

# UCAS evidence: The work of the Office for Students (OfS)

## Introduction

As an independent charity, UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, strives to empower students to make the best decision for them by making choices clearer. Our significant role as the gateway to post-secondary opportunities allows us unparalleled insight into the mindset of young people and mature students. We are aiming to bring parity to all post-school options, and each year more than 1 million students register with UCAS for support progressing to university, college, apprenticeships, or employment.

Our admissions services span undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories to access UK higher education (HE).

Supporting students from all walks of life in discovering their future is in UCAS' DNA, and at the heart of our vision. We are therefore fully aligned to the OfS' aim of ensuring that 'every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers'. Moreover, the focus on promoting access to flexible HE provision, including short courses and apprenticeships, aligns with UCAS' [acceleration of our apprenticeship plans](#), and our wealth of data and analysis offers, as summarised by TASO in their [rapid review](#), offers unique insight into equality, which will support providers in using the recently published Equality of Opportunity Risk Register ([EORR](#)).

In the following evidence, we identify opportunities for greater sector-wide efficiency in activities, specifically related to the OfS' work as an information provider and in equality of opportunity.

Summary of key points:

- **Incoming demographic pressure:** We are amid unprecedented demand for education and training, which is set to grow still further as we ['Journey to a Million'](#) - UCAS projects that there could be up to a million HE applicants in a single year by 2030, up from almost three quarters of a million today. This will see a reversal in the supply-demand balance, leading to a risk that it is the lesser supported groups of students who lose out. Such a shift in dynamic will require flexibility by the OfS to regulate the HE market and continue to promote the interests of students.
- **Support for bringing parity to technical routes and apprenticeships:** From this autumn, UCAS will expand their service so that young people can see more personalised options, including apprenticeships. From 2024, students will then be able to apply for apprenticeships through UCAS alongside an undergraduate degree application. As such, UCAS welcomes the OfS' focus on stimulating growth in such provision and flagging risks to equality through the EORR.
- **UCAS is the largest information, advice and guidance (IAG) provider for post-secondary education:** With more than 1.3 million users last year, [the UCAS Hub](#) is best placed to serve the student audience – this includes datasets, such as the NSS, commissioned by the OfS.

- **Equality of opportunity:** UCAS welcomes the pivot in approach to access and participation. Through our Fair Access Programme and broader investment across the UCAS estate, we are seeking to support earlier aspiration raising - and to help mitigate any risk to access posed by the increased demand for HE. The Outreach Connection Service (OCS), currently in pilot form, is a flagship deliverable from this programme – we would welcome the OfS’ support in encouraging sector-wide uptake upon rollout in autumn 2023.

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## Incoming demographic pressure

UCAS projections point to upcoming growth for the remainder of the decade. In numeric terms, by 2030, there could be up to 30% more HE applicants, with confidence ratings projecting an increase of 19.5% up to 41%. The origins of this growth are twofold: firstly, simple population dynamics play a major role with UK 18-year-olds set to increase by 38% by 2030, which would see the total number of 18-year-old applicants increase to 457,000, and secondly, we’re projecting an 60% increase in international students, signaling the ongoing attraction of UK HE.

This fundamental shift in the supply and demand model that has underpinned post-secondary education in recent years presents several challenges for sector:

- Growing the supply of post-secondary education opportunities to ensure that the most disadvantaged are not ‘squeezed out’ in the face of growing competition.
- Accelerating progress in widening access which, after significant improvement, has stalled in recent years.
- Supporting students in making aspirational decisions across all routes and pathways, with the need to promote comparable and high-quality information about the full range of options to students – including Higher Technical Qualifications, apprenticeships, and short-courses/ credit-based study.
- Safeguarding the quality of the student experience from teaching and support services to accommodation and careers education.
- The projected increase in student numbers provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fill skills shortages by upscaling education in training in key industries.

- Regulating in a more competitive marketplace as universities and colleges respond to the changing dynamic, as the narrative around student choice shifts.

UCAS' priorities over upcoming period, as set out in our [2022 Impact Report](#), reflect this changing market:

- Delivering on the 'digital Baker Clause', to provide dynamic, accessible, and personalised careers information, advice, and guidance for the full range of choices. This includes an ambition to support individuals to from a younger age, mindful that [UCAS research](#) shows that one in three students first think about HE at primary school.
- Acting as the gateway to all post-secondary opportunities, addressing fragmentation and connecting the right applicants to the right destination – also noting that young people will be able to use UCAS to search and apply for apprenticeships, alongside degrees under new plans [announced](#) by the Education Secretary and UCAS in February 2023.
- Using insight to drive positive change – [UCAS' Fair Access Programme](#) is delivering and developing initiatives to add additional value in widening access and participation.
- Building a world-class international experience by giving overseas students and agents unrivalled support throughout their application journey.

### Collaborative working across regulators and with other partners

The post-secondary education and training landscape is evolving. Following the post-16 qualifications review and wider skills reform, the next decade will see an overhaul in technical education, including T Levels, [Higher Technical Qualifications](#), and the Lifetime Skills Guarantee – linked to the [Skills for Jobs White Paper](#) and subsequent [Skills and Post-16 Education Bill](#). The Government has committed to a £3.8 billion investment in education and skills over the course of this Parliament, increasing apprenticeships funding to £2.7 billion by 2024-25. These reforms, as a package, present opportunities for students to access new and varied routes into and within post-secondary education.

UCAS is fully supportive of this innovation in the post-secondary landscape. In 2022, we hit 2.2 million searches for apprenticeships on the UCAS website. However, we know that accessing apprenticeships in the UK can be a complicated journey – 73% of students find it easy to access information about undergraduate study, compared to 26% for apprenticeships. That's why, from this autumn, UCAS has [announced](#) that it will expand its service so that young people can see more personalised options, including apprenticeships. From 2024, students will then be able to apply for apprenticeships through UCAS alongside an undergraduate degree application.

However, a risk inherent in the proliferation of new and diverse routes is that the landscape is not well understood by either students or their advisers. We know that interest in apprenticeships is growing, with 40% of UCAS applicants saying they are interested in this route. However, one in three students [tell us](#) they received no information about apprenticeships from their school. And this can be compounded for those students who face additional challenges in their journey: in our 2022 report, [Next Steps: What is the experience of students from a care background in education](#), we found that 45% of care leavers who

were supported by a Personal Adviser did not receive guidance about apprenticeships when making their decisions.

Whilst a range of data exists around retention, completion and the graduate outcomes of students progressing to degree programmes e.g. data related to average salary and employability, little is available in relation to other routes.

This means UCAS would encourage the OfS to work with its counterparts in the devolved administrations in addition to the ifATE, ESFA and Ofqual to maximise coverage and comparability of data appertaining to quality. This would improve its usefulness as a student information tool; information and advice must reflect the interests of the next generation, to ensure relevancy for those embarking on their journey for years to come.

### Personalisation and comparability must underpin information and advice

UCAS already plays a central role as the most cited source for information for the more than one million individuals researching all post-school options. Our dedicated customer-facing teams manage more than two million interactions each year and our in-house user experience function ensures that our products meet the needs of Generation Z (and, soon to be, Alpha), as well as being accessible for mature students and those with individual needs. In addition, our well-established relationships with more than 4,000 teachers and careers advisers across the UK mean we can play a critical role in helping schools and colleges navigate a very complex landscape, ensuring that individuals make the right decision for them.

Personalisation underpins UCAS' approach to information and advice, with students registering via the [UCAS Hub](#) early in their research and embarking upon their own individual journey based on their preferences and circumstances. This journey includes the option to attend UCAS events, and explore tools to help them build their own personal profiles and navigate choices.

The UCAS Hub is the only personalised career platform in the UK that is free for schools, colleges, and students. We introduced the UCAS Hub almost three years ago and last year it moved to a single sign-on environment, replacing Apply and Track. In 2022, this gave 1.3m students (up from 1m in 2021) their own dashboard to discover, save, favourite, and pin the content they found most valuable, refine their choices, and apply and make decisions about their HE and training destinations.

Given the importance of careers information in the decision-making process, it is a core part of UCAS' suite of tools and resources. The future of the UCAS Hub is an immersive and personalised experience, with content tools powered by UCAS data and insight, to help students understand their options and create a truly unique experience, for each individual. We have already developed a growing library of [subject](#), [industry](#), and [city](#) guides, supported by labour market data – including the Unistats dataset –, in recognition that student motivation to study is highly individual – whether that be salary, employability, or a healthy work/life balance.

Given the multiple touchpoints across [ucas.com](#) and the [Discover Uni](#) platform, there is potential to reduce overlaps to create a coherent experience for students whilst increasing efficiency. Indeed, working in partnership, this could lead to the retiring of the Discover Uni

site in its current form, with the UCAS Hub and broaderucas.com estate acting as the key vehicle for surfacing the Unistats dataset to students.

## Equality of opportunity

UCAS notes John Blake's recent [commentary](#) on equality of opportunity, and the [Government's intention](#) to refocus the access and participation regime to support the raising of aspirations and attainment in education. With commentators such as the [Education Policy Institute \(EPI\) reporting](#) how the pandemic has further increased the attainment gap at earlier ages in education, UCAS welcomes the pivot in approach, and the OfS' focus on equality of opportunity.

### UCAS' support for disadvantaged students and our 'Fair Access Programme'

Supporting disadvantaged and under-represented students is at the heart of UCAS' charitable objects – we are committed to helping students from all backgrounds in progressing into and through education. We aim to ensure all our products and services are accessible to and supportive for students from all backgrounds, with specific work focused on improving access and participation for disadvantaged and under-represented students.

Recently, UCAS has invested in a new Fair Access Programme to build upon our existing support for disadvantaged students. The Programme focuses on how UCAS can further support outreach organisations, widening access and participation efforts and fair access through five key areas:

- **The provision of data and analysis** – ensuring support for disadvantaged students is informed by the latest information, and that activity and investment is evidence based.
- **Audience and reach** – sitting at the nexus between secondary and tertiary education, UCAS acts as a digital equaliser and supports students from all backgrounds to make informed choices about their next step, whether that be an undergraduate course, apprenticeship or lifelong learning opportunity. Each year more than 1 million students register with UCAS for support.
- **A more tailored journey through its services** – understanding the needs of specific cohorts of disadvantaged or under-represented students across their full decision-making journey will help raise aspiration and build confidence. We aim to present the information and advice students need – at the point of optimum impact – to make informed choices across the full range of postsecondary pathways
- **The targeting of students** – with personalised information, advice or support at the key points along their journey, linking them to services, outreach interventions or content relevant to their needs and circumstances. Supporting teachers and advisers to navigate the maze of outreach opportunities available and support the sector to identify 'cold spots' within outreach.
- **The provision of admissions service** – continued reform of the application service to best support disadvantaged students- for 2023 entry UCAS introduced seven new questions into the application so a broad range of students can easily flag their circumstances and access the right support for their needs. More detail about reform can be found in the Future of Undergraduate Admissions [Report](#).

More detailed information about the Programme can be found in our [Impact Report](#).

## Deepening relationships between universities and colleges and schools

[UCAS research](#) supports the OfS in advocating for HE partnerships with schools as we highlight the importance of early aspiration raising. This report finds that more than three in four students first realise HE is an option for them before they start post-16 education, and one in three first realise this when they are within primary education. However, disadvantaged students tend to consider the prospect of HE later than their more advantaged peers, with 27% from POLAR4 Q1 (the most disadvantaged group) realising this in primary school, compared to 39% of those from Q5 (the most advantaged group) – reaffirming the findings of UCAS’ 2016 [Student Lens report](#), which emphasises the role of primary schools in shaping and broadening aspirations.

In 2023, following a national consultation, we launched the pilot of our Outreach Connection Service (OCS). Raising awareness of the full range of outreach and support available, this new service will help schools and students navigate and connect to the opportunities offered by HE providers and third-sector organisations. Not only will this significantly enhance our understanding of how students engage with such opportunities and their subsequent progression, it will also inform sector-wide evaluation and impact measurement. The service creates a ‘single source of truth’ about the trusted outreach opportunities available to all UCAS-registered centres in the UK.

We would welcome OfS’ support for use of the OCS to ensure under-represented and disadvantaged students can access the most effective outreach opportunities that will help them progress. The OCS presents a tangible opportunity for the sector to connect students to the outreach programmes and activities that are best suited to their needs and circumstances. However, for this to be a sustainable, reliable, and comprehensive resource for students, advisers, and outreach providers, there needs to be a UK-wide commitment to listing these opportunities.

Through our consultation with the OfS and Uni Connect partnerships, we are confident that the service would complement the success of existing regional Uni Connect outreach hubs, which currently operate with varying levels of sophistication and resource. Our existing engagement with the Uni Connect partnerships – as well as our trusted relationship with around 4,000 schools and colleges UK-wide - makes us well placed to support in these activities. Further development of the OCS will depend upon the appetite of outreach providers and stakeholder validation.

### Evidence about what works

UCAS welcomes the OfS’ focus on evaluation. As part of our work to better identify and support disadvantaged students, UCAS created its Multiple Equalities Measure (MEM) in 2015. The MEM is a framework for combining the effects of many of the measures currently used in the analysis of equality in HE (e.g. FSM status, school type, IMD) into a single value. This approach avoids focusing on a single measure or metric, which can create blind spots or lead to misclassification. In our [What happened to the COVID cohort?](#) publication, UCAS recommended the MEM be adopted as the default mechanism for measuring participation to provide a standard means of assessing high level progress in improving access to disadvantaged groups.

UCAS acknowledges that the OfS has used a similar statistical approach to develop its Associations between characteristics of students’ (ABCS) measures. That’s why we have already initiated discussions with the OfS about how such measures can be used in a manner

that gives clarity to the sector and supports real improvements within access and participation.

UCAS recognises the need for the sector to be more flexible and responsive as projections point to [upcoming growth](#) for the remainder of the decade, underpinned by evidenced based evaluation and impact. Tools such as UCAS' [Outreach Evaluator](#) provide robust statistical evidence on the impacts of engagement activities for HE providers and charitable organisations. The Outreach Evaluator benchmarks the performance of interventions against the national average or an appropriate control group, to provide robust evidence for 'what works' when evaluating outreach activity.