

UCAS END OF CYCLE REPORT 2019

**INSIGHT REPORT:
UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS –
THE APPLICANT EXPERIENCE**



UCAS

IN THIS REPORT WE WILL EXPLORE **TRENDS IN UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS** AND THEIR EFFECT ON APPLICANT BEHAVIOUR, AND HIGHLIGHT OTHER TYPES OF INCENTIVISED OFFERS APPLICANTS MAY RECEIVE.



This report aims to go beyond the numbers and explore the data further – giving context and a deeper understanding. For more information on the number of unconditional offers in each year and the characteristics of applicants receiving unconditional offers, please see ‘Chapter 5: Unconditional offer-making’¹ and the accompanying end of cycle data dashboard².

Offers made to applicants applying to a university or college are described as either conditional or unconditional. The majority of offers made to 18 year old applicants from the UK are conditional, which means that certain conditions, usually related to the attainment of specific qualifications and examination results, need to be satisfied to be accepted onto a course.

However, the removal of student number controls in England from 2012, and the year-on-year decreases of the 18 year old UK population have led to increased competition between providers to attract, recruit, and retain well-qualified students. This has caused changes in offer-making and Confirmation strategies, including high offer rates and a record number of unconditional offers being made to English, Northern Irish, and Welsh 18 year olds³.

This cycle, we have revisited our definition of unconditional offers, to increase the clarity of the definitions and for ease of understanding⁴.

There are now three distinct types of offer which fall within the broad category of unconditional offers:

- > **Conditional unconditional offer:** Offers which are conditional at the point of offer, and adjusted by the provider from conditional to unconditional if selected as an applicant’s firm⁵ choice. These are identified in the admissions system through free text fields providers can use to communicate any additional information to applicants⁶.
- > **Direct unconditional offer:** Offers which are unconditional at the point of offer.
- > **Other unconditional offer:** Offers which are conditional at the point of offer and become unconditional before 30 June – the final date on which main scheme applications can be submitted, and are not identified as conditional unconditional.

The total of these types of offers are referred to as **offers with an unconditional component**.

¹ ‘Chapter 5: Unconditional offer-making’, Annex A & B and a Glossary of definitions used in the End of Cycle reports can be found here: www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2019-end-cycle-report

² www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2019

³ This report will cover 18 year old applicants from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and offers to this group from all providers in the UK. This group typically apply with most of their Level 3 qualifications still pending and with predicted, rather than achieved, results. Unless otherwise specified in this analysis, ‘applicants’ refers specifically to this group

⁴ For more information on the rationale for revising the categories of unconditional offers, the difference between the definitions used in this report and previous reports and the types of offers included in each category refer to Annex A

⁵ An offer made by a provider which has been confirmed by the applicant as their first choice. Here we use ‘firm’ and ‘first choice’ interchangeably.

⁶ Note that in previous reporting of unconditional offers, we analysed the offer conditions on 30 June. We now take the offer conditions at the point of the applicant’s reply, or 30 June if no reply is made by this date.

137,805

OFFERS WITH AN UNCONDITIONAL COMPONENT

To help ensure universities and colleges are giving applicants the information they need about unconditional offers, UCAS and a group of universities have worked together to produce good practice considerations for admissions practitioners. These emphasise the principles of fair admissions, and offer advice on setting and reviewing admissions policies, communicating with and supporting applicants holding unconditional offers, and reviewing their progress and outcomes.

Offers with an unconditional component are increasingly common

There has been continued growth in offers with an unconditional component. This cycle, a record 137,805 offers with an unconditional component were given to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

Although increasing competition may have led to some of the growth in unconditional offers, there are a variety of reasons providers use them. These include using unconditional offers following an interview, or in the case of some subjects, such as creative arts and design or communications and media courses (the subject groups with the highest proportion of offers with an unconditional component), an assessment of an applicant's portfolio. Unconditional offers also form a part of some providers' practices in support of applicants with mental health difficulties. Case studies on some of these practices can be found in UCAS' 2018 End of Cycle Report⁷.

The influence of conditional unconditional offers on applicant decision-making is waning

Conditional unconditional offers experienced the largest growth in 2019 (26.2% increase) to become the most common type of offer with an unconditional component – comprising 59.9% of these offers. Over a quarter of applicants now receive at least one conditional unconditional offer.

The impact of conditional unconditional offers on applicant decision-making, however, appears to be decreasing – applicants are becoming less likely to select their conditional unconditional offer as their first choice than in previous cycles⁸.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of offers selected as an applicant's first choice by offer type, for those who received five offers, of which only one was a conditional unconditional offer. This group represents over 40% of applicants with a conditional unconditional offer⁹.

In 2019, 20.6% of these applicants selected their conditional unconditional offer as their first choice, compared to 25.6% in 2014. Despite applicants needing to select their conditional unconditional offer as their first choice if they wish it to become unconditional, they are now only marginally more likely (1.3 percentage points) to select their conditional unconditional offer as their first choice than any of their other offers individually.

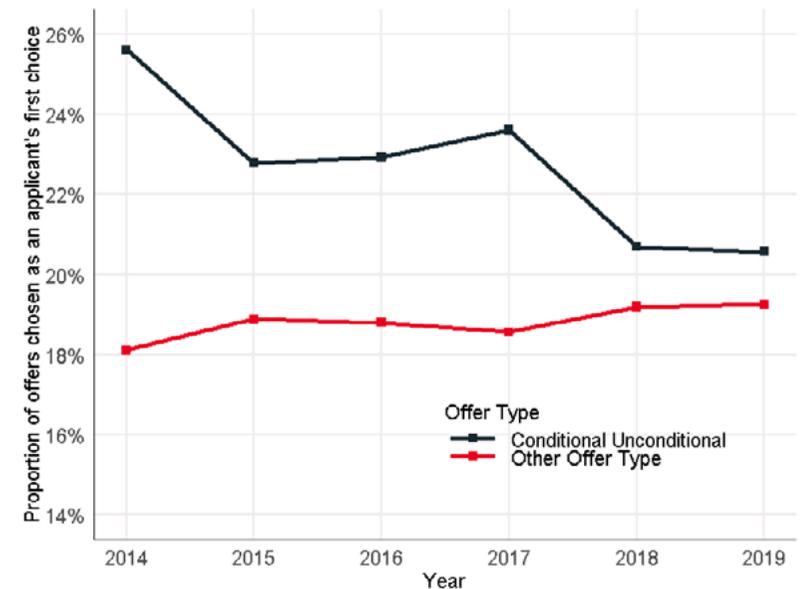


FIGURE 1: The proportion of offers chosen as an applicant's first choice for conditional unconditional offers compared to other offer types (for UK 18 year old English Northern Irish and Welsh applicants with five offers, and only one conditional unconditional offer – this group may contain applicants with other types of unconditional offers).

⁷ www.ucas.com/file/234561/download?token=00tzb2H

⁸ Based on analysis of applicants who receive two to five offers, and only one conditional unconditional offer. This covers over 75% of applicants receiving conditional unconditional offers in 2019, and a greater proportion than in previous cycles. This group remains large enough over the time period to measure changes in applicant behaviour.

26%

MORE CONDITIONAL UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS IN 2019 THAN IN 2018

This change is also reflected in survey responses¹⁰. Of applicants who reported receiving a conditional unconditional offer in 2019, 50% said it would have an impact on which provider they selected as their first choice¹¹. In 2018, this figure was 64%. 50% is the lowest since this question was first asked in 2015.

Overall, it appears conditional unconditional offers are less attractive to applicants than in previous cycles.

Applicant inclination to select a conditional unconditional offer as their first choice differs by their predicted grades and subject choices

Applicants with higher predicted grades are less likely to select their conditional unconditional offer as their first choice.

In 2019, applicants who were predicted grades BBB or above, and had five offers of which one was a conditional unconditional offer, were equally or less likely to select their conditional unconditional offer as their first choice than any of their other offers individually (figure 2).

As part of UCAS' commitment to ensuring students make well-informed decisions, we have expanded the information and advice available to them. Through the UCAS Hub, launched in September 2019, students are provided with independent and impartial advice – explaining what it means to accept an unconditional offer, and emphasising the importance of successfully completing exams because of potential impacts on success in HE and future employment prospects.

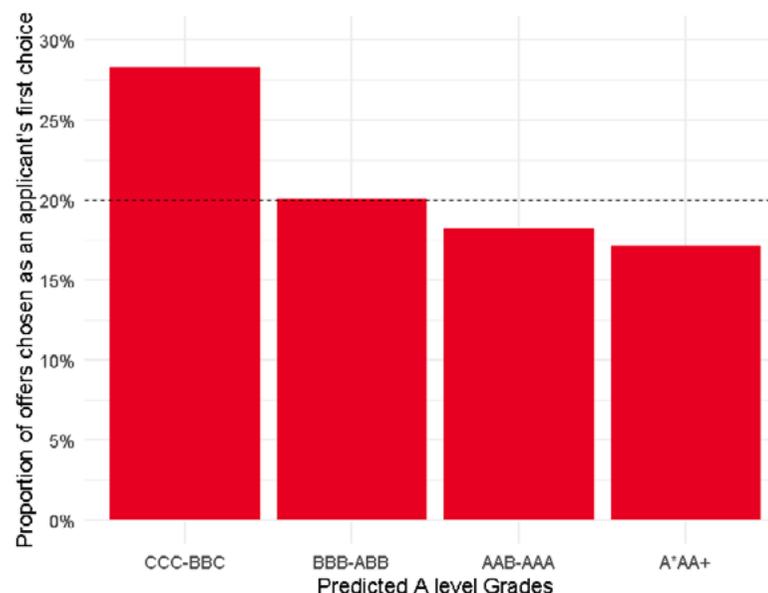


FIGURE 2: The proportion of conditional unconditional offers chosen as an applicant's first choice, for those with five offers and one conditional unconditional by predicted A level grade points in 2019. The dashed line represents the 20% threshold where an applicant is equally as likely to select their conditional unconditional offer as any of their other offers individually. Applicants with predicted grades lower than CCC are omitted due to small numbers.

Additionally, there are significant differences between how often applicants select their conditional unconditional offer as their first choice by subject and provider. For example, conditional unconditional offers for linguistics, classics and related subjects¹² are less likely to be selected as an applicant's first choice than those for business and administration studies. This indicates that differences may be related to the subjects applicants wish to study, their confidence in meeting the conditions of their other offers, and the types of providers giving conditional unconditional offers.

CONDITIONAL UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS HAVE LESS IMPACT ON APPLICANT DECISIONS THAN IN PREVIOUS CYCLES

⁹ The largest group of applicants who receive a conditional unconditional offer by the number of offers and the number of conditional unconditional offers.

¹⁰ Survey data here covers 2019 end of cycle placed and unplaced applicant surveys. In 2019, 31,820 ENW 18 year old applicants responded to these surveys, and in 2018, 9,890 ENW 18 year old applicants responded. The response rate is higher in 2019 due to monetary incentives being introduced for respondents. Survey response proportions are weighted to adjust for imbalance in response rates across applicant groups. The same survey is used throughout unless otherwise specified.

¹¹ The survey question was: 'Did the offer of an incentive have any impact on the decision you made?'

¹² This analysis by subject group uses the Common Aggregation Hierarchy which is applied across HECoS and JACS subject coding www.hesa.uk/innovation/hecos

APPLICANTS WITH
AN UNCONDITIONAL FIRM
OFFER FEEL **LESS STRESSED**
WHEN WAITING FOR
EXAM RESULTS

Unconditional offers can alleviate stress, but could also affect applicant attainment

Applicants with unconditional offers were less likely to report feeling stressed when waiting for their exam results. In 2019, over 30,000 English, Welsh, and Northern Irish 18 year old applicants told us how they felt whilst waiting for their exam results. Figure 3 shows applicants with an unconditional offer at their first choice¹³ were less likely to feel stressed, worried or uncertain while waiting for results, and more likely to feel calm¹⁴.

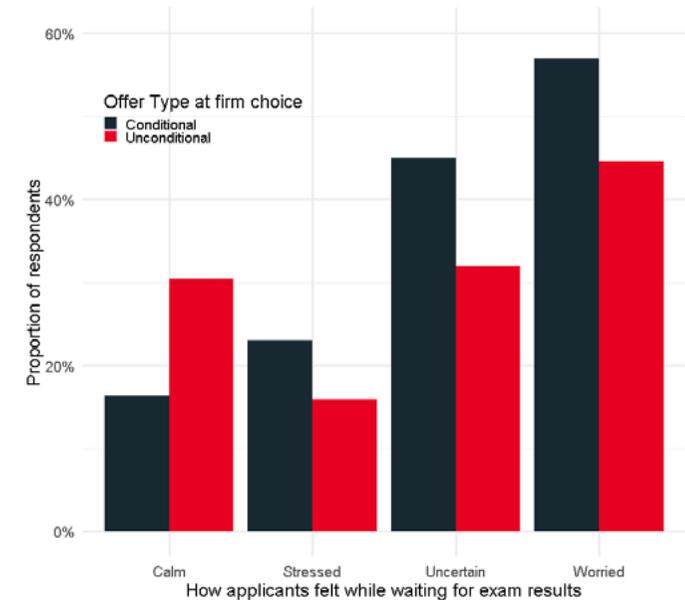


FIGURE 3: How applicants reported feeling while waiting for their exam results, by offer type held at their firm choice.

¹³ In this section when we refer to an unconditional firm or an unconditional offer at an applicant's firm choice, this covers all offers which had an unconditional status on 30 June, and which an applicant selected as their firm (first) choice.

¹⁴ The question asked was: 'During each of the following stages of the admissions process which words best described how you felt? Please select all that apply'. The stage analysed was 'Waiting for you exam results'.

Additionally, UCAS' 2018 End of Cycle Report¹⁵ found many applicants had positive opinions about unconditional offers – two thirds of comments exhibited positive sentiment towards unconditional offers, with examples specifically referencing the positive impact holding an unconditional offer had on the respondents' mental health¹⁶.

However, research also highlights some potential negative effects of unconditional offers on Level 3 attainment and HE continuation rates.

- > UCAS' 2018 End of Cycle Report¹⁷ showed applicants who held an unconditional offer at their first choice were more likely to miss their predicted grades by two or more grades than those who held a conditional offer.
- > On 30 October 2019, the Office for Students (OfS) published a report¹⁸ that found students accepted through an unconditional offer were marginally more likely to drop-out in their first year of studying than other students.

As in 2018, applicants with an unconditional offer at their first choice remain significantly more likely to miss their predicted grades.

In 2019, 42.8% of applicants holding a conditional firm offer missed their predicted A level attainment by three or more grades, compared to 56.7% of applicants holding an unconditional firm¹⁹. The proportions of applicants that miss their predicted grades has been growing since 2014 (figure 4). However, the extent of this difference is affected by many other factors and is not directly attributable to holding an unconditional firm offer.

¹⁵ www.ucas.com/file/234561/download?token=00tzob2H

¹⁶ How one applicant felt about receiving a conditional unconditional offer: 'My uni was my first choice anyway, so it was just an added bonus. I found the unconditional offer great for me in particular because it took off some of the stress so was good for my (failing) mental health'.

¹⁷ www.ucas.com/file/234561/download?token=00tzob2H

¹⁸ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update

¹⁹ This cycle, we have looked at applicants missing their predicted grades by more than three grades instead of two or more grades as the proportion of UK 18 year old applicants missing their predicted grades by three or more points has increased from 38% in 2018 to 43% this cycle. This proportion has more than doubled since 2011.

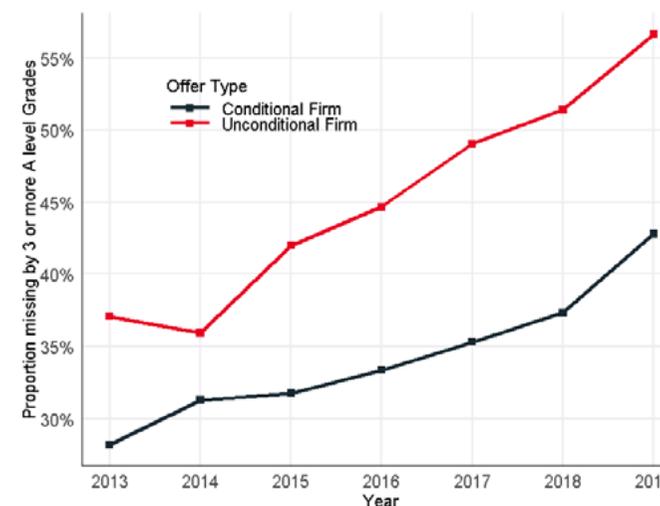


FIGURE 4: The proportion of applicants with a conditional offer at their firm choice, and an unconditional offer at their firm choice, who miss their predicted grades by three or more grades.

Statistical modelling enables us to start isolating the effect of holding an unconditional firm offer on A level attainment. This is achieved through controlling for other factors that can affect applicants' attainment. These include GCSE attainment, predicted A level attainment, and applicant characteristics. This model is detailed in Annex B.

Key findings from the model are summarised below. It is important to note that estimated effects are based on controlling the factors that can be quantified and are available. Other factors that may impact applicant attainment (for example, motivation) are not controlled for in the model.

KEY IMPLICATION	THE MODEL ESTIMATES THAT
Applicants with an unconditional offer are more likely to miss their predicted grades.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Applicants with an unconditional offer are, on average, 11.5 percentage points more likely to miss their predicted grades by three or more grades (than if they had received a conditional offer).²⁰
Holding an unconditional offer affects men more than women.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Men receiving an unconditional offer are, on average, 15.5 percentage points more likely to miss their predicted attainment by three or more grades than if they had received a conditional offer. > Women are, on average, 9 percentage points more likely than if they had received a conditional offer. > However, men with conditional offers are less likely to miss their predicted attainment by three or more grades than women with conditional offers. The net effect of the above is that men and women with an unconditional offer have similar attainment relative to predicted grades.
There is little difference between advantaged and disadvantaged applicants in the effect of holding an unconditional offer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Overall, POLAR4 quintile 5 applicants are least likely to miss their predicted attainment by three or more grades (and quintile 1 most likely). > However, modelling did not show a significant difference between POLAR4 quintiles in the impact of an unconditional offer on attainment.

TABLE 1: Findings from model – assessing the effect of different factors on missing predicted attainment by three or more grades.

UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS HAVE MORE EFFECT ON MALE APPLICANTS' ATTAINMENT

Although, as detailed in table 1, the effect of holding an unconditional offer does not significantly differ across POLAR4 quintiles, disadvantaged applicants are more likely to hold an unconditional offer at their first choice, with 23.2% of POLAR4 quintile 1 applicants holding an unconditional offer at their first choice compared with 15.3% in quintile 5. Consequently, disadvantaged applicants may miss their predicted grades as a result of holding an unconditional offer more often than more advantaged applicants. Further information about the characteristics of applicants who receive unconditional offers can be found in 'Chapter 5: Unconditional offer-making'.

Unconditional offers are the most common incentivised offer type – but there are others

Based on responses from over 30,000 applicants in 2019, 54% of 18 year old applicants in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales reported receiving an offer with an incentive to select the provider as their first choice²¹. Of those:

- > 56% reported receiving an offer where the provider would change the conditional offer to unconditional (a conditional unconditional offer²²)
- > 30% reported receiving an offer promising a guaranteed place in university halls
- > 17% reported receiving an offer which would include a scholarship, bursary or cash payment

The biggest change in the responses to this question was in the promise of a lower grade offer or entry requirement as an incentive for selecting the provider as their first choice. In 2018, 23% reported receiving this type of offer. In 2019, this proportion has risen to 36%.

UCAS' terms of engagement require providers to communicate their offers through the UCAS system. This promotes transparency and provides consistency in experience for applicants.

However, survey data suggests 30% of applicants who received any type of incentivised offer only received them directly from the provider – via post or email²³. When looking at applicants who received an offer which would be changed from conditional to unconditional if selected as their first choice, 26% reported only receiving it via post or email, and that it was not mentioned in their offer conditions.

Conditional unconditional offers made outside the UCAS system are challenging to identify

As referenced in the 'Unconditional offers – an update for 2019' report²⁴, it is impossible to identify all offers which are made unconditional if selected as an applicant's first choice, where the provider communicates this outside the UCAS system. In these instances, when an applicant selects that offer as their first choice, it will be included in the other unconditional offer category. This is because the offer will be conditional at the point of offer, and unconditional by 30 June (with no indication that they are conditional unconditional in the offer conditions). Here we will call these **potential conditional unconditional** offers.

Due to the variation in admissions practices, it is impossible to confidently disaggregate offers conditional on auditions, portfolios, performance at interview, proof of qualification or similar from potential conditional unconditional offers. By including these offers in the other unconditional offer category we avoid incorrectly assigning any offers to the conditional unconditional category.

Although impossible to identify individually, analysis of the number of offers in the other unconditional offer category that are selected as an applicant's first choice, supported by survey data, can give us an approximate estimate of the number of potential conditional unconditional offers.

Analysis of the proportion of offers in the other unconditional offer category chosen as an applicant's first choice suggest that up to 59% (11,895) of the 20,260 offers in in this category were potential conditional unconditional offers that were chosen as a first choice.

Extrapolating from the proportion of conditional unconditional offers chosen as an applicant's first choice overall²⁵, we estimate there would have been up to 47,500 additional conditional unconditional offers recorded, had these been communicated through offer conditions.

Empowering applicants to make the best choices for them is vital

Almost two in five applicants received an offer with an unconditional component in 2019, with conditional unconditional offers being the most common type.

Applicants' decisions appear to be influenced less by conditional unconditional offers than they have been in the past – with survey responses and admissions data suggesting applicants' tendency to choose a conditional unconditional offer as their first choice has decreased.

Some applicants may choose to select an unconditional offer as their first choice to reduce stress while waiting for their exam results. All applicants should be aware that holding an unconditional offer as their first choice could have a negative impact on their A level attainment.

In the current market, applicants are afforded more choice than ever before²⁶. Increased understanding of the effects of unconditional offers, and expanded advice available during every stage of the application journey, means applicants should be well placed to consider all options available and understand what each choice would mean for them.

With a reversal in the demographic shift – increasing UK 18 year old numbers from the 2021 cycle onwards – unconditional offer-making may decrease in scale and impact in the longer term.

OVER HALF

(54%)

OF APPLICANTS RECEIVED AN INCENTIVISED OFFER

²⁰ It should be noted that estimation of percentage point differences is based on the marginal effect of an unconditional firm offer for the sub-groups of applicants holding this type of offer described in the table.

²¹ The question asked was: 'Did any university or college offer you an incentive, which would only be available to you if you chose them as your firm (first) choice? Please tick all that apply'.

²² Offers of this type will only be recorded as a conditional unconditional offer within UCAS data if communicated in offer conditions as outlined in Annex A

²⁴ www.ucas.com/file/250931/download?token=R8Nn7uoI

²⁵ Overall, 25% of conditional unconditional offers were chosen as firm. Since not all applicants receive five offers, this proportion is expected to be higher than the 20.6% for applicants receiving all five offers, of which only one is conditional unconditional.

²⁶ www.ucas.com/file/286346/download?token=DookHVk1



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