

End of cycle report

2017

Summary of applicants and acceptances



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Applicants, acceptances, and the acceptance rate

Applicants and acceptances fell in 2017, but large rise in acceptance rate increased the odds of getting a place to the highest for nine years

Figure 1.1 shows the number of applicants, acceptances, and acceptance rates for all applicants to full-time undergraduate higher education courses at UK providers.

There were 699,850 applicants in the 2017 cycle, a decrease of 2.6 per cent from the 2016 cycle, with 18,500 fewer applicants. This is the second successive fall in applicants following a small decline in 2016. Prior to this, applicants had increased each year between 2012 to 2015.

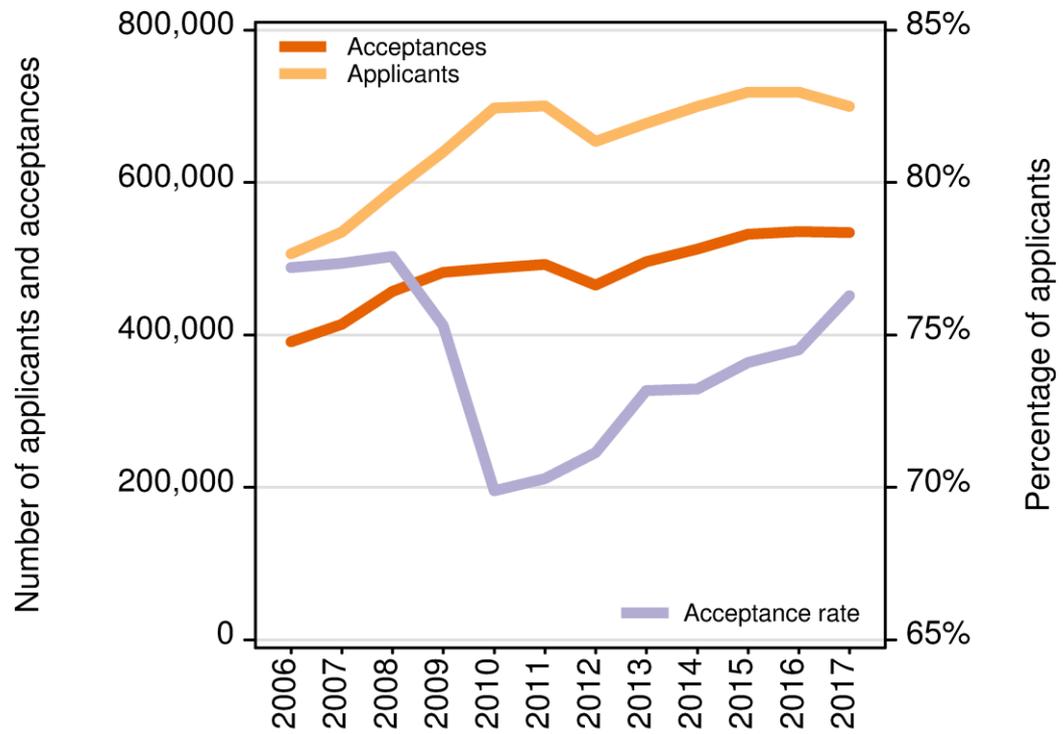
The number of acceptances in 2017 was 533,890, a decrease of 1,290 (-0.2 per cent). This is the first decline since 2012, but still the second highest number of acceptances on record.

The proportion of applicants who had a place at the end of the cycle is termed the acceptance rate, and reflects the relationship between total applicants and acceptances. Since the number of acceptances may be subject to number control or physical constraints, it can be broadly interpreted as the 'difficulty' of gaining admission to higher education in a particular year. However, becoming accepted requires both a higher education provider to make an offer to the applicant, and the applicant to accept and meet the conditions of the provider's offer. Therefore, changes in the acceptance rate can also reflect differences in applicant choices or preference to enter higher education, and changes in how providers make offers.

Between 2006 and 2008, the acceptance rate was around 77 per cent. Over the next two years it fell sharply, as the number of applicants increased by more than the number of acceptances. Growth in applicant numbers stalled and then fell between 2010 and 2012, which halted the fall in the acceptance rate. Between 2012 and 2016, the acceptance rate has increased, as the number of acceptances grew (aided by the removal of student number controls in England) by proportionally more than the number of applicants.

In 2017, the acceptance rate continued to increase. The larger proportional fall in applicants compared to acceptances this year meant the acceptance rate increased by 1.8 percentage points to 76.3 per cent, the highest since 2008.

Figure 1.1 Applicants, acceptances, and the acceptance rate



Fall in applicants from the UK and EU, increase in non-EU applicants

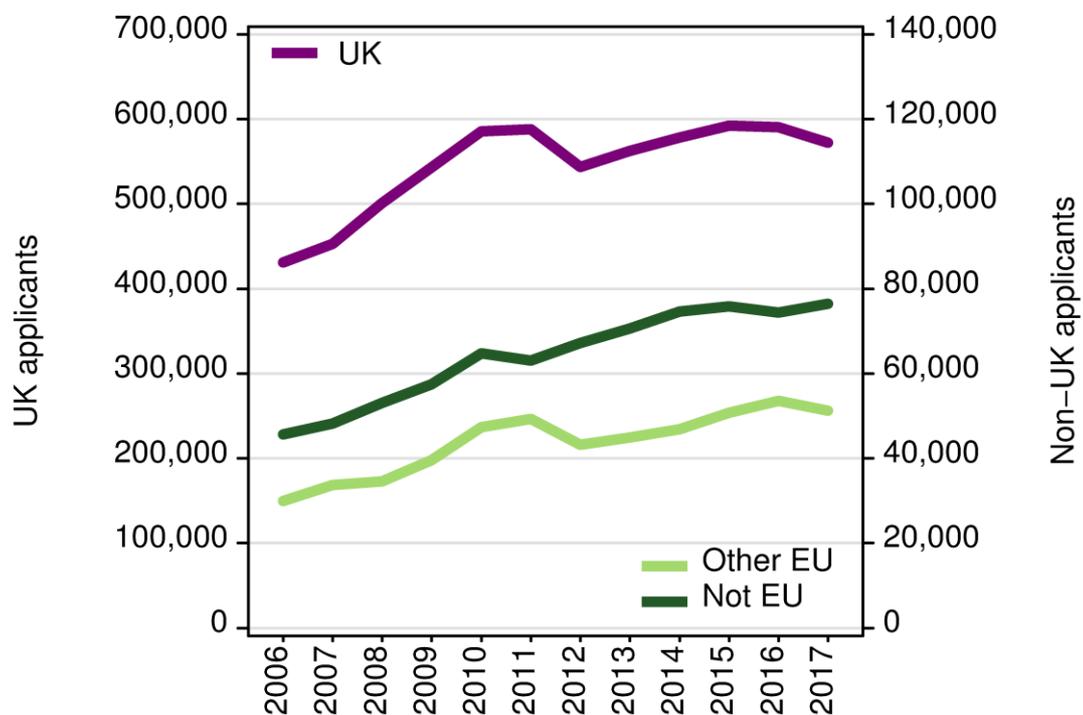
Applicants domiciled in the UK comprised 82 per cent of all applicants in the 2017 cycle, with EU comprising 7 per cent, and those outside the EU 11 per cent.

Applicants domiciled in the UK decreased by 3.1 per cent in 2017 (-18,220 applicants), to 572,285. This followed a decrease in the 2016 cycle, prior to which applicant numbers had increased each year since 2012 (Figure 1.2). Despite these decreases, the number of applicants in 2017 was 5.3 per cent higher (+28,945) than in 2012, but 1 per cent lower than in 2014.

Applicants from the EU decreased by 4.4 per cent (-2,375 applicants), to 51,185, reversing much of the growth in the 2016 cycle, but still the second highest number on record. The fall in EU applicants this year reversed a trend of year on year increases since 2012, the last time EU applicant numbers fell. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of EU applicants increased by between 4 and 8 per cent each year. Had that trend continued into 2017, applicants from the EU would have been around 10 per cent higher than observed.

Applicants domiciled outside the EU increased by 2.8 per cent, to 76,380, an increase of 2,090 applicants compared to 2016. This is the highest on record for this group, more than reversing the decline in the previous cycle.

Figure 1.2 Applicants by domicile group



Acceptances from the UK and EU decrease, but more non-EU acceptances than ever before

The number of acceptances followed a similar pattern to the number of applicants, with a decrease in acceptances from the UK and EU in 2017, and an increase in acceptances from outside the EU (Figure 1.3).

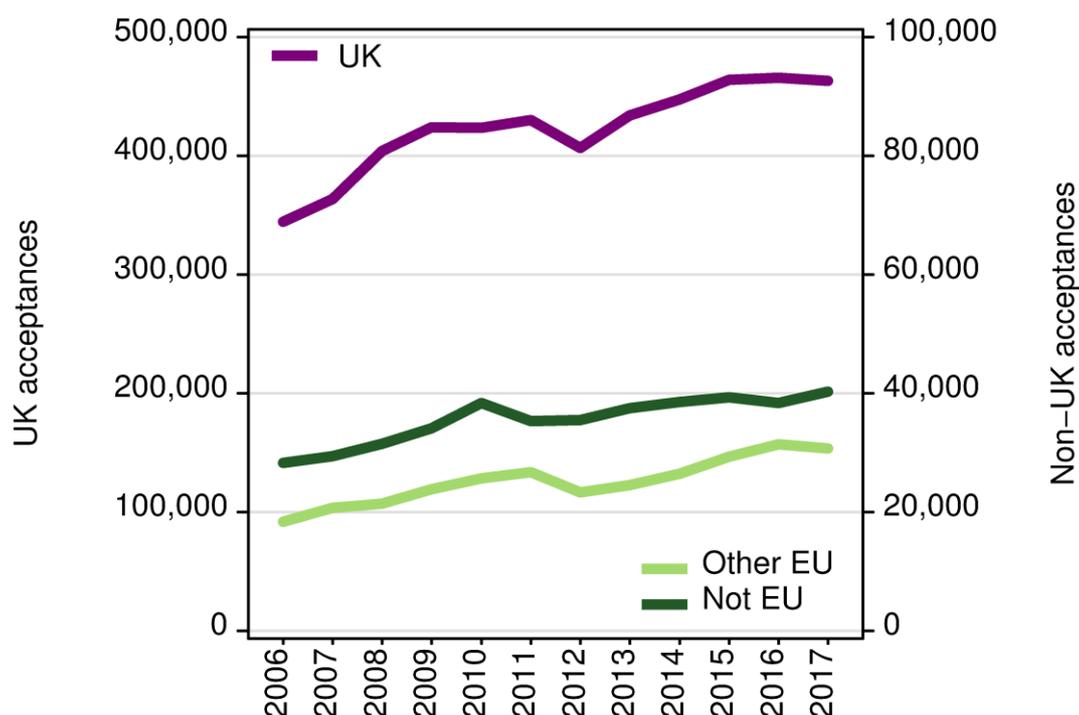
There were 2,535 fewer acceptances from the UK in the 2017 cycle, reducing the total to 462,945 (-0.5 per cent). This reverses a four-year trend of consecutive record highs, and brought the total to the third highest on record.

Acceptances from the EU (not including the UK) decreased by 2.1 per cent (-650) in 2017, to 30,700. This decrease reversed the pattern of growth each year from 2012. If that trend – around 8 per cent growth over the past few cycles – had continued into 2017, acceptances from the EU would have been around 10 per cent higher than observed.

Acceptances from outside the EU increased by 5.0 per cent (+1,900 acceptances), to 40,245. This more than offset the 2.3 per cent decline from the previous cycle, and brought the number to the highest recorded level.

The combined number of acceptances from the EU (not including the UK) and non-EU reached 70,945, an increase of 1.8 per cent (+1,250). This is the fifth consecutive year the number of acceptances from these domiciles increased, and is the highest on record.

Figure 1.3 Acceptances by domicile group



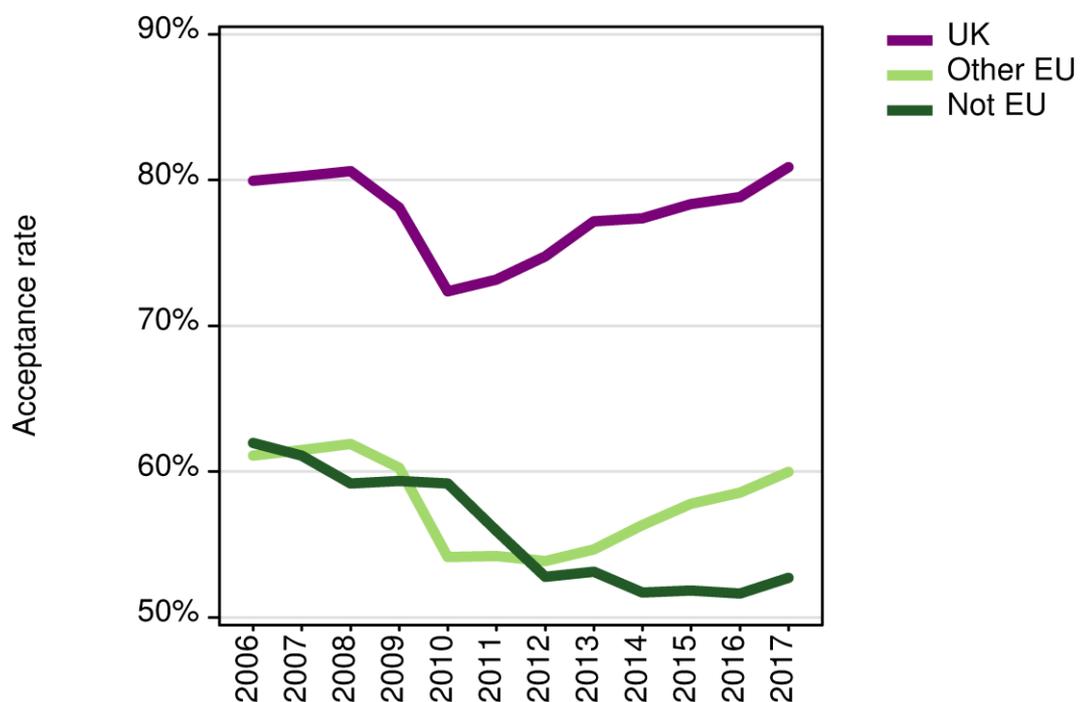
Acceptance rates increase for UK, EU, and non-EU applicants

The acceptance rate for UK applicants has been consistently higher than the acceptance rates for EU and non-EU applicants. Between 2006 and 2017, the acceptance rate for UK applicants ranged between 72 and 81 per cent (Figure 1.4). In the 2017 cycle, the acceptance rate for UK applicants increased by 2.1 percentage points to 80.9 per cent, the highest on record.

The acceptance rate for EU applicants (excluding those from the UK) is typically around 20 percentage points lower than the acceptance rate for UK applicants. In 2017, the acceptance rate for EU applicants increased by 1.4 percentage points, to 60.0 per cent. This continues the year-on-year increases in acceptance rates since 2012, when the acceptance rate was at its lowest (54.1 per cent).

The acceptance rate for non-EU applicants followed a different pattern to that of UK and EU applicants. In most years since 2006, the acceptance rate for non-EU applicants fell, and since 2012, non-EU applicants had the lowest acceptance rate of all domiciles. In 2017, the acceptance rate increased by 1.1 percentage points, to 52.7 per cent, the largest percentage point increase on record for this group.

Figure 1.4 Acceptance rates by applicant domicile group



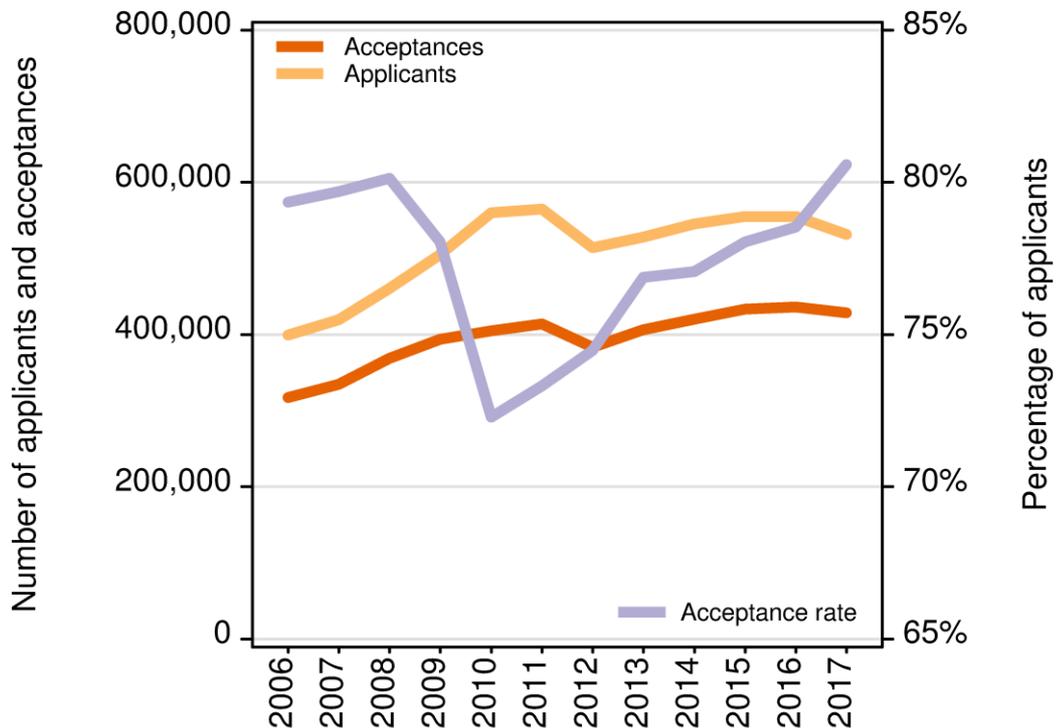
Highest ever acceptance rate for UK main scheme applicants

Main scheme applicants can make up to five initial course choices, followed by the opportunity to use other routes, such as Extra, Clearing, and Adjustment, later in the cycle. The acceptance rates of this group best reflect the ‘difficulty’ of gaining admission to higher education in a particular year. Figure 1.5 shows the number of UK main scheme applicants, acceptances, and acceptance rates.

At 93 per cent in 2017, main scheme applicants made up the majority of all applicants, with UK main scheme applicants comprising just over three quarters of all applicants. In 2017, there were 531,275 UK main scheme applicants, a reduction of 4.2 per cent (-23,455 applicants).

The number of UK main scheme acceptances in 2017 was 428,115, a reduction of -1.7 per cent (-7,530 acceptances), smaller than the reduction in applicants. These patterns in applicants and acceptances meant the acceptance rate for UK main scheme applicants increased by 2.0 percentage point, the second highest increase on record, to 80.6 per cent, the highest acceptance rate on record.

Figure 1.5 Applicants, acceptances, and the acceptance rate for UK main scheme applicants only



Record number of acceptances from Scotland, but decreases from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales

Most UK applicants and acceptances come from England. In 2017, 85 per cent of UK acceptances were from England, 8 per cent from Scotland, 3 per cent from Northern Ireland, and 4 per cent from Wales.

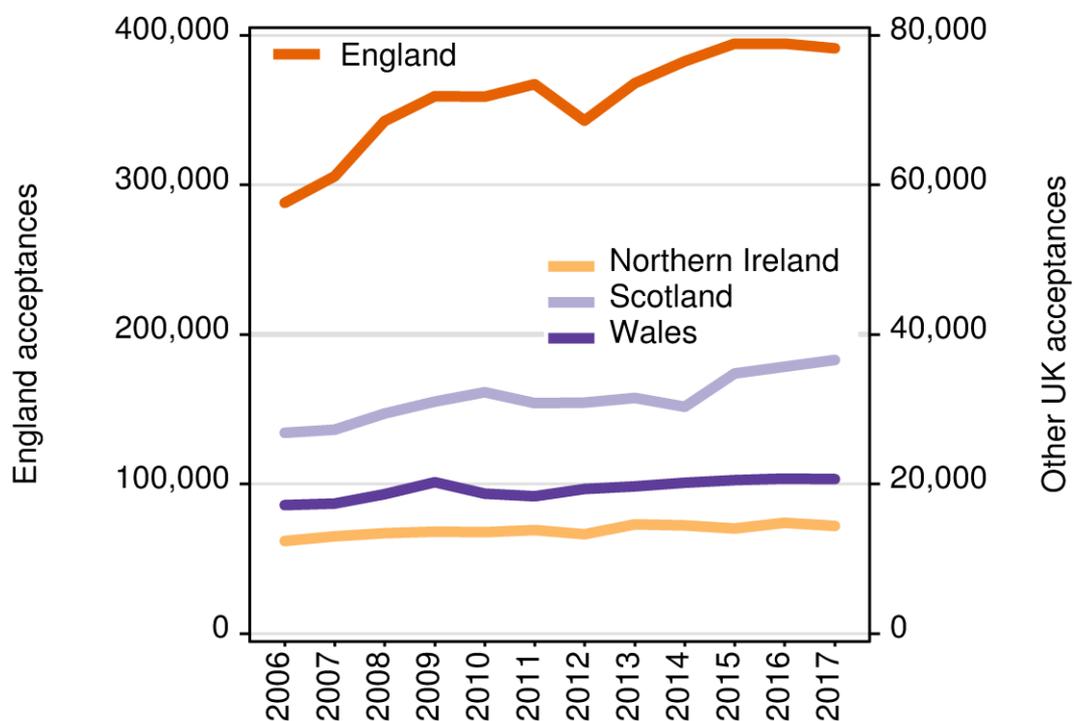
In 2017, acceptances from England decreased for the second year in succession. This year, there were 391,370 acceptances from England, a decline of 0.7 per cent (-2,930 acceptances). Despite the fall, the number this year is the third highest on record, and 2.3 per cent higher than the number of acceptances in 2014.

Acceptances from Scotland increased, the only UK domicile where the number was higher this year compared to last. A 2.4 per cent increase (+865 acceptances), brought the number of acceptances to 36,540, the highest on record.

Acceptances from Wales decreased by 0.2 per cent (-50 acceptances), to 20,665, the first decrease since 2011. Acceptances from Wales in 2017 were the second highest on record.

In 2017, acceptances from Northern Ireland decreased by 2.9 per cent (-425 acceptances), to 14,375. This is within the typical range of acceptances from Northern Ireland in the previous four cycles.

Figure 1.6 Acceptances by UK country of domicile



Fewer acceptances to providers in England and Northern Ireland, highest ever number to providers in Scotland and Wales

Typically, around 84 per cent of all acceptances are to courses at providers in England, with around 10 per cent of acceptances to providers in Scotland, 5 per cent to providers in Wales, and 2 per cent to providers in Northern Ireland. Figure 1.7 shows the number of acceptances by provider country.

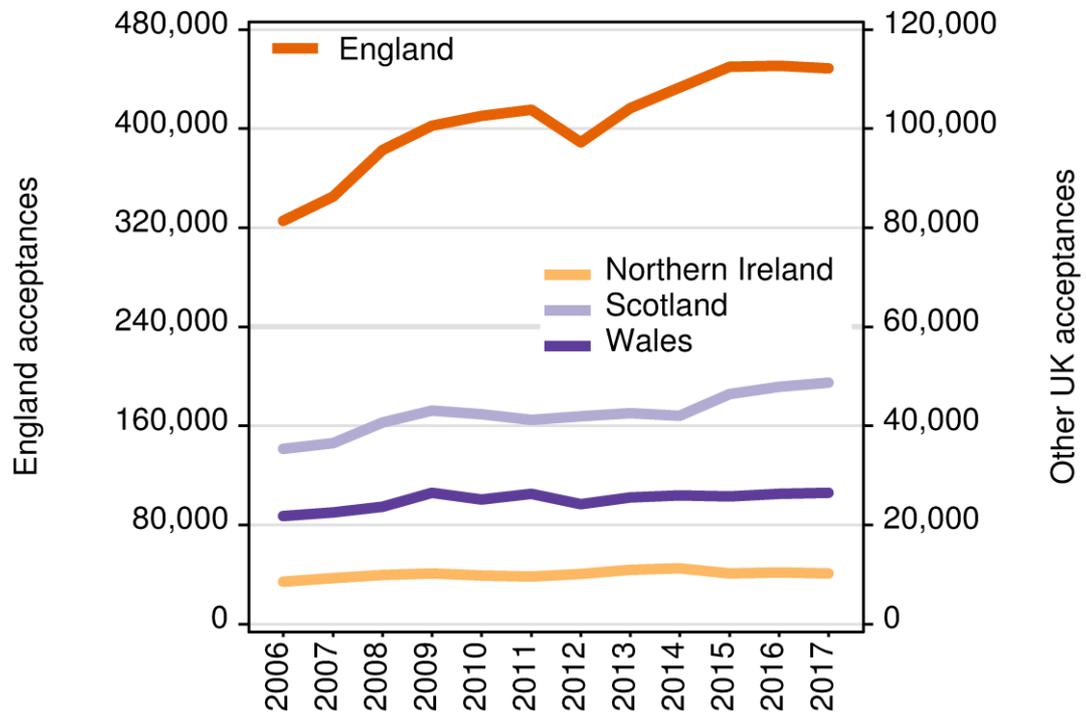
In 2017, the number of acceptances to providers in England fell by 0.5 per cent (-2,065 applicants) to 448,480. Despite this decrease, the first since 2012, the number of acceptances from England is the third highest on record, 0.3 per cent lower than in 2015, but 3.5 per cent higher than in 2014.

Acceptances to providers in Scotland increased by 1.7 per cent (+790 applicants), to 48,685. This is the third consecutive increase, bringing the number of acceptances to the highest on record.

For providers in Wales, the number of acceptances increased by 0.9 per cent, to 26,520, an increase of 230 acceptances. This increase brings the total to the highest on record.

There were 10,205 acceptances to providers in Northern Ireland, 245 fewer than in 2016, a proportional decrease of 2.3 per cent. This is the largest proportional fall of any UK country this year, but in absolute terms is eight times smaller than the decrease to providers in England.

Figure 1.7 Acceptances by provider country



Acceptances continue to increase to higher and medium tariff providers, and continue to fall at lower tariff

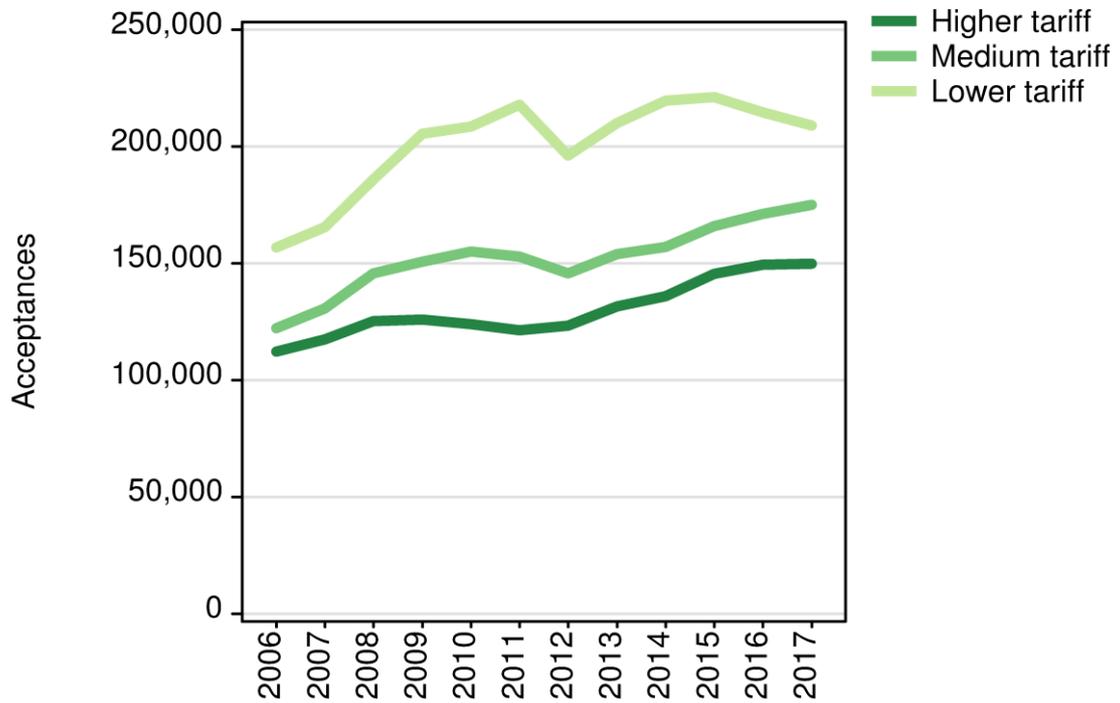
Higher education providers across the UK can be grouped based on the average levels of attainment of their UK 18 year old acceptances, summarised through UCAS Tariff points. Three groups are created, referred to as higher, medium and lower tariff providers, which each account for around a third of all UK 18 year old acceptances in recent cycles. Higher tariff providers are those which have accepted, on average, UK 18 year old applicants with the highest Tariff points in recent cycles, while lower tariff providers are those which have accepted those with the lowest. Forming fixed groups of providers in this way allows trends in acceptances to be reported, such that year-to-year variations are not the result of providers moving between groups due to changes in the number, or Tariff scores, of acceptances. Figure 1.8 shows the number of all acceptances by cycle for these provider tariff groups.

Across the period, lower tariff providers consistently had more acceptances than medium and higher tariff providers, while higher tariff providers had the fewest acceptances. Patterns in acceptances varied across provider groups prior to 2012, but subsequently increased for all groups over the next three years. In 2016, the number of acceptances continued to increase at higher and medium tariff providers, but fell at lower tariff providers.

This pattern continued in 2017. There were 208,920 acceptances to lower tariff providers, a 2.7 per cent decline, equating to a reduction of 5,740 applicants. Acceptances to lower tariff providers were 5.4 per cent lower this year, compared to their highest level in 2015.

Acceptances at higher and medium tariff providers increased in 2017. There were 149,890 acceptances to higher tariff providers this year, an increase of 525 (+0.4 per cent proportionally) and 175,080 acceptances at medium tariff providers, an increase of 3,925 (+2.3 per cent proportionally).

Figure 1.8 Acceptances by provider tariff group



Acceptance routes

Decrease in number accepted through firm choice

There are a number of different acceptance routes in the admissions cycle. Figure 1.9 shows the number of acceptances by acceptance route using a logarithmic scale, so that the proportional changes can be seen more clearly across the large differences in numbers accepted through the various routes.

Most acceptances, just over 70 per cent, are through applicants' firm choices. In 2017, 381,560 applicants were accepted through their firm choices, a decrease of 1.2 per cent from the previous cycle (-4,780 acceptances). This 1.2 per cent fall was smaller than the 1.5 per cent fall for main scheme applicants as a whole, which meant a slightly higher share of main scheme applicants were placed through their firm choices. This year, 77.7 per cent of main scheme applicants were placed through their firm choices, compared to 77.5 per cent in 2016.

Decrease in number accepted through insurance choice and Extra

In 2017, the number of applicants accepted through their insurance choice (for applicants who were not accepted through their firm offer) decreased by 4.8 per cent, to 37,590, the first decrease since 2012. This decrease is the result of the slightly higher share of main scheme applicants placed through their firm choices, combined with the 1.5 per cent fall in main scheme applicants this year.

Applicants who do not receive any offers from their five main scheme choices, or decline any offers they do receive, are eligible to make choices through the Extra route. This year there was a fall (around 17 per cent) in the number applicants eligible to use Extra. This is likely to have resulted in a reduction in the number of acceptances through Extra, which decreased by 15 per cent in 2017, to 6,370. This decline follows a relatively stable period between 2013 and 2016, before which a larger decrease of 18 per cent followed a period of growth in applicants placed through this route.

Record numbers accepted through Clearing

There are two routes for Clearing: an applicant may have been unsuccessful in the main scheme and then found a place in the Clearing process, or an applicant may have applied directly to the Clearing process. In 2017, the combined number of acceptances through main scheme Clearing and direct to Clearing reached a record high of 66,865. This is an increase of 3.1 per cent from the previous cycle, resulting in 1,990 more acceptances through this route.

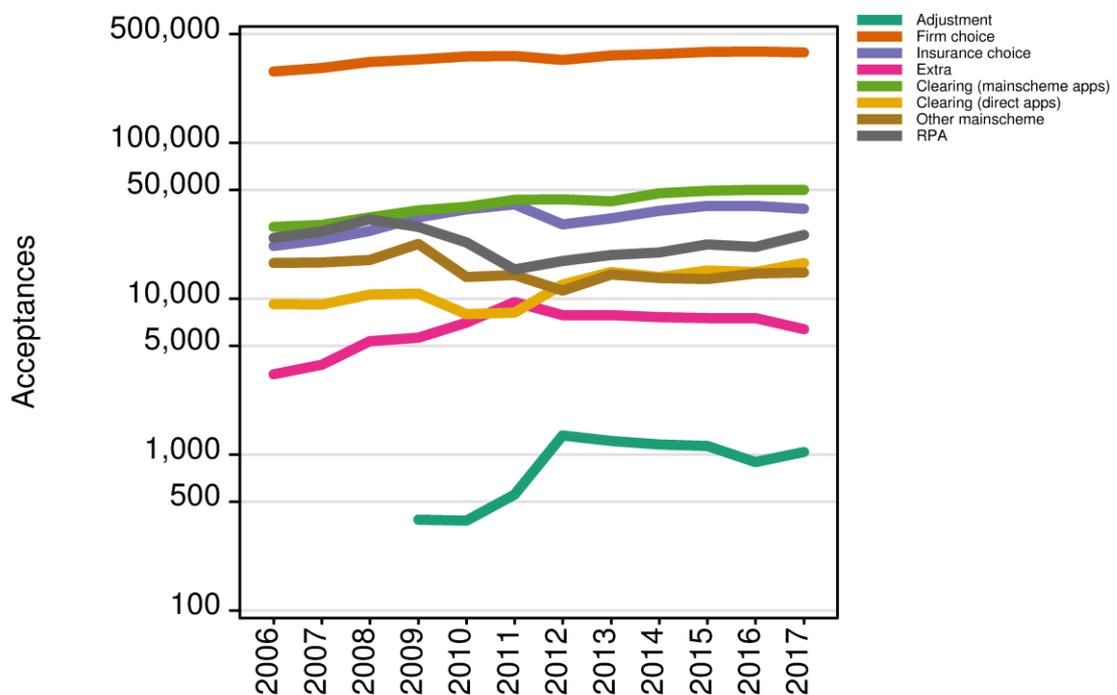
The majority of Clearing acceptances (around 75 per cent in 2017), come from those that were unsuccessful in the main scheme. Acceptances through the main scheme Clearing process decreased by 0.2 per cent in 2017, to 49,920. This equates to 105 fewer acceptances than in 2016, but 785 more than in 2015. This means the increase in Clearing acceptances this year came entirely from direct to Clearing acceptances, which increased by 14 per cent (+2,100 acceptances) from the previous cycle, to

16,950. This is 1,740 applicants more than the highest number previously recorded in 2015, indicating an increasing appetite among applicants to apply very late in the cycle.

Increase in acceptances through Adjustment

The Adjustment route is used by applicants to 'adjust' to a place at another provider, if they meet and exceed the conditions of their firm choice. At a share of 0.2 per cent of all acceptances, it is the least used of all the acceptance routes. Acceptances via Adjustment increased by 16 per cent (+145 acceptances) in 2017, to total 1,040. This reversed much of the unusually large fall in the previous cycle, with the number this year close to what might have been expected given the longer term decline that began in 2012.

Figure 1.9 Acceptances by acceptance route (logarithmic scale)



A note on numbers in Scotland

UCAS covers the overwhelming majority of full-time undergraduate provision for people living in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, so the statistics on acceptances or entry rates can be taken as being very close to all recruitment to full-time undergraduate higher education. In Scotland, there is a substantial section of higher education provision not included in UCAS' figures. This is mostly full-time higher education provided in further education colleges, which represents around one third of young full-time undergraduate study in Scotland, and this proportion varies by geography and background within Scotland. Accordingly, figures on entry rates or total recruitment in Scotland reflect only the part of full-time undergraduate study that uses UCAS.

In 2014, there were fewer very late acceptances than in other cycles recorded in the UCAS data for some Scottish providers. These changes may mean the number of applicants and acceptances to Scottish UCAS providers in 2014 recorded through UCAS could be understated by up to 2,000, compared to how applicants and acceptances have been reported in recent cycles. This means that comparing 2014 applicants and acceptances for Scottish providers (or those from Scotland) to other cycles, may not give an accurate measure of change.

In 2015, around 120 courses at Scottish providers which were previously part of the UCAS Teacher Training scheme, moved into the UCAS Undergraduate scheme. As such, the number of applicants and acceptances to Scottish providers in 2015 recorded through UCAS will include those which were previously part of UCAS Teacher Training. This means that comparing 2015 applicants and acceptances for Scottish providers (or those from Scotland, particularly those aged 21 or over) to previous cycles, may not give a like-for-like measure of change.

Glossary

Acceptance	An applicant who, at the end of the cycle, has been placed for entry into higher education.
Acceptance rate	The number of acceptances divided by the number of applicants.
Adjustment	An acceptance route where applicants who have met and exceeded the conditions of their firm choice choose to take up an alternative offer.
Age	This analysis uses country-specific age definitions that align with the cut-off points for school and college cohorts in the different administrations of the UK. For England and Wales, ages are defined on 31 August, for Northern Ireland on 1 July, and for Scotland on 28 February the following year. Defining ages in this way matches the assignment of children to school cohorts. For applicants outside the UK, a cohort cut-off of 31 August has been used.
Applicant	A person who has made an application in the UCAS system. Counts of applicants include those applying through the main scheme, late applicants direct to Clearing, and Records of Prior Acceptance (RPAs).
Base population estimate	The population estimates are based on Office for National Statistics mid-year estimates, and national population projections (published in June 2015). For 16 to 20 year olds, the estimates are obtained by ageing 15 year olds from the appropriate number of years earlier. This approach avoids the estimates being susceptible to changes in net migration (including overseas students) during these ages. Older ages are obtained from the mid-year estimates, and national population projections without ageing. 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. Analysis of application and entry rates by area-based background are supported through small area population estimates, available from the Office for National Statistics, National Records for Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency. These small area population estimates have been revised to be consistent with the national level population estimates.
Clearing	An acceptance route available late in the application cycle.
Cohort	A group of the population all born in the same academic year, who are therefore, for example, all aged 18 on a particular reference date.
Defer (deferred)	Most acceptances are into the academic year that starts immediately at the end of the cycle, for example into 2016/17 from the 2016 application cycle. Acceptances can also be deferred for entry into the following academic year, for example into 2017/18 from the 2016 cycle. These are called deferred acceptances.
Direct to Clearing	Applied through Clearing without an initial application through the main scheme (i.e. prior to the 30 June deadline).

Domicile	Declared area of permanent residence.
Entry rate	Number of acceptances from a UCAS application cycle divided by the estimated base population.
Extra	An acceptance route where applicants holding no offers after using all five main scheme choices can make additional choices.
Firm choice	An offer made by a provider which has been confirmed by the applicant as their first choice. These can be either conditional (dependent on achieving specified conditions), or unconditional (applicant has met specific conditions and assumed to be accepted or placed at the provider).
HE	Higher education.
Higher tariff provider	A provider that belongs to the higher tariff group, from the grouping of providers based on the average levels of attainment of their UK 18 year old accepted applicants (summarised through UCAS Tariff points) in recent cycles. The other two groups are medium tariff providers and lower tariff providers. Each group of providers accounted for around a third of all UK 18 year old acceptances in recent cycles.
Insurance choice	An offer made by a provider which has been confirmed by the applicant as their second choice, in case the conditions of their firm choice are not met. These can be either conditional (dependent on achieving specified requirements) or unconditional (no further requirements to be met).
Main scheme	The main UCAS Undergraduate application scheme through which up to five course choices can be applied for. This opens in September, and closes to new applications on 30 June the following year.
Main scheme Clearing	Where an applicant was unsuccessful in the main scheme (i.e. applied before 30 June), and subsequently found a place using Clearing.
Non-EU	Countries outside the European Union, including the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.
Offer	Provider decision to grant a place to an applicant. May be subject to the applicant satisfying academic and/or other criteria.
Provider	A higher education provider – a university or college.
RPA	Record of Prior Acceptance. When a provider informs UCAS of applicants it has accepted outside of the normal application process (e.g. individuals who have applied directly to the provider).
Tariff	A numerical summary of qualification level.
UK	United Kingdom. Excludes the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.