

## Universities Scotland response to UCAS consultation 2026

### The number of choices students can make as part of their main scheme application

Recommendations:

- Retain the current number of initial choices (five) in the short to medium term, pending further reform to Clearing and Extra.
- Further promote the existing flexibility within the current system, so students understand they can add choices at different times if it suits their needs.
- Further consultation with the sector regarding reform to Extra, recognising that a wide range of choice is available to students at this point.

Please indicate your position on the recommendations set out above:

- **I agree with these recommendations**
- I disagree with these recommendations
- I am not sure / I require further information

### US response

We support retaining the current number of choices as this will create much needed stability in admissions.

We are keen that we do not narrow opportunities and think that the current five choices allow applicants to consider a range of courses, particularly where an applicant is still to decide their preferred subject or discipline. Scottish applicants often present with a broad range of subjects at Higher which allow for a broader range of options at university. Disadvantaged applicants may not have the same access to IAG and we are keen that options are not unnecessarily restricted.

We think additional applicant IAG on applying for multiple courses at an institution could help create efficiencies and we would be interested in exploring whether an alert or something similar could be flagged to an applicant asking them to seek advice before submitting such an application.

We would welcome enhanced IAG on how admission works and the different ways that applicants can apply, whilst also alerting to ECD deadlines. It could be helpful to explain how the landscape differs across the UK, especially in Scotland where there are 3 different fee statuses and a cap on places as this may help with applicant expectations and communications. We would be keen to work with UCAS on that.

We are interested in UCAS further work on Clearing and how this could help Scottish providers. There is currently an extremely narrow window for Scottish providers to maximise their Clearing spaces due to the A level embargo. We understand why this is the case but it does mean that activity is restricted for a lengthy period of time for Scottish students.

### **The firm and insurance choice**

Recommendations:

- The insurance choice is retained in its current form pending reforms to Clearing.
- Introduce a series of measures to reduce friction in relation to the insurance process, including:
  1. working with the sector to introduce 'Decline My Place' for the insurance choice (known as CI decline), building on its successful introduction for both placed and unplaced firm choices. This was felt by some institutions to offer significant efficiencies
  2. continuing to drive efficiencies in the processing of qualifications via the Awarding Body Linkage process to get verified achievements to admissions teams quicker and support prompt decision-making
  3. working with the sector to develop good practice guidance on the processing of insurance decisions to promote timely and prompt decision-making and an effective flow of firm and insurance decisions, especially during the embargo period
  4. reviewing terminology and associated processes, along with supporting information and advice to increase clarity regarding the insurance choice

Please indicate your position on the recommendations set out above:

- **I agree with these recommendations**
- I disagree with these recommendations
- I am not sure / I require further information

### **US response**

We support keeping the insurance choice as we think it can encourage applicants to consider aspirational choices and it can also keep options open for longer. We do think there is more to be done however in explaining the value of the insurance choice so that applicants can be confident in making best use of this option. This will be especially important when designing a new CI decline process.

We support work to improve efficiencies and agree that refreshed sector guidance on processing insurance applications will be helpful. Delayed decision making especially at confirmation can add stress to applicants, but it also creates uncertainty for providers, especially in Scotland when semester dates are usually earlier and where certainty on entrant numbers is critical.

We agree that a supported applicant CI decline process will help create efficiencies by providing clarity of applicant intent. However this will need to be managed carefully so that applicants are not under pressure to decline and fully understand the implications of this choice. There has been a lot of change in the operation of the cycle in recent years resulting in changes to applicant behaviour and therefore conversion rates. We would be keen that this is considered before rolling out any change.

We hugely value the inclusion of National 5 results in the ABL and support UCAS work to explore other qualifications that could be included.

### **The timing of the January Equal Consideration Date and associated dates**

#### Recommendations:

- Retain a mid-January Equal Consideration Date, which should fall on the nearest Wednesday to 15 January.
- Ensure the main reject by default (RBD) date falls before the examination window for the majority of students who apply with pending examination results and ensure no reduction in processing time compared to normal (pre-pandemic) years.
- Maintain the March Advisory Date but take a more sophisticated approach to helping providers manage student expectations. For example, UCAS can provide universities and colleges with data and insight on offer turnaround times, which can be issued alongside offers to help manage student expectations.
- Introduce a ‘traffic light tool’ or similar to indicate the likelihood of a course being open after the January Equal Consideration Date, encouraging students to use their choices more flexibly.
- Continue working with universities and colleges to identify opportunities for greater efficiency in the admissions process.

Please indicate your position on the recommendations set out above:

- **I agree with these recommendations**
- I disagree with these recommendations
- I am not sure / I require further information

### **US response**

We support retaining the mid-January ECD and would value keeping this date consistent going forward to support certainty for both providers and applicants. We would not want the ECD to be any later.

We would welcome clarification on when the RBD might fall. Whilst Scottish applicants are not the majority of UCAS applicants, these exams take place from late April and so the RBD could fall much earlier than has historically been the case if they are included. Whilst we would not want a RBD decision to negatively impact an applicant, an earlier deadline could already squeeze a tight decision making timeframe for Scottish providers. This is especially significant when confirmation of funded places in Scotland is often not published until the end of March. For those with two-stage processes, time is also very tight to make decisions following, for example, portfolio submission.

We welcome the creation of “traffic light tools” and agree this could help applicants understand the landscape better. It could however add a layer of complexity, especially in Scotland where there is a cap on places and there is not as much flexibility in numbers. There will be variety within institutions as to which courses will still be open, and this could also vary by fee status. Any tool would need to be able to explain these nuances well to applicants. We like the idea of being able to signal early on which courses could be available later in the cycle but this could have unintended consequences in terms of applicants missing deadlines or receiving offers with a range of decision date deadlines. It could also encourage applicants to change behaviour and prioritise January deadline courses first.

**How often do you think UCAS should review the findings of this consultation and engage with the sector regarding dates, deadlines, and the number of choices students can make?**

Every year

Every two years

Every three years

Every four years

Every five years

Five years +

No need to engage further

**US response**

We have selected 5 years+ largely because we are keen for a period of stability after a number of years of lots of change, noting also that any changes have significant implications for systems and processes in institutions, with resulting costs. However, we recognise that there may be policy change in the interim and so it's also important to be flexible and would be happy to revisit this in the future should change be required. It could be helpful if UCAS published an annual status update reporting on behaviour and trends so any changes as a result of improved IAG for applicants and providers can be easily monitored.

**In addition to the areas explored previously, are there other areas of the undergraduate admissions cycle where UCAS could make enhancements?**

We would be interested in exploring whether existing language could be refreshed. This was highlighted in the consultation documents but there were no specific questions on this.

**Is there any other feedback you wish to share with UCAS?**

We thank UCAS for the thorough pre-consultation engagement, which has allowed for a targeted set of questions. There are differences in systems across the UK and so would welcome future engagement from UCAS with all providers.