

Written evidence submitted by the University and College Union

Introduction

1. The University and College Union (UCU) represents over 130,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians and postgraduates in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK. We are grateful for this opportunity to respond to this consultation.

Background

Research

2. UCU has done much work with a view to improving the support for decision-making for those wishing to progress to higher education.
3. In 2019 we published the paper *Post-Qualification Application: a student-centred model*¹ which set out a proposed model for reforming the higher education application process so that students apply to higher education after they have received their Level 3 grades, rather than on the basis of teacher-predicted grades. Our call for a move to a post-qualification admissions model gained traction across the sector and resulted in a government review of the admissions process in 2021. Our work in this area has recently been updated to reflect how our calls for reform correspond with five of the government's post-16 priorities.²
4. Whilst the government has recently announced that it will not go ahead with this reform, our model put forward a number of proposals designed to better support student choice making and higher education related information, advice and

¹ Atherton, G. & Nartey, A., (2019), Post-qualification application: a student-centred model for higher education admissions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, London: UCU, available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10041/Post-qualification-application-a-student-centred-model-Jan-19/pdf/PQA_report_Jan19.pdf

² Atherton, G., (2022), How admissions reform can address five big challenges for higher education, London: UCU, available at: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12453/PQA-report/pdf/PQA-report.pdf>

guidance. This was an area of consensus across stakeholders in the admissions debate. Much of the detail set out in our plans, in particular those that support decision-making and planning, are still possible within the current timetable for applying to higher education.

5. Evidence from the Higher Education Policy Institute/Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey³ in 2020 suggests that over a third of students are not happy with their choice of course and university. Furthermore, as the system currently functions, there are disproportionate impacts on student groups observed by ethnicity and socioeconomic class, as such, our proposals would serve to improve the information, advice and guidance experiences of people from these communities. A key finding during the course of our research was that at the top of the attainment distribution:

'grades are slightly more likely to be under-predicted, and among these high-attaining students, applicants from low income backgrounds are significantly more likely to have their grades under-predicted than those from high-income backgrounds. This is important because under-predicted candidates are also more likely to apply to, and to be accepted to a university which they are overqualified for. This could in turn affect their future labour market outcomes. (pp2. Wyness, 2016) ⁴.

6. As such, it is clear that there are significant groups of students who go on to reflect that they might not have made the best choice for themselves. Sub-optimal choices impact outcomes and progression, and so it is clear that greater support is required for choice-making. We believe that HE choice should be seen as a process that begins well before Level 3 study. UCAS for example in their 2021 report which informed their consultation response found that 'more than three in four students first realised HE was an option for them before they started post-16 education, and one in three first realised this when they were still at primary school.' Of those that think about HE progression at primary school, fewer of these students are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.⁵
7. In addition to the recent publications in this area, our thinking is also informed by our 2015 report which is of great import as there has been little improvement in the CEIAG offer since their publication.
 - a. In January 2015, UCU published research based on the polling of 2000 young people conducted by ComRes on our behalf. *Young People's Perceptions of*

³ Neves, J & Hewit, R (2020) Student Academic Experience Survey, HEPI, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2020.pdf>

⁴ Wyness, G., (2016) *Predicted grades: accuracy and impact*, London: UCU, available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec-16/pdf/Predicted_grades_report_Dec2016.pdf

⁵ UCAS (2021) *Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?* Available at: <https://wwwucas.com/file/435551/download?token=VUdIDVFh> cited in Atherton, G. (2021), *Post-qualifications applications: how we can make it work*, London: UCU, available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11479/PQAs-how-we-can-make-it-work-Apr-21/pdf/UCU_PQ_applications_report_Apr21.pdf

*post-18 education and training options*⁶ looked at young people's perceptions and aspirations in relation to post-school education and training.

- b. The research identified huge variation in the information, advice and guidance (IAG) received by socioeconomic background and type of education institution attended. Those attending state schools and colleges were much less likely to report that they had received each of the different forms of IAG. 16% of learners who attended state school say that they have received no information, advice or guidance. Just 5% of learners who attended a private school said the same.
 - c. One in six (17%) of those from social grade DE say that they have not received any advice or guidance, compared to just 9% of those from social grade AB. The majority of young people say that they have not received personalised support from an information, advice and guidance professional. Learners are most likely to have received advice or guidance from their family, and older learners are more likely to have received advice or guidance than younger learners
 - d. Further findings included:
 - i. just 39% of respondents said that they have spoken to a careers advisor
 - ii. just 38% say that they have accessed information on the internet
 - iii. only 10% of respondents said that they have spoken to a business professional.
8. This research showed the stark way in which socioeconomic background impacts receipt of careers education, information and guidance. Reversing this will require coordination, greater accountability for delivery and crucially increased funding to facilitate improvement.

UCU recommendations

9. We believe that integrating the following recommendations would greatly improve the careers education, information, advice and guidance experience of people progressing to higher education:
- a. Better information, advice and guidance (IAG) for students. It is proposed that all students from years 10 to 13 receive a **minimum of 30 hours of information, advice and guidance related to future opportunities** (10 hours per year) including further and higher education and employment. The admissions system needs to recognize and promote the idea that higher education choice is a long term process. This means strengthening the information, advice and guidance that young people receive regarding higher education entry before Level 3 study is under way. A target such as this should be readily achievable. It would be a powerful way of bringing together the work of the careers community including the Careers Enterprise

⁶ UCU, (2015), *Young People's Perceptions of post-18 education and training options*, available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6972/Young-peoples-perceptions-of-post-18-education-and-training--survey-results/pdf/ucu_comres_youngpeoplesperceptionsaboutpost18_dec14.pdf

Company and higher education institutions as well as providing a tangible outcome measure for any regional widening access outreach hubs such as those proposed in the second phase of the Office for Students funded National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP).

- b. **Better information, advice and guidance (IAG) for students - National Student Futures Week** The purpose of the Student Futures Week is to create a designated period in the school calendar for consideration of future education (including L4/5 and apprenticeships) and employment choices in addition to the 10 hours described above. During Student Futures Week, Higher education providers could also focus some outreach, recruitment and marketing resources on delivering activities during the week, alongside as open days. At present, schools, colleges and higher education institutions spend a lot of time attempting to schedule activities and creating a designated period will help to streamline this process. It would also encourage joining up activities such as open days with more focused work on future choice-making.
- c. **Help to match courses to students - study choice check** Based on the model in the Netherlands, all students would be able to take an online questionnaire related to a course(s) of their choice looking what they know of and expect of the course in respect of its: content, learning and teaching experience, and likely graduate outcomes. The result would help students understand how their expectations and preferences fit with the nature of the course. It is proposed that the study choice check is piloted in a number of institutions and subject areas in the transition period to the new admissions system.
- d. To strengthen engagement, **a duty on schools to enrol all students in the UCAS system from year 10 onwards who express an interest in HE progression.** This would link well with the greater commitment that UCAS has expressed to contribute more to the provision of information and support on HE progression and would emphasise to students (particularly those from underrepresented groups) that HE choice is something to engage in earlier than Level 3.

The implications of recent policy development for careers education, information, advice and guidance

10. Little is currently known about progression prospects for students undertaking T Levels, as the qualifications are not yet widely accepted for entry by higher education institutions. Although institutions are responsible for their own admissions criteria, there is a key role for government, having decided to launch a new flagship technical qualification. The absence of a properly funded, independent careers education, information, advice and guidance service also contributes to this communication gap. When we consider that underrepresented groups in higher education are more likely to have pursued vocational options to get there in the first place, it is crucial to the success of T Levels that they are not responsible for exacerbating structural inequalities.

11. Anecdotally, our members inform us that despite the Baker clause, there are practical difficulties in securing time in busy school calendars. Furthermore, colleges having access to students alone, does not constitute advice or guidance for young people. Impartiality can be problematic when there is not overall cohesion or responsibility for the delivery of face-to-face information advice and guidance. Janet Colledge aptly refers to: the Baker clause + careers programme + professional careers advice = careers guidance.⁷
12. Reduced funding, fragmentation and marketisation of the careers service has led to a lack of coherence and huge variation in the offer particularly for young people. These variations manifest regionally, locally, and according to student characteristics. We believe that a minimum offer should be developed for young people to ensure that there is a baseline level of support available for students until they leave school so that no young person slips through the gaps in provision. Bringing the disparate organisations together would help to develop a more coherent all-age offer reducing confusion from a user's perspective. This must be accompanied by increased funding.
13. It is important to highlight that careers education is a professionalised career and the service must be adequately resourced and empowered. Any changes must be made in consultation with the Career Development Institute. The dearth of funding in this area means that there is currently an over-reliance on teachers and lecturers supporting the careers education, information and advice process. Anecdotally, this has been a critique of why many students are not well informed about the Apprenticeship process, because non-careers professionals often have to rely on their own educational experiences.
14. It is of utmost importance that we move away from the viewpoint that careers education, information, advice and guidance can be delivered in a principally online format. Supporting people through high stakes and life-changing decision making requires face to face support, alongside the development of trust and rapport. Directing individuals to a website places the burden of navigating on the user and their own capacity in this regard. The implications of the covid-19 global pandemic mean that there are now a huge number of adults faced with having to relearn, retrain and reapply. It is essential that priority groups are broadened to ensure that the National Careers Service can help all workers facing redundancy or experiencing unemployment face-to-face.

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⁷ Colledge, J., (17 October 2021) Don't confuse the Baker clause with actual careers guidance, available at: <https://feweeek.co.uk/dont-confuse-the-baker-clause-with-actual-careers-guidance/>