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Pocket Watch – UCAS consult on changes to the admissions process for university entry

Introduction

It's 50 years since UCAS, or UCCA as it was then, began operating an admissions service for entry to higher education. The world was very different then with a student population in the 1960s of around 200,000; by contrast, last year alone, UCAS dealt with 697,000 applicants, 38% of whom were over 20 and 18% from outside the UK. There have been attempts at reform since such as the 2003/4 Schwartz Review but as UCAS has identified, the relentless growth of HE and the changing world in which it now operates, mean the time is now ripe for a review

What's wrong with the current system?

UCAS have identified three key areas

- Applicants have to make choices about what and where to study a long time ahead and on the basis of predicted grades which according to UCAS are often incorrect
- The system is pretty complicated with features like insurance offers and Clearing, let alone different institutional practices, leaving those less able to get good advice and support at a considerable disadvantage
- There's scope for efficiencies; for example cutting the number of transactions could see costs cut from a current £26m to nearer £8m

What is UCAS proposing?

It's proposing a PQA (post-qualification application) process built around 4 stages

- Research. Potential applicants sign up to 'myucas' to access support, research their opportunities and attend open days, develop choices
- Apply 1. Applicants who already have their results, such as international and mature applicants, apply to one HE institution at a time and at any point over the year's cycle
- Apply 2, the 'core' phase. Applicants, armed in most cases with their results and thus knowledge of whether requirements have been met, apply to two choices sometime between the end of June and the third week of July. Decisions would be confirmed by the third week of September
- Apply 4. Open late July to early October for single choice applications for those still not holding any offers

When might these changes happen?

UCAS is suggesting some modifications from 2014 with full implementation for the 2016 year of entry. The trickier bit is what impact such proposals would have on a standard year format. It would mean, for instance, A levels having to start 15 days earlier, the exam period completing within five weeks, results being available by early July and university terms starting in early October. A busy summer for many

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