

consultation response

Department for Education – Secondary School Accountability Consultation

UCAS' mission is to help learners make informed choices that best suit their aspirations and abilities and maximise their opportunity for success, and to benefit our university and college members, local authorities, schools, colleges and training providers through the provision of shared services.

UCAS provides information and advice, course information, entry requirements, and application services to around 650,000 applicants to over 350 UK higher education providers each year. These applicants make over 2 million applications to higher education (HE) courses. UCAS services support applications for full-time HNCs, HNDs and foundation degrees as well as undergraduate and some postgraduate degrees.

UCAS Progress¹ is a UK provider of course search and application services focused on learners' applications and transition to post-16 education and training. Its online course directory and application services cover all opportunities and destinations available locally for young people – including academic, vocational and apprenticeships/work-based training. UCAS Progress Search and Search and Apply currently operate across 76 local authorities in England and 1 in Wales. Services are used by around 2,180 schools and colleges and available to over 245,000 learners (and their parents).

UCAS welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation in relation to Secondary School Accountability. Learner choices at Key Stage 4 are important for determining their future progression pathways.

UCAS has responded to the Department for Education consultation in relation to the reform of Key Stage 4 qualifications. Although we have seen a change in direction regarding the reform of Key Stage 4 qualifications, we recommend that our response to that particular consultation is read in conjunction with this one.

Learner choice

Key Stage 4 is an important educational milestone with a number of potential outcomes and progression routes. It is important that learners make the right choices at this stage in order to keep a wide range of opportunities open to them. These choices should be made for the right reasons.

In this context it is important that school performance measures do not limit or influence student choice at Key Stage 4. For instance, students should not be encouraged to take qualifications on the basis that it is included within any accountability measure. The key consideration should be whether it is appropriate for the individual, their interests, and their future intentions.

UCAS believes that consideration should be given to the potential impact on widening participation. For instance, the proposed assessment techniques for GCSE examinations seek to reduce scaffolded and tiered questioning. Such an approach may not meet the needs of the whole ability range within the learner cohort. In limiting the scope for all learners to demonstrate their skills and knowledge, some learners may be particularly disadvantaged.

¹ <https://www.ucasprogress.com/>

There is also potential for the changes to the type of assessment methods proposed to inadvertently influence student choice.

UCAS welcome the inclusion of vocational qualifications within these accountability measures, and hopes that their inclusion will facilitate schools offering the full range of qualifications and options to learners.

References to higher education

The consultation states that the English Baccalaureate provides an “excellent grounding” for progression to HE. Whilst universities and colleges value the English Baccalaureate GCSE subjects for the core knowledge that they offer, other GCSE subjects, such as Religious Studies and English Literature, as well as other qualifications will carry the same currency in terms of demonstrating ability and suitability for progression to HE.

UCAS is not aware of any of its member institutions specifically requiring the English Baccalaureate in its entry requirements. HE providers are looking for achievement in range of GCSE subjects (or equivalent), including those that are contained within the English Baccalaureate.

The consultation document states that “wider achievements are frequently used by universities...to distinguish between pupils with similar academic attainment”. It is worth noting here that HE admissions staff take into account a number of factors when considering an application. As well as prior academic achievement this assessment may include additional tests, interviews, submission of work, work experience, or contextual information. Universities are autonomous in their decision making and the way in which they arrive at a decision regarding an individual applicant will differ from institution to institution.

Contextual data service

Contextual data is data used by universities and colleges to consider the attainment of an individual in the context of the circumstances in which it has been achieved. This typically includes educational, geo-demographic and socio-economic background data.

UCAS provides its members with a basket of data via its Contextual Data Service. This provides a number of data items, including:

- School performance average of students achieving 5 A*-C GCSE including English or Welsh and mathematics or equivalent in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Scottish Standard grade/SCQF level 4 or equivalent in Scotland)
- Average school “best 8” GCSE performance (England and Wales) and equivalent SCQF level 4 in Scotland

If our member institutions requested that the proposed accountability measures be included within the Contextual Data Service, UCAS would be keen to discuss with the Department how this could be achieved.

Education Destination Measures

Although not specifically consulted on, UCAS notes that the Department for Education published Education Destination Measures for the first time in July 2012. The data is as follows:

- The KS4 Measure is based on activity at academic age 16 (i.e. the year after the young person left compulsory schooling).

- The Key Stage 5 (KS5) Measure is based on activity in the year after the young person took A level or equivalent qualifications.

The Key Stage 5 measure details the number of students who progress to any higher education institutions, any Russell Group institutions and the University of Oxford and University of Cambridge.

The consultation document notes that the Department will consult separately regarding the performance measures for post-16 providers. We hope that this will provide an opportunity to comment in detail on the progression to HE measures.