

IOP Institute of Physics

IOP Response to the Department for Education's Review of Post-Qualification Admissions Reform

The Department for Education (DfE) is [reviewing the system for student admission into higher education \(HE\)](#), after stating the current system is “preventing some students from reaching their full potential at the first hurdle.” The department has proposed **to move to a system where offers are made after students have received their results**, and the consultation focused on two models to deliver this.

- **Model 1: ‘post-qualification applications and offers’**, with a longer application window created by moving results dates forward to the end of July and HE term dates back to the first week of October.
- **Model 2: ‘pre-qualification applications with post-qualification offers and decisions’**. Applications would be made during term-time (as now), but offers would be made after results day.

The IOP has responded to this consultation; this document summarises the response.

Executive Summary

The IOP supports the move to a PQA system, due to the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) challenges which are caused by the current system. However, the IOP is concerned that neither of the models proposed by the DfE will remove current EDI challenges in full. Issues include:

- the feasibility of completing the whole application process effectively within the time that is being proposed;
- the availability of support for students when completing their application;
- the speed of marking and grade-awarding;
- the potential impact on term time.

The IOP recommends a full impact assessment of the models, changes to the proposed timelines, and the widening of the scope of the review to include the advice and guidance provided to students, upon which they shortlist HE providers and make their applications.

The IOP has evidence to show that the physics community is not representative of wider society. There are too few women; too few Black physicists, especially of Black Caribbean descent; too few people with disabilities; too few LGBT+ people; and too few people from less well off or disadvantaged backgrounds. Those with protected characteristics are often underrepresented in the sector. The Institute is working to improve representation in the sector, and believes these reforms can support this change. Advisors at level 3 can find out how they can encourage their students to get into STEM and physics by learning about the IOP's Limit Less campaign and following its recommendations.¹

¹ IOP Limit Less Campaign: <https://www.iop.org/about/strategy/limit-less>

Problems with the current system

1. The rise in unconditional Offers

The number of unconditional offers to students by universities has risen significantly in recent years, leading to some students achieving lower grades at level 3 and attending a university for which they are not best suited. This, in some cases, leads to poorer student outcomes and student retention, when students are not well-matched with, or well-prepared for, their course or the wider HE environment.

There is widespread concern that the rise in unconditional offers will lead to lower achieved grades for some students, and the risk of this is particularly acute for those from disadvantage backgrounds, as UCAS research on unconditional offers in 2019 found that “*applicants from the most disadvantaged areas were 50% more likely to receive an unconditional offer than applicants from the most advantaged areas*”.² These students may also have lower predicted grades, and therefore feel pressure to act safely and accept unconditional offers from lower tier universities (or place these universities top of their application in exchange for an unconditional offer), even if they may be better matched to a different, higher performing university. This leads to mis-matching between students and universities, where lower numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds apply to, and attend, Russell Group and pre-1992 universities, worsening representation at these institutes and later in the workforce in high-skill sectors, such as physics.

2. The inaccuracy of predicted grades

The IOP has concerns over the accuracy of predicted grades for STEM students. The Isaac Physics project at Cambridge University worked with UCAS and found that on average, achieved grades for all physics cohorts were below their predicted grades.³

Wrongly predicted grades lead to student-university mis-match. Students may have secured a place in a university or on a course which they are not best suited to, leading to poor student fit, or they may have to seek an alternative provider through the clearing and adjustment systems. In the worst case scenario, this will be an alternative provider that the student won't have visited and will know little about. Under-predicting can disproportionately lead to mismatching for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those who are underrepresented in the sector, resulting in lower numbers of these students at Russell Group and pre-1992 universities, further worsening representation. The Sutton Trust found that disadvantaged students are at greater risk of grade under-prediction, with 1,000 high-achieving disadvantaged students having their grades under-predicted each year,⁴ and the IOP set out concerns that use of centre assessment grades for physics would likely under-reward girls and students from lower socio-economic groups, due to unconscious stereotypes.⁵ These issues create a circular chain of disadvantage which perpetuates stereotypes and mismatching for future generations.

² UCAS 2019: Unconditional Offers – an update for 2019

<https://www.ucas.com/file/250931/download?token=R8Nn7uol>

³ Isaac Physics: Impact & Engagement Summary (page evidence on page 7) (2018)

https://cdn.isaacphysics.org/isaac/publications/impact_summary_201804_v6.pdf

⁴ Rules of the Game: Disadvantaged students and the university admissions process (2017)

<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Rules-of-the-Game.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09500693.2015.1114190>.

The IOP's views on the models

Model 1: 'post-qualifications application and offers'

The IOP believes model 1 will not significantly improve the HE admissions system and has concerns about a number of potential unintended consequences from its implementation:

- The model is unworkable due to the timing pressure it places on exam marking and the exam board. For subjects like physics, it may be difficult to recruit examiners to mark exams and coursework in the outlined timeline.
- The model may not allow sufficient time for level 3 grade appeals by students.
- It will place strain on HE admissions staff and processes, as usually the processing of applications occurs throughout the year, but in this model it would instead be moved to the summer months. This will have cost implications for HE providers, particularly those which conduct interviews and/or entry tests. This could worsen existing EDI issues.
- Due to the tight timelines in the model, the IOP has concerns about the development of informal offers from universities, which will be competing for students.
- Students would be making their application out of term time. Without structured support from an institution, the IOP has concerns this will exacerbate disadvantage for those without access to support, knowledge of the system, and for those with disabilities or mental health issues. This would also be a considerable barrier to students without broadband or digital provisions. The IOP recommends the provision of ongoing university application support from level 3 providers for their students, or of accessible and free independent support.

Model 2: 'pre-qualification applications with post-qualification offers and decisions'

The IOP believes model 2 will not significantly improve the HE admissions system. Although this model would prevent universities from making unconditional offers to their applicants, the IOP fears that, due to competition between universities, these will be made informally by HE providers, meaning this practice and its implications would persist. Furthermore, this model offers no change to the EDI challenges that result from the use of predicted grades in the current model, and adds uncertainty to students, as they must wait for their offers after their results day. This will unduly add stress to students.

It also doesn't remove the problem of predicted grades being used for decision making and final application, and students would have made these decisions based on what they've been told to expect. This means the system risks the continuation of the current social inequities and mis-matching students with their university.

Mis-informed guidance

The IOP is concerned that neither model considers the ‘soft decision making’ element of selecting and applying to universities; the preparation done before applying and receiving results, nor does it consider the influences on a student during this process. In both models it is highly likely students will still consider, shortlist and visit universities before the official application process begins, using subjective guidance. This process is highly steered by those who are predicting the final performance of the student, meaning the outlined biases will likely still influence student choice.

If those who advise students on their pre-application plans have subconscious biases and stereotypes, this could limit the potential of, and lead to negative outcomes for, students (such as applying to universities they are not well matched to, or not pursuing a subject they would have succeeded in, such as physics). Groups of students who are currently under-represented in physics and physics-related subjects in the classroom, at specific HE providers such as Russell Group universities, and in physics sectors in the workforce, may still select, or be advised to select, universities and courses perceived as ‘safer’ options, with lower entry grades, rather than applying to Russell Group or pre-1992 providers. This further worsens representation at these top tier institutes and later in the workforce in high-skill sectors including physics.

The IOP supports and promotes the provision of well-informed careers guidance at level 3, the suppliers of which can encourage students to consider going to university and studying physics. This guidance and support are important in students’ lives, particularly those who are unsure or not confident of their future path, and it is important that students are encouraged and informed about the process of applying to HE, from university open days to how to navigate the UCAS system.

This is a core message of our Limit Less campaign,⁶ which is aimed at asking those who influence students and young people to encourage them to consider a career in physics, when they may otherwise have not seen themselves reflected in the subject.

In effort to remove the subjectivity of predicted grades and guidance, the IOP recommend the DfE consult on a different model, whereby instead of using predicted grades, students apply to universities earlier in the year using grades achieved in regular formal assessments or exams, such as a new subject specific National Reference Test.

Contact:

W: <https://www.iop.org/policy>

If you would like to receive the IOP’s full submission, please email policy@iop.org.

For more information on the IOP’s policy positions, see the IOP’s [policy statements on education](#).

⁶ IOP Limit Less Campaign: <https://www.iop.org/about/strategy/limit-less>