

Improving the Higher Education Applications Process

Preface

The University of Cambridge and its Colleges are strongly in favour of a genuine PQA system. The comments that follow should therefore not be interpreted as implying any objection to the principle of PQA. We do, however, have considerable reservations about the proposals in the consultation document.

The hybrid systems proposed borrow heavily from the system used in Australia. However, it must be remarked that Australia has substantially fewer universities than the UK and the entrance criteria for the most competitive courses are very well defined on highly differentiated scales. It is thus possible to predict with some accuracy whether one is likely to be accepted onto a given Australian course. For PQA to work similarly in the UK context a much better differentiated system of 14-19 qualifications would be needed, incorporating much more reliable predictors of success at the most selective universities than A-levels.

In attempting to adapt the Australian system to the UK context the Steering Group has constructed proposed systems of such complexity that we have serious concerns that they will disadvantage poorly-advised, poorly-supported and/or less confident students much more than the current system allegedly does.

Proposal 1

UCAS to continue their work to encourage the provision of clear, comparable entry requirement information, with a view to moving toward 100% provision of information for students wishing to enter HE in 2008/09.

Do you agree?

Yes

This is, in principle, an entirely sensible proposal. However, the difficulty of maintaining this information given the constant evolution of the 14-19 education system in England should not be underestimated. The proposed introduction in the near future of the specialised diplomas, extended projects, the AEA challenge within A-levels, the possibility of basing conditional offers on AS/A2 unit performance etc. will all impact on the entry requirements for HEIs.

Proposal 2

In the context of the end-to-end review of student finance delivery in England, further consideration to be given to how to realise the principle of giving students researching their possible HE applications easy access to timely, accurate and reliable information, preferably in one place, about all the financial support they may receive whilst in HE.

Do you agree?

Yes

UCAS is the obvious candidate organisation to take on the responsibility for providing this information, but not if this in any way detracts from its ability to perform its core tasks. Our

experience in the current admissions round suggests that UCAS is stretched beyond its capacity to manage already.

We would also note that this support for central provision of bursary information does not imply support for a national bursary scheme.

Proposal 3

HEFCE to commission early research on how students and their advisers are using the information on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website, to ensure it is meeting the needs of students and their advisers and to inform its further development from 2006.

Do you agree?

Yes

No comment

Proposal 4

HEIs to develop more informative letters to feed back to students, detailing particularly why their applications have been rejected.

Do you agree?

Not sure

This is, in principle, a sensible proposal. However, the resource implications for HEIs of doing this should not be underestimated. If it is not to become an entirely mechanistic and impersonal procedure, it is essential that the provision of feedback remains something that is done “on request” only. Until the public examination system in this country provides much finer-grained and more helpful discrimination between applicants, it is also questionable how genuinely helpful such feedback will be.

Given the coarse granularity of the current national examination grading system, there is a distinct possibility that many unsuccessful applicants will fit the outline profile of successful applicants (in 2003/4 Cambridge turned down 5325 applicants who went on to get AAA in their A-levels, and thus would have met our standard offer). Feedback provided in the form suggested by the Steering Group may therefore lead to increased instances of decisions being challenged, perhaps even in the courts.

The standard practice among Cambridge Colleges at present is to provide feedback to the writer of the UCAS reference, usually therefore a member of staff at the applicant’s school/college. There are two advantages to this practice. First, the referee is well placed to judge the best way to convey the feedback to the individual concerned so that it is received as a beneficial learning experience. Second, the provision of feedback to the applicant’s institution informs advisers of future applicants about the standards and requirements for the relevant Cambridge course and thus is of wider benefit to the admissions process. It would be unfortunate if the rigid assertion of the legitimate rights of the individual resulted in the loss of this wider benefit.

Proposal 5

Schools and colleges should not supply students’ predicted exam results with their HE applications and these should play no part in HE admissions decisions.

Do you agree?

No

Accepting the fact that these predictions can be inaccurate, it is nevertheless much better to have them than not. HEI admissions tutors will inevitably be predicting the future exam results of applicants in seeking to decide whether they will meet the institution's entry requirements. How can admissions tutors conceivably do this better than schoolteachers/college lecturers who know the individual student concerned well and the circumstances in which their examination record to date was achieved? Unless UCAS are going to devote vast amounts of staff time to censoring school/college references, how can this prohibition be policed anyway? A fair admissions process requires equal information about all applicants. It should also be noted that for many mature applicants the predictions of their performance on, for instance, their one-year access course is the only relevant information on their academic ability available to admissions tutors. This proposal is both unworkable and positively unhelpful to HEI admissions tutors.

Question 1

What other information could be supplied in their place?

The public examination record of the applicant in all examinations taken to date, including all AS/A2 (or equivalent) units (and preferably UMS scores) whether certificated or not. This information would, of course, need to be provided at the point of application. The provision of similarly fine-grained information at the point of confirmation is also desirable. The proposed reduction in the number of units making up A-levels will help limit the amount of data that then needs to be provided about each applicant. A tightening up on the rules covering the retaking and "cashing in" of units is also desirable.

In paragraph 4.4.2 of the consultation document it says "... students will be allowed to enter unit details and grades when they complete online applications." This should be a requirement.

Proposal 6

The Delivery Partnership (that we propose in Chapter 9) to keep in touch with developments in the e-portfolio and investigate its potential role in the HE applications process.

Do you agree?

Yes

No comment

Proposal 7

Students to submit initial applications between the beginning of September and the end of March, either together or separately. HEIs should seek to respond to applications as speedily as is practicable.

Do you agree?

No

Although superficially this seems like a sensible proposal, it actually works contrary to the principles of fair admissions. First, in a fair admissions system selection decisions can only be made in the context of the gathered field of applicants. This means making no decisions until you have had a chance to assess all applicants. This makes it impossible for HEIs to respond until after the application deadline has been passed. Second, if HEIs are, as this proposal envisages, expected to assess applicants outside the context of the gathered field, then this system inevitably privileges those who apply first, who are likely to be well-advised, confident students on a long-established path to university. Those likely to be disadvantaged are precisely the unconfident, poorly-advised students, predominantly from widening participation backgrounds, that PQA is supposed to be helping!

Question 2

Are you in favour of four or six initial applications?

Six

Any reduction in the number of choices available to applicants will privilege the well-advised and potentially discourage the unconfident from “aiming high” as choices will be perceived as more valuable (and not to be “wasted”) if fewer are permitted.

Proposal 8

Students who receive no offers from their initial applications to be able to submit an unlimited number of additional applications, one at a time, until they secure an offer, up to the end of June.

Do you agree?

Yes

The ability of students to make additional applications should not, however, be accompanied by a requirement that HEIs should hold places open for such applications.

Proposal 9

HEIs to publish monthly vacancy lists, from the end of March until the end of Clearing.

Do you agree?

Yes

No comment

Question 3

Should there be one single final date for the submission of applications, or should the current deadline of 15 October remain the same for the submission of applications for Oxbridge, Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science courses?

As now

Cambridge is fully committed to the concept of making admissions decisions in the context of the gathered field. To do this there must be an application deadline of some sort. Under current arrangements a deadline of 15 October results in decisions being made by the middle of January, after interviews in December. We could not contemplate a reduction in

the care with which we assess each applicant, thus a later deadline will result in decisions at a commensurately later date. An application deadline of 15 January, resulting in decisions in mid-April, after interviews in March/April, may be workable and could be considered. We would be interested to hear the views of other stakeholders about such a timetable. An application deadline of the end of March would result in interviews in May/June and decisions towards the end of June. We doubt this timetable would be welcomed.

Proposal 10

HEIs to continue their work to ensure against unfair competition for places between pre-qualified and other home and EU students.

Do you agree?

Yes

No comment

Proposal 11

HEIs to continue to consider applications from pre-qualified overseas non-EU students as they do now and, where appropriate, offer them places on an unconditional basis.

Do you agree?

Yes

No comment

Proposal 12

Students to continue to hold up to two offers.

Do you agree?

Yes

If students are to be encouraged to “aim high”, then it is vital that the “safety net” of the insurance offer is retained. Even though comparatively few students take up their insurance offer places, the availability of the insurance offer is a vital component in student decision-making about which offers to accept. We can see no conceivable benefit to students in removing the insurance offer option. The benefits to HEIs, if any, are marginal administratively, and, if the removal of the insurance offer results in some HEIs having more offers accepted firm, then their recruitment is benefiting by exploiting the insecurities of unconfident applicants. We would hope that the interests of the student are a primary concern of all HEIs.

Question 4

Should students who hold only one offer following their initial applications be allowed to submit additional applications until they gain a second offer?

Yes

No comment

Proposal 13

Students holding two offers to continue to rank them as first firm and insurance choices.

Do you agree?

Yes

In our view, this is a case of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”.

Proposal 14

Students who achieve higher grades than required by their conditional offers to be able to make a new application and have their original first firm conditional offer protected whilst they do so.

Do you agree?

No

This proposal sounds sensible in principle, but it is not at all clear how well it would work in practice. Considerably more detailed consideration must be given to how such a system would operate, addressing all the concerns detailed below, before we will be able to support it.

The first issue is what “achieve higher grades than required by their conditional offers” means. Would a student who was asked, say, to obtain AAA in Biology, Chemistry and Maths A-levels and obtained AAA in these plus a B in General Studies A-level be deemed to have achieved “higher grades”? If so, then vast numbers of students would be eligible to make a new application. Would students be able to make a “new” application to a university to which they have already applied? If students’ original first firm conditional offer is protected, then there is no risk attached to trying to “trade up”. This could result in some HEIs receiving thousands of such applications. Even if these were processed very mechanistically (which is contrary to the principles of fair admissions), then it would take a considerable time to handle these. We are not convinced by the argument in the consultation document that certain students would not apply speculatively. Our experience of what happens in A-level results week under current arrangements leads us to believe that, if students could legitimately try to trade up to HEIs they regard as more prestigious than the one at which they hold a firm offer, large numbers would try to do so.

There is also a danger that, if such an option exists, then some applicants and their advisers may perceive this as a way of making an application to leading universities while avoiding some of the more discriminating aspects of their selection processes (such as admissions tests and interviews). Conversely, if such universities, following the principles of fair admissions, wanted to ensure that fresh applicants approaching them for the first time in August were given the same rigorous assessment as earlier applicants, then processing these applications could take at the very least a fortnight, and in all probability longer than this, introducing unacceptable delays into the UCAS process. Thus, such a system could introduce considerable extra work for HEIs to very little effect – if admissions tutors get their cover ratios right, then there may (should) be very few places available once those who have met their offers are accounted for.

If significant numbers of students did successfully make new applications under this system, then it would become very difficult for HEIs to manage numbers, allocate accommodation etc. The eleventh hour withdrawal of an original firm conditional (now unconditional) applicant to go elsewhere would leave the HEI scrambling to fill the vacant place. This already happens under the current system to a limited extent with releases into Clearing and late withdrawals and causes considerable aggravation to the HEIs affected. Under these proposals this problem could be magnified substantially.

We also wonder whether the students who are really supposed to benefit from this option are going to have the confidence to “trade up” at such a late stage. They will presumably not have taken part in any of the activities universities run to build the confidence of students who would not usually apply to them.

Proposal 15

A confirmation and new application round to be run ahead of Clearing.

Do you agree?

Yes

If a confirmation and new application round is introduced, it should be run ahead of Clearing.

Question 5

How long would it take to run the above process?

How long this would take would depend crucially on the rules determining exactly which students were eligible to apply in this round (see our comments on Proposal 14). If Cambridge participated in this round, then we would want to ensure that these applicants were subject to the same careful, holistic assessment as earlier applicants. Arranging the necessary tests and interviews would take at least a fortnight.

Proposal 16

The two route application system for Art and Design to be replaced by a single application system which retains sequential applications and an opening date for applications at the beginning of September and a closing date in late March.

Do you agree?

Not sure

Cambridge is not affected by this proposal and therefore we do not feel it appropriate that we comment.

Proposal 17

Clearing to operate on the basis of three consecutive application rounds in which students submit one application in each round.

Do you agree?

Yes

Cambridge does not participate in Clearing, so these proposals would not directly affect us, but we are persuaded by the Steering Group's arguments that the proposed system would be fairer than the current one.

Proposal 18

The results of AS, A-Levels, Highers and Advanced Highers to be published at least one week earlier than at present.

Do you agree?

Yes

It is desirable to increase the time available for the confirmation and clearing stages of UCAS procedures. However, it is essential that any reductions in the time taken to mark public examinations are not achieved at the cost of reducing the reliability of the assessment process nor by making the examinations even more mechanistic than they already are.

We do not, however, support the suggestion in paragraph 5.13.5 that students should receive their results at the same time as HEIs. It takes universities a couple of days to process results data, determine how many students have met their offers, and thus how many places are available for those who missed them and through Clearing. If students receive their results on the same day as HEIs, admissions offices will be bombarded with inquiries before they have the information needed to answer them.

Proposal 19

Work to be undertaken to look at what might be done to inform those taking non A-level qualifications, whose timetables it is not feasible to bring in line with the HE admissions cycle, of the requirements of that cycle, with the aim of allowing them, where possible and appropriate, to timetable their learning and accreditation accordingly.

Do you agree?

Yes

No comment

Proposal 20

Work to be started now with the express purpose of ensuring that, by 2008/09, the results of non A-level portfolio based qualifications are published earlier than they are at present.

Do you agree?

Yes

This seems desirable but the same provisos that apply to Proposal 18 apply here.

Question 6

Working on the assumption that exams are published earlier, as proposed: is there sufficient time to operate our proposed approach to Clearing, whilst maintaining the current HE term start date?

Not sure

As Cambridge does not usually participate in Clearing we are not best placed to judge this and defer to those HEIs that are.

As the Cambridge term starts later than most, that is in the first week of October, our term dates are unlikely to be a constraint on the timing of these processes.

PQA Option A

Question 7

How might HEIs feed back to students' expressions of interest under Option A?

A three-level response seems appropriate: strong encouragement to apply, weak encouragement to apply, no encouragement to apply.

Question 8

Under Option A, should students questioning their exam results be able to accept an offer of a place based on their results, but re-enter the Application Phase unbound by that offer, if their Result Enquiry changes their grades?

Yes

However, it is important that the HEI making the offer based on their original results should not be indefinitely bound by it. Some deadline, e.g. the end of August as in the present system, at which the offer lapses is desirable.

Question 9

Do you support Option A?

No

A major concern about these proposals is that they make the system of applying for a place at university considerably more complicated than it is now. This may actually make the process less transparent and fair, privileging those with the most knowledgeable and experienced advisers and disadvantaging the very students PQA is supposed to help.

Although attractive in principle, the scheme as outlined seems to be unworkable in practice. There is no indication that HEIs such as Cambridge will be able to specify deadlines for expressions of interest earlier than 31 March. If this is the case, then we could not start assessing applicants in the context of the gathered field until after this deadline. Given the lead-time required to set up schedules for interviews and tests, it is difficult to see how these could conceivably be arranged before summer term began for schools/colleges and universities, and it is then difficult to see when these could practicably take place, given the teaching and examining demands on our academic staff at that time of year.

If an earlier registration deadline is possible within Option A, then obviously these objections no longer apply.

However, we have concerns about the fairness of a system that requires three consecutive application rounds, rather than multiple simultaneous applications. There must be a significant chance that a student achieving high A-level grades will, quite reasonably, apply to a competitive HEI, such as Cambridge, in the first round. If they are unsuccessful in that application, then will their second choice institution have any places left in round two? Indeed, will their third choice institution have any places left? There is a real prospect that they will end up accepting a place at an HEI far lower down their preference list than they would do under the current system. Faced with this prospect a student may well be tempted or advised to lower their aim in order to try to ensure that they win a place at one of their preferred institutions. A system that encourages students to aim lower does not represent an improvement on the current one.

Concerns would also remain about our ability to assess equitably and fairly those who apply in the Application Phase without having expressed interest in the Registration Phase. There is a danger that some applicants and their advisers may perceive this latter application route as a way of making an application to leading universities while avoiding some of the more discriminating aspects of their selection processes (such as admissions tests and interviews). Conversely, if such universities, following the principles of fair admissions, wanted to ensure that applicants approaching them for the first time in August were given the same rigorous assessment as earlier applicants, then processing these applications could take at least a fortnight, introducing probably unacceptable delays into the process.

Some of these objections might be reduced if the public examination system provided much finer-grained differentiation between students and measured reliably more of the attributes leading universities are looking for in applicants.

PQA Option B

Question 10

Do you support the proposal that Option B should not involve an insurance offer?

Not sure

It is very difficult to judge this. The arguments in favour of abolishing the insurance offer depend on how well Phase 2 works, and how well Phase 2 works depends on patterns of applicant behaviour that are impossible to predict.

Question 11 (a)

Should conditional offers be protected for those students wishing to change their applications?

Yes

This is essential. To maintain the concept of admissions decisions being made in the context of the gathered field HEIs must be able to encourage to apply in Phase 2 at least as many applicants whom they assessed in Phase 1 but did not make offers to as the number of offers they are reserving for allocation in Phase 2; there is absolutely no guarantee that those applying for the first time in Phase 2 will be stronger applicants than those squeezed out by the competition in Phase 1. Indeed, in reality, HEIs may need to encourage many more Phase 1 applicants to reapply than they have Phase 2 places, as no HEI can guarantee being the preferred choice of such (re)applicants. It would be

grossly unfair on those encouraged to reapply in Phase 2 (but with no guarantee of success) if they lost out on a place at another HEI they had won on merit in Phase 1.

Question 11 (b)

Should this protection apply whilst the student changes their application once only?

Not sure

It obviously complicates the process for HEIs if students maintain this protection for more than one Phase 2 application round. On the other hand, it seems hard on students whose results are genuinely better than expected to give them only one chance to “trade up” without risking the place they already have when there may be several HEIs to which they could legitimately aspire to apply.

Question 12 (a)

Should all HEIs reserve a minimum proportion of places for Phase 2 of Option B?

Yes

This is essential if some semblance of a PQA system is to be achieved.

Question 12 (b)

How might HEIs determine what proportion of places to allocate at Phase 1 and what proportion to reserve for Phase 2 of Option B?

Factors to be considered should include the number of applications already received in Phase 1 and the quality of those applications. It would also be very helpful to the making of such decisions if much better quality information than is presented in the consultation document about patterns of achievement exceeding expectations (including the grade and subject profiles of such students) were available. To be of any use to a university such as Cambridge this information must be in the form of individual A-level (or equivalent) grades and subjects, rather than accumulated UCAS tariff points and vague descriptors of the university course eventually applied for.

Question 12 (c)

Should the same proportion of places be reserved on all courses?

No

Given the enormous heterogeneity in the HE sector (one of its strengths) it is inconceivable that “one size fits all” is appropriate here. If the system is not to create unnecessary extra work for HEI admissions tutors the proportion to be reserved should reflect a realistic estimate of the number of suitably qualified applicants likely to present for the first time in Phase 2. This is inevitably a function of both course and institution.

Question 13

What proportion of places should be reserved for Option B Phase 2?

As discussed in our comment on Question 12(c) a single figure cannot be appropriate here. The recommendation of 15% in the consultation document arises from some very simplistic analysis and assumptions. There is no analysis in the consultation document, for

instance, about whether the 9% who achieve better examination results than predicted are distributed evenly across the ability/achievement range. Bearing in mind that, for the reasons discussed in our answer to Question 11(a), the greater the proportion of places that are reserved for Phase 2, the greater the number of Phase 1 applicants who have to be kept “in play” (invited to reapply in Phase 2) in order to maintain the concept of the gathered field, a rather smaller proportion of places, say 5%, would seem more sensible as the minimum. This could always be adjusted in the light of experience.

Question 14(a)

Under Option B, should students questioning their exam results be able to hold open the original offers they were made, whilst their results enquiry runs its course, and take up one of those offers if the results enquiry results in their grades changing?

Yes

However, it is important that the HEI making the offer based on their original results should not be indefinitely bound by it. Some deadline, e.g. the end of August as in the present system, at which the offer lapses is desirable.

Question 14(b)

Should those students be able to seek an alternative place during this time on the basis of the grades they are questioning and take up this place if their results enquiry does not change their grades?

Yes

No comment.

Question 15

Under Option B, thinking about students who hold no conditional offers at the start of Phase 2 and are questioning their results: should these students be able to gain an offer on the basis of the grades they are questioning, seek an alternative place should their results enquiry improve their grades, but still be able to take up their original place should they choose?

Yes

As the numbers of students in this category are likely to be very small, they will be part of “the noise” associated with admissions to any HEI. The same comment as for Question 14(a) applies, however.

Question 16

Do you support Option B?

No

A major concern about these proposals is that they make the system of applying for a place at university considerably more complicated than it is now. This may actually make the process less transparent and fair, privileging those with the most knowledgeable and experienced advisers and disadvantaging the very students PQA is supposed to help.

Although attractive in principle, the scheme as outlined seems to be unworkable in practice. There is no indication that HEIs such as Cambridge will be able to specify deadlines for expressions of interest earlier than 31 March. If this is the case, then we could not start assessing applicants in the context of the gathered field until after this deadline. Given the lead-time required to set up schedules for interviews and tests, it is difficult to see how these could conceivably be arranged before summer term began for schools/colleges and universities, and it is then difficult to see when these could practicably take place, given the teaching and examining demands on our academic staff at that time of year.

If an earlier registration deadline is possible within Option B, then obviously these objections no longer apply.

However, we have concerns about the fairness of a system that requires three consecutive application rounds, rather than multiple simultaneous applications, for those submitting new applications in Phase 2. There must be a significant chance that a student achieving unexpectedly high A-level grades will, quite reasonably, apply to a competitive HEI, such as Cambridge, in the first round of Phase 2. If they are unsuccessful in that application, then will there be any places left in round 2 at any of the other HEIs their grades now enable them to aspire to? If not, as seems likely, then the opportunity offered by Phase 2 may in reality be just a mirage. Alternatively, the Phase 2 applicant may well be tempted or advised to lower their aim slightly. When HEIs are collectively putting so much time, effort and resources into raising aspirations, introducing an application system that provides incentives to lower them seems, at best, perverse.

Concerns would also remain about our ability to assess equitably and fairly those who apply in Phase 2 without having applied Phase 1. There is a danger that some applicants and their advisers may perceive this latter application route as a way of making an application to leading universities while avoiding some of the more discriminating aspects of their selection processes (such as admissions tests and interviews). Conversely, if such universities, following the principles of fair admissions, wanted to ensure that applicants approaching them for the first time in August were given the same rigorous assessment as earlier applicants, then processing these applications could take at least a fortnight, introducing probably unacceptable delays into the process.

Some of these objections might be reduced if the public examination system provided much finer-grained differentiation between students and measured reliably more of the attributes leading universities are looking for in applicants.

As discussed, our other major concern about Option B centres around the need to keep Phase 1 applicants “in play” while Phase 2 first-time applicants are considered in order to maintain the concept of the gathered field. Depending on what proportion of places are reserved for Phase 2 allocation, this could be a very large number of students. Cambridge is in the fortunate position of being the preferred choice of the vast majority of our applicants, so we would probably only need to keep perhaps 20% more Phase 1 applicants in play than the number of places we were reserving for Phase 2 allocation. Other HEIs, even some of the most prestigious ones would need to keep much larger numbers of Phase 1 applicants in play in Phase 2 to ensure that they were able eventually to make enough offers to the best applicants they had seen to fill their available places. Taken across all HEIs the number of Phase 1 applicants being invited to reapply in Phase 2 is likely to be huge, and this may well render the entire scheme unworkable.

Question 17

Do you support the proposals made in Chapter 9 for a Delivery Partnership to lead implementation of reform to the applications system, supported by a Stakeholders Advisory Forum?

Yes

This support is, of course, predicated on the assumption that this consultation results in reforms that command strong support across all stakeholder groups being identified for implementation.

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