

UCAS response to the consultation on the provisions of the Education Bill (Scotland)

Introduction

As an independent charity, UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, strives to empower students to make the best decision for them by making choices clearer. Our significant role as the gateway to post-secondary opportunities allows us unparalleled insight into the mindset of young people and mature students. We are aiming to bring parity to all post-school options, and each year 1.5 million students register with UCAS for support progressing to university, college, apprenticeships, or employment.

Our undergraduate service alone supports over 750,000 students from over 200 countries and territories to access UK higher education (HE). In 2023, this included 36,480 applicants from Scotland who were accepted to institutions across the UK, and 5,665 international applicants to Scottish providers. We also worked closely with the Scottish government and stakeholders on the ongoing programme of education reform, and have previously offered our insight into the [national discussion on education](#).

As the admissions service which supports the majority of applicants in Scotland to go onto their next steps at university, we recognise the pivotal role we can play in supporting the Scottish higher education sector at this time of reform. We therefore welcome the opportunity to feed into this consultation, and to engage in discussions about how we can jointly support students during this period of reform. Our response is limited to our areas of expertise, and will focus on how a new qualifications body can best work with us to ensure that Scottish applicants are able to take their next steps with ease. We believe that successful cooperation between ourselves and the new qualifications body is particularly significant given the demographic uplift we are forecasting as part of our [Journey to a Million](#) campaign, that by end of the decade we could see up to a million applicants applying to UK higher education, an almost 30% increase from 2022, and double the numbers seen in 2006. As part of this, we project a 16.6% increase in 18 year old Scottish applicants by 2030 from 2022.

Key points

- **UCAS recognises the new qualification body as a key stakeholder and partner in supporting the effective transition of students into higher**

education. UCAS works closely with awarding bodies and qualification regulators to ensure a high understanding of developments UK wide, and to support smooth transition of students through providing verified qualification data as part of our Awarding Body Linkage service. We'd welcome discussion regarding how we can continue to collaborate with key partners such as the new qualification body to promote a positive student experience, particularly at the point of transition.

- **UCAS is a key source for qualification information around progression.** UCAS provides a wide range of information and content to students, schools, universities and colleges UK wide regarding qualification and qualification reform to support high quality decision making. We'd welcome the opportunity to work with the Scottish Government to communicate key messages around these reforms to ensure a high level of awareness and understanding UK wide.
- **Qualifications are a key part of careers information.** UCAS [understands](#) that 1 in 5 students closes the door to a university course of choice due to qualification or subject selection. UCAS supports students across the full range of post-secondary pathways, including undergraduate courses and apprenticeships. We can support My World of Work through reaffirming key messages around qualifications and qualifications choice to support students at those key decision points as they assess the array of options available to them.
- **UCAS is eager to use its insight into the forecasted growth in applicants to UK HE to support the broader Scottish sector, including the new qualifications body,** to further understand how qualifications and qualification changes impact on progression, particularly at a point of an increasing 18 and under population.

UCAS' priorities for working collaboratively with a qualifications body which can offer better outcomes for all

Delivering a seamless education and skills system for an increasing number of learners

UCAS has a strong working relationship with the Scottish Qualifications Agency, with the aim of ensuring both parties are alert to relevant developments, and to support a seamless student experience. For example:

- UCAS and SQA have a relationship on a policy level, allowing us to share and gain insight, which is also supported by SQA's presence on our Scottish policy group, where we exchange information more broadly with representatives across the HE and training sector.
- We have a critical operational relationship. As part of our Awarding Body Linkage process, our contractual relationship with SQA allows to receive and

share have exam results under embargo before the publication date to enable universities and colleges to make Confirmation decisions for applicants who have pending exam results in time for results days across the UK, which covers the majority of activity.

- Data, insight and communications: UCAS regularly supports SQA, particularly during the pandemic, with understanding current applicant trends to help shape the understanding of the sector. Furthermore, where needs have existed – such as to provide confidence in teacher determined grades – UCAS has issued joint communications with SQA to students and universities and colleges to ensure joined up messaging and understanding.

Maintaining the close connection that we've had previously with SQA with the new body will provide a smooth transition, and enable learners to progress to university and college seamlessly. We are therefore eager to have ongoing communications with the Scottish government about the shape of the new qualifications body, and to remain engaged at each stage of its development due to the crucial nature of our relationship. Furthermore, we'd recommend setting out the nature of our relationship in the form of a memorandum of understanding.

The introduction of a new qualification body comes at the point of a growing 18 year old population UK-wide. UCAS is projecting that we could see up to a million higher education applicants to UK higher education by the end of the decade – a 30% increase on 2022. This growth is driven largely by an increasing 18-year-old population across the UK, including in [Scotland](#), and a projected increase in demand for participation in higher education. Therefore, UCAS, the new qualifications body and other stakeholders across the Scottish education sector will need to undertake careful planning to support every single learner as they progress through their educational journey at a point of increased competition. We are therefore keen to engage with the reform team at the Scottish Government about these projections so that we can work collaboratively to ensure that the Scottish sector is well-prepared for this uplift.

UCAS' role in delivering high-quality careers information, and supporting timely communications to the sector

At UCAS, we recognise that selecting the right qualifications can have a profound effect on a person's life chances. For example, one in five students in the UK [said](#) that they could not study a HE subject that they because they did not have the relevant subjects for entry. Every year, 1.5 million students register on the UCAS [Hub](#), our personalised information and advice dashboard, which delivers content to students across the full range of post-secondary choices based on their circumstances and preferences and is already widely used, with 92% of students reporting using it in a recent survey. We are therefore committed to collaborating with the new

qualifications body, and My World of Work to provide the right information, advice, and guidance so that they choose the right pathway for them.

We would also welcome the opportunity to work with the new qualifications body to make sure that important messages to stakeholders and students are communicated in a timely way. Our role as a digital equaliser extends to our provision of communications too—as a brand more trusted than the BBC by applicants, we have significant reach with students as they choose their next steps. UCAS has the potential to work with the Scottish government to communicate key messages as part of the creation and development of the new qualifications body.

Alongside our access to learners, we have links with over 4,000 teachers and careers advisers across the UK, providing them with tailored packages including regular updates about what’s happening more widely in the education sector. Our [adviser newsletters](#) and our regular webinar series [Adviser Lives](#) would be a great place to communicate ongoing messages.

We also can play a key role in communicating with universities and colleges, ensuring that they are aware of the changes that are happening as part of the reform, and promoting a greater understanding of Scottish qualifications across the UK. When the Curriculum for Excellence was introduced and developed, we used our position to inform the wider sector of the alterations in the qualifications landscape, enabling stakeholders to make informed choices.

We look forward to aligning our messaging with the new qualifications body, and supporting joined up delivery across the education ecosystem.