

UCAS response: National discussion on education (Scotland)

Introduction

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent, trusted charity. Every year, we support over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories to access UK higher education (HE). In the 2021 cycle, over 55,000 Scottish domiciled applicants applied to institutions across the UK, and students from across the globe applied through UCAS to Scotland's 19 universities, and to the City of Glasgow College. Our mission at UCAS is to establish ourselves as 'route neutral', providing clarity and parity across academic and technical pathways.

UCAS is the shared admissions service which serves the majority of applications to Scottish universities, though we recognise that currently that the provision of HE and further education (FE) in most Scottish colleges currently exists outside the UCAS ecosystem. Given our embeddedness in the Scottish HE context, we appreciate the opportunity to respond to this consultation shaping the future vision of Scottish education. Our response to this consultation is shaped by our insight into the student mindset and the wider context of the uplift in demographics which will see an increase in demand for higher education across the UK and in Scotland over the next four years.

Key points

- **A commitment to widening access needs to remain at the heart of Scotland's vision for HE.** Scotland has made positive steps in widening access to HE in recent years, with the Commission on Widening Access's (CoWa) interim target that 16% of undergraduate entrants should be from the least advantaged areas (SIMD2020 Quintile 1) having been met and implementing successful initiatives to support care-experienced students. UCAS is projecting a 10% increase in the number of Scottish applicants by 2026. As this demographic uplift occurs, we need to ensure there is a sufficient supply of high-quality opportunities for students from widening access backgrounds, particularly given the student number controls which are currently imposed on Scottish HE. Careful planning and innovative approaches, including the ongoing reforms to the UCAS application service, will be required to safeguard the positive trajectory of Scotland's widening access programme.
- **A more joined up approach between Scotland's colleges and UCAS would allow us greater transparency of the Scottish context, particularly on widening access.** Going forward, better dialogue between colleges in

Scotland and our systems would allow the Scottish government and wider HE sector to visualise the full effect that articulation, students entering the second or third year of a university degree through qualifications gained at college, is having on Scotland's widening access programme. From a student perspective, incorporation within the UCAS ecosystem would enable them to access our personalised careers information and guidance (CIAG), and expose them to a broader range of choices.

- **Technical pathways need to be accessible alongside academic options to ensure that all young people have the right information to make the right decisions for them.** Research from our report [Where Next? What influences the choices that school leavers make?](#) found that disadvantaged students are more likely to consider HE later than their more advantaged peers. Presenting both routes with parity and increasing places to meet demand is critical in making sure that young people have the right options available to them. We are therefore keen to support Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Myworldatwork to provide true choice to Scottish students. We welcome discussions about how UCAS can help in periods of increased budgetary and demographic pressure to ensure that all students are receiving the information and guidance they need.
- **The projected increase in student numbers provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fill skills shortages.** UCAS has the capacity to develop insight into which areas of the economy and society would benefit from a highly qualified workforce, supporting Scotland's education and training sectors to establish their priorities.
- **Scotland should aim to diversify its international student population to continue to gain the benefits of student exchange.** With a projected 46% increase in international student numbers across the UK by 2026, Scotland can make up for the decrease in students from the European Union (EU) which has followed the UK's exit from the EU.

1. What kind of education will be needed by children and young people in Scotland in the future?

One of the Scottish education's greatest strengths is its flexibility. The Curriculum for Excellence allows greater fluidity in the way that qualifications are delivered, providing greater student choice, but also creating challenges when comparing different studio portfolios. We believe that the future of Scottish education will need to provide a pathway as unique as each individual young person. UCAS is here to deliver comparable information to higher education providers, and to work collaboratively with these institutions to provide clarity.

We know that the next few years will present some challenges and opportunities. **UCAS projects the 2026 admissions cycle could have up to one million applicants, around 27% more than in 2021, and twice as many as in 2006.** Overall, around 55% of this will come from a growth in demand from UK 18-year-olds (driven by an

increase in numbers and application rates), with the remaining 45% attributable to continued growth in mature students (c.10%), and international students (c.35%).

Looking at Scotland specifically, we expect a 10% increase in the number of Scottish applicants by 2026. This will have particular significance in Scotland due to student number controls, which already sees an overall lower offer rate in comparison to the other UK nations. The increase in demand will present several challenges and opportunities for the Scottish HE sector as a whole. There are four key areas that we believe that the Scottish HE sector will need to consider going forward:

- **Widening access:** How will we guarantee that Scotland's ambitious widening access goals are still fulfilled in a system that caps the number of university places, and will see increasing demographic pressure?
- **Pathways:** How will we ensure that young people understand the full range of options that are available to them?
- **Skills:** How can Scotland use this uplift in numbers to its advantage when addressing skills shortages and gaps?
- **International:** How can Scotland continue to reap the many benefits of being a popular destination for international students following the UK's exit from the EU?

2. How do we make that a reality?

Due to the increase in student numbers, we recognise that careful and collaborative planning will be required across the sector to make sure that that each individual student's educational journey can be supported. At UCAS, we are continually developing our services and products to ensure that every young person can make the right choices for them.

Supporting widening access

As we head into a period of increased competition, we understand it is more important than ever to give Scottish students from under-represented backgrounds the opportunity to access and thrive at university.

- **Helping schools and students navigate and connect to opportunities from universities and third sector charities.** Our new 'Outreach Connection Service' aims to raise awareness of the full range of outreach and support available. This will enable us to better understand how students engage with such opportunities, their subsequent progression and will also inform sector-wide evaluation and impact measurement. We hope to launch the service for the 2023 applicant cycle, creating a 'single source of truth' about the outreach opportunities available to all UCAS-registered services in the UK.
- **Reforming our application service to ensure that all students are supported equally.** As part of our continued mission to ensure that disadvantaged students are supported on their journey to connect with post-secondary

opportunities, we are making improvements to our application service. One recent development is **Clearing Plus**, a data-driven system which matches students to preferred courses. Through this tool Scottish providers can use the tool to target students from specific SIMD quintiles. Another new feature is the **Grades-on-entry-tool**, which will give more transparency on what A-Level and BTEC grades were accepted to enter onto courses. The tool is already available to advisers, but in 2023 UCAS is planning to release a student-facing version, to ensure that applicants who don't have access to advisers can benefit. We are currently working with the Scottish HE sector to explore the most helpful approach for capturing the nuances of SQA Highers and Advanced Highers. UCAS is conscious that the educational landscape in Scotland is unique, and we look forward to working with the Scottish HE sector to add value to individual contexts.

- **Journeys tailored for every individual student.** Our research and survey capabilities mean that we hold unique insight into the barriers that specific groups of under-represented students face. The 2023 entry cycle has seen us introduce **seven new questions** which allow applicants to **indicate to us any additional circumstances which may affect their journey to HE**. As of the October 15 deadline, UCAS analysis shows that (98%) have responded to at least one of these new questions while one in five (18%) positively answered at least one question, sharing circumstances such as receiving free school meals (11%), having caring responsibilities (4%), having a parent in the armed forces (2.8%) or being estranged (1%). Knowing, for example, whether a student has caring responsibilities will allow us to give students the information and advice they need at the right time so that they can make the best choice for them across all post-secondary pathways.
- **Supporting the evaluation of widening access and participation activities.** Our [Outreach evaluator](#) matches the data of individuals' who have participated in widening and participation activities to the UCAS database to trace their progress. At each stage, this data is compared with an appropriate control group, and a report produced on any significant change, offering robust statistical evidence on the impact of engagement activities for HE and outreach providers.

Ensuring all pathways are available

In line with our charitable mission, we aim to build UCAS into a leading discovery brand, situating ourselves as 'route neutral' to ensure parity across all pathways including academic and technical routes, including apprenticeships.

- **Presenting technical and academic pathways with parity.** Research from our report [Where Next? What influences the choices that school leavers make?](#) found that disadvantaged students are more likely to consider HE later than their more advantaged peers. In the same report, we found that almost one in three young people said they did not receive any information about

apprenticeships from their school. Increasing knowledge of pathways for students from all backgrounds is critical for making sure that the proud diversity of the sector in Scotland is maintained and nurtured. Thinking about our work with Scottish partners to provide parity across academic and technical routes, we look forward to extending our discussions with SDS and Myworldatwork. Looking more closely at the services we provide at UCAS, our Careers Quiz pairs students with employment tailored to their interests across academic and technical pathways. Beyond this, UCAS's extensive [events and exhibitions programme](#) allows students from across Scotland to connect with universities, colleges, apprenticeship providers and employers in one convenient location to explore the right route for them. In 2022, UCAS has held 12 events across Scotland, with almost 10,000 students and advisers in attendance.

- **We recommend increasing capacity across all pathways.** Given the projected rise in student numbers in Scotland, capacity across the board will have to be increased. Scottish Government, working with the Scottish Funding Council and the FE and HE sectors will want to consider the funding of new departments and/or campuses, and an uplift in technical and vocational provision to guarantee that students can pursue the trajectory that matches their needs and interests.

Developing skills for tomorrow

The increase in applicants, while bringing challenges, also has a wealth of opportunities. Working alongside UCAS and other partners, Scotland has the once-in-a-generation opportunity to analyse its skills landscape and connect young people to their future while supporting the nation's interests at large.

- **Our reach and expertise make UCAS central to understanding and promoting specific career pathways.** We hold an unparalleled reputation within the sector, providing free-to-access, personalised and trusted careers information advice and guidance to over 1.5 million individuals across the UK.
- **We would welcome the opportunity to work with key partners to answer the pertinent progression questions in Scotland,** exploring what drives young people to take a specific career path. Our report [Next Steps: Who are the 'future nurses?'](#) is one example of how we can work with industry partners to produce unique data and insights into skills and the workforce. Going forward, we could undertake similar research projects to help inform workplace planning activities in a variety of sectors in Scotland.

Supporting Scotland to remain an attractive global destination for students

The Scottish economy, society and educational settings have long benefited from the dynamic relationship between international students and national higher education. Scotland, therefore, has a significant amount to gain from the growth in

internationally mobile students. Holon IQ predicts that anywhere from 6 to 9 million internationally mobile students will be enrolled in foreign higher education institutions by 2030. Most of this demand is set to come from Asia and Africa ([ICEF 2022](#)). UCAS can support the Scotland to benefit from this growth.

- **The Scottish government and its partners to align university and college national campaigns, including Scotland is Now, to ensure that Scotland widens the range of countries from which its international students are recruited.** Alongside the implementation of the Saltire Scholarship scheme, we think that developing the nation-level intelligence on the different values, motivations and interests which are held within priority countries will allow Scotland to diversify its international student base. Our report [Where Next? What influences the choices international students make?](#) identifies some of the central motivations of different cohorts of students who choose to study across borders.

3. How can every child and young person's individual needs be supported and addressed in the future?

At UCAS, we believe that the key to ensuring that every child and young person's individual needs are supported and addressed in the future relies on our ability to understand their circumstances, and to provide a tailored experience for their needs. **The [UCAS Hub](#) provides a personalised careers information, advice and guidance for each student based on their context, preferences, and pathways.** Crucially, the Hub allows us to present academic and technical routes side by side meaning that students can explore all their options in one convenient location. We also work closely with other organisations to create impactful and aspirational content, ensuring that students are aware of the support they can receive.

4. What is one thing that needs to stay and why?

Since the establishment of CoWa in 2014, **Scotland has made progress in narrowing the participation gap between the most and least advantaged students.**

Universities in Scotland achieved the interim target that 16% of undergraduate entrants should be from the least advantaged areas (SIMD2020 Quintile 1).

- In our data examining the 2022 cycle, we saw that 16.6% of young people from the least advantaged areas (SIMD2020 Quintile 1) in Scotland entered UK higher education, the largest percentage point increase over the last decade out of the four UK nations. We are conscious that this figure does not include those students studying full-time higher education in Scottish further education colleges, which are not counted in the UCAS system.
- With young people from quintile 5 areas now 2.7 times more likely to progress than those from quintile 1 areas, Scotland has also seen the largest

narrowing of the 'entry rate gap' over the last decade out of the four UK nations.

As part of our Next Steps reporting looking at the progression of care-experienced individuals, UCAS has recommended consideration be given to the introduction of minimum entry requirements across the UK, following introduction in Scotland.

- The introduction of minimum entry requirements for care-experienced applicants has supported increased recruitment of this under-represented group in higher education. The initiative has seen the number of care-experienced students triple since it was introduced five years ago- from 0.5% of all undergraduates in 2015/16 to 1.9% in 2020/21 ([Maintaining the Momentum towards Fair Access Annual Report 2022](#))
- UCAS supports the recommendation from the [Universities UK's Fair Admissions Review](#) (2022) that universities and colleges across the entire UK should consider introducing minimum entry requirements for care-experienced applicants, and welcome the ongoing consultation that UUK is undertaking around this. We have the capacity to support this initiative through providing targeted information and advice, and raising awareness.
- We have also seen a significant improvement in the numbers sharing their status as a care-experienced student, becoming the nation with the highest declaration rate in 2020, and increasing still to 1.87% of Scottish applicants in 2022.

Therefore, UCAS believes Scotland's level of commitment to widening access needs to be sustained. Within the increasing competitive landscape of the next five years, we ask that the Scottish government, widening access organisations, and institutions work collaboratively with UCAS to guarantee that their widening access goals continue to be met.

5. What are the most important priorities for a future Scottish education system?

Notwithstanding the work on widening access that we discuss in detail above, we have identified some key priorities the future Scottish education system should focus on:

Ensuring high quality opportunities are provided across academic and technical routes

- In order to provide Scottish students with the opportunity to pursue a fulfilling educational and career trajectory in the face of the demographic uplift, we recommend that the Scottish Government, in collaboration with strategic partners, should consider the funding of new academic and vocational provision.

Provide careers information and guidance advice earlier, and through one easily accessible location

- As discussed in our report [“Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?”](#), two in five students believe more information and advice would have led to them making better choices.
- Access to high quality information, advice and guidance in a single accessible location will enable students to make better choices. We will continue our ambition of being the go-to place for post-secondary education, allowing young people from all backgrounds to consider all their options across academic and technical routes fairly.

Ensure proper skills planning to take advantage of the increase in demographics to support wider national interests

- As discussed in our report [‘Next Steps: Who are the ‘future nurses?’](#), changes in student preferences, or in this case demographics can allow educational systems to capitalise on growth and support wider skills shortages in the economy. Ensuring that there is a wider understanding of what skills are needed and providing the educational pipelines to meet them will guarantee that students and wider Scottish society can flourish.

Work collaboratively with the other UK nations to continue to promote Scotland as an attractive destination for international students

- Broadening the range of nations from which international students are recruited will allow Scotland to continue to retain the wide benefits of exchange across borders. We would welcome the opportunity to work closely with Scottish stakeholders to enhance understanding of global markets and student flows.

6. How can we ensure that everyone involved in education in Scotland has a say in future decisions and actions?

At UCAS, we will continue to work closely with our Scottish stakeholders to make sure that our ways of working are informed by the Scottish context. Key examples of this include our Scottish policy group, where we meet with Scottish representatives across the HE and training sector, and our regular meetings with Scottish schools and colleges associations. We recognise that the success of all the educational sectors across the UK, and particularly the success of our students travelling across borders relies on meaningful dialogue between nations. As a UK-wide organisation, we would welcome further opportunities to facilitate this.

We also recognise that at present the vast majority of colleges are currently located outside of the UCAS ecosystem. Looking forward we’d welcome a more

joined up approach with the college sector to fully understand the central role that articulation, students entering the second or third year of a university degree through qualifications gained at college, plays in facilitating access to Scottish HE.