

## **DfE consultation on Post-Qualification Admissions Reform**

Consultation response from the Sixth Form Colleges Association, May 2021

### **Introduction**

- We support the Government's ambition to address the unfairness and inequalities that exist in the current admissions system and agree that now is the right time to explore the possibility of a post qualifications admissions (PQA) system. Our shared aim should be to design a system that means students are able to make better decisions about their futures. A result of this will be that students will be more likely to progress onto, and be retained on, courses that suit their prior attainment and career ambitions, and will mean that they are better able to make a positive contribution to society and the economy. Admissions are a pivotal point in a young person's education, and an effective and fair PQA system will mean they can make these life-changing decisions based on accurate, up-to-date information and final grades.
- There has been a number of proposals and discussions in the past two decades to move to a PQA system to address the inequalities that have been present in the current system, including the inaccuracy of predicted grades, the adverse impact on high-achieving students and undermatching. In recent years, due to market and behavioural changes, we have seen an increase in incentivising offers from HE providers, including a substantial increase in the use of conditional unconditional offers and unconditional offers which many of our members have experienced. Overall these developments have had a detrimental effect on student work, aspirations, attitudes and final grades. A PQA system will help to address these rising concerns and give students the opportunity to access the right university course based on final grades which they have worked hard to achieve.
- However, it is vitally important that a PQA system does not create additional inequalities for students. We believe there is a risk of these arising from the proposed models outlined in the consultation. There is much to commend in the current system – a record number of students attending university each year including an increase in students from disadvantaged backgrounds applying for, and attending, university - this trend should not be reversed by a new PQA system.

### **The key objective: fairness for students**

- We agree with the Government that the status quo of pre-qualification admissions is suboptimal, particularly for social mobility, which is particularly important to our members. Sixth form colleges educate a more disadvantaged group of students than schools but see more of them go to university, including competitive institutions, so we know first-hand that socioeconomic background need not determine destiny. Nonetheless, there is still a strong link between parental income and education and a child's access to higher education, and our reading of the evidence suggests that the current admissions system is an important factor in perpetuating this (although not necessarily the *most* important one).

- Problems with the status quo largely stem from the pivotal role of predicted grades, an internationally singular feature of our admissions system. While the majority of students (75%) are predicted grades significantly higher than they go on to achieve, this does not mean that students are advantaged by the role of predicted grades in the system, as universities are well aware of the degree of over-prediction. This becomes a particular problem because not all groups are equally over-predicted: high-achieving disadvantaged students receive lower predicted grades than their advantaged peers (Murphy and Wyness 2020, 2). These are exactly the students whose entry to higher education is pivotal to achieving social mobility, yet they are systematically disadvantaged by the current system. This is a likely, if partial, explanation for the finding that poorer students are less likely to attend high-tariff universities than their equally qualified wealthy peers, and are more likely to embark on courses for which they are ‘overqualified’ – a phenomenon called undermatching (Campbell, Macmillan and Wyness 2019, 11). Significant amounts of money and teacher effort are expended every year on encouraging disadvantaged students to ‘raise their aspirations’ and apply to more prestigious institutions, but such efforts will continue to fail to have a systemic effect if these students simply do not have the predicted grades they need to realistically apply.
- As such, in theory, moving away from the use of predicted grades in admissions (which both models proposed in the consultation do; for further discussion, see below) should improve the life chances of individual disadvantaged high-achievers and contribute to improved social mobility. This is why we support a PQA system. However, we have significant concerns about implementing PQA without a number of additional changes to support students and 16-19 education institutions. Moving either the entire application process, or the offer and confirmation process, to the summer and/or the early autumn has significant implications for institutions. At present, applications take place over a period of several months, with students receiving personalised advice and support within the school or college day and early in the academic year. Without this, undermatching for disadvantaged students would likely be even more of an issue. In the summer, most sixth form colleges and school sixth forms are shut, and re-open for results day to hand over results to current students; they then quickly move to the business of admitting new Year 12 students who have received GCSE results, which makes up the bulk of work for staff in the final week of August. If former Year 13s instead require significant support at this time to either make their applications or to weigh up their offers, depending on the model of PQA adopted, something will have to give. Sixth form college teacher contracts will need to be renegotiated to allow for additional hours of work in the summer, and funding provided to institutions to allow them to train, re-deploy, and hire additional staff. Plainly put, there is no space in the current college budget for more staff to do more work in August, and without this support work we fear that disadvantaged students will continue to suffer unfairness in the application system, this time stemming from lack of support to make the right choices with the grades they have rather than from underprediction. Yet we see little appetite from the current government to make the right level of investment in 16-19 education, even to redress obvious unfairness; the rate of funding for sixth formers remains substantially below that for younger secondary students, despite their additional support needs, which include university applications support. We want PQA to succeed on its own merits, not be tripped up by the DfE’s unwillingness to provide the necessary scaffolding for it to work.
- Finally, social mobility in higher education requires either that fewer advantaged students attend university, allowing more disadvantaged students to take their places, or that more students in total attend university, such that disadvantaged students take additional (high-quality) places. Unfortunately, experience shows us that downward mobility is exceedingly unpopular and difficult to achieve by means of education policy, and wealthy parents will resist it fiercely – hence the phenomenon of overmatching, which is equal in scale to the problem of undermatching. (Campbell, Macmillan and Murphy, et al. 2019) Therefore, expanding the number of high-quality university places is likely to be necessary for more disadvantaged students to progress, at least in the short term. This is something this

government opposes, even as it uses the language of ‘levelling up’ to promote PQA; in July 2020, Gavin Williamson abandoned the target of 50% university attendance and claimed that a focus on university attendance has historically ‘cast aside’ the other 50% and no longer serves the UK’s economic needs. Reducing the number of students going to university is an aim implicit in a number of DfE’s current policies, most significantly its dangerous plans to scrap the majority of applied general courses at Level 3. These courses are disproportionately taken by disadvantaged young people and provide an alternative route to university.

- For PQA to work, it will require the government to strengthen the sixth form sector via additional funding for application support in the summer and encourage rather than discourage university attendance by the most disadvantaged. We hope the Department can provide the additional support and resources described here that are necessary for it to be successful.

## Models proposed in consultation

- Although we agree that a PQA system should be adopted, we think both models outlined in the consultation will not provide the necessary support students require to apply to university successfully and will require substantial changes to the structure teachers and colleges operate under including a realignment of resources in both colleges and the HE sector.
- Model 1 requires large structural changes to the post-16 and HE sector. This model is based on students starting the application process only after they receive their results with results day brought forward to July and university start dates pushed back, making the first university term shorter. There are many drawbacks to this model, making it unworkable, including:
  - It will create further inequalities for students and essentially disadvantage the most disadvantaged students even more. Students especially from deprived socioeconomic backgrounds may struggle to access a device to undertake their application offsite when colleges are closed during the Summer or face poor connectivity issues at home. Students may not have the parental support structure in place at home to enable them to complete their application successfully and this may lead to poorer applications from these students especially at a time when staff support is absent during the summer break. We may well therefore continue to see a disproportionate number of students applying to university based on their socioeconomic background – students from higher socioeconomic households with more ambition, support and parent drive are more likely to apply and be overrepresented compared to those students from less supportive backgrounds.
  - Students with disabilities and learning difficulties will also be disadvantaged under this model. These students require additional support from teachers as well as possible specialist equipment to undertake their application – this will prove difficult to provide during the Summer holidays.
  - Students require support from teachers with their applications. Currently, applications can take months of refining, with advice and guidance from teachers, tutors and careers advisers helping students make an informed decision. Successful applications cannot be undertaken in a matter of weeks but require time to enable students to explore, research and reflect on the options available.
  - Bringing results day forward will require changes to teacher contracts. It may be difficult for colleges to change teachers’ terms and conditions to enable them to work through their summer holiday and may require significant re-negotiation with teacher unions.
  - We also have concern that entry tests, interviews and auditions for some courses have not been factored into this model. If they take place after results day, it will put a significant amount of pressure on students at a time when there will be less support from teachers and thus, increasing the inequalities in the system rather than enabling social mobility. Furthermore, there will be students who may not have considered courses to places such as Oxbridge but may be in a position to apply to these universities after receiving their results. However, with a lack of experience

in interviews and lack of support from teachers during the summer break, they may not be able to fully reach their potential to apply.

- The consultation suggests teaching time could be reduced to bring forward results day. No proposals should condense teaching time or adversely affect the college academic year. Teaching time is invaluable and should be prioritised.
- There is a possibility with this model that leaving the application process too late in the year will see students not apply to university altogether, in particular by students from low socioeconomic households with less parental support available.
- Model 2 – we do see some merit in model 2 with applications taking place beforehand and only released once results are announced, leading to less disruption to the pattern of the year. Students can continue to undertake their application as they currently do during the academic year with the support of teachers on hand to help them make informed decisions. Members have found that students completing their applications early in the academic year tend to have higher aspirations, and to be more ambitious, increasing their drive to succeed. The use of mock exams and regular internal assessments can help guide students as to the universities and courses to which they might apply and to which they might be suited. Students are also more likely to follow through with their decision to attend university if their application is completed before results are announced. However, some of the same disadvantages from model 1 will apply to model 2 – changes to teacher contracts, changes to college timetable, results day being brought forward, lack of support to help students prepare for interviews, entry tests and auditions, not enough support for students to access advice and guidance from teachers after results day, and hence, the inequalities will remain which will require addressing before the model can be taken forward.
- Both models outlined will incur additional costs to extend or adapt teacher contracts, so that students can benefit from essential expert support during the Summer and to afford any identified needs to purchase and distribute additional devices for students during the Summer break.

## The use of personal statements

- We do see value in the use of personal statements to provide a contextualised viewpoint of the student and her/his personality without the grades, although they also have inbuilt inequalities, with some students benefitting from a broader cultural hinterland than others and with some students enjoying greater scaffolding and support from parents and teachers than others. It would be useful to explore how useful universities find personal statements and how much they are taken into consideration when making an offer.
- Overall, we think it is the right time to start initial discussions on a PQA system. The system has to be founded on a model which is fair for all – ensuring a system that allows students to make better choices and decisions, and colleges and HEIs to adapt their structures to ensure effective implementation and delivery. The introduction of PQA will only have the desired effect if wider reforms are made, such as to IAG.
- SFCA does not accept the first model due to the negative impact it will have on student support and college and HE structures as outlined. However, model 2 requires significant reworking for it to be successfully adopted. We think any proposal taken forward should not be implemented straight away but believe that discussions should be ongoing across the board to test out the practicalities involved before a final PQA model is introduced.
- For more information about this consultation response, please email [deepa.jethwa@sixthformcolleges.org](mailto:deepa.jethwa@sixthformcolleges.org) or [noni.csogor@sixthformcolleges.org](mailto:noni.csogor@sixthformcolleges.org)

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