



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Higher education student numbers

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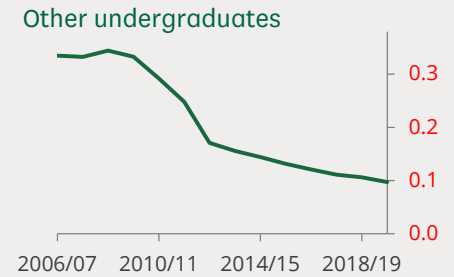
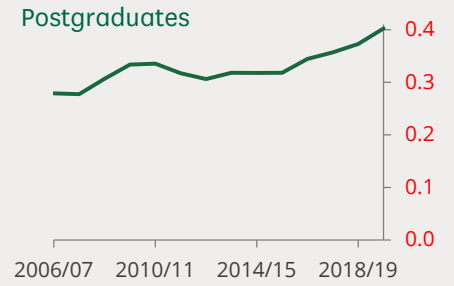
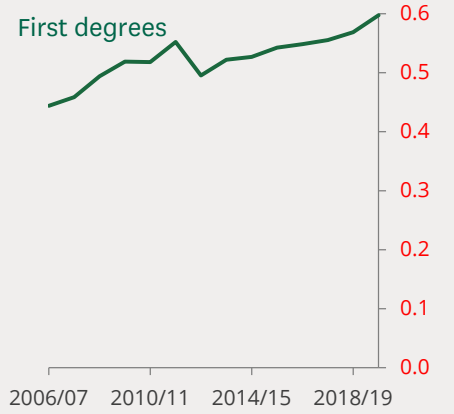
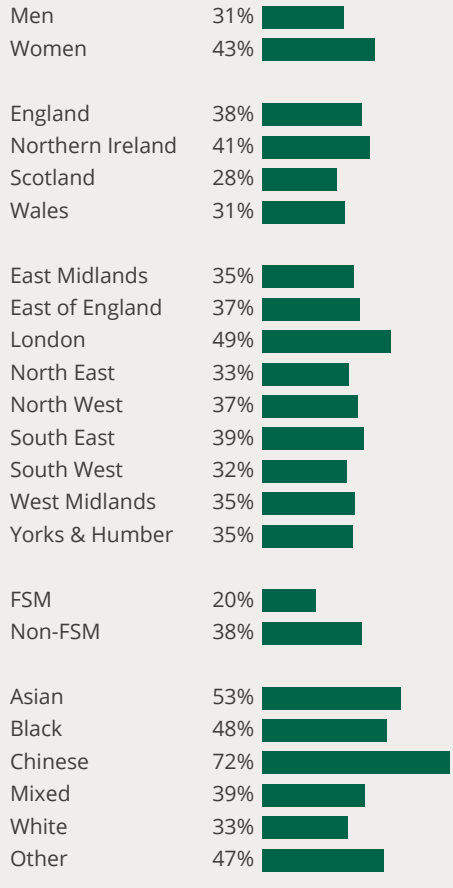
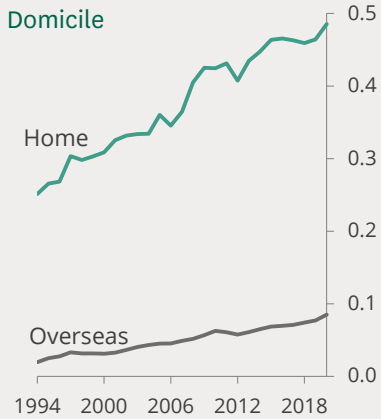
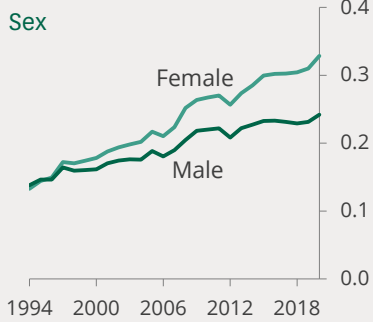
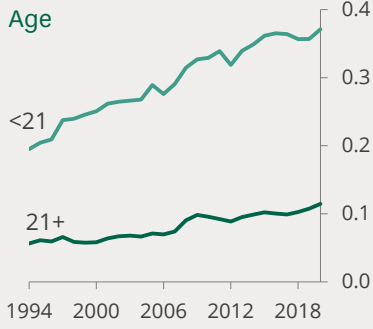
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# SUMMARY

## Accepted applicants through UCAS (millions)

## 18 year old entry rates Through UCAS (2020)

## 1<sup>st</sup> year students in the UK (millions)



## 4 Higher education student numbers

Headline student numbers have increased to new record levels in recent years following a short dip related to the 2012 reforms in the sector. There have been continued increases in entry rates for different groups of students, including those from disadvantaged areas/backgrounds where rates have also hit new record levels.

However, headline numbers tend to focus on full-time undergraduates and there are ongoing concerns about student numbers outside this group where trends have not been so positive. This includes part-time undergraduates, particularly those not studying first degrees, some postgraduate students, overseas students from some countries (especially Malaysia Ireland, Cyprus and Germany), mature students and some disadvantaged groups.

There is also considerable concern about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on student numbers, particularly those from overseas and uncertainty about the impact of Brexit on EU student numbers.

- In 2019/20 there were 2.46 million students at UK higher education institutions.
- Most full-time students are studying first degrees. There are proportionately more overseas students studying postgraduate courses.
- Over the past decade the number of entrants to 'other undergraduate' courses has fallen by over two-thirds. The large majority on these courses are part-time UK students.
- Total part-time entrants have fallen by 50% since 2008/9, 74% in 'other undergraduate' courses, 23% first degrees, 15% taught postgraduate and 19% postgraduate research courses.
- There were almost 730,000 applications for full-time undergraduate places through UCAS in 2020 and 570,000 were accepted. Both figures are new records.
- Applicant numbers fell in 2012 with larger falls among those who faced fees of up to £9,000. The total was 7.6% down.
- Applicant numbers bounced back in 2013. A record number were accepted in 2013 and new records were set for acceptances in each of the three following years.
- Applicants for 2020 were up by 3.2% to a new record high. There was concern that limits on travel and the type of teaching possible with coronavirus restrictions would lead to a large drop in student numbers. Applications from home students were up by 2.1%, those from the EU were down by 0.4% and those from other overseas students were up by 12.3%.
- The total the number of accepted applicants through UCAS in 2020 was up by 5.4% to a new record high. The number from the UK was up by around 21,000 or 4.5% to the highest number ever. The proportion of home 18 year olds with a place increased by 2.9 percentage points to a record 37.0%. There was a particularly large increase in acceptances among older students. Overall numbers from the EU were up by 1.7%. Accepted applicants from other overseas countries were up by 7,600 or 16.9%. They reached their fourth consecutive record high in 2020.
- Applicants through UCAS for 2021 were up by 11% at the end of January compared to 2021 with large increases among older applicants from outside the EU. The number of applicants from within the EU was down by 40%.
- While the number of applicants through UCAS for are up, the number of students eventually taking up places could show a different trend, particularly for overseas students. These figures only look at full-time undergraduates and there could be a different pattern for part-time and postgraduate students. The first comprehensive data covering all students in 2020/21 is due to be published in **January 2022**.

# 1. Scope of this briefing

This paper looks at trends in the size of the student population, changes in the number of entrants overall and for different types of students/courses and entry rates for different groups and areas.

This paper replaces [Entrants to higher education](#) and [HE in England from 2012: Student numbers](#) which looked in detail at policy around student number control and focussed on annual changes in student numbers, especially in the period leading up to and just after the 2012 higher education funding reforms. Those papers will no longer be updated. The data in this paper will be regularly updated and its coverage expanded over time.

The paper [Education: Historical Statistics](#) includes much longer term trends in student numbers. Readers may also be interested in the following briefing papers:

- [Part-time undergraduate students in England](#)
- [International and EU students in higher education in the UK FAQs](#)
- [Mature higher education students in England](#)
- [Support for students with mental health issues in higher education in England](#)
- [Support for disabled students in higher education in England](#)
- [Higher education finance statistics](#)
- [Higher education funding in England](#)
- [Student loan statistics](#)
- [Tuition fee statistics](#)
- [The value of student maintenance support](#)
- [Support for postgraduate students in England](#)

## 2. Snapshot 2019/20

In academic year 2019/20 there were almost 2.5 million students at UK higher education institutions.<sup>1</sup> This covers all years, modes, levels and domiciles. A full-breakdown is given below and a summary by broad category is shown opposite.

Key points are:

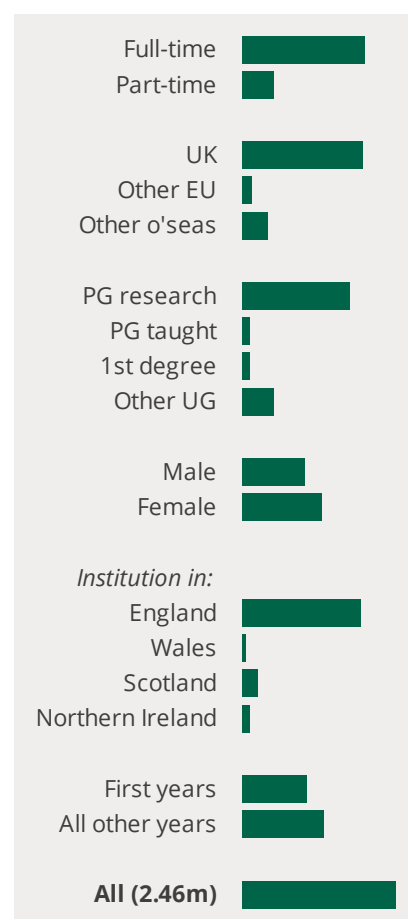
- Most full-time students are studying first degrees.
- Home students on full-time first degrees made up just over half of the total student population.
- There are proportionately more overseas students studying postgraduate courses
- Overseas students are much more likely to be full-time
- EU students are more likely than other overseas students to be studying at undergraduate level
- The large majority of 'other undergraduate' courses are taken part-time by home students.

### Snapshot of students at UK universities

2019/20, thousands

	UK	EU	Other overseas	Total
<i>Full-time</i>				
First degree	1,254	96	170	<b>1,520</b>
Other undergraduate	38	1	6	<b>45</b>
Postgraduate research	44	11	30	<b>84</b>
Postgraduate taught	120	22	164	<b>307</b>
<b>Total full-time</b>	<b>1,455</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>1,957</b>
<i>Part-time</i>				
First degree	175	2	3	<b>180</b>
Other undergraduate	80	2	8	<b>90</b>
Postgraduate research	21	2	3	<b>26</b>
Postgraduate taught	185	7	12	<b>204</b>
<b>Total part-time</b>	<b>462</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>499</b>
<i>All modes</i>				
First degree	1,429	98	173	<b>1,700</b>
Other undergraduate	118	3	14	<b>135</b>
Postgraduate research	65	13	32	<b>111</b>
Postgraduate taught	306	29	176	<b>511</b>
<b>Total all modes</b>	<b>1,917</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>2,456</b>

Source: [Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2019/20](#), HESA

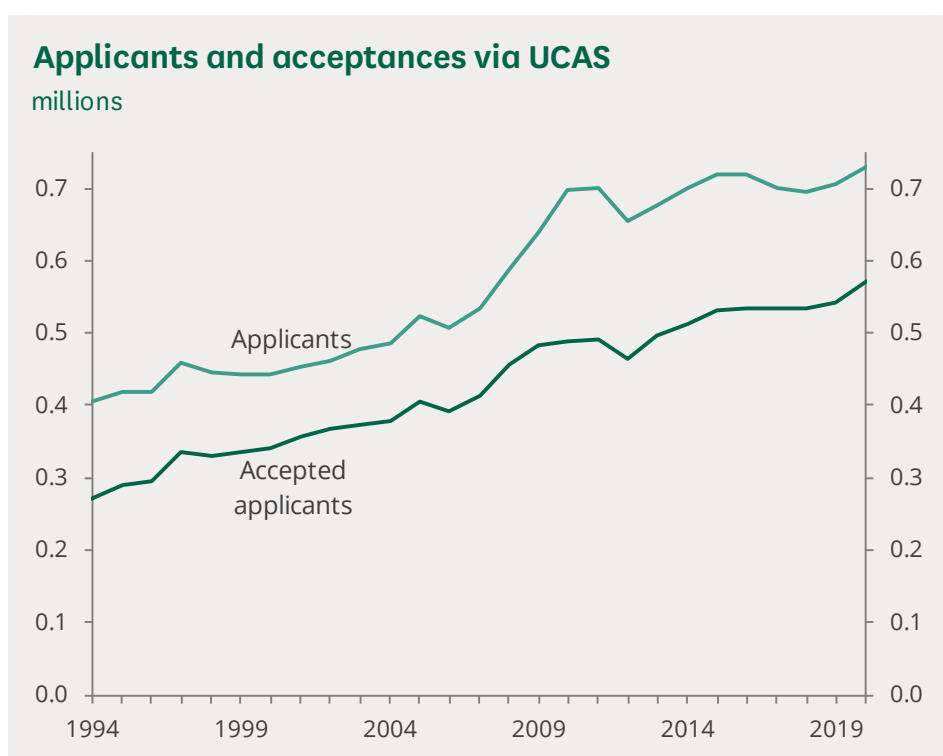


<sup>1</sup> These figures do not include higher education students who study at further education colleges or students at alternative (private) providers

## 3. Full-time undergraduates applying through UCAS

### 3.1 All applicants and entrants

There were almost 730,000 applicants for full-time undergraduate places through UCAS in 2020, 570,000 of whom were accepted. The table opposite summarises trends since UCAS was created following the reform of the sector in the early 1990s. The same data is illustrated in the chart below. These are annual numbers of applicants and entrants so show changes in the *flow* of students, not the overall population.



There have been underlying increases in applicants and acceptances (averaging 2.3% and 2.9% a year respectively) since the mid-1990s. The total number of home applicants via UCAS rose in each year between 1999 and 2005. There was a 4.1% drop in 2006, the first year of 'variable' fees. The drop in 2006 was greater than that seen in 1998 -the previous change to tuition fees. Both were preceded by relatively large increases in applications.

There was a return to the upward trend in 2007; applicant and acceptance numbers reached new records which were exceeded in 2008, 2009 and 2011.

Applicant numbers fell in 2012 with larger falls among those who faced fees of up to £9,000. The total was 7.6% down; accepted applicants were down by 5.5%.

### Applicants through UCAS (thousands)

	Applicants	Accepted applicants
1994	405	271
1995	419	291
1996	418	296
1997	459	336
1998	446	330
1999	443	335
2000	442	340
2001	454	358
2002	461	368
2003	476	374
2004	486	378
2005	522	405
2006	506	391
2007	534	413
2008	589	457
2009	640	482
2010	697	487
2011	700	492
2012	654	465
2013	677	496
2014	700	512
2015	718	532
2016	718	535
2017	700	534
2018	696	533
2019	706	541
2020	729	570

Note: Figures not adjusted for the changes in the courses covered by UCAS

Sources: UCAS annual datasets; End of cycle data resources, UCAS

## 8 Higher education student numbers

Applicant numbers bounced back somewhat in 2013. They rose again in 2014 but did not beat their 2011 peak until 2015. This remained the record high for *applicants* until 2020.

A record 496,000 applicants were accepted in 2013. New records were set for acceptances in each year to 2016 and the 2019 and 2020 totals were both record highs.

Much more detail on annual changes in these numbers for the period 2008 to 2014 and analysis of the impact of the 2012 funding changes is included in the papers [Entrants to higher education](#) and [HE in England from 2012: Student numbers](#).

The coverage of UCAS figures has increased over time as more courses have come under their remit. In general the impact is quite small, but some changes in coverages, such as the inclusion of ex-Nursing Midwifery Admission Service courses in 2008 had a much greater effect. These data are not adjusted in any way for these changes.

UCAS figures are published more frequently than others in this paper and are more up-to-date. Their figures can be found at: [www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis](http://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis) along with a timetable of when new figures are published.

UCAS handles the large majority of applications to full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities. The main 'gap' is in Scotland where around one-third of such courses are in further education colleges which are not covered by UCAS.



### 3.2 Breakdown by student characteristics

The reference table at the end of this paper gives a breakdown of applicants and acceptances by broad group. These are also illustrated in summary form below and opposite.

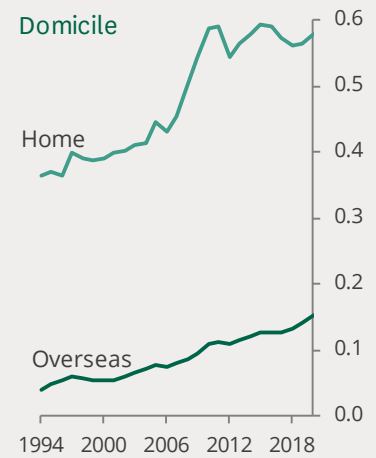
	Thousands						Change	
	1994	2000	2010	2018	2019	2020	1994-2020	2010-2020
<b>Applicants -Domicile</b>								
Home	365	389	587	562	565	577	+58%	-2%
EU	19	24	47	53	53	53	+185%	+12%
Other overseas	21	29	63	81	88	99	+364%	+56%
<b>Total</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>442</b>	<b>697</b>	<b>696</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>729</b>	<b>+80%</b>	<b>+5%</b>
<b>Acceptances</b>								
Female	133	178	267	304	310	329	+147%	+23%
Male	138	161	220	229	231	242	+75%	+10%
<i>Age (home accepted applicants only)</i>								
Under 21	195	251	329	357	357	371	+90%	+13%
21+	56	58	96	103	107	114	+103%	+20%
<i>Domicile</i>								
Home	251	309	425	459	464	485	+93%	+14%
EU	8	14	26	32	32	32	+292%	+26%
Other overseas	11	17	37	42	45	53	+365%	+42%
<b>Total</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>340</b>	<b>487</b>	<b>533</b>	<b>541</b>	<b>570</b>	<b>+111%</b>	<b>+17%</b>

Source: [UCAS end of cycle reports](#)

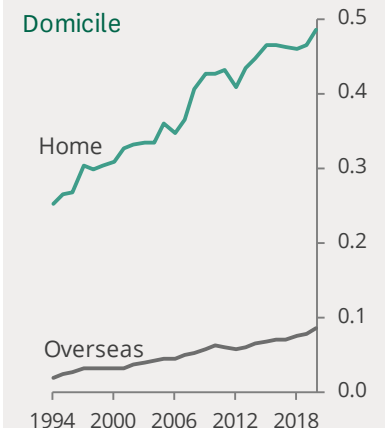
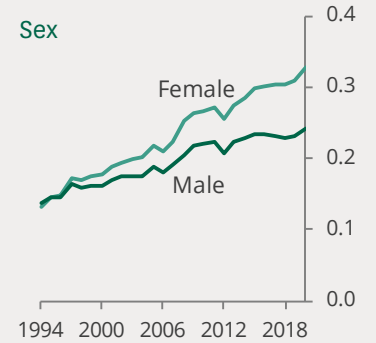
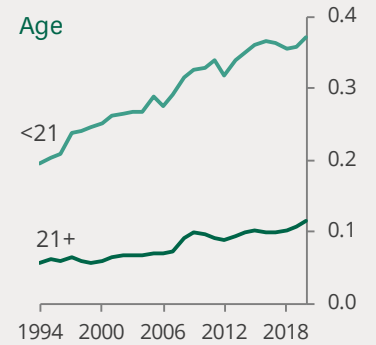
Key points to note are:

- The number of (all) overseas applicants has increased at a faster rate than those from the UK across the whole period.
- The drop in overseas applicants in 2012 was much smaller and more short-lived than among potential UK students
- There were more women accepted through UCAS than men for the first time in 1996. Since then the gap has grown to around 87,000 students or 36% more women than men.
- Overall the number of acceptances older (21+) students has grown at a faster rate than for younger (<21) applicants.
- The numbers of older people accepted did not increase over most of the last decade. It has only been in the last three years that numbers have increased consistently.

#### Applications (millions)



#### Acceptances (millions)



### 3.3 Applicants and entrants for the 2020 and 2021 cycles: Impact of the coronavirus pandemic

There had been concern that the coronavirus pandemic would lead to a drop in students because of restrictions on travel, moving (some) teaching online and a change to the student experience. Concern focussed on international students who might decide to delay their overseas study, change where they go to university or chose not to study overseas at all.

More detail and background on possible changes to the delivery of courses and surveys of international student intentions can be found in the briefing paper: [Coronavirus: Easing lockdown restrictions in FE and HE in England](#). Readers might also be interested in the paper [Coronavirus: Financial impact on higher education](#).

This section looks in detail at applicants through UCAS in 2020 and some of the areas of concern and differences with earlier cycles. Headline 2020 figures are included in the rest of this paper

#### Applicants

The total number of applicants in 2020 was 728,780, up by around 22,300 or 3.2% on 2019. This was the fourth annual increase in a row and took the total to above the previous record level set in 2015. There was an increase in home applicants of 2.1% and a fall of 0.4% in those from the EU. While home applicants were up, they were still below numbers in 2010-2011 and 2014-2016. Overseas applicants from outside the EU increased by 10,800, or 12.3%, to their highest ever level. Applicants from China were up by around 5,200 or 24%.<sup>2</sup>

The number of new applicants between when lockdown measures were announced (23 March) and 30 June was 17% higher than in the same period in 2019. The increase was 30% among home students with an even larger increase in mature applicants. This suggests that the pandemic *increased* the number of people applying to university. UCAS has said that their surveys of applicants found that almost half of late applicants said the pandemic had increased their likelihood of applying; 8% said it was the main or only reason for applying. They highlight the concern about job prospects and a desire to “work on the front line” as reasons for the increase in mature and nursing applicants.<sup>3</sup>

The number of home 18 year olds applying increased by 3.0% to a new record level, despite a fall in the 18 year old population of 1.5%. The application rate for 18 year olds increase to a new record of 41.5%.

Home applicant numbers were up by 3.4% for women and 2.4% for men. The largest increases were in older applicants; those aged 25-29 were up by 7%, 30-34 by 11% and those aged 35+ by 6%.

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<sup>2</sup> [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#) (Applicants)

<sup>3</sup> [Keep calm – students still want to study](#), Wonkhe blog 9 July 2020

## Accepted applicants

### Changes to A-level grading and removal of student number controls

On 13 August students in England received their A levels grades. As public examinations had been cancelled these grades were based on several factors including: centre assessed grades (CAGs), pupil rankings and a computer model or algorithm which took into account the past performance of individual schools. 40% of students were awarded grades lower than their CAGs. The subsequent protests resulted in a Government U-turn on the method used to calculate grades and on 17 August it was announced that grades would be awarded based on CAGs.<sup>4</sup> The briefing paper [A level results in England and the impact on university admissions in 2020-21](#) gives much more detail.

The move to CAGs resulted in a jump in the number of higher grades and meant many more students became eligible for places at their first choice provider and on high tariff courses. At the same time as the U-turn on grades the Government also announced that the temporary cap on student numbers in 2020/21 would be lifted to give universities more flexibility over higher education places. The cap was intended to stabilise admissions in 2020. Specifically, it was meant to ensure that more prestigious universities did not replace the (expected) loss in international students with home students at the expense of less prestigious institutions.

### Numbers of accepted applicants

The final number of accepted applicants was 570,475. This was up by 29,200, or 5.4%, compared to 2019. The increase in 2020 was the largest since 2013 and took it to its highest ever number.<sup>5</sup>

The number from the UK was up by 21,100 or 4.5%. This was also the largest annual increase since 2013 and surpassed the previous record level from 2016. The proportion of home 18 year olds who were accepted increased by 2.8 percentage points to a record 37.0%. Numbers from the EU were up by around 600 or 1.7%. Accepted applicants from other overseas countries were up by 7,600 or 16.9% and reached a record high.

Among home applicants there was a large increase in 18 year olds who were accepted; up by 6.8%. This is in large part due to the changes in A level (and Scottish Higher) grading described earlier. Numbers may also be increased by the lack of alternatives for school leavers (particularly employment and travel) due to the coronavirus pandemic restrictions. There were also above average increases in older placed applicants: 9.9% for those aged 25-29 and 11.6% for those aged 30-34.

Acceptances among women from the UK were up by 5.4% compared with a 3.3% increase for men. More women have gone to university than men for many years and this gap continued to grow in 2020.

The number of accepted applicants increased by 5.4% in 2020 with above average increases among non-EU overseas students, 18 year olds, applicants aged 25+, older students and those from 'disadvantaged' areas

<sup>4</sup> Ofqual, [Statement from Roger Taylor, Chair, Ofqual](#), 17 August 2020

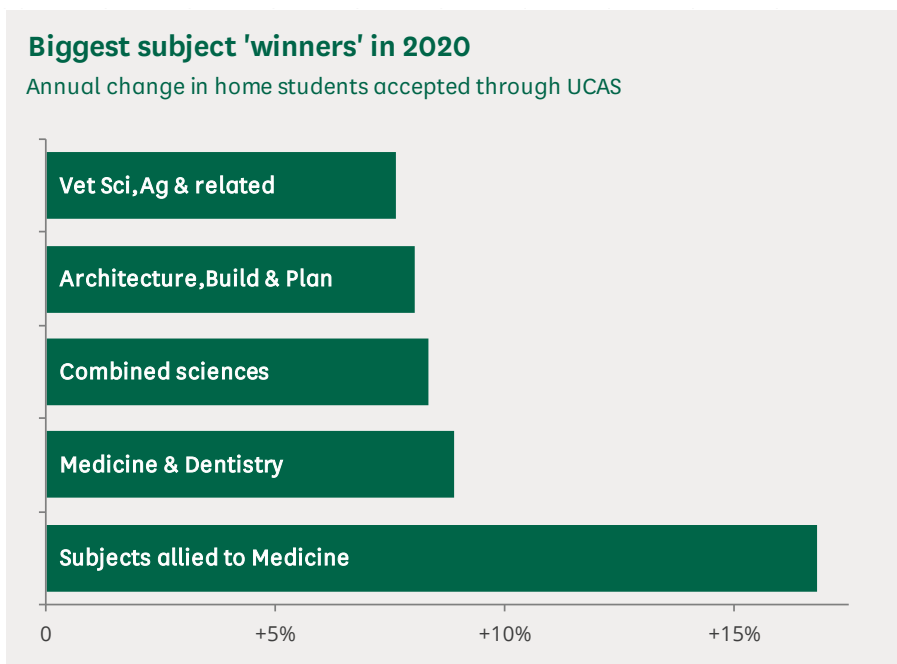
<sup>5</sup> [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#) (Acceptances)

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When the data on 18 year old home applicants is analysed by POLAR quintile<sup>6</sup> the largest increase in 2020 was in those from quintile 1, often referred to as the most disadvantaged. Accepted applicants from this group were up by 9.4% compared to 6.8% overall. Their 'entry rate' increased to a record 23.3% and while the gap by 'disadvantage' has fallen in relative terms, the rate for quintile 1 was still less than half that of quintile 5 (least 'disadvantaged').<sup>7</sup>

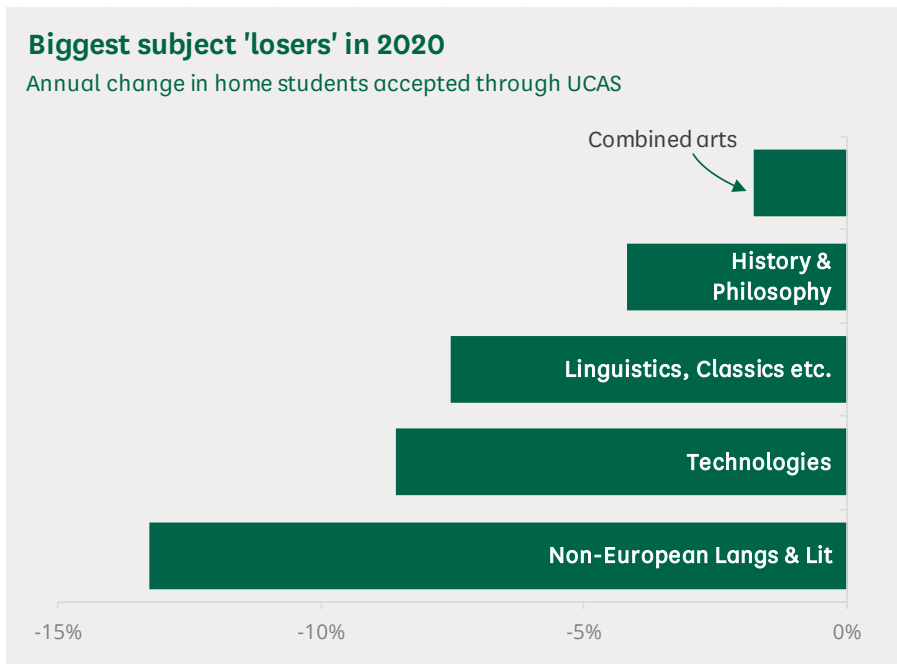
### Subject

The following charts look at the largest changes in accepted applicants by subject in 2020. The average across all subjects was a 4.5% increase.



<sup>6</sup> Areas of the UK are assigned to one of five 20% bands based on past levels of higher education participation. Quintile 1 has the lowest levels and is often referred to as the most 'disadvantaged'.

<sup>7</sup> [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#) (Entry rate)



Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#)

One particular feature of the 2020 applications cycle was the increase in applications to study nursing. At the end of 2019 the Government announced additional support for living costs for nursing students from England. This, combined with the impact of the pandemic, from the increased demand for staff, people looking for a secure career and the very high level of esteem the profession is held in, led to a large increase in applicants. Numbers from England were up by just over 7,000 or 18% to a new record high. There were particularly large increases among older applications; those aged 30-34 were up by 28% and those aged 35+ up by 39%. The number of accepted applicants to nursing from England increased by 5,900 or 25%. This was the largest annual increase and took the total to another new record. Again there were even larger increases those from older age groups. Accepted applicants aged 35+ increased by 43%. The briefing paper [Funding for healthcare students in England](#) gives more background on changes to funding and student numbers.<sup>8</sup>

### Widening participation

There was concern that the pandemic would affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds to a greater extent, due to lack of resources for online learning, particularly IT and space at home to study, and in some cases support from parents and teachers etc. The UCAS report [What happened to the COVID cohort?](#) focuses on widening participation. It said:

- The UCAS MEM equality gap narrowed, with the most advantaged English school pupils (group five) 4.23 times more likely to enter HE than the most disadvantaged (group one), compared to 4.40 times in 2019. The gap from 2010 has now narrowed by 26.4%.

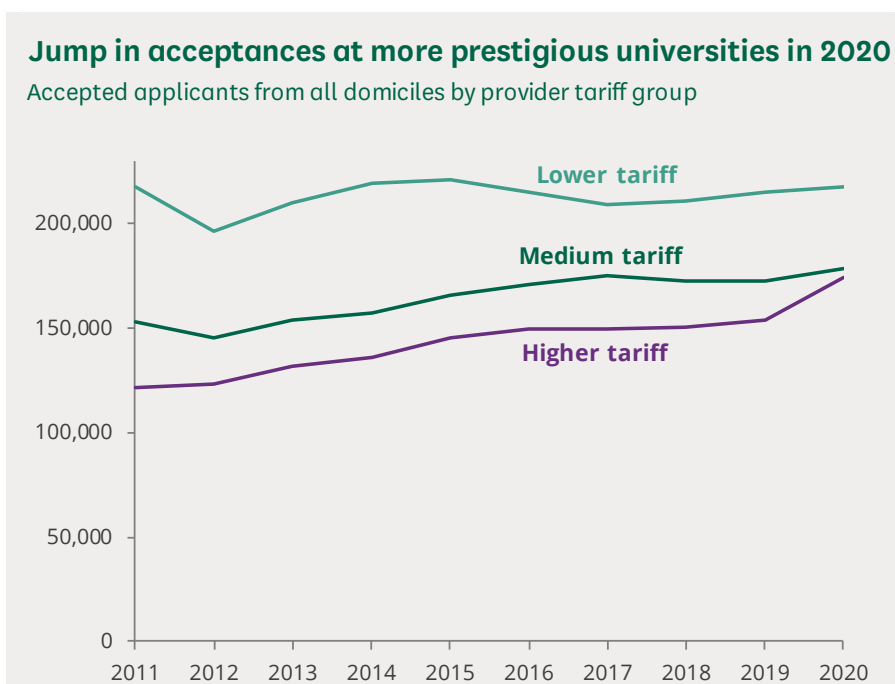
<sup>8</sup> [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#) (Nursing)

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- Record numbers of 18 year old acceptances from the lowest participation areas: 29,020 UK students from POLAR4 Q1, 1,645 Scottish students from SIMD Q1, and over 14,000 acceptances of 18 year old English pupils receiving free school meals (FSM).
- Significant growth in mature student acceptances, reflecting a demand for up- and re-skilling as the economy entered recession – the work of doctors, medical professionals, and NHS staff inspired applications to health and social care programmes, including nursing. Mature students (aged 21 or over) significantly increased to 114,440, representing the largest single year growth since 2009.
- Higher tariff providers and medicine courses accepted more disadvantaged students, with the MEM entry rate ratio for English 18 year old applicants to medicine narrowing. Nonetheless, the equality gap remains stark – advantaged students remain nearly 25 times more likely than their disadvantaged peers to be placed on medicine courses.
- A record number of students declaring disabilities, mental health conditions, or specific learning difficulties were accepted into HE. Nearly 4% of UK applicants now flag a mental health condition in their application, with a 10.4% increase in the number of accepted applicants declaring in 2020.
- Regional gaps in entry persist, with 49.1% of London-based 18 year olds entering HE, compared to 32.4% of those from the South West.

### Tariff level of providers

The number of accepted applicants can also be analysed by the ‘tariff level’ of universities. There are three tariff groups; high, medium and low which refer to average grades of students admitted. The previous section highlighted earlier concerns that a combination of the expected drop in overseas student income and the changes in A level grading could lead to more prestigious universities increasing student numbers at the expense of less prestigious ones. The chart below shows that 2020 saw a clear increase in acceptances at higher tariff institutions of 13%, while numbers at lower tariff universities barely increased.

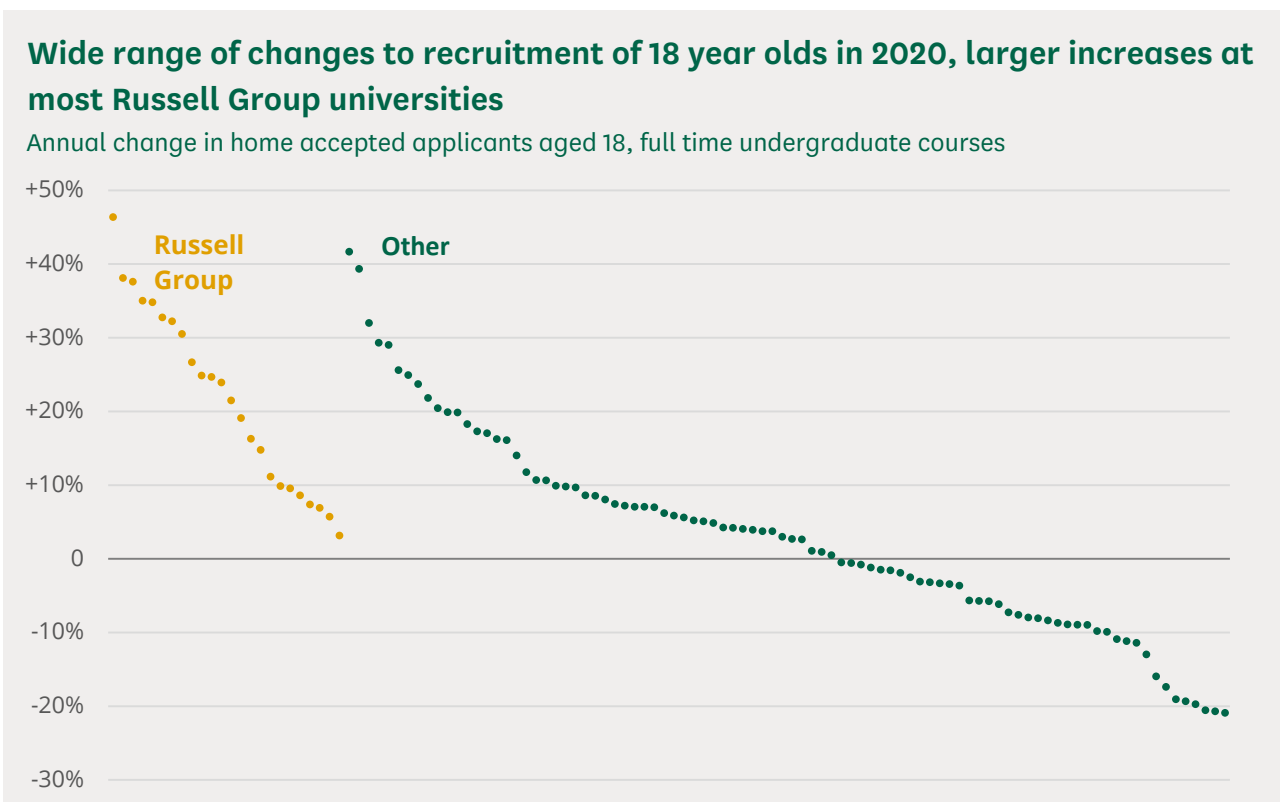


Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#)

While this seems to suggest that some of the earlier concerns have been realised it is important to note that this has been within an overall *increase* in acceptances. The increase at lower tariff institutions was still 1.1%. If the general shift from towards higher tariff universities had been at work with a *falling* number of potential students, the impact could have been much larger.

**Individual providers**

The chart below shows how the number of home accepted applicants aged 18 changed in 2020. It only includes providers that recruited more than 500 such students in 2020. There was a wide range from +46% at UCL to -21% at the University of Surrey, the University of Roehampton and Heriot-Watt University. 23 (of 114) providers saw an increase of 20% or more, 40 had a reduction in recruitment of 18 year olds.



Source: [2020 entry provider-level end of cycle data resources](#), UCAS

The chart also highlights the 24 ‘prestigious’ Russell Group universities. No Russell Group member saw a fall in acceptances of home 18 year olds, only two had an increase that was below average (7%) and they made up 12 of the top 20 increases by provider.

**Grade increases**

UCAS has analysed outcomes for those whose grades increased because of the switch to CAGs. This found that by 10 September 89% of the 174,000 with a grade increase were placed at their original firm or insurance choice university or had found a place through clearing at one in the same tariff banding. They estimate that up to 15,000 A-level students who did not have their firm choice confirmed on results day may have done so after CAGs were issued. 87% of these students were placed at their original firm or insurance choice university by 10

September, or one in the same or higher tariff band. Less than 10% had not (yet) found a place.<sup>9</sup>

### Deferred entry

There was earlier concern that limitations on the type of teaching possible under coronavirus restriction would lead to a large increase in deferrals -students accepting a place for 2021 or later years. The number of deferrals was up in the 2020 cycle, by 18% to 35,700, but the proportion of acceptances which are deferred was only up modestly from 5.6% in 2019 to 6.3% in 2020. By far the largest increase in deferrals was from non-EU overseas countries; these more than doubled to 4,400. Deferrals from EU applicants were down by around 100. Delaying their entry would mean they would not be eligible for home fee status or financial support in the form of fee loans. The deferral rate among 18 year olds from the UK was up slightly from 8.2% in 2019 to 8.4% in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

**These figures only look at those applying for full-time undergraduate courses. There could be a different pattern for part-time and postgraduate students, particularly those from overseas. In addition, they only cover the number of applicants accepted onto these courses, not those who have actually started at university. There is the possibility that the number starting, particularly overseas students, could be different this year.**

### Applicants in the 2021 cycle

UCAS extended the 'equal consideration' deadline from 15 January to 29 January for the 2021 cycle. This was to give students more time after schools and colleges were moved to online learning for most pupils in the third national lockdown. **The number of applicants to 29 January compared to the 15 January deadline in 2020 (and earlier) were up around 48,000, or 8%, to a new record level.** The other key trends were:<sup>11</sup>

- Home applicants were up by 12%
- Applicants from outside the EU were up by 17%
- Applicants from the EU were down by 40%.
- Home applicants aged 18 were up by 11%. The 18 year old application rate increased to a new record of 42.6%
- Applicants from mature students (aged 21 and older) were up by 24%, with increases of over 30% in the 25-29 and 30-34 year old groups
- Applications for nursing courses were up by 32%, with particularly large increases among older applicants

UCAS commentary on these figures focussed on the impact of the pandemic:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> UCAS press release 11 September 2020 [Students supported to return to preferred choices](#)

<sup>10</sup> [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2020](#)

<sup>11</sup> [2021 cycle applicant figures – 15 January deadline](#), UCAS

<sup>12</sup> UCAS news release 18 February 2021, [Nursing applications soar and UCAS publishes latest undergraduate applicant analysis](#)



The amazing work of our NHS continues to inspire people of all ages into fulfilling and rewarding careers, helping those in most need as we emerge from the pandemic.

In addition, they pointed out that the increase in applications from mature students was linked to the impact of the pandemic on the economy. Applications from mature students tend to increase in times of recession as people see the need and opportunity to improve their skills and long term employment prospects.

### 3.4 Application and entry *rates*

While total student/entrants numbers tell us about the overall size of the student population they tell us less about the level of demand from different groups of potential students or how successful they are at getting into university. Rates based on the size of these different groups help us to do this and are particularly important when comparing groups of different sizes or changes over time in a group that has increased or decreased in size.

#### **Box 1: UCAS definitions of disadvantaged students**

UCAS uses a number of different classifications of disadvantage among 18 year olds for its entry rates. These include where people live (POLAR4 classification of levels of young HE participation) and proxy measures for family income -whether the student was eligible for free school meals (FSM) or their family received a means-tested benefit while they were at school. According to UCAS:

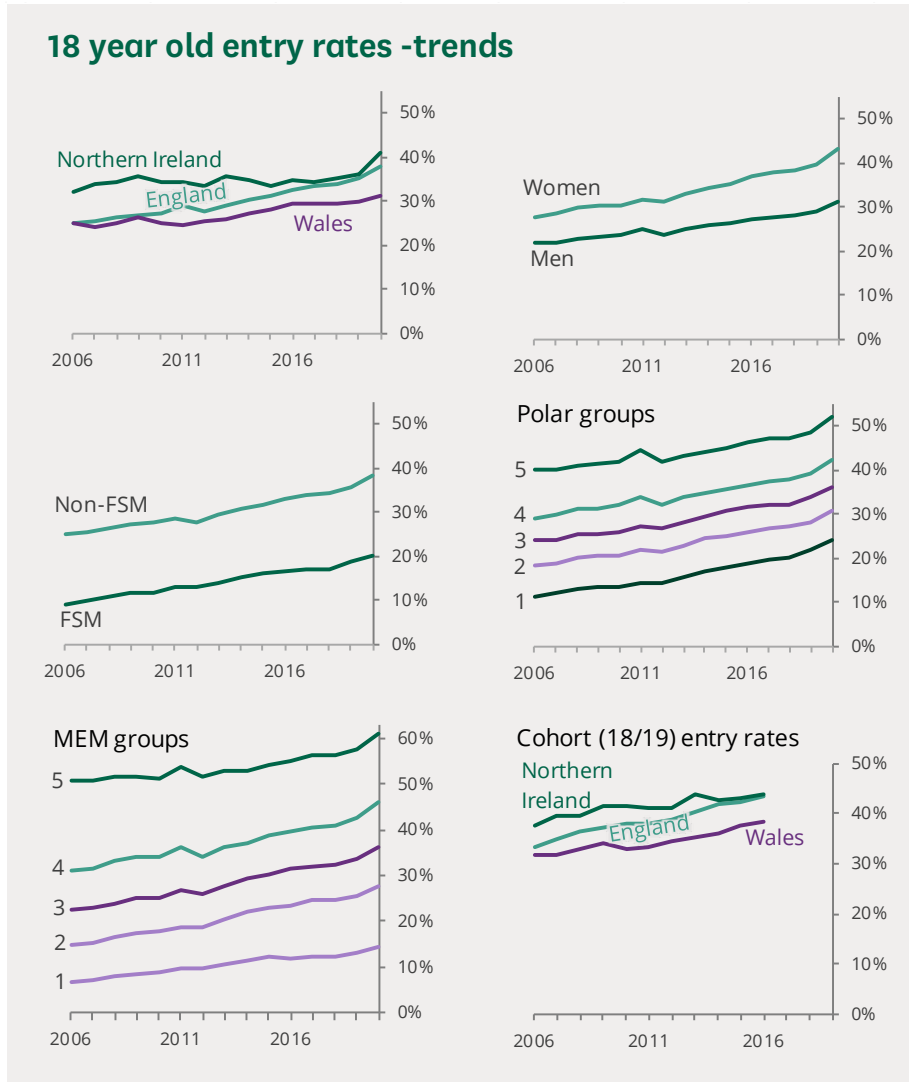
This is important because there is a wide variation in entry rates across combinations of these groups... Entry rates are used in these calculations because they directly measure the level of representation of different groups in HE, allowing the identification of those who are 'disadvantaged' in terms of their entry rate to university.

Recently UCAS has started combining different measures of disadvantage/equality for students from England into a single measure:

...a range of equality dimensions (sex, ethnic group, POLAR3, secondary education sector type, and FSM status) are combined to create an equality measure, which can then be estimated for pupils who were aged 18 in later years.

The methods used seek to predict whether an individual enters higher education or not when aged 18, using only the equality characteristics and their interactions with each other. The resulting predicted entry probability, termed the multiple equality measure (abbreviated to MEM), is based on 2006 to 2010 data, and is used to aggregate pupils into groups, where group 1 contains those least likely to enter higher education ('most disadvantaged' in this context), and group 5 contains those most likely to enter higher education ('most advantaged' in this context). Entry rates can then be calculated for each group and the trend assessed between groups across time.

UCAS has estimated entry rates for many different groups of students and their figures go back to 2006. Some trends are illustrated below<sup>13</sup> and a snapshot of a wider range of groups is shown opposite.

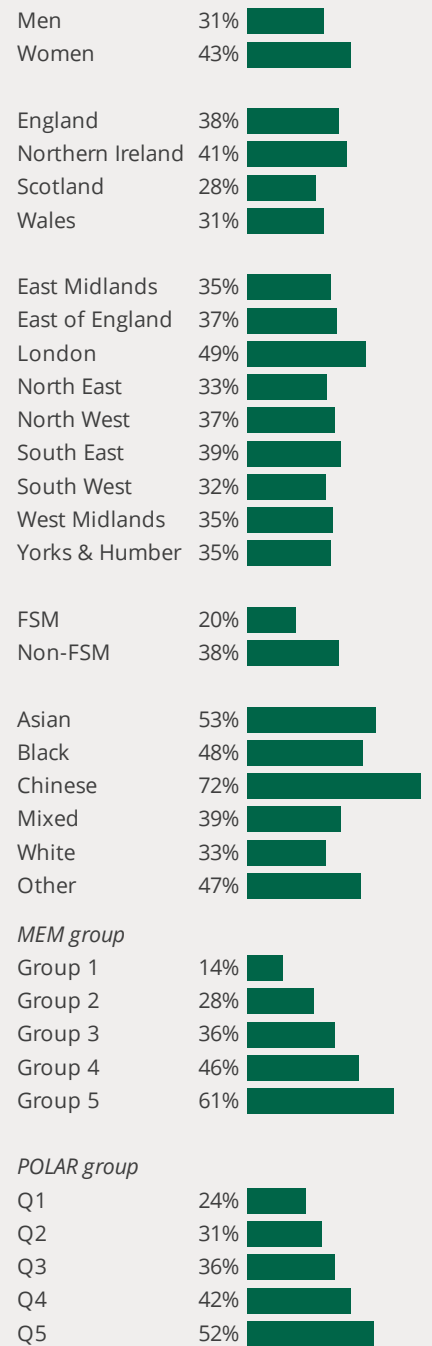


Many entry rates reached new record levels after 2012 and set new ones each year after. These include the national 18 year old rate, the cohort entry rate (18 and 19 year olds), those for both men and women, students formerly eligible for FSM and other disadvantaged groups.

The size of the gap between FSM and non-FSM students has fallen in *relative*<sup>14</sup> but not *absolute*<sup>15</sup> terms over the past decade. The relative gap itself increased slightly in 2016 and 2017. It has fallen in each subsequent year. The entry rate gap between students from the areas with the highest and lowest levels of historical participation (POLAR groups 5 and 1) has fallen in both relative and absolute terms over time. This was also the case for the most advantaged and disadvantaged MEM groups. However, while all

### 18 year old entry rates

#### UCAS entrants 2020



<sup>13</sup> Data for FSM, MEM groups and POLAR groups are all for England only

<sup>14</sup> How many times greater the entry rate is for non-FSM students.

<sup>15</sup> The difference (non-FSM minus FSM entry rates) in percentage point terms

groups saw entry rates increase in 2020 the increase was largest for the least disadvantaged groups (POLAR and MEM) so the absolute gap increased in the latest year. Despite the longer term trend the gaps between the most and least disadvantaged groups still remained substantial in 2020.

UCAS breaks down some of its group entry rates by the 'tariff' level of different universities. There are three tariff groups; high, medium and low and these refer to average grades of students admitted. High tariff institutions where entrants have higher grades are generally considered more prestigious and harder to get into. This type of analysis therefore can shed light on a different aspect of widening participation.

In 2020 only 3.9% of 18 year olds from England who were eligible for FSM at school got into one of these high tariff universities. The rate has increased over time from less than 1.5% in the period 2006 to 2010, but was still well below the 12.3% for the non-FSM group. The size of the relative gap has fallen over time; in 2006 the non-FSM group were almost six times as likely to go to a high tariff university and this fell to below four times as likely in 2015 onwards and just over three times as likely in 2020. However, the absolute gap has increased in recent years from six percentage points in 2012 to more than seven points from 2016 onwards and more than eight points in 2020.

UCAS has also produced interactive data 'explorers' for its data on constituencies (2016) and disadvantaged groups (2017):

[Entry rate data explorer for parliamentary constituencies](#)  
[Equality and entry rates data explorer](#)

There is a [sector-level data explorer](#) for the final 2020 cycle figures. A provider-level explorer is due to be published on 28 January.

### 3.5 Non-UCAS data on entry rates

The Department for Education (DfE) publishes annual participation rates for England. The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate<sup>16</sup> (HEIPR) was first produced to measure progress against the last Labour Government's 50% higher education aspiration. Trends in the HEIPR are illustrated below. A new methodology was introduced in 2006/07.

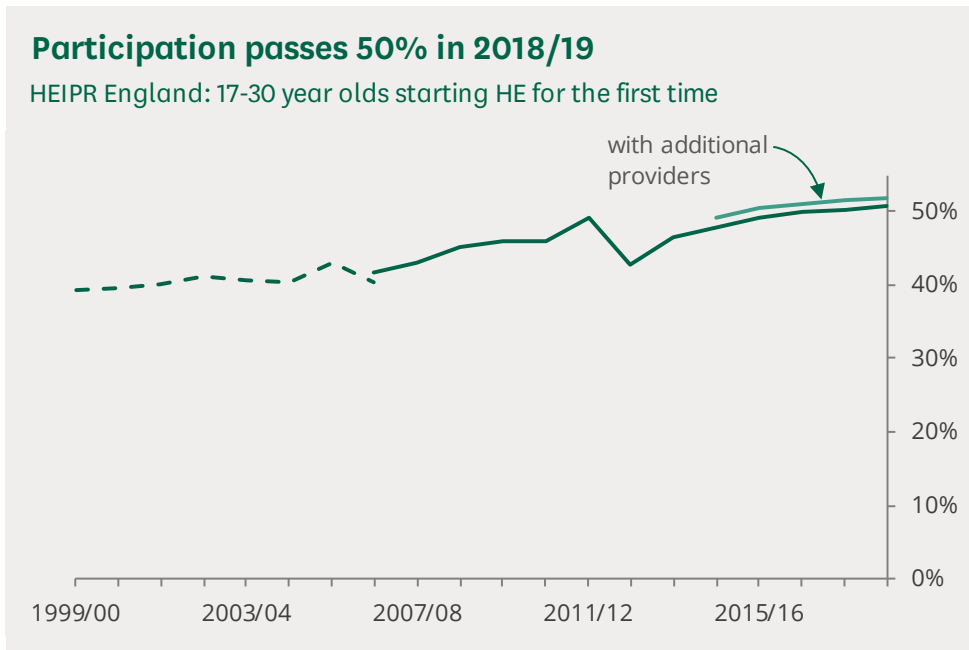
The overall level peaked initially at 49.1% (of those aged under 30) in 2011/12. It fell to just under 43% in 2012 and has risen subsequently to new highs in 2015/16, and then each year to 2018/19. It passed 50% in 2017/18 the level of the Labour Government's original aspiration and reached 50.7% in 2018/19. Participation at additional providers<sup>17</sup> was included in the measure in the latest release and this series was

Disadvantaged young people are much less likely to get into the most 'prestigious' universities. Entry rates among those eligible for free meals were around a quarter of the levels for those not eligible. This gap has increased slightly in recent years.

<sup>16</sup> This measure covers 17-30 year old English domiciled first-time participants in HE at UK HE Institutions, and at English, Welsh and Scottish Further Education Colleges. The HEIPR is a sum of the participation rates for each age from 17 to 30 inclusive. or each age from 17 to 30, the initial participation rate is calculated as the fraction of the academic year population that are initial entrants. These rates are added to create the total HEIPR.

<sup>17</sup> Those who do not receive recurrent public funding

backdated to 2014/15. This increases participation by just over one percentage point and takes the 2018/19 HEIPR to 51.9%.



Further breakdowns of the HEIPR by age and mode can be found in the DfE publication [Participation Rates in Higher Education: 2006 to 2019](#).

The DfE also publishes higher education entry rates by free school meal (FSM) eligibility. This covers young people who were in the state sector in England only. In 2018/19 26.3% of those eligible for FSM aged 15 (in 2014/15) had entered HE at ages 18 or 19. This was up from 14% in 2005/06, slightly higher than in 2016/17 and the same as in 2017/18, making it the highest level recorded. The rate among the non-FSM group was 45.1% in 2018/19, also a new record level. The absolute gap between these rates decreased over time from 19 percentage points in 2005/06 to below 17 points in 2013/14. It has increased since then and reached 18.8 points in 2018/19, the highest for more than a decade.<sup>18</sup>

In 2018/19 the overall HEIPR was just over 50%; 57% for women and 44% for men. The rate among those aged under 21 was 44% and if extended to all entrants aged 60 or less it was 55%

When the FSM entry rate data are broken down by gender and ethnicity they show:

- 13% of White British boys eligible for FSM (so-called 'white working class' boys) had started HE by age 19. The lowest rate of any major group.
- The gender gap was largest among Black Caribbean students; 24% (boys) v 40% (girls) among FSM eligible pupils and 38% v 59% non-FSM eligible pupils.
- Almost 58% of girls from Black ethnic backgrounds eligible for FSM started HE by age 19, the highest rate among girls from any broad ethnic group.
- More than half of all Black and Asian pupils eligible for FSM had started by HE age 19 compared to less than 17% of White FSM eligible pupils

<sup>18</sup> [Widening participation in higher education: 2020](#), DfE

The rate among the FSM group varied considerably across local authorities from 12% or below in Bracknell Forest and Hampshire to more than 50% in the London boroughs of Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea, Tower Hamlets, Brent, Newham, Harrow, Southwark Hammersmith & Fulham and Redbridge. In general FSM entry rates were much higher in London and above average in some other large urban areas. The FSM/non-FSM gap was as 35 percentage points or higher in Reading and Wokingham and below 10 points in Luton and much of inner London.

Full details of these rates and other indicators for disadvantaged groups can be found in the DfE publication [Widening participation in higher education: 2020](#)

### 3.6 Office for Students TUNDRA measure

In September 2019 the Office for Students introduced a new experimental measure of young participation in higher education: TUNDRA (tracking underrepresentation by area). This uses a broadly similar approach to the POLAR<sup>19</sup> measure produced by the earlier funding council. They both look at local data on participation among young people over several years. This is aggregated to a single measure across the relevant years and assigned to one of five bands or quintiles. Both look at very small geographies -middle-layer super output areas (MSOAs) and equivalents. There are a few key differences:

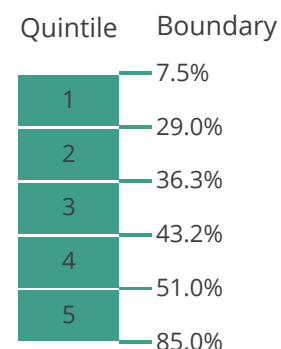
- TUNDRA covers England only, POLAR is for the UK
- TUNDRA only looks at maintained pupils, POLAR covered all young people regardless of what type of school they attended
- TUNDRA links individual records for pupils aged 16 to higher education records. POLAR compared data on entrants (by area of residence) to estimates of the relevant age group in the local area.

The TUNDRA results are based on pupils who completed their GCSEs between 2010 and 2014 and looks at how many (in each ear) started higher education aged 18 or 19 between 2012/13 and 2017/18. Rates for individual MSOAs varied from 7.5% to 85%. The quintile boundaries are given opposite. More detail can be found at [Young participation by area](#)

An analysis by region found that the North East and Yorkshire & the Humber had the higher proportion of areas in the lowest quintile (Q1). Both had more than 25% in this band while London had only just over 1% in Q1. At the other end of the participation spectrum the South West had 11% of areas in the highest participation band at 11% compared with almost 45% of areas in London.<sup>20</sup>

#### TUNDRA at a lower geographical level

In September 2020 the Office for Students [published TUNDRA at Lower Layer Super Output Area](#) (LSOA). This uses the same data as the original MSOA TUNDRA figures. There are almost 33,000 LSOAs in England. Data for around 1,300 LSOAs is suppressed because their estimated



<sup>19</sup> Participation of local areas

<sup>20</sup> [TUNDRA methodology](#), OfS

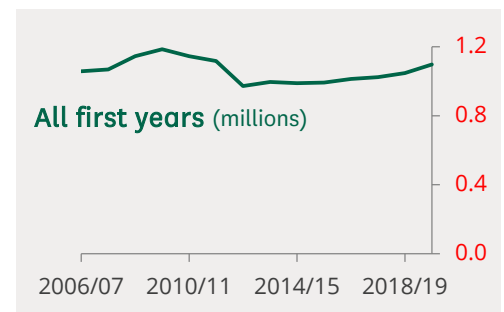
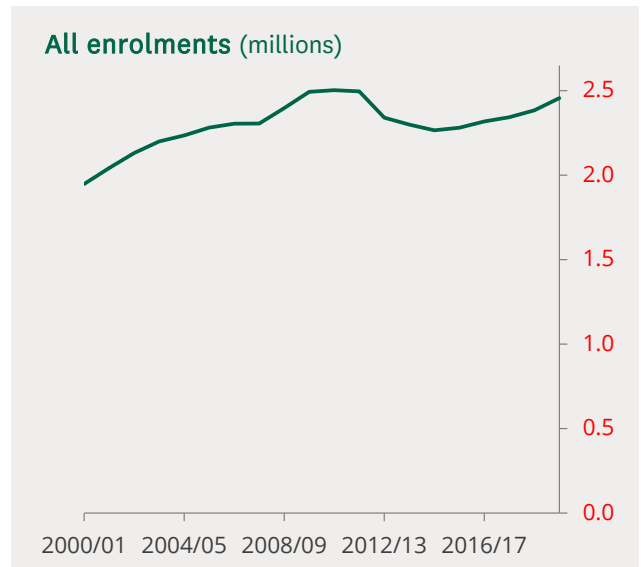
population aged 18 or 19 is less than 30. Rates for individual LSOAs varied from 10% to 90%.

### 3.7 Higher Education Statistics Agency data for the UK

#### All students

In 2019/20 there were 2.46 million students at UK higher education institutions. This was 3% higher than in 2018/19 but below levels in 2009 to 2012. The recent high was 2.50 million in 2010/11. Trends over the past decade are summarised in the table below and illustrated opposite.

Changes in the *stock* of students reflect any underlying shifts in the duration of courses taken and hence the full-time/part-time split rather than just a measure of demand for, and supply of, places. The number of first year students (entrants) is not affected by this. There were 1.10 million first years in 2019/20. Numbers of first years have increase for five years in a row, but again were still below the peak which was 1.19 million in 2009/10. Trends are also illustrated opposite.

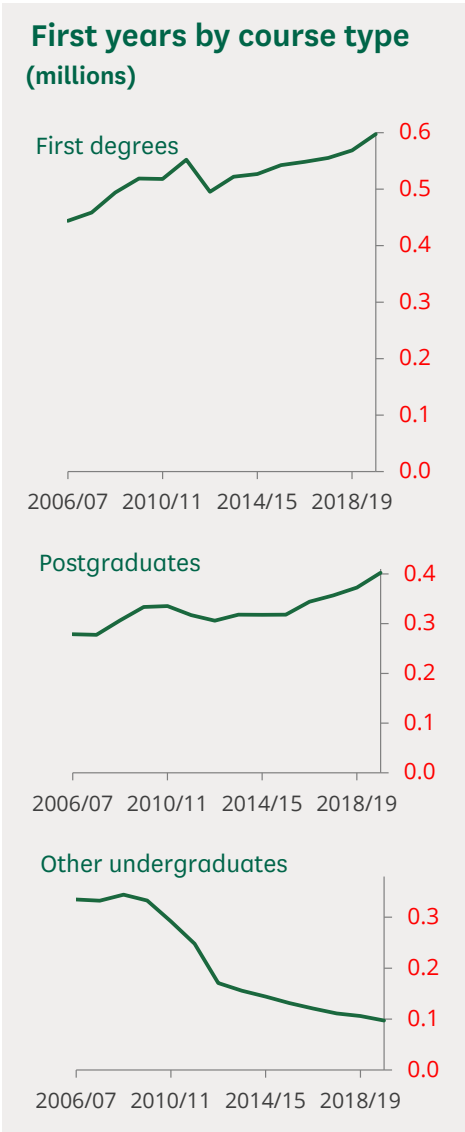


## Types of courses and students

The decline in entrants has been solely due to the fall in ‘other undergraduates’. Their numbers have fallen by 247,000 (72%) since 2008/09 while there were increases in those on first degree courses of almost 105,000 (21%), postgraduate research of around 3,500 (12%) and postgraduate taught programmes of 92,000 (33%).

Other undergraduate courses are generally taken part-time and students on these courses make up a large proportion of total part-time numbers. This means that total part-time entrants have fallen steeply as well from 470,000 in 2009/10 to 235,000 in 2019/20; a drop of 50% compared to an increase of 29% in full-time numbers. There were falls in each type of part-time course over this period; 74% in part-time ‘other’ undergraduates, 22% in first degrees (despite an increase in the latest three years), 15% taught postgraduate and 19% postgraduate research courses. Most of the decline in part-time postgraduate taught courses was to 2012/13 and numbers have since stabilised or increased slightly.

Students at UK higher education institutions			
Millions			
	2007/08	2011/12	2019/20
<b>All years</b>	<b>2.31</b>	<b>2.50</b>	<b>2.46</b>
<i>First years</i>			
First degree	0.46	0.55	0.60
Other undergraduate	0.33	0.25	0.10
Postgraduates	0.28	0.32	0.40
Full-time	0.62	0.73	0.86
Part-time	0.45	0.39	0.23
UK	0.88	0.88	0.79
Overseas	0.18	0.24	0.31
<b>All first years</b>	<b>1.07</b>	<b>1.12</b>	<b>1.10</b>



Source: [Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2019/20](#), and earlier, HESA

## Overseas students

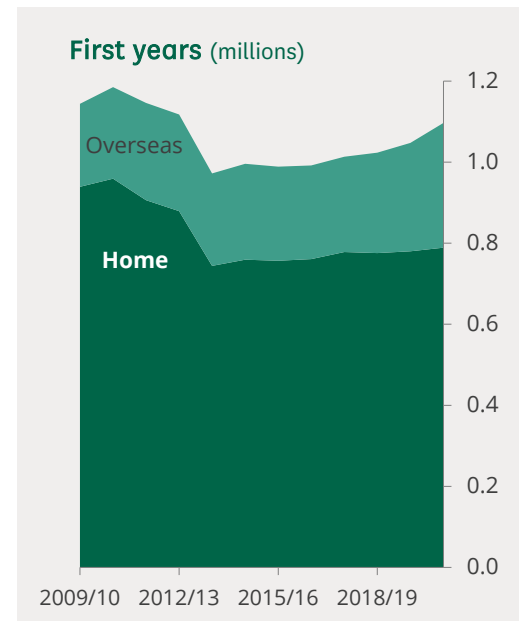
Home students make up the large majority of part-timers and as such their numbers have fallen since the end of the last decade (see opposite). Overseas student numbers increased to 2010/11 and dipped in 2012/13. There was some recovery up to 2016/17 and larger increases since then taking entrants to a new record levels in each of the last three years..

The table below/opposite gives the latest data on where these students come from. China clearly dominates with more entrants in the UK than the rest of the top ten combined. Some of the key recent trends were:

- Chinese student numbers are up by 90% since 2011/12. They increased by more than 15,000 in 2019/20 alone. Numbers from the US have increased more steadily over most of this time, but were down by 7% in 2019/20.
- Indian student numbers fell by 44% between 2011/12 and 2015/16. They have increased steadily for the following few years before increasing dramatically in 2019/20 by 120%.
- There has been a more recent decline in numbers from Malaysia. New students from Nigeria fell rapidly in 2015/16 and 2016/17 before stabilising, then increasing by 35% in 2019/20.
- There has been a general drop in entrants from the major EU countries since 2011/12; Ireland down by 43%, Cyprus 36%, Germany 29%, Greece 26% and France 18%. Italy was the exception with numbers up by 40%.
- Overall first year EU student numbers are down by 5% since 2011/12, but much of this cut happened in 2012/13 and numbers have increased up to 2016/17.

In 2015/16 56% of Chinese students were studying at postgraduate level (mainly taught courses), a very similar rate to those from the US (57%) and slightly below the proportion of Indian postgraduates (64%). The majority of EU students were undergraduates (63%).<sup>21</sup>

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data covers higher education institutions across the whole of the UK. It includes data on students at all levels, modes and years. It also includes figures on further education courses at higher education institutions, but these are not covered here. Some of their data is freely available online and can be found at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students>



## Top 10 countries of origin

First years 2019/20

China	101,855
India	39,360
United States	11,255
Nigeria	7,440
Hong Kong	6,700
France	6,330
Germany	6,155
Malaysia	5,810
Italy	5,695

Source: [Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2019/20](#), and earlier, HESA

<sup>21</sup> *Students in higher education institutions 2015/16*, HESA



## 4. Appendix -Higher Education Funding Council for England analysis

The (former) Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) published regular statistics and analysis of student numbers at English institutions. Their main focus is on home and EU students –those their funding/remit is linked with to some extent. This analysis is therefore especially relevant on the impact of changes in policy, specifically the impact of the 2012 reforms in England.

As the large majority of UK students study in England English the HEFCE data tended to show very similar trends to the HESA data set out above. This paper therefore just summarises some of their more recent analysis and commentary around these trends. It is taken from the following:

- [Higher education in England: Impact of the 2012 reforms \(March 2013\)](#)
- [Higher education in England 2014 Analysis of latest shifts and trends \(April 2014\)](#)
- [Pressure from all sides: Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education \(April 2014\)](#)
- [Higher Education in England 2015 \(July 2015\)](#)
- [Higher education in England: The population of undergraduates \(March 2017\)](#)
- [Higher education in England: The population of postgraduates \(March 2017\)](#)

The briefing paper [HE in England from 2012: Student numbers](#) looked in much more detail at their data and analysis from this period.

### Undergraduates

The fall in full-time undergraduate entrants between 2010/11 and 2012/13 was concentrated in courses other than first degrees. Entrants to these courses fell by 35%. Just over half of the fall was due to changes in nursing qualifications, which shifted from diplomas to degrees. Among other courses taught at higher education institutions the largest absolute fall was almost 8,000 in foundation degrees.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The funding council removed additional support for these courses from 2010/11.

These trends have continued and in 2014 they said that “Higher education institutions appear to be existing the market for study below degree level and focussing their undergraduate provision around degree courses.” There has been an increase to these courses at further education colleges.

The 2012 reforms cut the funding for part-time as well as full-time undergraduate courses, but part-time students had access to tuition fee loans for the first time in 2012. The largest fall in entrants in 2012 across all broad modes and levels was in part-time undergraduates. Their number fell by 78,000 or 34% in 2012/13. There were further falls of 20,000 in 2013/14, 18,000 in 2014/15, 5,000 in 2015/16 and 10,000 in 2016/17. These took numbers to 63% below their 2008 level. HEFCE suggestions of the different contributory factors behind the scale of the drop in part-time undergraduates included:

- Cuts in funding for equivalent and lower qualifications from 2008/09
- Phasing out of the programme to promote employer co-sponsored courses after 2011/12
- The 2012 funding reforms, specifically the loss of most direct funding for teaching, the impact on fees, possible confusion around the operation of loans, reluctance among mature students to take out loans and the fact that loans are not available for courses with an intensity of less than 25%
- The impact of the recession and continued ‘challenging’ economic conditions on individuals to fund their own part-time courses and employers to directly fund courses for their employees.

HEFCE said in 2014 that the overall decline in part-time entrants may “...have a detrimental impact on widening access overall”. This is because part-time higher education tends to have a higher share of students with characteristics linked to lower levels of participation - more mature students and those from ‘non-traditional backgrounds’ including disadvantaged, students with low prior qualifications or caring responsibilities.

## Postgraduates

Full-time postgraduate entrants increased from 2007 to 2011. They remained broadly stable up to 2015/16 before increasing by 22% (taught courses) in 2016/17. This jump is thought to be due to the introduction of loans for these courses. There was a smaller increase in part-time taught postgraduate courses of 9%. Full-time postgraduates are now in the majority (55% among home and EU students) after being the minority of entrants before 2011.

Much of the decline in part-time taught postgraduate entrants was in the subject area of education.<sup>23</sup> Without this subject the decline in part-time postgraduate courses has been much more modest. While postgraduate fees have increased HEFCE said that the main policy impact on part-time postgraduate entrants have been changes leading to lower support from employers for such courses in education. They also link the wider reduction in part-time postgraduate study to

HEFCE has linked the sharp decline in part-time students to the impact of the recession on Government spending, company training budgets, the 2012 funding reforms and some earlier policy changes

<sup>23</sup> Almost 19,000 out of a total fall of 25,000. The share was even larger (84%) if only higher education institutions are included.

austerity measures introduced by the (then) current Government which have reduced public sector employment<sup>24</sup> and cuts in training and development budgets.

HEFCE have raised the possibility that 2012 undergraduate entrants could be less likely to go on to postgraduate study because of their higher debts and limited access to finance. It is suggested that these effects will vary between different socio-economic groups and could result in a wider gap in postgraduate entry rates between these different groups. In their 2014 assessment they said "There is evidence to suggest that it is increasingly the better off who engage in study for a taught masters or doctorate."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> And hence in potential part-time study particularly in education and subjects allied to medicine

<sup>25</sup> [Higher education in England 2014 Analysis of latest shifts and trends](#). HEFCE p.37

## Summary of applicants and accepted applicants to higher education via UCAS

Thousands

	1994	2000	2005	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	% change 1994-2020
<b>Applicants -Domicile</b>															
Home	365	389	445	587	589	545	563	578	592	591	572	562	565	577	+58%
EU	19	24	29	47	49	43	45	47	51	54	51	53	53	53	+185%
Other overseas	21	29	49	63	62	66	69	75	76	74	76	81	88	99	+364%
<b>Total</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>442</b>	<b>522</b>	<b>697</b>	<b>700</b>	<b>654</b>	<b>677</b>	<b>700</b>	<b>718</b>	<b>718</b>	<b>700</b>	<b>696</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>729</b>	<b>+80%</b>
<b>Acceptances</b>															
<i>Age (home accepted applicants only)</i>															
Under 21	195	251	289	329	339	319	340	349	362	365	364	357	357	371	+90%
21+	56	58	71	96	92	89	95	99	102	100	99	103	107	114	+103%
<i>Sex</i>															
Female	133	178	217	267	270	257	274	285	300	302	302	304	310	329	+147%
Male	138	161	188	220	222	208	222	227	233	233	231	229	231	242	+75%
<i>Ethnicity (home applicants)</i>															
White	213	240	279	330	332	307	328	333	341	340	334	325	319	337	+58%
Asian	19	30	34	41	43	43	46	48	52	54	55	56	60	64	+233%
Black	7	10	16	27	30	31	32	36	37	38	38	39	42	42	+511%
Mixed	na	na	9	14	15	15	16	18	19	20	20	21	22	24	..
Other	3	6	4	4	5	6	6	7	8	8	9	9	10	11	+256%
Unknown	9	23	19	7	5	5	5	5	6	6	7	9	10	8	-13%
<i>Domicile</i>															
Home	251	309	360	425	431	407	435	447	464	465	463	459	464	485	+93%
England	211	256	302	359	367	343	368	383	394	394	391	388	395	412	+95%
Scotland	20	27	28	32	31	31	31	30	35	36	37	37	36	39	+96%
Wales	13	15	17	19	18	19	20	20	21	21	21	20	20	20	+58%
Northern Ireland	8	11	14	14	14	13	15	14	15	15	14	12	14	15	+81%
EU	8	14	17	26	27	23	25	26	29	31	31	32	32	32	+292%
Other overseas	11	17	28	37	34	34	36	39	39	38	40	42	45	53	+365%
<b>Total</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>340</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>487</b>	<b>492</b>	<b>465</b>	<b>496</b>	<b>512</b>	<b>532</b>	<b>535</b>	<b>534</b>	<b>533</b>	<b>541</b>	<b>570</b>	<b>+111%</b>

Sources: UCAS annual datasets; End of cycle report 2020, and earlier, UCAS

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