



Higher Education Policy Institute

How do Admissions Professionals use the UCAS personal statement?

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Executive Summary

- In January 2023, UCAS announced plans to reform the personal statement to a series of short questions covering six themes: motivation; preparedness for course; preparedness through other experiences; extenuating circumstances; preparedness for study; and learning styles.
- We surveyed admissions professionals on how they currently use the UCAS personal statement, receiving 113 responses from at least 31 providers.
- While the majority of personal statements are read, the average time spent on each statement is two minutes. Four-in-ten (39%) are read for one minute or less.
- Personal statements are mainly used to assess applicants' interest in a course (88%). Other uses include: gaining contextual information (65%), assessing academic potential (40%) and assessing work experience (29%).
- The majority of admissions professionals feel that decisions are primarily made on the basis of grades, although the personal statement is considered to be important for vocational or highly selective courses.
- The results have implications for UCAS's proposed reforms to the personal statement:
 - There is little evidence that 'preparedness for study' and 'preferred learning styles' are used in admissions – therefore, these themes should be removed from UCAS's proposals.
 - There should be space within the UCAS form for applicants to discuss extenuating circumstances, as admissions professionals do consider this information.
 - There is little evidence to support the division of 'preparedness for the course' and 'preparedness through other experiences' into two separate questions – only 6% of personal statements for non-vocational subjects were used to assess applicants' transferable skills.
- Overall, we recommend two short questions focussing on: (a) motivation and academic potential (such as 'Please describe one topic that is related to your course(s) and discuss what you have learnt about this topic'); and (b) other activities and experiences (such as 'Please describe one other activity or experience and discuss what you have gained and how this is relevant to your course(s)').

Background

In January 2023, UCAS announced their intention to reform the personal statement to a series of short questions.¹ This built upon UCAS's work with students and providers in 2022/23, as well as academic literature that has documented the challenges and inequalities that surround the personal statement, including our HEPI Debate Paper.² UCAS made an initial proposal to create short questions covering six themes (motivation; preparedness for course; preparedness through other experiences; extenuating circumstances; preparedness for study; and learning styles) and launched a consultation.

This HEPI Policy Note aims to inform the consultation, presenting results from a survey of admissions professionals on their use of the UCAS personal statement in undergraduate admissions. The survey was launched in January 2023 and ran until April 2023. It primarily targeted people whose day-to-day work involves processing and assessing applications, hereafter called ‘Admissions Officers’. This focus was chosen because we wanted to know how UCAS personal statements are used by practitioners, rather than gaining an institutional perspective from ‘Admissions Managers’, whose day-to-day job primarily involves managing those that process and assess applications. Although both Admissions Officers and Managers completed the survey, the former answered a broader range of questions.

We received 109 complete responses, with a further four responses that contained usable data. These responses were from at least 31 higher education providers. The actual number of providers is likely to be higher, as we did not require respondents to name their employer. In total, 53 (47%) of respondents were Admissions Officers and 60 (53%) were Managers.

Admissions Officers were asked a series of questions about the main course that they had been involved with in 2022/23, with the option to include information about a second course. This resulted in 68 responses about how UCAS personal statements are used when recruiting for a specific course. The sample is skewed towards the Russell Group (see Table 1) and STEM subjects (see Table 2), and there is a relatively even split of vocational and non-vocational subject areas. The relatively small sample from non-Russell Group providers means it is only feasible to compare the Russell Group to the overall sample.

Table 1: Responses to the survey, by type of HE provider

Provider type	Overall sample (%)	Course-level information (68 responses) (%)
Russell Group	51	53
Other Old Provider	12	13
Post-92	15	13
Other / Specialist	12	12
Unknown	11	9

Table 2: Responses to the survey, by Admissions Officers’ course type

	Vocational	Non-Vocational	Unknown
STEM	17	13	0
Social Science	13	7	1
Humanities	0	10	0
Unknown	0	1	6

How do Admissions Officers use the UCAS personal statement?

This section draws on data from Admissions Officers. Although this role varies between higher education providers, depending on whether they operate in a more centralised or decentralised admissions system, the day-to-day job of an Admissions Officer involves the processing and assessing of applications. As one Admissions Officer can be involved with a diverse range of subject areas, we asked them to provide information about the main course that they had been involved with in 2022/23, as well as providing an option to include information about a second course. This resulted in 68 responses.

We began by asking what percentage of personal statements are read (see Table 3). Admissions Officers said that they read the majority of personal statements, with 48 respondents saying that they read 100% of personal statements.³ Similarly, the mean percentage of personal statements read by Admissions Officers was 84%. However, six Admissions Officers reported reading 10% or fewer of UCAS personal statements.

Table 3: The percentage of personal statements that are read by Admissions Officers

Percentage of personal statements that are read	Frequency
0 - 10	6
11 - 20	2
21 - 30	0
31 - 40	0
41 - 50	3
51 - 60	2
61 - 70	0
71 - 80	3
81 - 90	3
91 - 100	48

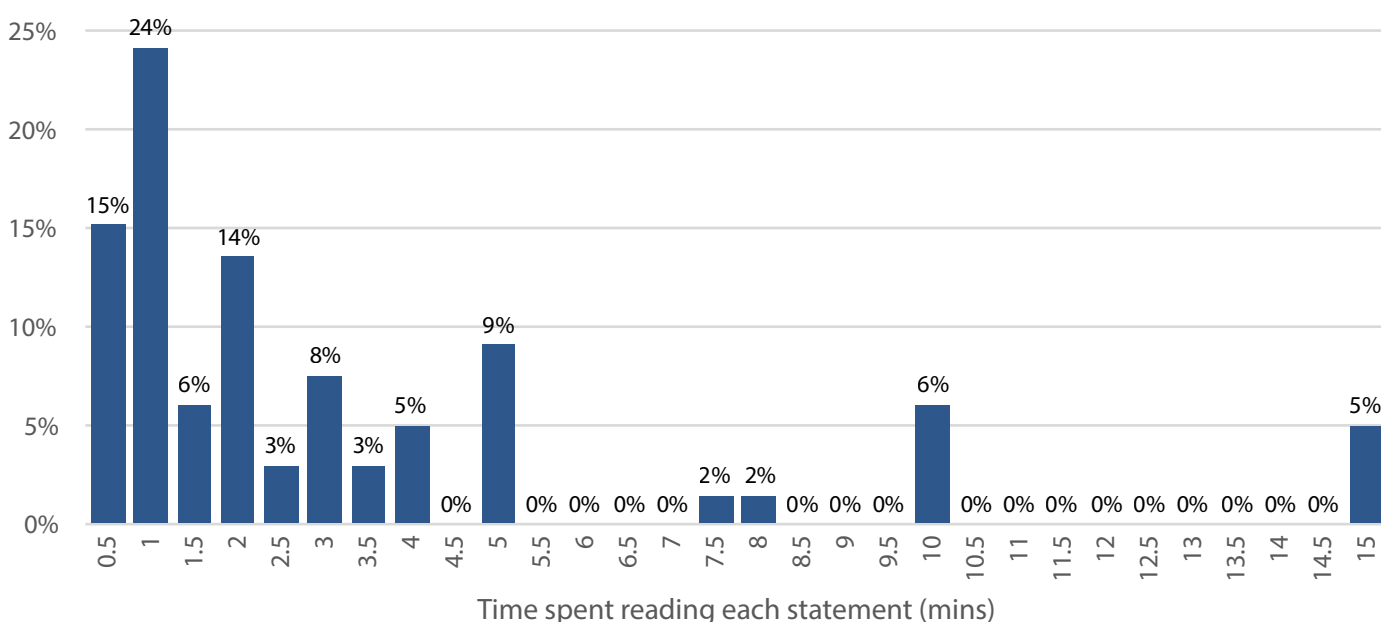
No large differences in the mean percentage of personal statements read was found by type of higher education provider or disciplinary area – the total was 84% overall, 87% for Russell Group institutions, 84% for STEM courses, 75% for Social Science courses, 100% for Humanities courses, 82% for vocational courses and 85% for non-vocational courses.⁴

However, Admissions Officers often only read statements that meet entry thresholds. Five respondents mentioned this point, with one person saying: ‘All students who are offerable based on grades will have their personal statement checked’. As this information was not explicitly prompted in the survey, it is likely that the exclusive consideration of statements from ‘offerable’ applicants is relatively widespread, reflecting the automated nature of admissions processes at many providers.⁵

We also asked how much time Admissions Officers typically spend reading a personal statement (see Figure 1). Our findings suggest the majority of personal statements are read very quickly. The median time Admissions Officers spend reading them is two minutes, which drops to 90 seconds for the Russell Group. Four-in-ten (39%) are read for one minute or less.

A number of comments emphasise the short amount of time Admissions Officers spend reading each personal statement. Again, although these comments were unprompted in the survey, 11 respondents said they only skim read the statements. For example, one wrote: ‘We look at them all, but the majority we don’t read in their entirety – we give them a skim’.

Figure 1: Approximately how much time would you typically spend reading one UCAS personal statement? (minutes)



Admissions Officers were then asked how they use the personal statement. Table 4 summarises these answers, as well as providing additional information about the Russell Group and vocational / non-vocational courses.

Table 4: Within this course, how do you use the UCAS personal statement?

	Overall Sample (%)	Russell Group (%)	Vocational Courses (%)	Non-Vocational Courses (%)
To assess applicants' interest in their course	88	92	90	87
To identify if an applicant has faced mitigating circumstances and / or to identify other relevant contextual information	65	61	50	81
To assess applicants' academic potential	40	44	30	52
To assess work experience	29	25	47	10
To assess extracurricular activity	28	28	33	23
To assess applicants' transferable skills (e.g. communication or teamwork)	22	22	37	6
To assess language skills	21	11	19	23
To assess broader personal traits that could benefit the university community (e.g. leadership)	12	11	17	10
Other	7	6	3	7
To create questions and topics for interviews	6	8	7	7
N/A – the personal statement is not used	3	0	3	3

The most common use of the personal statement is to identify whether an applicant has an interest in their chosen course(s) (88%). This is considerably higher than other uses, such as to assess academic potential (40%) or transferable skills (21%). It is also relatively commonplace to use the personal statement to assess learning from work experience (29%) and extracurricular activities (28%).

There are some differences between how the UCAS personal statement is used for non-vocational and vocational courses. Assessing academic potential is more common for non-vocational than vocational courses (52% versus 30%), whereas this is reversed for the assessment of transferable skills (6% versus 37%). This finding that only 6% of non-vocational courses assessed transferable skills is important. Admissions Officers recruiting for vocational courses are also more likely to assess learning from work experience (47% versus 10%) and extracurricular experiences (33% versus 23%).

There was widespread use of the personal statement to identify if an applicant has faced mitigating circumstances and / or to identify other relevant contextual information. Two-thirds (65%) of Admissions Officers use the personal statement in this way, making this the second most common use after assessing interest in a course. Our data do not allow us to understand exactly what Admissions Officers assess from this feature, and this should be further explored.

Other uses of the personal statement are much less common: assessing of language skills (22%); assessing personal traits (12%); creating questions for interview (6%); and other uses (7%).

The use of the personal statement by the Russell Group is similar to the overall sample. One difference appears around assessing language skills – while this is assessed by 21% of Admissions Officers in the overall sample, it drops to 11% for the Russell Group. While our survey is unable to understand the type of language skills that are assessed, such as fluency or avoiding slang, given evidence of inequalities in this area, this assessment could risk generating inequalities.⁶

When we consider the relationship between the use of personal statements and the time Admissions Officers spend reading them, we see a positive correlation. For example, Admissions Officers that use the statement to assess an applicant's academic potential read a statement for an average of three minutes, compared with only one minute for those do not assess this.

However, there some instances of assessments being made in a very short time. Six Admissions Officers assessed academic potential, alongside two or more other features, in less than 90 seconds.

Admissions Officers were finally asked to reflect on the following: 'Within this subject area, to what extent do you agree with the statement: The UCAS personal statement impacts significantly on decisions in university admissions'. This was answered on a Likert-scale (Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Agree; Strongly Agree).

Figure 2: The UCAS personal statement impacts significantly on decisions in university admissions

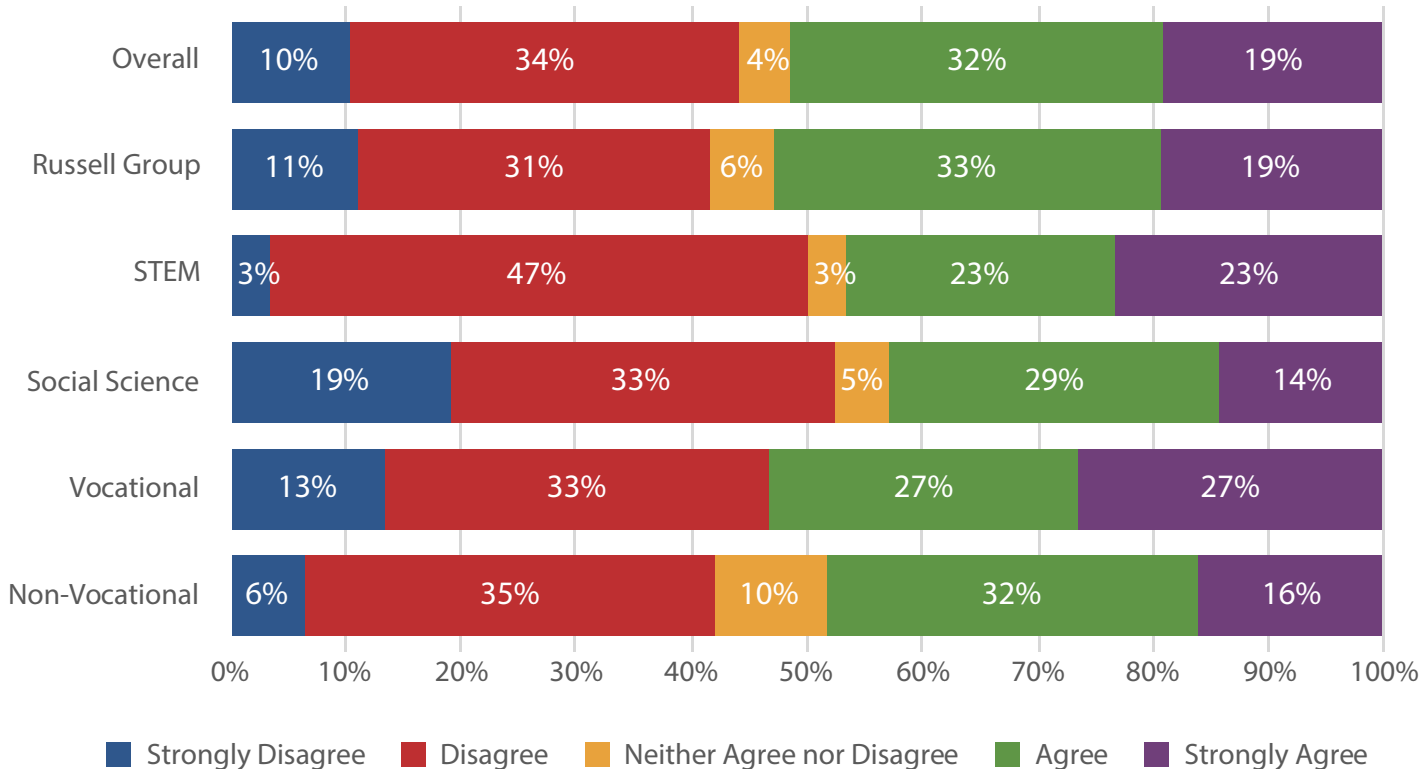


Figure 2 reveals the diversity of importance that is placed on the UCAS personal statement. Across all the categories, opinion is split on whether the personal statement has a significant impact on admissions decisions. This suggests there is considerable variation between different courses.

Of the patterns that can be identified from Figure 2, admissions processes for STEM courses appear to place more weight on the personal statement, when compared with Social Science courses. Only 3% of the former 'Strongly Disagree' that the personal statement has a significant impact, compared with 19% for the latter. There is also evidence that vocational courses are more likely to use the UCAS personal statement, with 27% of Admissions Officers for these vocational courses saying they 'Strongly Agree', compared with 16% of those recruiting for non-vocational courses. However, this difference should not be over-stated, the total saying either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' was broadly similar for vocational (54%) and non-vocational (48%) courses.

Overall perceptions of the importance of the UCAS personal statement

In addition to the course-specific information explored above, we asked two more general questions about perceptions of university admissions. These questions were answered by both Admissions Officers and Admissions Managers, with 113 respondents.

Respondents were firstly asked: 'From your experience, to what extent do you agree with the statement: Decisions on admissions are primarily made on the basis of grades'. This question was asked for three types of courses: 1) vocational courses; 2) highly selective, non-vocational courses; and 3) less selective, non-vocational courses. Respondents answered on a Likert-scale (Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Agree; Strongly Agree) and had the option to select 'Not applicable'.

Figure 3: Decisions on admissions are primarily made on the basis of grades

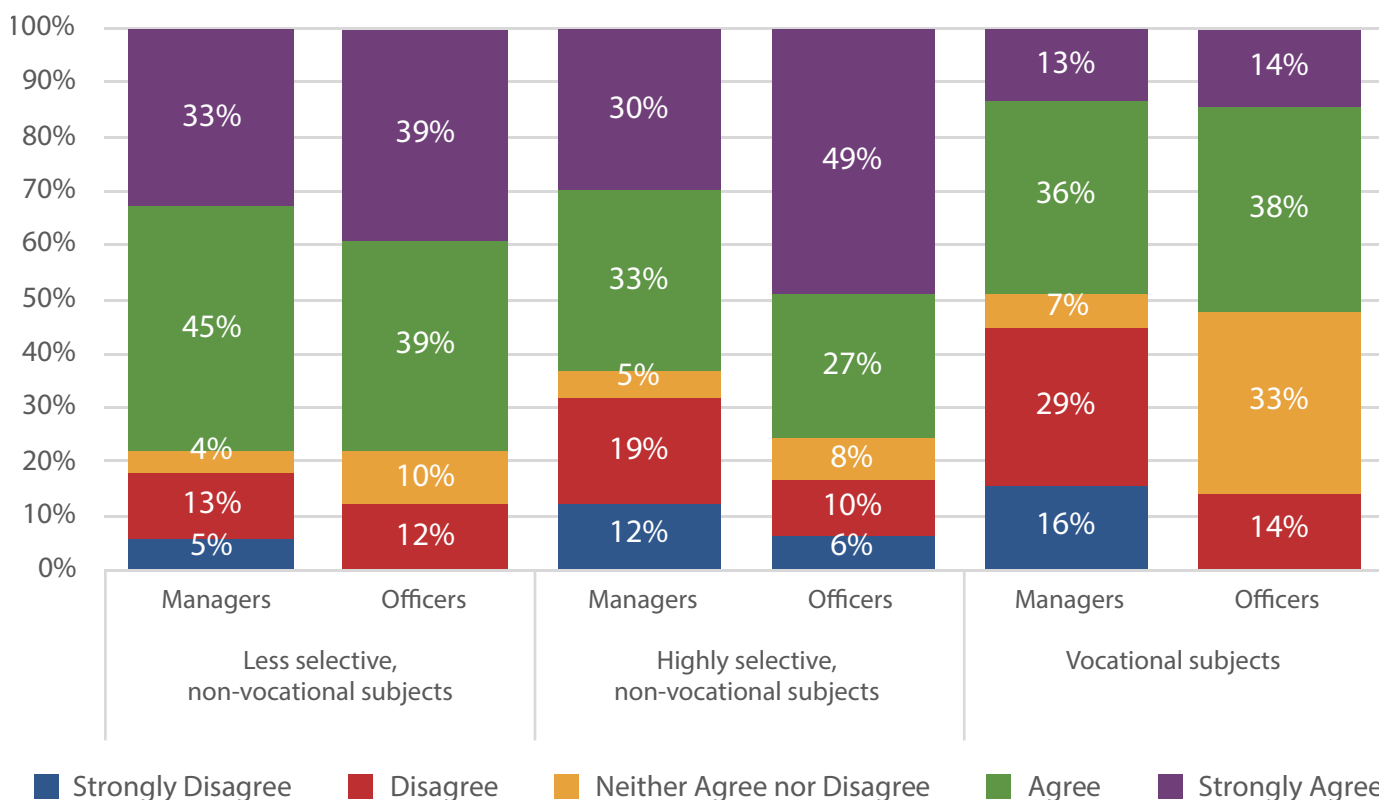


Figure 3 reveals broad agreement that 'Decisions on admissions are primarily made on the basis of grades': 78% of respondents 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' with this statement for less selective non-vocational subjects, 69% for highly selective non-vocational subjects and 50% for vocational subjects. Only 16% of respondents 'Strongly Disagree' or 'Disagree' with this statement for less selective non-vocational subjects, 24% for highly selective non-vocational subjects and 35% for vocational subjects.

Respondents were asked a second question that focussed on the role of the personal statement: 'From your experience, to what extent do you agree with the statement: The UCAS personal statement impacts significantly on decisions in university admissions'

Figure 4: The UCAS personal statement impacts significantly on decisions in university admissions

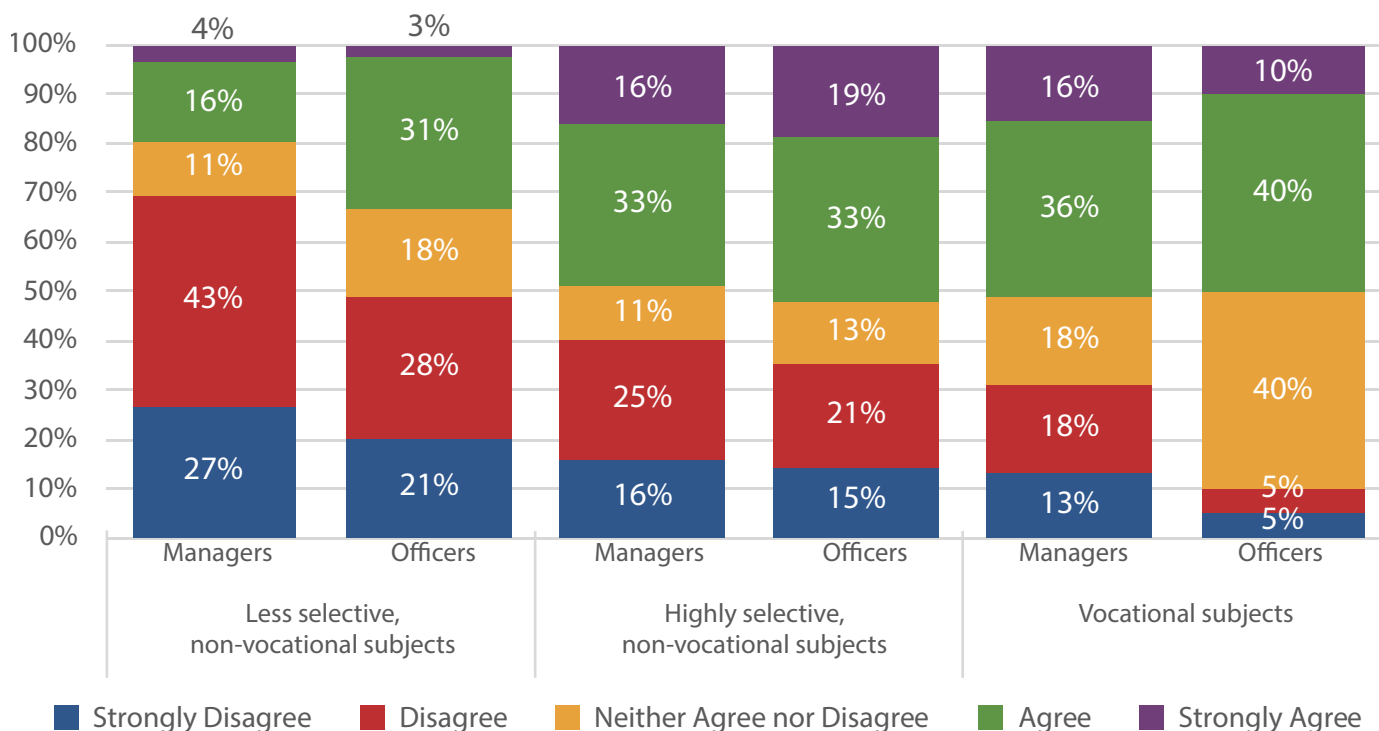


Figure 4 reveals admissions professionals perceive the personal statement to be more important for vocational subjects and highly selective non-vocational subjects, when compared with less selective non-vocational subjects. For the latter, only 20% of Admissions Managers and 34% of Admissions Officers believe the personal statement impacts significantly on admissions decisions.

There are some differences between Admissions Officers and Managers that can be observed in Figures 3 and 4. This is a relatively nuanced picture in which Admissions Officers appear to be less likely to challenge the idea that decisions are primarily made on the basis of grades, but more likely to see some role for the UCAS personal statement, especially in less selective non-vocational subject areas. In contrast, Admissions Managers are more likely to resist the idea that admissions decisions are primarily made on the basis of grades, but they are also more willing to dismiss the importance of the personal statement in less selective non-vocational subject areas.

It is worth noting that there are a relatively large number of respondents that answer 'Neither Agree nor Disagree', especially Admissions Officers, in Figure 4. This response should not be interpreted as 'Don't know' as respondents were able to opt out of questions if they did not have experience of a particular subject area. Instead, the large number of respondents selecting 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' is likely to reflect the considerable variation within each subject type. For example, the fact that 40% of Admissions Officers that say they 'Neither Agree nor Disagree' that the personal statement is important for vocational subjects suggests the personal statement is important for some, but not all, vocational courses.

Recommendations

These survey results have implications for the UCAS's proposed reform to the personal statement. The initial proposal included short questions covering six themes:

- i. Motivation for the course** – Why do you want to study these courses?
- ii. Preparedness for the course** – How has your learning so far helped you to be ready to succeed on these courses?
- iii. Preparation through other experiences** – What else have you done to help you prepare, and why are these experiences useful?
- iv. Extenuating circumstances** – Is there anything that the universities and colleges need to know about, to help them put your achievements and experiences so far into context?
- v. Preparedness for study** – What have you done to prepare yourself for student life?
- vi. Preferred learning styles** – Which learning and assessment styles best suit you – how do your course choices match that?

We wrote an initial response to these proposals in January 2023, and this survey data allow us to make a number of additional points.⁷

- 1. Admissions Officers are unlikely to make use of 'preparedness for study' (Theme 5) and 'preferred learning styles' (Theme 6).** At most, 7% of Admissions Officers use the personal statement for 'Other purposes', which would include these two themes. We therefore recommend that these questions are removed.
- 2. There is support for maintaining a question about extenuating circumstances (Theme 4),** as 65% of Admissions Officers do consider these. We feel it is important to allow applicants the space to address extenuating circumstances and other contextual information in their own words, rather than having to rely exclusively on their referee to provide this.⁸ There are ongoing conversations about the best place for this question within the UCAS form, but our survey provides evidence that this information would be useful to higher education providers.
- 3. Admissions Officers do sometimes use the personal statement to assess what applicants have gained from work experience and extracurricular activities,** at 29% and 28% respectively. Although this is more important for vocational subject areas, we believe there is enough use to justify including Theme 3 (Preparation through other experiences) as a short question.

4. **There is limited evidence to support the separation of Theme 2 (Preparedness for the course) and Theme 3 (Preparation through other experiences).** While 22% of Admissions Officers do assess transferable skills, this is almost exclusively in vocational (37%) rather than non-vocational courses (6%). We interpret this to mean that Admissions Officers are interested in skills and competencies applicants have gained from work experience / extracurricular activities, but less so the skills gained from more formal school-based learning. Thus, we recommend that transferable skills should be incorporated within Theme 3 (Preparation through other experiences), rather than within Theme 2 (Preparedness for the course).
5. **Enquiring about applicants' motivation and understanding of their course(s) is very important,** given 88% of Admissions Officers assess their interest and 40% assess their academic potential. However, we believe that one question that combines Theme 1 (Motivation for the course) and Theme 2 (Preparedness for the Course) could assess both an applicant's interest and whether they meet a baseline of academic competence. The case for this combination is strengthened by the finding that the personal statement is not widely used to assess transferable skills for non-vocational courses. This question should not be framed in an abstract way, as an abstract question about motivation is likely to prompt equally abstract and clichéd answers. Instead, a more concrete question that asks about how applicants have explored a topic related to their course(s) has the potential to assess both Theme 1 and Theme 2 in a more reliable way. This could assess both applicants' interest and understanding (for example, can they write about a relevant topic) and their baseline academic potential (for example, can they demonstrate some research and reflection on this topic).

Based on these survey results and previous research, we recommend short questions that focus on the two themes:

1. **Motivation and academic potential** – such as 'Please describe one topic that is related to your course(s) and discuss what you have learnt about this topic.'
2. **Other activities and experiences** – such as 'Please describe one other activity or experience and discuss what you have gained and how this is relevant to your course(s).'

Endnotes

- 1 UCAS, 'The Future of Undergraduate Admissions', January 2023, available from: <https://www.ucas.com/about-us/news-and-insights/reforming-admissions>
- 2 Tom Fryer, Steve Westlake and Steven Jones, 'Reforming the UCAS personal statement: Making the case for a series of short questions', HEPI Debate Paper 31, November 2022 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/11/24/ucas-personal-statements-create-inequality-and-should-be-replaced-by-short-response-questions/>
- 3 One Admissions Officer did not provide information for this question.
- 4 Note the small sample size of ten for courses from the Humanities.
- 5 Katherine Lloyd Clarke, 'What's actually wrong with admissions?', *Wonkhe*, December 2022 <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/whats-actually-wrong-with-admissions/>
- 6 Steven Jones, 'The Personal Statement: A fair way to assess university applicants?', The Sutton Trust, December 2012 <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/JONESPERSONALSTATEMENTS-2.pdf>
- 7 Tom Fryer, Steve Westlake and Steven Jones, 'UCAS reforms to the personal statement: One step forward, more to go', HEPI Blog, January 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/01/14/ucas-reforms-to-the-personal-statement-one-step-forward-more-to-go/>
- 8 Tom Fryer, Steve Westlake and Steven Jones, 'Reforming the UCAS personal statement: Making the case for a series of short questions', HEPI Debate Paper 31, November 2022 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/11/24/ucas-personal-statements-create-inequality-and-should-be-replaced-by-short-response-questions/>

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