

CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REVIEW CALL FOR EVIDENCE – UCAS RESPONSE

Introduction

The following document outlines UCAS' response to the [Curriculum and Assessment Review call for evidence](#).

As the UK's shared admissions service, UCAS supports over a million students each cycle to explore their next step in education, including qualification and subject selection. The UCAS Hub is a tailored information and advice dashboard, which delivers content to students across the full range of post-secondary choices based on their circumstances, preferences and qualifications. UCAS' historical entry grades tool (recommended by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities and Universities UK) has been created to help individuals better understand the currency of their qualifications and the pathways available to them.

From that pool of over a million students who register on UCAS.com, around 750,000 students apply to higher education each year. UCAS' role in supporting these applicants provides us with a deep understanding of how qualifications shape the progression journey of students, and how this can differ by student background.

Therefore, UCAS' response focuses on Level 3 qualifications and their role in enabling progression to higher education, and student choice. In particular, how certain qualifications open and close doors to certain pathways, and the key role they play in supporting widening access. Key points are as follows:

- **Qualifications are the currency for progression**, with Level 3 achievement the primary gateway to higher education. Students apply with more than 1,000 different qualifications designed to develop the skills they will require for higher education study – admissions teams are adept at assessing students on this basis.
- **Reintroducing the coupled AS** could provide additional breadth at Key Stage 5 and support the admissions process. Whilst predicted A level grades in England have become more optimistic, this is not a system-wide issue, nor does it require structural change to address. To improve the accuracy of predicted grades, the Review panel may wish to consider the reintroduction of the coupled AS, which acted as a useful point of reference to inform predictions. A level predictions that feature the AS are generally more accurate.
- **Vocational and technical qualifications play a key role in widening access and participation** with BTEC accepted students almost twice as likely to be from POLAR4 Q1 than their counterparts taking A levels. Therefore, caution must be exercised in eliminating any such routes that currently support social mobility. Furthermore, the difference between achieved and predicted grades for these qualifications tends to be narrower.
- **Adjustments for the SEND cohort are critical**. Pre-2020, disabled applicants were 23% more likely to defer entry to higher education due to missing support and adjustments – this figure has risen year on year and currently stands at 38% for the 2023 cycle. Therefore, any changes need to be met with comprehensive support for the SEND cohort.
- **The role of careers information, advice and guidance** in supporting progression from the early stages of education, should form a core part of the Review. Qualification choice can open and close doors, and the embedding of this information from an early stage can help students make aspirational and informed choices across a range of subjects, careers and pathways.

UCAS would be willing to elaborate on its submission via discussions with the Review team. Moreover, UCAS' analytical expertise and sector insights make us well placed to support with implementation.

SECTION 1: ABOUT YOU

1. Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

3. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, which of the below best describes which part of the sector your organisation represents?

Charity, social enterprise organisation or non-profit organisation

4. What is the name of your organisation?

UCAS

5. What is your role within the organisation?

NA

6. What is your name?

UCAS Policy team

7. What is your email address?

policy@ucas.ac.uk

8. Are you happy to be contacted directly about your response?

Yes

9. Would you like us to keep your responses confidential?

No

SECTION 3: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INCLUSION

12. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

In response to this question, UCAS would consider the following as key:

- Vocational and technical qualifications play a key role in supporting disadvantaged and under-represented groups to progress to HE. Therefore, routes that currently support social mobility should not lose funding without an alternative route established.
- Disadvantaged students tend to consider the prospect of higher education later than their more advantaged peers, which can curtail options later. This demonstrates the need to embed careers education within primary schools and early secondary years to support equality of opportunity, and raise aspirations from an early age
- A lack of information and advice is also more strongly felt by disadvantaged students during their secondary education. Therefore, the key enabler for access is high-quality, personalised and timely support.

Vocational and technical qualifications at Level 3 have made a significant contribution to widening access and participation and the broader equality of opportunity agenda, with BTEC accepted students almost twice as likely to be from POLAR4 Q1 than their counterparts taking A levels. Similar trends exist across wider Applied General qualifications, and T levels.

There is also a distinct link between the type of qualification taken in school and the type of university or college the student attends. For example, in England, students with post-16 vocational qualifications (e.g. BTECs or Cambridge Technicals) have a high likelihood of entering HE (overall entry rate of 49%), but they are significantly less likely to attend a higher tariff provider than those with general qualifications (e.g. A levels or IB) – this also holds true within specific degree subjects as set out in UCAS' report '[Where Next? What influences the choices students make?](#)'. Students holding these qualifications form a significant part of the student body at medium-sized and lower tariff institutions.

Therefore, any reduction in the range of funded qualifications to students should be mindful of this contribution by ensuring that the reformed vocational and technical offering continues to enhance social mobility across all pathways. In short, routes that currently support social mobility should not lose funding without an alternative route established.

UCAS' 2021 report '[Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#)' provides insight on what drives and enables student choice. Critically, the research highlights the role of information, advice and guidance in supporting students in making aspirational and informed decisions across a range of subjects, careers and pathways.

The report finds that disadvantaged students tend to consider the prospect of higher education later than their more advantaged peers, with 27% from POLAR4 Q1 (the most disadvantaged group) realising this in primary school, compared to 39% of those from Q5 (the least disadvantaged group).

Equally, two in five students felt more information and advice would have led to them making better choices, and over 60% said this would have been beneficial when they made their GCSE/National 5 choices. Moreover, students who report more information and advice would have led them to make better choices are almost three times as likely to report not being able to study a degree course that might have interested them at university or college due to not holding the necessary subjects (30% of students vs. 11% of students).

A lack of information and advice is also more strongly felt by disadvantaged students; 43% from POLAR4 Q1 report that more information would have helped them make better decisions, compared to 37% of those from Q5. Disadvantaged students are also more likely to have welcomed this advice earlier, when they made their GCSE/National 5 choices, with 65% of those from Q1 who reported they feel more information and advice would have been beneficial saying they would have liked it when choosing GCSE/National 5, compared to 56% from Q5. Additionally, non-selective school students are more likely (over 10 percentage points) to report that more information and advice would have led them to make better decisions.

Therefore, the key enabler is access to high-quality, personalised and timely support. That support should cover all options on an equal footing, and not only at the key decision points, but right from the start – at primary school and all the way through to graduation. At each stage, students should be aware of the impact of their choices, and how it may influence their future pathway.

13. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

In response to this question, UCAS would consider the following as key:

- [UCAS' research](#) into the experiences of disabled students in education, found that disabled applicants were 23% more likely to defer entry to higher education due to missing support and adjustments pre-2020 –this figure has risen year on year and currently stands at 38% for the 2023 cycle. Therefore, any changes need to be met with comprehensive support for the SEND cohort.
- Practical learning and assessments for some technical and vocational qualifications do not feel accessible to students with some impairments, so it is essential disabled people know early on that they are entitled to adjustments – and how to access them without stigma – otherwise students may be inadvertently excluded from progressing to higher level technical qualifications.

UCAS data and insight highlights that learners with SEND have distinct progression pathways. When considering changes to the wider curriculum, Government should be mindful of the groups of students that follow certain pathways, and ensure that additional barriers are not put in place. Furthermore, any changes need to be met with comprehensive information and advice personalised to the students that may follow a specific route.

[UCAS' research](#) into the experiences of disabled students in education, found that disabled applicants were 23% more likely to defer entry to higher education due to missing support and adjustments pre-2020 –this figure has risen year on year and currently stands at 38% for the 2023 cycle.

When looking at applicant data by declared disability, the following challenges and barriers have been identified:

- Students' decision making is influenced by the HE institution's support offer: 56% research an institution's support for disabled students before applying, with its reputation for equality, diversity and inclusion being of particular importance.
- Disabled applicants' experiences of support in education to date are mixed: around half feel supported by their school or college – educational support is felt to be strongest (53%) and access to inclusive extra-curricular activities is weakest (17%).
 - Practical learning and assessments for some technical and vocational qualifications do not feel accessible to students with some impairments, so it is essential disabled people know early on that they are entitled to adjustments – and how to access them without stigma – otherwise students may be inadvertently excluded from progressing to higher level technical qualifications.
 - Applicants with hidden disabilities are having a less positive experience: they are less likely to be satisfied with their experiences in education to date, more likely to feel uncomfortable sharing an impairment, and less likely to have high expectations for HE.

SECTION 5: CURRICULUM AND QUALIFICATION CONTENT

26. In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

In response to this question, UCAS would consider the following as key:

- Many young people that go on to apply to higher education are already mindful of future study prospects when making GCSE/National 5 choices: 80% report choosing some or all their subjects with their post-16 choices in mind, 78% were considering future HE entry more generally, and 64% were thinking of a specific degree subject area.
- In some instances, attainment at Level 2 can limit access to onwards education. 18% of students told UCAS their attainment at GCSE/National 5 had been a limiting factor in accessing their preferred post-16 options.

Through its research and insights UCAS understands key decisions, moments and influences in students' journey to higher education. UCAS' 2021 report, '[Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#)', maps a student's journey from GCSE/National 5 through to their choice of degree subject and beyond, including a survey of first- and second-year students at university or college.

The research highlights how subject choice is an important element of qualification pathways. Many young people that go on to apply to higher education are already mindful of future study prospects when making GCSE/National 5 choices: 80% report choosing some or all their subjects with their post-16 choices in mind, 78% were considering future HE entry more generally, and 64% were thinking of a specific degree subject area.

The point at which students start thinking about their choice of HE subject varies between degree programmes: 58% of pre-clinical medicine students had thought about their preferred degree subject before starting GCSE/ National 5, compared to only 18% of business studies students and 20% of economics students. However, more than one in four students once in higher education stated they would make different choices now they know what their degree course entails.

Attainment at Level 2 is also important for progression. 18% of students told UCAS their attainment at GCSE/National 5 had been a limiting factor in accessing their preferred post-16 options.

Attainment varies by student experience and background, and this can be clearly seen through UCAS data. In an analysis of GCSE data for applicants in 2022, as set out in "[What is the experience of students from a care background in education?](#)" shows a distinct gap between those with care experience and those without. One in three (35%) care experienced students achieved an average of grade 7 (or higher) in their top three GCSEs, compared to one in two (53%) applicants without care experience. One element of this is the impact of changing schools. 35% of those who were in care between the ages of 11 and 16 reported they had moved schools at least once. This demonstrates the necessity of considering the impact of a young person's experiences and personal circumstances on their attainment and subsequent progression opportunities.

SECTION 6: A BROAD AND BALANCED CURRICULUM

30. To what extent do the current qualifications pathways at 16-19 support learners to study a broad curriculum which gives them the right knowledge and skills to progress? Should anything change to better support this?

In response to this question, UCAS would consider the following as key:

- The forethought required to study more 'fixed' subjects at degree level does not always align with the subject areas students think about earlier. This may mean that some students are unwittingly 'blocked' from accessing certain 'fixed' subjects.
- Furthermore, students who pursue certain vocational qualifications (such as the Level 3 Extended Diploma) can face a narrowing of the higher education pathways they may be able to pursue, as their qualification typically leads to a relatively small number of degree subjects.

- The findings above highlight the importance of earlier, broader and personalised information, advice and guidance in supporting progression to higher education.

UCAS' ['Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?'](#) report explores how the decisions students make along their educational journey impact their choice of degree. Some degree courses, such as medicine and dentistry, mathematics, economics or languages, require applicants to have taken a specific set of fixed pre-requisite qualifications. Other subjects, such as business or law, are much more fluid and accept applicants with a diverse range of qualifications.

The forethought required to study more 'fixed' subjects at degree level does not always align with the subject areas students think about earlier. For example, based on survey data accompanying the above-mentioned report, only 20% of students studying economics reported starting to think about what subject they wanted to study at university or college before starting their GCSEs, compared to 42% of students studying nursing and 58% of students studying pre-clinical medicine. This may mean that some students are unwittingly 'blocked' from accessing certain 'fixed' subjects.

Furthermore, students who pursue certain vocational qualifications (such as the Level 3 Extended Diploma) can face a narrowing of the higher education pathways they may be able to pursue, as their qualification typically leads to a relatively small number of degree subjects, and as they typically only sit one qualification post-16. 26% of BTEC students reported being unable to study a subject that interested them at degree level because they did not have the relevant subject, compared to 18% of A level students. This inevitably impacts disadvantaged students more, as they are more likely to hold only BTEC qualifications than those from a more advantaged background. Whilst it is perfectly legitimate for choice to influence pathway, it is key this is understood at the point of qualification and subject selection.

The findings above highlight the importance of earlier, broader and personalised information, advice and guidance in supporting progression to higher education.

Finally, students in England study a smaller range of subjects at Level 3 than those in many other countries. This pattern is reflected in the UK higher education model, with most undergraduate degrees at English universities typically completed in three years, as opposed to the four-year model, which is common in many countries with a broader 16-19 curriculum.

SECTION 8: QUALIFICATION PATHWAYS 16-19

48. Are there particular changes that could be made to the following programmes and qualifications and/or their assessment that would be beneficial to learners: a) AS/A level qualifications b) T Level or T Level Foundation Year programmes c) Other applied or vocational qualifications at Level 3 d) Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 2 and below

In response to this question, UCAS would consider the following as key:

- Reintroducing the coupled AS could provide additional breadth at Key Stage 5 and support the admissions process, particularly in relation to predicted grades.

Any changes introduced as part of the Curriculum and Assessment Review will need to be mindful of their impact on progression to higher education. Should ensuring breadth of study across key stages – including Key Stage 5 – be an aim of the Review, consideration could be given to reinstating AS level qualifications in England.

These qualifications are largely available for awarding bodies to deliver and, as such, could be reinstated in such a way as to not create unnecessary burden on the education sector.

Previous [UCAS research](#) shows that it is not qualification structure or university acceptance that is the largest influence in a curriculum offer. Instead, UCAS research shows that is funding and performance measures that influence behaviour. Therefore, should the AS level provide an option for breadth, these means could be used to encourage take up. The reinstatement of AS level qualifications could also support increased accuracy in the issuing of predicted grades, which play an important role in the higher education admissions process. Further evidence on predicted grades is provided in response to question 54.

54. Do you have any further views on anything associated with the Curriculum and Assessment Review not covered in the questions throughout the call for evidence?

In response to this question, UCAS would consider the following as key:

- Reintroducing the coupled AS could provide additional breadth at Key Stage 5 and support the admissions process. Whilst predicted A level grades in England have become more optimistic, this is not a system-wide issue, nor does it require structural change to address. To improve the accuracy of predicted grades, the Review panel may wish to consider the reintroduction of the coupled AS, which acted as a useful point of reference to inform predictions.
- UCAS stands ready to play a key role in supporting the introduction of reforms to curriculum and assessment, both through its data and insights and communication fora with the education sector.

UCAS would like to share views on two additional points not covered in the questions throughout the call for evidence.

1) The use of predicted grades in assessment and progression

UCAS predicted grades are defined as the grade of qualification an applicant's school or college believes they are likely to achieve in positive circumstances at the point of terminal assessment. They generally form part of the wide range of information universities and colleges use to inform offer making, which also include a student's previously-achieved qualifications, personal statement and contextual factors. The way predicted grades are used in the admissions process will vary by course and institution.

Not all students apply with predicted grades. UCAS predicted grades are issued to students with pending qualifications – most commonly UK 18 year old students, who account for 43% of the total applicant cohort. 98% of 18-year-old applicants receive an offer, and 84% accept a place at university or college every year. The existing system is therefore working well and enables the vast majority of students to advance to their preferred higher education destination.

In 2016, the final year where all A level qualifications in England featured the AS, 41.8% of English 18 year olds holding three A levels achieved within one grade (+/-) of their UCAS predicted grades. In 2019 the percentage of applicants within a single grade of their predictions was 33.6%, and in 2023 it was 29.8%, and around half of students are within two grades. By contrast, predicted grades for qualifications with more regular assessment – such as Applied General Qualifications – tend to be more accurate. 67% of BTEC Extended Diploma predictions are within a single grade of what the student achieved, which is broadly in line with 2019.

Historically, the AS was a useful data point in informing predicted grades, and we continue to see greater accuracy in UCAS predicted grades for A level qualifications in Wales and Northern Ireland (which feature the AS). The structure of A levels, where the variance between predicted and achieved grades is most pronounced,

and the reintroduction of the coupled AS, may be something the Review panel wishes to consider, particularly as this would provide additional verified information to support university decisions.

When looking at the experience of different cohorts of students, UCAS modelling suggests that disadvantaged students are more optimistically predicted. Whilst this can impact on the chances of being accepted, statistical modelling by UCAS indicates applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds were significantly more likely to be accepted to their firm choice course than their advantaged peers.

UCAS also recognises there is a relationship between predicted grades and university entry requirements. It is common for universities to accept grades below their published entry requirements, particularly for students from a disadvantaged background. To support students in understanding this further, UCAS has recently launched the historic grades on entry tool, which provides information on the range of attainment accepted by universities. Since its launch in May, the tool has been used 1.7 million times, and received strong, positive feedback from students.

The above indicates that the system is working well for students, supporting those from the more disadvantaged backgrounds progress, and having a positive impact on future attainment. Whilst predicted A level grades in England have become more optimistic since the decoupling of the AS, this is not a system-wide issue, nor does it require structural change to address. UCAS has a range of initiatives under consideration to increase transparency around predicted grades and to support schools and colleges in increasing accuracy, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss these with the Review team. Similarly, universities are advancing their admissions practices, and where high volumes of similarly predicted students apply, including additional measures to support differentiation.

2) UCAS' role in supporting the introduction of reforms to curriculum and assessment

Through the role UCAS plays in supporting people making post-18 choices by providing information, advice, and guidance to inspire and facilitate educational progression, it could help young people, and those who support them, understand what any future curriculum and assessment reform means for these choices. UCAS' interactions and engagement with the audiences it serves, including students, teachers, advisers, HE providers and employers, could also help deliver information, advice and guidance related to any future reforms.