



# UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Academic Division  
Cambridge Admissions Office

APR TEAM  
UCAS  
NEW BARN LANE  
CHELTENHAM

19 January 2012

Dear Sir / Madam,

The University of Cambridge regards it as good practice that the application process delivered by UCAS for undergraduate entry to UK higher education institutions should be reviewed on a regular basis in order to ensure that it best serves the needs of the higher education sector, schools and colleges, and, importantly, of the applicants themselves.

However, we have the following serious concerns about the proposals contained within the UCAS consultation:

- that students would not cease to be led by predicted grades when they make their initial choices
- that all post-results models presented to date (including the model in the UCAS consultation) would reduce student choice
- that the proposed model of application post results would force students to make rushed decisions
- that the proposed application timetable would put intense pressure on students, teachers and advisers, parents, and admissions staff
- that the proposals will obstruct our widening participation efforts
- that the reduction in study time will have serious repercussions for students
- that the proposed timetable will have serious consequences for the quality of the admissions process operated at institutional level

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- that the proposals undoubtedly involve greater, not less complexity, at a much more challenging time, and on an unacceptably tight timescale; students from non-traditional backgrounds will have access to less effective advice and guidance when it matters

It is vital that any review should be based on a foundation of robust research and evidence. It is notable that the final consultation document omits some significant findings collected during the evidence-gathering stage of the review, and that there is a lack of evidence in relation to the potential impact of the proposals. For ease, Appendix 1 to this letter lists our particular concerns in this regard.

We do, however, believe that a number of adjustments could be made to the current process which would significantly improve the experience for students without creating the levels of uncertainty and disruption implied by the proposals. We have itemised these at Appendix 2 below.

Our overall view is that the longer term proposals set out in the consultation seem to be disproportionate to the issues uncovered by the review. For that reason we would argue for a concerted effort to improve the current process rather than a complete re-engineering.

We would be happy to discuss the content of this letter and our response in more detail if this would be helpful.

Yours sincerely

Mr J Beard  
Director of Undergraduate Recruitment

Dr P Fara  
Associate Secretary  
Senior Tutors' Committee

Dr G Parks  
Director of Admissions for the Cambridge Colleges

Professor J Rallison  
Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education)



## Appendix 1: Evidence and the Review

- 1.1 The first of the principal conclusions of the review is that ‘applicants are asked to make choices about what and where to study before they are fully ready’. This statement appears to be at odds with slide 10 of the document *APR Applicant Voice*, which states that ‘applicants are happy with the timings and deadlines involved in the UCAS process’.
- 1.2 The evidence that students select choices that they are ‘not interested in’ and that many attend open days after the point they have made their choices is used to further support the notion that students are making decisions before they are ready. However, it is arguable that this simply reflects the fact that students continue to refine their choices throughout the cycle, gathering increasingly detailed information and forming relationships with higher education institutions as they travel. This is a valuable process because it ensures that decisions taken by students are well considered. A post-results system removes the imperative to research and is likely to impact adversely most on those students who are the least well supported.
- 1.3 The second of the principal conclusions is that the current process is too complex – particularly Apply. Yet last year almost half a million students were placed through UCAS system, and the review reports that over 54% described the process as ‘extremely simple’ or ‘simple’ and less than 12% described it as ‘complex’ or ‘extremely complex’. The evidence therefore is that the majority of students do not find the main part of the process as difficult to navigate as the review suggests. Whilst later stages of the process are shown to be perceived as more complex, this is surely symptomatic of the pressure placed on the student by a narrow timeframe and lack of remaining vacancies rather than a statement on the process itself.
- 1.4 It is suggested that the Insurance choice is not working as a backstop, but the consultation itself records that 38,000 students were successfully placed by this route last year. Arguably, even if it is never used, the Insurance choice remains an important and effective mechanism if it gives students the confidence to aim high in their HE applications. To remove it would seriously impede efforts to widen participation and undermine agreements made with the Office for Fair Access.
- 1.5 It is notable that although the evidence shows that two thirds of applicants use all five of their choices and ‘having fewer options is unpopular across the board regardless of the number of applications applicants made themselves’, the proposal remains to reduce significantly the number of choices made available to a student.
- 1.6 It is a significant concern that no evidence or model is presented which shows what the impact of a post-results system might be. There is, for example, no evidence that students who apply in possession of their results would make applications to a different profile of courses and/or institutions compared to those who apply using predictions alone.



## **Appendix 2: Steps Towards a Better Process**

- 2.1 We support the suggestion that students should be allowed to submit personal statements that are tailored towards each of the institutions to which they have applied.
- 2.2 We also strongly believe that a deadline should be set by which all key transactions with UCAS are conducted electronically. Removing paper copies from the process will reduce cost and improve turnaround times.
- 2.3 Since it is argued that many students use their Insurance choice incorrectly, it would seem sensible to explore ways in which the online application procedure can be adapted either to ensure that applicants understand the consequences of accepting an Insurance offer that has conditions higher than or equal to those of their Firm choice, or to prevent them from accepting such an offer.
- 2.4 Imposing a break of between one and two weeks between the publication of results and the start of Clearing would have the dual benefits of ensuring that Confirmation is completed (thus allowing HEIs to better plan for Adjustment and Clearing), and that students have time to conduct further research having fully come to terms with their results (whether better or worse than expected).
- 2.5 We welcome the suggestion that UCAS works more closely with the Student Loans Company to align or integrate processes, and would welcome the provision of a central service which makes recommendations regarding fee assessment and assists with the CRB process.
- 2.6 We would encourage UCAS to negotiate with awarding bodies in order to make available AS/A Level UMS scores to HEIs. The University of Cambridge already makes extensive use of these and is arguably therefore one of the few institutions already operating a system based on post-16 examination results. Our evidence shows that UMS scores are the best available predictor of a student's likely academic performance once admitted to university, and considerably reduce reliance on predicted grades in the selection process.