

More high achieving students secure competitive university places

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For the first time, more than 100,000 UK 18 year olds were accepted onto courses at the most competitive universities and colleges in 2021.

New insight from UCAS' 2021 end of cycle data shows the most detailed impact to date on full-time undergraduate admissions from awarding grades based on teachers' assessments.

103,010 young people across the UK were accepted at higher tariff providers by the end of the 2021 admissions cycle, up 11% from 92,650 in 2020 (and up 28% from 80,380 before the pandemic in 2019). This 11% rise comes despite just a 3% increase in the UK's overall 18 year old population during the 2021 cycle.

The number of applicants achieving A level grades equivalent to three A*'s nearly quadrupled from pre-pandemic levels to 19,595 (5,655 in 2019), and close to doubled compared to 2020 (12,735).

Other key headlines include:

- The proportion of all UK 18 year olds with a confirmed place increased to 38.3% (representing 275,235 students), up from 37.0% (257,895) in 2020 and 34.1% (241,515) in 2019.
- 223,315 UK 18 year olds secured their first choice of course (81% of all those placed), up from 194,035 (75%) in 2020 and 177,680 (74%) in 2019.
- The number of UK 18 year olds choosing to defer starting their course for a year rose by 3,185 to 24,855, a 15% increase.
- 606,645 people of all ages across the UK applied (+5% on 2020), with 492,005 accepted (+1%).
- Internationally, a total of 142,925 people of all ages applied (-5% on 2020), of which 70,055 were accepted (-18%). This is split between 111,255 people from outside the EU applying (+12%), with 54,030 accepted (+2%); while 31,670 people from the EU applied (-40%) and 16,025 were accepted (-50%).
- A total of 749,570 applicants of all ages and domiciles applied in the 2021 cycle (+3% on 2020), of which 562,060 were accepted (-1%).

UCAS Chief Executive Clare Marchant said: "Students' hard work throughout the pandemic has been rightly recognised through their teachers' assessments. Their achievements, combined with the flexibility shown by universities and colleges, means thousands more students are benefitting from the opportunity to study a degree, especially at the most competitive institutions.

"While many of 2021's applicants have progressed with their original plans, [we are already seeing](#) high achieving students choosing to reapply in the current cycle, as they carefully consider their options.

“Half of applicants say they’re interested in knowing more about apprenticeships as well as the traditional three-year undergraduate route. A crucial part our independent and trusted role is to make sure students know enough about their options to make an informed decision, that’s right for them and we’ve seen searches on UCAS’ Career Finder increase by 45% this year to top 2 million.”

Ends

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Notes for editors

On Thursday 20 January 2022, UCAS, in collaboration with Health Education England will publish ‘Next steps: Who are the ‘future nurses’?’ painting a picture of the next generation of nurses who have been inspired by the pandemic, providing new insight from the 2021 cycle.

Provider-level data for the 2021 cycle will be published on [Thursday 27 January 2022](#).

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK’s shared admissions service for higher education.

Our services support young people making post-18 choices, as well as mature learners, by providing information, advice, and guidance to inspire and facilitate educational progression to university, college, or an apprenticeship. We manage almost three million applications, from around 700,000 people each year, for full-time undergraduate courses at over 380 universities and colleges across the UK.

We also provide a wide range of research, consultancy and advisory services to schools, colleges, careers services, professional bodies and employers, including apprenticeships.

We’re a successful and fast-growing organisation, which helps hundreds of thousands of people every year. We’re committed to delivering a first-class service to all our customers — they’re at the heart of everything we do.

In Scotland, there is a substantial section of higher education that is 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 – this proportion varies by geography and background within Scotland. Accordingly, figures on applications and application rates in Scotland reflect only those applying for full-time undergraduate study through UCAS.