

UCAS response to the Office for Students (OfS) Consultation: Strategy for 2022-25

Introduction

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).

Supporting students from all walks of life in discovering their future is in UCAS' DNA, and at the heart of our vision. We are therefore fully aligned to the OfS' aim of ensuring that 'every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers'.

In the following response, we highlight a series of external considerations for the OfS to reflect upon in the [development of its strategy](#), before commenting more specifically on the two priorities identified by the OfS. We look forward to engaging with the OfS in the formation of its strategy in 2022, and its implementation through to 2025.

Summary of key points:

- **Incoming demographic pressure:** We are amid unprecedented demand for education and training, which is set to grow still further. This has implications for how the OfS will look to regulate the HE market and promote the interests of students
- **Admissions reform:** UCAS continues to drive forward a series of student-led reforms and will wish to work with the OfS on both the ongoing sharing of intelligence and consistent messaging to the sector
- **Collaborative working across regulators and partners:** With the ongoing evolution of the education and training landscape, joint working by the OfS with the Institute for Apprenticeships, Ofqual, UCAS and partners to promote the rigour of apprenticeships and higher technical qualifications is essential
- **Personalisation and comparability must underpin information and advice:** UCAS is best placed to provide the information and advice most important and relevant to the individual, including that related to quality of provision. As routes and pathways diverge, completeness and comparability of data sets will be key
- **Equality of opportunity:** UCAS welcomes the pivot in approach to Access and Participation. Through our Fair Access Programme and broader investment across the UCAS estate, we are seeking to support earlier aspiration raising.

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External considerations for 2022-2025

Incoming demographic pressure

We are amid unprecedented demand for education and training. Record numbers are applying for full-time undergraduate study (+3% on 2020) and more than two million annual searches are being carried out on UCAS’ apprenticeships service, which helps students find jobs and degree/ higher apprenticeships, (+32% on 2020). This rising demand is set to continue.

UCAS projects that the 2025 cycle will have almost one million applicants – around 25% more than in 2021. About 40% of this increase will be 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 60% driven by continued growth in mature and international demand.

This fundamental shift in the supply and demand model that has underpinned post-secondary education in recent years presents several challenges for the OfS:

- Regulating in a more competitive marketplace as universities and colleges respond to the changing dynamic, as the narrative around student choice shifts
- Accelerating progress in widening access and levelling-up which, after significant improvement, has stalled in recent years
- Growing the supply of post-secondary education places to ensure that the most disadvantaged are not ‘squeezed out’
- Supporting students in making aspirational decisions across all routes and pathways, with the need to promote comparable and high-quality information about the full range

of options to students- Including Higher Technical Qualifications, apprenticeships, and short-courses/ credit-based study.

UCAS' priorities over the same upcoming period, as set out in our strategy, [Discover Your Future 2020 – 2025](#), reflect this changing market:

- Deliver on the 'digital Baker Clause', to provide dynamic, accessible and personalised careers information, advice and guidance for the full range of choices
- Act as the gateway to all post-secondary opportunities, addressing fragmentation and connecting the right applicants to the right destination
- Strengthening UCAS' reputation as a data-led innovator and reformer by publishing timely and influential research and analysis.

Leading with the student voice

As the OfS seeks to be a student-centric regulator, responding to students' evolving needs, preferences and requirements will be critical to the success of the upcoming strategy. The pandemic has resulted in several significant and potentially long-lasting shifts in student behaviour. Our most recent research from a joint UCAS/YouthSight survey of Year 12 students in June 2021 found:

- 48% are worried about being able to keep up at university after months of lost learning
- 44% are worried about getting a good job after university
- 24% are worried about not having enough support at university

During COVID, we saw students develop a greater reliance on UCAS for pastoral care – during the first lockdown, we responded to over 250,000 phone calls and social media enquiries. As such, we continue to work collaboratively with external partners to connect students with relevant experts; for example, our Discovery Week was delivered in partnership with government Youth Mental Health Ambassador, Dr Alex George, and we work with leading apprenticeship employers in content partnerships.

UCAS believes the student voice must be a key factor in shaping the OfS' upcoming strategy to ensure maximum relevance and impact for students. The OfS' preexisting mechanisms for collating feedback including its student panel and the National Student Survey will be important foundations. However, mechanisms for gaining student feedback will need to evolve as HE options diversify beyond the traditional model.

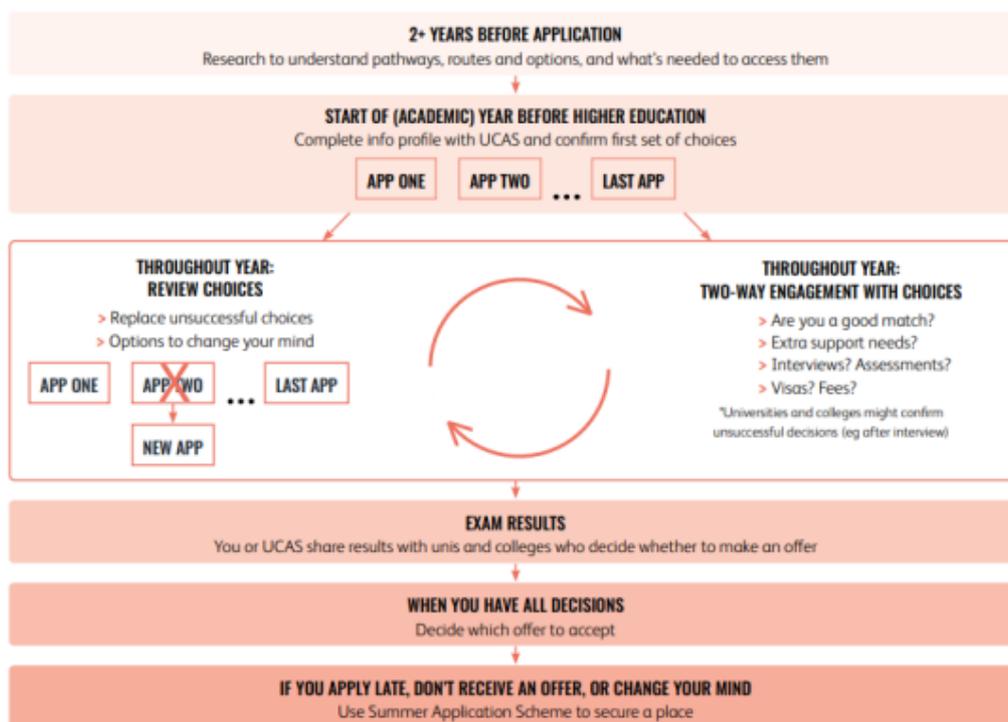
Our engagement with hundreds of thousands of individuals, and our growing survey expertise, means we would welcome discussions with the OfS about we can work together to better understand sentiment and behaviour. UCAS will continue grow its broader body of research on student choice through its [reports library](#). Most recently, we have published [insight](#) into the experiences of the 40,000 LGBT+ students who apply through UCAS each year as well as a deep-dive into [student mental health](#).

Enabling the government's proposals for admissions reform

UCAS is committed to working with policy makers, stakeholders, and customers across the UK to transform the admissions system – it must evolve to deliver better outcomes for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. UCAS welcomes the government's commitment to reform, including post-qualification admissions. UCAS' consultation [response covered](#) 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 Career Finder tool which receives two million hits each year to search for apprenticeship opportunities.
- **Student Hub on ucas.com** – a personalised information and advice dashboard providing 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.
- **Launch and continued development 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.
- **Streamlining of admissions process** – simpler access to available courses through the consolidation of Clearing and Adjustment routes.
- **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 to their students.

Our response to the DfE’s consultation and published discussion paper, [Reimagining UK Admissions](#), outlines a vision for a future admissions service and the challenges that would need to be overcome to ensure successful operation. In our contribution to the consultation, we set out ‘Model 2b’ (below), which proposes several ways to improve on Model 2, proposed by DfE.



A key challenge would be how to regulate within a post-qualification admissions system. For example, a post-qualification system would see the point at which an offer is accepted (and therefore a legal contract formed) delayed. Reform, in any guise, would need to be accompanied

by new advice and guidance from the OfS and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to complement self-regulation through UUK's forthcoming Code of Practice and safeguard students' rights as consumers.

For our part, UCAS will ensure that our reform programme is mindful of incoming demographic pressure. This means that the system will continue to support universities and colleges in preparing for, and delivering, a high-quality experience for the changing size and shape of student cohort they will recruit. This will be important for both in-cycle shifts in applicant patterns affecting accommodation and support services, and longer-term planning for the years ahead.

We will want to work with the OfS on both the ongoing sharing of intelligence and consistent messaging to the sector – this will support market stability and the student interest.

Collaborative working across regulators and with other partners

The post-secondary education and training landscape is evolving. Following the post-16 qualifications review, the next decade will see an overhaul in technical education, including T Levels, [Higher Technical Qualifications](#) (with the first wave is to be taught from September 2022), and the Lifetime Skills Guarantee – linked to the [Skills for Jobs White Paper](#) and subsequent [Skills and Post-16 Education Bill](#). Most recently, the Chancellor has committed to a £3.8 billion investment in education and skills, increasing apprenticeships funding to £2.7 billion by 2024-25. These reforms, as a package, present opportunities for students to access new and varied routes into and within post-secondary education.

A risk inherent in the proliferation of new and diverse routes is that the landscape mystifies students and their advisers, which may lead to their questioning of the quality of provision. Recent [UCAS research](#) found that the word 'prestigious' was only associated with apprenticeships by 4% of respondents relative to 76% for university degrees. Joint working by the OfS, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, and Ofqual to promote the rigor of apprenticeships and HTQs is essential to tackling such bias and ensuring that students are supported in making the right decisions for them.

OfS areas of focus for 2022-2025

Quality and standards

Upholding high standards of teaching and learning are critical to maintaining the UK's popularity as an HE destination; therefore, UCAS welcomes the OfS' commitment to ensuring the highest standards of post-secondary education are maintained and upheld. Of most relevance to UCAS is the OfS' goal of 'promoting and improving *comparable* information about *quality* for the benefit of prospective students'.

At UCAS, personalisation underpins our 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.

The UCAS Hub is growing in popularity, with over 417k sign-ups in 2020 and over 1.1m sign-ups in 2021, more than doubling its user base. The recent launch of the [Career Quiz](#) – a key gateway

for Hub registrations – has also helped more than 422k users find a career match since going live in mid-September 2021.

Given the multiple touchpoints across [ucas.com](#) and the [Discover Uni](#) platform, there is potential as the OfS considers its strategy to reduce overlaps to create a coherent experience for students whilst increasing efficiency. Indeed, working in partnership, this could lead to the retiring of the Discover Uni site in its current form, with the UCAS Hub and broader [ucas.com](#) estate acting as the key vehicle for surfacing the Unistats dataset to students.

The role of quality metrics in informing student choice

Our landmark research into student choice, [Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make](#), highlights the varied and diverse factors deployed by individuals in making their choices. We identified that 83% of students choose their degree subject before they think about the university or college they want to attend. When asked about their choice of subject, the following four factors were most cited by applicants: 'It is the subject I enjoy most' (74%); 'it will give me good career prospects after graduation' (54%); 'I needed to study this subject to pursue a specific career' (46%); and, 'it is the subject I am best at' (39%).

Thereafter, when making the (often) subsequent decision of which university or college to apply to, the 'quality of staff/teaching' and the 'quality of teaching facilities' are the two most important academic factors, with over half of respondents to UCAS' new applicant survey rating these as 'extremely important'. However, the impact of a proxy for quality (in the form of the TEF) on student choice appears limited to date, with just 15% of respondents saying the TEF rating was 'extremely important' when deciding which universities and colleges to apply to – one of the least important academic factors¹. So, while applicants appear to value information about quality, they have not placed much importance on metrics such as the TEF to date.

Equally, other factors – social, physical (e.g. location, emotional) – all play an integral role. For example, 'the location in the town or city' and 'the equality and diversity policies of the uni' are the two most popular lifestyle factors, with around 3/4 of respondents saying these were either 'extremely important' or 'important' in informing their choice of university or college.

We also [find](#) that it is important students consider not only what they are looking for from their degree, but also what will be personally important to them post-graduation, whether that be salary, employability, or a healthy work/life balance. They should be encouraged to think early about these next steps to ensure their satisfaction endures into the years that follow graduation.

This means that, for some students, information about the quality of provision will be of interest, whereas, for others, it will be less so. Similarly, the respective importance of factors also differs based on the individual's point in the student journey, highlighting the importance of personalisation.

In delivering dynamic, accessible, and personalised information and advice, UCAS is best placed to provide the information and advice most important and relevant to the individual, including that related to quality of provision. We look forward to working with the OfS in evolving our approach to information and advice to encompass new and evolving metrics.

The importance of comparability

¹ UCAS' new applicant survey 2021, with 45k respondents, weighted to the whole applicant population, sent between October 2020 and June 2021

UCAS agrees that the provision of comparable information enables students to make better decisions. As part of this, consideration should be given to the importance of UK-wide comparability and parity of information provision across all routes, including technical education and apprenticeships. We know that interest in apprenticeships is growing, with half of UCAS applicants saying they are interested in this route. However, one in three students tell us they received no information about apprenticeships from their school.

Whilst a range of data exists around retention, completion and the graduate outcomes of students progressing to degree programmes e.g. data related to average salary and employability, little is available in relation to other routes.

This means UCAS would encourage the OfS to work with its counterparts in the devolved administrations in addition to the iFATE, ESFA and Ofqual to maximise coverage and comparability of data appertaining to quality. This would improve its usefulness as a student information tool; information and advice must reflect the interests of the next generation, to ensure relevancy for those embarking on their journey for years to come.

Equality of opportunity

UCAS notes the recent [appointment](#) of John Blake as new Director for Fair Access and Participation, and the [Government's intention](#) to refocus the access and participation regime to support the raising of aspirations and standards in education. With commentators such as the [Education Policy Institute \(EPI\) reporting](#) how the pandemic has further increased the attainment gap at earlier ages in education, UCAS welcomes the pivot in approach, and the OfS' focus on equality of opportunity.

UCAS' support for disadvantaged students and our 'Fair Access Programme'

Supporting disadvantaged students is at the heart of UCAS' charitable objects – we are committed to helping students from all backgrounds in progressing into and through education. We aim to ensure all our products and services are accessible to and supportive for students from all backgrounds, with specific work focused on improving access and participation for disadvantaged and under-represented students.

This year, UCAS has invested in a new Fair Access Programme to build upon our existing support for disadvantaged students. The programmes focuses on how UCAS can further support outreach organisations, widening access and participation efforts and fair access through five key areas:

- the provision of data and analysis
- its audience and reach
- a more tailored journey through its services
- the targeting of students
- the provision of admissions services

As part of the Fair Access Programme, we have consulted with a range of stakeholders to support with the development of its strategic plan. UCAS will be publishing the outcomes of the consultation in early 2022, with the next stage being to work in partnership with existing experts to develop collaborative services that will make a tangible impact on the experience of disadvantaged students making decisions about their next step.

Deepening relationships between universities and colleges and schools

[UCAS research](#) supports the OfS encouraging ‘an increased focus on HE providers seeking opportunities to work in partnership with schools’ as we highlight the importance of early aspiration raising. This report finds that more than three in four students first realise HE is an option for them before they start post-16 education, and one in three first realise this when they are within primary education. Disadvantaged students also tend to consider the prospect of HE later than their more advantaged peers, with 27% from POLAR4 Q1 (the most disadvantaged group) realising this in primary school, compared to 39% of those from Q5 (the most advantaged group) – reaffirming the findings of UCAS’ 2016 [Student Lens report](#), which emphasises the role of primary schools in shaping and broadening aspirations.

Through the Fair Access Programme, and increased investment in information and advice across the UCAS estate, we are seeking to support earlier aspiration raising. One such example is an initiative to codevelop with stakeholders a service that will catalogue and promote outreach opportunities. This would be made available across the UK, and present opportunities based upon widening access and participation characteristics and postcode. The service would initially be made available to schools and colleges, acting as a low burden route to access outreach and identify cold spots of intervention. It would also support providers to work altruistically with students, helping them to succeed academically and progress onto the best route for them.

Through our consultation with the OfS and Uni Connect partnerships, we are confident that the service would complement the success of existing regional Uni Connect outreach hubs, which currently operate with varying levels of sophistication and resource. Our existing engagement with the Uni Connect partnerships and relationship with around 4,000 schools and colleges UK-wide makes us well placed to support in these activities. Further development will depend upon the appetite from providers of outreach and stakeholder validation.

Evidence about what works

UCAS welcomes the OfS’ focus on generating and disseminating new evidence about what works to improve access and participation. As part of our work to better identify and support disadvantaged students, UCAS created its Multiple Equalities Measure (MEM) in 2015 – a framework for combining the effects of many of the measures currently used in the analysis of equality in HE (e.g. FSM status, school type, IMD) into a single value. This approach avoids focusing on a single measure or metric, which can create blind spots or lead to misclassification. In last year’s [What happened to the COVID cohort?](#) publication, UCAS recommended the MEM was adopted as the default mechanism for measuring participation to provide a true sense of progress.

UCAS acknowledges the OfS has used a similar statistical approach to develop its Associations between characteristics of students’ (ABCS) measure. As such, we would welcome further dialogue about how such measures can be used in a manner that gives clarity to the sector and supports real improvements within access and participation.

A key focus of the OfS will be evidence-based strategies for tackling drop-out rates. UCAS supports students in making the right choice for them, maximising the likelihood of their continuation and success once enrolled. We are also exploring how our data, linked to third parties, can provide an indicator as to likely level of support need once enrolled.

Providing access to diverse and innovative provision

Diverse routes and pathways into and through HE can be an important method of widening access and participation.

Acting as a ‘digital equaliser,’ UCAS provides students with comprehensive information and advice regarding the full range of post-secondary opportunities including HE, apprenticeships, part-time study, and Higher Technical Qualifications – and ucas.com receives 30 million unique visits a year. Because we are trusted by students and advisers to offer impartial, high-quality, and smart advice, UCAS is well placed to work with the OfS to ‘seek to proactively increase the diversity of provision available to students’, both through our discovery brand and admissions services.

From a discovery perspective, this includes working with partners to ensure students hear from independent and expert voices; for example, our collaboration with [Emsi Burning Glass](#), the world’s leading authority on labour market dynamics, to produce the [Careers Quiz](#) which matches students to their best suited career options, and our content partnership with the Open University. Simultaneously, we continue to reform our admissions service to reimagine how students pursue their journey into and through HE – e.g. in considering how to support the likely shift to a greater take-up of modular study following the introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE).

Prioritising mental health

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 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.

The benefits of sharing a mental health condition with the university or college are clear: the OfS [reports](#) that students with mental health conditions tend to have lower rates of continuation, attainment, and progression into skilled work or further study, so it is vital students can access the right support early on to succeed with their studies.

We estimate more than 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. Welcoming the OfS’ goal to ‘explore opportunities to work with partner organisations ... to enable providers to support the good mental health and wellbeing of their students’, UCAS is championing a joined-up, cross-sector campaign to unify messaging – to promote the benefits of declaring a mental health condition, create a culture of positive disclosure, align terminology, and address lingering misconceptions and knowledge gaps. We invite the OfS to play a key role in this, which will include a cross-sector roundtable in 2023 to discuss mental health and disability more broadly.