

## Consultation on the operation of the UCAS undergraduate admissions cycle: dates, deadlines, and choices

### Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

#### A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a trade union and professional association representing over 25,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business leaders and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people across primary, secondary, post-16 and specialist education.
2. ASCL welcomes the opportunity to contribute evidence to the UCAS undergraduate admissions cycle consultation. Our response is based on the views of our members, obtained through our sixth form and FE advisory groups and prompted and unprompted emails and messages.
3. When considering the impact of any proposals on different groups, it is ASCL's policy to consider not only the nine protected characteristics included in the Equality Act 2010, but also other groups which might be disproportionately affected, particularly those who are socio-economically disadvantaged.

#### B. General points

4. ASCL welcomes the collaborative approach UCAS has taken and supports the direction of travel: incremental improvements combined with system stability.
5. The current cycle functions well overall, and adjustments must prioritise student welfare, equal access, and the operational realities of schools and colleges.

#### C. Responses to specific questions

##### Question 1:

The number of choices students can make as part of their main scheme application

Please indicate your position on the recommendations outlined in the [Overview and Response Guidance](#):

- I agree with these recommendations.
- I disagree with these recommendations.

- I am not sure/I require further information.**
- 6. Reducing the number of choices would have a disproportionately negative impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are less likely to have strong informal guidance networks and who may use their five choices to explore a broader set of opportunities. This aligns with UCAS' own evidence showing that the five-choice model supports broader application behaviour for disadvantaged students.
- 7. Sixth forms and FE colleges already operate under significant resource and workload pressures. Changing the choice structure without a fully reformed Clearing system risks further complexity at a time when the system requires stability.
- 8. Reducing choices may lead to risk-averse behaviour, with students applying predominantly to perceived 'safe' options, contrary to widening access priorities.
- 9. While a small number of highly selective universities may seek reductions due to high application volumes, the wider sector benefits from the diversity and choice created by the existing structure.
- 10. ASCL supports improved communication and guidance to ensure students understand they can add choices later and use Extra more flexibly. However, this should not replace the current five-choice baseline until evidence from a reformed Clearing process is available.

## **Question 2:**

### **The firm and insurance choice**

**Please indicate your position on the recommendations outlined in the [Overview and Response Guidance](#):**

- I agree with these recommendations.**
  - I disagree with these recommendations.**
  - I am not sure/I require further information.**
11. For many students, particularly those without strong family support, the insurance choice provides essential reassurance at a stressful stage of Year 13. Removing it without a robust alternative would increase anxiety and risk-averse behaviour.
12. In a qualifications landscape that continues to see year-on-year variability - particularly in vocational and technical pathways - maintaining an insurance option remains a fair and necessary safeguard.
13. The insurance choice particularly benefits students applying to competitive subjects or selective regions by keeping open an additional route without forcing premature Clearing decisions.

14. Many universities rely on insurance acceptances to stabilise recruitment. Removing the system could lead to greater volatility and unpredictability for both institutions and applicants.
15. ASCL therefore supports the proposed refinements: CI decline (Decline My Place for insurance); faster results processing (Awarding Body Linkage); clearer terminology and guidance for students. These are sensible improvements that reduce friction without removing an important student support mechanism.

### Question 3:

**The timing of the January Equal Consideration Date and associated dates**  
**Please indicate your position on the recommendations outlined in the [Overview and Response Guidance](#):**

- I agree with these recommendations.**
- I disagree with these recommendations.**
- I am not sure/I require further information.**
16. Many institutions conduct mock exams and predicted-grade review processes during late autumn and early spring terms. An earlier UCAS deadline would create significant and unsustainable pressure on staff and students, and would jeopardise the quality of predicted grades and references.
17. Students applying from disadvantaged backgrounds or with SEND, or those uncertain about higher education, often require additional time to complete research, receive guidance, and finalise choices. A move to an earlier date would disproportionately disadvantage them.
18. Schools and colleges report that the period following the Christmas break is already intense in terms of workload. An earlier deadline would compress the advisory window unacceptably.
19. ASCL acknowledges the benefits of students receiving offers before examinations, but this should not come at the expense of rushed applications or an unequal advising environment.
20. The suggested adjustments add value without disrupting the core timing of the cycle.

### Additional areas of feedback (all audiences):

**How often do you think UCAS should review the findings of this consultation and engage with the sector regarding dates, deadlines, and the number of choices students can make?**

- Every year**
- Every two years**
- Every three years**
- Every four years**

- Every five years**
- Five years+**
- No need to engage further**

21. Annual review creates instability and burdens schools/colleges with constant policy churn.

22. A three-year cycle allows evidence to accumulate, avoids unnecessary turbulence, and aligns with typical government and regulatory review rhythms.

**Feedback from the pre-consultation engagement has highlighted that there is a need for increased efficiencies across all universities and colleges. Would you, or a member of your institution, wish to engage with UCAS further regarding our efficiencies work?**

**Yes / No**

23. ASCL would welcome participating in sector-wide discussions focused on: reducing administrative burdens on schools and sixth-form staff; improving data flows between UCAS, awarding bodies, and providers; ensuring any efficiency reforms align with safeguarding student welfare, equity, and statutory duties of schools/colleges.

**In addition to the areas explored above, are there other areas of the undergraduate admissions cycle where UCAS could make enhancements?**

24. Strengthen support and clarity for students applying with mixed portfolios, e.g., combinations of A levels, T levels, BTECs/CTECs, and other vocational qualifications. This is particularly important in the transition to the future Level 3 landscape of V levels, A levels and T levels, when a range of qualifications are in scope, such as AAQs and TOQs.

25. Improve the transparency of offer-making practices. Schools and students should have clearer and consistent insight into: typical offer levels; contextual admissions criteria; use of GCSEs and other pre-16 metrics; variation in offers by subject and institution.

26. Clearer communication around admissions fairness, including how providers comply with equalities legislation, contextual admissions frameworks, and widening participation obligations.

27. An improved Clearing user experience, including better filtering, timeliness of vacancy information, and easier direct contact mechanisms with providers.

**Is there any other feedback you wish to share with UCAS?**

28. ASCL encourages UCAS to continue: grounding changes in robust evidence; engaging openly with practitioners; ensuring reforms do not unintentionally disadvantage underrepresented groups.

#### **D. Conclusion**

29. ASCL is pleased to contribute to this consultation and is happy to provide additional evidence as the reforms are implemented, including the convening of groups of school and college leaders if helpful.

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