



Impetus

# The debate on post-qualification admissions

Policy / Impact Briefing [8]  
May 2021

A sector-wide debate has taken place over the last few months about whether the UK higher education system should move to a system of post-qualification admissions (PQA).

Two models were proposed by the Department for Education:

- **Post-qualification applications:** students apply to university and receive their offers after they have been awarded their grades;
- **Post-qualification offers:** students apply to university prior to taking their exams, but do not receive their offers until after their grades have been awarded.

The access gap between young people who are free school meal eligible and their better-off peers currently stands at 18.8%pts, the highest since 2007. Any proposed changes to the current admissions system must have fair access at their centre and include clear plans to close the access gap. We do not believe that the proposed move to a PQA system achieves either of these criteria and instead would distract from the biggest barriers to access.

We believe this because:

- The main arguments for a PQA model are the risks around unconditional, conditional offers and predicted grades. We believe the former will not be resolved through PQA and resolution can be achieved through more moderate measures. We believe the latter will only be informalised in a PQA system, not eradicated, and that the evidence for eradicating predicted grades in favour of awarded grades needs further consideration.
- PQA would entail massive upheaval of a system built to accommodate the current admissions timeline. As with any major change, more affluent, well-resourced schools and colleges will be able to adapt quicker, risking a dual track system where the less affluent are left behind.
- Widening participation activities – a key pillar of fair access efforts – would also be disrupted by a move to PQA. The condensed nature of the timeline would undermine vital interventions such as relationship building and supporting considered, informed decision-making.
- A marketized higher education system risks being manipulated to generate certainty for universities, which is only exacerbated in a PQA system where student numbers will not be known until much later in the year. Informal arrangements or wealthier students applying direct or as international students in order to confirm places earlier are both possible, and would put students from underrepresented backgrounds on an unequal footing.
- PQA fails to address the biggest barrier to fair access: attainment. In a PQA model, students have no greater recourse to the high-quality tutoring or contextualised admissions needed to tackle the attainment barrier. And the use of awarded grades risks an over-emphasis on attainment, rather than facilitating a more holistic approach that considers a student's broader potential.

Overall, we think PQA and the discussion around it is ultimately a distraction from the evidence-backed interventions we know can support fair access. Rather than proposing significant upheaval of the admissions timeline, we believe we should focus on:

- Quality assured tutoring for all young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who need it, to help close the attainment gap at SATs, Level 2 and Level 3.
- Comprehensive contextualised admissions across the higher education sector, with a minimum contextual offer for all students meeting certain criteria and access to individualised data to target these offers successfully. This would acknowledge that awarded grades alone cannot demonstrate potential.
- Protecting widening participation funding and supporting research into what works to deliver evidence-backed interventions to tackle the other barriers to fair access, such as familiarity with the system and sense of belonging.

Following the release of Universities UK's Fair Admissions Review in November 2020, a sector-wide debate on the potential move to a model of post-qualification admissions (PQA) ensued, resulting in a consultation by the Department for Education.

The Department for Education proposed two models:

- **Post-qualification applications:** students apply to university and receive their offers after they have been awarded their grades;
- **Post-qualification offers:** students apply to university prior to taking their exams, but do not receive their offers until after their grades have been awarded.

This report details the arguments we put forward in our submission to the consultation. We also submitted a second response as part of the Fair Access Coalition, of which we are a member and provide the secretariat for; however the views contained in this report are those of Impetus only.

The access gap between young people who are free school meal eligible and their better-off peers currently stands at 18.8%pts, the highest since 2007. Any proposed changes to the current admissions system must have fair access at their centre and include clear plans to close the access gap.

We believe that it would ultimately be remiss to suggest that a move to PQA will resolve the issue of fair access to higher education. Instead, whilst relieving the pressure of some of the issues created by the current system, it would fail to address many of the fundamental barriers to fair access, and indeed introduce new ones. The access gap is an endemic issue in our education system that is neither caused by, nor can be eradicated by, the timing of applications and admissions. We propose that the resource required to successfully transition to this system of admissions is instead directed towards initiatives shown to impact the access gap, including tutoring, contextualised admissions and evidence-based widening participation interventions.

---

# 1. The benefits of post-qualification admissions are limited

There is an enticing logic to a PQA system, in which students apply or are offered places based on awarded grades. With regards to fair access, there is an argument that the access gap may be reduced by young people applying once they know their grades, particularly to higher-tariff universities where they are particularly poorly represented.

We know that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to access higher education and this is, in part, driven by significantly lower application rates. With greater knowledge of the grades they are applying to higher education with, it is likely that more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds would see the merits in applying and this could potentially raise confidence in moving into this space.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are also more likely to undermatch (attend a university with lower entry requirements than the grades they achieved) than their better-off peers. A move to post-qualification *applications* would ensure that students are fully informed of what entry requirements they meet upon applying, and we would hopefully see this both increase application rates and increase applications to higher-tariff universities. However, it is important not to overestimate the impact this would necessarily have, and to recognise the multi-faceted nature of the decision to apply to university.

Not all those who do not apply do so because they lack confidence, just as not all those who undermatch do so because they do not believe they will achieve the grades. Post-qualification applications will address some, but not all, of the factors which influence this decision and the barriers that students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience, such as lack of familiarity with the system and sense of belonging. In a post-qualification *offers* system however, where students apply before receiving their grades, the issue of undermatching is barely mitigated.

Many of the arguments in favour of post-qualification admissions centre on the exponential growth of conditional unconditional offers – where students are given an unconditional offer when they select a university as their firm choice – and the unreliability of predicted grades. However, neither of these justify nor require an upheaval of the admissions timeline to counter.

---

## 2. The arguments for post-qualifications admissions are flawed

### i) Conditional, unconditional offers

The rise of conditional, unconditional offers is undoubtedly an issue for those who care about fair access, and their disproportionate impact on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is one of grave concern. The pressure these types of offers place on students and the consequent impact on their attainment in general is undesirable.

However, a PQA model fails to limit the use of conditional, unconditional offers and, in a continually marketized system, will likely be replaced by other incentivising tactics. There are more moderate regulatory measures that can be enacted, as proven by the Office for Students' regulations of 2020. Despite the unprecedented circumstances of 2020, a more permanent, but more limited, measure could instead be enacted. Whilst this is an issue we agree needs addressing, moving to post-qualification admissions is a disproportionate response to an issue which can be tackled with more moderate measures.

### ii) Predicted grades

With regards to predicted grades, the landscape is more complex. A move to post-qualifications *applications* will undoubtedly diminish reliance on predicted grades. But the premise for doing so rests on the argument that predicted grades are often inaccurate. Mark Corver, founder of dataHE has made a persuasive argument that removing predicted grades would result in a *poorer* matching of people to places<sup>4</sup>. The question is whether they are sufficiently inaccurate, and thereby disruptive, to warrant a significant change to the admissions system.

The inaccuracy is often framed as causing great disruption to the admissions process. But most students are over-predicted, and higher education institutions are aware of this and factor it into their decision making. The group who disproportionately suffer from underprediction – high-attaining students from disadvantaged backgrounds – make up 1,000 students a year. They and their teachers deserve support to counteract this but reforming the entire admissions system for an issue impacting 0.2% of each cohort is not a proportionate response. It risks a lot of change to tweak the process for the benefit of a few.

---

## 3. There are significant risks in a post-qualification admissions system

### i) Massive upheaval of the current system

As with any significant reform, moving to PQA would entail massive upheaval of the current system. The established timelines for applications, offer-making, exams and the first term of university would all be required to move to some degree, altering the current educational infrastructure. In addition to the general uncertainty this would create, we fear that lower performing schools in less affluent areas would lack the capacity and resource to adapt to the changes as quickly as those with more resources, in particular private schools, as we have seen in the existing system<sup>2</sup>. This would put the schools with the groups most in need of support at a disadvantage as they adapt to the changes, potentially creating a postcode lottery for access to higher education, at least initially.

As a consequence of this reformed timeline, a post-qualification applications model will also move application support outside of term time. We have real concerns about the difficulty of engaging young people outside of term time, and there is a significant risk of self-selection bias, with those choosing to partake already motivated towards higher education, and those most in need of support least likely to engage<sup>3</sup>.

There is also a significant barrier in resourcing this support. There is some evidence of summertime support working for those going through Clearing and Adjustment, which currently operates successfully within the summer holidays. However, the numbers achieving higher education places through Clearing and Adjustment represent only 13% of the overall cohort size, and this therefore is much easier to resource. Scaling this up to cover the entire cohort would require proportionate scaling of resourcing, including staffing and external support.

We were pleased to see the Department for Education rule out a proposed January start date because of the substantial risks that a gap of that length poses for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. A significant break in education risks higher attrition rates in a system where there is a substantial gap in financial support, especially for students who move into employment in the meantime. But any delay to term starts pose problems including delaying the receipt of student loans, risking attrition amongst those initially planning to transition to higher education.

Even a shorter first term in higher education which allows for a start date earlier than January but a longer intervening period after receiving results may risk a lower sense of belonging within higher education and higher drop-out rates, particularly for those most in need of support with the transition.

### 3. There are significant risks in a post-qualification admissions system

But a compressed, intensive period of applications following results to enable term dates to remain as they are risks less support from over-stretched schools and colleges for those who need it most. The broader aspects of applications, including visiting campus, arranging accommodation, interviewing or completing assessments for certain courses and the consequent travel implications will all have a greater impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is a key example of how moving this one part of the established education timeline out of the current education infrastructure has wide-ranging repercussions.

#### **ii) Disruption to widening participation interventions**

A significant component of widening participation activities is the relationship building that occurs between a student and their university. This is actively encouraged by widening participation departments, who understand the importance of demystifying higher education, particularly for those who are the first in their family to attend or for other reasons have not experienced great exposure to higher education. Condensing this into a matter of weeks may not have any obvious, immediate impact, but will change a culture that encourages those from underrepresented backgrounds to engage with higher education, potentially to their detriment and the detriment of fair access.

Moving exams forward to allow for a few additional weeks cannot counteract the curtailment of what should be a process of at least two years. Information, advice and guidance needs to be delivered over a long period by a trusted adult to allow time for the information to be processed and applied. Whilst this could be maintained even if applications are submitted at a later date, the lack of hard deadlines prior to exams risks attrition from students who initially expressed interest. The decision to attend university is complex. Work by CFE Research has shown that students are not always equipped with the information needed to make high quality decisions, and the Behavioural Insights Team has shown the importance of breaking down information and not overloading students<sup>4</sup>. The system should not merely provide enough time to allow students to make good quality decisions, but should operate in a way that enables and encourages them to make the best decisions.

#### **iii) Difficulty delivering additional entry tests, auditions and interviews**

A post-qualification applications model significantly condenses the application period and, with it, the additional entry tests, auditions and interviews that are required for some courses and institutions. It is unclear whether continuing with these elements of the admissions process is achievable in a post-qualification applications model.



### 3. There are significant risks in a post-qualification admissions system

If it is, there is a clear burden here for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with less financial resource to access travel and accommodation at short notice. Should the intention be for these additional aspects of applications to be carried out in a much more intensive window, we would expect ringfenced support for young people from lower income households to ensure they do not lose out on opportunities more easily accessed by their better-off peers.

#### **iv) Risks of manipulation of the system**

In a system in which the application and offer-making process is condensed, there is a risk that students, schools and colleges, and higher education institutions may be incentivised to circumvent the uncertainty. We fear that direct links will be made between students and their school or college and higher education institutions in the form of either an informal arrangement or a direct application. And it is much more likely that more advantaged students who are more familiar with the system will engage in these tactics, utilising stronger networks and resources to build these relationships outside of the UCAS system. This could have severe implications for fair access and would mean young people from disadvantaged backgrounds would not be operating on a fair playing field.

In a post-qualification offers model, where students apply to a higher education institution prior to receiving grades, but with offers not to be made until much later, there are risks of an informal system of offers appearing. As we have seen with the rise of conditional, unconditional offers, the higher education landscape is increasingly marketized and competitive and it would be prudent to put in place processes to ensure these practices do not translate across to a post-qualification offers system.

Whilst we have concerns around this practice, it would be possible for the Office for Students to regulate this practice to ensure that all offers, regardless of how they are made, are provided following results.

#### **v) Increase of rejection in a post-qualification offers model**

In addition to ensuring no offers are made informally prior to results being received, we are concerned if higher education institutions are able to reject applications prior to seeing results, when based on other criteria. We know that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply to higher education due to feelings similar to those of imposter syndrome, and we fear that in a system where they spend months potentially only receiving rejections, they become deterred from attending once they have received their results. This, too, is easy to regulate, and we would urge for higher education providers to be prohibited from making any decisions prior to results being received. Whilst we understand that there may be some candidates universities believe for other reasons are not eligible for an offer, it would undermine the system of using assessed grades to make these offers should decisions be taken prematurely.

## 4. It fails to address the main barriers to access

### i) The attainment gap

Our main issue with the suggested move to PQA with regards to fair access is that it fails to address the main barrier facing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing higher education: the attainment gap.

We know that young people who are free school meal eligible are 18.1 months behind their better-off peers when they finish school at age 16, and this puts them at a distinct disadvantage when beginning their Level 3 qualifications<sup>5</sup>. Research from the Education Policy Institute has shown that, even when controlling for prior attainment, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are half an A-level grade behind their better-off peers when completing their Level 3 qualifications, indicating a poverty penalty<sup>6</sup>.

Because PQA fails to address this, it must be paired with, or the focus shifted to, efforts that address this attainment gap. Indeed, our view would be this should be the focus for the sector instead of a move to PQA. We believe the initiatives that will make the biggest impact on fair access include high-quality tutoring targeted at pupil premium eligible students to act as a “push” factor and support students in achieving the grades needed to access and succeed at higher education. However, in acknowledgement that even with tutoring, students face an attainment barrier that does not necessarily indicate their potential, a “pull” factor in the form of contextualised admissions should be implemented across the higher education sector. This would enable universities to diversify their intake and offer truly fair access that recognises potential as well as achievement.

PQA not only fails to address this, but it also risks exacerbating the issue. A post-qualification applications system would also rely on awarded grades, which are generally considered to be a more reliable indicator of ability. However, Ofqual have confirmed that assessed grades are only accurate to within one grade because of the various factors which influence a student’s performance<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, a reformed system would still wholly rely on somewhat inaccurate grading.

And with colleges, students and/or higher education institutions receiving access to awarded grades at an earlier stage, there is a risk these will be over-emphasised. As we have highlighted, awarded grades are potentially only accurate to within one grade and cannot fully reflect a student’s potential when they largely rest on one exam taken on one day. We hope that all sides will continue to take into account the many factors that determine a student’s success at university, outside of attainment.

---

## 4. It fails to address the main barriers to access

We also do not believe that a move to a PQA model will eradicate predicted grades, as some element of prediction will be necessary to guide a student's choices about which institutions to apply to. A PQA model risks merely informalising this process, rather than eradicating it.

Teachers are continually assessing students and are therefore able to provide direction on what level they are working at and what options they have in higher education. Should this practice lose its current formality, there is a risk that teachers will become reticent in providing this vital guidance and students will miss out as a result.

### **ii) Contextualised admissions**

The condensed nature of a PQA model also limits the time for contextualisation by higher education institutions. We are in favour of having a comprehensive contextual offer for all students who meet certain criteria – for example, free school meal eligibility – but we recognise that admissions remain in the purview of each institution. Many currently contextualise applications but do not automatically make contextual offers, and we are concerned this process would be lost in a PQA system with a much more intensive period of application review.

### **iii) Access to evidence-based widening participation interventions**

Attainment is not the only barrier however, and PQA alone will not provide the interventions that are necessary for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to tackle the additional barriers to higher education, such as familiarity with the system and sense of belonging. Whilst PQA is expected to raise students' confidence in their ability to access higher education through entry requirements, this is only one aspect of a wider conversation that must be had about opening up higher education as a route for all who desire and have the potential to succeed, regardless of their background.

Whilst we have strong reservations about a move to PQA, our strongest reservation is that it distracts from, or occurs in place of, initiatives we believe will have a much greater impact on reducing the access gap for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. We hope that whatever decision is taken with PQA, it does not detract from efforts to enact the initiatives we have detailed.

---

## 5. Comparisons between post-qualification *applications* and post-qualification *offers*

Post-qualification offers does not have the same fundamental risks that a post-qualification applications system poses, and we can understand why those who favour a move to post-qualification admissions prefer this approach.

A post-qualifications offer system does not entail *as much* upheaval as post-qualification applications would. The necessary adjustments to the admissions timeline required with a post-qualification applications system is not as mandatory in a post-qualification offers system, with a less intensive post-results period where only offers, rather than applications and offers are made, and less consequent pressure to move the higher education start date. Post-qualification offers does not have either of these implications to the same extent and therefore provides many of the benefits of moving to some form of post-qualification applications without some of the more drastic risks.

Whilst we are in favour of maintaining the current admissions timeline, we do recognise that a move to a post-qualification offer model would be easier to implement without such significant risks to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

---

## 6. Where the focus should be

Overall, we think PQA and the discussion around it is ultimately a distraction from the evidence-backed interventions we know can support fair access. Rather than proposing significant upheaval of the admissions timeline, we believe we should focus on: **Quality assured tutoring** for all young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who need it at SATs, Level 2 and Level 3. The attainment gap remains the biggest barrier to access and must be addressed head-on. Boosting attainment earlier on will also prevent young people becoming trapped on specific educational routes that limit their access to higher education.

**Comprehensive contextualised admissions across the higher education sector.** We recommend that the Office for Students sets a minimum contextual offer for all students meeting certain criteria, with higher education institutions having the ability to go further should they wish. To support targeted contextual offers, the Department for Education should allow higher education institutions access to individualised data, such as free school meal eligibility. Contextualised admissions acknowledge that, even with high quality tutoring, awarded grades alone cannot demonstrate potential.

**Protecting widening participation funding and supporting research into what works.** We recommend that the work of TASO continues to be funded and supported to build an evidence base for what works in widening participation. These interventions should then be delivered at scale to prevent a postcode lottery of access. Widening participation interventions are crucial in recognising that attainment is not the only barrier, and others such as lack of familiarity with the system and sense of belonging are significant in addressing fair access.

It is vital that fair access is at the centre of any reform. In any form of transition, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to lose out the most, and suffer from the longest adjustment times. The current system is not perfect, and with an access gap of 18.8%pts between young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off peers, there is clearly more work to be done. But PQA is not a silver bullet for fair access, and therefore it is essential that their interests are placed at the centre of any decisions made.

The prevalence of this debate has risked detracting from the needs of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the need for evidence backed interventions to support them. We would argue that instead of PQA, a system that embeds high quality tutoring, contextualised admissions and evidence backed widening participation interventions will have a much greater impact on fair access than changing the timeline of the admission process.

---

# References

1. HEPI, [\*Where next for university admissions\*](#), March 2021
2. The Sutton Trust, [\*Access to advantage\*](#), December 2019
3. TASO, [\*An investigation into the relationship between outreach participation and KS4 attainment / HE progression\*](#), March 2021
4. CFE, [\*HEFCE: Literature Review and Advisory Study\*](#) ; The Behavioural Insights Team, [\*Moments of Choice: how young people make career decisions\*](#), August 2016
5. Education Policy Institute, [\*Education in England: Annual Report 2020\*](#), August 2020
6. Education Policy Institute, [\*Measuring the disadvantage gap in 16-19 education\*](#), March 2021
7. House of Commons Education Committee, [\*Oral evidence: The Impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services\*](#), September 2020

## Background reading

- Department for Education, [\*Post-Qualification Admissions Reform Consultation\*](#), January 2021

## About Impetus

Impetus transforms the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds by ensuring they get the right support to succeed in school, in work and in life.

We do this by finding, funding and building the most promising charities working with these young people and by influencing policy and resources.

We support a number of charities helping to give disadvantaged young people a chance to succeed in school, in work and in life.



Impetus

**Impetus**

10 Queen Street Place,  
London  
EC4R 1AG

[Impetus.org.uk](https://www.impetus.org.uk)

[@ImpetusPEF](https://twitter.com/ImpetusPEF)

[info@impetus.org.uk](mailto:info@impetus.org.uk)

0203 474 1000

Charity 1152262.

© Impetus – The Private Equity Foundation 2021. All rights reserved.