



WHAT ARE **UNCONDITIONAL** OFFERS?

USE OF UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS

Universities and colleges are responsible for setting their entry requirements, deciding on assessment methods, and determining the level of prior attainment and potential required to secure both an offer and a place.

Higher education providers seek to recruit students who have the potential to succeed on their course, based on evidence and professional judgement. The approaches taken by providers are underpinned by the principles of fair admissions¹.

The sector has experienced significant change since 2012. With the removal of number controls in England, a declining UK 18 year old population, and a weakening of demand from mature and part-time students, providers have sought new and innovative ways to attract students. Providers have responded to these challenges in different ways, including:

- > increased marketing and outreach
- > introducing student lifecycle management
- > changes to offer-making and Confirmation strategies
- > employing a wide range of incentives, such as preferential access to accommodation, scholarships and bursaries, and discounted or free travel, electronics, or access to amenities

Such initiatives are often intended to have multiple benefits, supporting widening participation and access goals as well as student recruitment.



Offer-making has formed a key part of any provider's recruitment strategy, with the total number of offers made increasing by nearly 350,000 since 2012. Offers made by providers to applicants are described as either conditional or unconditional, depending on whether the provider wishes to attach certain conditions to the offer (usually the achievement of specific qualifications and grades).

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, the number of unconditional offers made to 18 year old UK applicants with pending qualifications has grown. This practice has raised concerns among pre-HE sector practitioners, who worry about potential impacts on student motivation and Level 3 attainment, and preparation for higher-level study.

There are several reasons why a provider may choose to make unconditional offers, either to an individual student or as part of their offer-making strategy. Possible reasons include:

- > in recognition of prior attainment and/or work experience, where a student has met the academic requirements to enter higher education, for example, SQA Higher grades or achieved A levels
- > to attract and retain talented students earlier in the cycle, who the provider is confident have evidenced sufficient potential to succeed on their chosen course. This could be on the basis of GCSE attainment, which is a good predictor of degree success, as well as their predicted grades, and other evidence of potential
- > to recognise high performance in an admissions assessment, such as an interview or internal admissions test
- > as a supportive measure, for example, to ease the pressure on applicants with mental health issues

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

ARE ALL UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS THE SAME?

Every provider will have a different approach to offer-making, including unconditional offers. Approaches taken by providers could be provider-wide, or course and/or cohort-specific – this will vary across the sector.

Broadly, unconditional offers can be grouped in to five categories. Providers are likely to use a range of the listed criteria to determine eligibility for an unconditional offer. Any approach taken should be informed by the principles of fair admissions.

1. Unconditional offers based on achieved qualifications

The student has met a defined set of academic (qualifications) criteria, for example:

- > **achieved qualifications at Level 3/SCQF Level 6 or above, such as A levels, BTECs, or Highers.** This may include situations where additional qualifications are pending, either at the same level (such as resits) or a higher level (such as a SCQF Level 7 Advanced Highers or a Level 4 Art & Design Foundation Diploma). If a provider is satisfied that a student's achieved qualifications and/or grades are suitable for entry onto their undergraduate course, they may not need to wait for the results of any pending higher-level qualifications to make an unconditional decision

EXAMPLE A:

Unconditional offer based on achievement at SCQF Level 6

Entry requirements for a number of courses are based on four or five Highers at specific grades by the end of S5, and providers strongly encourage applicants to fully commit to their S6 (Advanced Higher or additional Higher) studies, even if they have an unconditional offer based on their S5 results. Performing well in S6 as well as S5 helps differentiate students from their competition, and indicates a commitment to personal development.



2. Unconditional offers based on academic potential

Often using prior attainment (such as GCSEs) and predicted attainment as an indicator, the provider has identified that a student has the academic potential to succeed on their chosen degree course. This is largely based on one or more of the following:

- > **Achieved grades at GCSE, and predicted grades in qualifications such as A levels or Advanced Highers.** If a student is predicted suitable grades and has an academic profile to support this (such as strong GCSE grades), a provider may choose to make an unconditional offer on this basis. This may only be to applicants presenting certain types of qualifications and/or subject combinations.
- > **Achieved qualifications below Level 3/SCQF Level 6 (e.g. GCSE/ National 5 grades).** Potential to succeed on an undergraduate course is a key aspect of admissions decision-making, and therefore if a student's potential can be demonstrated with achieved qualifications below the usual level of entry, an unconditional offer may be made. This may be in conjunction with other criteria, including academic, but also work experience or other admissions assessment, or analysis of the degree attainment rate of similarly qualified applicants.

EXAMPLE B:

Unconditional offers based on academic potential (achieved Level 2 and predicted Level 3 grades)

Provider B makes unconditional offers to applicants for selected courses who meet course-specific levels of achievement at Level 2 (typically GCSE grades) and predicted attainment in a select number of qualifications at Level 3. Applicants are made a conditional offer initially and their offer is then made unconditional if they meet two non-academic conditions: accepting the offer as their firm choice, and engaging with provider B (e.g. by attending a post-application open day).

Level 3 attainment is encouraged by the automatic consideration for a scholarship for those that achieve certain grades. There is also a reminder of the importance of Level 3 grades not only for degree performance but also future career prospects and mid-degree placements. In addition, provider B also offers an enhanced guarantee on accommodation. An example how communications support Level 3 attainment, sent alongside comprehensive information about the offer, the accommodation guarantee and the scholarship, is below:

“In the meantime, we urge you to carry on working hard in your studies and get the best grades you can in your upcoming qualifications. Achieving good grades now is very important as a foundation for your time at university and for your future career. And don't forget – eligibility for our scholarship is dependent on the actual grades you achieve and subject to the full terms and conditions being met.”



3. Unconditional offers based on other criteria or assessment methods

The student has participated in another form of assessment which has demonstrated their ability and potential to a sufficient degree for an unconditional offer. Examples of this criteria include:

- > **interview or audition performance** – commonly used in creative and performing arts-based subjects, performance in an interview or audition may be a better indicator of potential success than academic qualifications
- > **submission of evidence of work**, such as a portfolio, project, or extended written work
- > **performance in an internal entrance examination or test**
- > **accreditation/recognition of prior experiential learning**, such as relevant work or voluntary experience. This may be in lieu of, or in addition to, qualifications

EXAMPLE C:

Unconditional offers following a portfolio assessment and interview for creative arts, design, and media courses

Provider C uses a portfolio-based interview as a key part of the admissions process for creative arts, design, and media courses. After shortlisting based on the initial application (including predicted and achieved grades), the interview focuses on assessing a portfolio, and discussing the student's creative potential, motivations for studying, and their understanding of what creative studies entails. The decision to make an unconditional offer following an interview is therefore based on individual competency, and potential to succeed in the arts.

Level 3 attainment is encouraged at interview, and reiterated post-offer with positive, proactive messaging, including how to manage exam stress, and highlighting aspirational examples of high achieving graduates. Provider C also monitors the impact unconditional offers have, both through a student's subsequent performance, and feedback from teachers and students – this intelligence is used to inform the annual review of offer-making strategies. As a result, provider C has seen a rise in the number of students who meet or exceed their predicted A level grades.

Provider C has also received positive feedback from teachers and advisers about the importance of conducting formal interviews and portfolios with students in the arts, and the motivational effect receiving feedback and advice from lecturers during the interview process can have on student performance. In addition, student feedback indicates the unconditional offer removed an element of pressure at an already stressful time, and gave them the security of knowing they could go to their first choice provider.



4. Unconditional offers based on applicant characteristics or circumstances

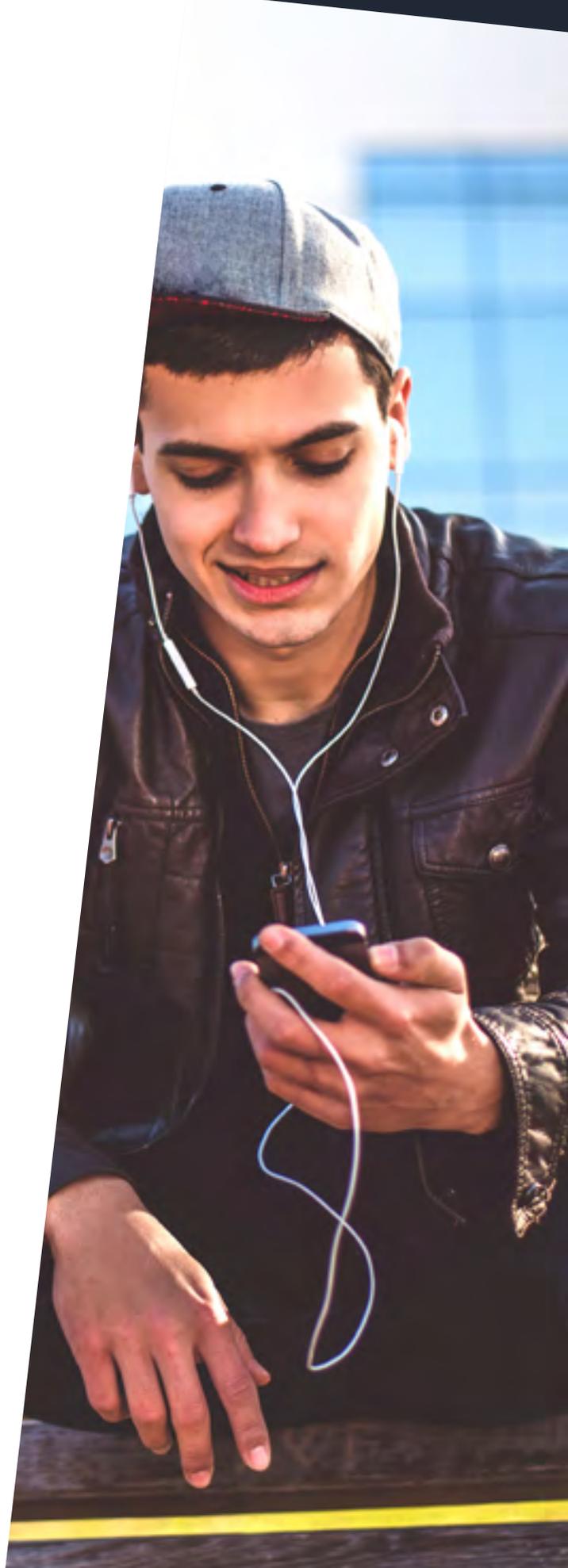
Providers may make unconditional offers to applicants based on specific sets of characteristics. This could be linked to their contextual offer-making or widening access policies.

- > Unconditional offers made to **all applicants from a particular background, or with a specific characteristic** (e.g. care leavers).
- > An unconditional offer made to an **individual applicant based on, or to support, their individual circumstances**, for example, a mental health condition or mitigating circumstances.
- > **Participation** in a summer school or other outreach project.

EXAMPLE D:

Unconditional offers to support students with mental health conditions

As part of their commitment to widening participation and fair access, provider D uses contextual data to support applications to all undergraduate degree courses. Provider D considers academic performance in the context of other factors when making an offer, including offering additional consideration to students with mental health conditions as part of their contextual admissions process. An applicant's potential to succeed is assessed in the context of their background and experiences, and could initially mean that the applicant may not be required to meet the published entry requirements to receive a conditional offer, or that they are made a lower conditional offer. In addition, if the applicant is predicted to achieve relatively strong academic results, they will be informed that the offer will be changed to unconditional if they then accept provider D as their firm choice.



5. Unconditional offers linked to the applicant's decision

The receipt of an unconditional offer may be the result of an action by the student. Initially, an offer made will likely be conditional, with an action leading to the offer being changed to unconditional. For example:

- > an offer may be conditional, with an option to be made (or later changed to) **unconditional if the student selects the offer as their firm choice**. This practice may be used in conjunction with any of the criteria outlined above. Examples of the use of this practice alongside other criteria are referenced in the examples above
- > a student may be made **an unconditional offer for a different course or route** (an unconditional changed course). If a student does not meet the criteria for the original course they have applied for, or they are more suitable for an alternative course (such as a foundation year), they may be made an unconditional changed course offer, particularly during Confirmation. This may also apply where students have not performed sufficiently well in another assessment method, such as an interview, but meet the conditions for another course

