

Foreword by Clare Marchant, Chief Executive, UCAS

I was proud to join UCAS shortly before exam results were announced across the UK this year. A record number of 18 year olds from all four nations entered higher education, using UCAS' admissions service. Taking all domestic, EU, and international students together, more than half a million students (533,890) were accepted into UK higher education. This is the second highest figure on record, a slight fall of 0.2 per cent on 2016.

What's remarkable is that this has happened during a significant fall in the number of 18 year olds in our population.

The number of Scottish students going to Scottish universities increased by 3 per cent in 2017 to 34,830, the highest figure on record. The number of English students accepted at Scottish universities was 4,945, also the highest figure on record, an increase of 2.8 per cent.

We saw that English and Scottish 18 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to enter higher education than ever before.

However, significant differences in entry to higher education remain between groups. UCAS' Multiple Equality Measure (MEM) accounts for multiple individual-level factors concurrently. It shows that little overall progress has been made since 2014 in narrowing the gap in progression between different groups who have as much potential to benefit from higher education as any other.

Our data showed that the entry rate for 18 year olds from all ethnic groups increased. The White ethnic group continues to have the lowest proportional rate of progression to higher education, and the gap between this group and all others widened slightly this year.

There is also a widening gap between progression rates into higher education for young people from London and the rest of England. To get a more complete picture of outcomes in higher education, this data would need to be considered alongside retention figures.

While it is so encouraging to see so many more 18 year olds progressing to higher education, and all the benefits that brings, entry rates for mature students continue to fall.

This may have been driven by the strength of the job market, and the greater uptake of higher education at 18. However, this is unlikely to account for the whole picture.

These trends are interesting at a time when lifelong learning and career changes are becoming commonplace, as we live and work longer. UCAS is keen to investigate this further, working with partners in the sector.

The evidence suggests that the UK remains an attractive place to study for students from other countries. The number of acceptances for international students (excluding those from EU countries) increased to a record high of 40,245, up 5 per cent on 2016. The number of EU students placed fell by 2.1 per cent on last year, to 30,700.

This has been a time of considerable change for the sector, not least with the reform of A levels. The 2017 entry cycle was the first time that students holding reformed A levels applied to higher education. We have sought to keep both the higher education and pre-higher education sectors informed of developments, and how this is impacting the provision offered by schools and colleges.

Finally, the growth of UCAS' data, and opportunities for analysis, has meant that this year, for the first time, we have released our End of Cycle Report in waves. This has meant we can share a wider range of our findings more quickly to deepen understanding and inform national debate and change within the sector.