

# UCAS response to Ofqual Consultation on arrangements for an autumn 2021 exam series

UCAS is an independent charity that connects students to their future pathway, whether this be undergraduate degrees, Level 4 and 5 study, distance learning or apprenticeships. We deliver high quality information and advice through personalised and digital channels, and [ucas.com](https://ucas.com) receives 30 million unique visits a year. We use our data science capabilities to support students in making aspirational choices, most recently through the introduction of Clearing Plus, which matches students to appropriate opportunities based on their interests and circumstances.

Throughout the pandemic, UCAS has continued to flex admission cycles as we seek to support students in the changing environment, most recently in extending the January application deadline by two weeks and in pushing back the advisory deadline – the date up until which universities and colleges are encouraged to keep places open for students pending outcomes of reviews of marking and appeals – from 31 August to 7 September.

We are committed to working with Ofqual, the Department and policy makers across the UK to ensure that this year's cohort is supported in progressing amid the ongoing public health challenge posed by COVID.

On 23 March, Ofqual published a separate consultation on autumn assessment opportunities for VTQ and other general qualifications. Note that this document encapsulates UCAS' response to both these consultations.

The key points within our submission are:

- UCAS will work with the Department and Ofqual on personalised communications for applicants entering the 2020 autumn series in addition to their advisers and receiving universities and colleges to ensure all parties are supported.
- Private candidates are a key group for whom the autumn series could benefit. For 2021, UCAS intends to enable private candidates to opt-in for additional support.
- It is important that the deadline for entries to this year's autumn series falls later than the revised advisory deadline of the 7 September.
- UCAS' preference is that for 2021, we only receive autumn series results for those applicants receiving a higher grade than their summer result (assuming the student has a previously awarded grade).

## **2021 autumn series for students that have received a teacher assessed grade**

For UCAS applicants, A level grades act as their 'progression passport'; therefore, we would anticipate a natural correlation between the HE acceptance rate and likely volumes of autumn series entrants (as well as requests for reviews of marking and appeals). The archetype of this occurred last year.

Following the ministerial decision that students would receive either their 'centre assessment grade' (CAG) or their 'calculated grade' – whichever was higher – 165,725 UCAS applicants received a grade higher than they were initially awarded. 84.5% of these 18 year olds were placed at their original first choice university or college, or on a course at a

university or college in the same or higher tariff band as their original firm choice – compared to 80.8% of all UK 18 year olds in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

The flexibility demonstrated by universities and colleges in accommodating this redistribution of students (supported by the government’s removal of number controls and the cap on medicine places) saw UK acceptances for all ages reach 485,400 (up 4.5% on 2019) and the UK 18 year old entry rate rise to a record 37.0% (up 2.9 percentage points on 2019).<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, uptake of both the review of marking and appeals process and autumn series was minimal. Overall, 31,435 (0.5%) of the 6 million grades certified for GCSEs, AS and A levels were challenged. Of which 4,650 (15%) were changed.<sup>3</sup> Whilst, for A level subjects in England there were 20,100 entries for the autumn 2020 exam series, or 3% of the total entries in the summer 2020 exam series (718,857).<sup>4</sup>

UCAS worked with five of the JCQ awarding organisations (AOs) to create and deliver a unique autumn results event. We matched 12,939 results to 8,550 UCAS applicants, the majority of whom have applied for 2021 entry i.e. have deferred their place. The few applicants who had a decision pending for a January 2021 start date received direct information, advice and guidance in December.

This year, we would anticipate flexibility to continue to be central to practices adopted by universities and colleges, and we expect to see a significant number of students accepted with grades below their stated offer as universities and colleges consider the difficult circumstances these students have faced. As noted above, this high acceptance rate will naturally influence the number of students that may wish to appeal their grade, or may wish to sit an examination in the autumn series.

However, the experience will be different across the sector. A key dependency for university and colleges’ admissions and confirmation strategies is understanding grading standards, and it is acknowledged that grading standards in 2021 will vary to those seen in 2019 and 2020, with the potential for an uplift in outcomes. This could lead to a greater proportion of students meeting the terms of their offer, particularly at higher tariff institutions, and therefore narrowing their scope to accept ‘near miss’ students.

Ofqual data shows that, in 2019, 63,980 AS and A level grades were challenged through a review of the marking process – of these, 33% were grade B. This suggests university offers influence a student’s propensity to appeal results as they seek to meet offer conditions for selective/higher providers or courses (e.g. medicine). Therefore, it is likely to be a similar cohort of student that wish to explore the option of sitting an examination in the autumn series. However, as we do every cycle, UCAS will be providing students with a range of support during the Clearing period, including Clearing Plus, our personalised matching service that connects students with appropriate opportunities, so support them in securing their next step.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/file/411836/download?token=51eovdPq>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/file/411836/download?token=51eovdPq>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/entries-for-gcse-autumn-2020-exam-series>  
[Entries for AS and A level: autumn 2020 exam series - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/entries-for-gcse-autumn-2020-exam-series)

## **Private candidates are a key group for whom the autumn series could benefit**

UCAS recognises the challenges faced by all students last year, particularly private candidates, some of whom were unable to obtain a grade. We welcome any measures that would allow these students to progress with their next steps, through the sitting of exams or otherwise, in a fair and accessible manner.

In 2020, UCAS sought to support these students through personalised content and produced good practice considerations for universities and colleges to support their admissions policies.

For 2021, UCAS intends to enable private candidates to opt-in for additional support. This will not only enhance our understanding of the size of this cohort, but also allow for targeted communications. In addition, this presents the opportunity to explore how UCAS could support the issuing of results to private candidates – we would welcome further discussion with the Department and Ofqual on this.

## **Timing of exams and the issuing of results**

As explained above, the link between an applicant's ability to progress and propensity to sit an exam in autumn is logical and evidenced by last year's minimal uptake. Therefore, it is important that the deadline for entries to this year's autumn series falls later than the revised advisory deadline of the 7 September. This is because, by this date, we would anticipate that most students, including those that may have requested a review of marking or appeal, will know whether they have a confirmed place.

Assuming that results are made available in December, students that sit their exams in autumn will be able to progress immediately to those courses that have January start dates; however, for the majority, they will most likely be looking at a deferred acceptance for an autumn 2022 start. This is because courses with January start dates only make up a small fraction of all courses. We anticipate that there will be around 500 available courses with a January 2022 start date, made available by in the region of 60 providers. This is relative to the c.35,000 courses at more than 380 providers that are typically available with autumn start dates.

## **Arrangements for VTQs**

While this consultation concerns students taking general qualifications, it is important that learners taking vocational or technical qualifications (VTQs) are not disadvantaged by these arrangements.

As VTQs tend to be modular, the cancellation of the summer series of exams is less impactful and there will be other windows for assessment. For T-levels, there is a November window for assessment for the 2020 cohort entering their second year who will have missed out on summer exams.

VTQ students should be treated equally where possible to students taking GCSEs and A-levels, however this does not mean they need to be treated the same.

For category B VTQs - those most similar to GCSEs and A levels, like BTECs and Cambridge Technicals - arrangements with AOs should be sufficiently flexible so VTQ students have the

option to choose between their teacher assessed grade awarded in the summer and any exam they sit at a later date.

### **UCAS' role – information and advice**

The needs of students have changed during the COVID period – they expect a greater level of pastoral care and more in-depth support; students come to UCAS as a trusted source of information and advice about progression.

In 2020, UCAS worked with the Department and Ofqual on specific communications for applicants entering the 2020 autumn series in addition to their advisers and receiving universities and colleges. This offered great benefits, allowing all customer groups to self-serve for information and access support from UCAS in a single location. In 2021, we intend to build on the collaborative arrangements already established to ensure all parties are similarly updated through high quality content across our growing range of digital channels.

### **UCAS' role – operational delivery of autumn series results**

Following the set up required to implement the 2020 autumn series, UCAS now has the technical and service delivery structures in place to receive an autumn results series for 2021 and to transfer these directly to universities and colleges via our Awarding Body Linkage service.

In 2020, we received, matched, and transferred all autumn series results to universities and colleges, without any reference or correlation to a summer result. This meant where applicants received lower autumn results, these were still visible on their application and transferred to their chosen universities and colleges. Such a scenario caused some concern for applicants and confusion for providers.

Therefore, UCAS' preference is that for 2021, we only receive autumn series results for those applicants receiving a higher grade than their summer result (assuming the student has a previously awarded grade). This would mirror the process that was followed over the summer – UCAS only received files containing grades that had been revised upwards. We would welcome discussion with the Department, Ofqual and the AOs as to how to achieve this to the benefit of all parties.