



UNCONDITIONAL OFFERS – AN UPDATE FOR 2019



CONTENTS

1. Introduction	3
2. Offer-making to main scheme applicants in 2019	6
2.1 The offer rate remains at a record level	6
2.2 The proportion of unconditional offers continues to increase	7
2.3 Use of conditional unconditional offers is also increasing	8
3. Patterns of unconditional offer making across applicants 2019	9
3.1 Around a quarter of applicants receive at least one unconditional offer	9
3.2 Nearly two in five applicants receive at least one offer with an unconditional component	10
3.3 Applicants from the most disadvantaged areas have a much higher chance of receiving an unconditional offer	11
3.4 Applicants from the most advantaged areas were slightly more likely to hold a conditional unconditional offer	12
3.5 Applicants across all levels of advantage had an increased chance of receiving a conditional unconditional offer in 2019	13
Annex A	14
Glossary	15

1. INTRODUCTION

Offers of places made to applicants applying to a university or college are described as either conditional or unconditional. The majority of offers made to applicants are conditional, which means the applicants have to satisfy certain conditions, usually related to the attainment of specific qualifications and examination results, in order to be accepted.

In July 2018, UCAS published a report, **Unconditional offers – an update for 2018**, looking at unconditional offers made to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales – a group who typically apply with most of their qualifications still pending, and with predicted, rather than achieved, grades. As most Scottish applicants already have Scottish Higher qualifications, which often form part of the entry requirements for courses, they were not included in the analysis.

This report forms an update to the July 2018 report. It also focuses on 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, except where stated otherwise. As described in more detail in the following section, the types of unconditional offer reported here are updated to include the practice of making 'conditional unconditional' offers. These are conditional offers, which are converted to unconditional if applicants choose them as their first (firm) choice. This type of offer was not included in the July 2018 report, but was included in our analysis of unconditional offers in the **2018 End of Cycle Report**.

Unconditional offers can be made to applicants who have already achieved sufficient qualifications or experience to meet entry criteria – mature students, for example. Unconditional offers may also be made following interviews, auditions or portfolio reviews. They can be made to reduce stress placed on some applicants during the high-pressure examination period, and, in recent years, as one of a variety of approaches to attract and retain interest from students in a competitive market.

The increased prevalence of unconditional offer-making in recent cycles has brought with it a greater interest in the volume of this practice, especially to young applicants who have not yet achieved their Level 3 qualifications.

This is the first report covering offer-making to applicants in the 2019 cycle. It is published 22 working days after the 30 June deadline – the final date on which applicants can apply through the UCAS main scheme¹. Applicants applying after this go directly into Clearing. The report begins with an overview of offer-making in the 2019 cycle, set against the context of previous cycles. Following this, we provide a view of how unconditional offer rates vary across applicants.

¹ The main UCAS Undergraduate application scheme through which up to five course choices can be applied for. This opens in September, and closes to new applications on 30 June the following year.

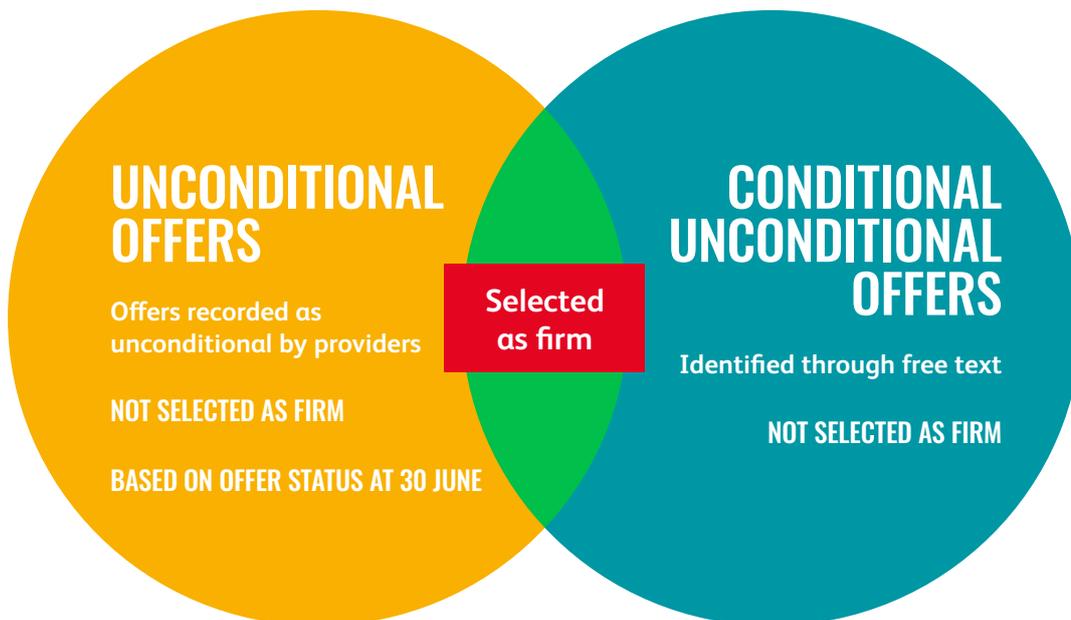
It follows the publication on 11 July 2019, of the **analysis of applicants applying by the 30 June deadline**. The 2019 End of Cycle Report will be published in a series of releases in late 2019 and early 2020, and will include further analysis of offer-making, along with acceptance and entry rates.

Defining unconditional offers

Unconditional offers are defined as offers made on applications submitted through 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 go directly into Clearing). This is the definition used in the July 2018 analytical reporting of unconditional offers.

In this report, as in the **2018 End of Cycle 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 through free text fields that providers can use to communicate any additional information to applicants.

These two types of offer, and their relationship to one another, are shown in the diagram below. 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.



Offers with an unconditional component =
 Unconditional offers + Conditional unconditional offers not selected as firm

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. This report replicates the methodology used in the **2018 End of Cycle Report** – separating the reporting of unconditional offers from the reporting of conditional unconditional offers. However, the methodology for reporting unconditional offers is under review and may be revised in future reports.

Defining conditional unconditional offers

Conditional unconditional offers are identified through 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.'

It is important to note that the conditional unconditional offers reported here are limited to those that can be identified through the free text fields in our admissions systems. Providers can use these free text fields to communicate any additional information about the offer to applicants.

Although UCAS' terms of engagement require providers to communicate their offers to applicants through our systems, we are aware of instances where they communicate directly with applicants about offers outside of UCAS. Where providers communicate directly to the applicant that an offer will be converted to unconditional if selected as firm, the associated offer will not be identified as conditional unconditional.

Timing of offer making

There has been heightened interest in offer-making practices by higher education providers in recent cycles, particularly in the growth in the use of unconditional offers.

Offer-making policies are typically confirmed up to 12 months before the start of the admissions cycle, and providers will generally seek to ensure consistency in approach throughout the cycle. By 31 March 2019, 98% of offers made to 18 year olds from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland by 30 June 2019 had already been made.

Information for students and guidance for admissions staff on unconditional offers

UCAS' survey of students who received conditional unconditional offers, published in chapter 3 of our **2018 End of Cycle Report**, found that around two thirds of respondents were positive about receiving this type of offer, with some saying they felt a reduction in stress knowing they had a confirmed place before sitting their exams. However, the **2018 End of Cycle Report** also reported an impact of unconditional offers on attainment – applicants holding an unconditional firm offer at 30 June were more likely to miss their predicted grades, compared with those holding a conditional firm offer. In addition, many of those receiving a conditional unconditional offer felt it had an impact on their university choice.

As part of UCAS' commitment to ensure students can make well-informed decisions, we have expanded and improved our information and advice on considering all types of offers. This explains what it means to accept an unconditional offer, and emphasises the importance of successfully completing exams because of potential impacts on employment prospects.

This autumn, we will be launching a new Student Hub, which will support students through every step of their decision-making journey, surfacing the right information at the right time, based on their expressed preferences and interests. This approach means students are encouraged to read independent and impartial advice on considering offers when they're making these decisions.

To help ensure universities and colleges are giving applicants the information they need about unconditional offers, UCAS and a group of universities have worked together to produce good practice considerations for admissions practitioners. These emphasise the principles of fair admissions, and offer advice on setting and reviewing admissions policies, communicating with and supporting applicants holding unconditional offers, and reviewing their progress and outcomes.

2. OFFER-MAKING TO MAIN SCHEME APPLICANTS IN 2019

2.1 The offer rate remains at a record level

Figure 1 shows the overall offer rate to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales from 2008 to 2019. Understanding the overall trends in offer-making provides useful context for the analysis of unconditional offer-making, which is given in the remainder of this report.

While the absolute numbers of offers made are prone to variation in line with the absolute number of applications, by analysing the offer rate we can make more meaningful comparisons across cycles. The offer rate covers all types of offers, including conditional offers, and refers to the proportion of applications that receive an offer (each applicant may make up to five main scheme applications).

Following the reform of funding and number control arrangements in 2012, the offer rate has increased each year from 2013 to 2018, with the offer rate in 2019 remaining at a record 80%¹. The rising/high offer rate in recent years may also relate to the fall in the number of 18 year olds in the UK every year since 2015, potentially leading to greater competition between providers.

Offer rates reported here are based on offers made by 30 June in each cycle. This reference point will cover the majority of offers² made to main scheme applicants within any cycle, and so the trends identified are accurate. However, the exact figures used here will change between this report and those to be published at the close of the cycle, due to some offers being made after 30 June – a difference resulting in an additional 1,745 offers as at the close of cycle in 2018.

The remainder of this report focuses on unconditional offer-making, and the changing use of each type of unconditional offer over time for 18 year old applicants domiciled in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

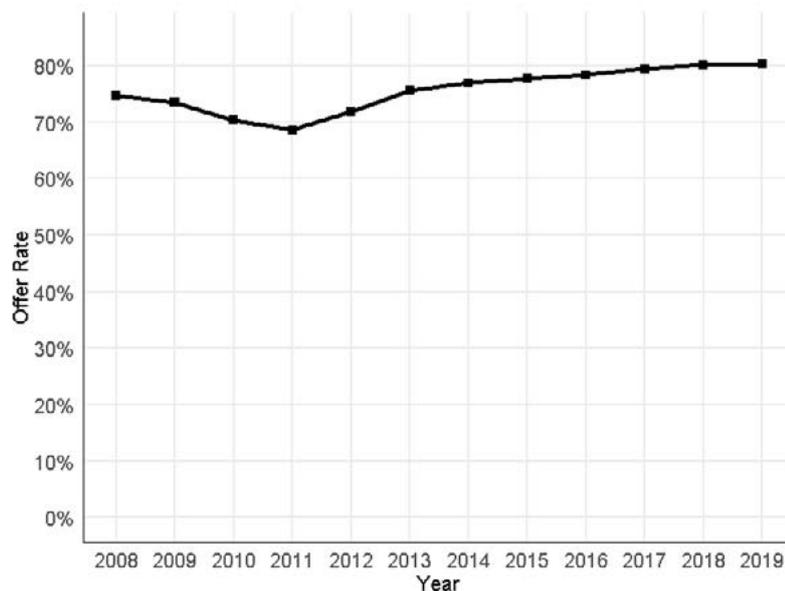


FIGURE 1:

Offer rate to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, from 2008 to 2019

¹ Throughout the report text percentages are generally rounded to integers, or one decimal place where under 10%.

² 99.8% of all offers to main scheme applications were made by this point in 2018.

2.2 The proportion of unconditional

offers continues to increase

Figure 2 shows the proportion of offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales that were unconditional. As described in the introduction, unconditional offers are defined as offers made on applications submitted through the main UCAS application scheme, and recorded as being unconditional on 30 June.

The proportion of unconditional offers has increased. At 30 June 2019, 7.8% of all offers made to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales were unconditional. This proportion increased from 7.1% in 2018, and continues the year-on-year growth in unconditional offer-making (albeit with a slightly smaller increase than in previous years). The total number of unconditional offers increased to 75,845³ in 2019, from 67,915 in 2018.

It is worth noting that the figures for unconditional offers will include conditional unconditional offers selected as an applicant's first (firm) choice. As the following section shows, the practice of conditional unconditional offer-making has also grown since 2018.

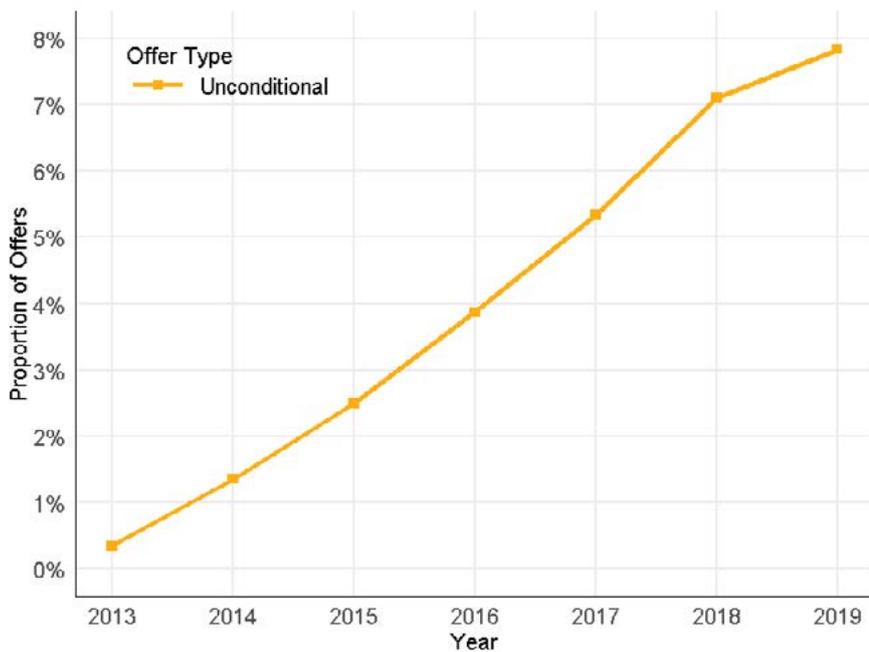


FIGURE 2:

Proportion of offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales that were unconditional, from 2013 to 2019

³ Note: Throughout this report, numbers are rounded to the nearest five.

2.3 Use of conditional unconditional

offers is also increasing

Figure 3 shows the proportion of offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales that were conditional unconditional or had an unconditional component. As described in the introduction, conditional unconditional offers are offers that are adjusted by the provider from conditional to unconditional if selected as an applicant's first choice. Conditional unconditional offers reported here are limited to those that can be identified through the free text fields in our admissions systems that providers use to communicate additional information about their offers to applicants. Offers with an unconditional component cover all unconditional offers plus any conditional unconditional offers not selected as firm.

The proportion of offers identified as conditional unconditional has increased. Conditional unconditional offers comprised 8.3% of all offers made to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales in 2019, compared with 6.6% in the previous cycle. The number of conditional unconditional offers increased to 80,785 in 2019, from 63,560 in 2018.

However, offers with an unconditional component still account for only a minority of all offers made to this group. While more offers with an unconditional component were made to 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales in 2019, only around one in seven (14%) of all offers made to this group were identified to have an unconditional component. In 2019, there were 137,700 offers with an unconditional component, increasing from 116,945 in 2018.

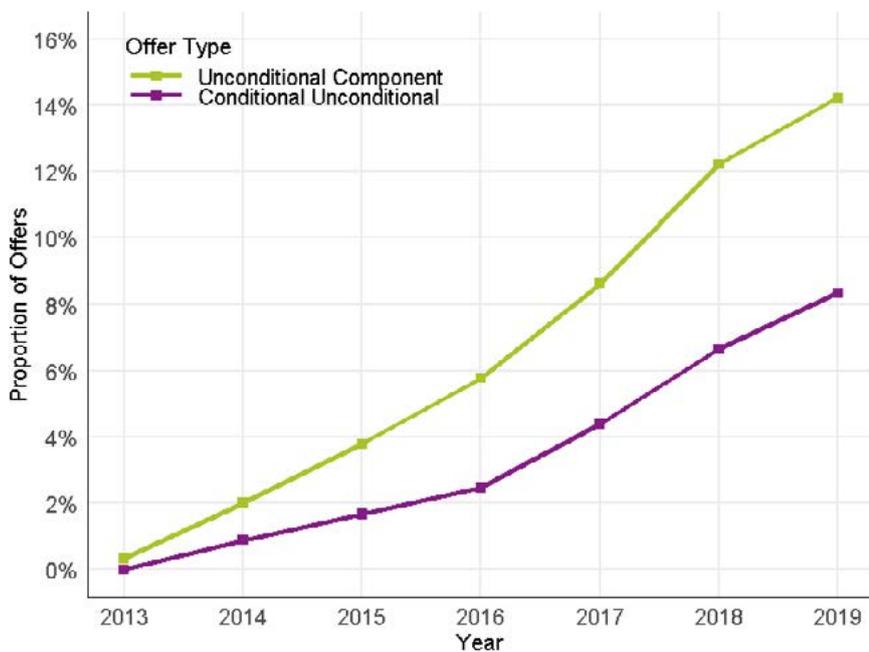


FIGURE 3:

Proportion of offers to 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales identified as conditional unconditional, or having an unconditional component, from 2013 to 2019

3. PATTERNS OF UNCONDITIONAL OFFER-MAKING ACROSS APPLICANTS 2019

3.1 Around a quarter of applicants receive

at least one unconditional offer

The proportion of applicants receiving at least one unconditional offer increased to a record high in 2019, with 25% (63,190 applicants) receiving an unconditional offer, compared with 23% (58,385) in 2018. However, the growth in the proportion of applicants receiving an unconditional offer between 2018 and 2019 was smaller than in previous years. This finding is consistent with the trend in the proportion of offers that were unconditional, shown in Figure 2. The percentages reported in Figure 4 are higher than those in Figure 2, due to the multiple applications (up to five) typically made by main scheme applicants.



FIGURE 4:

Proportion of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with an unconditional offer, from 2013 to 2019

3.2 Nearly two in five applicants receive at least one offer with an unconditional component

Figure 5 shows the proportion of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales who received at least one conditional unconditional offer, or offer with an unconditional component, between 2013 and 2019.

Nearly two in five applicants now receive an offer with an unconditional component. 38% of applicants (97,045 applicants) received at least one offer with an unconditional component in 2019, increasing from 34% (87,540 applicants) in 2018, and continuing the year-on-year growth in offers with an unconditional component since 2013. This trend is consistent with the increase in offers with an unconditional component shown in Figure 3.

The proportion of applicants receiving conditional unconditional offers has increased substantially. In 2019, one in four applicants (25%) received an offer identified as conditional unconditional, compared with one in five in 2018 (20%). This represents an increase to 63,830 applicants receiving a conditional unconditional offer in 2019, from 52,145 in 2018.

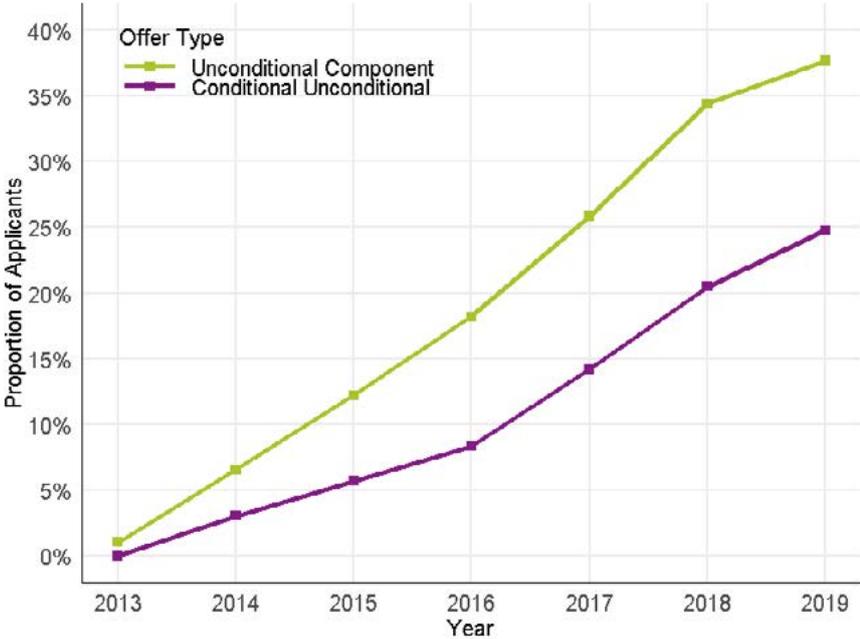


FIGURE 5: Proportion of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with a conditional unconditional offer, or offer with an unconditional component, from 2013 to 2019

3.3 Applicants from the most disadvantaged areas have a much higher chance of receiving an unconditional offer

Figure 6 shows the proportion of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with at least one unconditional offer, by POLAR4 quintile, for 2018 and 2019.

POLAR4 classifies areas across the UK into five groups, according to their level of 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).

Applicants from the most disadvantaged areas were 50% more likely to receive an unconditional offer than applicants from the most advantaged areas. 30% of applicants from POLAR4 quintile 1 (those from the most disadvantaged areas) received an unconditional offer in 2019, compared with 20% from POLAR4 quintile 5.

It is worth noting that the differences in unconditional offers across POLAR4 quintiles may relate to the varying patterns of predicted grades across them. In the **2018 End of Cycle Report** we showed how an applicant's chance of receiving each type of unconditional offer varies according to their predicted attainment.

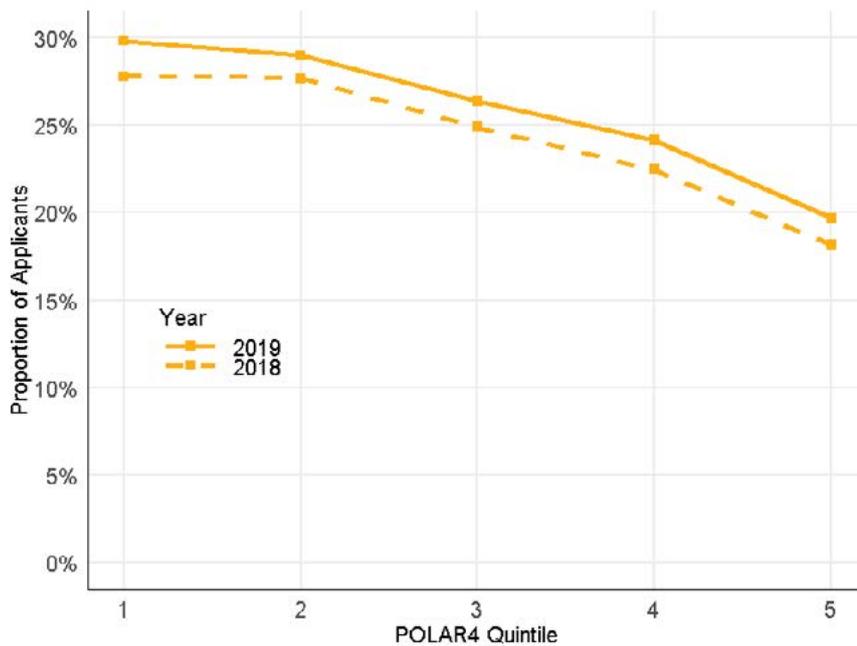


FIGURE 6:

Proportion of 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland and Wales with an unconditional offer by POLAR4 quintile, for 2018 and 2019

3.4 Applicants from the most advantaged areas were

slightly more likely to hold a conditional unconditional offer

Figure 7 shows the proportion of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with at least one conditional unconditional offer, or offer with an unconditional component, by POLAR4 quintile.

Applicants from the most advantaged areas were slightly more likely to have at least one conditional unconditional offer than applicants from the most disadvantaged areas. 26% of applicants from POLAR4 quintile 5 (those from the most advantaged areas) received a conditional unconditional offer in 2019, compared with 23% from POLAR4 quintile 1.

In contrast, applicants from the most disadvantaged areas (as measured by POLAR4) were more likely to have at least one offer with an unconditional component. 40% of applicants from POLAR4 quintile 1 (most disadvantaged areas) received at least one offer with an unconditional component, compared with 35% of quintile 5.

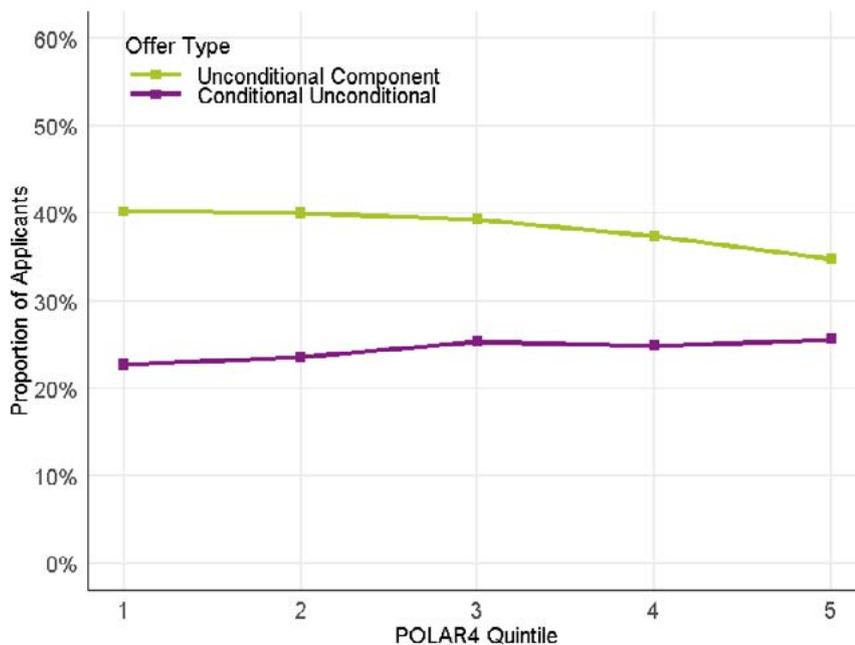


FIGURE 7:

Proportion of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with a conditional unconditional offer, or offer with an unconditional component, by POLAR4 quintile for 2019

3.5 Applicants across all levels of advantage had an increased chance of receiving a conditional unconditional offer in 2019

Figure 8 shows the proportion of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with a conditional unconditional offer, by POLAR4 quintile, for 2018 and 2019.

Applicants in all POLAR4 quintiles were more likely to receive a conditional unconditional offer in 2019 than in 2018. The proportion of applicants receiving a conditional unconditional offer increased by 4 – 5 percentage points for all POLAR4 quintiles.

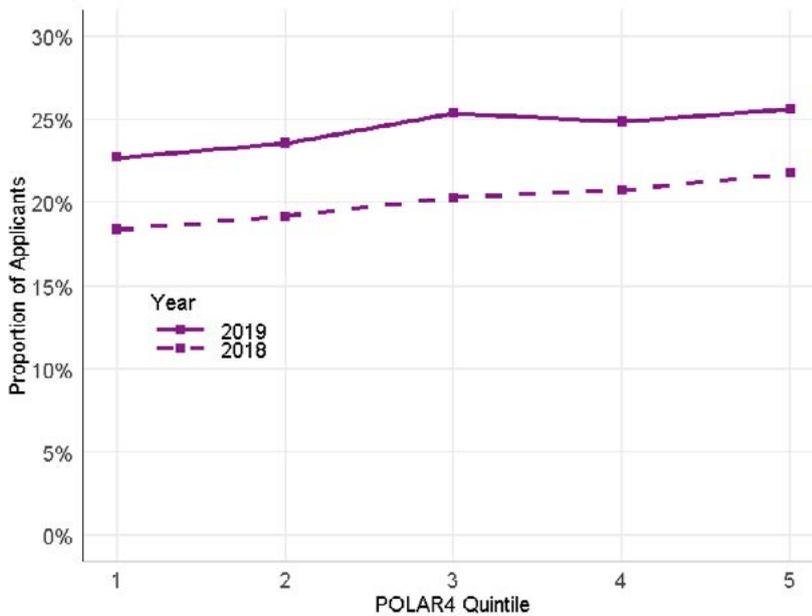


FIGURE 8:

Proportion of 18 year olds from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales with a conditional unconditional offer, by POLAR4 quintile for 2018 and 2019

ANNEX A

While the rest of this report focuses on 18 year old applicants from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, Figure 9 shows the overall offer rate to applicants of all ages from Scotland, from 2008 to 2019.

Typically, a very high proportion of Scottish domiciled students will remain in Scotland. The **2018 End of Cycle Report** showed that in 2018, 96% of acceptances from Scottish domiciled applicants were to Scottish providers. Scottish universities and colleges are subject to student number controls, meaning that the number of Scottish and EU domiciled students they can accept is limited. However, those providers are, in theory, able to recruit as many students from the rest of the UK as they wish. The increased competition for a limited number of places will impact on the observed offer rate made to Scottish and EU domiciled students. In 2019 the offer rate to applicants from Scotland was 54%.

In Scotland there is a substantial section of higher education provision not included in UCAS' figures. This is mostly full-time higher education provided in further education colleges, which represents around one third of young full-time undergraduate study in Scotland, and this proportion varies by geography and background within Scotland.

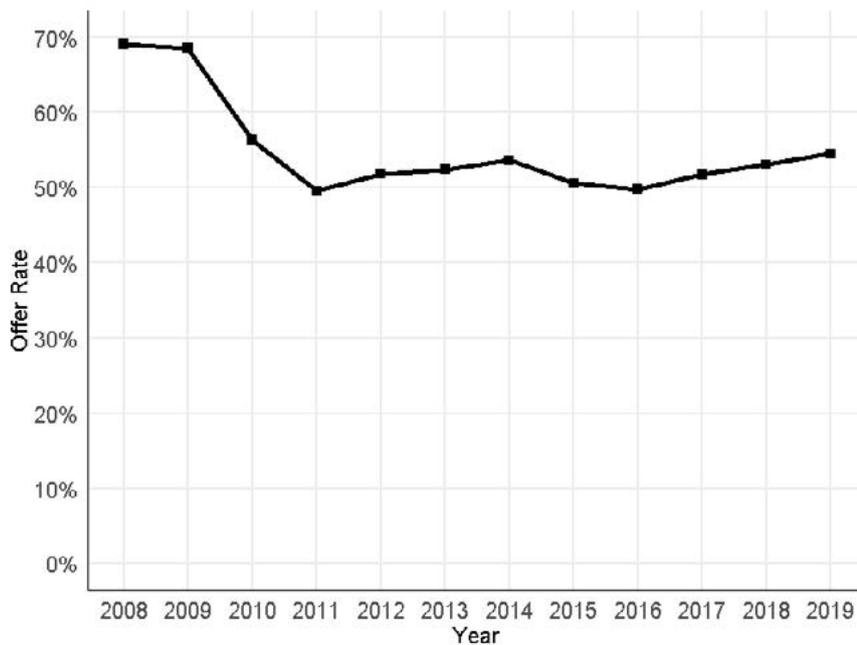


FIGURE 9:

Offer rate to applicants from Scotland, 2008 to 2019

GLOSSARY

30 June application deadline	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.
Acceptance	An applicant who, at the end of the cycle, has been placed for entry into higher education.
Age	This analysis uses country-specific age definitions that align with the cut-off points for school and college cohorts in the different administrations of the UK. For England and Wales, ages are defined on 31 August, for Northern Ireland on 1 July, and for Scotland on 28 February the following year. Defining ages in this way matches the assignment of children to school cohorts. For applicants outside the UK, a cohort cut-off of 31 August has been used.
Applicant	A person who has made an application in the UCAS system. Counts of applicants include those applying through the main scheme, late applicants direct to Clearing, and Records of Prior Acceptance (RPAs).
Conditional offer	Provider decision to grant a place to an applicant, subject to the applicant satisfying academic and/or other criteria.
Conditional unconditional offer	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.
Firm choice	An offer made by a provider which has been confirmed by the applicant as their first choice. These can be either conditional (dependent on achieving specified conditions), or unconditional (applicant has met specific conditions and assumed to be accepted or placed at the provider).
Main scheme	The main UCAS Undergraduate application scheme, through which up to five course choices can be applied for. This opens in September, and closes to new applications on 30 June the following year.
Offer	Provider decision to grant a place to an applicant. May be subject to the applicant satisfying academic and/or other criteria.
Offer description	Description of the offer, as communicated by the provider to the applicant through UCAS.
Offer rate	The proportion of applications receiving an offer. Note that each applicant may make up to five applications in the main scheme.
Offer with an unconditional component	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.
Provider	A higher education provider – a university or college.
Unconditional offer	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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