

UCAS RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW OF POST-18 EDUCATION AND FUNDING

Q1. This review will look at how Government can ensure that the post-18 education system is joined up and supported by a funding system that works for students and taxpayers. The panel would like to understand your priorities. What, if any, are your principal concerns with the current post-18 education and funding system?

UCAS is the UK's national admissions service. Every year we help around 700,000 students apply for full-time undergraduate courses at over 400 UK universities and colleges by providing relevant and timely information and advice about all post-18 opportunities, a comprehensive course search tool, and managing nearly three million applications. We also provide a similar suite of services for postgraduate courses, conservatoires, and teacher training, and information, advice and search services for higher and degree apprenticeships.

In responding to this consultation, we have focused on English universities and those applying to English universities, but consideration needs to be given to the impacts of any changes on students and providers across the rest of the UK.

Our main concerns encompass:

- The need to ensure that there is good, up-to-date personal support available to young people making post-16 and post-18 choices, and incentives to help all access open days, as these are critical to student decision making.
- Better awareness of the alternatives to three year full-time undergraduate programmes including part-time and sub-degree programmes, and the financial support available, as the current model incentivises young people to go straight into higher education (HE) at age 18.
- The need for more robust, comparable data and information about the student experience and student outcomes from these alternatives.
- The need for more progress on credit recognition to better support those who want to gain further and higher qualifications incrementally.
- The continuing gaps in participation between advantaged and disadvantaged students, the regressive funding model which leaves the poorest with the largest loan debts, and the impacts of rising living costs on student choices and success.
- Falling numbers of mature and part-time time students, and the need for alternative financial and support models which better meet their needs.

In responding to the questions below, we draw upon UCAS' extensive analysis and research to explore how young people and older students make choices about further study, the challenges they face, and the role that the Government could play in addressing these.

Q2. How do people make choices about what to study after 18? What information do they use and how do they choose one route over another: for instance, between academic, technical and vocational routes?

For young people, deciding what they should do after 18 is a major life decision, whether they realise it or not. Our research with students [[Through the Lens of Students report](#)

[\(2016\)](#)¹ shows that the earlier that young people are aware of HE, the more likely they are to apply. We also see differences by gender and area-based socio-economic background, with young women and those from more advantaged backgrounds being more certain at a younger age that university is for them.^{1A}

The routes open to young people post-18 are shaped by the qualifications and subjects available to them at Level 2, their attainment at Level 2, and subsequently at Level 3. Our research, presented both in our [Through the Lens of Students report](#), and in our [2016 Progression Pathways report](#)², shows that it is still the case that some young people find out too late that the qualifications and grades they have at Level 2 are insufficient for their kind of HE they're interested in.^{1B, 2} UCAS has published a range of information and advice for students, parents, advisers and higher education providers (HEPs), to improve understanding about the utility of different qualifications for educational progression, but young people still tell us that they want more and better advice on this at the right time.

When we asked young people about why some of their peers chose not to apply to university, 82% of respondents felt that this was because their peers were choosing to work or pursue an apprenticeship instead. However, 58% also felt that their peers did not consider university because they weren't going to secure good enough grades. Concerns about debt, a desire to start earning straight away, and not wanting to leave home were also significant factors.^{1C}

The kind of advice, encouragement and support that students receive from their schools, colleges and parents or carers is critical in informing post-18 choices. Our research identified that some young people feel that their schools only focus on supporting high achieving students, rather than showcasing the wide range of study opportunities available. Students wanted more information about vocational degree programmes, particularly where degrees are developed in partnership with employers, or offer work placements or internships as a core part of learning.

Our [2017 Progression Pathways report](#)³ highlighted that whilst there are a range of alternative post-18 study options and constantly evolving employment opportunities, teachers and parents tend to be conservative in offering advice, drawing on their own experiences of education and employment. Degree apprenticeships have caught the imagination of growing numbers of students who are attracted by the idea of securing a degree whilst gaining employment experience, and avoiding taking out tuition fee and maintenance loans. However, neither young students, nor their parents and advisers, may fully realise, or be prepared for, the challenges of working and studying under an apprenticeship model, and the commitments required to the sponsoring employer.

There is also a lack of awareness about sub-degree options like foundation years, foundation degrees and HNC/Ds, particularly how the student experience, funding, and outcomes differ in comparison with a three-year degree programme. This makes it difficult for teachers to advise students whether re-sits or a foundation year at a university offer their best option, or how to decide between a degree apprenticeship and a full-time degree.^{3A} Young people

may also not realise that they can pursue a degree later in life and don't have to go to university straight from school or college.

At UCAS, we provide information and advice on the full range of post-18 choices available, including a new, highly regarded [apprenticeship hub](#) where students can not only search and explore the widest possible range of full-time undergraduate degrees through our [search tool](#), but also the latest degree and higher apprenticeship opportunities. These are the first steps towards addressing the need of students to see information about all their options on one single platform

Where young people have decided that higher education is an option for them, we know that the decision-making process is highly individual. Some people have a clear idea of what they want to study with a career goal in mind, others are more interested in the university experience but don't know what they want to study. We also know that many young people change their minds during their final years at school or college as they mature and their interests change.

Young people use a wide range of information sources to help them to decide to what to apply for, and then how to decide between the offers they receive. Whilst data and comparative statistics have a role to play, decisions about which subject to study – and especially where to study – are highly emotive. Our research, seen in the [Through the Lens of Students report](#), shows that what students really want to know are the answers to question such as:

- What will it be like to study there?
- Where will I live and what will it be like?
- Will I get in? Will I fit in?
- Will studying there help me get a job or the job I want?
- How will I manage financially?

We also know that access to suitable accommodation is a critical factor. 64% of students think that the right accommodation is as important as the right course, with 70% of disadvantaged students agreeing with this statement^{1D}. For young people, the wider student experience is also an essential factor in decision making, with young UK students stating that 'fitting in'^{1D} and geographical location^{1E} were important factors in the choices they made. This is further supported by the findings of our 2017 Student decision report, in which applicants ranked the location of the provider in a town or city as the 3rd most important factor, and social life and activities as 5th in their decision making – above graduate earnings (4th) and league table position (9th).⁴

As such, applicants increasingly rely on the views of current or recent students and often it's a visit to a university open day, or an offer holder day, which cements the final choice^{1F}.

As a highly trusted, independent charity, UCAS aims to provide a complete support package for students, teachers and parents to help young people decide if HE is right for them and to guide through every step of the admissions process. Our programme of UK-wide exhibitions reaches an annual audience of around 174,000 students and we distribute our digital

content, which includes [case studies](#), [blogs](#), [vlogs](#), storytelling, as well as comprehensive step-by-step guides, through many channels. Our search tool allows students and advisers to search for and filter undergraduate, postgraduate, and conservatoire courses in one location. The tool links to the relevant key information statistics for each course, and information about TEF ratings.

What is clear however, is that young people want and need more timely, personalised information, advice and guidance. We fully support the adoption of the Gatsby Career Benchmarks, and believe that every young person should have access to the kind of high quality, one-to-one careers guidance that is the norm in the independent sector. Whilst it's not UCAS' role to address this, we support using our insight about the student decision making process to send and surface timely and subject specific information, supplied by industry experts, to inform post-18 choices.

Q3: How do people make choices later in life about what further study to undertake?

While English 18 year olds continue to apply for and access full-time HE through UCAS in record numbers, applications and acceptances for mature students continue to fall.^{6A} This is likely to reflect a number of different factors, including the strength of the job market, and the greater uptake of HE at age 18. With one in six of all applicants aged 21+ applying to nursing courses, the overall decline in older applicants is also being driven by the decline in demand for nursing following the replacement of the NHS bursary with tuition fee loans.^{6B}

As with younger students, our [Progression Pathways 2017](#) research shows that many older students are not aware of the full range of options open to them^{3A}. Our end of cycle applicant survey shows that, not surprisingly, the factors which inform decisions about further study are different for older students. Whilst course content and choice of modules remains the primary factor, there is less interest in the social life and activities available, and more emphasis on place, as many older students will be living at home and/or commuting whilst studying.⁴

As many older students may have family responsibilities and financial commitments, they are likely to be much more attuned to whether further study is value for money, and have questions about the whole support package a HEP offers in terms of accessibility to campus, facilities and teaching staff, as additional support with finances or study skills. UCAS provides specific information and [advice for mature students](#) on a number of topics including, meeting entry requirements, preparing for a return to study, financial issues and case studies, but this kind of focused information is not always easy to find on university websites. This year, we are launching a mature student campaign to continue the sector debate. It will be anchored around three releases: a statistical profile, survey insight work and work on transition to HE.

Q4: In recent years we have seen continued growth in three-year degrees for 18 year-olds. Does the system offer a comprehensive range of high quality alternative routes for young people who wish to pursue a different path at this age? How can Government encourage provision across a wider range of high quality pathways to advanced academic, technical and vocational qualifications?

There is a good breadth and diversity of provision available to young people, as highlighted in our Progression Pathways Reports, with the expansion of degree and higher apprenticeships adding to mix. Whilst SLC data shows that numbers of students taking foundation years are increasing, HESA data shows that numbers of students taking two-year foundation degrees, and HNC/Ds on both a part-time and full-time basis continue to fall.

We would stress that academic, technical and vocational pathways are not wholly separate. Many universities and colleges accept students with technical and vocational qualifications onto what are considered to be academic programmes, particularly where students also hold one or two A levels as well.^{5B} Many degree programmes use real-world problem solving as an integral part of teaching, with students working in business, industry or simulated environments, as described well by the [University Alliance](#).

Therefore, part of the challenge is helping students, parents, and teachers understand and explore the opportunities that already exist, and being able to compare the experience, benefits and outcomes of these opportunities. UCAS is tackling this through its information and advice provision, including new collaborations with HESA, HECSU and Jisc to link together HE outcomes with admissions data, but our [2017 Progression Pathways](#) report shows that there is a lack of comprehensive information and advice about some pathways, particularly in comparison to information available about full-time degrees. Even basic information which makes it easy to compare the different learning approaches, modes of study, time commitment, fees and financial support, and qualification and progression opportunities can be absent.^{3A}

In addition, students should be able to transfer between programmes and providers in order to extend or top up their learning. Clarity about qualifications and credit is essential, as is transparency about where and how credits are likely to be accepted. For example, some foundation years do not lead to the achievement of recognised credit, which can make it difficult for students to transfer to a different provider at the end of the year to continue their studies.^{3B}

To further promote and encourage diversity we believe that the Government should:

- Encourage providers to explain how routes differ from each other, share more information about the experiences of students pursuing these, and publish research about the outcomes for students on different pathways to inform decision making.³
- Encourage providers to evaluate and publish research on the benefits of foundation years versus retakes e.g. in terms of learning gain, progression, financials.
- Encourage providers to adopt consistent terminology regarding pathways and publish clear information about the qualifications and/or credit likely to be achieved, and how and where these can support progression to further study and employment

- Encourage employers to clearly articulate the qualifications and experience required to participate in an apprenticeship, consider the school year when recruiting, and use channels and services that are geared to the expectations of young people
- Support schools and colleges to deliver the commitments in the Careers' Strategy, noting UCAS' information and advice capabilities and teacher and adviser network.

Q7: How can Government further encourage high-quality further education and higher education provision that is more flexible: for example, part-time, distance learning and commuter study options?

To realise further diversity, Government should look to incentivise both demand and supply. Whilst flexible provision is likely to appeal more to older individuals who may have work, family or other caring responsibilities, and who may be geographically constrained, it may also be of interest to some younger students who would like to work and study at the same time.

On the demand side, the Government could encourage providers and those who work with students to promote the benefits of combining work and study, for example the flexibility it may offer and the ability to earn and learn. For some students, the ability to work at their own pace and to build their knowledge and learning more incrementally through sub-degree qualifications will be highly attractive. But it's also necessary to be honest about the challenges of working and learning at the same time.

For those who are working or have caring responsibilities, distance and ease of transportation to a university or college can be a barrier. The Government could subsidise or encourage others to subsidise transportation costs or access to appropriate technology to enable distance learning.

On the supply side, the challenges are similar to those for younger students. There is a pressing need to address the confusing terminology used for different forms of flexible provision, particularly at sub-degree level, and to address long-standing issues around credit recognition which may prevent some students from topping up to a full degree.^{3B}

The UCAS system already supports students who wish to transfer to a different HEP. We offer information on course opportunities for students looking to access the second year of a degree and enable students to share information about credit accumulated, and aim to extend this functionality to make it easier for students to explore transfer opportunities.

Q8: To what extent do funding arrangements for higher education and further education and other post-18 education and training act as incentives or barriers to choice or provision: both at the individual and provider level? How does this impact on the choices made by prospective students and learners? What can Government do to improve incentives and reduce barriers?

In 2014 UCAS published analysis on the impact of the 2012 tuition fees increase on applications and admissions. Our [analysis](#) showed that whilst applications from young students fell in 2012 after a period of annual increases, higher fees do not appear to have significantly reduced long term demand for full-time HE, and the number and proportion of English 18 year olds entering HE has continued to increase year-on-year. 2017 saw 207,920 acceptances from 18 year olds from England, the highest number on record, the highest acceptance rate on record (86.7%), and the highest ever entry rate (33.3%) for this cohort.^{5A}

As the data shows, the current funding model and perceptions about accumulated debt, incentivise young people with an interest in HE to apply at age 18. Market dynamics (following the removal of number controls) coupled with a declining 18 year old population also incentivises providers to recruit growing numbers of young, full-time students. These factors naturally suppress demand from older age groups, and the accompanying collapse in demand for part-time provision is well-documented. Older students also appear to be more sensitive to changes in the availability of financial support – as evidenced by the dramatic falls in demand from English students for full-time undergraduate nursing programmes in 2017 (-23% at end of cycle)^{5E} and 2018 (-14% at March deadline)^{6B} following the change from bursary to loan funding.

UCAS' [latest application data from March 2018](#) shows that the proportion of English 18 year olds applying this year is the highest on record at 37.8% (0.3% up from 2017). Despite this strong demand, the rate of increase in application rates is slowing.^{6A} We know that young people are concerned both about the debt they'll accumulate and accommodation and living costs at university. This is a persistent factor in many students' decision making about where to study. UCAS analysis shows that around 40% of UK students were accepted at a university or college within 25 miles of where they live when they applied, although this does not appear to have altered in response to changes in funding arrangements post 2012.

A priority for the Government should be to address the funding arrangements for those who wish study on a part-time basis, recognising that there are many different modes of study which may not be linear or immediately sequential. Similarly, UCAS would advocate further consideration as to the funding arrangements for accelerated degrees, as these also represent an alternative option for certain types of applicants. In addition, all students would benefit from better information and advice about the range of financial support available to them (including from universities, colleges and charities as well as Student Finance England), and realities and practicalities of budgeting and managing their money whilst studying. More consistent provision of information whilst young people are in secondary education would help to level the playing field and dispel myths about funding available for further study at 18 and later in life.

Q9: What particular barriers (including financial barriers) do people from disadvantaged backgrounds face in progressing to and succeeding in post-18 education and training?

Differences in attainment at age 16 and 18 by socio-economic background, sex, ethnicity, and geography continue to drive differential outcomes in admissions to HE.

UCAS analysis shows considerable progress has been made in widening access to HE. [Our 2017 End of Cycle report](#) showed that the entry rate to HE for English 18 year olds from POLARQ1 (20.4%) was the highest ever, and that rate of increase (0.9 percentage points, 4.6% proportionally) was the highest of each of the quintile groups. However, there remains a wide gap in entry rates of 26.7 percentage points between the most and least advantaged groups, and data on students in receipt of free school meals shows a similar picture.^{5C}

UCAS' Multiple Equality Measure (MEM) combines a range of dimensions (sex, ethnic group, POLAR3, secondary education sector type, and FSM status) to examine how disadvantage, in terms of entry into HE is inherently multidimensional in nature. The statistical model creates five quintiles such that Group 1 contains those least likely to enter HE (most disadvantaged), and Group 5 contains those most likely to enter HE (most advantaged). In 2017 this analysis shows that although entry rates for 18 year olds were increasing in all five Groups, the smallest increase was in Group 1, and that the gap in entry rates between were increasing rather than decreasing.^{5D}

Data published from the 2018 March deadline shows that the number of English 18 year old applicants from POLAR4 Q1 is down 3% compared to 2017, whilst the number of applicants from Q5 is down 2%, signalling the possibility of a widening gap in participation this year.^{6C}

Whilst the historical data indicates that young students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not appear to have been deterred from applying to, or entering HE, where and how they apply is different from their more advantaged peers. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to make the decision to go to university later (e.g. at age 16 rather than younger)^{1A}, are more likely to be taking applied general and technical qualifications which may restrict their subject and university choices, are less likely to have 1:1 support at school, and more likely to be in the minority amongst their peer group in applying to HE (28% of POLARQ1 compared to 6% of POLARQ5 students).

We also know that disadvantaged students are less likely to be able to afford to go to open days, and when they do so, they pick those that are more local,^{1G} and also that published entry requirements, the range of courses on offer, and living costs are the main reasons why applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds choose not to apply to higher Tariff providers.^{1H}

For those for whom HE is a more uncertain choice, [our research](#) shows that employment is a strong pull for young people; as one student said *"I come from a low income area and for the most part, people want to earn money straight away and 'start their lives', rather than spend three years studying before earning any money."*

The current financial arrangements are regressive with regard to the poorest students, and we would encourage the Government to look again at maintenance grants for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. In terms of supporting admissions to HE the Government could also encourage providers to:

- Engage earlier with students from disadvantaged backgrounds to promote the benefits of HE in all of its forms
- Better support disadvantaged students in accessing open days e.g. through travel vouchers or organised transport
- Use multiple measures of equality in evaluating access and contextualising admissions

Although the subjects that disadvantaged students study at HE may be constrained by what is offered locally, cost of living considerations, and also by their Level 3 qualifications and grades, their choices are not constrained by tuition fees. Any consideration of a move towards differential tuition fees for subjects or providers should be subject to a full equality impact assessment. This would also entail a comprehensive review of UCAS' information and advice to safeguard informed student decision-making.

Q14: What are the most effective ways for the Government and institutions to communicate with students and graduates on the nature and terms of student support?

Students and graduates use a variety of different channels and information sources to find out about student support. The Government should continue to make available high-quality content and data available for use by schools, parents, peers, and trusted non-governmental channels like UCAS.

For example, we attract around 20 million users to our website every year, and our 2017 new applicant survey found that 83% were either extremely or mostly happy with “the level of information provided on ucas.com about going to, or applying to, university or college”. Teachers and advisers also highly rate UCAS' information and advice: 93% of respondents to our most recent satisfaction survey said they were ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ satisfied with our resources.

We can deliver tailored communications to prospective students with relevant information about student support at exactly the right time in their application journey, and we're working increasingly closely with Student Finance England to ensure that we're offering the latest finance information. As we develop our personalised content further we aim to offer more tailored financial information for students with disabilities, care leavers, those with parental or caring responsibilities and estranged students, alongside our existing advice and support.