

UCAS response to the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry into Education and Careers in Land-based sectors

Introduction

As an independent charity, UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, strives to empower students to make the best decision for them by making choices clearer. Our significant role as the gateway to post-secondary opportunities allows us unparalleled insight into the mindset of young people and mature students. We are aiming to bring parity to all post-school options, and each year 1.5 million students register with UCAS for support progressing to university, college, apprenticeships, or employment.

Our admissions services span undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 750,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories to access UK higher education (HE).

Our insight and reach means that UCAS is well positioned to support the Government, the sector and industry to aid the promotion of pathways into the land-based industries, broadening their understanding of routes of how to get there. This consultation comes at a particularly critical time for the higher education sector, as UCAS is projecting that we could see up to a million higher education applicants by the end of the decade – a 30% increase on 2022. Our [Journey to a Million](#) project, which brought together over 50 experts from across the education and training sectors and industry, highlighted that with co-ordinated planning we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to tackle shortage skills areas.

Our primary interest in this submission is **how awareness of careers in land-based sector can be improved, what's important to young people, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and mature students when making decisions about their education pathway and career, and how effective our current education system is at supporting young people seeking careers in the land-based sector.**

Key points:

- **UCAS can provide leading insight into student decision-making and their choices, supporting pathways into the land-based industries.** Our [research](#) indicates that early outreach is key to ensuring that younger applicants are aware of the careers that are available to them in the land-based sector – one in three students considers higher education as early as primary school. However, high quality careers information is key – one in five students said they could not study a HE subject that interested

them because they didn't have the right subjects for entry. We also see a significant access gap into who is accepted onto courses that lead into land-based careers, with students from the most advantaged backgrounds 1.76 times as likely to be accepted onto agriculture, food and related studies than their disadvantaged peers (POLAR Q1) in 2022. UCAS' [Outreach Connection Service](#) could be transformative in this area, supporting students and advisers to connect to opportunities in the land-based sector that they would previously not have been aware of.

- **For those applicants aged 25 and over, those most likely to consider a career change, we see a mixed picture in terms of the uptake of courses** which are likely to lead to a land-based career. Given the preference of mature students to live at home while studying, the proximity of further and higher education offering land-based courses will be critical, as well the sector's ability to articulate a clear career pathway.
- **UCAS can support access to land-based careers through our personalised information, advice and guidance featured on our [UCAS Hub](#)**, allowing us to provide free content, including those covering land-based careers, to students based on their circumstances and preferences.
- **UCAS is committed to providing parity of esteem between academic and technical pathways.** The apprenticeships service that we are developing will allow more students who are currently unaware of technical routes to discover their options through personalised careers information, advice and guidance in the [UCAS Hub](#). Previous [UCAS research](#) shows that while three in four students say it is easy to find information about university study, only one in four say the same for apprenticeships. By presenting apprenticeship options side-by-side with university options in the [UCAS Hub](#), alongside our CIAG offer, students will be able to discover the full range of post-secondary choices.
- **UCAS would welcome the opportunity to collaborate on research and promotion of land-based careers.** Our report [Next Steps: Who are the 'future nurses'?](#) demonstrates how we can work with industry partners to undertake research to support with workforce planning, supported by marketing and media activities.

How UCAS is supporting understanding and awareness of career opportunities in land-based sectors

UCAS is a trusted, free-to-access, personalised source of careers, information, advice, and guidance (CIAG) reaching almost 1.5 million students each year, meaning we are well placed to support the promotion of land-based sectors.

The [UCAS Hub](#) is our personalised information and advice career platform that is free for schools, colleges, and students. It delivers personalised content to students based on their background and areas of interest, allowing them to explore the full range of post-secondary choices – including undergraduate student and

apprenticeships. We have already developed a growing library of [subject](#), [industry](#), and [city](#) guides, supported by a range of external data – including the National Student Survey and LMI data dataset –, in recognition that student motivation to study is highly individual – whether that be salary, employability, or a healthy work/life balance. Our dedicated customer-facing teams manage more than two million interactions each year and our in-house user experience function ensures that our products meet the needs of Generation Z (and, soon to be, Alpha), as well as being accessible for mature students and those with individual needs. Through this comprehensive careers information, advice and guidance offer, we believe that students will better be able to navigate their career options in all sectors, including land-based ones.

At UCAS we realise that online resources alone cannot help improve understanding of awareness of careers in land-based sectors. Our well-established relationships with more than 4,500 teachers and careers advisers across the UK mean we can play a critical role in helping schools and colleges navigate a very complex landscape, ensuring that individuals make the right decision for them. Personalisation underpins UCAS' approach to information and advice, with students registering via the [UCAS Hub](#) early in their research and embarking upon their own individual journey based on their preferences and circumstances. This journey includes the option to attend [UCAS events](#), and explore tools to help them build their own personal profiles and navigate choices. These events include our Discovery Exhibition series, which reaches nearly fifty locations UK-wide, allowing over 150,000 students from over half of the schools in the UK to discover the range of options available to them by connecting with 100+ Universities and Colleges in person.

How UCAS is supporting technical routes into land-based sectors

UCAS recognises the current disparity between academic and technical pathways and in line with our charitable mission, our aim is for UCAS to become a leading discovery brand, situating ourselves as 'route neutral' to promote parity across all pathways including academic and technical routes, including apprenticeships.

Our research shows that currently, academic and technical pathways are not being considered and accessed equally. Our report [Where Next? What influences the choices that school leavers make?](#) found that disadvantaged students are more likely to consider HE later than their more advantaged peers. In the same report, we found that almost one in three young people said they did not receive any information about apprenticeships from their school. This is why we at UCAS are offering a range of services to students to help promote the full range of pathways. These include:

- Our [Careers Quiz](#) pairs students with employment tailored to their interests across academic and technical pathways.
- Academic and technical pathways are now presented side-by-side in the [UCAS Hub](#), allowing students to easily compare progression routes.

- Our comprehensive careers, information, advice and guidance pages online explain technical pathways, highlighting case studies for employers and students who have taken this route
- Discovery Events across the country allowing students to connect with employers and universities and colleges offering apprenticeship pathways.

While we believe that routes such as T Levels and apprenticeships offer strong pathways for young people in all sectors, including land-based ones, we advocate for a range of policy positions to help improve the system. Our recent report, [co-authored](#) with the Sutton Trust, made recommendations to support this, including:

- Expand apprenticeship provision to accommodate growing demand. Currently over 400,000 students in the [UCAS Hub](#) indicate that they are interested in apprenticeships, yet starts at level 4 and above for those under 19 are less than 5,000 currently. This comes amid a significant growth in demand for apprenticeships, with 40% of all UCAS undergraduate applicants now interested in an apprenticeship role – about 430,000 potential apprentices – with projections that interest will increase further as part of the [Journey to a Million](#). While the Apprenticeship Levy has doubled the funding available for apprenticeships since its implementation in 2017, to £2.5 billion each year, 99.6% of this was spent in 2021-22. This means the system is under significant pressure without enough apprenticeship opportunities to meet demand.
- Mature efforts to support disadvantaged students entering apprenticeships, particularly for Higher and Degree Apprenticeships
- Support geographic mobility of young people in gaining apprenticeship opportunities
- Achieve parity in the way that students explore and connect to apprenticeship opportunities via UCAS services

What UCAS' data reveals about trends in land-based careers, including for those considering a career change

While overall applicant numbers decline, 18 year olds show increasing interest in courses which lead to land-based careers

UCAS' data can provide crucial insight into those who are likely to pursue a land-based career. Our [2022 End of Cycle data](#) reveals that:

- **Agriculture, food and related studies:** 5,045 applicants were accepted onto a course in 2022, a 7% decrease from the previous year (5,450), and a 3.6% decline since 2019. However, this appears to be driven by an overall decline in mature students (something that has been observed nationally). Demand from 18 year olds has increased 10% from 2019.
- **Geography, earth and environmental studies:** 9,805 applicants were accepted onto a course in 2022, a return to pre-COVID levels (9,800 in 2019). This follows a slight decline in accepted applicants in 2021 (9,610) and 2020 (9,610). Again, this was driven by a decline in mature students—demand for

18 year olds has increased 7% from 2019.

Our industry guide for agriculture has attracted over 20,000 views over the last 12 months, indicating keen interest in these pathways. UCAS would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the committee and Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs to support in capitalising on this interest, and increase conversion from those interested in these routes to actual applicants.

More can be done to promote routes into land-based careers for all students

UCAS acceptance data from 2022 shows there is frequently a significant participation gaps between the most and least advantaged students taking courses that can lead into the land-based sectors:

- **Agriculture, food and related studies:** We found that overall students from the most advantaged backgrounds (POLAR Q5) were 1.76 times more likely to go onto this collection of courses than their most disadvantaged peers (POLAR Q1). For applicants applying to study agriculture, we find that POLAR Q5 are more than twice (2.17) as likely to be accepted than students from POLAR Q1.
- **Geography, earth and environmental studies:** We find that the advantage gap was even more pronounced here, with POLAR Q5 students more than 5 times more likely to be accepted onto this collection of courses than their peers in POLAR Q1.

The findings here suggest that there is a significant pool of students from widening access backgrounds who are not accessing these courses. Mindful of the access gap, at UCAS we are piloting the [Outreach Connection Service](#), a new service which will help students and schools to navigate and connect to opportunities provided by higher education providers and organisations in the third-sector. The service could therefore be transformational in raising awareness of careers in land-based sectors for applicants both from disadvantaged backgrounds, but also from non-rural backgrounds who may not have exposure to land-based careers in their education to date.

Mature students demonstrate preferences for specific courses that lead onto a land-based career

When we dig deeper into the numbers of accepted applicants aged over 25, those most likely to be looking for a career change, we find that:

- **Agriculture, food and related studies:** just over 11% of applicants in 2022 were within this age bracket, broadly comparable to the 12.8% of UK accepted applicants in 2022 who applied to higher education over the age of 25. However, 2022 saw a 19.9% decline in applicant numbers from within this age bracket from 2019. We also find that there is a strong appetite already amongst mature students for specific courses. For example, 27.8% of

accepted applicants to forestry and arboriculture were aged over 25 in 2022, alongside 21.4% of accepted applicants to rural estate management.

- **Geography, earth and environmental studies:** just over 2% of applicants in 2022 were within this age bracket, well under the proportion of the UK accepted applicants in 2022 who applied to higher education over the age of 25 (12.8%). Following the pandemic, we have seen a 56% decline in applications to this course from this cohort of students since 2019.

For geography, earth and environmental studies, we see an under-representation of mature students which suggests more could be done to support this cohort in undertaking a higher education course to stimulate a career change, alongside increasing uptake of alternative pathways such as apprenticeships. However, for agriculture, food and related studies, the slight under-representation of applicants in this age bracket in 2022, and the existing attraction for mature students, suggests that with the right targeted outreach this would be a group which could be motivated to take up these courses to enact a career change.

What UCAS' insight says about student decision making, including how to facilitate new entrants and those considering a career change, into land-based sectors

Over the past two years, UCAS has released a series of [high-impact reports](#) that shine a light on pertinent issues in education and skills. Our 'Where Next?' series examines how people make decisions about their future and the influence of these choices on what they do next – from GCSEs to employment. Below are some of our key findings which illuminate some of the priorities for student-decision making for some core groups who are essential to reach as we look to support access to land-based careers – new entrants, including those from disadvantaged and non-rural backgrounds, those wishing to pursue a technical route or apprenticeship, and mature applicants.

Early engagement and outreach is crucial for supporting new entrants into land-based careers, especially those from disadvantaged and non-rural backgrounds

Two in five young people reported that more information and guidance would have led to them making better choices, and one in five students said they could not study a HE subject that interested them because they didn't have the right subjects for entry ([Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#)) highlighting the need for early careers guidance on how choices made at school can impact options later on.

Disadvantaged students were particularly affected by a lack of information and advice, with 43% of students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (POLAR Q1) reporting that more information would have helped them to make better decisions, in comparison to 37% from the most advantaged backgrounds (POLAR Q5). UCAS recognises the importance of careers information in the decision-making process,

and we are continually developing our offering to students and advisers. In the future, we want the [UCAS Hub](#) to become an even more personalised experience, and we are developing our growing library of subject, industry, and city guides, supported by labour market data, to support students from all backgrounds to make the right decision for them. We are keen to work with experts across the land-based sector to make sure that our content is engaging, and up-to-date.

Awareness of the different pathways that can lead to a land-based career

Our research has found that almost one in three said they received no information about apprenticeships from their school ([Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#)), but the appetite for this route is clear with over half of students looking to apply in 2022 told UCAS they are interested in apprenticeships ([Where Next? Improving the journey to becoming an apprentice](#)). We are keen to work with those in land-based sector to ensure that applicants are aware of the various pathways, including apprenticeships, that can lead to a land-based career. The [UCAS Hub](#), our personalised information and advice dashboard, applicants can view both academic and technical routes side by side, and from next year onwards they will be able to apply for apprenticeships alongside an undergraduate degree.

For those considering a career change, the proximity of further and higher education offering land-based courses will be crucial, as well as a clear career pathway

UCAS research into the [admissions patterns for mature applicants](#) captures some of the behaviours and trends for applying for full-time undergraduate courses for those aged 21 and over, and therefore shows some of the priorities for those students considering a career change. Mature students are more likely to live at home while studying full-time, and this likelihood increases with age. Half of 21 to 25 year olds live at home while studying, compared to nearly 80% of those aged 30 and over. In comparison, 18 year olds are more likely to attend a university over an hour away from their home, with over 50% having a drive time of 70 minutes or more. Mature students are also typically drawn to a small range of vocational courses, with subjects allied to medicine (including nursing), education, and social studies the most popular.

Across our body of research, our findings indicate the need for early engagement to support young people onto a specific career path, such as those in the land-based sectors, and an awareness of and access to different pathways that could allow them to have a career in this area. To attract mature students, and those considering a career change, further and higher education institutions offering courses that lead to land-based careers will need to be close by, and be able to articulate a clear path to future employment.

How UCAS' network of teachers and advisers can influence the influencers

UCAS [research](#) has found that teachers are a key influence for students, with 79% of

students saying that they made their post-16 choices based off the fact that their teachers told them that they would be good at it. UCAS has significant reach with students and their advisers, working with a network over 4,500 teachers and advisers in schools and colleges across the UK and gaining approximately 30 million visits to UCAS.com every year. We can play a central role in ensuring that these powerful figures have the resources and information to support students onto a career in the land-based sectors.

Our data also shows a clear synergy between a student's higher education subject choice and their parents' or carers' careers, with 19% of students who reported having a parent or carer involved in farming studying veterinary science, agriculture, and related subjects in 2020, compared to 1% of all students (with parents of any occupation). This connection demonstrates the powerful influence which familial environment can have on a students' career pathway and indicates the early outreach that is needed to expand access to those without a background in land-based careers.

How UCAS can support policy makers to promote and support careers in land-based sectors

UCAS' work with the NHS is a core example of how we can support local and central government in supporting applicants to access specific career pathways. In 2021, UCAS in partnership with Health Education England (HEE), published [Next Steps: Who are the 'future nurses'?](#) The report demonstrates the significant effect that the pandemic had on their career choices, revealing that more than two-thirds (69%) of 2021 nursing applicants cited the pandemic as their inspiration to apply. This report was produced as part of the 'We are the NHS campaign', and which is replicable in the following form:

- Insight and research – Use of insight surveys, focus groups and one-to-one interviews, as well as broader research reports such as the landmark piece discussed above.
- Audience identification – The identification of audiences to target including 'subject crossover' i.e., those subjects where we see a correlation with nursing.
- Media campaign – Use of traditional display media, email, social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok), in addition to new formats such as Facebook LIVE broadcasts and social filming.
- Reporting & Attribution – Proving return-on-investment by attributing demand to the campaign.

UCAS would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs and the Government to replicate such research for the land-based sector, exploring the motivations and behaviours of individuals who are considering a career in the land-based sector. As part of this, we would be happy to work with the DEFRA to explore how we can support workforce planning in the land-based sector.

How UCAS' events programme is supporting discovery of careers in land-based sectors

UCAS' [Discovery](#) events programme is our in-person engagement which allows further education, apprenticeship providers, and employers to communicate directly with students (and their advisers) about their options after pursuing a technical pathway. These events offer a wide range of activities including live application clinics, course and career taster sessions, and The Apprenticeship Zone, where students can interact with employers and discover the range of career options they could pursue. Crucially, these events provide expert guidance on how to research and make choices by presenting technical pathways alongside the option to go onto higher education. Our [research](#) into what determines the choices that school leavers make found that disadvantaged students are more likely to consider higher education later. Allowing students to see the full range of post-secondary options concurrently and in one location is therefore critical in maintaining the high quality of these events. These events provide an effective way of students discovering their career options, including those in land-based sectors.