



WAITING LISTS AND ADMISSIONS

Good practice considerations for HE providers

UCAS

Background

In June 2017, the UCAS Undergraduate Advisory Group (UAG) agreed to establish a working group to review UCAS' Business Rules, and the Admissions Principles contained within the Admissions Guide.

The UCAS Business Rules and Admissions Principles (BRAP) Working Group was responsible for leading consultation on whether the existing rules and process are fit for purpose, and if further clarification, amendment, or addition is required. The group was HE sector-led and supported by UCAS staff.

The group initially focused on the existing business rules and principles of Admissions, identifying whether amendments were required, and consulted on potential additions to these rules and principles. Following this work, a series of recommendations were made in 2019, including one referring to waiting lists:

'The Working Group recommends that UCAS consult with the sector on whether the use of waiting lists should be restricted to programmes that have externally set targets, such as teacher training and medicine.'

In April 2019, UCAS convened a working group, comprised of a range of universities and colleges and representatives from the secondary education sector, each with different approaches to and experiences of waiting lists as part of the admissions process.

Use of waiting lists in admissions

Waiting lists have long been a feature of university and college admissions processes. The Working Group identified the following primary uses:

- > To manage numbers for courses with external targets, such as medicine, dentistry, and nursing, where the number of qualified applicants exceeds the number of places available.
- > To manage numbers for programmes with limited places as a result of facilities limitations, for example performing arts or laboratory-based subjects.

In both instances, the use of waiting lists usually follows an additional layer of admissions assessment (e.g. an interview and/or admissions test) in order to further differentiate between suitably qualified applicants.

When waiting lists are used, the management takes place outside of the UCAS system, and there is currently no functionality to be able to visibly manage this in UCAS services. Waiting lists are therefore not perceived as transparent to teachers and advisers, and a student may only know they are on a waiting list following receipt of an email communication, often after an unsuccessful or change of course decision has been applied to their application.

It was noted by the Group that there are therefore currently no business rules or principles governing the use of waiting lists by providers, and it was the feeling of the Group that good practice considerations for providers should be produced to support the practice in its current form, and to ensure that the principles of fair admissions are applied even though the process operates outside of the UCAS system.



Good practice considerations for implementation

of waiting lists

1. Consider the types of courses that waiting lists could be used for

Waiting lists should only operate when there is a strict limitation on the number of places available. This could be as a result of externally set targets, or competitive courses where capacity is limited, such as performing arts. Waiting lists should not be used as a way to manage conversion numbers, unless there is a clear rationale to do so.

In addition, the Working Group considered it to be good practice to only apply waiting lists to students who have been fully assessed for their suitability for the course. An example of this would be a medicine course, where students are initially filtered based on prior attainment/predicted grades/ an admissions test score, and then undertake an interview as part of the assessment process. In this instance, only students who are successful at all stages of the assessment should be considered for a waiting list, and not students who narrowly miss the initial filtering criteria, as they could still be unsuccessful at interview even if they meet the required grades.

2. Clear, transparent, and accessible policies and procedures

Providers should consider the principles of fair admissions 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 operates a waiting list for a course or group of courses, this should be clearly stated in any public policy.

The criteria for being considered suitable for a waiting list should be clearly articulated, alongside any criteria they would need to meet to ultimately be accepted on their chosen course. For example, any non-academic conditions that they will need to meet.

If an applicant action is required, such as confirming they wish to be considered for a waiting list or referring themselves, this should be made clear in any supporting communications and, where applicable, any alternative offer that may have been made to the student. The overarching policy should be readily accessible via a range of channels, using appropriate and easy to understand language for a variety of audiences.

3. 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 a waiting list.

The lack of certainty associated with a waiting list may be a source of concern for applicants, and it is important that providers make it clear that a waiting list is not a guarantee of a place. Transparency is key to support student decision-making, therefore any ranking that is applied, or any data that students could use to assess their likelihood of getting a place should be clearly signposted.

Providers should take care to ensure that students on waiting lists have an appropriate and supportive communication journey, being mindful of the UCAS guidelines on contacting applicants after they have made their firm and insurance choices. Consider how you can communicate with students, to ensure that they receive the relevant information and are fully informed of any conditions or other criteria that will need to be met if they are successful in obtaining a place via a waiting list.

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 students on waiting lists or schools).

Linked to clear and transparent communications, consider the support needs of students on a waiting list, and how they can be incorporated in to wider university and college communications and/or events. The relationship between a provider and any prospective student is key to a successful transition, and it would not constitute a good applicant experience if a student did not feel adequately informed if a waiting list space became available.

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. Areas to consider include:

- > Evidence and data that could be gathered and evaluated in order to inform future decision-making and/or provision of information. For example, how many students were converted from a waiting list, which would be indicative of both the success of the scheme broadly but also the likelihood of a student being accepted via this method.
- > Whether a waiting list was actually necessary for the programme, or if it was advertised unnecessarily. Consider the positive and negative impacts of running such a scheme.
- > Qualitative feedback from students, teachers, advisers, and parents, either directly or indirectly.
- > Any lessons learned and how these can be improved in future.

Using or advertising a waiting list without clear evidence and rationale for doing so can have unintended or negative consequences, both to reputation and to recruitment goals. Equally, effective use of data and evaluation can be helpful in identifying the need for waiting lists, and to help respond to requests from senior managers to consider adopting new practices.

Recommendation for additional work

It is recommended that the Undergraduate Advisory Group takes forward the request to formalise the waiting list process and explore how UCAS can provide the required functionality as part of their system development. This could include:

- > providing a new 'waiting list' status in UCAS Track – consideration should be given to the current CUCAS model (see Appendix A)
- > investigating the relationship between a new status and applicant firm/insurance choices, and how these should interact
- > offering visibility of the status in adviser facing products
- > considering if/how 'conditions'/text can be applied to the status
- > the impact on terms and conditions



Appendix A: UCAS Conservatoires (CUCAS)

model for waiting lists

Existing offer types and reply combinations for CUCAS scheme

- > **Guaranteed unconditional (GU)** – a binding offer that confirms you've met the entry requirements.
- > **Guaranteed conditional (GC)** – an offer that's guaranteed if you meet certain conditions – usually exam results.
- > **Reserve unconditional (VU)** – confirming you've met the entry requirements and placing you on the reserve list – for a guaranteed place, you need to accept the offer and wait to see if a place becomes available (see below for more info).
- > **Reserve conditional (VC)** – a place on the reserve list if you meet certain conditions – for a guaranteed place you need to accept the offer, meet the conditions set, and wait to see if a place becomes available (see below for more info).

What is a reserve offer?

A reserve offer (VC or VU) does not mean a place has been 'reserved' for you. Until you receive and accept a guaranteed offer (GC or GU), you have not been accepted to study at that conservatoire.

If you've received a reserve offer, it means the conservatoire making the offer is not able to offer you a guaranteed place at the time of making their decision. This is usually because they have already made (or expect to make) enough guaranteed offers to fill the spaces on your chosen course or specialist area. A reserve offer indicates that the conservatoire would like the chance to review its offer to you in light of acceptances/declines to the guaranteed offers it has made.

However, a reserve offer is not a rejection. You'll become part of a pool of reserve candidates, from which the conservatoire may choose to make you a guaranteed offer if a suitable place becomes available. If the conservatoire chooses not to make you a guaranteed offer, you will not be able to enrol at that conservatoire.

If you have been given a reserve offer, you would need to accept it to be considered for a guaranteed place.

A conservatoire can make you a guaranteed offer to replace your reserve offer at any time during the application cycle. Reserve offers remain active until after A level results have been issued in August. However, the decision to wait and see if a guaranteed place becomes available, or to accept an offer at another conservatoire, is entirely up to you.

You may only be able to accept one offer as a first choice, or you may be able to accept two offers and state your first and second choices. This depends on the type of offers you have:

- > **If you accept a guaranteed unconditional (GU) offer**, you cannot accept any other offer as a second choice, and must decline (D) all other offers.
- > **If you accept a GU offer as your second choice and your first choice (VU or VC) is unsuccessful**, you will have a place at your second choice.
- > **If you accept a guaranteed conditional (GC) offer as your first choice**, you'll also be expected to take up this place provided you meet the conditions. You cannot accept any other offer as a second choice. You must decline (D) all other offers.
- > **If you accept a GC as your second choice, but you've met the conditions of the offer and your first choice (VU or VC) is unsuccessful**, you will have a place at your second choice.
- > **If you accept a reserve unconditional (VU) or a reserve conditional (VC) offer as your first choice**, you may accept any type of offer as your second choice.
- > **If your first choice is a reserve offer (VC1 or VU1) and the conservatoire changes it to a guaranteed offer (GC1 or GU1)**, then your second choice will automatically be rejected.

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