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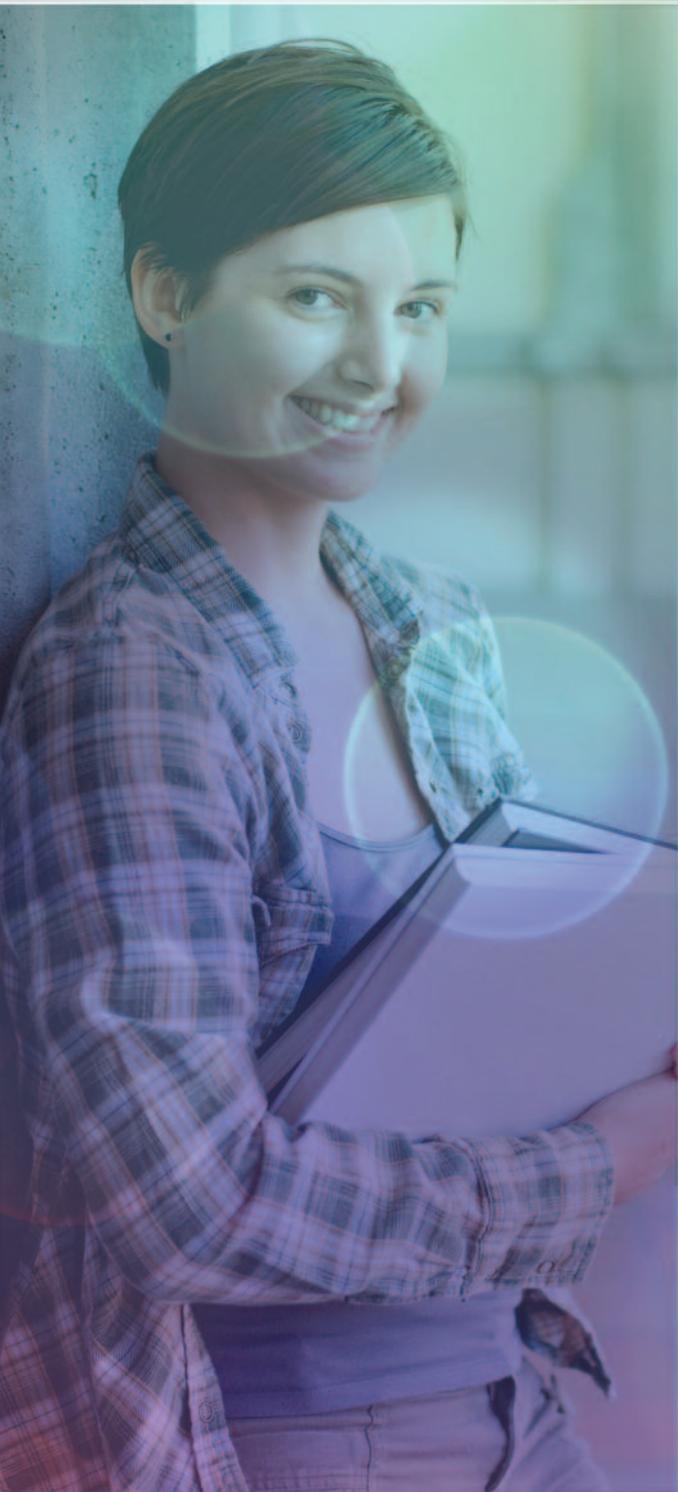
at the heart of connecting people to higher education

ADMISSIONS PROCESS REVIEW

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Contents

Foreword

This report sets out our recommendations following the Admissions Process Review and Consultation. We believe that implementing these recommendations will deliver real improvements in the centralised admissions process for entry to UK undergraduate courses of higher education for all users of the system; applicants, those who prepare and advise them, and the institutions which seek to admit students who will derive life-changing benefits from higher education.

Through this report of the consultation responses and the recommendations that flow from them, we seek a mandate to implement our recommendations, in particular from Universities UK, Guild HE and the Association of Colleges who, through their nominations to our Board, govern and direct the activities of UCAS.

In seeking this mandate, we are conscious of our responsibilities to serve the admissions needs of a wide range of institutions and courses, as well as the diverse body of applicants who seek entry to higher education with different educational, social and demographic backgrounds, qualifications, and aspirations for their futures. To be successful, we will need to build a constructive consensus about the best interests of all applicants, putting students' needs at the heart of the admissions system.

It is difficult in a report of this nature to sum up the diversity, thoughtfulness and insight evident in the responses we received from across the higher and secondary education sectors as well as from government bodies and other stakeholder groups across the UK. In all, we analysed 454 written responses, input from over 500 participants in our consultation events, and survey responses from over 11,000 applicants. We are very grateful for the candour and resources devoted by so many organisations and individuals who not only

responded to our proposals but went further in putting forward imaginative solutions.

The responses demonstrate real commitment, across the UK, to continuing a centralised admissions service and to providing an admissions process which supports fairness, transparency and widening participation in higher education.

A reformed admissions service

We are not recommending a move to a post-results system or PQA, as it is widely known. While there was a general consensus that, in principle, applying with known qualifications' grades represents a logical and desirable goal, we heard well articulated concerns from schools, colleges and the higher education sector about the practicalities of implementation and the potential risks such a system could hold for significant groups of applicants. These concerns are set out in detail in section 7.3 of our report.

However, there was widespread support from all stakeholder groups for the wide ranging improvements we proposed to the current admissions service. Most significant amongst these was the call for thorough reforms of the current Clearing system which was widely believed to fall short of fair admissions standards. Our recommendations not only take these views into account but also anticipate the transformation of Clearing from a last-minute pairing of unplaced applicants with unfilled courses to a fairer, managed and robust late application window catering for applicants who, for a variety of reasons, want access to the service after they have received their results. These include those who have not been placed in the main application scheme, those who are applying late for other reasons and those whose aspirations have changed on account of their known qualifications' grades.

This change will create choice for applicants and provide an additional recruitment opportunity for those Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) seeking to fill places late in the cycle.

Our detailed recommendations, set out in section 5.2, will deliver real improvements in the end-to-end admissions process. Applicants will get better information and support through the admissions process and more opportunities to seek offers; HEIs will receive validated and better quality information about applicants, their qualifications and interests, facilitating a better match of applicants to courses and supporting efficient admissions decisions. Improved technology will support flexibility in the service and our ability to respond to changes in policy and practice.

However, some challenges remain. Inaccuracy of predicted grades remains a problem and we continue to seek ways in which more accountability and accuracy for predicted grades can be secured. We also consulted on a number of options relating to the insurance choice. While we recommend improved guidance for its appropriate use by applicants, the support for removing it altogether, evidenced in the research phase of this project, was not matched in responses.

The consultation responses also emphasised the importance of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) for applicants and cited significant shortfalls in provision, especially for applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds. UCAS believes it has a role as a central resource for authoritative information to support applicants and their advisers and the consultation confirmed support for our continued investment in high quality information tools. Many recognised the role of central government in ensuring that IAG services are widely available to applicants wishing to consider higher education.

All stakeholders demonstrated their commitment to widening access and participation in higher education and called for access to better quality contextual information to support differentiated approaches to admissions for some disadvantaged groups. UCAS remains committed to working with government bodies to improve the quality of contextual data available to disseminate to HEIs.

A summary of our recommendations is set out in section 1.2 and an outline of implementation plans and governance is covered in section 6. With the support of our stakeholders, we intend to start implementation of these in a phased process starting from 2014 year of entry.

Professor David Eastwood, Chair UCAS Board and Vice-Chancellor, University of Birmingham

Rama Thirunamachandran, UCAS Board member, Chair of the UCAS Admissions Process Review Steering Group and Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost of Keele University

1. Executive summary

The UCAS Board initiated the Admissions Process Review Consultation as the culmination of six months' work by the UCAS Admissions Process Review Team and Steering Group. This represented a comprehensive review of an admissions process that has served the higher education sector and applicants well for 50 years since the inception of UCCA in 1961.

The consultation received an excellent response both in quality and quantity. The responses clearly show that implementing a full post-results admissions system is not feasible because of well-evidenced concerns about both process within a compressed timetable and access for certain key groups. In spite of a widely held view that, in principle, a post-results system would be desirable, it is clear that there are too many unresolved systemic issues in the proposed post-results model to support implementation. Amongst other things, differing approaches to term and examination timetables across the four countries of the UK presented insurmountable difficulties.

The consultation responses broadly supported a series of significant enhancements and reforms to the current process although some proposals require further refinement. A phased approach to delivering these recommendations will be adopted as part of an overall programme of continuous improvement from 2014 year of entry and beyond.

In particular, the proposals to reform the current Clearing process into a managed online service received strong support. A large number of applicants need to access a later application window – some because they have been unsuccessful in securing a place through the main application scheme, some who simply choose to apply after their qualification results are known and those who for other reasons make a late decision to apply. Our recommendations secure a final application window which provides an additional option for applications to higher education that is rigorous and fair.

The importance of IAG was emphasised in a large number of responses. The consultation did not put forward specific proposals for IAG nor is it in the remit of UCAS to do so. However, it is clear that the process will not be improved unless this is addressed and although this report makes some suggestions for initial action there are issues here for other bodies, including government.

The consultation also reinforced a strong commitment to widening participation. We are confident that the planned improvements will support widening participation and these changes will be carefully monitored and evaluated. However, we are conscious that the debate must continue within the education sector to ensure that applicants from a wide variety of backgrounds have equal opportunities and the support they need to make a successful application.

1.1   UCAS central recommendations

> UCAS plans to implement a programme of continuous improvements that will enhance the end- to-end process for applicants, schools, colleges and HEIs. The information provided to applicants throughout the application process will be markedly improved. There will be greater flexibilities in Extra that will enable more applicants to hold both a firm and insurance offer before Confirmation. Clearing will be replaced with a fair and managed process for applicants who have not been accepted through the earlier process and those who, for various reasons, prefer to apply later in the cycle and/or after receiving their results.

1.2   Proposals for implementation

A thorough analysis of consultation responses has enabled UCAS to group the recommendations into six categories:
- Proposals that received strong support and are recommended for implementation
- Proposals that have been amended in light of feedback and are now recommended for implementation
- Proposals that received support but where further refinement is required before implementation
- Proposals in respect of international applicants
- Proposals in respect of part-time applicants
- Proposals that received limited support and are not recommended for implementation.

Proposals that received strong support and are recommended for implementation

- The introduction of myUCAS© – a web portal to provide improved information to applicants to support their research, their choices and their applications
- Increasing and improving the use of mandatory fields and data validation in the online application form
- The facility to upload supporting documentation, including portfolios
- Working with awarding bodies to extend the Awarding Body Linkage (ABL) service so that a wider range of verified examination results are uploaded to applicant profiles
- Improved terminology (eg replacing CF, UF)
- Improved guidance for completing references
- Work with HEIs to achieve further developments towards paperless processing and use of e-forms
- Improved facility to provide feedback on HEI decisions to applicants
- At Confirmation, the facility for HEIs to view the conditions of the firm choice of their own insurance applicants
- Improving information capture and data quality to aid HEI decision-making
- Work with relevant bodies to secure the central capture of data and sharing with third parties, such as the Student Loans Company and UK Border Agency to streamline processes for finance applications, fee status assessments, visas and Criminal Records Bureau checks.

Proposals that have been amended in light of feedback and are now recommended for implementation

- Providing pop-ups and wizards to guide applicants through the online application
- Providing a service to match results to conditional offers
- Allowing an optional section of the personal statement to be tailored to each choice and allowing additional personal statements in defined circumstances
- Keeping the insurance choice but using pop-ups and wizards to support applicants during the application process to ensure informed usage.

Proposals that received support but where further refinement is required before implementation

- Consistent adherence by HEIs to deadlines and the introduction of guidelines for decision-making at key points in the cycle
- Introducing a defined offer window in Apply with no decisions communicated to applicants before 15 January and all decisions received by 31 March for applications received by 15 January
- Increasing the flexibility to gain offers in Extra whilst holding an offer from Apply
- Improving the process for applicants using the final application window by introducing a gap after Confirmation and replacing Clearing with a managed online process.

The term 'final application window' has been used throughout this report as a working title to denote the managed process that will replace Clearing.

Proposals in respect of international applicants

- UCAS will work through its International Advisory Board and with appropriate sector bodies to review the admissions process for international applicants and develop a model that takes the UK process as its basis but is tailored to the specific needs of international applicants and the HEIs that recruit them
- The timing for implementation of such changes will need to be determined.

Proposals in respect of part-time applicants

- UCAS will further develop Course Finder to provide information about part-time courses
- UCAS will establish a part-time advisory board to consider other developments which could be offered as opt-in services to support part-time applicants.

The wide range of needs of part-time providers and applicants is recognised and will be taken into account in any future proposals.

Proposals that received limited support and are not recommended for implementation

- Reducing the number of choices in Apply
- Changing the equal consideration deadline in Apply to 31 January
- Rebranding Apply, Extra and Clearing.

1.3   Over-arching issues that require further debate

A number of over-arching issues were raised during the consultation which are central to ensuring that the admissions process is fair and transparent for applicants. These require consideration and further debate by schools, colleges, HEIs and government bodies. UCAS recognises their importance in supporting applicants through the admissions process and will continue to encourage the debate with the sector to try to reach agreement on appropriate action. The most important of these are:

- **Information, advice and guidance**
  IAG plays a pivotal role in any admissions process by guiding applicants through the system and enabling them to make informed choices. The inequalities that exist in access to high-quality, timely and impartial IAG are a key concern for many.

- **Widening participation**
  While recognising that there are many factors outside the scope of the admissions process that contribute to widening participation in higher education, UCAS is committed to supporting its members to achieve this aim.

1.4   Implementation planning

UCAS received feedback from key stakeholder bodies that, while they felt 2014 year of entry was a manageable date to be ready for some of the proposed changes, a phased implementation approach should be adopted to allow sufficient time to communicate changes to applicants and their advisers.

Several key groups noted their support for continuous improvement and the need to review the system at regular intervals. UCAS recognises the need to establish appropriate engagement routes and is developing a governance structure to facilitate stakeholder dialogue.

A full Equality Impact Assessment (EQUIA) will be carried out to assess the impact of the changes on all affected groups.

2. Introduction

The UCAS Board initiated the Admissions Process Review Consultation as the culmination of six months' work by the UCAS Admissions Process Review Team and Steering Group. This represented a comprehensive review of an admissions process that has served the higher education sector and applicants well for 50 years since the inception of UCCA in 1961.

The consultation hypothesised that there would be significant advantages in moving the process for admission to full-time undergraduate courses in the UK to one in which applications are made following receipt of results. To help focus the debate, we proposed a model for a post-results system and through the consultation questions suggested a number of options to amend the model.

The proposed date for implementation of a post-results model was 2016 year of entry at the earliest. However, an interim solution to be phased in from 2014 year of entry was also proposed. The earlier change did not represent a fundamental reform of the current admissions process but proposed enhancements to the current system that would improve the applicant experience and drive efficiencies in the system.

Stakeholders felt that the consultation was timely, thorough and transparent and this was reflected in the number of responses and the wealth of insight and detail they contained. We were also encouraged by the extent of engagement from applicants, schools and colleges, government and regulators, as well as from the higher education sector. We also welcomed the support for maintaining a continuing debate about improvements to the service.

3. Consultation process and analysis methodology

The consultation was launched on 31 October 2011 and closed on 20 January 2012, giving stakeholders 12 weeks in which to respond. Hard copies of the consultation document and the response form were mailed to UK Vice-Chancellors, college principals and other key stakeholders. The document, response form and supporting research were also made available online.

In addition, seven regional conferences were held in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Belfast, Cardiff, London, Birmingham and Keele, attended by over 500 participants. A further conference held in Cheltenham focused on widening participation. All events were well attended and several were oversubscribed.

Detailed notes were taken at these conferences and consolidated reports were produced. These are available online at **www.ucas.com/admissionsprocessreview**

UCAS received 454 formal responses to the consultation across a broad cross-section of the education sector as illustrated in the table below.

Type of organisation	Total
Higher education- university	136
Higher education - college	17
Higher education - private provider	3
School	141
FE and sixth form college	47
Applicant or potential applicant	4
Parent	3
Government body	13
Non-government body	6
Higher education sector body	20
Other	58
Unknown	6
Total number of responses	**454**

The extensive free text comments in consultation responses were analysed to identify the key themes in the debate and this analysis was used to form the structure and content of Appendix 1 – Consultation response analysis.

All responses to multiple choice questions were statistically analysed at a total level, by type of respondent and by country.

An online survey about the proposals for a post-results system, using questions focused on the applicant experience, was completed by 11,164 current year applicants.

A high level analysis of responses to consultation questions and the applicant survey is presented in Appendix 1. The full analysis is available online at **www.ucas.com/admissionsprocessreview**

Four in-depth focus groups were also held with undergraduate students and 12 in-depth interviews were held with schools and FE colleges. The findings from this research are available online at **www.ucas.com/admissionsprocessreview**

4.   Overview of consultation response analysis

The Admissions Process Review Consultation received an excellent response both in quality and quantity. The richness of information in the responses highlighted the great diversity of courses and destinations in the UK-wide undergraduate landscape. This diversity makes it very challenging to devise a system that is universally ideal; and the landscape is constantly changing.

There was strong support for maintaining a single, UK-wide admissions service for the benefits that it confers on applicants, advisers and higher education providers. Although there are a number of issues with the current system that cause frustration for both HEIs and applicants, it works effectively for a large proportion of applicants. Nevertheless, it was heartening to note the genuine commitment from across the education sector to do more to evolve and improve the system.

There was a widely held view that, in principle, a post-results system would be desirable. Aspects of the proposal for application post-results were attractive to some, but it is clear there are too many systemic problems with the post-results proposals to support implementation.

Respondents felt that applying with results would not necessarily support applicants aspiring to the most competitive courses and concerns were raised about potential negative impacts on widening participation and less well-supported applicants. Loss of teaching time, the impact on standards of achievement, the potential for a more mechanistic approach to the assessment of applicants and the lack of time and resources to provide IAG at critical points were also major concerns.

If a greater appetite develops to move to a post-results process, further work would need to be done on the full implications of such a change, particularly to ensure that the UK remains competitive in the global education market.

There was, however, strong support for the proposed enhancements to the current system, an indication that they represent workable solutions and that they would offer significant benefits for users of the central undergraduate admissions service. Some of the proposals offered for 2016, like the introduction of the online applicant support portal, myUCAS©, were also seen as desirable enhancements of the current system and there was strong support for earlier implementation.

Creating greater flexibilities in Extra and the reform of Clearing to provide a more equitable managed process were seen as important improvements.

A number of proposals, although supported in principle, were felt to require further refinement before proceeding to implementation, such as the gap between Confirmation and the final application window. It was felt that implementation timescales should reflect a phased approach in these instances.

Throughout the consultation responses, the issue of timely access to high-quality IAG was highlighted. Whilst there is a growing volume of information available to applicants, the immense influence of high-quality guidance on the ability of an applicant to make effective choices was well-articulated; so too was the issue of the significant number of applicants who do not currently have access to such guidance and who will be disadvantaged in any system. Although it currently has no remit to offer guidance to applicants, UCAS represents a trusted source of information that should be enhanced and developed as an authoritative resource for applicants and their advisers.

Widening participation was also a key theme. There was recognition that there are many factors outside the scope of the admissions process, such as prior attainment, which can act as barriers to progression and access, particularly to more selective courses. As well as calls for better IAG, awarding bodies felt that higher education providers should consider the full range of non-A level qualifications presented by applicants, and that the admissions process should facilitate this. Schools requested greater transparency from higher education providers about their minimum entry requirements and how these may vary. There was also strong support for ensuring that the admissions process continues to: facilitate the use of contextual data and information; support compact schemes, summer schools, and outreach; and provide sufficient time to allow for additional consideration and support – for example where this is needed by care leavers or disabled applicants.

A detailed analysis of consultation responses is provided in Appendix 1.

5. Recommendations and outcomes

5.1   UCAS central recommendations

UCAS plans to implement a programme of continuous improvements that will enhance the end-to-end process for applicants, schools, colleges and HEIs. The information provided to applicants throughout the application process will be markedly improved. There will be greater flexibilities in Extra that will enable more applicants to hold both a firm and insurance offer before Confirmation. Clearing will be replaced with a fair and managed process for applicants who have not been accepted through the earlier process and those who, for various reasons, prefer to apply later in the cycle and/or after receiving their results.

5.2   Proposals for implementation

A thorough analysis of consultation responses has enabled UCAS to group the recommendations into six categories:

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- Proposals that have been amended in light of feedback and are now recommended for implementation
- Proposals that received support but where further refinement is required before implementation
- Proposals in respect of international applicants
- Proposals in respect of part-time applicants
- Proposals that received limited support and are not recommended for implementation.

5.2.1   Proposals that received strong support and are recommended for implementation

The introduction of myUCAS© – a web portal to provide improved information to applicants to support their research, their choices and their applications
This was proposed for the post-results model but is equally valid in the enhanced system. myUCAS© will be available to UCAS end-users, including applicants, members, parents, schools and colleges. The service will be customised according to applicant group and will enable users to gain access to tailored advice and support services.

Increasing and improving the use of mandatory fields and data validation in the online application form
UCAS currently uses mandatory fields and data validation in the application form but there are improvements that can be made to the existing provision and these tools could also be used on a wider range of data fields. Mandatory fields and data validation reduce the likelihood of HEIs receiving application forms with missing or incomplete data, causing them to contact applicants to collect or correct data.

The facility to upload supporting documentation, including portfolios

Applicants will be able to upload supporting documentation, such as scanned copies of certificates, during the online application process. Providing a central source of evidence will prevent applicants being asked by different HEIs to supply the documentation. This facility could also reduce the need for interviews for art and design courses, as portfolios could be viewed online if preferred.

Working with awarding bodies to extend the Awarding Body Linkage (ABL) service so that a wider range of verified examination results are uploaded to applicant profiles

UCAS receives results for some qualifications, such as A-levels and Scottish Highers, from awarding bodies through the ABL service. UCAS is then able to provide HEIs with results that have been verified by the relevant awarding bodies. However, when results are not provided through the ABL service HEIs may need to contact applicants or awarding bodies to retrieve or validate results. Extending the ABL service to include a wider range of qualifications will streamline the decision-making process for HEIs at Confirmation.

Improved terminology (eg replacing CF, UF)

The terminology used to denote decisions at different stages of the admissions process has evolved over time and can be confusing to applicants and advisers. For example, CF is used to denote a conditional offer that has been accepted as an applicant's firm choice. If an applicant meets the conditions of the offer the terminology will change to UF as the offer becomes unconditional.

There is a need to improve the terminology to make it more suitable for an external audience so that the meaning is more self-evident. This will make the process easier to understand, particularly for international applicants and applicants with limited support.

Improved guidance for completing references

Advisers would appreciate better guidance on the information that is useful to HEIs when completing references and HEIs would appreciate greater consistency and relevance in the information that references contain. Clearer guidance and a more structured reference form with examples of best practice on myUCAS© would help reduce the inequities between applicants who have well-informed advisers and those who do not.

Work with HEIs to achieve further developments towards paperless processing and use of e-forms

UCAS currently receives data from applicants electronically but continues to distribute it to HEIs by issuing over 2.7 million paper forms, which results in significant processing and cost inefficiencies. The paper form will be replaced with an electronic form and the user interface that enables HEIs to access the UCAS admissions system will be developed to support paperless processing. This will reduce the reliance on paper forms in the admissions process which will create processing efficiencies and shorten decision-making timescales.

Improved facility to provide feedback on HEI decisions to applicants

Although there is currently a facility for HEIs to provide feedback to applicants there are opportunities to improve the service and increase usage by HEIs. With greater flexibility to make subsequent applications later in the cycle, the feedback received about earlier unsuccessful applications will become increasingly important.

At Confirmation, the facility for HEIs to view the conditions of the firm choice of their own insurance applicants

At Confirmation, HEIs are unable to quantify their exposure to insurance applicants until decisions have been made by the applicant's firm choice HEI. Enabling HEIs to view the offer conditions of the firm choice and compare that to the results the applicant has obtained will enable them to judge their likely exposure to insurance applicants and hence support faster decision-making.

Improving information capture and data quality to aid HEI decision-making

There is a continual need to improve the online application process to ensure HEIs receive the most appropriate data to support their decision-making. Gathering a wide range of information about applicants, their academic achievements and background, supports holistic decision-making. With this in mind, UCAS will explore opportunities to introduce additional data fields to the online application form to support HEIs in their decision-making process.

Work with relevant bodies to secure the central capture of data and sharing with third parties, such as the Student Loans Company and the UK Border Agency, to streamline processes for finance applications, fee status assessments, visas and Criminal Records Bureau checks

Currently, applicants complete several different applications to enter higher education. For instance, applicants submit different applications to UCAS and the Student Loans Company (SLC) and must provide data that is common to both applications twice.

There is scope for efficiencies to be gained by UCAS capturing data during its application process that would support the processing of applications by other external bodies. This would also make the pathway to higher education easier for applicants to navigate.

5.2.2 Proposals that have been amended in light of feedback and are now recommended for implementation

Providing pop-ups and wizards to guide applicants through the online application

It was felt that the use of flags and/or warnings during the completion of the application form, for instance when selecting application choices, could discourage some applicants. Therefore, UCAS has amended this proposal to provide pop-ups and wizards to present information or short tutorials during the application process. Applicants will be supported in making more informed decisions but will not be dissuaded from taking a particular course of action.

Providing a service to match results to conditional offers

UCAS currently provides HEIs with an applicant's results but does not match these to the offer made by the HEI to the applicant. There is support from some HEIs for UCAS to provide a matching service so that applicants who have met the necessary conditions are easily identified. However, there were concerns by some HEIs that this would encroach on the autonomy of their decision-making process. Therefore, UCAS intends to provide a matching service on an 'opt-in' basis to HEIs who wish to use it. For those HEIs who wish to use the service, it would realise processing efficiencies by reducing the need for them to undertake the matching process, which is often done manually.

Allowing an optional section of the personal statement to be tailored to each choice and allowing additional personal statements in defined circumstances

The ability to tailor personal statements fully to each choice caused concern about the level of support required by applicants and the challenges around encouraging them to complete these. However, the ability to tailor a section of the personal statement was thought to be more manageable and would support applicant choice.

It is recommended that UCAS provides all applicants with the option to tailor a section of their personal statement to each of their choices in Apply, Extra and the final application window. While there was not support for all applicants to submit additional personal statements, it was recognised that it would be beneficial in certain circumstances, particularly when an applicant's aspirations have changed significantly from the start of the admissions cycle. This was thought most likely to be the case in Extra and the final application window when results are known.

Therefore, UCAS recommends that applicants have the option to submit a new personal statement when entering Extra and the final application window. New references may also be desirable in such cases.

It is proposed that UCAS engages with the Medical Schools Council, and other relevant groups, to explore options for applicants to medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine being able to submit an additional personal statement for their non-specialist choice.

UCAS will also work with the relevant bodies in Wales to explore the option of Welsh applicants being able to submit personal statements in Welsh where appropriate, as well as in English.

Keeping the insurance choice but using pop-ups and wizards to support applicants during the application process to ensure informed usage
There was a general feeling that the insurance choice should be retained as it provides an essential safety net for applicants.

A material number of HEIs were keen to remove the insurance choice, with 34% selecting this option as their first choice. However, this option was unpopular with schools, with only 5% selecting it as their first choice.

Enforcing the 'correct' use of the insurance choice was the best supported option. But it became very clear through the feedback received that there can be valid reasons why applicants will hold an insurance choice with grades the same as, or higher than, their firm choice; in these circumstances enforcement is not a viable solution.

Therefore, the proposal to enforce the correct use of the insurance choice has been amended to provide improved guidance and alerts during the application process to ensure applicants are making informed decisions.

UCAS recognises that the education sector is clearly divided about the insurance choice and there is a need for continued debate about its reform.

5.2.3   Proposals that received support but where further refinement is required before implementation

Consistent adherence by HEIs to deadlines and the introduction of guidelines for decision-making at key points in the cycle

There was strong support for firm adherence to deadlines, particularly from schools and applicants, to improve the applicant experience, reduce uncertainty and make the process more transparent.

There was reluctance from some HEIs to enter into a decision-making service level agreement (SLA) with UCAS.

UCAS recommends the introduction of agreed and firm decision-making timescales between HEIs and applicants at key points in the process.

The following changes are proposed:

- The 'advisory' date for HEI decisions at 31 March will become a firm deadline with no informal agreements for it to be relaxed
- UCAS will propose decision-making timescales between HEIs and applicants during Extra and the final application window
- When a gap is introduced between Confirmation and the final application window, applicants whose results have been confirmed by results day should receive a decision before this window opens.

Remaining challenges

The higher education sector would collectively need to agree to adhere to the deadlines and decision-making guidelines in the interests of applicants.

UCAS recognises the need to accommodate variable start dates in the admissions process and will work with the sector to model methods of achieving this.

Introducing a defined offer window in Apply with no decisions communicated to applicants before 15 January and all decisions received by 31 March for applications received by 15 January

A number of concerns were raised about all decisions being released on one day and the impact on applicant support. However, there was support from applicants for greater clarity about when decisions would be received.

It is felt that an offer window of 15 January to 31 March would address many of the concerns raised about a single offer date while giving applicants certainty about the timeframe in which they would be informed of decisions.

To ensure equitable treatment for all applicants the 24 March equal consideration deadline for some art and design courses will be removed and these courses will use the main equal consideration deadline of 15 January.

Remaining challenges
This improvement to the UCAS process has the potential to improve fairness to applicants but success relies on sector changes to build on the steps HEIs already take to ensure fair and equal consideration.

An impact assessment is required to understand whether particular applicant groups would be affected by this change, for example mature applicants who may require earlier decisions to prepare for entering higher education.

It is necessary to explore how courses with earlier start dates (eg nursing courses with start dates in January or March) could be accommodated.

The deadlines for international applicants will be considered separately (refer to 5.2.4).

Increasing the flexibility to gain offers in Extra whilst holding an offer from Apply
The proposal to increase flexibility for applicants wishing to enter Extra was well received. The current restriction for applicants to decline or be rejected from all five choices before entering Extra means that applicants using this route can only hold one offer at Confirmation. Increasing opportunities for applicants to gain both a firm and insurance choice before Confirmation was felt to make the system fairer. It could also reduce the need for applicants to use the final application window if they do not achieve the required grades for their firm choice.

Respondents felt there were some issues around the changes that required additional work, which have been addressed below:

• The current requirement for applicants to have used Apply before entering Extra would be retained as its removal would not deliver benefits and could lead to confusion
• An applicant carrying an offer forward from Apply will be required to accept it but will not have to make a decision about which offer to accept as their firm choice until the outcome of Extra choices are known
• We would expect applicants to continue to use all choices in Apply before entering Extra but would not require them to do this. However, once they enter Extra they will cease to be active in Apply.

Remaining challenges
Opening the Extra window earlier in the cycle would afford applicants who have been unsuccessful in Apply greater opportunities to obtain an offer. While this would place applicants who receive early decisions in Apply at an advantage, delaying the start of the Extra window could present timetabling challenges with Easter and the examination period. A balance must be struck between these concerns in agreeing a start date for the Extra window.

There could be a need for agreed decision-making timescales between HEIs and applicants to maximise an applicant's opportunity to make additional sequential applications through Extra.

The details of the interaction between Apply and Extra will need to be established, in particular the feasibility of allowing applicants to accept offers without declaring them as either firm or insurance.

Improving the process for applicants using the final application window by introducing a gap after Confirmation and replacing Clearing with a managed online process

There was agreement across the sector that there was scope for significant improvement to the Clearing process which would make it less stressful for applicants and help achieve a better match of applicant to course.

There were two main proposals which received widespread support and which UCAS believes will significantly improve the current process.

The introduction of a gap between Confirmation and the final application window

This proposal was well supported across the sector and there were seen to be significant benefits for both HEIs and applicants.

A gap after Confirmation would enable HEIs to manage their numbers more effectively by allowing them to enter the final application window with a clearer picture of available places.

A period of reflection before entering the final application window would benefit applicants by allowing more time to research available options. Importantly, it will also allow a greater proportion of applicants to enter the final application window at the same point, thus addressing some of the inherent unfairness in the current Clearing process.

UCAS will work with the sector to prepare detailed designs for the gap between Confirmation and the final application window. The principles behind the changes will be that:

- All applicants for whom the necessary results have been confirmed should receive a Confirmation decision before the final application window opens
- Applicants should have a short period of reflection and research before they are required to submit their application.

Remaining challenges

The different timings that currently operate need to be accommodated in the design of the new process. It is envisaged that an earlier final application window will operate in Scotland. Although the timings will be different, the process will be consistent with that for the rest of the UK.

Consideration will be given to how qualifications with early results such as the International Baccalaureate and BTEC are accommodated.

There are implications for applicants for whom there are outstanding Confirmation decisions for a variety of reasons eg re-marks, missing results, later results (in particular GCSEs) and compliance with non-academic conditions. Last year there were 62,657 applicants awaiting HEI Confirmation decisions on 20 August 2011, two days after A-level results day. This figure had reduced to 24,243 by 5 September 2011. UCAS will work with qualifications regulators and the awarding bodies to find manageable solutions that will meet the needs of applicants, including the option to receive GCSE results earlier through the ABL service.

A balance will need to be achieved between the benefit of confirming more results before the window opens and not unduly increasing applicant anxiety by delaying the start of the window.

To enable the gap to work effectively, places should be confirmed, where results have been released, before the start of the final application window. It is recognised that providing HEIs with increased processing time before results are released to applicants would support this and UCAS will work with the relevant awarding bodies to achieve this.

The higher education sector would need to prevent informal offer-making during the gap, particularly in the context of increased competition and student number controls.

Particular applicant groups should not be discouraged from applying as a result of introducing a gap after Confirmation. However, it may mean a longer wait for those applicants with early results such as those taking International Baccalaureate qualifications and this will need to be considered in the technical phase.

The replacement of Clearing with a managed process
There was strong support for a managed approach to applications in the final application window. It was felt that it would benefit both applicants and HEIs if it is established as a clearly defined application route, rather than a 'first-come first-served' dash for places.

UCAS will work with the sector to prepare detailed designs and develop implementation plans for the introduction of a managed process in the final application window. The principles behind the improvements will be that:

• Applicants should submit an online application
• There should be a brief period in which a gathered field approach applies, to achieve a better match of applicant to course and remove the pressure on applicants to apply as quickly as possible
• Clear and up-to-date vacancy information should be available to applicants
• There will be a need for agreed decision-making timescales between HEIs and applicants to enable decisions to be processed as quickly as possible
• Unsuccessful applicants should be able to continue applying on a sequential basis.

Remaining challenges
Clarity is needed about how engagement would operate between HEIs and applicants in the lead up to the gathered field and how informal offer-making would be prevented.

Both UCAS and HEIs would need to be able to accommodate the process on their IT systems.

The mechanism for providing IAG support to applicants during the final application window will need to be determined.

The benefits to HEIs of sequential applications would need to be balanced against the desire of applicants to maximise their chances of a successful application.

Any new processes or changes in HEI or applicant behaviour that result from student number control policies will need to be considered in the development of detailed plans during the technical phase.

The EQUIA will address the impact of the replacement of Clearing with a managed process on widening participation applicants and other under-represented groups.

5.2.4 Proposals in respect of international applicants

The UCAS application system is open for use by all EU and other international applicants, with information being available on the process in 14 languages. This offers benefits to non-UK applicants in terms of access to comparable information about study opportunities, a structured process to follow, and to HE providers in terms of managing applications and student numbers.

However, the system was designed around the needs of UK-domiciled applicants and respondents indicated that the nature of the admissions cycle and the complexity of the application process can pose real challenges for some non-UK learners. Many HE providers use agents to identify and recruit international students directly, which offers advantages in terms of relationship building between institution and student. This flexibility is important to HEIs in that it enables them to make offers early in the year in advance of overseas applicants receiving offers from institutions in other countries. It also enables them to work around the examination systems in other countries, where results may be given at very different times of year.

Proposed solutions
Many of the proposed enhancements will be beneficial for international applicants, such as the simplification and clarification of terminology, greater validation of information in Apply and a more structured final application window. However, other proposals such as the January to March offer window and the increased emphasis on adherence to deadlines might be disadvantageous to some.

UCAS recognises that it is challenging to accommodate adequately the requirements of all applicant groups in one standard application model and that further work is required to develop a more tailored process for international applicants. UCAS proposes to work through its International Advisory Board and with appropriate sector bodies to review the admissions process for international applicants and develop a model that, while taking the UK process as its basis, is tailored to the particular needs of international applicants and the HEIs that recruit them.

The introduction of a new admissions process for international applicants would be optional for those that wish to use it; applicants could continue to apply directly to HEIs if preferred. Specific issues that will need to be addressed include:

• identification of 'international' applicants and fee assessment
• terminology
• the Apply process, in particular qualification information and equivalence
• facilitating applications to a single HEI
• deadlines
• working with agents
• capturing data for visa applications.

UCAS recommends that as part of the overall continuous improvement programme, the proposals for international admissions continue to be developed and phased-in alongside the main scheme improvements.

5.2.5 Proposals in respect of part-time applicants

While differing views were expressed about the merits of, or need for, a centralised system for part-time applicants, it is clear that much needs to be done to improve IAG for part-time applicants, for whom currently no centralised information service exists. Applicants are largely reliant on the advice and support they receive from individual HEIs.

Proposed solutions
UCAS will develop Course Finder further to provide information about part-time courses and ensure that myUCAS© supports a wide variety of study options.

UCAS will establish an advisory board specifically to consider other potential developments to support part-time applicants.

The wide range of needs of part-time providers and applicants to part-time courses is recognised and will be taken into account in any future proposals.

5.2.6 Proposals that received limited support and are not recommended for implementation

Reducing the number of choices in Apply

Although a reduction in choices was not proposed in the consultation, responses and feedback at consultation events indicated that it should be considered. Schools noted that the fifth choice is often not used wisely by applicants and some felt that fewer choices would lead to more focused decision-making. HEIs were aware of the potential efficiency gains that reducing choices would bring but expressed concerns that applicants, particularly those from a widening participation background, should not be disadvantaged in order to increase efficiency. This may be revisited in the future, however, insufficient evidence was received to take forward a recommendation at this time.

Changing the equal consideration deadline in Apply to 31 January
There was insufficient support to move to a later deadline in January.

Rebranding Apply, Extra and Clearing
There was insufficient support to rebrand the earlier application windows. However, there was support to rebrand Clearing, particularly if a new process were introduced. The term 'final application window' has been used throughout this report as a working title.

5.3   Over-arching issues that require further debate

A number of over-arching issues were raised during the consultation which are central to ensuring that the admissions process is fair and transparent for applicants. These require ongoing consideration and further debate by schools, colleges and HEIs. UCAS recognises their importance in supporting applicants through the admissions process and will continue to encourage debate within the education sector to try to reach agreement on appropriate action. The most important of these are:

- **Information, advice and guidance**
  IAG plays a pivotal role in any admissions process by guiding applicants through the system and enabling them to make informed choices. The inequalities that exist in access to high-quality, timely and impartial IAG are a key concern for many.

- **Widening participation**
  While recognising that there are many factors outside the scope of the admissions process that contribute to widening participation in higher education, UCAS is committed to supporting its members to achieve this aim.

5.3.1   Information, advice and guidance

One of the strongest messages from the consultation responses was the importance of timely IAG and the immense influence high quality IAG has on the ability of an applicant to make appropriate and sensible choices.

There was a strong feeling from respondents that significant inequalities in access to this information remain, and more particularly in access to impartial advice and guidance.

Widening participation would be supported by more constructive and focused advice and guidance. Some groups were particularly vulnerable to poor quality IAG, for instance care leavers, mature applicants, those from low participation schools and colleges, and those with disabilities.

There was discussion about who should be providing IAG but it was felt the greatest responsibility falls on dedicated, professional staff in schools and colleges who understand the needs of the individual.

As a trusted source of information, UCAS will place greater emphasis on ensuring that it provides applicants with access to clear, comprehensive and impartial information about applying for higher education, and that it develops authoritative information resources that can be used by schools and colleges, parents and advisory services.

Potential solutions
It was agreed that applicants would benefit from wider research and visits to open days earlier in the process; the introduction of myUCAS© will support that.

Learners, applicants and those providing IAG would like HEIs to be more transparent about entry requirements and admissions criteria, including where contextual data or information may be used and for what purpose. UCAS is supporting this through its Qualifications Information Review and the inclusion of information in Course Finder about the qualifications held by successful applicants.

Better use could be made of professional associations to convey information to careers advisers, parents and teachers.

A lot of current UCAS initiatives such as Preparing the Professional could be more widely publicised.

UCAS resources need to be clearly signposted and tailored for different types of users. Whilst it is not within UCAS' remit to provide guidance, it is intended to develop a bank of trusted information resources that can be used by advisers. These should include downloadable documentation, presentations, videos, and self-assessment tools.

Remaining challenges
There were real concerns about the recent dissolution of advising bodies and how and by whom IAG was now going to be delivered. The loss of Connexions was acutely felt.

5.3.2 Widening participation

Universities and colleges are committed to promoting widening participation and enabling social mobility and UCAS is committed to helping its members achieve these aims. However, there are many factors outside the scope of the admissions process, such as prior attainment, which can act as barriers to progression and access, particularly to more selective courses.

Potential solutions

The changes that UCAS is consulting on through its Qualifications Information Review, coupled with the changes resulting from the Admissions Process Review will help to support the widening participation agenda. For example, improved contextual data services and visibility of how contextual data is used, an improved application form, simplified terminology, greater flexibility in Extra, and a move to a managed process in the final application window – should all benefit less well supported or less advantaged applicants.

The EQUIA will specifically address the impact of all the proposed changes on widening participation.

Remaining challenges

UCAS will need to evaluate the potential impact of changes on widening participation and less advantaged applicants, and monitor implementation carefully to ensure that the admissions process continues to facilitate:

- access to timely information
- the use of contextual data and information
- support for compact schemes, summer schools and outreach
- the provision of sufficient time to allow for any additional consideration needed by care leavers or disabled applicants.

6   Implementation planning

UCAS received feedback from key stakeholders that while they felt 2014 year of entry was a manageable date to be ready for some of the proposed changes, a phased implementation approach allowed sufficient time to communicate changes to applicants and advisers.

Several key groups noted their support for continuous improvement and the need to review the system at regular intervals. UCAS recognises the need to establish appropriate engagement routes and is developing a governance structure to facilitate stakeholder dialogue.

UCAS is developing a detailed implementation plan for a programme of continuous improvement which will detail operational ownership for delivery across the business, key delivery milestones and critical dependencies, both internally and externally.

In support of this operational activity a governance structure is being developed to support key decisions and oversee technical refinement and will include:

• Endorsement of these recommendations by key stakeholder groups
• Establishing an advisory group, drawn from across the sector, to lead the debate on the high-level issues that remain within the admissions process and to oversee detailed implementation decisions and process refinement
• Establishing working groups to refine the technical details of the more complex proposals that have been recommended for implementation.

A full Equality Impact Assessment (EQUIA) will be carried out for all proposals.

Appendix 1 - Consultation response analysis

7.1   Over-arching issues

Overview

The consultation put forward a range of proposals presented as enhancements to the current system to be phased in from the 2014 year of entry and a move to a process of application post-results from 2016 year of entry. There were a number of issues that cut across both these proposals about which respondents thought it important to take action whatever the overall system for undergraduate admission to higher education in the UK.

7.1.2   Information, advice and guidance

One of the strongest messages from the consultation responses was the importance of IAG and the immense influence high quality IAG has on the ability of an applicant to make appropriate and sensible choices. The variability in the quality of IAG applicants currently receive was acknowledged and the potential of the longer research phase and the introduction of myUCAS© in improving IAG were recognised. However, it was also emphasised that applicants will always need access to IAG at the critical point at which they receive their results and that this would be more difficult in the post-results model.

Consultation question 24.8.4: Widening participation would be supported by more constructive and focused advice and guidance.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**6%**	**35%**	**30%**	**17%**	**10%**
Schools and colleges	3%	25%	36%	23%	11%
HEIs	5%	45%	25%	13%	10%

Addressing the issue of IAG was an integral part of the proposals. Respondents agreed that inequality in the advice, guidance and support young people currently receive was an issue that needed to be addressed and the complexities of the issue were strongly articulated. However, it was felt that the compressed timescale of the post-results model and its position in relation to term and holiday times would exacerbate the issue; appropriate staff might not be available and applicants might not avail themselves of the support that was there.

There was discussion about who should be providing IAG, though in general it was felt that there was only so much HEIs or an organisation like UCAS could do. The greatest responsibility falls on dedicated, professional staff in schools and colleges who understand the needs of the individual. Some groups were particularly vulnerable to poor quality IAG, for instance those in the widening participation cohort, care leavers, mature applicants and those with disabilities. There are national differences in the provision of IAG across the devolved administrations which affect cross-border movements.

One important outcome of the consultation has been to raise the profile of IAG and the issue of equality of access to IAG is gaining momentum. It is clear that IAG is an absolutely vital aspect of any system and it was agreed that applicants would benefit from wider research and access to open days earlier in the process. Schools and colleges that are effective at providing IAG invest heavily in support from both teachers and careers advisers and it is this critical mass that ensures that students make well thought through and effective applications.

It was also emphasised that IAG needs to begin early in secondary school and not just in the final year. Good IAG is not a mechanistic process of matching individuals to courses or careers; it involves a constructive and focused process, a relationship between adviser and client, and a journey. In Scotland, for instance, the centrally-funded Schools for Higher Education Programme and organisations such as the Lothian Equal Access for Schools Programme support the raising of aspiration. A national standard for advice and guidance was suggested. However, although respondents saw benefits in the proposed myUCAS© portal, they felt that pragmatically, in the post-results model, there would be a tendency for applicants to leave their research too late.

To support those providing IAG, clear articulation of HEI entry criteria is vital, including what role contextual data will play in the decision-making process. An agreed central set of widening participation criteria would help ensure a consistent and easily communicated approach. It was suggested that data on entrants could be used to inform applicants and their advisers about qualifications that have previously secured entry to a given course.

There were real concerns about the recent dissolution of advising bodies and how and by whom IAG was now going to be delivered. The loss of Connexions was acutely felt. It was suggested that better use could be made of professional associations to get the point across to careers advisers, parents and teachers. Current UCAS initiatives such as Preparing the Professional are not well known.

7.1.3   Widening participation

Responses reinforced a strong commitment to promoting social mobility and social inclusion which made widening participation a key focus. It was acknowledged that the intention of the proposals was to support widening participation and accepted that the changes could be beneficial for some applicants. However, it was also feared that some aspects of the proposals might disadvantage those they aim to help. It was also acknowledged that the application process is only one factor among many that may or may not serve to widen access and participation.

Consultation question 24.8.1: A wider group of applicants would be encouraged to make more aspirational applications with the confidence of knowing they have achieved appropriate qualification results.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**4%**	**11%**	**33%**	**38%**	**11%**
Schools and colleges	2%	13%	39%	35%	8%
HEIs	2%	4%	27%	50%	15%

Applicant survey question: A greater number of disadvantaged applicants would be encouraged to make applications with the confidence of knowing they have achieved the required exam results.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
4%	27%	47%	12%	8%	2%

Consultation question 24.8.2: Applicants would be deterred from making aspirational applications by having to make decisions quickly and being restricted to two choices.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**4%**	**23%**	**41%**	**25%**	**4%**
Schools and colleges	1%	22%	43%	26%	6%
HEIs	3%	27%	42%	23%	2%

Applicant survey question: Those applicants who have taken a gap year or who already know their exam results may gain an advantage over others by being allowed to apply earlier than those waiting for results.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5%	22%	43%	18%	10%	2%

Consultation question 23.6.5: The lack of flexibility in the proposed post-results system may mean that HEIs are forced to reject candidates they may have accepted in the current system.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**3%**	**30%**	**48%**	**15%**	**2%**
Schools and colleges	0%	27%	53%	15%	2%
HEIs	2%	33%	48%	13%	1%

Consultation question 24.8.3: Applicants may not understand the importance of contextual data and would be deterred from applying for some courses if they have not achieved the grades.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**4%**	**40%**	**45%**	**7%**	**1%**
Schools and colleges	1%	38%	49%	8%	2%
HEIs	3%	47%	44%	4%	0%

Applicant survey question: Disadvantaged applicants may not realise that universities take a range of factors into account and therefore may be deterred from applying to courses where they have not achieved the required grades.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
4%	17%	46%	18%	12%	3%

Applicants, in general, thought that armed with knowledge of their grades they would have the confidence to apply to the best possible HEI for their grade outcomes and that this may be particularly true for those who achieved more highly than expected.

However, while some in the school and college sector agreed with this, many felt that further research was needed on the impact of any changes to those currently under-represented in higher education to ensure that these applicants are not disadvantaged. The reduction in choices and the reduced timeframe might lead to more cautious applications in order to secure a place in Apply 2[1], particularly for the widening participation student.

It was feared that the longer research period would further favour the more advantaged. Open days would take on an increased importance as there would have been no previous contact between the applicant and the HEI. While HEIs would have longer to recruit widening participation applicants to open days, the cost might be prohibitive and there might well be economic and other disadvantages if they were held over the summer period.

The increased admissions activity over the summer period would cause problems for the organisation of Summer Schools, often used as an introduction to higher education for widening participation applicants.

The condensed assessment period would result in less time to consider contextual information, leading to a mechanistic approach and over-reliance on grades. Applicants may not understand how contextual data is used by HEIs and may be discouraged from applying to courses for which they could be suitable if they do not appear to meet the specified entry requirements; this may be a particular issue for those holding non-traditional vocational qualifications. The majority of respondents thought that the lack of flexibility in the proposed system would mean that HEIs would be forced to reject applicants they could have accepted in the past.

[1]Apply 2: the post-results application window in the admissions model proposed for 2016 year of entry.

Apply 1[2] elicited both positive and negative responses in respect of widening participation. It would work well for mature applicants and those studying vocational courses for whom the current cycle, focused on A-level/Higher results, is not appropriate. The flexibility and simplicity of the Apply 1 window would make the process more accessible for mature applicants who are pre-qualified and can apply at any time during the cycle.

On the other hand, Apply 1 might cause particular problems for younger applicants from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Those from more affluent backgrounds would be able to afford to wait in order to gain a better chance of gaining a place, while widening participation applicants would not be able to do so. More research would need to be done to analyse the year-on-year impact of the more affluent applicant being able to defer to enter Apply 1. There was also concern that students who do not now have to enter Clearing, for instance those awaiting GCSE results, would be pushed into Apply 3[3]. There were concerns about meeting the needs of mature students on one-year Access courses which finish in June.

For some widening participation applicants, the choice is between higher education and employment. The removal of the conditional offer, the earlier completion of exams and the later term start mean that more may opt for employment in preference to higher education, particularly if there is family pressure to do so. Receiving a conditional offer boosts the confidence of widening participation applicants and can act as a powerful motivator. This aspect is lost in the post-results model.

In particular, the proposals do not sufficiently address the gap between those who receive good IAG and those who do not. Applicants from schools with good IAG will continue to be better supported and prepared throughout the research phase. There is a danger that widening participation applicants will not receive the support they need during the research phase and will make rushed and ill-informed decisions in Apply 2.

[2]Apply 1: the year-round application window open to applicants with known grades in the admissions model proposed for 2016 year of entry.

[3]Apply 3: the final application window for applicants who are unsuccessful in Apply 2 in the admissions model proposed 2016 year of entry.

7.2   Proposed changes to the current process to be phased in from 2014 year of entry

7.2.1   Introduction

The proposals put forward elicited broad support from across the sector, as did some aspects of the alternative model that did not require movement to a system of application post-results. It was felt that there are some issues in the present system and that the suggested improvements would address a number of them. It was also agreed that they are workable solutions and should be implemented. The higher education landscape is dynamic and changing and it is right that the admissions process should look for continuous improvement to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

However, there was also a strong consensus that these improvements should be embedded, reviewed and evaluated before a decision is made about whether or not more thorough reforms are required. One of the most significant of the proposed changes is the reform of Clearing to create a structured and managed final application window for those applicants who want or need it after receiving their results. When fully implemented and evaluated this would give an opportunity to assess the impact before deciding if any further change would be appropriate.

Consultation question 33.2.3: We believe that the proposed changes for 2016 year of entry and 2014 year of entry are workable solutions.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**10%**	**6%**	**19%**	**28%**	**34%**
Schools and colleges	9%	6%	21%	25%	36%
HEIs	7%	1%	18%	34%	38%

Consultation question 33.2.2: 2014 is a manageable date to be ready for the proposed changes to the current system.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**6%**	**17%**	**54%**	**13%**	**8%**
Schools and colleges	2%	25%	55%	5%	10%
HEIs	1%	10%	65%	14%	7%

Consultation question 33.2.4: If the proposal for 2016 year of entry does not go ahead, further refinements are needed to the 2014 process.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**11%**	**23%**	**47%**	**14%**	**3%**
Schools and colleges	6%	21%	47%	19%	4%
HEIs	7%	29%	51%	10%	0%

Some of the individual proposals received unqualified support. Others received support in principle but with helpful suggestions for amendment or refinement. There were some where the issues raised indicated that implementation would not be appropriate at this time. The responses to all of the proposals for implementation from 2014 year of entry are analysed below.

7.2.2 Technological enhancements

There was a general consensus that the proposed technology enhancements would offer significant improvements and result in real efficiencies. Proposals to streamline the application process by improving data capture and dissemination to third parties were warmly welcomed. However, respondents recognised the challenges of implementation and raised concerns about automating key decision-making processes.

Enhancing the online application form to improve mandatory fields and data validation, particularly qualification information, received significant support from HEIs. It was acknowledged that it would drive efficiencies by reducing the need for HEIs to request missing or incomplete information from applicants.

The ability to upload supporting evidence and documentation was well supported and it was felt that this would create efficiencies in the assessment process. HEIs offering art and design courses were particularly supportive of digital portfolios though it was recognised that agreeing a standard format would present a challenge.

HEIs were keen for UCAS to capture applicant data centrally during the process to support the completion of fee status assessments and Criminal Records Bureau checks. This would remove the need for HEIs to request additional information from applicants and streamline the admissions process. However, the potential challenges of sharing applicant data between agencies were highlighted.

Improved guidance for referees would be welcomed as it was acknowledged that there is an inconsistent understanding of the characteristics of a good reference. However, any requirement for multiple references for applicants would place an unmanageable burden on schools.

There was also strong support for UCAS to extend the ABL service to capture a wider range of qualifications to expedite the validation of results.

The proposal for UCAS to match results to conditional offers and flag where conditions had been met was supported by many HEIs as it would reduce the need for manual checking. However, there were significant concerns from some that this service could encroach on the autonomy of HEI decision-making. Others were sceptical that suitable business rules could be designed to reflect the complexity of offer-making and therefore felt the service would be limited.

There was support for UCAS to provide guidance, for example through the use of wizards and pop-up messages, to support applicants through the application process and reduce the likelihood of error. There were concerns about UCAS unduly influencing applicant behaviour.

7.2.3   Introduction of myUCAS©

The post-results model proposed depended on a very robust research phase. A system that does not include applications post results will require a shorter research period but this phase is still central to a successful process.

myUCAS©, a portal designed for UCAS end users, including applicants, members, parents and schools is regarded as an important part of any new system. Through myUCAS© applicants will gain their UCAS number and access to tailored advice and support services, customised to applicant characteristics and recognising the different needs of diverse applicants, including mature and international. Applicants could engage with myUCAS© at any point in their research journey, including during secondary education, and they could start to build up a shortlist of courses of interest to them. It could facilitate contact with HEIs and push information about open days, site visits and relevant admissions tests. HEIs could have access to a range of applications that would enable them to gauge the level of interest in their HEI and its courses, and promote their courses to suitably qualified students.

myUCAS© was thought to present a significant enhancement of the applicant experience and was popular with both HEIs and schools. Although such a tool would be essential within a post-results model, the benefits are independent of the admissions process itself and there was a strong feeling that its implementation should be accelerated.

7.2.4   Number of choices

While a reduction in choices in the current system was not proposed, responses to the consultation indicated that it should be considered.

Schools noted that the fifth choice is often not used wisely by applicants and some felt that fewer choices would lead to more focused decision-making. This could realise efficiency gains for HEIs and remove some complexity from the system without penalising applicants.

Others noted that a reduction in choices should be considered alongside the proposal to introduce more flexibility into Extra and a structured final application window after results are known. They felt there was a stronger argument for reducing the number of initial choices in Apply if there were improved opportunities to gain a place later in the cycle.

The proposed number of choices varied but it was felt that any reduction should be done gradually, moving to four in the first instance.

It is important to note, however, that there were concerns that reducing the number of choices could discourage aspirational applications and would be a particular problem for applicants to highly competitive courses such as medicine, veterinary medicine/science and dentistry.

7.2.5   Improved terminology and rebranding

UCAS received no objections to improving the terminology surrounding offer-making (eg CF, UF) to support a more intuitive understanding by applicants of their application status. However, it was noted that UCAS should provide sufficient notice of changes to terminology to enable HEIs and schools to reflect the change in their own guidance and literature.

There was some support for Apply, Extra and Clearing to be renamed as Apply 1, Apply 2 and Apply 3 as it was felt that neutral terms might remove any negative connotations associated with the different application windows.

Generally, there was more support to rebrand Clearing than any other application window. It was also felt that if a managed process were introduced in the final application window with significantly different features to the current Clearing process, it would be timely to rebrand it to signal this change.

However, some felt that rebranding the application windows would be ineffective as any negative connotations about the application windows would merely be transferred to the new branding. In addition, it would lead to confusion as applicants and their advisers sought to understand the new branding. This was thought to be compounded by the choice of branding which is not descriptive of the process.

Applicants echoed these concerns and were in the main neutral about rebranding in their survey responses.

Applicant survey question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that rebranding Apply, Extra and Clearing as Apply 1, 2 and 3 would make the system fairer?

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
6%	10%	17%	39%	15%	12%

It was regularly highlighted that if the post-results admissions model were to be introduced it would be unhelpful to use Apply 1, Apply 2 and Apply 3 as they refer to different processes in each of the models.

7.2.6   Tailored personal statements

The proposal to allow applicants to tailor personal statements for different application choices was welcomed in principle but in practice it was felt to be unmanageable in schools, particularly if applicants were required to submit additional personal statements for each choice. The proposal was more popular with applicants and in general received more support if additional personal statements were introduced only in defined circumstances.

Applicant survey question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the ability to write more than one personal statements would make the system fairer?

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
6%	26%	26%	12%	19%	11%

The quality of responses to this question was affected by widespread confusion that the proposals required additional personal statements for each choice rather than only in instances where applicants or HEIs thought it appropriate. However, it was highlighted that the difference could be superficial as any facility to submit additional personal statements could in time lead to increased pressure to do this for all choices.

It was recognised that an additional personal statement would support applicants to medicine who need to select one non-medical choice or applicants who wish to apply to a variety of course disciplines. It was also deemed appropriate for applicants entering Extra and the final application window who may have changed their aspirations since their original application in Apply. Likewise applicants applying to courses delivered in Welsh would benefit from the ability to provide a personal statement in English and Welsh.

However, there were strong concerns from teachers and advisers that personal statements for each application choice would become the norm and this would place unmanageable demands on their time to support applicants. This concern was compounded by a perception that the use of personal statements does not form part of the higher education assessment process in all instances.

There was also a concern from schools that tailored personal statements would lead to the need for tailored references which would exacerbate the drain on resources. Some noted that supplementary personal statements can already be requested by HEIs and the need for change was therefore questioned. However, others felt that since this already occurs it would be preferable if it was captured by UCAS in the initial application process.

The support from HEIs was mixed with some keen to see tailored personal statements and others concerned that they would make it difficult to assess an applicant's commitment to the course discipline. Schools echoed this concern.

Concerns were expressed from across the education sector about the potential impact on widening participation applicants who may not have access to the advice, guidance and support required to complete multiple personal statements. It was felt these applicants would be disadvantaged as a result leading to a further polarisation of the IAG divide.

7.2.7   Equal consideration deadline

In general, respondents to the consultation felt that the disadvantages of moving the equal consideration deadline to the third Friday in January outweighed the benefits.

Some respondents acknowledged that moving the deadline would give applicants slightly longer to research their choices and prepare their applications. This was felt to be of particular benefit to applicants who traditionally apply later in the cycle, such as international and mature applicants. However, the additional time such a move would allow is minimal.

Schools were concerned that a later deadline in January would increase the likelihood of applicants delaying their applications until the New Year. It was felt that this would be an unhelpful distraction, particularly for students with modular exams in January.

There were concerns that a later deadline would delay applications for student finance which could increase the likelihood that funding would not be in place for the start of term.

Some schools and colleges also expressed concern about the impact on 15 October applicants who could have to wait longer for responses.

Feedback from art and design institutions indicated that a later deadline was desirable to give applicants additional time to develop their portfolios.

7.2.8   Rigid deadlines and decision-making service level agreements

The proposal for a more disciplined approach to deadlines and an introduction of service level agreements (SLAs) for HEI decision-making was generally well supported by schools, colleges and HEIs. Schools were more in favour than HEIs with 88% agreeing with the proposal compared to 68% of HEIs.

Consultation question 31.3.2: The current process can be improved with a more disciplined approach to deadlines, service level agreements for decision-making by HEIs, with no informal agreements to relax them.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**8%**	**32%**	**46%**	**11%**	**2%**
Schools and colleges	4%	41%	47%	5%	0%
HEIs	6%	17%	51%	19%	5%

Respondents felt that greater consistency around deadlines would make the process more transparent and reduce anxiety for applicants at key points in the process. Some felt this could be supported by SLAs. There was a strong sentiment that it would support fairer admissions by encouraging the equitable treatment of applicants through the process.

Representative student groups highlighted the issue of applicants who are delayed from entering Clearing due to the time taken for HEIs to consider offers against a near miss in meeting conditions. They strongly supported decision-making SLAs at this key stage in the process. It was felt that UCAS should be able to intervene on behalf of the applicant in some circumstances. This was felt to offer particular benefits for widening participation applicants who may not have teachers or parents who can intervene on their behalf.

Some HEIs noted that flexible deadlines can often benefit applicants. These HEIs were concerned that they could be forced into rejecting applicants when further deliberation, which might enable a more positive response, was required. Particular groups, such as international, mature and disabled applicants, were identified as benefitting from flexible deadlines because the assessment process might naturally occur over a longer period. Some institutions believed an introduction of firm deadlines and SLAs would encroach on the autonomy of their decision-making.

Some HEIs felt that there were some circumstances, for instance when decisions are appealed by applicants, where they may legitimately be prevented from making a decision by the specified date.

Several HEI groups commented that they required greater clarity about the details of the proposal before they could reach a considered opinion. In particular, there was scepticism from a variety of respondents about UCAS' ability to 'police' the adherence to deadlines or the use of SLAs. Some HEIs explicitly stated their refusal to enter into a decision-making SLA with UCAS.

7.2.9   Single offer date

The proposal for a single offer date in Apply was conceptually well received across the sector but a number of significant concerns were raised. Managing support in schools and the potential loss of HEI competitiveness were worrying for many. It was felt that an offer window or a process by which no offers were made before a certain date might work more effectively.

Consultation question 31.3.1: A single offer date for all applications would help minimise the real or perceived advantages of applying as early as possible in the cycle.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**6%**	**30%**	**40%**	**13%**	**9%**
Schools and colleges	2%	38%	37%	12%	9%
HEIs	4%	17%	44%	22%	11%

Applicant Survey question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that a single offer date for all universities would make the system fairer?

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
6%	32%	30%	14%	12%	6%

One key government body welcomed the proposal as it believed a single offer date could limit the ability of any applicant to gain an advantage over any less well-informed or well-supported one.

Schools noted that parents question the fairness of the system when students applying to the same course receive offers at different points in the cycle. As this can place pressure on teachers, some schools welcomed the single offer date.

In general, it was felt that greater clarity about when applicants could expect to receive a decision would be beneficial to applicants and HEIs. It would reduce the anxiety for applicants and the volume of applicant enquiries handled by HEIs.

In Scotland, early offers can cause students to disengage with their studies because they often receive unconditional offers based on their Higher results. A later single offer date was welcomed by some to delay this disengagement occurring.

It was regularly highlighted by HEIs that a single offer date would not actually enforce a gathered field but rather reinforce the perception of one. Many HEIs also disputed that there was an advantage to applying earlier with HEIs either adopting a gathered field at 15 January or being able to operate equal consideration whilst making early offers. Therefore, the proposal was thought by many to address a perception rather than an actuality.

However, it was still believed to be valuable to minimise the perception that there is an advantage to applying earlier in the cycle. Reducing the pressure placed on applicants to apply in advance of the equal consideration deadline would improve the applicant experience and enable more informed decision-making.

Some respondents noted that it could limit the ability of applicants to manage their application process. For instance, applicants can currently develop their interview technique based on feedback from earlier decisions or be selective about attending open days and interviews based on offers received.

HEIs highlighted that early offer-making also allows engagement between HEIs and applicants to begin as soon as possible, a process which is advantageous for both parties and particularly for under-represented groups.

There were other concerns about particular applicant groups. Applicants who apply early, particularly those using the 15 October deadline, would have a long wait for responses which could lead to heightened anxiety for this cohort; mature applicants are thought to benefit from early offers as it enables them to make preparations for entering higher education, such as arranging childcare; applicants considering employment as an alternative to university may find alternative careers or opportunities.

Schools highlighted that students receiving early offers can motivate their peers to submit their applications. They were concerned that a single offer date could make it more difficult to persuade students to submit their UCAS application.

There were concerns across the sector about creating another 'pinch point' in the process. A single offer date would create a spike in demand for UCAS Track, HEI enquiry handling and support for applicants in schools. Schools were particularly concerned about the possibility of applicants receiving five rejections in one day. However, some colleges welcomed the opportunity to concentrate their support into one day and felt it would enable them to provide more assistance in the selection of firm and insurance choices.

A number of HEIs objected to a single offer date because they aim to make offers early in the cycle to gain a competitive advantage. This led to wider concerns that HEIs might make informal offers if they feel this competitive advantage is under threat, which would undermine the whole system. However, other institutions welcomed UCAS imposing stricter guidelines on offer making and confirmation of places.

Due to the complexity of the issues surrounding this proposal, a number of respondents felt more work was required to understand the potential impact of the proposals on both HEIs and applicants.

7.2.10 Changes to Extra

The proposal to increase flexibility for applicants wishing to enter Extra was well received. Increasing opportunities for applicants to gain both a firm and insurance choice before Confirmation was felt to improve the system by giving students the best possible opportunity to secure a place and reducing the number of applicants who need to re-apply once they have received their results. However, a number of technical details were identified that need to be addressed to ensure there is an effective interplay with the Apply window.

The current restriction for applicants to decline or be rejected from all five choices before entering Extra means that applicants using this route can only hold one offer at Confirmation. It was therefore felt to be advantageous to allow applicants to carry one offer from Apply into Extra and thus hold two offers at Confirmation. It would also encourage more aspirational choices and support the possible future reduction of choices in Apply.

It was noted that clarity was needed about how applicants would carry one offer from Apply into Extra. There was support for applicants being required to accept one offer but concern that if this was not a firm acceptance, it would cause number management issues for HEIs.

There was discussion about the correct time to open Extra. Some thought it fairer that Extra should not open until April, after the end of the proposed offer window in Apply, as there were fears of game-playing if it were possible to use Apply and Extra simultaneously.

7.2.11 Insurance choice

There was a great deal of debate during the consultation about the insurance choice and it was an issue that divided opinion. There was a general feeling that the insurance choice should be kept because it provides an essential safety net for applicants. Enforcing the 'correct' use of the insurance choice was the best supported option but responses made it very clear that the definition of correct was open to interpretation. As a result, enforcing an assumed 'correct use' was not thought to be a viable option. A material number, particularly of HEIs, were keen to remove the insurance choice.

Respondents were asked to rank their preferred options for the insurance choice from one to five. In the table below a score has been calculated for each option by assigning points dependent on the choice of ranking.

Organisation type	Keep insurance choice as is	Remove insurance choice	Enforce correct use of insurance choice	Make insurance choice optional for HEIs	Replace insurance choice with priority wait list option
Higher education - university	323	322	374	233	244
Higher education - college	42	40	51	33	36
Higher education - private provider	9	5	15	4	9
School	105	44	99	65	85
FE college	97	60	108	56	77
Government body	7	5	10	4	9
Non-government body	13	7	12	3	11
HE sector body	36	18	29	14	25
Other	383	172	338	195	270
Unknown	3	3	5	1	2
Total	**1018**	**676**	**1041**	**608**	**768**

▢ Favourite option   ▢ Least favourite option

Scoring system
1st choice	5 points
2nd choice	4 points
3rd choice	3 points
4th choice	2 points
5th choice	1 point

In the table below, the percentage of each group that ranked each of the five options as their first choice is shown. The analysis was performed on each option individually, so columns should be looked at in isolation, rather than reading across the rows. Respondents did not always rank all of their options so rows will not total 100%.

Organisation type	% of respondents who chose each option as their first choice				
	Keep insurance choice as is	Remove insurance choice	Enforce correct use of insurance choice	Make insurance choice optional for HEIs	Replace insurance choice with priority wait list option
Higher education - university	22%	34%	36%	6%	10%
Higher education - college	19%	19%	47%	13%	7%
Higher education - private provider	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
School	45%	5%	39%	0%	15%
FE college	30%	12%	50%	0%	12%
Government body	17%	0%	40%	0%	33%
Non-government body	25%	0%	0%	0%	67%
HE sector body	50%	13%	33%	0%	13%
Other	38%	3%	46%	3%	21%
Unknown	20%	20%	50%	0%	0%
Total	**32%**	**16%**	**40%**	**3%**	**14%**

There was support to enforce the correct use of the insurance choice as a genuine safety net. Both schools and HEIs felt this would prevent applicants wasting their insurance choice and provide more security when predicted grades were not achieved.

It was noted by some schools that student support is more focused on selecting initial application choices than the selection of firm and insurance choices. Applicants are therefore acting more independently at this stage in the process and this was thought to contribute to the misunderstanding and misuse of the insurance choice.

However, it was often highlighted that defining the 'correct' use of the insurance choice was not straightforward. There are valid reasons for selecting an insurance choice with equal or higher conditions than the firm choice rather than it being due to a lack of IAG in all instances.

For example, holding an insurance choice and a firm choice with the same grade requirements would provide security if the insurance choice institution were more lenient on near misses. For some applicants, their confidence in achieving conditional grades in one subject might be more or less than for another subject. It was noted that applicants applying to very competitive courses may only receive offers for top grades so would have no option but to select an insurance choice with the same conditions as their firm although it could be argued that in this case their selection of choices was not optimal.

In addition, due to the complexity of offer-making, it can be logical to hold an insurance choice with conditions that appear to be higher than the firm choice. For example, an applicant with a firm choice for BBA at A-level, with an A in English, and an insurance choice for AAB might seem to hold an insurance choice with higher conditions than their firm. However, if the applicant achieves AAB, with the B in English, they could be rejected from their firm choice but accepted at their insurance choice.

Consequently, many respondents, particularly schools, objected to enforcing the insurance choice because they felt applicants should not be prevented from selecting an insurance choice with the same or higher conditions than their firm. Others objected or raised concerns on the grounds that it would be challenging to create business rules to reflect the complexity of offer-making and achievement profiles.

There were also fears from some that enforcing insurance choice rules could lead to misuse of the firm choice. An applicant's preferred choice may not be the one with the highest grade requirements. If applicants had to select an insurance choice with the same or lower conditions than their firm they could be encouraged to select their highest offer as their firm choice, rather than their preferred option.

A significant number of HEIs supported the removal of the insurance choice. However, this was the least popular option with schools and would prove unpopular with applicants. It was highlighted that the insurance choice makes it very difficult for HEIs to manage their student numbers during Confirmation and Clearing. HEIs must wait for decisions from other institutions to establish their exposure to insurance choices whilst making decisions on near miss firm choices and Clearing applicants.

This leads to decisions on near miss applicants and the release of places into Clearing being delayed while the exposure to insurance choices is clarified. Applicants who are released into Clearing later in the post-results period are placed at a disadvantage as fewer places are available. The staggered release of places into Clearing also creates unfairness.

Consequently, a number of HEIs noted that if the insurance choice were removed they could be more lenient on near misses and confirm their Clearing places more quickly. Although this could lead to more applicants in Clearing, it was felt it would remove some of the unfairness in the current system. In particular, a managed process in the final application window was felt to further support the case for the removal of the insurance choice as applicants would have a more equitable opportunity to gain a place.

However, it is noted that highly selective institutions are heavily reliant on the insurance choice as applicants could be discouraged from accepting conditional offers from these institutions without this back-up option.

7.2.12 Gap between Confirmation and the final application window

Introducing a gap after Confirmation was overwhelmingly supported across the education sector. It was felt that it would provide a fairer system by allowing HEIs to be clearer about their vacancies before the final application window opens and it would support applicants in making more informed decisions. However, a number of implementation challenges were identified, the most critical being ensuring compliance from all HEIs and preventing informal offer-making.

Consultation question 31.3.4: A short break between Confirmation and Apply 3 would help to improve the process to place applicants after they have achieved their results.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**9%**	**34%**	**46%**	**6%**	**2%**
Schools and colleges	5%	47%	40%	4%	1%
HEIs	6%	28%	52%	8%	2%

Applicant survey question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that a gap between A-level results and Clearing starting would make the system fairer?

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
6%	25%	40%	21%	6%	2%

Giving HEIs time to confirm their firm and insurance places before the final application window opens will lead to greater clarity about the places available. Unplaced applicants would be in a more equitable position, being able to apply when the final application window opens rather than being staggered throughout the period as HEI decisions are received. There was also support for applicants to have a few days to consider their options and discuss them with their parents and advisers before making an application. It was thought this would lead to a better match of applicant to course. In the context of increased fees, this time for reflection was thought to be particularly important. It would also provide time where applicants could choose to revise their personal statements to support their new applications. However, it was understood that applicants are keen to secure a place quickly and prolonging the process could also increase their anxiety.

There were concerns that the gap would be difficult to enforce because applicants would continue to contact HEIs to discuss their suitability and HEIs could make informal offers. If informal offer-making occurred it would undermine the system by placing some applicants and HEIs at an advantage. This could impact fair access and efforts to widen participation in higher education.

There were concerns that some applicants would continue to be at a disadvantage because they are waiting for later results such as GCSEs and Access Diplomas and would therefore not have received decisions on their firm and insurance choices. Several groups proposed a gap of a week to take account of GCSE results. However, others thought this would extend the period of uncertainty for applicants and may increase the likelihood of informal offer-making.

It was acknowledged that, in the current process, Scottish applicants are able to enter Clearing in early August, once they have received their Higher results, and this would need to be taken into consideration in any changes.

There were some concerns that additional support would be required from schools as teachers would need to be available on A-level/Highers results days and again for supporting applicants when the final application window opens. Others felt it was helpful to concentrate support into one day and were concerned that introducing a gap might discourage students with less confidence or guidance at home from applying.

Some HEIs also preferred to complete the Clearing process in one day and were concerned about prolonging the process.

7.2.13 A managed process to replace Clearing

There was very strong support for the introduction of a managed application process to replace Clearing. It was supported across the sector but particularly by schools and colleges where there was almost total agreement with the proposal. However, as with the proposal to introduce a gap after Confirmation, the importance of compliance and the elimination of informal offer making were emphasised.

Consultation question 31.3.3: The replacement of Clearing with a managed process of applications with equal consideration for places available at that point would give students a more positive experience and achieve a better match of applicants to courses.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**6%**	**42%**	**41%**	**7%**	**2%**
Schools and colleges	1%	57%	39%	1%	0%
HEIs	5%	31%	42%	15%	3%

It was thought that a gathered field on day one of the final application window would help to secure the best match of applicant to course, rather than the current first-come first-served process. Respondents felt that it would remove the rush for places as there should be no benefit to applying earlier on this day. This would reduce applicant anxiety and support them in making more considered choices.

The impact of the AAB+ policy in England and increases in fees, on both applicant and HEI behaviour is currently unclear. However, if these were to lead to increased demand for applications-with-results it was felt to be important that a more structured process was in place.

It was noted that the current process enables applicants to obtain offers from a number of HEIs before submitting their application. There were therefore concerns about applicants being limited to a single choice in their initial application in the gathered field.

There was discussion about whether applicants could continue to call HEIs during the gap between Confirmation and the start of the final application window. While this would enable applicants to discuss their suitability for a given course before submitting their online application, it could result in informal offer making which would undermine the broader benefits of the process.

Some respondents highlighted that a later decision in the final application window would reduce the time available for arranging accommodation and student finance. This would increase the risk that these arrangements were not in place for the start of the academic year. This would be acutely felt by disabled students. It was noted that this would be particularly difficult for applicants who were unsuccessful in the gathered field.

There were some operational concerns about the ability of UCAS' IT infrastructure to support the gathered field on day one of the final application window.

7.3 A proposed post-results system from 2016 year of entry

7.3.1 Introduction

The consultation proposed a radical solution for improvements to the admissions process. Research from the UCAS Admissions Process Review indicated that there would be significant advantages in moving the process for admissions to full-time undergraduate courses in the UK to one in which applications are made following receipt of results. The consultation set out to establish the views of the sector on a process of application post-results and set out a proposed model for a post-results system.

Respondents endorsed the decision by the UCAS Board to review the admissions process at this time. New funding arrangements will result in significant changes in HE for both applicants and universities. It is therefore right to explore whether or not the current admissions process reflects a sufficiently applicant-centred approach.

We were reminded that UCAS has supported the UK higher education sector for many years and continues to have one of the best and most highly regarded central application systems for higher education in the world. Neither the higher education nor the schools and colleges sector think the current system is broken or without merit.

The higher education sector is a dynamic environment and there have been changes even since the consultation was launched in October 2011. In considering responses to this proposal, UCAS acknowledges the challenges faced by HEIs in different parts of the UK and has placed this alongside the need to offer an applicant-centred admissions service when reaching conclusions and making recommendations.

There was strong support for the benefits of a UK-wide centralised system. Respondents emphasised the need to maintain a process that can accommodate the diversity of higher education across the whole UK and take into account the increasing divergence in the education policies and structures of the constituent nations, both in schools and higher education.

The proposed changes were based on the principle of enabling students to apply with results, having had time to complete more extensive research to determine the course and HEI that is right for them. Support for the principle was mixed. Some respondents reported that there was a lack of empirical evidence to demonstrate that a post-results system would deliver benefits; others argued that it was logical and fair. It also seemed logical to some that HEIs should only have to process applications from appropriately qualified applicants. However, serious concerns were raised across the sector about the impacts of the model as proposed. 2016 year of entry was thought to be too early for such significant change.

Consultation question 33.2.1: 2016 year of entry is a manageable start date for a system of applications post-results.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**6%**	**9%**	**29%**	**20%**	**33%**
Schools and colleges	1%	12%	41%	16%	27%
HEIs	2%	3%	23%	26%	42%

Consultation question 33.2.3: We believe that the proposed changes for 2016 year of entry and 2014 year of entry are workable solutions.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**10%**	**6%**	**19%**	**28%**	**34%**
Schools and colleges	9%	6%	21%	25%	36%
HEIs	7%	1%	18%	34%	38%

7.3.2   Applicant experience

We were advised of the need to evaluate how the UCAS admissions process fits within the total applicant experience, which includes all the opportunities or points of interaction between higher education and a potential student. It is this total experience which affects whether or not an individual becomes a higher education student or indeed whether s/he decides to apply for higher education in the first place.

There was a sound consensus that applicants would have longer to make informed decisions and myUCAS© was seen as a useful enhancement. Some suggested the implementation of myUCAS© to support any future model. However, successful implementation of the post-results model pre-supposes well-prepared and highly motivated applicants who do everything when they are supposed to, when the reality is often very different.

Consultation question 25.18.3: A more streamlined process would make the process easier for applicants to navigate.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**7%**	**18%**	**47%**	**22%**	**4%**
Schools and colleges	4%	19%	50%	19%	5%
HEIs	3%	13%	50%	29%	2%

Applicant survey question: It would be better to apply for university during the summer after exam results are received.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
0%	26%	30%	12%	20%	11%

Applicant survey question: Applying to university after exam results are known would make the process easier to understand.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1%	22%	29%	20%	21%	6%

Consultation question 23.6.6: Giving young applicants more time to make application decisions recognises how much they mature over the final year at school or college.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	5%	19%	40%	26%	6%
Schools and colleges	0%	25%	42%	25%	5%
HEIs	3%	7%	44%	33%	10%

Applicant survey question: Applying post-results recognises that many young people mature and may change their mind about what course they want to do during the final year of school or college.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
0%	26%	45%	16%	10%	2%

Consultation question 28.7.4: The resources available in schools and colleges will be sufficient to give students support to make applications and manage offers in the timescale proposed.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	12%	3%	9%	26%	49%
Schools and colleges	1%	1%	11%	23%	61%
HEIs	23%	0%	5%	28%	43%

Consultation question 23.6.3: Two choices is an adequate number for Apply 2, allowing applicants both an aspirational and a more realistic application.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**3%**	**9%**	**33%**	**31%**	**23%**
Schools and colleges	0%	8%	39%	25%	25%
HEIs	2%	7%	28%	36%	23%

Applicant survey question: When applying post-results, two choices would be enough.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3%	5%	15%	9%	43%	25%

Applicant survey question: Knowing results would enable applicants to make an aspirational choice (eg to a course with very high demand) as well as a more realistic choice.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3%	22%	47%	13%	11%	3%

Applicant survey question: Applying for additional choices one at a time would be stressful.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3%	19%	37%	23%	14%	3%

Applicant survey question: Applying for additional choices one at a time would be a fair process.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3%	5%	23%	39%	24%	6%

Giving young people longer to consider their choices and more time to mature before applying should help them make more informed choices and could reduce the drop-out rate in higher education. However, it was questioned whether there is evidence to show that young people make better choices even if they have longer to think about it.

One benefit of the current system is that it allows the development of an important relationship between the applicant and the institution which results in applicants being generally well-prepared to start university. While some respondents felt there were opportunities, with an extended research phase, for HEIs to build a stronger relationship with potential applicants, others felt there would be less commitment on the part of the applicants and relationship building would be more difficult.

There were concerns that applicants would lose the motivating effect of conditional offers in their final year which encourages them to work harder and has a positive effect on achievement. Applicants would also lose the security provided by conditional offers which would increase anxiety in their final year.

Multiple application windows may confuse applicants, particularly those eligible for different ones (eg those taking re-sits). There was a fear that more applicants would end up in Apply 3 than are currently in Clearing because applicants would continue to pick popular over-subscribed HEIs in Apply 2.

The compression of key activity into the summer period was seen as a significant problem. It would be difficult for applicants to be focused in their choice of open day attendance - currently some attend post-offer so they don't incur the cost of travelling to institutions to which they don't subsequently apply. Applicants disperse over the summer for work and holidays which will make managing Apply 2 and Apply 3 difficult from both a school and applicant perspective. Applicants may not be supported by teachers and advisers over the summer when most advice would be required. This would deepen the divide between those who are well supported and those who are not. School-based applicants won't research throughout the year and will rush decisions in the summer when they are not supported by their schools. Two choices in Apply 2 are not enough and may encourage 'safe' applications and discourage aspirational applications. Applicants may be misled into thinking that they will be offered a place if they have achieved the specified entry requirements.

A later term start may mean that the induction period for new students is reduced or removed and there would be insufficient time for applicants to prepare for higher education both practically (eg accommodation, finance, travel) and psychologically.

7.3.3   Fairness

The proposal was based on an assumption that admissions decisions should be evidence-based; applying with achieved results would remove the unreliability of predicted grades, a potential source of unfairness for many. There was strong support from both applicants and sector bodies for the principle that applying post-results would be fairer. However, it was questioned whether the proposed model would support equality and diversity, and there were fears that it might just move the unfairness from one group to another. There would continue to be disadvantaged groups; those without access to good IAG about higher education, those with mitigating personal circumstances or those with non-standard qualifications.

Consultation question 23.6.1: A system of application post-results would deliver a fairer admissions process because the applicant would submit actual results and the reliance on predicted grades would be removed.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**3%**	**24%**	**37%**	**23%**	**12%**
Schools and colleges	0%	33%	40%	14%	11%
HEIs	3%	10%	40%	33%	11%

Consultation question 23.6.2: Applying post-results will not necessarily have positive impacts on equality and diversity.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**2%**	**31%**	**48%**	**15%**	**2%**
Schools and colleges	0%	27%	49%	19%	2%
HEIs	0%	37%	52%	8%	0%

Consultation question 23.6.7: A post-results system will not be agile enough to provide a better experience for all groups of students; those with A-levels, those with Scottish Highers and those with other academic or vocational qualifications.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**6%**	**30%**	**32%**	**24%**	**4%**
Schools and colleges	2%	22%	33%	32%	5%
HEIs	2%	37%	42%	15%	2%

Particular concerns were raised about disabled applicants; that there would be insufficient time for HEIs to assess and meet their needs and they may be unable to comply with their legal obligations.

There was much discussion about the whole basket of measures HEIs currently use to assess the suitability of applicants for courses; interviews, submission of course-work or portfolios, auditions and contextual information. While a greater reliance on grade achievement might make the process more transparent, it was not necessarily fairer and would lead to an imbalance between grades and other selection criteria. It was also felt that applicants with vocational qualifications might be disadvantaged because they take longer for HEIs to assess fully.

There were a number of concerns about the interface between Apply 1 and Apply 2. The lack of an equal consideration period in Apply 1 would mean that those applicants who apply early in the cycle would potentially have an advantage over later applicants. Applicants to Apply 2 would be considered as part of a gathered field whereas applicants to Apply 1 would not, which would introduce unfairness across the two application windows.

Apply 1 could encourage applicants to 'play the system'. For example, it might particularly benefit applicants who were able to take a gap year, to the disadvantage of those who were not. Some schools indicated that they might advise their applicants to apply in Apply 1 in the following admissions cycle. For some courses Apply 1 could potentially fill up before Apply 2 opens and it would be difficult for HEIs to manage their intake in a fair way across both windows. Two choices would further disadvantage applicants applying to competitive courses in Apply 2 as they would have a greater likelihood of remaining unplaced.

Issues were also raised about the overlap between Apply 2 and 3. This could disadvantage applicants who get a late decision in Apply 2 as there will be fewer places available in Apply 3. HEIs might hold places in Apply 3 as they may get stronger candidates than in Apply 2 due to the restricted number of choices.

7.3.4 Efficiency

The majority of respondents indicated that a post-results process would be more streamlined and result in efficiency savings. However, in written responses serious concerns were expressed that the need for resources would simply move around the system and other inefficiencies would be introduced.

Consultation question 25.18.1: A post-results system is an efficient system as fewer applications require processing by HEIs.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**5%**	**26%**	**38%**	**20%**	**9%**
Schools and colleges	4%	39%	41%	11%	3%
HEIs	4%	14%	33%	34%	13%

Consultation question 25.18.2: A more efficient streamlined process would enable HEIs to make financial savings.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**9%**	**18%**	**39%**	**26%**	**5%**
Schools and colleges	9%	27%	45%	12%	4%
HEIs	4%	5%	39%	42%	8%

It was accepted that many HEIs would realise efficiency savings because of the reduction in applications, though this might not be the case in the more selective HEIs. The removal of conditional offer making and insurance choices would also realise further efficiency savings.

However, there were concerns that any efficiency savings from reducing the number of choices would be offset by other inefficiencies that would be introduced. HEIs would be engaging with the entire population of potential applicants rather than actual applicants, and schools would have to provide year round support. This could be viewed as being less efficient than the current system. The compressed timescale proposed for decision-making would create an exceptionally high workload at a time in the year when it would be difficult to manage. HEIs said that large numbers of temporary staff would need to be employed during peak times, with associated costs of training and lack of experience. Admissions staff may be under-utilised at other points in the cycle, which would not be cost-effective.

The proposed system would increase pressure at other points in the year as HEIs would need to invest heavily in the research phase. They would need to engage with a greater number of initial enquirers, with a large increase in marketing activities and costs. Meeting these demands may well overshadow the efficiency gains of a reduced number of choices.

There were serious concerns that uncertainties around student demand and a shortened decision-making period could have implications for resource planning and managing student numbers.

Schools expressed concerns that a shorter application period would lead to more mistakes in applications and this would increase the workload for HEIs. Although the cost of implementation has not been calculated, some respondents believed it would be too great for the potential benefits that would be achieved.

Respondents highlighted that for many institutions academics are heavily involved in the admissions process to which they bring a wealth of expertise and experience. HEIs were clear that it was in the best interests of applicants for this to continue. However, this might well be incompatible with essential research activity which takes place during the summer period and HEIs felt that withdrawal of academics from the admissions process would be counter-productive.

7.3.5   Impacts on bodies in the sector

a)   Schools and colleges

The potential impact on schools was regarded as severe in two particular aspects: the effects on teaching time and the timing and nature of applicant support. There were serious concerns that the proposals would have an adverse effect on teaching and learning. There was a feeling that schools and colleges were expected to make more changes than the higher education sector and that this was unfair.

Applicant survey question: Bringing the A-level exam period forward by three weeks would not have an impact on results achieved.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
6%	9%	20%	18%	28%	20%

There were strong indications from schools, colleges, awarding bodies, Ofqual and HEIs that the loss of three weeks' teaching time would be damaging to curriculum delivery, student achievement and standards. It was felt that reducing teaching time and exam timetables would be unfair on the majority of students who are not entering higher education.

While a return to linear A-levels would free up more teaching time at other stages in the curriculum and this could support a move to a post-results system, it was felt that these issues should not have undue influence on the parallel debate about A-level reform. In addition, it was made clear that a change in the timetabling of A-level teaching and examinations would have an impact on the scheduling of GCSEs which would create an even bigger burden on schools. Most importantly, any new model would need to accommodate the complexities of the different examination systems across the UK.

There was a view that such a radical proposal needed a more radical approach to change in the whole academic timetable. It simply would not be feasible to shoe-horn a post-results model into the current academic year. While a more radical revision of the whole academic timetable might not necessarily be impossible or damaging, it would require agreement from across the education sector and all four administrations and certainly could not be accomplished by 2016 year of entry.

It was also felt that the proposals come at the wrong time for reasons beyond the control of UCAS and that proposing to take out teaching time at a point when it is already under threat due to the reduction in the post-16 unit of funding would have a detrimental effect that outweighs any advantages gained by application post-results.

Despite a willingness to try, it appears that the practicalities and challenges of dealing with applications in the proposed timeframe might be insurmountable. There seems no doubt that applicants would be less supported by teachers over the summer period than is currently the case. Offering support would be dependent on the goodwill of teachers which would polarise the advantage provided to well-supported applicants. There was some suggestion that it could be achieved provided support came, not from teachers, but specialist careers advisers with different contractual arrangements, but this would be particularly difficult to implement at a time when Connexions is being disbanded and responsibility for IAG is falling directly to schools and colleges.

If teachers were required to support applicants over the summer period, their terms and conditions would need to be changed which could be an insurmountable problem.

The concept of a long research phase was supported but schools felt it would result in the UCAS application becoming a year-long distraction for final-year students. In particular, it would be very disruptive if HEIs were to take students out of school for open days throughout the year. There were concerns that some schools would focus exclusively on teaching throughout the year and not give students any support through the research phase.

There was much discussion of the nature of support that applicants receive now and would require in a reformed system. Personal statements are clearly an issue. Schools struggle to get students to write one personal statement so writing multiple personal statements would be unmanageable and would become an unnecessary distraction from the curriculum. In the post-results model, if applicants changed their choices after results there would not be enough time to write personal statements and references before the equal consideration deadline. There was also concern that multiple personal statements would lead to the need for multiple references and this was considered unmanageable.

On the other hand, schools also have concerns about estimated grades and the increasing feeling of pressure from parents for teachers to predict grades at the top end of expectations. Schools recognised the unfair advantage this could give to such applicants. A post-results system would remove this pressure.

b) Higher education institutions

There were serious issues raised about the impact on HEI processes in respect of their ability to match applicants to courses effectively and manage student numbers. There was concern about the adverse effect on crucial research activity. Any cost efficiencies were seen as superficial since, in order to maintain a knowledgeable admissions team and process applications through the three phases, they would still need to be employed throughout the year. Interviews, assessment tests and portfolio reviews could not be accommodated in the nine week assessment period.

Consultation question 29.4.2: Universities could make appropriate resources available to make offer decisions and process applications between mid-July and end August.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**23%**	**6%**	**24%**	**25%**	**19%**
Schools & Colleges	34%	5%	26%	22%	11%
HEIs	5%	2%	29%	34%	26%

Applicant survey question: A system of applying post-results during the summer would give universities enough time to process applications before term starts in October.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5%	6%	20%	20%	33%	16%

Consultation question 23.6.4: A system of application post-results may encourage a mechanistic approach to admissions with contextual and other data used less effectively.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**3%**	**43%**	**38%**	**13%**	**1%**
Schools and colleges	0%	41%	44%	13%	1%
HEIs	2%	50%	35%	11%	0%

Applicant survey question: A system of applying post-results may encourage universities to place all the emphasis on grades and not other achievements or information about the applicant.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
0%	19%	38%	18%	20%	5%

Consultation question 23.6.5: The lack of flexibility in the proposed post-results system may mean that HEIs are forced to reject candidates they may have accepted in the current system.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**3%**	**30%**	**48%**	**15%**	**2%**
Schools and colleges	0%	27%	53%	15%	2%
HEIs	2%	33%	48%	13%	1%

Applicant survey question: Applying post-results could result in universities rejecting applicants they might have accepted in the current system due to there being less flexibility.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
0%	21%	48%	18%	10%	2%

Applicant survey question: There would be enough time between applying at the end of June and getting ready to attend university at the beginning of October.

Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5%	10%	26%	9%	30%	19%

Consultation question 28.7.2: The option of starting the HE term for first year students in late October is worthy of consideration.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**4%**	**18%**	**42%**	**18%**	**16%**
Schools and colleges	0%	30%	47%	14%	6%
HEIs	2%	3%	35%	27%	30%

Consultation question 28.7.3: The option of starting the HE term for first year students in January is worthy of consideration.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**4%**	**15%**	**23%**	**24%**	**31%**
Schools and colleges	0%	26%	23%	25%	24%
HEIs	2%	1%	24%	26%	44%

Consultation question 29.4.1: An earliest start date of circa 8 October for first year students would not have a serious impact on the delivery of HE courses.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**14%**	**14%**	**36%**	**18%**	**15%**
Schools and colleges	17%	20%	45%	11%	5%
HEIs	2%	5%	31%	31%	28%

HEIs were concerned that the timeframe to process applications would be too short and would be unmanageable over the summer. At this time academics are committed to research so it is difficult to see how a sufficient number of high-quality admissions tutors could be made available. While this in itself need not be an obstacle, such research is not only income generating but provides a research-rich environment in which students can flourish. The changes would also have an unacceptable impact on admissions officers' annual leave, particularly as it was pointed out that there is a large demographic of women with children so the summer is the traditional time to take leave entitlement.

There was a strong feeling that the process as proposed would inevitably lead to a less holistic assessment of applicants and admissions decisions would become more mechanistic. While HEIs said they would endeavour to continue to conduct a holistic assessment of every applicant, drawing on a range of information, it would undoubtedly be challenging for them in such a compressed time-scale. HEIs would have less time to take account of contextual information and less flexibility to adjust entry requirements for applicants from different backgrounds. HEIs would have no discretion on near misses as applicants who miss the grade requirements are unlikely to apply although they could be offered a place under the current model.

The implications for those HEIs and courses where interview, audition, workshop or portfolio are part of the consideration process were said to be severe, unless special provision was made to accommodate them. Affected courses would range from medicine to the fine arts and there are some courses, such as social work, where an interview is a requirement of the professional body. There were also concerns that the process might lead to a reduction in interviewing and auditions which in turn might increase subsequent withdrawals.

However, there were some useful solutions put forward such as the use of Skype, video conferencing and other types of communication tools. Digital portfolios were suggested for art and design applications, although the drawbacks were also recognised and it was suggested that the potential for shared interviewing could be explored, especially for professional courses.

There were concerns also about the shortened time between acceptance and the start of university terms. There would be insufficient time for HEIs to carry out necessary preparation after offers are made (eg CRB checks, organising accommodation, issuing the Certificate of Acceptance for Studies) particularly for applicants in Apply 3. This could be a particular problem for widening participation applicants who may need to secure funding.

It would be more difficult for HEIs and applicants to build relationships. HEIs would also have to build relationships with a wider pool of 'potential' applicants which would be resource intensive and counteract any processing efficiencies gained.

HEIs would not be able to manage their numbers without the use of conditional offer-making which would impede their ability to meet number controls and assess the viability of courses. They would struggle to manage applications across Apply 1 and Apply 2; in particular with highly competitive courses where there could be sufficient applications to fill Apply 1 before Apply 2 opens.

Nursing courses, and other similar vocational courses, operate a tightly compacted timetable with a blend of teaching and practical training. This makes any changes to the term start date unworkable.

There was strong sentiment from the schools sector that the higher education start of term could be moved to January to accommodate post-results applications. However, although a majority of HEIs were willing to consider a start date of late October, it was emphasised that a January start date would have an adverse impact on widening participation and progression to higher education in general as well as to competitiveness in a global market for higher education.

c) Further Education (FE) colleges

It was felt that the proposals have not sufficiently taken into account the structures in FE colleges and the interface between higher and further education. Many FE colleges offer a range of higher and further education courses and proposed changes are likely to have negative impacts on normal college business. While the problems are probably surmountable with improved management processes we should not underestimate the extent of the potential impact.

Summer business in FE colleges is recruiting, interviewing and enrolling students for the next year's intake. There would not be capacity within FE colleges to support higher and further education applications simultaneously; especially since FE colleges are very large and may have to support around 1,000 applicants for higher education in one cohort. Many FE students require significant support with applications, for example mature applicants and those lacking confidence with ICT.

FE colleges cannot accommodate a later start date because the college timetable must also accommodate non-HE courses and contracted FE college staff have dual roles delivering pre-HE and HE.

The college sector would be concerned about a centralised system for all international and part-time students. Colleges often recruit international students as part of a contract with a company or with Government, and a centralised system would not add any value to that process. At present, many part-time applications are late and direct and the college sector could see little benefit of a centralised system.

The college sector could see the benefits of a post-results system for those young students at college studying for A-levels but felt that the benefits for adult and vocational students were less clear. The proposals also do not benefit potential students who want to study higher education in an FE college. Any changes would need to take into account that the higher education sector is entering a period of unprecedented change with more home-based, sub-regional study and an increasingly diverse range of providers.

It was suggested that UCAS should consider a separate application process for those only wishing to apply to one course at one institution. This could be open all year and run concurrently with Apply 1 and would meet the needs of both the applicant who wants to study locally and the late applicant.

d) Awarding bodies

Awarding bodies in the main expressed willingness to accommodate the examination cycle in the compressed timescale, indicating that the system could be as agile as the participants were willing to make it. They also acknowledged the merits of a system that enabled applicants to apply to higher education with actual, rather than predicted results and were creative in their suggestions as to how the process could be made to work. The regulator also indicated that if there were a strong consensus that the proposed changes should be made, they would play a constructive role in seeking to make them happen.

However, all also articulated the increased costs and risks very forcibly. While individual changes might be manageable, the cumulative effect of the changes is significant to the extent that the proposals in their current form were deemed unacceptable.

Consultation question 28.7.1: The changes to the examination timetable should not have a major impact on the accuracy of assessment; with appropriate changes to the systems, awarding bodies should be able to maintain accuracy and rigour in a shorter marking period.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**14%**	**6%**	**22%**	**27%**	**28%**
Schools and colleges	3%	5%	18%	30%	41%
HEIs	27%	5%	24%	26%	16%

Awarding bodies shared the concern of schools that the reduction of teaching time would have consequences on students' performance and learning opportunities, at a time when stakeholders were expressing a need to enhance the quality of delivery and achievement in the schools and colleges sector. There would also be an impact on standards.

Accommodating examinations in a shorter and earlier period would be challenging for both awarding bodies and schools, with the timing of Easter and holidays of other faiths adding to the planning difficulties. The impact of moving GCSE and A-level examinations further apart, including the issuing of results, is one that needs to be explored carefully. Unless the GCSE timetable was also changed, there would be increased pressure on school facilities, with the associated impact on the curriculum for other students and the potential for examination clashes to increase. While it was suggested that this could be facilitated by the use of Saturday or evening sessions, there would be problems associated with that also.

The five weeks available for marking would be tight and place some pressure on the system. Recruitment of examiners would be more difficult as schools, colleges and HEIs would be reluctant to release markers within the proposed timeframe. In these circumstances it would be more difficult to secure the accuracy and quality of marking which would have a knock-on effect on appeals and re-marks. Much of the contingency time, which allows for re-marking if there is any doubt about the original, would be lost.

Pressure on marking would be increased if there were a requirement in the future for more examinations at A2. Any changes would also need to take into account examinations like orals and practicals which take place before the start of the formal examination period.

Awarding bodies pointed out the importance of enquiries and appeals as part of a transparent examinations system. There would not be enough time to accommodate re-marks in the window after results and the Apply 2 equal consideration deadline which would place applicants who require a re-mark at a disadvantage.

If access to higher education is to be widened, it is essential that issues regarding vocational qualifications are properly taken into account.

7.3.6 Impact on devolved administrations

There was strong support for the system of undergraduate admissions being UK wide. Respondents made it clear that any changes are only acceptable if they can ensure parity among applicants from all four administrations.

a) Scotland

Two main issues underpinned the proposals in relation to Scotland: whether Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) results could be made available in time to facilitate a process of application post-results and how applicants could be supported through the Apply 2 timeframe, given the term dates in Scottish schools. Term dates were clearly a factor but the issues for applicants taking SQA qualifications as well as those making cross-border applications appeared more significant.

Scottish respondents expressed reservations about the proposals because a majority of Scottish domiciled applicants applying to Scottish universities are already applying post-results so the proposed model was not perceived to meet their needs. Other respondents felt that Scottish applicants may have an advantage under the new system.

While the introduction of Apply 1 and Apply 2 was meant to simplify the process, it was felt that it could be more complex for Scottish applicants. They could apply in Apply 1 with Highers so would have an advantage over applicants from the rest of the UK, but could also apply in Apply 2 with Advanced Highers. This might give some applicants more opportunities to gain a place. Some might be eligible to use Apply 1 for some of their courses, while they would have to use Apply 2 for those that required additional qualifications. This would be confusing and would discourage aspirational choices.

A large proportion of Scottish applicants would use Apply 1 so the lack of gathered field would be a real problem. It would also result in Scottish HEIs filling courses in Apply 1 which would disadvantage Apply 2 applicants. It was felt that the proposals had not taken into account the growing number of Scottish applicants following courses which are internally assessed, where such assessments continue into May or June.

The Scottish Government is currently legislating on the use of contextual data. Any new system would need to accommodate this statutory requirement, at least for Scottish domiciled students applying to Scottish universities.

The additional complexities would increase the amount of support required in schools. Term-time support would not be available for Apply 2 and schools in Scotland would have to support year-round applications in Apply 1 which would be an unwelcome distraction from the curriculum. Scottish Highers are taught in one year so any reduction in teaching time would have a proportionally greater impact than in England.

Some suggested a separate application window for Scottish applicants to reflect their different pre-higher education system, but the majority stressed the importance of maintaining a UK-wide process.

b) Northern Ireland

Since Northern Ireland largely uses the same examination system as England all of the related issues apply. However, respondents from Northern Ireland felt that parity could only be achieved in the post-results model if term dates were the same across the UK.

In Northern Ireland the summer term finishes at the end of June, so in the proposed post-results model, they would not be in school when the A-level results are released. This is related to a historically embedded business and family holiday pattern and the term dates in Northern Ireland were seen as a significant, even insurmountable, problem.

Respondents from both the school and higher education sectors in Northern Ireland were clear that unless a full complement of school staff, facilities and resources were made available during the results period to service the application process, applicants from Northern Ireland would be distinctly disadvantaged in terms of access, advice and guidance. While some potential solutions were put forward, it was felt that it would be unfair to some staff to expect them to give up time in the summer, when others would not have to.

Issues were also raised in respect of the interface with the Irish system. Results for the Irish Leaving Certificate are released in mid-August. Unless that were to change, Irish students wishing to apply to HEIs in Northern Ireland, or indeed anywhere in the UK, would be greatly disadvantaged and effectively would only be able to use Apply 3.

c) Wales

There were fewer differentiated issues raised in respect of Welsh HEIs or applicants. Both the examination system and the term structures are aligned with those of England and while all the generic issues raised elsewhere in the report apply equally in Wales, only a small number of issues were raised that would affect Wales specifically.

The Welsh Baccalaureate is popular with Welsh students. Changes to the examination and results timetable would need to take this into account and as a composite qualification it might prove more difficult to have all the elements completed and marked within the given time-scale.

The concept of tailored personal statements was popular. It was felt that these would particularly help Welsh students applying to a mixture of Welsh and other HEIs who may find it advantageous to have one personal statement in English and another in Welsh, although there may be cost implications for translations.

7.3.7   International and part-time applicants

Proposals for international and part-time admissions were presented as part of the proposal for post-results admissions. However, many of the issues raised in responses are applicable to the present system.

Respondents emphasised that the issues for international and part-time students were actually very different. In general there was support for a centralised system (though that was greater for international students) but it was not thought that a post-results process would benefit either. In respect of both international and part-time applicants, a centralised process could only work if the UCAS application form and process was conducive to the different types of applicants.

Consultation question 26.5.3: Access to improved data about international and part-time applications will be a benefit of being part of a central admissions service.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**19%**	**21%**	**49%**	**7%**	**2%**
Schools and colleges	30%	21%	44%	1%	1%
HEIs	3%	17%	58%	15%	4%

Consultation question 26.5.4: The proposed new process has the capacity to offer greater flexibilities which will support international and part-time admissions.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**22%**	**5%**	**28%**	**29%**	**14%**
Schools and colleges	36%	5%	36%	20%	0%
HEIs	3%	0%	15%	47%	32%

a) International applicants

Respondents were clear that recruitment of international students is an important and successful aspect of the UK higher education system. While there are aspects of the proposals that could have some advantages for international students, there are a number of complex issues that need further research.

Consultation question 26.5.1: It is desirable for international applicants to apply through a centralised system and not direct to HEIs.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**16%**	**24%**	**40%**	**12%**	**6%**
Schools and colleges	26%	27%	36%	6%	2%
HEIs	2%	19%	42%	23%	11%

The debate around international applications centred around two issues: whether we should retain a centralised system in the current structure which does not have 100% buy-in and whether the post-results process would create advantages or disadvantages for international applicants.

A number of advantages of a centralised system were highlighted and it was admitted that the present system does pose challenges for international students in respect of navigating the system and deadlines. A centralised system has the potential to be more efficient, reducing duplication and simplifying procedures for admissions staff. The benefits for universities in having more information on market trends through data obtained from UCAS were recognised and it should be helpful for managing numbers.

Student groups, in particular thought it was desirable, not least because they viewed it as being fairer if international applicants were assessed alongside UK and EU applicants, ensuring equity of access. Having a centralised system also minimises the burden and cost to the students, ensuring a one-stop-shop for finding comparable information about different institutions. From the point of view of the international applicant, a simple, centrally organised, clearing house system allows them to make multiple applications through one exercise and gives them access to consistent information.

However, a centralised system to support international applications needs to be fit for purpose and the view was expressed that the current system, based largely on the system for UK applicants, is not optimal. There were concerns about the value of a centralised system both within the current process and under the proposals for application post-results.

Those who argued against a centralised system said that HEIs want autonomy to recruit international applicants who are more likely to apply with a single institution and course in mind and like the flexibility of being able to apply direct to the HEI of their choice. HEIs increasingly work with agents and working directly enables relationship-building which can be lost through a centralised system.

Among those who favoured a centralised system, there were concerns about how it would function in a post-results environment. The international market is highly competitive, and there were concerns that the UK would become less able to compete on a level with other countries. If HEIs couldn't give international applicants the security of conditional offers early in the cycle they may accept offers from other countries, particularly the USA and Australia, rather than wait for a decision from the UK. This would also impact recruitment from those countries where local results would be known earlier. International applicants need to be reassured early in the admissions process that a place in the UK is guaranteed as long as they meet the entry requirements.

Some respondents perceived that Apply 1 would offer more flexibility to accept entrants from overseas who already have their results. It would also improve the process for applicants whose results are available before Apply 2 opens, because they would be able to have confirmed places earlier than in the current system. Others felt that the present system, which allows international applications up until 30 June, actually allows greater flexibility. There was a concern that it would be unfair to UK applicants if too many international applications were processed in Apply 1.

For those international applicants who applied through Apply 2 and 3, a number of significant logistical issues were highlighted. There would not be enough time to process visas or to complete English language tests which might be required. An application window in the summer would not be aligned with the funding cycles in an applicant's home country which could impede their ability to secure funding. Even the perception of an insufficient timeframe to process visas, finance and accommodation would discourage international applicants. International students in UK schools go back to their home country over the summer so would be unsupported during the Apply 2 and Apply 3 windows.

b) Applicants for part-time study

The needs of international and part-time applicants are very different. While some of the advantages of a centralised system are shared with those for international applications and overall there was agreement that it was desirable, there was a clearer consensus among those who made written responses that this would be inappropriate for part-time students. There was some resistance to UCAS becoming involved in the part-time market as HEIs who accept part-time applicants would like to do so without barriers.

Consultation question 26.5.2: It is desirable for part-time applicants to apply through a centralised system and not direct to HEIs.

	Skipped	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total	**20%**	**17%**	**38%**	**16%**	**7%**
Schools and colleges	27%	22%	38%	8%	2%
HEIs	10%	7%	37%	31%	13%

The vast majority of these applicants apply to only one specific higher education programme and any move to a centralised system may increase competition, thus compromising applicant numbers. Also, many applications are made locally, often to an institution in which the applicant is enrolled on a pre-higher education course, so respondents found it difficult to see the benefits of a centralised system for this group. Part-time courses can begin at various points in the academic year and flexibility is therefore essential. Some applicants may be offering a portfolio of complex or unusual qualifications or experience which makes direct contact essential.

It was thought that in many cases a UCAS application would be superfluous and would simply complicate the process for applicants and HEIs. The associated costs may not be financially viable for institutions that have part-time course delivery.

What is clear is that much will need to be done to improve the IAG for this group. Currently they benefit from advice and support from within individual HEIs and there is no centralised information service.

Providing optimal solutions for international and part-time applicants is complex but essential to an effective, holistic and inclusive admissions process. Many of the proposals for enhancement of the system will be beneficial for both international and part-time applicants and UCAS will ensure that myUCAS© supports a wide variety of study options. In addition we will initiate work with advisory groups and the sector to review the processes and develop specific models tailored to meet the needs of these important cohorts of applicants.

UCAS

For more information about the UCAS admissions process review, please visit:

www.ucas.com/admissionsprocessreview
or email: admissionsprocessreview@ucas.ac.uk

UCAS
Rosehill
New Barn Lane
Cheltenham
GL52 3LZ

UCAS