



UNCONDITIONAL OFFER-MAKING

Good practice considerations for HE providers

APPROACH TO GOOD PRACTICE

To support the sector, UCAS has commissioned the production of good practice resources around unconditional offer-making.

In August 2018, we invited universities and colleges to submit expressions of interest in participating in this work. We received a range of bids, and convened a working group comprising representatives from nine universities and colleges, each with different approaches to unconditional offer-making.

UCAS would like to thank the following individuals for their help and support in the production of these good practice resources:

- > **Carolyn Deeming**, Plymouth College of Art
- > **Claire Pryke**, University of Bradford
- > **David Moyle**, Aberystwyth University
- > **Dominic Davis**, City, University of London
- > **Michelle Morgan**, Bournemouth University
- > **Natasha Cresswell**, University of Gloucestershire
- > **Nicky Stecker-Doxat**, University of Southampton
- > **Ross Sands**, University of Northampton
- > **Simon Jones**, Coventry University

We value your feedback on the use and efficacy of these resources – if you have any comments or suggestions, please contact Ben Jordan (Senior Policy and Qualifications Manager) at b.jordan@ucas.ac.uk.

Offer-making and unconditional offers

The number of unconditional offers being made to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales has been increasing year-on-year since 2013, as explained in the **UCAS Undergraduate End of Cycle Report 2017**, and **Unconditional offers – an update for 2018**. In 2013, there were 2,985 offers recorded as unconditional, accounting for 0.4% of all offers to that group of applicants. By 2018, unconditional offers had increased to 67,915, accounting for 7.1% of all offers. More than a fifth of 2018 applicants (22.9%, 58,385) received at least one unconditional offer – a rise of 29% on 2017.

Unconditional offers have always been a feature of university and college admissions, and are used in a variety of circumstances, for example, in admitting mature students who have already achieved sufficient qualifications to meet entry criteria. Likewise, in Scotland, a substantial proportion of applicants aged 18 have already attained SQA Highers, and therefore met the academic requirements to enter higher education. However, in recent years, providers have increasingly made unconditional offers to 18 year olds with pending qualifications. This practice has raised concerns among the pre-HE sector.

Evidence-based decision-making is at the heart of fair admissions, and our guide to the types of unconditional offer gives an overview of the range of criteria that may be employed when making unconditional offers. Broadly speaking, the principles for implementing an unconditional offer strategy, and making unconditional offers, could be applied to any type of offer-making. Equally, any offer-making practice undertaken by an HE provider should adhere to the principles of fair admissions¹.

¹ Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group (2004) **Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice**



CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW

The practice of making unconditional offers to 18 year old applicants with pending qualifications has received a range of feedback and attention from teachers, advisers, students, and the media, who have expressed concerns about potential impacts on student motivation and Level 3 attainment, as well as preparation for higher-level study.

Evidence indicates that those students who receive unconditional offers are less likely to meet their predicted grades². Due to the evidence and level of feedback, it is important providers that wish to implement an unconditional offer-making strategy do so in a way that places the student interest at the fore, and which is evidence-based.

These principles aim to equip higher education providers with the key considerations to assist them in compiling a policy, and procedures and processes for making unconditional offers to applicants. They may also be used when reviewing the efficacy of existing strategies. They can be applied to admissions to courses through UCAS, and to direct applications throughout the cycle. The following principles were developed in conjunction with the working group:

1. Clear, transparent, and accessible policy and procedures

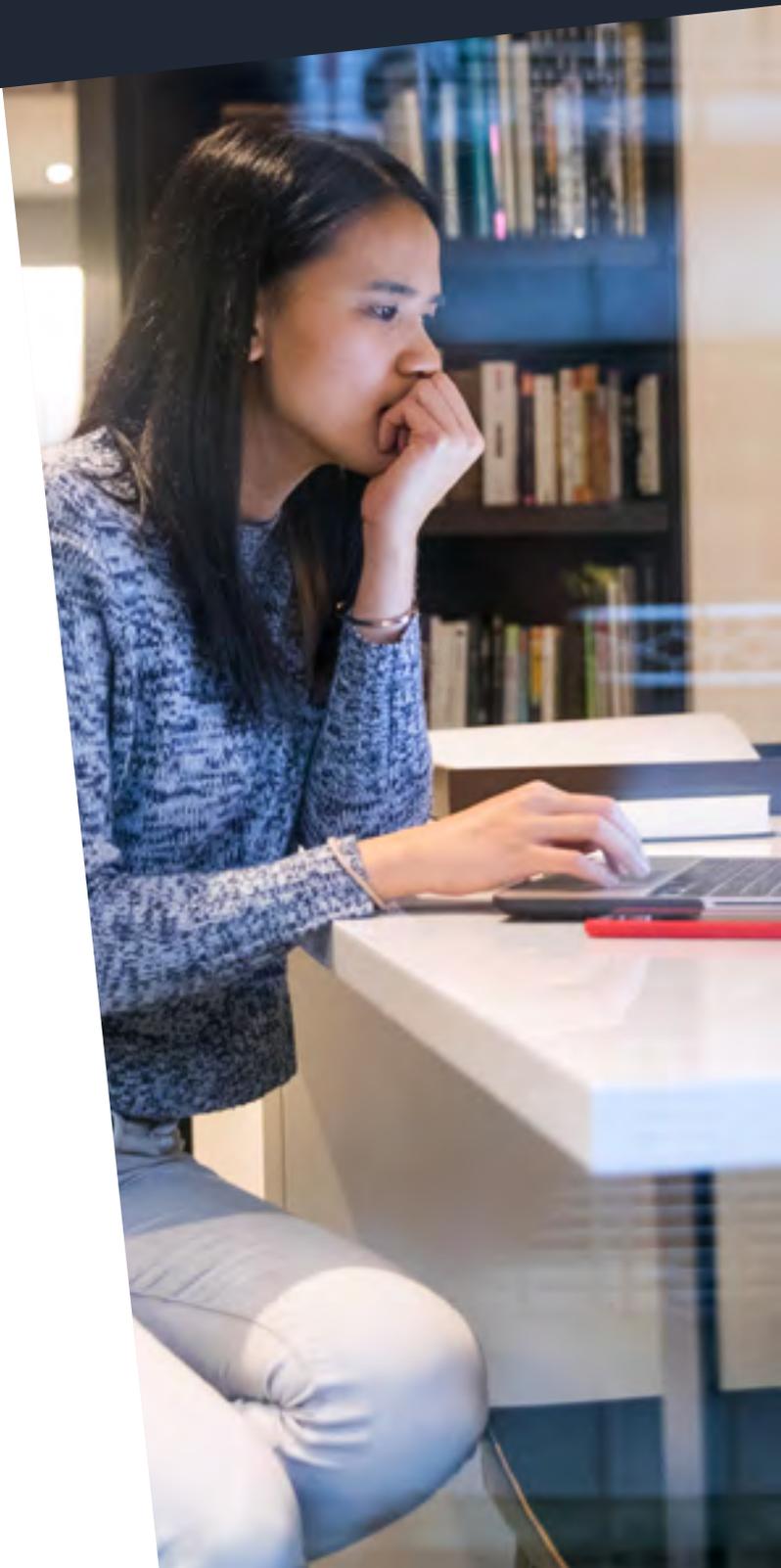
Providers should consider the principles of fair admissions³ when developing and reviewing their policies and procedures. As with any admissions policy, it is important that prospective students and their advisers understand the criteria for entry, and can easily access detailed information on the policy of that specific provider. For example, if a provider determines who will receive an unconditional offer based on their portfolio and/or interview, this should be clearly stated in any public policy. Equally, if using predicted grades or prior attainment, it is advisable to specify which qualifications and/or grades are required (or excluded) for consideration. If an applicant decision is required, such as firm acceptance, this should be made clear in the offer and any supporting communications. The overarching policy should be readily accessible via a range of channels, using appropriate and easy to understand language for a variety of audiences.

If unconditional offers or schemes are only applicable to certain courses, this should be clearly articulated in any published information, to ensure a student can understand if their chosen course is eligible. In addition, providers should consider how the overarching strategy and criteria for selection can be communicated to all members of staff involved in interactions with prospective students (including those who may not be directly involved in the admissions process), to ensure information is conveyed consistently.

When revising policies and processes, consideration should also be given to the timing and rollout plan, to avoid changes during the admissions cycle.

²UCAS (2016) **Factors associated with predicted and achieved A level attainment**

³Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group (2004) **Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice**



2. Communications and messaging

Linked to clear and transparent policies and procedures, a clear communication plan (both internal and external), alongside careful messaging, will be important when considering the implementation of unconditional offer-making.

Providers should take care to ensure the communication journey of an unconditional offer holder is equitable to a conditional offer holder, including any information that is targeted around conversion or conditions that need to be met post-offer, such as a DBS check. Communications or events specifically for unconditional offer holders could be considered as part of a wider engagement strategy. In addition, communications to advisers, teachers, parents, and other influencers may be welcome, both generally (e.g. information freely available to those researching or advising) and more targeted (e.g. bespoke teacher and adviser guides sent directly to offer holders or schools).

If you make unconditional offers to students with pending Level 3 qualifications, you should seek to ensure the offer made to the student doesn't result in them ceasing their studies or failing to perform to the best of their ability, and proactively employ practices that mitigate against this. For example, you might want to email students to highlight the importance of their grades, how focusing on their qualifications will prepare them for undergraduate study, and how future employers often look at Level 2 and 3 grades when recruiting. Some providers link incentives (such as scholarships) to Level 3 attainment to further encourage performance.

An unconditional offer may bring forwards certain aspects associated with the admissions process, such as accommodation applications. Providers should be mindful of the impacts of this in their communications planning, to ensure neither conditional nor unconditional offer holders are advantaged or disadvantaged.

3. Consider support needs

If conversion or transition support is offered to students holding conditional offers – particularly if they have specific characteristics, or are from particular backgrounds – this should be replicated for unconditional offer holders, to ensure fairness and equity in the applicant experience.

If a student is made an unconditional offer while they still have pending qualifications, ensure their attainment is tracked during the results processing period, and consider any additional support that may be offered to ensure an effective transition, particularly if there is a level of subject-specific knowledge required.

In addition, consider the impact of this admissions and recruitment policy on the wider provider, and ongoing student support needs. Admissions practitioners may wish to flag students in receipt of an unconditional offer to other staff, such as personal tutors or academic faculty colleagues, to ensure their transition is effective, and they are offered any appropriate support (such as subject knowledge enhancement).



4. Feedback and evaluation

The continuous monitoring and response to feedback and evaluation is a key component of any fair and successful admissions practice. It is vital that HE providers monitor the impact of any change to their practices, and respond accordingly.

Having clear and transparent policies – alongside the proactive and effective use of feedback and evaluation – should be central to successful implementation and/or continuation of any strategy, including unconditional offer making. Areas to consider include:

- > the type of data/evidence that can be gathered and measured to inform future decision-making. This could be unique to unconditional offers and/or in comparison with other offer-making strategies within a department or provider, and takes account of different cohorts of students. Examples of possible data and evidence include:
 - predicted vs. achieved Level 3 attainment
 - impact on recruitment
 - conversion and enrolment rates
 - retention rates and longitudinal tracking (e.g. first year and/or degree attainment)
- > whether the criteria used to make unconditional offers to applicants remains fit for purpose, and whether this could/should be extended or amended (e.g. to incorporate other qualifications)
- > qualitative feedback from students, teachers, advisers, and parents, either directly (e.g. through a survey or established school and college networks) or indirectly (e.g. through online forums and student reviews)
- > positive and negative impacts of the scheme, including reputational impacts linked to feedback
- > any additional applicant or student support that needs to be put in place
- > any lessons learned, and how these could be mitigated in the future

Implementing an unconditional offer scheme that is not underpinned by clear evidence and transparent policies could be damaging, both reputationally and to recruitment. These considerations are not exhaustive, but should help shape effective monitoring and evaluation, and support an evidence-based approach going forwards. They may also help shape responses to requests from senior managers to consider adopting new offer-making practices.



5. Understand the higher education landscape

As previously noted, evidence for implementing and evaluating an unconditional offer-making policy within a provider is crucial, but it is also important to look externally to underpin this evidence with wider higher education context.

It is important to understand and emphasise that not every HE provider is making unconditional offers, particularly to 18 year old students with pending qualifications, and that practices vary significantly both between and within providers. It is advisable to use data on sector-wide unconditional offer-making, not only to inform your decisions, including the volume of offers being made, but also the type of students who are receiving them (particularly around certain grade profiles) to inform your provider's approach.

Finally, when seeking to form or review any policy on unconditional offer-making, we would encourage you to circulate these good practice guidelines and gather intelligence via your own network, to understand the wider context.

