

Assessment of UCAS applicants to courses with a 15 October deadline

October 2018

UCAS Analysis and Insights

Introduction

15 October is the deadline for applying to the majority of undergraduate degree courses in medicine, dentistry, and veterinary science/medicine, or any courses at the University of Oxford and University of Cambridge. It is the first deadline of the UCAS Undergraduate admissions cycle.

Courses subject to the October deadline are highly competitive, with only around one in four applicants to these courses gaining a place, compared to three in four applicants to courses without a 15 October deadline. This, coupled with applicants generally needing to achieve higher than average grades to gain a place on these courses, leads to a high share of applicants not being placed at the end of the cycle, and reapplying the following year.

Typically, between 8 and 10 per cent of main scheme applicants will apply to courses with the 15 October deadline, meaning that at this time, it is not possible to draw conclusions around what to expect by the end of the cycle. However, we can see how demand for October deadline courses has changed, and draw insight about the characteristics of these applicants.

This analysis reports only on courses subject to the 15 October deadline. For more information on any of the topics covered, please refer to the 2019 entry October deadline applicant figures at www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/record-number-applicants-early-deadline-university-courses.

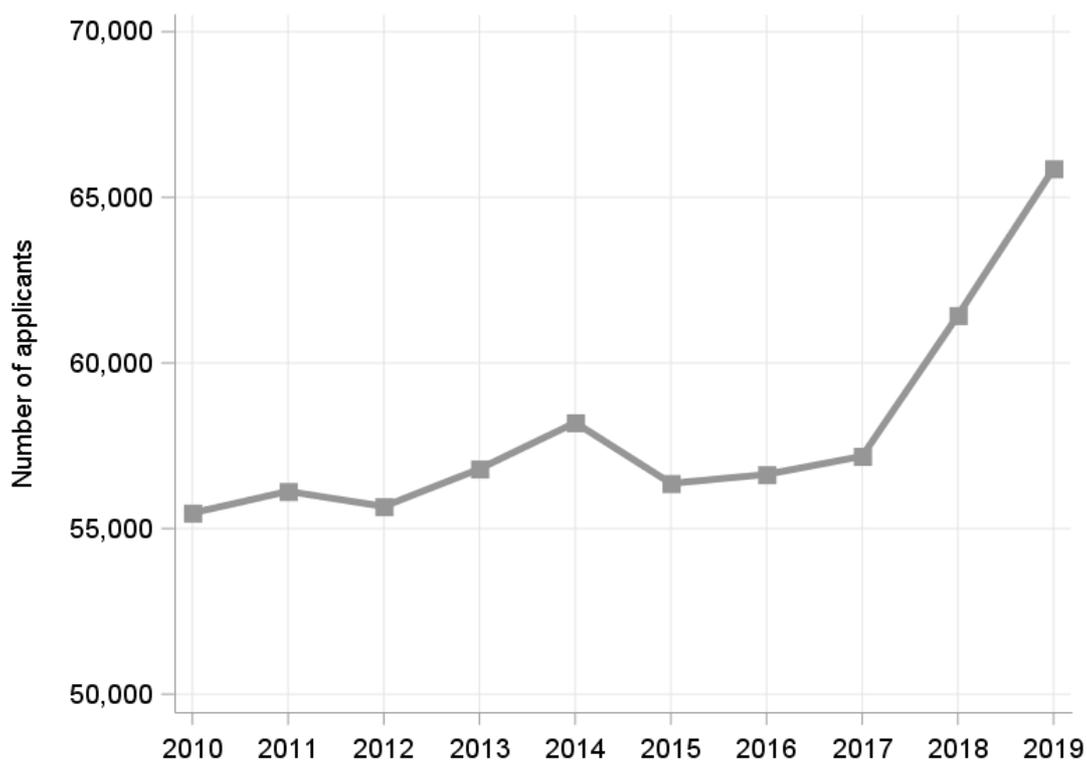
Number of applicants to courses with the 15 October deadline increase, despite declining population

This year, the UK 18 year old population has decreased by 2.0 per cent, resulting in 14,500 fewer 18 year olds. As generally around half of all applicants to courses with the 15 October deadline are UK 18 year olds, we would expect this decrease to have an impact on the number of applicants. However, the total number of applicants to courses with the 15 October deadline has increased to 65,870 this year – the highest number ever. This is the second year in a row that the total number of applicants have increased by 7 per cent.

This increase in October deadline applicants is in stark contrast to the decline in the number of main scheme applicants reported towards the end of the previous cycle. With the population down, and the trend in overall number of applicants having declined for the past two years, the increase in October deadline applicants appears to be bucking the trend.

To determine which groups of applicants are driving the increase in numbers at the 15 October deadline, there are four main areas worth investigating: age group, subject group or provider, reapplicants, and sex.

Figure 1: The number of applicants to courses with a 15 October deadline has risen notably over the past two years, to the highest ever



Large increases in applicants from young, declining populations

The general decline in the UK 18 year old population has been ongoing for many years now – declining by 11 per cent since 2009, putting significant strain on higher education providers. The reduction in UK 18 year olds, coupled with removal of student number caps, have been contributing factors in the increasing use of incentivised offer-making, as providers compete to fill their spaces. The reduced population size is also likely to have been a contributing factor in the 2 per cent decline in 30 June deadline applicants, which was seen last year.

But courses with the 15 October deadline appear unaffected. The number of UK 18 year olds applying to these courses increased by 10 per cent this year, with nearly 3,000 more applicants than last year. If the population had stayed the same as it was last year, we could have expected an extra 690 applicants, pushing the increase in UK 18 year old applicants up to 12 per cent.

The population of UK 19 year olds has also declined this year, by 2.5 per cent. Despite this, the number of UK 19 year olds applying to courses with the 15 October deadline has increased by 11 per cent.

The same pattern can be seen for all age groups up to the age of 30, with declining populations, yet increasing numbers of 15 October deadline applicants. For age groups older than 30, there have been increases in population sizes and in numbers of 15 October deadline applicants.

To summarise, the declining population is having no adverse effects on 15 October deadline applicant numbers.

Applicants from all domiciles increase or remain stable

At the end of the 2018 cycle, increases in numbers of applicants from the EU and non-EU countries stopped the overall decline in applicant numbers from being larger. However, for courses with the 15 October deadline this year, this pattern is not apparent, as the number of applicants from every domicile has either increased or remained stable. The largest increases have been from applicants domiciled in England, increasing by 9 per cent. Applicants from Northern Ireland and Wales have also increased, while Scotland remained stable. This is the opposite of what we saw in 2016, where Scotland was the only UK domicile to have increased in applicant numbers.

Further afield, applicants domiciled in the EU remained stable, while applicants from non-EU countries have increased by 6 per cent. Applicants from non-EU countries have been increasing for at least ten years now, showing that courses with the 15 October deadline, and UK higher education in general, continue to be ever more popular with these applicants.

Large increases in first time applicants and reapplicants

Reapplicants are those who applied at any point in the previous cycle, and have applied to a course with the 15 October deadline this year. First time applicants did not apply at any point in the previous cycle.

The increase in 15 October deadline applicants last year, coupled with a similar number of places available to fill, meant that, by the end of the 2018 cycle, it is likely there would be a greater number of 15 October deadline applicants who were not placed. This would result in a larger pool of applicants potentially choosing to reapply to 15 October deadline courses this year. This is reflected in the number of reapplicants this year increasing by 11 per cent. However, reapplicants are a small group of applicants, so this 11 per cent increase contributes just 14 per cent of the overall increase.

The majority of the increase in 15 October deadline applicants (the remaining 86 per cent) comes from first time applicants. This is significant, as it means the increase in applicants this year is not merely a by-product of an uncharacteristic increase last year, but possibly the beginning of a genuine trend, with more people choosing to initially apply to courses with the 15 October deadline.

Increase in medicine places combatting increased demand

Typically, around one third of 15 October deadline applicants apply to at least one medicine course, making them a large group of applicants. Changes to government policy tend to have large impacts on the number of applicants to specific courses, with medicine being no different.

Previously, around 6,000 places on undergraduate medicine courses have been available, limiting the number of potential applicants who are able to secure a place. However, recently, plans have been put in place to increase the number of available places on medical courses by 25 per cent, with the allocation of 1,500 additional places. For entry in the 2018 cycle, 630 of these extra places were made available, with 8 per cent more people choosing to apply, bucking the trend of falls seen in previous years. For entry in the 2019 cycle, an additional 690 places have been made available, increasing the number of available places by a further 10 per cent. The number of applicants to medicine courses has increased by 8 per cent this year – a lower rate than the increase in the number of places, meaning a higher proportion of medicine applicants should be placed by the end of the cycle, compared to last year.

This year, there have been 22,340 medicine applicants. With just under 7,400 available medicine places this year, we would expect around one in every three applicants to be placed onto these medicine courses by the end of the cycle. This would be an increase on previous cycle acceptance rates, meaning a higher proportion of medicine applicants would be accepted onto a course with the 15 October deadline.

Applicants to dentistry and veterinary medicine/science, and applicants to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, have also increased, showing that medicine courses are not the only driver behind increased applicant numbers. Numbers of applicants to Oxford and Cambridge have increased by 6 per cent, while applicants to dentistry and veterinary medicine/science courses outside of Oxford and Cambridge have increased by 13 per cent.

Women drive the increase

Historically, women are far more likely to enter UK higher education than men. They're also far more likely to apply. This trend begins early on, with women typically achieving higher grades at GCSE level. This translates to more women taking further education qualifications, and thus being eligible for university entry.

This year, the gap between men and women applying to courses with the 15 October deadline has increased again, following a 10 per cent increase in women and a 4 per cent increase in men. There are now 23 per cent more women applying to courses with the 15 October deadline than men. This is a 6 percentage point increase from last year, and a 14 percentage point increase from 2012, with the gap only showing signs of increasing further.

For men, the increase in applicants is primarily from England and non-EU countries, with applicant numbers from every other domicile having decreased.

For women, there have been increases in applicants from every domicile, with the largest increases of 13 and 11 per cent coming from England and Wales respectively.

Applicant behaviour is changing

We've seen in this report that, while there have been larger increases for some groups of applicants than others, increases are seen across the board, for most age groups, domiciles, reapplicants, first time applicants, subjects, and sexes.

The increase in applicant numbers is likely to be the result of a shift in applicant behaviour, with applicants choosing to apply to courses subject to the 15 October deadline, as opposed to a sudden increase from a particular group of applicants.

For the past few cycles, between 8 and 10 per cent of all main scheme applicants have applied to courses with the 15 October deadline. This is set to rise above 10 per cent for the first time ever this cycle.