

University Alliance response to the UCAS Admissions Process Review Consultation

Introduction and Summary

1. University Alliance represents 23 major UK universities who work closely with business and the professions to deliver world-class research and a high quality student experience. At University Alliance, just like our universities, our approach is about putting solutions, innovation and enterprise at the core of everything we do. We deliver evidence-based policy and research and foster close links with Government and business in order to improve higher education policy; to the benefit of the economy and society.
2. University Alliance members broadly support the changes proposed for 2014 and there is general recognition that there is value in pursuing reform of the admissions system. However, it is not clear that the proposal for 2016 provides the best solution to the underlying issues highlighted in the Admissions Process Review (APR). We believe that further work to develop an alternative model may be beneficial. Our members indicated a willingness to work constructively with UCAS and other key partners to move towards a simple and effective admissions model that delivers benefits to applicants and the wider sector.
3. If not already considered, there may be value in exploring a 'hybrid' model that could incorporate some of the desirable elements of a post qualifications system but that removes some of the barriers to implementation by completing some parts of the admissions process prior to school examinations (see paragraph 14 for further details).
4. We consider it too early to have sufficient evidence to fully answer the detailed questions laid out in this consultation so we have set out our response around the main sections of the consultation and based on the key principles of an admissions system identified by UCAS (see p11 of APR consultation document).

The proposed 2014 entry enhancements

5. *Process efficiencies welcomed*

An admissions process should be effective at delivering member efficiencies and minimising unnecessary transactions and costs. The proposed efficiencies and system enhancements in the 2014 reforms are welcomed and many would be necessary to enable a further move to a post results system. The benefits from more integrated data sharing systems are potentially quite significant and a coordinated approach that considers synergies with student finance and other external agencies, including exam boards, schools, universities and colleges, is an essential step towards increasing the efficiency of the admissions process and improving the applicant experience.

6. *Streamlining Clearing/Apply 3 is supported*

The APR found that improvements could be made to the Clearing process to make it more efficient for universities and less stressful for applicants. The process is not well designed for applicants as success often depends on good fortune in getting the right phone response quickly. With around 45,000 applicants attempting to contact a couple of hundred universities in a short period of time, a system that is managed centrally by UCAS could increase the fairness and efficiency of the process and minimise the stress experienced by applicants. The introduction of equal consideration during Clearing is likely to be fairer and more transparent but there are reservations around the likelihood of ensuring all institutions and applicants use the central process. The effectiveness of this arrangement will also depend largely on the effectiveness of the UCAS systems established to support it.

7. Compatible systems enabling efficient and up to date communication between UCAS, institutions and applicants along with comprehensive modelling would be essential in creating a centralised 'Clearing' process. Any delays or inaccuracies in the information given to applicants at this stage could greatly disadvantage those participating. The design of a more managed process would also have to take into consideration the timing of GCSE and other result publication to ensure the system remained fair for all applicants.

8. The renaming of the current application windows to improve comprehension is welcome. The renaming of the decision-reply statuses could also be helpful if suitable, easily understandable alternatives can be found and assuming any changes would be clearly communicated to applicants and those in advisory roles.

9. Some institutions have raised concerns around auto-matching of results to offers as it could impact on institutional autonomy to accept or reject applicants. Although recognising the potential benefits of efficiencies in this area, it may be beneficial to explore the option of a matching process where all 'straight-forward' confirmations of places are processed automatically but any possible rejections are flagged to the institutions concerned. This would give institutions the flexibility to still offer places to those who have not met the stated offer requirements. Initially, 'auto-matching' could be introduced by providing a flag for institutions which indicates whether or not the conditions of the offer appear to have been met, but which leaves the final decision to the institution. This could speed up internal processes within institutions and may, over time, provide institutions with sufficient confidence to use the 'auto-matching' facility alone.

10. *Clear communication of any changes is essential*

Any changes to the established system require clear and early communication to applicants and to those providing potential applicants with information, advice and guidance (IAG). The timescale for communicating any changes for 2014 to potential applicants is tight.

Communication will be an essential part of the process if changes are to be implemented fairly and successfully. In particular, information around any changes to the UCAS tariff must

be effectively communicated by the sector so that non-traditional/non-A-level applicants understand entry requirements.

11. Great care must also be taken in communicating any changes to an international audience. So soon after UKBA changes, it is essential that international applicants are not unnecessarily put off applying.

Proposed post-results system as a whole

12. Moving towards a fairer system

As recognised in the key principles set out in the UCAS consultation document, an admissions system should be fair and support access for all applicants. In a system with more applicants than places available this is crucial. In order to be fair any admissions decisions must be based on accurate information. Around half of predicted grades are inaccurate, with grades for applicants from underrepresented groups and those receiving lower grades being less likely to be predicted accurately. Removing the option of using predicted grades in making admissions decisions would be in keeping with increasing the fairness of the admissions system. In a post results system the obstacle of predicted grades is removed. Whether a post results system would be fairer than the current system would then depend on the other elements of the system; it would not automatically deliver a fairer system.

13. Supporting diversity

Any admissions system would need to be able to cope with a wide diversity of applicants. The APR focussed on young, full time, English, undergraduates for programmes starting in the Autumn and, therefore, the system proposed for 2016 focuses primarily on the needs of this group. While recognising that UCAS intends to look at other groups of students in a further review in 2012, including those applying to part-time undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses, we have some reservations about supporting a proposed new system that has not been purposefully designed for the diverse range of applicants and provision in UK HE. Applications to courses with entry points other than the Autumn (including vocational courses such as teaching and nursing) and courses which use interviews or portfolios as the basis for their admissions also need to be accommodated in the design of any new system. It is important that any new system is designed to accommodate a broad range of applications from different applicants to different types of provision: a system which is based purely on the predominant existing model of higher education provision will not support the development and expansion of other forms of higher education provision nor aid widening participation.

14. A 'hybrid' model

The system proposed for 2016 is a post results application system where virtually all parts of the process happen after school exams. This model would remove the option of using

predicted grades and admissions decisions could be based on results obtained. However, even if it were possible to obtain the necessary agreement from all affected parties (including the school sector and each of the devolved UK administrations) and to implement the necessary shifts in university, school and examination timetables, the proposed model may not be the most appropriate solution to the issues raised in the APR. It is imperative that in seeking to improve the current admissions process we do not create a system where every applicant goes through a 'Clearing-like' experience due to the increased levels of uncertainty from not holding any offers and the time pressured nature of the model. There may be value in looking at a model where some of the application process occurs earlier in the academic year.

15. Such a model could include making applications prior to the examination period and conducting interviews or auditions prior to the publication of results. Following the receipt of applications, institutions would make conditional or unconditional offers, or reject an applicant. These decisions would be evidence based, using interviews, portfolios, auditions, personal statements, previous exam results and contextual information. This initial sifting (including interviews) could happen between the end of school examinations and the publication of results. Applicants could hold, for example, six conditional or unconditional (if based on AS level/other prior attainment) offers. Applicants would still have a broad range of options open to them as they would not have to narrow down their choices prior to receiving their results. So an applicant could hold offers that include those that are ambitious (relative to their own expectations) and those that are fall backs in case they do not do as well as they hoped in the school exams.
16. The time pressure on all parts of the system would be relieved reducing the extent of changes to school, university and admissions timetables. Institutions would have to learn new offer ratios and acceptance rates to control student numbers. A model like this could reduce the pressure on applicants and institutions in the period following examinations and result publication offering more time for making well informed decisions. It may also offer some solutions to issues around completing CRB or occupational health checks prior to the start of the academic year. This would potentially create a model that maintains the principal benefit of a post results system that applicants and institutions are able to make fair and informed decisions. Applicants would be able to keep options open to institutions with a range of entry requirements. Institutions would be basing offers or rejections either on prior attainment or actual results obtained. Clarity around the best way to use the six applications would enable applicants to take advantage of the opportunity to make some more aspirational and some safer applications. IAG making this clear, to widening participation applicants in particular, would be important.
17. As with any proposal, modelling around how a 'hybrid' model of some kind might deliver the flexibility required to best meet the diverse needs of applicants and providers would be essential.

18. Whatever changes are made, we would advocate a more structured or coordinated system of giving advice and support to teachers and advisers to ensure a smooth transition and to reduce the risk of changes having a negative impact on students. This could include suggesting a timeline for IAG and providing clear, accessible information about when actions (e.g. university visits or writing personal statements) or decisions should, or need to, be made in the new system.

Widening Participation in a post results system

19. To remove barriers to widening participation the admission process must hold to the principles of fairness, of supporting access for all applicants and of being able to cope with a wide diversity of applicants. We support UCAS's aim of seeking to create a system that is simpler, fairer and more transparent. It should be recognised that changes are more likely to negatively impact those who are unable to readily access good IAG. Clarity and flexibility are needed in the system design and also in the support and IAG provided to potential applicants. To mitigate the impact of any changes, particular care must be taken to provide ready access to tailored IAG for those not in the UK school or further education sector at point of application, those from widening participation backgrounds, adults and those returning to education.
20. It will be extremely important to clarify the role of contextual data in a post-results admissions system. Institutions, in their course information, and advisors in their IAG, must be extremely clear about whether the stated academic requirements are flexible, and if so to what extent. Without clarity from institutions and from UCAS, in particular regarding the role of auto-matching, applicants may waste an application on an institution that would not consider their application or fail to apply somewhere they might have been accepted had the minimum requirements been made clearer.
21. There is an emphasis in the consultation document on 'aspirational choices'. Greater clarity is needed on this subject as it is unclear what role 'aspirational choices' could play in a system where applicants apply with known results. If an applicant applies to a course for which they meet the minimum requirements it would not be 'aspirational'. If they applied for a course where they did not meet the requirements they could not be considered, due to being ruled out through auto-matching, and therefore their application would be wasted.
22. Reducing the stated minimum academic requirements across the board would not be a feasible solution to this issue as it might increase the volume of applications to an unmanageable level, particularly if the sifting process is to take place over a shorter period of time.
23. *Supporting widening participation in the longer term*

To successfully address the widening participation agenda, the sector must develop a consistent and systematic approach to the assessment of 'potential'. The methods used to

assess this should address the different experiences and opportunities afforded to applicants. To continue building on progress in this area, any new system should ensure that contextual data or other measures of potential can be properly considered when making admissions decisions. For meaningful widening of participation in HE, this would have to be alongside total growth of the number of student places available.

Part time and international students

24. Clear communication of the application process is essential for part time and international students. Any changes to the system are likely to be more difficult to communicate to these groups of applicants. For both groups the process must be flexible and the system must be simple and compatible with other elements in the wider process. For international students, this may mean ensuring that the system has enough time built in for visas to be applied for and granted between offer confirmation and the start of term. Consideration as to how to support the role of agents supporting international applicants is also essential. For part time students in particular, reasonable time may need to be built in so that arrangements can be made around work or caring commitments.
25. Alongside designing a system where these needs are met, there is a great need for clear, relevant information reaching all potential applicants so that they are not unnecessarily put off from applying due to lack of understanding of the new system regardless of whether applications are made centrally or to individual institutions.

Alliance universities – Bournemouth University, University of Bradford, Cardiff Metropolitan University, De Montfort University, University of Glamorgan, Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Hertfordshire, University of Huddersfield, Kingston University, University of Lincoln, Liverpool John Moores University, Manchester Metropolitan University, Northumbria University, Nottingham Trent University, Open University, Oxford Brookes University, Plymouth University, University of Portsmouth, University of Salford, Sheffield Hallam University, Teesside University, University of Wales, Newport, University of the West of England.