



# END OF CYCLE REPORT 2018

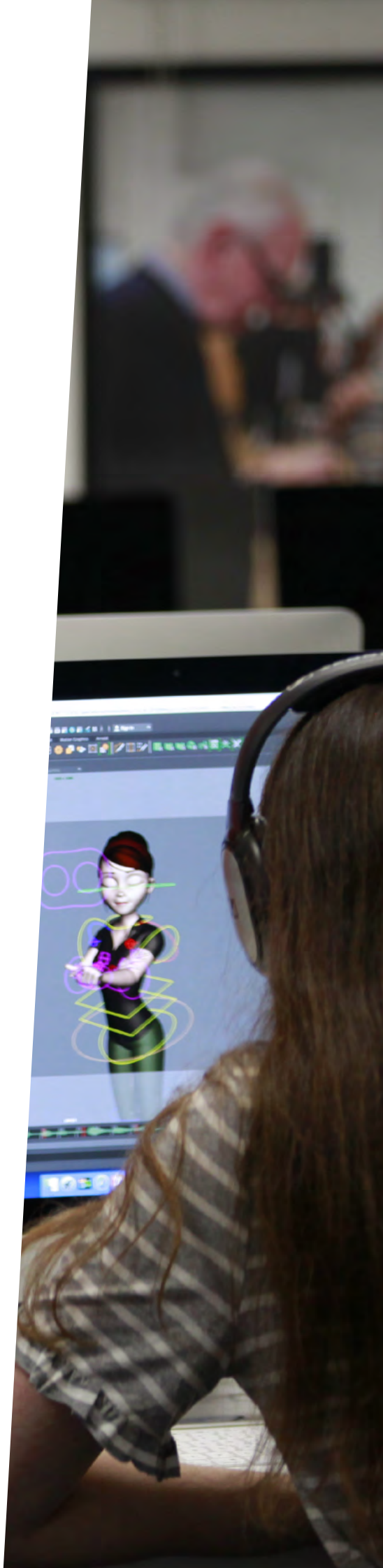
Unconditional offer-making to 18 year olds  
from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales

CHAPTER 3

UCAS

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# INTRODUCTION

This report is part of the first release of UCAS' End of Cycle Reports for the 2018 undergraduate admissions cycle.

As an independent charity, UCAS publishes timely data and analysis about demand for, and progression and admission to higher education, to contribute to public debate about education, access, and social mobility.

This year, we are publishing our end of cycle data and analysis in four releases, between 29 November and 31 January 2019, with the first release published 25 working days after the 2018 cycle closed. Weekly, between 29 November and 13 December, we will publish a series of detailed analysis reports covering the entire 2018 cycle. These will cover acceptance, offer, and entry rates, and differences by applicant background. On 13 December, we will also publish a series of analysis reference tables and data sets for the 2018 cycle. On 31 January, we will publish end of cycle provider-level application data, together with provider-level data on unconditional offer-making. This release will include analysis of trends in application rates by country, sex, and background, with recent years for comparison, and further analysis of offer-making.

It is in the context of this series of publications about the admissions cycle for 2018, that this report provides an in-depth analysis of unconditional offer-making to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

We would like to thank the universities who supported us in providing insight into their unconditional offer-making processes for use in the case studies throughout this report.



## 1.1 Trends in offer-making

The gradual removal of student number controls in England from 2012, the declining number of 18 year olds in the UK population, and falling demand for higher education from mature students, have all stimulated competition between providers to attract, recruit, and retain well-qualified students. Universities and colleges have responded to these challenges in different ways, including increased marketing and outreach, introducing student lifecycle management, investment in teaching infrastructure and student support, changes to offer-making and Confirmation strategies, and employing a wide range of incentives, such as preferential access to accommodation, scholarships and bursaries, and discounted or free travel, electronics, or access to amenities. Such initiatives are often intended to have multiple benefits, supporting widening participation and access goals, as well as student recruitment.

Since 2012, there have been significant year-on-year increases in the number of offers made by universities and colleges, and changes in the types of offers made, with previously only 2017 having shown a slight fall. In 2018, there were around 1.91 million offers made to all main scheme applicants (those applying before 30 June). This is a decrease of 0.7 per cent compared to 2017, but a 20.4 per cent increase compared to the number made in 2012.

## 1.2 Understanding

### unconditional offers

Universities and colleges are responsible for setting their own entry requirements, deciding on assessment methods, and determining the level of prior attainment and potential required to secure both an offer and a place. Providers take seriously the need to recruit only those students who have the ability to succeed and to complete the course they have applied for.

As set out in the principles of fair admissions<sup>1</sup>, universities and colleges can determine how much weight to give to prior academic achievement versus future potential, when making admissions decisions. This means that, for young people, offers of a degree place are most often described as conditional, being dependent on future academic achievement in specific qualifications and subjects. Providers can also take contextual factors into account, meaning that one applicant might receive a lower offer than another for the same programme.

Unconditional offers can be made where providers are satisfied that an individual has demonstrated sufficient attainment and potential to succeed on their chosen programme. For example, in Scotland, young students often apply with their SQA Highers results and receive unconditional offers on this basis. Across the UK, mature students applying to university normally have secondary level qualifications, and work-based or other professional experience, that enables them to demonstrate their potential to complete a degree programme. As such, they are more likely to receive unconditional offers compared to those aged 18, whose qualifications are typically pending.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/providers/good-practice>





### 1.3 The use of unconditional offers is increasing

In 2018, providers made about 68,000<sup>2</sup> unconditional offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, compared to about 3,000 in 2013, with the share of unconditional offers increasing from 0.4 per cent to 7.1 per cent in 2018.

Increasingly, unconditional offers are being made to 18 year old applicants who have taken their GCSEs (or equivalent) but still have to sit their final A level, applied general, or other Level 3 examinations. In doing so, providers will look carefully at GCSE attainment, which is a good predictor of degree success, as well as predicted grades, and any relevant work experience or volunteering evidenced in the application. In some cases, additional individual factors are taken into account, such as an applicant's health, sporting ability, or other extracurricular activities evidenced in a personal statement, performance at interview, or portfolio.

In 2013, 2 per cent of all unconditional offers made to applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales were made to 18 year olds, but by 2018 this had increased to 32 per cent. Although a third of the total number of unconditional offers were made to 18 year old applicants, such offers account for only a small proportion of all offers, conditional and unconditional, made to this group. In 2018, as stated previously, just over 7 per cent of offers to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales were recorded as unconditional. However, this also means that 22.9 per cent of these applicants, more than one in five, received at least one unconditional offer.

For the first time, UCAS has examined the practice of making 'conditional unconditional' offers, that is those offers made to young people which are conditional, but which are converted to an unconditional offer when a student picks that offer as their first (firm) choice. Prior to this, analysis of unconditional offer-making included only those offers that were unconditional from the beginning, and conditional unconditional offers that were chosen as firm. This analysis is the first time that conditional unconditional offers not chosen as firm have also been identified. In 2013, no conditional unconditional offers were detected, but the frequency of this type of offer has increased year-on-year. In 2018, providers made 66,315 conditional unconditional offers, 6.9 per cent of all offers made to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Combining the data on standard unconditional offers and conditional unconditional offers shows that 87,540 18 year old applicants (34.4 per cent) received at least one offer with an unconditional component in 2018.

The landscape of unconditional offer-making is not uniform across different course types, with patterns varying significantly by the subject applied for. In 2018, 18 per cent of offers made to young people for creative arts and design courses were unconditional, compared to 0.3 per cent for medicine and dentistry courses. This reflects that an audition or portfolio review is normally a core part of the assessment for a creative arts and design course. The demonstration of potential via this form of assessment often carries more weight in reaching an admissions decision than examination results.

Analysis of unconditional offer-making by the predicted A level grades of applicants shows that the growth in unconditional offer-making spans all predicted grade profiles, but the predicted attainment of those most likely to receive an unconditional offer has changed over the last five years. In 2014 and 2015, applicants predicted AAA were most likely to receive an unconditional offer, but in 2018, applicants predicted BBC became the most likely. Applicants with higher predicted grades are, however, much more likely to receive a conditional unconditional offer.

As outlined in some of the cases studies in this report, a number of providers use unconditional offers as a tool to support their widening participation goals. The last five years have seen increases in unconditional offers made to 18 year olds across all POLAR4 quintiles. However, applicants from quintiles 1 and 2 (least advantaged) were more likely to be in receipt of unconditional offers (27.7 per cent for both) in 2018, compared to applicants from quintile 5 (most advantaged), of which 18.1 per cent were likely to have received an unconditional offer. However, applicants from quintile 5 are more likely to hold a conditional unconditional offer (22.3 per cent) than those from quintile 1 (19.2 per cent). This is likely to relate to patterns observed in relation to predicted grades, with those in the most advantaged areas generally being predicted to achieve higher grades than those in more disadvantaged areas.

<sup>2</sup>. Note: Throughout this report, numbers are rounded to the nearest 5. Where this is not the case, prefixes are used to express that rounding is to a larger granularity.

## 1.4 Holding an unconditional offer as a first (firm) choice increases

### likelihood of students missing their predicted grades

The increase in unconditional offer-making to young people has drawn the attention of schools, colleges, and awarding organisations, that have expressed concerns about potential impacts on student motivation and Level 3 attainment, and preparation for higher level study. Providers are conscious of these risks, and encourage students to work hard irrespective of the offer they hold. Some providers also offer additional incentives, such as a bursary or scholarship if students who accept unconditional offers subsequently go on to perform well in their exams. After they have enrolled in higher education, many providers monitor unconditional offer students' progress, to compare progression and degree attainment in relation to students admitted to the same programmes via conditional offers.

However, it remains the case that applicants who hold an unconditional offer as their firm choice are more likely to miss their predicted A level grades by 2 or more points, compared to those who are holding a conditional offer as their firm choice.

Research published by UCAS in 2016 showed there are many factors associated with whether a student will achieve the A level grades they have been predicted<sup>3</sup>. This included whether they were holding an unconditional offer. English 18 year old applicants holding an unconditional offer as their first (firm) choice were found to have a higher probability of missing their predicted attainment by two or more grades. This was the case even after controlling, for many of the other factors associated with A level attainment. An update of this research, covering the 2013 to 2018 admissions cycles, in Annex A, shows that this is still the case –applicants holding an unconditional firm offer were between 7 and 13 per cent more likely to miss their predicted attainment by two or more grades, compared to what might be expected given their prior attainment, background characteristics, and the provider and subject at which the firm choice is held. It is estimated that in 2018, holding an unconditional firm offer resulted in an additional 1,015 English 18 year old applicants, who were studying for three or more A levels, achieving two grades lower than predicted. This is 1.6 per cent of this group.

<sup>3</sup> [Factors associated with predicted and achieved A level attainment](#)

## 1.5 Applicants are generally positive towards conditional unconditional offers

Applicants are generally positive about unconditional offers, with around 72 per cent in UCAS' applicant survey expressing positive views in 2018. Despite decreases in positive sentiment from 2015 to 2017, the percentage of positive comments has increased by nearly 10 percentage points from 2017. Around 9 per cent of applicants held negative views about unconditional offers in 2018, compared to 13 per cent in 2017.

In 2018, over 60 per cent of applicants who received a conditional unconditional offer said it had a big impact, or some impact, on their firm choice decision, with less than 20 per cent saying it had no impact at all. The majority of applicants who receive a conditional unconditional offer go on to study at one of these providers, and are especially likely to do so if they have stated that the conditional unconditional offer had an impact on their firm choice decision.

# 2.

# AN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING UNCONDITIONAL OFFER-MAKING PATTERNS

## 2.1 Defining unconditional offers

**Unconditional offers** are defined here to be offers made on applications submitted via the main UCAS application scheme, and recorded as being unconditional on 30 June – the final date on which main scheme applications can be submitted (applications received after this date go directly into Clearing). This is the definition used in previous analytical reporting of unconditional offers.

In this report, we also consider the type of offers which, as described in the introduction, are adjusted by the provider from conditional to unconditional if selected as an applicant's firm choice. These offers, referred to in this report as **conditional unconditional offers**, are identified in the admissions system via free text fields that providers can use to communicate any additional information regarding the offer to the applicants.

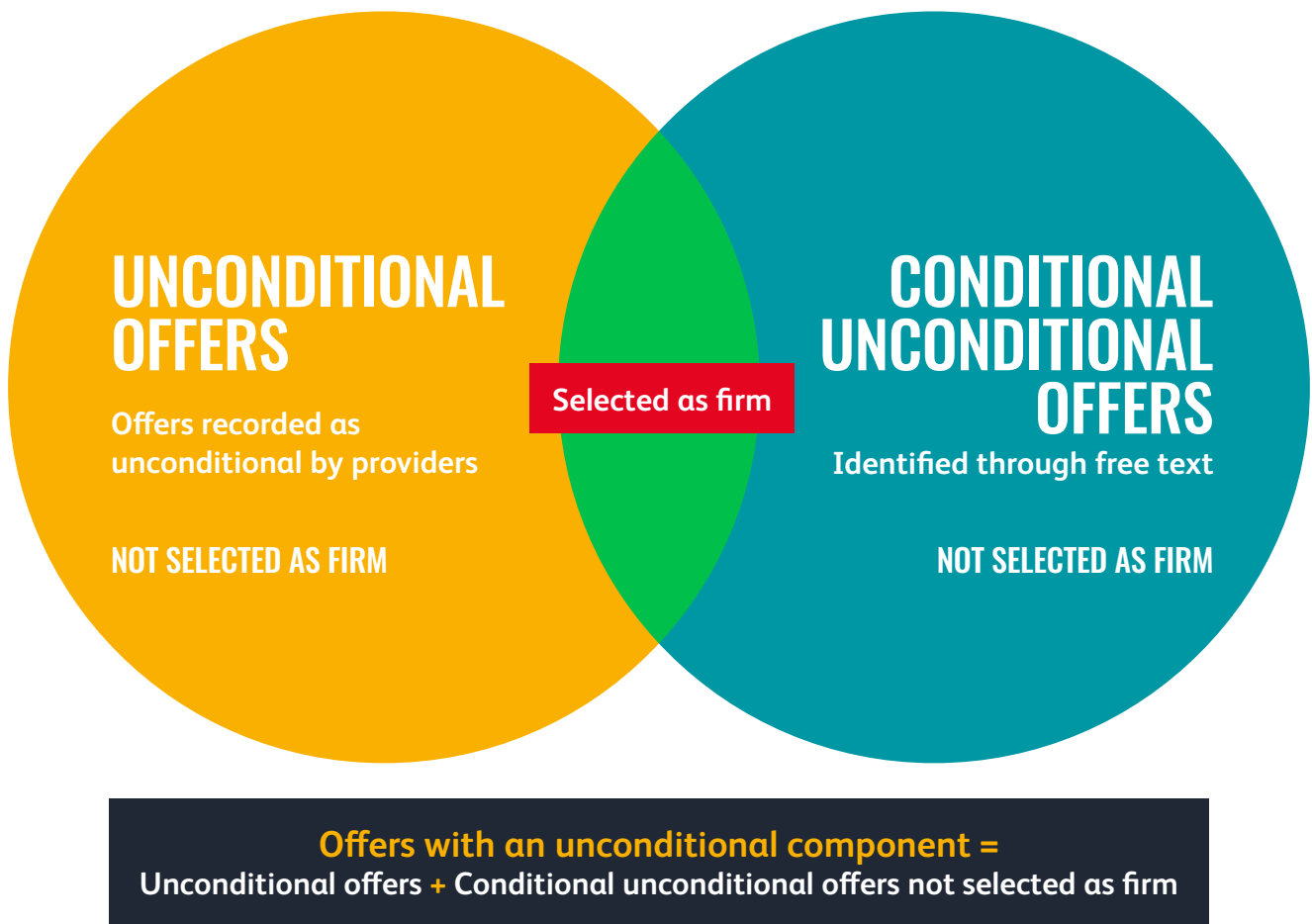
These two types of offer, and their relationship to one another, are shown in Figure 1. There is an overlap between the offer types. By definition, unconditional offers include any conditional unconditional offers selected as an applicant's firm choice. This is because conditional unconditional offers (that are recorded as conditional when the offer is first made), are subsequently adjusted by the provider to be unconditional, once selected as firm. Conversely, conditional unconditional offers that are not selected as firm will remain recorded as conditional, and so are not defined to be unconditional offers.

The full set of offers, that is unconditional offers plus conditional unconditional offers not selected as firm, are defined as **offers with an unconditional component**.

This overlap in offer types makes the complete reporting of offer-making patterns particularly challenging. The solution adopted here has been to separate the reporting of **unconditional offers** from the reporting of **conditional unconditional offers**. This brings about two main benefits. Firstly, patterns of unconditional offers are consistent with, and directly comparable to, previous UCAS analysis. Secondly, patterns of conditional unconditional offer-making can be assessed.

Finally, it is important to note that not all conditional unconditional offers can be identified, and so the numbers are likely to be under-reported. Although UCAS' terms of engagement require providers to communicate their offers to applicants through our systems, we are aware of instances where providers communicate directly with applicants about offers outside of UCAS. In cases where these providers make conditional unconditional offers, such offers will not have been identified as conditional unconditional.





## FIGURE 1:

Relationship between the different types of offers considered in this report. The colour scheme is used throughout the report to identify the different types of offer

### Identifying conditional unconditional offers

Conditional unconditional offers are identified via free text fields that providers use to communicate additional information about their offers. Examples from operational data are given below.

'We are delighted to offer you a place under our unconditional offer scheme. This means that if you make us your firm choice the conditions above will not apply, and you will be automatically made unconditional with us.'

'Alternatively, we are delighted to inform you that you have been selected for the [provider] Unconditional Offer Scheme. This means that if you make [provider] your firm choice we will respond to this commitment by making your offer unconditional.'

'If you make this course your firm choice we will make it unconditional based on your exceptional performance to date in your studies.'

'If you make [provider] your firm choice we will respond to this commitment by making your offer unconditional.'

## 2.2 Scope of the report

This report focuses on 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales who applied through the main UCAS admissions scheme. All numbers and patterns shown, unless otherwise stated, relate specifically to this group. Analysis of offers is restricted to those made by 30 June to applications submitted through the main scheme.

We have focused on this group, since they are least likely to apply already having achieved a full set of qualifications typically required for undergraduate higher education. Instead, they usually apply with most of their qualifications pending, and with predicted, rather than achieved grades.

In Scotland on the other hand, a substantial number of 18 year old applicants apply having already achieved SQA Highers, and are accepted onto undergraduate courses at Scottish universities based on their attainment in these qualifications. This, combined with the fact that most applicants from Scotland tend to apply to Scottish providers, means a higher proportion of offers to Scottish 18 year olds are recorded as unconditional, compared to those from elsewhere in the UK. Because of this very different context, offers made to Scottish applicants are not included in this report. However, offers made by Scottish providers to applicants from elsewhere in the UK are included.

Due to the differing programmes of study and range of qualifications presented by non-UK applicants, offers made to non-UK domiciled applicants are excluded from the scope of this report, to enable a consistent and accurate picture of unconditional offer-making to be examined.

Where predicted and achieved grade attainment is reported, the scope of this report is focused on applicants with 3 predicted A levels only. A levels are by far the most common qualification English, Northern Irish, and Welsh 18 year old applicants are studying towards, and provide a consistent cohort to analyse across the time period covered. The variation in the structure, composition, times and means of assessment of BTEC, together with the variable applicant profile, means that to present the most consistent results we have chosen to focus analysis of predicted grade attainment on the A level cohort only.

The reporting of unconditional offers as outlined above, is consistent with previous UCAS reporting of unconditional offers. We have not reported here the data relating to unconditional offers by specific providers or groups of providers; our end of cycle reporting in January 2019 will publish provider-level data and commentary around the patterns and subject ranges of unconditional offer-making across provider groups.



## 2.3 Quantifying the use of unconditional, and conditional unconditional offers

Two key measures are used to report patterns of unconditional, and conditional unconditional offer-making:

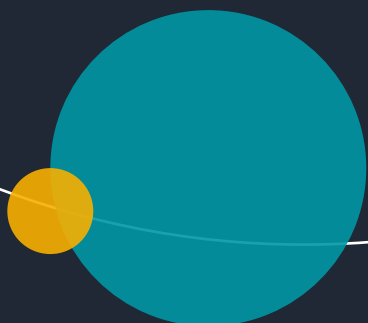
- > When considering patterns of offer-making across groups of providers or subjects, we report the proportions of all offers in each group recorded as unconditional. These proportions estimate the **probability** that an offer made by a particular provider, or to study a particular subject, is unconditional. They are preferable to reporting **counts** of unconditional offers, which in many cases will simply reflect the relative size of the groups.
- > For similar reasons, when looking at patterns across different groups of applicants, we report the proportions of applicants in each group that had an unconditional offer. Such proportions estimate the **probability** that applicants in each group would have received an unconditional offer.
- > The same approach has been used to report conditional unconditional offers, and offers with an unconditional component, across groups of subjects, and applicants.



3



**PATTERNS  
OF UNCONDITIONAL  
OFFER-MAKING  
ACROSS THE SECTOR**





### 3.1 Around one in seven offers to applicants of all ages from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales were unconditional in 2018

Since 2013, the total number of offers of all types made to applicants of all ages from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales has increased, from around 1.3 million offers, to around 1.4 million in 2018. A minority of these offers are recorded as unconditional, but each year the share of all offers made that were recorded as unconditional has increased, from 9.2 per cent in 2013, to 15.1 per cent in 2018.

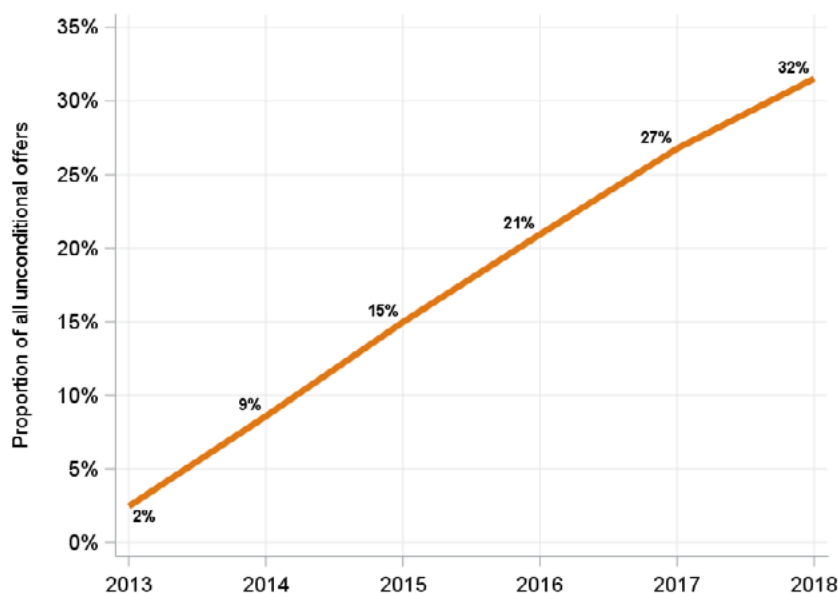
### 3.2 Most unconditional offers are made to applicants aged 19 and over, but the proportion made to 18 year olds has increased substantially since 2013

Among applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, most unconditional offers are made to those aged 19 and over. However, since 2013, the share of all unconditional offers made to applicants aged 19 and over has fallen, with the proportion going to 18 year old applicants increasing.

Figure 2 shows that, in 2013, 2 per cent of all unconditional offers were to 18 year old applicants. By 2018, 32 per cent of unconditional offers (nearly one in three) were to 18 year olds.

## FIGURE 2:

The proportion of unconditional offers made to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, by year



### 3.3 Unconditional offers are common

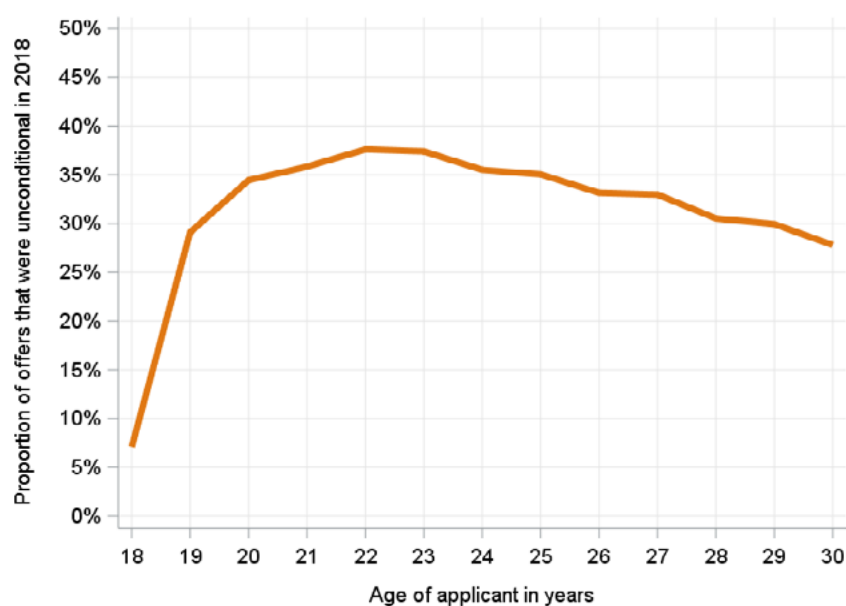
#### for applicants aged 19 and above

Although around a third of all unconditional offers are made to 18 year old applicants, such offers account for only a small proportion of all offers made to this group. This is partly because they make the majority of applications each year, and therefore they receive the majority of offers. In 2018, just over 7 per cent of offers to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales were recorded as unconditional (Figure 2).

Figure 3 below shows the proportion of offers to each age group in 2018. This shows that offers to applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales aged 19 to 30 were between four to five times more likely to be unconditional, compared to offers made to 18 year olds. In 2018, 22 year olds received the highest proportion of unconditional offers (38 per cent), and 19 year olds the lowest (28 per cent). Offers to those aged 19 and above would typically be unconditional in the cases where applicants had achieved suitable prior qualifications.

### FIGURE 3:

Proportion of offers to applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales in 2018 that were unconditional, by age



### 3.4 The proportion of offers to 18 year olds

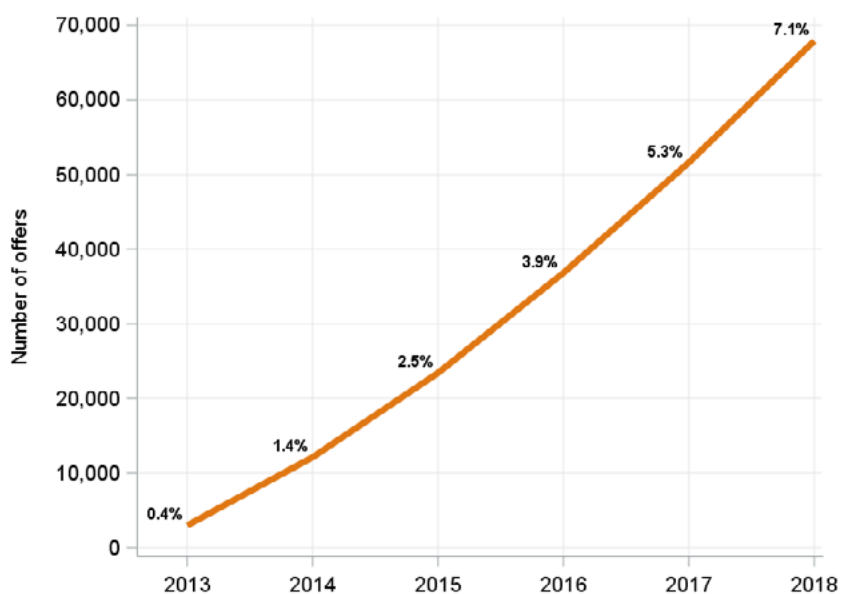
#### recorded as unconditional is increasing

The number of unconditional offers made to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales increased between 2013 and 2018 (Figure 4).

In 2013, there were 2,985 offers recorded as unconditional, accounting for 0.4 per cent of all offers. In 2017, the number of unconditional offers had increased to 51,615, which was 5.3 per cent of all offers made to that group that year. In 2018, the number of unconditional offers increased again, by 16,295 (+32 per cent) to 67,915, accounting for 7.1 per cent of all offers made to this 18 year old group.

#### FIGURE 4:

Number and proportion of offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales that were unconditional, by year



## 3.5 More than one in five applicants received

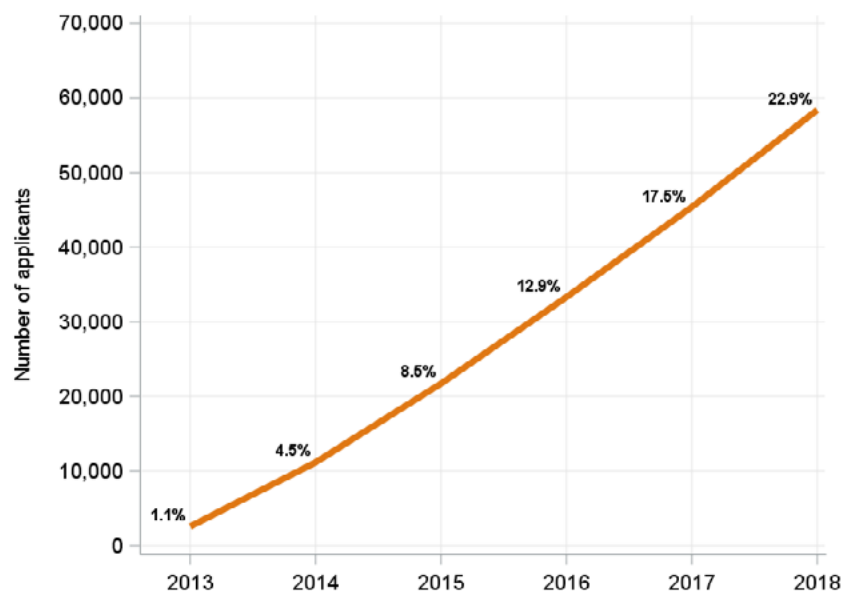
### at least one unconditional offer in 2018

The number and percentage of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales that received at least one unconditional offer is shown in Figure 5.

In 2013, 2,570 applicants (1.1 per cent) received at least one unconditional offer. Since then, the number and percentage of applicants receiving at least one unconditional offer has increased each year, to reach 45,385 (17.5 per cent) in 2017. In 2018, the number increased again, by 29 per cent, to 58,385, meaning that 22.9 per cent of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, received at least one unconditional offer.

### FIGURE 5:

Number and proportion of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, with an unconditional offer, by year



### CASE STUDY:

#### Using unconditional offers to support sporting excellence.

Provider X uses a flexible policy to support promising athletes in their application across their entire undergraduate portfolio. Competition in sport at regional, national or international level, or strong evidence of future outstanding sporting potential, is considered by provider X alongside an assessment of academic potential. If the applicant's predicted grades meet the standard entry criteria and they are confirmed as a promising athlete by provider X's sports department, they may be considered for an unconditional offer (or a reduced grade offer if the predicted grades do not meet the standard criteria) for selected courses. Given that this is a model targeted at very specific applicants, overall the practice of making unconditional offers accounts for a small percentage of the provider's total offer-making.



### 3.6 The number of offers identified as conditional unconditional offers has also increased since 2013

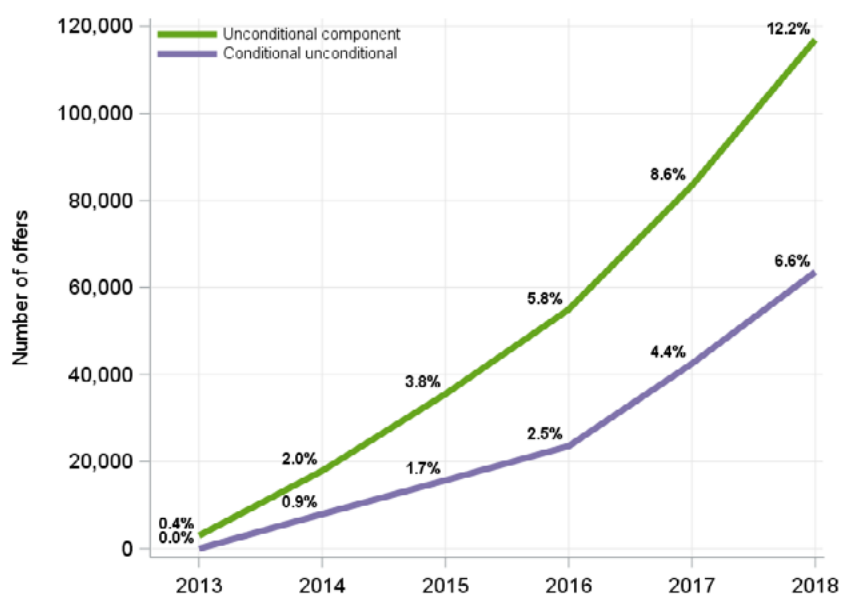
Figure 6 shows the number and proportion of offers each year that were identified as conditional unconditional offers (that is offers that are initially recorded as conditional, and adjusted to unconditional only if selected as an applicant's firm choice). In 2013, no conditional unconditional offers were identified, but each year since the number has increased. In 2018, a total of 63,560 conditional unconditional offers were identified, accounting for 6.6 per cent of all offers made to the 18 year old group that year.

### 3.7 One in eight offers had an unconditional component in 2018

Figure 6 also shows the number and proportion of offers each year that had an unconditional component. Both the number and proportion of offers with an unconditional component increased each year from 2,985 in 2013 (0.4 per cent of all offers), to 116,945 in 2018 (12.2 per cent of all offers).

## FIGURE 6:

Number and proportion of offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales identified as conditional unconditional, or as having an unconditional component



### 3.8 A third of applicants received an offer with an unconditional component in 2018

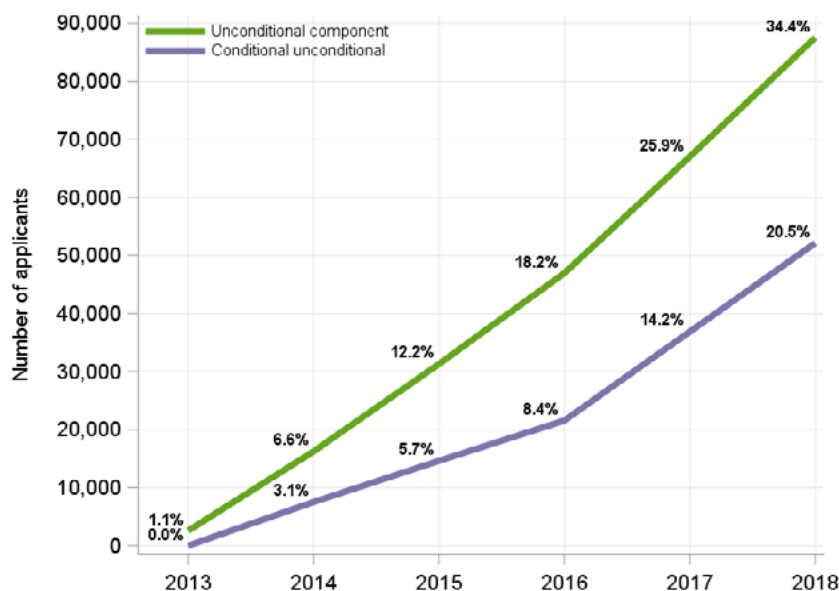
Figure 7 shows the number, and proportion, of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales who received a conditional unconditional offer, along with the number and proportion who received an offer with an unconditional component.

52,145 applicants (20.5 per cent) received at least one conditional unconditional offer, in 2018. This is an increase of 15,275 (+41.4 per cent) on the number in 2017. In 2013, no applicants received this type of offer.

87,540 applicants (34.4 per cent) received at least one offer with an unconditional component in 2018, an increase of 20,515 (+31 per cent) on the year before. In 2013, the number was 2,570.

#### FIGURE 7:

Number and proportion of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with a conditional unconditional offer, or an offer with an unconditional component



# 4. PATTERNS OF UNCONDITIONAL OFFER-MAKING ACROSS SUBJECT GROUPS

## 4.1 Unconditional offers have increased

### across nearly all subject groups

The proportion of offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales that were recorded as unconditional, split by subject group, is shown in Figure 8.

In 2013, the proportion of all offers recorded as unconditional ranged between 0.1 per cent for courses in mathematical sciences and education, and 1.5 per cent for courses in creative arts and design. Since then, except for medicine and dentistry courses, the proportion of offers recorded as unconditional increased every year, although the increases were not equal across subjects.

## 4.2 Unconditional offers are most

### likely to be made for creative arts

### and design courses

Since 2013, the proportion of offers recorded as unconditional increased the most for courses in creative arts and design. By 2018, 18 per cent of all offers to study these courses were recorded as unconditional. Offers to these courses are commonly based on an applicant's portfolio, or performance in an audition, meaning that offers only become unconditional once the applicant has displayed a level of talent or potential through media other than in the initial application to university.

Relatively large increases also occurred for courses in mass communications and documentation, and technologies, where respectively 14.5 per cent, and 12.9 per cent of all offers, were recorded as unconditional in 2018.

Across the period, only a very small proportion (between 0.2 and 0.3 per cent) of offers to study courses in medicine and dentistry were recorded as unconditional.

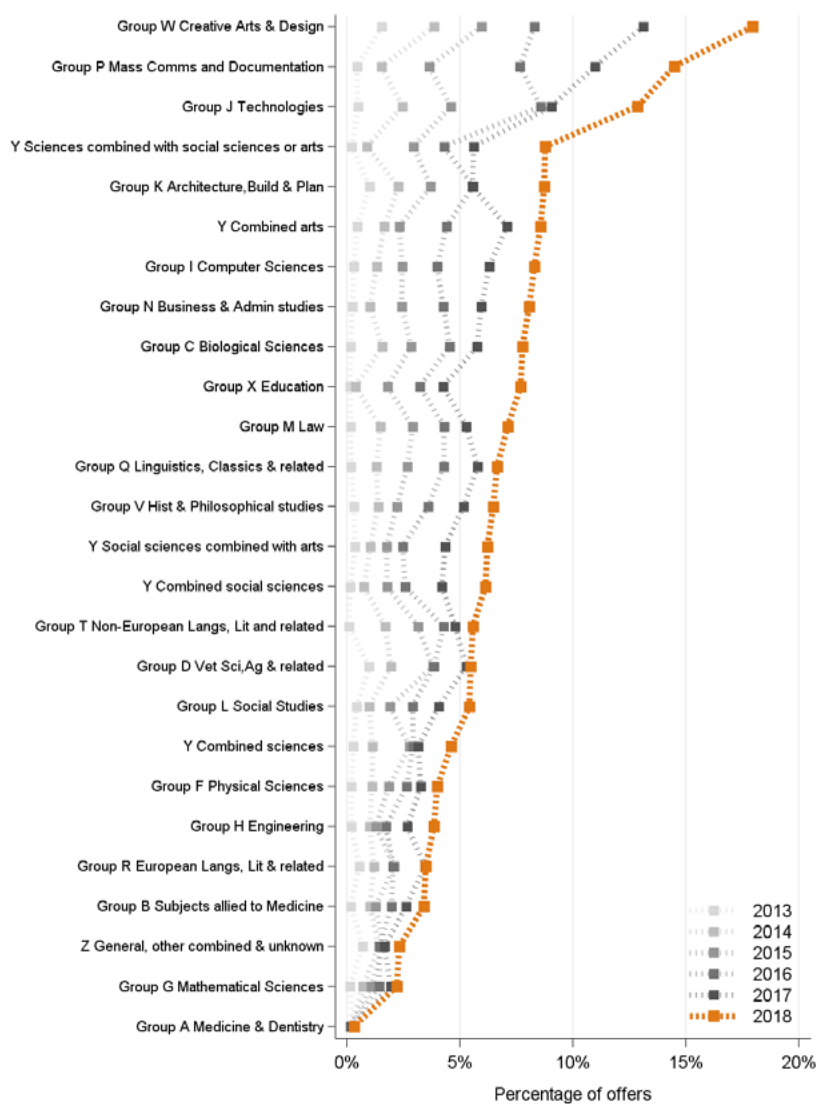
### 4.3 Conditional unconditional offers account for

### 3 to 10 per cent of all offers in most subjects

The proportion of offers identified as conditional unconditional in 2018 across JACS 3.0 subject groups is shown in Figure 9.

Conditional unconditional offers were made for courses in every subject group in 2018, except for medicine and dentistry. For subject groups where conditional unconditional offers were made, they accounted for between 3 and 10 per cent of all offers made. In 2018, the courses with the highest proportion of conditional unconditional offers were linguistics, classics and related, and combined arts.

Also shown are the proportion of offers identified as having an unconditional component in 2018. The pattern is similar to that in Figure 8, as they include unconditional offers as well as conditional unconditional offers not selected as firm. This means that relatively high proportions of offers made to study courses in creative arts and design, mass communications and documentation, and technologies, have an unconditional component, and a very low proportion of offers to study courses in medicine and dentistry.



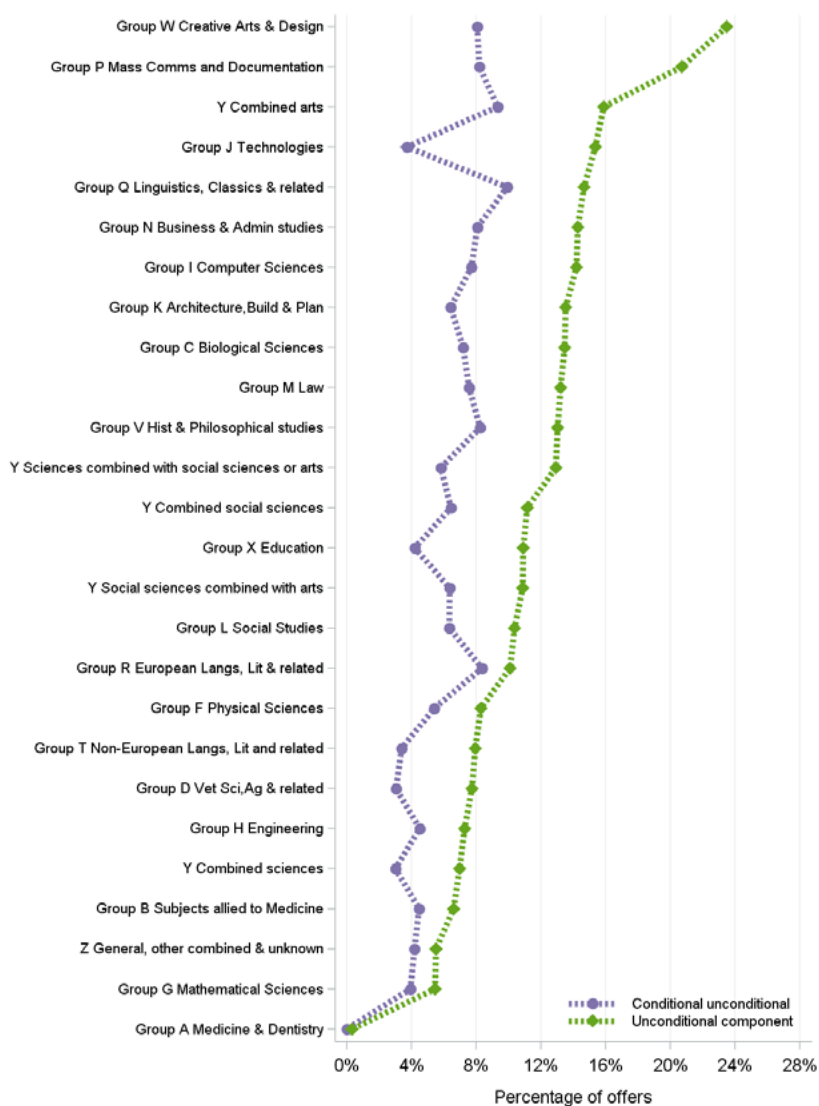
**FIGURE 8:**

Percentage of offers 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales that were unconditional, by JACS 3.0 subject group and year



## FIGURE 9:

Percentage of offers to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales in 2018 that were conditional unconditional, or had an unconditional component, by JACS 3.0 subject group



## CASE STUDY:

### Making unconditional offers following a portfolio assessment and interview for creative arts, design and media courses

The use of unconditional offers based on interviews and/or portfolio submissions for creative arts, design, and media courses is a well-established and common practice. Provider X specialises in creative subjects and uses portfolio-based interviews as a key part of the admissions process. After shortlisting based on the initial application (including predicted and achieved grades), the interview focuses on assessing a portfolio, and discussing the applicant's creative potential, motivations for studying, and their understanding of what creative studies entails. The decision to make an unconditional offer following interview is therefore based on individual competency and potential to succeed in the arts, and represents the majority of offers made to applicants.

Level 3 attainment is encouraged at interview and reiterated post-offer with positive, proactive messaging, including how to manage exam stress and highlighting aspirational examples of high achieving graduates. Provider X also monitors the

impact that unconditional offers have, both through the applicant's subsequent performance, and feedback from teachers and applicants. This intelligence is used to inform the annual review of offer-making strategies. As a result, provider X has seen a rise in the number of applicants who meet or exceed their predicted A level grades.

Provider X has also received positive feedback from teachers and advisers about the importance of conducting formal interviews and portfolios with students in the arts, and the motivational effect that receiving feedback and advice from lecturers during the interview process can have on student performance. In addition, applicant feedback indicates that the unconditional offer removed an element of pressure at an already stressful time, and gave them the security of knowing they could go to their first choice provider.

5



**PATTERNS  
OF UNCONDITIONAL  
OFFERS ACROSS  
APPLICANTS**

## 5.1 An applicant's chances of receiving an unconditional offer varies according to their predicted attainment

The 2017 UCAS End of Cycle Report identified differences in the probability of receiving an unconditional offer among 18 year old applicants studying for A levels, by predicted attainment.

For every applicant predicted to achieve at least three A levels (of grade E or higher), the top three predicted grades are converted to a numerical scale by assigning a value of 6 points for an A\* grade, 5 points for an A grade, and so on, down to 1 point for an E grade. The proportion of applicants grouped according to their best three predicted A level point score total, that received at least one offer recorded as unconditional, is shown in Figure 10, for each year since 2013.

The proportion of applicants who received at least one unconditional offer shows substantial variation across predicted A level attainment, both within and across years.

## 5.2 The growth in receipt of unconditional offers spans the full range of predicted attainment

In 2013, the proportion of applicants with predicted A levels who received an unconditional offer was small, ranging between 0.3 and 1.6 per cent. Except for those predicted to achieve 6 points or fewer (equivalent to three A levels at grade D), the proportion of applicants receiving an unconditional offer increased each year, with the proportions in 2018 being the highest recorded.

In 2018, almost one in three applicants predicted 11 points (equivalent to BBC) received an unconditional offer. Around one in ten applicants predicted 6 points or fewer (equivalent to DDD or below), and around one in 20 applicants predicted 18 points (equivalent to A\*A\*A\*) received an unconditional offer.

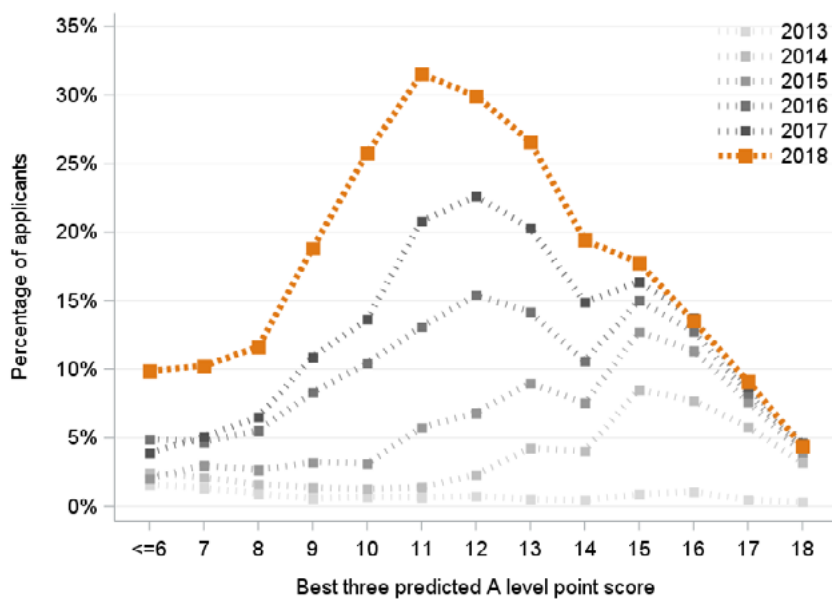


### 5.3 The predicted attainment of applicants most likely to receive unconditional offers has shifted through time

Figure 10 shows how unconditional offers were initially concentrated among applicants with relatively high predicted A level grades. In 2014 and 2015, applicants predicted 15 points (equivalent to AAA) were most likely to receive an unconditional offer. By 2017, applicants predicted 12 points (equivalent to BBB) were the most likely to receive an unconditional offer. Then, as described above, in 2018, applicants predicted 11 points (equivalent to BBC) became the most likely.

#### FIGURE 10:

Percentage of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with an unconditional offer, by predicted A level points and year





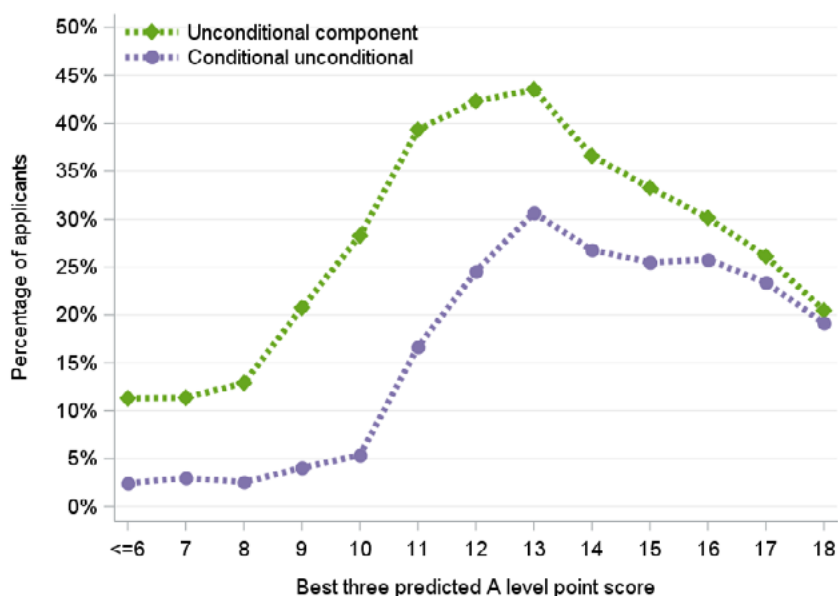
## 5.4 In contrast, conditional unconditional offers

### are made to higher attaining applicants

Figure 11 shows the proportion of applicants in 2018 who received at least one offer identified as conditional unconditional, by predicted A level point score.

Applicants with higher predicted grades (11 points or more – equivalent to BBC or higher) were much more likely to receive a conditional unconditional offer than those with lower predicted grades. This pattern reveals how conditional unconditional offers appear to be targeted towards higher achieving applicants, perhaps to attract such students.

Also shown in Figure 11, are the proportions of applicants in 2018 who received at least one offer with an unconditional component. The two lines illustrate how applicants with higher predicted grades are far more likely to hold a conditional unconditional offer than those with lower predicted grades, given they hold an offer with an unconditional component.



**FIGURE 11:**

Percentage of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales in 2018 with a conditional unconditional offer, or an offer with an unconditional component, by predicted A level points

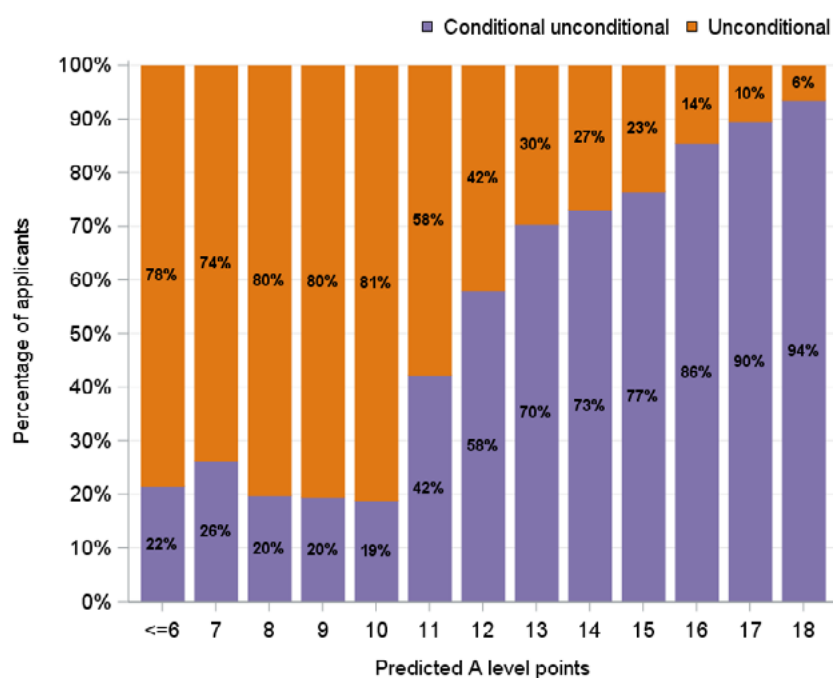




This is shown more clearly in Figure 12, which shows the proportion of all applicants with an offer with an unconditional component, where those applicants also held a conditional unconditional offer. Almost all (93.6 per cent) applicants who were predicted to achieve the highest grades and who were holding an offer with an unconditional component, also hold a conditional unconditional offer. In contrast, only a fifth (21.6 per cent) of applicants predicted to achieve the lowest grades, and who were holding an offer with an unconditional component, also hold a conditional unconditional offer.

## FIGURE 12:

Share of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales holding an offer with an unconditional component in 2018, who also held a conditional unconditional offer, or an unconditional offer, by predicted A level attainment



## CASE STUDY:

### **Making unconditional offers based on predicted grades and firm acceptance, with a supporting scholarship for the duration of the student's undergraduate degree**

Provider X makes unconditional offers to applicants to selected courses who are predicted to achieve ABB or above at A level, and to a small number of applicants who perform exceptionally well in an interview – therefore accounting for a small proportion of offers made by this provider. Applicants are made a conditional offer initially, and their offer is then changed to unconditional if they decide to accept it as firm. If they do not accept the offer as firm, the conditions still stand, and this is made clear to applicants in receipt of these offers.

Provider X sends clear, supportive communications to unconditional offer holders, to encourage Level 3 attainment. Applicants are also made aware of the opportunity to receive an academic achievement scholarship if they achieve AAA or above at A level. If students are awarded this scholarship, additional scholarships are then made available annually as they progress through their undergraduate course if they continue to achieve at the highest level.

## CASE STUDY:

### **Making unconditional offers based on achieved Level 2 and predicted Level 3 grades, firm acceptance and engagement, with a supporting scholarship and accommodation guarantee**

Provider X makes unconditional offers to applicants to selected courses, who meet course-specific minimum levels of academic achievement at Level 2 (typically GCSE grades), and predicted attainment in a select number of qualifications at Level 3, including A levels, the International Baccalaureate Diploma, BTEC Nationals, and combinations. Applicants are made a conditional offer initially, and their offer is then changed to unconditional if they meet two non-academic conditions: accepting the offer as their firm choice, and engaging with provider X (e.g. by attending a post-application open day).

Level 3 attainment is encouraged by the offer of an academic scholarship to those who achieve certain grades. Consideration for this scholarship is automatic for those eligible for the unconditional offer. There is also a reminder of the worth of Level 3 attainment, not only in relation to degree performance but also to future career prospects, including mid-degree placements. In addition, the firm commitment to provider X also allows for an enhanced guarantee on accommodation. An example of how the communications support Level 3 attainment, sent alongside comprehensive information about the offer, the accommodation guarantee, and the scholarship scheme, is below:

'In the meantime, we urge you to carry on working hard in your studies and get the best grades you can in your upcoming qualifications. Achieving good grades now is very important as a foundation for your time at university and for your future career. And don't forget – eligibility for our scholarship is dependent on the actual grades you achieve and subject to the full terms and conditions being met.'

## 5.5 Applicants from low higher education (HE) participation

areas more likely to hold an unconditional offer in 2018,

compared to those from high participation areas

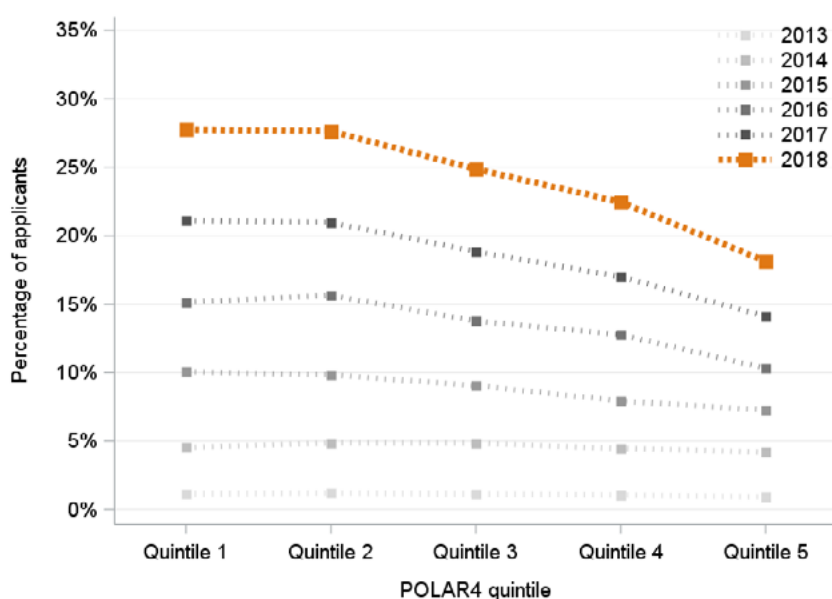
The POLAR4 measure classifies small areas across the UK into five groups, according to their level of young participation in higher education (entry at age 18 or 19). Each of these groups represents around 20 per cent of young people, and are ranked from quintile 1 (areas with the lowest young participation rates, considered as the most disadvantaged) to quintile 5 (highest young participation rates, considered most advantaged).

The proportion of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales holding unconditional offers each year since 2013, by POLAR4 quintile, is shown in Figure 13.

In 2013, the proportion of applicants from each quintile holding an unconditional offer was small, ranging between 0.9 to 1.2 per cent. That is, in 2013, around one in every 100 applicants from each POLAR4 quintile held an unconditional offer.

Every year since 2013, the proportion of applicants holding an unconditional offer from each POLAR4 quintile has increased. Bigger increases among applicants living in low participation areas have resulted in a larger variation in the proportion of applicants holding an unconditional offer across the quintiles.

In 2018, applicants from POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2 were the most likely to hold an unconditional offer (27.8 per cent for quintile 1, and 27.6 per cent for quintile 2). In the same year, 24.9 per cent of applicants from quintile 3 held an unconditional offer, as did 22.5 per cent of applicants from quintile 4, and 18.2 per cent of applicants from quintile 5.



**FIGURE 13:**

Percentage of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with an unconditional offer, by POLAR4 quintile and year

## 5.6 Applicants from low HE participation areas are more likely to hold offers with an unconditional component, compared to those from high participation areas

The patterns across POLAR4 quintiles described above are also seen for the proportion of applicants from each quintile with an offer identified as having an unconditional component (Figure 14). Applicants from quintiles 1 and 2 were most likely to hold an offer with an unconditional component (36.8 per cent and 37.3 per cent respectively), while those from quintile 5 were least likely (31.6 per cent).

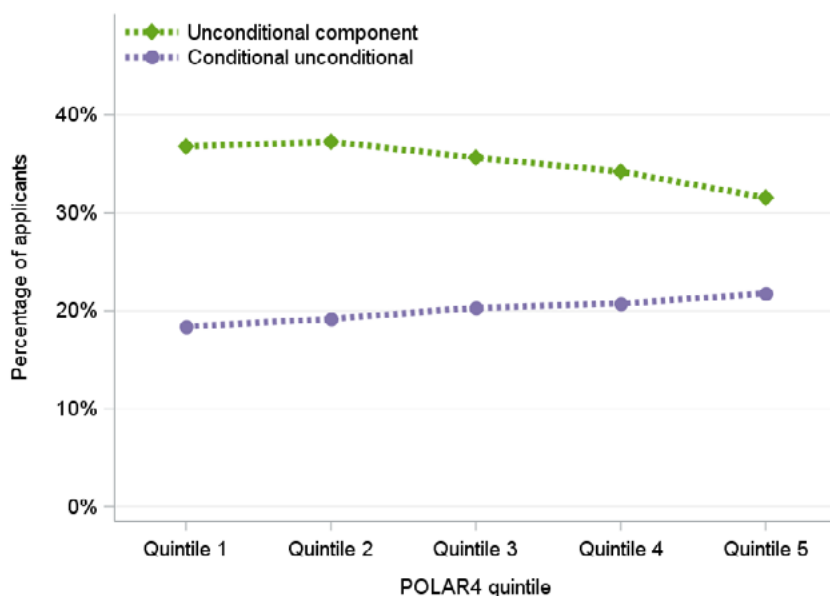
## 5.7 Conditional unconditional offers are more likely to be held by applicants from high HE participation areas

The opposite pattern is seen across POLAR4 quintiles when we consider applicants holding conditional unconditional offers. Figure 14 shows how, in 2018, applicants aged 18, and from higher HE participation areas, were more likely to hold offers identified as conditional unconditional (21.8 per cent), than applicants from lower HE participation areas (18.4 per cent).

The higher proportion of applicants from higher HE participation areas holding conditional unconditional offers is likely to be related to the patterns observed by predicted A level attainment. Applicants from areas with higher levels of HE participation tend to be predicted, on average, to achieve higher A level grades than those from lower HE participation areas. Since applicants with higher predicted grades are also more likely to hold unconditional offers (Figure 11), the higher proportion of applicants holding conditional unconditional offers from higher HE participation areas is expected.

### FIGURE 14:

Percentage of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with a conditional unconditional offer, or with an offer with an unconditional component in 2018, by POLAR4 quintile



## CASE STUDY:

### Using unconditional offers to support students with mental health conditions

As part of their commitment to widening participation and fair access, provider X uses contextual data when considering all applicants across their entire undergraduate portfolio. Provider X considers academic performance in the context of other factors when making an offer, including offering additional consideration to applicants with mental health conditions as part of their contextual admissions process. The applicant's potential to succeed is assessed in the context of their background and experiences. This could initially mean the applicant may not be required to meet the published entry requirements to receive a conditional offer, or they are made a lower conditional offer. In addition, if the applicant is predicted to achieve strong academic results, the conditional offer will inform them that the offer will be changed to unconditional if they then accept provider X as their firm choice.





# 6. THE EFFECT OF OFFER TYPE ON ATTAINMENT

This section addresses the effect of offer type on student attainment. We do not consider the effect on attainment of very low conditional offers, for example two E grades at A level offers, or those offers which are conditional, but where the conditions are significantly lower than the grades the applicant is predicted to achieve. Due to the flexible way in which providers are able to express the academic conditions of offers, we are unable to analyse any effects at an adequate level of confidence to be included in this report.

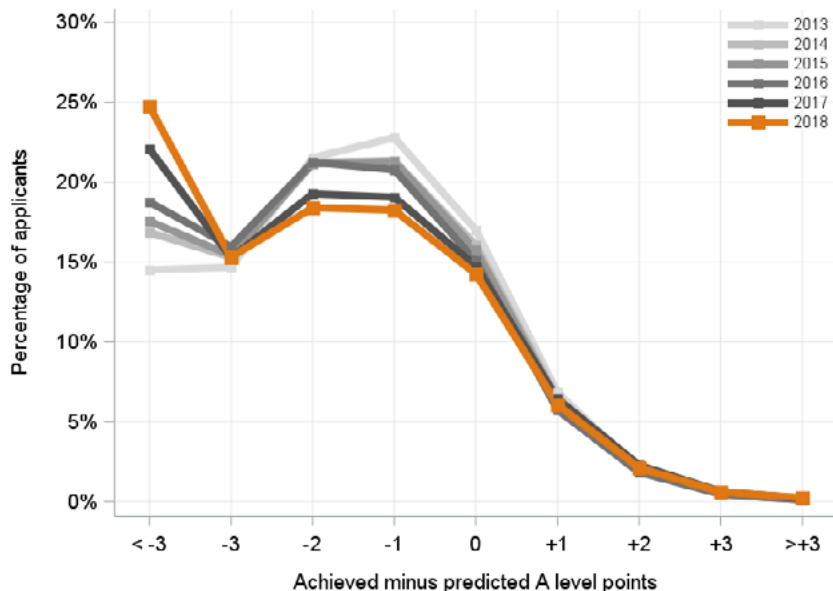
## 6.1 Most 18 year old applicants studying for A levels miss their predicted grades irrespective of the type of offer held

Previous research by UCAS<sup>4</sup> revealed how 18 year old applicants studying for A levels while applying to university tend to achieve, on average, grades lower than those they were predicted to achieve. Typically, among applicants who are studying for three or more A levels, achieved grades tend to be between one and two grades lower across their A levels, than those they were predicted to get. A predicted grade is the grade of qualification the applicant's school or college believes they are likely to achieve in their final examination or assessment, in positive circumstances. This is communicated to the provider as part of the information supplied by the school or college in the student's application.

Figure 15 shows the proportion of 18 year old applicants by the difference in their achieved and predicted attainment, as measured by the difference in best three achieved, and best three predicted A level point scores. In each year, a greater percentage of applicants missed their predicted attainment than met or exceeded it. Furthermore, in each year, the percentage of applicants who meet or exceed their predicted grades has decreased. Since 2013, the percentage of applicants who miss their predicted grades by more than 3 A level points has increased, with nearly one in four applicants missing their predicted grades by this margin in 2018.

**FIGURE 15:**

Distribution of difference between achieved and predicted attainment by year



Many factors are associated with the probability of an applicant not achieving their predicted attainment. The most important factors affecting attainment include prior attainment at GCSE and equivalent level, the predicted A level grades, and the subjects being studied, the type of school attended, and various background characteristics of the applicants.

Holding an unconditional firm offer was also shown to affect attainment, with those holding an unconditional firm offer found to have a higher probability of missing their predicted attainment by two or more grades. This was the case even after controlling for many of the other factors associated with A level attainment.

<sup>4</sup> Factors associated with predicted and achieved A level attainment, August 2016



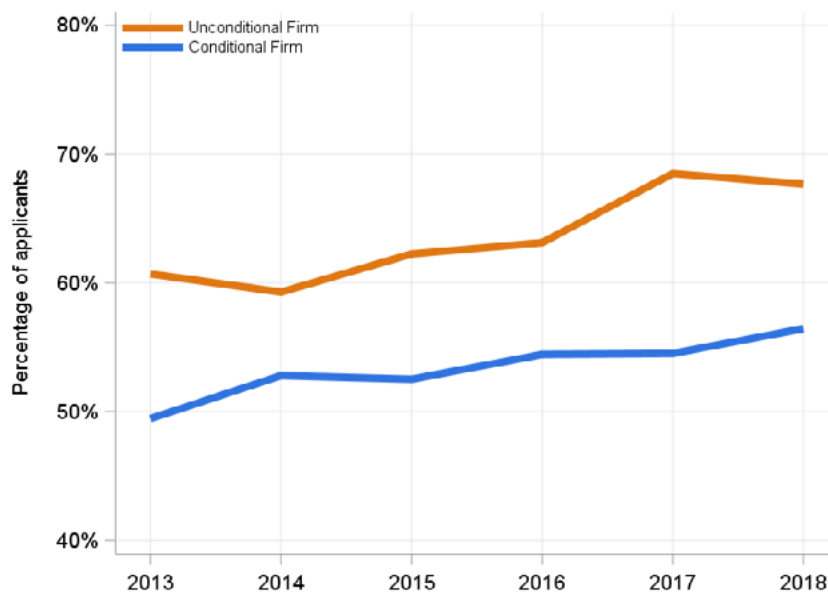
## 6.2 Applicants holding an unconditional firm offer at 30 June are more likely to miss their predicted grades, compared to those holding a conditional firm offer

Figure 16 shows the proportion of 18 year old applicants from England who miss their predicted A level attainment by two or more grades, split by whether their firm offer was conditional or unconditional. In each year, the proportion of applicants who missed their predicted attainment was higher among those holding an unconditional firm offer, compared to those holding a conditional firm – a difference typically in the region of 7 to 12 percentage points.

However, the differences in proportions expressed here may appear to exaggerate the impact which holding an unconditional offer has on the likelihood of applicants missing their grades, due to the typically different characteristics of those who are in receipt of unconditional offers. Further analysis, that enables the effects of unconditional offers on attainment to be isolated using a modelling approach (which takes into account applicant characteristics), can be found in Annex A.

### FIGURE 16:

Proportion of English 18 year old applicants who missed their predicted A level attainment by two or more grades, by type of firm offer and year



## CASE STUDY:

**Selecting students for unconditional offers, based on a rigorous assessment of the applicant and their potential, including achieved and predicted grades, the reference, and personal statement.**

At provider X, the majority of offers made are conditional upon high levels of attainment, some are contextual offers, and a small proportion are unconditional offers. The university uses a range of criteria and information to reach a decision on an applicant's eligibility for an unconditional offer for a select number of courses. This includes an applicant's personal statement, reference, proven academic achievement at Level 2 (typically at least four GCSEs at A\*/9 and four at A/7, a proven and reliable indicator of academic achievement), and predicted grades at Level 3 (typically A\*AA at A level), and internal provider assessments where appropriate for the selected course (e.g. in creative or performing arts).

Retention and attainment data for applicants in receipt of unconditional offers is tracked, and the criteria and strategy for unconditional offer-making is reviewed regularly. Provider X also has regular engagement with schools, including at senior level conferences, and regular ongoing discussions with teachers. Prospective students are able to access information and advice on the admissions policies at the university, and can use an online tool to determine their eligibility for, and likelihood, of an offer. Offer holders are also encouraged to attend open days and offer holder visit days, to support them in their decision-making.

As a cohort, applicants who join the university on an unconditional offer are among the best performing students. Data within provider X shows that, in addition to strong student retention rates, having an unconditional offer has no bearing on the likelihood of a student dropping out of their course (either due to academic performance or other reasons).

## CASE STUDY:

**Selecting students based on academic achievement, and using data and evidence to inform the use of unconditional offers annually.**

Provider X has been making unconditional offers for a number of years, and uses an annual review of data and evidence to review its scheme and ensure it is targeting the correct students. To be considered for an unconditional offer, applicants must demonstrate high academic achievement. Initially, this was based on A level predictions and GCSE performance. However, using analysis of offer to acceptance conversion, percentage of students who met their published entry grades, and distribution of A level results by GCSE attainment, the unconditional offer scheme was refined for 2018 entry, to consider the best eight GCSE results. For 2019 entry, provider X is also considering the first year average results for students who entered through the scheme. Eligible applicants receive a conditional offer, which becomes unconditional once firmly accepted.

Using this evidence-based approach has resulted in a positive impact, both on conversion and attainment. A higher percentage of applicants eligible for an unconditional offer meet the published entry requirements at provider X than non-eligible applicants, and a higher proportion achieve ABB or above. In addition, applicants admitted through the scheme in 2016 and 2017 performed better in year one than their peers.

7

HOW APPLICANTS

**VIEW**

CONDITIONAL  
UNCONDITIONAL

**OFFERS**





## 7.1 Sentiment towards conditional unconditional offers

### is generally positive among applicants

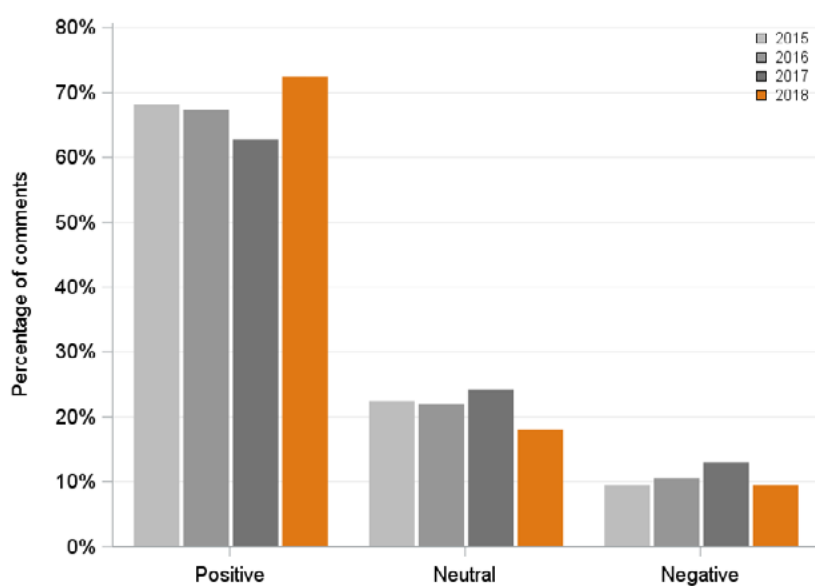
Applicants who were identified through survey responses as having received a conditional unconditional offer were asked how they felt about receiving it. Comments from over 6,000 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales who responded to this question, were examined, and their average sentiment levels estimated for each year (Figure 17).

The majority (around two thirds) of comments had an overall positive sentiment towards the receipt of a conditional unconditional offer. Around one in five comments exhibited a neutral sentiment, while around one in ten comments exhibited a negative sentiment.

In 2018, a higher proportion of comments had positive sentiment than in any other year this survey was issued, with over 70 per cent of comments recorded as being positive. This may have been in part due to the changing distribution of respondents, with fewer unplaced applicants responding to the survey, resulting in a lower proportion of comments from unplaced applicants compared to previous years. This may have led to an increase in sentiment, as unplaced applicants are unlikely to have chosen a conditional unconditional offer as their firm choice, and therefore may be more likely to have negative sentiment around the use of conditional unconditional offers.

#### FIGURE 17:

Proportion of comments exhibiting positive, neutral, or negative sentiment towards conditional unconditional offers, among applicants who said they received this type of offer



**IN 2018, AROUND 2,000 APPLICANTS  
TOLD US HOW THEY FELT ABOUT RECEIVING A  
CONDITIONAL UNCONDITIONAL OFFER. SOME EXAMPLES OF  
WHAT APPLICANTS SAID ARE GIVEN BELOW**

“Proud and determined in myself to achieve the best grades so I wouldn’t let the university down!”

“My uni was my first choice anyway, so it was just an added bonus. I found the unconditional offer great for me in particular because it took off some of the stress so was good for my (failing) mental health.”

“I had already decided that I wanted my chosen university to be my firm, so it did not affect my decision”

“Made my decision tough started worrying what if i fail or make the wrong decisions”

# THE EFFECT OF CONDITIONAL UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS ON APPLICANT DECISIONS

## 8.1 Applicants say that receiving a conditional

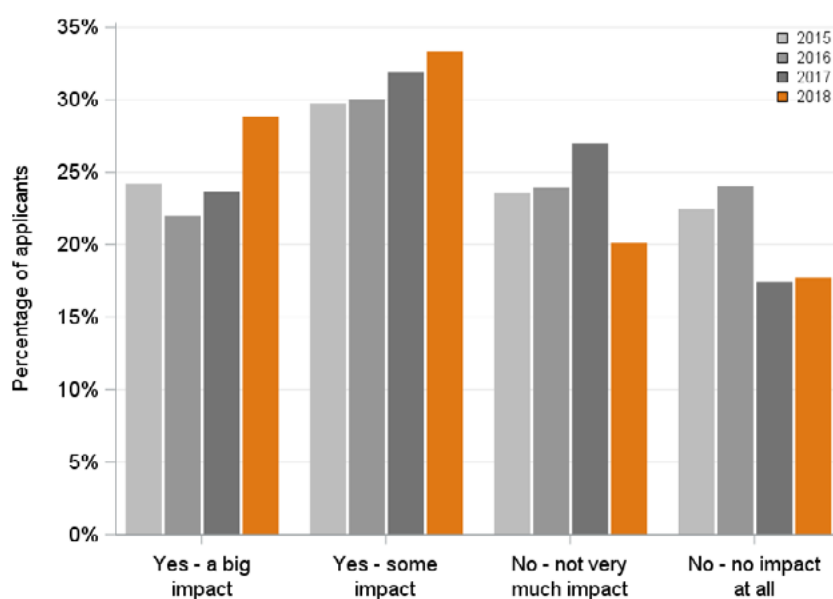
### unconditional offer has a big impact on their decision making

Applicants who reported receiving a conditional unconditional offer were also asked whether receiving such an offer had an impact on which offer they chose as their firm choice. Over 7,500 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales responded to this question over the past four years, and their responses are shown in Figure 18.

Between 2015 and 2017, just over half of applicants who received a conditional unconditional offer said it had either a big impact, or some impact, on their firm choice decision. In 2018, this rose to over 60 per cent. Around a quarter of applicants said it did not have very much impact, while between 17 and 24 per cent said the offer had no impact at all.

### FIGURE 18:

Proportion of applicants (weighted) who reported receiving a conditional unconditional offer by the reported impact the offer had on their firm choice decision



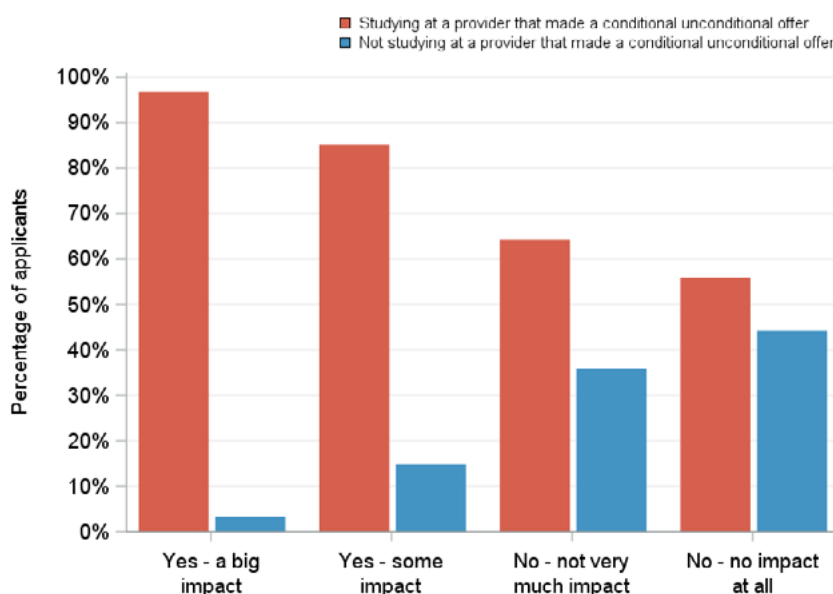
## 8.2 Applicants with conditional unconditional offers tend to go on to study at the providers that made them

Applicants who said they received a conditional unconditional offer were also asked whether they were studying at a provider that made them this kind of offer. Over 2,000 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales responded to this question in 2018. Among this group of applicants, most of them (80 per cent) said they were studying at a provider that made them a conditional unconditional offer.

Figure 19 shows how the proportion of applicants studying at a provider that made them a conditional unconditional offer varies, according to the reported impact on their firm choice decision. Most applicants who reported an impact on their decision said they were studying at a provider that made them this kind of offer. Applicants who reported no impact of a conditional unconditional offer on their firm choice were far less likely to be studying at a provider that made them this kind of offer.

### FIGURE 19:

Share of applicants (weighted) who said they received a conditional unconditional offer by impact on first choice decision, and where they now study



It is important to note that difficulties in identifying the true number of conditional unconditional offers, alongside the uncertainty in interpreting survey responses, mean that assessing whether conditional unconditional offers influence applicant decision-making is extremely challenging. However, the patterns described above provide some evidence that conditional unconditional offers do influence the decisions of a substantial number of applicants, and in such a way that results in them going on to study at the providers that make them.



# 9. CHANGES BETWEEN A LEVEL RESULTS DAY AND THE END OF CYCLE

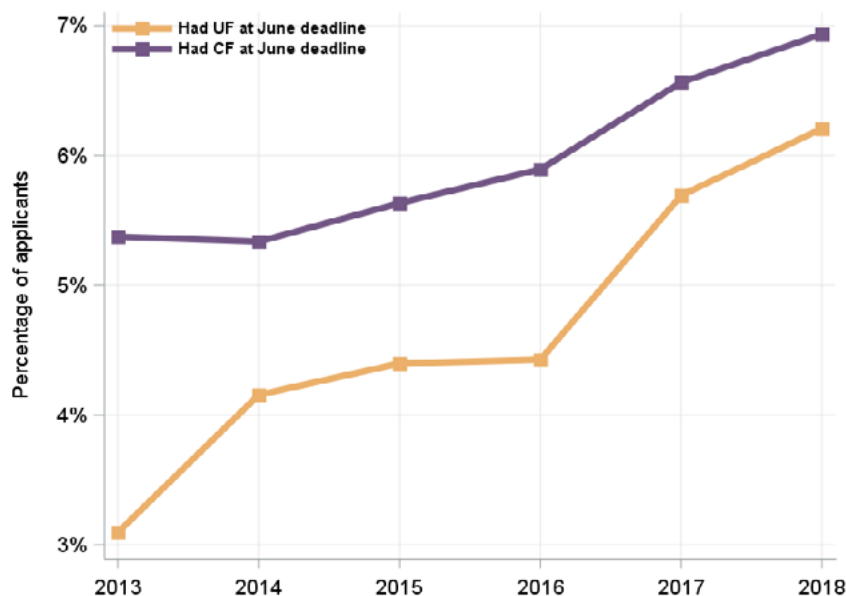
Most applicants placed through UCAS on A level results day go on to take up that place. But a relatively small numbers do not, and by the end of the cycle are either placed at another provider, or are unplaced. Those applicants may be placed at another provider through the Adjustment process, or by being released from their results day place and then being accepted to another provider through Clearing.

## 9.1 Applicants placed via unconditional

### offers are less likely to switch providers, or be unplaced, after confirmation

Figure 20 shows the proportion of 18 year old applicants placed at their firm choice provider on A level results day who were no longer placed at that provider by the end of the cycle (either placed at another provider, or unplaced). Also shown, are the proportions of applicants according to whether they were placed through a conditional, or an unconditional offer.

In each year, the proportion of applicants who are no longer placed at their firm choice provider is higher for those accepted through conditional offers, than those accepted through unconditional offers.



**FIGURE 20:**

Share of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales no longer placed at firm choice provider at end of cycle, by offer type and year



# CONCLUSIONS



## Conclusions

Recent debate has presented the growth in unconditional offers to young students who have not yet taken their exams as a wholly negative practice. However, as the analysis presented in this report shows, the growing use of unconditional offers is not a binary issue.

Universities and colleges are using unconditional offers in a variety of ways across different subject areas, not just as one of many available recruitment tools, but also to support efforts to widen participation and access, and to assist vulnerable students. Unconditional offers are also being used more widely in certain disciplines, where providers consider the demonstration of talent through an audition, portfolio, or interview, to be a more valid means of evaluating potential than examination grades. Good practice around the use of unconditional offers has been developed by universities, and published by UCAS.

Applicants themselves remain broadly supportive of the use of unconditional offers, welcoming the certainty of knowing they have a place, and being able to go ahead and arrange their accommodation and start planning for their lives in higher education. Many speak about a reduction in stress, and the mental health and wellbeing benefits this confers.

Although some applicants holding unconditional offers talk about their determination to study hard and succeed in their exams, there is evidence that those who accept unconditional offers as their first (firm) university choice are more likely to miss their predicted grades, than those who accepted conditional offers as their firm choice.

However, those holding conditional offers are still more likely to miss their predicted grades than meet or exceed them. In the current climate, where the number of 18 year olds in the population is falling, many providers choose to confirm the places of applicants who have missed their predicted grades. In 2018, applicants holding conditional offers who were accepted at their first choice, on average, missed their predicted grades by 1.5 grades across three A levels.

The analysis cannot stop here. In accordance with good practice, many universities and colleges are tracking the progress and outcomes of students admitted with unconditional offers, and benchmarking them against students admitted to the same programmes through conditional offers. As this evidence base builds, providers should share their findings, to enable a nuanced debate about the future use of unconditional offers to young people.

## ANNEX A

### ESTIMATING THE IMPACT OF HOLDING AN UNCONDITIONAL FIRM OFFER ON ATTAINMENT THROUGH STATISTICAL MODELLING

This annex details the findings and underlying methodology from statistical modelling techniques used to estimate the impact that holding an unconditional firm offer has on applicant attainment.

#### A.1 Holding an unconditional firm is associated with an increase in the probability of missing predicted A level attainment, compared to holding a conditional firm offer

The effect of holding an unconditional firm offer on the probability that an applicant will miss their predicted attainment by two or more grades is assessed, by comparing the difference (as estimated from the statistical regression model detailed in Annex B) it makes to the typical probability of missing the predicted grades among applicants holding a conditional firm offer.

Over the period of the modelled data, 49.3 per cent of applicants holding a conditional firm offer missed their predicted attainment by two or more grades. The statistical model estimates that the proportion of this group of applicants who would have missed their predicted attainment by two or more grades had they held an unconditional firm, would have been 58.9 per cent – 20 per cent higher than observed.

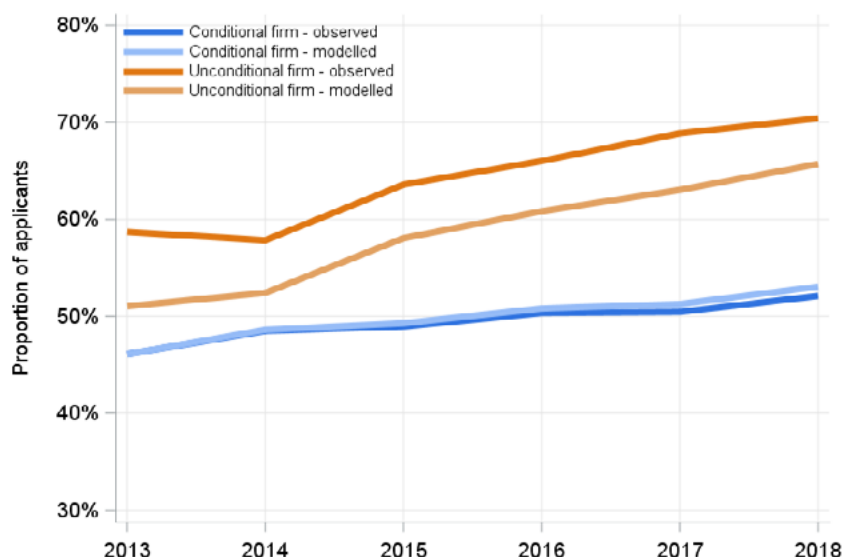
#### A.2 Less than 2 per cent of applicants who missed their predicted A levels by two or more grades in 2018, did so as a result of holding an unconditional firm

Further investigation into the effect on attainment of holding an unconditional firm offer, compared to a conditional firm, was carried out by comparing the observed proportions of applicants who missed predicted attainment by two or more grades, with the estimated proportions from a model that did not include a term for the type of firm offer held. This approach has the benefit that the difference in proportions is not based upon a model parameter estimate, giving an alternative way to assess the impact of the type of firm offer held.

Figure 21 shows the observed proportion of applicants who missed their predicted attainment by two or more points, and the estimated proportions from a statistical model. The model does not contain a term for whether the firm offer was unconditional or conditional. Observed and modelled proportions are plotted separately for applicants who held conditional firm offers (blue lines) or unconditional firm offers (orange lines). Proportions for unconditional firm offer holders are plotted from 2013 onwards, when there were more than 400 unconditional offers to this group for the first time.

#### FIGURE 21:

Observed and model-estimated proportions of offer holders missing their predicted attainment by two or more points, by year and type of firm offer



Note: A subset of English 18 year old applicants was used for regression models (see Annex B for further details). This means the trends shown above differ slightly from those shown in Figure 16.

For applicants holding conditional firm offers, the observed probability of missing predicted attainment by two or more points has increased steadily, from 46.1 per cent in 2013, to 52.1 per cent in 2018. The estimated probabilities given by the model are almost identical to those observed, showing that the factors included in the model describe very well the chance that these applicants miss their predicted attainment by two or more grades.

The observed proportion of unconditional firm offer holders who miss their predicted attainment by two or more grades is different to that observed for conditional firm offer holders. The observed proportion for this group is higher, increasing from 51.3 per cent of these applicants in 2013, to 65.7 per cent in 2018.

The model-estimated proportion of unconditional firm offer holders who missed by two or more points was also higher than that observed for conditional firm holders. This shows, the model estimates that applicants holding unconditional firm offers have a combination of factors that would suggest higher proportions missing their predicted attainment by two or more grades, than the applicants with conditional firm offers. However, in each year the proportion missing by two or more grades estimated by the model is not as high as the proportion observed. That is, for unconditional firm offer holders, the model (without a term for the type of firm offer held) underestimates the chances of missing by two or more grades. The underestimation is found to be statistically significant (p-values less than 0.001) for each year. This, combined with the fact that the same model accurately estimates the observed proportions of conditional firm offer holders who miss by two or more grades, strongly suggests that, since 2013, there were more unconditional firm offer holders who missed their predicted attainment by two or more grades than their prior attainment, predicted grades, application choices, and background suggest.

The number of English 18 year old applicants studying for three or more A levels who hold an unconditional firm was relatively small, but has grown each year since 2013. Table 1 estimates what the difference between the modelled and observed proportion of applicants missing their predicted attainment by two or more grades means for the group. In each year, the proportion of this group of applicants who miss their predicted attainment by two or more grades is 5 to 8 percentage points (7 to 13 per cent proportionally) higher than the model estimates.

**TABLE 1:**

**Observed and model-estimated proportions of unconditional firm offer holders missing their predicted attainment by two or more grades by year**

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Applicants with an unconditional firm	565	3,005	7,635	10,525	15,775	21,580
Proportion missing by 2+ grades	58.7%	57.9%	63.5%	66.0%	68.9%	70.4%
Model-estimated Proportion	51.0%	52.4%	58.1%	60.8%	63.0%	65.7%
Percentage point Difference	7.6	5.5	5.5	5.2	5.9	4.7
Proportional Difference	13%	9%	9%	8%	9%	7%
Estimated difference in applicants holding an unconditional firm that missed by 2+ grades	+40	+165	+415	+545	+930	+1,015

This equates to around 3,100 additional applicants over the six years, who missed their predicted attainment by two or more grades. The number of applicants holding an unconditional firm offer has increased each year, meaning each year more applicants are estimated to have missed their grades due to the type of offer held over time.

Table 2 shows the total number of applicants each year who missed their best three predicted A levels by two or more grades, irrespective of the type of firm offer held. Placed into this context, the additional number of applicants who missed their grades (as estimated by the model) accounts for only a small proportion of all applicants who missed their grades. This means, although there appears to be an association between holding an unconditional offer and A level attainment, the number of applicants affected is small (1.6 per cent in 2018) relative to the total number who miss their grades.

## TABLE 2:

Applicants estimated to have missed their predicted A levels by two or more grades through holding an unconditional firm, as a proportion of all applicants who missed their predicted grades

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Estimated difference in applicants holding an unconditional firm that missed by 2+ grades	+40	+165	+415	+545	+930	+1,015
All applicants missing by 2+ grades	53,310	56,205	59,985	62,175	64,340	65,230
Estimated difference in applicants holding an unconditional firm that missed by 2+ grades as a proportion of all applicants that missed by 2+ grades.	0.1%	0.3%	0.7%	0.9%	1.4%	1.6%

## ANNEX B

### METHODOLOGY OF STATISTICAL MODELLING

#### B.1 Factors accounted for in the model

A logistic regression model, based on data from over 720,000 applicants during the 2013 to 2018 cycle, was used to assess whether holding an unconditional firm offer is related to how likely an applicant is to achieve their predicted A level attainment.

This allows the effect of holding an unconditional offer on the difference between an applicant's predicted and achieved attainment to be assessed, while controlling for other factors that are also known to be important. These other factors include measures of predicted A level attainment, achieved prior GCSE attainment, applicant background, including where they live, the type of school or college attended, the HE provider and subject of the course at which the firm choice was held, and the year in which the application was made.

The measures of predicted A level attainment include the total predicted point score from the best three predicted grades, and the predicted grades for each of the three A levels, along with the subjects studied.

For prior GCSE attainment, the measures include the average point score of the best eight GCSE grades (eight points for an A\*, seven points for an A, and so on, down to one point for a G), and the number of GCSEs attained, to a maximum of eight.

The model also included a measure of the interaction between total best three predicted A level points, and the average best eight GCSE point scores. This means that, within the model, GCSE attainment is considered relative to the level of the predicted grades at A level.

The measures of applicant background included in the model were sex, POLAR4 quintile, and ethnic group.

Information about the university or college at which the firm offer was held was included in the model, using a separate flag for each provider. This flag allows the model to adjust for any differences in the relative attractiveness of securing a place between providers, including, for example, any guaranteed accommodation or bursary support which might be provided if any academic conditions of an offer are met.

Because the proportion of applicants missing their predicted grades has increased each year across the analysis period, the admissions cycle is included in the model as a categorical variable. As such, the admissions cycle is used to reference the passing of time, and means changes in the overall level of over-prediction between admissions cycles are accounted for.

The model includes a measure that identifies applicants holding a firm offer at any provider that made unconditional offers during the admissions cycle in which they applied, so that any differential effect that selecting a firm offer (conditional or unconditional) from one of these providers has on the chances of missing predicted attainment can be accounted for.

It is important to appreciate that a statistical model cannot account for all factors that might impact an applicant's attainment. Of note are conditions relating to any A level grades required, that form part of a conditional offer. The nature of these conditions, relative to an applicant's predicted grades, could affect the probability an applicant misses their grades, in a similar fashion to holding an unconditional firm (a special case where there are no conditions).

For example, consider an applicant predicted a total of 12 points who selects as their firm choice an offer that requires them to achieve a total of 13 points to be accepted. To guarantee entry onto their chosen course, this applicant must exceed their predicted attainment by one grade. Now consider the same applicant, but who instead chooses a firm choice which requires them to achieve a total of 11 points, meaning they could afford to miss their predicted attainment by one grade. It may be that different offer levels could act as a differential incentive for attainment. Since the level of offer is unknown when grades are predicted, but is known before final examinations are taken, it is possible the level of the offer could be associated with the difference between predicted and achieved attainment.

Due to the many ways in which providers can set the academic conditions associated with an offer they make to an applicant (for example, in many cases there may be multiple sets of conditions expressed in unstructured text, of which an applicant only has to satisfy one), using academic requirements of the offer to understand their effect in relation to the predicted and achieved grades is not possible.

The inclusion of a flag indicating whether an applicant's firm choice was an unconditional offer can be regarded as crude a proxy for the level of the offer, and the size of the effect interpreted as the maximum size of any effect of more typical changes to the detailed level of a conditional offer.



## B.2 Applicants included in the model

To avoid issues associated with small numbers, the set of applicants considered for modelling were:

- > 18 year old applicants domiciled in England
- > applicants predicted to achieved at least three A levels equivalent to a grade profile of DDD or higher, not including general studies or critical thinking
- > applicants where the difference between achieved and predicted grades was in the range of -9 to +4 A level points
- > applicants with prior GCSE attainment that was not unusual given their predicted grades (defined according to a cross tabulation of predicted A level and achieved prior GCSE point scores)
- > applicants holding firm offers at one of the largest 140 providers, defined to have had at least 500 acceptances each year since 2012

## B.3 Standard logistic regression versus multi-level logistic regression

Two types of statistical modelling approaches were used. The first was standard logistic regression, and the second a multi-level logistic regression model, with a random intercepts term used to account for the school attended. The second model, while able to account for any differences in the changes of missing predicted attainment associated with the school attended, gave very similar results to the standard logistic regression model. As such, the results from the relatively simpler standard logistic regression model have been reported.

## GLOSSARY

<b>Age</b>	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.
<b>Applicant</b>	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).
<b>Conditional offer</b>	Provider decision to grant a place to an applicant, subject to the applicant satisfying academic and/or other criteria.
<b>Decline</b>	The decision by an applicant to decline an offer, and thus not select is as either their firm or insurance choice.
<b>Conditional unconditional offer</b>	An offer made by a provider which is originally stated as being conditional, then is converted to an unconditional offer once the applicant selects that offer as their firm (first) choice.
<b>Firm choice</b>	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).
<b>Insurance choice</b>	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).
<b>30 June application deadline</b>	The final date by which an applicant can submit up to five applications to study on a course of higher education through the UCAS main scheme. Applicants who apply after this date go directly into Clearing.
<b>Offer</b>	Provider decision to grant a place to an applicant. May be subject to the applicant satisfying academic and/or other criteria.
<b>Offer description</b>	Description of the offer, as communicated by the provider to the applicant through UCAS.
<b>Offer with an unconditional component</b>	Provider decision to grant a place to an applicant, that is not subject to the applicant satisfying academic and/or other criteria. Offers with an unconditional component cover all unconditional offers, plus conditional unconditional offers that the applicant does not select as their firm choice.
<b>Provider</b>	A higher education provider – a university or college.
<b>Reply</b>	Applicant response to any offers received – this could be firm, insurance, or decline.
<b>Unconditional offer</b>	Provider decision to grant a place to an applicant, that is not subject to the applicant satisfying academic and/or other criteria. Based on the offer status at the 30 June application deadline. An unconditional offer will include conditional unconditional offers that were selected as an applicant's firm choice.

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