

# Higher education admissions:

## The time for change

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A report for UCU by  
Dr Graeme Atherton and Angela Nartey



# Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY                            | 3  |
| 1: INTRODUCTION - A CONSENSUS FOR CHANGE?    | 6  |
| 2: METHODOLOGY                               | 6  |
| 3: VIEWS ON THE PRESENT SYSTEM               | 7  |
| 4: HOW COULD THE PRESENT SYSTEM BE IMPROVED? | 12 |
| 5: THE SYSTEM IN THE FUTURE                  | 16 |
| 6: THE TIME FOR CHANGE                       | 21 |
| Notes  | 22 |
| Appendix 1: Questionnaire                    | 23 |
| Appendix 2: Follow-up questions              | 27 |



## Executive summary

### 1. BACKGROUND

Interest and concern regarding the admissions of students into higher education (HE) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has increased significantly since mid-2018. The consequence of the increasing interest from policymakers and across the HE sector was a review of HE admissions to be led by the Office for Students (OfS) scheduled for 2019-20. This review was postponed due to Covid-19. Universities UK has also undertaken a review of HE admissions themselves.

UCU has been leading in the work to advocate for reform of the HE admissions system over the last two years.<sup>1</sup> In 2018 the report *'Post Qualifications Admissions: How it works across the world'*, showed that England, Wales & Northern Ireland were the only nations amongst the 29 surveyed to rely on predicted grades to determine how prospective students are offered HE places.

This work was followed by another report launched in January 2019 – *'Post-qualification application: a student-centred model for higher education admissions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales'*, which outlined what a different system based around post-qualifications system could look like.

This study builds on the two reports described above, examining the perspectives of senior leaders from across sectors on the present HE admissions system and whether the recent proposals presented in our 2019 report described above resonate with their concerns.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

Between July and September 2019 an electronic survey was circulated to university vice-chancellors and secondary school head teachers across the United Kingdom, and college principals in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The survey received 128 responses. Of the respondents 43% came from the higher education sector (a higher education institution or higher education in a further education college), with 32% from a secondary school and 25% from the further education or sixth form college sector. These respondents were drawn from across the country. An additional set of five follow-up questions were distributed to respondents who indicated they would welcome the opportunity to respond to additional questioning. Ten respondents responded to the additional qualitative questioning.

### 3. KEY FINDINGS

#### Views on the present system

- Over 60% of respondents (60.5%) felt that the current application process did not enable students to make the best decisions according to their achievements.
- Over 70% of respondents (71%) felt that predicted grades were not an accurate proxy for final achievement.



- Over 80% of respondents (82.3%) felt that the advertised grade profiles did not always match the grade profile of students admitted.
- In response to the statement '**students do not always make the best decisions for themselves during clearing**', around two thirds (65%) of respondents agreed or agreed strongly.
- Over 90% of leaders in the secondary sector and further education and sixth form leaders think there should be limits on the use of unconditional offers, but this falls to just over 50% for higher education leaders.
- In response to the statement '**government is doing enough to support fair admissions to higher education**' almost two thirds (61.2%) of respondents disagreed strongly or disagreed.
- A majority (61.6%) of senior leaders felt that the higher education application process is not fit for purpose, but while more than 80% of school leaders think it is not fit for purpose only 40% of higher education leaders do.

#### Views on improving the system

- Nearly 70% of school leaders think that students should make higher education admissions decisions later than they do at the present.
- More than four in five (82.5%) of leaders support further exploration of a post-qualification higher education admissions system.

#### What a future system could look like?

There is significant support from leaders from across sectors for the key features of a new higher education admissions system model recommended in the 2019 UCU report 'Post-qualification application: a student-centred model for higher education admissions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales'.

- Over 80% of leaders from across sectors supported a minimum of 10 hours information, advice and guidance per student between years 10-13.
- Over 70% of leaders supported a dedicated week-long exploration of future learning and employment options for all Level 3 students at the end of year 12/first year of Level 3 course.
- Over 60% of leaders (and over 70% of school leaders) supported the introduction of an online questionnaire about course choice modelled on the 'Study Choice' check system in the Netherlands.
- Over 60% of leaders supported allowing students to make non-binding expressions of interest to institutions they would like to explore in the January of year of application.



After their expression of interest, students will receive information in the form of 'study choice packs'.

- Over 80% of school leaders and over 60% of HE leaders supported a later start date for first year students in higher education.

Additionally, respondents were asked about their views on reforming Level 3 examinations, the Level 3 examination timetable and the timing of result publication. Views differed considerably across sectors. Understandably there was greater caution regarding Level 3 change from schools and colleges. There is a view from leaders from across sectors that for admissions reform of a significant nature there would need to be changes to the timescale that students and schools, colleges and HE providers have to make decisions and process applications.

#### **4. THE TIME FOR CHANGE**

This report has shown conclusively that there are leaders from across sectors who believe that HE admissions can be improved. In some areas there is consensus regarding the problem and the potential solution – in particular the limitation of predicted grades and the importance of information, advice and guidance. In others there are considerable levels of contrast – for example limiting unconditional offers. There is greater support for system changes from schools and FE leaders. HE admissions is a genuinely cross sectoral endeavour. In moving forward this research suggests that a new system is needed which is owned equally by those sending students to HE and those receiving them.

Covid-19 has led to some unprecedented challenges for the HE admissions system. It has shown that it is possible to change how the admissions system works, albeit forcing it down an opposite road to the one favoured by the majority of leaders in this report. This potential for change needs to be harnessed. There is a unique opportunity here for the government that has highlighted the need for HE admissions reform in their recent election manifesto to craft a system which can meet the needs of students entering HE in the 21st century rather than those in the mid-20th.

The evidence in this report shows that such a system, based around post-qualifications admissions is not only possible but would command support from senior leaders from across sectors.



## 1. INTRODUCTION - A CONSENSUS FOR CHANGE?

Interest and concern regarding the admissions of students into higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has increased significantly since mid-2018. It is becoming apparent that a system designed to admit less than 5% of 18-year-olds over 30 years ago, may need revising and improving in an era when over 400,000 students apply to enter HE every year. The consequence of the increasing interest from policy-makers and across the HE sector was a review of HE admissions to be led by the Office for Students (OfS)<sup>1</sup>. This review has been postponed due to Covid-19. Universities UK has also undertaken a review of HE admissions.<sup>2</sup>

The evidence that change is required however is undoubtedly strong. Analysis of predicted grades undertaken by Wyness in 2016 shows that just 16% of applicants' grades were predicted correctly.<sup>3</sup> Recent data from the Office for Students shows that the percentage of applicants receiving an unconditional offer has increased from 1.1% in 2013 to 34.4% in 2018<sup>4</sup> and over 60,000 students are entering higher education via the clearing process. These features of higher education admissions are in the context of England, Wales and Northern Ireland being alone internationally in having a system where offers of higher education places are made before any form of entry qualifications are taken.<sup>5</sup> As was argued in the 2019 report on reimagining the higher education admissions system also produced by UCU, *'Higher education admissions have increased in complexity in recent decades as the number of students entering higher education has risen and their backgrounds have become more diverse. Higher education admissions need to be reformed and updated'*.<sup>6</sup>

In order to really address the challenges presented by the existing HE admissions system though, cross-sectoral change will be necessary and these changes will be significant. Such changes will only be effective if they are owned by schools, colleges and HE. The purpose of this report is to examine what changes senior leaders from across these sectors would like to see and whether recent proposals presented by our earlier work resonate with their concerns. It draws upon a cross-sector national survey and face-to-face discussions with sector leaders exploring in detail fairness and transparency in the application and admissions process, as well as what a system could look like in the future.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Between July and September 2019 an electronic survey was circulated to university vice-chancellors and secondary school head teachers across the United Kingdom and college principals in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The survey was available for completion between 1 July and 6 September 2019. The majority of questions required a response based on a Likert scale with some questions allowing free-text responses.

The survey received 128 responses. Of the respondents, 43% came from the higher education sector (a higher education institution or higher education in further education college) with 32% from a secondary school and 25% the further education or sixth form college sector. The majority of respondents were the head of their organisation or a senior leader/teacher (43% and 48% respectively), with 9% of respondents stating that they were a teacher/lecturer. These respondents were drawn from all across the country.



An additional set of five follow-up questions were distributed to respondents who indicated that they would welcome the opportunity to respond to additional questioning. Ten respondents responded to the additional qualitative questioning.

Finally, the Association of Colleges Academic and Sixth Form Policy Group was consulted regarding their views on the higher education admissions system.

**3. VIEWS ON THE PRESENT SYSTEM**

When looking at the present system the fieldwork concentrated on six key areas and the views of responses in relation to these areas are described below.

**HOW THE SYSTEM ENABLES STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES TO MAKE DECISIONS**

It is essential, that as a first principle, the higher education admissions system focuses on student decision making. On balance the majority of respondents (60.5%) felt that the current application process did not enable students to make the best decisions according to their achievements. However, at the same time, nearly 40% of respondents felt that it did. There is strong consistency between the different sectors here – with the percentage feeling that the current process did not allow students to make the best decisions ranging from 76% for schools to then 67% for colleges and 45% for higher education.

**Table 1: The current application process enables students to make the best decisions according to their achievements**

| VALUE             |  | PERCENT | RESPONSES |
|-------------------|--|---------|-----------|
| Strongly agree    |  | 3.2     | 4         |
| Agree             |  | 35.5    | 44        |
| Disagree          |  | 45.2    | 56        |
| Strongly disagree |  | 15.3    | 19        |
| Don't know        |  | 0.8     | 1         |

Totals 124

While the majority of respondents felt that the application system did not enable students to make the best application decisions according to their achievement, there was less agreement on decision-making according to a student’s potential. When asked if the current application process enables students to make the best decisions according to their potential, the response was mixed. Whilst 53.2% of respondents disagree or disagree strongly, 45.3% of respondents agree or agree strongly. As can be seen below the proportion of respondents that agree and disagree is the same, 41.3% respectively. However, when responses are broken down by sector a slightly different picture emerges. 44% of school leaders agree or strongly agree with the proposition below and only 28% of those from further education, but 57% of higher education leaders do.



*The current system forces young people and universities to make decisions too early, based on incomplete data – just as they start studying a course, they have to decide if it's what they want to do at university, and try to find ways of demonstrating in a personal statement the interest they have not necessarily yet developed. [School leader – head of organisation]*

**Table 2: The current application process enables students to make the best decisions according to their potential**

| VALUE             | PERCENT | RESPONSES |
|-------------------|---------|-----------|
| Strongly agree    | 4.0     | 5         |
| Agree             | 41.3    | 52        |
| Disagree          | 41.3    | 52        |
| Strongly disagree | 11.9    | 15        |
| Don't know        | 1.6     | 2         |

Totals 126

Predicted grades play a significant role in the decision-making process for both students and those who assess their applications. The findings suggest that there is wide recognition that the correlation between predicted grades and achieved grades can be poor with 71% of respondents disagreeing or disagreeing strongly that predicted grades are an accurate proxy for final achievement. There is relative consistency in responses across sectors here, although some evidence that higher education (69.8%) and further education (80.7%) leaders have a greater level of concern regarding the limitations of predicted grades and thereby strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the proposition. The figure for schools was 65.9%.

**Table 3: Predicted grades are an accurate proxy for final achievement**

| VALUE             | PERCENT | RESPONSES |
|-------------------|---------|-----------|
| Strongly agree    | 0.8     | 1         |
| Agree             | 25.6    | 32        |
| Disagree          | 52.8    | 66        |
| Strongly disagree | 18.4    | 23        |
| Don't know        | 2.4     | 3         |

Totals 125

### HOW THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR PROVIDES INFORMATION TO STUDENTS

In order to make effective decisions, students need the most accurate information. When asked if advertised grade profiles always match the grade profile of students admitted, four fifths (82.3%) of respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly. Just 8.9%



of respondents said that they agreed, with the same proportion of respondents stating that they did not know. Here we see strong agreement amongst senior leaders that there is information asymmetry on the part of the student in the higher education application process. Again there is consistency across sectors. Interestingly despite being the sector responsible for advertising these grade profiles, over 80% of higher education leaders felt that grade profiles advertised do not match the profiles of students admitted.

**Table 4: Advertised grade profiles always match the grade profiles of students admitted**

| VALUE             | PERCENT | RESPONSES |
|-------------------|---------|-----------|
| Agree             | 8.9     | 11        |
| Disagree          | 59.7    | 74        |
| Strongly disagree | 22.6    | 28        |
| Don't know        | 8.9     | 11        |

Totals 124

Concerns over the relationship between advertised grade profiles and the grade profiles of students who are actually admitted was echoed in the qualitative responses:

*It's becoming clear that many (but not all) universities are using their advertised grade profiles as a form of marketing, going on to admit students with grades well below that level. [Higher education – senior leader/teacher]*

Some respondents were clear that social capital worked to unfairly privilege some students:

*The current system greatly favours those applicants with access to the cultural capital that informs them of how the system works. The great variation between schools, combined with the different levels of knowledge and influence among parents and peers provides an unfair advantage for those who attend 'good' schools... [Higher education – head of organisation]*

**THE ROLE OF CLEARING**

In response to the statement 'students do not always make the best decisions for themselves during clearing', around two thirds (65%) of respondents agreed or agreed strongly while nearly a quarter of respondents, (25%) disagreed strongly or disagreed, whilst 9.8% of respondents said that they did not know. As such, the majority of senior leaders do not believe that students make the best decisions for themselves during clearing. However, when looking at the situation by sector the picture looks different. There is much more support for the current system amongst higher education leaders where nearly 60% support the view that the current application process enables students to make the best decisions according to their potential, as opposed to less than 30% of further education leaders.



Table 5: Students do not always make the best decisions for themselves during clearing

| VALUE             |  | PERCENT | RESPONSES |
|-------------------|--|---------|-----------|
| Strongly agree    |  | 8.1     | 10        |
| Agree             |  | 56.9    | 70        |
| Disagree          |  | 22.8    | 28        |
| Strongly disagree |  | 2.4     | 3         |
| Don't know        |  | 9.8     | 12        |

Totals 123

### THE ROLE OF UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS

The survey showed support for limiting unconditional offer-making, however this support varied considerably by sector. Overall nearly 80% of respondents said that they strongly agreed or agreed that there should be limits to the number of unconditional offers for students with predicted grades. Nearly one fifth (17.5%) of respondents disagreed strongly with the concept of limitations to the number of these offers whilst 3.2% of respondents said that they did not know. However, when these results are analysed by sector some significant differences emerge. Given the profile attached to this issue at present it is worth presenting the results actually by sector in order to capture the nuances of sector difference here.

As Table 6 shows, nearly 98% of leaders in the secondary sector agreed or strongly agreed that there should be limits, alongside 94% of further education and sixth form leaders. In the higher education sector while the majority of respondents did think that there should be limits this majority was slight (57%).

Table 6: I believe there should be limits to the number of unconditional offers to students with predicted grades [by sector]

|                   | SCHOOLS    | FURTHER EDUCATION & SIXTH FORM COLLEGES | HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS |
|-------------------|------------|---|-------------------------------|
|                   | %          | %                                       | %                             |
| Strongly agree    | 73.2       | 78.1                                    | 39.6                          |
| Agree             | 24.4       | 15.6                                    | 17.0                          |
| Disagree          | 2.4        | 3.1                                     | 28.3                          |
| Strongly disagree |            |   | 9.4                           |
| Don't know        |            | 3.1                                     | 5.7                           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>      | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b>                              | <b>100</b>                    |

Note: Percentages rounded to one decimal point



Looking at the detailed feedback from respondents to the survey with regard to this issue there is clearly an aspect of real division across sectors here. It is an issue that can engender quite strong feelings in particular where 'conditional unconditional offers' ie an unconditional offer which is contingent upon an applicant making an institution their first choice amongst all other offers, are concerned.

*Unconditional offers based on inflated predictions are ultimately undermining student attitudes to learning. [School – senior leader/teacher]*

*Unconditional offers should be prohibited in order to promote the value of entry grades and to support the endeavours of teachers and students to achieve the highest outcomes possible. [Further education – head of organisation]*

*The competitiveness of the market is now not simply about the quality of the applicant but also about the quantity, and thus the introduction of unconditional offers is a logical if unwelcome development that now needs to be addressed through a major overhaul of the admissions system that befits the current [higher education] environment. [Higher education – head of organisation]*

*...Unconditional offers that are conditional upon a candidate firmly accepting is fundamentally wrong and tantamount to a bribe. [Higher education – head of organisation]*

## HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS AND FAIRNESS

As shown in Table 7, in response to the statement 'government is doing enough to support fair admissions to higher education' almost two thirds (61.2%) of respondents disagreed strongly or disagreed. Less than one third (29.8%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed'.

**Table 7: Government is doing enough to support fair admission to higher education**

|                   | SCHOOLS    | FURTHER EDUCATION & SIXTH FORM COLLEGES | HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS |
|-------------------|------------|---|-------------------------------|
|                   | %          | %                                       | %                             |
| Strongly agree    | 2.4        | 6.5                                     | 0                             |
| Agree             | 22.0       | 6.5                                     | 44.2                          |
| Disagree          | 41.5       | 35.5                                    | 48.1                          |
| Strongly disagree | 19.5       | 38.7                                    | 5.8                           |
| Don't know        | 14.6       | 12.9                                    | 1.9                           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>      | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b>                              | <b>100</b>                    |

Note: Percentages rounded to one decimal point



### IS THE PRESENT ADMISSIONS SYSTEM FIT FOR PURPOSE?

The final area examined in this section is whether overall the present arrangements are 'fit for purpose'. Overall, a majority (61.6%) of senior leaders felt that the higher education application process is not fit for purpose. Given the strong concerns expressed above about different aspects of the system this probably should not be seen as a surprise. However, as with many of the responses above there are clear differences across sectors here. As Table 8 shows 22% of school leaders agree that the system is fit for purpose while nearly 60% of higher education leaders do.

**Table 8: The higher education application process is fit for purpose**

|                   | SCHOOLS    | FURTHER EDUCATION<br>& SIXTH FORM COLLEGES | HIGHER EDUCATION<br>INSTITUTIONS |
|-------------------|------------|--|----------------------------------|
|                   | %          | %  | %                                |
| Strongly agree    | 0          | 3.1  | 3.8                              |
| Agree             | 22.0       | 12.5                                       | 55.8                             |
| Disagree          | 61.0       | 62.5                                       | 34.6                             |
| Strongly disagree | 17.1       | 15.6                                       | 3.8                              |
| Don't know        | 0          | 6.3  | 1.9                              |
| <b>TOTAL</b>      | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b>                                 | <b>100</b>                       |

Note: Percentages rounded to one decimal point

As the answers to the open questions in the survey revealed, there are differing views regarding the system and how fit for purpose it is.

*Predictive grades can be inaccurate, and it is down to those making them to be as realistic as possible; however, institutions utilise a range of other evidence to inform their selection decisions. By and large the admissions system is fit for purpose; however, the market has changed institution and applicant behaviours. [Higher education – did not say]*

*The present system is used nowhere else in the world for a good reason – it is unfair, unreliable and anti-meritocratic. Having post-qualifications applications would do more at one stroke for social mobility than all the Access agreements and other widening participation initiatives out in place in the last decade. [Further education – head of organisation]*

### 4. HOW COULD THE PRESENT SYSTEM BE IMPROVED?

The overriding conclusion from Section 3 is that in terms of its constituent parts and as a whole there are areas where the HE admissions system can be improved. This section and that which follows look at the views of respondents on potential changes to improve the system. This section concentrates on three broad changes at the point of principle and system design while section 5 examines perspectives on more specific changes.



### SHOULD STUDENTS MAKE DECISIONS LATER?

The timing of 'decisions' is a key part of the HE choice process. Relative to other countries, students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland make a decision on HE course and provider some time before their final examinations and when they enter higher education – as the 2018 UCU report looking at international practice in HE admission showed.

The vast majority of respondents from schools (80.5%) and colleges (78%) favour this kind of change as Table 9 shows. However less than 40% of those in HE support it. This suggests that those working in institutions that largely support students through the application process have differing opinions to those in institutions that assess applications. This answer again reveals how each sector perceives higher education admissions differently.

*It would probably need a January start for the universities, and would create workload issues in schools, who would need to support young people who have left school in making their applications, but it would be a very positive step in terms of benefits for the young people.' [School – head of organisation]*

*There are enormous logistic challenges for both schools and universities in moving to PQA. The 'real world' has defeated an apparently rational idea several times. [Higher education – head of organisation]*

**Table 9: Students would make better choices if they applied to university later in the year than they currently do [by sector]**

|                   | SCHOOLS    | FURTHER EDUCATION & SIXTH FORM COLLEGES | HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS |
|-------------------|------------|---|-------------------------------|
|                   | %          | %                                       | %                             |
| Strongly agree    | 26.8       | 15.6                                    | 3.8                           |
| Agree             | 53.7       | 62.5                                    | 32.7                          |
| Disagree          | 14.6       | 6.3                                     | 40.4                          |
| Strongly disagree | 2.4        | 6.3                                     | 5.8                           |
| Don't know        | 2.4        | 9.4                                     | 17.3                          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>      | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b>                              | <b>100</b>                    |

Note: Percentages rounded to one decimal point

### SHOULD STUDENTS KNOW THEIR GRADES WHEN THEY APPLY FOR HE?

In terms of students knowing their grades when they apply to HE, a fundamental aspect of any post-qualifications system, the majority of respondents – just over 75% – think that knowledge of grades when applying would lead to better choices. But as Table 11 shows, over 90% of those in schools and colleges think that it would help them better choices. However, only 47% of those in HE feel this way. Opinion is clearly divided in the HE sector with a significant minority unsure as to their view. This finding, however, is crucial in demonstrating that the majority of senior leaders across the education sector



feel that choice-making would be improved by students having an accurate understanding of their exam achievement when making application decisions.

**Table 10: Students would make better choices if they knew their grades when applying to university [by sector]**

|                   | SCHOOLS    | FURTHER EDUCATION<br>& SIXTH FORM COLLEGES | HIGHER EDUCATION<br>INSTITUTIONS |
|-------------------|------------|--|----------------------------------|
|                   | %          | %  | %                                |
| Strongly agree    | 62.5       | 45.2                                       | 9.4                              |
| Agree             | 35.0       | 41.9                                       | 37.7                             |
| Disagree          | 2.5        | 6.5  | 34.0                             |
| Strongly disagree | 0          | 3.2  | 0                                |
| Don't know        | 0          | 3.2  | 18.9                             |
| <b>TOTAL</b>      | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b>                                 | <b>100</b>                       |

Note: Percentages rounded to one decimal point

### SHOULD A POST-QUALIFICATIONS ADMISSIONS SYSTEM BE EXPLORED FURTHER?

Given the findings above, as Table 11 shows, opinion continues to be split across sectors. Virtually every senior leader who completed the survey thinks that a system whereby students apply to university after they have received their results should be explored further. However, the greater support for exploring a change in the system amongst school and further education leaders relative to higher education leaders means that overall more than four in five (82.5%) of leaders support further exploration of a post-qualification HE admissions system.

**Table 11: I believe a system whereby students apply to university after they have received their results should be explored further [by sector]**

|                   | SCHOOLS    | FURTHER EDUCATION<br>& SIXTH FORM COLLEGES | HIGHER EDUCATION<br>INSTITUTIONS |
|-------------------|------------|--|----------------------------------|
|                   | %          | %  | %                                |
| Strongly agree    | 62.5       | 45.2                                       | 9.4                              |
| Agree             | 35.0       | 41.9                                       | 37.7                             |
| Disagree          | 2.5        | 6.5  | 34.0                             |
| Strongly disagree | 0          | 3.2  | 0                                |
| Don't know        | 0          | 3.2  | 18.9                             |
| <b>TOTAL</b>      | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b>                                 | <b>99.9</b>                      |

Note: Percentages rounded to one decimal point



The reasons that respondents favoured further work on a post qualifications varied.

*The current admissions process is very difficult to manage as you want to ensure a student has the best possible chance of getting a place but is capable of achieving the required grades and accessing their future course. It would be much easier after results to then apply. [School – senior leader/teacher]*

*The system needs reform in the interests of our collective socio-economic interests as well as the life-chances of individuals' [Further education – head of organisation]*

*Huge amount of time and effort is wasted in handling applications and making offers that come to nothing. Post qualification system may be better but the time would be tight for this. [Higher education – senior leader/teacher]*

In terms of the issues to be examined then, the provision of information, advice and guidance, in particular for disadvantaged students, was seen as a vital prerequisite in any future system that was based on a post-qualifications system.

*I am supportive of further exploration of a post-results model. However, there are important areas for investigation including the feedback between student performance and targets set through conditional offers... similarly, careful realistic consideration needs to be given to the time required to complete the process with appropriate advice and guidance, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. [Higher education – senior leader/teacher]*

*Students would only make better decisions post results if they were supported by effective information, advice and guidance. Having their results would be useful and would save a lot of administration and time, but only if accompanied by the context in which these results had been achieved. [Higher education – senior leader/teacher]*

There are undoubted reservations though amongst senior leaders where a post-qualifications admission system is concerned. They focused in the main on the extent of the challenges in implementation and their practicality.

*the practical difficulties outweigh the potential disadvantages', [Higher education – senior leader/teacher]*

*Although there is a reasonably strong case for introducing PQA, it would be a major policy change with implications for all parts of the education system, with significant resistance/opportunity costs. I am not convinced it is the most important priority with work on contextualised admissions, quota, better measures of disadvantage etc. coming higher. [Higher education – senior leader/teacher]*



## 5 THE SYSTEM IN THE FUTURE

It is clear from the responses above that there is significant support amongst senior leaders from across sectors for reforms to the present HE admissions system, and almost universal support for changes to particular aspects of the system from those in schools and colleges. The HE sector remains a little more wedded to the system as it is, primarily it appears from the qualitative work due to concerns over the practical challenges thrown up by systemic change. However, even in this group there is an honest appraisal of the shortcomings of the present system and an acknowledgement of the room for improvement.

The survey also explored in a little more detail levels of support for more specific changes to the system. These changes correspond to the proposals put forward by UCU in the January 2019 paper *'Post-qualification application: a student centred model for higher education'*.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of this paper was to 'reimagine' the HE admissions system seeing HE admissions as constituting three phases:

- Supporting choice making
- Application and decision making
- Entry into higher education

In this context there were a number of key features the report argued would be crucial in the successful implementation of a post-qualifications HE admissions system which respondents were asked their view on. These features were:

- a minimum of 10 hours information, advice and guidance per student between years 10-13
- a dedicated week-long exploration of future learning and employment options for all Level 3 students at the end of year 12/first year of Level 3 course
- an online questionnaire about course choice modelled on the 'Study Choice' check system in the Netherlands
- students able to make non-binding expressions of interest to institutions they would like to explore in the January of year of application. After their expression of interest, students will receive information in the form of 'study choice packs'.
- a later start date for first year students in higher education

In additions respondents were asked their views on:

- the examination timetable for Level 3 qualifications
- when examination results were published
- whether Level 3 examinations should be reformed.



Given that a distinguishing feature of the responses to the questions on the system thus far have been levels of difference between the three sectors in this section, the responses are presented by sector.

### SCHOOLS LEADERS ON THE FUTURE OF THE SYSTEM

As Table 12 below shows school leaders are in favour of reforming the system in all of the suggested areas apart from changing the Level 3 examination timetable or reforming the nature of these examinations. Given the extent of reforms over the last decade and also the pressures on teaching at this level in the time that is available to schools, reticence here is perfectly understandable. Where there is particular support is for earlier publication of examination results and also the 10 hours of information, advice and guidance. Overall there is support for the dedicated week of future learning and employment options at 60%.

Table 12: Views of school leaders on the future of the system

|  | STRONGLY AGREE | AGREE | DISAGREE | STRONGLY DISAGREE | DON'T KNOW | TOTAL |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|------------|-------|
|  | %              | %     | %        | %                 | %          | %     |
| Earlier examination timetable for Level 3 qualifications   | 7.3            | 22    | 51.2     | 17.1              | 2.4        | 100   |
| Earlier publication of examination results   | 32.4           | 43.2  | 18.9     | 5.4               | 0          | 100   |
| A later start date for first year students in higher education                                       | 33.3           | 54.6  | 9.1      | 3.0               | 0          | 100   |
| Students able to make non-binding expressions of interest to institutions they would like to explore | 12.1           | 54.6  | 6.1      | 0                 | 27.3       | 100   |
| Level 3 examination reform   | 3.2            | 22.6  | 35.6     | 25.8              | 12.9       | 100   |
| An online questionnaire about course choice  | 19.5           | 48.8  | 12.2     | 2.4               | 17.1       | 100   |
| A minimum of 10 hours 10-13 information, advice and guidance per student between years               | 31.7           | 51.2  | 7.3      | 2.4               | 7.3        | 100   |
| A dedicated week-long exploration of future learning and employment options for all Level 3 students | 19.5           | 41.5  | 22       | 2.4               | 14.7       | 100   |



### FURTHER EDUCATION LEADERS ON THE FUTURE OF THE SYSTEM

Where further education leaders were concerned it is interesting that there is significantly more support for changes to the examinations timetable and examination reform. However, only a minority of respondents (less than 40%) actually support changes to the timetable. Again there is strong support at over 80% for the 10 hour commitment and also the week exploring future options for Level 3 students. With the online questionnaire there is a relatively high percentage of respondents who are unsure which will reflect the fact that this is the newest element of the system suggested in the January 2019 paper and will need articulating.

Table 13: Views of further education leaders on the future of the system

|  | STRONGLY AGREE | AGREE | DISAGREE | STRONGLY DISAGREE | DON'T KNOW | TOTAL |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|------------|-------|
|  | %              | %     | %        | %                 | %          | %     |
| Earlier examination timetable for Level 3 qualifications   | 6.3            | 31.3  | 28.1     | 34.4              | 0          | 100   |
| Earlier publication of examination results   | 6.5            | 77.4  | 3.2      | 9.7               | 3.2        | 100   |
| A later start date for first year students in higher education                                       | 14.3           | 53.6  | 28.9     | 0                 | 3.6        | 100   |
| Students able to make non-binding expressions of interest to institutions they would like to explore | 6.9            | 79.3  | 10.3     | 3.5               | 0          | 100   |
| Level 3 examination reform   | 24.1           | 31    | 37.9     | 6.9               | 0          | 100   |
| An online questionnaire about course choice  | 12.9           | 48.4  | 9.7      | 0                 | 29         | 100   |
| A minimum of 10 hours information, advice and guidance per student between years 10-13               | 38.7           | 45.2  | 12.9     | 0                 | 3.2        | 100   |
| A dedicated week-long exploration of future learning and employment options for all Level 3 students | 15.6           | 56.3  | 15.6     | 0                 | 12.5       | 100   |



### VIEWS OF HE LEADERS ON THE FUTURE OF THE SYSTEM

The responses of the HE sector, as with those in the previous two tables, reflect to a considerable extent, the knowledge that sector has of the system. There is significant support at over 70% for Level 3 timetable reform, and over 90% favour the earlier publication of examination results. Looking at these responses, support for the 10 hours of information, advice and guidance support and the future choices week also now appears universal. It is also interesting that the majority of respondents support a later start date for first year students entering HE and the introduction of the online questionnaire about course choice.

Table 14: Views of higher education providers' leaders on the future of the system

|  | STRONGLY AGREE | AGREE | DISAGREE | STRONGLY DISAGREE | DON'T KNOW | TOTAL |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|------------|-------|
|  | %              | %     | %        | %                 | %          | %     |
| Earlier examination timetable for Level 3 qualifications   | 25             | 48.1  | 17.3     | 1.9               | 7.7        | 100   |
| Earlier publication of examination results   | 30.8           | 61.6  | 3.9      | 0                 | 3.9        | 100   |
| A later start date for first year students in higher education                                       | 10.2           | 51.0  | 20.4     | 10.2              | 8.2        | 100   |
| Students able to make non-binding expressions of interest to institutions they would like to explore | 6.1            | 51    | 26.5     | 4.1               | 12.2       | 100   |
| Level 3 examination reform   | 6.1            | 28.6  | 24.5     | 2                 | 38.8       | 100   |
| An online questionnaire about course choice  | 9.6            | 44.2  | 17.3     | 5.8               | 23.1       | 100   |
| A minimum of 10 hours information, advice and guidance per student between years 10-13               | 25             | 59.6  | 3.9      | 1.9               | 9.6        | 100   |
| A dedicated week-long exploration of future learning and employment options for all Level 3 students | 15.1           | 49.1  | 15.1     | 3.8               | 17         | 100   |

### THE FUTURE SYSTEM

There is a relatively high level of support from across sectors for the changes advocated in the 2019 UCU paper on reimagining the HE system. In particular, there is support for a later start to year 1 for HE students and more systematic information, advice and guidance provision. There appears, though, underlying the answers a consensus that significant and meaningful change will require a change in how the key parts of the system are delivered.



This implies giving more time for students and organisations to engage with HE admissions between taking Level 3 examinations and entering HE. Where there are differing views is regarding how this longer window should be created. It is worth stating here that in the 2019 paper key stakeholders in admissions were consulted including those involved in the marking of examinations. They were strongly of the view that with Level 3 examinations in their current form, reducing the time available to mark these examinations would not be feasible. This makes supporting earlier publication of examination results, while not supporting changing the Level 3 examination timetable and/or reform of these examinations, a difficult position to hold.

### LEARNING FROM OUR NEIGHBOURS

In addition to the closed questions examined in this section respondents were invited to share their wider views regarding how the HE system could be reformed. A particular theme emerging from these responses was the case for examining HE admissions systems in countries close to England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

*A fairer system is for a student to rank choices and for all to be selected on publication of results based on ranked choices. The Republic of Ireland system is much fairer for students. [School – senior leader/teacher]*

*As I am in Scotland, all of these issues aren't really apparent as the vast majority of students apply in S6 having already received their Higher grade results which are the bases on which their offers are made. [School – senior leader/teacher]*

*'There are many lessons to be learned from the Scottish system where applicants take Highers at the end of the fifth year but do not generally progress to university until after sixth year. While some applicants will apply to university at the start of fifth year and may then sit through sixth year with an unconditional offer if they meet the grades, others will leave applying until sixth year when they know how they have performed and whether they need to pick up any additional qualifications in sixth year. The concept of adding to a portfolio of qualifications is much more akin to how we develop through life and thus could be explored further.' [Higher education – head of organisation]*

Both Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have quite different educational systems to that in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish system of upper secondary education in particular offers different routes into higher education and into a system which with a greater focus on higher education delivered in further education settings is in some ways more diverse. However, Scotland is an example of a system which is instructive to examine to inform any potential admissions reform.



## THE TIME FOR CHANGE

This report has shown conclusively that there are leaders from across sectors who believe that higher education admissions can be improved. In some areas there is consensus regarding the problem and the potential solution – in particular the limitation of predicted grades and the importance of information, advice and guidance. In others there are considerable levels of contrast – for example limiting unconditional offers and changing the Level 3 examination timetable. What is evident is that there is a greater support for system changes from schools and further education leaders. There is clearly some real frustration with elements of the system from those who actually have the responsibility for supporting students through the admissions process.

It is understandable that reviews of the admissions system are led by the HE sector. However, HE admissions is a genuinely cross sectoral endeavour. In the context of the concerns across parties and the education system regarding the impact of Covid 19 on students from more disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, it is vital that HE admissions is more joined up.

In moving forward this research suggests that a new system is needed which gives equal ownership of it those sending students and those receiving them. On the basis of the findings above a system that is based on post-qualification rather than pre-qualification entry would be an essential part of such a new system.

Covid-19 has produced some unprecedented challenges for the HE admissions system. It has shown that it is possible to change how the admissions system works, albeit forcing it down an opposite road to the one favoured by the majority of leaders in this report. This potential for change needs to be harnessed. There is a unique opportunity here for the government after it has highlighted the issue of admissions in their manifesto to craft a system which can meet the needs of students entering HE in the 21st century rather than those in the mid-20th.

The evidence in this report shows that such a system, based around a post-qualifications admissions approach, is not only possible but would command support from senior leaders from across sectors.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-backs-review-of-university-admissions>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/Pages/fair-admissions-review.aspx>

<sup>3</sup>OWyness, (2016), Predicted grades: accuracy and impact, available at:  
[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec16/pdf/Predicted\\_grades\\_report\\_Dec2016.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec16/pdf/Predicted_grades_report_Dec2016.pdf)

<sup>4</sup><https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/7aa7b69b-f340-4e72-ac0f-a3486d4dc09a/insight-1-unconditionaloffers.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Atherton, G. (2018) Post Qualifications Admissions: How it works across the world  
London:UCU

<sup>6</sup> Atherton, G & Nartey, A (2019) Post-qualification application: a student-centred model  
for higher education admissions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales London:UCU

<sup>7</sup> Atherton, G. and Nartey, A.,(2019), 'Post-qualification application: a student centred  
model for higher education', London: UCU. Available at:  
<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/9835/Post-qualification-application-a-student-centred-model>



## Appendix 1: Questionnaire

### THE FUTURE OF ADMISSIONS

This questionnaire has been designed to gather opinions on the subject of higher education admissions from professionals from across the education sector. In order to gain an understanding of the views of the profession on this subject, we would like you to answer in a personal capacity rather than giving the formal policy of your organisation.

This work is being led by UCU and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON).

### About you

1. Which sector do you work in? [select box]

- Higher education
- Higher education in a further education college
- Further education college
- Sixth form college
- School
- Other - please state \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please indicate your role [select box]

- Head of organisation
- Senior leader/teacher
- Teacher/lecturer

### Current system and its challenges

1. The current application process enables students to make the best decisions according to their achievements

Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know

2. The current application process enables students to make the best decisions according to their potential

Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know

3. Predicted grades are an accurate proxy for final achievement

Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know

4. Students do not always make the best decisions for themselves during clearing

Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know

5. Students have equal access to information, advice and guidance on higher education admissions

Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know



6. I believe there should be limits to the number of unconditional offers to students with predicted grades  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
7. Predicting grades is a good use of teacher time  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
8. Advertised grade profiles always match the grade profiles of students admitted  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
9. The higher education application process is fit for purpose  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
10. Government is doing enough to support fair admission to higher education  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
11. The higher education sector could do more to support fair admission to higher education  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
12. Please use this space to outline any comments you may have on the challenges of the current admissions system

### Exploring solutions to the challenges

1. Students would make better choices if they applied to university later in the year than they currently do  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
2. Students would make better choices if they knew their grades when applying to university  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
3. I believe a system whereby students apply to university after they have received their results should be explored further  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
4. I believe a system whereby students apply to university after they have received their results would be fairer for:
  - a. Students
  - b. Admissions staff
 Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know



5. Removing the need for predicted grades would reduce teacher workload  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
6. Applying to university later in the year would enable students to focus on their Level 3 studies more than at present  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
7. Please use the this free text space to outline any comments you may have on solutions to the challenges of the current admissions system

#### Future admissions

1. In a system where students apply to university after then have received their grades, the following should be explored:
  - a. Earlier examination timetable for Level 3 qualifications  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
  - b. Earlier publication of examination results  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
  - c. A later start date for first year students in higher education  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
  - d. Students able to make non-binding expressions of interest to institutions they would like to explore  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
  - e. Greater use of contextualised offers  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
  - f. Level 3 examination reform  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
  - g. Greater support information, advice and guidance during term time  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know
  - h. Removing the predicted grades system  
Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know



**2. An online questionnaire about course choice could help students to understand more about their chosen course before applying**

Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know

3. Between years 10-13, students should receive a minimum of 10 hours per year of information, advice and guidance in relation to their post-18 options.

Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know

4. All Level 3 students should complete a dedicated week-long exploration of their future learning and employment options.

Strongly agree|Agree|Disagree|Strongly disagree|Don't know

5. Please use this space to outline any comments you have on a system whereby students apply to university after they have received their grades.

**Focus group and interview**

1. If you would like to be contacted to participate in an interview or focus group please leave your contact details here. Please note that your contact information will be held separately to your survey responses.

This data will be used solely for this purpose and held securely. The processing of personal data by UCU shall be in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the data will be deleted after three months.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Role \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Contact telephone number \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix 2: Follow up questions

- 1) What are the key elements that a PQA system would need in order to be effective?
- 2) What are the merits of PQA from a student perspective?
- 3) How do you think a PQA system could assist in addressing inequalities in access and participation between students from different backgrounds?
- 4) Are the differences between student potential and student achievement well balanced in the current application process?
- 5) What do you think are the main challenges to be addressed in the implementation of a PQA system?



Produced by University and College Union, Carlow Street, London NW1 7LH

T: 020 7756 2500 W: [www.ucu.org.uk](http://www.ucu.org.uk) August 2020

