

## 1994 Group Response to UCAS Admissions Process Review

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The following is the 1994 Group's response to the UCAS Admissions Process Review consultation. For more detailed information please refer to the individual responses of our member institutions.

Members of the 1994 Group are: University of Bath, Birkbeck University of London, Durham University, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, University of Exeter, Goldsmiths University of London, Institute of Education University of London, Royal Holloway University of London, Lancaster University, University of Leicester, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University of London, University of Reading, University of St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Surrey, University of Sussex and University of York.

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### 1. 1994 Group response

- 1.1. We warmly welcome the review of the admissions system. It is absolutely right that at this key time of change in higher education the application system is re-examined and improvements sought. It is important that the admissions system, as a sector owned process, is reviewed by the sector so as to ensure the system can best provide a high quality applicant experience which effectively supports the journey into higher education.
- 1.2. The majority of 2014 proposals put forward by the consultation present excellent opportunities to strengthen aspects of the system, and we strongly endorse the implementation of a more managed process of clearing (Apply 3) and a short break between confirmation and the start of Apply 3. These facets will enhance the admissions process for applicants and are welcome improvements. However, whilst we appreciate the motivations behind the 2016 application post-results (APR) proposals, we are not persuaded that this particular package of reforms offers workable improvements to UCAS based on fairness, equality and efficiency. Before implementation of changes beyond those proposed for 2014, there must be confidence throughout the sector that changes will result in a better system for applications.
- 1.3. There may be other admissions systems or variants of post-results application models which are better able to meet the aims and objectives set out by UCAS. We would welcome detail from UCAS on the other models considered as part of the review process and re-consideration of these other models, including those in which sequential applications can be made. Variants on the package of 2016 proposals may provide options for reform of the admissions system whilst avoiding the negative consequences of the present proposals.
- 1.4. We note that there is as yet substantial uncertainty about the effects of wider changes in the sector, including student number controls, upon admissions. This makes it especially difficult to predict the impact of the proposed changes and future review of the application system may therefore also be beneficial.

## 2. Fairness and widening participation

- 2.1. A move to a post-results system would have some benefits for applicants in terms of making an informed decision about where to study based on their actual grades, and following a longer research phase. However, the package of proposals for 2016 will not result in a fairer system than the one at present due to a number of negative consequences.
- 2.2. An APR system may actually deter applicants from making 'aspirational' choices which would particularly impact on applicants from widening participation backgrounds. In the current system use of predicted grades allows applicants to make ambitious applications and gives institutions the flexibility to give consideration to 'near-misses'. Previous research has shown that students from widening participation backgrounds are more likely to have over rather than under-predicted grades and they therefore benefit from the current system. Aspirational choices would also be deterred by a reduction from five application choices to just two. Whilst a reduction in places applied for would be beneficial in terms of efficiency we suggest this should be three or four so as not to impact on the ability of applicants to consider ambitious choices.
- 2.3. Careful consideration of contextual data is recognised as an important means of widening access and promoting equality in the admissions system and has been widely encouraged.<sup>1</sup> The proposed system places this mechanism at risk. The shorter assessment period will not allow institutions sufficient opportunity to consider contextual and other detailed information regarding complex or extenuating circumstances submitted by applicants.
- 2.4. In order for prospective students to make an informed decision which is appropriate for them, it is fundamental that they receive the right information, advice and guidance (IAG) throughout the application process. This is especially the case for students from widening participation backgrounds who may not recognise their abilities given their circumstances and are likely to have access to fewer resources. The importance of IAG is recognised in the consultation document, with the opportunity envisaged for an extensive research phase as part of the APR system though 'myucas'. However, there is a fundamental problem regarding the availability of IAG in the APR model. In this model, applicants will have reduced or no access to IAG through their school or college at the crucial moment after they receive their results. Applicants from advantaged and independent school backgrounds are much more likely to have the increased resources to navigate this landscape successfully producing inequalities in the system.
- 2.5. The current system allows for a relationship to be established between the institution and applicant. One of the important benefits of this is the ability to provide pre-entry support for those from widening participation backgrounds. This is particularly important for disabled students and care leavers. A move to an APR system will impact on the university's ability to ensure that reasonable adjustments have been considered and implemented before students arrive at the start of the academic year. A change to the 2016 proposals would make this applicant centred relationship impossible to achieve.
- 2.6. In summary, whilst the principles of equality and widening participation underpinning the APR proposals made for 2016 are to be welcomed, in practice the proposals for 2016 will reduce the ability for individuals to make 'aspirational' choices and for their applications to be given the due consideration necessary. Our concern is that this will mean in practice that the application becomes unavoidably more mechanistic and less flexible, to the detriment of applicants, particularly those from widening participation backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Including within the 2011 Social Mobility Strategy 'Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers' and guidance from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) 'How to produce an Access Agreement for 2012-13'.

### **3. Efficiency Improvements**

- 3.1. Under the 2016 proposals, applicants would submit only two applications. Whilst this may create efficiencies for applicants in terms of the number of applications, we are concerned this reduced number of choices will have detrimental consequences in other respects, including the restricted options to make 'aspirational' choices as discussed in section 2. Furthermore, the proposed 2016 system would produce inefficiencies in other areas of the recruitment cycle.
- 3.2. Timescales in the current system allow institutions to give careful consideration to applications received by a body of admissions professionals with specialist knowledge and experience. However, although there will be fewer applications made in the proposed APR model, these will need to be considered within one highly compressed period. This is likely to result in reliance on temporary staff to cope with demand at particular pressure points. A move away from the use of experienced, professional staff would not be welcomed due to consequences on the quality of the application process.
- 3.3. In the present system, once prospective students have made their (up to 5) choices, institutions are able to interact with them in an individual-centred manner, with tailored and appropriate information, invites to specific course-centred open days and other activities which establish a positive and productive relationship. Not only does this provide a better applicant experience but promotes efficiencies within institutions. During the longer research phase individuals will engage with institutions at a more general level. Universities will need to engage with much larger numbers of initial enquirers in the proposed system rather than the well targeted relationship building which is currently possible. Rather than improving efficiency, pressure would be shifted elsewhere in the admissions system with significant consequences on efficiency and effectiveness likely to outweigh any gains from reduced applicant choices.
- 3.4. A key concern is that due to the unsuitability of the proposed system as highlighted in section 6, this will leave some HEIs with little option but to either opt out of the post-results system or to supplement the system by making 'informal' conditional offers to applicants, particularly where admissions require interview. Far from reducing efficiency this will add duplication and complication in comparison to the current system.

### **4. International and part-time students**

- 4.1. The present admissions system poses challenges for international students in terms of navigating the system and deadlines. However, the post-results system proposed is likely to raise additional problems for international applicants. The later offer deadline in the proposed system will mean international students will have less time to apply for visas than in the current system. The timescale would present real difficulties for admissions teams to issue Certificates of Acceptance of Studies (CASs) effectively, increasing the risks for applicants of obtaining a visa for the autumn term.
- 4.2. We are also mindful of the international competitiveness of UK institutions in comparison to competitor countries. Recruitment to institutions in the USA requires deposits to be paid by applicants by June, it would be very serious if applicants decided to accept earlier formal offers from US institutions rather than wait for decisions from UK universities. International recruitment has been a major success of UK higher education this should not be placed in jeopardy by admissions processes.
- 4.3. It is vital that the principle of institutional autonomy is upheld in the use of the admissions system as different institutions adopt varied views about the benefits of a central admissions system for international and part time students.

### **5. Examination, results and applications timetable**

- 5.1. A delay to the start of term for first year students to January is unacceptably late and should not be considered. Such a delay would adversely impact upon the student and

learning experience for new students by reducing the teaching time available. This is similarly true of starting the term in late October. Institutions would be variously affected if an early October start date were to be required, but we draw attention to the current clustering of university start dates in mid to late September in order to provide high quality student experiences. The introduction of a later start date would also impact negatively on specific groups of students, for example Nursing students and those on Teacher Training programmes. Nursing students are required to complete a set amount of learning activities before placements can begin and this would not be possible with a later start date.

- 5.2. Schools and colleges are in the best position to advise on the viability of IAG to prospective students on the proposed timescale. It is essential that all applicants have access to support in their decision making. We are seriously concerned that students from widening participation backgrounds may be disadvantaged in this respect, as detailed in section 2.

## **6. Proposed timetable changes**

- 6.1. A move to the APR 2016 proposals would have severe implications for applicants where interview, audition, workshop or portfolio are part of the consideration process. This is an important part of the admissions system for many courses ranging from medicine to the fine arts. For some courses, such as social work, interview is a requirement of the recognised professional body. We do not believe it would be viable for institutions to carry out all interviews, auditions and additional application processes in the six week timescale suggested. To overcome this, interviews may need to be conducted at the expression of interest stage resulting in inefficiencies and defeating the objectives of post-results application.
- 6.2. Academic staff involvement in interview and audition is highly valuable to the application process. The timetable envisaged in the 2016 proposals will restrict the role research-active academic staff are able to play due to juxtaposition with the intense summer period of research activity. This will particularly affect the admissions processes at research intensive institutions such as those within the 1994 Group. The involvement of academic and research-active staff is inherently important in admissions and is needed particularly in applications which require interview, workshop, audition or portfolio consideration. In addition, for some courses external professionals are used within interview panels. The shorter timescale would limit the availability of professional staff to the detriment of the rigor of the admissions process.
- 6.3. Additional challenges will be posed by a compressed timeframe, Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are essential for some courses, notably in health, and gaining these checks for all students in the timeframe will be extremely challenging. Changes in the timetable will also pose logistical challenges for applicants in terms of securing accommodation and living arrangements for the start of term. This will particularly affect groups of students with additional needs such as those who need to secure childcare, international students and those with disabilities.

## **7. Benefits and risks of the proposed 2014 enhancements**

- 7.1. Proposals detailed for 2014 present excellent opportunities for improving the admissions system without the negative impacts of the 2016 changes.
- 7.2. The research phase envisaged, which would start from secondary education, is welcomed as an opportunity to provide appropriate and applicant-centred information, advice and guidance from early on. In this model, as at present, applicants would continue to benefit from IAG provided by schools, colleges and advisors throughout the admissions process and crucially at the most important decision stages.
- 7.3. There is much value in revising the application stages to Apply, 1, 2 and 3 which will increase the transparency and ease of the process for applicants, including those

overseas. We are supportive of this change. It is worth noting however, that consistency in the terminology used is important for clarity in any subsequent system changes.

- 7.4. Revisions proposed to the clearing process are strongly supported. The break between confirmation and Apply 3 will vastly improve the fairness of the system and improve the applicant experience. Allowing confirmation to complete before Apply 3 starts will improve equality for applicants, promote transparency and enable applicants to research available options. A more managed process of clearing/Apply 3 is similarly welcome; this will improve transparency and reduce uncertainty for applicants.
- 7.5. The intention behind a single offer date is appreciated but we are unconvinced that this will offer value to applicants. Universities already operate on the principle of equal consideration for all applicants. Early notification, as is possible in the current system, can be beneficial in reducing applicant uncertainty, increasing motivation and ensuring interviews can be arranged efficiently. A single offer date would create extreme pressure for IAG around this date which may be unmanageable for schools, colleges and advisors.

## **8. The insurance choice**

- 8.1. It is important that applicants have a viable fall-back position should they not achieve their predicted grades in the current system. However, the insurance choice is not widely used by many applicants and is therefore difficult for universities to manage. These problems may be most effectively resolved through implementing a different approach to Clearing/Apply 3 which would allow additional applications to be made.

## **9. Timetable for reform**

- 9.1. At this time of change for the higher education sector we strongly welcome this review of the admissions system and the opportunity to enhance the applicant experience and improve the journey into higher education.
- 9.2. Changes proposed for 2014 regarding confirmation and clearing/Apply 3 will promote greater equality and transparency that will bring significant benefits to individuals and to institutions. We would welcome the implementation of these changes, the timescale for which is realistic.
- 9.3. However, whilst the intention behind the 2016 proposals for an APR system is appreciated, when considered as a package they do not present a workable solution for applicants or institutions. Of primary concern is that APR would not provide a fairer or simpler application experience and that these processes may be so unsuitable in terms of timescales that institutions are forced to circumvent or opt out of the system in order to properly support applicants.
- 9.4. A review of the applications system is undoubtedly welcome. Before implementation of changes beyond those proposed for 2014, there must be confidence throughout the sector that changes will result in a better system for applications. We would welcome further analysis into different models which may present improvements in the application system.