

UCAS response: Inquiry into the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act

About UCAS

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for post-secondary education. This service spans 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). In 2022, UCAS facilitated 25,380 Welsh domiciled students in accessing post-secondary education in the UK, and 86,225 students in applying to Welsh providers.

In addition, we are a student-centric organisation with one of the UK's largest student audiences – ucas.com receives 30 million unique visits per year and more than 1.3m people engage with UCAS each year, exploring HE, apprenticeships, and early careers.

Summary

UCAS is a trusted, free-to-access, personalised source of information and advice for millions of school pupils and mature students and is in a unique position to support the sector's work on progression pathways. As such, we hope that this evidence will support the successful implementation of the new curriculum in Wales, ensuring that pupils can progress along their chosen route into HE, training, or employment.

Key points:

- **Disadvantaged students are likely to consider HE at a later stage which can limit their choices and specific cohorts of students may have a less linear journey to HE.** Therefore, it is vital that Welsh Government and the education sector work with expert bodies that support those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to ensure that the reform of the curriculum, and associated careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) provision, are supportive of these groups and their ambitions.
- **Parents, carers, teachers, friends, and post-16 choices play an important part in subject choice for school leavers in the UK.** Therefore, dissemination of CIAG should not just be limited to students, but also involve parents and teachers, some of whom will need more support than others.
- **Increasing demand and competition for higher education could have a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students.** One critical mitigating factor will be high quality CIAG. UCAS recognises its key role here, supporting universities, schools, colleges, and students progressing to HE or apprenticeships within this changing landscape.
- **Despite more students showing an interest in apprenticeships, students aren't getting the information they need about apprenticeships.** It will be

important for Estyn to place more emphasis on the monitoring of CIAG in schools. This should span technical education and apprenticeships and include how primary schools equip children to progress.

- We have [collaborated](#) with the UK Government Department for Education and Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to make UCAS the key place to access apprenticeships. In Wales, we are working with stakeholders, including Welsh Government, and employers to maximise opportunities posed by our new services to better support Scottish learners and employers.

Considerations for admissions to Higher Education

Disadvantaged students are likely to consider HE at a later stage and specific cohorts of students may have a less linear journey to HE

UCAS [‘Where Next’](#) research into influences on choices of school leavers in the UK found that while one in three applicants report first thinking about HE at primary school, disadvantaged students are more likely to consider HE later, which can further limit their choices. A lack of information and advice is also more strongly felt by disadvantaged students. Additionally, students with a parent or carer who is educated to degree level tend to feel more satisfied with the information and advice they receive.

Our research also highlighted disabled applicants are more likely to defer entry to HE. Furthermore, students with a care background have a longer and nonlinear journey into HE with a higher likelihood of them being 21 and above at entry.

UCAS recommends that Welsh Government and the education sector work with expert bodies that support those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to ensure that the reform of the curriculum, and associated CIAG provision, are supportive of these groups and their ambitions. UCAS insight into the experiences of different cohorts highlights the importance of supporting a range of groups such as [disabled students](#), [LGBT+ students](#) and [students from a care background](#). We would be happy to discuss our insights the experience of specific cohorts of students in navigating the post-16 educational landscape with the Committee.

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 operates across the UK and 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](#). A particular piece of upcoming work which may be of interest is the Entry Grades Report which is being developed for [ucas.com](#). The report will be a visualisation of A-Level and BTEC results held across the 2018-2022 application cycles to provide applicants with the transparency of grade profiles of students accepted to universities in previous years.

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

Careers information, advice and guidance

The impact of careers information, advice and guidance on progression to HE makes it imperative to understand where and how students access advice. Our [Where Next](#) research found that parents, carers, teachers, friends, and employment prospects play an important part in subject choice for school leavers in the UK.

Based on the findings, dissemination of CIAG should target advisers and parents, in addition to students themselves. Some of them will need more support than others due to the differences in experiences and resources at their disposal. UCAS can support this as a trusted, free-to-access, personalised source of information and advice for millions of school pupils and mature students. 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.

[The UCAS Hub](#), our personalised information and advice dashboard, is the go-to place for students of all ages to explore the full range of post-secondary options. Students can explore a myriad of careers, subjects, courses and providers through [ucas.com](#) and we are now developing tailored journeys for different groups so we can present information and advice that students need. This will ensure students from all backgrounds are supported throughout their journey – from research through to transition.

What Next: UCAS data on applications and admissions to higher education

UCAS end of cycle data for 2022

UCAS has been supporting students in making informed choices and providers in recruiting talented individuals in accessing their courses for 30 years. In 2022, UCAS supported 25,380 Welsh students apply to UK HE, and 86,225 students in applying to Welsh providers.

In 2022, we saw a near record demand from Welsh domiciled 18-year-olds. The Welsh entry rate reached 32.4% in 2022, slightly down on 2021 figures but 2.6 percentage points up on the last examination year (2019).

In terms of admissions to higher education among particular cohorts:

- **There has been a significant increase in Welsh domiciled applicants from ethnic minority backgrounds:** Asian applicants are up 10.6% since 2021 (from 1,270 applicants in 2021 to 1,405 applicants in 2022) and Black applicants are up 15.4% since 2021 (from 520 applicants to 600 applicants).
- **There has been a growth in students applying from disadvantaged areas.** In 2022, Welsh domiciled applicants from most disadvantaged areas increased by 2.6%.
- **Welsh domiciled applicants with a declared disability have increased.** In 2022, 16.0% of Welsh applicants declared a disability, as compared to 13.6% in 2021.
- A quarter of Welsh domiciled applicants (6,395) held a combination of A levels and Welsh Baccalaureate qualifications. One in five (5,345) applicants from Wales held A levels only.

Across the UK, there has been a 22.1% increase in the number of apprenticeship views on Career Finder compared to last year, showing more young people in the UK are looking for apprenticeship opportunities than ever before.

UCAS Equal Consideration Deadline- 25 January 2023

19,100 Welsh domiciled individuals applied for an undergraduate course by the 2023 equal consideration deadline (ECD). Compared to pre- pandemic cycle (2020), this was a 3.6% increase.

While overall, demand from Welsh applicants has gone down by 9.1% between 2023 and 2022 ECD, the percentage decrease in Welsh domiciled applicants applying to Welsh providers is less (7.5%) in comparison to the percentage decrease to English providers (9.0%) and Scottish providers (18.9%).

Even though there has been an increase in international students applying to England and Northern Ireland, this has not been the case for Scotland and Wales. In Wales, the number of international applicants has dropped slightly from 9,540 in January 2022 to 9,150 in 2023.

In terms of applications to higher education among particular cohorts:

- There has been a minor increase in Welsh domiciled applicants who identified as an ethnic minority (2,700 in January 2022 compared to 2,710 in January 2023).
- The decrease in applicants has been higher for Welsh domiciled applicants from most disadvantaged background than applicants from least disadvantaged background, 9.4% and 4.6% respectively.
- The decrease in female Welsh domiciled applicants is larger than male Welsh domiciled applicants (10.4% vs 7.1%). This has caused the application rate gender gap to narrow from 1.54 to 1.49.

In Wales, currently 11,700 Welsh students who have signed up for the UCAS hub so far for 2023 entry have expressed interest in apprenticeships.

Impact of the 'journey to a million' applicants

UCAS is forecasting [up to a million applicants](#) to UK HE by the end of the decade. Despite the improvements in access that we are seeing among underrepresented groups in the end of cycle and ECD data above, the increased competition because of this growth in demand poses specific risks for disadvantaged students. Whilst, in Wales, we project that total domiciled applicants could decline by 3.9% (24,500), this is due to likely declines in mature demand – we project that the number of 18-year-old applicants in Wales will increase by 22.9% to reach 16,100 by 2030. This means that Welsh school pupils will enter HE and training for the first time in 2029 in a highly competitive admissions market having sat the new full curriculum for the first time.

One critical mitigating factor will be high quality CIAG - **UCAS recognises it plays a key role here, supporting universities, schools, colleges, and students progressing to HE or apprenticeships within this changing landscape.**

UCAS are continuing to launch our collection of essays on this 'Journey to a Million' applicants over the coming months, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that this growth presents for the UK HE sector. Our essay collection includes a [contribution](#) from Welsh Government Minister for Education and Welsh Language on what the increased competition means for student progression in Wales and the importance of innovation and collaboration to meet student and sector needs.

Apprenticeships

We know that the interest in apprenticeships is growing every year. In just two years interest from students has doubled across the UK from 152,000 students interested at equal consideration deadline in 2021 to 427,000 in 2023. Our pre-applicant database tells us that those interested in studying certain subject groups are most interested in apprenticeships, with social studies (56% of applicants), business (46% of applicants) and medicine (41% of applicants) ranking highest.

Despite more students showing an interest in apprenticeships, **students aren't getting the information they need**. Our '[Where Next](#)' research into influences on choices of school leavers in the UK found that **one-third of students did not receive any information about apprenticeships from their school or college**. In addition, this lack of awareness of apprenticeships is creating stigma and misconceptions, as we can see a difference in perception towards apprenticeships compared to university degrees. Our '[Where Next](#)' research into improving the journey to become an apprentice found that 76% of students interested in apprenticeships associated the word 'prestigious' with university degrees, compared to just 4% for apprenticeships.

Therefore, CIAG should be embedded within the curriculum in primary and early secondary school years. It will be important for Estyn to place more emphasis on the monitoring of CIAG in schools. This should span technical education and apprenticeships and include how primary schools equip children to progress.

UCAS' work on apprenticeships

On 6 February 2023, **we set out our proposed [roadmap](#) for the accelerated development of our apprenticeships service**, with UCAS as a gateway through which students can discover, decide and apply for any undergraduate course or apprenticeship, all in the same place. This means that from this autumn, students will be able to explore apprenticeship opportunities alongside undergraduate courses within the UCAS Hub, allowing them to discover and decide between their options in the same place for the first time. From autumn 2024, students will be able to complete apprenticeship applications via UCAS for the first time.

As part of this work, we are working with the Department for Education in Westminster to ensure as many vacancies as possible are listed on UCAS, so more people will benefit from a wider choice of high-quality options. Employers will also benefit from better access to talent on UCAS and the ability to manage their apprentice recruitment process. We have already had positive engagement with Welsh Government and stakeholders across Wales to maximise opportunities posed by our new services to better support learners and employers across the UK and increase the number of vacancies listed.