



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# The reviews of university admissions

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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. In 2013 1.1% of 18 year old applicants received at least one unconditional offer, by 2019 this had increased to 37.7%.

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 2019 this number had increased to 88.

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.

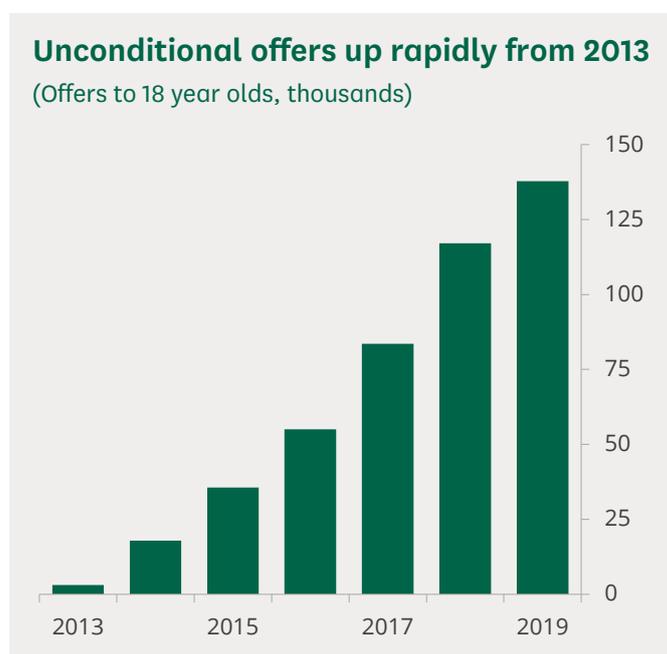
Various reforms have been suggested to the admissions system such as moving to some type of post qualification application (PQA) scheme and the increased use of contextualised admissions. On 14 August 2019 the Labour Party announced its support for a PQA system.

There are currently three overlapping reviews of the admissions system taking place.

On 27 February 2020 the Office for Students launched a review with a focus on unconditional offers and widening participation.

On 22 July 2019 UUK launched its own separate review of admissions, this review has now concluded and its report [Fair Admissions Review](#) was published on 13 November 2020. The review recommended a move to a PQA system by 2023- there will now be further consultations on this process.

UCAS is also about to announce its proposals to reform the admissions system.



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On 13 November 2020 the Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson said that it was his **intention to consider post-qualification university admissions** and that the government will consult on proposals to “remove the unfairness” in the university admission system.

This briefing paper discusses the main issues around university admissions and outlines the reviews currently taking place.

# 1. Background: 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, 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.

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. The use of centre assessed grades for the awarding of exam results in the summer of 2020 has brought this issue back into the spotlight.

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

## 1.1 Predicted grades debate

The use of predicted grades for university admissions has been questioned for many years. 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.<sup>1</sup>

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).

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

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- 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.
- 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.<sup>2</sup>

Bodies such as the [Sutton Trust](#)<sup>3</sup> 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**.<sup>4</sup>

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

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> Sutton Trust, [Rules of the Game](#), 2017

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

be accepted to a university which they are overqualified for. This could in turn affect their future labour market outcomes.

Most recently in August 2020 the UCL Institute of Education published a working paper, [Grade Expectations: How well can we predict future grades based on past performance?](#) The paper stated that **only 16% of pupils were accurately predicted.**

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".

The issue of predicted grades resurfaced in the summer of 2020 when centre assessed grades, based on teacher predicted grades were used to award GCSE and A level results.

This issue of predicted grades is discussed further in section 4 of this briefing in the context of a post qualification admission system (PQA).

## 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 the following elements of the UCAS End of Cycle Report 2019:

- [Insight report: Unconditional Offers — The Applicant Experience](#)
- [An analysis of unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales.](#)
- [Unconditional offer-making by provider group](#)

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

In 2019 UCAS introduced new definitions of different types of unconditional offers:

- **Conditional unconditional offer:** Offers which are conditional at the point of offer and adjusted by the

**37.7 per cent** of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, **more than one in three**, received an **offer with an unconditional component** in 2018/19.

UCAS End of Cycle Report 2019

provider from conditional to unconditional if selected as an applicant’s firm choice. These are identified in the admissions system through free text fields providers can use to communicate any additional information to applicants

- **Direct unconditional offer:** Offers which are unconditional at the point of offer.
- **Other unconditional offer:** Offers which are conditional at the point of offer and become unconditional before 30 June – the final date on which main scheme applications can be submitted, and are not identified as conditional unconditional.

The total of these types of offers are referred to as **offers with an unconditional component**.

The UCAS report stated that the **majority of offers to 18 year olds are conditional**, but the share of all applicants who received at least one unconditional offer **has increased, from 1.1 per cent in 2013, to 37.7 per cent in 2019**. The table opposite summarises headline data.<sup>5</sup>

**There were 137,800 unconditional offers to 18 year olds in 2019, up 20,700 on 2018. This was 14.2% of all offers to this age group.**

The rate was highest in England at 15.1%. It was 11% in Wales and much lower in Scotland (1.3%) and Northern Ireland (0.1%).

This rate is lower than the proportion of 18 year olds with one or more unconditional offer because applicants make multiple applications, so can have a mix of conditional and unconditional offers. Trends in the total number of unconditional offers are also included in the table and the chart opposite.<sup>6</sup>

**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**.<sup>7</sup>

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.

[...]

### Unconditional offers to 18 year olds

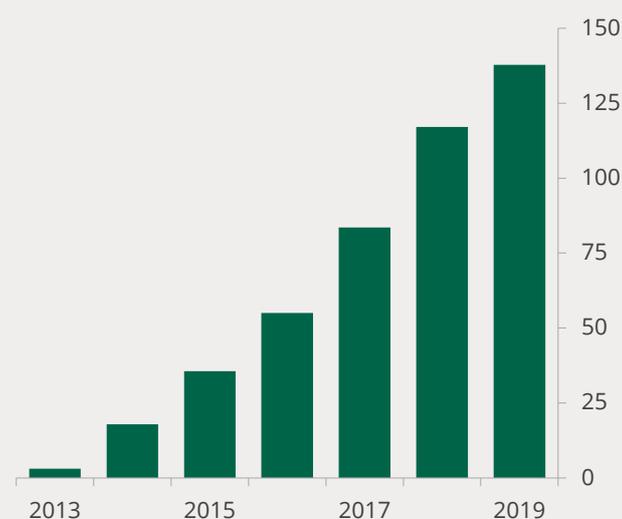
Applicants from England, N. Ireland & Wales

	Number of unconditional offers	% 18 year olds with 1 or more unconditional offer
2013	3,060	1.1%
2014	17,955	6.6%
2015	35,625	12.2%
2016	55,035	18.2%
2017	83,585	25.9%
2018	117,125	34.4%
2019	137,805	37.7%

Source: [End of cycle report 2019](#) , Ucas

### Unconditional offers up rapidly from 2013

(Offers to 18 year olds, thousands)



<sup>5</sup> UCAS, [Insight report: Unconditional Offers — The Applicant Experience](#)

<sup>6</sup> UCAS, [An analysis of unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales.](#)

<sup>7</sup> UCAS, [UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018, from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales Unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds.](#)

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.

## Variations between universities

In 2013 just 16 universities had unconditional offer rates to 18 year olds of 1% or more. In 2019 this number had increased to 88. No universities had unconditional offer rates to 18 year old of 20% or more in 2013, while 37 had rates this high in 2019. At **15 universities in 2019 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 2019 the unconditional offer rate to 18 year olds at these universities was 22.3% compared to 18.6% at medium and 3.6% at high tariff universities. **Unconditional offer rates at high tariff universities have changed little over the past five years.**<sup>8</sup>

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.”<sup>9</sup>

## Difference in unconditional offers by subject

The UCAS End of Cycle Report 2019 showed that the number of unconditional offers made to applicants varied with subjects:<sup>10</sup>

The subject group with the highest proportion of direct unconditional offers is creative arts and design (13% of offers made), which is unsurprising as assessment of an applicant’s portfolio often determines their suitability for the course.

Creative arts and design is followed by communications and media (6.7%), architecture, building and planning (5.7%), and computing (4.3%).

## 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

The unconditional offer rate at universities with the least well qualified entrants **was more than six 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 2019

<sup>8</sup> UCAS, [2019 End of Cycle Report](#), Chapter 9

<sup>9</sup> “[20 universities account for bulk of rise in unconditional places](#),” The Guardian, 31 January 2019

<sup>10</sup> UCAS, [2019 End of Cycle Report](#), Chapter 5

BBC became the most likely. Applicants with higher predicted grades are, however, much more likely to receive a conditional unconditional offer.

## Unconditional offers and widening participation

The UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018 said that “a number of providers use unconditional offers as a tool **to support their widening participation goals**”.<sup>11</sup>

The UCAS report, [Unconditional Offers - an update for 2019](#) stated that **“applicants from the most disadvantaged areas were 50% more likely to receive an unconditional offer than applicants from the most advantaged areas”**.<sup>12</sup>

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."<sup>13</sup>

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 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.

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

<sup>12</sup> UCAS, [Unconditional Offers - an update for 2019](#), p11

<sup>13</sup> [“Clampdown on luring students with unconditional offers”](#), BBC News, 25 January 2019

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.<sup>14</sup>

The number of conditional unconditional offers increased to 82,600 in 2019 and a quarter of all 18 year olds received at least one conditional unconditional offer. The UCAS Insight report on unconditional offers said:<sup>15</sup>

Conditional unconditional offers experienced the largest growth in 2019 (26.2% increase) to become the most common type of offer with an unconditional component – comprising 59.9% of these offers. Over a quarter of applicants now receive at least one conditional unconditional offer.

The impact of conditional unconditional offers on applicant decision making, however, appears to be decreasing – applicants are becoming less likely to select their conditional unconditional offer as their first choice than in previous cycles

In 2019 around 9% of offers from low tariff universities were conditional unconditional, compared to 14% at medium and 4% at high tariff institutions. A starker pattern emerges when these are expressed as a proportion of all offers with an unconditional component; these were 42% at low, 73% at medium and 93% at high tariff institutions.

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

<sup>14</sup> UCAS, [UCAS End of Cycle Report 2018, from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales Unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds](#) p6

<sup>15</sup> UCAS, [Insight report: Unconditional Offers — The Applicant Experience](#)

## 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:<sup>16</sup>

...the removal of student number controls in England from 2012, and the year-on-year decreases of the 18 year old UK population have led to increased competition between providers to attract, recruit, and retain well-qualified students. This has caused changes in offer-making and Confirmation strategies, including high offer rates and a record number of unconditional offers being made to English, Northern Irish, and Welsh 18 year olds.

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.<sup>17</sup>

## 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.<sup>18</sup>

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

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

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Universities UK, [Growth and Choice in University Admissions](#), June 2018, p13

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

a **reduction in stress**, and the mental health and wellbeing benefits this confers.

In September 2019 the Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson expressed his “**deep concern**” about unconditional offers in his guidance letter to the OfS:

The injudicious use of unconditional offers is an issue of deep concern to me, particularly the use of conditional unconditional offers. There are also other recruitment practices, including the use of inducements that could have an adverse impact on the access and success of students in higher education. I am therefore pleased to see that you are working with the Competition and Markets Authority to identify and address any breaches of consumer law by providers. I am also concerned about the evidence that the use of unconditional offers has already had an adverse impact on students’ achievements in level 3 qualifications and their subsequent success in higher education.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

However, the [UCAS End of Cycle Report 2019](#)<sup>21</sup> stated that “**applicants’ decisions appear to be influenced less by conditional unconditional offers than they have been in the past**”<sup>22</sup>.

## 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, 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

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<sup>19</sup> Department for Education, [Strategic Guidance to the Office for Students — Ministerial priorities](#), 16 September 2019

<sup>20</sup> Universities UK, [Growth and Choice in University Admissions](#), June 2018, p14

<sup>21</sup> UCAS End of Cycle Report 2019, [Insight Report: Unconditional Offers -The Applicant Experience](#)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p8

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.”<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

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 and it is not in the interests of the student or the university to encourage or accept poorer performance”.<sup>25</sup>

early indications point very strongly to a **behaviour change in 2020**. We forecast as many as 75% of universities and colleges which made conditional unconditional offers in the 2019 cycle will no longer make these in 2020.

[UCAS 30 January 2020](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Ofs 'will be proactive to prevent closures'](#), *Times Higher Education*, 28 March 2019

<sup>24</sup> ["Clampdown on luring students with unconditional offers"](#), *BBC News*, 25 January 2019

<sup>25</sup> ["Lancaster University defends 'unconditional offer' stance amid government criticism"](#), *Lancaster Guardian*, 9 April 2019

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."<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> ["DfE tells universities to stop 'unethical' admissions tactics,"](#) *The Guardian*, 5 April 2019

<sup>27</sup> ["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 issue:

### 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.<sup>28</sup>

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

<sup>28</sup> University of Exeter Centre for Social Mobility, [Research into use of contextual data in admissions](#), June 2018 p46

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](#)<sup>29</sup> into higher education in 1997, but it was the use of **centre assessed grades**<sup>30</sup> for the awarding of GCSE and A level exam results in the summer of 2020 that has currently brought this issue into sharp focus.

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

In 2004 the [Schwartz Review](#)<sup>31</sup>, conducted a consultation into the university admission process with a view to making admissions fairer and more transparent. The Review recommendations set out five principles for a fair and transparent admissions system and **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 at the time 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 as an objective voice on UK higher education admissions and to lead on evidence-based good practice in the recruitment and selection of students.

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<sup>29</sup> The Dearing Report, [Higher Education in the learning society](#), The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997

<sup>30</sup> Department for Education, "[GCSE and A level students to receive centre assessment grades](#)", updated 18 August 2020

<sup>31</sup> Schwartz Report, [Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice](#), 2004

In 2011 UCAS published a report on the admissions system, [Admissions Process Review Findings and Recommendations](#)<sup>32</sup>- 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.

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

In 2019 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](#), 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".<sup>33</sup>

Most recently in August 2020 the UCL Institute of Education published a working paper, [Grade Expectations: How well can we predict future grades based on past performance?](#) The paper stated that **only 16% of pupils were accurately predicted in their final grade outcomes across 3 A levels** - of the rest, 75% were overpredicted and just 8% underpredicted. The paper showed that the accuracy of predictions varied by school type and subject:

The paper also shows that high-achieving comprehensive school pupils are more likely to be under-predicted compared to their grammar and private school counterparts.

Among high achievers, where under-prediction is most common, the team found 23% of comprehensive school pupils were underpredicted by two or more grades compared to just 11% of grammar and private school pupils.

[...]

Predictions were improved by including data on 'related' GCSEs – those A-level subjects that have an equivalent GCSE – showing that exam subjects themselves need to be taken into account alongside student achievement and school type.

Maths was easier to predict among high achievers than other subjects such as history and chemistry, but for average and low achievers, the opposite was true.

English Literature was most accurately predicted across all achievement levels, while Law predictions were the least accurate.

For subjects without related GCSEs, the task was even more challenging, with lower prediction rates across the board.<sup>34</sup>

An article on the website [A beginner's guide to post-qualification admissions](#), January 2019 commented on the difficulty of moving to a PQA system:

Predicting A-level grades accurately 'near-impossible task'

UCL Institute of Education August 2020

<sup>32</sup> UCAS, [Admissions Process Review Findings and Recommendations](#), 2011

<sup>33</sup> "[Clampdown on luring students with unconditional offers](#)", *BBC News*, 25 January 2019

<sup>34</sup> UCL, [Predicting A-level grades accurately 'near-impossible task'](#), 11 August 2020

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 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".<sup>35</sup>

However in November 2020 Ms Marchant said that "now is the time to take a serious look at reforming the admissions timetable":

There are two options for reform that could work practically and aim to improve fairness for students, as well as eradicate problems for applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds that have become ingrained into the current admissions process.

'It is absolutely crucial though that we limit any unintended consequences of such major change. UCAS is ready to innovate and we look forward to sharing full details in the coming weeks, and working with colleagues from across the education sector in the UK to develop these ideas further.'<sup>36</sup>

### 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.

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<sup>35</sup> [Labour plans to scrap predicted grades system](#), *BBC News*, 14 August 2019

<sup>36</sup> UCAS, [UCAS maps reforms of higher education admissions](#), 9 November 2020

"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."

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,"<sup>37</sup>

### 4.3 Secretary of State for Education comments on PQA November 2020

On 13 November 2020 Gavin Williamson the Secretary of State for Education said that it was his **intention to consider post-qualification university admissions**. He said the government will consult on proposals to "remove the unfairness" that some groups currently face due to inaccurate predicated grades:

By using predicted grades it is limiting the aspirations of students before they know what they can achieve.

We need to explore how to change a system which breeds low aspiration and unfairness. That is why we are exploring how best to transform the admission process to one which can propel young people into the most promising opportunities for them within higher education.<sup>38</sup>

### Written statement 16 November 2020

On 16 November 2020 Mr Williamson made a statement in the House - [University Admissions System](#) in which he said that the government would consult on reforming the university admissions system to make it more efficient and transparent and to help disadvantaged students:

Today I want to update both Houses on policy developments for reform within the university admissions system.

On Friday 13 November, I announced the Department's intention to explore a post-qualification admissions (PQA) system for higher education, where students would receive and accept offers after they have received their level 3 (A-level or equivalent) grades.

The Government's manifesto committed us to "improve the application and offer system" and in a way that is "underpinned by a commitment to fairness, quality of learning and teaching, and access". Evidence shows that the current admissions system falls short of this commitment, which is why we are now exploring how a new system could work. We want to ensure the system works for disadvantaged students and facilitates the levelling up that we all want to see, so that everyone with the qualifications and ability to benefit from higher education can do so, no matter what their background.

If we were starting from scratch today, no one would design the higher education admissions system we have now—a system

"If we were starting from scratch today, no one would design the higher education admissions system we have now—a system which, with its reliance on predicted grades, systematically favours the most advantaged".

Gavin Williamson  
16 November 2020

<sup>37</sup> "[Labour plans to scrap predicted grades system](#)," *BBC News*, 14 August 2019

<sup>38</sup> Department for Education, "[Government plans for post-qualification university admissions](#)", 13 November 2020

which, with its reliance on predicted grades, systematically favours the most advantaged. While the higher education provider base has expanded significantly in recent decades, with the emergence of new providers and courses, the admissions system has remained largely unchanged since the 1960s. The current system lacks transparency, and it works against the interests of some students, notably high achieving disadvantaged students. In recent years we have also seen the emergence of undesirable admissions practices, such as the mass use of unconditional offers.

We know, due to the pandemic, that students have experienced considerable disruption to their education this year. We believe that the unique set of circumstances students faced could have been better dealt with by a fairer higher education admissions system.

A broad range of interested parties across the education system, and from across the political spectrum—including the Sutton Trust, Policy Exchange, and the University and College Union—have been calling for a post-qualification admissions system to support social mobility and to remove the complexity and undesirable practices of the current system. According to a recent poll by the Sutton Trust, two thirds of this year's university entrants (66%) are in favour of removing predicted grades from university admissions and making decisions based on actual results. Universities UK has also confirmed its desire to work with the Government to explore moving to such a system.

The Government will therefore consult universities, colleges, schools, students, and other interested parties to develop a potential model of reform over the coming months. We will work across the sectors to design a more efficient and transparent system that helps all students, especially those who are disadvantaged, access the course and institution that best suits their aspirations and capabilities. This is a set of reforms we would look to deliver during the course of this Parliament, but it will not affect students over the current academic year.

[HCWS580]

## 5. Reviews of university admissions practices

Reviews of admissions are currently being conducted by the Office for Students, Universities UK and UCAS. The reviews are discussed in an article on the Wonkhe website, [Who owns admissions policy and where will it end up? The government just complicated the picture](#), 13 November 2020.

### 5.1 Office for Students review

On 5 April 2019 Damian Hinds the Secretary of State for Education [announced](#)<sup>39</sup> that there would be a review of university admissions practices to stop what he said were “‘unacceptable practices” used by some universities use to lure students into accepting higher education places” and to end what he called “pressure-selling tactics” by universities:

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.

[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

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 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.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Department for Education, “[Universities urged to review ‘unacceptable’ admissions practices](#)”, 5 April 2019

<sup>40</sup> Universities UK, “[Response to government calls for university admissions review](#)”, 5 April 2019

Gordon Marsden, the then 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,”<sup>41</sup>

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.”<sup>42</sup>

## DfE guidance letter to the OfS September 2019

On 19 September 2019 the Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson sent a [letter to the OfS](#), setting out Ministerial priorities for higher education. The letter said that Mr Williamson welcomed the review of admissions and said that he wanted the review to **consider models of PQA:**

I welcome your decision to conduct a review of the admissions system and your commitment to keep Ministers and officials regularly informed of the emerging views and any recommendations from this work. I note that you recognise the importance of gathering evidence and consulting with both students and schools and colleges and I would endorse the proposal to use the review to consider the pros and cons of potential models of Post Qualification Application (PQA). While this has been considered before, the context in which the sector is operating has changed and there has been much recent debate about this topic expressing differing views.

Overall, I anticipate that the review will be an opportunity to identify improvements, based on evidence, which will help to further improve and develop the admissions system so that it remains fair and transparent for students both now and in the future, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. I look forward to your updates and final report.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “[‘Comprehensive’ review of English university admissions launched](#)”, *Times Higher Education*, 5 April 2019

<sup>42</sup> National Union of Students, “[NUS response to the Department for Education announcement on conditional unconditional offers](#)”, 5 April 2019

<sup>43</sup> Department for Education, [Strategic Guidance to the Office for Students — Ministerial priorities](#), 16 September 2019

## Review launched February 2020

On 27 February 2020 the OfS launched the [consultation on the higher education admissions system in England](#). An overview of the review is set out on the OfS website at, [Reviewing the admissions system](#).

The consultation seeks stakeholders views on:

- A proposed set of principles for a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system
- Ten issues across each stage of an applicant's experience of the admissions process
- Three options that are currently being widely discussed in relation to the future direction of the undergraduate full-time admissions system, together with any other approaches that stakeholders think should be considered.

The ten issues across the admissions process to be considered are:

- Advertised entry requirements versus actual entry requirements
- The use and accuracy of predicted grades in undergraduate admissions
- The use of assessment methods, including:
  - Personal statements and references
  - Auditions, portfolios, admissions tests and interviews
- The role of contextual offers and contextual admissions
- The use of unconditional offers and 'attainment offers'
- The use of offer incentives, inducements and false marketing claims
- Applications which are made later in the admissions cycle, including the use of the UCAS Clearing system
- The transparency of the admissions process
- Applicants' experience of the admissions process
- Stakeholders' perceptions of the extent to which the English higher education admissions system is fair and effective

The three options to be considered are, **retaining the current system** with reforms, a **PQA system for offers** and a **PQA system for applications**.

The review is discussed in a *BBC News* article, [Uni admissions could scrap use of predicted grades](#), 27 February 2020.

## Consultation paused due to Covid

The [OfS website](#) states that the consultation is currently paused due to the Covid pandemic and will relaunch no earlier than Autumn 2021-22:

The review has been delayed due to the significant impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the 2020-21 and potentially the 2021-22 admissions cycles. Our [new time-limited condition Z3](#) to maintain integrity and stability in admissions remains in place until

there was widespread recognition that parts of the admissions system were "not working"

[Sir Michael Barber](#)  
[OfS](#)

30 September 2021, unless we choose to consult on removing the condition earlier.

We are pausing our review to avoid placing additional regulatory burden on higher education providers who will be focusing on making admissions in 2021 as fair as possible, in light of any potential further disruption over the course of this cycle.

## 5.2 Universities UK Fair Admissions Review

In July 2019 Universities UK announced its own review - 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. The deadline for responses to the review was December 2019.<sup>44</sup> The review will be chaired by Paddy Nixon, vice-chancellor of Ulster University.

The UUK review and the OfS review are “entirely separate”.<sup>45</sup>

### Review report November 2020

On 13 November 2020 Universities UK published its [Fair Admissions Review](#) report. The most far reaching recommendation in the report is the proposal to **move to a PQA system for higher education admissions**.

The reports' recommendations included:

- the ending of 'conditional unconditional' offers
- guidance on the acceptable use of unconditional offers
- a new code of practice to maintain standards
- greater transparency, consistency, and standard indicators to support contextual offer-making
- and a proposed switch to post-qualifications admissions (PQA) – where applicants express interest in universities and offers are made to applicants after they have achieved their qualifications – from 2023 subject to full consultation.

A [Q&A document](#) gives an overview of the report and its recommendations.

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<sup>44</sup> UUK, [Major review of university admissions underway](#), 22 July 2019

<sup>45</sup> “Major’ review of UK university admissions under way”, *Times Higher Education*, 22 July 2019

The UUK proposals on PQA offer a hybrid system where students would still apply for higher education course before they have their exam results but offers would be made by universities after the awarding of qualification in the summer. Under this system it is expected that university term dates would not need to change although this would be part of the consultation on this proposal.

UUK stated that "the recommendations will be implemented in stages, some over the short term (within one year) with others over the long term (within 3-4 years)". The long term recommendations such as the move to a PQA system will be the subject of **ongoing consultation** with stakeholders led by UUK.

## Responses to the report

Comments focused on the recommendation to move to a PQA system.

### Russell Group

"Applying to university is a crucial moment in students' lives, and it is vital that we have a fair, transparent admissions system that works for all applicants.

"We welcome efforts to build greater trust and public understanding of the offer-making and admissions process to show that the system is working in the best interests of students. Our own report, [Pathways for Potential](#), reiterated the commitment of Russell Group universities to that goal.

"We look forward to working with UUK on a full consultation of its findings, including how to address the practical challenges a post-qualification admissions system may present as well as ensuring contextual admissions are used effectively for students and universities." <sup>46</sup>

### University and Colleges Union

"The current system is based on inaccurately predicted results and leads to those from less-affluent backgrounds losing out.

"Allowing students to apply after they receive their results will help level the playing field and put a stop to the chaotic clearing scramble."

"UCU and many sector leaders now agree the time has come for the UK to join the rest of the world and finally to move away from the current unfair system." <sup>47</sup>

### Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

Teachers work hard and diligently to provide accurate predicted grades, but it is not an exact science and never can be.

Post-qualification admissions would be better and fairer.<sup>48</sup>

### Sutton Trust

Sir Peter Lampl, founder and chairman of the Sutton Trust and chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation said:

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<sup>46</sup> Russell Group, [Response to UUK Fair Admissions Review](#), 13 November 2020

<sup>47</sup> "[University offers could be based on real exam results](#)", *BBC News*, 13 November 2020

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*

“We welcome that the government is looking at how to make university admissions more transparent and fairer – something which the Sutton Trust has long campaigned for.

“Moving the timing of applications so students apply to university after they receive their exam results would allow young people to make life-changing decisions based on their actual grades, rather than predicted grades, which we know are wrong in the majority of cases, especially for poorer students.

“For many years the Sutton Trust has campaigned to improve social mobility and moving to a system of post-qualification applications would be a major step forward.

“Reforming university admissions is challenging and so it is only right that the government should consult widely across the sector.”<sup>49</sup>

## Labour Party

**Kate Green MP, Labour’s Shadow Education Secretary,** responding to Government plans to review the university admissions system, said:

“The Government appears to be finally ready to listen to Labour’s repeated calls to reform the university admissions system.

“University admissions must be transparent, fair, and widen access to higher education. The current system simply fails to do this and must be overhauled.

“This consultation announcement is a welcome start, but the Government must also look at the wider factors universities should consider when making offers to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure the system is genuinely fair to all.”<sup>50</sup>

## Commentary on the proposals

A blog on the Higher Education Policy Institute website questioned the timing of reforms:

The pandemic, and changes to admissions in 2020 means now is not the right moment in time to revamp the higher education admissions system. We have waited this long: it seems prudent to now wait another three years for the empirical evidence of how teacher predictions map onto higher education performance. It might be we need to rethink more than the timing of the admissions process and re-evaluate more broadly how and why we admit students.<sup>51</sup>

An article on the Wonkhe website also considered the timing of changes and suggested that a new system may not be any fairer than the current system:

The implementation of PQA is proposed for 2023-24, which would mean to live up to the principles of fair admissions the finalised process would need to be publicised to advisers and potential applicants 12-18 months in advance. Less substantial

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<sup>49</sup> The Sutton Trust, “[The Sutton Trust responds to government plans to review university admissions](#)”, 13 November 2020

<sup>50</sup> Labour, “[Kate Green responds to Government plans to review the university admissions system](#)”, 13 November 2020

<sup>51</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute, “[Should the UK be moving to post-qualification admissions?](#)” 14 November 2020

changes in admissions – such as the move to paperless admissions – took far longer and different providers moved at different paces.

Such inconsistencies would undermine the entire purpose of creating a fairer system for all, so smaller providers may need supplementary finance and expertise to ensure delivery. Rushing such a major change without unified support and oversight of process developments is highly likely to lead to unintended consequences that builds-in unfairness.

For example, UUK's preferred model envisages a relatively similar application timeline, but with offers delayed until after results. Applicants will only be permitted up to three choices, but if they're seen as unsuitable they can change them a potentially unlimited number of times prior to results.

There's a high risk, based on precedent, that some selective courses in some universities will only consider those who put them in their initial three choices. The proposed new model has every potential to have disadvantage implicitly built-in and create a new market where obscured selection practices favour those with additional advice and support.

PQA has been a very long time building and UUK is just the latest in a long line of sector voices to back it. Whether you favour PQA (in one of its many forms) or not, it is now time to shift the debate onto ensuring it delivers on its promises. Similar to the current admissions process, it will not necessarily be the system that's unfair, but how it is used.<sup>52</sup>

### 5.3 UCAS reform options for admissions

On 9 November 2020 UCAS announced that it would be unveiling two radical new plans for reforming the admissions process in the coming weeks.<sup>53</sup> It said that “both would have far-reaching impact and better support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are often under-predicted and less likely to apply to selective universities”.

The reforms are considering changes to the timetable of the admissions cycle and it is thought likely that UCAS will propose some type of PQA system.

Now is the time to take a serious look at reforming the admissions timetable

Claire Merchant,  
UCAS Chief  
Executive

<sup>52</sup> Wonkhe, “[Reviewing Universities UK's Fair Admissions Review](#)”, 16 November 2020

<sup>53</sup> UCAS, [UCAS maps reforms of higher education admissions](#), 9 November 2020

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