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## Executive summary

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widen access. In the 2019 admissions cycle, 541,240 people were [accepted through UCAS](#) for a place on a full-time undergraduate course in the UK, with a record entry rate among UK 18-year-olds of 34.1% ([UCAS, 2019a](#)). In recent years, substantial progress has been made in widening university access to under-represented groups, including a narrowing of the gap in applications and admissions between the most advantaged and disadvantaged in society.

There has been growing public scrutiny of admissions

The review recommends that universities and colleges should

1. Abide by a set of updated admissions principles on fairness and transparency (from the [2004 Schwartz Review](#) FHQWUHG RQ WKH DSSOLFD
2. Ensure that admissions and offers are made in the best interests of students, without limiting ambition or adversely influencing course choices. This includes ending 'conditional unconditional' offers of unconditional offers to specific circumstances, and ensuring that incentives are clearly published and do not place pressure on applicants. WLRQDO¶ RIIHUV UHVWULFW
3. Be ambitious in ensuring that admissions practices address inequalities in access and participation, including greater transparency in the use of contextual admissions. This includes universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: providing clear, consistent messaging on what contextual offers are and their purpose; using standard indicators to support contextual offers (Free School Meals and Index of Multiple Deprivation data, and care experienced status); developing minimum entry requirements for contextually -

7. The higher education sector should take a more proactive approach to identifying and addressing key admissions challenges and criticisms. This LQFOXGHV GHYHORS LQJ D μFRGH RI SUDFWLFH¶ ZLWK FR and convening a forum for applicants, schools, college and university representatives to assess where further action is needed to uphold fairness and transparency in DGPLVLRQV ,Q WKLV IRUXP¶V IRFXV ZLOO LQFOXGH throughout the pandemic.
  
8. Further consideration should be given to a reformed undergraduate admissions system based on a Post-Qualifications Admissions (PQA) model whereby applicants do not receive offers until their exam/assessment results are known. Stakeholders have raised concerns about the use of unconditional and conditional unconditional offers; the use and accuracy of predicted grades and the fairness of predictions; and the use of incentives to encourage early applicant decision-

There have also been developments in the use of contextual admissions to level-up opportunity

This workshop involved representatives from universities, colleges, schools, exam regulators, UCAS and student representation.

5.





## Updating the fair admissions principles

The Schwartz fair admissions principles were published in 2004, since when there have been fundamental changes to different parts of the education sector, and subsequently in applicant behavior and university admissions practices.

Based on feedback gathered through this fair admissions review, it is recommended that the



admissions process, all applicants should be given an equal opportunity to provide relevant information or demonstrate relevant skills.

Admissions criteria should not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit: for example, universities and colleges should not give preference to the relatives of graduates or benefactors. Admissions staff have the discretion to vary the weight they give to examination results and other indicators of achievement and potential and therefore to vary the offer that

e) A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes

2) Universities and colleges should ensure that admissions and offers are made in the best interests of students, without limiting ambition or adversely influencing course choices

This means universities and colleges:

- x VKRXOG QRW PDNH μFRQGLWLRQDO¶ XQFRQG
- x should restrict the use of unconditional offers to specific applicant circumstances (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland).<sup>4</sup> Universities and colleges should only make unconditional offers when the applicant:
  - o already holds the required grades for the course
  - o applies to a course where admissions decisions have been informed by an interview, audition or additional application procedure (such as a submission of a portfolio or skills test)
  - o Tm 0.1492og 87 Tm 1 189.53 626.26 Tm 0.149 g 0.149 G86(n)-5

degree than those entering with conditional offers.

Stakeholder feedback has found that incentives that are used to support access, raise aspirations or encourage higher performance are viewed much more positively than those that are designed to influence decision making. Schools were particularly likely to report a lack of transparency around the use of incentives. Concerns were also raised about incentives where a time pressure is involved, which were overall deemed not to support the student interest.

3) Universities and colleges should be ambitious in ensuring admissions practices address inequalities in access and participation including greater transparency in the use of contextual admissions (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Universities and colleges should provide greater transparency on how contextual admissions are used, underpinned by:

- x a sector-level explanatory statement on contextual admissions to improve applicant and adviser understanding of how and why they are used. This statement should be published on university/college websites
- x greater consistency in the data used to inform contextual admissions. The universities and colleges consisting of: Free School Meals (FSM) status, Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) data, and care experienced status<sup>5</sup>
- x the development of minimum entry requirements for students that meet
- x provision of guaranteed offers to care experienced applicants if they meet the minimum entry requirements as referenced above, (as is already the case in Scotland).

Further details on the above proposals can be found in Annexe 2.

Universities and colleges should also:

- x further explore how contextual admissions could support access to higher education for other students without family support, such as estranged students, refugees and asylum seekers.
- x take further efforts to address racial inequalities by eliminating unconscious and implicit bias in admissions decision-making.
- x ensure that efforts to address inequalities are regularly evaluated.

In addition to the recommended actions outlined above to address racial inequality, UUK should ensure its upcoming review of the [BAME student awarding gap](#) (UUK, 2019c) also captures efforts to remove racial

<sup>5</sup> & Deprived status. Includes students with a care background at any stage of their life, including adopted children who were previously looked after.

inequality within admissions practices.

## **Supporting information**

Higher education entr

criteria and offers, including through Clearing.

5) UCAS should progress with a series of planned reforms to improve fairness and transparency in admissions

This includes: a pilot adviser tool to drive greater transparency around qualifications accepted on entry; and revising guidance on references and making enhancements to the adviser portal to deliver efficiencies for schools. Additionally, UCAS will provide a new Clearing and Hold Day engaging experience for students this is due to launch next cycle alongside enhancements to Clearing Plus<sup>6</sup>.

UCAS is continuing to deliver incremental and impactful enhancements to its services, intended to add value both within the current system and in any reformed Clearing Plus. Future plans include the launch next year of a new student interface that brings together UCAS Apply and Track to make the process of applying more accessible and intuitive. They are also creating a pilot adviser tool this cycle to drive greater transparency around the level of attainment students are accepted with as a means of supporting more informed advice and decision making.



## 6) Governments must support fairness and transparency in admissions

This includes the Westminster and devolved governments facilitating access to FSM data at the point of application and providing continued funding to support school-FE-HE collaboration. In England, this will require continued government funding for FE-HE-s FKRRO SDUWQHUVKLSV RQFH WKH 216 comes to an end in 2021.

The government should also engage with league table providers to consider and address any measures that may discourage providers from widening access through admissions.

## 7) The higher education sector should take a more proactive approach to identifying and addressing key admissions challenges and criticisms

This includes UUK:

- x GHYHORS LQJ D μFRGHS BL SUDJ WKFH QHYLHZ ¶ and recommendations, with consequences for breaches of the code. Ownership of the code will sit with UUK (in partnership with other representative bodies, such as Guild HE and the Association of Colleges), while UC\$ 6 ¶ WHUPV RI VHUYLFH FRXOG FOns UO abide by the code. This code will further support behaviour prioritising applicant choice
- x convening a forum for applicants and representatives of schools, colleges and universities to assess



Other observations from the stakeholder group were that:

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predicted grades and conditional unconditional offer s. For applicants,  
delaying decisions until qualifications are achieved could reduce pressure and allow  
sufficient time for an applicant -provider relationship to develop. For schools and  
education providers, it could be implemented fairly quickly. However, it privileges  
applicants who already hold their qualifications and would create substantial time  
pressure for higher education providers in the summer months. It would not  
necessarily reverse the growth in unconditional offers and would not address  
critic isms of predicted grades. It could also create more emphasis on exam results  
and create applicant anxiety as certainty would be provided later than at present.

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preferences, although challen

workable option for applicants. Overall, this model would involve the following steps:

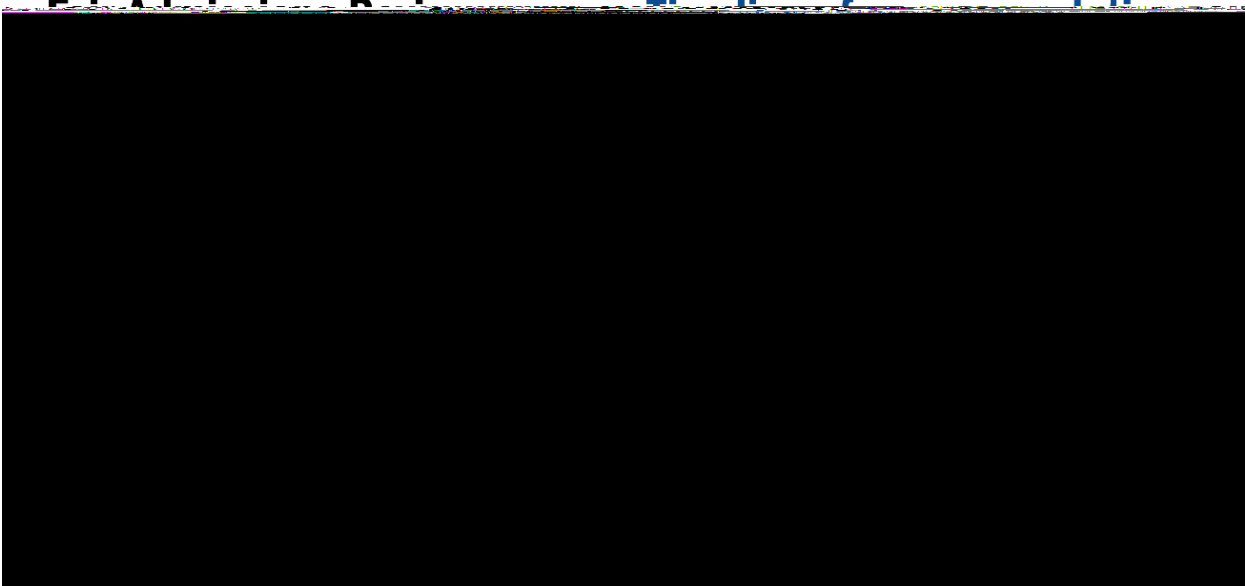
- x An applicant researching choices and creating a profile in UCAS Hub from Year 11 or before.
- x From September to June of the last academic year before starting higher education, the applicant curates initial university and course choices. At this point providers will undertake assessments and auditions before either rejecting an applicant or internally recording the findings of the initial assessment. Applicants can either replace a rejected application or swap an outstanding choice.
- x In August, UCAS confirms verified grades to providers. Providers have a one week window to validate decisions ahead of

## Next steps and implementing the recommendations

Although the fair admissions review has been informed by extensive engagement with different stakeholders, many of the proposals in this report will require further detailed consultation across the education sector and with students if they are to be workable and, ultimately, improve fairness and transparency. This applies in particular to recommendations made on contextual admissions and on PQA.

In more recent months, the Covid-19 pandemic has limited the scale and scope of engagement opportunities with wider stakeholders and, while this is expected to continue at least in the short-term, this review proposes a stakeholder engagement plan ahead of any implementation of the proposed reforms due over the medium - and longer-term. Details of this plan are set out in Table 1.

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## Annexe 1:

## Annexe 2: Contextual admissions proposals

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admissions. These recommendations do not apply to Scotland as several of the proposals are

Efforts to boost transparency for applicants should be underpinned by consistency in the use of contextual indicators by universities and colleges. There are several measures which are already used for contextual admissions. No single dataset or indicator is perfect: some measures are not collected





## References

Admissions to Higher Education Review (2004) Fair admissions to higher education: Recommendations for good practice (the Schwartz Review) available at <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5284/1/finalreport.pdf>

Boliver, V, Crawford, C, Powell, M & Craige, W (2017) Admissions in context: The use of contextual information by leading universities available at [www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Admissions-in-Context-Final\\_V2.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Admissions-in-Context-Final_V2.pdf)

OfS (2020a) Lower A-level grades from Unconditional offers lead to higher dropout rates, warns regulator. Press release 23 July 2020 available

[-and-media/lower-a-level-grades-from-unconditional-offers-lead-to-higher](#)



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