

Minutes

NIAG/22/M3

Group meeting

Held on 14 November, virtually through MS Teams

Chair:	Roisin McEvoy	Queen's University Belfast
Present:	Ronan Cullen Darren Feely David Cunningham Stuart Rankin Jonathan Cockerill Donna Finlay Alan Thompson Michael Harris	Ulster University Stranmillis University College The Royal School Armagh South Eastern Regional College Department of Education CCEA Department for the Economy Department for the Economy (Apprenticeships)
Apologies:	Conor Brady Helena Parks Barbara McDade Louise Warde Hunter Caroline Rogan Mark Cardwell Mark Lee	Department for the Economy CCEA Stranmillis University College Belfast Metropolitan College St Mary's College Department of Education Department for the Economy (WP and HE in FE)
UCAS in attendance:	Caitlin De Jode Victoria Waterson Laura Hawkins Lynsey Hopkins	Public Affairs and Campaigns Manager Service Delivery Co-Ordinator Customer Engagement Co-Ordinator Head of Operations
Presenting:	Carys Willgoss	Principal Policy Advisor

A2/22/01 Welcome and apologies

The Group was welcomed to the meeting and the apologies were noted. The Group introduced themselves.

A2/22/02 Minutes and action log from previous meeting

The minutes were approved as a correct and accurate reflection of the last meeting.

A2/22/03 Chairs update • Any issues/feedback Group would like to raise at the next Council meeting

Roisin updated the Group on the last UCAS Council Meeting.

A presentation delivered on UCAS' steps being taken to support the journey to a million.

There had been an organization update from the Chief Executive. The qualifications awarding bodies have been making a determined effort to 'return to normal grades' pre-pandemic from 2023. Not all regions have been moving at the same pace due to some results being modular, and others linear. The grade distribution outturn will continue to move towards what was normal prior to the pandemic.

It was questioned whether UCAS would help unplaced students in the system – confirmation and clearing cycle was still fresh, but communication around this matter would be likely continue into October. It was noted there was a large number of applicants who were uncertain about their confirmed place and changed their minds even within courses such as Medicine and Dentistry. This was something to consider analyzing further within the Group.

External affairs update has seen new government and Policy people for UCAS to engage with, along with other sector bodies.

Lynsey's Reform / Admission Development has become a response by UCAS from the PQ admissions consultation. Each Provider Advisory Group will receive a report from the admissions development Group which will feed back into the government board.

The next meeting for Council will take place on 17 November. Group members were encouraged to input anything they may wish to beforehand.

A2/22/04 UCAS presentation: Shaping upcoming UCAS research: What does 'value' mean to students, and how does it influence their decision-making?

Carys Willgoss presented UCAS Policy Group's study.

Over the last 18 months UCAS have produced Policy Reports nation specific utilizing Advisory Group's. These are available for viewing on the UCAS website. A wide range of topics are covered such as mental health, widening access, and nursing. UCAS have been collaborating with external partners and contributing to the debate.

Highlights from recent reports were noted –

- International students aspired for HE from a far younger age (11+)

- Students with disabilities were more likely to defer their HE. More than half research student support services prior to applying.

UCAS have an Up-and-coming report which focuses on care experience students early December.

Value research

UCAS Hepian advanced HE survey tracks student's perception of value for money. UCAS are focusing on the holistic value for money and what students are looking to get out of their HE experience.

Key findings

- Student's perceptions of good value differ widely, so metrics are more difficult to produce.
- Students believe Universities and Colleges should have autonomy over determining what they feel is good value, along with government having a role to play.
- Since the Pandemic, career pathway has increased significantly. Focusing more on job satisfaction/skill gain rather than financial gain.
- Student wellbeing comes out as the best measure of value.

Members of the Group agreed this is a fair reflection on what they have experienced. Both students and employers have been expressing meta skills being a priority. Technical skills-based learning has been pushed over traditional academic learning within colleges in NI by using project-based learning, which has seen an improvement on student's meta skills.

It was also noted that NI has the highest rate of 18-year-old applicants to UCAS across the four nations. This may be down to their perceived value of opportunity that HE offers. Parental values have also been said to influence this. Degrees are seen as the 'best' pathway to career due to lack of knowledge and experience regarding apprenticeships opportunities. Fees may also be a factor that is considered amongst applicants – NI UG tuition fees being cheaper than England.

Questions were directed at Group -

Questions were as follows:

- *Sample studies across the nations, is there an indication of how many people responded across the four nations?*
- *Do these initial findings align with what you would have been expected?*

Group Members main comments

- UCAS findings are representative of the population as it is a weighted sample. Students seemed to push towards outcomes demonstrating value.
- Vocational subjects such as nursing, and midwifery are more popular currently within Queens and Ulster due to the pursuit of 'meaningful work'.
- 10X (decade of innovation) has led to subjects such as ICT, Manufacturing industry specific courses. Should NI focus on strengthening the connection between these degrees and industry afterwards.
- Loss of talent is experienced within NI from tertiary education –due to geographical mobility and a net outflow of educational migration from

Northern Ireland to the other three nations of the UK. Understanding what students want out of their degree can lead to talent retention.

- Value vs Cost

It was noted that NI is expecting a significant increase in applicants to higher education due to the projected demographic growth in the 18 year old population post pandemic, which will play a part in UCAS's projected Journey to a million . The student number cap which operates in NI differs from the other nations and may lead to potentially more applicants for the same number of places which will inevitably encourage more education migration from Northern Ireland

A2/22/05 Campfire – member updates • CCEA to update on 2023 awarding arrangements • Updates from members of the group

Donna Finlay presented CCEA's approach to awarding grades in summer 2023. The four nations have had a different approach to guiding grades back to pre-pandemic standard.

Last year's optional unit admission will no longer apply in summer 2023. Instead, advanced information will be available for most subjects, this is designed to support students and to focus their revision. The CEA website has a summary of all of this for viewing.

The Groups main comments were -

- The school sector has been lobbying for a reduction to the breadth of what is examined again this year. This could be a detriment to schools who had taught the full specification in previous years. This would not be beneficial to student progression; school leaders do not support this and there is a need to get back to pre-pandemic assessment and grading.
- There has been funding within schools to further support students needing access to additional resources.
- UCAS have had no feedback from Providers which suggests differential offer making strategies.

Main findings from Stranmillis College's Review of Level 4 and 5 qualifications. BTEC, HTQ

- There is a public consultation regarding policy changes. It has been signed off by the Minister for the Department for the Economy.
- Developing an advertising campaign for level 4 and 5 due to findings needing more promotion and awareness of what is on offer. It is being picked up by a marketing company to ensure promotion and awareness raising is properly undertaken.
- A second consultation will take place on Vocational qualifications at level 3.
- Perception piece will be sent to the Group.
- Widening participation landscape within NI has been researched and published by SFE and will also be sent to the Group.
- A WP forum is being set up. Very early stages but have 7 high level recommendations from the research.

- Two of Northern Ireland's Regional Colleges will now use UCAS for their full time applications – Belfast Met and Southern.

Apprenticeships update

- Apprenticeship applicants for Level 2 and 3 are back up to pre-COVID levels.
- Introducing all age apprenticeships for level 2 and 3 to help widening participation.
- Eligibility funding restrictions for age 25 and above currently stand, hoping this will lift in the new year – dependent on budgets but the Minister was keen to approve
- Open call approach to public sector apprenticeships.

Apprenticeship Week is being held 6-10 February. Group are encouraged to get involved.

Ulster University Update

- Good uplifts in application numbers 2022-2023 growth.
- A new online interview platform had been implemented (collaborated with Queens). Highest intake in years in clearing.
- Second intake of Medicine 70/70 places filled.
- 10-15,000 moved onto the new City Centre campus in Belfast for Ulster.

Queens Update

- Queens had the highest amount of UCAS applicants than ever before. Very high numbers of applications for Nursing and Midwifery, Dentistry, and Medicine.
- There is currently very little in Clearing for NI and Republic of Ireland applicants due to the MaSN , however there were some spaces in Clearing for GB and international students.
- Strategy 30 plan has committed to working on the WP agenda which needs to be carefully managed within the MaSN context.

The benefit of bringing Irish Leaving Certificate and A-level results closer together was expressed.

A2/22/06 Any other business and Close

There had been a request from DFE for more granular information regarding declaration of identity, specifically in relation to religious identity. This has been achieved and a written response as to how will be presented will be circulated in the Group.

Date of the next meeting will be confirmed, and a Placeholder has been set for 15 April 2023.