

Student Advisory Group Agenda

SAG/24/A1

Student Adviser Advisory Group meeting

To be held on Friday 9 February 2024 online via MS Teams

Meeting scheduled to start at 10:30 – 13:00

Chair:	Sunil Parshotam	Lead Customer Success Manager
Attendees:	Abishek Saha	University of Oxford
	Alex Dunn	University of Bristol
	Emma Berwick	University of Birmingham
	Emilia Edwards	Project Pioneers Founder & IT Apprentice
	Danyal Hussian	Ermysteds Grammar School
	Habil Alam	Ermysteds Grammar School
	Maya Blackmore	Swansea University
	Millie Gallimore	Stockport Grammar School
	Nawal Sheikh Bin-Sheikh	Solicitor Degree Apprentice
	Nitish Tamhankar	Marshall Aerospace Degree Apprentice
	Reeva Sharma	Coventry University
	Rubin Poku	Black Apprentice Network Founder
	Samantha Croucher	TUI Degree Apprentice
	Shah Yaseen Ali	Newcastle University
	Taylor Watson	Project Pioneers Founder & IT Apprentice
Apologies:	Amy Vince	University of Hertfordshire
	Holly Cobb	University of Oxford
	Lamin Tarawally	School of Oriental & African Studies
	(SOAS)	
	Oyindi Adeniyi	Hull York Medicine School
	Wayne Gouro	University of Oxford
UCAS in attendance:	Courteney Sheppard	Director of Customer Experience (Interim)
	James Austin	Lead Product Manager
	Laura Hawkins	Customer Engagement Coordinator
	Lanka Smith	Senior UX Researcher
Presenting:	Alexa Gillett	Lead Product Manager
	Carolyn Mindos	Principal Admissions Reform Lead
	Clare Cozens	Group Product Manager
	Craig Froggatt	Team Manager (Team Bonsai)
	Gabriela Geeson	Customer Insight Lead
	Genia Garrity	Led Product Manager
	Kim Eccleston	Head of Strategy & Reform
	Laura Ratcliffe	Senior UX/UI Designer
	Melanie Allford	UX Researcher

Pete Milsom
Phil Bowell
Rachel Harris
Nicola Turner

Partnerships Manager
Senior UX/UI Designer
Product Owner
Senior Fair Access Adviser

Action

A3/23/01 Welcome and apologies

The Group was welcomed to the meeting and the apologies were noted.

A3/23/02 Minutes and action log from previous meeting

The minutes were approved as a correct and accurate reflection of the last meeting.

The open actions from the log were discussed:

- SAG035 - The two actions include adding to the provider pages and adding content to subject guides around relevant societies and social life. UCAS are currently exploring options with a partner about how clubs, societies, events, and student union content could be added onto the provider pages. Conversations are immature currently; however, the aim is to have something by Q3 at the latest next year. This means UCAS will not be adding specific content in the short term, but more valuable specific and exciting info will arrive by Q3.

A3/23/03 Product Update

UCAS are making changes to the personal statement driven by a reform project. Clare Cozens and Melanie Allford presented the upcoming changes to UCAS' personal statement strategy and slides will be shared with the minutes. The UX and Insights Teams will work closely with advisers and students on how to best present the three questions and to build information and guidance and best practice support to make it a smoother process for applicants.

The character count will be a key area of focus, and the line limit is being removed whilst extenuating circumstances will be in a separate box with a 1,000-character limit. These changes aim to be in place for the 2026 admissions cycle, so students have time to prepare over the summer.

Feedback from the group included:

- How can UCAS ensure fairness for applicants from diverse backgrounds with varying experiences, and ensure guidance is clear on what is expected by providers?
- There were concerns over experiences and preparedness being too similar and it would confuse applicants.
- Some help text boxes with examples of what could be included outside of a large document on information and guidance.
- Confusion on the word 'learning' - does this apply to the classroom or online courses outside?

- Would conservatoires approach with a portfolio or practical experience for question one?
- What guidance would be given for question one on where a student is applying to lots of different courses?
- Alternative Question one proposal – ‘What sparked your interest in this course?’

Feedback on character count:

- Character count is hard to visualise – could words be used instead?
- Many members favoured option 4 of having the characters split between the 3 sections, chosen by the applicants.

Extenuating circumstances

Feedback on extenuating circumstances included:

- It depends how supportive the college is as some have various levels of support.
- The box could be optional as a tick box in case the applicants are not comfortable with the information being passed on.
- How would it relate to mitigating circumstances schools or colleges already hold?
- Could confidentiality be broken if it is passed on from providers to advisers due to welfare concerns?
- It would be helpful to direct applicants to a link to a page defining what could be included in extenuating circumstances.
- It was considered a better alternative to the current situation which is to sit one-to-one with a student advisor and explain a sensitive topic. There are students out there who are happy to share this kind of information with their institutions but do not feel comfortable with the in-person conversation.
- Some universities are using ‘exceptional circumstances’ rather than ‘extenuating,’ so could the wording be changed?
- Would it be better to have a separate word count so that advisors do not need to take away characters from the overall reference for this?

C&C Course Search Module Changes

Genia Garrity presented a demo of the new filters on Course Search, which are looking to be made over Clearing and were shown to advisers for feedback before development.

UCAS’ two objectives include: How do we create an experience that simplifies default filter selections to ensure relevance search results?

Assist students in exploring courses outside of clearing. Wireframes were shared which will be circulated with the minutes.

The group agreed the developments shared were an excellent improvement on the current system and there was no further feedback.

Entry requirements

- Some applicants use entry grades as likelihood of being accepted on a course.
- The range of grades could be confusing, so clarification around information on what the grade range means, and likeliness of getting into the course.
- Some applicants believe the grade ranges should be replaced with a minimum grade for the course to consider all applicants achieving above this equally.

- Can UCAS direct students to UCAS points for information and guidance.
- Assumption applicants have done A-Levels, how would other types of qualifications be included?
- How would contextual offers be reflected? Is there scope to modify the search page?
- Some students have been put off applying to courses solely due to high entry grade requirements.

Members recognised that published entry requirements are not the only thing universities/colleges will consider and were aware of contextual offers.

A3/23/04 Operational Update

Carolyn Mindos presented an update on the shape of the cycle which will be circulated with the minutes. Before Christmas UCAS met to discuss the equal consideration deadline (ECD) and reject by default (RBD) deadlines. The feedback resulted in the deadline remaining the same but other areas of reform came to light during the research. This deadline consultation will be released in May 2024.

The group were asked to answer how they would like the admissions process to be approached.

Feedback from the group included:

- The waiting list was seen as a good development.
- The students are relying on receiving the predicted grades.
- Applicants are unsure whether to apply for clearing due to the risk of having to reject courses they are not sure they want to do anymore but want to go to university.
- Can coursework be used for grade references? This could be seen as a better indication of ability for some courses.
- The ability to change course later would be beneficial for young applicants unsure of the pathway they want to choose.
- Student finance, and DSA or scholarship funding would require applicants to know what course they are doing.
- There needs to be space on the personal statement for estranged students and supporting extra needs.
- Members liked the objectives and themes identified - stability, clarity, reducing waiting times and overall, any measures that reduce anxiety for students in the process is beneficial.
- Clearing can feel like a last-minute, unstructured rush with little consistency between providers.

Members are encouraged to reach reform@ucas.ac.uk if there is any other feedback.

Contextual data review

Reviewing data shared with universities about students to aid with contextual offer making, and to help UCAS understand how providers are using it and help with best practice whilst clearing it up for students.

Feedback included:

- The challenge is there is no universal definition of widening participation, and there can be confusion over whether applicants would be eligible for certain summer courses.

- Some providers wait until all applicants have been received and then a benchmark is created.
- A better network/communication with universities to let students know if they are contextual. Offers may be received before the university emails to confirm an applicant is contextual. If applicants are relying on this for a firm choice, they may not receive an email at all.

UCAS have released a page on [What are contextual offers?](#) If members feel anything is missing, please let Nicola know at n.turner@ucas.ac.uk

The group were asked if any were missing any groups in widening access.

Feedback included:

- A lack of representation or awareness on dyspraxia.
- Applicants with multiple disabilities/impairments can be hard to define.
- Themes around universal use of key terms/language - is there any scope for some more research into a set of standardised terms in this area? Terms that align with universities/schools/colleges/local authorities.
- There can be hesitation for students who have caring responsibilities but cannot directly qualify as carers to mention this through UCAS or to universities for extenuating circumstances. With questions such as “are you a young carer?” This term should be broadened to having caring responsibility.

A3/23/05 Apprenticeships Development

Pete Milsom presented UCAS’ developments on apprenticeships. Slides will be circulated after the meeting.

Feedback from the group included:

- Access to apprenticeships without STEM requirements for degree apprenticeships - enabling students to access them without completing the A-Levels.
- Guide applicants on ucas.com to networks such as the black apprenticeship network so they have support as degree apprenticeships can be time committing and stressful.
- How will UCAS advise students on tailoring personal statements for specific companies?
- Will there be a standardised date for applying for apprenticeships?
- Bringing apprenticeships together with the university application process was seen as a positive development.
- Is there work that can be done with the portal to get conversations started earlier in schools, so apprenticeships are not seen as a second choice.
- Are FAQs on apprenticeships being shared with employers? UCAS could encourage smaller businesses to consider offering this.
- There could be progress in raising awareness of the different levels of apprenticeships.

UCAS will look to develop tailored applications and bridge a two-way communication between applicants and employers. UCAS are working with the department of education and employers who encourage advertising apprenticeship vacancies earlier.

UCAS are developing a product by which students can be matched to apprenticeship opportunities and can sign up for email updates. Alexa Gillett wanted to gain some insight on what students' feelings were with sharing information such as gender, disability, and ethnicity.

A short survey will be shared with the group to answer offline.

SAG037
AG / GM

A3/23/06 Chatbot & Live Chat

There was no time to cover this in the meeting; it will be set as an agenda item at the next meeting.

A3/20/07 Any other business and Close

In the June meeting there will be an item regarding predicted grades and how they are being used in UG admissions and a potential reform project. Courteney will be bringing that research for discussion then. If in the meantime, if the group has any feelings towards how predicted grades are currently being used, they are encouraged to contact Courteney by email c.sheppard@ucas.ac.uk.

The date of the next meeting is in the diary for Wednesday 5th June 2024 in-person, location is to be confirmed offline.