

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

Informed by extensive pre-engagement in 2025, UCAS is undertaking a consultation on the operation of the undergraduate admissions cycle, seeking views from its beneficiaries and the wider sector on the number of initial choices available to students, the firm and insurance choice, and the use of dates and deadlines. The overarching feedback from the sector was that the current undergraduate

admissions cycle functions well for most applicants and institutions up to the January Equal Consideration Date. The use of the early (October) deadline was also discussed as part of the pre-consultation activities, which identified 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. This feedback was combined with significant concerns across universities, schools, and colleges - particularly in relation to widening access..

The pre-consultation engagement also highlighted a desire to see greater efficiencies in the system, along with an appetite for reform to Clearing.

Area and recommendation	Rationale
<p>The number of choices students can make as part of their main scheme application: Students can make up to five initial choices as part of their UCAS application. In recent cycles, a small number of institutions with increasing applicant numbers have suggested this could be reduced to provide efficiencies. Equally, around 29% of students apply to a course they do not intend to progress to.</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ 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, such as spreading choices.▶ Further consultation with the sector regarding reform to Extra, recognising that a wide range of choice is available to students at this point.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Students view the reduction of choice as a limit on opportunity.▶ Five choices encourage students to apply to a wider range of institutions.▶ There is no clear consensus across universities and colleges, with many valuing the current breadth of choice.
<p>The firm and insurance choice: Around 6.3% (32,365 in 2025) of applicants are initially placed at their insurance choice, and 1 in 4 of these subsequently use 'Decline My Place' to explore alternative options in Clearing. The insurance choice also presents operational burden for some institutions, along with challenges around numbers management.</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ 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:<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Work with the sector to introduce 'Decline My Place' for the insurance choice▪ Continue to drive efficiencies in the processing of qualifications via the Awarding Body Linkage▪ Work with the sector to develop good practice guidance on the processing of insurance decision▪ Review 'firm' and 'insurance' terminology, along with supporting guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ The insurance plays an important psychological safety net for students, promoting a breadth of choices.▶ 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.▶ Removal of the insurance without a replacement mechanism could make the process feel more 'high stakes'.
<p>The timing of the January Equal Consideration Date and associated dates: In recent cycles, the equal consideration date has moved between mid and late January. This consultation seeks to confirm a position of the ECD that balances the interests of all beneficiaries.</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ 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▶ Introduce a 'traffic light tool' or similar to indicate the likelihood of a course being open after the January Equal Consideration Date.▶ Continue working with universities and colleges to identify opportunities for greater efficiency in the admissions process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ 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.▶ Mixed views across universities and colleges.