

Variable start dates working group: Final recommendations

Background

A variable start dates working group (VSDWG) was initially commissioned by the Undergraduate Advisory Group in February 2017 at the request of the Change Steering Group. A group of interested providers met in April 2017 to work with representatives from UCAS to review the current challenges posed by variable starts and developed a high-level proposal that was submitted and approved by the Undergraduate Advisory Group in June 2017. As development of the UCAS Undergraduate Application Management Service (AMS) was still in its early stages, it was not possible to deliver detailed recommendations at this time. As work on AMS continued, the Change Steering Group requested in November 2017 that the group be reformed, formalised and to extend the scope across all schemes.

The reformed VSDWG was established in 2018, and met three times between November 2018 and March 2019 to consider the current challenges presented by courses with variable start dates across each of the schemes, along with the initial recommendations for the UG scheme delivered in 2017. These were quickly dismissed as being likely to introduce more issues than they would solve. The group recognised that non-traditional start dates are still the minority and that any recommendations should not have a significant impact on applications to autumn start dates.

The work of the VSDWG assumes that the proposals of the Dates and Deadlines Working Group are implemented; which included the retention of 15th October and 15th January as the main cycle application deadlines for September/October start courses. It also assumes UCAS will introduce the ability to defer RPAs and conditional offers as part of the AMS delivery workstream.

The group comprised of representatives from across the HE sector including several alternative providers. All members had at least one course with a non-traditional start date, providing a useful balance between the needs of catering for these courses against their requirements for traditional start dates - mirroring the practice across the sector.

Final recommendations

1. Introduce a control to stop applicants from accepting an insurance choice with a start date before the start date of their firm choice. See recommendation 2 for further information on the parameters.
2. Introduce functionality in the Collection Tool to allow providers to indicate at course level, the final date a new application would be considered – this date could be before or after the course start date

- This field would be optional, but if populated would automatically remove the start date from search once the date is passed. If the field is blank the opportunity would be displayed until the end of the cycle
- For this to work UCAS would also need to make the course start date within the collection tool a mandatory field
- The search tool should be intelligent enough to know that a course start date and grace period has passed and so the opportunity should not be advertised.

3. Allow applicants to filter search opportunities by intake.

- Applicants can then actively display courses with variable start dates, or filter these out completely.

4. A provider should be able to indicate that a course is available for future start dates.

- This should only display if the provider has filled in relevant information around the other options available
- If left blank a generic UCAS message would display

5. There should be an 'enrolled' flag against an applicant for providers to use to stop opportunities such as the 'I'm still looking' flag, UCAS Media campaigns etc. being available to applicants who have already started their course.

- This flag would be optional for all courses but providers with non-traditional start dates would be actively encouraged to use it for relevant applicants

6. No changes should be made to the equal consideration deadline for courses with variable start dates, but more guidance should be offered to manage applicants' expectations if they are applying for courses with non-traditional start dates

7. Providers with non-traditional start dates starts should be able to set a 'latest DBD date' in the collection tool, as it is unrealistic for applicants to think they can use this choice as an option once the course has started.

- If the applicant chooses to miss that date the offer would be withdrawn and their application would continue, to allow them to 'move on' and manage their other choices.
- This needs to account for the 14-day reply cooling off period.

8. For non-traditional starts providers need the ability to set the vacancy status as 'open but' and display relevant guidance to applicants in both the search tool and AMS.

- This would be used when in circumstances including (but not limited to) when the provider has nearly ran out of time or spaces for a particular intake and messaging would be along the lines of: you may not be considered for the January intake but you may be considered for the September intake instead.

9. For non-traditional start dates providers need ability to flag that the applicant can 'agree to move on to the next available intake'