UCAS response to the Office for Students' consultation on a new approach to regulating student outcomes

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Background

UCAS provides careers education and admissions services to help over 700,000 people progress in education and training each year. As a trusted, independent charity, supporting people across the UK from all backgrounds to discover their future is in UCAS' DNA, and at the heart of our strategy, *Discover Your Future*. Our reach is significant: ucas.com receives 30 million unique visits a year, and our programme of UK-wide virtual and physical events is attended by 150,000 individuals each year. Key points from our response to this consultation include:

- UCAS' research highlights the varied and diverse factors that influence making choices about education and training, with personalisation critical when using student outcomes data to inform choice.
- Using student outcomes data without account of individuals' backgrounds could have the unintended consequence of encouraging universities and colleges to be less ambitious in their widening access activities.
- Evidence drawn from UCAS' use of application data that produce positive outcomes for students.

1. Student outcomes as an information tool

The role of the student outcomes data in informing student choice

Our recent research into student choice, _Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make_, highlights the varied and diverse factors deployed by individuals in making their subject choices. At all key decision points, subject enjoyment remains the most influential factor – 99% of students report making choices at school based on their enjoyment of a subject, and this is also the primary driver of degree choice. However, employability has become increasingly important post-COVID, with over 50% reporting that high graduate employment rates have become more important to them since the start of the pandemic.

This is further supported by the results of UCAS' new applicant survey 2021. When asked what influenced their choice of subjects, the top reasons students selected were:

1. 71% said it was the subject they enjoyed the most
2. 53% said that it would give them good career prospects after graduation
3. 51% said they needed to study this subject to pursue a particular career they were interested in.

The report shows that students choose their degree subject before they think about the university or college they want to attend. In making the (most often subsequent) decision about where to study, student outcomes grow in importance. Similarly, the new applicant survey finds 83% of 2021 cycle applicants state that graduate prospects were 'extremely important' or 'important' when they decided which universities and colleges to apply to. In addition, 67% of 2021 applicants say that the likely earning potential of a university or college's graduates was 'extremely important' or 'important' to them in deciding where to apply.

Nonetheless, we know the motivating factors behind degree choice are often not based on financial return, and salary is not the 'be-all and end-all' – only 13% of finalists consider salary to be more important than an interest in the role when looking for a graduate job.[1]

The _Where Next?_ report also indicates that students' motivations in choosing their degree tend to correlate with trends in student outcomes. For example, maths students are particularly motivated by graduate prospects when choosing their degree subject and have one of the highest recorded salaries – almost half of maths graduates earn £27,000

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[1] A UCAS survey of finalists in 2020 (in the last year of their full-time undergraduate degree) to help us understand what factors are important to students when looking for a graduate job (380 UK respondents).

approximately 15 months after graduating (compared to 31% of all graduates). Therefore, it is important students consider what will be personally important to them post-graduation, whether that be salary, employability, or a healthy work/life balance.

UCAS has also carried out [research into what influences apprenticeships choice](#), finding that Over half of students looking to apply to higher education in 2022 are interested in apprenticeships, but find it difficult to access relevant information. More needs to be done to highlight the benefits of apprenticeships - only 8% of students surveyed associated apprenticeships with leading to a good job.

Upcoming research from UCAS will seek to further understand the role of outcomes data within careers education. For example, a future report will explore what students mean by value in the context of higher education and training to answer the question, what do students recognise as good outcomes from their studies? UCAS will keep the OfS updated on this research and look to share key findings to inform its regulatory approach.

UCAS' use of student outcomes data as part of careers education

UCAS already makes student outcomes data available both within the UCAS Hub and through its course search tool, which lists more than 30,000 opportunities. This includes data related to student satisfaction, employment 15 months after graduation, and the proportion of individuals who go onto work and study – all of which is derived from the Unistats dataset.

At UCAS, personalisation underpins our approach to information and advice, with students registering via the [UCAS Hub](#) – now used by 92% of students – early in their research and embarking upon their own individual journey based on their preferences and circumstances. As part of upcoming developments for the Hub, personalisation will see us make greater use of more granular outcomes data, such as the 48 identified within the consultation. This is important because different individuals will be interested in different types of data; for example, some will be interested in metrics around continuation for undergraduate students, whereas others will wish to explore progression data for apprentices.

Indeed, given the multiple touchpoints across ucas.com and the [Discover Uni](#) platform, there is potential, as the OfS considers its strategy, to reduce overlaps by retiring the Discover Uni site in its current form given students find multiple sources of information unhelpful. Then, in partnership with the OfS, the UCAS Hub and broader ucas.com estate could become the key vehicle for surfacing student outcomes data, creating a more coherent experience for students and generating efficiencies for the sector.

Considerations for using outcomes data to support student choice

- **Comparability across the full spectrum of education and training options:** Whilst the design of these measures will encompass all UG provision at English registered universities and college – including apprenticeships, many other education and training options sit outside of its scope. At a time of great diversification - of the 750,000 people over the last six months who have set up their pre-application UCAS account ready for next year, 342,000 said they are interested in an apprenticeship which is up 123% on the previous year -, this could limit usefulness for individuals.
- **Consistency of data** across the full range of outcomes metrics that are to be made accessible to students, including those relating to transparency announced by Government in February 2022; specifically, comparable data on the percentage of students who have completed that course, and the percentage of them who have gone into either professional employment or further advanced study.
- **Care must be taken to not encourage less ambitious progress in widening access**: The use of absolute data, without account of individuals' backgrounds could have the unintended consequence of encouraging universities and colleges to be less ambitious in their widening access activities. This is because we already know that more disadvantaged students are more likely to drop out of university and therefore negatively impact outcomes measures. Clarity would be welcome as to how the OfS will ensure synergy with these measures and those that sit within its approach to access and participation.

2. Supporting universities and colleges in achieving good student outcomes

Improving outcomes through student-centric admissions reform

The analysis within the *Reimagining UK Admissions report* showed there is clear evidence to suggest that the longevity and quality of a relationship between a university or college and an applicant influences their likelihood to complete their course. The closest to a post-results application process UCAS has today is Direct to Clearing; analysis of this service shows that 16% of applicants using this route drop out before their second year of study – a trend apparent across all tariff bands. This compares to 6% for other Clearing applicants, and 5% for students accepted to their firm choice of university or college.

Current admissions reform UCAS is undertaking to improve outcomes and choice:

- **Transformation of UCAS' apprenticeships platform** – we are investing in much greater quality of support and information for aspiring apprentices, connecting employers to potential apprentices through employer profiles. We know the demand for this service is there, with 343,000 out of 750,000 people setting up their

UCAS account in the 2021/22 admission cycle expressing an interest in an apprenticeship.

- **Introduction of the 'Decline my place' option** – a service giving applicants control over their choices and allowing them to consider their options easily at all stages.
- **Launch and continued development of Clearing Plus** – a data-led system that suggests courses to students based on their preferences, circumstances, and achieved grades. This has the potential to introduce students to opportunities they may have previously considered out of reach. For the first time in 2021, this also marketed apprenticeship opportunities.
- **Brand new 'historic grades on entry' tool** – providing teachers and advisers with insight into the achieved grades students held when they were accepted to courses during the 2017-2019 application cycles, this tool enhances transparency across the sector and allows teachers to promote informed and aspirational choices to their students.
- **New application questions** – we have committed to introducing new questions enabling a greater range of under-represented groups to flag their circumstances, including: estranged students, students with caring or parenting responsibilities, refugees and asylum seekers, Service leavers and veterans, and children from UK Armed Forces families. These will allow more students to access the right support for their needs, helping them to stay in education, and work towards successful outcomes.

UCAS' plans to improve fair access

We have recently undertaken a sector-wide consultation to identify how UCAS can best support widening access and enable positive student outcomes. We do this by bringing together schools, colleges, and universities, helping them find and share what works best, and engaging the hardest-to-reach young people at an early stage. Key projects include:

- Exploring how UCAS data, linked to third parties, can provide an indicator as to the potential risk of a student not progressing through their course and/or completing, allowing universities and colleges to put in place early transition and study support to reduce this risk.
- Enriching the provision of UCAS data and analysis to support the identification and targeting of students for outreach opportunities, in addition to the evaluation of their success.
- Developing a service to catalogue and promote outreach opportunities. Initially available to schools and colleges, this would act as a low burden route to identify and access outreach activities and identify cold spots of intervention. It would also support outreach providers to work altruistically with students, helping them to succeed academically and progress onto the best route for them.

- A pilot programme – currently in development – to support teachers and advisers in low-progression schools and colleges to better understand the UCAS application cycle and the range of support available for their most disadvantaged students.