



[REDACTED]  
8 March 2022

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Dear Zak Golombek,

Thank you for sending a copy of the Regulation 28 report of 27 January 2022, concerning the inquest into the tragic death of Finnian Kitson on 8 October 2020.

UCAS is an independent charity, running the UK's national higher education admissions service. Every year, we help around 700,000 students apply for full-time undergraduate courses at nearly 400 UK universities and colleges.

We are committed to ensuring that everyone who can benefit from higher education can do so – and to go on to succeed once they have started their course. We work in partnership with charities and other organisations, to provide practical and inspiring information, advice and resources for underrepresented groups, as well as producing reports to inform public debate.

### **The experience of students with individual needs applying to higher education via UCAS**

Within the UCAS application, students are invited to share information about any support needs they may require, such as a disability, learning difference or mental health condition. This information is provided voluntarily by the student, and is not verified by UCAS. Students are supported by a range of information, advice and guidance to allow them to understand the use of this information, why it is relevant to their application, and build confidence in sharing.

Once the application has been submitted, an important process begins within the university or college to arrange support. It's important to note that this process varies significantly between institutions and it may differ for students who have applied for Disabled Student Allowances (DSAs), but is broadly as follows:

1. The application is sent by secure transfer to the university or college admissions department. All health data is handled confidentially under UK-GDPR legislation.
2. Admissions staff assess the application based only on the applicant's academic aptitude and potential to succeed on the course. Information about an applicant's health is kept confidential and only shared with those who are responsible for organising support.
3. If the applicant is made an offer or invited to interview or audition, the information is transferred securely to the student support team where reasonable adjustments are organised as necessary.
4. Once an offer is accepted, the student services team may contact the applicant with more information about the available support or to discuss their needs. This may include

completing a questionnaire, a visit to the university or college, or help with applying for DSAs.

5. Before the student's arrival, the student services team may draft a support agreement outlining any reasonable adjustments and discuss this with the student – taking account of DSA recommendations where applicable.
6. Prior to starting the course, the student services team will discuss the distribution of any support document with the student. This will be securely shared on a strict 'need to know' basis, and may include academic staff, the personal tutor, the accommodation team, library staff, and exams officers as appropriate.

### **Improving the experience of students with mental health conditions applying to higher education**

We can see from our records that Finnian originally applied through UCAS in November 2018 to start his course in September 2019, and later deferred his application to start his course at the University of Manchester in 2020. Since Finnian's original application, UCAS has introduced a number of changes to the question that asks applicants about disability, mental and physical health and learning differences, as outlined below.

In July 2019, UCAS held a cross-sector roundtable discussion to review this question, with a particular focus on the needs of students sharing a mental health condition. The group, which comprised representatives from sector bodies (such as Universities UK and Advance HE) and expert organisations (such as NADP, UMHAN and Student Minds), concluded that the format of the question remained fit for purpose, but a significant update to the wording of the question, help text and categories was needed – including a greater emphasis on mental health. Work to review the language was subsequently completed by autumn 2019 and the full revisions – outlined below – will be introduced in May 2022 for the 2023 entry cycle. The full text can be found in Annex A.

In the period between the agreed changes and implementation, we made a number of interim adjustments: in November 2019, we updated the help text to reflect the broader range of conditions and impairments captured and, in May 2021, we made further improvements to the on-screen question text, as follows:

*Select the option which you feel best describes any physical and/or mental health condition, long-term illness, or learning difference you may live with. If you don't have a disability, select to confirm you don't have a disability. We've got more help [here](#). Read more about applying to university with a physical and/or mental health condition, long-term illness, or learning difference. [Click here to know more](#). You can also read our [FAQS](#).*

Further changes to this question are planned for a future cycle, including the ability for an applicant to select multiple categories (instead of selecting the 'two or more' option), and to share an impairment or condition later in the cycle.

As part of our ongoing commitment to ensuring students receive the best experience possible, we regularly review our products and services to ensure that they are fit for purpose. Student mental health is at the forefront of these commitments, and a matter UCAS takes very seriously. Cognisant of the changes to the landscape since we held our original roundtable in 2019, we have committed to convening another event in summer 2022 whereby we will revisit our discussion about the UCAS application and check our original decision remains the best approach. We are also currently undertaking a review of the reference section, which allows teachers and advisers – with the permission of the applicant – to flag any mitigating circumstances, such as a mental health condition.

## UCAS research into the experience of students with mental health conditions applying to higher education

In June 2021, we published our student mental health report, [Starting the conversation](#). Here we found that, while mental health declarations had risen 450% over the last 10 years, nearly half of all applicants with an existing mental health condition chose not to share this with their university due to misconceptions about how the data was used. To address these misconceptions and lingering stigma around mental health, we recommend several next steps – for UCAS, the wider education sector and government, including a joined-up campaign to promote the benefits of disclosure and clarify how the data is used to connect students to the right support for their needs.

This research also found there were significant differences in the disclosure rate depending on an applicant's gender, ethnicity, LGBT+ group and care experience. Accordingly, the report highlights the importance for universities and colleges to consider the intersectionality of mental health with other characteristics, and for the sector to re-evaluate how they target communications about mental health to groups where disclosure rates are low.

### Other ways UCAS supports student mental health

Other work UCAS has recently undertaken to support student mental health includes:

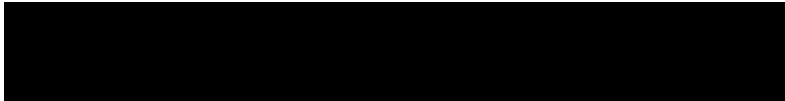
- **Sector collaboration** – we work closely with Student Minds (UCAS is a member of the Student Space Independent Governance Group), UMHAN, NADP and Advance HE (including the Disabled Students' Commission) among others to ensure a joined up approach that informs our work.
- **Information and advice** – for students to help them understand more about how to get support and the benefits of sharing a mental health condition in the application.
- **Social media** to engage students in a timely and immediate way, and signpost support. Over the COVID-19 period, we delivered a series of Facebook live sessions to keep students fully updated about the changing situation – these sessions included mental health support from contributors including Dr [REDACTED], Dr [REDACTED], and Student Minds.
- **New teacher and adviser resources** to help them support students with mental health conditions in their application and transition. This includes a new toolkit and an online training module due for release later this month.
- **UCAS events** – we are currently in the process of developing wellbeing zones in our physical events to support students with more information about mental health and wellbeing in higher education. We have also partnered with Dr [REDACTED], the Youth Mental Health Ambassador to support year 12 students making decisions about their post-secondary choices as part of our UCAS Discovery events.

I hope this offers clarification on how UCAS has been working to support students through the application process, and how we are seeking to improve the connection between applicants and higher education providers in the future.

Yours sincerely



**Chief Executive**  
**UCAS**



## **Annex A: New question wording to be introduced for the 2023 cycle**

*Every year, over 60,000 students with a physical and/or mental health condition, long-term illness, or learning difference apply through UCAS to study at a university or college in the UK, and access a range of support available to help with their studies, day-to-day activities, travel, or lifestyle.*

### **Would you consider yourself as living with any of the following:**

- *A learning difference (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, or AD(H)D)*
- *A visual impairment uncorrected by glasses (e.g. blindness or partial sight)*
- *A hearing impairment (e.g. D/deafness or partial hearing)*
- *A physical impairment or challenges with mobility (e.g. climbing stairs or uneven surfaces), or dexterity (e.g. using a keyboard or laboratory equipment)*
- *A mental health condition, challenge or disorder (e.g. anxiety or depression)*
- *A social, behavioural or communication impairment (e.g. an autistic spectrum condition or Tourette's Syndrome)*
- *A long-term illness or health condition which may involve pain or cause fatigue, loss of concentration or breathing difficulties – including any effects from taking associated medication.*
- *A condition or impairment not listed above (please give details in the box below)*
- *Two or more impairments or conditions (please give details in the box below)*
- *None*

*Telling a course provider about a health condition or impairment early means they can work to make the arrangements or adjustments ready for your arrival. However, if you decide not to give this information now, you may do so after you have sent your application, by contacting them directly.*

*Select the option(s) which you feel best describes any physical and/or mental health condition, long-term illness, or learning difference you may live with. If you have no impairment or condition, select None.*

*IMPORTANT: The information you provide here will not negatively impact the academic judgement of your application, or the decision about whether to offer you a place. Under the Equality Act 2010, it is unlawful for any information you provide about an impairment or condition to be used in making an academic decision about your application. This information will only be shared with those involved in supporting you, or making the arrangements for your support – contact the course provider's disability team to find out more about the support they can offer. The information you provide here may also be used (anonymously) for monitoring purposes to inform and improve support for future students.*

*Please be aware that some courses – particularly professional courses – may have additional requirements relating to 'fitness to practise' – [find out more about fitness to practise](#).*

*[For more information about answering this question read our FAQs.](#)*