

A charter for fair and transparent admission to higher education

Towards a post-qualification application process

October 2016

OPINION PIECES FROM ACROSS THE POST-16 EDUCATION SECTOR

THE SUTTON TRUST

'The Sutton Trust welcomes the UCU Charter for Fair Access and its recommendations for making university admissions policies and practices more transparent, fair and accessible. If we are going to meet the Prime Minister's laudable goals to increase access into higher education, universities must be more transparent about their admissions policies processes.'

JOHN WIDDOWSON, PRESIDENT, ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES

'The Association of Colleges supports UCU's charter for transparency and fairness in undergraduate admissions. 31% of the students aged under 19 who enter higher education through UCAS previously studied at an FE or sixth form college. We therefore share the view that the maximum amount of information should be available for young people choosing their post-18 education options. In particular, we are keen to see universities end the use of unconditional offers, the introduction of name and nationality blind applications and we support the need for parity between applications with and without AS level qualifications.'

THE RUNNYMEDE TRUST

'Runnymede welcomes and supports the UCU charter as it makes important recommendations for addressing the clear disparities in admissions to higher education for potential students from a range of non-traditional backgrounds.'

'It is now well known that despite year on year increases in participation for those from minority ethnic backgrounds to universities in England and Wales, this participation is uneven, with specific groups, namely those of Black Caribbean and Pakistani heritage, finding it particularly difficult to access research intensive institutions such as those found within the Russell Group.'

'Greater transparency in the admissions process, drawing on suggestions included within the charter, is to be welcomed, but must be accompanied by collective working across the higher education sector with specific focused attention on those institutions which are the least successful in diversifying their intake.'

CHARTER TO SUPPORT TRANSPARENCY AND FAIRNESS IN UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS

UCU recognises the autonomy of higher education providers and their right to self-govern admission policies and practices within two key parameters. First, the ethical imperative to ensure that admission policies and practices are transparent, fair and accessible. Second, the need for greater public accountability.

UCU is calling on higher education stakeholders to sign this charter to support greater transparency and fairness in the higher education admissions process.

- Ban making applicants unconditional offers prior to completion of, or results from, awards published as entry requirements for applicants for the 2018/19 cycle onwards. This includes conditional offers with a guarantee to convert to unconditional if the applicant accepts as firm.
- Trial a name-and-nationality blind application process.
- Ask UCAS to move to a post-qualification application (PQA) process by September 2020.
- Review the necessity of applicant interviews on a course-by-course basis for 2018/19 applicants onwards. Where interviews do take place, adhere to Supporting Professionalism in Admission's (SPA) good practice.
- Publish entrance requirements that give a true reflection of the range of qualifications and grades accepted. This could be done by showing the average UCAS point score of 10%, 50% and 90% of successful applicants along with the ratio of offers to the number of applicants.
- Ensure all staff with a role in admissions or teaching undertake training on unconscious bias in colleges and higher education.
- Publish a statement to give students a clear understanding of, if, and how contextualised information will be used in the decision making process.
- Publish a clear statement in light of A level qualifications reform to give applicants, teachers and advisors a clear understanding of how parity will be ensured between applicants with and without AS level qualifications. Such a statement should recognise that a sole focus on GCSE attainment can have a negative impact on widening participation. Institutions should explicitly state equivalence under the new numbering system.
- Publish annual institution level data for internal review to show application and acceptance rates, and degree-qualified statistics by the following student characteristics:
 - Participation of local areas (POLAR3) classification of young participation in HE
 - Gender
 - Ethnicity
 - Disability status
 - School type
 - Qualifications on entry
 - Mature student status
 - Part-time student status
 - Carers

ANONYMOUS, ASSESSMENT RESEARCHER**Admission to university: the case for better measurement**

It is unlikely that anyone, tasked with designing a new university admissions system, would propose the UK's present arrangements. Specifically, were we to start anew, the use of predicted A-level grades – as opposed to final ones – as the basis of students' application choices and universities' admissions decisions would be ruled out early on. As the UCAS data cited by UCU shows, predicted grades are not always accurate. Indeed, exam boards no longer require schools to submit them for use in the grade awarding process. Using A-level predictions is unfair to some students, and unhelpful in supporting universities to achieve optimal selection. Students predicted high grades, which they then don't achieve, can still be admitted to more sought-after university courses – increasingly on the basis of unconditional offers – while students who outperform expectations have little to no opportunity to trade up without deferring for a year. Students who do not meet the conditions of their accepted offers, and who are treated without clemency, may find themselves in clearing, having rejected offers on more suitable courses.

Unfortunately, while it is not difficult to reach a positive consensus on the merits of post-qualifications applications (PQA), recent efforts by the Schwartz review and UCAS to encourage its adoption have shown that reaching agreement on its implementation is less straightforward. Could universities reasonably be expected to process all of the applications in August and September? How about courses that currently require interviews? The A-level examinations timetable, and the period in which the exams are marked and graded, can only be compressed so far. If exams are brought forward in the school year, they will eat into teaching time. Would starting the first year of university later, or sitting A-level examinations earlier, create a financial no-man's land between leaving school and starting university? Would this disproportionately deter poorer students from applying to university? The problems are numerous but they shouldn't be insurmountable; however, they won't be solved unless there is a will to do so.

Happily, the UCU charter contains proposals that do not face such logistical obstacles and which warrant serious and immediate consideration. Again, some of these relate to the quality of the information used in making admissions decisions.

UCU cites evidence to suggest that the admissions system favours white British applicants, even when the choice of course and academic attainment are accounted for. It is suggested that the appearance on forms of applicants' names, nationalities, and addresses cannot be ruled out as a source of bias. This information could simply be removed from the application forms sent to universities. If the bias dissipates, then removing personal information was the right decision; if it persists, nothing will be lost.

While prior academic achievement is undoubtedly the single strongest indicator of how successful a student will be on his or her university course, it does not give the whole picture. There is a growing body of evidence to show that the A-level grades of students from poorly performing schools under predict how successful they will be at university when compared with students achieving the same grades at highly performing schools. What this suggests is that either: (i) some of the additional value added by highly performing schools to students' examination grades – whether it takes the form of better tuition, more coaching in exam technique, or simply more pressure to succeed – does not transfer to the university context; or (ii) students whose preparation for A-level

examinations is more self-reliant are better prepared for university study, even though their A-level grades may fall somewhat short of their better-schooled peers. Presently, many universities use contextual data for admissions, but practice varies considerably in both the emphasis placed on the data and the stage at which it is used. If we are committed to using data to measure individuals' propensity to succeed at university, then a more systematic inclusion of contextual variables in the process should be explored.

Another aspect to consider is the inclusion in the UCAS application of the personal statement: an opportunity for applicants to demonstrate their interest in and suitability for their chosen course of study. The problems with the personal statement are several. For a test to be fair, all the candidates should know what is expected of them and have the opportunity to prepare for it. Insight into the university system and opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, including relevant work experience, are not universally available. Moreover, although such personal achievements are laudable, it is not obvious that they are a valid tiebreaker for admitting applicants to a degree course. Of greater concern still is the authenticity of the personal statement which, unlike applicants' examination results, is unverifiable in terms of both its content and its authorship. It is therefore difficult to defend its inclusion in such high-stake decision making.

Some selective universities have argued that A-level grades are too coarse a measure to differentiate between high-achieving applicants; for certain courses, such as medicine, universities now require applicants to take an aptitude test. However, research suggests that aptitude tests, despite reporting finer-grained scores, are often no better than A-levels for predicting university degree outcomes. Choosing between applicants with the same A-level grades on the basis of their aptitude test scores is false precision; neither applicant is likely to perform measurably better or worse at university than the other. Faced with high applicant-to-place ratios, it is a natural instinct to use any available information to help make difficult decisions. Therefore, it is vital that this information is valid for the selection task. Evidence shows that prior academic attainment is valid, and so is data that contextualises applicants' attainment, such as where their achievement stands relative to the average at their school. The use of personal statements is questionable on the grounds of authenticity alone, but also because it risks favouring applicants from particular socio-economic backgrounds when the validity of its use is unproven. Ultimately, it would be better to accept a random selection of similarly qualified applicants than to allow unreliable or irrelevant information to bias the process.

The crux of the university admissions debate is the reason for a university offering an applicant a place. Are places on university courses intended to be prizes awarded to the applicants with the best A-level results? If they are, then this is incongruous with having a personal statement and, in some cases, interviews. If university places are not prizes, but are intended to be offered to the applicants who will make the most of them, we need to make sure at the time of admission that, to the greatest extent possible, we are considering all of the factors that are relevant to success at university and none of the factors that are not. That is the essence of valid measurement.

DR DEAN MACHIN, LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS**Post-qualification application (PQA)**

At one point in the comedy series *Red Dwarf* danger causes Rimmer to declare a Red Alert. Kryten looks troubled and enquires whether things really are that bad: after all a Red Alert does mean changing the light bulb.

Kryten may have been right – it may have been a false alarm – but he offered the wrong kind of reason. And one suspects that he did so because he was in charge of changing the light bulb. Universities' resistance to PQA is very similar.

The case for PQA

The principled argument for PQA is simple. Generally, people make more informed choices when they have more reliable information. They also have to expend less effort to make informed choices. Unless 16-18 year-old students are the exception, we would expect them to make more informed, and so 'better', choices in a PQA world – especially when it is universally accepted that prospective grade predictions are guesses that are wrong more often than they are right.

What does 'better' mean? Students are more likely to choose a course and destination that fits what they want. As a result, their higher education experience should be better and their labour-market outcomes may improve. Public benefits would flow from this (and more student debt should be repaid). In addition, to the extent that students' application choices hinder attempts to widen participation, it is reasonable to expect PQA to improve this as well.

We need to remember what is at stake. Making more-informed university choices is not small beer. Prospective students are making life-changing choices for which they are financially liable into their 50s. It seems much fairer to impose this burden on them when they have more information. Interestingly, as UCAS found during its review of the admissions process (2012, pp.51-3), no-one really questions the fairness argument for PQA.

The case against

So what trumps all these obviously good things? Sadly, it seems to be bureaucratic reasons. We should not dismiss bureaucratic reasons tout court; they are important. Large societies need bureaucracies and if the transitional costs of change are large enough, they may outweigh the benefits that will follow.

But no one seriously suggests that introducing PQA would bring down universities – they are pretty robust institutions. Oxford and Cambridge pre-exist Protestantism, several London Colleges pre-exist the Great Reform Act, and many universities across Europe have outlasted the Ottoman Empire.

In one form or another, the universities in England have survived democratization, two World Wars, the Cold War, the Great Recession and the unfortunate creation of reality television. It beggars belief that any would suffer serious damage by the move to PQA. And the cost to universities would occur once only. All the benefits cited above would be realized year-on-year during each application cycle. And we should remember that PQA would bring some benefits to universities; it would produce a more stream-lined and efficient application process.

To be fair to the HE sector, schools are just as keen to advance relatively trivial bureaucratic reasons. UCAS found that in schools there was opposition to PQA because there 'was a feeling that schools and colleges were expected to make more changes than the higher education sector and that this was unfair.'(UCAS, 2012, p.54).

Trumping reasons

The point of all this is not that the case for PQA is open-and-shut. But if universities (and schools) don't want to appear Kryten-like and only seem to care about the wrong kind of self-regarding reasons, they need better arguments than this.

What benefits would flow to students from PQA? What of general or public benefits and benefits to the taxpayer? Would PQA help widen participation? Only when we have answers to these questions should any attention be paid to the resource planning implications for universities. As life has taught us all, sometimes there just are very good reasons to change the light bulb.

DR GRAEME ATHERTON, HEAD, ACCESS HE

Ambition and challenge should be welcomed

On a number of levels the UCU charter on admissions is ambitious. It asks higher education institutions (HEIs) to publicly commit to a set of reforms which implicitly imply that what they are doing at present may not be up to scratch. It finishes by asking for a reform in post qualification admissions that appears clearly off the political agenda at the moment. And it hopes that the sharing of information by publishing better data on who progress etc. will impact on applicant behaviour.

Ambition and challenge should be welcomed though. Already we are seeing elements of the charter becoming policy with name blind admissions and the announcement at the start of February by the Prime Minister of the new 'transparency duty' requiring HEIs to publish admissions and retention data by gender, ethnic background and socio-economic background. It is also not hard to imagine the parts of the charter that call for open sharing of information on A level parity, contextualised admissions, acceptance grades and institutional performance being implemented. The advantage of all these things to the government is that they do not cost money but can support their desire to appear student centred and committed to social mobility. However, as valuable as publishing information is it is crucial that potential students are equipped to see it and interpret what it means. The charter needs to be go hand in hand with far greater support in the area of information, advice and guidance (IAG) for potential students and in particular for those from backgrounds under-represented in higher education. It is interesting to think here of the merits of developing a charter as a vehicle for initiating policy change in the area of access to HE specifically. Presenting a coherent set of actions as UCU does with the charter encourages this debate about what good practice is and what we should aspire too. Despite the investment and attention placed on widening access work in the last 15 years nothing exists like this charter which articulates so clearly the steps that need to be taken to advance participation by those from under-represented groups in HE.

The charter will no doubt meet with predictable scepticism in some quarters, especially where moving admissions away from interviews and curbing the use of unconditional offers are concerned. It is crucial though that we try and shine a clearer light on these

issues. HEIs do have the right and indeed duty to build their own student body but also have a responsibility to students. The increase in unconditional offers while ostensibly to the obvious advantage of students is a strategical move to benefit institutions. If the very object in a selective admission system like England is to get the best prepared students for your institution this is hardly served by removing the motivation to work from prospective students before their examinations. As the charter emphasises the aim should be fair and transparent admissions. Transparency means checks and balances being in place to ensure that institutions are forced to be more honest with students in their motivations and actions with students.

As worthwhile as the charter is though, one of the drawbacks with charters is that once the objective(s) are achieved then the drive for further progress ebbs away. They are seen as an end rather than a beginning. Perhaps the main merit of the charter however is that it has sufficient breadth to stimulate an active debate about the whole approach to admissions that fits with the diversified, high participation system that England has in the early 21st century. It will be as a springboard for such a conversation that the charter could have its greatest long term impact. It is also the route by which the most ambitious goal in the charter could hope to be achieved. Post-qualification admissions will require a shift in both structures and culture. Building the constituency to support these shifts will mean putting post-qualifications admissions in the context of the need for whole system reform. The Charter does that well. Let us hope that HEIs are brave enough to respond to this challenge.

JOSHUA OWARE FRSA – RESEARCH MANAGER, RARE; AND ADVISOR TO UNIVERSITIES UK SOCIAL MOBILITY PRACTITIONERS ADVISORY GROUP

I am encouraged by the progressive agenda proposed by the UCU's charter. It is important that the clarity of statements be translated, as best they can, into actual policy shifts. The climate is ready, and the necessity might never have been greater.

Given our work at Rare two points are of particular interest: (a) contextual decision-making, and (b) unconscious bias.

Contextual decision-making

Jack's school is sprawled across a postcard enclave in a leafy south London suburb. Jill's oversubscribed college is on the outskirts of Stockton-On-Tees. Jack debates, plays tennis, and volunteers with Age UK every week. While Jill balances studying with caring for her three rowdy siblings, as her single mum, a ward nurse, works nights at the James Cook.

Jack and Jill opened their results at the same time on August 20, last year. They had both applied for Physics at Manchester. They did exceptionally. Jack scored A*AA; Jill, A*AB. Jack's grades turned out to be about average in his school that year. Jill's were the best. Ever.

Jack made it in. Jill didn't.

In disregarding where someone has come from, and how they have done so, we risk missing some of the most impressive and resilient young people of our time. In the past ten to fifteen years, some universities - and now recruiters - have begun offering informed adjustments to account for this inequality. The examples are numerous:

from bespoke summer schools, to grade flexibility at admission. This is important, and it must continue. But to implement these changes and take the UCU's charter seriously we need: (1) better processes (standardised, reportable, metrics); and (2) better technology (systems that enable (1)).

Unconscious bias

How far do things that are irrelevant to the potential to succeed at university, but are linked to our biases, influence us unconsciously as assessors? The research on the unconscious is clear: we are all susceptible to a multitude of so-called unconscious biases; these biases are hardwired into our neural circuitry and exhibited in all of our everyday actions. This matters in assessment because a person's economic, social and cultural capital is not only relevant to how they appear on paper but also how they appear in person. Young people embody their capital. In interviews, for example, this may exhibit itself as cultural literacy. There exists a cultural, linguistic and social canon; this canon is, by its very nature, 'the way things get done'. It is a metalanguage that enables social and intellectual interaction. Not having access to, or experience of, this canon may place individuals at unfair, largely unconscious, disadvantages. So, for these reasons, a blend of blind (obscuring irrelevant information) and contextualised (understanding the relevance of background) stages will help us move towards a more egalitarian university admissions process.

We look forward to seeing the impact of, and the inspiration that follows, the charter.

RUTH WOODFIELD, PROFESSOR OF EQUALITIES AND ORGANISATION, SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT, UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

The UCU Charter to support transparency and fairness in undergraduate admission recommends a number of key changes in higher education policy and practice, aiming to tackle inequalities. Principally, the changes it suggests will target areas of practice in relation to admissions, where informal and unsystematic judgements can benefit some applicants; where an applicant's predicted grades might be elevated, for instance, or where they might perform well at interview and secure a lower, or even an unconditional, offer. Of course, it is not always the most advantaged students that benefit from areas of the admission process where 'softer' judgements can exert an influence, but for every student that does benefit, there are others who are disadvantaged or who turn away from applying to a particular HEI or course. Students might turn away because they believe the published entry requirements are hard and fast, and that they will fall slightly short of them. Other students might not find the opportunity to be interviewed for a university place one that particularly benefits them, but may secure grades that meet the published entry requirements, and, indeed, may have the capacity to flourish within the course itself.

What we have learned from published research focused on the HE sector is that staff working in higher education, and making decisions in relation to admissions, are not immune to unconscious biases and preferences. Boliver, in the UK (2013), has shown that offer rates from Russell Group institutions were between seven and 16 percentage points lower for applicants from UK BME backgrounds than for white British applicants. This was after taking into account their pre-entry qualification grades, and the popularity of the courses they applied to (Boliver 2013). In the US, candidates with identical profiles applying to science laboratories in research-intensive universities were viewed

more favourably – more suitable, more competent, more deserving of reward and support - if they were assigned a male rather than a female name (e.g. Moss-Racusin 2012).

The UCU Charter further recommends more transparency around degree attainment and, in particular, the relationship between attainment and a variety of background characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity. In the context of increasing focus on the achievement of an Upper degree by employers and postgraduate admissions staff, the persistent evidence that, for instance, a student's ethnicity has an independent impact on their degree outcome should not be ignored (Richardson 2015; Smith and White 2015).

The 2013 report from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission urged universities to pursue a variety of approaches that broaden their students' social backgrounds, in the context of the higher education sector becoming: 'increasingly central to our future social prospects. Who gets in to university and how they get on once they have left will be crucial in determining whether Britain's sluggish rates of social mobility can be improved' (2).

The UCU Charter will undoubtedly play a key role in taking forward this agenda. It identifies the work that needs to be undertaken, and voices support for it from the staff and managers who will be directly involved in ensuring the required changes in policies and practices are made.

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PROFESSOR JACQUELINE STEVENSON, HEAD OF RESEARCH, SHEFFIELD INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION, SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

Fair access in undergraduate admissions? A personal and a professional perspective

For more than twenty-five years I have worked with those seeking access to education and training. This has included helping young people and adults access community education, work-based learning, and further and, in particular, higher education. I have supported those with significant or multiple barriers to accessing university including refugees, young people leaving public care, students with disabilities and those from

neighbourhoods with low rates of participation in higher education. I have done so by researching barriers to access, evaluating outreach activities, informing institutional practices and shaping national policies. As a widening participation manager, and now as an academic involved in widening participating research and evaluation much of my work has involved helping universities to think about their widening participation access and progression policies and practices.

The majority of this policy-based work has been located within the Post-1992 sector and I have been, and remain, largely convinced by these institutions' strong sense of commitment to issues of equity and social justice. Clearly their admissions policies are underpinned by an economic, not just a social justice imperative – they are businesses after all; but I have always also been struck by their additional values-based commitment to widen participation - although I suggest that this has become less visible as universities seek to position themselves in the neoliberal global market place. Nonetheless my sense is that universities such as the one I work in, Sheffield Hallam University, really care about the diversity of their student body and are committed to opening up access to different sorts of students.

Over the years my work has also included mentoring and advising individuals, as well as those supporting them, to help them understand the UK higher education sector. This has included helping individuals to navigate the complexities of the application process. I have helped them understand the different sorts of UK HE institutions, the qualifications required for different courses, how to make informed choices, and how to write their personal statements. However, I have rarely seen those I have worked with find the process anything other than confusing, stressful or demanding, albeit to a greater extent for some than for others. Here I offer two very personal accounts which will help explain why I support the UCU Charter to support transparency and fairness in undergraduate admission.

Fatou's story: Fatou is my (informal) foster daughter. She is also a refugee who I mentored as part of a refugee access to HE mentoring scheme at a previous university. She arrived in the UK with no qualifications, no family, and no English language skills. Within a few years she had gained a range of FE qualifications, spoke fluent English and was holding down a job. She also had one of the strongest desires to go to university than anyone I have ever met. I worked with Fatou to draw up her application, including helping her to write her personal statement – a feat in itself when you don't wish to describe or make claims about your traumatic past. Together we applied for a range of courses at different universities, all of which indicated that they used contextual data to make decisions, would consider non-traditional qualifications, and/or make decisions on a case by case basis. Fatou was rejected from all of them. It was clear that what we had understood to be flexible and transparent admissions processes proved to be anything other than so. In seeking to discover the reasons for her rejection I came away with a sense of system open to subjective and, I would argue, highly biased decision-making process, a lack of clarity about who was even making these decisions and little sense of being able to challenge these inconsistent and seemingly arbitrary decision making processes. What was particularly concerning was that one of these universities was the same one that ran the refugee mentoring scheme!

Chris's story: Chris is my son. I have two children: my daughter has followed a linear route to University, applying in year 13, making her firm and confidential choices based on her predicted grades, and subsequently attending her first choice university post A-level results. There was a certain level of second-guessing going on in the process but she survived pretty much intact. My son found the whole process so stressful that we ended up gaining a letter from his GP asking that he be exempt from applying for University before his A-level results. He became riddled with uncertainty and self-doubt; he began to question whether he would get any qualifications at all, never mind sufficient grades to get a university place. However, the pressure from his college was constant. Yes, they said, he could choose not to make an actual application but he still had to draw up a list of choices, draft a personal statement, have a discussion with his academic tutor... in other words do everything except press the submission button. In the end I simply wrote his application and submitted it simply to end the pressure. A year later, post-A levels and part way through a year travelling round Africa and South East Asia Chris has made a fully-informed application to university. He was able to do so because he had got his A level results and could use them to make appropriate and not ill-informed choices, and so avoid making a hit and miss decision.

Fatou and Chris are from completely different backgrounds but both found the current HE application process to be wholly confusing, and unhelpful. However I am lucky that because of my professional knowledge and position I have been able to support them. Fatou gained her place when I made a direct appeal to the head of a particular course and I simply intervened to take the decision out of Chris's hands. They are therefore the lucky ones; but there are probably thousands of young people who could and would never have got past these same barriers. From a personal perspective, therefore I absolutely support the UCU charter. However I also do so from the position of my role as a widening participation academic and practitioner. I am convinced that a true institutional commitment to both widening participation and to social justice requires transparency and fairness in the higher education admission process. I therefore fully endorse the UCU charter and would strongly encourage all higher education stakeholders to sign it.

KALWANT BHOPAL, PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

The UCU charter to support greater transparency and fairness in undergraduate admissions is to introduce a post qualification application system ensuring equity and fairness in how decisions are made. On the face of it, inclusive policy making in the UK seems to be a success story; the Equalities Act (2010) provides a basic framework against direct and indirect discrimination; and the Athena SWAN charter introduced 10 years ago works to advance the position of women in STEM subjects. In addition to this, we have recently seen the introduction of the Race Equality Charter mark. The Race Equality Charter mark works in a similar way to the Athena SWAN charter but its main focus is on race equality, particularly in relation to improving the representation, progress and success of minority ethnic staff and students in higher education. Last week 8 out of 21 institutions were awarded a bronze Race Equality Charter mark.

However despite such policy making inequalities continue to persist in the student experience. Whilst there has been a significant increase in the numbers of Black and minority ethnic (BME) students attending higher education institutions (HESA 2013-14), there is recent evidence to suggest that the numbers fall at postgraduate level (Equality in Higher Education Statistical Report 2015, ECU). A total of 22.5% of first year undergraduates are from minority ethnic backgrounds but this number decreases to 19.2% for first year post graduate students. There are also ethnic differences in degrees awarded. For example, 76% of white undergraduates in England get a first or 2:1 degree, compared to 60% of BME students overall (which is 50% of Black students). A total of 23% of white students obtain a first class degree compared to only 9% of Black students (ECU Statistical Report, 2015). There is also evidence to suggest that BME students are less likely to secure places at Russell Group or elite universities and this may be due to a process of unconscious bias and direct discrimination (Boliver, 2014). Publishing annual institutional data on types of degrees awarded by ethnicity, gender and disability will enable institutions to examine which groups are under represented and areas for improvement in providing greater access for those groups which may be disadvantaged. In addition, making applications name and nationality blind would help to reduce unconscious bias in the selection processes. Providing mandatory unconscious bias training for staff involved in admissions would be a positive step forward to assist in this process.

The UCU charter will ensure universities have greater transparency in their selection processes and provide accountability in how they respond and comply to equalities legislation. If universities are serious in addressing race and other inequalities signing up to the UCU charter on fair admissions would demonstrate this commitment. A charter to support transparency and fairness in admissions procedures is clearly a move in the right direction and will work to ensure that issues of unconscious bias are addressed so that students from BME backgrounds do not continue to be disadvantaged.

THE BRIGHTSIDE TRUST

At Brightside we support disadvantaged young people to make confident and informed decisions about their future. Working with their mentors, young people are helped to collect as many facts as possible about their education options, and told not to rely on guesswork and outdated preconceptions. However, should they choose to enter higher education, these young people are then required to navigate an applications system based on assumptions rather than on concrete data. In our view, the current applications process, whereby students receive offers based on their predicted grades, feels more like a gamble than a straight transactional choice.

Evidence in favour of moving to a post-qualifications applications (PQA) system has been presented by the Schwartz Report in 2004 and UCAS in 2012, but in both cases the proposals were withdrawn following opposition from universities and schools over the amount of upheaval they would cause. However, given that the recent green paper sets challenging targets to radically increase the number of disadvantaged students in higher education by 2020, we believe it is once again timely to examine the benefits PQA could have for exactly the sort of students Brightside works with and who universities are now under even greater pressure to attract.

For the system as it stands is weighted against young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research shows that fewer than half of predicted grades are accurate, and that accuracy is worse lower down the socio-economic scale: only 39% of predictions for the poorest students are accurate, compared to 51% for the richest. What's more, private schools tend to be more optimistic in their predictions for their pupils' A-level grades, whereas state schools tend to underestimate them. Low predictions don't just harm a student's prospects, they also damage their confidence when considering which universities are likely to accept them.

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission says that even after controlling for a range of factors, including A-level grades and the subjects taken at A-level, pupils from state schools need to be the equivalent of two grades better qualified than privately educated pupils to be as likely to apply to Russell Group universities. This implies that PQA would serve to reduce the 'missing 3,700' state school students who the Commission says could be studying at Russell Group institutions if application and acceptance rates were equal. PQA would also eliminate unconditional offers, which are inevitably made more often to students with higher predicted grades.

It would also serve to reduce the importance of personal statements. Whilst it is undoubtedly valuable for students to communicate their suitability to study a subject in ways beyond mere grades, private school pupils get much better support writing their personal statements, and greater social capital means they can often fill them with details of extra-curricular activities other young people simply don't have access to, as a recent Sutton Trust report attests.

Having all students apply in a shorter timeframe could have other benefits for social mobility too. As well as offering their students greater coaching through the admissions process, private schools often encourage them to apply earlier, which research by Warwick University suggests puts them towards the top of the pile when offers are being made.

Of course, PQA isn't a social mobility silver bullet. Despite disparities in predictions, private school pupils do get higher actual grades on average. That's why Brightside is also supporting the call made by UCU and others for greater use of contextual data alongside PQA, so students' individual circumstances are more fairly considered.

Any change towards PQA would need to be managed carefully to minimise disruption for university admissions departments as well as for students. However, whilst taking A-level exams earlier might increase the pressure on students in some respects, PQA would mean they had more time to research their university options before applying, making more suitable choices more likely.

One clear benefit for both universities and students would be an end to the current panicked scramble of clearing.

According to government research, 36% of clearing students who drop out do so because they feel they made the wrong choice of university – compared to 23% of others – which means a greater risk of losing money at a time when universities are increasingly reliant on tuition fees for income. After all, universities are also taking a gamble on students to some extent – so they too need to be able to make the most confident and informed decisions they can.