

UCAS response: Consultation on the replacement of SQA and reform of Education Scotland

Background

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for post-secondary education. 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).

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Introduction

Helping students make the best decision for them is in UCAS' DNA. Each year, we support between thirty and forty thousand Scottish-domiciled students in progressing into UK higher education and apprenticeships, with 19 Scottish universities and colleges choosing to use our admissions services to admit students from all corners of the globe.

UCAS also supports the thousands of students who choose to cross UK borders to study at a university or college in a different nation to their place of domicile; for example, in 2021, 6,860 English, Welsh and Northern Irish students were accepted into Scottish universities and colleges, and 1,700 Scottish students chose to study elsewhere in the UK. We therefore welcome the opportunity help set the direction of travel for the future of Scottish education.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have an enduring impact on the lives of students – 77% of students tell us it has had a personal impact¹ and, with the education gap in Scottish schools likely to grow², our shared mission must be to advance widening access. It is incumbent on us all to work together to 'enhance the experiences and outcomes of current and future learners'. Against this backdrop, UCAS is investing more in its support for disadvantaged students, and we would welcome discussions about how we can work collaboratively with the revised bodies on this.

In our response, we propose the following priorities for the shape of Scotland's national education agencies in the future:

- Maximising stakeholder engagement
- Maintaining UK-wide awareness
- Engaging in admissions reform

¹ 2020 UCAS /Youthsight survey of 17-19 year old applicants

² <https://www.scotsman.com/education/scotland-exams-2021-covid-blamed-for-widening-of-attainment-gap-between-poorest-and-richest-students-3340593>

- Enhancing existing operational relationships with UCAS

Overall, UCAS recognises that the revised bodies will be key stakeholders, with a shared mission of supporting students from all backgrounds to make their next steps in education and training – and we look forward to developing these mutually beneficial relationships.

UCAS is happy to expand on any of the points in this document by participating in Scottish Government’s planned engagement activities throughout 2021 and into 2022, and by meeting with Professor Ken Muir and his team to provide additional information.

Maximising stakeholder engagement

UCAS is proud to be a UK-wide service provider and, as such, maintains close relationships with stakeholder bodies across the UK via formal fora and regular, informal communications. Given that qualifications act as the currency of progression to HE, SQA is a critical delivery and strategic partner for UCAS, whilst Education Scotland shares UCAS’ focus on careers information and advice.

As the policy landscape evolves over the next few years, with Scottish Government having [accepted the recommendations](#) of SFC’s Review of Tertiary Education and Research which will promote greater coherence across the tertiary sector, UCAS is keen to work with the revised agencies to promote cohesion for students.

Recently, UCAS established a Scottish Policy Group to:

- Shape UCAS’ strategic response to matters of education policy in Scotland
- Provide an opportunity for discussion and consultation on topics related to progression to post-secondary education
- Reflect the priorities of the Scottish customer and stakeholder community
- Understand how changes in the rest of the UK affect Scotland
- Guide UCAS’ public position on matters of education policy and widening access and participation

SQA and Education Scotland are both members of this group and attended the first meeting in November 2021 – we look forward to inviting the revised agencies to future meetings.

Maintaining UK-wide awareness

UCAS recognises the differing educational contexts across the UK, with personalisation at the heart of our organisational vision. In the Scottish context, this is made possible through regular and ongoing engagement with relevant stakeholders – Scottish Government, SFC, SQA, Education Scotland, Skills Development Scotland, and others – to maintain awareness of current and upcoming policy development.

UCAS can not only support in delivering policy change through its products and services, but also by informing and influencing at an earlier point through our unparalleled insight into student progression. We wish to maintain these relationships with the revised agencies to ensure policy is based on data-led evidence and intelligence.

As highlighted above, it is also the case that many students choose to cross UK borders and study at a university or college in a different nation to their place of domicile. Consequently, we encourage the revised agencies to maintain dialogue with relevant Government departments, bodies, and agencies across the UK to ensure a high level of awareness of activities and continued promotion of the easy movement of students.

Engaging in admissions reform

UCAS is committed to working with policy makers, stakeholders, and customers across the UK to transform the admissions system, which must evolve to deliver better outcomes for students – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. UCAS welcomes the Department for Education’s (DfE) commitment to reform and, as outlined in our consultation [response](#) on post-qualification admissions, we have already undertaken a series of student-led reforms, including:

- **Transformation of UCAS’ apprenticeships platform** – we are investing in much greater quality of support and information for aspiring apprentices, such as employer profiles, on [ucas.com](#). This builds on our current service which currently receives two million hits from applicants each year, with half of those visitors to the UCAS website interested in apprenticeships
- **Student Hub on [ucas.com](#)** – a personalised information and advice dashboard that provides students with the tools and information they need to make their choice on university, college, or an apprenticeship – allowing us to tailor their experience and support based on their background and location
- **Introduction of the ‘Decline my place’ option** – a service giving applicants total control over their choices and allowing them to consider their options easily at all stages.
- **Refinement of Clearing Plus** – a data-led system that suggests courses to students based on their preferences, circumstances and achieved grades. This has the potential to introduce students to opportunities they had previously considered out of reach. For the first time in 2021, this also marketed apprenticeship opportunities
- **Brand new ‘historic grades on entry’ tool** – providing teachers and advisers with insight into the achieved grades students held when they were accepted on to courses during the 2017-2019 application cycles, this tool enhances transparency across the sector and allows teachers to promote informed and aspirational applications with their students

In our report, [Reimagining UK Admissions](#), and in our [response](#) to the DfE’s consultation on admissions reform, we outline a vision for a future admissions service – and the challenges that would need to be overcome to ensure successful operation.

The existing shared admissions service in the UK ensures equal opportunity for students exploring cross-border options and a joined-up, common system. Nonetheless, UCAS is acutely aware of the differing contexts within Scotland, and of other devolved administrations, so we wish to ensure our services continue to meet the needs of Scottish customers, reflecting their diversity and promoting choice and opportunity for students.

UCAS is keen to ensure that all Scottish stakeholders are engaged in discussions around admissions reform. It is likely that the revised agencies will be formed at a point of significant change; therefore, their involvement will be critical to shaping the future of the admissions system, and we would welcome early engagement regarding this.

Enhancing existing operational relationships with UCAS

Each year, UCAS processes SQA Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications via a process known as Awarding Body Linkage (ABL). Under contractual embargo, UCAS receives results ahead of SQA results day and matches these to UCAS applicants. This facilitates the confirmation process, enabling universities and colleges to make decisions about their applicants, and means most students learn of the outcome of their university or college application on the morning of results day.

During any period of transition (and thereafter), UCAS would value ongoing dialogue with SQA’s successor to maintain the smooth operation of the admissions system. There may be

opportunities to expand the range and volume of qualifications that UCAS receives via ABL, enabling us to provide an enhanced experience to a broader range of students.

UCAS plays a key role in articulating the features of the Scottish education system and common Scottish qualifications to its UK and international audience. With likely upcoming changes to the curriculum and assessment following the [OECD review](#) of national qualifications and assessment, and the growth of Foundation Apprenticeships, UCAS would welcome the opportunity to work in collaboration with SQA's successor to develop content, and careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG).

For UCAS, the most pertinent aspect of Education Scotland's remit relates to its focus on skills development and preparation for the world of work aged 3-18 – as outlined in the [Career Education Standard 3-18](#). Our recent report on student choice, [Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#) emphasises the criticality of embedding careers education at primary level in response to our finding that one in three students first think about HE in primary school.

As the role of Education Scotland evolves, UCAS would be keen to maintain a focus careers education in primary school – and its continuity into secondary education. We would also seek to work closely with the reformed agency, alongside Skills Development Scotland, in our aim to provide comprehensive information, advice, and content tools about the full range of post-secondary options, including apprenticeships.