

## Introduction and summary

Supporting disadvantaged students is at the heart of UCAS' charitable objects – we are committed to helping students from all backgrounds access the post-secondary education, apprenticeship, or training option that is right for them. To support this, we are developing a new fair access programme, **and would welcome your views and input**. In particular, we are keen to know your thoughts about how UCAS could further support fair access through:

- **the provision of data and analysis**
- **its audience and reach**
- **a more tailored journey through its services**
- **the targeting of students**
- **the provision of admissions services**

We are particularly interested in your thoughts around how, in partnership with third party organisations (whether this be your own or another), UCAS could add value to the support already given to disadvantaged students, or develop collaborative services that would make a tangible impact on the experience of disadvantaged students making decisions about their next step. This includes sharing examples of best practice.

**We ask that any feedback is sent to [access@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:access@ucas.ac.uk) by Friday 17<sup>th</sup> September.** If you would prefer a meeting to discuss your views, please contact Ben Jordan (Senior Policy Unit Manager – [b.jordan@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:b.jordan@ucas.ac.uk)).

## Background: how UCAS currently supports access

UCAS is an independent charity that operates across the UK and internationally to provide information, advice, and admissions services to help students to progress to the next stage of education and training. This service spans undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship options, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories.

As part of this, we support the full range of students who wish to benefit from higher education or training, and last year supported over 29,000 18 year old students from POLAR4 Q1 areas to secure a place at university or college. We do this by:

- **Careers education and advice:** Acting as a 'digital equaliser,' UCAS provides students with comprehensive careers education and advice regarding the full range of post-secondary opportunities to allow them to make fully informed decisions, with [ucas.com](https://ucas.com) receiving 30 million unique visits a year. This includes providing students with content relevant to their circumstances, working with partners to ensure students hear from independent and expert voices. In response to the pandemic, we have introduced digital events such as UCAS' *Discovery Days* as well as more social media engagement than ever before.
- **Raising aspiration through digital innovation:** In 2020, 8,500 students were placed after using [Clearing Plus](#), our service that presents tailored opportunities to students based on who they are, including opportunities that they may not have previously considered. Our ['self release' functionality](#) also allows students to have total control over their application and reassess their options – last year nearly 30,000 students used this service to find an alternative place in Clearing.

- **Holistic understanding of students:** We collect information from students that outline their individual circumstances, promoting a rounded understanding of the student. We are continuing to add new data fields to capture a broader range of student characteristics, including estranged students, carers, and a more inclusive gender question. Our [contextual data service](#) also provides information regarding the educational context of a student, such as the percentage achieving grade C/4 or above in GCSE English and maths. Furthermore, our modernised contextualised data service utilises our [Multiple Equalities Measure](#) to provide a comprehensive view of the circumstances of a student. Finally, we have recently introduced the use of Free School Meals (FSM) data as part of the application process to further enhance the understanding of a student’s background.
- **Increasing transparency:** Transparency is core to UCAS’ mission, ensuring that students can be confident they are connecting to opportunities in a fair and transparent way. As an example, in 2020 UCAS launched the ‘grades on entry’ tool, providing an overview of the actual level of achievement with which students are accepted to university or college, and how this differs by background. The purpose of this is to aid teachers and advisers in helping their students make better informed choices.
- **Analysis and research to inform the public and policy debate:** Recent outputs include [What happened to the COVID cohort?](#) and [Where Next?](#) which shine a light on student progression, and outlined how improvements can be made.
- **Open access data:** Each cycle, [UCAS releases over 2 million datapoints in an open data format](#), allowing researchers to explore this rich resource with a range of student information, including POLAR, SIMD and disability. Furthermore, we publish annual equalities statistics to understand the experience of disadvantaged students at specific universities and colleges.
- **Evaluation of impact:** UCAS provides a data service called [STROBE](#) which allows organisations such as the Brilliant Club to evaluate the effectiveness of their outreach and interventions. Alongside this, UCAS facilitates organisations, including universities and colleges, to communicate directly with disadvantaged students. This has been trialled with Brightside as a means of targeting students for mentoring.

### How could UCAS support access further?

UCAS’ plans to support the increase in participation of disadvantaged students in education and training will focus on:

- **Provision of data and insight**, ensuring support for disadvantaged students is informed by the latest information, and that activity and investment is evidence based.
- Using UCAS’ **audience and reach** to provide high quality, personalised information, advice and content via the UCAS Hub, promoting a clear understanding of the range of choices and support available to students. UCAS is keen to continue working with a range of experts to ensure this guidance is consistent, up to date and high value. Furthermore, recognising that early engagement raises aspiration and leads to more informed decisions, we would like to understand how we can reach pupils earlier, including at primary school.
- Leveraging our deep relationship with over 4,000 teachers and advisers to create a more **tailored journey through UCAS’ services** to encourage applicants to make ambitious and informed choices.
- Better **targeting of students** with personalised information, advice or support at the key points along their journey, linking them to services or content relevant to their needs and circumstances.
- Through the **provision and constant improvement of admissions services**, putting in place additional support for disadvantaged students.

UCAS would welcome your views on how it can enhance the support it gives to those considering their higher education and training options further along these themes at a local and/or national level. In particular, we are interested in how you feel UCAS could add value to the work of third parties supporting disadvantaged students, or develop collaborative services to make a positive impact on the experience of disadvantaged students.

Please send any feedback to [access@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:access@ucas.ac.uk) by **Friday 17<sup>th</sup> September**. Furthermore, if you would prefer a meeting to discuss your views, please contact Ben Jordan (Senior Policy Unit Manager – [b.jordan@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:b.jordan@ucas.ac.uk)).