

# The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

**2 December 2020**

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**This briefing document has been produced by Universities UK which provides the secretariat for the University APPG.**

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## **Agenda**

**This meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group is being held to discuss potential reforms to the university admissions system**

- 5:00pm Daniel Zeichner MP, Chair, All-Party Parliamentary University Group**
- c5:05pm Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive, Universities UK**
- c5:15pm Professor Quintin McKellar, Vice-Chancellor, University of Hertfordshire**
- c5:20pm Professor Sally Mapstone, Vice-Chancellor, University of St Andrews**
- c5:25pm Clare Marchant, Chief Executive, UCAS**
- c5:35pm Beth Linklater, Assistant Principal, Queen Mary's College**
- C5:45pm Questions, comments, and discussion with university leaders, MPs and peers**
- 6:30pm Meeting concludes.**

## Speaker Biographies

### **Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive, Universities UK**



Before taking up his current role, he was Deputy Chief Executive, and prior to that Director of External Relations at Universities UK. Before joining UUK in 2013 he was a Director at the University of Birmingham and has previously held communications, campaigning and political relations roles for national organisations in both the public and private sectors.

Alistair is currently a member of the Government's high-level stakeholder working group on EU Exit, Universities and Research; a member of the Financial Services Skills Taskforce and sits on the steering group of the Industrial Strategy Council prosperity mapping project. Alistair represents Universities UK on the Department for Education's taskforce for higher education, established to explore the challenges currently facing the higher education sector as it continues to deal with the effects of the Covid-19 crisis. He has previously held voluntary roles as Deputy Chair of the board of Wonkhe, a higher education policy media company; as a Commissioner of the UPP Civic Universities Commission; and as a member of the judging panel for both the Times Higher and Guardian University Awards.

He was educated at the Universities of Kent, Leicester and the Institute of Education, University of London. Alistair is a fellow of the RSA.

### **Beth Linklater, Assistant Principal, Queen Mary's College**

Beth Linklater is an Assistant Principal at Queen Mary's College in Basingstoke, where she runs careers, student welfare, student finance, and a range of other support areas. Previous to this she was a lecturer in German at various universities, and admissions tutor, so understands the university application process from both sides. Beth has been involved with UCAS for 7 years, and currently chairs the Secondary Education advisory group and is a member of the Fair Admissions Review. Beth has a PhD in German literatures.



## **Clare Marchant, Chief Executive, UCAS**

Clare graduated from University of Hull in 1993, in History and Politics. She later went on to complete an MSc in Manufacturing, Management, and Technology from the Open University.

She started her professional life as a management trainee, then worked as Engineering and Production Manager for Rank Hovis McDougall. Clare then joined Deloitte Consulting, where she worked for a variety of clients including Burberry, Abbey, Department for Work and Pensions, and Department for Constitutional Affairs, leading large scale transformation programmes.



In 2003, Clare joined the Department for Health, leading the development and implementation of 'Choose and Book' and picture archiving communication services across the NHS. Having taken a short sabbatical to teach IT in Ghana, she returned as Chief Deployment Officer.

In 2010, she joined Worcestershire County Council as Head of Change, and in 2012, was appointed Assistant Chief Executive, with responsibility for leading change across the organisation. Clare was appointed as Worcestershire County Council's Chief Executive in February 2014. She left to take up the post of UCAS Chief Executive in July 2017.

Clare is passionate about delivering reform and value in public services, and particularly, the benefit education can bring to both an individual's overall life chances, and creating a more productive society. With three sons at differing stages of life's journey, she is delighted to have the opportunity to lead UCAS during this time of considerable change in the education sector.

## **Professor Quintin McKellar, Vice Chancellor, University of Hertfordshire**



Quintin McKellar graduated in Veterinary Medicine in 1981, and gained a PhD in Veterinary Parasitology in 1984 from the University of Glasgow. He became Lecturer (1984), Senior Lecturer (1991), Reader (1994) and Professor and Head of Department (1996) in Veterinary Pharmacology at the University of Glasgow. He was appointed director of the Moredun Research Institute which carries out infectious disease research of livestock in 1997, and was appointed Principal of the Royal Veterinary College, University of London in 2004. Since 2011 he has been the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire.

He was awarded a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine in 2002, and has been awarded Fellowships of the Institute of Biology, the Royal Agricultural Society, The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce, The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and The Royal Society of Edinburgh. He has been

awarded research prizes by The Wellcome Trust, British Veterinary Association, British Small Animal Veterinary Association, Royal Agricultural Society and Saltire Society of Scotland.

He is UUK Vice-President (England and Northern Ireland), and is chairman of the Hatfield Town Regeneration project. He is also a Non-Executive Director of the Centre for Innovation Excellence in Livestock. He was made Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 2011.

### **Professor Sally Mapstone, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of St Andrews**

Professor Sally Mapstone FRSE is Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of St Andrews, the second woman in succession to hold this role there. She is a board member of Universities UK, a trustee of UCAS and of the Europaeum, and a member of the advisory board of the Higher Education Policy Institute.

She leads on widening access work for Universities Scotland. She is chair of the international advisory board for the University of Helsinki. In 2017 she received the Foreign Policy Association of America medal for services to higher education. In 2019 she was elected to the fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. As an academic Sally is a medievalist, with expertise in the area of medieval and Renaissance Scottish literature. She is President of the Saltire Society, which champions Scottish culture.



## Introduction

### Post Qualification Admissions

A post-qualification admissions (PQA) system is a process whereby applicants apply to and/or receive offers from higher education providers based on their achieved qualifications. This differs from the existing system in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, where applicants can apply and/or receive offers based on their predicted grades.

There are different options for a PQA system, which include the following:

- a. The applicant applies before achieving their qualifications, but the provider only makes offers based on achieved qualifications
- b. The applicant makes 'expressions of interest' before achieving their qualifications, then applies formally after achieving their qualifications
- c. The applicant starts the entire application process after achieving their qualifications, and the provider makes offers accordingly.

UCAS data for 2019 shows 79% of 18-year-olds in the UK accepted to university with at least 3 A levels had their grades over-predicted, whereas 8% were under-predicted.

UCU's 2016<sup>i</sup> report on the accuracy and impact of predicted grades show almost 3,000 disadvantaged, high-achieving students (or 1,000 per year) have their grades under-predicted.

### Unconditional offers

In 2019, UCAS revised their definition of an unconditional offer to include three distinct types of offer which fall within the broad category of unconditional offers:

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

### Statistics on use

The UCAS End of Cycle 2019 reported statistics on the use of unconditional offers<sup>ii</sup>:

- In 2019, a record 37.7% of applicants received an offer with an unconditional component. This is an increase of 3.3 percentage points, continuing increases since 2013 (when reporting began)
- Over a quarter of applicants (25.1%, 64,825 applicants) received a conditional unconditional offer, 11.5% (29,785 applicants) received a direct unconditional offer, and 7.6% (19,555 applicants) received an 'other unconditional' offer

- The proportion of applicants receiving a conditional unconditional offer increased by 4.2 percentage points in 2019, direct unconditional increased by 0.9 percentage points, while those receiving an other unconditional decreased by 0.3 percentage points
- 23.4% of quintile 1 applicants received a conditional unconditional offer in 2019 (an increase of 4.3 percentage points from 2018), compared to 25.8% of quintile 5 applicants (an increase of 3.8 percentage points)<sup>iii</sup>
- While the most disadvantaged applicants (POLAR4 quintile 1)<sup>8</sup> are more likely to receive an offer with an unconditional component, direct unconditional offer or other unconditional offer than the most advantaged applicants (quintile 5), they are less likely to receive a conditional unconditional offer.

## **Contextual admissions**

‘Contextual admissions’ refers to the practice of using additional information, such as where a potential student lives or which school they go to, to assess their attainment and potential.

A contextual offer is an offer made on the basis of contextual data or participation in an outreach event. This might include:

- an offer based on advertised grades
- an offer at a grade or more lower than advertised
- an unconditional offer
- an offer linked to a foundation year.

The 2004 Schwartz Review of university admissions concluded that ‘it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors as well as formal educational achievement, given the variation in learners’ opportunities and circumstances.’

## **Sector reviews**

### **2004 Schwartz admissions review**

In 2003, Charles Clarke MP, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, asked Brunel University Vice-Chancellor, Steven Schwartz, to lead an independent review of the options that English higher education institutions should consider when assessing the merit of applicants for their courses, and to report on the high-level principles underlying these options. A steering group was established, and two consultation papers were published to get feedback from the sector.

The Steering Group presented a set of five principles for fair admissions:

- Principle 1: Be transparent, and provide consistent and efficient information
- Principle 2: Select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential
- Principle 3: Use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
- Principle 4: Minimise barriers to applicants



- Principle 5: Be professional in every respect and underpinned by institutional structures and processes.

You can read the full report [here](#).

## **2008 review of Schwartz principles**

In 2008, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills commissioned a review in response to one of the Schwartz reviews recommendations to government that a further review be undertaken after 3 years.

UCAS surveyed 322 higher and further education institutions. The survey consisted of the original questions posed in the 2004 survey with additional questions about the impact of the Schwartz Report, procedures that were undertaken within the admissions decision-making process and whether any changes had taken place since the publication of the Report.

You can find the executive summary and conclusions of the review [here](#).

## **2012 UCAS Admissions Process Review**

In 2012, UCAS established an Admissions Review Process Review Team and Steering Group to undertake a 6 month comprehensive review of the higher education admission process. The principal conclusions of the review were:

- any applicants are asked to make choices about what and where to study before they are fully ready.
- the combined effect of predicted grades, insurance choices and Clearing have led to a system that is complex, lacks transparency for many applicants and is inefficient and cumbersome for HEIs.
- only the best informed applicants and advisers are able to optimise UCAS applications and there is an undesirable divide between those applicants who receive effective advice and those who do not.

This review consulted on a proposed PQA system to change to admissions processes whereby applicants would apply only with known grades.

You can read the full review [here](#).

## **2017 Universities Scotland Working to Widen Access**

In 2016, Universities Scotland established three working groups to respond to the university-facing recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) report 'A Blueprint for Fairness' published in early 2016. The report mapped 15 actions against the university-facing CoWA recommendations.

You can read the full report and recommendations [here](#).

## 2020 Universities UK Fair Admissions Review

Universities UK's Fair Admissions Review was launched on 22 July 2019 to: identify the main challenges linked to admissions and offer-making practices; review the 2004 Schwartz principles on fair admissions, and propose changes that will ensure that admissions work in the best interests of applicants.

An advisory group was formed of higher education, further education, school, student and UCAS representatives to determine the scale and scope of the review and agree to priority activities in relation to the most substantial challenges linked to admissions and offer-making

A total of 181 higher education providers, schools, colleges, current students, recent graduates, parents, employers, representative groups and other bodies responded to UUK's call for evidence earlier this year, which informed the recommendations of the 'Fair admissions review' advisory group.

Opinion polling was carried out among 1,499 individuals aged 18 and over who had applied to a UK university, college or other higher education institution while a UK resident, between 2015 and 2019.

The recommendations include:

- 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-qualification 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

Proposals on a reformed admissions system based on a Post-Qualifications Admissions model and recommendations on contextual admissions will be subject of full consultation, led by Universities UK, with stakeholders and students over winter 2020/spring 2021.

Any move to a PQA system would apply to applicants starting at university in autumn 2023 at the earliest given the significant changes that would need to take place across the education system to facilitate this shift.

You can find the full report [here](#) and a Q&A [here](#).

## 2019 Office for Students Admissions Review

In April 2019, Damian Hinds, then Secretary of State for Education announced there would a review of university admissions after an increase in the use of 'conditional unconditional offers'<sup>iv</sup>. In his speech, he said it was 'unacceptable for universities to adopt pressure-selling tactics, which are harming students' grades in order to fill places.'

In February 2020, the Office for Students launched a review seeking the views of students, staff at universities, colleges and schools on issues relating to university and college admissions.

The consultation asked respondents to consider issues including:

- Use and accuracy of predicted grades and personal statements
- The role of contextual information in admissions
- The use of unconditional offers
- The use of incentives in the admissions process
- The transparency, fairness and effectiveness of the system

The review considered three options for reform of the system

- Retaining the current system with reforms
- Post-qualification offers
- Post-qualification admissions

The consultation was paused and will relaunch no earlier than Autumn 2021-22. This is due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the 2020-21 and potentially 2021-22 admissions cycle.

## **UCAS 2020 Admissions Review**

On 9 November, UCAS published the results of their own review into university admissions in the Times. The article previewed recommendations which include two options for post-qualification admissions in the next academic year:

1. Students would apply to university *after* receiving their A-level grades, and the academic year would begin in January, or;
2. Students apply in the usual way but will only receive offers from universities once they have their grades in August.

John Cope, the director of strategy, policy and public affairs at UCAS wrote for the Times:

“In the case of both options, working with the devolved nations will be essential or else a devolution divide will open up, with nothing stopping Welsh, Northern Irish and Scottish universities walking away from Ucas and all the benefits that a UK admissions shared service brings.”

“This would be terrible for students, creating four fragmented and out-of-sync systems. We also need to recognise the pressure placed on universities and colleges by both options, with less time for interviews and other assessments, which is especially relevant to the arts, medicine or nursing,”

You can read the Times article [here](#).

## **Government view**

In September 2019, Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson endorsed the Office for Students' proposal to use their review of admissions to consider the pros and cons of PQA.

The Education Secretary has made a series of comments and interventions in relation to admissions in recent months. In his speech at Universities UK's annual conference he referred to the UUK and OfS reviews as opportunities for the sector to "get its house in order". The Secretary of State followed up on this speech with a letter to UUK President, Professor Julia Buckingham, asking the sector to "make greater progress" in access for disadvantaged students.

On 13 November 2020, Gavin Williamson outlined his intention to consider post-qualification admissions, announcing the government will consult on proposals. The minister said moving to a system in which offers are made after students receive grades will address the use of unconditional offers.

## **Stakeholder views of PQA**

### **Sutton Trust**

In December 2017, the Sutton Trust released a report that reviewed the admissions process, particularly focussing on the elements that may present barriers to disadvantaged students.

The report made 5 recommendations

- PQA should be trialled and implemented
- Universities and UCAS should review the personal statement
- Universities should use contextual data in the admissions process
- Greater transparency from universities when communications how contextual data and personal statements are evaluated
- A guaranteed level of careers advice for all pupils

October 2020, the Sutton Trust published a research brief on 'PQA: Reforming University Admissions' which found that two-thirds of this year's university entrants were in favour of removing predicted grades from university admissions and making decisions based on actual results.

### **Labour Party**

In August 2019, the then shadow education secretary Angela Rayner MP announced Labour's plans to implement a post-qualification admissions system where students would apply for their university or higher education place after receiving their results in A-Levels or other qualifications. They suggested it would make the admissions system 'fairer, more accurate, and a genuine vehicle for social justice'<sup>v</sup>

The Labour manifesto included a commitment ‘introduce post-qualification admissions in higher education, and work with universities to ensure contextual admissions are used across the system.’

## **University and College Union and NEON**

In January 2019, University and College Union (UCU) and NEON released a report on post-qualification applications which described a student-centred higher education admissions system whereby students apply to university after they received qualifications.

UCU have been campaigning for a PQA system since a survey of members in 2015 found that seven in 10 respondents would like to see a system in which students apply after grades have been received.

In the UCU and NEON proposed system students would:

- make ‘expressions of interest’ to up to 12 universities in January
- apply for up to 8 universities in the first week of August
- receive decisions in the third week of September
- be placed by the end of September

The start of the academic year would be the 1 November.

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<sup>i</sup> Wyness, G (2016), ‘Predicted grades: accuracy and impact’, University and College Union, London.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/file/292711/download?token=hPNcy1Qo>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/file/292731/download?token=mvFM1ghk>

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-urged-to-review-unacceptable-admissions-practices?utm\\_source=c25e58a3-e288-419a-a8cf-17dbbdfc2f4f&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm\\_content=immediate](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-urged-to-review-unacceptable-admissions-practices?utm_source=c25e58a3-e288-419a-a8cf-17dbbdfc2f4f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate)

<sup>v</sup> <https://labour.org.uk/press/labour-announces-radical-shake-higher-education-admissions-system/>