**FOR FRIDAY RELEASE**

**UCAS announces new initiatives to encourage students from low-income families to apply for university**

A new package of support targeting students who might disregard university as an option for them, because of initial financial barriers or because they believe they will not achieve the entry requirements published by universities, has been announced today by UCAS.

The new measures are being launched in response to concerns about stalling progress in widening participation. While the higher education (HE) sector has made significant strides in supporting the most disadvantaged students in the past decade, progress has slowed in recent years.

The total number of young people eligible for free school meals is growing but this group's entry rate is at its lowest level since 2019. The UK 18-year-old population is also rising but the university application rate of this age group is not keeping pace.

The initiatives being launched today by UCAS are:

**Students in receipt of free school meals (FSM) will no longer have to pay for their university application**

* In England, 19.1% of 18-year-olds eligible for free school meals go on to university, compared to 36.4% of those who do not claim free school meals.
* Whilst the application fee is not a barrier for most, with 90% saying they did not need any financial help to cover the cost, those receiving free school meals are among the most likely to struggle to pay the cost.
* From September 2024, UCAS is waiving the £28.50 application fee for students in receipt of free school meals.
* In a new survey by Teacher Tapp, nearly two in three teachers agreed the fee waiver would help FSM students to progress to higher education.

**Applicants will soon be able to view historic entry grades data and offer rates displayed for each course**

* Previous UCAS research found nearly half (49%) of applicants were admitted with lower than published entry requirements. The tool will show studentsboth offer rates and the historic grades held by previous successful applicants on admission to a particular course, alongside the listed entry requirements published by universities.
* The entry grades tool was recommended by Universities UK’s Fair Admissions Review. It was also a recommendation of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. It will display entry grade data for all universities listed on UCAS.
* The measure is intended to increase transparency around the admissions process, allowing students to better understand how their predicted or achieved grades compare to those of previous successful applicants to the courses they are interested in, and helping them to make informed, ambitious choices.
* When testing the tool with students, 78% said the entry grade tool would be extremely or very useful to them.

**Dr Jo Saxton, Chief Executive at UCAS, said:** “In my career I have led both some of the most disadvantaged schools in the country and taught in leading universities. Not only have I seen first-hand the challenges faced by the students but also the transformational impact higher education can have. In my new role, I want to ensure UCAS does everything it can to ensure more students from disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit from the life-changing experience of university.

"Applying through UCAS is only one part of a much broader journey students take, which starts as early as primary school. As a sector, we need a fresh conversation on how to address the stubbornly persistent gaps in participation and how we can collectively help accelerate progress in widening access and participation.

“I want to make sure no young person is forced to rule out higher education as an option, either because of the costs associated with applying or because they lack the confidence that their application will be successful. These new initiatives are the first in what will be a series of steps we take to make the university application process more fair, simple and accessible, and I’m delighted that UCAS can announce this support today.”

**Lewis, aged 17, from Lincolnshire, receives free school meals.** He is looking to apply to Japanese studies with Linguistics in 2025. He said: “Waiving the UCAS application fee will mean it’s less of a burden on me and students like me, when finances can be stretched. It won’t seem as much of a stretch. As one of five children in my family, I have to work a part-time job as I don’t like asking my mum for money. For me, the £28.50 would be the equivalent of working a five-hour shift at my work, just to apply.”

**Ben, aged 16, from Devon, receives free school meals.** He is looking to apply to Computer Science in 2025. He said: “UCAS removing the application fee for free school meal students will mean a lot for me. The application fee is three quarters of my week’s salary for my part-time job and that money can now be used towards paying my bills, including towards paying the electric at my family home.”

**Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England, said:** “Most young people I speak to feel confident in their knowledge about apprenticeships, university options and career paths, but for some there have been barriers to higher education. Today’s announcements will help break down some of the barriers experienced by students who have worried their financial situation or own doubt about meeting course entry requirements would stop them from higher education. Every young person, regardless of their background, deserves the chance to pursue their dreams and ambitions and these changes will help them make informed decisions.”

**Sir Peter Lampl, Founder of the Sutton Trust and Founder of the Education Endowment Foundation, said:** “UCAS’s decision to waive the application fee for pupils on free school meals is great news. We know that young people from low-income households are the most likely to be deterred from applying to university because of the overall cost.  Anything that can be done to lessen the financial burden on them and their families is welcome. Gaining a university degree is the surest route to social mobility for disadvantaged young people and as well as having societal benefits, this decision is a welcome step in the right direction.”

**Vivienne Stern MBE, Chief Executive of Universities UK, said:** “Going to university can be a transformative experience. Indeed, [a recent poll](https://100faces.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stats-behind-the-stories) showed that almost a third of students who were the first in their family to attend university described it as ‘the best decision they have made’. So it can’t be right that you are much less likely to go to university if you received free school meals. The university sector has made great strides towards expanding opportunity, but there is much further to go, and it is clear that affordability is a real barrier. It would be nothing short of a tragedy if someone chose not to apply to university because they couldn’t afford the UCAS application fee.

“Today UCAS is making a welcome step by ending the university application fee for students who have received free school meals. I warmly welcome this decision. It may be a small part of the overall cost, but it sends an important signal – we want you, and we want to do all we can to make going to university possible, whatever your financial circumstances.

 “This announcement adds to sector progress to better support students eligible for free school meals to apply to university, the numbers of applicants with FSM status increased by 13% between January 2024 and the 2023 cycle.”

**Kevin Gilmartin, Post 16 Specialist at the Association of Schools and College Leaders (ASCL), and former college Principal, said**: “It’s unfair that financial means continues to have such a bearing on the opportunities available to young people. Some schools and colleges have to pay the UCAS application fee on behalf of disadvantaged students and the fee dissuades some students from applying to university. Higher education has the power to transform lives and should be an option that is open to everyone, irrespective of their background. We welcome any action taken to break down these barriers and are pleased to see UCAS waiving application fees for students in receipt of free school meals.”

**ENDS**

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**UCAS**

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for higher education.

UCAS’ services support young people making post-18 choices, as well as mature learners, by providing information, advice, and guidance to inspire and facilitate educational progression to university, college, or an apprenticeship.

UCAS manages almost three million applications, from around 700,000 people each year, for full-time undergraduate courses at over 380 universities and colleges across the UK.

UCAS also provides a wide range of research, consultancy and advisory services to schools, colleges, careers services, professional bodies, and employers, including apprenticeships. We’re a successful and fast-growing organisation, which helps hundreds of thousands of people every year.

UCAS is committed to delivering a first-class service to all our customers — they're at the heart of everything we do.

**Notes to editors**

Any student applying for 2025 entry through their school or college who has been in receipt of free school meals at any point in the last six years will be eligible for the fee waiver.