

The members of the JCQ are as follows:

UCLES, Edexcel, AQA, SQA,  
WJEC, CCEA and City & Guilds

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## UCAS/JCQ WORKING GROUP ON UNIT INFORMATION

### Consultation on proposed incorporation of unit grade information into HE admissions

#### Questionnaire

Name of Respondent: **Dr Geoff Parks**

Job Title: **Director of Admissions for the Cambridge Colleges**

Telephone Number: **01223 332799**

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Name and Address of Institution/Organisation:

**Cambridge Admissions Office  
University of Cambridge  
Fitzwilliam House  
32 Trumpington Street  
Cambridge CB2 1QY**

Type of Institution/Organisation e.g. Comprehensive School, FE College, University, Connexions

**University**

UCAS School Number (where applicable) .....

The UCAS/JCQ Working Group on Unit Information is undertaking a consultation on the proposed incorporation of unit grade information into the HE admissions process. This questionnaire should be completed in conjunction with the accompanying paper from the Group.

This is an important issue for all parties concerned. We are therefore hoping for as much response as possible in order to inform the debate. We would therefore encourage you to consult with colleagues and to provide your institution's response on this questionnaire.

Please return the completed questionnaire by post to Gwyneth Jordan, Outreach Department, UCAS, Rosehill, New Barn Lane, Cheltenham, Glos GL52 3LZ to reach UCAS by **Friday 12 November**.

Gwyneth can be contacted as follows: direct line 01242 544890, fax 01242 544954, email [g.jordan@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:g.jordan@ucas.ac.uk).

The same questionnaire is being sent to all parties. **Section A should be completed by all respondents. Section B is for completion by UCAS member institutions (HEIs and FECs with HE courses) only.**

If you would like to discuss the content of the questionnaire or the issues in the paper, please contact Richard Skerrett – direct line 01242 544868, e-mail [r.skerrett@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:r.skerrett@ucas.ac.uk).

## SECTION A – ALL RESPONDENTS

Please put “X” in the appropriate box

	YES	NO	Not Sure
<p>1. Does your institution/organisation consider that it would be useful for HEIs to receive information about <b>which units</b> of qualifications have been taken or are to be taken (but <b>not</b> actual unit grades)? (See <i>consultation paper 4(a)</i>) Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>Yes, even if unit grade information is not provided, this information will potentially be very helpful in identifying applicants with appropriate knowledge and skills sets for specific courses at HEIs. This is particularly, but not exclusively, important with respect to Maths A-level.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>2. Does your institution/organisation support the principle of HEIs receiving <b>unit grade</b> information as part of the admissions process? (See <i>consultation paper 4(b)</i>) Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>Yes, the admissions process would be considerably enhanced by providing finer grained information about applicant achievement than is presently available.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>3. Does your institution/organisation believe that unit grade information will assist differentiation for entry to selective HE courses? (See <i>consultation paper 3 (a)</i>) Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>Yes, the admissions process would be considerably enhanced by providing finer grained information about applicant achievement than is presently available. However, unit grade information is not a panacea. As far as Cambridge is concerned an applicant with 5 high A grade units and one high B grade unit would almost certainly be better than an applicant with 6 low A grade units, but would appear worse on paper.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	YES	NO	Not Sure
<p>4. Does your institution/organisation believe that the use of unit grade information will make for a fairer admissions process for applicants? (See <i>consultation paper 3(d)</i>) Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>Yes. If HEIs are able to make conditional offers based on future unit grade performance, then this will enable more challenging offers to be made than is presently possible. This in turn will enable HEIs to make more offers which will “put the ball in the applicant’s court”. At present the chances of gaining a place at Cambridge are largely determined by our willingness to make an offer, rather than on the applicant’s ability to meet the offer. This would change if more challenging offers could be made, and would therefore help us to identify and admit the applicants with the greatest ability and potential.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>5. Should unit grade information eg relating to GCE/VCE AS be supplied by applicants as part of the UCAS application, whether or not the qualification has been certificated? (See <i>consultation paper 4 (b) i</i>) Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>Yes. In a fair admissions system the same information should be available about all applicants if at all possible. Not requiring disclosure of unit grade information if not certificated would simply result in tactical certification decisions being made by applicants and their advisers.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>6. Where appropriate, should HEIs’ conditional offers include required grades in particular units? (See <i>consultation paper 4(b) i</i>) Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>Yes. This is desirable both for the reason discussed in answer to question 4 and because in some cases not all units are equally important as a preparation for study of particular HE courses. HEIs should be able to target the most relevant units in offers where this is appropriate. At present some applicants are able to compensate for weak performance in relevant units by strong performance in irrelevant ones. This is clearly an unsatisfactory situation.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>7. Should unit grade information eg for GCE/VCE A level be supplied through UCAS to HEIs in August to inform the Confirmation process? (See <i>consultation paper 4(b)ii</i>) Please make any comments:</p> <p><b>Yes. This is obviously essential if conditional offers are being made based on performance in individual units, but it will also provide HEIs with useful finer-grained information to help in the exercising of discretion about those who have narrowly missed their conditional offers.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	YES	NO	Not Sure
<p>8. Should unit grade information be taken into account at Confirmation:</p> <p>(a) by all HEIs for all courses? <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p>(b) on a discretionary basis for certain courses only? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>(See consultation paper 4(b) ii)</p> <p>Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>The information should be provided to all HEIs, but it is surely up to individual HEIs to determine what use to make of this information within their admissions procedures.</b></p>			
<p>9. Should UMS marks be used in the HE admissions process in addition to unit grades? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>(See consultation paper 4(e))</p> <p>Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>As our answer to question 3 indicates, unit grade information is not a panacea. Given how coarse the grading bands are, a given grade can still disguise a huge variation in performance.</b></p> <p><b>The argument that disclosure of UMS marks will lead to HEIs placing too much weight on spurious differences is itself spurious – HEIs already do this: for instance in the difference between 479 UMS marks (= grade B) and 480 UMS marks (= grade A).</b></p> <p><b>Full disclosure of UMS marks on each unit (and the ability to set offers on these) will enable HEIs to see the full picture clearly and identify for themselves significant and insignificant differences, rather than having almost arbitrary distinctions imposed upon them by the setting of grade boundaries.</b></p>			
<p>10. Please make any additional comments here:</p>			

## SECTION B – UCAS MEMBER INSTITUTIONS ONLY (HEIs and FECs with HE courses)

	YES	NO	Not Sure
<p>11. Would your institution wish to take into account details on the UCAS application of which units of qualifications have been taken and are likely to be taken?</p> <p>Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>Yes, even if unit grade information is not provided, this information will potentially be very helpful in identifying applicants with appropriate knowledge and skills sets for specific courses at HEIs. This is particularly, but not exclusively, important with respect to Maths A-level.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>12. Would your institution wish to specify which units of qualifications should be taken?</p> <p>Please give any specific details here:</p> <p><b>Certainly not in all cases, but in some cases, especially in respect of Maths (and Further Maths) A-level, we would wish to specify which units were essential preparation for specific courses.</b></p>			
<p>13. Would your institution wish to receive on the UCAS application details of unit grades achieved eg in GCE/VCE AS?</p> <p>Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>Yes, the admissions process would be considerably enhanced by providing finer grained information about applicant achievement than is presently available.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>14. Would your institution wish to make conditional offers including unit grade requirements?</p> <p>Please give more detailed information here:</p> <p><b>Yes. This would enable us to make more challenging and therefore more offers, which, as argued in our response to question 4, would make the admissions process fairer for applicants. It would also enable us to target the most relevant units in offers where this is appropriate.</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	YES	NO	NOT SURE
<p>15. Would your institution wish to make use of unit grade information from UCAS at Confirmation of Offers for all courses?</p> <p>If not, please give further details here:</p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>16. Would your institution like to receive UMS marks for GCE/VCE A level in addition to unit marks?</p> <p>Please make any comments here:</p> <p><b>Please see our answer to question 9.</b></p>			
<p>17. If grade A in GCE A level were to be subdivided, would this affect your response to Q 11-16?</p> <p>If so, please give details here</p> <p><b>A subdivided A grade would be an improvement on the current situation, but only a marginal improvement. If the subdivision was simply on the basis of total UMS marks, it would encourage even more strongly the serial resitting of AS modules in order to squirrel away marks as protection against the “hard winter” of more challenging A2 modules.</b></p> <p><b>Similarly, the recent suggestions that an A* grade be awarded to those achieving A grades in every unit would again encourage resitting of units until an A was achieved. It would also exacerbate the problem alluded to in our answer to question 3: a student scoring 6×80 (total UMS score: 480) would be awarded an A*, while a student scoring 5×100 and 1×79 (total UMS score: 579) would only get an A. This is a patently absurd outcome.</b></p> <p><b>To reiterate the point made in our response to question 9: Full disclosure of UMS marks on each unit (the ability to set offers on these) will enable HEIs to see the full picture clearly and identify for themselves significant and insignificant differences, rather than having almost arbitrary distinctions imposed upon them by the setting of grade boundaries. This is the only route forward that will make admissions to HE genuinely fairer. Any system of grading/aggregation will inevitably result in inequalities (and tactical game-playing by applicants and their schools/colleges).</b></p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>18. Please make any additional comments here:</p> <p><b>If a simple change is to be made, the most effective one would be to implement the recommendation of the 2002 Tomlinson Enquiry and decouple the AS and A2 qualifications.</b></p> <p><b>We would be very happy to use AEAs to assist in differentiation (as suggested in section 3(a) of the consultation paper), if their take-up and confidence in them rose. As taking AEAs is of considerable benefit educationally to the most able, because of the nature of the engagement with the subject they cultivate, promoting their use would actually, in many ways, be preferable to changing the grading basis of A-levels to improve differentiation. Longer term, the Tomlinson Working Group’s recommendation that AEA-style questions be incorporated into A2s (or their successors) is the best way forward.</b></p>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Thank you for your time in completing this questionnaire. Please ensure that your completed questionnaire reaches UCAS by **Friday 12 November**.