

Transparency in Undergraduate Admissions Essays: The case of the UCAS personal statement in the UK

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Abstract

There is considerable debate about the fairness of university admissions processes, particularly in national contexts with substantial prestige differences between providers. However, there does tend to be agreement that admissions processes should be transparent. This study investigates the extent to which undergraduate university admissions in the UK are transparent, particularly with regard to the use of an admissions essay called the UCAS personal statement. Our methods are twofold: 1) we assess whether university staff use the personal statement in ways that align with information on student-facing websites, and 2) we perform an in-depth transparency analysis of fifteen university course websites to assess the extent to which universities helped applicants to understand what a high-quality personal statement looked like. We find considerable evidence of issues related to transparency, with some examples of good practice. The paper concludes with several recommendations for providers to enhance their transparency. The 2025-26 reforms to the UCAS personal statement offer an opportunity for all universities to update their public-facing websites and guidance, so this paper represents a timely intervention.

Keywords: Higher education; admissions; personal statement; widening participation; university access

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Introduction

University admissions systems, particularly those with substantial prestige differences between providers, are often subject to public critique about their fairness. Around the world, a diverse range of policy discussions have addressed fairness in higher education (HE) admissions, with various attempts to remove barriers for students from under-represented backgrounds (Boliver et al., 2022;

McCowan, 2016). Some of these discussions centre on the reform of existing processes, such as abolishing the preferential treatment of children of alumni at leading US universities (Hurwitz, 2011) or ‘parallel admissions’ in Kenya (Odhiambo, 2016), the latter enabling applicants who fail to gain access through conventional admissions processes to pay higher tuition fees to access public universities. Other policy debates question the most appropriate way to account for prior social inequalities, whether caste quotas in elite Indian providers (Deshpande, 2006) or the use of socio-demographic information to adapt admissions requirements in China (Jia & Ericson, 2017), the UK (Boliver et al., 2021), and Australia (Jackson et al., 2023).

Despite the plethora of opinions around what constitutes fair HE admissions, at least one value is held in common: transparency. No matter one’s idea of fairness, there is a consensus that university processes to select applicants should be transparent. This transparency is the cornerstone of a fair admissions system, enabling public scrutiny of processes and outcomes. It is therefore unsurprising that transparency is positioned as a key value within various concordats or principles of fair admissions (Schwartz, 2004). In the UK, the case study of this paper, the vast majority of universities have signed a ‘Fair admissions code of practice’ (UUK, 2024). The first of the code’s five principles states: ‘Applicants who apply to a university or college that follows this code can expect admissions processes that are transparent’ (UUK, 2024). The code goes on to explain this means sharing information on how decisions are made and the relative weight of different aspects of admissions processes, which should be explained using clear and simple language.

This paper investigates the extent to which UK universities’ undergraduate admissions processes are transparent, with respect to one aspect: the UCAS personal statement. This case was chosen because a national-level policy change is planned for the personal statement in 2025-26. By revealing best practice and opportunities for improvement in transparency, at a time when universities are developing new guidance, this paper seeks to intervene and inform these developments.

For those less familiar with undergraduate admissions in the UK, it is important to know that a charity, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), tends to collect candidates’ applications and delivers these to candidates’ (up to five) university choices. The UCAS application consists of a range of background information, actual and predicted grades, a reference, and a personal statement. The latter is a 4,000 character and 47-line essay without an explicit prompt. This personal statement is sent to all five of the applicant’s HE provider choices, so cannot be tailored to one specific university. As was mentioned, the

planned reform to the UCAS personal statement in 2025-26 will replace the long-form essay with three structured questions (UCAS, 2024b):

1. Why do you want to study this course or subject?
2. How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?
3. What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

A relatively small body of literature has explored the relationship between the UCAS personal statement and widening participation. Steven Jones' (2013) analysis found that state school applicants were more likely to have personal statements with grammatical mistakes, compared with their private school peers. Jones (2014) also found inequalities related to the examples students could draw from: private school applicants were more likely to mention high-skill/prestige *experiences* and less likely to discuss low-skill/prestige *jobs* than their state school peers. A range of other studies have explored more specific inequalities relating to foundation year students (Dunn & Faulkner, 2020), those applying for medicine and dentistry (Husbands & Dowell, 2013; Wright & Bradley, 2010), and students from under-represented backgrounds (Fryer et al., 2022). These inequalities do appear to make a difference. Vikki Boliver's (2013) analysis found that applicants from manual class and state school backgrounds were only around two thirds as likely to receive admissions offers from Russell Group universities when compared to their privately educated peers, even when grades were controlled for. UCAS's reform to the personal statement aims to address these inequalities, as well as reduce stress for candidates (Ecclestone, 2023).

For the purposes of this paper, it is interesting to note that UCAS's latest guidance on the personal statement reform stresses the need for applicants to research what individual universities are looking for. For example, an informational video for teachers said:

What always makes a good personal statement, what always has and always will, even with the [policy] changes, is research. That is the foundation to a really strong personal statement. Requirements are different across every university or college, particularly depending on the course, so it's really important that students fully understand what the course will entail. Ask those universities and colleges 'What are you looking for in the personal statement?' before they start writing. (UCAS, 2024b)

This advice is premised on the assumption that universities provide transparent information about how the UCAS personal statement is used to recruit for a particular course. The prompt to take a course-level approach is supported by existing evidence, which has documented considerable diversity of practice in the uses of the UCAS personal statement, even at the same HE provider (Fryer & Jones, 2023). This diversity of practice makes transparency even more important. Without this, candidates and their advisers would be left in the dark regarding how their university applications will be assessed, and this would contradict both the ‘Fair admissions code of practice’ (UUK, 2024) and UCAS’s guidance (UCAS, 2024b).

This study provides the first analysis of transparency about the UCAS personal statement. We undertake two complementary analyses. First, by comparing the actual uses of the UCAS personal statement by admissions staff, with student-facing information available on university websites, we can assess the extent to which universities communicate their admissions processes transparently. Second, we perform a more in-depth analysis of fifteen university courses, identifying the strengths and limitations of their information related to UCAS personal statements. We end by making recommendations for university admissions teams in the UK, as well as in other national contexts, to enhance transparency for all applicants.

Methods

The first of our two analyses drew upon data from Fryer and Jones’ (2023) survey of UK-based admissions staff.¹ The survey gathered responses from 46 admissions staff,² whose day-to-day role involved processing and assessing applications at a named HE provider and course. This sample covered 12 universities and a broad range of courses (STEM, 50%; Social Science, 33%; Humanities, 17%), although the admissions staff did disproportionately work at prestigious providers (61% Russell Group). While this sample is relatively small and non-representative, this

¹ The original study collected non-personal information about the professional practice of admissions staff. All participants gave explicit consent for the use of their data for academic outputs relating to how the UCAS personal statement is used.

² The overall sample from this research was 113 responses. In this analysis, we consider only data from people whose day-to-day work involved processing applications, rather than admissions managers, and from those who provided information on the specific provider and course that they recruited for.

was the most comprehensive data on uses of the UCAS personal statement, at the time of analysis.

Our first analysis compared the responses of the 46 admissions staff with information provided on student-facing websites for the particular course they were recruiting for. This comparison enabled us to assess the extent to which providers are transparent about how the UCAS personal statement is used within admissions decisions. Specifically, we compared information about: 1) the importance of the UCAS personal statement; and 2) what the UCAS personal statement was used to assess. Within this second aspect, we compared university websites with the following survey question: *Within this course [recruitment], how do you use the UCAS personal statement?* with the following options (Fryer & Jones, 2023):^{3,4}

1. To assess applicants' interest in their course
2. To assess applicants' academic potential
3. To identify if an applicant has faced mitigating circumstances and / or to identify other relevant contextual information
4. To assess applicants' transferable skills (e.g. communication or teamwork)
5. To assess language skills
6. To assess broader personal traits that could benefit the university community (e.g. leadership)
7. To create questions and topics for interviews

To promote reliability, the analysis was completed by the first author, and a non-blinded double coding was then performed by the second author. However, two limitations impact this analysis. First, there was a time-lag between the survey, disseminated from January to April 2023, and the website analysis in August 2024. It is possible that admissions practice or public-facing guidance changed over this period, hindering our ability to judge transparency. We predict this risk is low, given the longevity of many admissions practices and the lack of reforms to the personal statement over this period. Second, to protect the anonymity of survey participants,

³ Note, the survey included three additional uses (to assess work experience; to assess extracurricular activity; and other) that were excluded from our comparative analysis. For the former two uses, it is unclear if admissions staff assess work experience and extracurriculars as a way to demonstrate an *interest in the course* or if they are assessed *in and of themselves*. This ambiguity makes a comparison with university websites inappropriate. Similarly, 'other' uses were not specified, and therefore cannot be analysed.

⁴ Two courses provided no information about the UCAS personal statement. This absence of information was interpreted as meaning that these courses do not use the personal statement for any of the seven uses asked in the survey.

our findings cannot provide concrete examples to illustrate and exemplify our conclusions.

These limitations prompted the need for a second analysis, exploring the transparency of university websites in more detail. We assessed the websites of fifteen universities (five at the top of the Guardian league table, five from the centre, and five from the bottom),⁵ for undergraduate courses in business and/or management studies, the most popular subject area in 2023 (HESA, 2024). This variety of providers was chosen as there is some evidence that the personal statement may tend to be given more weight at more selective providers (Fryer & Jones, 2023).

To undertake this in-depth analysis, we developed a tool (see Table 1) to judge university transparency with regard to the UCAS personal statement. This was informed by the ‘Fair Admissions Code of Practice’ (UUK, 2024), as well as the authors’ experience supporting students from under-represented backgrounds with their UCAS personal statements. This tool identified three key aspects: 1) how is the personal statement used; 2) what is assessed; and 3) what information, advice and guidance (IAG) is provided to help candidates produce high-quality statements.⁶ Each of these aspects were divided into particular features and assessed on a Red/Amber/Green (RAG) rating.

Table 1. *A tool to assess transparency regarding UCAS personal statements*

		Green	Amber	Red
What does the website say about how the PS is incorporated into admissions processes?	Who reads?	States who reads the PS, e.g. <i>PSs will be read by an admissions officer rather than the academic teaching team.</i>	Some description of who reads the PS, but lacks detail, e.g. <i>PSs are read by admissions tutors.</i>	No or misleading information.

⁵ University of Arts, London, should have been included in the sample. However, at the time of analysis in August 2024, the website contained no information about their Business and Management undergraduate courses.

⁶ The term ‘high-quality’ refers to the written document, not applicants, recognising that inequalities influence the documents that applicants produce.

	In what circumstances?	States the circumstances when used, e.g. <i>PSs are read for all applicants who meet standard entry criteria.</i>	Some description of circumstances, but lacks detail, e.g. <i>PSs may be used to distinguish equally qualified candidates.</i>	No or misleading information.
	Relative importance?	States the relative importance of the PS, e.g. <i>decisions are made on the basis of grades. PS is used when candidates are on the border of receiving an offer.</i>	Some description of relative importance of the PS, but lacks detail, e.g. <i>decisions are mainly made on the basis of grades.</i>	No or misleading information.
What does the website say about what is assessed and how?	What is assessed?	States the factors the PS is used to assess, e.g. <i>PS is used to assess: 1) you have an interest, and 2) you have an understanding of the topics</i>	Some description of factors the PS is used to assess, but lacks detail or clarity, e.g. <i>PS is used to assess your academic suitability for the course.</i>	No or misleading information.

		<i>covered in the course.</i>		
	What is not assessed?	States the main factors the PS is not used to assess, e.g. <i>PS is not used to assess your academic potential.</i>	Some description of factors the PS is not used to assess, but lacks detail or clarity, e.g. <i>PS is unlikely to be used to assess your extra-curricular experiences.</i>	No or misleading information.
	How is context considered?	States whether and how PSs are judged contextually, e.g. <i>free school meal status will be used as context when assessing your work experience.</i>	Some description of whether PSs are judged contextually, but lacks detail or clarity, e.g. <i>PSs will be judged in a contextual way.</i>	No or misleading information.
What information, advice and guidance does the website offer?	Structure	Supports best practice for structuring a PS, e.g. <i>include at least one paragraph that explains how you have explored a</i>	Some support for best practice in structuring a PS, but lacks detail, clarity or appropriateness, e.g. <i>use clear paragraphs.</i>	No or misleading information.

		<i>course-related topic.</i>		
	Approach	Supports best practice for approaching a PS, e.g. <i>it is better to explain a small number of examples, rather than list everything you have done.</i>	Some support for best practice in approaching a PS, but lacks detail, clarity or appropriateness, e.g. <i>tell us how you have explored your subject outside of the classroom.</i>	No or misleading information.
	AI	Supports best practice for using AI in a PS, e.g. <i>AI can be used to generate ideas to explore further, or for help with structure and readability, following UCAS's (2023) advice.</i>	Some support for best practice in using AI, but lacks detail, clarity or appropriateness, e.g. <i>AI should not be used to generate all your PS.</i>	No or misleading information.

The aim was to assess the extent to which universities helped applicants to understand what a high-quality personal statement looked like. We assessed guidance according to criteria we developed in three broad areas: how the personal statement is used; what is assessed; and information, advice and guidance offered by universities. In this analysis, we initially assessed course websites, and if this contained little to no information pertaining to the three areas, then broader university guidance about the UCAS personal statement was also considered. Formal admissions policies were excluded from the analysis because these

documents were judged not to be student-facing nor written in the clear and accessible style mentioned in the ‘Fair admissions code of practice’ (UUK, 2024).⁷ This analysis enabled us to report and share specific examples of transparency issues, as well as examples of best practice, as the analysis is unconnected to Fryer and Jones’ (2023) survey. As with the first analysis, the first author completed an initial analysis, before non-blinded double coding by the second author.

Findings and Discussion

Do admissions staff use UCAS personal statements in ways reported on their websites?

Our analysis found a considerable mismatch between university websites and how admissions staff actually use the UCAS personal statement. The first issue is related to the provision of course-specific information. Of the 46 courses, only three (7%) had subject-specific information, while 41 (89%) contained only non-subject specific information, and two (4%) had no guidance at all. Similarly, in terms of the relative importance of the personal statement, 22 courses (48%) provided no information, 17 (37%) provided limited information, such as a simple statement *that grades are the primary factor used to make admissions decisions*, and only seven courses (15%) provided a clear explanation of the relative importance of the personal statement.

In terms of what the personal statement was used to assess, only 11 courses (24%) shared some of this information. Instead, the majority (76%) provided personal statement *guidance*, advising applicants on how to write a personal statement, rather than stating exactly how the personal statement would be assessed. In other words, most university websites told applicants what to do with their personal statement, but were not open about what *they* will do with it. For the purposes of this analysis, we interpreted all university guidance as a statement about how the personal statement is used by admissions staff—we reasoned that this was how applicants were most likely to interpret this guidance. However, this does impose one limitation on our findings in Table 2: when we report a lack of alignment, this most often stems from a mismatch between *website guidance* and *how staff use the personal statement*, rather than a *factually incorrect statement* about how the UCAS personal statement is used.

⁷ At times these policies are referenced in the findings, when they did provide additional and/or contradictory information.

Table 2. *Do admissions staff use UCAS personal statements in ways that align with their websites?*

	Staff use the PS in a way that aligns with website (%)		Staff don't use the PS in a way that aligns with website (%)	
	Staff do assess	Staff do not assess	Staff do assess	Staff do not assess
Applicants' interest in their course	89	0	0	11
Applicants' transferable skills (e.g. communication or teamwork)	22	0	0	78
Broader personal traits that could benefit the university community (e.g. leadership)	4	28	9	59
Applicants' academic potential	35	4	4	57
Mitigating circumstances and/or other relevant contextual information	22	20	37	22
Language skills	17	4	2	76
Create questions and topics for interviews	2	41	4	52

From Table 2, we can see that all websites said that the UCAS personal statement should convey applicant's interest in their course. This aligned well with actual uses by admissions staff, with 89% of staff assessing applicants' interest. In the remaining 11% of cases, although the university website advised applicants to demonstrate their interest in their statements, this was not assessed by admissions staff. Overall, universities were relatively transparent about this use of the UCAS personal statement.

However, Table 2 shows that across other uses of the UCAS personal statement there were more substantial issues related to transparency. While applicants were advised to include a variety of material in their personal statement, admissions staff often assessed a more limited range of items. For example, 78% of websites recommended applicants demonstrate their transferable skills when this was not actually assessed by admissions staff. Equivalent figures for two other uses—assessing broader personal traits and applicants' academic potential—were

59% and 57% respectively. This suggests that applicants were often encouraged to include information in their UCAS personal statements, even when this was not actually assessed by admissions staff.

The opposite issue was seen with regard to mitigating circumstances and/or contextual information. In 37% of cases, admissions staff sought this information from the personal statement, even though their university website made no mention of this. It is also worth noting the considerable differences in advice in this area—some universities explicitly advised applicants not to include this information, but instead to include this in their academic reference or to contact the university directly.

The findings about the two remaining uses, language skills and creating interview questions, are harder to interpret. On the former, we found few admissions staff assessed language skills, but almost all university websites mention the importance of proofreading, spelling and grammar, which is one aspect of language. That 76% of courses mentioned this in their guidance, but did not directly use the personal statement to assess language skills, suggests either a lack of transparency or that spelling/grammar was important only in so far as it enabled candidates to clearly communicate their interest and preparation for the course. On the second use, the lack of alignment in using the personal statement to make interview questions is likely to stem from the fact that few courses use interviews for undergraduate admissions in the UK, rather than demonstrating a large-scale issue with transparency. However, this lack of alignment does highlight the issue with offering generic rather than subject-specific guidance.

Detailed transparency analysis of university websites

The results from the second analysis are summarised in Table 3, where red signals the lowest level of transparency and green the highest. Details for each of the fifteen business and/or management courses are also provided in Table 4 (see Appendix). The discussion of these results is divided into three sub-sections, relating to the three aspects of transparency: how the statement is used; what is assessed; and IAG.

Table 3. *Results of the transparency analysis*

		Red (%)	Amber (%)	Green (%)
How is the PS used?	Who reads?	87	13	0
	In what circumstances?	53	47	0
	Relative importance?	53	47	0
What is assessed?	What is assessed?	40	60	0
	What is not assessed?	47	40	13
	How is context considered?	93	7	0

Information, advice and guidance	Structure	53	47	0
	Approach	33	33	33
	AI	87	0	13

How is the personal statement used?

Table 3 reveals that university websites provide an inadequate level of information about how UCAS personal statements fit within admissions processes. There was a particular lack of transparency over who reads UCAS personal statements, with 13 universities (87%) providing no information in this area. Of these, some made no reference to who reads the personal statement, whereas others mentioned a generic occupation, such as admissions selectors, without clarifying who these people are. Two providers (13%) provided more information, albeit there remained some ambiguity. For example, St Andrews University (2024) stated: ‘*UK and EU applications are assessed by academic admissions officers within the academic Schools*’. While it is likely that ‘academic admissions officers’ refers to an academic member of staff, it is unclear if they teach on the specific course or simply have an administrative role in this area. It is telling that even with our understanding of the structure of job roles in academic departments, an understanding that many applicants are likely to lack, we remain somewhat unclear who reads the personal statements.

Beyond the student-facing websites, some universities provided more detail about who reads personal statements within their Admissions Policy. At times, these defined various job roles and responsibilities. For example, University of the West of Scotland (2024) clarified that the Admissions Office Team were professional services staff that made ‘standard decisions according to agreed criteria’ and Academic Admissions Officers were academic members of staff that provide the Admissions Office with details of entry criteria and deal with non-standard offers. As was mentioned in the methodology, we considered these admissions policies to be formal documents rather than accessible student-facing content.

We also found limited transparency regarding the circumstances in which a personal statement is read. This information should clarify whether all statements are read, or if there is a filtering process; whether personal statements are only read to distinguish between borderline candidates or all candidates that meet entry requirements; or whether personal statements are only read if a candidate misses their grades in the summer. No university provided this information in an unambiguous statement on their website, and eight (53%) provided no information at all. Of the seven (47%) that provided some information, this typically involved a

vague statement, e.g. to distinguish between similar candidates, leaving the specific circumstances in which a personal statement is read, at best, opaque.

The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) was one of the most transparent in this regard, although this did appear only in their Admissions Policy. The LSE Admissions Policy stated that UCAS applications are initially assessed by an Admission Assessor (professional services staff) *‘to identify and respond quickly to applicants with no prospect of success (i.e. those that do not meet the minimum programme entry requirements). Following the preliminary assessment, the remaining applications are passed on to the Admissions Specialists for further consideration. The Admission Specialists consider the remaining applications, consult with departmental Academic Selectors where necessary, and make the final admissions decisions.’* (LSE, 2024b, p. 6). This provides a relatively transparent description of who is involved at each stage of the admissions process, although there is scope for greater detail about how exactly the UCAS personal statement is used.

Finally, we found little evidence that universities are transparent about the relative importance of the UCAS personal statement. Eight universities (53%) provided no information, and seven (47%) provided only limited information. The latter typically involved a brief statement that either *offers are primarily made on the basis of grades* or that *the personal statement is very important*. We found no university that provided a clear and transparent explanation of how important the personal statement was in admissions decisions. University of Warwick (2024) provided one of the clearest statements on the relative importance:

The most important aspect of our assessment of applications is your academic performance, including both achieved and predicted grades. Personal statements are unlikely to be the single most important factor in deciding whether you receive an offer. However, personal statements may be used alongside other factors as an additional way of ensuring you are well prepared for your chosen course.

This text from University of Warwick (2024) does clearly explain that the ‘most important’ aspect of the admissions process is the achieved and predicted grades. This does provide advisers and applicants with some information about the importance of the UCAS personal statement, relative to other aspects, even if there was scope for greater clarity on how ‘personal statements may be used alongside other factors as an additional way of ensuring [applicants] are well prepared’.

Providing transparent information about the relative importance of the personal statement would enable applicants to make an informed decision about

how much effort to put into their UCAS personal statement. Given research has found some students spend upwards of 30 hours on their statements, making considerable sacrifices in their life (Fryer et al., 2022), this transparency is particularly important. Similarly, as many applicants find the process of writing a personal statement stressful (Ecclestone, 2023), transparency about its importance could reduce this stress, helping applicants to gain a greater sense of perspective on this essay.

What is assessed?

The next section considers transparency in what was assessed. We found only one course (7%) at University of Oxford that provided subject-specific guidance about the UCAS personal statement. The other 14 (93%) had some form of generic guidance on the personal statement, with the exception of University of Buckingham that did not offer any specific guidance.⁸ This lack of subject-specific information evidences a lack of transparency, as research suggests the use of UCAS personal statements varies within institutions (Fryer & Jones, 2023). More than this, some admissions policies explicitly suggested there were course-specific competencies, even when these are absent from webpages. For example, a policy from University of Bath (2024a, p. 8) stated: ‘Each course has specific entry requirements and selection practices tailored to its needs’, but the BSc Management course failed to share these course-specific requirements, at least with regard to the UCAS personal statement.

Our analysis of transparency, related to how staff assess UCAS personal statements, found six providers (40%) gave no or misleading information, and nine universities (60%) gave some indication of what was assessed by admissions staff. No university provided an entirely transparent statement about what was assessed. In terms of advice about what not to include, seven universities (47%) provided no information, while six (40%) provided some information, and two (13%) provided a clear explanation of the factors that were not assessed in the personal statement. In terms of the latter, there were some high-quality resources dedicated to addressing common misconceptions of what should be included in a UCAS personal statement. A strong example was from University of Oxford, whose guidance responded to a series of common applicant questions including: does my personal statement need to stand out? The answer to this question was particularly nuanced (University of Oxford, 2024):

⁸ This university is a private institution that enables direct applications, as well as through UCAS. This may explain the absence of specific UCAS personal statement advice.

Students sometimes feel that they need to say something dramatic to stand out from the crowd and be really memorable in their personal statement but this is not true. Applying to Oxford is not like a talent show where you may only have a few seconds to make an impression. Tutors consider each application carefully on its individual merits, looking for evidence of your commitment and ability. If you use your personal statement to demonstrate your academic abilities and your engagement with your subject(s), then your application will be memorable for all the right reasons.

However, we found evidence that at least five (33%) universities continued to push the narrative that personal statements do need to ‘stand out from the crowd’. For example, University of Sussex (2024) explained that the personal statement ‘gives you the chance to tell us how you stand out from other candidates’. Aside from the fact that there are well documented social inequalities in who is able to write a statement that stands out (Jones, 2013), there is evidence that this advice is misinterpreted by many students. For example, Fryer and colleagues (2022) found that applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds were often worried about how to write their opening sentence—how could they stand out? Uncertainty on how to do this, often led to attempts at humour, quotes, poetic language, and exaggerated statements that are more likely to hinder than facilitate the production of a high-quality personal statement, as University of Oxford’s guidance explains. That some universities continue to push the idea of ‘standing out from the crowd’ risks both creating unnecessary stress for applicants and fails to offer a transparent description of how applicants are judged.

We also assessed whether universities provided transparent information related to contextual admissions and the UCAS personal statement. In other words, did universities explain the ways in which they took account of candidates’ social and educational backgrounds when assessing the personal statement, if at all? We found that the vast majority of providers (14, 93%) provided no information in this area. The only provider offering some information was University of Bath (2024b):

Your application will first be considered against our selection criteria, using aspects such as your GCSEs, the subjects you are studying, your personal statement and predicted grades. If your application is strong enough you will receive an offer on that basis, regardless of your circumstances. Otherwise, if you meet our contextual criteria, we have a dedicated Admissions Progression Team who aim to make sure that we carefully consider information about your background and circumstances before deciding whether or not we can make you an offer. They will make sure we consider

each aspect of your UCAS form carefully in context. This process doesn't stop if you receive an offer: if you choose Bath as one of your final choices but miss your offer, our Admissions Progression Team will assess your application thoroughly again and strongly prioritise you for a place at Bath.

Although the above statement is an improvement on the absence from other providers, there is still scope for greater clarity. While contextual information leads to a candidate's application being read again, it is unclear whether and how this information is used to make judgements on the strength of the application. For example, is there a process by which applicants' background is considered when judging whether a candidate has demonstrated adequate competencies and/or knowledge?

Information, Advice and Guidance

The final aspect of our transparency analysis considered the guidance universities offered to applicants on how to complete their UCAS personal statement. This included guidance on the structure, approach and use of AI in personal statements. We considered this IAG to be an aspect of providing transparent information to candidates about UCAS personal statements.

Within this guidance, we found examples of excellent practice. Particularly with regard to advice on the approach and style candidates should adopt, there were five (33%) universities judged to provide students with support that encouraged best practice, a further five (33%) that provided some guidance, albeit that lacked detail, clarity or appropriateness in places. The remaining five universities (33%) provided very limited information on the recommended approach to take, e.g. failing to mention that simply listing skills, experiences or things you have read is not a recommended approach, but instead candidates would be better exploring a smaller number of examples in greater depth. Of those universities with higher quality IAG, some provided relatively extensive advice on their own webpages (e.g. University of Oxford and LSE), whereas others were more concise with their advice (e.g. Wrexham University) but then linked to appropriate external resources, such as UCAS.

We found less evidence of transparent IAG around how to structure a personal statement, with eight universities (53%) failing to provide even limited guidance or links to external resources in this area. The remaining six universities (47%) provided some guidance that supported best practice, most commonly by offering a vague statement about prioritising academic content, or by linking to appropriate guidance from UCAS (2024a).

Further, some of the advice on how to structure a UCAS personal statement was more likely to hinder the creation of high-quality documents. For example, University of Bedfordshire (2024) recommended writing a statement with three sections:

- Introduction: ‘Write a strong opening paragraph explaining your suitability for the course’
- Middle section: This was recommended to cover: ‘Your interest in the subject you’ve applied for; Achievements (certificates, awards, etc); Volunteering experience; Work experience; Hobbies and interests; Future career plans; Positions of responsibility; Involvement in community projects; What do you think you will gain from university’
- Conclusion: ‘Tie together all the topics raised and reiterate your interest in the course’

If applicants interpret this guidance to mean that there should be one central paragraph covering all of these topics, the resulting personal statement would be challenging to read and hinder the applicant’s ability to effectively convey their interest and preparation for the course. Similarly, it is unclear whether several of the items mentioned in this ‘middle section’ are assessed by admissions staff, e.g. hobbies and interests. A candidate following this advice would be left with fewer words to evidence other more relevant competencies, such as demonstrating an interest in their chosen course.

The form that the IAG took was also variable. One example of innovative and effective practice was from LSE (2024a), which contained several pieces of text, with accompanying explanations of why this represented good or bad practice. However, there were also examples of IAG that did not use particularly accessible language or failed to offer specific advice that demystified admissions processes. To give one example, University of Greenwich’s (2022) advice on writing personal statements said to ‘Show passion and excitement for the subject you want to study’. However, there was no attempt to explain how candidates could demonstrate this passion. Given that it is relatively common for applicants to believe that passion is best demonstrated by listing all the things they have done, or by using exaggerated and/or poetic language, this absence of an explanation risks hindering some candidates, particularly those with more limited access to support (Fryer et al., 2022; Jones, 2013).

The final aspect we considered was whether there was an explicit statement about the appropriate uses of AI when producing a UCAS personal statement.

UCAS (2023) have a policy in this area, which explains AI can be used to brainstorm, help with structure, and check for readability, but should not be used to generate a large part of the text that is copy and pasted into the final version. We found that 13 universities (87%) did not mention AI in their personal statement guidance, with only two (13%) providing appropriate guidance or links to UCAS's policy. Some statements about AI were potentially misleading.⁹ For example, LSE stated: 'We reserve the right to reject your application where it has been found that a statement has...been created with the use of Artificial Intelligence' (LSE, 2024a). This could be interpreted as a ban on all uses of AI, which would not be in-keeping with UCAS guidance.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper, focussing on the case study of the UK, has found evidence of considerable transparency issues relating to university admissions processes. Our analysis specifically focussed on the use of UCAS personal statements within undergraduate admissions. Given that universities will be updating their public-facing guidance in response to UCAS's reform in 2025-26, there is an opportunity for providers to develop transparent guidance related to the UCAS personal statement. We recommend that our approach to transparency outlined in Table 1, should be used as a tool by universities to judge and improve the transparency of the information they provide to applicants. This would help universities to meet their commitment to operate a fair, transparent and equitable admissions process (UUK, 2024).

Beyond this contribution, our findings allow us to make several more specific recommendations. First, a core finding was the relative lack of course-specific information. Only three courses (7%) had subject-specific guidance in the first analysis, and one-in-fifteen universities (7%) provided this in the second. Given there is a diversity of practice at the course-level (Fryer & Jones, 2023), even at the same provider (UCAS, 2024b), this absence represents a substantial transparency issue. We recommend that universities shift to provide course-level, rather than provider-level, information about uses of the UCAS personal statement.

Second, each university course should provide transparent information about how the UCAS personal statement is incorporated within wider admissions practices, as well as its relative importance. Given that no providers were

⁹ Some universities did have statements about AI in their Admissions Policy, which was judged not to be part of the student-facing information.

considered to provide a fully transparent statement regarding: 1) who reads the personal statement, 2) in what circumstances is the personal statement read, and 3) its relative importance, this suggests there is room for considerable improvement.

Third, we recommend that all courses provide a statement about what exactly admissions staff use the UCAS personal statement to assess. This should take the form of explicit statements, such as ‘We will use your personal statement to assess...’, rather than framing this as guidance, which fails to clarify whether or not the personal statement is actually used to assess these features. This recommendation would address the substantial mismatch between university websites and how admissions staff use the personal statement, as identified in the first analysis. For example, over half of websites recommended that candidates include information that demonstrated their transferable skills, broader personal traits, and academic potential, even though this was not assessed by admissions staff. Similarly, this recommendation would address the fact that none of the fifteen universities provided a clear statement of what was assessed, in the second analysis.

Fourth, if universities offer IAG related to the UCAS personal statement, then they should ensure that this is high-quality and compatible with the information about how the personal statement will be used. While there was evidence of some excellent practice in this area, that eight universities (53%) provided no or misleading information about how to structure a personal statement, and five (33%) did the same for how to approach a personal statement, suggests that transparency could be increased in this regard. Finally, given the increasing availability of AI tools, we recommend all providers should provide clear IAG around appropriate and inappropriate uses of AI in UCAS personal statements.

Overall, we contend that the reform to the UCAS personal statement presents an opportunity to create a fairer and more equitable university admissions process in the UK. More specifically, the reform has the potential to address the misunderstandings (Fryer et al., 2022) and stress (Ecclestone, 2023) around this aspect of the application process, which currently hinders access for applicants without the ‘know-how’ (Jones, 2013). However, this potential is dependent upon universities providing applicants with transparent subject-specific guidance about the UCAS personal statement. To impact widening participation, universities must seize this opportunity to transform the transparency of their admissions practices, taking an active approach to address inequalities in this area. The extent to which providers adopt a more transparent approach in the face of this reform has lessons for policymakers and universities around the world, particularly those with highly stratified HE systems.

Author biographies

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Steven Jones is Professor of Higher Education at *Manchester Institute of Education*, which is part of The University of Manchester. Co-author of commissioned reports for the *Sutton Trust*, the *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* and *HEFCE*, Professor Jones is particularly interested in the marketisation of higher education and how it affects staff and students. He is a prominent commentator on English universities, writing op-ed pieces for the *Guardian*, presenting research findings to *HM Treasury*, and giving evidence to the *All-Party Parliamentary University Group* in the House of Commons. Professor Jones's latest book, *Universities Under Fire*, was published in 2022.

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Appendix

Table 4. *Results of the transparency analysis at the provider-level*

	How used?			What assessed?			IAG		
	Who	When	Importance	What	What not	Context	Structure	Approach	AI
University of St Andrews									
University of Oxford									
London School of Economics									
University of Warwick									
University of Bath									
Coventry University									
University of Sussex									
University of Buckingham									
Edinburgh Napier University									
London South Bank University									
University of Greenwich									
Buckinghamshire New University									
Wrexham University									
University of the West of Scotland									
University of Bedfordshire									