



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

Supporting information and rationale

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FOREWORD FROM DR JO SAXTON CBE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF UCAS

Our conversations across the sector have made one thing clear: fairness and consistency remain at the heart of a trusted admissions system. The shared framework of dates, deadlines, and processes plays a vital role in supporting students and ensuring transparency for all involved.

With this consultation, we aim to determine whether the current structure continues to meet the needs of today's applicants and institutions. Early engagement indicates that the cycle operates effectively for many, while also highlighting areas where considered enhancements could strengthen the system.

Feedback regarding dates, deadlines, and choices suggests that the existing structure remains broadly supported by the large majority of respondents. At the same time, several opportunities for improvement have been identified, as reflected in the suggestions set out throughout this document. This consultation therefore seeks to assess the extent to which these initial insights are shared across the wider population.

As the UK's shared undergraduate service, we recognise the challenges facing both of our beneficiary groups. UCAS has heard first-hand the need to strengthen the support we provide to institutions, while also understanding the pressures on schools, colleges, and applicants. We are mindful of avoiding any unnecessary burden and continue to take steps to improve the experience for applicants, including removing the application fee for the most disadvantaged applicants and care leavers. Through this consultation, it is important that we understand the perspectives of the diverse range of stakeholders and beneficiaries we serve, and explore how we can support them more effectively in their individual contexts.

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

The first theme was in relation to **efficiency**.

UCAS recognises the need to deliver its services and operations in a more efficient manner, in line with the broader sector focus on efficiency identified by Universities UK's recent Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce. As a shared service, UCAS strives to deliver efficiency and value to its beneficiaries. For example, the new course collection tool, UCAS Collect, and applicant document upload facilities will offer significant efficiencies for admissions teams. For schools and colleges, UCAS' growing information,

advice, and guidance offer provides significant support, with the Careers Quiz and Scholarships and Bursaries Tool making it easier to guide students to the information they need. Furthermore, the UCAS predicted grades data reports provide teachers and advisers with greater support in this area.

Continuing to make the management and processing of applications more efficient for schools, colleges, and universities remains a paramount consideration for UCAS, and we are keen to explore with the sector the opportunities that verification and automation present. As part of our efficiency commitment, we will bring the sector together to do just that.

The second theme was **Clearing**.

Feedback received through the pre-consultation exercise was that UCAS' focus in future years – and a central focus of its engagement with the sector – should be on the design and delivery of an enhanced Clearing process. Historically, Clearing was viewed as a point of limited choice for disappointed applicants. Today, that could not be further from the truth; Clearing now serves as a post-qualification admissions process for the more than 70,000 students (c.13% of accepted applicants) who gain their higher education place this way each cycle. In other words, Clearing is now a genuine moment of choice for students, with many using it as a direct post-qualification system, as well as to revisit or reaffirm their decisions, with places available at the majority of universities and courses at this point. The combination of the ability to make pre and post-qualification applications is a key feature of the current system and provides greater flexibility to students.

Should this consultation reaffirm the views expressed during the pre-consultation phase that the main scheme cycle does not require wholesale change, the development of an enhanced Clearing will become UCAS' focus henceforth.

As higher education diversifies and the needs of students change, it is only right that the nation's shared undergraduate admissions service evolves to continue meeting the needs of its beneficiaries.



Dr Jo Saxton CBE,
Chief Executive.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UCAS, the UK's shared undergraduate admissions service, was established over 30 years ago through the merger of its predecessors, the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) and the Polytechnics Central Admissions System (PCAS), to bring efficiency, fairness, and transparency to how people apply to higher education. These founding principles continue to underpin the organisation. Today, UCAS supports over a million students to explore 35,000 courses across more than 350 universities and colleges.

Through its services, UCAS seeks to support the diverse range of higher education institutions across the UK – ranging from large recruiting universities to highly selective medical schools, specialist arts institutions, and further education colleges. Given this diversity, a national admissions system can only function effectively when it is underpinned by a single, shared rulebook and structure that applies consistently to every applicant and every institution.

In recent years, UCAS has received increased feedback from a small number of universities regarding specific aspects of the undergraduate admissions cycle structure, largely relating to the number of choices students have, the management of those choices, and the positioning of the January Equal Consideration Date. As the impartial bridge between applicants and providers, UCAS has listened carefully and engaged widely to understand these issues and develop the options now proposed for consultation.

Key themes

These proposals are based on extensive pre-consultation activity undertaken in the second half of 2025, including engagement workshops with schools and colleges, higher education providers, policy stakeholders across UK nations and international audiences, and UCAS' extensive data and insight on student progression.

Feedback suggests the existing undergraduate admissions cycle works well for most applicants, particularly up to and including the January Equal Consideration Date. Therefore, through this consultation, UCAS is seeking views regarding the following proposals that seek to build on the current support for the existing cycle structure:

► The number of initial choices and how applicants use them

use them: A reduction of initial choices to three or four was considered. Student feedback on this was particularly strong, stating that a reduction in choice would be seen as a cap on opportunity. During the pre-consultation engagement, schools and colleges also reported that five choices enable students to include a range of options, from 'safe' to

'stretching'. Feedback from universities was mixed – a small number of highly selective institutions that were experiencing a high volume of applications felt that a reduction in initial choices could provide efficiencies for them, whereas other institutions were concerned it could reduce their opportunities to recruit students. It is therefore proposed that students should continue to benefit from five initial choices as part of their application, recognising that this supports breadth and flexibility, particularly for underrepresented groups. Maintaining five choices promotes sector stability by not introducing measures that make the recruitment landscape more challenging for some providers, at a point where financial sustainability is a key consideration for many. UCAS is also proposing to introduce a range of measures to promote greater flexibility in how students use these choices, such as providing more information about courses that may remain available beyond the January Equal Consideration Date.

► How students manage choices, including the selection and operation of firm and insurance routes

routes: Around 7% of main scheme applicants are unsuccessful in meeting the conditions of their firm choice, and are placed at their insurance choice. Applicants who are unsuccessful at their firm choice but hold a confirmed place at their insurance choice are more likely to search for an alternative place in Clearing. UCAS' data and insight suggest that the insurance choice plays a key role in promoting confident decision-making, whilst providing the safety of a confirmed place, and that its removal would have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students. Whilst some universities felt the insurance choice created operational challenges, the general consensus was the benefit to students outweighed this. Therefore, UCAS is recommending that the insurance choice is retained. In addition, a range of measures will be explored to make the processing of application decisions and insurance choices more efficient for university and college admissions teams, reducing friction ahead of results day.

► The timing of the January Equal Consideration

Date: A range of positions for the Equal Consideration Date, from December to March, were considered. Whilst these have merit – for example a December date would allow additional processing time for universities which was welcomed by some, and likely result in applicants receiving offers earlier – it was felt by the majority of schools and colleges in the pre-consultation phase that this would place undue pressure on their resources and have a

knock-on impact on other initiatives such as mock exams. This could have a range of implications, such as reducing teachers' and advisers' understanding of their cohort, limiting their ability to support them, and ultimately affecting student attainment and destinations.

The 2026 entry cycle saw the January Equal Consideration Date move from the end of the month back to the pre-pandemic norm of mid-January, while maintaining the previous reject by default (RBD) date. The intention of this move was to ensure that the majority of students receive decisions earlier in the calendar year, while providing additional processing time for institutions that require it.

It is recommended that a mid-January date is retained for the foreseeable future, with the RBD date positioned to balance the time providers need for processing, while ensuring it falls before the majority of students with pending qualifications sit exams. This would mean the RBD date is slightly earlier than in 2026, while still allowing for more processing time than in 2019 (the last time the ECD was 15 January). It is felt such a positioning balances the needs of UCAS beneficiaries.

► **The use of the early (October) deadline:** Through the pre-consultation exercise, UCAS sought views on codifying the use of the early deadline, based on its current usage, to support consideration of any potential requests from additional institutions in the future. This engagement, however, showed that codifying the early application deadline is not possible without a specific request to provide context, given the wider Business Rules involved – such as limits on choices for courses that already use this deadline (e.g. medicine, Cambridge, and Oxford).

UCAS explored the theoretical inclusion of one or two additional universities within the early deadline. Feedback on this was wide-ranging, with significant concerns raised by all stakeholder groups, particularly schools and colleges. These concerns included the impact on widening access, resource challenges in schools and colleges, reduced opportunities for some students – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – and the overall coherence of the admissions system. 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.

Next steps and future developments

As part of the pre-consultation exercise, UCAS discussed the scope for large-scale change to the operation of the admissions cycle. Feedback from the pre-consultation exercise, however, suggests that for

the vast majority of stakeholders, the undergraduate admissions service works well, with little appetite for significant reform to the structure of choice and deadlines. The pre-consultation exercise did, however, garner feedback in two areas where further action is required.

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 in light of the ongoing financial challenges faced by the sector. In this climate, it is only right that the shared undergraduate admissions service, true to its founding principles, aims to deliver greater efficiencies for its school, college and university beneficiaries, and ultimately make the processing and management of applications easier. As part of this efficiency commitment, **UCAS will work with the sector 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. Student decision-making has shifted over the last decade, with increasing demand for flexibility and the ability to revisit choices. Clearing, in particular, has evolved significantly; now used by the vast majority of universities and colleges, applicants increasingly use this period to reaffirm or change their earlier decisions, or to apply for the first time. Today, the largest cohort of applicants placed via Clearing consists of those who proactively use it to revisit their options despite having already secured a place.

This shift has 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 the focus 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 any proposals for reform of Clearing, UCAS will engage with the sector afresh on whether the use of five choices remains appropriate, and whether a smaller number of initial choices could be balanced with greater flexibility and more options later in the cycle through a reformed Extra and Clearing process.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

UCAS, the UK's shared undergraduate admissions service, was established over 30 years ago by the merger of its predecessors, the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) and the Polytechnics Central Admissions System (PCAS). In its first year, UCCA processed c.70,000 applications, and today, UCAS manages nearly three million each cycle.

The aim of the nation's shared undergraduate admissions service remains the same to this day: to bring efficiency, fairness, and transparency to the process of accessing higher education (HE), with student choice at the heart. Fairness is promoted through the uniformity of the undergraduate cycle, with the consistent treatment of students, and recruiting universities and colleges adhering an agreed set of rules and principles – brought together by the UCAS Business Rules.

In recent cycles, UCAS has received feedback from parts of the sector regarding these Business Rules and the structure of the undergraduate cycle. In particular, feedback has focused on:

- ▶ the number of choices students can make
- ▶ the management of these choices (particularly the insurance choice)
- ▶ the timing of the January Equal Consideration Date and related deadlines, and
- ▶ the use and purpose of the early application deadline

This feedback comes at a time when patterns of progression are changing. While demand for higher education remains strong, it has plateaued in recent cycles. In 2025, 36.3% of UK 18-year-olds entered

higher education – 0.1pp down from the previous cycle. Similarly, although positive progress has been made in widening access, the gap between the most and least advantaged students entering higher education has remained consistently stubborn across a range of measures. It is within this context that governments across the UK are looking to both UCAS and the wider sector to continue removing barriers for students and widening access, whilst promoting overall stability across the sector.

In light of this feedback, UCAS is consulting on a range of proposals regarding the ongoing operation of the undergraduate admission cycle. The scope of these proposals includes full-time undergraduate courses within the UCAS undergraduate service, and both domestic and international students. To inform these, UCAS has already undertaken an extensive pre-consultation exercise, hosting a series of multi-audience and variable format workshops to shape and inform the proposals outlined in this consultation document. In total, 554 individuals participated, including attendees from schools and colleges, higher education providers, and policy stakeholders across the four nations, as well as international audiences. A further 351 individuals to date have fed in via UCAS' pre-existing network of advisory groups and forums. A summary of the regional sessions undertaken as part of the pre-consultation engagement is available upon request.

This document contains the feedback received to date across multiple audiences, the proposed way forward for the short to medium-term, and the supporting evidence underpinning these proposals. To share your thoughts and insight, please complete the [online survey](#).

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

Background information and rationale

Areas of consideration:

The number of choices a student can make, and the management of these choices

Included within this section are:

- ▶ the number of choices students can make as part of their main scheme application
- ▶ the timing and use of these choices, including main cycle and Extra
- ▶ the firm and insurance choice

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

As part of a UCAS main scheme¹ application, students are able to make up to five choices² in their initial

application. Students are able to make additional choices as part of Extra and Clearing. UCAS guidance regarding the use of choices is neutral, although it is common for teachers and advisers to recommend students include a range of different grade profiles across their choices, from “safe” to “stretching” options.

In 2025³, 759,830 applicants made 2,997,590 choices – an average of 4.51 per applicant. Most main scheme applicants use five choices (80% of total applicants and 90% of UK 18-year-old applicants). While applicants do not have to include all five at the point of initially submitting an application, 95% of main scheme applicants made all their main scheme choices at the same time: for UK 18-year-olds this rises to 96%, with the figure slightly lower for UK mature (21+) (92%) and international (93%) students.

Year	Applicants	Accepted applicants	Acceptance rate	Main scheme applications and percentage change since previous year	Average number of applications per main scheme applicant
2016	713,750	535,175	75.0%	2,899,700	4.30
2017	695,605	533,890	76.8%	2,793,405	-3.7%
2018	691,875	533,360	77.1%	2,726,680	-2.4%
2019	702,470	541,240	77.0%	2,730,165	+0.1%
2020	722,905	570,475	78.9%	2,788,715	+2.1%
2021	746,120	562,060	75.3%	2,955,490	+6.0%
2022	761,740	563,175	73.9%	3,048,480	+3.1%
2023	752,025	554,465	73.7%	2,977,020	-2.3%
2024	752,210	564,940	75.1%	2,952,325	-0.8%
2025	759,830	577,725	76.0%	2,997,590	+1.5%

Figure 1: Number of applicants, accepted applicants, and applications 2016 – 2025 (All ages, all domiciles)⁴

1 This is the period between the opening of the cycle and 30 June, where students are able to make up to five initial choices. Applications after this point are directly to Clearing.

2 This was reduced from six in 2008. Some restrictions do apply, for example applicants can only choose up to four medicine and dentistry courses, requiring the use of the fifth choice for a different subject.

3 UCAS 2025 End of cycle dashboard.

4 In 2024, UCAS simplified its application fees, removing a single-choice option and enabling all applicants to add up to five choices to their application and take advantage of UCAS Extra and Clearing.

UCAS has received the following feedback from some parts of the sector regarding the number of choices a student can make:

Students are not seriously considering all five choices, creating inefficiencies in the system: UCAS' 2025 survey of placed students indicates that nearly a third (29%) of those using all five choices applied to at least one course they had no intention of studying, typically as a back-up or potential insurance option.

While applications to courses that students do not intend to pursue potentially create additional resource pressures for providers – especially following the January Equal Consideration Date, when the majority of applications are submitted – they are not without value. For example, the proportion of applicants returning to one of their original five choices during Clearing continues to increase year on year, suggesting that even initially unwanted options can play a meaningful role later in the admissions cycle.

Some institutions are experiencing a high volume, or increasing number, of applications for highly selective courses, and a reduction in the number of initial choices could reduce the resource challenges faced by some of these providers: As noted in Figure 1, the total number of choices made by applicants received via UCAS over the last decade has fluctuated from 2,726,680 (2018) to 3,048,480 (2022), with 2,997,590 received last cycle. During this period, the number of applications received by higher tariff providers has grown by nearly 300,000 and now accounts for 43.9% of all applications received – compared to 35.5% in 2016. During the same period, the number of applicants to higher tariff providers increased by 64,000, and the number of accepted applicants has increased over 38,535. The increasing volume of applications received by some institutions has led to internal pressure to process these within the existing timeframes and associated deadlines.

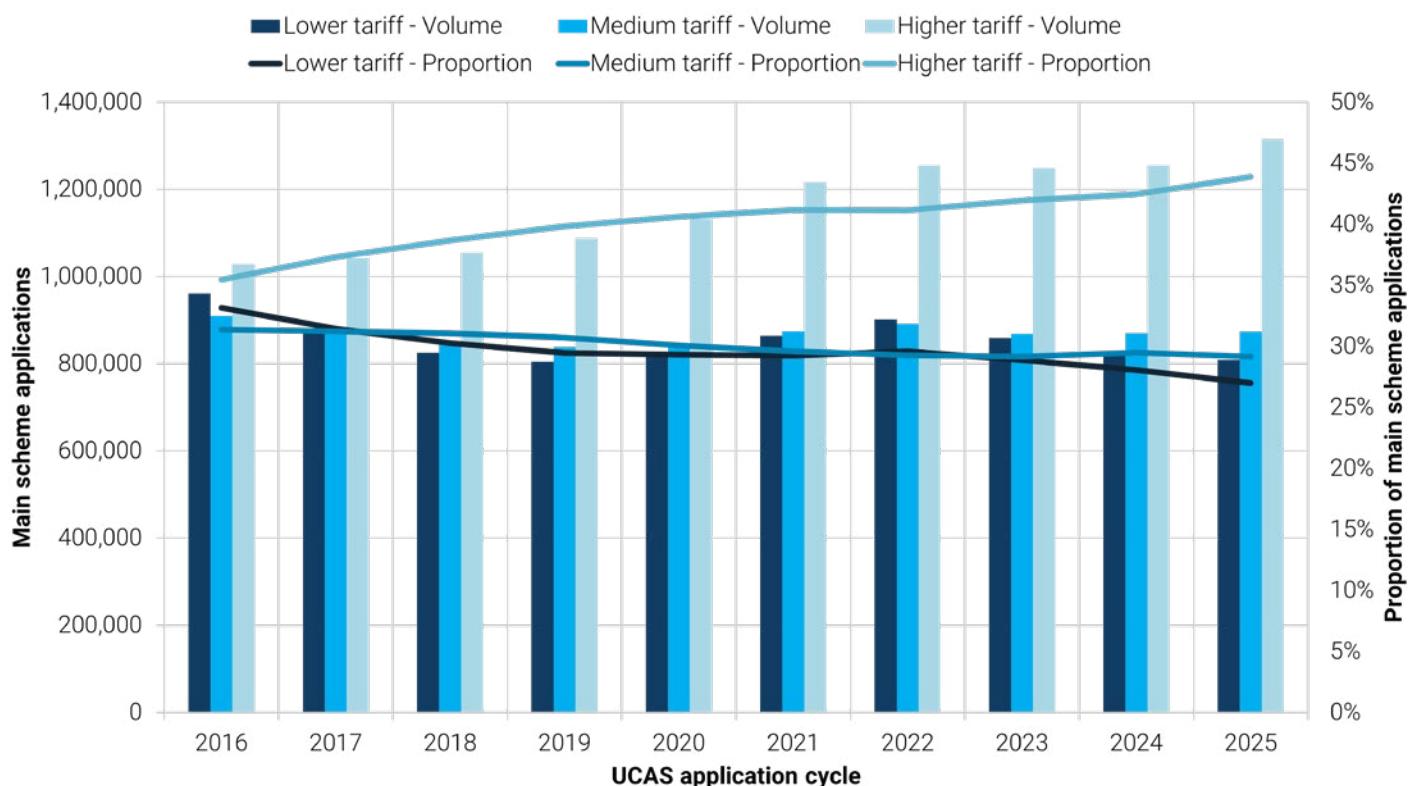


Figure 2: The number of applications received by higher, medium, and lower tariff providers, and the proportion of total applications received by each group (2016 – 2025) (all ages, all domiciles)

Proposition

UCAS is proposing that, on balance, **the use of five initial choices is retained at present**. This is because students – and, to a slightly lesser extent, teachers, advisers, parents, and the public – view reducing the number of choices as a cap on opportunity. Feedback from universities and colleges is less consistent.

During the pre-consultation engagement, a small number of universities that are experiencing an increase in application volumes felt a reduction in initial choices may offer operational efficiencies. However, other universities were concerned that a reduction in initial choices may reduce their opportunities to recruit students at a time of increasing competition and shifting application patterns, and make years' worth of management information less reliable.

While it is undoubtedly the case that, for some students, not all choices made represent their intended destination, continuing to offer five choices allows

students to apply for a broad range of options, which is particularly beneficial for underrepresented groups. Within the relevant dates and deadlines structure, students do not need to add all of their choices at the point of submitting an application if they do not wish to do so, and can use the existing flexibility within the system to take time to explore other options before committing to applying.

The current application process allows students the flexibility to choose whether to use all five choices at the same time or add them later within the dates and deadlines of their application cycle.

Rationale

Five is felt to be the right number of initial choices, particularly by students: Multiaudience polling by J.L. Partners (JLP) found that five is currently considered about the right number of choices by the public, parents, students, and teachers alike⁵.

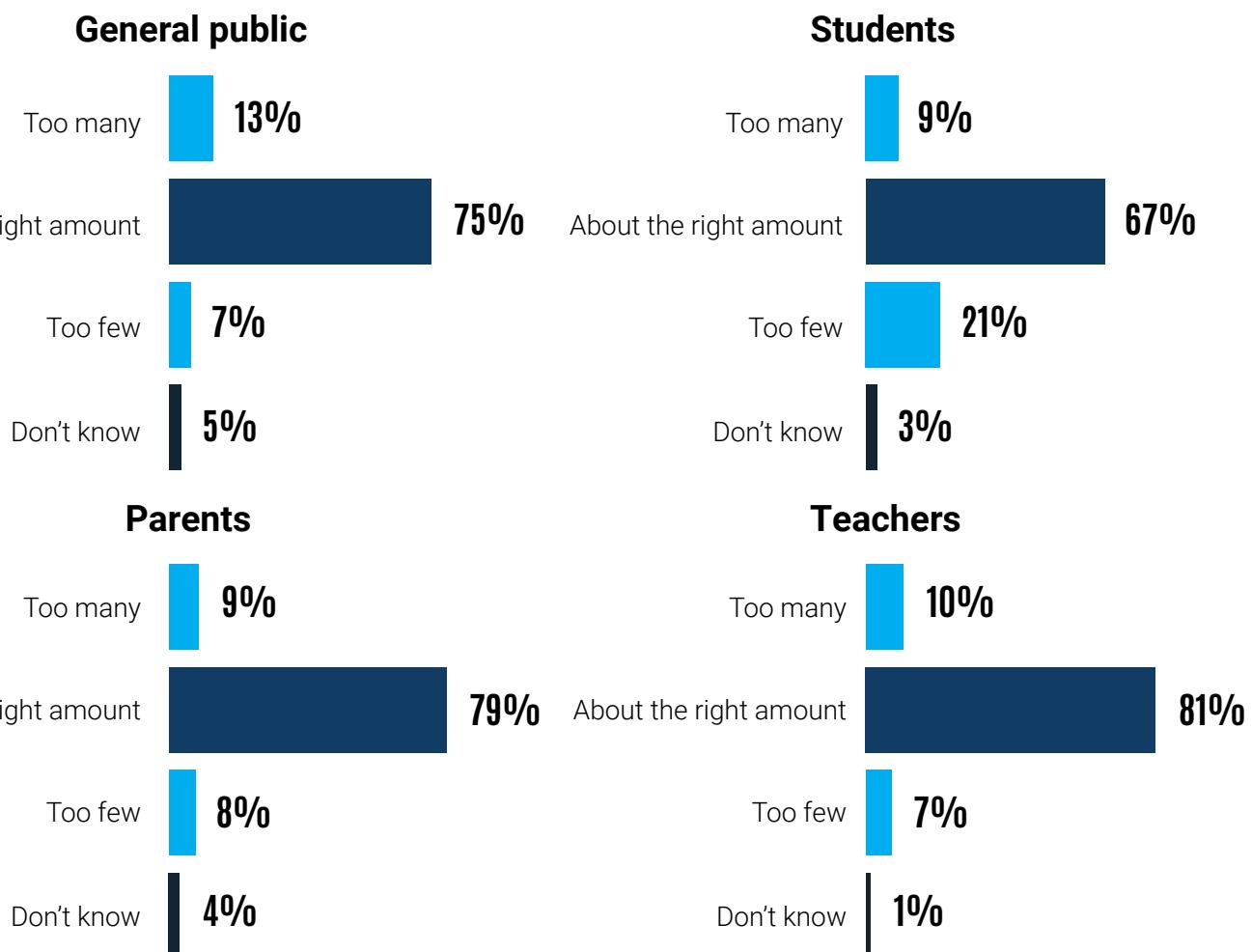


Figure 3: Multi-audience polling on the number of choices through UCAS, JLP on behalf of UCAS, 2024

⁵ JLP polling on behalf of UCAS, 2024. Question: Currently, applicants can choose up to five higher education institutions to apply for through UCAS. Do you think this is...Base: 1,018 respondents for general public, 549 for students, 512 for parents, and 300 for teachers.

UCAS' 2024 applicant survey⁶ concluded similarly: 64% said they liked being able to make five choices, 31% said they would have preferred to be able to make more than five choices, and 5% would have preferred the maximum to be fewer than five choices. Within UCAS' pre-consultation engagement exercise, there was also strong consensus as to retaining five choices under the current process among all stakeholder groups, citing the benefits in supporting breadth and flexibility.

The pre-consultation exercise suggested that there was no consensus in view across universities and colleges. A small number of institutions with high volume, highly selective courses expressed an interest in a reduction in choices. Other views across the sector noted the importance of the fourth and fifth choices, and how students can change their intentions once they explore these options further (such as visiting an open day). Furthermore, feedback from universities and colleges indicated that the removal of choices from students could make the recruitment landscape more challenging and less stable for some providers, particularly at a point where financial sustainability is a key consideration for many.

The feedback from institutions experiencing operational challenges as a result of increased application volumes cannot be ignored. To support these institutions, and as part of its efficiency commitment, UCAS intends to bring the sector together to explore how the processing and management of applications can be made more efficient, and what opportunities automation and verification can provide. As recently as UCAS' Annual Provider Update in January 2026, suggestions were raised about enhancing the reference by supplementing it with high quality, verified information about schools and colleges, helping to better contextualise an application.

UCAS' survey insight suggests that the current five choice model encourages a spread of choices, including supporting disadvantaged students applying to a broader range of institutions:

As noted above, 29% of applicants for the 2025 entry cycle who used all five choices did not intend to accept a place at all of them, seeing them as a 'back-up' option. A more common behaviour is the use of the five choices to apply to courses with a range of entry requirements – particularly by disadvantaged students.

Of respondents from a disadvantaged or under-represented background, 41% applied to two or more courses they thought were out of their reach compared to 32% of non-underrepresented respondents.

This shows that the current system is encouraging under-represented groups to apply to a broad range of universities and colleges.

Reducing the number of choices will not necessarily lead to a reduction in volume for providers:

The reduction of initial choices from five to four or three was considered as part of the pre-consultation phase. It was felt that while this may reduce the overall number of applications made, it would not necessarily lead to a reduction in the volume of applications to highly selective courses at some providers. Many universities expressed concerns that a reduction in choice could limit their ability to recruit students and would render years of management information less reliable – information that plays a crucial role in helping institutions understand and plan their recruitment position.

The timing and use of choices

Main scheme

As noted above, applicants are able to make five initial choices as part of their UCAS application.

- ▶ 78% of applicants apply by the January Equal Consideration Date. For UK 18-year-olds, this increases to 96%.
- ▶ Most main scheme applicants use all of their five choices (80% of total applicants and 90% of UK 18-year-olds)⁷.
- ▶ 95% of main scheme applicants made all their main scheme choices at the same time: for UK 18-year-olds this rises to 96%, with the figure slightly lower for UK mature (21+) (92%) and international (93%) students.

Feedback from the pre-consultation sessions suggested, particularly in the case of students with pending qualifications, that this is often deliberate, to allow students to complete their application and then focus on their studies. This feedback also highlighted a general lack of awareness of the option to gradually add choices throughout the cycle within the current system and was met with some interest once understood – particularly from schools and colleges who see many students change their mind later in the cycle. Many commented on the potential value of students 'holding a choice back' to provide greater flexibility later on.

This concentration of applicant behaviour leads to a peak in applicant volumes, which in part can contribute to the pressure that some institutions have reported in processing applications.

⁶ UCAS New Applicant Decisions Survey, 2024. Question: How do you feel about the number of choices you were able to make in your application? Base: 11,756 respondents.

⁷ UCAS End of cycle dashboard, 2025.

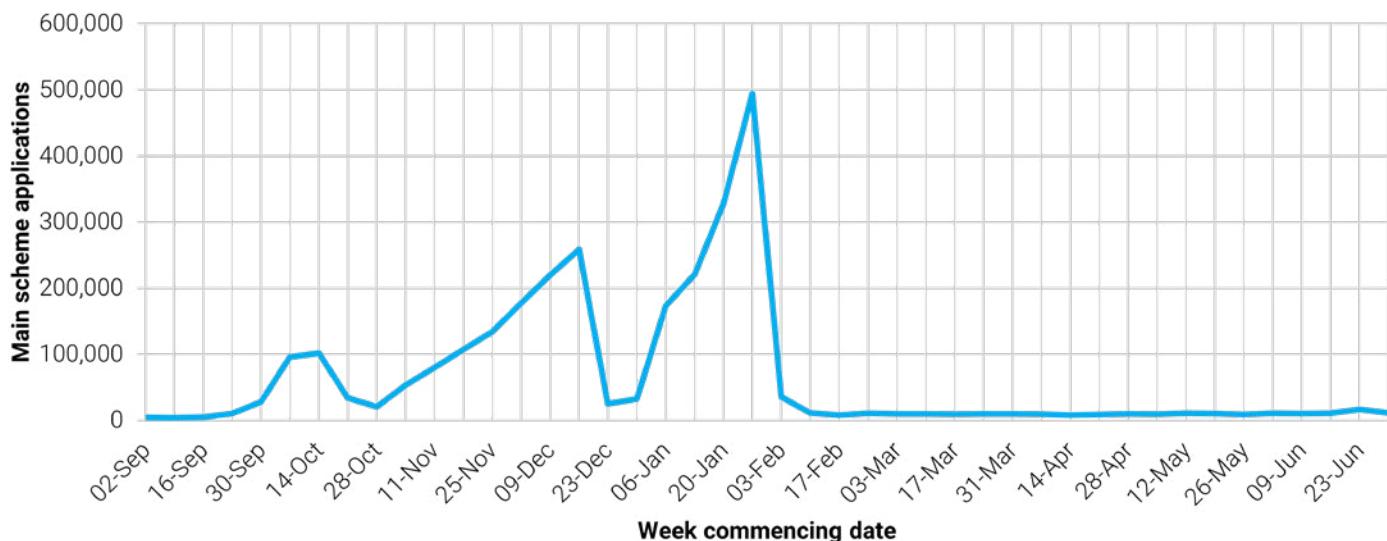


Figure 4 : Number of main scheme applications submitted by week in the 2025 application cycle⁸

The 'spreading out' of choices does occur within the current system, albeit at a small scale. 5.5% (36,400) of all 2025 main scheme applicants added at least one choice on a later date than their initial application submission⁹, with UK mature applicants (age 21 and over) the group most likely to opt for this:

- ▶ UK 18-year-olds: 4.2%
- ▶ UK mature (21 and over): 8.3%
- ▶ International: 7.3%

The tendency to spread choices also varied by the submission date of the initial application:

- ▶ 11% of those who initially applied by the early deadline added at least one later choice (7.3% of those applying to medicine and 12% of those applying to Cambridge or Oxford).
- ▶ 4.3% of those who initially applied by the January ECD added at least one later choice.
- ▶ 8.1% of those who initially applied after the January ECD added at least one later choice.

A commonly held view among those who took part in the pre-consultation phase was that there is significantly reduced opportunity after the January Equal Consideration Date. UCAS data does not support this, with c.1-2% of courses closing at this point (mainly at a small number of higher tariff universities).

The view from all audiences during the pre-consultation sessions was that, for a small cohort of students, better awareness and use of this flexibility would be a positive. It was also noted that this could increase complexity in the system.

As such, in addition to retaining the existing initial five-choice model, **UCAS is proposing work to raise awareness among students in relation to the option of spreading their initial choices throughout the main scheme.** In the short-term, options to do this include:

- ▶ improved information, advice, and guidance on mechanisms around the application process, along with guidance for students and advisers who wish to spread their choices
- ▶ functionality to increase visibility of post-submission choices for teachers and advisers e.g. through pre-approval mechanisms
- ▶ improved information about the range of courses that are likely to remain open after the January Equal Consideration Date, for example a proposed 'traffic-light' system indicating the likelihood of a course being closed for applications after the January Equal Consideration Date
- ▶ a mechanism to reduce duplication within a set of choices e.g. addressing inefficiencies caused by applicants using multiple choices for very similar courses at the same university or college (e.g. "Business Management" and "Business Management with Placement Year" at the same institution)
- ▶ decoupling replies from offer responses e.g. allowing students to make a firm/insurance choice(s) or decline an offer before receiving all their offers.

⁸ Main scheme applications submitted within the seven-day period.

⁹ This includes choices made on a later date in the main scheme (excludes Extra). Where a choice is substituted, the date used is the initial date it was added.

Extra

Discussion regarding flexibility (for example, holding back one of the initial five choices to use later), and the revisiting of choices, naturally leads to considerations around Extra.

The pre-consultation phase indicated that the flexibility offered by Extra was under-utilised. At present, applicants who do not hold an offer after using their initial five choices can use Extra. Only 4,525 applicants successfully followed this route in the 2025 entry cycle – 0.8% of all accepted applicants. This may be due to a lack of awareness – a 2025 survey of UCAS offer holders¹⁰ found only 37% of respondents were aware of Extra, including 4% who had used the service, with the remainder unaware of this route.

Suggestions for reform to Extra mooted as part of the pre-consultation phase included:

- ▶ reviewing Extra to enable eligible individuals to add an Extra choice at any point during the admissions cycle, and/or linking it to 'triggers' such as receiving a rejection or application withdrawal. This would involve opening Extra from the start of the cycle and keeping it available throughout, including into Clearing. A key benefit of this approach is that it could allow conditional offers to be made during Clearing
- ▶ expanding Extra to allow for up to a maximum of two live choices, to enable applicants to hold both a firm and insurance choice in the case of having received five rejections (and/or having withdrawn all five initial choices)
- ▶ moving towards a more 'basket' model, where applicants have a reduced number of initial choices, but greater flexibility to hold a set number of applications 'in hand' as the cycle progresses.

Further engagement will be required to shape the future of Extra. This should be undertaken in conjunction with a future review of Clearing in the medium to long-term, should there be sector support to do so.

The firm and insurance choices

Once an applicant has received all of their decisions and at least one offer, they can select a firm and an insurance choice. A firm choice (sometimes referred to as a 'first' choice) represents the applicant's preferred destination from the offers received, while the

insurance choice serves as an alternative should they not meet the conditions of their firm choice.

Overall, 6.3% of all acceptances (excluding RPAs) in 2025 were made through the insurance route (32,365), including 6.6% of all main scheme applicants. This represents an increase of 1,980 applicants compared with 2024, when 6.1% of all acceptances (excluding RPAs) (and 6.4% of main scheme acceptances) were via this route¹¹. 5.0% of eligible applicants choose not to select an insurance choice¹² despite the knowledge that some will not be accepted by their firm choice.

UCAS has received the following feedback regarding the insurance choice:

- ▶ **The insurance choice can make numbers management within a university or college more challenging** due to uncertainty regarding the numbers placed at their firm choice as near-miss candidates, and how this affects the number of insurance candidates other providers will be required to accept. This can lead to uncertainty around Confirmation decisions and Clearing strategies at a late stage. As was noted during UCAS' pre-consultation engagement events, this challenge is exacerbated where student number controls operate e.g. within Scotland and Northern Ireland. Recent changes in the market have made the 'insurance conversion' less predictable.
- ▶ **Some applicants wish to decline both their firm and insurance choice and move directly to Clearing**, and can make that decision prior to, or following the receipt of results. In the main cycle, applicants can **withdraw their entire application and/or any of their choices** before an offer has been made, provided they are confident they no longer wish to proceed. In 2025, 123,180 applicants withdrew or cancelled choices (16% of applicants) and 17,805 applicants had completely withdrawn their entire application (2.3% of applicants) at the close of the cycle. Applicants awaiting a decision on a conditional firm place cannot use 'Decline My Place' on an unconditional insurance choice – even if they are no longer interested in their insurance choice – and are then automatically placed there if made unsuccessful by their firm. Of those initially placed at their insurance choice, 25% subsequently go on to use 'Decline My Place' to find a new course or provider through Clearing¹³.

¹⁰ UCAS Offer Holder Survey, 2025. Question: Before today had you heard about UCAS Extra? Base: 2,584 respondents.

¹¹ UCAS End of Cycle dashboard, 2025.

¹² The proportion of 2025 main scheme applicants who are eligible to assign an insurance offer but choose not to i.e. they are in receipt of two or more offers and have selected a firm choice with a conditional offer.

¹³ The number of people who used Decline My Place in 2025 to decline the choice that matched their 30 June insurance choice, as a percentage of people who were ever placed at their 30 June insurance choice. The equivalent for firm is 6.6%.

Proposition

In the short to medium-term, UCAS is proposing to **retain the insurance choice, recognising it serves as an invaluable source of psychological safety for applicants, enabling them to make choices with greater confidence.**

Within the pre-consultation sessions, consideration was given to removing the insurance choice in favour of a single choice model. Feedback from the majority of attendees across all audiences highlighted the important role the insurance choice plays in supporting applicants to apply to a broad range of options.

Whilst many universities felt that the removal of the insurance choice would provide operational efficiencies, it was generally felt that the benefit to applicants outweighed this. However, in order to increase efficiencies in this space, UCAS will also:

- ▶ 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 to offer significant operational efficiencies, and support early clarity on recruitment numbers
- ▶ 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. This includes continuing to explore the inclusion of GCSEs, building on the successful introduction of National 5 qualifications
- ▶ work with the sector to **develop good practice guidance** on the processing of insurance decisions to promote timely and prompt decision-making
- ▶ explore ways to **improve information, advice, and guidance** on mechanisms around the insurance choice to promote more effective use
- ▶ review UCAS terminology to test options and **redefine terms such as 'firm', 'insurance', 'Extra', and 'Clearing'**. During UCAS' pre-consultation engagement exercise, suggestions included renaming 'firm choice' and 'insurance choice' to 'first choice' and 'second choice', or alternatively 'main choice' and 'backup choice'. These alternatives are considered more student-friendly and intuitive. Indeed, within student focus groups in December 2025, many used these terms interchangeably

Should this consultation reaffirm an appetite across the sector to reform Clearing, further consideration will be given to the role of the insurance choice.

Rationale

Removing the insurance choice in its current form may reduce confident decision-making, particularly among applicants who typically favour local options: Insights from Boxclever Consulting's December 2025 student focus groups indicate that eliminating the insurance choice could lead to a more risk-averse approach to applying to higher education. Students reported they would be inclined to be more cautious with their choices, applying to courses across a narrower range of entry requirements

Perhaps understandably, lower-attaining students, especially those uncertain about their choices and outcomes, felt this change might push them towards very safe options, undermining confidence and security.

“I WOULD PICK MY INSURANCE AS MY FIRM CHOICE THEN”

Student with low grades, London

“IT WOULD MAKE ME PLAY IT SAFE BECAUSE WITHOUT HAVING AN INSURANCE CHOICE CLEARING WOULD BE A MUCH LONGER PROCESS, AND I WOULD BE LESS LIKELY TO END UP WITH AN OPTION I WAS HAPPY WITH”

Student with low to mid grades, outside London

Disadvantaged groups expressed heightened anxiety, describing a model without an insurance choice as 'all or nothing':

"IT'S ALL OR NOTHING... THAT'S HOW IT'S COMING OFF TO ME, AND I DON'T SEE HOW THAT'S FAIR, BECAUSE... IT'S PUTTING YOU UNDER MORE PRESSURE"

Student from an under-represented background.

Complementing these qualitative research findings, UCAS used quantitative techniques including statistical modelling to examine the selection of insurance choices relative to firm choices amongst a subset of 18-year-old 2025 cycle applicants and validated using 2024 cycle applicants.

This analysis uses advertised entry requirements as a proxy for aspiration¹⁴. UCAS recognises the limitations of this approach, largely due to the complexity of student decision-making, which is influenced by factors such as location, reputation, prospects, course availability, and course features. It also acknowledges that entry requirements do not fully capture course competitiveness. Nonetheless, the modelling is informative in its findings.

The analysis suggests that the insurance choice acts as an important 'safety net' for most applicants, though not necessarily all. Additionally, if the insurance choice were removed and firm choice aspiration levels fell to the level of the insurance, some applicant groups might be affected more than others. Applicants making a larger number of local choices showed a pronounced difference in aspiration between firm and insurance choices, suggesting they could experience a notable drop in aspiration without the 'safety net' of the insurance choice. This gap may reflect the limited availability of suitable courses, particularly in some regions, and/or a stronger desire to avoid Clearing.

Similarly, there were also regional differences, with London among the regions with the smallest gaps (in both 2024 and 2025), likely linked to the broader range of local opportunities available for applicants living in London.

Further details on the modelling approach, population, statistical controls, and additional findings are provided in the [research accompanying this report](#).

Removing the insurance choice may have a larger impact on outcomes for certain ethnic groups and those from disadvantaged areas: UCAS modelling, using data from a subset of 18-year-old accepted applicants in the 2025 cycle, explores which applicant groups might be most affected if the insurance choice were removed. The modelling assumes that removing the insurance choice could lead to more applicants being accepted through Clearing rather than via their insurance choice, and tests to what extent any impact might vary across applicant groups.

The outcome considered is academic match, defined in this context as the difference between the average A level attainment of applicants on a course and the attainment of an accepted applicant. The analysis examines how academic match varies by acceptance route and applicant characteristic(s).

The modelling concludes the following groups experience a greater decrease in academic match when comparing acceptance via the main scheme (both firm and insurance) and Clearing (where the applicant has been rejected from their firm and insurance choices), and so may be more impacted by removing the insurance choice:

- ▶ Those from the Asian and Black ethnic groups.
- ▶ Those from disadvantaged areas (IMD quintiles 1 and 2).

Further details on this modelling, including modelling population and statistical controls, are provided in the [research accompanying this report](#).

14 See 'Definitions' in Annexes.

THE TIMING AND ROLE OF DATES AND DEADLINES

Included within this section are:

- ▶ the timing of the January Equal Consideration Date, along with aligning Reject by Default (RBD) and Decline by Default (DBD) dates
- ▶ considerations in relation to the early application deadline.

The undergraduate admissions cycle is comprised of a series of dates and deadlines designed to help applicants move through the process and promote efficiency, fairness, and informed decision-making.

The last formal review of all dates and deadlines was in 2016, when UCAS – via its Undergraduate Advisory Group – commissioned a sector-led working group to consider the dates and deadlines on which the UCAS undergraduate scheme was structured, and determine whether these were still fit for purpose. More recently, in late 2023, UCAS [consulted](#) on options for the January ECD. The outcomes of this latest exercise clearly demonstrate a strong appetite for a broader review of dates and deadlines – one that ensures they are future-proof and responsive to the needs of all customers. This consultation is designed to fulfil that purpose.

The timing of the January Equal Consideration Date (ECD) and associated dates

The January ECD is the main application deadline for most undergraduate courses. Applications submitted by this date are guaranteed equal consideration, meaning they are assessed in the same way rather than on a first-come, first-served basis. This deadline typically accounts for around 80% of all applicants in a cycle, including the vast majority of UK 18-year-olds. It is supported by a number of other connected milestones, which are contingent on the timing of the January date:

- ▶ **March Advisory Date:** This is UCAS' provider advisory decision date. Universities and colleges are encouraged to have sent decisions on all applications received by the ECD by this point.
- ▶ **Reject by default (RBD):** RBD is the process by which UCAS automatically rejects outstanding decisions not made by providers, preventing applications from remaining unresolved indefinitely.
- ▶ **Decline by default (DBD):** DBD occurs when an applicant automatically loses their offers because they miss the deadline to respond. For the 2026 cycle:
 - if all decisions are received by 31 March, applicants must reply by 6 May
 - if all decisions are received by 13 May (RBD), the reply deadline is 3 June

The January Equal Consideration Date was historically fixed on 15 January before moving to the end of the month during the pandemic. Since then, UCAS has engaged with the sector regarding the future timing of the deadline and corresponding dates – most recently in late 2023. For the 2026 and 2027 entry cycles, the Equal Consideration Date was set at 14 and 13 January respectively, with a commitment to further review and establish a longer-term position.

In relation to the January Equal Consideration Date, UCAS has heard the following feedback:

- ▶ **Regular changes to the January Equal Consideration Date have created planning challenges across schools, colleges, and universities and a consistent, longer-term approach would be welcomed.** The approach for the 2026 and 2027 entry cycles was welcomed amongst schools and colleges.

- ▶ **In recent cycles, where the January ECD fell later in the month, a small but increasing number of students received decisions close to, or during the examination period,** which risks disrupting their preparations. For the 2026 cycle, the RBD date for applications submitted by the January ECD is 13 May. Scottish Highers and International Baccalaureate exams begin on 22 and 24 April, with A levels starting 11 May. UCAS Business Rules require providers to avoid letting applications reach RBD by making timely decisions – whether an offer, rejection, or withdrawal. These rules have been strengthened for the 2026 cycle.
- ▶ As noted previously, some institutions continue to experience **operational pressures as a result of a high volume of applications.** These providers have voiced support for an earlier deadline, along with an extended processing window in the form of a later RBD date.
- ▶ **Not all universities or colleges are able to adhere to the March Advisory Date,** meaning that the management of student expectations on when they may hear from an institution about their application remains challenging.

Proposition

Proposals are made in relation to three areas:

- ▶ Timing of the January Equal Consideration Date
- ▶ March Advisory Date and supportive mechanisms
- ▶ DBD timing

January Equal Consideration Date timing

It is proposed that the January Equal Consideration Date should **fall on the nearest Wednesday to 15 January.** It was widely acknowledged within UCAS pre-consultation engagement sessions that a mid-January ECD represents a reasonable compromise, balancing fairness, operational feasibility, and minimising the risk of subsequent decisions falling within examination periods. There is also strong support for Wednesday deadlines, as they allow for preparation and follow up within the working week, outweighing the acknowledged advantages of a single memorable fixed date.

UCAS **will publish the exact date no later than the December prior to the cycle opening** to ensure all stakeholders are adequately prepared, e.g. in December 2026 for the 2028 cycle, which opens in May 2027.

If adopted, the January Equal Consideration Date would fall as follows for the next six cycles:

- ▶ **2026:** Wednesday, 14 January
- ▶ **2027:** Wednesday, 13 January
- ▶ **2028:** Wednesday, 12 January
- ▶ **2029:** Wednesday, 17 January
- ▶ **2030:** Wednesday, 16 January
- ▶ **2031:** Wednesday, 15 January
- ▶ **2032:** Wednesday, 14 January

March Advisory Date and supportive mechanisms

To support students entering the examination season with the greatest possible certainty, UCAS is proposing to **retain the March Advisory Date for the majority of courses**.

Mirroring the approach throughout, UCAS will schedule it to fall on the last Wednesday in March, ensuring appropriate support is available in the run-up to and beyond the deadline, with confirmation of dates the December prior to the opening of the cycle.

UCAS recognises that some providers – particularly those with selective courses requiring lengthy admissions processes, or those based in Scotland and Northern Ireland awaiting number allocations – may struggle to meet this date for all applicants. These challenges can create workload pressures for admissions teams and risk compromising fair and robust decision-making.

Therefore, UCAS proposed to explore:

- ▶ an '**expected turnaround time**' function, allowing providers who wish to use it to opt out of the March Advisory Date and instead indicate their own timeframe for responding to applicants. UCAS would work with the sector to define 'turnaround time' and establish appropriate parameters for its display and guidelines for adherence
- ▶ an **optional 'action required' flag** would allow providers to alert students when they need to take specific steps, such as responding to an email requesting additional information or submitting a fee assessment form. UCAS would work with the sector to shape this development and ensure visibility for advisers supporting applicants
- ▶ **changes to RBD timing and promoting awareness of key school examination periods to HE providers:** UCAS will look to ensure that the RBD for those applying by the January ECD falls before the start of the A level examination period. At the time of writing, Scottish schools and colleges have not expressed concerns about the timing of offers in relation to

the examination window, though we will engage directly with these centres during the consultation to test this further. Whilst this RBD is earlier than the 2025 entry cycle, combined with the earlier ECD it would generally still allow for an additional five days processing time for universities and colleges compared to pre-pandemic norms.

Recognising that this RBD would not be before all applicant examination periods, UCAS will also seek to raise awareness of examination periods and promote prompt decision-making by:

- ▶ **publishing overarching content related to students' examination periods for universities and colleges** on ucas.com, integrating this within relevant toolkits and communication packages ahead of Confirmation and Clearing
- ▶ **implementing a targeted communications strategy** to increase provider awareness and responsiveness. Specifically, UCAS could issue tailored notifications to individual providers, detailing the volume of applicants with 'pending decision' status, segmented by qualification type. These communications would be designed to give providers sufficient notice to process decisions in advance and/or avoid critical dates, thereby minimising disruption to applicants during key study phases
- ▶ re-purposing existing functionality within the adviser portal that **allows advisers to record dates on which students are unavailable** (traditionally used for interviews) to highlight exam dates if known.

UCAS would welcome views on the use and value of these initiatives to university and college admissions teams.

DBD timing

DBD dates would be **scheduled to align with a mid-January Equal Consideration Date and repositioned RBD**, with a view to giving applicants ample time to consider their options both pre and post-examination periods. As with the above, dates would be confirmed in the December prior to the launch of the cycle.

Rationale

Most groups – students, parents, teachers, and the general public – advocate for a January ECD: Independent research conducted by JLP in May 2024 shows that most people view the application deadline as 'about right', with the next popular option being that it is currently too early¹⁵. The major reluctance to support a shift into December relates to the potential for applicants to run short of time. Whilst relatively popular among the general public and students, parents, and teachers (second to retaining the current timeline), a later deadline poses significant challenges for providers by further shortening their processing window (on the assumption that the March Advisory Date would remain) – this feedback was explicit during UCAS' late 2023 dates and deadlines consultation.

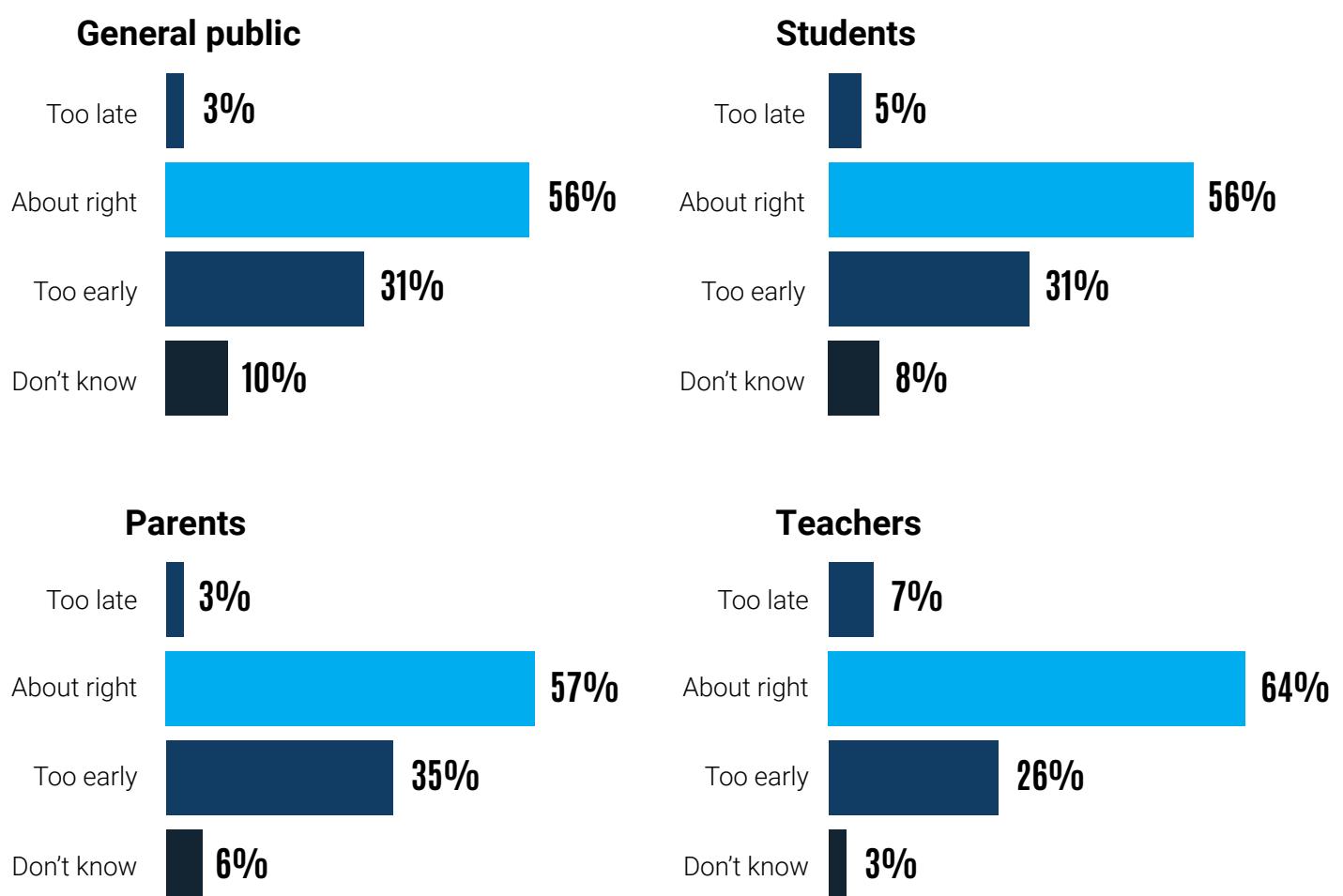


Figure 5: Multi-audience polling related to the January ECD, JLP on behalf of UCAS, 2024

¹⁵ JLP polling on behalf of UCAS, 2024. Question: Currently, the main application deadline for higher education through UCAS is the end of January in the year that exams are taken. Broadly speaking do you think this is... Base: 1,018 respondents for general public, 549 for students, 512 for parents and 300 for teachers.

Mindful that the original JLP research was conducted when the ECD fell at the end of January, UCAS has since sought to capture a current snapshot of students' views for this cycle, reflecting the now mid-January ECD. Student polling conducted this year found that around three quarters of respondents feel that a mid-January ECD is 'about right' with, once again, the next popular response being that it is too early.¹⁶

Most universities that participated in the pre-consultation phase welcomed the reinstatement of the pre-pandemic Equal Consideration Date, citing reduced pressure on concurrent processes, including postgraduate recruitment. A small number of institutions that are receiving an increasingly high volume of applications would welcome an earlier Equal Consideration Date to allow for additional processing time. As noted above, it is UCAS' intention to bring the sector together as part of a working group to understand how the processing and management of applications can be made more efficient to support these institutions.

Applicants are deadline-driven, and respond accordingly:

UCAS analysis consistently demonstrates that applicants are highly deadline-driven, meaning a change to the timing of the January ECD would shift behaviour, but likely not cause more applicants to miss the deadline. Figure 6 shows the change in applicant behaviour before and after the change from a mid-January ECD to an end of January ECD. The mid-January cycles of 2018-2020 (orange) saw 50-60% of applications submitted before the Christmas holidays, and a further 30-35% submitted in the first half of January. The 2021 cycle, the first after the move to an end of January ECD, appears to be a transitional cycle with unique behaviour – noting that this was also the height of the COVID pandemic. Then, 2022-2025 (the end of January cycles, blue) saw 45-48% of applications submitted before the Christmas holidays, and a more gradual increase over the start of January, before a similar trend of around 30% of applications being submitted in the final two weeks prior to the end of the month deadline.

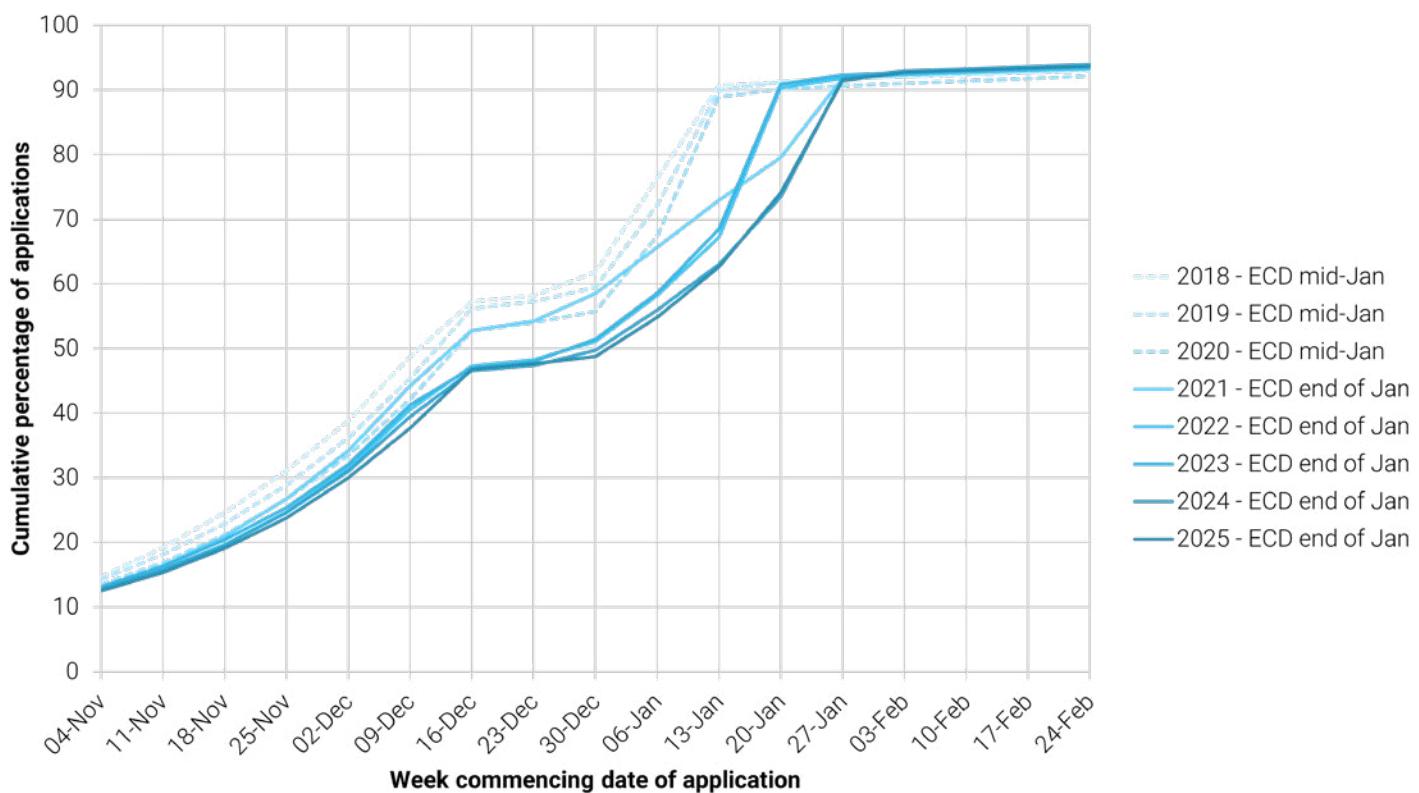


Figure 6: Cumulative main scheme applications by week for January ECD courses by date (Nov-Feb) and application cycle, comparing cycle shape before (dotted line) and after (solid line) the ECD moved to the end of January.

¹⁶ UCAS polling, 2025. Question: Currently, the main application deadline for higher education through UCAS is the middle of January in the year that exams are taken. Broadly speaking do you think this is...Base: 1,094 respondents.

UCAS analysis also shows that some groups of students have a consistently higher likelihood of completing their application in the two weeks before the January ECD – regardless of its timing – and who therefore may be most affected by a change. These are:

- ▶ applicants applying independently, without direct support from a school or college
- ▶ applicants from the EU, where their home country's deadlines may no longer align with the UCAS deadline
- ▶ 18-year-old applicants from specific centres (particularly further education colleges) where a lot of applications are completed closer to the deadline
- ▶ 18-year-old applicants sitting BTEC qualifications
- ▶ male applicants

While this analysis¹⁷ highlights the need for targeted support for specific groups, it also indicates generally good levels of deadline awareness among applicants, as well as a resilience to change.

A late January ECD shifts patterns in offer-making:

Figure 7 shows the change in provider behaviour before and after the change in ECD date from mid-January to the end of January. The 2018-2019 cycles, which had a mid-January ECD and did not see any COVID pandemic-related effects, saw nearly 40% of offers received by the Christmas holidays, and 90% of offers received by the middle of March. In later cycles, with an end of January ECD, offer-making shifted later, with around 30% of offers received by the Christmas holidays, and 90% of offers received by mid to late April.

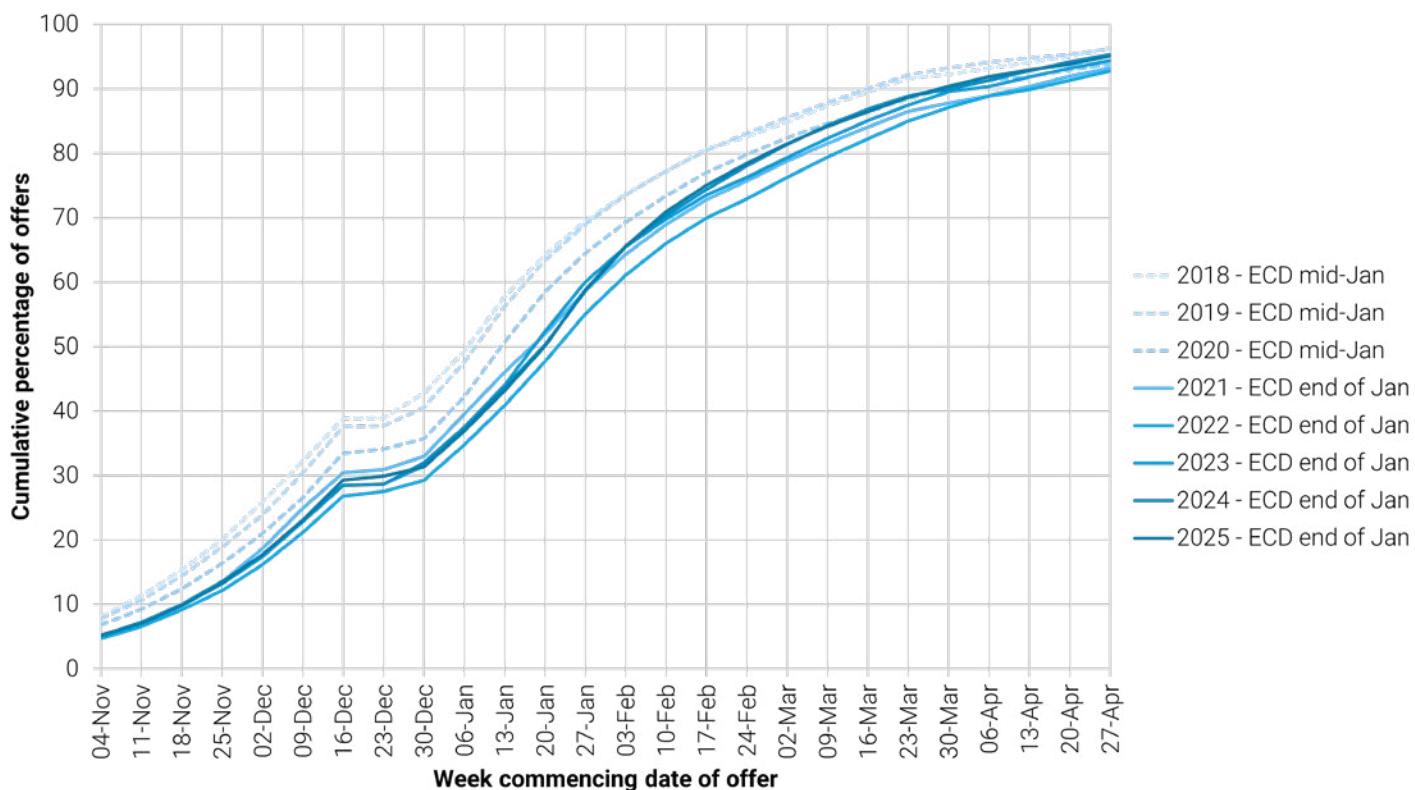


Figure 7: Cumulative main scheme offers for January ECD courses by date and application cycle, comparing cycle shape before (dotted line) and after (solid line) the ECD moved to the end of January

17 This is based on analysis of the 2019 and 2022 UCAS cycles.

A move to an earlier January Equal Consideration Date, with earlier offers, presents potential benefits to student attainment: UCAS modelling based on the 2019 admissions cycle indicated that applicants holding unconditional offers were less likely to achieve their predicted grades compared to those with conditional offers. This analysis suggests students may respond to a target or offer – for example, English 18-year-old applicants who are predicted AAA are 1.45 times more likely to achieve those grades (or better) if their offer conditions sit at their predicted grades (or above), compared to if their firm choice offer is ABB.

Clarity earlier in the academic year is welcomed by students: UCAS analysis suggests that the timing of an offer does not influence the subsequent decisions that students make – offer holders rank the speed of receiving an offer as 19th out of 20 factors in importance when determining their firm choice, albeit it does rank slightly higher for international students (17th out of the 20 factors)¹⁸. Applicant surveys consistently speak to the stress placed upon students awaiting offers – the top three emotions students report in this phase are 'nervous', 'stressed' and 'worried'.¹⁹ Applicants want to know when to expect a response and would like universities and colleges to have fixed deadlines to adhere to, so that they can prepare themselves for reapplying if they need to. The retention of the Equal Consideration Date in mid-January would ensure more students receive clarity on their position earlier in the academic year. This would be accompanied by measures to help manage student expectations – such as the March Advisory Date, and data regarding potential turnaround times.

The March Advisory Date encourages earlier decision patterns: The late Advisory Date was reintroduced in 2024. Although not formally in place during the three preceding years (2021–2023 inclusive), many HE providers continued to use the date to guide decision-making timetables and support planning. As a result, differences in behaviour are minimal, though still noteworthy.

In the two most recent cycles, where the March Advisory Date was reinstated, a higher proportion of decisions were received earlier – specifically by 31 March. This reduced the number of applicants receiving later decisions during their critical examination preparation period. The number of choices which were rejected by default has also reduced. Since the reinstatement of the March Advisory Date in 2024, only 0.2% of choices saw an RBD decision processed

in mid-May, a fall from 8,160 in 2023 to 4,710 in 2024. When we focus on UK 18-year-old choices – the cohort most likely to be taking examinations – this figure falls even further, to 0.1% of total choices from a peak of 0.6% in 2022.

Considerations in relation to the early application deadline

It is common for admissions services across the globe to have an 'early' deadline for courses that require additional assessment, such as admissions tests, practical assessments, and interviews. For example, VTAC – a shared admissions service in Australia – has an early deadline (August and September) for courses that require a portfolio assessment and for medicine.

In the UK, it is long established custom and practice that the early deadline falls in October, and is used for applications to medicine, dentistry, and veterinary science courses across the sector, as well as to the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford. These courses and institutions have a tradition of extensive additional assessment when reviewing applications, including interviews and admissions tests.

This early deadline is currently fixed to a specific calendar date of 15 October (although that has sometimes been moved when it falls on a weekend).

The current early deadline usually accounts for c.10% of applicants in any given cycle, and these students commonly have very high predicted and achieved grades. Courses and institutions that use this deadline usually have additional admissions practices in place to assess the particular skills they are seeking, and to differentiate between a highly competitive cohort. These additional assessments include interviews, admissions tests, and additional external examinations.

The increasing volume of applications received by higher tariff providers – which now account for 44% of the total made, the highest percentage this decade²⁰ – have created resource pressures within some providers. Related to this, UCAS has received a small number of queries from institutions regarding the potential use of the early deadline to support them in managing application volumes. To date, UCAS has not received any requests for additional cross-sector subject groups to join the early deadline.

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 request to utilise it.

18 UCAS Student Decisions Report 2025. Question: When deciding which uni offers to accept or decline, how important to you were the following...? Base: 124,020.

19 UCAS End of Cycle survey, 2025. Question: During each of the following stages of the admissions process, which words best describe how you felt? Please select all that apply. Base: 4,576 respondents.

20 UCAS End of Cycle dashboard, 2025.

However, it became clear that such codification cannot take place in the abstract, and that context is essential. Feedback indicated 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.

When discussing the theoretical inclusion of any other additional institutions within the early deadline, UCAS heard wide-ranging concerns from the majority of audiences, particularly schools and colleges, as well as from government. The reasons stakeholders gave against theoretical inclusion of one or two additional institutions within the early deadline ranged from the impact on the stability of the sector at a vulnerable moment, to grave concerns about a negative impact on widening participation. Schools and colleges – particularly administrative and advisory staff – also raised significant concerns about the impact on their capacity and the knock-on effects to other associated processes, with this ultimately leading to a reduction in the quality of support offered to students, which could affect their opportunities going forward.

Government officials and regulators have also informally expressed concerns regarding a potential increased use of the early deadline, due to a combination of the reasons above. Whilst they do not have jurisdiction over admissions or UCAS, their role as custodians of the wider system means they are important stakeholders.

Proposition

Given the strength of feedback received by UCAS from the majority of audiences engaged with, it is proposed that in the eventuality that a university or college formally requests the use of the early deadline, the UCAS Board will consult with the wider sector regarding the specific request made, and the Business Rules alongside this.

As part of consulting with the sector, the Board would seek views from relevant stakeholders on:

- ▶ the coverage of the provider's courses that should be included
- ▶ whether institutions that use the early (October) deadline should be subject to shared application rules, reflecting the existing approach at Cambridge and Oxford, where a student can apply to only one of these institutions
- ▶ the impact on the wider sector
- ▶ the impact on widening access
- ▶ the basis on which the UCAS Board should consider any requests

To initiate this consultation, a formal request will need to be made by the applying institution's Accountable Officer to the UCAS Board.

Rationale

The wide-ranging feedback regarding the expanded use of the early application deadline from schools and colleges: As part of the pre-consultation exercise, UCAS discussed with teachers and advisers the concept of increased use of the early application deadline. The overarching sentiment from this audience was that the inclusion of one or two additional institutions within the early deadline would not be in the best interests of students. Common points raised included:

► **Negative impact on widening access:** The increased use of the early application deadline would have a significant impact on widening access. Teachers and advisers frequently cited the challenges involved in encouraging disadvantaged and under-represented cohorts to apply for higher education, and noted that reducing the time and opportunity available to them in some instances would exacerbate these issues. It was also common for schools and colleges to highlight the importance of the first term of the second year of post-16 study in helping students realise that higher education is for them, and in shaping the range of institutions they wish to consider. Concerns were expressed that expanding the use of the early deadline could limit the opportunities available to the most disadvantaged students.

► **Disproportionate impact on colleges, where teachers and advisers typically have a shorter relationship with their students:** This was felt to be further exacerbated for mature students undertaking the Access to HE Diploma, for example, who would likely have only been registered with the college a few weeks before the early application deadline.

► **Ongoing challenges with school and college attendance:** DfE statistics suggest that attendance remains below pre-pandemic levels. This has created a range of challenges for schools and colleges, including impacts on attainment, reduced student engagement with exploring their next steps, and increased pressure on staff capacity. Schools and colleges involved in the pre-consultation exercise felt that a rise in institutions using the early deadline could negatively affect participation in this context.

► **Increased complexity within the admissions process, raising the risk of 'missed opportunities'—particularly for students who lack support and who are typically from under-represented groups:** This is supported by UCAS insight: a survey of those who had not applied by the January ECD found that UK mature (24%) and international (48%) respondents were more likely to cite a lack of awareness of the deadline and/or a lack of support, relative to UK 18-year-olds (10%).

► **Schools and colleges fed back that the support required for students using the early deadline is significantly greater than for those applying in January:** Given the specific nature of applications to courses using the early application deadline, concerns were expressed that increased use of this deadline would stretch school and college resource, dilute provision, and have the greatest impact on those institutions with the least resource. In a survey by Teacher Tap, 43% of schools and colleges reported they provided additional support for students applying to courses linked to the early deadline.

► **Lack of support amongst universities and colleges:** The majority of institutions felt that extending the early deadline would not serve the best interests of the wider sector. Many also expressed concern that increasing the use of the early deadline – particularly if not accompanied by codified criteria – could be perceived as creating an arbitrary two-tier system. This, they felt, could unduly influence applicant decision-making and have unintended consequences for sector stability, widening access, and the overall coherence of the admissions system.

► **Regulators and government expressed concerns informally**, in particular in relation to the impact on widening access, and on overarching sector stability, and would wish to be engaged in any consideration regarding the inclusion of additional institutions within the early deadline.

NEXT STEPS

Responses to this consultation will be analysed by an independent third party to ensure that they are handled according to best practice, with due weighting given to responses from organisations and individuals. The UCAS Board will agree UCAS' final position on the consultation outcomes, which will then be shared with stakeholders in summer 2026.

Further engagement activity where recommended will follow, and any changes to processes or Business Rules will be subject to UCAS' normal governance procedures. Any change to cycle practice would be implemented no sooner than for the 2028 entry cycle.

ANNEXES

Technical notes

Descriptive analysis of the UCAS undergraduate admissions system has been carried out, unless otherwise stated, on data collected during the 2025 admissions cycle, with comparison to previous years where necessary. This includes data collected from applicants via the application, and from higher education providers through the admissions process conducted through the UCAS system.

Surveys are sent to UCAS registrants and applicants during the admissions cycle. The survey responses are weighted up to be representative of the population of students who are eligible to receive the survey. The weighting process uses a logistic regression model to assign each respondent a weight, considering differences in response rates observed in different characteristic groups, including gender, age, ethnic group, POLAR4 Quintile, country, the type of school a student attended, and (for students from the UK) the region where the students are originally from. Survey analysis conducted by external parties on behalf of UCAS may use differing methodologies.

Population estimates are based on Office for National Statistics mid-year estimates 2023, and national population projections 2022. For 16- to 20-year-olds, the estimates are obtained by ageing 15-year-olds from the appropriate number of years earlier. This approach avoids the estimates being susceptible to changes in net migration (including overseas students) during these ages.

Definitions

Aspiration/Ambition – by this, UCAS means students making choices that enable them to realise their potential. Aspiration is relative, and will differ between individuals depending on their strengths, circumstances, and background

Decline by default (DBD) – when an applicant automatically has their offers declined because they missed their deadline to respond to offers.

Decline My Place – the mechanism by which an applicant may decline the course at which they have been accepted and become eligible to add a Clearing choice (only possible in the Clearing period).

Equal Consideration Date (ECD) – the date in mid-to late-January by which any submitted application must be considered equally by providers.

Extra – the mechanism by which an applicant who does not hold any offers (due to either being unsuccessful in all their applications or by declining all their offers) is able to add a new choice to their application beyond the possible five choices in the main scheme.

International applicant – an applicant whose declared area of permanent residence (domicile) is outside of the United Kingdom, including other countries or territories, Crown Dependencies such as the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man, and British Overseas Territories.

Main scheme – the period between early September and 30 June in which an applicant can make up to five applications at a time.

March Advisory Date – the UCAS provider advisory decision date – universities and colleges should aim to have sent all decisions on applications received by the ECD. Usually takes place in late March.

Mature applicant – an applicant whose school-aligned age is 21 or above, unless stated otherwise.

Record of Prior Acceptance (RPA) – where an application is submitted to UCAS by an institution when an unconditional firm offer has already been offered and accepted by the applicant.

Reject by default (RBD) – the process whereby UCAS rejects outstanding decisions not yet made by the provider. It prevents applications from being left unresolved indefinitely, enabling applicants to move their application forward.

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