



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

All-Party Parliamentary University Group Meeting
Admissions Reform
Wednesday 2 December
17:00-18:30

Speakers

- Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive, Universities UK
- Professor Quintin McKellar, Vice-Chancellor, University of Hertfordshire
- Professor Sally Mapstone, Vice-Chancellor, University of St Andrews
- Clare Marchant, Chief Executive, UCAS
- Beth Linklater, Assistant Principal, Queen Mary's College

Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive of Universities UK (UUK) opened the meeting by giving some background to the Fair Admissions review and how it fit into UUK's wider strategic priorities relating to 'opportunity' and 'trust'. On opportunity, he clarified that meant everyone with the will and potential to benefit from higher education should be able to access it. In terms of trust, he explained that universities should seek to maintain public and political trust by acting fairly and responsibly and demonstrating their positive impact on society.

The Fair Admissions Review was established to ensure the admissions system was fair, transparent and operating in the best interests of students. In order to do this the review group had sought and incorporated the views of students, applicants and schools, he explained. Alistair added that fair admissions was at the heart of universities' efforts to enhance life chances and address social inequalities, stressing it would become even more important for universities to offer ladders of opportunity as the full effects of the pandemic were felt, including by offering opportunities to reskill and retrain.

Summarising, he stressed the recommendations from the Fair Admissions Review should be seen in the wider context of ensuring the university sector is acting fairly, responsibly and in the best interest of students and for the benefit of the wider public.

Professor Quintin McKellar, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire and Chair of the UUK Fair Admissions Review Group ran through the main recommendations of the review group's final report. He stressed that two of the main themes were giving applicants choice without putting undue pressure on them, and ensuring applicants had access to better information about providers.

The first group of recommendations centred on minimising pressure on applicants and included: ending the use of conditional unconditional offers, unconditional offers only to be used in certain situations (i.e. courses based on auditions/portfolios and for those with certain disabilities), ending the use of inappropriate incentives and improving transparency around other types of incentives.

The second set of recommendations were concerned with the use of contextual offer making. The review group thought contextual offers could play an important role in addressing inequalities, but that a consistent core set of indicators should be used to determine who could receive a contextual offer; this could include Free School Meals and Index of Multiple Deprivation data. Information and transparency around their use should also be increased.

The final recommended area for reform was on moving to a post qualification admissions (PQA) system for university admissions in which offers are not made to applicants until after they have received their results.

Professor McKellar briefly mentioned other areas for reform that were explored by the group but ultimately rejected due to their limited impact on increasing fairness, including moving to a system of anonymous applications.

Professor Sally Mapstone, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of St Andrew's and vice-chair of the Fair Admissions Review Group opened by saying universities had not been as clear, focused or transparent about contextual admissions as they could have been.

She stressed the recommendations applied to England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and largely mirrored the direction of travel in Scotland over the past few years including the common parlance adopted for how contextual admissions are spoken about.

One example of where contextual offers could play an important role was for care experienced students; only 12% of young people that had experienced at least 12 months of care entered higher education, compared with 42% for the general population.

The review group recommended that universities should publish minimum entry requirements that could be used when making contextual offers, and that care experienced students should receive a guaranteed offer if they met these requirements.

Clare Marchant, Chief Executive of UCAS opened by reminding attendees that out of the 700,000 students UCAS dealt with every year only around 300,000 were UK based 18-year olds. She also thought reforming the admissions system provided an opportunity to ensure a new system was future proofed, and could support those undertaking modular and more flexible learning and bring the results and application window for vocational qualifications more in line with A Levels.

Turning to the recommendations in the Fair Admissions Review, and UCAS's own modelling, Clare thought a PQA system where offers were made post results could be more logical for students and parents as well as increase transparency and fairness. She warned that, as with any major reforms, there could be unintended consequences such as predicted grades "going underground". The consultation period would be key, especially in looking at the impact on schools, teachers and advisors who would be more heavily relied on over the summer months in a system of PQA for expert careers support, particularly for those from a more disadvantaged background.

Beth Linklater, Assistant Principal of Queen Mary's College Basingstoke started by warmly welcoming the review's recommendation to end the use of conditional

unconditional offers as they caused confusion amongst students and could lead to negative outcomes including some students dropping out of college.

She did, however, say unconditional offers (without attached conditions) did benefit some students, especially those with poor mental health who went on to achieve better results once the anxiety around achieving certain grades had been removed. Beth similarly welcomed the recommendation on streamlining contextual offers and establishing a basket of indicators for eligibility as contextual admissions were currently a maze.

Publishing actual entry requirements would be helpful she thought, but mentioned the confusion and anxiety a couple of universities recently saying they would lower their grade requirements for 2021 entry had caused, as students had already submitted applications to UCAS.

She thought the school and sixth form college sectors would welcome the move to a PQA system, but time needed to be taken to properly design the system in consultation with schools; removing predicted grades from the process would be a positive development.

Finally, she noted that careers advice varied hugely across the sector which could be problematic, and was concerned that a reformed PQA may lead to a proliferation of admissions tests which could distract pupils from their A Level exams.