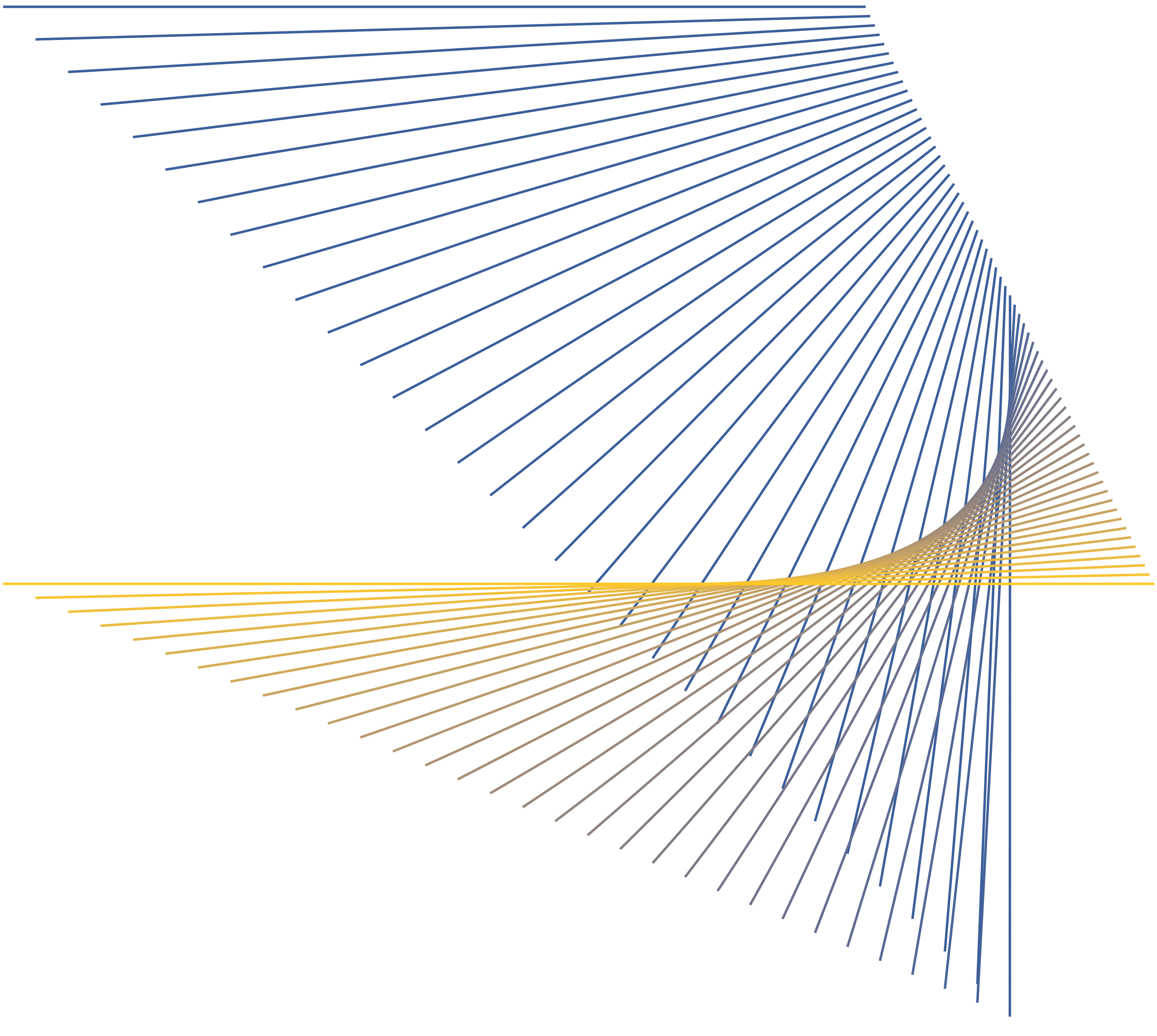
GROWTH AND CHOICE IN UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS



Universities UK

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2010, increased competition for students has emerged in the UK higher education sector. A nationwide decrease in the number of 18-year-olds and the removal of student number controls means that universities are now making more offers to a wider range of students throughout the recruitment cycle.

This has not, however, led to a decline in the prior attainment of the students recruited by the sector. As undergraduate acceptances have increased, average student attainment has also risen.

Key points from the analysis include:

- The growth in the sector since 2010 has been based on an increasing proportion of 18-year-olds applying for university. The declining size of the 18-year-old population, allied with the already high rate of applications, presents risks to recruitment volumes across the sector in the short term.

- The uncertainty of the new environment is having an impact on institutional recruitment strategies and outcomes. Despite significant swings in acceptances at individual institutions, only a small number – notably in London, where competition for students is higher – have seen year-on-year decreases in their acceptances. Aside from London, there is no significant link between type of institution and the size of changes in undergraduate acceptances. In particular, having a lower entry tariff does not seem to be correlated with decreases in acceptances.

- Despite the increase in competition, there has not been a fall in students' entry qualifications. Students entering university are on average more qualified than in the past, while the range of average entry tariffs across the sector has narrowed slightly. All types of universities are now recruiting applicants with a wider range of pre-higher education qualifications.

Students entering university are on average more qualified than in the past.

- There has, however, been a diversification in the range of qualifications accepted by universities, with increasing numbers of applicants accepted with vocational qualifications at all types of universities. This is likely to have opened up new routes to university for groups which have historically been underrepresented in higher education.

- Increasing competition between universities has given applicants more power to choose between institutions, and in response students and institutions have changed their admissions patterns. Students are increasingly using the full length of the admissions cycle and are using Clearing to change their choices. In response, more universities are offering more places on courses later in the recruitment cycle, including in Clearing.

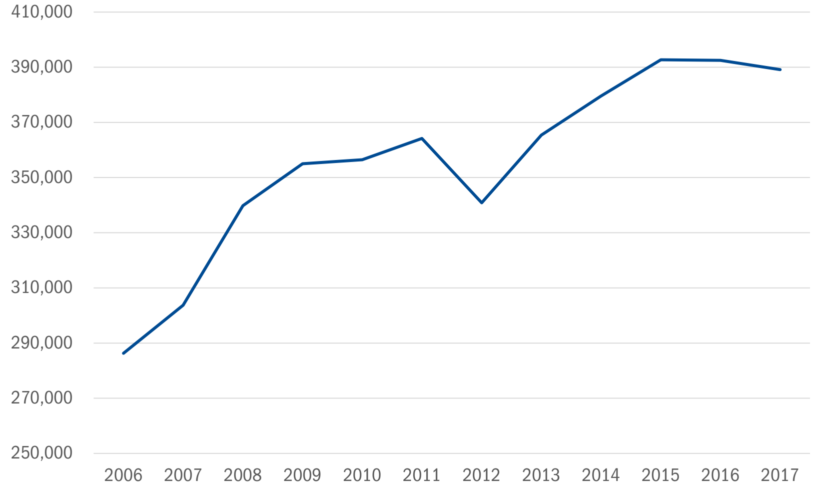
- The current volatility in recruitment may only be temporary as it is linked to a decrease in the number of 18–20-year-olds in the population between 2010 and 2021. This number will rise sharply from 2022. If the proportion of young people entering higher education continues to increase or is even maintained, this is likely to lead to considerable increases in the numbers of young people entering university. The government's review of post-18 education and funding will need to consider this as part of their recommendations.

Increasing competition between universities has given applicants more power to choose between institutions.

INTRODUCTION

FIGURE 1

UK-domiciled acceptances to full-time undergraduate courses at English higher education providers



Source: UCAS (2017) end of cycle resources

This report explores trends in student recruitment since 2010, a period which covers two substantial reforms in England: the introduction of £9,000 undergraduate tuition fees, and the progressive removal of student number controls[1]. This latter reform in particular has allowed significantly more flexibility in the number of students universities can recruit.

Over this period the number of applicants accepted by universities has grown considerably. Between 2006 and 2015 acceptances increased steadily, apart from a dip in 2012, which was the result of the introduction of increased fees in England. In 2016, UK acceptances remained broadly stable, and in 2017 they fell slightly. This fall was linked to the combined impact of a decrease in the number of 18-year-olds, changes to funding for degrees in nursing, midwifery and other allied health professions, and continuing decreases in the number of mature learners

Despite the decrease in acceptances, demand for undergraduate study remains high, particularly from 18-year-olds. The proportion of 18-year-olds from England applying to university has increased, from 33.4% in January 2010 to 37.5% in January 2018, and the proportion entering university has also increased, from 27.1% in 2010 to 33.3% in 2017.

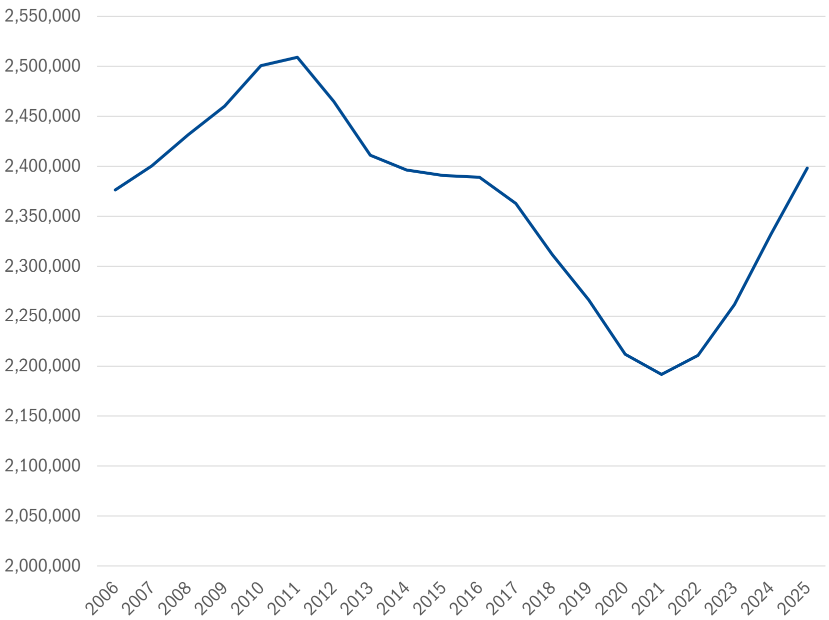
Despite the decrease in acceptances, demand for undergraduate study remains high, particularly from 18-year-olds.

1 Number controls were initially removed for students with grades equivalent to AAB at A-level or above in 2012, with further liberalisation for students with grades equivalent to ABB at A-level or above in 2013 and 2014. Controls were then abolished for all students in 2015.

At the same time, the number of UK 18–20-year-olds (the largest group of university entrants) is estimated to have fallen by 137,900 (-5.5%) between 2010 and 2017. This decline will continue until 2021, which will further increase competition between universities for undergraduate students. After 2021, the trend is expected to reverse, with a sharp increase expected in the young population.

FIGURE 2

18–20-year-old UK population based on ONS mid-year estimates



Source: ONS

During this period there has also been growth in the number of young people studying vocational qualifications. An extra 50,000 15-year-olds remained in education between 2010 and 2015, 96% of whom studied vocational qualifications such as BTECs[2]. This growth has contributed to the number of higher education entrants holding BTEC qualifications more than doubling between 2008 and 2017[3]. However, entering higher education still remains less common for vocational students, with just 41% going on to university in 2010–11, compared to 79% of A-level students[4].

An extra 50,000 15-year-olds remained in education between 2010 and 2015, 96% of whom studied vocational qualifications such as BTECs.

[2] Social Market Foundation (2016), *Passports to progress*

[3] UCAS (2017), *End of Cycle Data Resources: DR2_033_05*

[4] HEFCE (2015), *Young participation in higher education: A-levels and similar qualifications*

TRENDS BY TYPE OF INSTITUTION

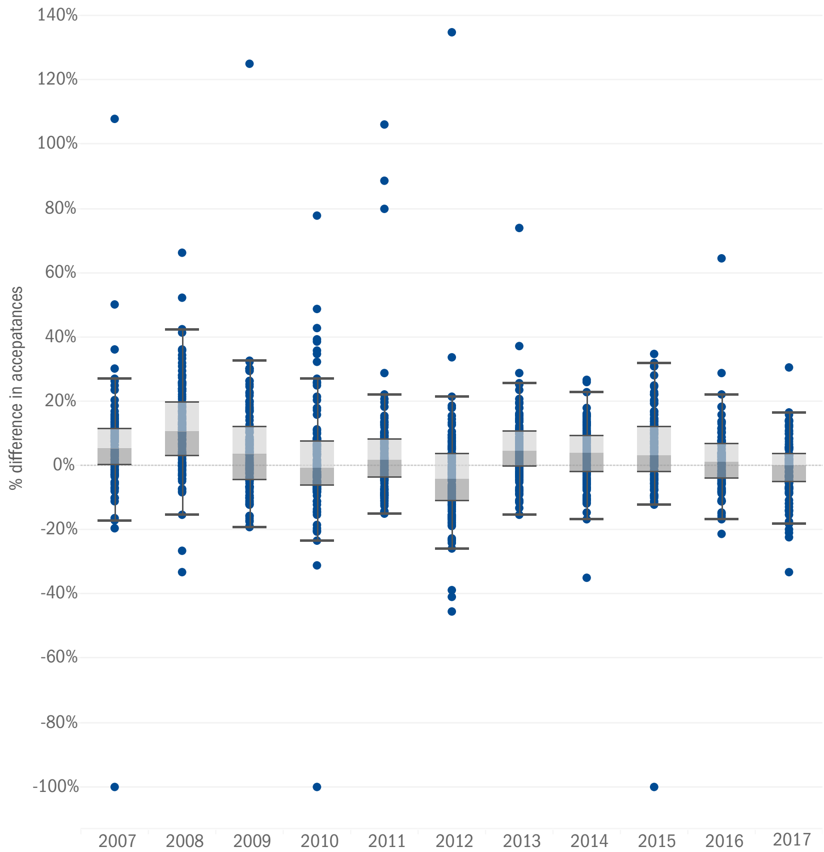
The variation in the numbers of acceptances at universities year-on-year is clear evidence of competition in the higher education sector. Since the removal of student number controls some institutions have seen considerable swings in the number of undergraduate students they accept each year, ranging from an increase of 30% at one institution between 2016 and 2017, to a decrease of 33% at another. However, these variations remain within the ranges seen both before and after student number controls were introduced, suggesting that some level of competition between institutions has always been present.

Variation in the numbers of acceptances at universities year-on-year is clear evidence of competition in the higher education sector.

Figure 3 shows the annual variation in full-time UK undergraduate acceptances through UCAS at 121 English higher education institutions between 2007 and 2017, with each institution represented by a dot and the grey band showing the middle 50% of institutions. As can be seen, the range of changes in 2016 and 2017 was lower than those seen under the tolerance band system in place before 2009.

FIGURE 3

Annual changes in UK acceptances at English higher education institutions, 2007 to 2017



Source: UCAS (2018)

There does not yet appear to be a strong correlation between the number of acceptances and an institution's average entry tariff[5]. When institutions are grouped into high, medium and lower tariff, there is a slight correlation between increasing tariff and increasing acceptances. But this correlation is only present for the low tariff group and, though it is statistically significant, it is very weak. This means that although there is a definite relationship, the two factors are not very closely linked (see Figure 4).

There does not yet appear to be a strong correlation between the number of acceptances and an institution's average entry tariff.

The majority of lower tariff institutions experienced decreases in their acceptances over the period, but many still had strong growth, with the strongest overall growth coming from two lower tariff institutions. Medium to high tariff institutions had a mix of outcomes, with some strong growth, but overall institutions were split between growth and decreases. By contrast, institutions with the very highest tariffs have tended to grow, with two exceptions.

FIGURE 4

Proportional change in UK acceptances, 2016 to 2017, by average entry tariff, 2016–17

Source: UCAS (2018) and HESA (2018), *HESA Student Record*

[5] Average entry tariff is the typical UCAS score of students currently studying at a university. Tariff points are allocated to qualifications on the basis of the grade achieved in them. For a comparison of the points allocated to different qualifications and grades in the period covered in this report, see the Bournemouth University website.

Our analysis does not suggest any correlation or significant relationships between the year-on-year changes in undergraduate acceptances and any of the following:

- institutional size
- levels of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (using either POLAR or the proportion of students living at home)
- research intensity
- TEF ranking[6]

By contrast, there have been considerable differences in changes in acceptances by region between 2010 and 2017. These may have been affected by regional demographic variations, the local labour market, and the take-up of vocational qualifications at level 3. Regional trends may also be influenced by supply-side factors, such as the number, size and mission of universities in the region. Historically, growth in the East of England, the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber, has not kept up with other regions.

There have been considerable differences in changes in acceptances by region between 2010 and 2017.

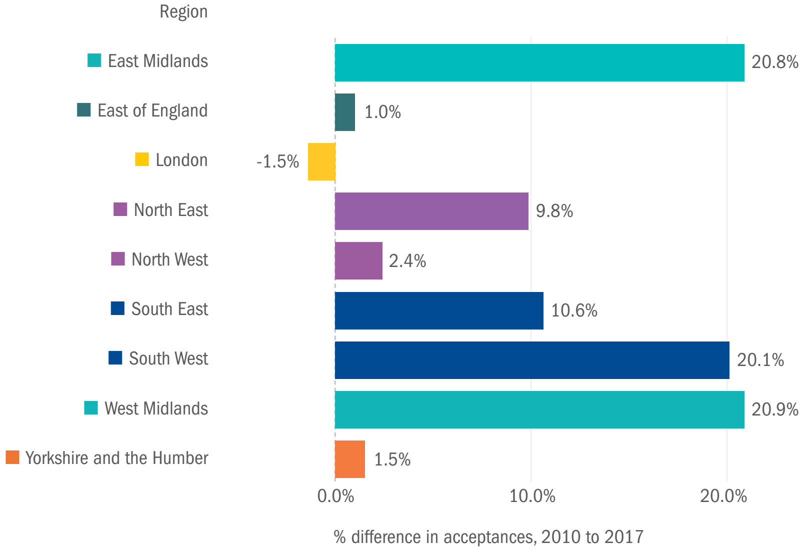
Interestingly, London is over-represented in the small number of institutions which have had substantial and continued decreases in acceptances since 2010. Of the ten institutions with strong decreases in UK undergraduate acceptances between 2010 and 2017, six are in London, one is within easy commutable distance of London, and two have London campuses[7].

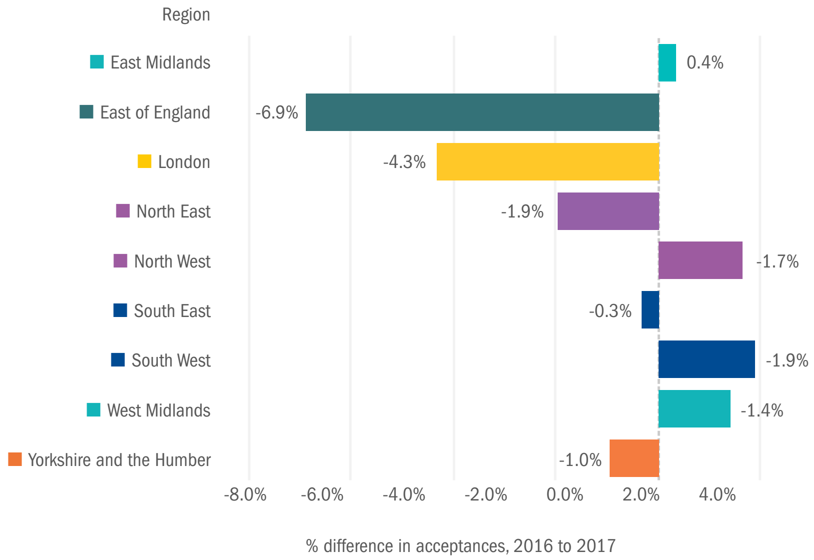
This would suggest that the concentration of institutions in London has made competition for students more intense. This is likely to be the result of local recruitment, as undergraduate students at institutions in London are more likely than those in other parts of England to be from the local region[8]. In general, newer universities are more likely to recruit locally and therefore be vulnerable to local competition, and this is certainly the case in this instance – all eight of the institutions with London connections and strong decreases in their undergraduate acceptances are modern universities.

[6] Even in the 2017 cycle, the majority of applicants will have made their choices before the first TEF awards were published.
[7] UUK (2018), *UUK analysis of UCAS End of Cycle Data Resources DR4_003_01 (2018)* and *HESA Student Record*
[8] UUK (2018), *UUK analysis of HESA Student Record*

FIGURE 5

Percentage change in UK acceptances by region of institution, 2010 to 2017 and 2016 to 2017





Source: UCAS (2018)

TRENDS IN ENTRY TARIFF

This section explores the level of acceptances by the average UCAS entry tariff. The UCAS tariff is a measure of the prior attainment of students used in the recruitment and admissions process and is therefore a suitable measure of the selectivity of an institution. Our analysis suggests that:

- on average, students going to university are more qualified than before, despite the parallel increase in the proportion of young people going to university
- more flexible approaches to entry requirements have narrowed the range of the average tariff across the sector

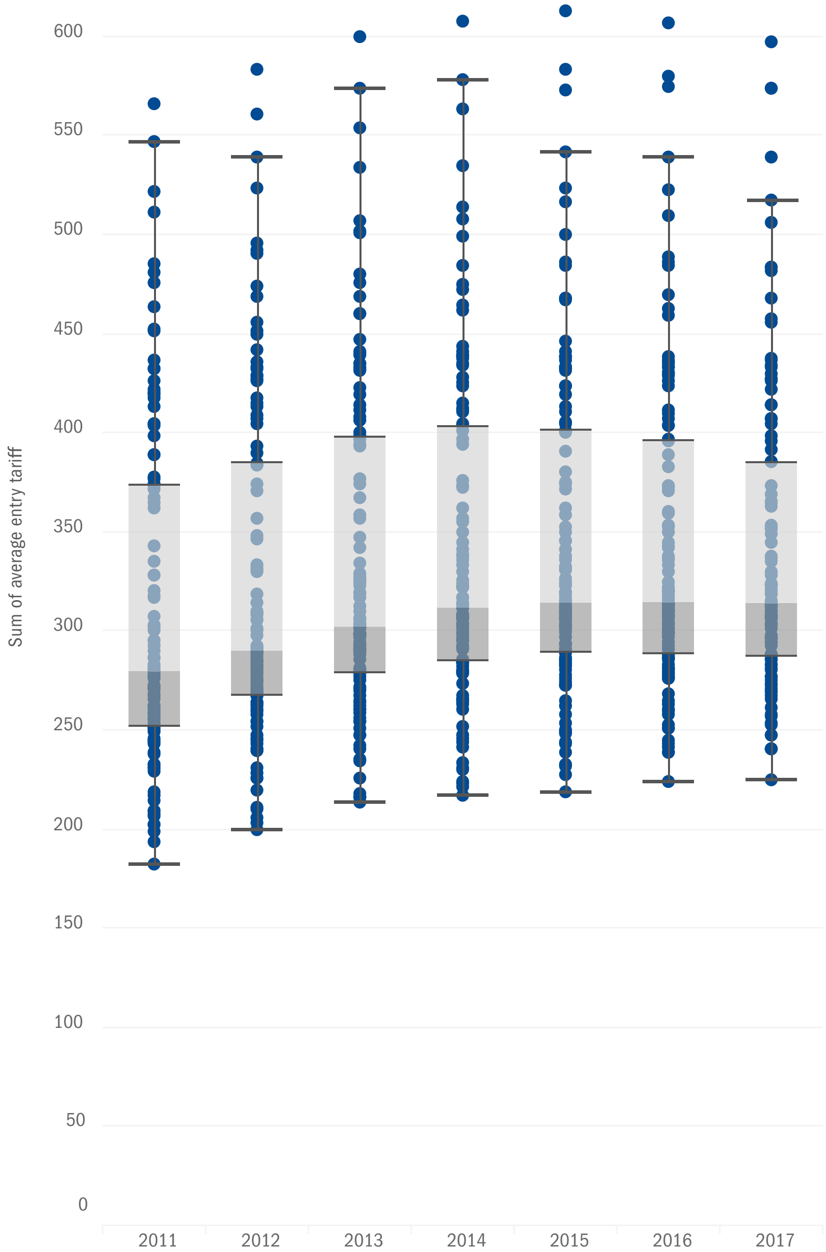
Contrary to fears over the impact of competition on levels of student attainment, there has been an increase in the average entry tariff across the sector since 2010. This has been allied with a decrease in the range of average entry tariffs at universities over the period, with convergence around entry tariffs in the 300s[9]. Figure 6 shows the spread of average entry tariff at English higher education institutions between 2010–11 and 2016–17. Each institution is represented by a blue dot with a grey box around the middle half of institutions. This shows that the range covering the middle half of institutions has narrowed from a 122 tariff points in 2010–11, to 98 points in 2016–17.

Contrary to fears over the impact of competition on levels of student attainment, there has been an increase in the average entry tariff across the sector since 2010.

[9] From around CCB (plus C at AS level) to AAB (plus B at AS level) for students with A-levels, or DMM to D*D*D for students with BTECs.

FIGURE 6

Average entry tariff at English institutions, 2010–11 to 2016–17



Source: HESA (multiple years), *HESA Student Record*

Higher tariff universities have continued to attract the highest attaining students. The average attainment of applicants accepted to higher tariff providers in 2017 was between AAA and AAB at A-level, as it has been since at least 2012 (UCAS have not released data for earlier years)[10]. In 2016, the proportion of applicants accepted at high tariff universities with A-level grades equivalent to ABB or above was 1.3% higher than it was in 2008[11]. However, acceptance rates for applicants with slightly lower grades have also increased, with the acceptance rate for applicants with BBB at A-level increasing from 17% to 39% between 2011 and 2017, although the absolute numbers of these students remained relatively low[12].

[10] UCAS (2017), *End of cycle report 2017: Qualifications and competition*
[11] UCAS (2016), *End of cycle report 2016*
[12] UCAS (2017), *End of cycle report 2017: Qualifications and competition*

At medium tariff universities, the average attainment of applicants accepted has remained broadly equivalent to BBC at A-level, but has fallen across the period from being closer to BBB in 2012, to being closer to BCC in 2017[13]. The proportion of accepted applicants gaining ABB or equivalent at A-level fell by 14.8% between 2008 and 2016[14], and acceptance rates for applicants with lower A-level attainment (grades of CCC or below) have increased between 2011 and 2017.

Notably, lower tariff institutions have been able to marginally increase the average attainment of the students they accept, from close to the equivalent of CCC at A-level in 2012 , to the equivalent of BCC in 2017[15]. This change occurred largely in the 2017 admissions cycle, when lower tariff providers became less likely to accept applicants with grades below the equivalent of BCC at A-level[16]. It has also been boosted by increases in acceptances for those holding the highest BTEC grades[17]. Between 2011 and 2016, lower tariff providers were becoming more likely than they had been in the past to accept applicants with DDD or DDE or equivalent at A-level[18].

All types of universities have become increasingly open to accepting students with vocational BTEC qualifications. The proportion of students accepted with BTEC grades equivalent to ABB at A-level increased steadily between 2008 and 2014[19], with a spike in 2013 when students with those grades were removed from student number controls. Growth then slowed in 2015, when all students were removed from controls, and started to reverse in 2016. Equivalent data was not released in 2017, but the acceptance rate for 18-year-old applicants with BTECs grew by less than half the increase in the acceptance rate for 18-year-olds with A-levels[20]. This suggests that many universities still prioritise the recruitment of A-level students.

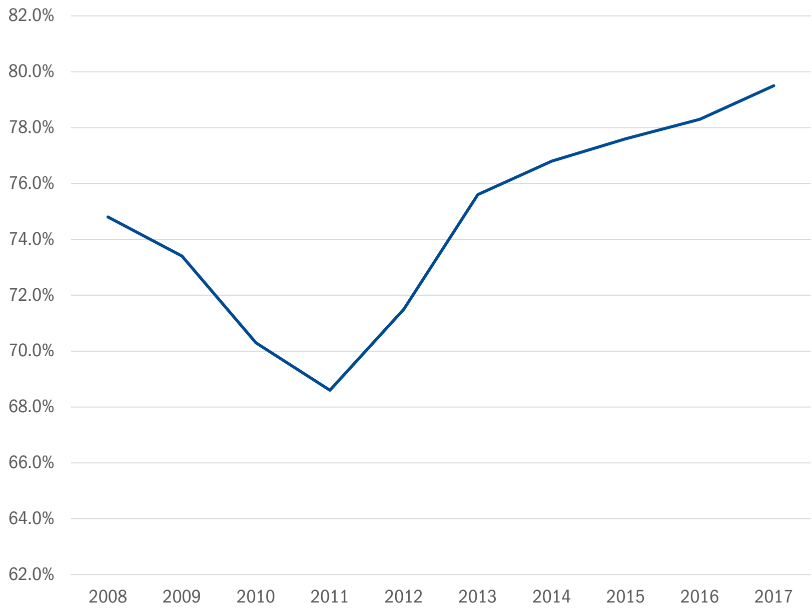
All types of universities have become increasingly open to accepting students with vocational BTEC qualifications.

[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.; UCAS (2014), *End of cycle report 2014*; UCAS (2015), *End of cycle report 2015*; UCAS (2016), *End of cycle report 2016*
[17] UCAS (2017), *End of cycle report 2017: Qualifications and competition*
[18] UCAS (2016), *End of cycle report 2016*
[19] UCAS (2015), *End of cycle report 2015*
[20] UCAS (2017), *End of cycle report 2017: Qualifications and competition*

OFFER MAKING

FIGURE 7

Offer rate to 18-year-old UK full-time main scheme applicants at higher education providers in England



Source: UCAS (2017)

As competition between institutions has increased, they have increased the number of offers they make and focused more on making those offers attractive to applicants. The proportion of 18-year-old main scheme applicants receiving an offer from English higher education providers has never been higher[21], as can be seen in Figure 7. The proportion of applicants receiving offers from all five of the institutions they applied to has also increased, from just over a fifth in 2011 (21.4%) to over a third in 2017 (34.4%)[22].

The proportion of 18-year-old main scheme applicants receiving an offer from English higher education providers has never been higher.

One of the ways institutions have made their offers more attractive is by making them unconditional. The proportion of 18-year-old applicants receiving at least one unconditional offer has increased from 0.95% at its lowest point in 2012, to 17.5% in 2017[23]. The number of institutions where unconditional offers make up more than 5% of all offers made has also increased, from 12 in 2014 to 49 in 2017[24].

21 UCAS (2017), *End of cycle report 2017: Offer making*
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.

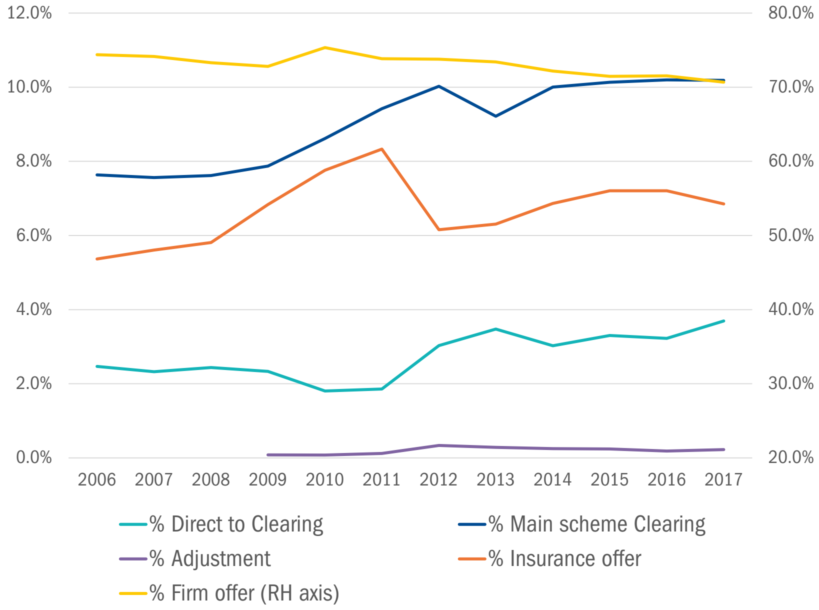
It is important to note that unconditional offers only make up a small proportion of all offer-making. In 2017, only 5.3% of the offers made to 18-year-olds in England, Northern Ireland and Wales were unconditional[25]. Nevertheless, given the increases in unconditional offer-making, particularly in 2017, it will be important to monitor trends and impacts of the practice. School leaders have raised concerns that unconditional offers can demotivate students and undermine their attainment at A-level, with potential consequences for their future career. Institutions will also want to monitor the impact of unconditional offer-making on student retention and attainment.

It is important to note that unconditional offers only make up a small proportion of all offer-making.

CHANGING APPLICANT BEHAVIOUR

FIGURE 8

Proportion of UK acceptances at English providers by route, 2006 to 2017



Source: UCAS (2016); adjustment has only been available since 2009, % firm offer is shown against the right-hand axis

[25] Ibid. The majority of 18-year-olds from England, Northern Ireland and Wales will be applying with predicted grades, having not yet taken their final qualifications. Older applicants and those from Scotland are likely to be applying with their final grades so any unconditional offers they receive will reflect them having already met entry conditions.

As institutions have changed their offer-making strategies over the period, so applicants have also changed their application strategies. Many applicants now apply later in the admissions cycle and some are starting to use Clearing to secure a place at university after receiving their results (Annexe A sets out how the UCAS admissions cycle works). This has been facilitated by the increasing numbers of universities that make courses and places available during Clearing.

The 15 January 'equal consideration' deadline remains the main application route for students in England. In 2017, 81% of applicants from England applied by the 15 January. But this is 5% down on the 86% of applicants who used the January deadline in 2011[26], and anecdotal evidence suggests that even those who do use the January deadline are waiting until the deadline day itself to submit their application.

Increasing numbers of applicants are applying directly to Clearing. Between 2010 and 2017, there was a 97% increase in the proportion of students accepted directly to English institutions through Clearing without having applied earlier in the admissions cycle[27]. In addition, the proportion of applicants to UCAS's main scheme changing their undergraduate place through Clearing has increased by 29% since 2010 at English universities. Over 10% of UK students accepted to English universities in 2017 originally applied through the main scheme and then went on to change their choice during Clearing.

The changing speed of Clearing is another indication of its increasing importance to institutions keen to maintain their undergraduate intake. Places on offer in Clearing are increasingly being filled within 36 hours or less, where previously this may have taken up to a fortnight. In 2017, 3.0% of all main scheme applicants (11,180 applicants) had accepted places through Clearing by the end of A-level results day. Nearly 7,000 main scheme applicants were placed on A-level results day itself; 18% of all applicants accepted as part of Clearing.

Most institutions now offer courses in Clearing and in some cases, Clearing represents an increasingly significant part of the total undergraduate intake. As the number of applicants has fallen this year, Clearing has become an increasingly important way to increase the number of applicants accepted each year.

Most institutions now offer courses in Clearing and in some cases, Clearing represents an increasingly significant part of the total undergraduate intake.

[26] UUK (2016), *UUK analysis of UCAS; 2017 applicant figures – January deadline*; *Applicants and acceptances by groups of applicants 2017*

[27] UUK (2017), *UUK analysis of figures from UCAS*; *Applicants and acceptances by groups of applicants 2017*

In recognition of this changing use of Clearing, UCAS is also updating its guidelines, which are due to be published alongside the new Apply system when this is introduced. These changes were proposed by university admissions directors working with the Academic Registrars' Council, and are designed to make it easier for applicants to change their mind. Changes include applicants being able to 'self-release' into Clearing, thus allowing them to take up a new place without having to ask the university they already hold a place with to let them go.

However, the use of Clearing as a post-qualification admissions route is only likely to be the right option for a relatively small proportion of applicants. Making decisions at such a late stage places additional pressure on both applicants and institutions, which may undermine the quality of students' options or the choice they make. For example:

- There is less choice for applicants in Clearing as only those courses and institutions with unfilled places are available.
- It is harder for applicants – particularly disadvantaged applicants – to access appropriate information, advice and guidance over the summer.
- There is more pressure on students to make decisions as institutions fill places in real time.
- There are logistical difficulties for applicants applying in the summer, including the need to arrange accommodation at short notice.

Information, advice and guidance for applicants will need to take this into account, and provide adequate support for applicants either entering the admissions cycle or changing their minds over the Clearing period.

However, the use of Clearing as a post-qualification admissions route is only likely to be the right option for a relatively small proportion of applicants.

CONCLUSIONS AND THE FUTURE

Students place a high priority on the long-term sustainability of their university[28]. Whether, where, and what to study is a significant decision which can have a long-term impact on a prospective student's future. It will be important to ensure that the increasingly competitive landscape in England enables the diverse population of prospective university students to make well-informed choices, from a range of good quality options that fit their study needs and objectives.

In the short term the higher education sector is likely to see increasingly intense competition for students. To date, demand-side pressures have been offset by the increasing proportions of 18-year-olds entering higher education and by changes in institutional recruitment strategies. However, the decline in the young population, increasing take-up of vocational qualifications, and uncertainty around EU and non-EU recruitment are likely to mean in a decline in applicants to university over the next four years.

Despite this increase in competition, concerns that the removal of student number controls will lead a 'race to the bottom' – with universities taking increasing numbers of students with lower qualifications – have not come to pass, and students currently at university have higher average attainment than in the past. Instead, the removal of controls has been allied with a widening of the potential routes into higher education, and a more flexible approach to entry requirements, which has helped to widen participation.

Despite this increase in competition, concerns that the removal of student number controls will lead a 'race to the bottom' – with universities taking increasing numbers of students with lower qualifications – have not come to pass.

In the longer term, the sharp increase in the population of 18 to 20-year-olds from 2022 is likely to change the admissions environment significantly. If demand increases on the current trend, or is even maintained, the numbers of young people entering higher education is likely to increase considerably. Both institutions and applicants are likely to need to adapt to this changed environment, with potential changes in offer-making and application routes. Institutions may need to develop new capacity to meet demand from employers and students for more flexible provision, as well as developing provision in new and evolving disciplines and skills. The government's review of post-18 education and funding will need to consider this as part of their recommendations.

[28] UUK (2017), *Education, consumer rights and maintaining trust: what students want from their university*

ANNEXE A

THE UCAS ADMISSIONS CYCLE[29]

UCAS	
MAIN SCHEME	EXTRA
(used by 91% of all UK acceptances in 2017)	(used by 1% of all UK acceptances in 2017)
15 October deadline (used for Oxbridge and most medicine, dentistry and vet courses, and by 6.9% of UK applicants in 2017).	25 February: Extra opens for applicants who used all five choices and have not yet received any offers. They may apply for one additional course at a time. Extra closes the day before Clearing opens.
15 January deadline (used for the majority of courses at the majority of HEPs, and by 75.1% of UK applicants in 2017).	
24 March deadline (used for some art and design courses, and by 4.6% of applicants in 2017).	
30 June deadline (end of main scheme application period, used by 5.9% of applicants in 2017).	

↓

CLEARING

(used by 3% of all UK acceptances in 2017)

5 July: Clearing opens for applicants who did not use UCAS's main scheme.

20 September: final deadline for Clearing applications.

↓

OFFERS AND REPLIES

HEPs make offers to applicants, who accept or reject them (as firm or insurance offers during the main scheme, or as their sole choice during UCAS Extra or Clearing).

↓

CONFIRMATION AND CLEARING (MAIN SCHEME)

(Main scheme Clearing was used by 10% of UK acceptances in 2017; the remaining main scheme and Extra applicants went through Confirmation)

First Thursday in August: SQA results released. Scottish applicants are either confirmed in their main/insurance institution or released to Clearing.

Second/third Thursday in August: A-level results are released. Applicants are either confirmed in their main/insurance institution or released to Clearing. Adjustment opens.

↓

UNIVERSITY ENTRY POINT

[29] 4% of UK applicants reported to UCAS apply outside of the UCAS system and are not therefore included in this diagram.

Universities UK is the representative organisation for the UK's universities. Founded in 1918, its mission is to be the definitive voice for all universities in the UK, providing high quality leadership and support to its members to promote a successful and diverse higher education sector. With 136 members in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, Universities UK promotes the strength and success of UK universities nationally and internationally.

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