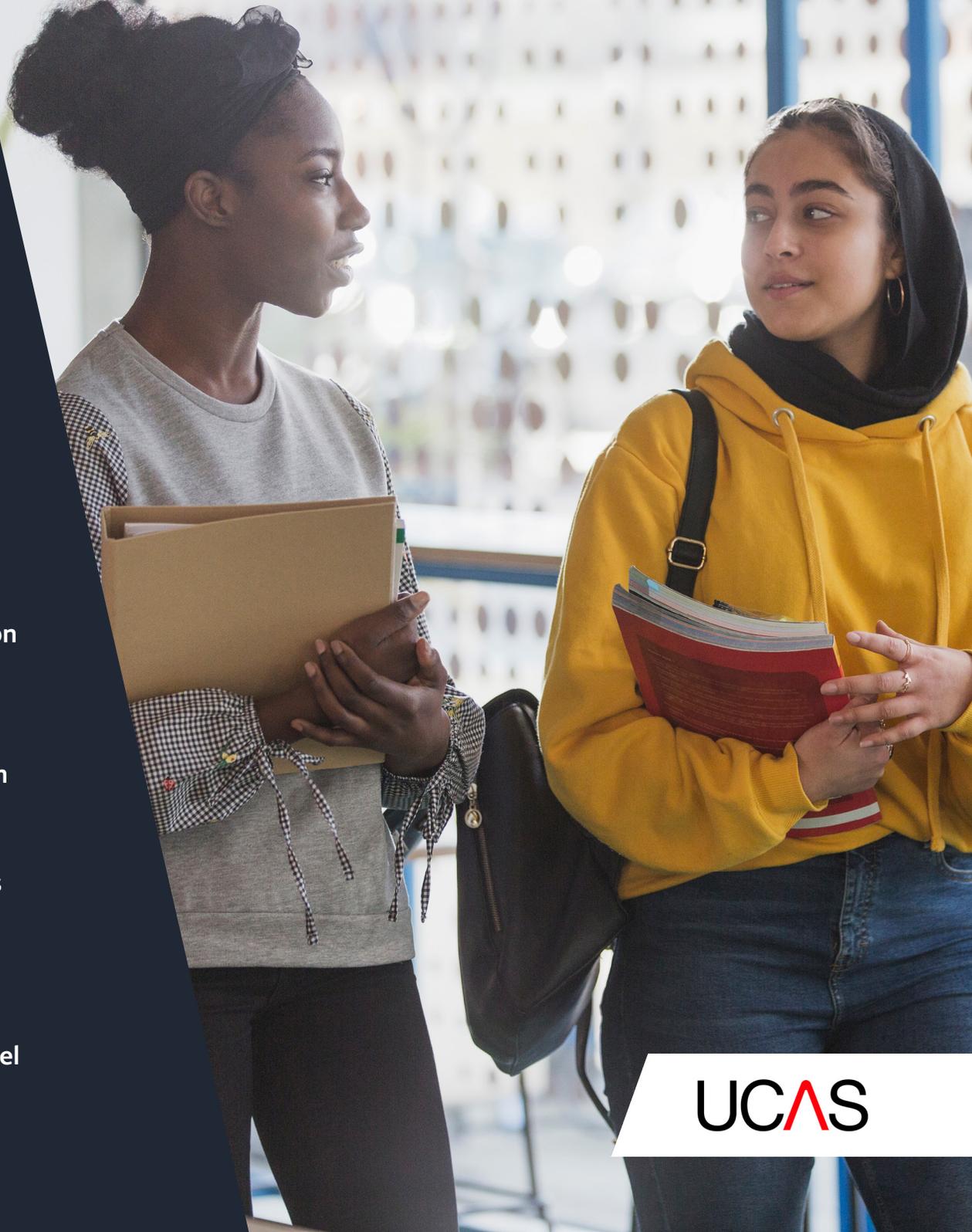


# UCAS END OF CYCLE REPORT 2019

## CHAPTER 8: QUALIFICATIONS

- > UK higher education (HE) continues to offer progression opportunities from a range of different qualifications – students apply with over 750 different qualifications each year, something that is almost unique to the UK.
- > 58% of UK 18 year olds apply with only A levels – down 1.2 percentage points on 2018.
- > UCAS is actively exploring ways of providing data driven additions or alternatives to predicted grades, as the difference between achieved and predicted grades persists. 43.2% of accepted applicants missed their predicted A level grades by three or more grades – up from 37.9% the previous year.
- > The acceptance rate for students holding AAA at A level was 91.9%, an increase of 0.2 percentage points from the previous cycle. DDD declined by 0.1 percentage points, to 82.7%.



Explore all the end of cycle data in our interactive dashboard on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com)<sup>1</sup>

Definitions of terms used in this report are given in the glossary<sup>2</sup>



## EACH CYCLE, UCAS APPLICANTS HOLD OVER 750 DIFFERENT QUALIFICATIONS, SOMETHING THAT IS ALMOST UNIQUE TO THE UK.

### The current qualifications landscape

Qualifications across the UK have changed significantly over recent years, with reforms to A levels, GCSEs, Curriculum for Excellence, and the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate. In the 2019 cycle, students applying with the final major wave of reformed A levels in England reached higher education – this included a reformed mathematics specification. Alongside this, almost all English 18 year old applicants applied holding reformed 9 – 1 GCSEs for the first time. Students also applied holding reformed Highers with revised unit structures, and the number of students applying with reformed Applied General qualifications also increased.

A key feature of UK HE is the diversity of qualifications students apply with. Each cycle, UCAS applicants hold over 750 different qualifications, something that is almost unique to the UK.



**FIGURE 1:** The common qualifications used by 18 year old UK domiciled applicants in the 2019 entry cycle<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2019>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2019-end-cycle-report>

<sup>3</sup> The size of each section represents the number of applicants holding at least one of each qualification type. Any qualifications held by fewer than 1,000 applicants will be included in the 'other' group. The 'other' group represents 8,095 students who applied with less commonly held qualifications.

EPQ HAS GROWN

15%

SINCE 2017

In 2019, 58% (163,095) of UK domiciled 18 year old applicants held three or more A levels only<sup>4</sup>, down 1.2% (1,990) from the previous cycle. However, the number of applicants holding both an A level and BTEC qualification<sup>5</sup> has increased by 5.1% (985), to reach 20,350 (7.2% of the cohort). Other qualification trends this cycle are:

- > The number of UK 18 year olds holding only BTEC qualifications<sup>6</sup> (most commonly the Extended Diploma) has declined 4.7% to 25,715.
- > There has been an increase in applicants holding other Applied General qualifications, such as OCR Cambridge Technicals. There are 76% (4,475) more UK 18 year old applicants holding an OCR Cambridge Technical in 2019 than there were in 2017, and one fifth of applicants in the 'other' category are holding one of these qualifications. This means the total number of UK 18 year old students entering HE with vocationally related qualifications has grown.
- > The number of students holding only SQA qualifications, who are predominantly based in Scotland, declined by 2.9% to 17,075. This is broadly in line with the 3.5% decline in Scottish 18 year old applicants observed in 2019, and the 3% decline in the overall population of 18 year olds in Scotland.
- > 2,495 UK domiciled 18 year old applicants applied with the International Baccalaureate. However, it should be noted that the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) offers this qualification internationally, and many more students outside the UK will study it. 76.5% of all applicants holding the IB apply from outside the UK.
- > The Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) continues to increase in popularity, with the number of UK domiciled 18 year old applicants holding this qualification increasing 14.8% since 2017 to 37,095. As referenced in 'Insight Report: Realising Ambition'<sup>7</sup>, the EPQ develops similar skills to those used in higher education.

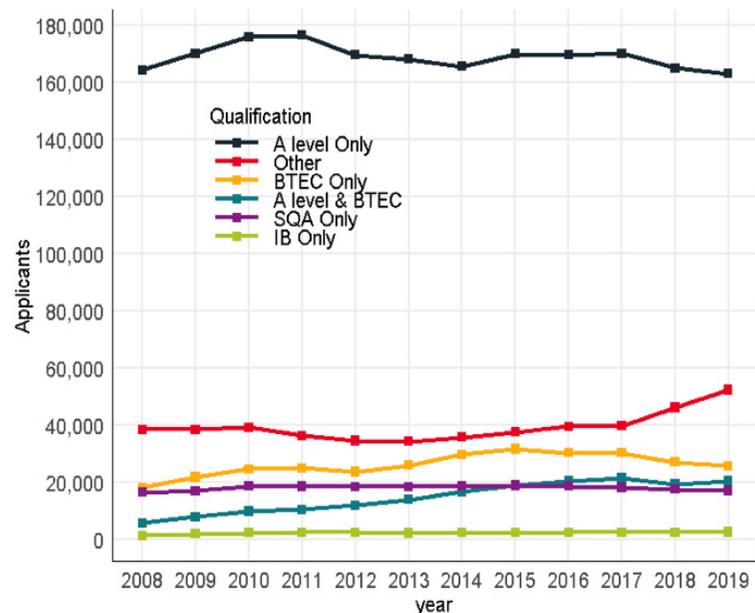


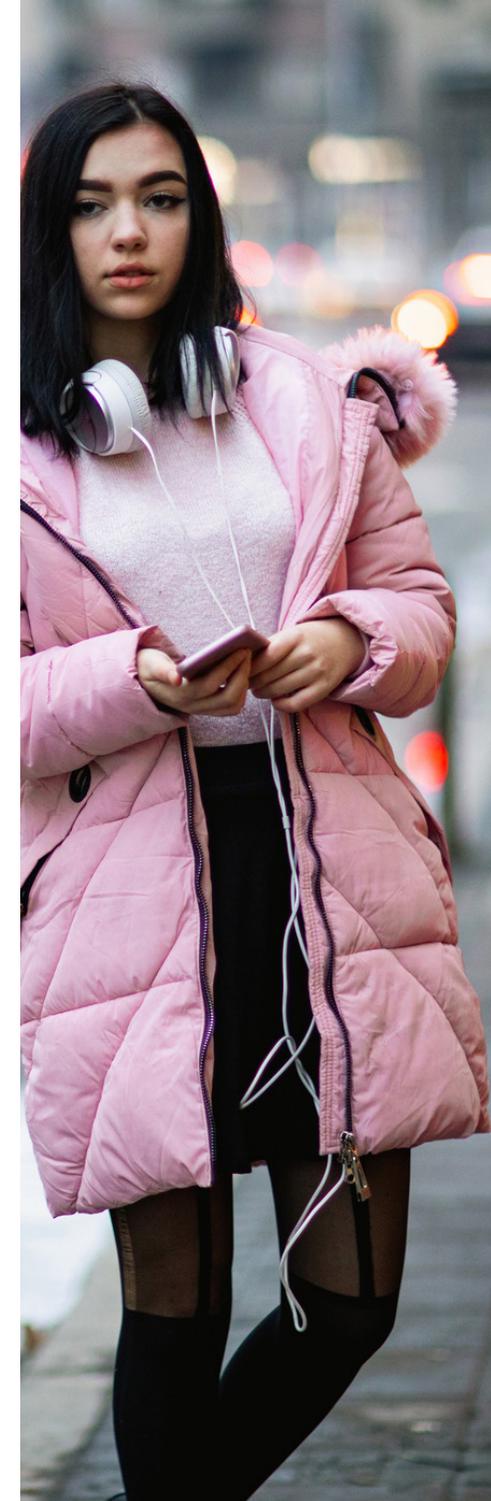
FIGURE 3: Number of applicants holding different qualification combinations between 2008 and 2019

<sup>4</sup> A level only: applicants who hold three A levels and no BTEC, SQA or IB qualifications.

<sup>5</sup> Holding A levels and BTECs equivalent to three A levels or more, and no IB or SQA qualifications.

<sup>6</sup> Holding only BTEC qualification equivalent to three A levels, and no A level, SQA or IB qualifications. For example, one Extended Diploma.

<sup>7</sup> www.ucas.com/file/286346/download?token=DookHVk1





## Predicted grades

When an applicant applies with pending qualifications, their school or college submits predicted grades. Advisers use a range of methods to inform predicted grades, including GCSE attainment, internal assessment, school management information services, and their own professional judgment and experience.

Predicted grades are only one part of the holistic assessment a university or college will typically undertake when assessing the potential of an applicant. Other elements can include the applicant's background, including their personal statement, related experience, previous qualifications, and school performance.

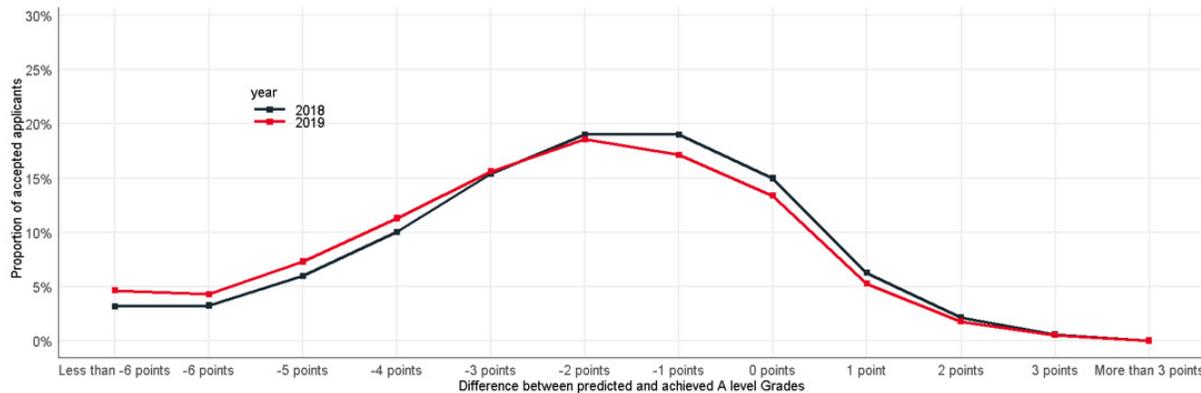
UCAS' analysis shows that, since 2012, the application rate by the June deadline for English 18 year olds has increased from 33.2% to 39.5%. During this time, there has been an increase in the range of qualifications and grades students have applied with. These factors may have contributed to an increased deviation between predicted and achieved grades.

UCAS is actively working with schools, colleges, and universities to improve the accuracy of predicted grades, recently publishing updated good practice guidance<sup>8</sup>, and launching a free service for advisers to help them understand the accuracy of their predictions. UCAS is also exploring how advanced modelling based

on information about the previous achievement of a student, such as GCSE or National 5 grades and their context, could create a data-driven addition or alternative to predicted grades.

In 2019, 21% (31,220) of accepted 18 year old applicants met or exceeded their predicted grades, a decrease of 3 percentage points. In addition, 43.2% of accepted applicants had a difference of three or more A level grades – an increase of 5 percentage points (7,190 applicants more) since 2018.

**1 IN 5**  
**18 YEAR OLDS**  
**MET OR EXCEEDED**  
**THEIR PREDICTED**  
**GRADES IN 2019.**

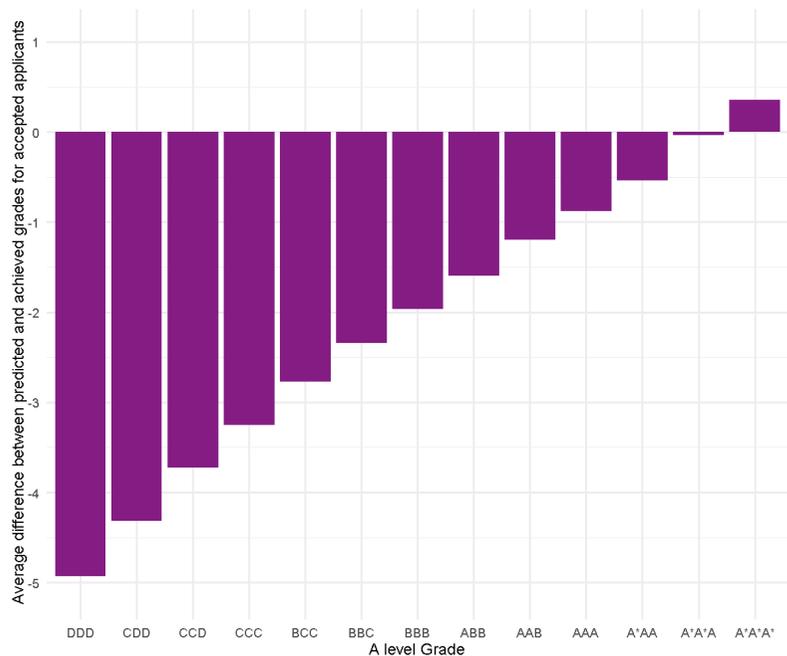


**FIGURE 3:** Difference between best three predicted and achieved A level grades of placed UK 18 year old applicants with three or more predicted A levels<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> [www.ucas.com/advisers/managing-applications/predicted-grades-what-you-need-know](http://www.ucas.com/advisers/managing-applications/predicted-grades-what-you-need-know)

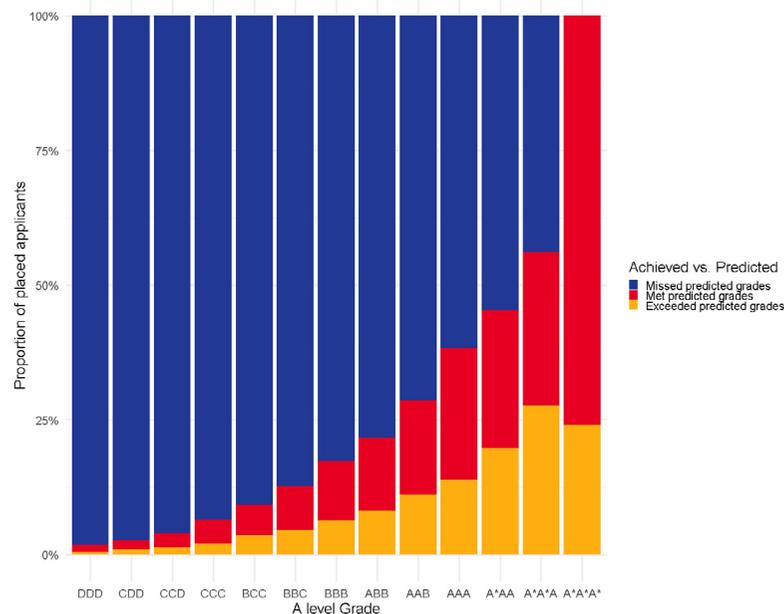
<sup>9</sup> Each A level point corresponds to one grade. For example, a student predicted AAA who achieved AAB would have missed their predicted grades by one point.

On average, 18 year UK students studying A levels are predicted 2.35 A level grades above their achieved grades. The difference between achieved and predicted grades is larger at certain grade profiles, and, in general, this difference increases as attainment goes down. For example, applicants who achieved AAA were, on average, predicted 0.88 of a grade higher than they achieved, whereas students achieving BBB were predicted 1.96 grades higher, and those who achieved DDD were predicted 4.93 grades higher.



**FIGURE 4:** Average difference between best three predicted and achieved A level grades of placed UK 18 year old applicants with three or more achieved A levels, by achieved grade

With the exception of A\*A\*A\* and A\*A\*A, students are generally over-predicted for each grade profile. Students are more likely to meet or exceed their predicted grades as attainment goes up. For example, 24.4% of applicants who achieved AAA were predicted to achieve those grades, 61.7% were predicted to achieve higher, and 13.8% were predicted to achieve lower. In comparison, for applicants who achieved DDD, 98.3% were predicted to achieve higher than DDD, leaving 1.7% meeting or exceeding their predicted grades. This may encourage aspirational choices, with providers making realistic offers, and taking near miss candidates when confirming places after results are available.



**FIGURE 5:** Percentage of placed UK domiciled 18 year old applicants who met their predicted grades, or are under or over predicted by achieved A level grade profile



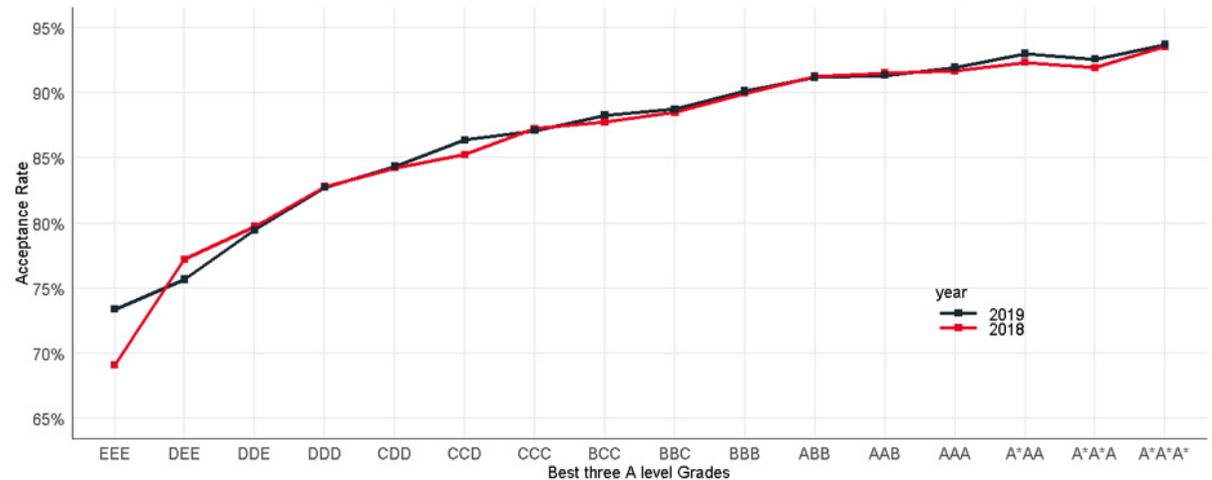


FIGURE 6: Acceptance rates by A level grade profile for UK 18 year old applicants

### Acceptance rates

The acceptance rate is the percentage of applicants who are accepted by the end of the cycle. On average, the acceptance rate for UK domiciled 18 year olds is 86%.

Different grade profiles also have different acceptance rates. In 2019, the acceptance rate for students holding AAA at A level was 91.9%, an increase of 0.2 percentage points from the previous cycle. The acceptance rate for applicants holding BBB was 90.1%, also an increase in 0.2 percentage points.

The acceptance rate for applicants holding DDD declined 0.1 percentage points to 82.7%. The acceptance rate for applicants holding CCC at A level also fell 0.1 percent points to 87.1%. The acceptance rate for students holding EEE has also increased. However, this represents just 305 students in 2019. Figure 6 shows that despite the competitive landscape, the trends in acceptance rates over the past two cycles has remained broadly similar. It will be interesting to observe whether this remains the same in the 2020 cycle given the continued demographic decline in 2020.



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