

Universities UK Fair Admissions Conference 2022

Key Insights

- Record numbers are applying to undergraduate courses **with up to 1 million HE applicants projected** by 2026.
- **Planning for student numbers** was flagged by attendants as the biggest concern for the upcoming HE admissions cycle.
- Future admissions priorities may involve:
 - Changing/embedding fair admissions approaches; improving & critiquing IAG; clarifying application processes; increasing focus on the transition stage to HE.
- Alternative study modes present opportunities & challenges for HE admissions & wider student life.
- **Interviews** & other forms of selective processes can be used in admissions, but universities should **consider the practical & equitable implications** of these approaches.
- Further discussions & actions are needed to determine **how we develop student-centred approaches to admissions**, including the ways in which we use terminology to describe structural issues & move away from deficit or stigmatising models & discourse.

Introduction to Fair Admissions

1. Introduction from Professor Quintin McKellar CBE (Vice-Chancellor & Chief Executive, University of Hertfordshire).
2. The HE **admissions landscape is changing**. This conference explores how developments such as the new fair admissions code, changes in access, offer-making processes & programme design are shaping HE;
3. **Student numbers planning** is the **biggest concern** amongst attendees for this 2022 admissions cycle. Three further concerns are also sizeable & include international recruitment, developing offer making strategies & supporting student preparedness.

Admissions: Where are we headed?

4. Panel Members: Chris Hall (Interim Chief Executive Officer, Universities UK); Shoonagh Hubble, (Head of Careers (Higher Education) & Aspire Lead, Barton Peveril Sixth Form College & Chair, Secondary Education Advisory Group, UCAS); Jo Wilson (Head of Sixth Form, The Pingle Academy, Derbyshire); Susie Whigham (CEO, The Brilliant Club). Key points summarised:
5. **Fairer admissions?** The fair admissions code aims for HE admissions to be transparent, use simple language, evidence-based, eliminate discrimination &

- connected to institution-wide approaches to promote equitable opportunities across the student lifecycle;
6. Greater focus needed in the code for postgraduate & international student experiences.
 7. **Information, advice & guidance (IAG)?** More diverse opportunities & IAG are needed for all, including those who meet minimum entry requirements;
 8. Honest, critical discussion is needed to help applicants & their supporters & consider the finer details of courses they are interested in & find the “best” courses for them, beyond traditional hierarchies, HE awards & league tables;
 9. **Navigating the application?** With growing pressure on places, some applicants are being asked to navigate an increasingly complex application process, placing undue pressure on staff, applicants & their supporters;
 10. **Engaging parents through a community organising model** may be a way to (re)engage parents & supporters with the process;
 11. **What about the transition?** Student support through university transition & adulthood differs & is important to student success. Institutions need to be better at building relationships with students to best support them through the lifecycle.

Preparing for a changing higher education landscape

12. Panel Members: Julie Tam (Interim Director of Policy, Universities UK); Professor Diane Houston (Pro-Vice Chancellor, Birkbeck, University of London); Liz Gorb (Director of Apprenticeships, Manchester Metropolitan University); Amy Smith (Associate Director of Admissions & Student Recruitment, Nottingham Trent University). Key points summarised:
13. Record numbers are applying to full time university study & UCAS projects that by 2026, there **may be 1 million applicants**;
14. Arguably, UCAS is a world-class, universalised admissions system, but is currently unable to manage the increasing complexity of applying to alternative study modes;
15. **Government HE policies** & priorities can **shape applicants’ decision making**;
16. Lifelong learning & modular approaches are being developed, but more work is needed to support students’ access, admissions, transitions, success & equity to these;
17. **Degree apprenticeships** involve different styles of learning with **nuanced admissions** processes;
18. As modes of study diversify, credibility & parity between traditional & newer options need to be **clear & consistent** for students, employers & HE institutions.

Reflections and insights on admissions from UCAS

19. Speaker: Clare Marchant (CEO, UCAS). Key points summarised:
20. Diversity, Demography & Dem& (3Ds) are driving increases in applicant numbers!;
21. Blended learning approaches may help, but work is needed to determine **what is good, blended learning**;
22. Stark contrasts exist between applicant interest & uptake of vocational/technical approaches to higher level study. Sourcing & supporting SMEs (small-medium enterprises) to engage will help to better fulfil demand;

23. Providers continue to adapt their approaches to offer making & applicants are utilising the UCAS Clearing process in ever-changing ways;
24. In the short term, UCAS will be **revising how it collates admissions references**;
25. Educational disruption continues to impact admissions cohorts & WP remains a high priority across the sector;
26. Student confidence levels are high, with **teachers aware of growing competition** for places.

Student numbers planning is the biggest concern amongst attendees for this 2022 admissions cycle. Three further concerns are also sizeable & include international recruitment, developing offer making strategies & supporting student preparedness.

Professor Quintin McKellar, 2022

In anticipation of growing applicant numbers, institutions are exploring ways to ensure applicants are considered fairly & beyond just their exam grades through interviews

Fair admissions through the interview process

Commonplace labelling of students' in access, WP & social justice priorities may inadvertently stigmatise. It can have both positive & negative impacts on how students' achievements are recognised; it is important that individuals are not made to feel as if they got an easy way in.

The future of student-centred admissions

Fair admissions through the interview process

27. Chair: Ed Castell. Speakers: Dr Samina Khan (Director, Undergraduate Admissions & Outreach, University of Oxford); Angela Kubacki (Associate Dean for Admissions, St George's, University of London); Rhys Thomas (Head of Admissions, Royal Central School of Speech & Drama). Key points summarised:

28. In anticipation of growing applicant numbers, institutions are **exploring ways to ensure applicants are considered fairly & beyond just their exam grades**;

29. **Interviews** in the admissions process can take a variety of forms, including panel interviews & multiple mini-interviews (MMIs);

30. Most, if not all, shortlisted applicants are interviewed at the HE institutions represented: University of Oxford, St Georges, University of London & Central School of Speech & Drama;

31. In response to the global pandemic, these institutions held their interviews & relevant portfolio submissions online in 2020 & 2021. All conduct evaluation to determine future approaches;

32. Interviews are used to distinguish between similarly qualified candidates & develop a greater understanding of their suitability for each course;

33. Universities are urged to **consider the practicalities & equity of interviewing applicants** before taking this selection approach. It can be time & resource-intensive, open to increased bias, & difficult to navigate for applicants;

34. Interviewees are **offered IAG** to complete the admissions interview process;

35. As much **flexibility** as possible & as many **reasonable adjustments** should be offered when inviting applicants for an interview.

The future of student-centred admissions

36. Panel Members: Joshua Killilea (Medical student, Imperial College London) & Phoebe Butler (Geography student, University of Cambridge – Brilliant Club Student Ambassadors); Mary Curnock Cook CBE (Independent education expert & Chair, Student Futures Commission, UPP); Mike Nicholson (Director of Recruitment, Admissions & Participation, University of Cambridge); Dr Beth Linklater (Assistant Principal, Queen Mary's College, Basingstoke); Dr Omar Khan (Director, TASO). Key points summarised:
37. Insights varied on what panellists would like to see change about student-centred admissions ideally. These include possibilities for **universal interview processes** as well as, reflective & **greater weighting of the personal statement**;
38. Commonplace **labelling of students'** in access, WP & social justice priorities may **inadvertently stigmatise**. It can have both positive & negative impacts on how students' achievements are recognised; it is important that individuals are not made to feel as if they got an easy way in.

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