

## Minutes

SAG/19/M1

Student Advisory Group meeting  
held on Wednesday 5 June 2019 by Skype.

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- Chair: Courteney Sheppard; Customer Experience Manager, UCAS  
Coventry University
- Present: Birkbeck College, University of London  
CEO, University of Gloucestershire  
Holy Cross College  
Newent School (3 attendees)  
Nottingham Trent University  
Students' Union and UCAS Board Member  
University of Hertfordshire  
University of South Wales  
University of Surrey (2 attendees)
- Apologies: Bath Spa University  
London South Bank University  
University of Bristol  
University of Gloucestershire  
University of Leicester  
University of Liverpool—  
University of Nottingham  
University of Reading  
University of South Wales
- UCAS in attendance: Ben Jordan; Senior Policy and Qualifications Manager (presenting)  
Deniz Gosai; Provider Engagement Co-ordinator  
Jess Deakin; Product Owner (presenting)  
Jill Eyes; Service Delivery Manager (presenting)  
Sam Sheppard; Product Owner (presenting)

**A1/19/01 Introductions including:**

- **Conflicts of interest**
- **Governance – co-chair**
- **Approval of minutes and actions from the log**

All members of the Group were welcomed to the meeting.

There were no conflicts of interest.

The Group was asked whether any members would be happy to co-chair meetings, in case the Chair was unable to attend. They were asked to email [groupsandforums@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:groupsandforums@ucas.ac.uk) by Thursday 27 June 2019 if they were interested.

The minutes were approved as a correct and accurate reflection of the last meeting.

The open actions on the log were discussed.

USAG002 – ‘Are you ready campaign’ had begun at UCAS. More information for teachers and advisers had been included, in the hope that applicants would receive better support.

All other actions were closed.

**A1/19/02 Contextualised admissions and unconditional offers – best practice and advice**

**Contextualised admissions**

A presentation on contextualised admissions was shared with the Group. A copy was sent out immediately after the meeting. A brief explanation of contextualised admissions was given, explaining that it covered other factors (such as the applicant’s background) which would also be considered, along with their grades, when deciding who should receive an offer. The Group was asked for their views on contextualised admissions, and how UCAS could promote them further.

Feedback from the Group included:

- Not all universities appeared to be using contextualised admissions. Furthermore, those who did, did not do it through UCAS.
- During 2012, the Sutton Trust charity made applicants aware of contextualised admissions.
- Would be good for applicants if it was done at point of application.

- The Group was not aware that contextualised admissions were used during Clearing.
- Applicants received numerous communications from universities after A level results day. The communications would not be standardised, and so were often confusing. It would be better for applicants if the questions were more centralised.
- Schools had informed students to include contextualised information in their personal statements. This was often a struggle, as they felt that they not only had to explain why they wanted to study a course, but also explain their background. It proved difficult for some applicants, as they didn't understand how their background would affect their chances of getting on a course, and in some instances, felt that it could 'drag them down'.
- The younger members of the Group (Year 12), did not know much about contextualised admissions, as it was not explained in-depth at school.
- They confirmed that [ucas.com](https://ucas.com) should be the place which highlighted this information – and if it was through text, it should be kept short. Otherwise, interactive videos would be a good way of communicating it.
- It was asked whether the new contextualised admissions questions could be included on the new beta for the application management service (AMS) dashboard. In future, the UCAS application would be more around creating an applicant account, which would be developed over a number of years by the student, hopefully starting at a younger age (around Year 9). This was an idea the Group welcomed.

It was agreed that the content currently available on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com) would be sent to the Group for feedback. An update on contextualised admissions would be given at a later meeting.

BJ SAG004

### **Unconditional offers**

There were currently two types of offer that a university could make. Conditional offers – where applicants needed to meet grades/targets to get onto the course, and unconditional offers, where no targets were set, and if the applicant accepted the offer they would take up the place. It was confirmed that unconditional offers were on the increase, and the Group was asked for its views on this. The feedback included:

- Unconditional offers should still be seen as a target for the applicant, so they did not miss out on achieving their grades.
- Universities could appear to make themselves look desperate if they offered too many unconditional offers.
- By offering unconditional places, universities were giving applicants the impression they did not care about the applicant's grades.

- Graduate employers were still interested in A level results, and so not meeting grades could affect students' job prospects.
- The Group thought it would be interesting to see the percentage of applicants who dropped out after semester one, compared to how many of those entered university with an unconditional offer.
- One member of the Group had received both a conditional and unconditional offer, and had taken the unconditional offer to reduce their stress levels during the exam period. However, with retrospect, they wished they had taken the conditional offer, as they still met their grades, and the conditional offer university had better student support.
- The Year 12 students on the Group felt that unconditional offers were good, as it took the stress away during the exam period, and so was better for students' mental health. However, the final decision should be about which university they ultimately would like to attend.
- Applicants often felt pressured to accept unconditional offers.
- If applicants were more aware of Clearing, then unconditional offers could be of a lesser value.

UCAS had information on its website about unconditional offers, which would be sent to the Group after the meeting.

BJ  
USAG005

#### **A1/19/03 Corporate strategy: UCAS 2020 – 2025**

UCAS' Future Focus corporate strategy would end in 2020, and so UCAS was looking at what its new strategy should look like. A presentation on this was given to the Group.

The Group was asked which markets UCAS should focus on, and the following points were suggested:

- ucas.com should have information (not necessarily in-depth) on all the different further education paths, including apprenticeships, and short courses which could be studied alongside a degree.
- Universities now offered Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which were free of charge. It would be useful for applicants to have taster versions of what degree courses were like, before they committed.
- UCAS sent communications to applicants to encourage them to use UCAS for postgraduate courses. However, only a few providers were listed on the UCAS Postgraduate website. It would be helpful if postgraduate information on ucas.com was easier to navigate, and more providers subscribed to the service, to make it more comprehensive.

The future of what the undergraduate application would look like was discussed. Currently, the process was fairly consistent, and the Group was asked whether there should be complete consistency depending on where they were applying, or whether it should be more personalised. The Group agreed that tailored questions, depending on the course choice, would be good, as this would ensure the personal statement was more focused on why the applicant wanted to study the particular course. However, this could prove problematic for joint honours. In addition, applicants often struggled to complete one personal statement to cover all their choices, as sometimes their course choices differed, depending on the university they were applying to. CS SAG006

The Group asked how changing dates and deadlines would work for applicants accepting offers. It was stressed that all concepts suggested were still in the exploratory stage, but UCAS was looking at using different deadlines and different times for accepting offers. The Group confirmed it did not want individual dates and deadlines to be changed. DG SAG007

#### **A1/19/04 Application management system (AMS)**

The new application management system (AMS) was shared with the Group, and the new questions which UCAS would be introducing were explained.

The parents and carers question hadn't yet been introduced by UCAS, although universities might have already asked the question previously themselves. It was confirmed that UCAS would report on the contextualised data, which could be provided as part of the Freedom of Information Act. These questions would not be mandatory as part of the application. In addition, data was also available on UCAS' analysis and insight pages.

The residential category was explained. Currently, EU applicants would be contacted by each of their choices for additional information – UCAS was looking into centralising this, mainly through document upload, which had been welcomed by universities.

Universities would also be able to add their own questions to the application.

Information on Clearing was shared with the Group. A wireframe for what this would look like was shown, and how applicants could make themselves eligible for Clearing. The Group liked the changes being made, especially as applicants would not be losing their current offers. They also felt like more power was being passed back to the applicants. It was confirmed that universities had also strongly welcomed this change.

An update on Clearing would be given at the next meeting.

### **A1/19/05 Embargo – how this affects students**

A presentation on the embargo was shared with the Group. The view from the Group was mixed on whether receiving communication from universities before results had been received was a good thing, and it all depended on what the communication said. One member of the Group had received a text message the night before receiving their results, which was confusing. Blocking emails from universities until applicants received their results was a suggestion the Group had, and was something that UCAS could explore. Another member thought receiving the message earlier was positive, and helped them be more relaxed when picking up results.

It was confirmed that the embargo was lifted at 06:00 on A level results day. In the past, providers would not have actively contacted. However, this appeared to be increasing, and UCAS was looking into whether the embargo should be lifted later. The Group also suggested that contact from universities should be at a time when advisers were available to support applicants.

The information and advice UCAS provided applicants about when they should receive their confirmed place from universities needed to be reviewed. One Group member waited five weeks from receiving their International Baccalaureate results to receiving their confirmed place, as the university waited until A level results day to contact them. JE USAG008

### **A1/19/06 Students with caring responsibilities**

Currently, it appeared that it was at the discretion of the university what pregnant and maternity rights their students had, as the current act was more focused on the workplace. The National Union of Students (NUS) had carried out some research in this area, which concluded that many students had felt pressured to leave a course when they revealed they were pregnant. The research was now being expanded to include young carers.

Birkbeck College, University of London, who was leading on this agenda item, was pleased to see that UCAS was incorporating widening participation characteristics into the new application, but noted that it would be good to have links to the support available on [ucas.com](http://ucas.com). Scotland and Wales had better support compared to England.

From UCAS' perspective, a lot of work had been done with other organisations to help promote information and guidance on [ucas.com](http://ucas.com), and to also help support advisers. UCAS was also happy to promote the work from the NUS on [ucas.com](http://ucas.com). It was confirmed that UCAS was also working with organisations for people who had been in prison or just released from prison, and with estranged students.

Some members of the Group shared their universities' pregnancy and maternity policies.

#### **A1/19/07 Ordering of search results onucas.com**

Course searches onucas.com were listed A-Z by provider. It was asked whether providers lower on the list were disadvantaged. It was noted that a couple of years ago UCAS had carried out a lot of work in this area, which listed courses by relevance. This received negative feedback, as providers did not agree with the algorithm. Due to this, UCAS reverted back to the A-Z list. UCAS had looked into using ads (like Google), which was not welcomed by the Group. The Group confirmed that A-Z listings of search results did not influence their decision on where to study.

#### **A1/19/08 Any other business and close**

For the first time, UCAS was allowing applicants to release themselves into Clearing, providing they had an unconditional firm place. UCAS wanted feedback from universities on this. Initial feedback from the Group was that they thought this was a good idea, but were unsure how universities would feel. UCAS would provide an update post-Confirmation and Clearing. CS SAG009

All colleges, schools, and universities had been informed, and UCAS would continue to reinforce the message.

The next meeting was scheduled for Tuesday 22 October 2019 at UCAS, Cheltenham. A calendar invitation would be sent to the Group shortly.

Each member of the Group at the meeting would receive a £50 Love2shop voucher.