

Post Qualification Admissions

Sector reactions and blogs for further reading on the topic

Stakeholder reaction

The following comments were all included in the Government's [press release](#):

Clare Marchant, Chief Executive of UCAS, said:

We support the government taking a serious look at reforming the admissions timetable, which we have been doing over the last few months with universities, colleges, students, and schools.

There are different approaches to reform, so it's right for any consultation to be open minded and have the aim of levelling up fairness for students. Importantly, the consultation will provide an opportunity to address any unintended consequences of such major change, as well as practicalities for higher education providers.

Professor Graham Virgo, Senior Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education), Cambridge University said:

The University of Cambridge welcomes the government's decision to consult on reforming the way students apply to university, particularly through the adoption of a post-qualification admissions system. The University will work with the government towards the shared goal of establishing a system that will better enable our brightest young people, regardless of their background, to access university places that match their ability.

Leora Cruddas, chief executive of the Confederation of School Trusts (CST) said:

CST supports the Secretary of State's decision to consult on post-qualification admissions. While there is much to consider in terms of the detail of these proposals, it is important that we pause to consider the impact of our current arrangements, particularly on students from the most disadvantaged communities.

Lee Elliot Major OBE, Professor of Social Mobility, University of Exeter, said:

Applying to university with actual A-level grades is a reform that would enhance social mobility as it would sweep away the barriers, from poor advice to low expectations, that for too long have stymied the prospects of poorer students.

Other Comments *(not from Government publications)*

Alex Proudfoot, Chief Executive of Independent HE, commented:

"We welcome the Secretary of State's announcement on reforming higher education admissions. This issue has become a central topic for debate across the education sector, and this year more than ever a matter of fairness for young people who have faced so much disruption and disappointment.

"The UK's higher education sector offers a diverse system of learning opportunities for adults of all ages and at every stage of their career, and independent providers lead the way with multiple start dates and flexible entry and exit points. Any redesign of the admissions process must underpin not undermine this responsiveness, which is so integral to meeting our emerging economic, social and cultural needs.

"We must also remember that the UK is a magnet for international students, and any solution must also accommodate them, not least so that the Government's own target of increasing numbers to 600,000 by 2030 can be achieved.

"Exams are important, but they aren't everything, and we will work with the Department to highlight the essential value of contextual information within the admissions process, and the innovative, inclusive and highly personalised approaches that many independent specialist providers have adopted for years."

Dr Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union, said:

"The proposal to move to using real, rather than predicted A level grades to allocate higher education places is overdue and welcome. It has the potential to eradicate some of the weaknesses in the current system, in particular the under-estimation of predicted grades for disadvantaged students. It should also eliminate any bad practice of unconditional offers which can tie students into courses which are not most suited to their interests and to their future career prospects.

"However, whilst offers rely so heavily on grades - even when made after results are received - admissions will only ever be as fair as the system which awards these grades.

"To truly have 'fair' admissions we need a fairer qualification system in England - one which is fit for purpose for the 21st century. Currently, grades are based on exams at the end of the course and this disproportionately benefits those who have greater means to prepare for such exams. Covid has exposed a range of inequalities baked into the grading system in England, as well as the way home learning environments are deeply unequal. That is why the National Education Union has called for a review of the system in its recent Fair Grade petition."

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders union NAHT, said: "The government is right to want to explore the options for reworking university admissions. Many voices have expressed concerns about the current system where students apply with predicted grades. Our concern is one of fairness and equality of opportunity. Any new system needs to work in favour of learners. There is some evidence that high performing pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds fare worse than their peers under the current system. However, some of the alternatives to the way things are done now could also work against students in this category, so the government will need to listen carefully to the range of views that will be expressed."

Dr Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union, said:

"The proposal to move to using real, rather than predicted A level grades to allocate higher education places is overdue and welcome. It has the potential to eradicate some of the weaknesses in the current system, in particular the under-estimation of predicted grades for disadvantaged students. It should also eliminate any bad practice of unconditional offers which can tie students into courses which are not most suited to their interests and to their future career prospects.

"However, whilst offers rely so heavily on grades - even when made after results are received - admissions will only ever be as fair as the system which awards these grades.

"To truly have 'fair' admissions we need a fairer qualification system in England - one which is fit for purpose for the 21st century. Currently, grades are based on exams at the end of the course and this disproportionately benefits those who have greater means to prepare for such exams. Covid has exposed a range of inequalities baked into the grading system in England, as well as the way home learning environments are deeply unequal. That is why the National Education Union has called for a review of the system in its recent Fair Grade petition.

"Any move to post-qualification higher education admissions is going to require careful thought and planning. We expect teachers and leaders to be consulted, and fully involved throughout."

University Alliance Chief Executive Vanessa Wilson said:

"This is a timely call for a consultation to develop a more fair and transparent system of admissions that delivers equity of opportunity for all.

"Sharpening up contextual admissions policies in particular is crucial if the government is serious about transforming access to, and participation in, higher education for talented disadvantaged students.

"We look forward to building on the extensive engagement with schools, colleges and wider partners already undertaken by the sector through UUK's own admissions review, led by a University Alliance member. We will

work in collaboration with government and key sector bodies as well as the whole education system to drive ambitious sector-led change, enabling talented students from diverse backgrounds to go to university."

Commenting on the publication of Universities UK's recommendations for reforms of the university admissions system, **Hillary Gyebi-Ababio, NUS Vice President for Higher Education**, said -

"The recommendations here should, if implemented fairly and with student interest front and centre, make for a much fairer admissions system. The wider use of contextual admissions will be vital for levelling the playing field between students from a wealth of backgrounds, and we want to see a system put in place which prioritises the achievement of those who face multiple barriers to higher education.

"Education has the power to be a transformative experience. However, from the A Levels scandal to the experiences of those tricked back to campus so that universities could claim fees and rent, Covid has shown us that our education too frequently relies on and reproduces injustice. It's clear that we need to not just look again at how students are admitted, but move towards a full-scale transformation until we have an education that is funded, accessible and lifelong for all."

Blogs – from Wonkhe

Excerpts from Wonkhe's blog - [Would PQA help disadvantaged students?](#)

There is, clearly, a lot more to be done to promote fairness in university admissions beyond fiddling with when providers can make offers. A levels themselves have always been the [most middle-class of qualifications](#), and the recent move towards staking everything on a final exam has made results both more difficult to predict and more likely to benefit those with the resources to undertake intensive revision or additional tuition.

The actual issues with university entry qualifications are a growing difficulty in predicting grades – most likely due to an increasing reliance on traditional exams rather than coursework – and the tendency that students from more advantaged backgrounds achieve better actual results.

Shifting to a post-qualification application or offer system would solve neither of these issues, and would remove the small advantage that disadvantaged applicants get from teachers predicting based on aptitude rather than likely exam performance. There is hard work to be done on educational inequality, and PQA is not a shortcut.

Excerpts from the Wonkhe daily:

Last week saw a roller coaster ride of announcements on university admissions, with an op-ed in *The Times* from UCAS on Monday promising two contrasting proposals for debate, the report of the Universities UK (UUK) Fair Admissions Review on Friday, and a late-stage intervention from Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson on Friday night promising a government consultation on admissions in the coming months.

What's odd is that all three pretty much agree on a direction of travel towards a version of post-qualification admissions (PQA) – a shift that is in itself remarkable given the number of times PQA has been proposed and rejected over the last twenty years. And UUK's proposals include a number of other measures that would have a more immediate impact on admissions processes, including restricting the use of unconditional offers, promoting consistency in use of data for contextual admissions, and developing a sector-owned code of practice for admissions with consequences for a breach.

... the fourth actor in this saga, the Office for Students, is nowhere to be seen, having paused its own review of admissions in light of Covid-19 and given the sector notice not to expect the review to even restart before autumn 2021.

It all speaks to a struggle over the ownership of university admissions specifically, and higher education policy generally. Universities have autonomy over admissions to their own courses, but have proven **willing to sacrifice some of that autonomy in the interests of efficiency, of public confidence in the process, and of**

retaining sector ownership of the process. Other actors have other agendas – and admissions reform is a particularly media-friendly way of signalling concern for equity, willingness to challenge entrenched interests, and suchlike.

Library Briefing: The House of Commons Library has [published](#) a research briefing on the review of university admissions, covering the history and criticism of PQA advocacy from the 2004 Schwartz review to date, unconditional offer making, and the quality of grade predictions. It's a fantastic read.

Other Wonkhe blogs:

- [Paul Greatrix was into post qualification admissions before it was cool.](#) He even liked the early stuff.
- A nice blog explaining the American system and exploring whether it is transferable to the UK – [A US-style application system isn't everything it seems](#)
- [Reviewing Universities UK's Fair Admissions Review](#) Admissions expert Dan Shaffer assesses the UUK Fair Admissions Review on the extent to which it aids admissions professionals - and finds some limitations.