling a line from a song four decades past, 'I don't know where I'm going, but I'm going...'

Is there a problem?

There is a determination to do something, but the Government's consultation on post-qualification admissions is some distance from the rhetoric that preceded it. The Secretary of State's Foreword talks of an 'intention to explore' – indeed the word 'explore' appears five times in five short paragraphs – and the first line of the consultation asks 'whether to change' the current system. So why the new-found hesitancy?

We have been here before. The Dearing Commission in 1997 looked favourably on the principle of a post-qualification system and the Schwartz review (2003) sought to remodel and add substance to the skeleton. But, two decades on, these reports gather dust. In any organisation there is a 'too difficult' box, where the challenges of radical change outweigh any perceived benefits, and where failure could cost the protagonist their career. It may be that a complete overhaul of the admissions system falls into that category.

The race has also slowed. A standard 12-week consultation has been extended to 16, and the Department for Education knows it has far greater challenges to tackle in the interim, while schools, colleges and universities are hardly short of equally urgent priorities.

Following the consultation there will be change, but how much? First, it helps to understand the scale of the problem. Almost four-fifths of all pupils have their grades over-predicted, but this 'best possible outcome' is understood by admissions tutors across the length and breadth of the devolved nations, and, while the intercept has shifted, the curve, predicted versus actual, is largely consistent. A far bigger issue covers a far smaller proportion of the population – the one-in-twelve whose performance is underestimated. But research by DataHE comes to a counter-intuitive conclusion that these individuals are less likely to be drawn from under-represented groups. Clearly, it would be helpful to know more. In the interim, increasingly challenging Access and Participation Plan targets rightfully continue to help drive institutions towards truly meritocratic outcomes.

And what of the UCAS system itself? Three-quarters of applicants now get a place at their first-choice institution (though one-in-four do not), and each year a further refinement – compensation, Clearing, Clearing Plus, Adjustment, self-release – facilitates flexibility post-qualification.

But there is another important factor; the market. While the number of applicants being placed at low-tariff and, increasingly, middle-tariff institutions declines or ossifies, the number entering high-tariff providers accelerates upwards, with an 11 per cent increase in 2020 alone. This acceleration will continue: financial uncertainty, debts and covenants, the loss of international and EU student numbers, all pressure institutions to recruit flexibly, and the removal of student number controls allows a perceptual elite to benefit. Given this, the applicant who aspires to study at a high-tariff provider is increasingly likely to see that aspiration met.

There remains, however, the nub of the perceived problem, the inaccuracy of predicted performance and the concern that this will lead to a suboptimal outcome for the individual. In terms of learning and teaching or student support, a lower-tariff provider may be far from suboptimal, and not all students will have similar levels of geographical mobility. It is, however, right to acknowledge that much of the labour market, particularly outside of the main public sector employers (health, education, social care) has a long-established, and seemingly immutable, preference for graduates from a limited number of universities.

The discontinuity between prediction and grade, if it matters much, is a product of competition – no school or college wants to place a pupil at a perceived disadvantage by under-estimating optimum performance – and, increasingly, a lack of evidence. In the disrupted school years of 2019/20 and 2020/21 this is particularly pronounced.

It is also a product of the shift away from modularised A-Levels in the middle years of the past decade. While the treadmill of summative assessments in the January and May / June of both Years 12 and 13 was ripe for reform, the lurch to a single summative examination point after two years of study comes at considerable cost; no independent evidence of pupil performance to inform teacher assessments, and no independent Level 3 guidance to university admissions tutors to inform pupil aptitude for higher education.

Is post-qualification admissions the solution?

The vast bulk of educational disadvantage occurs long before two-fifths of the 18-year old population enters higher education; but would PQA lessen disadvantage at this point in the educational lifecycle? The answer is moot.

Most universities with strong track records in widening participation will talk eloquently about longer-term relationship building, about preparing an applicant for degree-level study, about supporting an applicant and their families for the non-academic aspects of the next three or four years of their lives. We have seen this through Aim Higher (in its various iterations), Lifelong Learning Networks, Action on Access and, now, through the sadly-diminished Uni Connect programme.

A post-qualification applications model would be in danger of destroying that relationship completely, a post-qualification offer model would doubtless diminish it, as candidates hold a range of expressions of interest rather than a commitment to one. And decisions made in haste, in a much-shortened post-offer window, may be decisions regretted; higher withdrawal rates for those entering through Clearing would certainly suggest so. Think of this through the lens of the applicant. Would performance, health and well-being be best served by entering Level 3 examinations with marks in the bank; with a three-in-four chance of their first-choice university; with a goal to aim at and an incentive to perform to the best of their ability?

The alternative to a rushed decision-taking process and a delayed start to term might not help either. The Government consultation wisely all but rules out a January start, which would see those less able to depend on family support drifting into jobs that failed to reflect their capacity and potential. But even the delay of a month would have a concomitant effect and put the university year, already truncated for many, increasingly out of synchronisation with schools and colleges.

The biggest problem with a short window between offer, acceptance and commencement may, however, relate to

the need to interview and gather further information and clearances for very many students. Are you admitted to perform without an audition, to paint without a portfolio?

If you plan to train to teach or work in the NHS, you will normally be interviewed, face-to-face, by both an academic and an active practitioner. The University that employs me has 7,000 applications for Health programmes every year, and the ability to test a candidate's commitment and capacity for a challenging career cannot happen in the summer window. Nor can it happen without a wholesale restructure of the academic contract.

There is more. Candidates for professional programmes leading to public service need Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance. No individual can be put into a practice-based setting without it; nor can they be fully enrolled and therefore entitled to draw down their student loan. Between March and September 2020, DBS clearance was given to 2,926,000 applicants, with universities spreading their numbers across the recruitment cycle. Concertina DBS applications from and for education providers into a shortened time frame and the system, which depends on police verification, would be severely stretched, possibly to breaking point. And, ultimately, workforce supply could suffer.

Conclusion

Over half-a-million candidates apply to UCAS every year. Approaching 400,000 get their first choice and only a declining percentage who would wish to do so do not enter university. The system is not perfect, but it would be a brave politician who turned over the tables in the temple, given the risks involved. That said, could the current system be improved?

- The reintroduction of some form of summative assessment at the end of Year 12 would give an objective basis for teacher assessments and admission tutors' judgments.
- Delaying the opening of UCAS until mid-October for applications for Medicine, Health, Social Care and Teaching programmes (where interviews and DBS checks are essential) would break the eternal cycle.
- If feasible, commencing a truncated Main Cycle from the beginning of January – enabling pupils and schools to focus on learning and teaching throughout the autumn term – could help, with all decisions reached by the end of March.

Further strengthening of the late application and Clearing process – possibly by insisting that all institutions hold over a percentage of places (one-in-ten?) for those they wish to compensate or recruit through Clearing, Adjustment or self-release; and, through the Access and Participation Plan, monitoring (and, if necessary, setting targets for) recruitment through this process.

Not perfect, but better? Less likely to collapse – and less likely to create vacancies in the Department for Education in Great Smith Street. And that earworm? It has moved on: 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for'. You too?

8. Findings from the Universities UK (UUK) Fair Admissions Review

Chris Hale, Director of Policy, Universities UK

University admissions play a pivotal role in the student journey. On one level it is about matching prospective students with the course and university that is best for them. But it is also far more than that – it is about realising the hopes and aspirations of individuals. It is a very serious business. Admissions also play a critical role in unlocking opportunity for the most disadvantaged. For all these reasons we need to constantly ask ourselves whether processes are fair, transparent and easy to understand for applicants.

Overall, seven-in-ten students (70 per cent) think the current system of university admissions is fair.²⁹ However, more than one-in-four recent applicants (28 per cent) disagree that the application process works in its current form. We have also seen increasing scrutiny and criticism of university admissions practices, shifts in applicant behaviour and an increase in questions over the fairness of the traditional approach of applying to university based on predicted grades.

The Universities UK (UUK) Fair Admissions Review, working with school and college leaders, students and UCAS, was established to examine the evidence and make recommendations on what needs to happen for admissions to continue operating fairly and in applicants' interests. Many of the challenges were focused on England but it was also important to include stakeholders from across the UK, to understand and learn from the devolved administrations and maintain coherence. We gathered a huge amount of evidence

29 <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Documents/uuk-perceptions-fairness-comres-research.pdf>

from all stakeholders and the Review reported in early November 2020.³⁰

We started with a previous admissions review, conducted by Professor Steven Schwartz.³¹ The Schwartz principles of fairness established in that review have successfully guided admissions practice for over 15 years. We found that they were still largely fit for purpose but updated them to ensure the applicant interest is reflected more explicitly.

Building on these revised principles we make a series of bold recommendations for short-term action. We recommend phasing out the use of conditional unconditional offers and tighter use of conditional offers, using these only in specific circumstances. We want to see institutions review the use of incentives and greater transparency on the actual grades previous applicants have been admitted with, rather than just advertised grades. The group also reaffirmed the important role that contextual offers can play in levelling up and addressing disparities in opportunities, but we propose greater transparency and a more consistent approach.

With the support of UCAS, the group considered more fundamental longer-term reform including several models under the umbrella of post-qualifications admissions. Drivers for exploring these options included problems identified with the use and accuracy of predicted grades and the fairness of predictions. Our polling identified that while 64 per cent of students think it is fine to apply to university or college with predicted grades, a majority would prefer offers to be made post-results.

30 <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/fair-admissions-review.aspx>

31 <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5284/1/finalreport.pdf>

Post-qualification applications, where applicants apply and offers are made by universities after applicants have received their qualifications, was potentially attractive but rejected. The scale of disruption needed to make it happen, including potentially shifting term start dates to January, was seen to outweigh the benefits along with concerns that applicants would be unable to build a relationship with the institutions they were applying to. A 'post-qualification decisions' option was also considered. This is where applicants apply and offers are made by universities before results are received, although applicants' acceptance of any offer comes after they have their qualifications. Again, this was rejected, but mainly because in many respects it was not radical enough to address the challenges identified. The third option considered was post-qualification offers. This is where applicants can build relationships with institutions but offers are not made (and accepted) until the applicants have their grades. There was stronger interest in this as it held many of the benefits of more radical options but without the associated disruption. There were, however, several problems identified, which included a potential lack of access to guidance from advisers when offers are being made. The review recommends that further consideration is given to this model, with additional consultation on the practical and workability issues, to aim for implementation within three to four years.

The UUK Fair Admissions Review has moved the admissions debate on and sets a clear blueprint for short and longer-term action. The big question is where we go next with all of this? The shorter-term actions are perhaps more straightforward. UUK is committed to developing an admissions code of practice, encompassing the recommendations above, which we will consult on during the first half of 2021. Key questions will include how we appropriately assure compliance to

ensure confidence in the approach. We will also develop and consult on proposals around contextual offers.

A critical question on longer-term reform is – where does the mandate and legitimacy to lead reform sit? My answer is that it is distributed. Universities have autonomy over admissions, underpinning the success of UK higher education, and are the ones that will implement any reforms. Government (including devolved administrations) have a legitimate interest on behalf of the public in ensuring the system is fair and to set policy direction. The current legislative framework may restrict certain actions on university admissions by government, but this does not negate a legitimate interest. Indeed, the Department for Education has recently published its own consultation on post-qualification admissions options. UCAS, as the sector's admissions service, will also play a role, not least in implementing reform and making any new system work for applicants and institutions. Alongside this are those with a very strong stake – students, schools and colleges.

If we are to achieve this reform the trick will be for those organisations above to work collectively. The aims feel well aligned now, but we need to avoid a collective action problem emerging if we are to make real progress. This can be achieved by agreeing to establish a clear mechanism through which to work collectively, resolve issues and chart the way forward. The scale of the change that will come from these reforms also points towards the need for a collective effort. Even if any one of the actors above had sole legitimacy or agency, none of them can do this on their own. As UUK, we stand ready to work collectively to take those next steps.

9. Post-qualification offers versus post-qualification applications

John Cope, Director of Strategy, Policy,
and Public Affairs, UCAS

Higher education is more important and wide-ranging than ever before. Demand for higher technical and degree-level qualifications from employers continues to grow as our economy becomes more digital and automation advances. Our working lives are becoming longer as life expectancy increases, meaning adult education and retraining are on the rise. Regional inequalities in education are better understood than they have been before. The emphasis on apprenticeships over the last 10 years has fundamentally shifted what people look to UCAS for, with nearly 50 per cent of those writing their applications interested in apprenticeships. And the perceived 'default' of a full-time three-year undergraduate course is less defined with flexible, part-time and modular learning increasingly important.

As a result, the UK's shared national admissions service delivered by UCAS over the last 50 years has changed beyond recognition. Reform is in our DNA as decisions about starting an apprenticeship or going to college and university are life-changing, meaning we owe it to students continually to improve the advice they receive and the admissions process they experience.

The Government has posed the question of whether a post-qualification admissions system might play an important part in the levelling up process. This is by no means a new question – the Dearing report in 1997 supported admissions based on actual achievement to 'assist students since they know more about their abilities (and possibly their interests) having received their examination result'. Professor Schwartz

agreed in 2003 when he set out the Schwartz Principles that now underpin our admissions system. UCAS's own review in 2011/12 found merit in reform, although held back from endorsing an approach due to the practicalities involved.

Why has post-qualification admissions reform hovered out of reach?

It is important to recognise the current system is much more cultural than formal, creating enormous sticking power. Indeed, as a charity, UCAS's status as the UK admissions service rests on the quality of our service, not regulation. As well as cultural stickiness, admissions do not exist in a vacuum – any change has big knock-on effects for careers advisers, universities, teachers, students, international students, the Student Loans Company and so on. Impact also varies by institution, subject and type of course. It is also important to recognise that the current system works well for the majority of students, many of whom get their dream first choice.

Simply because something is difficult and will cause upheaval is not a sufficient basis to reject it

There is good reason admissions reform returns to the agenda with such regularity and the additional scrutiny of results in 2020 made it almost inevitable. The accuracy of predicted grades (UCAS data for 2019 shows 79 per cent of 18-year olds in the UK accepted to higher education with at least three A-Levels had their grades over-predicted, with 8 per cent under-predicted), increased use of unconditional offers and access for disadvantaged students all contribute. Overarching this are questions about the logic of asking applicants to make life-changing decisions six months before they know their exam results. That is why UCAS backs reform.

There are two broad options on the table:

- i) *Post-qualification offers* – the application and research phases still happen pre-qualification, but course offers and applicant decisions are made on actual grades; or
- ii) *Post-qualification applications* – moving the entire application process to after grades are confirmed, meaning courses realistically need to start more towards January.

There are other variants, such as the second option but keeping the current October start of term. Enticing, but unworkable. It would create a highly mechanical, impersonal, algorithmic process pressured into a few weeks. Extra support to help disadvantaged and disabled students would vanish. Interviews and extra tests made impossible. Higher education institutions and accommodation providers left with little clue how many people are going to turn up until the last moment and little time for visa arrangements to be made for international students. The list goes on. The losers in all this would be the applicants.

The first option however – moving to offers being post-results – would address issues around predicted grades without shrinking the application window to weigh-up options in Years 12 and 13. It would mean students could make choices when they are most informed. Students would not need to narrow down to two courses before they got their results – they could keep their options open for longer. This also creates space to consider if a 15 October application deadline for some courses remains necessary. As a result, post-qualification offers is UCAS's preferred model.

Reform cannot create worse problems that those we seek to address

The second option, moving applications entirely post-results with a January start, keeps the benefits of option one but creates serious new headaches. The biggest of these would be a nearly five-month gap (longer in Scotland) at the end of Year 13 or equivalent – fine for anyone with financial support or connections to get work experience, but a new social justice chasm if not. This could be mitigated if the Government filled the gap with paid traineeships or an extended National Citizen Service programme for example, creating a short ‘Year 14’, or at least a ‘Year 13.5’.

A January start would place us out of sync internationally, putting our world-class universities and international student market at risk, as well as ripping open a devolution divide, with nothing stopping Welsh, Northern Irish and Scottish universities walking away from UCAS and all the benefits a shared UK service brings. This would be terrible for students, creating four fragmented systems.

UCAS’s preferred option of post-qualification offers is not without potential drawbacks too. By moving offers to after the release of exam results, higher education institutions could feel pressure to encourage students to make choices informally, creating the potential for hard to detect ‘early offer making’ requiring new regulation – Universities UK has proposed a ‘code of conduct’ in their Fair Admissions Review to combat this. Greater access to advice and guidance beyond results day would also become much more critical.

Higher education admissions reform is not just about universities

Finally, as well as listening carefully to what students think of reform, other voices need to be heard in this debate.

A sizeable proportion of higher education takes place in colleges, conservatoires or institutes of technology. Reform could also be an opportunity to boost further education and apprenticeships. If we look to combine academic and technical Level 3 results on one day as well as combining (where possible, as many apprenticeships do not run on an academic year) offers into the same period, higher technical qualifications, degrees or higher and degree apprenticeships would be on a more equal admissions footing for the first time.

10. Post-qualification applications and social mobility

James Turner, Chief Executive, Sutton Trust

There is a simple and appealing logic behind post-qualification applications: that decisions as life-defining as what and where to study at university should be based on the most complete information possible. That means using real grades rather than projections – especially when most predicted grades are wrong, and wrong more often for poorer students than for others.

Our research has highlighted that it is bright low-income youngsters who are most likely to have their grades under-predicted, potentially contributing to an ‘under match’ of students in higher education and suppressing social mobility.³² Through our programme work, which has supported almost 50,000 young people to date, we often hear from sixth-formers who, being the first in their family to go to university, simply did not believe they were good enough to get in to a certain university course, even though they go on to do incredibly well in their A-Level exams. Whether under-predicted or over-predicted, it is surely in everyone’s interests for students to make informed choices which suit their talents and aspirations.

One of my very first tasks on joining the Sutton Trust back in 2004 was reviewing the recommendations of the Schwartz report on fair admissions, of which our Chairman, Sir Peter

32 Gill Wyness, *Rules of the Game*, Sutton Trust, December 2017; <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Rules-of-the-Game.pdf> Stuart Campbell, Lindsey Macmillan and Gill Wyness, *Mismatch in higher education: prevalence, drivers and outcomes*, Nuffield Foundation, Nuffield Foundation, December 2019 <https://mk0nuffield-founpg9ee.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Wyness-42856-Executive-Summary-Nov19.pdf>

Lampl, was a member.³³ Among the recommendations was a move to post-qualification applications, as:

the current system, relying on predicted grades, cannot be fair ... It does not meet the Steering Group's recommended principles of fair admissions, since it is based on data which are not reliable, it is not transparent for applicants or institutions, and may present barriers to applicants who lack self-confidence.

Fast forward 16 years and post-qualification applications are back on the table, with the Secretary of State announcing in November 2020:

*We need to explore how to change a system which breeds low aspiration and unfairness ... That is why we are exploring how best to transform the admission process to one which can propel young people into the most promising opportunities for them within higher education.*³⁴

For organisations like the Sutton Trust, who have been pressing for change for over two decades, this renewed interest is welcome. But can we say it is job done? Well, not yet.

First, it is far from clear exactly what form PQA will take. The Trust's historic support has been for post-qualification *applications* – that students make actual applications to university after their results are known, albeit that much of the researching and visiting can be done beforehand. The Government, though, deliberately refers to post-qualifications *admissions*, also bringing into scope models of post-

33 Admissions to Higher Education Review, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, September 2004 <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5284/1/finalreport.pdf>

34 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-plans-for-post-qualification-university-admissions>

qualification *offers* – where students apply before their results, but receive offers once grades are confirmed. While this may have some benefits for fair access – eliminating unconditional offers for example – there is a significant question mark over whether it will address one of the key problems we see with the current system: less confident, often disadvantaged students aiming lower than their eventual grades suggest they should.

Secondly, as those who have been involved in previous PQA reviews will know, the devil really is in the detail of its implementation. The logistical challenges are significant and there is a risk of well-intentioned changes making things worse, for example if poorer youngsters – who typically have less support at home – are left stranded without guidance from schools and colleges. A critical issue for the Government to consider is what support will be on offer to those students in a period of decision-making in the summer holidays. And we also need to look at how (if?) the time between students sitting exams and getting results – which has been the same for generations – can be shortened to allow sufficient time for a fair process to be run in the summer months. We are pleased that the current Government consultation is exploring both concerns. If a ‘pure’ PQA system really relies on first-year students starting their courses in January, it seems doomed from the start.

And third, whatever form it takes, PQA is not a silver bullet which will remedy all the ills of the system. Fair access to university will continue to require action on other fronts too, from school-age upwards. Potential will continue to be lost if universities do not adopt contextual admissions, for example. The pre-18 education playing field will remain highly uneven (and has become yet more unequal since COVID struck) regardless of when university decisions are

made.³⁵ A by-product of PQA would be to make the process of contextualising admissions much more transparent to prospective undergraduates than it is now.

Some may argue that this is exactly the wrong time to be looking again at this issue, when universities and schools are struggling with the basics of staying open safely. But if there is any silver lining to the disruption of the last 12 months, it is that it has given us a chance to look afresh at the status quo.

Schools are generally supportive of the reform in principle, and the tide seems to be turning in the university sector. Importantly, the Trust's recent polling suggests that the COVID generation of young people want to see change too. Even among the class of 2020, who ended up with the highest grades on record, two-thirds support a move to PQA, not least as their own predictions still diverged from their eventual, largely teacher-assessed, grades. And many from working-class backgrounds say they would have made different choices had they applied to higher education after they knew their results.³⁶

Summer 2020 brought into sharp relief how high stakes admissions decisions are, and how much a place in higher education still means to many. Like anything worth doing, making PQA work is not plain sailing: there are some rough waters ahead. But the prize is potentially worth it, especially for those young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who, in a terrible year, have had the very rawest deal of all.

35 Education Endowment Foundation, *Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: Rapid Evidence Assessment*, June 2020 [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/EEF_\(2020\)_-Impact_of_School_Closures_on_the_Attainment_Gap.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/EEF_(2020)_-Impact_of_School_Closures_on_the_Attainment_Gap.pdf)

36 Erica Holt-White, Rebecca Montacute and Carl Cullinane, *PQA: Reforming University Admissions*, October 2020 <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Reforming-University-Admissions-PQA.pdf>

11. How could admissions reform work in practice?

Dr Graeme Atherton, Director, National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)

Most people reading this chapter probably cannot remember the first time they thought about going onto higher education. It was always the case they would end up at university. The process of choosing which provider and which course begins early for many who go onto higher education. But deciding higher education is not for me also starts far earlier than the point when UCAS forms are submitted. Thinking about when young people make choices about their future means any discussion about the higher education admissions system must examine then what we mean by this system, when it starts and what it is looking to achieve.

The trilogy of reports produced by the University and College Union (UCU) between 2018 and 2020, looking at how the higher education admissions system in England could be improved, began from these starting points. The first in 2018 compared the admissions system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to that in 29 other countries.³⁷ It showed, aside from Scotland, that the UK is a global outlier in having a system where offers of university places are made on predicted rather than actual results. It also highlighted, however, the big differences between countries in how students gain admission to higher education. In many countries universities set their own entrance examinations, and in others admission is decided mainly via national aptitude tests. These differences shape the extent to which direct comparison between admissions systems is

37 Graeme Atherton, *Post Qualifications Admissions: How it works across the world*, June 2018, London:UCU https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/9430/Post-Qualifications-Admissions-How-it-works-around-the-world/pdf/UCU_PQA_around_the_world_Report_June18.pdf

possible. However, they also illustrate that alternative ways of organising the higher education admissions system exist. International comparisons did not necessarily highlight one system to emulate, but it did show that across different countries denying students the choice that only comes with knowing for certain their grades in what is an actual / de-facto university entrance examination (like A-Levels have become) would never be countenanced. At a level of principle, this is not how students are treated in the vast majority of countries in the world.

Looking globally at higher education admissions illustrated the potential, as argued in the second UCU report of the series, to 're-imagine' the admissions system.³⁸ This report outlines a model of an admissions system which aims more fully to encompass the journey to higher education. It argues that the admissions system should be divided into three phases. The first is a 'supporting choice making' phase from Year 10 up to and including final examinations prior to higher education application. It would include a minimum of 10 hours per year of higher education-related information advice and guidance over each of Years 10 to 13 and a 'Student Futures Week' at the end of Year 12, which would be a designated period in the school calendar for consideration of future education. Guaranteeing this level of support would create a clearer mutual understanding across universities, schools and colleges regarding what should be done to enable students to make optimum higher education choices. In the January of the year of application, applicants would be able to make 'expressions of interest' to up to 12 universities. An expression of interest window would provide,

38 Graeme Atherton and Angela Nartey, *Post-qualification application: a student-centred model for higher education admissions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales*, January 2019, London:UCU https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10038/PQA-report-Jan19/pdf/PQA_report_Jan19.pdf

as in the present system, a mechanism to provide universities with information regarding course demand without pushing students into making earlier choices than they need to.

The second phase of a new system would be 'application and decision-making' which would run from the first week of August to the end of September, with students applying for their institutions and courses in early August. The final phase is that of Entry into higher education. Applications made after results, in the context of A-Level examinations in May / June, implies a later start for the face-to-face element of teaching for first-year students. The report suggests the first week of November with a period of online preparation beforehand. The main questions raised regarding this model was how students would be supported at the time of application and the later start to the first year of higher education. The very purpose of this model is to recognise choice as a process and enable it accordingly. This does not mean that support at the time of application is not needed. But the present system, because of the uneven provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) students receive through their secondary career, makes some level of support when results are provided in August more important than it should be. This alternative model aims to improve the provision of information and guidance. Starting later should not be seen as an inevitable negative side effect of a more student focused admissions system. It may be beneficial in allowing students to prepare better for their first year and universities to focus specifically on first-year students when they enter.

The final UCU report of the trilogy looked at the views of leaders from schools, colleges and universities in admissions system reform.³⁹ It found that, of the sample of 128 leaders,

39 Graeme Atherton and Angela Nartey, *Higher education admissions: The time for change*, August 2020 London:UCU https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/ucu_he_admissions_time4change_aug20.pdf

over 80 per cent favoured further exploration of a post-qualification admissions system and the majority supported the key elements of the model described above. This includes the later start for first-year students which over 80 per cent of school leaders and 60 per cent of higher education leaders supported. Moreover, 80 per cent of leaders from across the education sector supported a minimum of 10 hours information, advice and guidance per student between Years 10 to 13. Aside from the specific findings, the report illustrated clearly the need to engage school and college leaders in shaping the future of the system.

Looking at the higher education admissions system in depth, consulting schools and others at home and what happens across the world shows that while we do not have a higher education admissions system that is failing, we can have a system that does better. It was designed at a time when relatively small numbers of students made automatic choices between a limited number of options and students were seen and not heard. If we want to help students from all backgrounds make the best choices possible, then it needs to support students through the whole decision-making and admissions process. This means starting earlier, finishing later and giving students the maximum support and time to make choices at the points in-between.

12. The challenges for international student admissions

Anne Marie Graham, Chief Executive, UK Council for International Student Affairs

At UKCISA international students are at the heart of everything we do – and positioning the UK as an attractive destination for students was a central theme of our policy position paper, which we published in July 2020. So, what do we mean by this? Well, it is more nuanced than it may first appear; creating a welcoming environment for international students begins before they even apply. The admissions process is a key part of the ‘before’ in the student life cycle, so ensuring that it meets the needs of applicants and institutions is essential to the success of any ambition to increase international student numbers.

We know that, for international students, making the decision to study abroad is a prolonged process – simply put, it takes more time and research – and to effectively support these decisions, communication and processes need to be clear and accessible for students, the university staff advising them and institutions who need to successfully promote their courses. Recruitment agents play an important role in international admissions, but the impacts of the pandemic – which are likely to push well into the 2021 admissions cycle – may elevate their importance yet further, as institutions look to local representatives to boost their recruitment efforts and offer on-the-ground support while travel restrictions remain in place and market conditions continue to fluctuate.

Therefore, any proposed changes in government policy need to consider the full admissions cycle and recognise just how early international students start to plan and when they need the right information in order to make these life-

changing decisions. To ensure our world-leading universities can continue to recruit and admit international students in line with the ambitions of the refreshed International Education Strategy (IES), the Government needs to introduce timely amendments which enable institutions to plan and implement changes to admissions processes.

From 1 January 2021, EU students go through the new immigration process for the first time, applying for permission to study in the UK via the new Student Route. Although this is arguably a simplified process, we must not underestimate the uncertainty this is causing EU students, who may perceive a significant loss of entitlements. For these students, they will have to prepare far more to study in the UK than they would have done previously due to the new restrictions. Without clear and effective communication, they may not realise just how much earlier and this is an area where UKCISA can actively support and influence, using our team of expert advisers to ensure we are communicating the latest guidance and information in clear and accessible ways to reach as many students as possible.

It is no exaggeration to say that the biggest admissions issue currently facing UK universities is the issue of EU student fees. We spent the autumn of 2020 tirelessly seeking further clarity on what 2021/22 fee regulations might look like, and calling for a timely update for UK institutions to enable them to advise students accordingly. And, although the Government published its fee regulations in mid-February 2021, there is still much work to do to analyse these long and complex wordings – and most importantly ascertain the impact on prospective students who will be choosing to study with a UK university in the next admissions cycle.

Without clarity on these critical issues, the questions – and the impact of not having clear answers – become more urgent.

Given the current global climate, prospective EU students may not want to be making rushed decisions, particularly when the full cost implications are not clear. While more clarity on the new Graduate Route, which heralds the return of post-study work rights for international students, may act as lure for students from beyond the EU, it may not be enough to sway EU students until the full cost and benefit picture is clear.

We know from our work with international students themselves that this ongoing lack of clarity is causing significant uncertainty, and with this comes more risk for the international student experience and the reputation of the UK sector.

UKCISA is committed to a collaborative approach, working with government and with partner organisations across the education sector to achieve the best possible outcomes for international students. For example, the recent acquisition of the 'MO University Assistant' platform by UCAS to administer postgraduate international student admissions is a development that will benefit from close consultation with the sector, to ensure its capability enables institutions to retain autonomy and ensures high-quality applicants who will achieve the best outcomes. Any new mechanisms that impact on admissions need to prioritise the student experience, and we look forward to working closely with UCAS – and our other sector partners through its International Advisory Group – in the months ahead to ensure the new system is implemented in a way that does not disadvantage international students or inhibit institutions' ability to ensure quality and maximise retention in the admissions process.

The same holds true for any potential move to post-qualification admissions. If the sector were to consider moving to a PQA system, then a full analysis of how this would impact on international admissions would be essential. This

is particularly important given that COVID continues to affect exam timetables across the globe and create challenges for admissions staff across the UK. The knock-on effects of any potential changes to wider policy ambitions cannot be underestimated – and it is again pertinent here to reiterate the ambitions of the International Education Strategy to increase the number of international students studying in the UK.

The admissions process remains an essential part of the student experience, and therefore needs to consider international students' specific requirements. More crucially still, the diversity of these requirements must be reflected in any changes or innovations to the admissions system, or else we risk disrupting – rather than improving – the international student experience.

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In early 2021 the Government announced a review of the current admissions system. This edited collection explores the opportunities and challenges surrounding any move to post-qualification admissions.

Among the topics considered are:

- Should the UK admissions system move to a model of post-qualification admissions and if so which: post-qualification applications, decisions or offers?
- What would the impact of admissions reform be across the UK and for attracting international students?
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