

What happened to the COVID cohort?

Lessons for levelling up in 2021 and beyond

Widening access and participation (WP) is about ensuring that future generations have equal opportunities to access and succeed in higher education (HE). For UCAS, WP is about supporting everyone with the potential to benefit from HE to make aspirational choices about their next steps, regardless of their background and access to support.

Executive summary

The impact of COVID on students, especially those from a disadvantaged background, was one of the biggest concerns the education sector faced this year, with many, such as the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), fearing that the progress seen over the past decade would be reversed¹. Despite school closures as the nation went into lockdown and huge variation in learning experiences – 77% of applicants reported they had been personally impacted by COVID² – more students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds across the UK entered HE in 2020 than ever before. This was reflected even in the most selective universities and courses.

This happened for several reasons: students (particularly mature students) saw higher education (HE) as a stable option during a turbulent time for the labour market, more students met the terms of their offers on ‘centre assessment grades’ (‘estimations’ in Scotland) than on their original exam results, the government increased capacity across HE, and there was an immense UK-wide effort to offer more support than ever to the COVID cohort.

Despite progress against the odds, the following challenges remain – and these are where we all must now focus our efforts:

Learn lessons from 2020 to support the class of 2021: Students hoping to go to university or college in autumn 2021 are playing catch-up, both academically and in defining their next steps. Without sustained effort, they may become the forgotten COVID cohort – less visible than last year’s entrants, but arguably starting from an equally bad or worse position. Ensuring disadvantaged students, are supported in accessing HE in 2021 will be critical, especially those who have experienced significant educational disruption.

¹ [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/REA -
Impact of school closures on the attainment gap summary.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/REA_-_Impact_of_school_closures_on_the_attainment_gap_summary.pdf)

² UCAS/Youthsight survey of 17 – 19 year old applicants.

Tackle the impending squeeze on HE and apprenticeship places: Progress in narrowing the gap between the most and least advantaged has slowed since 2015. This, combined with a rising 18 year old population (around 90,000 additional applicants are forecast by 2025), presents a potential pinch on HE and apprenticeship places. Without growth in post-secondary education places, competition will increase. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to be at the lower end of the attainment spectrum, with 13.4% of 18 year old POLAR4 Q1 (the most disadvantaged) applicants achieving grades below CCC at A level in 2020, double that of their advantaged peers in POLAR4 Q5 – therefore, without action, there is real potential for this capacity squeeze to have a greater impact on disadvantaged students.

Accelerate progress in levelling up opportunity to access education: Analysis within this report models the scale of change required to deliver a step change in social justice. The annual admission of 70 more of the most disadvantaged English 18 year old pupils to each higher tariff provider could all but eliminate the equality gap highlighted through UCAS' multiple equality measure (MEM) in just a decade. In 2020, each higher tariff provider accepted an average of 75 students from such backgrounds. Based on this current rate of progress, the gap would not be eliminated until 2352 – taking 332 years.

The majority of analysis in this report covers UK 18 year old students. Where age or domicile differs from this, it is explicitly referenced in the text or accompanying footnotes³. The recommendations accompanying this report are designed to propose practical steps that, taken together, will ensure the lessons learnt from 2020 endure into 2021 and beyond. The recommendations are relevant to UCAS, universities, colleges, schools, expert groups, and government policy.

Key 2020 insights

- The UK 18 year old entry rate rose to a record 37.0%, from 34.1% in 2019.
- Record UK application (41.5 % for 18 year olds) and acceptance rates (89.1% for 18 year olds), resulting in growth in participation across all POLAR4 groups.
- The UCAS MEM equality gap narrowed, with the most advantaged English school pupils (group five) 4.23 times more likely to enter HE than the most disadvantaged (group one), compared to 4.40 times in 2019. The gap from 2010 has now narrowed by 26.4%.
- Record numbers of 18 year old acceptances from the lowest participation areas: 29,020 UK students from POLAR4 Q1, 1,645 Scottish students from SIMD Q1, and over 14,000 acceptances of 18 year old English pupils receiving free school meals (FSM).
- Significant growth in mature student acceptances, reflecting a demand for up- and re-skilling as the economy entered recession – the work of doctors,

³ The major exception is analysis using the UCAS MEM, free school meals (FSM), and ethnic group, which is carried out using the National Pupil Database (NPD, source: Department for Education), and so is limited to English domiciled 18 year old students only. Further information on this, rounding, and other inclusion criteria, can be found in the Technical Appendix at the end of this document.

medical professionals, and NHS staff inspired applications to health and social care programmes, including nursing. Mature students (aged 21 or over) significantly increased to 114,440, representing the largest single year growth since 2009.

- Higher tariff providers and medicine courses accepted more disadvantaged students, with the MEM entry rate ratio for English 18 year old applicants to medicine narrowing. Nonetheless, the equality gap remains stark – advantaged students remain nearly 25 times more likely than their disadvantaged peers to be placed on medicine courses.
- A record number of students declaring disabilities, mental health conditions, or specific learning difficulties were accepted into HE. Nearly 4% of UK applicants now flag a mental health condition in their application, with a 10.4% increase in the number of accepted applicants declaring in 2020.
- Regional gaps in entry persist, with 49.1% of London-based 18 year olds entering HE, compared to 32.4% of those from the South West.

The report therefore recommends:

In the short term: 2021

1.	<p>Sustain efforts made in 2020 recognising the significant challenge facing those looking to progress to HE in 2021 by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maintaining the uplift in capacity in HE places and improved support for employers to take on apprentices or offer T Level placements • prioritising catch-up arrangements, including national online programmes • recognising educational disruption in the assessment and awarding of qualifications • demonstrating flexibility where at all possible 	UCAS, policymakers, qualification regulators in each devolved nation, schools, universities, and colleges.
2.	<p>Adopt UCAS' MEM as the default mechanism for measuring participation, providing a true sense of progress.</p>	UCAS, policymakers, and higher education regulators in each devolved nation, universities, and colleges.
3.	<p>Promote sharing of information at the application stage, including that related to disability, learning difference and mental health, by building confidence in students to trust that UCAS and universities and colleges will use this information to arrange appropriate support and inform future improvements.</p>	UCAS, expert groups, and outreach organisations such as HELOA.

In the medium to long-term: 2022 – 2025

4.	Enhance understanding of an individual's circumstances through improving the information UCAS collects from applicants, including disability, learning difference and mental health, gender identity, free school meal status, refugee status, whether they are veterans or Service children, have care or parenting responsibilities, or are estranged from their parents.	UCAS, expert groups, and charities.
5.	Better tailor course provision and support to account for each applicant's need. In light of rising numbers, this is especially relevant for mature students and those with mental health conditions, learning differences or disabilities –who are among those most likely to drop out. For subject areas where mental health declarations are low, target messaging to improve visibility of support.	Universities and colleges.
6.	Increase the number of HE places and apprenticeships to reflect the growing 18 year old population and ensure disadvantaged students do not miss out as a result of increased competition.	Policymakers, universities, and colleges
7.	Consider how a post-qualification admissions system might improve the application experience and outcomes for disadvantaged students. HE admissions reform should be used as an opportunity to explore how technical education and apprenticeships could be integrated into the UCAS application process.	Policymakers, UCAS, universities, colleges, and schools.
8.	Explore the benefits of a UK shared apprenticeships admissions service to enable students to consider and connect to all post-secondary education options in a single location.	UCAS.

The analysis and recommendations contained in this report are anchored in UCAS' strategy, [Discover Your Future](#), which sets out our aim to support students in exploring all post-secondary education options, including apprenticeships, higher technical qualifications, and part-time study.

Explore all the [end of cycle data](#) and view the glossary in our interactive dashboard on [ucas.com](#)

SECTION 1 – What happened in 2020?

Summary

- Despite a decade of progress in WP, headway has slowed in more recent years, with the MEM equality gap narrowing by an average of 1.1% year on year since 2015 versus 4.4% across the previous five years.
- 2020 sees a continuation of gradual progress in WP. This holds true at sector-level and across all tariff groups and most measures.
- Placed numbers of mature students (aged 21 or over) significantly increased to 114,440, the largest single year growth since 2009 (+ 7,000).
- Record numbers of English 18 year old students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were accepted onto medicine courses in 2020.

With students outside of a formal education setting since March, there were concerns that less support would mean many young people would struggle to make their next step after school or college. In May, the Sutton Trust published evidence⁴ on the inequality of access to information and advice, digital poverty, financial uncertainties, and varying school and college support. The EEF published similar research⁵, noting that ‘school closures are likely to reverse progress made to narrow the gap in the last decade.’ This was against the backdrop of findings from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) Education in England: Annual Report 2020⁶ that suggested the stalling of the gap at secondary level had occurred even before the COVID pandemic had impacted the education system.

2020 saw a continuation of gradual progress in WP in HE, with record entry rates among the lowest participation areas (using the POLAR4 and SIMD measures) and those receiving free school meals (FSM). The number of mature students (aged 21 or over) entering HE also significantly increased to 114,440, the largest single year growth since 2009.

Regarding ethnicity, the overall entry rate for Black students reached 47.5%. Entry to higher tariff providers, where historically entry has been low, also reached a record level, with 10.2% of Black students entering this group of providers. However, the Black ethnic group remains the least likely to enter higher tariff providers – 3.94 times less likely than those from the Chinese ethnic group.

While the progress in each of these groups is important to note, to really understand the full impact of the pandemic in 2020 we must consider all the different aspects of disadvantage. To do this, UCAS developed the multiple equality measure (MEM)⁷ in 2015. This approach avoids focusing on one measure or metric, which can create

⁴ www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-and-Social-Mobility-Impact-Brief-2.pdf

⁵ https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/REA_-_Impact_of_school_closures_on_the_attainment_gap_summary.pdf

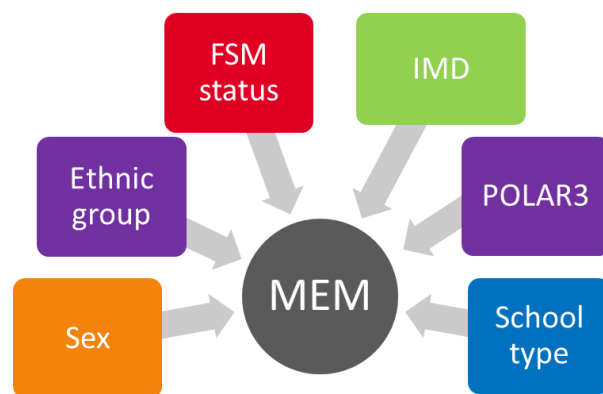
⁶ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/>

⁷ As discussed in the linked report, the MEM is derived using data available in the National Pupil Database (NPD, source: DfE), and, as such, its constituent variables are limited to those available in this data set. UCAS is continuously looking to develop the MEM by improving and expanding the data fields included, when possible.

blind spots or oversimplify. A multi-factored measure provides a truer understanding of a student's circumstances.

Students are assigned to MEM groups (one – five) based on their combination of background characteristics (Figure 1). Those in MEM group one are the most disadvantaged, and those in MEM group five are the most advantaged.

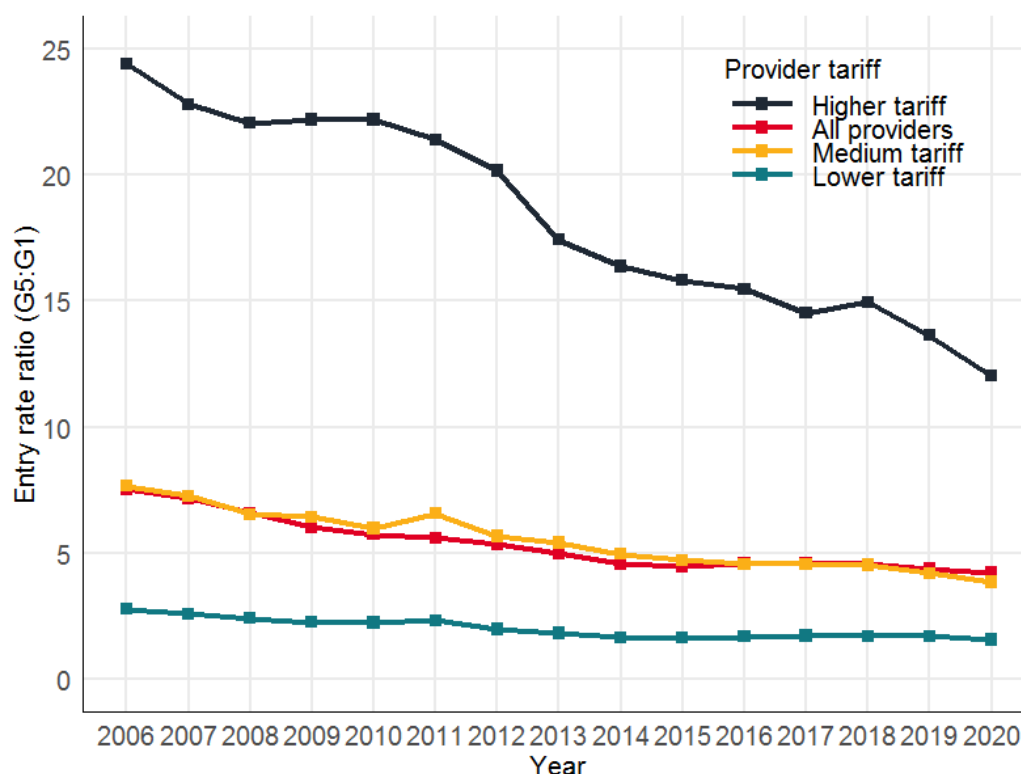
Figure 1: Equality factors included in the UCAS MEM



Variables are:

- Free school meal (FSM) status
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)
- POLAR3
- School type

Figure 2: Entry rate ratio between the most and least advantaged students entering HE by provider type (2006 – 2020)



There were increases in acceptances across all MEM groups in 2020. Importantly, the entry rate of students in MEM group one (the most disadvantaged group) increased by 9.3% proportionally, to 14.4% overall. As a result, while the equality gap measured by UCAS' MEM remains substantial, it is the lowest on record, with 2020 reporting the largest single year proportional decrease since 2014. Nonetheless, and as Figure 2 above shows, headway has slowed in more recent years, with the MEM equality gap narrowing by an average of 1.1% year on year since 2015 versus 4.4% across the previous five years.

The equality gap narrowed across all tariff groups and most measures

Participation in higher tariff providers has always been a key measure of progress in WP. The following tables illustrate entry rate ratios for various equality measures. The value of the entry rate ratio indicates how many times more likely the advantaged group is to enter HE than the disadvantaged group, and colour shading shows whether 2020 saw a widening (red), plateauing (orange), or narrowing (green) of the equality gaps.

Overall, the challenge is greater for higher tariff providers across most measures, namely POLAR4, SIMD, MEM, FSM, and ethnicity. Gender is the prominent exception, where the gap is widest at lower tariff providers, while medium tariff providers see a notable difference in geographical inequality by region. The year on year picture is broadly positive across tariff groups with only FSM plateauing, and the geographical region and gender gaps widening.

Table 1: 2020 entry rate ratios for POLAR4, SIMD, MEM, and FSM

	POLAR4 (UK domiciled) (Q5:Q1)	SIMD (Scottish domiciled) (Q5:Q1)	MEM (English domiciled) (Group five: Group one)	FSM (English domiciled) (Non-FSM: FSM)
Overall	2.20	2.99	4.23	1.88
Higher tariff	4.70	3.19	12.02	3.15
Medium tariff	1.92	2.68	3.86	1.98
Lower tariff	1.05	_*8	1.59	1.31

Table 2: 2020 entry rates and entry rate ratios for gender (UK domiciled)

	Men	Women	Entry rate ratio (Women:Men)
Overall	31.3%	43.0%	1.38
Higher tariff	11.4%	15.3%	1.34
Medium tariff	10.7%	14.0%	1.30
Lower tariff	9.2%	13.8%	1.50

Table 3: 2020 entry rates and entry rate ratios for ethnicity (English domiciled)

	Any Other ethnic Group	Asian	Black	Chinese	Mixed	White	Entry rate ratio (ethnic group with highest entry rate: ethnic group with lowest entry rate in 2020)
Overall	46.6%	53.1%	47.5%	71.7%	39.0%	32.6%	2.20
Higher tariff	13.0%	14.2%	10.2%	40.2%	13.0%	10.7%	3.95
Medium tariff	17.2%	17.6%	17.5%	19.6%	13.1%	10.9%	1.80
Lower tariff	16.5%	21.3%	19.9%	12.0%	12.9%	10.9%	1.95

Table 4: 2020 entry rates and entry rate ratios for UK region (UK domiciled)

	Nor th East	Nor th Wes t	Yorksh ire and The	East Midla nds	West Midla nds	East of Engla nd	Lond on	Sou th East	Sou th Wes t	Entry rate ratio (regi on)
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⁸ In 2020, there were only ten SIMD quintile 1 acceptances and 30 quintile 5 acceptances to lower tariff providers. As such, the SIMD entry rates to lower tariff providers are too small to determine a statistically reliable entry rate ratio. The value of the ratio in 2020 is 3.29

			Humb er							with high est entr y rate: regio n with lowe st entr y rate in 2020)
Overa ll	33.2 %	36.5 %	34.6%	35.0%	35.3%	37.1 %	49.1 %	38.6 %	32.4 %	1.52
Highe r tariff	11.5 %	12.5 %	10.7%	10.4%	10.2%	12.6 %	18.9 %	15.9 %	12.8 %	1.85
Medi um tariff	10.8 %	4.2 %	10.7%	13.3%	9.4%	14.2 %	17.0 %	15.4 %	12.9 %	4.08
Lowe r tariff	11.0 %	19.9 %	13.2%	11.3%	15.6%	10.3 %	13.3 %	7.4 %	6.7 %	2.97

Outcomes for disadvantaged students looking to study in the most selective providers and medicine courses improved in 2020

By the end of the 2020 cycle, 1,925 POLAR4 Q1 applicants were placed in 15 of the most selective universities and colleges⁹ – a 34.8% increase on the previous cycle. In total, 34,045 UK 18 year old students were placed at this group of providers by the end of the 2020 cycle – an 18.5% increase on 2019.

Medicine remained one of the most competitive subjects in 2020, with only just over a third (34.9%) of choices made by English 18 year olds applicants resulting in offer¹⁰. Helped by the lifting of the cap on medical places in England in 2020, 105 English 18 year old students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (MEM group one) were accepted onto medicine courses, compared to 80 in 2019 – a new record. Whilst an additional 25 places for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds is positive,

⁹ 'Selective providers' are defined in Annex A: 'Selective provider definition' - www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2020-end-cycle-report

¹⁰ Note that each applicant can make up to five choices on their application in the UCAS main scheme, four of which can be to medicine courses.

the equality gap remains stark, and advantaged students remain nearly 25 times more likely than their disadvantaged peers to be placed on medicine courses.

Ongoing efforts made by medical schools to expand and collaborate on outreach programmes, such as UKWPMED, will be central to reducing this gap.

SECTION 2 – How was 2020 different?

Summary

- A record UK 18 year old entry rate of 37.0% sees more disadvantaged students enter HE than ever before.
- The grading change had a positive impact on WP at all universities and colleges, including 15 of the most selective providers, and saw POLAR4 Q1 acceptances grow by 11.6% at these providers between 19 August and the end of the 2020 cycle.
- As the economy shifts, older students look to re- and up-skill through HE, with UCAS forecasting rising numbers of mature applicants in 2021.
- Mental health declarations continue to (modestly) rise, but young men are significantly (and increasingly) less likely to declare.

Record UK 18 year old entry rates sees more disadvantaged students enter HE than ever before

Due to the cancellation of exams across the UK in 2020, the qualifications awarding process was different this year. Following ministerial announcements for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, it was decided that students would receive either their 'centre assessment grade' (CAG) ('estimation' in Scotland) or their 'calculated grade' ('moderated result' in Scotland) – whichever was higher.

Consequently, 165,725¹¹ UCAS applicants received a grade higher than they were initially awarded. 84.5% of these 18 year olds were placed at their original firm choice university or college, or on a course at a university or college in the same or higher tariff band as their original firm choice – compared to 80.8% of all UK 18 year olds in 2019.

The flexibility demonstrated by universities and colleges in accommodating this redistribution of students (supported by the government's removal of number controls and the cap on medicine places) saw UK acceptances for all ages reach 485,400 (up 4.5% on 2019) and the UK 18 year old entry rate rise to a record 37.0% (up 2.9 percentage points on 2019).

Grading changes had a positive impact on WP

Through the collective efforts of the sector, more students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds across the UK entered HE in 2020 than ever before, with just over 29,000 POLAR4 Q1 18 year old acceptances this year. This was supported by the government, with universities and colleges in England explicitly asked by the Universities Minister to prioritise disadvantaged students.

Across the UK, concern regarding the impact of the original grading for disadvantaged students was widespread. However, recent research from Ofqual¹² suggests that, whether using the original calculated grades or 'final' grades, no

¹¹ Figures in this paragraph are limited to applicants with a main scheme firm choice on 30 June.

¹² www.gov.uk/government/news/summer-2020-outcomes-did-not-systemically-disadvantage-students

groups of students were systemically disadvantaged in 2020 based on their protected characteristics or socio-economic status. Evidence for this can be found by looking at the data at 19 August, prior to the policy changes, where the UK 18 year old entry rate was 34.3%¹³, a 1.3 percentage point increase compared to the same point in the 2019 cycle and a record high. By this date, 26,190 POLAR4 Q1 applicants already held confirmed places in HE – an increase of 1,270 from the same point in the previous cycle.

The Ofqual research also showed that the most consistent effect of the policy change was an uplift in final outcomes for *all* groups. With more students meeting the terms of their offer, the number of placed UK 18 year old main scheme applicants increased by 5.5%, from before the policy change to the end of the 2020 cycle, with those placed at their firm choice course increasing by 5.1%, and acceptances to higher tariff providers growing by 7.5%. This contrasts with movements over the same period in 2019, in which there was a 1.6% uplift in main scheme applicant acceptances (and a slight decrease in the number placed at higher tariff providers).

There were increases in acceptances across all POLAR4 groups. This included an increase in the total number of POLAR4 Q1 main scheme applicants placed at 15 of the most selective universities and colleges, from 1,725¹⁴ before the policy change to 1,925 by the end of the 2020 cycle – an 11.6% increase.

The grading change therefore resulted in an overall increase in access to this group of selective providers, benefitting *all* student groups, including the most disadvantaged.

Concerns had been raised that the reissue of grades after results day would result in some students having to defer, due to a lack of capacity for students meeting their offer conditions only after the change¹⁵. In total, there were 1,520 deferred firm choice acceptances late in the cycle among applicants who had grade increases. Around 1,000 of these 'late deferrals' would not have occurred had this group's deferral rate been the same as expected based on the 2019 cycle¹⁶.

More students seek out careers in health and social care than ever before

In July, UCAS reported¹⁷ that the number of new nursing applicants¹⁸ between 15 January and 30 June was 63% higher than the same period last year (12,840 in 2020, compared to 7,880 in 2019). The first lockdown period (23 March – 30 June

¹³ This figure (as with all in cycle figures in the report) excludes RPAs; End of Cycle figures include RPAs. Full details of inclusion criteria are in the Technical appendix.

¹⁴ This figure is rounded to the nearest 5 due to the direct comparison with an End of Cycle figure. (Other in cycle figures are rounded to the nearest 10, as indicated in the Technical Appendix.)

¹⁵ www.theguardian.com/education/2020/aug/19/how-will-the-a-level-u-turn-affect-uk-university-admissions

¹⁶ Annex B: 'Additional firm choice deferrals estimation' provides the methodology used to produce this estimate of additional deferrals. www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2020-end-cycle-report

¹⁷ <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/keep-calm-students-still-want-to-study/>

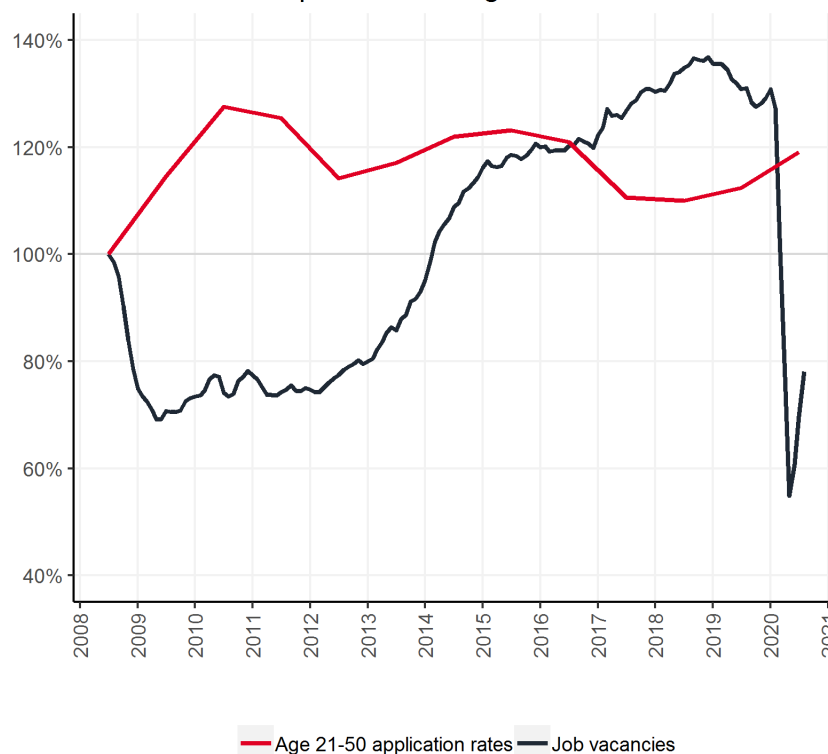
¹⁸ Figures in the paragraph cover applicants from all domiciles and all age groups.

deadline) itself saw nearly double the number of applications to nursing relative to the same period in the year previously (up 98% on 2019). Nearly half of all new applicants during this period said COVID had increased their likelihood of applying, and for 8% it was their main or only reason for applying. Further evidence of how frontline workers inspired students is evidenced by the rise in health and social care acceptances – nursing acceptances reached a record high of 37,630 (up 23.8% on 2019).

The economy will change the make up of applicants

UCAS analysis¹⁹ has previously shown that rises in mature applicants can be linked to a weaker job market. Between Q3 2019 and Q3 2020, job vacancies fell by 40.4%²⁰, and this cycle saw a record number of acceptances for mature UK students. The number of applicants aged 21 – 50 increased by 5.8% on 2019, to reach a total of 149,720. Acceptances among UK applicants rose to record levels for those in the 25 – 29 (23,790, +9.9% since 2019), 30 – 34 (14,960, +11.7%), and 35 and over (28,330, +4.2%) categories. This has continued for those starting in 2021, with data from the 15 October deadline²¹ showing a 28% rise in applicants from the 21+ age group.

Figure 3: Relationship between job vacancies and mature application rate
Proportional change from 2008



Earlier UCAS research²² has found mature students to have different motivations, expectations, and needs than their younger counterparts. However, a November

¹⁹ www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/mature-students-local-focused-and-female

²⁰ www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/october2020

²¹ www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2021/2021-cycle-applicant-figures-15-october-deadline

²² www.ucas.com/file/175936/download?token=UVSBJLVD

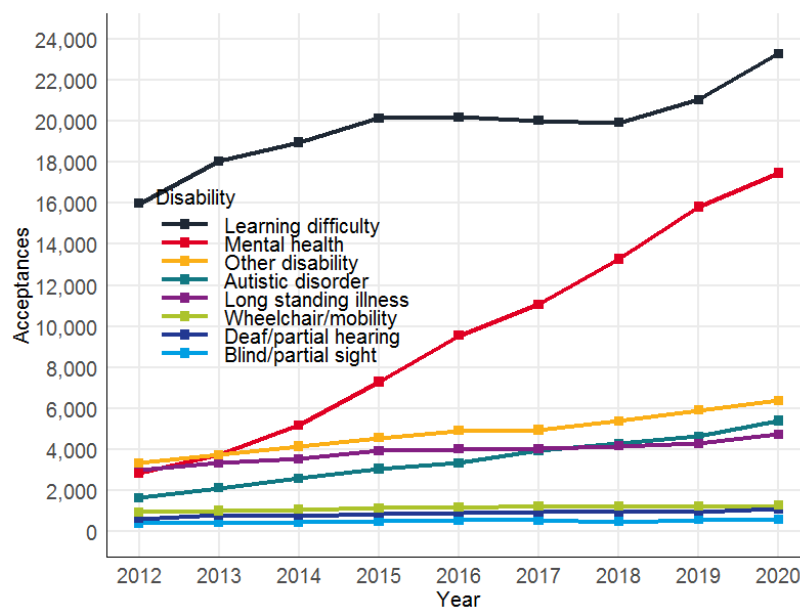
2020 report by TASO²³ highlights the current absence of consistent good practice to support the retention and attainment of mature students. It is, therefore, important for universities and colleges to continue to tailor course provision and support to account for a likely uplift in mature students, and to enable success – as noted by Universities UK with the CBI.

A record number of applicants sharing information about disability and mental health

Disability²⁴

In total, 64,965 accepted UK applicants declared a physical or mental health condition in 2020 – an increase of 11.5% on 2019. Since 2012, there has been an overall rise of 82.1% in the proportion of accepted applicants making a declaration – from 7.4% to 13.4% in 2020. Declarations in all categories reached a record high, but significant increases were seen in accepted applicants declaring an autistic spectrum condition – rising 16.2% (5,400 applicants), a specific learning difficulty – rising 10.7% (23,270), a long-term illness – rising 10.7% and continuing a year on year increase (4,745), and deafness and hearing impairments, also up 10.7% (1,100). Over a quarter (26.9%) of all declarations by accepted applicants in 2020 were for a mental health condition. UCAS will be exploring this area next year in a future publication.

Figure 4: Number of accepted applicants declaring an impairment or condition as part of the UCAS application



Over the past five years, the proportion of accepted applicants declaring a physical or mental health condition or impairment has increased year on year, from 9.4% in 2015 to 13.4% in 2020. This increase, largely driven by the rise in mental health

²³ <https://taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Full-report-Understanding-gaps-in-the-student-experience-Bridge-Group-and-Coventry-University.pdf>

²⁴ Analysis in this section refers to UK applicants of all ages, unless stated otherwise in the text.

declarations, seemingly indicates that students are increasingly comfortable sharing information about their support needs.

However, there is still a way to go: too many applicants still choose not to declare. Continuing efforts to frame the question positively for applicants and their advisers are critical to ensuring students have an equitable chance of success in HE. UCAS recognises its critical role in this process and, working with key organisations and sector bodies, has been exploring ways to improve the application to encourage more students to declare a disability, learning difference or mental health condition. Changes to the language, format, and help text will be introduced in future cycles.

Mental health declarations continue to (modestly) rise but some groups are far less likely to declare

The impact of COVID on student mental health has been the centre of much discussion and has seen the sector working together to explore ways to address this major concern. In response, Student Minds launched Student Space, a collaborative mental health programme to help students find resources, tools, and information to support them through the pandemic.

Since 2012, there has been a steady year on year rise in the number of applicants declaring a mental health condition. In 2020, 17,455 accepted students shared this information in their UCAS application – an increase of 10.4% on 2019, and a record high. However, when looking at the *proportion* of accepted applicants who declared a mental health condition, this uplift is far more modest than it first appears – from 3.4% in 2019 to 3.6% in 2020, suggesting that the year on year increases since 2015 (when the proportion was only 1.5%) may be starting to level off. We should also be mindful that this data will underrepresent the number of students who will experience difficulties with their mental health²⁵, not least as the ongoing impacts of COVID continue to be felt.

By examining how mental health declarations intersect with other characteristics, analysis can start to pinpoint where support may be in higher demand: applicants aged 21 – 24 (6.6% in 2020) are almost three times more likely to declare than those aged 18 (2.3%), those from POLAR4 Q1 (4.6%) are more likely to declare than those from POLAR4 Q5 (3.2%), and those from the Mixed (4.4%) or White (4.3%) ethnic groups are almost twice as likely to declare than applicants in other ethnic groups.

Importantly, this data also highlights which groups are significantly less likely to declare – it should not be assumed these students are less likely to face challenges with their mental health. For example, the number of female applicants declaring a mental health condition is consistently higher than male, with the gap between rates of declaration by male and female applicants growing since 2012. In 2020, female applicants were twice as likely (4.7%) to declare a mental health condition than male (2.1%), whereas, in 2012, female applicants (0.9%) were only 1.6 times as likely to

²⁵ digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up

declare than males (0.6%). Research by the Mental Health Foundation²⁶ has shown that men with mental health conditions are more likely to be under-diagnosed and less likely to access support than women. This stark gender gap is a concern because current efforts to reduce stigma seem to be failing to resonate with male applicants.

One approach to tackle under-declaration may be to target messaging to those applying to subject areas where mental health declarations are lowest – these are consistently:

1. medicine and dentistry (1.4% of all accepted applicants declared a mental health condition in 2020)
2. engineering (1.4%)
3. business and admin studies (1.5%)
4. architecture, building, and planning (1.8%)

Except for medicine and dentistry (which itself has a high POLAR4 Q5 entry), these courses tend to have a high male:female ratio. In contrast, students accepted to courses in arts and languages (including European and Non-European languages and literature, Creative arts and design, and Linguistics) are between three to six times more likely to declare a mental health condition, and they also tend to present a higher female:male ratio. In these instances, gender itself cannot be deemed to be the determining factor in the lower declarations – other issues will be influencing this – however, it is worth considering when addressing the disparity at subject level.

²⁶ www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/m/men-and-mental-health

SECTION 3 – What does the future look like for levelling up?

Summary

- As the 18 year old population rises, resulting in around 90,000 additional applicants by 2025, there will be more competition for university and college places and apprenticeships. There is a risk that disadvantaged students, who are typically lower attaining, will be squeezed out.
- Modelling different scenarios illustrates the scale of change that would be required to eliminate the equality gap at higher tariff providers, with the current trend meaning the gap will take 332 years to close.²⁷
- Higher technical education and apprenticeships present challenges and opportunities for social justice.
- Reforming HE admissions offers an opportunity to better support FE and apprenticeship options.

What will the 2021 WP story look like?

Though analysis of the 2020 cycle is broadly positive for disadvantaged students, the challenge of carrying this through to 2021 should not be underestimated. Current applicants have faced significant barriers to their progression – when surveyed over the summer, 30% of those looking to apply in the upcoming cycle reported zero hours of contact time with their school during lockdown, and 93% had concerns about making decisions about their future²⁸.

Equally, the potential for disadvantaged students to experience a disproportionate impact of the pandemic on their Level 3 attainment is clear. Based on studies of previous school closures across different countries, the EEF estimates²⁹ that the socio-economic attainment gap in England could widen by 36% (reversing progress in narrowing the gap seen since 2011), and school attendance rates appear lower for more disadvantaged areas and students. Meanwhile, in November, Teach First reported³⁰ that four out of five (84%) schools with the poorest pupils do not have enough devices and internet access to ensure all self-isolating pupils can keep learning.

Therefore, the role of UK governments and qualification regulators in recognising educational disruption in the assessment and awarding of qualifications will be critical. The flexibility of universities and colleges, plus government willingness to invest in maintaining capacity of HE and apprenticeships, will also be essential.

To support students entering HE in 2021, UCAS will:

²⁷ Annex C: 'Forecasts for the higher tariff provider MEM equality gap' provides (in part ii) the methodology used to produce this estimate www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2020-end-cycle-report

²⁸ Figures from the 2020 UCAS pre-applicant survey of Year 12/S5 students. The questions asked were 'On average each week, how much contact time are you getting with your teachers? This could be through online classes, Zoom calls, one-to-one phone calls with your teacher or similar.' and 'How worried, if at all, are you feeling about being able to make the right decision about your future?'

²⁹ [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/EEF_\(2020\)_-_Impact_of_School_Closures_on_the_Attainment_Gap.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/EEF_(2020)_-_Impact_of_School_Closures_on_the_Attainment_Gap.pdf)

³⁰ www.teachfirst.org.uk/press-release/digital-divide

- provide greater transparency to advisers in schools and colleges regarding the range of attainment levels universities and colleges accept, rather than just what is marketed in prospectuses
- build on the extensive content on our website and online events to provide students with trusted information and advice about their options
- provide guidance on how information about COVID disruption faced by an applicant is communicated in UCAS references or the personal statement
- make enhancements to the Clearing Plus service, to provide a greater and more diverse range of options for applicants to choose from

What will the next five years entail if we are to level up?

The impact of COVID on educational inequalities, combined with a growing population, has the potential to put the brakes on – or even reverse – recent progress in WP.

2021 will bring the first increase in the 18 year old population since 2015 – a trend that is set to endure for the next six years. By 2025, Office for National Statistics (ONS) data projects a net increase of 114,060 18 year olds across the UK, bringing the total to 811,130³¹. By 2025, UCAS forecasts there will around an additional 90,000 UK 18 year old applicants based on a projected application rate of 47.5%. The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) has similarly suggested³² that, considering such projected increases in participation, around 358,000 more student places would be required in England alone by 2035.

Such a shift would change the nature of levelling up, with increased competition for places likely to increase the selectivity of the HE sector. Universities and colleges will need to make tougher decisions – and there is a risk that lower attaining disadvantaged students will be squeezed out given they are on average 18 months behind their more advantaged peers, according to the EPI³³.

This ‘disadvantage gap’ is also found in UCAS’ data, with 13.4% of 18 year old POLAR4 Q1 applicants achieving below CCC at A level in 2020 – over double that of POLAR4 Q5. The Equality and Human Rights Commission suggests³⁴ that, without intervention, persistent inequalities at both primary and secondary level could increase post-pandemic, widening the pre-HE attainment gap. In addition, disadvantaged students are also more likely to be accepted with lower levels of attainment than the advertised entry requirements. For example, in 2019, the UCAS report, Realising Ambition³⁵, showed that 60% of POLAR4 Q1 placed applicants were accepted on courses with actual A level grades below advertised entry requirements

³¹

www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2018based To obtain the population values provided here in this report, UCAS further processes the ONS population forecasts to align with UK country-specific school year.

³² www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Demand-for-Higher-Education-to-2035_HEPI-Report-134_FINAL.pdf

³³ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/>

³⁴ www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/equality_and_human_rights_commission_how_corona_virus_has_affected_equality_and_human_rights_2020.pdf

³⁵ www.ucas.com/file/286346/download?token=DookHVk1 -figures based on 18 year olds domiciled in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, with at least three predicted A levels, who have been accepted on courses for which A level entry requirements have been supplied to UCAS.

(compared with 49% across all placed applicants). This means that disadvantaged students may be most vulnerable to an uplift in competition for places.

Devolved government policy in Scotland determines that places are ringfenced for disadvantaged students. SIMD targets were introduced in Scotland in 2007 and disadvantaged 18 year olds from SIMD Q1 are now twice as likely to enter HE than in 2008. In addition, Scottish universities and colleges committed to setting minimum entry requirements for disadvantaged students from the 2020/21 cycle. Among 18 year old females in Scotland, 15 January deadline application rates for SIMD Q1 rose to 24% in the 2020 cycle (from an average of 23% across 2016 to 2019)³⁶, while application rates among males remained constant at 12%.

Improving how choices are made is crucial

A broader question is the extent to which disadvantaged applicants might *choose* to apply for an undergraduate degree. In 2020, the 15 January application rate for POLAR4 Q1 students was less than half that of POLAR Q5³⁷ – aspiration remains a considerable barrier for disadvantaged students in accessing HE. Moreover, as innovation and interest in alternatives to three-year, full-time, undergraduate degree programmes grow, the challenge in attracting disadvantaged applicants to more traditional forms of HE will likely mount.

Graduate employability appears more important to disadvantaged applicants, with 79% of POLAR4 Q1 18 year old applicants citing that their choice of subject was influenced by career prospects or requirements, compared to 74% of Q5³⁸. Organisations such as the Sutton Trust have long since championed apprenticeships as having the ‘potential to be powerful vehicles for social mobility’³⁹ – unsurprising given their promise of a salaried route to a degree (and a likely fast track to employment).

Higher technical education qualifications are to be newly approved from 2022 and, following the ‘Kickstart Scheme’ announcement in July, there was a 12% month-on-month increase in the number of listed opportunities on the UCAS apprenticeship search tool, Career Finder. In addition, 30% of UK 18 year old applicants are seriously considering an apprenticeship at the point of their UCAS application (rising to 32% for POLAR4 Q1 students)⁴⁰.

This means that success in WP ought not to be defined by headline numbers around those from the most disadvantaged quintiles entering HE, but considered holistically in terms of levelling up opportunity for all. Another (and in many ways contrary) risk

³⁶ www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2020/2020-cycle-applicant-figures-15-january-deadline

³⁷ www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2020/2020-cycle-applicant-figures-15-january-deadline

³⁸ Figures from the 2020 UCAS New Applicant Survey. The question asked was: ‘Which of the following influenced your choice of subject(s)? Please select all that apply’.

³⁹ www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Degree-Apprenticeships-Levelling-Up.pdf

⁴⁰ Figures from the 2020 UCAS New Applicant Survey The question asked was: ‘In addition to your application for higher education, are you seriously considering any of the following? Please tick all that apply’.

is that, short of attracting disadvantaged students in greater numbers, the absence of a centralised application process and transparency of route for technical education and apprenticeship pathways could create a barrier to entry. Such fairness challenges will need to be addressed, as noted by the Social Mobility Commission⁴¹.

Looking further into the future, how ambitious can we be?

The external environment means the next five years will see universities, colleges, and apprenticeship providers required to redouble their efforts to improve equality of access to post-secondary education. The combined effect of the supply of 18 year old applicants outweighing demand for places, a likely widening of the attainment gap as a result of the pandemic, and the growth in alternatives to a three-year degree (especially apprenticeships) that do not currently fall under UCAS' national shared admissions service, means levelling up cannot be taken for granted.

However, collective investment in and commitment to WP is considerable. The UK HE sector spends upwards of £500 million annually to improve access, provide financial support, and research or evaluate commitments detailed in their access and participation plans⁴². This funds, for example, bursaries, adjustments for disabled students, and delivering outreach activities and events to secondary schools and colleges.

Modelling the scale of change required to widen access and participation is important to understand the scale of action required. For example, if each higher tariff provider had admitted just an additional 70 MEM group one students in 2020 (an increase in total acceptances to this group of providers of 3.5%), the equality gap across higher tariff providers would be half of what it is now⁴³. A consistent use of such practices as illustrated below, could enable the eradication of the equality gap by 2030⁴⁴.

⁴¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeships-and-social-mobility-fulfilling-potential

⁴² www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/2efcda44-8715-4888-8d63-42c0fd6a31af/transforming-opportunity-in-higher-education.pdf

⁴³ Annex C: 'Forecasts for the higher tariff provider MEM equality gap' provides (in part i) the methodology used to produce this estimate www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2020-end-cycle-report

⁴⁴ Annex C: 'Forecasts for the higher tariff provider MEM equality gap' provides (in part iii) the methodology used to produce this estimate www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2020-end-cycle-report

Table 5: Modelling the scale of change required to widen access and participation

Additional English 18 year old MEM group one acceptances, per UK higher tariff provider, per year	Yearly percentage point increase in MEM group one entry rate	Additional yearly proportional growth in total higher tariff acceptances required	Forecasted year where MEM group one and group five entry rates are equal
5	0.8ppt	0.2%	2080
10	0.9ppt	0.5%	2063
30	1.7ppt	1.5%	2041
50	2.4ppt	2.5%	2034
70	3.1ppt	3.5%	2030

Reforming the admissions system to provide choice and level up opportunity

In November 2020, the Department for Education announced plans to review the HE admissions service and consult on the introduction of a form of post-qualification admissions. Universities UK's fair admissions review also recommended reforming the undergraduate admissions system.

This is a welcome recommendation, and one that should be given serious consideration. UCAS has delivered the UK's national shared admissions service for over 50 years, and has continually evolved the system to the benefit of students, seeking to enhance student choice through the provision of high quality information and advice, and presenting an array of opportunities in a single location. Reform, innovation, and change in admissions is continual and necessary as our education system changes.

While the current system works well for most people across the four nations, some common challenges persist, including:

- the role of predicted grades
- unconditional offers
- access for disadvantaged students
- the efficacy of asking applicants to choose their options six months before they know their exam results

While admissions reform will not address each of these issues alone, it can contribute to an improvement. In early 2021, UCAS will release a report looking at the case for reforming the admissions service and propose a preferred option for reform to shape and inform the government's consultation. Our driving purpose is to promote student decision-making and improve fairness, while avoiding any unintended consequences.

Technical Appendix

- The majority of analysis covers UK 18 year old students. Where only domicile is referenced in the text, the age can be assumed to be 18. Where only age is referenced, the domicile can be assumed to be UK.
- The major exception is analysis using the UCAS multiple equality measure (MEM), free school meals (FSM), and ethnic group, which is carried out using the National Pupil Database (NPD, source: Department for Education), and so consequently is limited to English domiciled 18 year old students only.
- Where age or domicile differs from the above, it is explicitly referenced in the text or accompanying footnotes.
- RPAs are generally included in end of cycle figures and excluded from in cycle figures. Exceptions are indicated in the text.
- End of cycle counts are generally rounded to the nearest five, and percentages to one decimal place. In line with previous reporting, in cycle counts are generally rounded to the nearest ten. Survey percentages are reported to the nearest whole number. Gap ratios are rounded to two decimal places. Where previously published figures are reported, the original level of precision is retained. Exceptions are indicated in the text.
- Throughout the report, 'firm choice' refers to applicants' main scheme firm choice courses on 30 June, and 'firm choice university or college' indicates applicants' main scheme firm choice providers on 30 June. Applicants without a main scheme firm choice on this date are excluded from these figures.