Reforming the UCAS personal statement: Making the case for a series of short questions

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About the authors

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Executive Summary

There are increasing calls for the UCAS personal statement to be reformed. These calls are based on the claim that the current personal statement gives unfair advantages to more privileged applicants within higher education admissions.

While this topic has attracted political attention, there is much about the personal statement that remains unknown. Of the evidence that does exist, it suggests that applicants from under-represented backgrounds face larger challenges with their personal statements, and that this results in fewer offers from more selective higher education providers. However, there has been less attention on understanding applicants' perspectives and the specific challenges they face in writing their UCAS personal statement.

This report offers two new pieces of evidence to address this gap:

i. By analysing 164 personal statement drafts from 83 applicants from under-represented backgrounds, this report outlines the challenges applicants face when writing a UCAS personal statement. Particular challenges were found on including an appropriate academic discussion, with 83 per cent of drafts failing to supply an evidence-based opinion about a topic in their subject area. Similarly, applicants struggled to organise their statement in an effective way, with 35 per cent of applicants struggling in at least one draft to write with cohesive paragraphs.

ii. Surveys and interviews with under-represented applicants. The applicants describe three main challenges in writing

their statements: a) the opening paragraph; b) meeting the character limit; and c) knowing what would impress the admissions tutors. Applicants tell of the large toll of the personal statement, with some spending 30 to 40 hours on it, which requires sacrifices in both their studies and their wider lives.

Combining this new evidence and the existing literature, the report then assesses the case for reforming the UCAS personal statement by considering its compatibility with Universities UK and GuildHE's *Fair admissions code of practice*.[1] It is argued that the personal statement should be reformed because its long-form free-response nature creates many of the challenges applicants face, imposing an unnecessary burden and contributing to inequalities in higher education access.

Four options for reform are considered, and it is argued that a series of short-response questions is most compatible with the *Fair admissions code of practice*. To be compatible, these short-response questions should assess 'baseline' suitability for a course rather than being used to distinguish between applicants that demonstrate competencies above this.

The report concludes with three example short-response questions, arguing that these have considerable potential to increase fairness in higher education admissions.

1. What do we know from the literature?

The UCAS personal statement is an unusual document. In one sense, it is very well known. Many readers will have written one and may have helped a family member or two grapple with theirs. Any teachers reading this report will have seen hundreds of statements and those involved with higher education admissions might wish that it was only hundreds.

However, despite their familiarity, there is a lot that we do not know about UCAS personal statements. The limited academic research in this area makes it difficult to assess the use, impact and fairness of personal statements in higher education admissions. For such a familiar topic, and one that is so central to admissions, we really do not know very much.

This first chapter outlines what we do know from the existing literature, and where the gaps remain.

A bit of background

The UCAS personal statement is a 4,000 character and 47-line essay that applicants submit when applying for UK undergraduate programmes. There is no explicit question or prompt that applicants respond to – instead the UCAS personal statement is a long-form free-text response. It is one part of the application, alongside a reference, commonly completed by a teacher, and a form that provides details of previous educational achievement and predicted / actual grades. The same UCAS personal statement is sent to all the higher education providers an applicant applies to, regardless of whether they are applying for different courses. This means the statement cannot be overly geared towards one provider.

Compared with international higher education admissions, the long-form free-response nature of the UCAS personal statement is atypical.[2] A number of higher education systems operate solely on the basis of grades and / or standardised tests, such as Ireland, China and Kenya, and these do not require written statements from applicants. Other higher education systems do involve a written component, however these tend to be either short-response questions, as is used in some Canadian provinces, or long-form writing in response to an explicit question, as is common for many US colleges.

The UCAS personal statement is intended to help admissions to consider factors beyond grades. This recognises that grades can be problematic in higher education admissions. Grades have been shown to be influenced by social background, benefitting some applicants over others, and they are unreliable, with up to one-in-four grades being wrong.[3] In this context, the UCAS personal statement is intended to give applicants an opportunity to demonstrate their potential, either by evidencing their skills and exploration of a subject area or by giving context to their previous academic achievements.

Increasingly, there are claims that the UCAS personal statement is not fit for purpose on the grounds that it ends up promoting unfairness in admissions. In February 2022, Michelle Donelan, then Universities Minister, said that she 'felt that personal statements in their current form favour the most advantaged students', following a call for reform in an opinion piece written by Lee Elliot Major.[4,5] Responding to the proposed changes, the Chief Executive of UCAS, Clare Marchant, told *The Times* that 'reform of the personal statement is absolutely in our

plans'.[6] Subsequently a group of experts were invited by UCAS to consider next steps for potential reforms.

In the face of these claims, it is important to reflect on what we know from the academic literature, and where the gaps remain. This will help to assess whether the UCAS personal statement needs reform, and if so, what an appropriate set of changes might look like.

What do we know from the academic literature?

We performed a literature review that identified 17 items of research on UCAS personal statements, evidencing the limited research in this area.[7] The most substantial of this existing work was led by Steven Jones, a co-author of this report. His 2010 study analysed 327 UCAS personal statements of applicants to one university department who subsequently went on to achieve grades of BBB.[8] This research assessed the extent to which the personal statements varied by the type of school applicants attended. Jones found that applicants from state schools were more likely to have grammatical mistakes in their personal statements, with those from comprehensive schools making roughly three times as many mistakes compared with their private school peers.[9] The research notes there is a risk these grammatical errors influence admissions tutors' judgments, and there is some evidence that these errors discourage admissions tutors from considering the content of statements.[10]

Jones' research also found there were inequalities in terms of the work-related activities discussed in personal statements. Compared to their state-educated peers, those from private schools were more likely to draw on experiences (typically high

skill, high prestige and unpaid) than jobs (typically low skill, low prestige and paid).[11] Jones noted that 'while sixth form college applicants were able to report 2.35 *experiences* for every *job* (and comprehensive school applicants, 2.66), grammar school applicants reported 3.85, and private school applicants 5.42'.[12] This demonstrates that the UCAS personal statement can enable those from more privileged backgrounds to gain advantages within the admissions process.

A recent paper by Rachel Dunn and Stephen Faulkner extends this research to consider the experiences of applicants to foundation year programmes.[13] Through a mixture of interviews, assessments of personal statements and a questionnaire, Dunn and Faulkner gathered experiences from around 20 students from two universities. The authors found those who applied to higher education directly from school or college produced personal statements that were likely to be judged as higher quality by admissions tutors, compared with those that applied independently, for example those that applied while working. This suggests that mature applicants without school / college support face particular challenges with their UCAS personal statements.

Another study comes from Elizabeth Houghton, who interviewed 15 students from two universities and assessed their personal statements.[14] It was found that personal aspects of applicants' lives tended to be omitted from UCAS personal statements, even when this offered important information about previous academic attainment or future aspirations. This corroborates Dunn and Faulkner's finding that applicants tend to produce 'impersonal' statements that fail to mention factors

that could help admissions tutors contextualise candidates' previous education or desire for future learning.[15]

Houghton describes the case of Anne:

> [Anne] left school at 16 with fewer than five GCSEs, the result of bullying and undiagnosed dyslexia and dyscalculia ... that she worked her way through further education to gain the qualifications needed to access higher education; that having seen how supportive the further education environment was she decided to become a teacher so other children would not be unsupported in school as she was.[16]

This narrative could help to contextualise Anne's previous educational achievement, as well providing a powerful rationale for her application. However, this did not feature in Anne's personal statement – the information only arose during her interview with Houghton.[17] Anne's personal statement focused on generic transferable skills and lists of extra-curricular activities. While there is nothing wrong with this focus, this is a missed opportunity to provide admissions tutors with important information to contextualise her application. Hence, the existing research shows that applicants often fail to use the UCAS personal statement to provide important contextual information.

Other studies have considered the ability of schools and colleges to provide effective UCAS personal statement support to applicants. Jones found that teachers are often unable to distinguish aspects of the personal statement that would increase an applicant's chance of gaining an offer.[18] Further, teachers sometimes recommend removing or modifying

aspects of a statement that actually increase an applicant's chances of gaining an offer. In particular, teachers tend to underestimate the extent to which admissions tutors value 'focused and sustained analysis of a specific topic of interest or case study rather than broad statements about a subject'.[19]

All of the research described above indicates that applicants from more privileged backgrounds may be better placed to produce a personal statement that is deemed to be high quality. However, these studies do not assess the actual impact of this inequality on access to higher education. One piece of research that does address this comes from Vikki Boliver, who found inequalities in relation to personal statements may well hinder access to higher education.[20] Using UCAS data from 1996 to 2006, Boliver found applicants from manual class and state school backgrounds were only around two-thirds as likely to receive admissions offers from Russell Group universities when compared to their peers with the same grades from higher professional / managerial and private school backgrounds.[21] As Boliver's research controls for grades, this indicates that personal statements do give more privileged applicants an advantage within higher education admissions.

There is also a subset of studies that focus on entry to Medicine, Nursing and Dentistry. Many of these consider whether academic achievement in higher education can be predicted by the 'quality' of UCAS personal statements.[22] These studies tend to find little-to-no correlation between the grades achieved in higher education and the 'quality' of UCAS personal statements. This provides initial evidence that the personal statement is not a valid measure of academic ability. However, these studies should not be interpreted as evidence

that personal statements are useless in admissions – by only considering successful candidates, these studies are unable to say whether the personal statement allows appropriate selection between prospective applicants.

Much remains unknown

The existing research provides some evidence that applicants from more privileged backgrounds have advantages in writing their UCAS personal statements, and this is likely to contribute to benefits around admissions. However, the research also has important limitations which hinder our ability to understand the role UCAS personal statements play in higher education admissions:

- Much of the research is dated, with Boliver's research using data from 1996 to 2006, and Jones' work drawing on data from 2010.[23] Since this time, there have been a number of important changes, including the removal of the student number cap, the increase in tuition fees and a rise in the use of contextualised offers. It is unclear the extent to which research on higher education admissions in the 1990s and 2000s is applicable today.

- The more recent studies have a relatively small sample, typically including fewer than 20 students.[24] Although these studies make an important contribution, they are unlikely to capture the full experience of the 600,000 people who applied through UCAS before the most recent January 2022 deadline.

There are also a number of important gaps:

- Previous research has considered the end-product, that

is the final version of the UCAS personal statement, rather than the drafts and processes by which applicants write their statements. Analysis of this end-product may underestimate the challenges that applicants face.

- There is limited research on applicants' experiences of writing their UCAS personal statements. One of the most extensive is from Dunn and Faulkner, but this focuses exclusively on former foundation year students, who may not be typical.[25]

- It is unclear how personal statements are used within the admissions processes. Although some higher education providers offer explicit explanations, this is not consistently available across the sector. Similarly, no recent research has considered how admissions tutors use and interpret personal statements. This is important as it is known admissions tutors hold diverse values and beliefs, which may influence their practices.[26]

- Existing research on UCAS personal statements has focused on home applicants, which leaves the experiences of international applicants largely unknown.[27]

At a time when there is talk of reforming the UCAS personal statement, it is more important than ever to address these research gaps. If we understand the full challenges applicants face with the current UCAS personal statement, we will be in a better position to assess whether it needs reform and what form these changes might take. Chapters 2 and 3 take up this challenge, exploring the challenges applicants from under-represented backgrounds face when writing their personal statements.

2. What challenges do applicants face in their personal statements?

This chapter analyses 164 UCAS personal statement drafts, written by 83 applicants in the 2021/22 academic year.[28] The draft statements were submitted to Write on Point, a project that aims to widen participation in higher education by providing online UCAS personal statement support to applicants from under-represented backgrounds. The applicants using Write on Point in 2021/22 were sponsored by one widening participation team, after these applicants attended a summer school run by the higher education provider. The applicants were were mostly non-mature and were all from under-represented backgrounds:

- 81 per cent were the first in their family to attend higher education;

- 39 per cent currently or recently received free school meals; and

- 87 per cent were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

The summer schools were in humanities and social science subjects, and the majority of applicants went on to apply for these subject areas. The applicants had access to Write on Point from July 2021 to January 2022 and could receive feedback on an unlimited number of drafts.

This dataset enables an analysis of how applicants developed their statements over time, as well as identifying the challenges they faced in the process. Each of the 164 personal statements were analysed to consider whether they demonstrated 15

aspects that are relevant to the way admissions tutors judge personal statement 'quality':

i. three aspects referred to the structure of the personal statement (for example, whether paragraphs were used or not);

ii. five aspects considered whether inappropriate things were included (such as irrelevant information or an overly large focus on non-academic topics);

iii. three aspects assessed whether positive competencies were demonstrated (such as evidence-based opinions on a topic); and

iv. the last four aspects dealt with miscellaneous items (for example, if the statement was too long).

More detail on these 15 aspects is provided in the Appendix. Each of the drafts was independently analysed by two authors of this report, Tom Fryer and Steve Westlake, and then areas of coding disagreement were discussed and resolved.

Overall, it was found that the applicants faced several challenges in producing personal statements that were likely to impress admissions tutors. Some of the key issues are described below.

Including appropriate academic discussions

Personal statements should offer 'focused and sustained analysis of a specific topic of interest or case study rather than broad statements about a subject'.[29] This can help to demonstrate applicants have the research and critical thinking skills to thrive in higher education as well as evidencing their interest and exploration of a subject area. It is regarded as one

of the most important aspects of a UCAS personal statement.

In the dataset, 83 per cent of drafts did not present an appropriate evidence-based opinion or evaluation of a topic related to their subject area. One of the main aims of Write on Point is to help applicants to develop this type of evidence-based opinion, but only a small number of applicants were able to do this in their statement, even with explicit one-to-one guidance and feedback. Only seven applicants managed to incorporate an evidence-based opinion in a later draft, which represents 15 per cent of the 47 applicants that submitted more than one draft to Write on Point.

It is worth illustrating the difference between a statement that contains an evidence-based opinion and one that does not. The following two extracts are from the same candidate, the first is from an early draft and was not judged to give an evidence-based opinion, and the second is from a later draft that was judged to do this.

Extract 1

> *I signed up for a ThinkIn with former US Vice President Al Gore who argued that the key to solving the climate crisis had to begin with solving world inequalities due to the disproportionate effect of global warming on our poorest members of society. I especially agreed with his views as it draws upon my own interests in sociology and systemic inequity, an area that I would like to correct in the future. The ThinkIn allowed me to represent Al Gore's views at my sociology club where I reinforced his argument whilst also adding my own personal opinions about policing the climate crisis.*

Extract 2

> *From attending ThinkIn seminars with former US Vice President Al Gore on the role of governments in mitigating climate disasters, to studying the work of Joss Fong, I have become intrigued by the socio-economic and political paradigms of climate change. This is shown through the correlation between child poverty rates in Arizona and rising surface temperatures … [I] explore[d] Fong's research in greater depth, discovering that this was due to urban planning favouring wealthier neighbourhoods, meaning fewer green initiatives, such as the number of trees planted per square mile, in poorer communities. In this case study alone, one finds the value of geography through the intricate intersection of urban planning, public policy, inequality, and climate change itself all at play.*

Whereas the first extract simply states that the candidate agrees with Al Gore that climate change and social inequality are related, the second extract evidences why they agree. It uses Joss Fong's research to demonstrate the interconnections between climate change and social inequality, thus justifying the agreement with Al Gore. Furthermore, the second extract also makes a more explicit point that geography is necessarily interdisciplinary – this could be considered to be an evidence-based evaluation of the discipline, which is not present in the first extract.

There are a number of factors that hinder applicants from developing an evidence-based opinion in their UCAS personal statement.

First, some statements had a lack of appropriate academic sources. The definition of 'academic source' adopted in this research was broad and inclusive, encompassing journal articles, books and lectures, but also relevant newspaper articles, blogs and documentaries. Even with this broad definition, 41 per cent of applicants wrote a draft containing very few or no academic sources. This suggests that many applicants had issues including relevant material, although 10 applicants (representing 21 per cent of the sample) modified their statements to include appropriate sources in their later drafts. Without this academic material, it is impossible for applicants to present a 'sustained analysis of a specific topic'.[30] A smaller number of personal statements, approximately 4 per cent, failed to engage with any academic topics related to their subject – these applicants were clearly unaware of the expectations from higher education providers.

Applicants face a related challenge of including too many topics. The downside of including a large number of topics is that this leaves little space to demonstrate research and critical thinking skills and promotes a superficial engagement with each topic. Overall, 55 per cent of applicants submitted at least one draft that included too many topics. It was common for applicants to explicitly ask for help on this when submitting their drafts to Write on Point, saying things such as:

> *I realise my personal statement is over the limit but I cannot decide what parts are important or not – if you could also help me out with this, I would appreciate it.*

> *Did I fulfil the requirements, is this waffling, too much stuff??? Any other feedback is welcome [Prayer emoji].*

Organisational challenges

A second area that applicants found challenging was how to organise their personal statement. This is understandable, as many applicants have never written an essay without a question. Thirty-five per cent of applicants struggled in at least one draft to write with cohesive paragraphs that focused on one main topic or theme. It was common for applicants to write paragraphs that combined disparate topics, for example their A Levels and some unrelated work experience, or their research on China's involvement in Africa and their opinions about the value of psychology. Often applicants attempted to include all their reading, thinking and experiences, which led to issues with organisation, as it was impossible to create coherent paragraphs within the 4,000-character limit.

Furthermore, 39 per cent of applicants struggled to have an appropriate flow of ideas in at least one of their drafts. Without this, personal statements fail to present a coherent narrative to admissions tutors. Applicants often struggle with this flow, by either inappropriately jumping back and forth between academic and non-academic topics, or by using a structure that emphasises topics that are of less relevance to admissions tutors.

A smaller number of applicants (8 per cent) wrote at least one draft that did not use paragraphs. These drafts consisted of a single paragraph of 4,000 characters. These statements are challenging to read and are likely to dispose admissions tutors to miss important points. It is notable that some applicants produce statements with no paragraphs in their final draft to try and get within the 47-line limit.

Miscellaneous challenges

There are a number of other challenges applicants face, many of which stem from a misunderstanding of how to impress admissions tutors through the UCAS personal statement. For example, 11 per cent of the statements included irrelevant information, with applicants giving long and largely inappropriate discussions of their time in the gym or subjects they were not applying for. This is particularly problematic given the restricted character-count of the personal statement.

Another common issue is that applicants waste characters offering a definition of their subject area. In the drafts, it was common for applicants to spend several sentences defining their subject area in the introductory paragraph. This offers little insight into the applicant themselves, and leaves applicants with less space to develop the academic discussions that can help them to gain offers.

Only 8 per cent of applicants faced some issue with finding an appropriate tone for their statement. However, this research focused only on identifying large-scale issues in this area, such as when an overly formal tone made a statement challenging to read. This means that smaller-scale issues may have been missed, and so this problem is likely to be underestimated. Of the applicants that did struggle with achieving an appropriate tone, most used overly formal language that hindered understanding.

3. What are applicants' experiences?

This chapter presents an analysis from two surveys and follow-up interviews with applicants that used Write on Point. The survey data come from Write on Point's 2020/21 and 2021/22 impact evaluations and included questions on applicants' experiences of writing their UCAS personal statement. All applicants were from under-represented backgrounds, as outlined in Chapter 2. Overall, 161 applicants were invited to take part in the survey, with 78 from 2020/21 and 83 in 2021/22. There were 43 responses, with 27 from 2020/21 and 16 from 2021/22. In the 2021/22 survey, applicants were asked if they would be willing to take part in a 30-minute follow-up interview that explored their experiences in greater depth. Three applicants agreed to be interviewed, and these quotes are included alongside the survey analysis.

What challenges did applicants experience?

Applicants described a range of challenges that they faced when writing their UCAS personal statements (see Figure 1 and Table 1). Figure 1 shows the responses from the 2021/22 survey about whether applicants found certain aspects of the UCAS personal statement to be challenging.[31] Answers were given on a Likert Scale: Very Easy, Easy, Neither Easy nor Difficult, Difficult, Very Difficult. Figure 1 groups Very Easy and Easy, and Difficult and Very Difficult, to aid readability.

Further information about these challenges is seen in Table 1. Applicants in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 survey were asked: 'What did you find most challenging about writing a personal statement?' as a free-text response. The applicants' answers were then categorised.

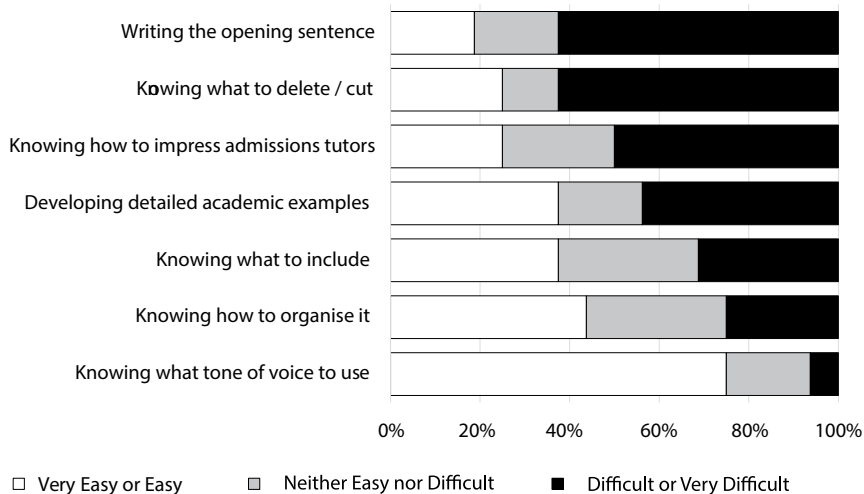*Figure 1 Applicant perceptions of aspects of the UCAS personal statement (Write on Point, 2021/22)*

Writing the opening sentence
Knowing what to delete / cut
Knowing how to impress admissions tutors
Developing detailed academic examples
Knowing what to include
Knowing how to organise it
Knowing what tone of voice to use

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

□ Very Easy or Easy   ▣ Neither Easy nor Difficult   ■ Difficult or Very Difficult

Table 1 Applicant perceptions of the prevalence of challenges in the UCAS personal statement (Write on Point, 2020/21 and 2021/22)

Category	Percentage of applicants who mentioned this challenge
Within 4,000 characters	40%
Developing an introduction	33%
What to include	30%
Developing examples	14%
How to conclude	9%
Clarity	5%
Making it personal	5%
Organisation	2%

From Figure 1 and Table 1 it can be seen that applicants perceived three main challenges:

i. The introduction and opening sentence.

ii. Keeping the statement within 4,000 characters.

iii. Knowing how to impress the admissions tutors.

Challenge 1: opening the statement

Applicants were particularly worried about writing their opening sentence, with 63 per cent reporting this to be 'Difficult' (25 per cent) or 'Very Difficult' (38 per cent). Similarly, 33 per cent of applicants mentioned that developing an introduction to their personal statement was challenging. Within the interviews, applicants also reflected on their anxiety about the start of the personal statement:

> *I did have issues with writing the introduction. Because when I researched online, they will like you know … it's not preferable to include an introduction that links to your personal experience, because it's more common, because there's this cliché way of writing 'I've always wanted to become a doctor' … or 'My parents run a business' … but I didn't want to link it in that way. So, I made sure that my introduction links … like it has a personal element but also it's something that would impress the admissions tutors.*

> (Interviewee 2)

This concern with avoiding cliché was also mentioned by Interviewee 3, who said that she received the following advice:

> *A comment that people always say is 'When you're writing*

your personal statement make sure you don't say clichéd things. Make sure that you're writing new and interesting things'.

(Interviewee 3)

This anxiety to create a personal, memorable and non-clichéd opening was matched by another concern to make the introduction link to the conclusion in a cohesive way. This was mentioned in two of the three interviews. This was a particular source of stress for one of the applicants:

To be honest I think my main struggle was how much should I include in my intro. I don't really know how to explain it, but I feel like I was talking too much in my intro and in my conclusion. My teacher told me to link my intro and my ending but I wasn't able to do that ... It was the fact that in the intro I was talking about the law and then my teachers told me that the ending is about why I want to study law. But I didn't really see how to link [them].

(Interviewee 1)

Challenge 2: meeting the character limit

Another major issue that applicants mentioned was the challenge of staying within the 4,000-character and 47-line limit. This was the most common response, with 40 per cent mentioning this issue. Similarly, 63 per cent of the applicants surveyed in 2021/22 said that it was 'Difficult' or 'Very Difficult' to know what to delete in their personal statement. One interviewee said:

I feel like one major flaw with the personal statement is the character count. I feel like people have so much they

want to talk about, but they're limited to 4,000 characters.

(Interviewee 1)

Similarly, Interviewee 3 discussed how one of their biggest challenges was writing with nuance within the character limit. This applicant explained how they spent approximately 15 hours refining their statement to get below the character limit, compared with only five to six hours researching academic topics. This demonstrates the large amount of time that applicants can spend refining their statements to meet the character limit.

Challenge 3: knowing how to impress the admissions tutors

The third main concern was knowing what would impress admissions tutors. This is related to the problem of the character limit, as a lack of clarity on what impresses admissions tutors makes it challenging to know what to delete from a personal statement. Half of applicants said that they found this 'Difficult' or 'Very Difficult'. Similarly, 30 per cent of applicants mentioned the issue of knowing what to include when asked about the issues they faced in their personal statements. This topic was also discussed in the interviews, with applicants noting their lack of clarity about what admissions tutors want, and the ways that the character limit made these decisions more fraught:

> *I was still struggling on what to include and what not to include, because of the character count. Yeh, but I had to like constantly change because there were some bits, but I didn't know how to bring it down to the character count, and I didn't know what would be seen as more important ... So, I did a couple of virtual work experiences but then I also watched some online lectures, so I was struggling*

for which virtual work experience to include and which lectures to include. Like what would be most relevant to talk about in my personal statement and link it well.

(Interviewee 1)

Other challenges: time commitment

Applicants commented on a range of other challenges they faced when writing their personal statements. One particularly important challenge arose in the interview discussions. Applicants explained that their personal statement was a significant piece of work to which they had dedicated in the region of 30-to-40 hours. This required applicants to make sacrifices in their studies and wider lives. The experiences of all three interviewees are given below, which speak to the burden the personal statement places on their lives:

During the time that I was writing my personal statement ... that was when I was doing my mocks. And I was trying to dedicate some time to my personal statement but also focus on my mocks ... but like there were deadlines I needed to meet for my personal statement, so I had to kind of neglect my education.

(Interviewee 1)

Yeah, I think I was stressed definitely because … I always have the habit of starting things early and in advance, but since the summer schools all begin towards the end of the summer after Year 12, this meant that I had to start writing the personal statement in Year 13. So, it definitely has been a stressful part, yeah.

(Interviewee 2)

I think it … at the time, I think it was quite stressful. The whole application process is quite stressful … It had a bit of an impact because it did take up quite a bit of my time and because I was an early applicant. I had to make sure that it was done by like early October at the latest. And it was like quite hectic to manage that with end of years, and starting Year 13 … and [another higher education admissions exam], and I know my other friends applying for Medicine and Dentistry had other admissions exams, so I do think it was quite hectic, it was quite hard to sort of balance my time … Once I went back to school in September, I actually had a few exams … but it was quite hard because … once again, I was an early applicant, and I had to do interview prep, and prep for the admissions tests … So, I did have to give up quite a bit of my revision time and I had to let my teachers know that … I had to ask for extensions for homework sometimes because I felt that it would be more important to focus on my personal statement because that's in the actual application that gets sent off rather than some of my exams and homework at the time. And thankfully my teachers were understanding of that.

(Interviewee 3)

Other challenges: mismatched expectations

There are some interesting areas of mismatch between applicants' perceptions of challenges, and the issues that were identified from their draft personal statements in Chapter 2. A relatively small number of applicants noted that it was a challenge to develop examples of engagement with academic research. Only 6 per cent of applicants said this was 'Very Difficult', although 38 per cent did say it was 'Difficult'. Similarly,

in Table 1 this was only the fourth most common challenge, mentioned by 14 per cent of applicants, whereas Chapter 2 showed that 83 per cent of drafts failed to offer an evidence-based opinion. This could suggest that applicants were unclear what was expected of them.

A final area of mismatch relates to the organisation and structure of the UCAS personal statement. Only 2 per cent of applicants said this was an issue. However, as was noted in Chapter 2, many drafts did have organisational issues: 35 per cent of applicants failed to produce a statement with coherent paragraphs and 39 per cent failed to produce a statement with an appropriate flow of ideas. Again, the fact that applicants do not tend to note this challenge, but it is nonetheless a widespread weakness, suggests applicants may be unclear on how best to structure their personal statements.

What can we conclude?

This data suggest that applicants from under-represented backgrounds experience a number of challenges when writing their UCAS personal statements. This is not through a lack of effort, with some applicants spending 30-to-40 hours on their essays, requiring them to make compromises in their studies and wider lives. This is not to mention the extra hours given by teachers to support their students.

Many of the challenges applicants face relate to the long-form free-response nature of the UCAS personal statement. The challenges around crafting an appropriate opening paragraph and developing an effective flow / structure arise because the statement is a long-form essay. Other challenges, such as knowing what to cut and what would impress admissions

tutors, relate to the free-response nature of the UCAS personal statement – the absence of an explicit question necessarily promotes some ambiguity over expectations. Similarly, this free-response nature and the associated ambiguity is likely to be partly responsible for the lack of academic discussion that was found in many personal statements.

Overall, Chapters 2 and 3 show the large challenges that applicants from under-represented backgrounds face when writing their UCAS personal statements. This complements and extends the findings of previous research on the disadvantages these applicants face compared with their more privileged peers.[32] The long-form free-response nature of the personal statement is responsible for many of these challenges, begging the question of whether this should be reformed to promote greater fairness.

Reforming the UCAS personal statement: Making the case for a series of short questions

4. What are the options for reform?

This chapter considers whether the UCAS personal statement should be reformed, and if so, what form it should take. One way to approach these issues is to assess whether the UCAS personal statement, and the options for reform, are compatible with Universities UK and GuildHE's *Fair admissions code of practice*.[33] This code sets out a series of principles for fair admissions and, as of September 2022, over 100 higher education providers had signed up.

The *Fair admissions code of practice* has one overarching principle: 'Admissions processes must protect and prioritise the interests of applicants'.

It goes on to explain that to meet this overarching principle, admissions must both 'prioritise the interests of applicants above the interests of universities and colleges' and 'support student choice and not create unnecessary pressure for applicants'.

Beyond this overarching principle, there are five additional principles:

Applicants who apply to a university or college that follows this code can expect:

1. *Admissions processes that are transparent*

2. *Admissions processes that enable universities and colleges to select students able to complete a course, as judged by their achievements and potential*

3. *Admissions processes that use reliable, valid and explainable assessment methods*

4. *Admissions processes that minimise barriers for applicants and address inequalities*

5. *Admissions processes that are professional and underpinned by appropriate institutional structure and processes*

This chapter argues that in its current form, the UCAS personal statement contradicts the *Fair admissions code of practice*, and is therefore unfair and in need of reform. Various options for reform are compared to the *code of practice* and a recommendation is made to replace the statement with a series of short-response questions.

Is the UCAS personal statement fair?

In terms of the overarching principle, the UCAS personal statement creates a large amount of unnecessary pressure on applicants. This report has shown that applicants can spend many hours on their personal statements, often requiring them to cut back on other academic work or life activities. It is notable that the main challenges that applicants experience (see Chapter 3) stem from the long-form free-response nature of the personal statement – from the fixation on the first sentence and introduction, to the problems of the character limit and knowing what would attract the attention of admissions tutors. These challenges do nothing to facilitate applicant decision-making and therefore become unnecessary pressures.

The UCAS personal statement also contradicts several of the 'Additional principles' in the *Fair admissions code of practice*, including:

• *Principle 1: Admissions processes [should be] transparent* –

This report has found evidence that applicants are unsure about what to include in their statement and applicants can be unclear about what is likely to impress admissions tutors. In particular, there remains a lack of clarity about the importance of academic discussions.

- *Principle 3: Admissions processes [should] use reliable, valid and explainable assessment methods* – The literature review found little research supporting the idea that the UCAS personal statement is a reliable and valid way to assess whether applicants are able to complete a course.

- *Principle 4: Admissions processes [should] minimise barriers for applicants and address inequalities* – Applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to experience greater challenges in writing their UCAS personal statements. The personal statement is likely to contribute to inequalities in the sector.

The conclusion that the personal statement should be reformed is supported by the interviews from Chapter 3. All three applicants described spending a lot of time on their statements, with much of this focused on cutting their essay down or selecting the best examples, rather than spending time researching their subject area. For example, one applicant said:

> *I do think it should be reformed because it ... it isn't something that's easy for everyone, especially for someone that studies STEM subjects, I know a lot of them struggled writing an essay. I remember a lot of them asking me for help, or asking other humanities students for help, so I do think that the way it is formatted is not easy for everyone*

to be able to write personal statement, let alone write a good personal statement. If you're not receiving a lot of help from your school or from outside of school it is something big to tackle, because it really is the biggest part of your application.

(Interviewee 3)

In its current form, the UCAS personal statement is incompatible with Universities UK and GuildHE's principles of fair admissions. This is compelling evidence that the personal statement should be reformed. The next section outlines four options for reform and evaluates them against the *Fair admissions code of practice*.

Option 1: adding an explicit question

One option for reform is to add an explicit question to the UCAS personal statement. An example of this question could be: 'Please demonstrate that you have the interest and skills to succeed on the course'.

Such a reform could have some potential benefits. It could enhance transparency by clarifying what admissions tutors are looking for (Principle 1). This would address some of the myths about the personal statement, for example, that it always needs to be very personal, which can be both a source of stress and unnecessary pressure for many applicants (Overarching Principle).[34]

However, there are several weaknesses with this reform option:

i. It maintains the long-form nature of the personal statement. It is likely that applicants would continue to spend lots of time writing their essay, often spending time on aspects that

do nothing to enhance their decision-making. In this way, this reform does little to tackle the unnecessary pressure that a long-form essay places on applicants (Overarching Principle).

ii. This reform does little to address the inequalities that characterise the current format (Principle 4). Even with an explicit question, applicants from more disadvantaged backgrounds will be less likely to produce essays that are deemed high-quality, as existing research has demonstrated.

iii. The transparency benefits may be minimal (Principle 1) – adding an explicit question does not necessarily mean that applicants will gain knowledge of how the personal statement is evaluated by admissions tutors.

In summary, this reform would make admissions only slightly fairer. Adding an explicit question could make expectations clearer and reduce some pressure on applicants. However, by maintaining a long-form essay format, this option is likely to maintain the unnecessary pressure that applicants currently face, as well as failing to address issues of inequality adequately.

Option 2: a personal essay

The second option for reform proposes that the UCAS personal statement should be replaced with an essay that focuses on applicants as people. This model is used by some US colleges and could involve asking applicants a question such as:

> *If you'd like to share a perspective you bring or experiences you've had to help us understand you better, perhaps*

related to a community you belong to, or your family or cultural background, we encourage you to do so.[35]

This option for reform could have some benefits around transparency, making it slightly more explicit what applicants should write about, compared with the free-form nature of the current statement. However, this reform comes into tension with the code of practice on fair admissions in a number of ways:

- *Overarching Principle: Admissions processes must protect and prioritise the interests of applicants.* By maintaining a long-form essay format, this option would not address the unnecessary pressure placed on applicants.

- *Principle 3: Admissions processes [should] use reliable, valid and explainable assessment methods.* It is unclear what traits the personal essay would assess, and how these traits relate to applicants' potential to complete the course. There is no discussion of this in the existing UK literature.

- *Principle 4: Admissions processes [should] minimise barriers for applicants and address inequalities.* There is no reason to think that the inequalities around writing a statement would be addressed by this reform. An unconventional form of essay actually risks increasing inequalities.

The applicants interviewed in Chapter 3 identified a number of these issues:

I think that would have been difficult for many … for some students to think about … for whom writing essays is a more time-consuming process … It's kinda like a very broad question, there's no like direction to whether the

> *essay should focus on the course or focus on a personal experience.*

> (Interviewee 2)

In summary, this reform would make higher education admissions less fair overall. It does not address the issues that stem from a long-form response format. Further, introducing an unconventional form of writing risks creating unclear expectations (breaching Principle 1), that some applicants are better placed to answer (breaching Principle 4), all of which contributes to additional unnecessary pressure (breaching the Overarching Principle).

Option 3: removing the UCAS personal statement

The third option is to remove the UCAS personal statement from admissions altogether. As was noted in the literature review, higher education admissions systems in places such as China, Ireland and Kenya operate without a personal essay from applicants.

This option offers significant benefits. The unnecessary pressure that stems from the long-form free-response nature of the statement would be removed (Overarching Principle). This reform has the potential to address inequalities by removing the advantages more privileged applicants tend to gain through the UCAS personal statement (Principle 4). Also, in the absence of much evidence that the personal statement can help to assess applicants' ability to succeed on a course, this reform would prevent any inappropriate uses (Principle 3).

However, it is challenging to assess the fairness of this option in isolation. Removing the UCAS personal statement

inevitably increases the relative importance of other aspects, namely applicants' grades. However, evidence suggests that grades are unreliable and unfair. They are unreliable in the sense that up to one-in-four grades are wrong (more in some disciplines and less in others).[36] They are also unfair measures of applicants' ability and potential, as applicants from more disadvantaged backgrounds tend to achieve lower grades.[37] Hence, for this reform to reduce inequalities (Principle 4) it must be paired with an admissions system that uses contextual offers in evidence-based ways, and recognises the unreliability of exam grades with a procedure such as 'fuzzy marking'.[38]

The option for reform also has other potential issues. First, while this reform might remove some instances where the personal statement is used inappropriately, removing the statement curtails any appropriate uses of a written response in the admissions process.[39] Secondly, completing some sort of written response may be in the interests of applicants (supporting the Overarching Principle).

For example, it could support decision-making, by prompting applicants to explore their subject. Also, a written component in higher education admissions may continue to incentivise the provision of work experience opportunities for all applicants, which in turn aids decision-making. Thirdly, removing the personal statement may limit the opportunity for applicants to explain directly to admissions tutors if any factors have impacted their previous academic performance. This should always remain part of the admissions process as it protects applicants' interests.

When this option for reform was presented to applicants, they expressed some concerns about emphasising grades in higher education admissions. One applicant argued that every applicant should be able to write something about their subject:

> *I think it's really important that ... if you're interested in the subject, you probably would like to write something about it. I just don't think it would be fair to apply just on the basis of predicted grades. I feel that would benefit some students more than others.*

<div align="right">(Interviewee 3)</div>

In summary, this reform has the potential to make admissions fairer by removing unnecessary pressure on applicants. However, if this reform is not paired with contextualised admissions and a reformed approach to grades, it risks increasing inequalities. Furthermore, this reform removes any potential benefits from a written response, including benefits to applicants' decision-making.

Option 4: Short-response questions

The fourth option for reform is to use a series of short-response questions. Each question should have a clear focus (Principle 1) that considers a trait that relates to an applicant's potential to complete the course (Principle 2). The short question should be a valid and reliable measure of this trait (Principle 3) and the question should explicitly address inequalities (Principle 4).

For illustration purposes, an example of these short-response questions is given in Table 2.

Table 2 Exemplar short questions

Short question	Traits to be assessed
1. Please describe one topic that is related to your course. Please discuss what you have learnt about this topic, through exploring this outside of the classroom. This could include books, articles, blogs, seminars, lectures, documentaries, or any other format. (150 words)	· Applicant demonstrates a basic level of interest in the course · Applicant demonstrates that they understand what type of material is covered by the course
2. Please describe one experience and explain how this demonstrates you have the skills to thrive on your course. This experience can be a work-experience placement, part-time job, summer school, volunteering, caring responsibilities or any other experience from your personal life. Please mention at least two transferable skills. (150 words)	· Applicant demonstrates at least two relevant transferable skills
3. (Optional) Please describe any factors that have negatively impacted your previous or predicted grades. (150 words)	· No formal assessment of this question; it provides contextual information for the application.

These short-form questions should be used to assess whether an applicant has reached an appropriate baseline, rather than distinguishing between applicants that demonstrate competencies above this baseline. For example, Question 1 assesses whether an applicant has a basic level of interest in their course. Once an applicant has demonstrated a basic level of interest, the short-response questions should not be used to distinguish between applicants who are more or less

interested, have done more or less exploration or have more or less subject knowledge.

This focus on whether applicants meet a baseline is essential for this option for reform to be compatible with the following aspects of Universities UK and GuildHE's *Fair admissions code of practice*:

- *Principle 3: Applicants can expect admissions processes that use reliable, valid and explainable assessment methods*. There is little evidence that written responses in higher education admissions are a valid way to assess different levels of applicants' strengths. Evidence from the literature on medical education has found that applicants' UCAS personal statements largely fail to predict differential achievement in higher education.[40] However, a written response is more likely to be able to assess baselines, such as whether applicants have a basic level of interest in their course. If an applicant cannot produce 150 words about their subject area, this is likely to reflect a lack of sufficient interest to succeed on the course.[41]

- *Principle 4: Applicants can expect admissions processes that minimise barriers for applicants and address inequalities*. It is likely that some of the inequalities associated with long-form personal statements would also apply to the short-response questions. Some applicants are likely to receive more support and have greater access to opportunities to explore their subject. A baseline approach would minimise these inequalities, offering no extra reward to applicants that go beyond this baseline.

Other aspects of the admissions process, such as exam grades, may be better able to distinguish between candidates that

meet these baseline criteria than the personal statement. However, as discussed in Option 3, given the well-documented inequalities around grades, this additional 'distinguishing' process should consider attainment in a contextual manner, as well as being attentive to the unreliability of raw grades.

In addition, for this option for reform to be compatible with the principles of fair admissions, the short-response questions must assess traits that are relevant to applicants' potential to complete a course (Principle 2). In Table 2, the short questions assess whether applicants demonstrate three things: a basic interest, some knowledge of course content and at least two transferable skills. These traits are either grounded in evidence on student success or are plausible and testable propositions that could be assessed if the reform was implemented.[42]

The reform would have various other benefits in relation to the principles of Universities UK and GuildHE's *Fair admissions code of practice*:

- **Overarching Principle:** The proposed reform would remove the unnecessary pressure that stems from a long-form free-response format. The short-response questions are both more manageable and clearer in their expectations. By continuing to encourage applicants to explore their subject, this reform would maintain any potential benefits to decision-making.

- **Principle 1:** The reform would enhance transparency if each short-response question is explicit about what it intends to assess.

- **Principle 4:** The reform could address inequalities by limiting the number of examples that can be used in each answer and by emphasising the acceptability of less prestigious activities. Research has also noted that applicants often fail to use the existing personal statement to provide contextual information about their past achievement.[43] Including an explicit question may help to address this issue.

When this option for reform was presented to the interviewees, they were broadly supportive:

> *I think … yeah, this would be better option ... because it's more directed and helps me narrow down the information that I should provide to the admissions tutor. And also like it is beneficial for future job applications where I might need to have reflected on these experiences ... [Also] because it's more narrowed down and I'm more able to communicate directly on how … it helps me like to say something that the admissions tutor wants.*

> (Interviewee 2)

In summary, this reform could make admissions substantially fairer. It would remove unnecessary pressure and could facilitate applicants' decision-making. When used to assess baseline measures of traits that are relevant to applicants' potential to complete a course, this reform could address the inequalities that characterise the current UCAS personal statement.

Summary and recommendations

Using Universities UK and GuildHE's *Fair admissions code*

of practice, this report has argued that the UCAS personal statement is unfair and in need of reform.[44] Its long-form free-response nature creates unnecessary pressure for applicants, hinders transparency and exacerbates inequalities.

This report recommends replacing the current personal statement with a series of short-response questions. This option for reform was judged to be the most compatible with Universities UK and GuildHE's *Fair admissions code of practice*:

- Each question is used to assess whether applicants reach a specific competency 'baseline', rather than to distinguish between applicants that demonstrate competencies above this.

- Each question assesses an explicit trait where there is evidence that this is relevant to applicants' potential to complete a course and measurable in a reliable and valid way using a short-response question.

- Each question considers how to reduce inequalities. This might be achieved by placing limits on the number of examples applicants can give for each question, or by emphasising the acceptability of less prestigious activities.

To ensure this reform is implemented in a way that is compatible with the *Fair admissions code of practice*, we recommend that higher education providers:

- Identify competencies that are relevant to selecting candidates who are able to complete a course, and develop appropriate baselines for each competency. This is likely to be done in consultation with staff, UCAS and the wider sector. At all times, attention should be paid both to whether

the competency is relevant to selecting candidates that are able to complete a course and whether a short-response question is a reliable measure of this baseline competency. Regular reviews would need to be undertaken to ensure that admissions practices remain as fair as possible.

- Provide explicit, transparent and accessible guidance for candidates on how each baseline competency will be assessed by the short-response questions. This guidance should emphasise that candidates can draw upon part-time work, caring responsibilities and other activities that may be viewed as less traditionally academic.

There is value in using Universities UK and GuildHE's *Fair admissions code of practice* to evaluate all aspects of higher education admissions. Through this process, we may be able to take a big step in creating fairer admissions to higher education for all applicants.

Reforming the UCAS personal statement: Making the case for a series of short questions

Appendix

There were 15 items that were evaluated for each personal statement. These fall into four categories: structure, inappropriate inclusions, positive elements to include and miscellaneous.

Structure:

1. *Paragraphs*. Did the statement contain paragraphs or is it a single block of text?

2. *Cohesive paragraphs*. Does the statement contain cohesive paragraphs, each of which focuses on one main topic?

3. *Appropriate flow*. Does the statement have an appropriate flow of ideas? An appropriate flow tends to 1) discuss motivation for the subject area near or at the beginning, 2) emphasise academic content by including these paragraphs near the beginning, 3) avoid repeating ideas and examples at multiple points in the statement. Also, a statement with six or more paragraphs, or with a paragraph of two sentences or less (excluding the conclusion), was judged to have an inappropriate flow, as these statements made too many points.

Inappropriate inclusions:

4. *Lists*. Does the statement list rather than explain? Listing could relate to things such as: topics studied, books read or work experience completed. A statement was judged to list if: 1) more than three discrete topics are mentioned in one sentence, or 2) three or more consecutive sentences focus on different things.

5. *Non-academic focus*. Does the statement contain 50 per cent or more content related to non-academic topics? Work experience was considered to be an academic topic when this was related to a candidate's subject area.

6. *Irrelevant information*. Does the statement contain irrelevant information? This could include discussions of a subject that is not being applied for or describing something that the admissions tutors are already aware of from other elements of their application, such as grades.

7. *Too many academic topics*. Does the statement mention too many academic topics? This was judged by whether a statement mentioned four or more academic topics – too many topics leaves less space to develop evidence-based opinions (see Item 11). If a statement did offer an evidence-based opinion, then it was judged not to have too many topics, even if it contained more than four academic topics.

8. *Definition of their subject*. Does the statement offer a generic definition of the subject area? This was judged to waste space, revealing little about a candidate's competencies.

Positive elements to include:

9. *Academic topics*. Does the statement consider at least one topic related to their subject? It was possible for a relevant topic to arise from their work experience or extra-curricular experiences.

10. *Sources and evidence.* Does the statement include sources and evidence related to their subject? 'Sources' was interpreted broadly, and includes academic articles, books, lectures, videos, newspapers and blogs, among others. If no sources are mentioned, or if only one source is briefly mentioned, then the statement was judged to lack sources.

11. *Evidence-based opinion or evaluation*. Does the statement contain an evidence-based opinion or evaluation? To qualify as an evidence-based opinion, a statement had to either 1) present two sides of an argument and then explain why they sided with one, or 2) offer a clear

evaluation of some academic work, for example, how it has a systematic bias or how it is unable to account for a certain phenomena.

Miscellaneous items:

12. *Too long*. Was the statement over 4,100 characters?

13. *Too short*. Was the statement shorter than 3,800 characters?

14. *Appropriate voice*. Did the candidate write in a clear and accessible way? Extensive use of formal language, complex sentence structure, and unclear phrasing were judged to be examples of inappropriate voice.

15. *Duplicate information*. Did the statement include information that is found elsewhere in their application? Examples of this include discussing A Level or GCSE grades (except when discussing mitigating circumstances) or listing a number of achievements that may be better placed in the references, such as attendance awards.

Endnotes

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5   Lee Elliot Major, 'Students' personal statements reveal privilege, not ability', *The Times*, 18 January 2022 https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/students-personal-statements-reveal-privilege-not-ability-53chr66kh

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40   Sarah R Wright and Philip M Bradley, 'Has the UK Clinical Aptitude Test improved medical student selection?', *Medical Education*, 44(11), 2010 pp.1069-1076 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1365-2923.2010.03792.x

41   This latter statement is a conjecture, and could be researched, if this reform was implemented.

42   This research would assess whether the short questions focus on an appropriate feature that relates to an applicant's ability to complete the course (Principle 2) and whether this can be measured this in a reliable way (Principle 3).

43   Rachel L Dunn and Stephen J Faulkner, 'Selling Themselves Short: How Inclusive is the UCAS Application Process to Non-traditional Students?', *Journal of the Foundation Year Network*, 3, 2020, pp.43-56 https://jfyn.co.uk/index.php/ukfyn/article/view/59

44   Universities UK / GuildHE, *Fair admissions code of practice,* last updated 29 September 2022 https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/fair-admissions-code-practice

The UCAS personal statement is a 4,000 character and 47-line essay that each applicant submits when applying for UK undergraduate programmes.

This paper begins by looking at the limited existing literature on UCAS personal statements before presenting some new analysis of applicants' draft personal statements.

The authors conclude that, in its current form, the UCAS personal statement is incompatible with the principles of fair admissions outlined by Universities UK and GuildHE.

They propose replacing the long-essay form with a series of a series of short-response questions and explain the benefits that would be likely to result.

Debate Paper 31