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Fair admissions code of practice



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Introduction

This code of practice is intended to guide higher education admissions practices to ensure that they are fair, transparent, and deliver admissions in the interest of applicants.

This code has been developed by Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE, and will be referenced by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)'s admissions principles.

This is a living document that will be updated as necessary to best respond to future admissions challenges.

Throughout this code, we've used the term 'universities and colleges' as shorthand for all providers of higher education.

Why have universities and colleges signed up to this code?

An effective higher education admissions system is key to ensuring the stability of the education sector and commanding public confidence in the ability of universities and colleges to deliver the best outcomes for students.

Universities and colleges are autonomous in their admissions processes, but these processes are delivered in line with shared principles that:

- protect applicants
- support fairness and transparency
- ensure the stability of the higher education sector
- maintain high academic standards

Admissions are also shaped by various channels, including:

- the [Quality Code](#)
- the [consumer rights of students](#)
- for users of UCAS, the [UCAS terms of service](#)

This code of practice builds on the above to demonstrate these shared values of fairness and transparency. The universities and colleges that abide by it are committed to following the principles and behaviours outlined.

Who does this code of practice apply to?

This code of practice covers universities and colleges that have signed up to the code in relation to the admission of home undergraduate students.¹

Universities and colleges should also consider how the principles can be applied to the admission of other students, including postgraduate applicants and applicants from outside of the UK, even though their admissions processes for these students may be different.

Admissions practices are also different in different parts of the UK. In Scotland, for example, contextualised admissions and minimum entry requirements are an integrated part of the admissions process across all 18 universities, and universities administer a Scotland-wide guarantee for students from care-experienced backgrounds. Many students in Scotland have also completed their Scottish Highers by the time they apply to university, and so will already hold grades suitable for entry.

At its heart, this code is made up of the revised [Schwartz principles for fair admissions](#)² as agreed through UUK's [Fair admissions review](#). Each principle has underlying behaviours that admissions processes should show and that applicants to universities and colleges can expect. These behaviours are not exhaustive, and universities and colleges should be guided primarily by the updated Schwartz principles.

¹ The phrase 'home students' has different meanings for the UK's four nations, applying in each case directly and respectively to students in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. This code is broadly intended to cover the experience of students from all nations of the UK, regardless of in which part of the country they are studying.

² The Schwartz principles were originally developed in 2004 as part of the Schwartz review of 'Fair admissions to higher education' for English universities and colleges.

Overarching guiding principle

Admissions processes must protect and prioritise the interests of applicants

University and college admissions policies and processes should prioritise the interests of applicants and deliver the best outcomes for these applicants, above the interests of universities and colleges.

Universities and colleges should ensure that admissions practices support student choice and do not create unnecessary pressure. Applicants must be able to make informed choices based on clear evidence of their strengths, capability and potential, and on comprehensive and consistent information about how courses, universities and colleges will meet their expectations, both as future students and for their aspirations beyond graduation.

Behaviours that demonstrate this principle:

- Above all, universities and colleges put the interests of applicants above their own. This includes an individual's experience as an enquirer, applicant, and their student experience and ability to succeed should they be admitted to the university or college.
- Universities and colleges ensure that applicants have all the information they need to make an informed decision about the best course of study for them, and ensure entry requirements mean that applicants who are admitted can succeed on the course.
- Universities and colleges avoid applying undue pressure through their offer making practices or use of incentives. This means:
 - Universities and colleges do not make 'conditional' unconditional offers or offers with significantly lower entry requirements based on the type of choice applicants make (for example, for those who apply through UCAS, whether an offer is made 'firm' or 'insurance').

- Universities and colleges only make use of unconditional offers when the applicant:
 - already holds the required grades or qualifications for the course³
 - applies to a course where admissions decisions have been substantively informed by an interview, audition, or additional application procedures (such as the submission of a portfolio or skills test)
 - requires special consideration due to mitigating circumstances, such as illness or disability
 - is applying to a university or college where non-selective admissions to undergraduate programmes is a core part of the founding purpose of the university or college
- Universities and colleges ensure that the use of incentives does not place undue pressure on the decisions that applicants make, or the timescales in which they should make them, meaning:
 - All incentives should be published clearly, consistently and accessibly, and communicated to applicants in a timely manner. This includes in relation to aspects of an offer communicated to applicants within or outside of UCAS that are tied to accommodation and other material and financial incentives.
 - Universities and colleges should review their use of incentives against the revised principles set out in this code of practice.
- Universities and colleges do not use offer holder events or aspects of the admissions process that are used for assessment (such as interviews or auditions) to put undue pressure on applicant decision making.
- Universities and colleges value and support the achievement of applicants on their existing studies and develop offer making practices that uphold this value.

³ This can include Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Highers, where many applicants apply with grades suitable for entry.

Additional principles

Applicants who apply to a university or college that follows this code can expect:

1. Admissions processes that are transparent

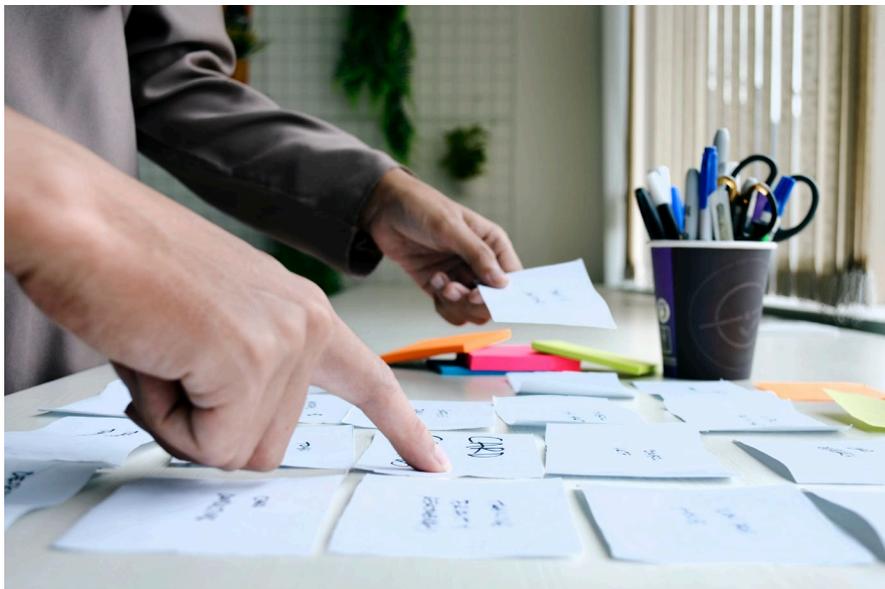
Universities and colleges abiding by this code of practice should provide the information applicants need to make an informed choice (such as information about the admissions process, the entry requirements, and selection criteria) consistently, clearly and efficiently through appropriate mechanisms.

This should include:

- the university or college's admissions policy,
- an explanation of processes, including how decisions are made,
- procedures for complaints and appeals

Entry criteria should include:

- the relative weight of different elements of assessment,
- how historic requirements may differ from those advertised,
- if and how these requirements might change throughout the cycle



Behaviours that demonstrate this principle:

- Universities and colleges use clear and simple language in admissions policy documents that is accessible to applicants and their advisers. Where possible, they use a common shared language (see the [glossary](#) for common examples) and the same language that is used in other guidance resources (such as the UCAS website).⁴
- Universities and colleges can clearly explain admissions processes (including how qualifications, prior experience, and additional assessment such as personal statements, interviews and auditions are taken into consideration) and why types of offers are appropriate (including the use of contextual offers).
- As recommended in the [Fair admissions review](#), universities and colleges aim to allow applicants to make use of historic, actual entry requirements to understand where past applicants may have been admitted holding lower grades. They can explain why students might have been admitted with lower entry requirements than advertised.
- Universities and colleges make the application deadlines clear and ensure they are aligned with relevant sector dates. They do not use deadlines to put undue pressure on applicants. They are also transparent about other relevant deadlines, including for provision of supporting documentation, final certificates, and applying for accommodation.
- Where possible, universities and colleges give useful feedback on request to unsuccessful applicants.

⁴ Universities and colleges in Scotland have already moved towards expressing their outward-facing admissions materials in standardised language and applicant-focussed presentational materials.

2. Admissions processes that enable universities and colleges to select students able to complete a course, as judged by their achievements and potential

A student's potential to complete a course must be an essential criterion for admission, and it's legitimate for universities to select those applicants who have the greatest potential to succeed on a course.

Admissions staff have the discretion to vary the weight they give to examination results and other indicators of achievement and potential, and therefore can vary the offer that they make to applicants. However, this must be done in a way which is consistent with the principles of fair admissions.



In assessing applicants' achievements and potential, universities and colleges may legitimately consider other factors in addition to examination results, including:

- the educational context of an applicant's formal achievement or any mitigating circumstances, such as illness or disability ([see principle 4](#) for more information on contextual admissions)
- other indicators of potential, capability, and how an applicant could contribute to their learning environment (such as the results of additional testing or assessment, including interviews, or non-academic experiences and relevant skills)

Applicants should be assessed as individuals and, at any stage in the admissions process, all applicants should be given an equal opportunity to provide relevant information or demonstrate relevant skills.

Behaviours that demonstrate this principle:

- Universities and colleges give applicants the information they need to make an informed decision about the best course for them including course content, the award given, costs, and the university's terms and conditions (in line with consumer rights legislation). Marketing and recruitment materials give potential applicants a clear idea of what studying at that university or college will be like.
- Admissions criteria do not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit.
- Universities and colleges only make use of unconditional offers when the applicant:
 - already holds the required grades or qualifications for the course (this can include Scottish Qualification Authority Highers, where many applicants apply with grades suitable for entry)
 - applies to a course where admissions decisions have been substantively informed by an interview, audition, or additional application procedures (such as the submission of a portfolio or skills test)
 - requires special consideration due to mitigating circumstances, such as illness or disability
 - is applying to a university or college where non-selective admissions to undergraduate programmes is a core part of the founding purpose of the university or college

3. Admissions processes that use reliable, valid and explainable assessment methods

Assessment can legitimately include a broad range of factors. These include quantifiable measures, such as grades, or methods that rely on qualitative judgments, such as interviews. In either case, policies and procedures should be informed and guided by current research and good practice, and be carried out in the interests of applicants.

Where possible, universities and colleges use quantifiable measures and approaches that have already been shown to predict the suitability and success of undergraduates.

Universities and colleges should monitor and evaluate the link between their admissions policies and undergraduate performance and retention, and review their policies accordingly.

Behaviours that demonstrate this principle:

- Where decisions are made differently to advertised criteria (such as where a university or college receives a higher than anticipated volume of applications), universities and colleges can explain to the applicant how and why such decisions were made.
- Universities and colleges indicate ahead of time what other considerations they may take into account in the event of unforeseen circumstances.
- Universities and colleges make use of the latest research and good practice relating to admissions and adjust their approach accordingly.
- Universities and colleges monitor and evaluate the link between admissions and student outcomes, such as examining the link between types of offers and retention and attainment.
- Interviews, auditions, or additional application procedures (such as a submission of a portfolio or skills test) are appropriate and necessary.

4. Admissions processes that minimise barriers for applicants and address inequalities

Admissions processes should seek to minimise any barriers to satisfying admissions requirements.

This could include:

- barriers arising from the means of assessment
- the varying resources and support available to applicants
- disability or illness
- the type of an applicant's qualifications (eg academic or technical)

Universities and colleges should communicate why work is being done to improve access, and how this is being achieved. This information should be clearly visible to applicants and advisers.

Universities and colleges should consistently review equality of opportunity. Where inequality in access remains evident, universities and colleges should explore causes and ensure appropriate steps are put in place to address any issues. They should ensure that such interventions are a clear part of wider organisational objectives to eliminate barriers to equality (such as access and participation plans for universities and colleges in England).



Behaviours that demonstrate this principle:

- Universities and colleges ensure admissions processes do not disadvantage applicants and actively seek to address any access gaps related to protected characteristics. Admissions form part of broader institutional equality, diversity and inclusion strategies.
- Universities and colleges use consistent communication methods, ideally using a single channel such as the UCAS Hub, and take an applicant's access to resources into account.
- Where contextual offers are used, they are used in situations where they minimise barriers to entry for applicants and address inequalities, while maintaining standards. Universities and colleges can clearly explain their use of contextual offers, including why contextual offers are made, what evidence is used, how context is taken into consideration, and the benefits of disclosing contextual information.
 - Universities and colleges aim to use a shared language to talk about contextual offers and make information regarding them clear and readily accessible. They should consider the publication of a shared sector-level statement on their websites as recommended in UUK's [Fair admissions review](#).
- Data used to inform contextual admissions is used consistently and makes use of available data sources, as recommended in UUK's [Fair admissions review](#) (such as free school meals status, index of multiple deprivation data, and care experienced status).
- Universities and colleges monitor their progress against equalities targets and take steps to address any gaps.

5. Admissions processes that are professional and underpinned by appropriate institutional structure and processes

The structures and processes in universities and colleges should be designed to ensure a high-quality, efficient admissions system, a professional service to applicants, and command public trust and confidence.

Structures and processes should feature:

- clear lines of responsibility across the university or college to ensure consistency (guided by relevant training and/or support)
- allocation of resources appropriate to the task
- clear guidelines for the appointment, training and induction of all staff involved in admissions

Universities and colleges should also monitor and evaluate admissions data and practices and identify what works well and what doesn't in terms of serving the interests of students of all backgrounds. They should identify opportunities to share good practice within their institution or with the wider higher education sector where appropriate.

Behaviours that demonstrate this principle:

- Universities and colleges uphold the highest standards of conduct to support the stability of the higher education sector.
- Admissions processes are part of a whole institutional approach to providing a high-quality experience for students.
- Admissions teams are sufficiently resourced and structured as to allow for an efficient and professional service.
- Admissions processes form part of broader institutional strategies and commitments to ensure equality of opportunity through widening participation or access.
- Universities and colleges consider how admissions processes and practices can be reviewed as part of wider organisational governance, including evaluating compliance against the principles and behaviours outlined in this code of practice.

Glossary

Access and participation plans

Plans monitored by the Office for Students (OfS) that set out how universities and colleges in England will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education.

Admissions

The term used to describe the process by which individuals (applicants) make applications to universities and colleges to study on higher education courses, are assessed, are made offers, make their final choices, and have their choices confirmed.

Adviser

Individuals who give information, advice and support to applicants. They are most commonly teachers or tutors.

Applicant

Individuals applying for courses at universities or colleges.

Conditional offer

An offer made to an applicant dependent on them meeting certain requirements. Most commonly, these offers are dependent on achieving grades in a qualification or subject.

Conditional unconditional offer

An offer that becomes unconditional if an applicant accepts a university or college as their firm choice. This type of offer was prohibited in England by the OfS from 2020 to 2021.

**Contextual admissions/
contextual offer**

Universities and colleges using information and data about an applicant's individual circumstances to assess their potential and adjust an offer accordingly. Information might include an applicant's socioeconomic status or their educational background.

Entry requirements/criteria	What a university or college recommends applicants need to be accepted onto a course. This might include qualifications, specific grades, or passing admissions tests. Applicants who meet these requirements are not guaranteed an offer.
Firm choice	An applicant's first choice of course and university or college, where they are guaranteed a place if they meet the requirements.
Free school meals status	Indicator of whether a student received free school meals at any point in the six years leading up to key stage four (KS4) used in England. This indicator can be used to inform contextual admissions, where data is available when an individual makes their application.
Index of multiple deprivation (IMD) data	Data sets that draw on multiple measures (including employment rates, income and education) to determine the relative deprivation of areas within the UK. Each nation of the UK derives their IMD measure differently.
Insurance choice	An applicant's second choice of course and university or college, that they can use in the event that they do not meet the requirements of their firm choice (dependent on them also meeting the conditions of their insurance choice).
Schwartz principles	<u>Principles</u> developed as recommendations for fair admissions in 2004 as part of a review conducted by Professor Steven Schwartz. These principles were revisited and updated as part of Universities UK's <u>Fair admissions review</u> published in 2020.
Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)	The central organisation that processes applications for most full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges.

UCAS Hub	A source of tools and information to help applicants explore courses, universities and colleges.
UK Quality Code for Higher Education	A <u>set of expectations and practices</u> for UK universities and colleges developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).
Unconditional offer	An offer of a place with no conditions (ie specific entry requirements). Usually used where applicants already hold the required grades or have been assessed in another way (ie through interviews or auditions).
Universities UK (UUK) Fair admissions review	A <u>review</u> launched by UUK in 2019 to identify challenges in home undergraduate admissions and offer making, review the Schwartz principles and propose changes to improve fairness and transparency.

Universities UK is the collective voice of 140 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world; maximising their positive impact locally, nationally and globally.

Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.

GuildHE is an officially recognised representative body for UK Higher Education.

Our members include universities, university colleges, further education colleges and specialist institutions from both the traditional and private ('not for profit' and 'for profit') sectors.

Member institutions include some major providers in professional subject areas including art, design and media, music and the performing arts; agriculture and food; education; business and law, the built environment; health and sports.

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