

# 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 is 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. This document was first published in March 2022, and was most recently updated in July 2024.

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 and international undergraduate students. It is the responsibility of signatories to ensure that franchised provision and any contracted partners (including agents) operate in accordance with the code.

Specific processes and legal obligations can vary for home and international students; this code sets out where considerations and behaviours apply to either or both. Universities and colleges should also consider how the principles can be applied to the admission of other students, including postgraduate applicants, even though the 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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> [UUK Fair Admissions Review \(universitiesuk.ac.uk\)](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk)

# 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 place undue pressure on applicants. 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:

1. 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. This also means setting entry requirements at a level appropriate to support a student's potential.
2. Universities and colleges ensure that applicants have complete, accurate and timely information they need to make an informed decision about the best course of study for them, and comply with [CMA guidance](#) including ensuring compliance by third parties. Universities and colleges should consider sector recognised titling conventions for qualifications to ensure that course content is clear for interested applicants.<sup>3</sup>
3. Universities and colleges avoid applying undue pressure through their offer making practices or use of incentives. This means:
  - a. Universities and colleges do not make 'conditional unconditional' offers or offers with significantly lower entry requirements based on

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications](#) and the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#).

the type of choice applicants make (for example, for those who apply through UCAS, whether an offer is made 'firm' or 'insurance').

- b. Universities and colleges only make use of unconditional offers when the applicant:
  - i. already holds the required grades or qualifications for the course<sup>4</sup>.
  - ii. 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).
  - iii. requires special consideration due to mitigating circumstances, such as illness or disability.
  - iv. 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.
- c. Universities and colleges ensure that communications to applicants or the use of incentives do not place undue pressure on the decisions that applicants make, or the timescales in which they should make them, meaning:
  - i. 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.
  - ii. Universities and colleges should review their use of incentives against the revised principles set out in this code of practice.
  - iii. Where possible, universities and colleges should avoid tight offer acceptance deadlines, where these are not linked to other internal admissions, or external visa processing timescales.

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<sup>4</sup> This can include Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Highers, where many applicants apply with grades suitable for entry.

- d. Universities, colleges and contracted partners do not use recruitment and offer holder events or aspects of the admissions process that are used for assessment (such as interviews or auditions), or fee payment and deposit deadlines, to put undue<sup>5</sup> pressure on applicant decision making, and should be mindful of the equality impacts for different groups of students.
- e. Universities and colleges value and support the achievement of applicants on their existing studies and develop offer making practices that uphold this value.

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<sup>5</sup> By undue, we mean that where universities set requirements they should be necessary for the successful completion of the admission, visa sponsorship or accommodation allocation process, and not designed to pressure applications into an early commitment that they would otherwise not need to make.

# 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 should provide the information applicants need to make an informed choice (such as information about the admissions process, course fees and funding, the academic and English language entry requirements for international students, and course 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

Published information on entry criteria used for admissions should include:

- the different elements that will be considered within an assessment, and where possible the relative weight of these,
- explanations on how historic requirements may differ from those advertised,
- if and how these requirements might change throughout the cycle. For example, where entry grades may be revised during the confirmation and clearing period.

### Behaviours that demonstrate this principle:

1. 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).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Universities and colleges in Scotland have already moved towards expressing their outward-facing admissions materials in standardised language and applicant-focussed presentational materials.



2. 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). Where students apply to franchise provision, applicants should know who the awarding body is and who is making the admissions decision.
3. For international applicants, universities and colleges include in their published admissions policies, the process for benchmarking international qualifications against UK equivalents for the purpose of admissions decision-making. In doing so, universities and colleges can use ENIC, the UK National Information Centre for the recognition and evaluation of international qualifications. They also publish details of acceptable English language tests and qualifications.
4. As recommended in the [Fair admissions review](#), universities and colleges aim to allow home applicants to make use of historic and actual entry requirements to understand where past applicants may have been admitted holding grades that differ to the advertised entry requirements, where the data is available. They can explain why students might have been admitted with qualifications, skills and/or experience that differ to advertised entry requirements.
5. Universities and colleges make course 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. For students who require a visa to study, universities and colleges make clear the processes and deadlines for submission of documentation required to issue a CAS, as well as any related deposit and fee payment deadlines.
6. Where possible, universities and colleges give useful feedback on request to unsuccessful applicants.

## 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),
- for international applicants, proof of English language proficiency.

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:**

1. 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.

Universities and colleges ensure they hold responsibility for the quality of information given to prospective students via third parties including recruitment agents, franchised provision, and formally contracted pathway providers, and should have governance processes in place to properly assure this so that it meets the expectation set out in the overarching principle.

Universities and colleges ensure that international education agents they contract to represent them, provide advice and guidance to prospective students in accordance with the Code of Ethical Practice for Education Agents.

2. Admissions criteria do not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit.
3. Universities and colleges only make use of unconditional offers when the applicant:
  - a. 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)
  - b. 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)
  - c. requires special consideration due to mitigating circumstances, such as illness or disability
  - d. 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 continuation, achievement, and progression, and review their policies accordingly.

#### **Behaviours that demonstrate this principle:**

1. 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.
2. Universities and colleges ensure clarity for applicants on where responsibility for admissions decisions sits and the process for decision making. For example, within a franchising arrangement, applicants should be clear which organisation is making admissions decisions. More widely, decisions for admissions should only be made by those who are qualified and trained to do so.
3. Universities and colleges indicate ahead of time what other considerations they may take into account in the event of unforeseen circumstances.
4. Universities and colleges make use of the latest research and good practice relating to admissions and adjust their approach accordingly.
5. Universities and colleges monitor and evaluate the link between admissions and student outcomes, such as examining the link between types of offers and retention, attainment, and progression.
6. 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. University admissions processes for all applicants must operate in an accordance with the Equality Act 2010. Admissions processes should neither directly nor indirectly discriminate against applicants with protected characteristics and processes should be designed to avoid this. This could include preventing barriers arising as a result of:

- the means of assessment
- the varying resources and support available to applicants
- disability or illness
- pregnancy or maternity
- failure to make reasonable adjustment
- the type of an applicant's qualifications (e.g. academic or technical)

Additionally, as part of their Access and Participation Plans or devolved equivalents, universities must proactively address barriers to access and inclusion for identified groups of students. 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:**

1. 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.

2. Universities and colleges use consistent communication methods. For home (and some international) students this may be using a single channel such as the UCAS Hub. More widely, universities take into account an applicant's access to resources and technology to reduce barriers to entry.
3. 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.
  - a. 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.
4. 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).
5. Universities and colleges monitor their progress against equalities targets among home students 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 and any third party partners (including agents and contracted pathway provision), to ensure fairness and 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, including third party partners such as agents, 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:**

1. Universities and colleges uphold the highest standards of conduct to support the stability of the higher education sector.
2. With regards to sponsored students, universities and colleges comply with UKVI requirements and take appropriate steps to maintain the integrity of the Student visa route.
3. Universities and colleges engage international education agents in line with the recommendations of the UK Agent Quality Framework.
4. Admissions processes are part of a whole institutional approach to providing a high-quality experience and outcomes for all applicants.
5. Admissions teams are sufficiently resourced and structured as to allow for an efficient and professional service.

6. Admissions processes form part of broader institutional strategies and commitments to ensure equality of opportunity through widening participation or access.
7. 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

<b>Access and participation plans</b>	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.
<b>Admissions</b>	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.
<b>Adviser</b>	Individuals who give information, advice and support to applicants. They are most commonly teachers or tutors.
<b>Agent Quality Framework (AQF)</b>	A charter that has been designed to promote shared best practice in international agent management including a Code of Ethical Practice for agents, robust training and standardised agent management processes.
<b>Applicant</b>	Individuals applying for courses at universities or colleges.
<b>Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS)</b>	Electronic document generated for the Home Office for sponsored students, confirming the acceptance of a student on a course of study in the UK for the purposes of a Student Visa application.
<b>Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) guidance</b>	Guidance for higher education providers across the UK to help them understand their responsibilities under consumer protection law in their dealings with prospective and current undergraduate students.
<b>Conditional offer</b>	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.
<b>Conditional unconditional offer</b>	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.
<b>Contextual admissions/ contextual offer</b>	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
<b>Entry requirements/criteria</b>	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.
<b>Firm choice</b>	An applicant's first choice of course and university or college, where they are guaranteed a place if they meet the requirements.
<b>Free school meal status</b>	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.
<b>Index of multiple deprivation (IMD) data</b>	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.
<b>Insurance choice</b>	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).

<b>Schwartz principles</b>	Principles 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 Fair admissions review published in 2020.
<b>Sponsored student</b>	International student supported in their Student Visa by a licensed sponsor, as per <a href="#">UKVI requirements</a> .
<b>Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)</b>	The central organisation that processes applications for most full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges
<b>UCAS Hub</b>	A source of tools and information to help applicants explore courses, universities and colleges.
<b>UK Quality Code for Higher Education</b>	A set of expectations and practices for UK universities and colleges developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).
<b>Unconditional offer</b>	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).
<b>Universities UK (UUK) Fair admissions review</b>	A review 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 142 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

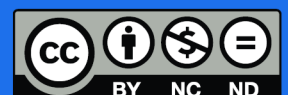
Our mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world; maximising their positive impact locally, nationally and globally.

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



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