



Department  
for Education

## Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

### UCAS Applications - Outline of Activities

#### Introduction

In its first report, the Taskforce proposed that it should work with UCAS to explore how the journey students take when progressing to higher education could be enhanced to support applicants as they share information about their mental health disability or challenge. This has been agreed by the Minister. This note should be read alongside the relevant section of that first stage report.

#### Project Summary

Choosing to disclose a mental health condition via UCAS has a range of benefits, such as enabling applicants to connect earlier with appropriate support within a HEP. Many HEPs also use the information collected via UCAS to target pre-enrolment surveys for those applicants who have disclosed a mental health challenge or disability. The additional information collected through these surveys may support in the development of individual learning, support, or safety plans for students, and potentially the initiation of the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) process.

In December 2023, UCAS published its end of cycle data for 2023<sup>1</sup>. It demonstrated that an increasing number of applicants are now sharing a mental health condition (+125% compared with 2019). This, in part, may be explained by positive enhancements to the UCAS application service, including enhanced help text regarding the collection of information around mental health, but also due to broader societal shifts in how we encourage open conversations about mental health.

In late-2023, two roundtables were organised to discuss: sharing information during the application and enrolment phase (hosted by the HE Student Support Champion); and different approaches to identifying at-risk students (hosted by the HE Mental Health Taskforce). UCAS were represented at both of these roundtables. There was broad consensus across these two roundtables that there may be benefit in considering further how students with individual needs could be better supported in their journey as they progress to higher education, including at the application stage. This should include consideration of the information held by schools and colleges on students with individual

needs, and the best ways of sharing this with HEPs, including potentially through the reference process or through other mechanisms.

As part of its Fair Access programme, UCAS is undertaking an information gathering exercise to understand what additional information is collected by universities and colleges to support their understanding of a student's individual circumstances, including their mental health (for example, through pre-enrolment surveys).

Upon completion of this exercise, UCAS will review the range of information collected to understand whether the journey for students could be enhanced. This could include production of good practice to promote greater consistency in, or a more informed, approach by universities and schools, or changes to the information UCAS collates. UCAS will feedback to the Taskforce its findings and agree next steps in collaboration with the Taskforce.

Taskforce has heard that a number of students do not enter higher education via UCAS, and so consideration should also be given to understand different approaches and strategies to encourage disclosures from these groups of students too.

## Brief

- UCAS will collate findings from its information gathering exercise and share with the Taskforce (expected late-Spring).
- Taskforce will work with UCAS to facilitate an open roundtable to discuss findings and explore the following areas:
  - What additional information HEPs currently gather about students, and the purpose of doing so;
  - The method of collecting this information;
  - The level of consistency across the sector;
  - The impact on the student;
  - What a future approach to promoting greater consistency and an enhanced journey might look like; and
  - How students outside of the UCAS process are supported.
- Taskforce will work with UCAS and sector partners to establish how we might take these suggestions forward.

## Proposed Timelines

March:

- Taskforce receives summary paper for discussion – **7 March**.

May:

- UCAS provides Taskforce with a summary of findings for discussion – **31 May**.

- Taskforce work with UCAS to agree scope of the roundtable.
- Taskforce members assist in identifying attendees for the roundtable.

Summer (date TBC):

- Taskforce facilitates a Roundtable to discuss findings and agree areas to take forward.

## **Note on the Student Support Champion's Wider Work**

In February 2024, the HE Student Support Champion set out in his Newsletter an outline of proposed projects for 2024. Included in this is a proposal to consider in more detail the growing interest in a 'student passport', potentially linked to a single student identifier. Benefits of this may include more effective and systematic collection and sharing of information about students' academic progress, their interactions with services, and their support needs. This would follow students as they move between secondary and tertiary educational settings.

There is potential synergy between the proposed Taskforce work with UCAS and a proposed 'student passport'. However, this is being kept deliberately separate at this stage given the Taskforce's focus on mental health rather than generic student support. It is anticipated that discussions and outcomes of the Taskforce-UCAS project will inform the HE Student Support Champion's work to investigate a 'student passport' if that is taken forward.

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