

Imperial College Union  
**Post-Qualification Admissions (PQA)**  
*A Paper by ICU President – Scott Heath*

Background

1. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) released an Admissions Process Review Consultation on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> October 2011.
2. This Consultation was designed to look at the areas of difficulty within the UCAS Application Process as well as points of inequality such as predicted grades.
3. UCAS believes:
  - 3.1 Many students make choices about their courses before they are ready to do so,
  - 3.2 The current system is complex and not transparent,
  - 3.3 There is a divide between students which access to good advice and advisors and those who don't, leading to unfairness,
4. UCAS has shown, by using the 2010 data available:
  - 4.1 Almost 700,000 students applied for UK universities.
  - 4.2 Of these, 582,000 (84%) applied with Predicted Grades as a performance indicator.
  - 4.3 A sample of the Predicted Grade Applicants (37.7%) was analysed. It showed that 51.7% of predictions were exact; 6.6% were under-predicted and the remaining 41.7% were over-predicted.
  - 4.4 Students can apply to a maximum of 5 universities through UCAS. Of these, 76.4% of applicants went into their Firm Choice (i.e. their preferred option) with only 7.8% using their insurance choice (i.e. their second choice).
  - 4.5 Of the remaining applicants, 9.6% were forced into the clearing system.
5. The full data set is available from the UCAS Website, as a booklet called 'APR Consultation Evidence Base.'
6. Imperial College believes that, as the courses here require some of the highest grades in the country, only the under-predicted students should be a direct concern to us.
7. UCAS devised a potential alternative to the application process which they believe is a better way to apply to University and Colleges.
8. The alternative would require students to apply to University after they have received their A-Level (or equivalent) examination results.
9. If accepted the proposed alternative would be in place by 2016, with an interim year in 2015.
10. This proposal has caused a large amount of discussion. It has been supported by Members of Parliament, NUS and others but actively opposed by Universities, Exam Boards and Schools.
11. It is noted that Post-qualification admission has been shown to be successful in countries such as Scotland.

The new application model

UCAS's proposal has suggested a three-part entrance route to University, named Apply One, Two and Three.

This process will require A-Level examinations to start earlier as the majority of home students would be expected to apply to University in early June.

The model proposes a Higher Educational Institute (HEI) start date of early October for first year students. This is typical for Imperial College but, as we are all too aware, is later than most of our counterparts.

*Apply One*

Students who received their results in the previous academic year will be permitted to apply to University at the start of the application cycle – expected to be January.

*Apply Two*

This will open a week before results are received, at the end of June and finish in the third week of July. Student would make only two choices and would be informed by the University as to whether they have been accepted or rejected by September.

*Apply Three*

This will be the way that students who get rejected by their two choices attempt to find a place at a University. It will be open at the end of July and close in early October.

As stated in the Background, there are many people arguing for and arguing against this proposal. I have summarised these arguments; however the lists are not exhaustive:

Arguments for this model

1. Students will have their results when they apply. This will mean:
  - 1.1 The disadvantages made due to errors with predicted grades become history.
  - 1.2 Students from poorer backgrounds should become less disadvantaged. Several reports, including the UCAS's 'Estimating the Reliability of Predicted Grades' highlight that students from the highest socioeconomic background receive the most accurately predicted grades.
  - 1.3 It will be easier for universities to assess the academic capabilities of students.
2. Students will have longer to consider their University choices; meaning they will make more education decisions about where to study. It is hoped that this will lower the drop out rate.
3. The existence of Apply One will motivate some students to take Gap Years. These are seen by many to be beneficial as they produce well-rounded students. Students who undertake them are also able to consider their University choice even further, so hopefully make an even more educated decision.
4. The clearing system is chaotic. As the statistics show, the majority of people are accepted and go to their 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> preference. By people applying to Universities that they have the grades to attend, the numbers needing the 'clearing alternative' i.e. Apply Three, should reduce.
5. Introducing this system will force Universities to become more efficient with their application process i.e. faster and more efficient interviews, admissions tests, more online/distance admissions options, etc. This will be beneficial for existing students as less time will be devoted to the application cycle and will benefit future students as time devoted to getting into University is reduced.
6. Post-Qualification Admission has been on the agenda for decades. With all the changes in Higher Education now is the best (and most likely) time to get this proposal accepted.

Arguments against this model

1. The academic timetable will probably change. Conversations with the Undergraduate Admissions Committee highlighted that it is expected that University would start as late as January. Some of the effects of this would be:
  - 1.1 University ending later for students. This would force employers to chance their graduate programs or disadvantage UK students who attend universities with a long final term.
  - 1.2 International Students, who have to deal with rather complex Visa systems, could be

greater deterred from studying in the UK. This would be beneficial to the international competition to UK Higher Educational Institutes as they would offer earlier start times but could reduce the internationality of our Universities.

2. Lecturers and staff would be required to do student admission interviews during the busiest time in the academic calendar. The effect to research schedules and staff motivation to teach during term is unknown as they miss out key research and conference time.
3. Interviews would have to be conducted in a window no longer than three weeks. Many Imperial Students apply to other institutes which interview, which makes the application process more stressful and difficult.
4. These proposals will do little to help the widening participation agenda i.e. they favour students from less disadvantaged backgrounds. This is justified by:
  - 4.1 Apply One motivating students to undertake a Gap Year/a year out of the education cycle.
  - 4.2 Students being required to attend interviews at short notice. Transport is cheaper with foresight and advanced booking.
  - 4.3 Students with greater access to free cash will be able to visit more Universities and thus have a more balanced view on where to go when they get their results – the UCAS data showed that over 50% of students attend open days.
  - 4.4 Students from such backgrounds can have their requirements mildly adjusted. If such a student slightly misses the grade requirements necessary they will not apply. However they may have been given an offer that their performance would meet had they been interviewed under the current environment.
5. Students will become even more focused on grades; further devaluing extra curricular activities.
6. The problems UCAS wish to rectify are clearing and unfair predictions. The primary is replicated by Apply Three and the latter could be resolved without overhauling the application process.

### Beliefs

It is my belief that we as a Union should not support the UCAS recommendations. As such I recommend these Union beliefs:

The Union believes that:

1. The best way to judge the performance of a student is after they have performed. As such the ideology of Post-Qualification Admissions is supported by us.
2. The views of UCAS outlined in 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 are supported by us.
3. The proposed model involving Apply One, Two and Three will create significant upheaval and is not proven to help the Widening Participation agenda. We do not support this proposal.
4. Energy should be focused on fixing the predictions allocation method as opposed to radically changing the application process. There is great uncertainty in the Higher Education Sector. Upheaval should be the last resort.