

A group of five diverse young people (three men and two women) are smiling and looking towards the camera. They are outdoors, with green foliage in the background. The image is partially obscured by a dark grey diagonal shape on the left side.

# UCAS END OF CYCLE REPORT 2019

**INSIGHT REPORT:  
REALISING AMBITION**

UCAS



TODAY'S PUBLICATION OF THE FIRST SET OF 2019  
END OF CYCLE REPORTS PROVIDES INSIGHT INTO THE  
**UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY** AVAILABLE TO THOSE  
CONSIDERING HIGHER EDUCATION.



Here we highlight three key conclusions for those advising higher education applicants, in the 2020 cycle and beyond.

## 1. STUDENTS HAVE MORE CHANCE OF RECEIVING AN OFFER OF A PLACE THAN EVER BEFORE

In 2019, 97.8% of UK 18 year olds applying through the UCAS main scheme received at least one offer<sup>1</sup>. This is a new high<sup>2</sup> – and is a 0.2 percentage point increase since 2018.

This record-breaking figure is likely a consequence of both:

- > declining numbers of UK 18 year olds, resulting in increased competition between universities and colleges for students
- > the gradual removal of student number controls in England from 2012

The UK 18 year old population is expected to fall to its lowest point in recent years in 2020. Consequently, now may be the best time ever to apply to higher education – particularly since this population is expected to grow again from 2021, reaching 2010's height by 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> All UCAS applicant figures are based on UK 18 year olds, unless otherwise stated. Throughout this report, applicant numbers are rounded to the nearest five unless a larger level of granularity is indicated. Percentages are rounded to integers, or one decimal place where under 10% or over 90%.

<sup>2</sup> For the years 2008 – 2019. Since 2008 applicants have been able to make up to five main scheme choices..



When the UK nations are considered individually, the outlook for prospective applicants remains positive. While the proportion of applicants receiving at least one offer in 2019 was highest in England (98.1%), this figure was at the highest level since 2009 for Scottish applicants (94%). Applicants from Northern Ireland (96.6%) and Wales (97.8%) were also very likely to receive an offer from at least one of their choices. Population projections vary across UK regions, and some locally recruiting providers are likely to continue to face recruitment pressures beyond 2020. The geographic mobility of younger applicants in particular mean that they are well placed to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the intersection of demography and HE provision.

Correspondingly, **growth in the offer rate is evident across almost all degree subjects**<sup>3</sup>. This includes traditionally 'hard to enter' subjects, such as medicine and dentistry. The offer rate for medicine and dentistry<sup>4</sup> has increased every year since 2013, and applications to this subject group in 2019 were 1.7 times more likely to receive an offer than in 2013. This is likely to, at least in part, reflect the government's decision to fund an additional 1,500 medical school places<sup>5</sup> in England. The additional places are being introduced in a phased approach, starting with courses that began teaching in September 2018. This represents an unprecedented opportunity to aspiring medics to enter the profession.

Findings from the 2019 cycle also suggest that applicants should not be deterred from applying to courses with challenging entry requirements. Universities and colleges frequently accept applicants who perform below their entry requirements<sup>6</sup>. Encouragingly, this is most often experienced by disadvantaged applicants. In 2019, 60% of POLAR4 quintile 1 placed applicants were accepted on courses with actual A level grades below advertised entry requirements (compared with 49% across all placed applicants)<sup>7</sup>.

This may, in part, reflect the use of contextual offers, which are described further in the next section.

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<sup>3</sup> Refers to growth between 2010 and 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to the JACS 3 subject area 'Medicine and Dentistry'

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/funding-for-providers/health-education-funding/medical-and-dental-target-intakes/>

<sup>6</sup> UCAS is in open dialogue with universities and colleges about the benefits of sharing data about actual grades held by students accepted.

<sup>7</sup> Based on 18 year olds domiciled in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, with at least three predicted A levels, who have been accepted on courses for which A level entry requirements have been supplied to UCAS.

## 2. FOCUS ON DISADVANTAGED APPLICANTS IS STILL NEEDED – ALTHOUGH THE EQUALITY GAP HAS NARROWED, DISADVANTAGED APPLICANTS MAY NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Recent research by the Education Policy Institute<sup>8</sup> shows that gaps in attainment are evident from as early as the reception year, with the gaps widening throughout each year of education. UCAS' research has indicated that almost all differences in HE entry across different groups of the population can be tied back to differing levels of attainment, so it is perhaps unsurprising that in 2019, pupils from the 20% most advantaged areas<sup>9</sup> were around 2.3 times more likely to enter university than those from the 20% most disadvantaged.

However, over the longer term the higher education entry gap has been narrowing, with disadvantaged students 61% more likely to enter university now than they were ten years ago.

Provider use of contextualised admissions, and in particular contextual offers, may enable disadvantaged students to enter courses with higher entry requirements.

**Disadvantaged student awareness of contextualised admissions is key** to this group making the most of their opportunities in HE. Responses to our 2019 survey of placed applicants provided the following insight<sup>10</sup>:

- > **Around one in six (17%) of the most disadvantaged applicants report receiving a contextual offer.**<sup>11</sup>
- > However, **many remain unaware that some universities make contextual offers.** Concerningly, the most disadvantaged applicants were less likely to be aware of contextual offers (60% aware) than the most advantaged (68%). These responses were collected at the end of the cycle, when many applicants would have been in receipt of these offers. **Awareness may have been even lower when it was most needed** – at the point of application.

<sup>8</sup> <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2019/>

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this report where applicant metrics are referenced 'advantaged' refers to POLAR4 quintile 5, and 'disadvantaged' refers to POLAR4 quintile 1. Many providers use other measures of disadvantage in addition to or instead of POLAR – see for example [https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Admissions-in-Context-Final\\_V2.pdf](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Admissions-in-Context-Final_V2.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> There were 75,095 respondents to the placed applicant survey. Responses relate to the following questions:

- > Are you aware that some universities make contextualised offers? A contextualised offer is an offer which takes into account other information about an applicant's individual circumstances, such as where they grew up and the type of school they attended, in addition to qualifications and grades. Contextualised offer-making may result in an applicant receiving easier to achieve offer conditions, or receiving an offer when they would not have otherwise done so.
- > Did you, or anyone you know, receive this type of offer?

Survey responses have been weighted to adjust for imbalance in response rates across applicant groups.

<sup>11</sup> While this question was only asked of applicants who had previously confirmed they were aware that some providers make contextual offers, the 17% response is based on all placed applicants. Self-reporting is likely to exclude offers that were contextualised by the provider without applicant knowledge.





**It is recommended that teachers and advisers familiarise themselves with the practice of contextualised admissions<sup>12</sup>.** This enables the best advice and support to be given to applicants, and encourages aspirational choices. Although all universities and colleges have plans to widen access and participation, contextualised admissions practices vary substantially between HE providers<sup>13</sup>. UCAS is working with universities and colleges and widening participation organisations to encourage consistency in the communication of contextualised admissions practices through our new UCAS Hub. (Scottish universities and colleges are ahead of the rest of the UK market in the introduction of practices to support clarity around the use of – and consistency in expressing – contextual offers<sup>14</sup>.)

**Disadvantaged applicants may also require support with the provision of additional contextual information** beyond the UCAS application, as this may be a requirement for contextual offer consideration.

In addition to the guidance provided by teachers and advisers in schools, **outreach and support programmes can support young people with realising opportunities in higher education.**

These types of programmes are important in starting to address the disparity in attainment and aspiration prior to higher education that are apparent from a young age, since contextual offers alone are unlikely to close these gaps.

This is particularly relevant for those hoping to enter higher tariff providers since, as Durham University Evidence Centre for Education note<sup>15</sup>, 'higher-tariff providers will need to set academic entry requirements much lower for socioeconomically disadvantaged learners if they are to achieve the targets set by OfS'.

One such programme, IntoUniversity, delivers programmes from 31 learning centres across the UK to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain a place at university.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/file/86786/download?token=zVfQ-oHo>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-and-resources/adviser-news/news/contextualised-admissions-how-it-works-practice>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/publications/working-to-widen-access/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/dece/ContextualisedHEadmissions.pdf>

# 72%

OF LEEDS INTOUNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS PROGRESS TO HE

## EARLY AND SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT IS KEY

**Louise Banahene, Head of Educational Engagement, University of Leeds.**

It's important that all students, regardless of background, can access higher education. Whether they are pupil premium students or identified disadvantaged through POLAR or the multiple equality measure (MEM), exposure to HE, and how to make the right choices, is crucial to help them set and realise their ambitions.

Our partnership with the national charity, IntoUniversity<sup>16</sup>, provides students as young as seven from disadvantaged backgrounds in the South and East of Leeds, to engage with a local learning centre through a programme of activity. Keeping HE at the forefront of students' minds as they think about their future, allows them to make a more informed decision, rather than deciding for the first time when they leave school in Year 13.

A large part of our work, particularly with disadvantaged students, is to open eyes to the sheer variety available at degree level, and that crucially, undergraduate study isn't confined to your three A level subjects. There is also a focus on cultural activities, such as visiting art galleries, arranging work experience and mentoring sessions, and for those that need extra academic stretch, additional homework assignments to provide further stimulation and challenge. The impact is clear. In Leeds, the estimated HE progression rate of IntoUniversity students is 72%. In contrast, in the same area, only 20% of all maintained school pupils receiving free school meals progress to HE.

We know how important subject choice can be at GCSE and post-16, and our research reinforced the value of the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). When demographic predictors, prior attainment at Levels 2 and 3, and subject area are controlled for, there is a positive effect for those who undertake the EPQ. Those who achieved highly in the EPQ typically perform better at the end of their first year compared to those who do not (or who did not study it). The EPQ provides valuable experience for young people, giving them their first opportunity to apply research skills, understand how to set research questions, and ease the transition into a learning environment where research is vital to success<sup>16</sup>. Our outreach programme includes a core strand supporting teachers and students on delivery and preparation for the EPQ.

<sup>16</sup> <https://intouniversity.org/>



### 3. CLEARING IS AN INCREASINGLY POPULAR ENTRY ROUTE, AND AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONSIDER NEW OPTIONS

Clearing acceptances have been on the rise for several years. This continues into 2019. **Over 34,000 UK 18 year olds secured a place through Clearing** – the highest number on record. This figure accounts for 14% of all placed UK 18 year old applicants.

#### KEY CLEARING 2019 STATS<sup>17</sup>:

- > On A level results day this year, **almost all UK universities and colleges had courses available in Clearing**. This covered over 30,000 courses.
- > **Clearing covers a broad range of subject areas**. This includes typically highly selective courses, such as pre-clinical medicine (over 400 placed through Clearing, comprising 7.9% of all UK 18 year old acceptances to this subject) and mathematics (over 600 placed through Clearing – 14% of acceptances to this subject).
- > **2019 also brought the highest ever proportion of places secured through Clearing at higher tariff providers** – 9.8%, compared with 8.3% in 2018.
- > **New in 2019 was the option for placed applicants to ‘self-release’ online into Clearing**. Nearly 16,000 UK 18 year olds with main scheme places took advantage of this option, with over 11,000 of these placed on a new course.

#### WHAT THIS MEANS FOR 2020 APPLICANTS

Considering the likely impact of the further decline in the 18 year old population, and the expansion of applicant choice in the admissions process, now may be the best time ever for students to realise their HE ambitions.



UCAS is committed to providing personalised and relevant information and advice to all students, and in September 2019 launched the UCAS Hub. Early feedback from Hub users shows it is encouraging students to expand their horizons – nearly three quarters (73%) of students said that they are now thinking of applying to universities of colleges they hadn't previously considered<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Find out more about Clearing in the Clearing chapter of our 2019 End of Cycle report: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2019-end-cycle-report>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/new-ucas-hub-encourages-students-shoot-stars>



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UCAS, a company limited by guarantee, is registered in England and Wales.  
Registered number: 2839815.

Registered charity number:  
1024741 (England and Wales) and SC038598 (Scotland)

Publication reference: MD-5795

Published by: UCAS, Rosehill, New Barn Lane, Cheltenham, GL52 3LZ.