

UCAS response to UPPF Student Futures Commission – July 2021

UCAS is an independent charity that operates across the UK and internationally to provide information, advice, and admissions services to help students to progress to the next stage of education and learning. This service spans undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories, with more than 400 different verified qualifications, to access UK higher education (HE).

Our [What happened to the COVID cohort?](#) December publication offers a comprehensive and definitive assessment of the impact of the pandemic on progression to HE in 2020 - we hope it will inform the Commission's work and recommendations. The report finds record proportions of UK 18-year-olds applying (41.5%) and being accepted (37%) into university or college, in addition to continued, albeit slowing, annual progress in widening access and participation, with record entry rates among the lowest participation areas (using the POLAR4 and SIMD measures) and those receiving free school meals (FSM). This is undoubtedly a reflection of the enduring determination of young people from all backgrounds to progress to HE despite all the interruptions to daily life throughout the pandemic.

Nonetheless, the pandemic will have an enduring impact on the lives of students, and advances in widening access and participation to date cannot be taken for granted. It is incumbent on us all to work together to support the so-called 'COVID cohort'.

Summary of recommendations

- **Focus on transition support:** Demand for UK HE and training remains strong despite the pandemic. However, only 26% of this year's domestic applicants and 44% of this year's international applicants report feeling 'completely ready', highlighting the importance of 'catch up' arrangements and support in transition.
- **Tackle the impending squeeze on HE and apprenticeship places:** Looking beyond 2021, there is a need to increase the number of HE places and apprenticeships to reflect the growing 18-year-old population and ensure disadvantaged students do not miss out because of increased competition.
- **Smash the myths and stigma around mental health:** We estimate over 70,000 students with an existing mental health condition entered HE in 2020, but half chose not to share this with their university or college – either via UCAS or directly. The purpose and use of this information must be better communicated to create a culture of positive disclosure.
- **Step-up careers, information, advice, and guidance (CIAG) in primary schools:** To deliver the ambition set out by the Government in its vision for education, skills, and apprenticeships, we argue that CIAG should be embedded within the curriculum for primary schools and early secondary years.
- **Improve the journey for potential apprentices:** UCAS, working with partners, to support the delivery of the Baker Clause via digital means, providing comprehensive information, advice, and content

tools to help students make informed and aspirational choices about the full range of post-secondary opportunities.

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Preparing for September 2021

This section responds to **Section 1, Question 4** of the UPPF Student Futures Commission’s call for evidence: *For students – whether new to university or returning – have the events during the last year changed your perceptions as to what is important to you and how that may affect the way you engage with and spend your time at university?*

The information provided below highlights the importance of ensuring students can access catch-up arrangements and obtain the support they need as they begin or resume their studies.

Admissions cycle 2021 – what do the numbers say?

Demand for UK HE continues to be strong despite the pandemic. As of the [30 June deadline](#), a total of 682,010 people had applied – an increase of 4% on 2020. UCAS is predicting that increases in applications and offer making will see a record number of students starting university or college in the autumn. Further analysis shows:

- **Continued growth in demand.** 311,010 UK 18-year-olds have applied – an increase of 10% on 2020. These applicants represent 43.3% of the 18-year-old population, meaning this is the first year that more than two fifths of young people have applied.

- **A notable increase in mature applicants.** Mature applicants (those aged 21 and over) from the UK have risen by 9% to 125,090. Previous UCAS [research](#) has shown applications from older age groups are prone to increase when the economy is not as strong.
- **Increases in applicants across ethnic groups.** The largest proportional increase in UK applicants by their declared ethnic group has come from mixed-race students, up 11% to 28,150. Applications from Black students have increased 8% to 47,790. Applications from the Asian ethnic group have increased by 9% to 74,590, while 7% more white students (to a total of 383,100) have applied.
- **A slight increase in the number of disadvantaged applicants.** More than a quarter of 18 year old students from the most disadvantaged areas (27.0% from quintile 1 of the UK using the POLAR4 measure – 34,830 students) have applied, up from 25.4% at the same point in 2020.
- **Continued increase in applicants from outside of the EU.** Applicant numbers from outside of the EU continue to rise and are up this year by 14% to a record 102,000. Applicants from China and India have increased to 28,490 (+17%) and 9,930 (+30%) respectively. The USA has seen the largest proportional increase of any major nation as applicant numbers have risen 53% to 7,650.
- **A marked decrease in the number of EU applicants.** EU applicant numbers have decreased to 28,400 (-43%) as the short-term effects and uncertainty at the end of the last calendar year surrounding the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, and changes to student support arrangements, have impacted on applications from the continent. However, applicants from Ireland have increased by 24% to reach 5,260.
- **Growth in interest in apprenticeships:** UCAS' [CareerFinder](#) tool reported a record 1.35 million searches in the last 12 months, up 37% from 986,000 in 2020. These searches have resulted in 225,000 job applications, an increase from 181,000 last year (+24%).

Admissions cycle 2021 – what are students thinking?

Throughout the pandemic, UCAS has undertaken periodic student research to understand applicant perceptions and sentiment.

Recent [UCAS/YouthSight research](#) of UK applicants, carried out in March 2021, finds:

- 91% of applicants are 'confident' in getting their place at university, citing information on grading and universities' flexibility as important factors.
- Only 26% of applicants report feeling 'completely ready' for HE, with a further 60% telling us they feel 'somewhat ready', highlighting the importance of 'catch up' arrangements and university support during transition.
- 98% of all applicants are expecting there will still be some sort of social distancing in place in September – two thirds are comfortable with this, demonstrating their pragmatism.

In June 2021, [UCAS conducted research with YouthSight](#) on the motivations of international applicants as they prepare for study in the UK this autumn:

- Only 14% of applicants identified the success of the UK's COVID-19 vaccine programme as a motivating factor behind their choice to apply to study in the UK, although this was slightly more attractive for students from Asia (21%). The UK's strong academic reputation (77%) and its welcoming environment for international students (over 50%) are top motivating factors.
- In preparing for this year, ongoing travel restrictions (34%), general uncertainty around COVID-19 (32%), changes to the way courses are delivered (27%) and entry/quarantine requirements upon arrival in the UK (20%) are primary concerns, particularly for applicants from the Americas and Asia. Alongside concerns related to the pandemic, high tuition fees and living costs (69%) and the ongoing impact of Brexit (36%) are also top concerns for international applicants, particularly from Europe.

UCAS' May 2021 briefing – [Where Next? Improving the journey to becoming an apprentice](#) – highlighted that year 12s and 13s are increasingly interested in apprenticeships but find it hard to get information about them:

- Over half of Year 12 and Year 13 students interested in applying for entry to HE in 2022 have registered an interest in apprenticeships. These students are more likely to be from areas with the lowest participation in HE: 46.3% of students from the most disadvantaged areas (POLAR4 Q1) were interested in apprenticeships, compared to 40.9% from the most advantaged areas (POLAR4 Q5).
- Students still struggle to find information about apprenticeships, with one-third noting that they did not receive any information about apprenticeships from their school or college.
- More needs to be done to articulate the benefits of apprenticeships – only 8% of students surveyed associated apprenticeships with good job prospects.
- There is a need to better explain what an apprenticeship is – a job with training – and also an opportunity to promote degree apprenticeships as a bridge between apprenticeships and undergraduate study as a way to raise the prestige of apprenticeships overall. The word 'prestigious' was associated with university degrees by 76% of those polled compared to just 4% for apprenticeships – a further 14% of respondents rated them equally prestigious.

Looking further ahead

This section responds to **Section 1, Question 2** of the UPPF Student Futures Commission's call for evidence: *What do you envisage doing differently throughout the academic year 2021/22 and beyond compared to pre-pandemic?*

The information below provides additional context on how the impending squeeze on HE and apprenticeship places, due to the growing 18-year-old population, can be addressed to ensure disadvantaged students do not miss out on learning opportunities. It also highlights how careers information, advice and guidance can help to raise aspirations and inform decisions from an early age.

Context – Rising population set to increase the widening access and participation challenge

Impressive progress in narrowing the gap between the most and least advantaged has slowed since 2015. UCAS projects the 2025 cycle to have almost one million applicants, which is almost 40% more than 2020. About 50% of this increase is attributable to a growth in demand from UK 18-year-olds (driven by both an increase in application rates and an increase in the population) with the remaining 50% driven by continued growth in mature and international demand. Without a notable increase in capacity, such growth in demand will create pressure on HE and apprenticeship places.

Analysis within UCAS' [What happened to the COVID cohort?](#) report shows that post-secondary education places will need to grow significantly to meet this demand. Without additional places, competition will become much stronger. Because of [the widely studied 'disadvantage gap'](#), those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have fallen behind their more advantaged peers, with 13.4% of 18-year-old POLAR4 Q1 (the most disadvantaged) applicants achieving grades below CCC at A level in 2020 – double that of their advantaged peers in POLAR4 Q5.

UCAS' April 2021 report on [post-qualification admissions reform](#) identified the potential for reform to help promote aspiration and support widening access and participation by keeping a greater amount of choice and flexibility later in the admissions process, as long as caution is exercised to avoid pivoting to a system reduced to selection based on grades alone.

UCAS collects a large amount of information from students, including disability and care experience information. This information is used to ensure applicants get access to additional support and the institution they are applying to is able to support also. As we redesign the undergraduate application experience for students, we are introducing new questions to help universities and colleges to offer better support to prospective students. These include new questions about students with caring and parenting responsibilities, refugees, and asylum seekers, estranged students, and students from military families. This is in addition to new, more inclusive gender identity and disability questions, and a broader definition of the care experience.

Transparency and simplicity for students

UCAS' continual programme of [student-led improvement and reform](#) will lead to a radically different experience. We will continue to invest in recent innovations to increase transparency and enable student choice by enhancing the 'historic entry grades' tool, Clearing Plus, the Student Hub, as well as broadening the range of destinations students can engage with via UCAS – namely apprenticeships, higher technical education, or modular study.

Careers information, advice and guidance

Primary school

Early access to high quality information advice and guidance helps young people make better choices. Overall, one in three students start thinking about HE at primary school, more advantaged students are 1.4 times more likely to do so than their disadvantaged peers. This means it is crucial that all students can access high quality careers education from an early age. It cannot be left to chance.

To deliver the ambition set out by the government in their vision for education, skills and apprenticeships in the Skills Bill and other reforms, careers information, advice, and guidance should be embedded within the curriculum for primary schools and early secondary years. This curriculum should be age-appropriate, rooted in local economies and communities, and supported by universities, colleges, secondary schools, local employers and training providers and charities.

'Digital Baker Clause'

UCAS already plays a central role as the most cited source for information for the 700,000 applicants that come to our platform looking for information on HE and apprenticeships.

This is underpinned by an ambition to act as a 'digital Baker Clause', meaning regardless of background, educational setting, or location, every young people would get information on apprenticeship and technical options from [ucas.com](#). This includes integrating a much greater amount of employer-led content on [ucas.com](#) in the coming months.

This content is a freely available and comprehensive tool for schools and colleges across the country to draw on; it acts as a digital equaliser to ensure all students can access the information they need at each stage of their journey into education or employment. The limitations on this effort as a result of digital poverty are clear, which is why UCAS remains committed to resuming physical events once lockdown restrictions ease.

Student experience and wellbeing

Mental health

This section responds to **Section 2, Question 1** of the UPPF Student Futures Commission's call for evidence: *How have students' mental health and wellbeing changed through the pandemic? What data or instances have you seen of changing health and wellbeing? Has this disproportionately affected any particular groups of students in your experience and if so, who?*

As the number of applicants and students disclosing a mental health condition continues to increase, we must work to develop a culture of proactive disclosure within the education sector.

Over the last decade there has been a significant positive shift in the willingness of students to talk about their mental health, and we have seen the number of UCAS applicants from the UK sharing a mental health condition increase by 450% in this time. However, our new report, [Starting the Conversation: UCAS report on student mental health](#) (released June 2021), shows there is still more work to do to smash the myths and stigma around mental health, and to highlight the support available.

Key findings:

- In 2020, 21,105 UK applicants declared a mental health condition – nearly one in twenty-five (3.7%, compared to 0.7% in 2011). Mental health conditions now account for over a quarter of all impairments and conditions declared by UK applicants.
- We estimate over 70k students with an existing mental health condition entered HE in 2020, but half chose not to declare it with their university or college – either via UCAS or directly.
- Those less likely to share are not necessarily less likely to experience mental ill health, if we take national statistics into consideration. More effort is needed to engage with students with 'invisible' support needs – particularly men, and students from black and Asian ethnic groups.
- Many students withhold information about a mental health condition due to a lack of understanding and knowledge about disclosure, and believe it might negatively impact their chances of receiving an offer. The purpose and use of this information must be better communicated to create a culture of positive disclosure.
- Some students used the free text responses to say they regretted not sharing a mental health condition sooner – particularly in light of the impact of COVID. Students need to know they do not have to use the support but it is a useful safety net in case their circumstances change later on.

Improving information available

This section responds to **Section 2, Questions 5 and 6** of the UPPF Student Futures Commission's call for evidence: *What information do you think students want and need and where do they get it from in advance of term starting in Autumn 2021? Who has felt left out and what do they feel left out of throughout this pandemic and how can this best be addressed by institutions and the sector more widely?*

Given UCAS' role in connecting people across the UK and around the world to their next stage of education and learning, we are committed to ensuring applicants and students can get the personalised information they need to feel supported as they make decisions about their futures.

UCAS' role

Independent, high quality information and advice is critical to inspiring students to reach their full potential and supporting their access to HE and future learning. During COVID, UCAS provided more support than ever before, leading to a 300% increase in social media engagements and 30-40% increase in call handling time as students seek reassurance and advice. We also recognise that students require increasingly more welfare support which we deliver through our channels, including with partners such as Student Minds.

This is in addition to providing channels to allow individual universities and colleges to better communicate with applicants – most notably *UCAS Discovery Days*, a series of virtual events offering support and reassurance to students preparing to leave school or college. The aim is that they not only explore HE, apprenticeship, and employment opportunities, but also gain a real sense of optimism about the future.

More specific to the pandemic, in 2020 UCAS developed the functionality to allow providers to include a link to their COVID-specific web pages to allow students access to information about their individual responses – this year 176 universities and colleges have made use of this field.

Research into information needs of 2021 applicants

[UCAS/YouthSight March 2021](#) survey analysis of UK applicants found that reasons for not making the 29 January deadline mainly centre on them not having enough information and support. Similarly, information and guidance is the key factor that encourages applications: 92% of those thinking about applying believe more information from universities would trigger their application and more than 90% seek information about the reality of university life determining their decision.

Equally, for applicants who had not yet determined their firm choice, 43% of survey respondents cited more information as a factor that would aid decision-making.

With only around a quarter (26%) of applicants feeling completely ready for university, there is scope for universities and colleges to help them feel more prepared. Although excited, the level of uncertainty around what university or college life will look like prevents many from feeling completely prepared for HE.

Equally, information needs are not restricted to academia but span the range of experiences that students expect from a university or college education. Free text responses to the UCAS survey indicate a need for more information about the social and emotional transition involved. Those who do not feel ready at all say they lack support and guidance, particularly from their school or college.

UCAS/YouthSight [June 2021 survey analysis](#) of international applicants discusses how they prefer to receive information and support in the current context, given the uncertainties associated with the start of this academic year. They are keen to receive information from universities via direct contact such as email and virtual engagement, to feel reassured, obtain the most information possible on how their studies will be proceeding, and know where to go to obtain appropriate support. Other findings include:

- Nearly all international applicants (97%) prefer to receive information via email as a first port of call.
- Virtual sources continue to be used by students to help guide their decision making in preparation for studying abroad – university websites (78%), the UCAS website (72%) and social media channels (46%) are most frequently used.
- The role of non-virtual sources is increasingly important for secondary guidance – friends and colleagues are a top secondary source (38%), alongside direct contact with a provider (35%).

UCAS is committed to enhancing the experience of international students looking to study in the UK, and supporting the realisation of the UK government's International Education Strategy. Myriad by UCAS will be launching later this autumn as a single gateway for international postgraduate applicants, providing a world-class and welcoming application service, with the experience of students tailored to their own circumstances.

Employability

This section responds to **Section 4, Question 2** of the UPPF Student Futures Commission's call for evidence: *How do you think the pandemic has affected students' future job market preparation and employability outcomes?*

As employability is one of the driving factors of applicants' decisions, and the interest in apprenticeships continues to increase, the information below provides further details on how comprehensive and comparable information and advice about all routes can help students make informed and aspirational choices about their futures.

The role of employability in student decision-making

Within UCAS' [What happened to the COVID cohort?](#) December 2020 report and the [Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#) March 2021 report, we discussed the role of employability in influencing student decision-making, noting:

- Decisions are most influenced by enjoyment: 99% of students report making choices at school based on their enjoyment of a subject, and this is also the primary driver of degree choice.
- Employability is increasingly important post-COVID: Over 50% report that high graduate employment rates have become more important to them since the start of the pandemic.
- Graduate employability appears more important to disadvantaged applicants: 79% of POLAR4 Q1 (most disadvantaged) 18-year-old applicants cite that their choice of subject was influenced by career prospects or requirements, compared to 74% of Q5 (most advantaged).

Surge in popularity of apprenticeships

As outlined above, UCAS' [Where Next? Improving the journey to becoming an apprentice](#) May 2021 report provides further insights on the increasing appetite for information on apprenticeships. UCAS is the most cited source for information for applicants across both HE and apprenticeships – supporting previous research commissioned by UCAS and YouthSight in spring 2020, where 89% of students said it would be helpful to have a centralised platform offering an advice service when it comes to finding and applying for apprenticeships.

Moreover, A UCAS [survey](#) of parents and guardians from February showed that there was a strong link between the knowledge of parents or guardians about apprenticeships and their child's undergraduate vs. apprenticeship decision making. This highlights the need for a trusted and centralised source of information and advice.

UCAS is working hard to improve its apprenticeships offer, to add value to existing services and ensure students can see all the options available to them as they consider their future learning and career options. This includes a multimillion-pound investment in the coming year and beyond to deliver rapid improvement the UCAS apprenticeship service.