



# CONSULTATION ON THE OPERATION OF THE UCAS UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS CYCLE: DATES, DEADLINES, AND CHOICES.

Overview and response guidance

LAUNCHED FEBRUARY 2026 | CLOSES 22 APRIL 2026

# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

UCAS' history dates back to the late 1950s, when the Council of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP – now Universities UK) recommended creating a national shared undergraduate admissions service to ensure efficiency, fairness, and transparency in higher education applications.

In constitutional terms, UCAS has two beneficiary classes: the higher education providers who are our legal founders and members, and the students we support in securing admission to those providers. In addition, as a charity, UCAS is required to act for the benefit of the public as a whole in accessing higher education.

This means we aim to both deliver efficiency and value for our higher education provider members, but also play a clear and appropriate role in supporting participation and reducing barriers where it is right for us to do so. These constitutional, legal, and strategic guardrails shape the decisions UCAS takes.

In support of this commitment, and in response to sector feedback, UCAS has engaged widely with its stakeholders – speaking directly with more than 300 universities, colleges, and schools, and thousands of students – to explore current use, challenges, and opportunities around the structure of the admissions cycle, covering:

- ▶ the number of initial choices a student can make
- ▶ the firm and insurance choice
- ▶ application deadlines, including the early (October) deadline and January Equal Consideration Date

UCAS undertook a range of pre-consultation activities during the latter half of 2025 to explore these areas further. This pre-consultation activity indicated that the existing model for the undergraduate admissions cycle works well for the majority of applicants and institutions, particularly up to and including the January Equal Consideration Date. This consultation therefore seeks to assess the extent to which these initial insights are shared across the wider population.

The early application deadline was also discussed as part of the pre-consultation engagement. The pre-consultation engagement sought to gather views on codifying the current use of the early application deadline, to inform the approach should an additional institution seek to adopt it. However, it became clear that such codification cannot take place in the abstract, and that context is essential. Feedback indicated that

this could only be considered in relation to a specific request, given the range of associated Business Rules – including limits on the number of choices available for courses and institutions that use this deadline, as is currently the case for medicine and for courses at the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford.

Feedback on this was wide-ranging, with significant concerns raised by all stakeholder groups, particularly schools and colleges. Given the strength of feedback received by UCAS from the majority of audiences engaged, it is proposed that, in the event a university or college formally requests use of the early deadline, the UCAS Board will consult with relevant stakeholders regarding the specific request and the associated Business Rules.

Beyond the structure of the undergraduate admissions cycle, UCAS heard directly from the education sector two areas where it would like us to do more.

**Firstly, it is clear that there is a need for increased efficiencies across all universities and colleges.** For example, UCAS heard feedback from some highly selective institutions that were receiving an increasing number of applications and the pressures this was creating for their operations. Similarly, UCAS also heard feedback from admissions teams who are facing tightening budgets. As part of our efficiency commitment, UCAS will work with the schools, colleges, and universities to identify areas where this efficiency is most sought, through the convening of a Sector Efficiencies Working Group made up of representatives from the broad range of institutions we serve.

**Secondly, UCAS heard feedback about the changing shape of Clearing, and the need to reform it in line with its current use.** Changes in student decision-making have driven a greater appetite across the sector for a modernised, digital Clearing process. Those who engaged with UCAS as part of the pre-consultation phase indicated that the design and development of an enhanced Clearing process should be a priority in future years. **Should the wider sector support the position outlined in the pre-consultation phase and endorse the above, UCAS will proceed with further engagement with the sector to co-create a more efficient and flexible Clearing process for the future.** As part of this development, UCAS will also engage with the sector afresh on whether the use of five choices remains appropriate, as well as the role of the insurance choice, in the context of a potentially reformed approach to Clearing.

**The purpose of this document is to support you in collating your responses.  
All submissions must be submitted via the [online survey](#)**

The recommendations within this consultation have been shaped by UCAS' constitution, along with feedback received as part of the pre-consultation engagement. The recommendations are designed to serve the interests of all UCAS' beneficiaries and recognise the breadth and diversity of the universities, colleges, schools, and students that use UCAS' services.

The deadline for submissions is Wednesday 22 April. For queries, contact [consultation2026@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:consultation2026@ucas.ac.uk)

# CONSULTATION

The below presents a brief, high level view of the consultation. Background analysis, insight, and feedback – along with areas for change – can be found [here](#).

Summaries of the pre-consultation events are available upon request.

## **The number of choices students can make as part of their main scheme application**

Students are able to make up to five choices as part of their initial UCAS application. UCAS data shows that 80% of all applicants, and 90% of 18-year-old applicants, use all five choices, and 95% of all main scheme applicants submit all five choices at the same time.

In 2025, applicants made 2,997,590 choices – the second highest on record. This has led to some providers who receive a high volume of applications suggesting that the number of choices be reduced due to operational pressures. Furthermore, survey insight suggests that, as part of their initial five choices, 29% of applicants apply to a course they do not intend to accept.

## **Recommendations:**

- ▶ Retain the current number of initial choices (five) in the short to medium-term, pending further reform to Clearing and Extra.
- ▶ Further promote the existing flexibility within the current system, so students understand they can add their choices at different times if it suits their needs.
- ▶ Further consultation with the sector regarding reform to Extra, recognising that a wide range of choice is available to students at this point.

## **Rationale:**

- ▶ External polling undertaken on behalf of UCAS suggests that a range of audiences, including students, view a reduction in the number of initial choices as a cap on opportunity.
- ▶ UCAS' survey insight suggests that the current five choice model encourages students, including the most disadvantaged, to apply to a broader range of options.
- ▶ Feedback from universities was mixed – a small number of highly selective institutions experiencing high volumes of applications felt that a reduction in initial choices could provide efficiencies for them, whereas other institutions were concerned that it could reduce their opportunities to recruit students.
- ▶ Promoting flexibility across the cycle and supporting increased use of a reformed Extra would offer greater benefit for institutions recruiting those students who are more likely to apply after the January Equal Consideration Date – particularly mature and international students.

**Question 1:** The number of choices students can make as part of their main scheme application

**Please indicate your position on the recommendations set out above:**

- ▶ **I agree with these recommendations.**
- ▶ **I disagree with these recommendations.**
- ▶ **I am not sure/I require further information.**

Please provide any rationale for your response or any further comments below. **[Free text response]**

## The firm and insurance choice

Once a student has received all their decisions, they choose a firm and, if they wish, an insurance choice. If they meet the terms of their firm offer, they have a contractual right to that place. If they do not, but they do meet the terms of their insurance offer, they are entitled to that instead.

The insurance choice does not apply if the firm choice accepts them, even if the student does not meet the terms of their firm offer. Around 6.3% (32,365 in 2025) of applicants are ultimately placed at their insurance choice, but 1 in 4 initially placed at their insurance used 'Decline My Place' to explore alternative options in Clearing. By contrast, 54,480 students are placed via main scheme Clearing, and 22,630 accepted students applied directly into Clearing.

For some universities and colleges the insurance choice is a welcome source of students, accounting for over 10% of their intake. For others it can cause uncertainty and present challenges in the management of numbers, and some have suggested it is removed.

### Recommendations:

- ▶ The insurance choice is retained in its current form pending reforms to Clearing.
- ▶ Introduce a series of measures to reduce friction in relation to the insurance process, including:
  - work with the sector to introduce 'Decline My Place' for the insurance choice (known as CI decline), building on its successful introduction for both placed and unplaced firm choices. This was felt by some institutions to offer significant efficiencies

- continue to drive efficiencies in the processing of qualifications via the Awarding Body Linkage process to get verified achievements to admissions teams quicker and support prompt decision-making
- work with the sector to develop good practice guidance on the processing of insurance decisions to promote timely and prompt decision making and an effective flow of firm and insurance decisions, especially during the embargo period
- review terminology and associated processes, along with supporting information and advice to increase clarity regarding the insurance choice.

### Rationale:

- ▶ UCAS polling and focus groups suggest that the insurance choice provides an important psychological safety net for students, and that its removal would affect the choices they make, narrowing the range of institutions they consider.
- ▶ Removing the insurance option without a replacement mechanism (such as an enhanced Clearing process) risks making the process feel more 'high stakes' for students.
- ▶ UCAS modelling indicates that removal of the insurance choice may have a greater impact on outcomes for certain ethnic groups and those from disadvantaged areas.
- ▶ Whilst some universities felt the insurance choice created operational challenges, the general consensus was the benefit to students outweighed this.

### Question 2: The firm and insurance choice

#### Please indicate your position on the recommendations set out above:

- ▶ **I agree with these recommendations.**
- ▶ **I disagree with these recommendations.**
- ▶ **I am not sure/I require further information.**

Please provide any rationale for your response or any further comments below. **[Free text response]**

## The timing of the January Equal Consideration Date and associated dates

The January Equal Consideration Date is an established milestone in the cycle. By this point, around 96% of UK 18-year-olds and 80% of all applicants have applied. Applications submitted by this date receive equal consideration, meaning they are assessed the same way rather than on a first-come, first-served basis, and may not be rejected on the grounds that a course has already received enough applications.

In recent cycles, the equal consideration date has moved between mid and late January. A later date contributed to an increase in students receiving offers later in the cycle, often close to exams. There has been some interest among providers in an earlier deadline to support offers being issued earlier in the cycle, while also providing additional capacity within current processes for those that may require it. Whilst teachers and advisers voiced concerns about student preparedness, they also welcome the idea of students having clarity on their offers as early as possible.

### Recommendations:

- ▶ Retain a mid-January Equal Consideration Date, which should fall on the nearest Wednesday to 15 January.
- ▶ Ensure the main Reject by Default date falls before the examination window for the majority of students that apply with pending examination results, and ensure no reduction in processing time compared to normal (pre-pandemic) years.
- ▶ Maintain the March Advisory Date, but take a more sophisticated approach to helping providers manage student expectations. For example, UCAS can provide universities and colleges with data and insight on offer turnaround times, which can be

issued alongside offers to help manage student expectations. Such an approach will be of particular value to institutions in Northern Ireland and Scotland, which receive funding decisions after the admissions cycle has started, as well as to some high-volume institutions that are unable to meet the existing March Advisory Date.

- ▶ Introduce a 'traffic light tool' or similar to indicate the likelihood of a course being open after the January Equal Consideration Date, encouraging students to use their choices more flexibly.
- ▶ Continue working with universities and colleges to identify opportunities for greater efficiency in the admissions process.

### Rationale:

- ▶ UCAS analysis suggests that receiving an offer before examinations begin can be motivational for students and support their attainment.
- ▶ Polling across the general public, schools, colleges, and students supports retaining a January Equal Consideration Date.
- ▶ The vast majority of courses remain open after the January Equal Consideration Date, giving students plenty of choice should they wish to apply later.
- ▶ Moving earlier would have a large impact on a range of school and college processes, such as the delivery of mock exams.
- ▶ Whilst some universities would welcome the additional processing time an earlier deadline would provide, many felt the current timing was appropriate. Equally, many universities felt that a later deadline would place pressure on other admissions processes, such as postgraduate recruitment.

**Question 3:** The timing of the January Equal Consideration Date and associated dates

**Please indicate your position on the recommendations set out above:**

- ▶ **I agree with these recommendations.**
- ▶ **I disagree with these recommendations.**
- ▶ **I am not sure/I require further information.**

Please provide any rationale for your response or any further comments below. **[Free text response]**

## Additional areas of feedback (all audiences):

How often do you think UCAS should review the findings of this consultation and engage with the sector regarding dates, deadlines, and the number of choices students can make?

- ▶ **Every year**
- ▶ **Every two years**
- ▶ **Every three years**
- ▶ **Every four years**
- ▶ **Every five years**
- ▶ **Five years+**
- ▶ **No need to engage further**

Feedback from the pre-consultation engagement has highlighted that there is a need for increased efficiencies across all universities and colleges. Would you, or a member of your institution, wish to engage with UCAS further regarding our efficiencies work?

### Yes / No

In addition to the areas explored above, are there other areas of the undergraduate admissions cycle where UCAS could make enhancements? **[Free text response]**

Is there any other feedback you wish to share with UCAS? **[Free text response]**

# HOW TO RESPOND

The purpose of this document is to support you in collating your responses. All submissions should be submitted via the [online survey](#).



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