

## Qualifications in UCAS

### DG/A2/002

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#### For discussion

##### 1. Issue

This paper provides an overview of the changes UCAS is planning to make to its products and services in light of the changing qualifications landscape.

##### 2. Recommendation

The Group is invited to discuss the issues in the paper and share feedback.

##### 3. Summary

The qualification landscape is changing significantly, with reformed A levels, GCSEs, vocational qualifications and Scottish qualifications due to reach higher education (HE) between 2017 and 2021. During this period, significant numbers of learners will be taking a mixed economy of reformed and unreformed qualifications. This is likely to challenge the accuracy of qualifications input by learners into Apply. This paper outlines the initial considerations undertaken by UCAS about how we can support institutions in this changing landscape and improve the accuracy of qualifications input by applicants.

##### 4. Report

In recent years the qualifications landscape has changed significantly and continues to do so. We have seen an increasing diversity in the qualifications used for progression to HE and this will likely increase as a result the current reforms. This increase in diversity has led to challenges in relation to accuracy of data input by applicants. Below we outline how we intend to enhance the quality of data input by applicants in the current environment and how we intend to adapt to the forthcoming reforms.

###### 4.1 Improving the accuracy of current qualifications input by applicants

A number of HEPs have commented that there is a relatively high level of inaccuracy of qualifications input by learners. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these relate to BTEC qualifications, where there is a large number of similarly named qualifications and titles. The

recent reform of vocational qualifications and forthcoming changes to the QCF has the potential to increase the range of titles used by similar qualifications.

At present, the input of qualifications in UCAS Apply is based on an applicant's self-declared information and does not have third party validation, therefore options are limited regarding how the accuracy of this data can be improved on the existing IT platform.

Ahead of September 2015, UCAS will be producing a range of communication materials that include:

- Updated guidance to learners and advisers about how to correctly identify qualifications, particularly vocational qualifications.
- Information detailing the importance of advisers reviewing the qualifications input by applicants as part of the application process. At present, there is a box available to advisers to confirm that the information input by a learner has been reviewed. The guidance will detail the importance of reviewing this data and highlight the potential consequences of incorrect information being input.
- Guidance on how schools can influence the qualifications viewed by an applicant in Apply. Current functionality allows for a school or college to make the qualifications offered in that particular centre to be more prominent. Although this is used by a large number of centres, evidence suggests that they add to the list available as opposed to remove qualifications that are no longer offered.
- Improved guidance on reference writing, which although is more focused on forthcoming changes, will support advisers now.

#### **4.2 Reformed qualifications in Apply**

Qualification reform in the UK is likely to increase the diversity of qualifications taken by learners. For example:

- A level qualifications will be structurally different across the UK, with Wales and Northern Ireland choosing to retain a coupled AS. Equally, the phased introduction of A level qualifications across the UK will mean that learners will apply holding reformed and unreformed qualifications at the same time.
- The grading structure of qualifications across the UK will change. For example, Ofqual accredited science A levels will have two grades from 2017 award to take account of the new science practical, whereas Welsh and Northern Irish will only have one. Equally in England, GCSEs will be graded 9-1, whereas Welsh and Northern Irish will be graded A\*- U. Again, the introduction of these qualifications will be phased, so learners will apply to HE holding reformed and unreformed qualifications.
- Reform to vocational qualifications will lead to a greater proliferation of qualification titles. For example, the City and Guilds Technical Diploma and BTEC Extended Diploma are similar qualifications of the same size, but have different titles.
- Reforms to the Welsh Baccalaureate mean that in the space of four admissions cycles (2014-2017 entry), three different versions of the qualification will be held upon entry. Each has a similar title.

To ensure that UCAS is providing the information and support that HE providers need, we have established a working group to ensure these changes are managed effectively on the

current IT platform. The subject matter expert for this groups is Ben Jordan ([b.jordan@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:b.jordan@ucas.ac.uk)).

It is likely that UCAS will remain on its current IT platform for the 2017 entry cycle. With this in mind, we will adapt to the changing qualifications landscape and ensure a high level of accuracy in a number of ways, including:

- Providing enhanced information and advice to advisers about how they can support applicant's when inputting qualification information into Apply. This is outlined in section 4.1.
- Adding new qualifications to UCAS Apply via Qualifications Manager. These include reformed vocational qualifications and Core Maths qualifications.
- Ensuring the structural changes to qualifications are reflected in UCAS Apply and other services. For example, reformed GCSEs will have a 9-1 grading scale in England and the science practical grade will be provided via ABL.
- Increased guidance regarding reference writing to highlight the contextual information HEPs would like regarding qualification choices made by centres and how to provide this in the current version of Apply.
- Support to institutions on the identification of reformed and unreformed A levels throughout the UK, including the provision of high quality IA and continued investigation into more technical solutions. The diversity in qualifications potentially presented by learners has led to requests from HEPs regarding the ability to 'flag' reformed and unreformed A levels. However, this is not that straight forward due to re-sit arrangements. For example, at present Ofqual are unable to definitively state the final award of the AS.

#### **4.3 Customer requirements and potential improvements for the new Apply**

UCAS recently participated in the SPA National Export Think Tank on qualification reform. As part of this, the group prepared a list of operational requests for UCAS that would improve the user experience of HEPs in relation to qualifications. This list is included in Appendix A of this paper and we would welcome the group's thoughts on these proposals. These will be considered as part of our ongoing work in this area and part of the Digital Acceleration development.

In addition, HEDIIP has recently approved an implementation plan for increasing the use of the ULN. If the Skills Funding Agency is able to offer a ULN verification service, UCAS will be able to consume this and very ULNs when students apply. This would provide the capability to access verified data on level 1 and 2 qualifications held and potentially to pre-populate these for home students, improving for the student experience and the quality of the qualifications data supplied to HE providers.

This is an area that UCAS will explore further as part of our wider digital developments.

## **5. Finance and Resources**

All associated resources will be absorbed by the External Relations and Operations BAU activities. More extensive changes will be managed as part of our Digital Acceleration work.

## **6. Impact assessment**

N/A

## **7. Communications**

UCAS will be producing a range of materials to communicate qualification changes to universities, colleges and advisers and supporting guidance to improve the accuracy and identification of qualifications. These are detailed in the main report.

**Appendix A: Operational requests submitted by the SPA NETT on qualifications reform**

	<b>Change</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>UCAS products</b>
1	Improved information and advice for applicants regarding the input of qualifications into UCAS Apply, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The importance of inputting the correct qualifications. Incorrect input could potentially be considered fraudulent.</li> <li>That incorrect or inaccurate data could impact adversely on the student's application.</li> </ul>	Better quality qualification data provided	Apply
2	Improved information advice and guidance for schools regarding the importance of ring fencing qualifications. Including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guidance on how to 'ring fence' qualifications in Apply so that applicants only see the qualifications they could have taken.</li> <li>Highlight the importance of this ring-fencing and keeping this list up to date</li> <li>Importance of centres reviewing applications</li> </ul>	Better quality qualification data provided – consideration will need to be given on how to handle applications from students who have taken qualifications at different centres.	Advisor apply Apply
3	Mandatory completion of the box indication that the referee has reviewed the qualifications held by the applicant. If No is selected this will include a mandatory box providing a reason why it has not been reviewed and verified. The list of reasons should reflect the challenges that may be felt by schools/colleges providing single year qualification.	Better quality qualification data provided	Advisor Apply
5	Support and guidance that would accommodate an exam officer completing the validation of the qualifications being studied by the applicant.	To ensure they understand the importance of validated and accurate qualification information provision	Advisor Apply

	<b>Change</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>UCAS products</b>
6	Improved guidance on the identification of BTECs. Potentially placing extended diploma and subsidiary diploma first in the drop down list.	Better quality qualification data, lots of inaccurate data currently being presented	Apply
7	Mandatory completion of the suite of qualifications offered by the school/college as part of the annual registration process for advisor apply. This will limit the list provided to the applicant in Apply.	Better data quality, always reviewed each year to ensure accuracy	Advisor Apply
8	Verified GCSE, iGCSE and functional skills qualifications provided via ABL or other sources, such as the ULN.	Reduction in time spent on verification by individual institutions, reduction in duplication, enhanced qualification quality and data	ABL
9	Development of a structured reference.	Common format will be easier to manage	Advisor Apply ODBC Xml Weblink
10	Development of a transcript for international students.	Better understanding of specific performance, enhanced qualification information, especially in less well known qualifications	Apply ODBC Xml Weblink
11	Development of a structured personal statement.		Apply ODBC Xml Weblink
12	Codified predicted grades for a wider range of qualifications. Mandatory completion of individual predicted grades for each qualification pending provided by the student. If they are unable to provide a prediction a reason for non-completion is mandatory.	Less chasing by institutions, better understanding of likely future performance – particularly important in light of linear examinations. More consistency in how predicted grades are presented (and where!)	Apply ODBC Xml Weblink
13	Mandatory predicted grades for pending qualifications.	Less chasing by institutions, better understanding of likely future performance – particularly important in light of linear examinations	Advisor Apply ODBC Xml Weblink

	Change	Reason	UCAS products
14	Unit grades continue to be provided for Welsh and NI A levels.	Helpful for near misses	ABL ODBC Xml Weblink
15	Ofqual replacement for UMS via the ABL process to be provided to institutions with the results.	To allow robust ways in which to differentiate, particularly in near-miss cases - conscious this may only be a Cambridge requirement!	ABL ODBC Xml Weblink
16	Free text qualifications input in Apply – include a smart selection based upon the qualifications that are available that year. Include a proximity/look up system	Better data quality	Apply
17	Provide HEPs with dummy application so they can view Apply without having to register each year.	So we can see what applicants are asked to complete without having to complete a fake application each time	Apply
18	Provide HEPs with dummy application so they can view Track without having to register each year.	So we can see what applicants are able to see/do in Tack which will help when advising	Track
19	Provide HEPs with dummy application so they can view Advisor Track without having to register each year.	So we can see what schools/colleges are asked to do	Advisor Track
20	'Other' qualification input in Apply should only appear at the bottom of the list once learner has reviewed drop down list. Change the wording to <i>My qualification is not listed above</i>	Better data quality, reduction in 'lazy' selection of 'other'	Apply
21	Include an indication that the qualification that is being studied has a separate practical assessment for science based subjects. This should be available on the application when institutions are considering offer conditions. Include the outcome of the Science practical in ABL.		Apply Advisor Apply ABL ODBC Xml Weblink

	<b>Change</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>UCAS products</b>
22	Include an indication that the qualification that is being studied has a separate oral assessment for English. This should be available on the application when institutions are considering offer conditions. Include the outcome of the oral practical in ABL.		Apply Advisor Apply ABL ODBC Xml Weblink
23	Reformed GCSE subjects only include relevant subjects that are available for that year of study. Remove other drop downs to ensure accurate	Better data quality	Apply
24	Flag to HEPs about new and old A levels. This could use smart logic looking at awarding date, location of applicant, subject and AO.		Apply Advisor Apply ABL ODBC Xml Weblink
25	Multiple references tailored for specific institutions.	Helpful if an applicant is applying for very different courses – acknowledged that this is unlikely to be very popular with referees!	Apply Advisor Apply ABL ODBC Xml Weblink
26	School profile information - mapping to student progression by school – what institution/region do they go to, accurate (and up to date) data on progression to HE, data on school performance (for example average GCSE point score, Average % with 5 or more A-C at GCSE, Average % with 5 or more A-C including English and Maths, Average Level 3 score per Student, Average Level 3 score per Exam Entry i.e. data currently available from DfE (for example).	To give better educational context to the application/to allow appropriate support to be put in place.	TBA

	<b>Change</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>UCAS products</b>
27	Add a statement of qualification diet for each school/college and ensure that this is part of the annual mandatory data review	To ensure that an applicant is not disadvantaged because they were unable to take a 4 <sup>th</sup> AS level (for example)	Advisor Apply ABL ODBC Xml Weblink
28	Include a facility on track that would enable institutions to request that the applicant contacts them directly	For ease of effective communication	Track ODBC Xml Weblink
29	Provide the UCAS tariff for each qualification as part of the ABL data provided and in ODBC, xml and Weblink		ABL ODBC Xml Weblink
30	Provide a separate download of the UCAS tariff achieved for institutions		ABL ODBC Xml Weblink
31	Provide institutions with an indication of which BTEC students they will receive electronic results for and those that they will have to contact directly	Reduction in unnecessary checking for institutions	Apply Advisor Apply ABL ODBC Xml Weblink
32	Provide the ability for students with a document upload facility to load scans of their qualifications achieved	Less manual chasing by each individual institution, streamlining of processes at confirmation/registration/matriculation	Apply
33	Provide IELTS results through ABL and reference number and approved centre	Less manual chasing	ABL ODBC Xml

	<b>Change</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>UCAS products</b>
			Weblink
34	Provide the facility to make a conditional deferral	For example, a financial guarantee where we would want to see more recent evidence than 12 months previous	ODBC Xml Weblink
35	Provide the facility to make a conditional offers through a RPA		ODBC Xml Weblink