

UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS: THE INTERNATIONAL PICTURE

Post qualification admissions systems around the world

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About the Sutton Trust

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Key Findings

- England has a ‘pre-qualification’ system of higher education admissions, where applications and offers are made to young people before exam results are received. While in most cases offers are conditional on achieving a grade target in A Level exams, recent years have seen an exponential growth in ‘unconditional offers’, where the offer of a place is made long before exams are taken, and is not conditional on results.
- In 2021 the UK government stated its intention to move towards a ‘post qualification’ admissions system, and established a consultation to examine two potential models.
 - **Post Qualification Applications:** whereby candidates make their application to universities after they receive A Level results in the summer.
 - **Post Qualification Offers:** whereby candidates would make their applications at the same time as currently, during term-time before exams, but universities would not make offers of places until after exam results are known.
- This report seeks to update existing research on the international context in university admissions. As has been previously highlighted, the English system is an international outlier. Of 31 countries in the OECD outside the United Kingdom examined in this research, all have post qualification admissions systems, where applications, or offers, or both occur after relevant exams are taken and results are known.
- Of these 31 countries, 20 have Post Qualification Offers (PQO) systems, and 11 have Post Qualification Application (PQA) systems. The timing of higher education applications, as well as the timing and nature of examination processes used to inform offers vary substantially across countries.
- While timings have often been offered as an objection to a PQA system, several European countries operate university application timetables similar to that proposed by the PQA model in the consultation. An example of one such country is outlined in the report.
- In comparison to England where students apply around 16 weeks before they take examinations, the norm in the OECD across PQO systems is less than 2 weeks. In around two thirds of OECD countries students have less than 2 weeks to make a decision regarding the university place that they are offered. It is 3 weeks in England.
- Examinations/tests that facilitate HE entry in OECD countries can be divided into 4 groupings: ‘Matura/Abitur/Bac’; ‘National University Entrance examination’; ‘university entrance examination’; or ‘individual subject-based examination’. England falls into the final category. The majority of countries (28) fall into one of the 3 other groupings to England.
- Combining the timing of application systems with the nature of examinations allows to create a new typology of admission systems. These types are:
 - A: **‘HE as right’** – includes 9 countries who are nearly all PQO
 - B: **‘Big Test’** – includes 6 countries who are all PQA
 - C: **‘University driven’** – includes 9 countries who are a mix of PQO/PQA
 - D: **‘Central application’** – includes 5 countries who are nearly all PQO
 - E: **‘Anglo Admission’** – includes 5 countries who are all PQO

- England has most in common with the ‘Anglo Admission’ category, but also potentially demonstrates a move towards the ‘Big Test’ category as the importance of the A-Level examination as the route into higher education for younger learners is increasing.
- Outcomes in terms of student access and success vary between systems and admissions types:
 - In terms of access to HE amongst those whose parents did not attain tertiary education, it is slightly greater on average across PQO than PQA systems.
 - Retention, in terms of students who are still enrolled at the start of the second year of study, it is slightly higher on average in PQO than PQA systems.
 - In terms of average level of earnings for graduates compared to those with upper secondary qualifications it is higher on average in PQA than in PQO systems.
- Currently available data that can be compared across countries does not demonstrate a clear advantage between PQO or PQA systems, or across the five types of systems. System types and outcomes may also be both confounded by other relevant factors, such as levels of economic inequality, or the structure of systems of schooling.
- Innovations in admissions were identified in 5 different countries in the OECD which may also be relevant for admissions reform in this country, including the establishment of the ‘Study Choice Check’ in the Netherlands, where applicants’ fit for their selected programme is explored and evaluated through an interview or questionnaire.
- The study demonstrates the breadth of approaches to university admissions in developed countries. The current government consultation provides an opportunity to understand and learn from these different approaches in order to inform our way forward.

1. Background

The government has recently announced a review of the HE admissions system in England and has opened a consultation on the future shape of this system. The consultation focuses on the merits of the timetable for HE admissions remaining as it is, moving to a Post Qualifications Offers (PQO) model or moving to a Post Qualifications Applications (PQA) model.

This briefing focuses on the global picture where HE admissions systems and specifically HE admissions timetables are concerned. The briefing is to support the work of the Sutton Trust on HE admissions and their response to the government consultation.

It draws on previous work undertaken by Professor Graeme Atherton, Head of the Centre for Levelling Up (CELUP) at the University of West London (UWL) and Director of the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) examining HE admission systems across the world.¹ The briefing updates and augments this work with up-to-date analysis on HE admission systems and highlights where notable reform work is underway which may be relevant to the consultation underway at present.

Higher Education admission systems – the international picture

Higher Education (HE) admission systems globally differ significantly yet also there are key commonalities overall and they can be classified in different groups. The major commonality is the use of some form of test/assessment at the end of the upper secondary compulsory school phase as the major mechanism to facilitate progression. This test/assessment can differ in length and nature, which has a major role in defining when students make applications to HE. These tests/assessments interact with differing arrangements for secondary schooling as well the policy concerns of different nations to mean that arrangements and hence timetables for HE entry are individual to every country. There are broad patterns though that can be identified.

To identify these patterns the focus is on countries in the OECD. Given that membership of the OECD is generally confined to higher income countries and that there is other data on HE access/outcomes from the OECD this makes comparison between England and other countries more realistic and more feasible.

¹ Atherton, G. (2018) Post Qualifications Admissions Dr Graeme Atherton June 2018 How it works across the world, London: UCU

2. Classifying systems as PQO or PQA

The key dividing line in the government consultation on admissions reform, as outlined above, is between PQO and PQA. Tables 1 and 2 below classify OECD countries, other than the UK, into those with PQO and PQA systems. OECD countries not included are Hungary, Latvia and Luxembourg as information was difficult to obtain. Israel is also not included as the vast majority of young people undertake military service, thus apply to enter HE in their early twenties before they leave the military. The tables show when students apply, when they take examinations that facilitate entry into HE, when they are offered a place and the time they have to accept. As Table 1 shows, 20 countries in the OECD which have been examined have PQO systems.

Table 1: HE Systems admission timetables (PQO)

Country	Students (000) ²	When students apply	When exams taken	When offered place	Acceptance time
Australia	951	September - November	November	January	8 weeks
Austria	184	March - May	May	Before end of September	12 weeks
Belgium	366	September – June	No examinations	September – September	16 weeks
Canada ³	1109	November – January	June year before application onwards	February - May	8-16 weeks
Czech Republic	193	February	May	June- July	3 weeks
Denmark	195	Jan-July	May	End July	3 weeks
Estonia	28	April-May	June	August	2 weeks
France	991	March - May	June	July	3 weeks
Germany	1872	May – June	March – June	August – September	2 weeks
Iceland	12	April – June	April- June	July	3 weeks
Ireland	161	April - June	June	August	1 week
Japan	2567	December - February	January - February	March	2 weeks
Mexico	3493	March - May	May	June	14 weeks
Netherlands	647	March - May	May	May	12 weeks
New Zealand	145	September -November	October - November	Immediately from October onwards	20 weeks
Norway	199	February - April	May – June	July	1 week
Poland	986	April-May	May	June	2 weeks
Portugal	204	June	June	June-September	Up to 12 weeks
Slovak Republic	79	March	April-May	June	3 weeks
Sweden	246	March - May	None	July	2 weeks

The PQO systems vary in size and geography with differing application & acceptance windows. Table 2 outlines the nature of the 11 PQA systems examined showing when students apply, take exams and are offered places in PQA systems.

² Undergraduate/Bachelor's degree

³ HE in Canada is delivered via the 10 different provinces. Example given is for Ontario. Performance and completion of modules over the final two years of schooling are taken into account in HE entry. Students can apply before they receive all their assessment information/complete all courses but the full application requires information on all courses undertaken.

Table 2: HE Systems admission timetables (PQA)

Country	Students (000) ⁴	When exams taken	When students apply	When offered place	Acceptance time
Chile ⁵	1380	November	January	February	1 week
Colombia	2440	March	June	July	3 weeks
Finland	219	March	March - May	July	2 weeks
Greece	659	May	July	August	2 weeks
Italy	1077	June	June - August	September	4 weeks
Korea	2550	November	December -February	February	1 week
Lithuania	108	January - May	June - August	July	1 week
Spain	1204	May	June – August	July	1 week
Switzerland	195	March-May	June-August	August	4 weeks
Turkey	4112	May	June-July	July	1 week
United States	20400	March to December	November - January	December to April	Up to 20 weeks

Looking at the systems above in more depth, a number of important features can be identified and are analysed below.

2.1 Application Times

It appears that in comparison to England where students apply around 16 weeks before they take examinations, the norm in the OECD across PQA systems is less than 2 weeks. Students are often able to apply soon after they undertake their examinations/tests. This is because, as outlined below in Table 3 in contrast to England, these examination/tests are less content heavy and easier to mark quickly. This shorter time frame to produce examination/test results provides these systems with a longer period between students having their offer of a place and the academic year beginning. With Colombia, Finland, Spain and Turkey for example in Table 2 above they have academic years starting in September, as for the majority of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the England, but students receive offers in July. Looking internationally, the evidence would suggest that either form of post qualifications admission suggested by the government in their consultation document would benefit from the longest possible window to enable students and HEIs to prepare for the start of the year. This would therefore support HEIs considering how they could start their academic year in late October for instance as suggested in the recent report from the UCU on making a post-qualifications system work.⁶

2.2 Acceptance Times

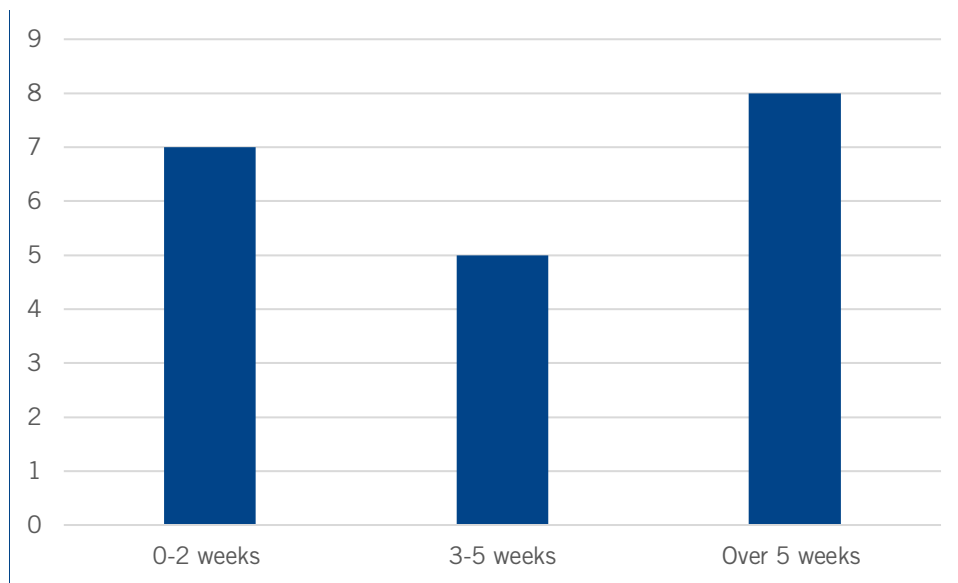
The first issue to examine is the variations in the amount of time that students have to accept an offer of a place. As Figure 1 below shows, for countries with PQA systems acceptance times vary with the largest number of systems offering over 5 weeks for students to make a decision. In England the designated time is 3 weeks. However, because application happens well before HE entry in England the actual time is in principle longer although depending on the nature of the offer received the ability to change one's mind is restricted and can be risky.

⁴ Undergraduate/Bachelor's degree

⁵ Academic year starts in March.

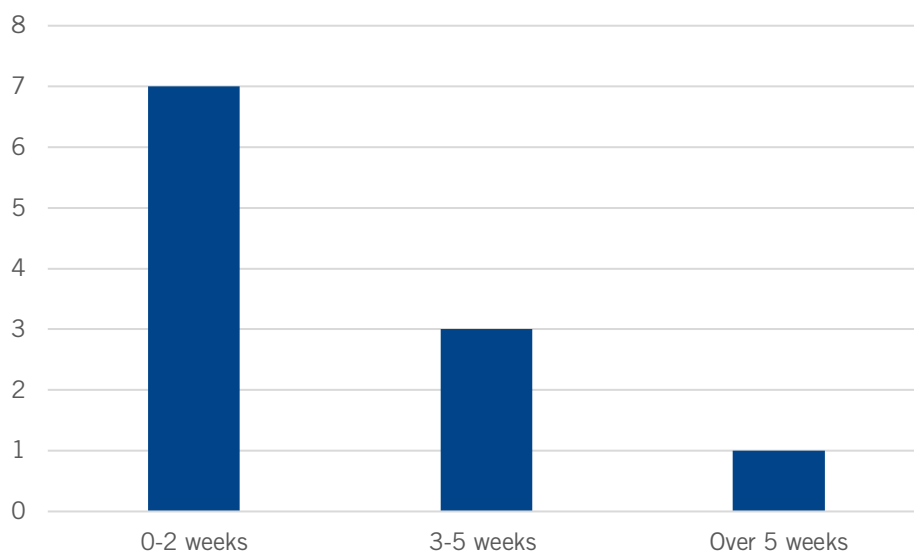
⁶ Atherton, G (2021) Post-qualifications application: How can we make it work, London: UCU

Figure 1: Acceptance time in PQO systems



Looking at PQA systems there are greater differences between systems in terms of acceptance times. In the majority of countries, students have less than 2 weeks to accept their offer of a higher education place.

Figure 2: Acceptance time in PQA systems



2.3 Entry examinations/tests

As argued above, key to understanding different HE admission systems is understanding the nature of the qualification that students have to take to gain entry into HE. Unlike in England, for many countries universities themselves set some form of test/examination and/or there may be a specific national university entrance examination sat at a particular time which may or may not be in the form of a scholastic test. For others, again unlike England, there may a school leaving examination or certificate/baccalaureate that confers on the holder the right to enter HE. Table 3 below classifies OECD countries into one of 4 entry test/examination groupings.

Table 3: Higher Education examinations/tests in OECD countries

<p>Matura/Abitur/Bac</p>	<p>National University Entrance Examination</p>
<p>This is the school leaving examination approach common across mainland Europe. The number of subjects ranges from 5 (as in Germany for example) to in some cases 8 (as can be the case in Italy for example) and usually includes a language component. Assessment is usually a combination of final examination, and completion of components of the qualification in upper secondary schooling. On completion of the qualification students are able, as right, to attend HE.</p>	<p>In some OECD countries, mainly outside of Europe, there is a national set of university entrance examinations. These are usually taken at one time in the year to significant media attention although in the US they can be taken up to three times by a student who can then select their best scores. In Korea for example The Suneung, an abbreviation for College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) in Korean, is an eight-hour examination which has back-to-back papers in six sections.</p>
<p>University Entrance Examination</p>	<p>Individual subjects-based examinations</p>
<p>It is also common in OECD countries for universities to set their own entrance examinations in some or all subject disciplines. In most of Europe university entry is facilitated by a combination of the school leaving certificate and university entrance examinations with the latter being the selection mechanism. Outside of Europe university entrance examinations are key as students do not have the right to enter HE given by a Matura, Arbitur etc. In Colombia for example each university sets their own entrance examinations and students will have to take several different examinations if they want to try and enter HE.</p>	<p>This approach is more akin to that in England. However, students undertake a broader range of subjects. In Ireland for example students take between 6 and 8 subjects and in Australia a minimum of 4. The way in which the results are converted into university entry also differs to England. In contrast to Europe passing the school leaving certificate does not confer a right to HE entry and university entrance examinations are not used.</p>

2.4 OECD Admission System Typologies

Bringing the information together from Tables 1 and 2 and Figures 1 and 2 it is possible to generate 5 different types of HE admission system in the OECD. These are shown below in Table 4.

Table 4: OECD Admission System Typology

System Type	Name	Description	Size of system	Admission model	Countries
A	HE as right	Mainly central/eastern European countries where entry is a right when school leaving certificate is obtained	Mainly smaller but France/Germany large	Virtually all PQO	Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic
B	Big Test	Mainly non-European countries with national set piece entry tests mandatory for entry to most HEIs/courses	Larger systems with over a million students	Mainly PQA	Chile, Korea, Japan, Mexico, Turkey, United States
C	University driven	Mainly European countries where even though students have a school leaving certificate there is a strong emphasis on universities setting entry criteria/tests to enter.	Mainly small to medium sized systems	Mix of PQO and PQA	Belgium, Colombia, Iceland, Greece, Portugal , Spain, Italy, Switzerland
D	Central Application	Scandinavian/West European countries with national application agencies and combination of entry as a right/university tests.	Smaller systems with less than 250,000 students	Virtually all PQO	Denmark, Netherlands, Finland, Norway, Sweden
E	Anglo Admission	UK linked countries where entry based on school leaving examinations and grades.	One relatively large (circa 1 million students) and 2 smaller systems	All PQO	Australia, Ireland, New Zealand

In terms of admission models, the most common type of PQA model is the ‘Big Test’ one. These ‘Big Test’ systems are larger ones where students undertake some form of national standardised testing. There are PQA systems in the ‘University Driven’ typology, but the other system types are predominantly PQO.

Looking at these typologies in turn with **Type A** – HE as right describes the approach most common in mainland European OECD countries. The automatic right to enter HE with possession of a school leaving certificate combines with a greater tendency for students to enter universities close to where they live, fewer courses where demand exceeds supply and less hierarchy built into the systems. While they are virtually all PQO systems, given their characteristics it would be feasible for them to be PQA systems as well. As entry is granted automatically for most students into local courses where places are readily available timings of acceptance/entry/preparation which is often seen as the issue with PQA is less relevant.

Type B systems are the most frequently observed PQA model. These countries differ more in terms of their overall systems than in Type A so they approach admissions with greater level of difference. What they have in common is a greater separation than in Type A between school achievement and HE entry. Specific examinations to define HE entry are used which are national in nature. These tests can be quite exacting for students. In Colombia for example, the Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior (ICFES) examination is divided into two 4-hour sessions taken on a Sunday with very short, mainly multiple choice questions of which they are over 200 covering 6 areas. The students who receive the highest score in the test nationally is given a prize by the President on national television showing the high profile given to the test.

Type C also separates to an extent school achievement from HE entry but to a lesser degree. School achievement is combined with university tests to define HE entry. This ‘mixed economy’ approach can

be combined with PQA or PQO. In fact, of the 8 countries in this typology 5 of them are PQA models. This illustrates again the association between specific university related tests and PQA.

With **Type D**, fundamentally they resemble Type C strongly but centralise application. This is done for efficiency reasons in what are small systems. With the exception of Finland, they take a PQO approach.

At present, England has most in common with **Type E** – Anglo Admission, mainly because entry is based on the results of school leaving examinations, there is no standardised national testing and no right to HE entry upon award of an upper secondary leaving certificate. However, England has aspects in common with Type D countries as well, due the existence of UCAS. However, as is argued in the conclusions, to an extent HE admissions in England may be drifting toward a Type B system or at least a high-stakes examination entry method.

A move to either a PQO or a PQA system would mean that the admissions system in England would come to closer resemble others in the OECD but it would remain distinctive. The Anglo Admission systems are to an extent similar, but also individual. In Australia for example, students are ranked as individuals on a regional basis in the ATAR system and in Ireland students convert their grades in their final examination into points which are the main determinant of HE entry. However, a change to either form of post qualification admission system would move us closer to international norms here. Hence, it would be instructive to look at both a PQO and a PQA system in more detail in order to appreciate how HE admissions is organised in this context.

Box 1: Understanding PQO in the OECD – Ireland

Students study 6 or more subjects in their end of schooling ‘Leaving Certificate’ examination from around 40 subjects available including a wide range of European and non-European languages, science, business and practical subjects. The Leaving Certificate Examination results are converted into points via a set points scale. These points are then used to allocate places to applicants when demand for places exceeds the number of places available (which is the case for most courses). The scales which underpin the translation of grades to points in the Leaving Certificate have recently been changed to reduce the number of candidates who have the same number of points after their Leaving Certificate.

Students apply via the Central Applications Office at the end of January/start of February. From February to May, interviews/portfolio application occurs. Examinations begin in June and students can amend their choices from May to July 1st through what is known as the ‘change of mind’ period. This is an opportunity many students take as they develop what they see as a better idea of their likely Leaving Certificate result as they take their examinations. Results of the Leaving Certificate are released in mid August and students receive offers shortly afterwards. There are two rounds of offers made to assist all who wish to enter to get a place.

The drawbacks with the Irish system is the importance placed on the Leaving Certificate and points attached to courses which encourages a heightened sense of hierarchy, puts pressure on students and makes the examination very high stakes. There is a relatively high degree of transparency though which many students like as they are concerned that other forms of assessment are prone to personal bias. The change of mind period also provides a form of flexibility and give the system a form of ‘quasi PQA’ in that students can apply, if not with their results, with a better idea of what these results will be.

Box 2: Understanding PQA in the OECD – Spain

At 16 students can choose academic or vocational pathways. The academic pathway is the Bachillerato, which prepares them for university entrance, which lasts two years. The qualification for admission to higher education in Spain is the Prueba de Acceso a la Universidad, or P.A.U., also known as la Selectividad, which is a nationwide university admissions test taken after the end of the second year of upper secondary. In theory, la Selectividad is open to all students who have completed a Título. In practice, because students in vocational programs will not have been studying in university preparatory courses they have low chances of success.

The PAU is a series of six examinations, three of which are mandatory exams which are known as the “general phase” of the PAU. In addition to the general phase is the “specific phase”, where students may choose from approximately thirty other subjects in which to be tested. Each PAU exam is graded on a score of one to ten, as is the Bachillerato.

Students apply to universities based their performance in two examinations: the Bachillerato and the PAU. They are given a nota de corte (i.e. cutoff grade) that is 60% based on the Bachillerato and 40% based on their best two exams in the general phase of the PAU.

Students may apply to each province’s central admissions service, and for a small fee may apply to three separate programs (there is no limit on the number of provinces to which one may submit applications). They apply after they have received their PAU results. The PAU is taken after the final Bachillerato tests in June, with application for HE in June to August depending exactly on the region of country (in Valencia the deadline for applications is late July for example). The gap between taking the PAU and the results of the PAU is quite small.

The analysis of different HE admission arrangements across the OECD shows that there is no one system which can be used as a model for England to follow in developing a PQO or PQA system. This does not mean however, that there isn’t much to learn from how different systems operate. Each system is different and unique, even if some are more similar than others. The analysis above shows there are different options for policymakers that can be informed by international practice which can be integrated into a PQA, or PQO system, to meet the specific needs of the HE system in England.

3. Admission systems and outcomes in the OECD

Establishing the advantages/disadvantages of different admission systems in a comparative way depends on identifying criteria by which a system could be judged. This is because there is not in existence a comparative survey instrument that examines the specific benefits of admission system arrangements from either a student or societal perspective.

However, the OECD does collect data on particular features of HE systems, i.e. participation by proxy-measure of socio-economic background (in this case parental education), completion rates and graduate employment. The extent to which the admission model influences these features of any HE system is a matter of debate. Each feature is also subject to other, perhaps greater, determining factors. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the admission model exerts an influence on them. It can clearly shape participation, but also retention and graduate outcomes as they can be related to course/institutional choice. A potential argument for PQA would be that it could improve retention/graduate employment by enabling students to make better choices that suit their preferences/abilities hence making them less likely to drop out and more likely to excel in the labour market. Research undertaken looking at European HE admission systems for the European Commission in 2017 showed that relationships between different systems and graduate outcomes do exist.⁷

In context of England, there are a number of specific issues with regard to the choices that students make and their potential relationship with HE outcomes that make the analysis below valuable. Evidence from the Higher Education Policy Institute/Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey in 2020 suggests that over a third of students are not happy with their choice of course and university. The proportion not happy with their choices increases to 40% for disabled students, 45% for students from BAME backgrounds and to 55% for Black students. It is feasible to suggest that students who make choices they are not happy with may be less likely to achieve their potential within and after HE. This dissatisfaction then takes on another important dimension in the context in England. There is evidence to suggest that a significant percentage of graduates are earning less than non-graduates and working in jobs that do not require graduate skills. These potentially sub-optimal outcomes for graduates, the economy and society are a major concern for policymakers.

While we do not have comparative data from across the OECD on student choice satisfaction we do have data on outcomes at the HE system and graduate level. This data is presented below comparing PQA, PQO systems and the United Kingdom using OECD data.⁸

⁷ Orr, D. et al (2017) Study on the impact of admission systems on higher education outcomes, Brussels: European Commission

⁸ For some HE outcomes data for all OECD countries is not available so data is presented for those countries where it is available only.

3.1 Admission systems and levels of participation

In Figure 3 below the overall levels of HE participation amongst different countries in the OECD are outlined including the average for PQO and PQA systems.

Figure 3: Average % of 25-34 year olds with tertiary level education

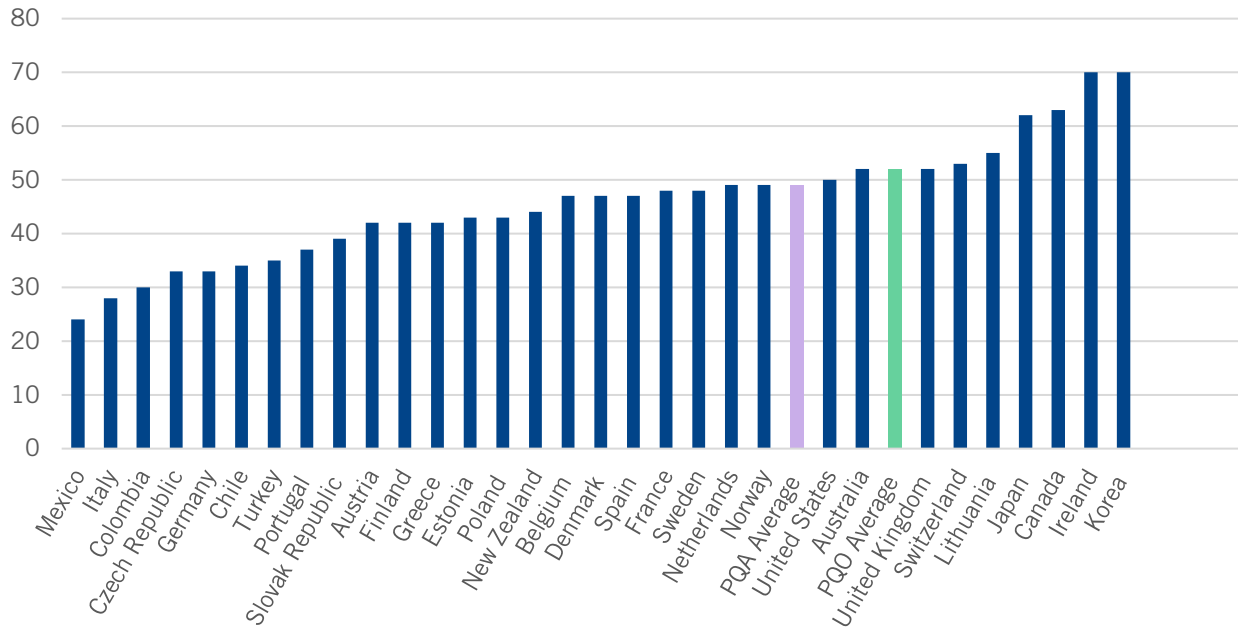
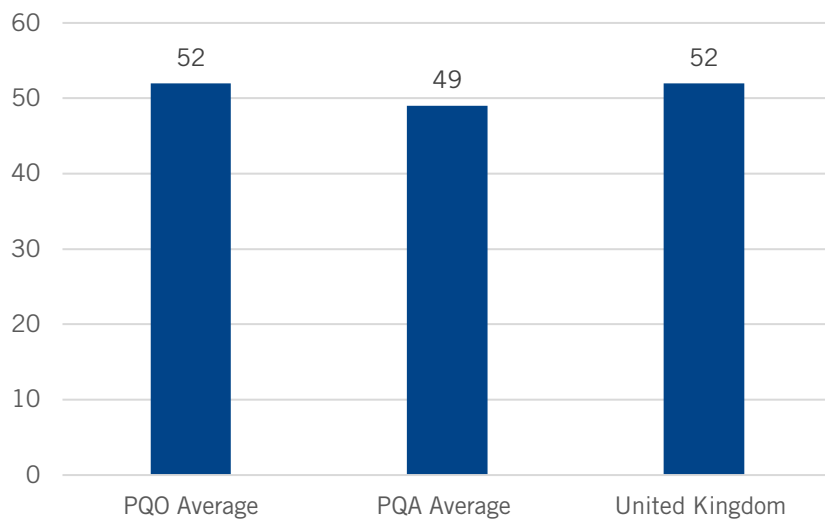


Figure 3 shows that there are considerable differences across the OECD in terms of tertiary level education. Figure 4 shows the average percentage of 25-34 year olds with tertiary level education in PQO and PQA systems and the UK.

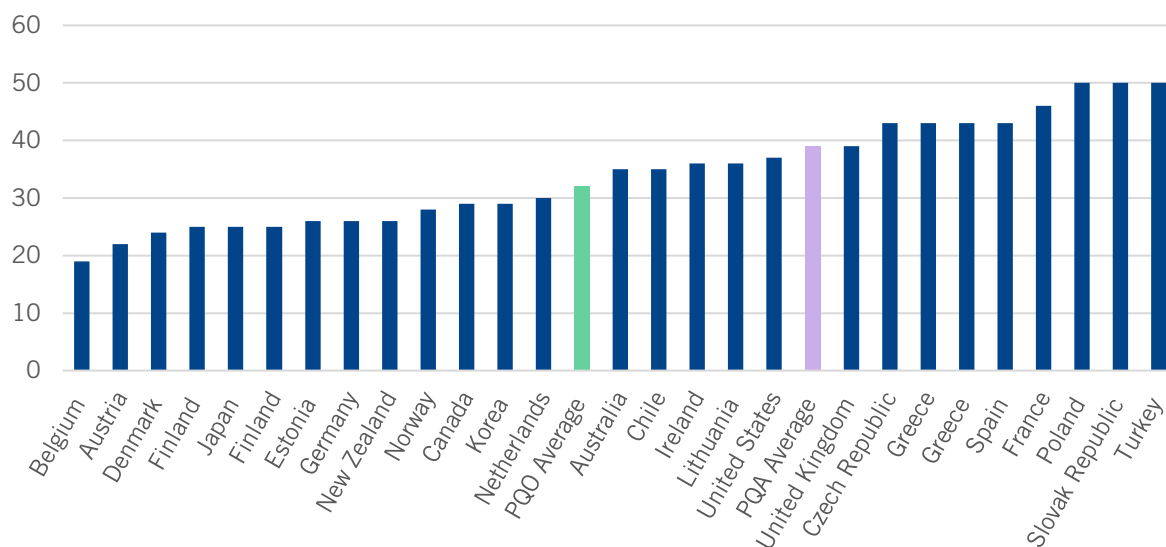
Figure 4: Average % of 25-34 year olds with tertiary level education



3.2 Admission systems and access by parental background

In Figure 5 below the difference between the percentage of 30-44 year olds in OECD countries with tertiary level attainment with parents who have less than tertiary level education and parents who have tertiary education is outlined.⁹ As the figure shows there are significant differences here across the OECD. They will reflect the broader levels of socio-economic inequality in a particular country, the extent to which those older than 44 have participated in HE across earlier generations as well as the admission system now.

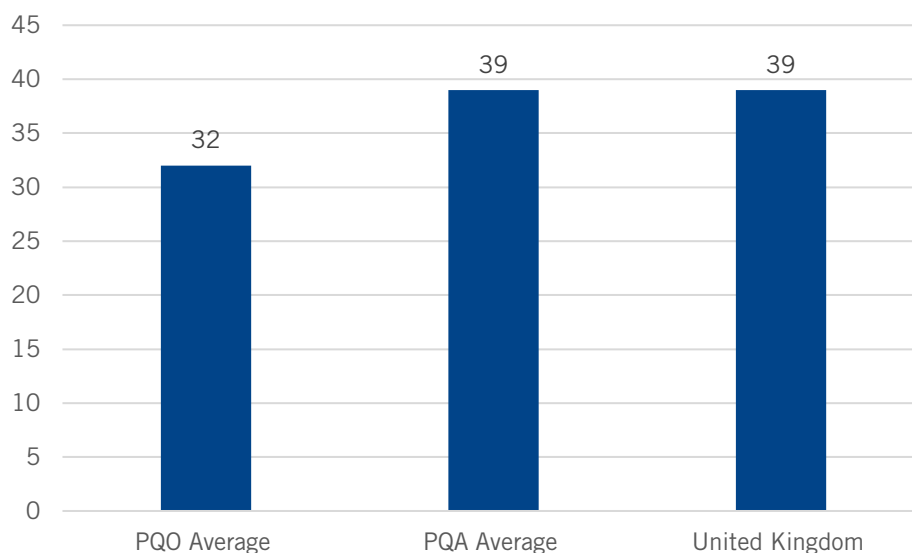
Figure 5: Difference in % of those aged 30-44 with level education between those whose parents who had tertiary level education and those who did not



⁹ OECD (2020) *Education at a Glance*, Paris: OECD

In Figure 6 below, the average gap for countries with PQO systems, PQA system and UK are presented. As the figure shows this gap is the same for PQA systems and the UK but smaller for PQO systems.

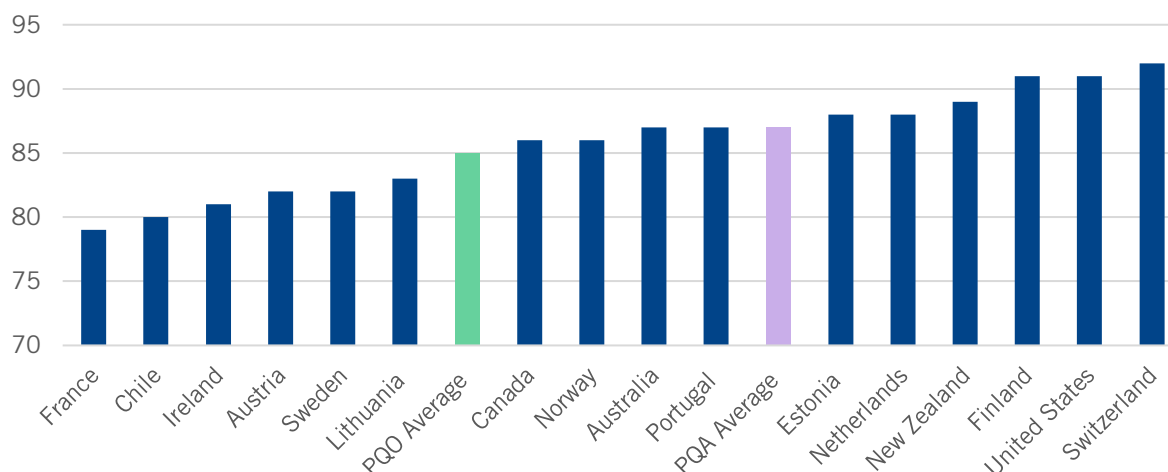
Figure 6: Average % differences between those aged 30-44 with level education between those whose parents who had tertiary level education and those who did not in PQO and PQA systems compared to UK



3.3 Admission systems and completion/non-completion

Figure 7 shows the percentage of students who are still enrolled in a Bachelor’s degree or equivalent by the beginning of the second year of their studies for countries with both PQO and PQA systems where data is available.¹⁰

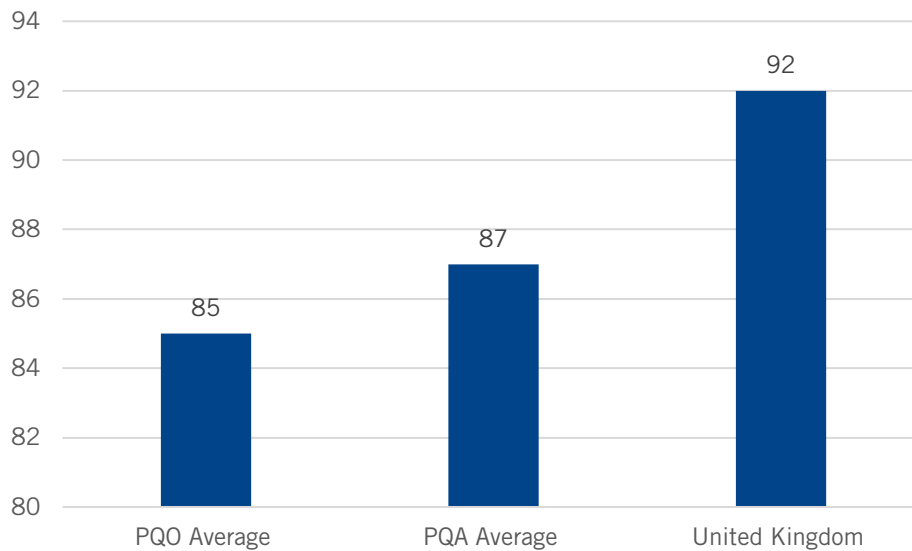
Figure 7: Average levels of student enrolment (%) by country by the beginning of year 2



¹⁰ OECD (2019) Education at a Glance, Paris: OECD

Figure 8 below shows the average percentage of students still enrolled for countries with PQQ and PQA systems. The UK fares well here with a higher level of students enrolled than in with PQA or PQQ systems.

Figure 8: Average levels of student enrolment (%) by the beginning of second year of study

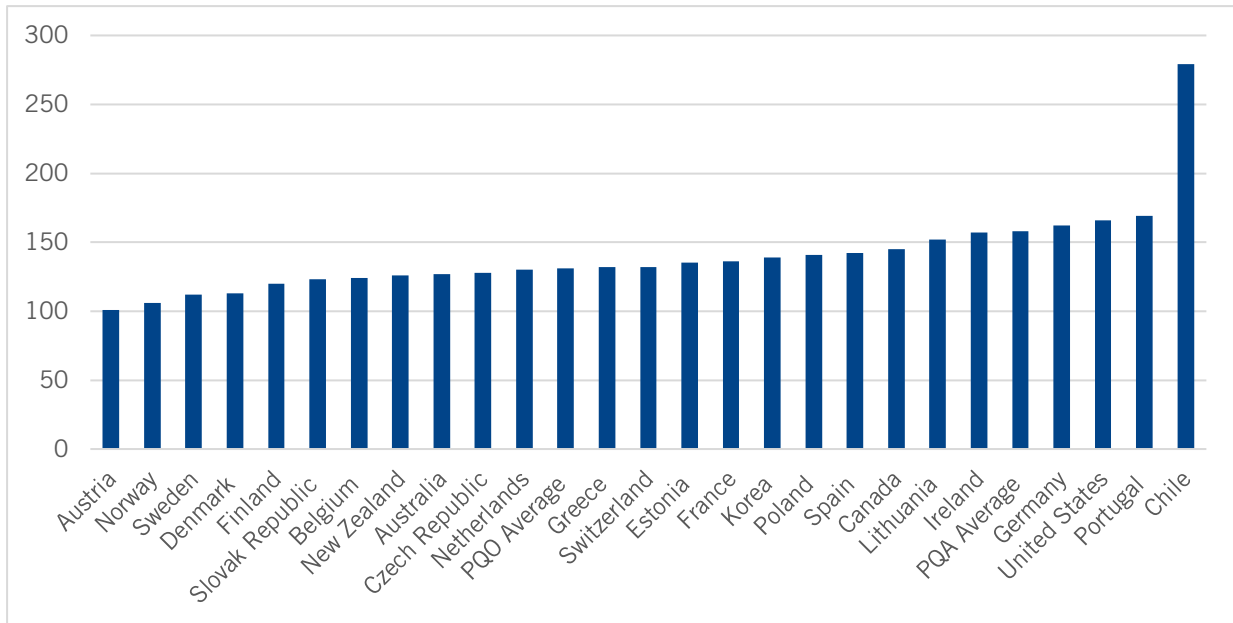


Looking at the two figures it is clear that there are some differences across countries where retention is concerned. The percentage of students still undertaking their studies at the start of year 2 ranges from 79% in France to over 90% in Finland. The United Kingdom does well in this measure as shown in Figure 8 at 92% - higher than either PQQ or PQA averages. This is in part due to a system where provision for students to extend their courses beyond the designated time is low, and the cost of non-completion is high.

3.4 Admission systems and graduate earnings

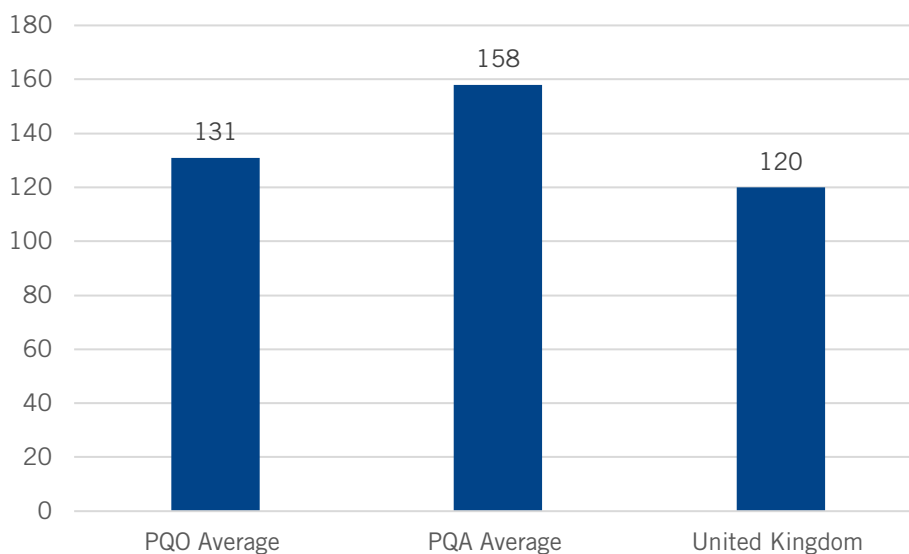
Figure 9 outlines the relative earnings of workers aged 25-64 with Bachelor's degree or equivalent in OECD countries where data is available. These earnings are expressed as an index relative to students who leave compulsory education with just upper secondary education.¹¹

Figure 9: Graduate earnings relative to those with upper secondary qualifications for OECD countries



In Figure 10 below the average earnings of those with Bachelor's degrees or equivalent for countries with PQO, PQA systems and the United Kingdom are presented. The PQA measure here is distorted somewhat by the extraordinary high returns to a tertiary degree in Chile.

Figure 10: Average levels of graduate earnings for graduates compared to those with upper secondary qualifications only



¹¹ OECD (2020) Education at a Glance, Paris: OECD

With access and attainment measures Figure 9 and 10 above show there is not overall a major difference between PQO and PQA systems where graduate earnings are concerned. Figure 10 does show on average a noticeable difference in favour of PQA systems but this difference is in a sizeable part due to impact of Chile where the returns to a degree appear very high indeed as shown in Figure 9. However, it also shows that for both systems the return to a degree is higher than in the UK.

3.5 Admission systems and outcomes – summary

In Table 5 below the relationships between PQO, PQA systems and the United Kingdom in terms of the different forms of HE outcomes above are summarised.

Table 5: Differences in HE system and outcomes between PQO/PQA systems and the UK

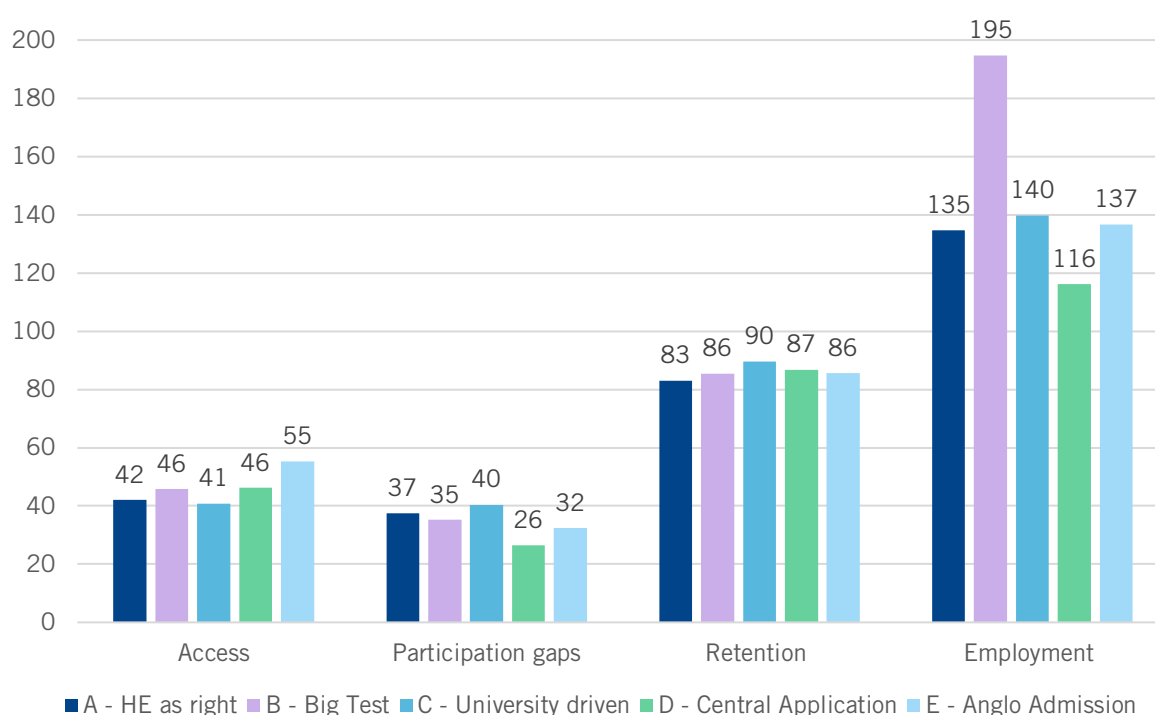
System outcome	PQO	PQA	United Kingdom
Levels of participation	52	49	52
Participation gaps by parental background	32	39	39
Enrolment at second year	85	87	92
Graduate earnings	131	158	120

As Table 5 shows, there is no one system that is ‘performing’ better than the other or the UK on all measures. The one area where the UK is performing worse is on graduate earnings.

3.6 Admission system typologies and outcomes

As well as looking at the relationship between HE systems and outcomes, the relationship between the admission system typologies described in Table 4 has been analysed. Figure 11 shows how the 5 different typologies compare in terms of the system outcomes examined throughout this section.

Figure 11: Admission system typologies and system outcomes summary (%)



As with the comparison of HE systems undertaken above, the system typologies all have differing strengths. Anglo-Admission countries appear to be strong on overall access, considerably ahead of the University driven countries for example. With participation gaps the central application countries lead which is consistent with the lower levels of overall inequality found in Scandinavian countries. There is less variation in terms of retention but the university driven systems perform the best here. Finally, the Big Test countries lead the way by some distance here in terms of graduate earnings. This is due to the presence of Chile with its extremely high returns to degree level education. However, even removing Chile would see the Big Test countries leading here. In each of the 4 outcome areas the leading system is different.

4. Higher education admissions system reform in the OECD

While the global pandemic has caused massive disruption to HE entry mechanisms across the world and a shift away from the norm where entry examinations/tests and timetables are concerned in most OECD countries (although not all), it has yet to lead to detailed discussion regarding longer term admissions reform. There are examples of countries who are reforming their admission systems, or where discussion on reform is evident. But these practices and debates are separate in the main from the impact of the pandemic. Nor do they explicitly relate to the timing of HE entry - there is no other country at present that appears to be looking to shift from PQA to PQO or vice versa. Nevertheless, there are changes/trends relevant to the situation in England that are underway and these are summarised in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Examples of admission system reform in the OECD

Country	Issue in HE admissions	What is being done/discussed
Australia ¹²	At the centre of the admission system is the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). All students are given an individual rank in their state which then influences the offer they receive from a university. It is argued that the ATAR is being used less and less by universities thus is becoming less useful and it also stifles creativity in teaching by encouraging 'teaching to a test.	Each of the 9 states in Australia has their own leaving certificates. Some are looking at piloting broadening curriculum and not producing ATAR scores. HE entry is defined by universities themselves ultimately as in the UK and here again moves away from reliance on the ATAR are being piloted. For example, at Australian National University (ANU), as a compulsory condition of entry, students are now required to demonstrate their involvement in activities outside of the classroom from Year 10 to Year 12, such as sports, volunteering, internships, paid and unpaid employment and exchange opportunities.
Finland ¹³	The proportion of Finnish citizens participation in tertiary education which is below the OECD average and this level of participation has plateaued in recent years.	At admission is on the basis of a high school leaving certificate and a university entrance examination. From 2023 some applicants with good school-leaving certificate grades can be admitted directly to some study fields, with no entrance exam.
Japan ¹⁴	The number of applicants to HE is plateauing due to demographic changes and also there is a need to prepare students to develop broader thinking skills from HE.	From 2021, there will be a new national common university entrance test which will aim to measure the ability of students to discover and solve problems for themselves. Emphasis will be put on their ability to think, make judgements, and express themselves. It is intended to more broadly test applicants' abilities with less reliance on the multiple-choice format.
Netherlands	Student non-completion was seen as too high in the Netherlands and this was a cost to students, society and the HE system.	In 2017 the Netherlands introduced Studiekeuzecheck, or 'Study Choice Check'. Every student applying to HE must undergo a "check" to evaluate their fit with their selected study programme. The result is meant as guidance. The purpose of the Study Choice Check is to help students get a better understanding of their own interests and abilities and to obtain a more realistic picture of the course of training and the career opportunities associated with it. At some HEIs and programmes

¹² Education Council (2020) Looking to the Future – available at <https://uploadstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public-assets/education-au/pathways/Final%20report%20-%202018%20June.pdf>

¹³ University World News (2020) Revamping student admissions to raise national education levels – available at <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2020082116380925>

¹⁴ Nippon.com (2019) Japan to Introduce New University Entrance Exam in 2021 – available at <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h00596/japan-to-introduce-new-university-entrance-exam-in-2021.html>

		this is done through a direct interview; elsewhere it is done through a digital questionnaire administered on the internet.
United States	Standardised testing may be a sub-optimal way of assessing HE potential as it is 'one off' and can discriminate low income students who cannot afford extensive, pre HE test preparations.	While there is no actual reform of the system planned at national level, there is discussion of whether more US colleges will go 'test optional' permanently after the impact of the pandemic abates. Most colleges have gone test optional as a result of COVID, paying less/no attention to standardised aptitude testing. A significant minority are already test free/optional and focus more on a mix of high school performance data, extra-curricular commitments, insights from teachers etc. It is likely that as a result of the pandemic more will go 'test' optional, into the longer term.

The common trend in Table 6 is a re-consideration of what tests/assessment are required to facilitate entry into HE. In some instances that implies a move away from testing per se, whilst in others it means changing what kinds of tests/assessment are used, when and for which learners. However, there is an underlying belief with regard to the changes/prospective changes described above that the nature of the HE admission model clearly impacts on the outcomes of the HE system.

5. HE Admissions in the OECD – key messages for reform in England

There are a number of points emerging from the analysis above that can inform discussion around the potential move to a post-qualifications admission system in England.

In comparison to the admission to HE arrangements in other countries in the OECD, those in England are clearly different. As well as being the only pre-qualification offer system, students apply to HE much earlier than in other countries and are generally given more time to accept an offer after it is made. International evidence suggests that the prospective moves to a PQA system needs to be informed by a discussion around the broader challenges in the HE system that admissions process can contribute to addressing and how the choices that students can make are structured by how their potential to enter HE is measured.

In terms of broader challenges the data examined in section 3 shows that possibly different admission systems may contribute to a range of outcomes in contrasting ways. It is not possible to conclude here what system may be ‘best’, but this analysis, especially in the light of the discussion regarding graduate and system outcomes in England, does point to possible further work that could be undertaken in England. In the case of England discussion of admissions in the context of these broader outcomes is essential- as has been undertaken in the countries for example in Table 6 above.

This discussion should be informed by analysis of the relationship between graduate outcomes and admissions in this country. As stated above there needs to be caveats here. Drawing clear lines of causality between admission systems practice and system outcomes needs to be done carefully. But England is one of the most data rich countries in the world where higher education access and outcomes is concerned. However, the discussion on PQA thus far has not utilised these strengths completely – the work on predicted grades and entry is strong but in the light for example of the data on student dissatisfaction in England and graduate under-employment more could be done. This kind of work in the Netherlands is what led to the implementation of the Study Choice Check described in Table 6. Given the evidence regarding the gaps in HE related Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in England further analysis of this kind of subject specific exercise which aims to identify the ‘fit’ between student and course may be very valuable.

International analysis of admission systems also shows that there are a range of ways of assessing potential to enter HE. In terms of how these methods could be implemented in England some would require a change in the nature of the Level 3 qualification structure – for example a move to a broader *Arbitur/Matura*. However, there are other options which combine the use of specific university related tests with school leaving qualifications. Most of the PQA systems described in Table 4 do this to an extent – although with the Type B Big Test systems the emphasis is placed on specific national tests. The differing mix of combinations of school leaving qualification and university tests used in the OECD does however provide a range of examples which can help inform the design of a post-qualifications admissions model that reflects the unique nature of the HE system in England. As illustrated in Box 2 for example, Spain utilises a split of 60:40 between the school leaving and university examinations, while in Box 1 in the Irish system there is a quasi-PQA approach where students might not make a final application after their examinations can change their application after/when they are taking them thus with a much better idea of the outcome of the examination.

Is England drifting toward a Big Test system?

Finally, while at present England may have more in common with the Anglo-Admission systems in Table 4 it could be argued that in some ways England is drifting toward a Big Test system. There may be a risk

here that unless a more comprehensive model of PQA is implemented then some of the worst aspects of the Big Test system may come to shape the admissions system.

The A Level examination has become increasingly important in England as the route into higher education for young people in the last decade. The ending of the AS Level meant that students and HEIs had to rely solely on A-Levels as a measure of potential. The proposed defunding of the majority of Applied General Qualifications from 2024, mainly the BTEC qualification, is designed to push those who wish to progress to HE into A Levels. In 2020 over 45,000 18-year-old students entered HE with just BTECs or A-Levels/BTECs.¹⁵ It is clear that for parents, policymakers and the media A-Levels exist as de-facto university entrance examinations, as was evident in the grading controversy in 2020.

The evidence from looking at high-stakes examinations in admission systems across the world is that they place big pressures on learners and schools/colleges. Placing more pressure on young people in a country where comparatively, young people already experience greater pressure than in other nations is potentially problematic.¹⁶

A system where students are supported through adequate IAG and where admission decisions are structured and transparent, which is informed by how other large countries are supporting more diverse cohorts of students to enter HE and achieve their full potential, is even more important in this context. By looking closely at how other countries admission systems work we can aim to avoid an unintended consequence of automatically supporting an approach that looks like a 'low risk' option but in fact places even more pressure on students and staff. For example, simply moving to a PQO model where students make decisions about their HE options after they receive their examination results will add to the pressure on students to make quick choices and school/college staff to do this in the summer months. These pressures are hard-wired in the system at present (students who are concerned about their choices now are encouraged by UCAS to contact their schools/colleges in August). A simple PQO system will only exacerbate them. A PQA system would bring even greater pressures unless we bring in greater IAG and are creative with when we ask students to do different things in the system. This need to be creative demands that we look closely at how our competitors organise HE admissions. As shown in this report there are a range of ways that HE admission can be organised, bringing together different forms of examinations/tests, timings and support systems. We need to learn from them.

¹⁵ UCAS (2020) UCAS Undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020 - <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2020>

¹⁶ OECD (2015) PISA 2015 Results Volume III – Students' Wellbeing - <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA-2015-Results-Students-Well-being-Volume-III-Overview.pdf>

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