

UCAS response: Consultation on reimagined GCSEs for Wales by Qualification Wales

About UCAS

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for post-secondary education. This service spans undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories to access UK higher education (HE). In 2022, UCAS facilitated 25,380 Welsh domiciled students in accessing post-secondary education in the UK, and 86,225 students in applying to Welsh providers.

In addition, we are a student-centric organisation with one of the UK's largest student audiences – ucas.com receives 30 million unique visits per year and more than 1.5m people engage with UCAS each year, exploring HE, apprenticeships, and early careers.

Summary

As the gateway to UK higher education (HE), UCAS is in a unique position to support the sector's work on progression pathways. As such, we hope that this evidence will support the successful implementation of the new curriculum in Wales, ensuring that pupils taking the new GCSEs can progress along their chosen route into HE, training, or employment.

Summary of key points:

- **GCSE performance is directly and indirectly linked to admission processes for HE and apprenticeships.** GCSE attainment is strongly associated with predicted A levels and can also be used by universities and colleges within admissions processes. Furthermore, GCSEs play a key role in allowing for professional accreditation, and in employment when securing apprenticeship opportunities. As such, the universities, colleges, and employers are a key partner of the new qualifications and must be fully informed of the GCSE changes and what it means for progression – something UCAS is happy to support, as we did extensively for previous reforms to A levels and the Welsh Baccalaureate.
- **GCSEs can influence the choices available to students in HE,** often in the form of required qualifications. One in five students reported they could not study the HE subject that interested them because of the qualification and subject decisions they made in school. The likelihood of this happening is

even higher for disadvantaged students. Therefore, clear advice and guidance on post-GCSE education pathways must accompany the implementation of the new curriculum.

- **Parents, carers, teachers, friends, and post-16 choices influence subject choice at GCSE.** Therefore, dissemination of careers information, advice and guidance should not just be limited to students, but also involve parents and teachers, some of whom will need more support than others.
- Focus must be placed on **maintaining currency and portability of these qualifications both inside and outside of Wales**, including with employers and training providers, who play a central role in apprenticeship and skills pathways.
- **Increasing demand and competition for higher education, and the increasing cost of living has the potential to have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students.** UCAS can support Qualification Wales in understanding these risks at a time of qualification change and in a period of growing competition and costs.
- **UCAS has the network and relationships to ensure that change is well understood by the universities, colleges, schools, and employers:** UCAS maintains personal relationships with c.350 universities and colleges across the UK, as well as some of the country's largest employers. UCAS' Fair Access Programme is also actively working in establishing an understanding of the experiences of different disadvantaged groups and providing them contextualised support in their decision-making journey.

**Question 7. What do you think is needed to support the successful implementation of the qualifications included in this consultation?
Please explain your answer below.**

UCAS welcomes the opportunity to feed into the [consultation](#) of reimagining qualifications for 14–16-year-olds in Wales. We acknowledge the importance given to progression to post-16 learning and training, with flexibility in content and assessment approach, supporting a diversity of learners. Our response below highlights the importance of GCSE choices and outcomes in successful progression to HE and training.

Our [research](#) finds that 65% of students from most disadvantaged areas and 56% from least disadvantaged areas would like more information and advice when choosing GCSEs. It also identifies that 1 in 3 students do not receive information about apprenticeships from their schools.

UCAS is the [most cited source](#) of information for applications to HE and apprenticeships in the UK. It is used by 1.5 million prospective students each year. This puts us in a unique position to support Qualification Wales in ensuring that all key partners in the sector understand the progression pathways associated with the new curriculum.

What role do GCSE outcomes play in the HE and apprenticeships admissions process?

GCSEs play a direct and indirect role in the admission processes for HE and training.

A [UCAS study](#) on predicted and achieved A level attainment found that GCSE attainment of applicants is strongly and positively associated with their predicted A level grades. Predicted grades are a part of an array of intelligence used by universities and colleges in admissions decisions, with other factors including achieved qualifications, personal statements, references etc. GCSEs also commonly form part of a university or college's admissions policy, with a student being required to showcase good English language and numeracy skills, commonly through the achievement of a Grade C or 4 in English and Maths (and on occasion, Science).

GCSE choices and attainment not only link to admissions processes for HE, but also play a key role in allowing for professional accreditation, and in employment when securing apprenticeship opportunities.

GCSE choices and attainment are therefore crucial to the opportunities available to students in the future. **As an organisation that engages with more than 1.5 million prospective students each year, more than 4,000 teachers and advisers, c.350 universities and colleges and a range of employers, UCAS welcomes the**

opportunity to work with Qualification Wales to raise awareness about the reformed GCSEs in Wales.

How do GCSE subject choices affect progression?

Qualification and subject choices made at GCSE stage can influence choices available later. For example, one in five students in the UK [reported](#) that they could not study a HE subject that interested them because they did not have the relevant subjects for entry. **This means that any changes to the curriculum at GCSE must be accompanied by high-quality careers information, advice, and guidance (CIAG) about their next steps.**

Some students can be unwittingly blocked from pursuing a course of their choice at degree level because of choices made at GCSE. For example, Medicine, Dentistry, Maths, Economics, European languages, Literature etc are 'fixed' degree paths, requiring students to hold specific qualifications and subjects. It seems that whilst doctors, teachers, and nurses of tomorrow are planning their careers well in advance, those preparing for less linear careers e.g., our future students of Economics and European languages tend to do so later in their journey.

Our [research](#) also found that only 57% of Welsh students feel 'certain' about their degree choice when they choose their post-16 subjects. With many students admitting to the need of more advice and guidance at earlier stages of study, clear advice and guidance on post-GCSE education pathways must accompany the implementation of the new curriculum.

UCAS is a trusted, personalised source of information and advice for millions of school pupils. Each year there are 30 million unique visits to ucas.com, with students exploring content on the full range of post-secondary options UK-wide, including technical education, apprenticeships, and flexible and lifelong learning. This means that we are well-placed to partner with Qualifications Wales in the delivery of high-quality CIAG.

What role do employers play?

Focus must also be placed on maintaining the currency and portability of these qualifications both inside and outside of Wales, including with employers who play a central role in apprenticeship and skills pathways.

We know that half of students interested in undergraduate opportunities are also interested in apprenticeships. UCAS supports students in exploring all of their post-secondary destination, with apprenticeship opportunities presented alongside undergraduate choices on ucas.com, as we help students make the best decision for them. Our successful 'Careers Finder' apprenticeships search listing received a record 2.3 million searches in 2021, up 41% from 2020, and our apprenticeship content receives millions of views each year. Our most recent innovation allows employers to create profiles on UCAS and showcase their offer to students. These

include Jaguar Land Rover, Vodafone, Rolls Royce, Sky and Keir Group - some of the top apprentice employers in the country.

UCAS would welcome the opportunity to work with Qualifications Wales to build understanding of the upcoming reforms among employers and training providers UK-wide, ensuring all pathways are aware of the changes proposed.

Who influences GCSE subject choice?

The impact of subject choice at GCSE on progression to HE makes it imperative to understand the influences and influencers. Our [Where Next](#) research found that parents, carers, teachers, friends, and employment prospective play an important part in subject choice for school leavers in the UK.

Based on the findings, dissemination of CIAG should target advisers and parents, in addition to students themselves. Some of them will need more support than others due to the differences in experiences and resources at their disposal. UCAS can support this - our well-established relationships with more than 4,000 teachers and careers advisers across the UK mean we can play a critical role in helping schools and colleges navigate a very complex landscape, ensuring that individuals make the right decision for them.

14. Have you any other comments on the impacts of the proposals on persons who share a protected characteristic?

Impact of the 'journey to a million' applicants and cost of living crisis

UCAS is forecasting up to a million applicants to UK HE by 2026. The increased competition as a result of this growth in demand poses specific risks for disadvantaged students. In addition, since the pandemic, UCAS has noted an increase in applicants' alertness to cost, along with an increased desire to gain part-time employment alongside their studies (which has accelerated in line with cost-of-living concerns).

Our [15 October deadline data](#) for 2023 shows that Welsh domiciled applicants from most deprived areas have seen a higher growth than applicants from the least deprived areas since 2019, the last normal exam year since 2022. A proactive approach must be taken jointly by the sector in making sure that increasing competition and rising cost of living do not reverse the progress made for disadvantaged students in recent years. One critical mitigating factor will be high-quality CIAG - **UCAS recognises it plays a key role here, supporting universities, schools, colleges, and students within this changing landscape.**

UCAS will be launching an essay collection on journey to a million in Spring next year that will articulate the risks and opportunities for the sector. **UCAS can consequently collaborate with Qualification Wales in supporting fairness in students progressing to HE or apprenticeships as the landscape becomes more competitive.**

Disadvantaged students are likely to consider HE at a later stage

UCAS has published [several reports](#) in the past year, which focus on the experiences of students with protected characteristics. While the findings may focus on experiences in accessing HE and training, these can often be traced back to choices made at GCSE, and the conversations and experiences at that stage.

UCAS '[Where Next](#)' research into influences on choices of school leavers in the UK found that while one in three applicants report first thinking about HE at primary school, disadvantaged students are more likely to consider HE later, which can further limit their choices. A lack of information and advice is also more [strongly felt by disadvantaged students](#). Additionally, students with a parent or carer who is educated to degree level tend to feel more satisfied with the information and advice they receive.

Our [research](#) also highlighted disabled applicants are more likely to defer entry to HE. Furthermore, students with a [care background](#) have a longer and nonlinear journey into HE with a higher likelihood of them being 21 and above. **UCAS recommends that Qualification Wales works closely with the expert bodies that support those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to ensure that the reform to qualifications in Wales, and associated CIAG provision, are supportive of these groups and their ambitions. Furthermore, UCAS can work with Qualification Wales as we continue to deliver high quality content to students based on their individual circumstances and progression routes.**

UCAS' support for disadvantaged students –Fair Access Programme

Supporting disadvantaged students is at the heart of UCAS' objectives and the work we carry out. UCAS established its [Fair Access Programme in 2021](#) with a commitment to supporting the sector in bridging the access and participation gap for disadvantaged students. Amongst other initiatives, the team continues to build an understanding of the needs of specific groups under-represented students across their decision-making journey.

With the launch of Outreach Connection Service next year, a platform that will help schools and students navigate and connect to outreach, UCAS will be able to better support disadvantaged students and students from different backgrounds in making informed choices at an earlier stage. **UCAS will wish to work with Qualifications Wales and the Welsh education sector more broadly, so students are able to access outreach opportunities through our new service.**