

UCAS

# FUTURE OF UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS

JANUARY 2023



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# INTRODUCTION

UCAS operates across the UK and internationally to provide information, advice, and admissions services to help both young and adult students to progress to the next stage of education and training. We support 1.5 million students every year to explore entering higher education, employment, and apprenticeships and manage almost three million applications, from around 700,000 people each year, for full-time undergraduate courses at over 380 universities and colleges across the UK.

Reform and constant improvement are in UCAS' DNA. Over the years, UCAS has evolved the admissions service to better serve applicants and broaden participation, including the introduction of Clearing Plus in 2020, the release of a new application experience integrating UCAS Apply and UCAS Track in 2021 and the launch of seven new widening participation questions in the application in 2022.

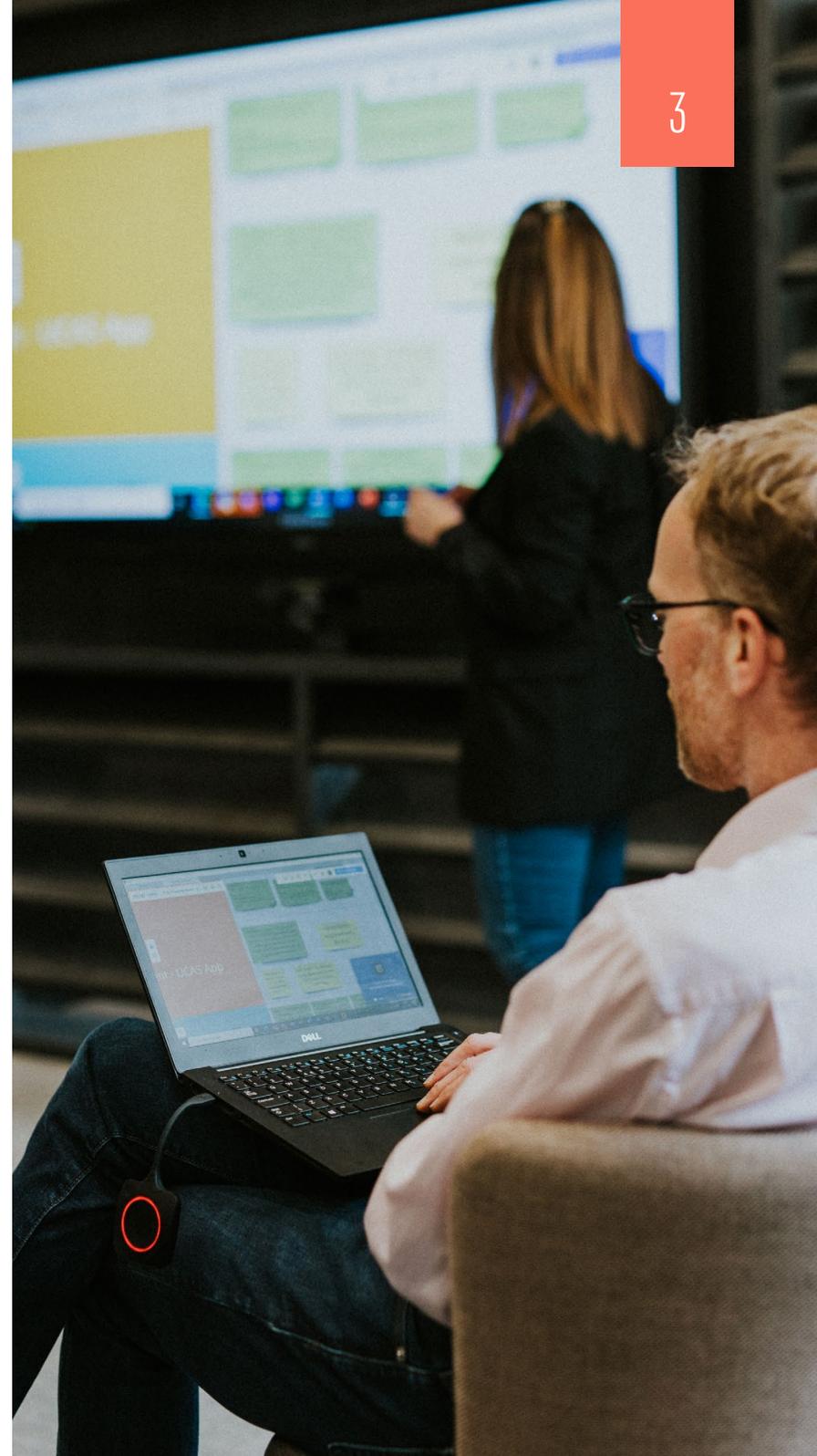
**In April 2021 UCAS published *Reimagining UK Admissions*.** While the publication focused largely on considerations for how a post qualification model of admissions could work for higher education, underpinning its findings were a series of principles that were established through engagement with over 180 universities and colleges, over 700 teachers and their representative bodies, and nearly 15,000 students.

This engagement found consensus that a successful admissions journey should...

- ▶ encourage students to easily explore a wide range of options across the UK
- ▶ provide sufficient time to engage with shortlisted choices, supporting effective transition to their next step in education
- ▶ inspire students to reach their full potential and support their access to higher education and future learning
- ▶ have transparency about entry conditions, along with how offers and decisions are made
- ▶ empower students to exercise choice simply and easily within a framework that protects their interests
- ▶ enable universities and colleges to plan and manage undergraduate admissions effectively.

Since this publication, UCAS has continued to engage on these principles and explore how they can drive innovation in admissions.

This report spotlights five key outcomes of this work to date. We also highlight how you can work with us to shape these reforms and ensure that they support students in successfully discovering and accessing their next steps.



# REFERENCES

## What's the issue?

The academic reference is a free text section of the application in which an applicant's referee - often a form tutor, head of sixth form, or careers adviser – can share useful information about the student to help providers make selection decisions or plan support for a student post-enrolment. Providers have told us that it is becoming challenging to meaningfully compare applicants' academic references: the content varies from referee to referee but can include subjective descriptions of applicants which compare them to others within their own school or college rather than the overall applicant pool, or long descriptions of a school/college's achievements that offers little insight into the applicant. Although there is Information and Advice to help with the writing of referees, advisers report increasing pressure to invest more and more time in compiling the references with an expectation that this will increase applicants' chances of success.

## What are we doing?

We are redressing the imbalance of effort advisers put into the reference and the value providers get from them by replacing the free text approach with three structured questions for all undergraduate applications starting with the 2024 entry cycle. These questions, which have been designed with providers, act as a built-in guide for referees keeping their focus firmly in the areas that providers want to know more about.



**Enter a general statement about your school/college (mandatory for applications sent via a registered centre)**



**Enter any information about extenuating circumstances which may affect this applicant's performance in examinations or other assessments (optional)**

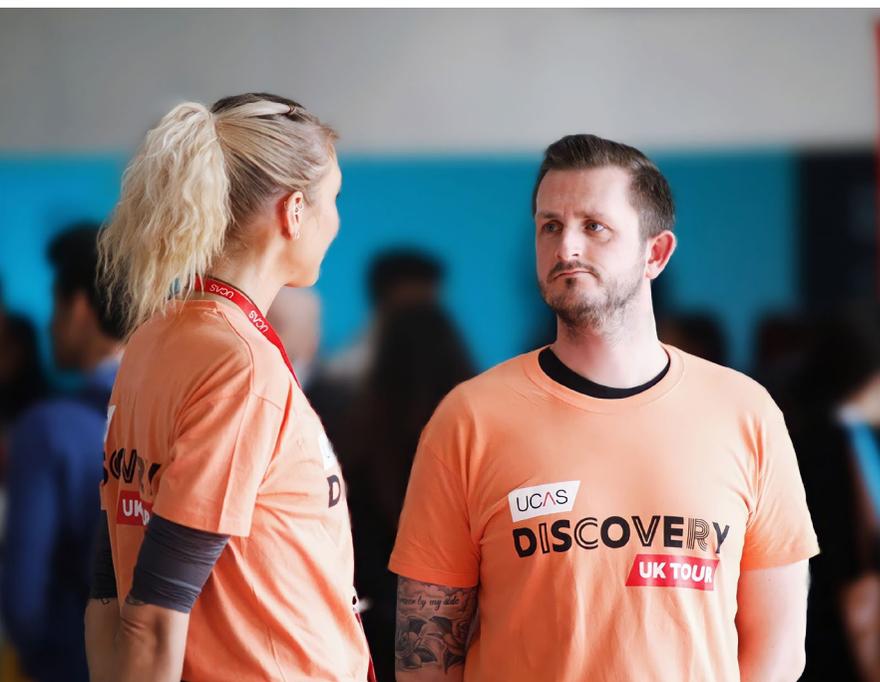


**Use this section to outline any other circumstances specific to the applicant that you think universities/colleges should be aware of (optional)**

Providers will be able to quickly and easily find the information they need to make selection decisions and target support; advisers can be confident that their efforts are being channelled into providing the information that is most helpful; and students have more transparency over the information being shared about them.

## How can you get involved?

If you're writing a reference, either through our adviser portal or as an independent referee, we'll be updating our resources to help you with this change.



# GRADES ON ENTRY

## What's the issue?

In the UUK Fair Admissions Review, published in March 2022, Universities UK noted that their "(admissions) Stakeholders noted that any discrepancy between advertised entry requirements and the grades that providers ultimately accept hinders efforts to improve transparency in admissions". In light of this, the review recommends that UCAS build on the Grades on Entry tool which was released in February 2021 and allows users of the UCAS Adviser Portal to access course-level information on the grades students held when entering Higher Education. The Government's March 2022 response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities also makes a commitment to ensuring the availability of this data "so that disadvantaged students have the information they need to apply to university on a fair playing field". UCAS' own engagement with its Student Advisory Group and focus groups confirmed that students would value access to this information, so that they can make more informed decisions when narrowing down their application choices.

## What are we doing?

We are building "Entry Grade Reports" which will be available through the search tool on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com). These reports will give visibility of the range of grade profiles that have been accepted for entry to courses over a five-year period. User testing has shown that this tool sparks curiosity amongst students, prompting them to dig deeper into entry requirements and re-evaluate options that they may previously had considered out of reach.

Students using the tool while logged into the Hub will see a personalised view – for example, if a logged in student has indicated that they are taking BTECs or SQA qualifications, the tool will switch from A Level data to data more appropriate for their qualifications.

## How can you get involved?

Look out for the tool when it launches in 2023 – we will be seeking feedback on ongoing enhancements once the tool is live.

**“ IT IS GOOD TO KNOW WHAT LEVEL OF ROOM FOR ADJUSTMENT THERE IS. SOME UNIVERSITIES TAKE STUDENTS WELL BELOW THE PUBLISHED GRADE CRITERIA AND IT IS GOOD TO KNOW WHICH INSTITUTIONS DO AND DO NOT DO THAT IN ORDER TO ENSURE THE STUDENT HAS A BALANCE OF ASPIRATIONAL, BACK-UP AND FAIRLY SAFE CHOICES**

Adviser, end of cycle survey 2021



# PERSONAL STATEMENT

## What's the issue?

While advisers value the role that the process of writing a personal statement plays in helping their students affirm for themselves that they have chosen the right set of courses, support for the existing personal statement process is not universal. A free text opportunity for students to promote themselves, the statement is seen by some commentators as a mechanism to “widen the gap”. Feedback shows fears that students who do not have access to high quality advice and guidance will not be able to use the statement to shine in the same way that their more advantaged peers can. There are also concerns about the extent to which students understand how providers use personal statements in decision-making.

The student view is similarly mixed. 72% of respondents to a 2022 applicant survey felt positive about the Personal Statement; underlying sentiment shows that this is where they feel they can use their own voice and advocate for themselves. However, 83% reported that the process of writing a personal statement is stressful, with 79% agreeing that the statement is difficult to complete without support.

**“ I FELT (THE PERSONAL STATEMENT) MADE THE APPLICATION MORE PERSONAL AND ABOUT MORE THAN MY GRADES BECAUSE I AM SO MUCH MORE THAN JUST MY GRADES!**

Student, March 2022

## What are we doing?

Working with students and providers, we have tested different models to identify a way to retain the space for the student voice that the personal statement offers while reducing the associated stress. Through this work both groups identified a preference for structured questions that bring focus and clarity for students, reducing the need for support. This approach also supports comparability for providers.

Following on from this, we have been engaging further to begin establishing the focus of the questions. Six key areas have been identified by Providers so far:

- ▶ Motivation for Course – Why do you want to study these courses?
- ▶ Preparedness for Course – How has your learning so far helped you to be ready to succeed on these courses?
- ▶ Preparation through other experiences – What else have you done to help you prepare, and why are these experiences useful?
- ▶ Extenuating circumstances – Is there anything that the universities and colleges need to know about, to help them put your achievements and experiences so far into context?
- ▶ Preparedness for study – What have you done to prepare yourself for student life?
- ▶ Preferred Learning Styles – Which learning and assessment styles best suit you – how do your courses choices match that?

We continue to refine these areas to ensure that they capture the information providers really need from applicants.



### How can you get involved?

As we work to refine and deliver this change, we are continuing to engage with customers and stakeholders – if you would like to feed into this, we are particularly interested in these areas:

▶ **Questions**

Beyond the six areas identified, are there any areas that you feel are missing?

▶ **Readiness**

Based on current feedback on the time needed for students and advisers to prepare for a new approach, we understand that a new approach for the personal statement should be introduced no earlier than 2024 for 2025 applicants. Based on your own position, how much preparation would you need to undertake for a new approach, and when would the ideal launch cycle be?

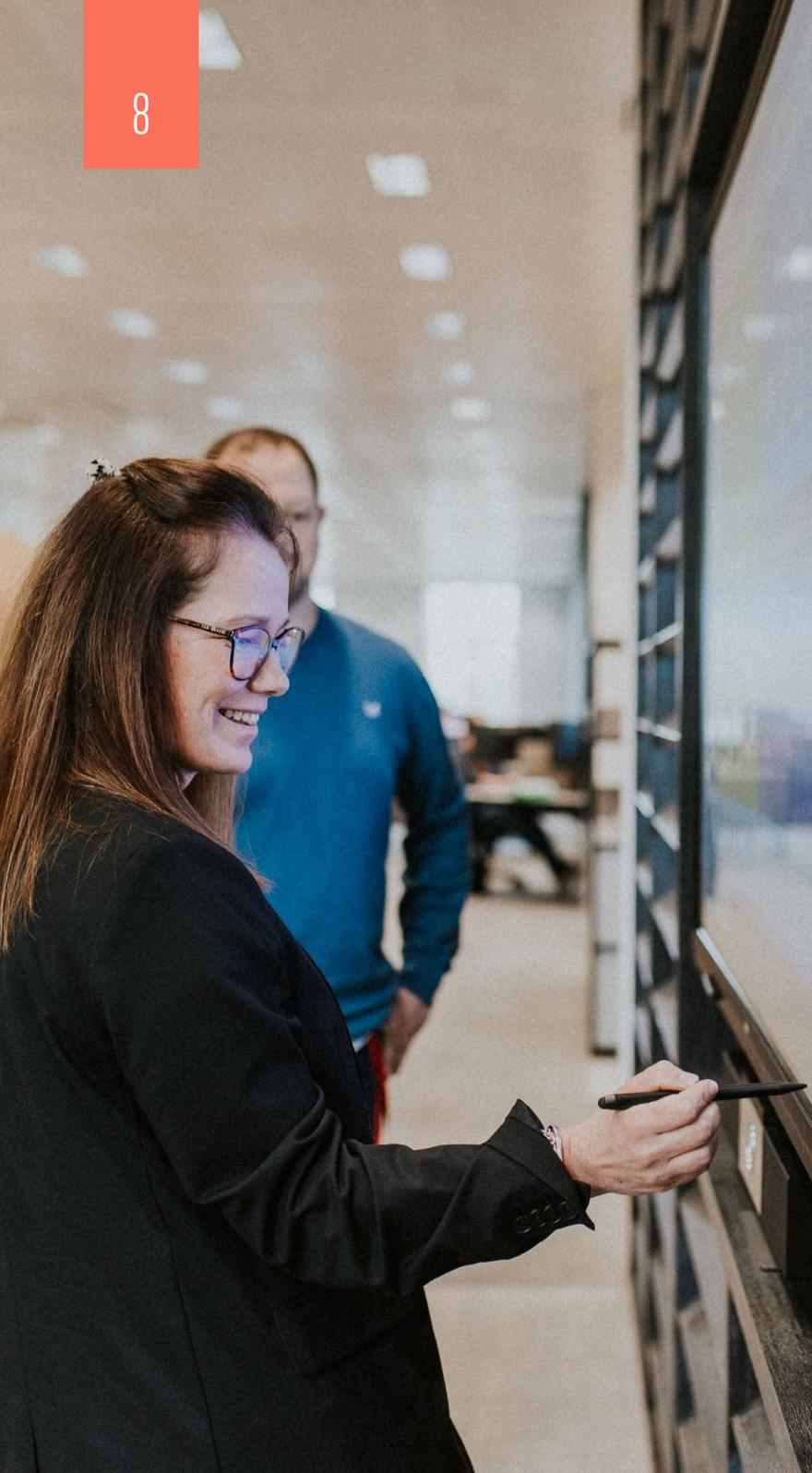
▶ **Multiple Statements**

We hear very mixed perspectives from all customer and stakeholder groups on the benefits and challenges of allowing students to write a different personal statement for each of their application choices. Under this model, what are your views on this?

Please let us know your thoughts through this survey

Restructuring the Personal Statement in this way also paves the way for further enhancements in future years such as moving from written text to multi-media submissions. As always, we are committed to working with all customer groups as we explore and maximise the potential of this new format.





# PERSONALISATION

## What's the issue?

Students making choices about options after school face a bewildering array of choices and UCAS insight shows many students are closing down options without realising it until it is too late. This is especially true for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While there is a significant range of career information advice and guidance sources, students are sometimes unsure of the quality and independence of the advice that is on offer. While there is a plethora of data available on the quality of courses, the individual providers, the student experience, the outcomes of the graduates etc, students often find the sheer volume of data available overwhelming, and it can be put aside in the decision-making process. Students may put undue weight on options which are recommended from the experiences of their immediate peer group.

UCAS has access to unparalleled data that shows the relationship between qualifications taken at school, entry to higher education choices and can match those with graduate outcome data. We also know that students trust UCAS with their personal data and value the independence of UCAS advice and guidance. Data and decision-making tools from UCAS carry authority, given the unique role UCAS has in the decision-making process.

**“ AT SOME UNIVERSITIES I APPLIED FOR I NEEDED A GRADE 6 GCSE MATHS, BUT WHILE I WAS DOING MY GCSES I DIDN'T REALISE I HAD TO DO WELL IN MATHS TO DO WHAT I WANTED TO DO AT UNIVERSITY.**

Student, 2021

### What are we doing?

We are using UCAS data and insight to create personalised recommendations for students making post-secondary choices. The Career Quiz, which has seen over 1.6m users visit since its launch in September 2021, already shows students the relationship between careers, higher education courses and graduate outcomes. We are building on this and have created a prototype for a personalised course recommendation tool. The tool using the information student share with UCAS when they create their account, looking at their subjects areas of interest, career goals, grade profile, willingness to travel and other attributes to make recommendation on courses. The tool is designed to expand choice, presenting options that students may not necessarily encounter or consider. In a trial with 300 year 13 students, using the information students provided, they were sent course recommendations based on their preferences feedback. 91% agreed the recommended courses were of interest, and only 39% said they had already seen the courses. 69% said it helped them consider new options.

### How can you get involved?

We are looking to expand the trial of the course recommendation engine, to see how it can be developed and used at scale to help students make more informed, data driven decisions.

“ [I'D HAVE LIKED TO KNOW] WHICH SUBJECTS TRADITIONALLY LEAD TO WHICH CAREER PATHWAYS. MORE ABOUT ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS LIKE APPRENTICESHIPS ALSO [WOULD HAVE BEEN USEFUL]

University student, reflecting on their own journey to Higher Education



# WIDENING ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

## What's the issue?

Significant progress has been made in widening access and participation in the past 15 years, with an increase of over 30,000 more students from the most disadvantaged areas applying in 2021 (a percentage increase of 66% applying since 2007), resulting in those students now being twice as likely to progress to higher education (HE). In 2022, we saw a 23% increase in the number of students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds placed in HE compared to 2019.

However, this progress has slowed in recent years: the Multiple Equality Measure equality gap has narrowed by an average of 1.1% year on year since 2015 versus 4.4% across the previous five years. The tertiary education sector continues to be challenged to innovate in this space. The journey to a million higher education applicants in 2026 – and increased demand across the full range of post-secondary pathways – presents further challenges, as increased competition risks disadvantaged students losing out.



## What are we doing?

Informed by national consultation, we have launched the Fair Access Programme, which aims to support universities and employers in their efforts to widen access and participation by:

- ▶ transforming the sector's understanding of students through new questions, data and insight;
- ▶ connecting HE and outreach providers to the hardest to reach students, earlier;
- ▶ helping the sector understand what works in WP;
- ▶ bringing schools and universities closer together;
- ▶ removing barriers and inspiring students.

Through the Fair Access Programme, we are delivering and developing a range of initiatives to supporting the most disadvantaged students progressing to higher education or apprenticeships and adding value to the existing work across the sector.

In 2023 we intend to launch our **Outreach Connection Service**. Raising awareness of the full range of outreach and support available, this new service will help schools and students navigate and connect to the opportunities offered by HE providers and third-sector organisations. Not only will this significantly enhance our understanding of how students engage with such opportunities and their subsequent progression, it will also inform sector-wide evaluation and impact measurement. The service creates a 'single source of truth' about the trusted outreach opportunities available to all UCAS-registered centres in the UK; we will begin by working closely with a range of partners to act as early adopters.

## How can you get involved?

Join our virtual community via [access@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:access@ucas.ac.uk) - through this group, we will be sharing the latest insight, asking for views and collaborating to shape our future offer – and look out for our Fair Access Programme roadshow starting in early 2023.

# WHAT'S NEXT?

UCAS recognises that Reform is an ongoing drumbeat and not a one-time deliverable. External contexts change, digital capabilities evolve, and our customer needs continue to develop. As we work through the delivery of the reforms listed above, we will continue to identify further areas to transform the admissions experience and we will continue to engage with customers and stakeholders to ensure we continue to create value for everyone involved.

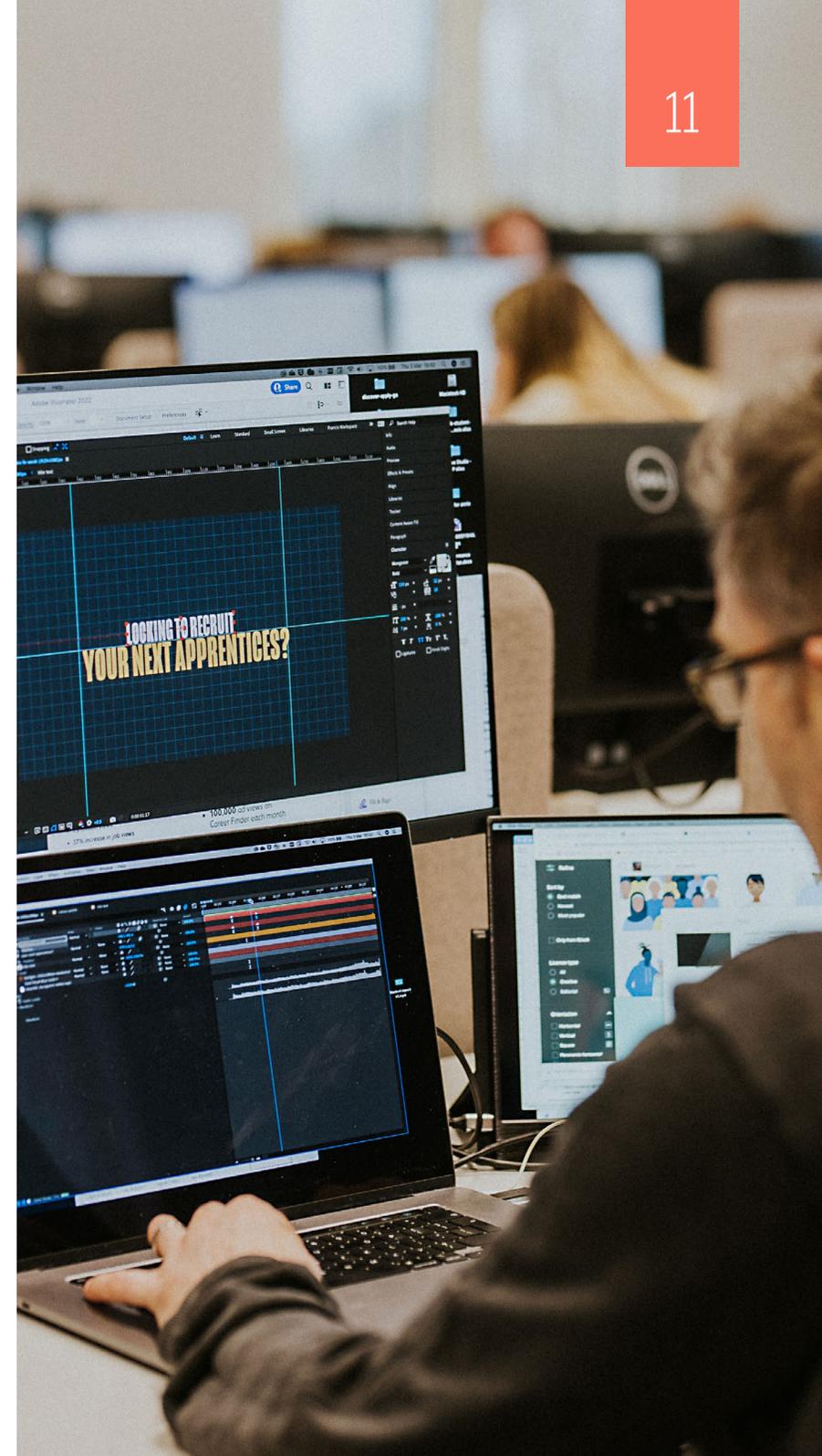
Over the coming 12 months, we will be growing our engagement on **Predicted Grades** – sharing our growing insight on the ways in which they shape outcomes for students.

We will also begin exploring reform in the context of **international undergraduate admissions**, particularly around the opportunity and challenge of increased applications, and therefore competition for places, from students domiciled overseas. In addition to this, we will commence discussions around personalisation and flexibility, in terms of point of entry, intake, and delivery mode, which have become central to the UK's continued appeal as a destination of choice for international students.

Looking further ahead, we continue to better understand and prepare to support an increasingly diverse group of students and adults to access an increasingly broad range of choices. Nearly 50% of those that come to UCAS are interested in apprenticeships and many thousands use UCAS to discover and find an apprenticeship or employer every year.

Whether a student is fully intent on a traditional three year full time experience, seeks the dual earning and learning benefits of an **apprenticeship**, or needs to navigate education and training in smaller modular chunks over their lifetime; our mission remains to support them in understanding all of these options, identifying the right route for them, and successfully accessing higher education.

As always, we will continue to engage with customers, stakeholders and colleagues to ensure that we are best placed to anticipate and support with areas where we can work to improve the admissions journey.



# UCAS

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