



BRIEFING PAPER

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The review of university admissions

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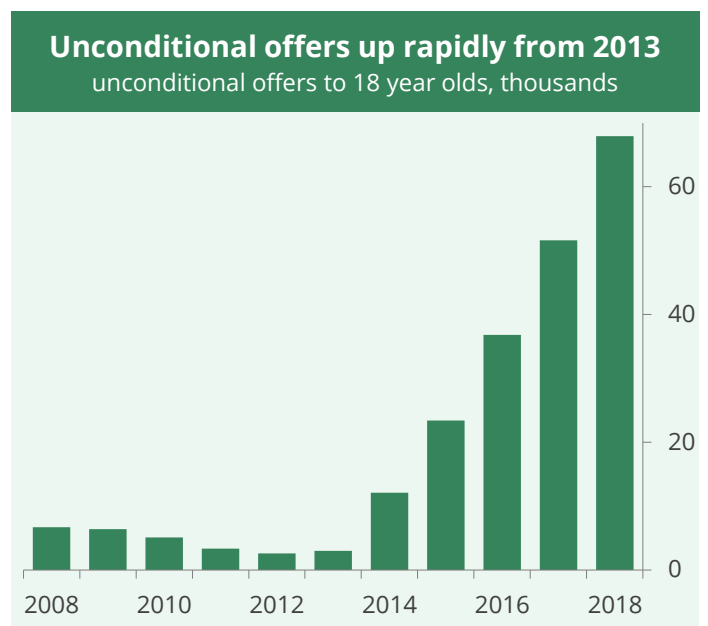
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Summary

In the UK prospective students apply for university places through the UCAS administrative system. Students applying through UCAS are required to submit various types of information including: predicted exam grades, a personal statement and academic references. Universities assess the information provided by candidates and offer students places based on a holistic assessment of all the data provided.

The university admissions system has been under scrutiny for decades and reviews have been conducted such as the Schwartz Review in 2004. Tweaks have been made to the system as a result of these reviews, but a number of criticisms remain. Current concerns are focused on the use of predicted grades and unconditional offers and in particular on their impact on disadvantaged students.

The minority of university offers are unconditional, but the share of all offers made that were recorded as unconditional has increased significantly, from 9.2 per cent in 2013, to 15.1 per cent in 2018. Most unconditional offers are made to older students, but the unconditional offer rate for 18 year olds has driven the overall increase in unconditional offers; up from less than 1% of offers to this age group in 2013, to 7.1% in 2018. 23% of 18 year olds received an unconditional offer in 2018, or 34% if all offers with any unconditional component are included. Unconditional offers are more common at universities with lower entry requirements. In 2013 just 16 universities had unconditional offer rates to 18 year olds of 1% or more. In 2018 this number had increased to 84.



This rise in unconditional offers has been attributed to the increasingly competitive market in higher education and the raising of tuition fees in 2012. The rapid rise in the number of unconditional offers made is seen as concerning as unconditional offers may be demotivating for students and lead to under achievement in exams.

Various reforms have been suggested to the admissions system such as moving to some type of post qualification application (PQA) scheme and the increased use of contextualised admissions. On 14 August 2019 the Labour Party announced its support for a PQA system.

On 5 April the Education Secretary, Damian Hinds announced that the Department for Education would conduct a review of university admissions practices with a focus on unconditional offers and widening participation. The OFS is expected to launch this review later in the year. On 22 July 2019 UUK launched its own separate review of admissions.

1. University admissions

In the UK prospective students apply for university places through the UCAS administrative system. Students applying for university places through UCAS must submit various types of information including the grades that their school predicts they will achieve in their exams. Universities assess the information provided by candidates and offer students places based on a holistic assessment of all the data provided.

Various aspects of the university admission system such as the use of predicted grades have been questioned for a number of years and reforms to the system, such as moving to a post qualification application (PQA) scheme, have been suggested.

Recent debate around university admissions has focused on the use of unconditional offers by universities. The use of these offers has increased in recent years and this change is seen as concerning as unconditional offers may be de-motivating for students and lead to under achievement in exams.

1.1 Predicted grades

The use of predicted grades for university admissions has been questioned for a long time. Many critics argue that predicted grades should not be used for university entry because they are not sufficiently accurate and it has been suggested that disadvantaged students in particular lose out under this system.

A report by UCAS in 2016, [Factors associated with predicted and achieved A level attainment](#), stated that achieved A level grades are **on average lower** than those indicated by predicted grades:

In 2015, just over half of all English 18 year old applicants missed their predicted attainment over three A levels by two or more grades; an increase of 34 per cent since 2010.¹

The report found that certain groups of students tended to be over predicted in their grades:

..even after taking other factors into account, lower attainment relative to predicted grades was associated with the following factors.

- Having higher predicted grades (in contrast to the overall association).
- Having lower prior GCSE attainment (for a particular level of predicted grades).
- Those studying certain A level subjects, such as the combination of biology, chemistry, and mathematics.
- Applicants with a firm choice at a provider with lower average qualifications on entry.

¹ UCAS, [Factors associated with predicted and achieved A level attainment](#), August 2016

- Applicants in the Asian, Black, Mixed, and Other ethnic groups.
- Applicants with a firm choice that has no academic conditions attached to it (sometimes called an 'unconditional offer')
- Applicants from disadvantaged areas.
- Women applicants.²

Bodies such as the [Sutton Trust](#)³ have argued against the use of predicted grades suggesting that they can lead to disadvantaged students ending up at less prestigious universities:

The rationale for PQA is that **teachers tend to underestimate the grades of some of their pupils from disadvantaged homes**. They end up accepting places at less prestigious universities on the basis of low predicted grades. By the end of August when they are clutching their string of As and Bs, all the places on the most competitive courses are already gone. The Sutton Trust reckons that each year **several thousand pupils unjustly miss out on places at Russell Group institutions as a result of this**.⁴

A report by the Universities and Colleges Union, [Predicted grades: accuracy and impact](#), December 2016, also criticised the use of predicted grades and suggested that grades were more accurately predicted by independent schools:

I find evidence that the system of predicted grades is inaccurate. **Only 16% of applicants achieved the A-level grade points that they were predicted to achieve**, based on their best three A-levels. However, the vast majority (75% of applicants) were over-predicted – ie their grades were predicted to be higher than they actually achieved. **Students from disadvantaged backgrounds and state schools are more likely to be over-predicted**, whilst those at independent schools receive more accurate predictions. However, accuracy varies dramatically according to the A-level attainment of the student with lower attaining applicants far more likely to have their grades over-predicted. Therefore, after controlling for prior attainment and background characteristics, students from state schools are actually less likely to be overpredicted than those in independent and grammar schools.

Meanwhile, at the top of the attainment distribution, grades are slightly more likely to be under-predicted, and among these high-attaining students, applicants from low income backgrounds are significantly more likely to have their grades under-predicted than those from high-income backgrounds. This is important because under-predicted candidates are also more likely to apply to, and to be accepted to a university which they are overqualified for. This could in turn affect their future labour market outcomes.

“the majority of incorrectly predicted grades were accurate within one grade”

Wonke, A
[beginner's guide to post-qualification admissions](#). 14 January 2019

² UCAS, [Factors associated with predicted and achieved A level attainment](#), August 2016 p3

³ Sutton Trust, [Rules of the Game](#), 2017

⁴ [“Post-qualification applications: good for access but not a practical option”](#), *The Guardian*, 21 September 2011

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A *BBC News* article ['Ditch predicted grades' from university admissions](#), 19 June 2018 said that the UK was unusual among developed countries in using predicted grades:

Universities in the UK should stop using predicted grades when people are applying for places, say lecturers and head teachers.

A study from the University and College Union says no other developed country uses such a system of forecasts of results for university admissions.

The lecturers say most predicted grades turn out to be incorrect.

Head teachers have backed calls for a change, saying the current approach is "no longer fit for purpose".

A study from the UCU lecturers' union has examined admissions systems from 30 major countries and found no others using the UK's approach of pupils applying on the basis of grades predicted by their teachers.

[...]

The report from lecturers calls for an "urgent overhaul" of the application system, so that pupils would know their actual exam grades before making their final applications.

"We are alone in the world in using a system where students are offered university places based on highly inaccurate predicted grades," said UCU leader Sally Hunt.

The calls for a review of the application system - and ditching the reliance on predicted grades - was backed by the ASCL head teachers' union.

"Out of date and no longer fit for purpose, it is a historical quirk which is not mirrored in other countries and creates unnecessary problems," said Malcolm Trobe, the ASCL's deputy general secretary.

He said that there might be practical challenges - such as the timetable for applications - "but we do not believe these are insurmountable".

2. Unconditional offers

Universities are autonomous bodies and they have complete discretion over their admissions processes - they set their own entry requirements and assessment methods, and determine the level of prior attainment and potential required to secure both an offer and a place.

Universities make offers of places to prospective students on a conditional or an unconditional basis.

An **unconditional offer** means that the student has been offered a secure place regardless of their future exam grades.

Conditional offers mean that the applicant's university place is dependent on meeting certain requirements – normally on achieving specific exam grades.

Prospective students may also receive a conditional offer that changes to unconditional if they firmly accept it (as their first choice). These are known as **conditional unconditional offers**.

The UCAS webpage, [UCAS Undergraduate: types of offer](#), explains the difference between conditional and unconditional offers.

Historically most prospective students received offers of places on a conditional basis and unconditional offers were generally only used for students who had confirmed exam grades or who had demonstrated sufficient attainment and potential to succeed on their chosen programme. However there has been recent concern about the **increased use of conditional offers** for applicants who have not taken their exams. It has been suggested that this is the result of greater competition between universities for students linked to higher tuition fees in England (from 2012), falling numbers of 18 year olds and the removal of the cap on student numbers (from 2015).

2.1 Numbers of student receiving unconditional offers

A detailed analysis of unconditional offer-making to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales was set out in two chapters of the UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018:

- [Unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales.](#)
- [Patterns of unconditional offer-making by providers](#)

Scotland was excluded from the UCAS analysis, because many Scottish students have already received SQA Higher results at the time of their application.

An article in the *Guardian*, [One-third of 18-year-old university applicants get unconditional offer](#), 29 November 2018, discussed the report.

22.9 per cent of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, **more than one in five**, received at least one **unconditional offer** in 2017/18.

UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018

The UCAS report stated that the **minority of offers are unconditional**, but the share of all offers made that were recorded as unconditional **has increased, from 9.2 per cent in 2013, to 15.1 per cent in 2018**.⁵

The table opposite summarises headline numbers for 18 year olds.

The proportion of offers made to 18 year olds that were unconditional fell from 0.9% in 2008 to 0.3% in 2012 before increasing to 7.1% in 2018. **The rate in 2018 was highest in England at 7.6% compared to 4.9% in Wales and 0.1% in Northern Ireland.**

As applicants make multiple applications the **proportion of them who received at least one unconditional offer is higher; 22.9% of 18 year olds in 2018, up from less than 1% in 2012.**

Totals are also illustrated in the chart opposite

Most unconditional offers are made to applicants aged 19 and over. However, since 2013, the share of **all unconditional offers made to applicants aged 19 and over has fallen**, and the **proportion offered to 18 year old applicants has increased significantly:**

In 2018, providers made about 68,000 unconditional offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, compared to about 3,000 in 2013, with the share of unconditional offers increasing from 0.4 per cent to 7.1 per cent in 2018.

[...]

In 2013, 2 per cent of all unconditional offers made to applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales were made to 18 year olds, but by 2018 this had increased to 32 per cent.

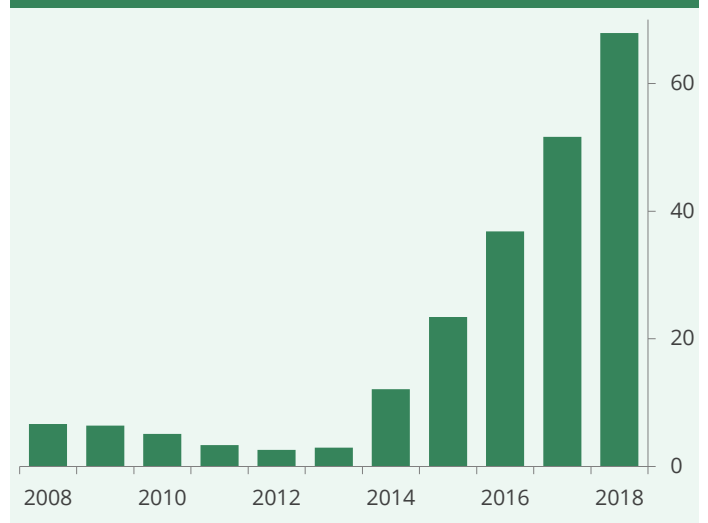
Older prospective students were still more likely to receive unconditional offers. 29.1% of offers to 19 year olds were unconditional (compared to 7.1% of offers to 18 year olds), increasing to more than 35% for offers to those in their early to mid-20s.

Unconditional offers to 18 year olds applicants from England, Northern Ireland and Wales

	Number	% of offers to 18 year olds	18 year olds with 1 or more
2008	6,675	0.9%	2.4%
2009	6,395	0.8%	2.2%
2010	5,105	0.6%	1.7%
2011	3,355	0.4%	1.2%
2012	2,605	0.3%	0.9%
2013	2,985	0.4%	1.1%
2014	12,115	1.4%	4.5%
2015	23,410	2.5%	8.5%
2016	36,825	3.9%	12.9%
2017	51,615	5.3%	17.5%
2018	67,915	7.1%	22.9%

Source: [End of cycle report 2018](#) (and earlier), Ucas

Unconditional offers up rapidly from 2013 unconditional offers to 18 year olds, thousands



⁵ UCAS, [UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018, from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales Unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds](#) p13

Variations between universities

In 2013 just 16 universities had unconditional offer rates to 18 year olds of 1% or more. In 2018 this number had increased to 84. No universities had unconditional offer rates to 18 year old of 20% or more in 2013, while 18 had rates this high in 2018. At **eight universities in 2018 50% or more of offers to 18 year olds were unconditional.**

Unconditional offers are much more common at lower tariff universities - these are the third of providers where applicants have the lowest tariff points (qualification levels). In 2018 the unconditional offer rate to 18 year olds at these universities was 14.0% compared to 8.2% at medium and 1.2% at high tariff universities. **Unconditional offer rates at high tariff universities have changed little over the past five years.**⁶

An article in the *Guardian*, [20 universities account for bulk of rise in unconditional places](#), has a chart showing the universities which make the highest number of unconditional offers; the article stated that “the University of Suffolk, York St John University and the University of Bolton, made more than 70% of their offers unconditional in 2018.”⁷

Difference in unconditional offers by subject

The UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018 showed that the number of unconditional offers made to applicants varied with subjects:

The landscape of unconditional offer-making is not uniform across different course types, with patterns varying significantly by the subject applied for. In 2018, **18 per cent of offers made to young people for creative arts and design courses were unconditional**, compared to **0.3 per cent for medicine and dentistry courses**. This reflects that an audition or portfolio review is normally a core part of the assessment for a creative arts and design course. The demonstration of potential via this form of assessment often carries more weight in reaching an admissions decision than examination results.⁸

Unconditional offers and predicted grades

The UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018 also showed a change over time in the link between unconditional offers and predicted grades, with a change towards offering **unconditional offers to students with lower predicted grades:**

2014 and 2015, applicants predicted AAA were most likely to receive an unconditional offer, but in 2018, applicants predicted BBC became the most likely. Applicants with higher predicted grades are, however, much more likely to receive a conditional unconditional offer.

The unconditional offer rate at universities with the least well qualified entrants **was more than ten times higher** than at those with the highest qualified entrants .

Unconditional offers are most likely to be made for **creative arts and design courses** and least likely for **medicine and dentistry** courses.

UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018

⁶ UCAS, [2018 End of Cycle Report](#), Chapter 7

⁷ “[20 universities account for bulk of rise in unconditional places](#),” The Guardian, 31 January 2019

⁸ UCAS, [UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018, from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales Unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds](#) p6

Unconditional offers and widening participation

Unconditional offers have been used by some providers as part of their widening participation strategy, this approach to increasing access was raised in the UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018:

As outlined in some of the cases studies in this report, a number of providers use unconditional offers as a tool **to support their widening participation goals**. The last five years have seen increases in unconditional offers made to 18 year olds across all POLAR4 quintiles. However, **applicants from quintiles 1 and 2 (least advantaged) were more likely to be in receipt of unconditional offers (27.7 per cent for both) in 2018, compared to applicants from quintile 5 (most advantaged),** of which 18.1 per cent were likely to have received an unconditional offer. However, **applicants from quintile 5 are more likely to hold a conditional unconditional offer** (22.3 per cent) than those from quintile 1 (19.2 per cent). This is likely to **relate to patterns observed in relation to predicted grades**, with those in the most advantaged areas generally being predicted to achieve higher grades than those in more disadvantaged areas.⁹

A spokesperson for the MillionPlus group of universities said that using unconditional offers for students from disadvantaged groups was valid and necessary:

Greg Walker, chief executive of the MillionPlus group of universities, said unconditional offers were a longstanding part of the system.

"Higher education plays a major role in narrowing educational gaps that occur in primary and secondary education," he said, "and since the evidence shows that lower socio-economic status is correlated to lower prior attainment, using unconditional offers to support students with the potential to succeed is a valid and necessary approach to enable social equality."¹⁰

The government's view of the use of unconditional offers for widening participation purposes was given in answer to a PQ in December 2018:

Universities: Admissions: Written question - HL12310

The Lord Bishop of Winchester: 13 December 2018

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps the Office for Students is taking to encourage universities to use unconditional and other alternative offers to widen participation by minority groups including those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: 20 December 2018

Widening participation is a priority for this government. We want to ensure that everyone with the potential to benefit from a university education has the opportunity to do so, regardless of their background or where they grew up. Significant progress has been made in recent years; in 2018, 18-year olds from

⁹ UCAS, [UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018, from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales Unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds](#) p6

¹⁰ ["Clampdown on luring students with unconditional offers"](#), BBC News, 25 January 2019

disadvantaged backgrounds were 52% more likely to enter full-time higher education than in 2009.

However, we have made clear our expectation that the Office for Students (OfS) will challenge universities to make greater progress in widening access and participation.

For example, we have asked the OfS to explore further the use of contextual information in university admissions, such as whether an applicant comes from a low participation neighbourhood or attends a school that does not send many students to university.

We expect universities to use unconditional offers responsibly. There are cases where the use of unconditional offers can be justified, however the systematic use of unconditional offers is not in the interest of students. [HL Deb 20 December 2018]

2.2 Conditional unconditional offers

An offer made by a provider which is originally stated as being conditional and is converted to an unconditional offer once the applicant selects that offer as their firm (first) choice is known as a conditional unconditional offer.

Conditional unconditional offers appear to be targeted towards higher achieving applicants, most probably to attract these students. The number of conditional unconditional offers has increased year by year:

In **2013, no conditional unconditional offers were detected**, but the frequency of this type of offer has **increased year-on-year**. In 2018, providers made 66,315 conditional unconditional offers, 6.9 per cent of all offers made to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Combining the data on standard unconditional offers and conditional unconditional offers shows that 87,540 18 year old applicants (**34.4 per cent received at least one offer with an unconditional component**) in 2018.¹¹

In 2018 around 6% of offers from low tariff universities were conditional unconditional, compared to 12% at medium and 3% at high tariff institutions. A starker pattern emerges when these are expressed as a proportion of all offers with an unconditional component; these were 32% at low, 67% at medium and 94% at high tariff institutions.

Nearly all unconditional offers at high tariff universities were **conditional on the applicant accepting the offer as their first choice**.

2.3 Why have unconditional offers increased?

Various reasons have been given for the change in university offer pattern, but mainly the increase in unconditional offers has been linked to **increased competition** between HEIs:

The gradual **removal of student number controls** in England from 2012, the **declining number of 18 year olds** in the UK population, and **falling demand for higher education from**

¹¹ UCAS, [UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018, from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales Unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds](#) p6

mature students, have all stimulated competition between providers to attract, recruit, and retain well-qualified students.¹²

A report by Universities UK, [Growth and Choice in University Admissions](#), said that unconditional offers were used by providers to attract students:

As competition between institutions has increased, they have increased the number of offers they make and focused more on making those offers attractive to applicants.

[...]

One of the ways institutions have made their offers more attractive is by making them unconditional.¹³

2.4 Are unconditional offers a problem?

Most 18 year old applicants studying for A levels miss their predicted grades irrespective of the type of offer held.

Holding an unconditional offer as a first (firm) choice increases likelihood of students missing their predicted grades:

The use of unconditional offers is controversial among school leaders, who say they disrupt pupils' efforts. But those concerns are only partly borne out by the Ucas data, which shows students holding unconditional offers were marginally less likely to achieve their predicted grades than their peers with conditional offers.

The figures show a majority of sixth-form applicants missed their predicted A-level grades, regardless of the type of offer held. Applicants with offers conditional on achieving specific grades missed their targets by two grades or more in 56% of cases, compared with 67% for students with unconditional offers.¹⁴

Applicants say that receiving a conditional unconditional offer has a **big impact on their decision making**. Applicants with conditional unconditional offers tend to go on to study at the providers that made them.

Applicants themselves remain broadly supportive of the use of unconditional offers, **welcoming the certainty** of knowing they have a place, and being able to go ahead and arrange their accommodation and start planning for their lives in higher education. Many speak about a **reduction in stress**, and the mental health and wellbeing benefits this confers.

In 2018 Universities Minister Sam Gyimah said that universities should limit the number of unconditional offers that they made:

"The rise in unconditional offers is completely irresponsible to students, and universities must start taking a lead, by limiting the number they offer," he said.

"Places at universities should only be offered to those who will benefit from them, and giving out unconditional offers just to put

Applicants holding an unconditional firm offer at 30 June are **more likely to miss their predicted grades**, compared to those holding a conditional firm offer.

UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018

¹² *ibid* p5

¹³ Universities UK, [Growth and Choice in University Admissions](#), June 2018, p13

¹⁴ [One-third of 18-year-old university applicants get unconditional offer](#), *The Guardian*, 29 November 2018

'bums on seats' undermines the credibility of the university system.

"Along with the Office for Students, I am closely monitoring the number being issued and fully expect the regulator to take appropriate action.

"Unconditional offers risk distracting students from the final year of their schooling, and swaying their decisions does them a disservice - universities must act in the interest of students, not in filling spaces."¹⁵

In January 2019 the Universities Minister Chris Skidmore repeated the government's concern over unconditional offers:

Universities: Admissions: Written question - 215082

Mr Jim Cunningham: 31 January 2019

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions his Department has held with representatives of UK universities on the use of unconditional offers for undergraduate courses.

Chris Skidmore: 05 February 2019

We have made it clear to universities that we are concerned with the recent rapid increases in the numbers of unconditional offers being made. We have, consequently, asked the higher education regulator, the Office for Students, to review the practice and, where it identifies adverse impacts on students, to take action in accordance with its regulatory powers. [[HC Deb 5 February 2019](#)]

The Universities UK report [Growth and Choice in University Admissions](#) was also cautious about the increased use of unconditional offers and said that these offers should be monitored:

Nevertheless, given the increases in unconditional offer-making, particularly in 2017, it will be important to monitor trends and impacts of the practice. School leaders have raised concerns that unconditional offers can demotivate students and undermine their attainment at A-level, with potential consequences for their future career. Institutions will also want to monitor the impact of unconditional offer-making on student retention and attainment.¹⁶

2.5 Role of the Office for Students (OfS)

The government asked the OfS, the higher education regulator, to monitor the impact of unconditional offers on students.

In January 2019 the OfS published an Insight, [Unconditional offers serving the interests of students](#). The report noted that there was no pattern to the making of unconditional offers:

There is **no uniform approach** to unconditional offer-making. It varies by type of offer, university, geography, subject, and applicant characteristics. The **extent of unconditional offer-making varies between universities**. Some make no or very few unconditional offers; some used to use them but have stopped; others are making increasing use of them. In 2012,

¹⁵ "[Huge rise in unconditional university offers for students](#)", BBC News, July 2018

¹⁶ Universities UK, [Growth and Choice in University Admissions](#), June 2018, p14

when they were rarely used, 11 per cent of English universities and colleges made no unconditional offers, and unconditional offers were fewer than 10 per cent of all offers made at almost all universities and colleges. In 2017, 6 per cent of universities and colleges were not making any unconditional offers, and more than a quarter of universities and colleges made at least 10 per cent of offers that were recorded as unconditional, although this is likely to be a conservative estimate.

The report expressed concern about the rapid increase in unconditional offers and in particular with conditional unconditional offers which it called '**pressure-selling**' by providers.

The key findings of the report were:

- The OfS is **concerned about the rapid rise** in unconditional offers, **particularly those that require students to commit to a particular course**. We will take action where they are not in students' interests.
- While some are seeking to **justify unconditional offers as a tool to support fair access for disadvantaged students, contextual offer-making is a more effective** way of achieving this.
- We will make clear where '**pressure selling**' practices are **at risk of breaching consumer protection law**, and empower students to challenge this as well as taking regulatory action if appropriate.
- We will bring together a range of education, employer and other organisations to explore whether the admissions system serves the interests of students. We will work with the Department for Education, students, UCAS and others on a **consultation** on principles for how the admissions system can best achieve this goal.

The report said that the OfS would take various actions with regard to unconditional offers:

- We will continue to **monitor** and assess the way unconditional offers are being used across the sector.
- We will ensure that **provider-level data on unconditional offers is published** on a regular basis, starting in 2019, including their impact at all stages of the student lifecycle where this can be monitored.
- We will identify any cases where the evidence suggests that students with unconditional (or very low) offers are particularly at risk of poor outcomes, or not being properly supported. **We will challenge the universities or colleges concerned, and intervene where necessary.**
- We will make clear our expectations that the governing bodies of universities and colleges are fully sighted on their institution's admissions policy and its implications for the **interests of individual students.**
- We will make clear **where 'pressure selling' practices are at risk of breaching consumer law, and empower students to challenge this as well as taking regulatory action** ourselves if appropriate.

- We will work with UCAS and other bodies providing information, advice and guidance to improve students' ability to make informed choices about unconditional offers. (p8)

The report was discussed in a *BBC News* article, [Clampdown on luring students with unconditional offers](#), 25 Jan 2019:

2.6 Universities' response

Universities are very wary of government interference in admissions processes. Nicola Dandridge the chief executive of the OfS referred to 'push back' from the sector when the OfS made its comments on unconditional offers

When the OfS [published a data analysis](#) on the rise of unconditional offers in January – saying that it would empower students to challenge “pressure selling” – “there was some pushback from the sector on that”, said Ms Dandridge. “Some people really didn't like our position on it, felt it undermined their own position and policy on admissions and all the rest of it.”

But the feedback from the sector in general, students and parents was “overwhelmingly positive”, showing “real concern” particularly on conditional unconditional offers, she said.

The OfS will “work constructively and respectfully with what is a fantastically world-leading, high-quality sector”, Ms Dandridge continued. She added: “We want their respect, but not to approve what we do. We're a regulator.”¹⁷

Some universities such as Sheffield Hallam University, which made a high number of unconditional offers in 2018, have responded to criticism by arguing that unconditional offers have a role to play in offer making:

But Sheffield Hallam University said such offers could help some students.

It makes hundreds of unconditional offers each year to students with high predicted A-level grades.

And vice-chancellor Chris Husbands said unconditional offers had a place, particularly for young people who “might otherwise not have the opportunity to study at a very high level”.

“What unconditional offers can do when used in this way is to remove one element of pressure from the system and then ideally help students to achieve their potential and to thrive,” he added.¹⁸

The University of Lancaster has also defended its unconditional offer policy:

Lancaster's unconditional offer scheme is linked to excellence in scholarship to attract the best applicants and therefore encourages students to continue to strive for the best possible grades in their exams. Lancaster is a top 10 ranked UK university

¹⁷ [Ofs 'will be proactive to prevent closures'](#), *Times Higher Education*, 28 March 2019

¹⁸ [“Clampdown on luring students with unconditional offers”](#), *BBC News*, 25 January 2019

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and it is not in the interests of the student or the university to encourage or accept poorer performance".¹⁹

The University of Birmingham, which made high numbers of unconditional offers in 2018, said that its unconditional offers were a small part of its admissions strategy:

The University of Birmingham, a member of the prestigious Russell Group, is also on the DfE list. A spokesperson defended the use of unconditional offers. "We closely monitor the progression of students and those students with an unconditional offer achieve good honours at the same rate as their peers, often better.

"Applicants are not pressured to accept unconditional offers; rather unconditional offers form a small part of a wider and well-developed admissions strategy that has a firm focus on supporting students to make the right choice for them. We continue to review and refine our strategy and remain confident that our offer-making practice is legal and ethical."²⁰

However others universities, such as the University of Nottingham, which used unconditional offers for over 11% of its offers in 2018, have now stopped making unconditional offers:

Nottingham announced on Wednesday that it would no longer be using unconditional offers after this September, saying the increase in their use meant they were no longer attracting the applicants it wanted to encourage.

"Selective universities like Nottingham will always compete legitimately for talented applicants. However, we want everyone to be fully confident that they are admitted purely on their merits and potential. That is why we are ending the use of unconditional offers," said Paul Greatrix, the university's registrar.²¹

¹⁹ "[Lancaster University defends 'unconditional offer' stance amid government criticism](#)", *Lancaster Guardian*, 9 April 2019

²⁰ "[DfE tells universities to stop 'unethical' admissions tactics](#)," *The Guardian*, 5 April 2019

²¹ "[20 universities account for bulk of rise in unconditional places](#)," *The Guardian*, 31 January 2019

3. Contextualised admissions

Research has shown that external factors such as 'schooling effects' and family background have a major influence on the performance of students in exams and on the educational aspirations of individual students. Universities therefore use a wide range of information and data to evaluate an applicant's prior attainment and potential during the offer making process in order to make the fairest assessment of students.

A student's data may be **assessed in the context of their individual circumstances**, the aim of this is to form a more complete picture of the applicant. A UCAS factsheet, [Contextualised admissions](#), gives an overview of the topic:

What is contextual data and information?

Contextual data includes educational, geodemographic and socio-economic background data, such as historic data about an applicant's school or college. Contextual information relates to individual applicant circumstances, such as if they have been in care, or involved in widening participation activities.

Further details of the issues involved in contextual admissions are set out in an OfS Insight, [Contextual admissions Promoting fairness and rethinking merit](#), May 2019.

Higher education (HE) providers have been using contextual data and information for many years. This practice was endorsed in the 2004 Schwartz Report Fair Admissions to Higher Education and by the Social Mobility Advisory Commission. Research by the University of Exeter in June 2018 also concluded that the use of contextual data was a positive development:

Overall, increased use of contextual data across the sector is a positive development, firstly as a way to progress fair access objectives and secondly, increasingly widespread use of contextual data is creating momentum for changes in practices which benefit social mobility, countering negative arguments voiced in the sector and in the public domain. There is clearly potential for contextual data to be used more by institutions moving forward.²²

The [OfS](#) encourages providers to consider the use of contextual data and information, so long as they follow procedures which are fair, transparent and evidence-based.

3.1 Contextual offers

Statistical data, or individual characteristics can be used as a basis for placing an applicant's achievements in context and markers or 'flags' may be used by admissions officer to highlight that a student is from an underrepresented group or meets widening participation criteria.

Universities that use contextualised data may have an admissions policy which permits **making lower offers** to some students based on their

²² University of Exeter Centre for Social Mobility, [Research into use of contextual data in admissions](#), June 2018 p46

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personal circumstances. These offers may be one or more grades lower than the standard offer for a particular course. These offers are not connected to unconditional offers and applicants will still be expected to meet the conditions of their contextual offer. Universities' contextual admissions policies may be found on their websites.

A survey by the Higher Education Policy Institute, [*What do students think of contextual admissions?*](#) July 2019 showed that the majority of students backed the use of contextual admissions practices, although less than half of the respondents backed using this approach to make lower offers:

- Most students (72%) think higher education admissions should take account of applicants' backgrounds. Just 23% oppose this.
- Roughly half of students (47%) back making lower grade offers to those from disadvantaged areas, although nearly as many (45%) oppose this.
- Support for contextual offers is stronger among students at the most selective (Russell Group) universities, with 57% in favour and 36% opposed.

4. Post Qualification Admissions (PQA)

Concerns around the university admissions system have led to calls for the whole admissions process to be reformed. One reform that is frequently raised is the idea of moving to a system where students apply for places after they receive their exam results – proponents of this scheme say that it would be fairer and more transparent.

The idea of a Post Qualification Admission (PQA) process has been around for many years. It was first raised in the [Dearing Report](#)²³ into higher education in 1997.

Since the Dearing Report there have been numerous other reports on the university admissions system and PQA.

The [Schwartz Review](#)²⁴ 2004, conducted a consultation into the university admission process with a view to making admissions fairer and more transparent – the Review **endorsed a PQA system**:

An admissions system relying on predicted grades, only half of which are accurate, cannot be fair. It does not meet the Steering Group's recommended principles of fair admissions, since it is based on data which are not reliable, is not transparent for applicants or institutions, and may present barriers to applicants who lack self-confidence. For these reasons, **the Steering Group wholeheartedly supports a move to PQA**, believing that it will facilitate the implementation of all five principles of fair admissions. In addition, PQA will produce a system that is more efficient for all participants and will offer financial savings. The move to a fully electronic and thus faster application system will allow more time for the assessment of applications after results are known. (p44)

However only 54% of the consultation's respondents favoured PQA.

Although the recommendations of the Review did not lead to the introduction of PQA following the Schwartz Review a new independent body [Supporting Professionalism in Admissions](#) (SPA) was established to be an objective voice on UK higher education admissions and to lead on evidence-based good practice in the recruitment and selection of students.

In 2011 UCAS published a report on the admissions system, [Admissions Process Review Findings and Recommendations](#)²⁵ - this report **did not** recommend moving to a post-results system for numerous reasons including, the adverse impact on university research over the summer period and the difficulty of assessing applicants over a shorter period:

²³ The Dearing Report, [Higher Education in the learning society](#), The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997

²⁴ Schwartz Report, [Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice](#), 2004

²⁵ UCAS, [Admissions Process Review Findings and Recommendations](#), 2011

There were serious issues raised about the impact on HEI processes in respect of their ability to match applicants to courses effectively and manage student numbers. There was concern about the **adverse effect on crucial research activity**. Any cost efficiencies were seen as superficial since, in order to maintain a knowledgeable admissions team and process applications through the three phases, they would still need to be employed throughout the year. Interviews, assessment tests and portfolio reviews could not be accommodated in the nine week assessment period.

HEIs were concerned that the **timeframe to process applications would be too short and would be unmanageable over the summer**. At this time academics are committed to research so it is difficult to see how a sufficient number of high-quality admissions tutors could be made available. While this in itself need not be an obstacle, such research is not only income generating but provides a research-rich environment in which students can flourish. The changes would also have an unacceptable impact on admissions officers' annual leave, particularly as it was pointed out that there is a large demographic of women with children so the summer is the traditional time to take leave entitlement.

There was a strong feeling that the process as proposed would **inevitably lead to a less holistic assessment of applicants and admissions decisions would become more mechanistic**. While HEIs said they would endeavour to continue to conduct a holistic assessment of every applicant, drawing on a range of information, it would undoubtedly be challenging for them in such a compressed time-scale. HEIs would have less time to take account of contextual information and less flexibility to adjust entry requirements for applicants from different backgrounds. **HEIs would have no discretion on near misses as applicants who miss the grade requirements are unlikely to apply** although they could be offered a place under the current model.²⁶

As a result of the 2011 UCAS report the admission process was improved by the introduction of an [adjustment period](#) after results where students who did better than their predicted grades could 'trade up' to a higher tariff university.

A report for the Universities and Colleges Union, [Post-qualification application: a student-centred model for higher education admissions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales](#) 2019, also proposed a new post results system. Matt Waddup, head of policy at the University and College Union, called for universities to shift to a PQA system to make "unconditional offers redundant, bring us in line with the rest of the world and end the chaotic clearing scramble".²⁷

An article on the Wonkhe website [A beginner's guide to post-qualification admissions](#), gives an overview of the history of PQA and discusses the issues; it makes the following comment on the difficulty of moving to a PQA system:

²⁶ UCAS, [Admissions Process Review Findings and Recommendations](#), 2011 section 7.3.5(b)

²⁷ "[Clampdown on luring students with unconditional offers](#)", *BBC News*, 25 January 2019

Even if the sector could be brought to agree to, for example, delay the start of the university term for a few weeks (a process that sounds simple but wouldn't be) no advocate of PQA has ever been able to explain how to prevent autonomous institutions from informally accepting or rejecting applicants at any time they like. The central application system is used for efficiency; no institution is required to use it and students can still apply directly to their institution of choice outside the UCAS system.

There is no doubt that PQA advocates are acting on principle – certainly that UCU could only be in favour of the policy on a principled basis, given the level of upheaval any PQA system would cause to its own members. But this could be a case where principles get in the way of good policymaking. Increasingly PQA feels like a solution in search of a problem. Meanwhile, a number of thoughtful proposals focused on substantially enhancing the support for applicants to make effective choices may never get air time, because PQA is sucking all the oxygen from the debate.

4.1 UCAS response on PQA

In August 2019 Clare Marchant, chief executive of UCAS commented on a PQA system and acknowledged that a PQA service had "a natural appeal". She also said however that a new system would be disruptive and could disadvantage under-represented groups:

"if introduced wholesale within the current timetables, it would be likely to significantly disadvantage under-represented and disabled students, unless secondary and/or university calendars changed".²⁸

Ms Marchant said in a BBC news [article](#) that the current system worked well for the 78% of students who got their first choice university and that UCAS already had a PQA service for students who wanted to wait until they had their results - adding that in 2018, more than 17,500 students were accepted directly through that route.

4.2 Labour policy on PQA

On 14 August 2019 Labour shadow education secretary Angela Rayner said that Labour would scrap the system of university places being offered on the basis of predicted grades and bring in a system of applying after results. Ms Rayner said:

predicted grades were wrong "in the vast majority of cases" and disadvantaged students "lost out on opportunities on the basis of those inaccurate predictions".

"No-one should be left out of our education system just because of their background," she said, "yet with grants scrapped and fees tripled, the system is now deeply unfair.

"A Labour government will deliver the reform that is needed... we will put students at the heart of the system, making it fairer, more accurate, and a genuine vehicle for social justice."

²⁸ [Labour plans to scrap predicted grades system](#), BBC News, 14 August 2019

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Ms Rayner acknowledged the move may require changes to the school calendar but said a Labour government would consult and work with the sector to design and implement the new system.

"We may have to look at then calendar and we are willing to do that because what we believe is more important is that students get the opportunity to get the best university for them based upon their actual grades,"²⁹

²⁹ ["Labour plans to scrap predicted grades system," BBC News, 14 August 2019](#)

5. Government review of university admissions practices

On 5 April 2019 Damian Hinds the Secretary of State for Education [announced](#)³⁰ that there would be a review of university admissions practices:

A full review of university admissions is required to end 'unacceptable' practices some universities use to lure students into accepting higher education places, the Education Secretary said today (5 April).

Damian Hinds is calling for a review of admissions practices after the extent that 'conditional unconditional' offers are used by institutions was revealed by UCAS last year.

[...]

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

It is simply unacceptable for universities to adopt pressure-selling tactics, which are harming students' grades in order to fill places. It is not what I expect to see from our world-class higher education institutions.

'Conditional unconditional' offers are damaging the reputation of the institutions involved and our world-leading sector as a whole. That is why I will be writing to 23 universities, urging them to stamp out this unethical practice.

But I am concerned about the wider picture of how some universities are getting students through their doors, so I am asking the OfS to look at how well current admissions practices serve students and how they can be improved, so we can protect the integrity of our higher education system.

[...]

The Education Secretary will be asking the OfS to take a comprehensive look at university admissions procedures, in guidance sent to the regulator setting out his priorities for the financial year.

The scope of the review would be developed in due course. But the Education Secretary would like the OfS to look at ways of improving current practices, including greater access and participation for students from underrepresented groups and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Universities UK responded cautiously to the review announcement:

"There are clear benefits for students in universities being able to use a variety of offer making practices that reflect the individual student's circumstances and potential.

"As with all offers to study at university, universities must be able to explain why and how they award unconditional offers with conditions attached. We are already working together with UCAS, reviewing existing guidance and gaining a better understanding of

[universities] are **'backing students into a corner'** to accept a place at their institution – trapping them from exploring other options that could be more suitable.

Damian Hinds, 5 April 2019

³⁰ Department for Education, "[Universities urged to review 'unacceptable' admissions practices](#)", 5 April 2019

how these offers are being used. This work will help inform the review and includes surveying universities to understand how good practice is being adopted, and holding forums to discuss best practice.

"It is essential that admissions processes and policies are fair and transparent, underpinned by clear criteria and in the best interest of students."³¹

MillionPlus were more guarded about the review and stressed the issue of university autonomy over admissions:

"University admissions practices are something that the OfS state they are examining already in relation to their regulatory responsibilities. An independent look at some of these issues is an opportunity to look at the evidence in the round, away from the media headlines. Ahead of this evidence gathering we should not assume that any particular practice is generally unacceptable. Universities take their responsibility for admissions seriously, while their autonomy in doing so has rightly been protected by parliament. Universities are best qualified to judge who can benefit from the opportunity to study in higher education."³²

Gordon Marsden, the shadow Universities Minister, said that the review should be wider than unconditional offers:

"Any review of current admissions processes must be robust, independent and wide-ranging. It must focus not just on unconditional offers but also the case for post-qualification admissions and the lack of progress on improving access and widening participation in our higher education sector,"³³

The National Union of Students welcomed the review:

"We welcome the Government's call for a review of the university admissions process. We know that barriers to accessing higher education exist across the student lifecycle, including at the admissions stage.

"Whilst we are concerned that the increased use of unconditional offers can prevent students from making the right choices for them, it is important to remember that the solutions to this problem exist beyond the admissions process. In particular, universities need to ensure that disadvantaged students have access to suitable support once they start at university.

"At a national policy level, we need a sustainable HE funding system which doesn't require universities to compete and take drastic steps to recruit vast student numbers in order to stay afloat. We hope to see that these crucial changes are recommended through the upcoming Augar review."³⁴

The Association of Colleges said the review was timely:

"This is an important review which needs to address the worrying rapid rise in unconditional offers, as well as the number of so-called year zero courses being offered. Making the transition to

³¹ Universities UK, "[Response to government calls for university admissions review](#)", 5 April 2019

³² MillionPlus, "[MillionPlus responds to the Education Secretary's call for a review of university admissions](#)", 5 April 2019

³³ "['Comprehensive' review of English university admissions launched](#)", *Times Higher Education*, 5 April 2019

³⁴ National Union of Students, "[NUS response to the Department for Education announcement on conditional unconditional offers](#)", 5 April 2019

higher education is tough for most students but is made even harder when the last few months of learning have been lost.

“AoC will be happy to contribute intelligence from our members to the review on the impact on students, on motivation, on completion of Level 3 courses and on choices”

“For the review to be thorough it will need to understand the range of choices young people make and how university behaviour supports or undermines the best choices. Young people need the best support and advice to make the right choice for their future.”³⁵.

The OfS will conduct the review – the terms of reference and further details of this review have not yet been announced. The review is expected to launch later this year.³⁶

5.1 UUK Fair Admissions Review

In July 2019 Universities UK announced that it is establishing the 'Fair admissions review' to:

- Collect evidence on how admissions practices work and to identify the main challenges linked to admissions and offer-making practices including unconditional and contextual offers.
- Review whether the 2004 [Schwartz principles](#) on fair admissions in higher education remain valid.
- Recommend best practice in offer making and propose changes that will ensure that university admissions work in the best interests of applicants and are fit for purpose in a rapidly changing post-18 education environment.

The 'Fair admissions review' advisory group will consist of UCAS, school, college, student, and university representatives. Its recommendations, due in spring 2020, will be informed by best practice from across the UK.³⁷ The review will be chaired by Paddy Nixon, vice-chancellor of Ulster University.

The UUK review and the OfS, ordered by the government, are “entirely separate”.³⁸

³⁵ Association of Colleges, “[Review of Higher Education Admissions arrives at a timely moment, says AoC](#),” 5 April 2019

³⁶ “[University applications could be after A-levels](#)”, *BBC News*, 22 July 2019

³⁷ UUK, [Major review of university admissions underway](#), 22 July 2019

³⁸ “[Major’ review of UK university admissions under way](#)”, *Times Higher Education*, 22 July 2019

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