



END OF CYCLE REPORT **2018**

Qualifications

CHAPTER 6

UCAS

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is part of the third release of UCAS' End of Cycle Reports for the 2018 undergraduate admissions cycle.

As an independent charity, UCAS publishes timely data and analysis about demand for, and progression and admission to higher education, to contribute to public debate about education, access, and social mobility.

This year, we are publishing our end of cycle data and analysis in four releases, between 29 November and 31 January 2019, with the first release published 25 working days after the 2018 cycle closed. Weekly, between 29 November and 13 December, we will publish a series of detailed analysis reports covering the entire 2018 cycle. Chapters one to four, covering acceptance, offer, and entry rates, and differences by applicant background, have already been published. On 13 December, we will also publish a series of analysis reference tables and data sets for the 2018 cycle. On 31 January, we will publish end of cycle provider-level application data, together with provider-level data on unconditional offer-making. This release will include analysis of trends in applications and acceptances by qualification type and geography.

Universities and colleges have a responsibility to only recruit those students who have the ability and potential to succeed and complete the course they have applied for. Admissions decision-making normally includes an assessment of prior academic achievement and future potential. Achievement of certain levels of attainment in specific qualifications can therefore be an important determinant in students' entry into higher education (HE). The focus of this report is on the qualifications held by UK domiciled 18 year old applicants, the largest group of applicants.



2. SCOPE

In this report applicants are grouped according to the qualifications they hold. The following qualification groupings are used:

- A level only: Those with three or more A levels, and not holding one of the other qualifications.
- A level and BTEC: Applicants holding a combination of A level and BTEC qualifications, such that their total number of qualifications is greater than, or equal, to three.
- BTEC only: Applicants holding three or more Level 3 BTEC qualifications, equivalent in size to three A levels, and not holding one of the other qualifications.
- SQA only: Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Highers and Advanced Highers are considered together. These are applicants with at least three of these qualifications, and not holding any other qualification.
- IB only: Applicants holding only an International Baccalaureate (IB) qualification.
- Other: Any other applicants.

The qualifications reported here include those which applicants state they have achieved when making their applications, and those which were awarded during the application cycle. Also covered in the report are predicted grades for A level and BTEC students. Unless otherwise specified, applicants referred to in this report are 18 year old UK applicants, and the measure of average used in this report is the mean.



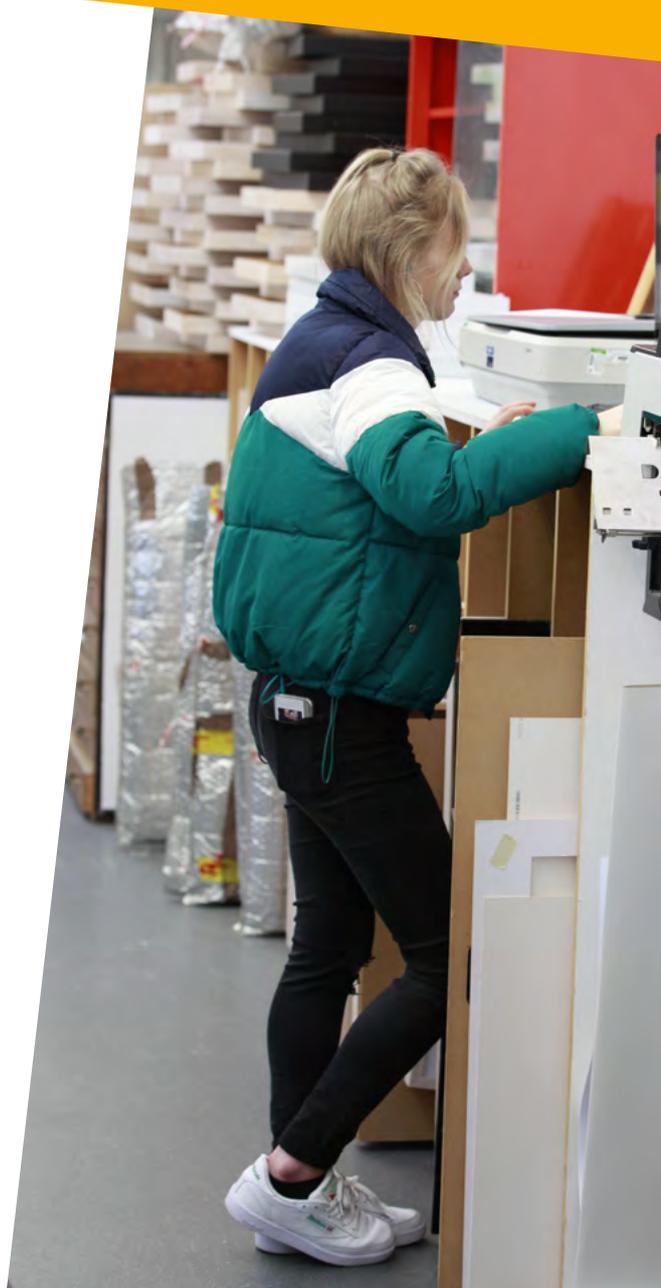
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APPLICANTS, ACCEPTANCES AND ENTRY RATES BY QUALIFICATION TYPE

3.1 Most applicants hold A levels or BTECs, but applicant numbers with other qualifications are growing

A levels remain the most common qualification held by 18 year old UK applicants, with 59.8 per cent of applicants in 2018 holding only A levels. As has been the case since 2008, the second most common single qualification type is BTECs, although the proportion of applicants holding only BTECs fell this year, to 10.1 per cent – a 1.0 percentage point decrease from 2017. There has also been a slight decrease in the proportion of applicants holding a combination of BTECs and A levels, from 7.9 per cent in 2017 to 7.2 per cent this year. 99.9 per cent of applicants holding SQA qualifications are from Scotland, and they comprise 6.3 per cent of UK applicants.

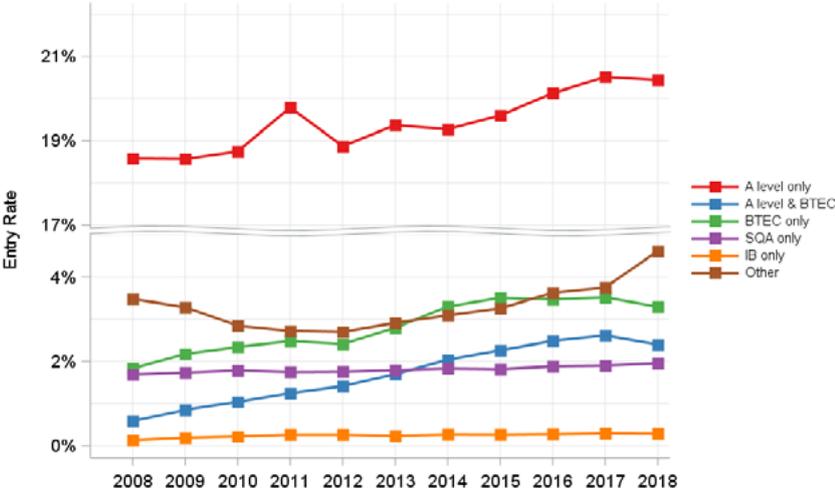
This year, 15.7 per cent of applicants held 'other qualifications', as defined in the introduction. This is an increase of 2.6 percentage points from last year. A large part of this increase is attributable to the number of applicants holding one or two A levels or BTECs alongside other qualifications, such as Cambridge Technical Qualifications, either alone, or alongside A levels and BTECs. There have also been increases in applicants holding Cambridge Pre-University qualifications, Extended Projects, and alternative vocational qualifications alongside one or two A levels or BTECs.



3.2 Entry rate growth has plateaued for students holding BTECs or A levels

The proportion of the 18 year old UK population accepted into HE (the entry rate), split by qualification type, is shown in Figure 1. The growth in entry rates for A level and BTEC students from 2012 to 2017 has stopped this year, with slight decreases in the entry rates of 0.1 and 0.2 per cent points respectively. In fact, the only exception to this relative stabilisation is among applicants with other qualifications, where the entry rate has grown from 3.8 per cent in 2017, to 4.6 per cent this year – a relative growth of 22.9 per cent.

FIGURE 1:
UK 18 year old entry rates by qualification type (2008-2018)



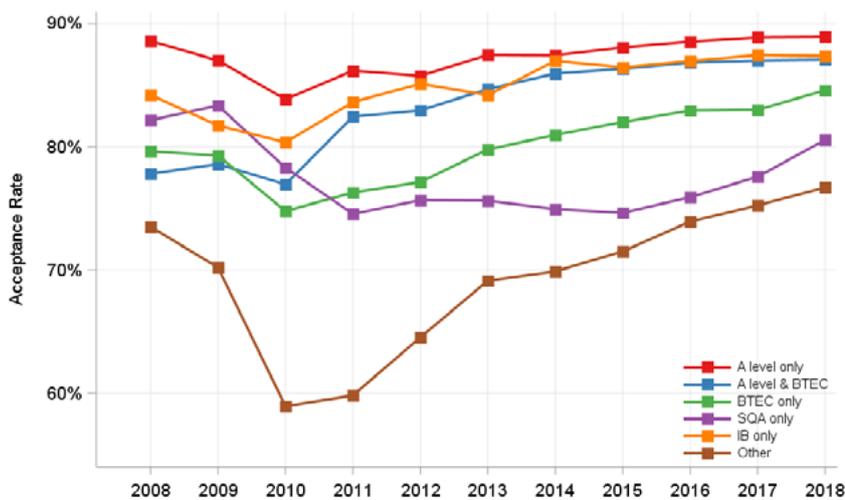
3.3 The acceptance rates for applicants with BTEC

and SQA qualifications continue to rise

Figure 2 shows the proportion of applicants who gain a place at HE (acceptance rate) by qualification type. The acceptance rate for applicants with Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) awarded qualifications is above 80 per cent for the first time since 2009, following a 3.0 percentage point increase. There has also been a continued increase in acceptance rates for applicants with BTEC only, with a 4.8 percentage point increase since 2013, including a 1.6 percentage point increase since 2017. The acceptance rate for applicants holding A level only has always been higher than for applicants holding any other qualification types that we report on here. This year, the acceptance rate for applicants holding only A level only has remained stable at 88.9 per cent – this is a 1.4 percentage point increase since 2013.

FIGURE 2:

UK 18 year old acceptance rates by qualification type (2008- 2018)



The increasing acceptance rates and application numbers for students with alternative qualification profiles, labelled as 'Other' in figure 2, may indicate a diversification of the qualifications that HE providers will accept. The rise in acceptance rates for BTEC only also follows this trend, indicating a growing acceptance among providers of vocational qualifications as a measure of academic ability, and mirroring the trend of widening participation at HE highlighted in the patterns by applicant characteristics report¹. This diversification in accepted qualifications may be indicative of a market with increasingly high levels of competition between providers.

With 78.9 per cent of the UK 18 year old applicant population holding either A levels, BTECs, or a combination of the two in 2018, the features of applicants in this group will characterise the majority of the applicant population. The remainder of this report will, therefore, concentrate on these two qualification types.

¹ [Patterns by applicant characteristics \(PDF\)](#)

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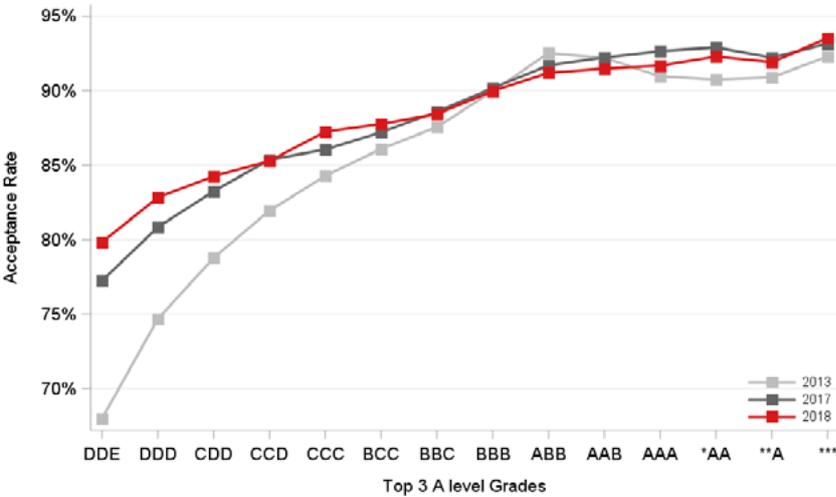


**A LEVEL
ACCEPTANCE RATES,
AND DIFFERENCES
BETWEEN PREDICTED
AND ACHIEVED
ATTAINMENT**

4.1 Acceptance rates among applicants achieving lower A level grades have continued to grow

Figure 3 shows that, for applicants with at least 3 A levels, with grades equivalent to BCC or below, the acceptance rate to HE continues to rise. For example, applicants with A level points equivalent to DDD have an acceptance rate of over 80 per cent for only the second year since 2013. In fact, for the 42,785 applicants with grades equivalent to CCC or lower, the acceptance rate to HE has reached 85.1 per cent this year, in comparison to 80.4 per cent in 2013. For the higher grades, the acceptance rate to HE remains similar to previous years for grades A*A*A and above, and slightly lower for grades ABB to A*AA. The slight decrease in acceptance rates from 2017 to 2018 for applicants with grade profiles ABB to A*AA are in part due to the increased applicant numbers to 15 October deadline courses experienced in the 2018 cycle. 15 October deadline courses² typically have lower acceptance rates compared to all courses, due to their higher academic requirements and typically large number of applicants per course.

FIGURE 3:
Acceptance rates of UK 18 year old applicants by A level profile points in 2018, 2017 and 2013



² [Assessment of UCAS applicants to courses with a 15 October deadline \(PDF\)](#)

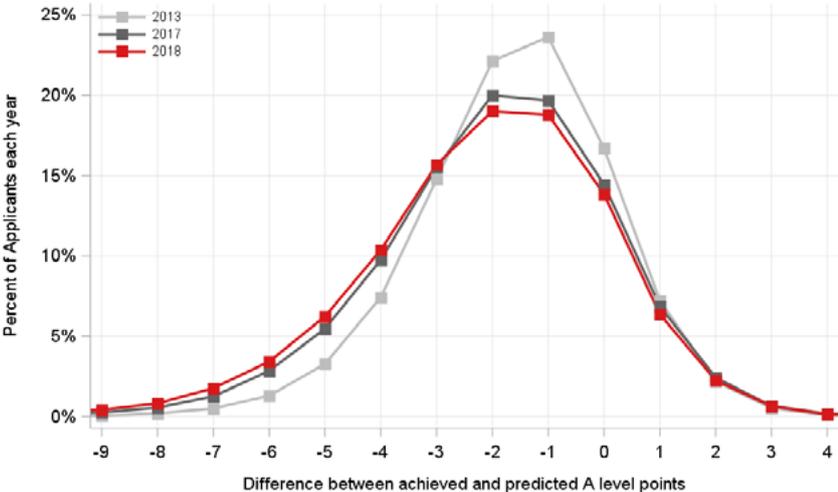
4.2 There are more placed applicants missing their predicted A level grades by three or more grades than in previous years

Figure 4 shows the distribution of placed applicants (applicants accepted to HE) by the difference between their predicted and achieved grades at A level. Each A level point corresponds to one grade. For example, a student predicted AAA who achieved AAB would have missed their predicted grades by one point. The proportion of placed applicants achieving fewer points than they were predicted has grown over the last five years, from 73.3 per cent in 2013, to 76.8 per cent this year. This year, there are a similar number of accepted applicants missing their predicted points at A level to last year. However, the proportion of accepted applicants missing their points by three or more grades has increased by 3.3 percentage points since 2017, and 11.5 percentage points since 2013. This has caused the average applicant's difference between predicted and achieved points at A level to rise from 1.9 points in 2017, to 2.1 points this year, which is a significant increase on the average difference in 2013 of 1.6 points.

Accepted applicants with lower grade profiles have, on average, a larger difference between their achieved and predicted grades. For placed applicants achieving below CCC, the average difference between predicted and achieved grades is more than three points this year, whereas for applicants with grades AAB or above this falls to below one point. The increasing difference between predicted and achieved grades may, therefore, be due in part to the increasing acceptance rates for applicants with the lowest grades.

UCAS is working with schools and universities to improve the accuracy of predicted grades, exploring the different ways teachers make predictions, and how they are used by admissions teams when making offers. Our good practice guide will be published in early 2019.

FIGURE 4:
Difference between achieved and predicted A level points for UK 18-year-old placed applicants in 2018, 2017 and 2013



5. BTEC ACCEPTANCE RATES AND REFORMS

5.1 Acceptance rates among applicants with the lowest BTEC grades continued to grow

BTEC qualifications are the most commonly held vocational qualification among UK 18 year old applicants. Of applicants holding only BTEC qualifications, as defined in the introduction, 84.1 per cent hold at least one Level 3 BTEC Extended Diploma or equivalent, with the other applicants holding a combination of other Level 3 BTEC qualifications. In this report, only Level 3 BTEC Extended Diplomas will be included. Grades for BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma qualifications range from PPP to D*D*D*.

The growth in acceptance rates at the lower A level grades, below CCC, is mirrored in the acceptance rates by BTEC grades. Figure 5 shows acceptance rates for 18 year old UK domiciled applicants holding a Level 3 BTEC Extended Diploma, or equivalent. The qualifications reported here only include those which are awarded during the application cycle, although this includes 98.8 per cent of UK 18 year old applicants holding BTEC qualifications. Acceptance rates for students who achieved a PPP grade have increased, from below 50 per cent in 2013 to 70.0 per cent this year. There have also been increased acceptance rates among the highest achieved BTEC grades compared to 2013.

The increased acceptance rates among applicants with lower A level and BTEC grade profiles may be both indicative of the increased competition to recruit among providers, and better support being offered to BTEC students to make a successful transition to HE.

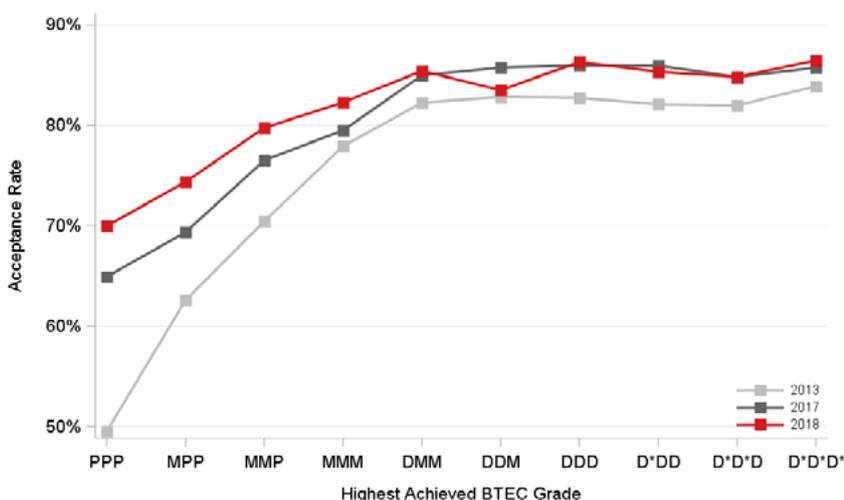


FIGURE 5:

Acceptance rates by highest achieved BTEC grade in 2018, 2017 and 2013

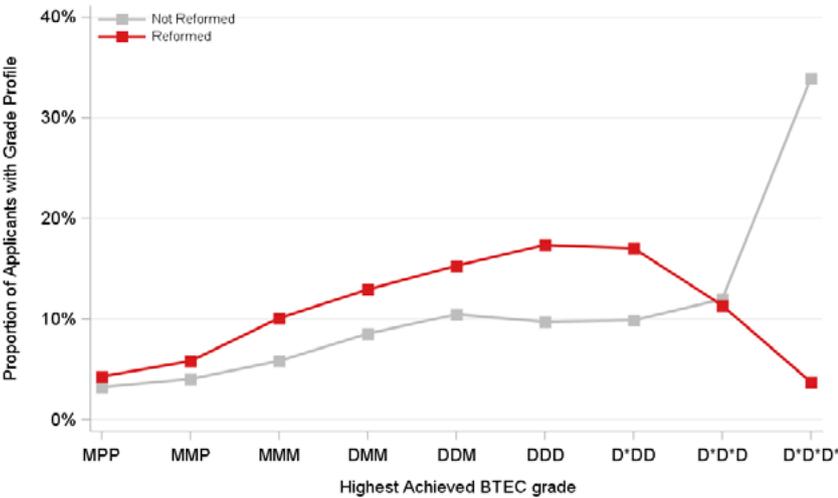
³ BTEC qualifications receive grades of Pass (P), Merit (M), Distinction (D), or Distinction Star (D*). Students taking BTEC qualifications equivalent in size to three A level grades (typically the BTEC Extended Diploma) receive a grade profile which can range from three passes (PPP) to three distinction star grades (D*D*D*).

5.2 Proportionally fewer applicants achieve top grades in reformed BTEC qualifications, compared to non-reformed BTECs

The Department for Education (DfE) has recently introduced reforms to vocational qualifications, which aim to increase their rigour⁴. While these reforms affect all types of vocational Level 3 qualifications, given the popularity of BTECs among applicants, in this report only the effect on BTEC qualifications will be considered. Currently, both the reformed and non-reformed BTEC qualifications are being taught, meaning this cycle's applicants can hold reformed BTECs, non-reformed BTECs, or both. As above, only the Level 3 Extended Diploma and its reformed equivalent, the Level 3 National Extended Diploma, will be considered.

This year, 24,540 UK 18 year old applicants were awarded at least one BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma or equivalent, with a full grade profile. Of these, 3,725 (15.2 per cent) hold a reformed BTEC Level 3 National Extended Diploma. Figure 6 shows the proportion of applicants with reformed and non-reformed BTEC qualifications by achieved grade. The proportion of applicants with reformed BTECs achieving the top grade of D*D*D* is 3.7 per cent, compared to 33.9 per cent for non-reformed BTECs. In fact, the proportion of applicants achieving the top grade (D*D*D*) in the non-reformed BTECs 33.9 per cent is almost equivalent to the proportion of applicants achieving the top three grades (D*DD to D*D*D*) in the reformed BTECs (32.0 per cent). The most common grade achieved by applicants in reformed BTEC examinations is DDD, compared to D*D*D* for non-reformed BTECs. This suggests it was more difficult to obtain the highest grades in the reformed BTEC qualifications.

FIGURE 6:
Proportion of reformed and non-reformed applicants by achieved BTEC grade profile in 2018 cycle



⁴ www.gov.uk/government/publications/vocational-qualification-reform-plan

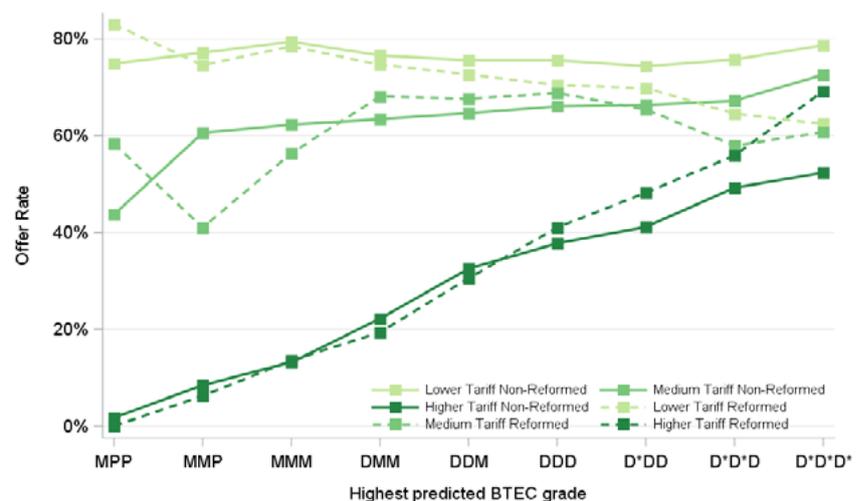
5.3 The probability of receiving an offer does not vary by qualification type

Due to the recency of these reforms, this is the first cycle in which applications to HE are being made by UK students who are studying reformed BTECs in sufficient quantity to analyse reliably. Figure 7 shows the offer rate for each predicted grade profile split by tariff group of provider.

Broadly, the offer rates observed for applicants with reformed and non-reformed BTECs at a predicted grade profile are in line with one another. Some discrepancy between offer rates is expected given the small numbers of applications and the variations resulting from differences in courses that applicants will apply to. By way of context, fewer than 100 applications were made to medium tariff providers by applicants with MMM or below.

FIGURE 7:

Offer rate by highest predicted BTEC grade for applications to each tariff group in the 2018 cycle



Given the stated goals of the reform and the differing grade distributions between the reformed and non-reformed qualifications, one might expect applicants with reformed BTECs to experience a higher likelihood of receiving an offer than applicants with non-reformed BTECs at the same predicted grade profile. As reported in the Offer-making chapter⁵ of the End of Cycle Report, an applicant's attainment, and the provider and course that the application is for, are the most significant factors that affect the likelihood of receiving an offer. When these factors are controlled for (model and methodology detailed in Annex A), whether the applicant had reformed or non-reformed BTECs was found to have little impact on the likelihood of receiving an offer, with the predicted grades of the reformed and non-reformed qualifications being treated comparably.

Whilst it is the case generally that there was no significant differentiation in offer-making across reformed and non-reformed BTECs, this does not imply there was no difference across all providers. Indeed, although their offer rates to BTEC students remain the lowest (compared to other tariff groups), higher tariff providers are making proportionally more offers to applicants predicted the highest grades (D*DD or above) in reformed BTEC qualifications, compared to the same grades in the non-reformed BTEC. Due to the significant majority of BTEC applications being made to courses at medium or lower tariff providers however, this effect was not sufficient to affect the overall picture.

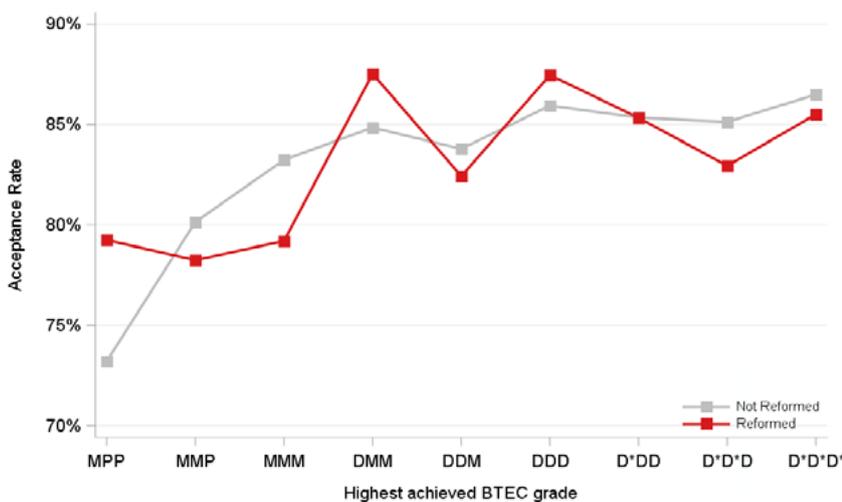
⁵ www.ucas.com/file/196146/download?token=VGsWCAzp

5.4 Acceptance rates similar across reformed and non-reformed BTEC grade profiles

Figure 8 shows the relationship between acceptance rates for reformed and non-reformed BTECs, showing a trend towards higher acceptance rates among those with the highest grades. As might be expected given the relative parity of offer rates, the acceptance rates seen for applicants with different grade profiles for reformed and non-reformed BTEC qualifications are broadly in line with each other, with the fluctuations seen in acceptance rates for reformed BTEC applicants almost certainly a consequence of the small numbers holding each grade of the reformed BTECs. By way of context, only 140 applicants obtained grade D*D*D* in a reformed BTEC, compared with 7,060 who obtained grade D*D*D* in a non-reformed BTECs.

FIGURE 8:

Acceptance rates by highest achieved BTEC grade for applicants with reformed and non-reformed BTECs in the 2018 cycle



ANNEX A

MODELLING

A.1 The effect of reformed BTECs

for different grade profiles

A logistic regression model was used to assess the effect of holding a reformed or non-reformed BTEC on whether an applicant received an offer. Applications from applicants with at least one Level 3 Extended Diploma, a full predicted grade profile and who held only BTEC qualifications were used to create the model. This includes 3,110 applicants (14,390 applications) with reformed BTEC qualifications and 18,150 applicants (77,780 applications) with non-reformed BTEC qualifications.

The independent variables used were a flag to indicate whether the qualification was reformed, predicted grade, the JACS3.0 subject group of the course, and tariff band of the provider the application is for. Whether the applicant received an offer from an application was used as the response variable. The model shows that once the predicted grade, subject group and the tariff band of an institution is accounted for, whether the grade is for a reformed or non-reformed BTEC has no significant effect on the probability that the applicant receives an offer.

To further explore the differences at the higher end of the attainment spectrum, another model was created to test the difference between the likelihood of receiving an offer for applicants achieving D*D*D* in the non-reformed BTEC and D*DD to D*D*D* in the reformed BTEC. These two groups of applicants represent about the top quarter of applicants in terms of predicted attainment. Consequently, since applicants within each group represent almost identical proportions of all applicants in terms of predicted attainment, it is a valid comparison to contrast the offer making practices to these groups by provider tariff and course applied to. In this case, a similar logistic regression model was used, built on reformed BTEC applicants predicted D*DD to D*D*D* and non-reformed BTEC applicants predicted D*D*D*, but excluding predicted grade and including an interaction term between the reformed BTEC flag and tariff band (to split the effect of holding reformed or non-reformed BTECs down by tariff band as outlined in section 5.3). This model shows that applicants sitting the reformed BTEC qualifications experienced an improved likelihood of receiving an offer from higher tariff providers, whereas in the medium and lower tariff band reformed BTEC applicants were significantly less likely to get an offer – further reinforcing the result obtained previously of grades being treated comparably (despite smaller proportions achieving the top grades in the reformed BTEC). Due to the small numbers of applicants applying to higher tariff providers, this effect was not large enough to alter overall trends.

GLOSSARY

Acceptance	An applicant who, at the end of the cycle, has been placed for entry into higher education.
Acceptance rate	The number of acceptances divided by the number of applicants.
Age	This analysis uses country-specific age definitions that align with the cut-off points for school and college cohorts in the different administrations of the UK. For England and Wales, ages are defined on 31 August, for Northern Ireland on 1 July, and for Scotland on 28 February the following year. Defining ages in this way matches the assignment of children to school cohorts. For applicants outside the UK, a cohort cut-off of 31 August has been used.
A level points	A level grades are assigned points such that A*=six points, A=five, B=four, C=three, D=two, and E=one. Achieved A level grade profiles of applicants are assigned the total number of points of their best three achieved grades – for example, a grade profile of AAB would be worth 14 points.
Applicant	A person who has made an application in the UCAS system. Counts of applicants include those applying through the main scheme, late applicants direct to Clearing, and Records of Prior Acceptance (RPAs).
BTEC	Originally Business and Technician Education Council, BTECs are qualifications now offered by Pearson.
Domicile	Declared area of permanent residence.
Entry rate	Number of acceptances from a UCAS application cycle divided by the estimated base population.
IB	International Baccalaureate Diploma.
Offer	Provider decision to grant a place to an applicant. May be subject to the applicant satisfying academic and/or other criteria.
Provider	A higher education provider – a university or college.
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority – Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications taken by young people in Scotland when applying to higher education.
Tariff Band	Provider tariff bands are based on the average levels of attainment of their UK 18 year old acceptances. There are three tariff bands: lower tariff, middle tariff, and higher tariff. Each group of providers accounted for around a third of all UK 18 year old acceptances in recent cycles.
UK	United Kingdom. Excludes the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

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