



# Call for Evidence: Universities UK Review of Fair Admissions

1. Please enter the name of your higher education provider: Universities Scotland

2. Please select the location of your higher education provider:

- England
- Northern Ireland
- Scotland**
- Wales

## Informed choices

5. What key information do applicants need in order to make informed choices about higher education during the different stages of the admissions process (pre-application, application, post application, and transition to higher education)?

### Notes:

- **Pre-application stage:** This covers an individual's consideration of higher education study, including all pre-application activities and interactions with a higher education provider prior to starting a course of study.
- **Application stage:** This covers activities from the point a prospective student decides to complete an application to university up to the point where the application is considered by the institution(s) applied to.
- **Post-application stage:** This covers activities surrounding an institution's consideration of an applicant's submitted application, from the point the application is submitted to when an applicant has been confirmed, or guaranteed, a place of study.
- **Transition to higher education:** This covers post-confirmation activities, from the point an applicant's place has been confirmed through to (and potentially beyond) the commencement of higher education studies.

It is important that applicants have access to clear, detailed and accurate information when they are making decisions about Higher Education. Universities Scotland has worked to introduce a common language statement on admissions<sup>1</sup> to help applicants and their advisers better understand the information and the process and to avoid confusion for those applying to more than one institution. The statement was developed in 2018 by our Admissions Working Group, led by University of St Andrew's Principal Professor Sally Mapstone with representatives from universities and from NUS Scotland, School Leaders Scotland, Colleges Scotland, UCAS and the Scottish Funding Council. All of Scotland's universities have had

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/publications/admissions-how-scottish-universities-aim-to-be-fair/>



input into the process and approved the wording of the statement, with the exception of the Open University which does not set entry requirements for its courses.

The statement sets out clearly how universities aim to ensure fairness to those applying to study in Scotland, recognising applicants need to be able to access accurate information about the course, the institution, and the application process, including how universities consider each application. The statement covers fair admissions, the purpose of personal statements and references and universities' attitudes to different qualifications. This is to help applicants understand how we consider applications to explain that we look at them in the round, and help applicants write their personal statements. To ensure the statement reaches our intended audience of university applicants, their teachers, guidance staff, parents and guardians we have shared it with universities, schools, Education Scotland, UCAS, Schools Leaders Scotland, parent groups and others. To help organisations decide how best to share it, we sent a Guidance for Use document alongside the statement. You can find this on our website: <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Universities-statement-full-with-branding.pdf>

In addition to this, universities in Scotland have developed minimum entry requirements, and have agreed a common format for presenting these to applicants in order to improve understanding. Universities will be using this in their prospectuses for the first time for 2020/21 entry.

Many applicants will look for information primarily on institutions' websites, but it is also useful to have information on UCAS (recognising that not everyone will apply via UCAS). Individuals' information needs will vary because of their different circumstances, interests and priorities. However, this must be balanced with the need to ensure applicants are not overwhelmed; research has also shown that more information is not always better – see *UK Review of the provision of information about higher education: Advisory Study and Literature Review Report to the UK higher education funding bodies by CFE Research* (April 2014)<sup>2</sup>. Some years ago, the then UK HE Public Information Steering Group, which advised HEFCE, SFC, HEFCW and DELNI, developed questions for prospective taught postgraduate students to consider in order to help them make decisions about postgraduate applications.<sup>3</sup> This approach might have merit for undergraduate applicants.

**6. How does your provider ensure that applicants have access to the right information, at the right times, in order for them to make informed choices?**

n/a

**7. On balance, how transparent are the ways that higher education providers use applicants' qualifications and experience to assess potential?**

- Very transparent
- Fairly transparent**
- Not very transparent
- Not at all transparent
- Unsure

**Please explain your answer:**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405115122/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2014/infoadvisory/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180319113213/http://postgradsteps.hefce.ac.uk/>



Although universities present information on admissions policies and practices on their websites, there is variability in terms of the level of detail included and in terms of how easily accessible the information is. Even where information is comprehensive and easily accessible, the fact of its presentation does not necessarily mean that applicants, advisers, teachers, parents etc. will have a good understanding of how admissions policies work in practice, and the many and varied considerations that must go into admissions decision-making. We think this issue might particularly disadvantage students from widening access backgrounds, who may have fewer people around them with experience of applying to university.

Through our work on widening access, including developing common language across the Scottish sector, we aimed to bring clarity and (Scottish) sector-wide consistency to information about contextual admissions, moving away from a situation where institutions use slightly different language to describe their admissions processes. Our statements on fair admissions and on the use of personal statements and references explain how institutions use this information and help applicants and referees decide what to include in them. You can find the link to the statement in our answer to Q5.

## Assessing applicants

**The Schwartz report recommended that the ability of an applicant to complete a course must be an essential criterion for admission. In assessing applicants' merit and potential, institutions may legitimately consider other factors in addition to examination results, including: the educational context of an applicant's formal achievement; other indicators of potential and capability; and how an individual applicant's experiences, skills and perspectives could contribute to the learning environment. With this in mind:**

### **8. What types of information do higher education providers need in order to fairly assess an applicant's potential to succeed on a course?**

Institutions need a basket of information to accurately assess a candidate. This would include, for example, examination results/predicted examination results, educational context, indicators of disadvantage, information about why the applicant is interested in the subject(s), career aspirations, relevant experiences and interests. The information needed varies according to the course applied for, particularly vocational/professional degree programmes, and those with a practical element.

### **9. To what extent does the use of personal statements to assess applicants support fairness in admissions?**

- To a great extent
- To some extent**
- Very little
- Not at all
- Unsure

Please explain your answer:

A personal statement gives universities useful information about why an applicant is interested in a particular subject, their career aspirations, relevant work experiences, extracurricular activities and interests and may assist institutions in their admissions decision-making, including in extremely competitive situations where qualified applicants far outnumber places available. Universities are also aware that different applicants will



have had access to different opportunities and so we value how the applicant reflects on their experiences, rather than the experience itself.

In addition, we think that writing a personal statement is a useful opportunity for the applicant to reflect on their own learning to date and their aspirations and that this reflection is a useful skill to have. We do appreciate that some applicants may receive more advice on the production of a personal statement than others. That is why Scottish universities do not use the personal statement in isolation and why we encourage the composition of the personal statement very clearly to indicate the candidate's personal choices and preferences in course application.

## Supporting applicants

**The Schwartz report recommended that admissions processes should seek to minimise any barriers that are irrelevant to satisfying admissions requirements. This could include barriers arising from the means of assessment; the varying resources and support available to applicants; disability; and the type of an applicant's qualifications (e.g. vocational or academic). With this in mind:**

**10. What are the key admissions challenges for the following applicant groups, and how do / can higher education providers best support them?**

### **a) Part-time applicants**

Generally, part-time applicants study closer to home and therefore have fewer options. It can be harder to get information on financial support (living costs and tuition fees – part-time undergraduate students are liable for fees in Scotland, although there is a part-time fee grant for eligible students<sup>4</sup> and the fees are generally much, much lower than those in England<sup>5</sup>).

Information for applicants is predominantly aimed at full-time students, so accessing information may be harder.

Part-time applicants will probably not be applying through UCAS.

Part-time applicants may not have easy access to in-person advice on universities and applications.

Part-time students are more likely to be mature.

Part-time applicants are more likely to have children so childcare costs are likely to be a factor.

A significant number of part-time applicants will also be working as they study, and may find it difficult to get time off for course interviews etc.

### **b) Mature applicants**

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.saas.gov.uk/part\\_time/ug/funding\\_available.htm](https://www.saas.gov.uk/part_time/ug/funding_available.htm)

<sup>5</sup> The SFC's fee assumption for Scottish domiciled part-time undergraduate students in 2019-20 is £1,285 pro rata.



Many institutions have many applicants who enter straight from school, or soon after school, so information about entry requirements and online prospectuses can sometimes be aimed at this demographic more than others. Accessing information about recognition of prior learning – for mature applicants who do not possess ‘traditional’ qualifications, or who achieve their qualifications many years ago – can be challenging, and they may need to contact institutions directly to discuss issues they are facing.

There is a variety of pathways for mature applicants, depending on both the institution and the subject. Depending on the chosen route, mature applicants may not have easy access to in-person advice on universities and applications. Mature students are more likely to have family and financial commitments, be more likely to study closer to home and therefore have fewer options available to them.

### **c) Disabled applicants**

Disabled applicants may need adjustments or additional support to transition to and succeed at university. These adjustments and additional support needs will be highly individual, and so it is essential that universities liaise with applicants to ensure that they can offer the appropriate support and make any necessary reasonable adjustments. Disabled applicants will require additional information about how the university will support them into and through university. This can sometimes be difficult to find. We are also aware that universities vary in terms of when they start to engage with disabled applicants, as well as the type and level of support they provide, so applicants might have different experiences in engaging with different institutions.

We are aware that there may be requests to include disability as a contextual indicator in admissions in future, and currently the organisation Lead Scotland is circulating a petition calling for this. NUS Scotland have indicated their support for the petition. We plan to consider this very carefully because we want to be sure that it would be the most appropriate way to support disabled students, and our new Admissions Policy Group will look at this issue in the New Year. In general, contextual indicators aim to identify groups who face disadvantage where the disadvantage is likely to be fairly consistent across that group. ‘Disability’ is a very broad category, and disabled applicants will have had a similarly broad range of experiences and faced different barriers in their educational journeys. It might not be appropriate, therefore, to adopt disability as a marker in contextual admissions. Indeed, some of our members have concerns about the legality of doing so. All of our member institutions work hard to support disabled applicants as they transition to university and throughout their degrees. In our fair admissions statement, we set our commitment to being fair to individuals’ circumstances and there is opportunity for disabled applicants to highlight this in their personal statements, and for their referees to do likewise in references.



#### **d) Estranged students**

We are aware that a number of Scottish institutions currently provide support for estranged students. We plan to look at what is currently available for this group and determine whether this is an area where the sector should seek to align provision of support. We believe that producing an agreed sector-wide definition of estrangement would help with this and our Admissions Policy Group will look at this in the New Year.

#### **e) Applicants applying through non-traditional routes**

These applicants may have less access to guidance.

#### **f) Additional comments**

We were surprised that the situation of care experienced students and students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds did not feature more explicitly in this consultation. Despite recent work to address some of the barriers to entry for these groups, there are still barriers for them, including prior attainment being affected by circumstances. Socio-economic disadvantage and care experience are clear priorities for widening access for the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council, and a wide range of campaigning organisations in Scotland, as well as for universities themselves. The consultation also excluded Asylum Seeker and Refugees as specific applicant types with complex and variable needs.

Universities Scotland has looked to address the barriers for care experienced learners by introducing a guaranteed offer to any care experienced applicant who meets minimum entry requirements. We are now working to refine this offer so that it applies to students who articulate (enter university directly into Year 2 or Year 3 with a HN qualification) as well. Our universities have also been looking at how they can better support care experienced students financially, and with other issues such as accommodation.

For applicants from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and areas, we have taken a number of measures as outlined above. These measures include:

- The introduction of minimum entry requirements for widening access students, recognising that their prior attainment may not reflect their potential.
- The introduction of common language so that it will be easier for applicants who are applying to more than one institution.
- The introduction of the fair admissions statement and a statement on personal statements and references and qualifications to help

## **Offer making**

**The Schwartz report recommended that admissions policies and procedures should be informed and guided by current research and good practice. The report adds that criteria should not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit. With this in mind:**

**11. Please outline the key strengths or weaknesses of using the following offer types, and where there might be room for improvement to promote greater fairness and transparency for applicants:**



### **a) Contextual offers**

Contextual offers are an important part of widening access, as they recognise the fact that there is not a level playing field in terms of school achievement. Circumstances do impact on attainment and on opportunities.

In Scotland, we have worked to get institutions to explain contextual offers more clearly via our common language approach. Furthermore, we have introduced minimum entry requirements for Scotland-domiciled applicants in all undergraduate courses (excepting the Open University in Scotland, which has an open admissions policy) from 2020-21. These minimum entry requirements are lower than the standard entry requirements - often by amounts equivalent to two Higher grades, but in some cases, they can be as much as four Higher grades or one Higher qualification lower than the standard offer. Some institutions may also still consider applications from widening access students who do not meet the minimum entry requirements. Institutions have set minimum entry requirements at a level where widening access students should be able to complete a course successfully, without compromising academic standards. Some institutions already provide targeted pre- and post-entry support for widening access students in order to give them the best possible start to their studies, and we expect this to grow. Scottish universities have guaranteed to make offers to care-experienced applicants who meet the minimum entry requirements.

Having said that, we do think that more could be done to explain both the rationale for contextual offers across the UK and how universities use such offers, so that this is clearer to applicants and their advisers.

We do not think it is helpful that this consultation has included contextual offers in the same list as unconditional offers and conditional unconditional offers. Unconditional and conditional unconditional offers have had many questions raised about them (at least in an English context) and this might damage the legitimacy of contextual offers by association, particularly for respondents from outwith universities.

### **b) Unconditional offers**

In Scotland, unconditional offers have long been made to applicants who have already obtained the qualifications (normally Highers) required for entry in S5 (roughly equivalent to lower sixth) but have chosen to stay on at school for the S6 year (roughly equivalent to upper sixth) and undertake more qualifications. These unconditional offers are well understood by schools, teachers, parents and applicants in Scotland, and it is important that UUK's work distinguishes between unconditional offers based on qualifications already achieved and those that are not.

Not all Scottish applicants will be in this position because some will need to attain qualifications in S6 in order to satisfy entry requirements.

There are also some teachers who would prefer that all offers made to current school pupils are made on the basis of qualifications still to be taken (i.e. in S6) rather than those already achieved. However, universities maintain it would not be equitable to set different entry requirements in order to do this. Universities do not routinely require Advanced Highers<sup>6</sup> because the availability of Advanced Highers across Scotland is much more variable than the availability of Highers and therefore there are issues of equity. However, where an applicant is studying for Advanced Highers and has not already met entry requirements; then universities will often allow the use of the Advanced Higher to meet entry requirements.

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<sup>6</sup> Some subjects like medicine do use Advanced Highers in entry requirements.



We do not believe the use of unconditional offers without prior qualifications has been as prevalent in Scotland as in other parts of the UK.

**Figure 1: Percentage of offers to England, Wales & Northern Ireland domiciled 18 year olds<sup>7</sup> (Source: UCAS<sup>8</sup>)**

Type of offer	Country			
	Scotland	England	Wales	Northern Ireland
Unconditional	1.2	7.6	4.9	<0.1
Conditional unconditional <sup>9</sup>	1.9	13.0	8.4	<0.1

**c) Conditional unconditional offers**

Based on the 2018 UCAS end of cycle report, we do not think the use of conditional unconditional offers has been as extensive in Scotland as in others parts of the UK. See Figure 1 above.

**12. In which ways can higher education providers' use of incentives support fairness and transparency for applicants? Are there any ways in which incentives would not support fairness and transparency?**

Any incentive should be course and candidate related rather than institution related.

**Processes**

The Schwartz report recommended that universities and colleges should monitor and evaluate the link between their admissions policies and undergraduate performance and retention, and review their policies to address any issues identified. The report also outlined that a fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid. With this in mind:

**13. How might higher education providers best monitor and evaluate the impact of their admissions processes on applicants?**

We agree that monitoring and evaluating admissions policies is important. We are especially keen to see this with regards to widening access applicants and in relation to equalities more broadly, to ensure we can continue to be confident that we are offering fair admissions to all.

**14. To what extent do the processes of Clearing and Adjustment support fairness in admissions?**

- To a great extent
- To some extent**
- Very little
- Not at all
- Unsure

Please explain your answer.

<sup>7</sup> UCAS reports on unconditional offers exclude Scottish domiciled students for the reasons outlined above.

<sup>8</sup> End of cycle report 2018: patterns of unconditional offer-making by providers: <https://www.ucas.com/file/212856/download?token=ctKA2mp8>

<sup>9</sup> An offer made by a provider which was originally conditional, but becomes unconditional if the applicant selects that offer as their firm (first) choice.





Clearing offers applicants who do not meet their offer conditions the chance of finding a different place at university, and in a sense it is a second chance to enter higher education within the same admissions cycle. 'Second chance' in this context does not imply that a Clearing choice is in any way inferior to first choices made in UCAS Apply – simply different. Likewise, applicants who exceed their offer conditions, e.g. because they performed better than expected in their school/college assessments, may wish to apply to a higher tariff course and/or institution which, on the basis of predicted grades, they would have been unlikely to receive an offer for. Adjustment enables them to do this. It is possible that, in future, Adjustment could be rolled into Clearing at UCAS, so that one process instead of two deals with 'trading up/down'. So Clearing and Adjustment give applicants additional options, but they do not contribute to the fairness of decision-making per se.

## Systems

Some parts of the admissions system operate differently in different UK nations.

What would be the relative advantages and disadvantages for applicants, providers and schools of the following features of an admissions system?

**15. System A: Pre-qualifications offer-making (available in current system), whereby the higher education provider can make offers to applicants before they have achieved their qualifications. Under this system, applicants may apply, receive offers and have their places accepted before receiving their qualifications.**

**16. System B: Post-qualifications confirmation (available in current system), whereby the higher education provider confirms all applicant places after they have achieved their qualifications. Under this system, some applicants may apply and receive offers before achieving their qualifications, but their place will not be confirmed until they have achieved their qualifications.**

System B is how the system currently operates in Scotland.

A risk attached to any system that requires applicants to apply before they gain their results is that the applications they make may not match well to these results. This might cause problems for applicants if they decide to seek a more suitable match, e.g. via Clearing or Adjustment, but there are no longer places available.

A post qualifications application system would require substantial readjustments to the education system as a whole, and might include moving school examination and result dates, and term dates for schools, colleges, and universities. This is further complicated because these key dates are different in Scotland and the rest of the UK. If any such changes were made, it would be important to work with Scottish institutions, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Scottish Government, Schools Leaders Scotland, colleges and schools to ensure that Scottish applicants were not disadvantaged and, in particular, that applicants had access to advice and guidance when they made their applications and received offers.

**17. System C: Post-qualifications offer-making, whereby the higher education provider only makes offers to applicants after they have achieved their qualifications. Under this system, some applicants may apply**



before achieving their qualifications, but will not receive an offer until they have achieved their qualifications.

**18. System D: Post-qualification applications, whereby applicants apply after they have achieved their course entry requirements. Under this system, applicants cannot apply until they have met the conditions of the course.**

**19. Other systems, including combinations of the above (please outline).**

**20. On balance, which of the above features might best operate in the interests of fairness and transparency for applicants while guaranteeing an efficient and effective admissions process? (Tick all that apply).**

- System A: Pre-qualifications offer-making
- System B: Post-qualifications confirmation
- System C: Post-qualifications offer-making
- System D: Post-qualifications applications
- Other systems, including combinations of the above (please outline)
- Unsure

**Please explain your answer.**

## Principles

**Based on your responses and experiences, please suggest whether each Schwartz report principle is still valid or needs to be amended:**

**21. Principle one: A fair admissions system should be transparent.**

- Still valid
- Needs to be amended
- Unsure

**Please explain your answer.**

It is important that the process is transparent. There is room to increase the understanding of admissions systems by stakeholders, perhaps generically at national level. This would also include helping people to understand what contextual admissions is, what its purpose is and the rationale for using it.

**22. Principle two: A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential.**

- Still valid
- Needs to be amended
- Unsure

**Please explain your answer.**



We believe that a fair admissions system should allow institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential. However, there is a cap on full-time undergraduate Scotland- and EU-domiciled student numbers in Scotland. This means that we increasingly have courses (across all of our institutions) with many more applicants than there are places. Therefore, a fair admissions system needs to be able to select between applicants who could complete the course.

In addition, it is important that any admissions system is flexible enough to recognise potential in applicants from widening access backgrounds, from non-traditional entry routes, for mature learners. It is important that these applicants are not squeezed out. Indeed, universities might consider a lower probability of completion for these students. Certainly, the Commission on Widening Access<sup>10</sup> and the Commissioner for Fair Access<sup>11,12</sup> have both argued that universities should have a greater appetite for risk in terms of student outcomes for access students. Of course, we do not want to set students up to fail, and it is important to talk to students themselves about their appetite for risk, but identical probabilities of success may not be appropriate.

**23. Principle three: A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid.**

- Still valid**
- Needs to be amended
- Unsure

**Please explain your answer.**

This is difficult to disagree with – we could hardly support the use of assessment methods that are unreliable and invalid.

**24. Principle four: A fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers for applicants.**

- Still valid**
- Needs to be amended
- Unsure

**Please explain your answer.**

The admissions system should be as user-friendly as possible, and seek where possible to reduce barriers to applications.

**25. Principle five: A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.**

- Still valid**
- Needs to be amended
- Unsure

**Please explain your answer.**

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<sup>10</sup> A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access (2016):

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/>

<sup>11</sup> Laying the foundations for fair access: annual report 2017 from the Commissioner for Fair Access (2017):

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/laying-foundations-fair-access-annual-report-2017-commissioner-fair-access/>

<sup>12</sup> Commissioner for Fair Access annual report 2019: building on progress towards fair access (2019):

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/commissioner-fair-access-annual-report-2019-building-progress-towards-fair-access/>



This helps to set expectations of professionalism for staff in universities, colleges and schools, as well as for applicants, parents and the wider public. It helps to give confidence that the admissions process will be handled effectively, and that problems/complaints will be taken seriously.

**26. Are there any other principles that should be considered?**

We wonder if the principles (or accompanying text) should be more explicit about trying to address inequalities such as widening access. This seems an increasing pressure point. We think that both the rationale for action to address inequalities and the actions themselves are not always well understood by students, applicants, advisers and the public. (See for example, HEPI's report [\*What do students think about contextual admissions.\*](#)) We have done some work to explain this in Scotland and we would support more work across the UK to do this, but it might be helpful to have a principle on addressing inequalities.

