

Survey of 2015 cycle UCAS applicants on the use of their personal data

UCAS

UCAS Analysis and Research
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Key findings from the personal data survey

UK domiciled undergraduate UCAS applicants were invited, by email, to participate in an online survey between the 14th and 17th April 2015. In this four day period there were 37,000 respondents (a response rate of 7.2%) and 28,000 of those answered all 35 questions (equating to a response rate of 5.5%).

Some of the questions in the survey were based on the measurement of data trust developed in the RSS/IPSOS MORI survey *Perceptions of Data Sharing* conducted in June 2014 to enable comparisons to the wider population¹. The language used for different types of data user (for example, *The British Government*) was kept the same where possible. The full set of questions used in the survey are provided at Annex A.

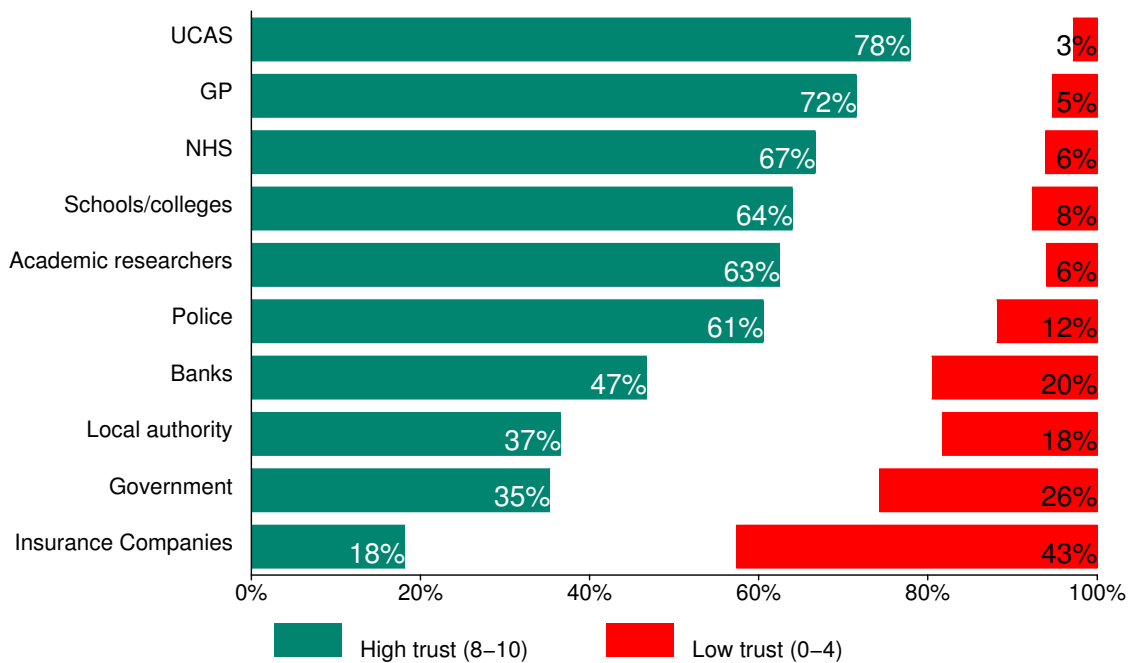
The 28,000 respondents who answered all questions were weighted, using a response model, to be representative of the characteristics and numbers of the UK domiciled March deadline applicant population (see Annex B for details). These weighted responses from those who answered every question are used as the base for this analysis (referred to in these results, for simplicity, as *applicants*). The pattern of results reported are similar to those calculated from the responses before weighting. Data for every question, with both the weighted and unweighted values, are provided in the data tables (see Annex C for details).

¹ See <http://www.statslife.org.uk/news/1672-new-rss-research-finds-data-trust-deficit-with-lessons-for-policy-makers>

78 per cent have a high level of trust in UCAS to use their personal data appropriately

Most, 78 per cent, of applicants reported a high level of trust in UCAS to use their personal data appropriately. This is higher than for any other organisation included in the survey questions for comparison, including Schools (64 per cent having high trust), academic researchers (63 per cent), Banks (47 per cent), and local (37 per cent) and central (35 per cent) Government. Few applicants report low data trust in UCAS (3 per cent), though those with low trust may have chosen not to use UCAS or to answer the survey. The proportion reporting low trust is higher for some other organizations, for example 26 per cent have low trust in Government.

Figure 1 Proportion of respondents (weighted) with high (score of 8 to 10) or low (score of 0 to 4) levels of trust in using personal data appropriately by organisation



Applicants are cautious about providing their personal data to other organisations

Personal data was defined in the survey as data where an applicant could potentially be identified, including where names were not provided. Around half of applicants (56 per cent) agreed with the statement that UCAS should only provide data where there was no chance of them being identified, 14 per cent of applicants disagreed with this statement.

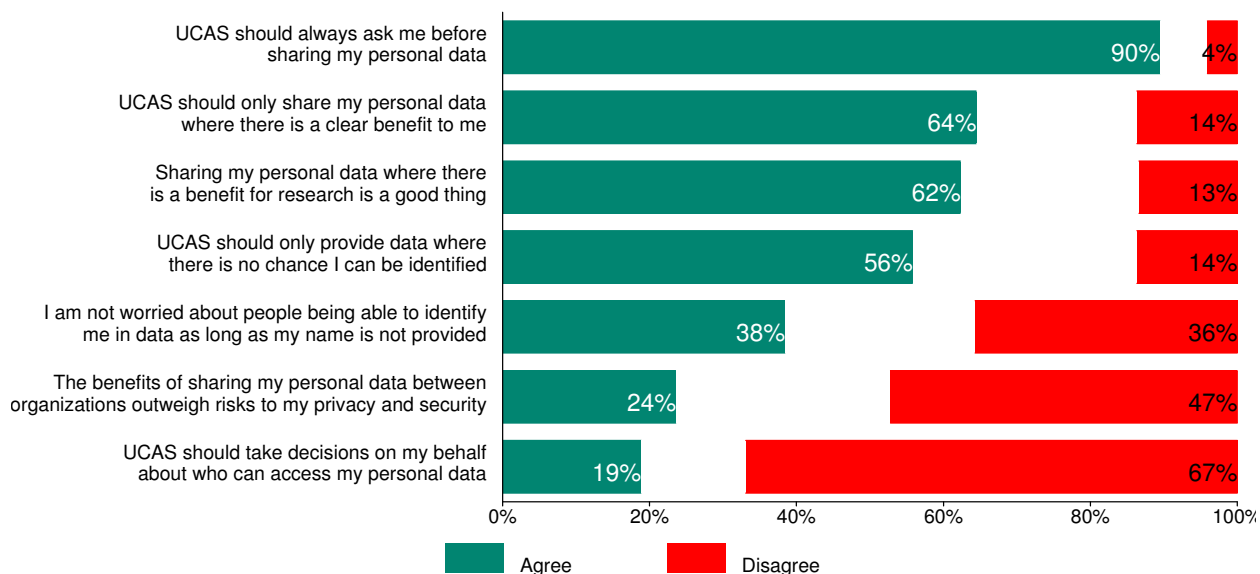
When asked if, in general, the benefits of providing personal data outweighed the risks, 24 per cent agreed and 47 per cent disagreed.

There was a relatively high proportion of applicants who did not agree or disagree with these general statements. Answers to other questions in the survey suggest this may reflect many applicants wanting to assess each use on its merits, rather than give a single answer.

Almost all applicants want to be asked before their personal data is provided

The responses from applicants showed a preference for remaining in direct control of their personal data. The large majority of applicants (90 per cent) agreed with the statement that they should be asked before their personal data was provided, over twenty times more than disagreed with that statement (4 per cent).

Figure 2 Proportion of respondents (weighted) who agree or disagree with various general statements about the use of their personal data.



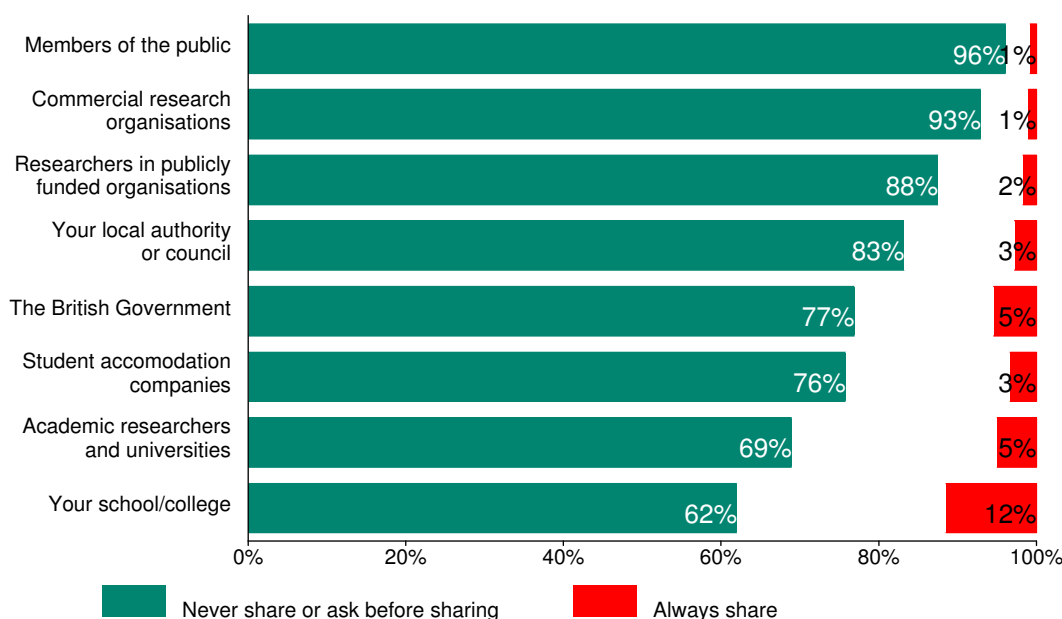
Applicants recognise value of research but want to decide themselves on providing data

Applicants were asked about their views on providing personal data for statistical research purposes, where it was made clear no contact would be made with them or actions taken relating to them personally.

Most applicants (62 per cent) agreed with the general statement that sharing personal data where there is a benefit for research is a good thing. When asked about their personal data being provided for statistical research purposes to a range of potential users, a majority said that either they must be asked first or that their data should never be provided. This was the case across every user type proposed, including schools (62 per cent), academic researchers (69 per cent), central Government (77 per cent), local Government (83 per cent) and researchers in publicly funded organisations (88 per cent).

Relatively few applicants said they wanted their personal data to *always* be provided for research purposes, typically between 1 and 5 per cent, higher at 12 per cent for Schools.

Figure 3 Proportion of respondents (weighted) who said to never provide, or to ask first, for providing their personal data to different organisations for statistical research



Applicants prefer control of each and every use of their personal data for research purposes

Typically applicants indicated that their consent must be sought each and every time their personal data was provided for research. For example, for providing personal data to Government for statistical research purposes, 9 per cent said they would never share, 49 per cent said they should be asked each and every time, 19 per cent wanted to be asked just once, 18 per cent were content for UCAS to decide if it was safe and appropriate, and 6 per cent were happy for their data to always be provided.

The pattern of wanting to be asked, and being asked each and every time being preferred, is similar across most potential research data users. The full distribution for each use is provided in the data tables.

Applicants want to be asked about providing named personal data for operational purposes

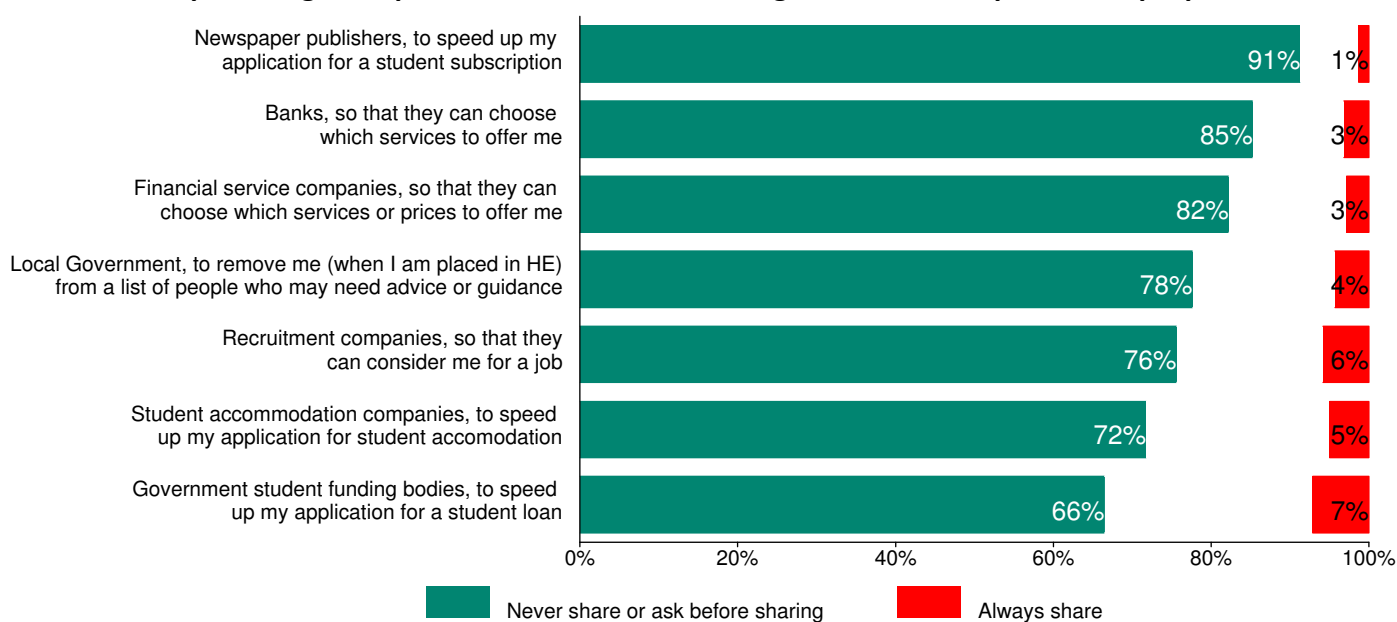
Almost two thirds (64 per cent) of applicants agreed with the statement that their personal data should only be shared where there was a clear benefit to them personally.

Applicants were asked about their views on providing personal data (including their names) for operational processing purposes that might benefit them. These were explained as purposes where some action about them as an individual, possibly including some form of contact could be made. Views were sought for a range of potential users of personal data and, for clarity, an example of the operational processing use was provided (for example, to *Government student funding bodies to speed up my application for a student loan*).

Overall, the views of respondents about providing their data for operational purposes were similar to providing for statistical research purposes. A majority of applicants said that they should be asked before any data was provided (or that their data should never be provided). This proportion ranged from 66 per cent for student loan applications to 91 per cent for accessing student subscriptions from newspaper publishers.

As in the case of research uses, applicants typically indicated they would like to be asked on each and every occasion. For example, when asked about providing named personal data to recruitment companies so that they could be considered for jobs, 6 per cent said never provide their data, 45 per cent to ask their consent each and every time, 24 per cent to ask them just once, 19 per cent were content for UCAS to decide on their behalf, and 6 per cent said their data should always be provided without them being asked.

Figure 4 Proportion of respondents (weighted) who said to never provide, or to ask first, for providing their personal data to different organisations for operational purposes



Applicants say providing personal data without consent reduces trust in admissions service

At the end of the survey, applicants were asked to report what their response might have been to a hypothetical situation where, before they applied to UCAS, they were told their personal data would be provided to other organisations for certain purposes without their consent being asked for first. This question was asked of all respondents, including those who had previously indicated that they always wanted their personal data shared, or were content to let UCAS take decisions on their behalf.

Three scenarios were presented. In each case a substantial proportion (between 40 per cent and 78 per cent) said they would trust UCAS less with their data, or would consider not using UCAS to apply to higher education, if their data were provided without their consent.

For the scenario of personal data being provided to Government to speed up an application for a student loan, 60 per cent of applicants said they would be content with the arrangement, 34 per cent said they would continue to use UCAS but would trust UCAS less, and an additional 6 per cent said they would consider not using UCAS if their data were used in that way.

When asked to consider that their personal data was provided to Government and other organisations for statistical research purposes, 44 per cent said they would be content, 48 per cent said that they would continue to use UCAS but would trust it less, and an additional 8 per cent said they would consider not using UCAS.

For the example of providing personal data to commercial organisations for operational decisions such as what type of bank account to be offered only a minority, 22 per cent, said they would be content. Around half of applicants (49 per cent) said they would trust UCAS less and a further 29 per cent said they would consider not using UCAS.

The responses weighted back to the size and characteristics of the March deadline UK domiciled applicant population at March deadline suggests that in total roughly 200,000 to 400,000 of this group would trust UCAS less if one of the proposed personal data sharing uses was done without active consent. Within this total, some would consider not using UCAS as a result of how their personal data was being used, with the weighted figures suggesting a range from 29,000 for providing for operational student loan uses, 42,500 for statistical research purposes, and 153,000 for providing for operational commercial purposes.

Further comments provided by 12 per cent of respondents

In total 4,000 comments were left by applicants – a 12 per cent completion rate amongst survey respondents. As in the responses to the survey questions, the comments reflect a range of views on personal data provision. Many comments stress the importance of asking consent before providing data, even if the individual intends to provide their data. Often reference is made to wanting to assess the extent, nature and purpose of data provision before giving consent, with support indicated for personal data provision in specific contexts.

Some comments show a high awareness of personal data issues, including the risks of identifying people from data that does not include names, and how data can be used to track individuals. Some comments reflect a view that applicants are capable of weighing up the risks and benefits of making their own decisions about personal data.

Some comments argue the specific importance of consent for personal data provision in relation to a service like UCAS as it would not be easy to apply to university by another route if they disagreed with the use of their data.

Annex A: Questions used in the survey

Q1:

“Please tell us on a score of 0 to 10 how much you personally trust each of the organisations below to use your personal data appropriately. 0 means you do not trust an organisation at all, and 10 means you have complete trust.”

Rows are [rows randomised per respondent]:

- Banks
- Insurance companies
- Your local authority or council
- Your school or college
- UCAS
- The NHS
- Your GP surgery
- Academic researchers and universities
- The British Government
- The police

Q2:

We want to seek your views on some examples of how personal data could be provided for research purposes. In these examples your personal data would be used for statistical analysis but would not be used to contact you or to take any action about you personally. In each of these made-up examples please tell us your view on how acceptable you would find sharing of your personal data to the example organisation for research purposes.

Response columns are (left to right)

- “Never provide my data to this type of organisation”
- “Provide my data, but ask for my consent every time”
- “Provide my data, but ask for my consent just once”
- “Provide my data without asking me, if UCAS thinks it will be used in an acceptable and safe way”
- “Always provide my data to this type of organisation without asking me first”

Rows are [rows randomised per respondent]:

- Your local authority or council
- Your school or college
- Academic researchers and universities
- Members of the public
- The British Government
- Researchers in publically funded organisations outside of universities
- Commercial research organisations
- Student accommodation companies

Q3:

Some organisations want to access your personal data so they can take a decision about offering you a particular service. In these examples the organisation would always require personal data with your name, and sometimes your contact details. Please tell us your view on how you would like your named personal data to be used in each of the made-up examples.

Response columns are (left to right)

- “Never provide my data to this type of organisation”
- “Provide my data, but ask for my consent every time”
- “Provide my data, but ask for my consent just once”
- “Provide my data without asking me, if UCAS thinks it will be used in an acceptable and safe way”
- “Always provide my data to this type of organisation without asking me first”

Rows are [rows randomised per respondent]:

- Newspaper publishers, to speed up my application for a student subscription
- Local Government, to remove me (when I am placed in higher education) from a list of people who may need advice or guidance
- Student accommodation companies, to speed up my application for student accommodation
- Government student funding bodies, to speed up my application for a student loan
- Banks, so that they can choose which services or prices to offer me
- Financial services companies, so that they can choose which services or prices to offer me such as special student insurance
- Recruitment companies, so that they can consider me for jobs

Q4:

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Response columns are (left to right)

- “Strongly agree”
- “Tend to agree”
- “Neither agree or disagree”
- “Tend to disagree”
- “Strongly disagree”

Rows are [rows randomised per respondent]:

- UCAS should take decisions on my behalf about who can access my personal data
- UCAS should always ask me before sharing my personal data
- UCAS should only provide data where there is no chance that I can be identified

- I am not worried about people being able to identify me in data so long as my name is not provided
- The benefits of sharing my personal data between organisations outweigh the risks to my privacy and security
- UCAS should only share my personal data where there is a clear benefit to me personally
- Sharing my personal data where there is a benefit for research is a good thing

Q5:

Imagine that before you applied to UCAS you were told that your personal data would be provided to Government and other organisations for statistical research purposes. Would you...?

Rows are [rows not randomised – only select one]:

- Be content my data was being used in this way
- Continue to use UCAS but would trust it less
- Consider not using UCAS

Q6:

Imagine that before you applied to UCAS you were told that your personal data would be provided to Government to help take decisions about you as an individual, such as speeding up checks on your student loan application. Would you...?

Rows are [rows not randomised – only select one]:

- Be content my data was being used in this way
- I would continue to use UCAS but would trust it less
- I would consider not using UCAS

Q7:

Imagine that before you applied to UCAS you were told that your personal data would be provided to commercial organisations to help take decisions about you as an individual, such as what type of bank account or insurance to offer you. Would you...?

Rows are [rows not randomised – only select one]:

- Be content my data was being used in this way
- I would continue to use UCAS but would trust it less
- I would consider not using UCAS

Annex B: Notes on analysis methodology

All UK domiciled undergraduate applicants at the 24 March deadline were considered within the scope of the survey (521,000). Once contact preferences were taken into account, a total of 510,000 invitations to complete the survey were sent by email on 14th April 2015. The survey remained open until 17th April 2015, and a total of 37,000 responses were received within that four day period (7.2 per cent of all invited). Three quarters of those that responded (28,000) answered all 35 questions (5.5 per cent of all invited). It is this base of applicants that answered every question that are used in the analysis reported here and in the data tables and comments file.

The data has been weighted by sex, age, background, and country of domicile to be representative of the complete UK March deadline population by those dimensions. In each of the tables and charts we show the weighted responses for this base of 521,000 applicants. The weighted totals can be taken as an estimate of how many applicants hold a particular view if those who did not respond to the survey had the same views, within each of the weighting categories, as those who did respond.

Annex C: The survey data tables

A full set of data tables are provided for each question in the survey.

The survey results are presented both as the number of responses in each category (from the 28,000 respondents who answered all questions) and as the weighted (by the methodology described in Annex B) totals.

As well as the overall results, data (responses and weighted totals) are also provided for the different types of applicant used in the weighting model. Results are reported by sex, age, area background (POLAR3 classification) and UK country of domicile. The area background measure, POLAR3, is based on the level of young participation in higher education. In the data tables it is used as a general measure of advantage or disadvantage in order to classify applicants of all ages.

For each question, the weighted results are given first, then then unweighted results in the same format. The final total row states whether weighted or unweighted results are being reported.

A separate data file is provided of the free text comments. This contains the free text comments made by the 28,000 respondents who answered all the questions. Comments were only removed from this file if they contained information that could identify an individual, if they contained words that might be considered offensive, or were about a topic unrelated to personal data.