

Analysis of UCAS January deadline application rates by country

UCAS, January 2012

Key points

- UCAS January deadline application rates show cycle to cycle changes in demand for entry to UCAS member institutions
- This note reports application rate trends of 18 year olds (by country, sex and an area-based measure of advantage) and for 21 to 24 year olds (by country).
- Application rates for 18 year olds are an important guide to demand for higher education as they have generally not previously had the opportunity to apply.
- In England application rates for 18 year olds have decreased by around one percentage point in 2012 compared to a trend of increases of around one per cent annually since 2006
- There is little change in application rates for 18 year olds in 2012 for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales
- The application rate of 18 year old men in 2012 has decreased and the difference in application rates between men and women has increased
- The application rate for 18 year olds from the most disadvantaged areas in England has decreased slightly in 2012. There has been a larger decrease in the application rate from the most advantaged areas. Both of these decreases follow a trend of annual increases since 2006.
- There is no clear change from trend in 2012 in the application rates of 18 year olds from advantaged and disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- There is no above trend increase in the 18 year old application rates in 2011 that would suggest that that people who would have normally applied aged 19 in 2012 applied aged 18 in 2011 instead.
- The application rate for 21 to 24 year olds in England has decreased in 2012. This decrease (and a smaller decrease in 2011) follows a large increase in 2010.

Introduction and notes

People who submit their applications to UCAS by the 15 January deadline are considered 'on time' applicants for the large majority of courses offered through UCAS. Their numbers can be used to measure trends in demand to enter this type of higher

education. One way to measure demand is through application rates. These report the number of applicants from a group divided by the size of that group in the population. That is, the proportion of a group that have made an application - a direct measure of demand in terms of propensity to apply.

The advantage of using application rates is that they show trends in this measure of demand without being affected by year to year changes in the population size. This is important as changes in the population size can have a substantial effect on applicant numbers, often as large as any change in application rate.

The analysis uses country-specific age definitions to accurately capture any year to year changes in application rates of different groups. For England and Wales ages are defined on the 31 August, for Northern Ireland on the 1 July and for Scotland on the 28 February the following year. Defining ages in this way matches the assignment of children to school cohorts.

The main analysis looks at trends in the application rate of 18 year olds. This group has the highest application rate to UCAS and is particularly important when using application rate trends to assess demand for higher education as, generally, they will not have had a previous opportunity to apply to higher education.

The applicants used in this analysis are those that had applied by the relevant January deadline between 2003 and 2012. This long time period allows changes for the 2012 entry cycle to be put in the context of longer term trends. However it does bring issues of the consistency of the time-series given the changes to the scope of the January deadline data in this period.

These issues were investigated using a restricted subset of applicants that excluded applications to subject areas (such as Nursing and Art and Design) or institutions that had been affected by changes to the scope of the January deadline. This analysis showed that the interpretation of the application rate trends for 18 year olds were not materially altered when using the restricted applicant subset. The analysis of 18 year olds therefore uses the entire January deadline data to give the fullest picture. The application rates trends of older age groups were in some cases affected by the consistency issues and the restricted subset of applicants is used in their reporting in this note.

The population estimates are based upon Office for National Statistics Mid-Year Estimates and National Population Projections. For 18 year olds the estimates are obtained by aging 15 year olds. This approach avoids the estimates being susceptible to changes in net migration (including overseas students) in the 18 year old group. The 20 to 21 year olds are obtained from the Mid-Year Estimates and National Population Projections without aging. In both cases the estimates are adjusted from age at mid-year to age on the country-specific reference dates using the monthly distribution of births. The population estimates for advantaged and disadvantaged areas use these estimates in conjunction with the small area population estimates produced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in their work on young participation.

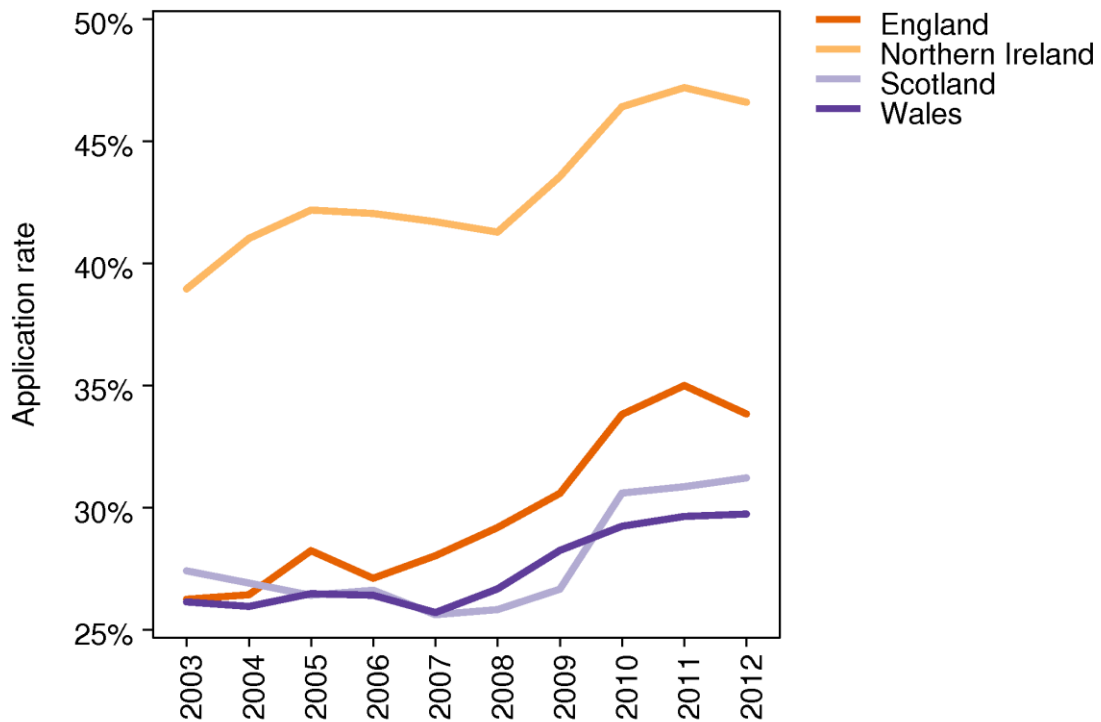
Application rates of 18 year olds by country

The trend in January deadline application rates for 18 year olds by country is shown in Figure 1. For all countries application rates have generally increased over the past five years. There is no signal of above trend increases in application rates in 2011 that would indicate that people who would normally apply at age 19 in 2012 had applied at age 18 in 2011 instead.

For 2012 the application rates for Scotland and Wales have increased slightly or stayed broadly the same, the rate for Northern Ireland has declined slightly (but within the range of expected variability given its relatively small population). For England the application rate decreases by around one percentage point in 2012 compared to a trend of rising since 2006 by at least one percentage point a year.

If it is assumed that the recent trend of a one percentage point increase each year in England would continue in 2012 then the observed decrease of one percentage point would represent a fall in the application rate against the assumed 2012 rate of around two percentage points which is, proportionately, around five percent decrease. That is, around one person in twenty who would have been expected to apply if the recent trend of increasing application rates was maintained for 2012 did not do so. However, it is also the case that the level of the application rate for England in 2012 is not inconsistent with the longer term trend across the period.

Figure 1: January deadline application rates for 18 year olds by country

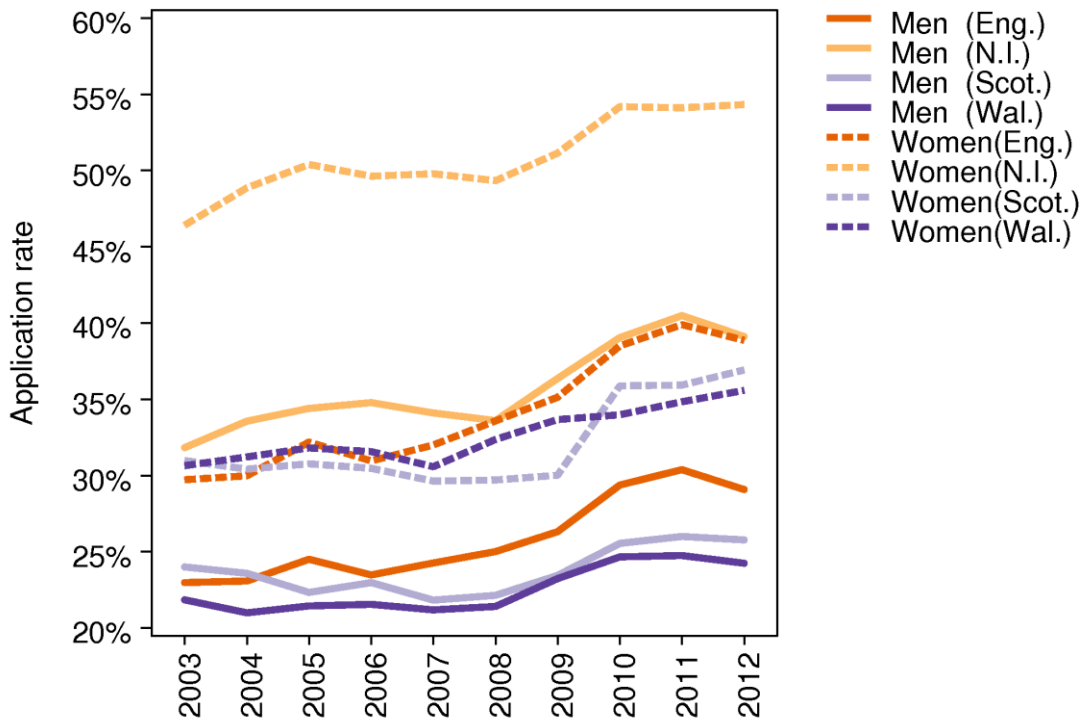


Application rates of 18 year olds by sex

The application rates for 18 year olds reported in Figure 1 are shown split by sex in Figure 2. The application rates for women are substantially higher than for men in all the constituent countries of the UK. In 2012 the application rate for men fell in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales whilst the application rate for women increased. In England the application rate decreased for both sexes, but this decrease was greater for men than for women.

The difference in application rates between women and men for 18 year olds increased in 2012 compared to 2011. In 2012 18 year old women were 34 per cent more likely to apply than 18 year old men in England, 39 per cent in Northern Ireland, 43 per cent in Scotland and 47 per cent in Wales.

Figure 2: January deadline application rates for 18 year olds by sex and country



Application rates of 18 year olds from disadvantaged and advantaged areas

The POLAR classification developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) classifies small areas across the UK into five groups according to their level of young participation in higher education. Each of these groups represents around 20 per cent of young people and are ranked from quintile 1 (areas with the lowest young participation rates, considered as the most disadvantaged) to quintile 5 (highest young participation rates, considered most advantaged).

Figure 3 shows the application rates of 18 year olds from the most disadvantaged grouping (quintile 1) defined using the POLAR2 version of the HEFCE classification. The annual populations in this group are relatively small in Northern Ireland (around 4,000), Scotland (around 5,000) and Wales (around 8,000) so that their application rate trends are subject to more year to year variation than for England (typical population size of around 140,000).

All countries show a long term trend of substantial increases in application rates for this disadvantaged group; for example, the application rate for this group in England increased from under 11 per cent to over 18 per cent across the period, a proportional increase in the application rate of over 70 per cent. As for 18 year olds nationally, there is no sign of an above-trend increase in application rates in 2011 that would indicate people who would normally apply at age 19 in 2012 applied at age 18 in 2011 instead.

For 2012 the application rate for this group in Wales increases by a percentage point. For Northern Ireland and Scotland there is not a clear deviation from the trend, given the year to year variability resulting from their small population size in this group. In England the application rate for this disadvantaged group decreases slightly (0.2 per cent) in 2012. This is the first application rate decrease since 2006, since when annual increases have ranged from 0.8 to 2.7 percentage points. However, the level of the application rate for England in 2012 is not inconsistent with the trend across the period as a whole.

The application rates of 18 year olds from the most advantaged grouping (quintile 5) are shown in Figure 4. The annual populations for this group are relatively small in Northern Ireland (around 6,000), Scotland (around 23,000) and Wales (around 8,000) so that their trends are again subject to more year to year variation than for England (typical population size of around 120,000).

For Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales there is not a clear trend across the period. In England application rates for this group have increased over the period from 47 per cent (2003) to 53 per cent (2012), a proportional increase of over 10 per cent. The changes in 2012 for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are within the range of their year to year variability. In England the application rate for this group has decreased by 2.5 percentage points. This is against a trend of annual increases since 2006 of between 0.5 and 3.0 percent each year. The increase in 2011 was below the recent trend and provides no indication that the 2011 application rate was increased by people who would usually have applied aged 19 applying at age 18 instead (as was the case in 2005).

Figure 3: January deadline application rates for 18 year olds (most disadvantaged areas)

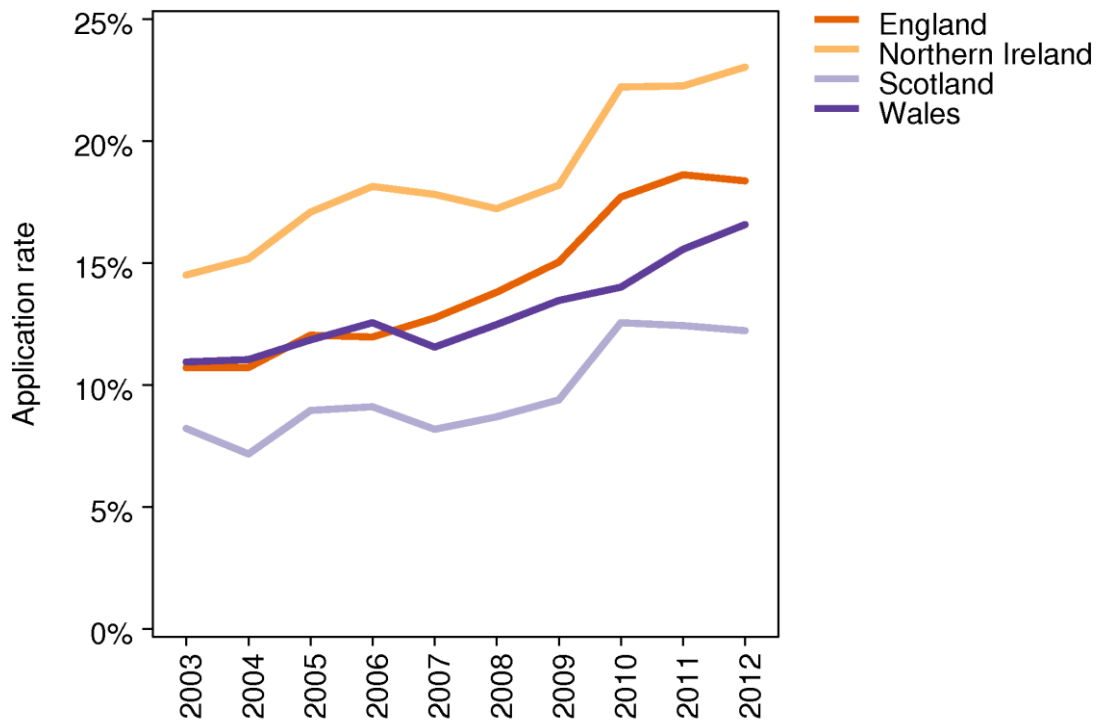
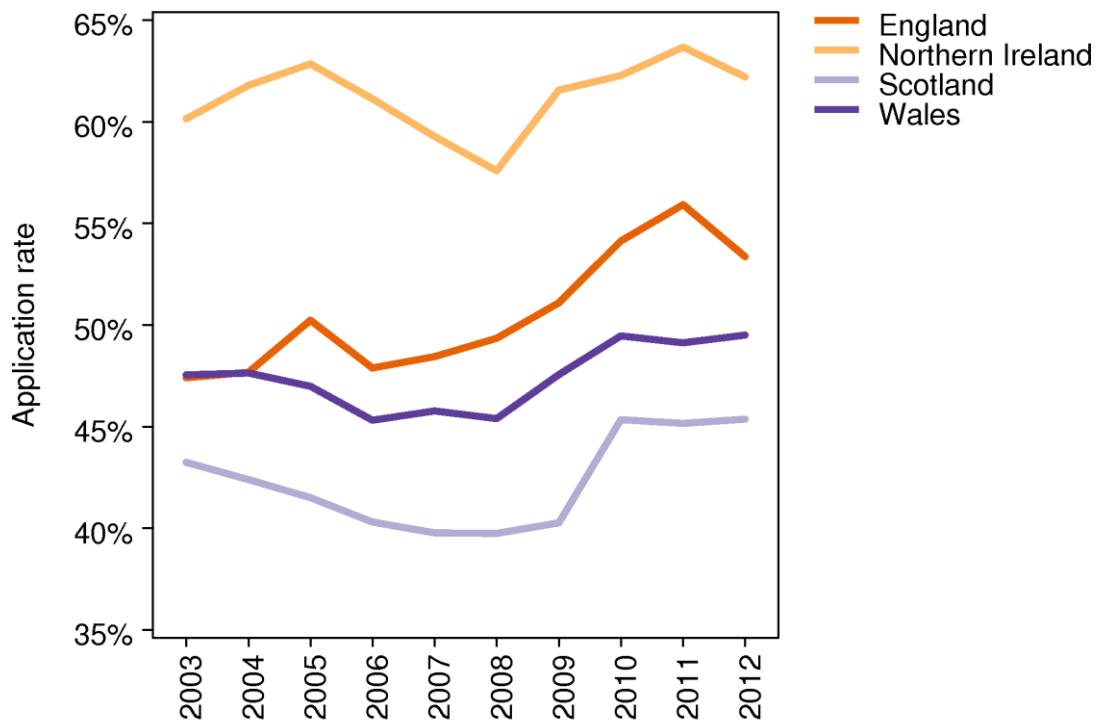


Figure 4: January deadline application rates for 18 year olds (most advantaged areas)



Application rates of 21 to 24 year olds

Interpreting application rate trends for older age groups is more difficult. The link to the background population is less clear (for example, a large and changing proportion will already have higher education qualifications) and the applicants themselves will in many cases have had previous opportunities to apply. This section reports the trends for one of the larger older entry groups - 21 to 24 year olds – as an example of the trends typical across many of the older cohorts. For older age groups, including 21 to 24 year olds, the effect of the changes to the coverage of the UCAS system over the period are more relevant so the time-series application rate variant is used which excludes certain types of applicant.

Figure 2 shows the application rate for 21 to 24 year olds using the reduced time-series applicants. Application rates in this age group are very much lower than for 18 year olds. Over the period as a whole there is a general trend of increasing application rates across the four countries of the UK. All countries show a sharp rise in application rates in January 2010, possibly as a response to increases in redundancies and unemployment that occurred in the preceding 12 months.

In 2012 the application rates for 21 to 24 year olds change only slightly for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. For England there is a decrease in the application rate in 2011 and a larger decrease – the largest across the period - in 2012. However, because of the large increase in the application rate in 2010, the application rate for 2012 is at a level not inconsistent with the trend established from 2003 to 2009.

Figure 5: January deadline application rates for 21 to 24 year olds

