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University applications before A-level results 'unfair'

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There have been warnings about barriers blocking poorer students from university

The university admissions system which allows pupils to apply before they know their A-level results is "unfair and inefficient", says research.

A study by academics at the University of Warwick says applying on the basis of predicted results discriminates against poorer students.

The current applications timetable places "higher hurdles" for disadvantaged groups, say researchers.

University access is due to be examined in a White Paper this summer.

With tuition fees in England set to rise to up to £9,000 per year from next year, there has been concern about the impact on applications from young people from poorer families.

Self-confident

There are already worries about the under-representation of disadvantaged groups at the top universities, and the researchers say the admissions system schedule creates another bias against poorer groups.

At present the majority of students apply to university before they know their actual A-level grades.

Admissions bodies look at information such as predicted grades, GCSE results, school references and interviews.

But the study suggests that relying on such information, rather than a common currency of exam results, favours confident, well-drilled applicants from ambitious schools.

The "late developer" in a state school, who might eventually score very highly when A-level results are published, will have lost out in this admissions system, says the report.

The groups disadvantaged in the current system are not just youngsters from low-income families.

The study says that girls are more likely to receive offers of places ahead of similarly able boys.

Further education students face a tougher battle for places than school applicants and applicants from the London area are more successful than their equivalents in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Late penalties

The researchers, Wiji Arulampalam, Robin Naylor and Jeremy Smith, also say there are penalties in the timing of applications.

Deadlines to apply to university are in October, January and after exam results are published.

But the study says students who apply late have a lower chance of getting into their chosen universities.

Since there is a pattern of later applications from disadvantaged groups, the "lateness penalty is particularly harmful to the under-represented populations", says the report.

The report says that it would be fairer to consider applications at the same time against a more objective, reliable measure.

The unfairness of applying before A-level results has already been identified as a serious problem by the last major report into fair access.

The Schwartz Report, commissioned by the government and published in 2004, argued that applying before A-level results were known gave an unfair advantage to better-off applicants.

It found that predicted grades were unreliable and that "tossing a coin" would be as fair as much of the interviewing process.

Ministers accepted the need to tackle the "inherent unfairness" of the current system - but such a change in timetable, known as PQA (post-qualification application), has never been implemented.

A subsequent report published by the Department for Business, Skills and Innovation and the Sutton Trust claimed that each year thousands of the most talented state school pupils were missing out on places because of the system of applying on the basis of predicted grades.

The government is once again set to announce a shake-up of the higher education system in England, with a White Paper in the summer - and there have been reports that the timing of the application process is once again to be under scrutiny.