

Office for  
Students



# Update to data analysis of unconditional offers

Relationship with continuation rates

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# Summary

1. This report updates the analysis of unconditional offers published in July 2020.<sup>1</sup> It compares how likely those who entered higher education with unconditional offers are to continue their studies with those who entered through other routes. We have extended our analysis to include the proportion of 18-year-old entrants to full-time undergraduate courses in 2018-19 and 2019-20 who continue studying into their second year of study.

## Findings

2. This update finds broadly the same results as previously reported. For entrants with A-levels, the continuation rate of those who entered through an unconditional offer was lower than those with a conditional offer. This difference is small, but statistically significant. However, the difference has decreased in the latest two years. We estimate that the difference for entrants in 2019-20 is between 0.0 and 0.6 percentage points. For context, the difference for those placed through 'other UCAS routes' in 2019-20 is between 0.5 and 1.0 percentage points.<sup>2</sup>
3. The previous update estimated that 2017-18 BTEC entrants with unconditional offers were more likely to continue with their studies, compared with entrants with a conditional offer. The cumulative effect of the changes to the data and model in this update mean that we no longer detect any statistically significant difference for BTEC entrants.
4. The analysis also shows that continuation rates increased in general by between 0.8 and 0.9 percentage points for each entry route in 2019-20, the year where the coronavirus pandemic could have affected continuation rates. This was the biggest increase seen across the five years in the analysis, where the largest increase previously was 0.5 percentage points.

## Background

5. An unconditional offer is one where the higher education provider guarantees a place in higher education without any academic or other type of condition that needs to be met by the applicant. These are commonly made to applicants who have already been awarded A-level or other Level 3 qualifications.
6. For applicants who were yet to be awarded those qualifications when they applied, unconditional offers were previously unusual but became more common between 2013 and 2019. UCAS analysis shows that the proportion of English 18-year-olds who received an offer with an unconditional component increased from 1.1 per cent in 2013 to 39.1 per cent in 2019.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> July 2020 update to data analysis of unconditional offers available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/).

<sup>2</sup> 'Other UCAS routes' are mostly placed through Clearing, but also some other UCAS routes. For description see page 11.

<sup>3</sup> Unconditional offers available at [www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021](http://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021).

## Offers with an unconditional component

- **‘Conditional unconditional’ offer:** Offers which are conditional at the point of offer and adjusted by the provider from conditional to unconditional when selected as an applicant’s firm choice. These are identified in the admissions system through free text fields that providers can use to communicate any additional information to applicants. The offer conditions are analysed at the point the applicant replies to the offer, or if this is not available, 30 June.
- **‘Direct unconditional’ offer:** Offers which are unconditional at the first point of offer.
- **‘Other unconditional’ offer:** Offers which are conditional at the point of offer and become unconditional before 30 June – the final date on which main scheme applications can be submitted, but which are not identified as ‘conditional unconditional’ from offer conditions.

## Why are we interested in unconditional offers?

7. At the Office for Students (OfS) we want every student, whatever their background, to have a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. We wanted to understand whether changes to offer-making have had an impact on students. One of the early signs of success in higher education is the proportion of entrants who continue studying into their planned second year of study. To understand the impact of unconditional offers we compare the continuation rates for students with and without them.

## What did our previous analysis find?

8. We reported analysis of the continuation rates of students who applied and entered higher education immediately at age 18, and who applied to UCAS before the June deadline.
9. The analysis found that A-level students entering higher education through unconditional offers were consistently less likely to continue into the second year of their studies than A-level students who entered through conditional offers. Statistical modelling indicated that, after controlling for predicted entry grades, provider, subject of study and several student characteristics, there was a small (but statistically significant<sup>4</sup>) negative difference<sup>5</sup> in continuation from being placed through an unconditional offer compared with a conditional offer for A-level entrants in each year from 2015-16 to 2017-18.

## What has changed in this update?

10. In this update we include an additional two cohorts of entrants to the analysis, adding those who entered higher education in 2018-19 and 2019-20.

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<sup>4</sup> At the 5 per cent significance level, which is used throughout this report when reporting statistical significance.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this report, we avoid use of the term ‘effect’ to describe the association between unconditional offers and continuation outcomes, after controlling for the factors listed. This is because we cannot be certain the relationship we have identified is purely causal, even after having controlled for other factors. It is possible that there remains some unobserved factor, correlated with both an entrant’s route into higher education and their likelihood of continuation, which is driving the negative relationship between unconditional offers and continuation rates.

11. The admissions cycle for both cohorts would have been completed before the coronavirus pandemic was declared in March 2020.
12. The pandemic affected continuation rates for the two cohorts in different ways.
  - a. For most of the 2018-19 cohort they would have already continued studying into their second year before March 2020. The only exception would be anyone who started their course after March 2019.
  - b. The final cohort who entered higher education in 2019-20 would have entered their second year of study after March 2020 and therefore their continuation rates could have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic.
13. The data used in the statistical modelling has been updated in two ways.
  - a. We have improved our linking and can now identify approximately 1,500 additional entrants in each year.
  - b. The information about predicted A-level qualifications has been updated in the UCAS data. For the continuation analysis this means between 7,500 and 8,000 entrants per year are recorded with additional predicted qualifications.
14. We have also included four additional characteristics in the statistical modelling and replaced the participation of local areas (POLAR4) measure with the tracking underrepresentation of areas (TUNDRA) measure to align with the recent updates to Association Between Characteristics of Students (ABCS) for full-time continuation.<sup>6</sup> Details of these changes are described in the 'Methodology' section.

### **How did unconditional offer-making change in 2020 and 2021?**

15. Unconditional offer-making has changed in the past two admissions cycles. The coronavirus pandemic was declared during the 2020 admissions cycle, at the point when providers were still making offers to applicants. At the end of March 2020, the Universities Minister announced a moratorium on unconditional offers. Following this, the OfS consulted on and introduced a time-limited condition of registration, condition Z3, that prohibited the use of 'conditional unconditional' offers and other unconditional offers to UK students that could materially affect the stability and integrity of the English higher education sector.<sup>7</sup>
16. The number of offers made with an unconditional component for 2020 admissions increased slightly overall, but a greater proportion were 'direct unconditional' offers. In 2021, the number of offers with an unconditional component decreased overall, and there were no conditional unconditional offers made.
17. These changes to the number and type of offers for the 2020-21 entrants and the 2021-22 entrants mean that the 2019-20 cohort are the last year where the admissions conditions were

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students-abcs-2021/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students-abcs-2021/).

<sup>7</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-5-condition-z3-temporary-provisions-for-sector-stability-and-integrity/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-5-condition-z3-temporary-provisions-for-sector-stability-and-integrity/).

broadly the same across the years. For this reason, we are unlikely to update this analysis in the same form for the later cohorts.

## Introduction

18. This report updates the analysis we published in July 2020 of the continuation outcomes for 18-year-old entrants,<sup>8</sup> comparing those who entered higher education with unconditional offers with those who entered through other routes. This update extends the analysis to include continuation rates for entrants in 2018-19 and 2019-20 academic years.
19. Before we look at the analysis of continuation rates, we examine the trends in unconditional offer-making. Although we do not yet have data about continuation rates for the 2020 and 2021 admissions cohorts, we can look at the numbers and types of unconditional offers in those years.

## Unconditional offers

20. When 18-year-olds in England apply to higher education through the UCAS undergraduate scheme they are usually studying for Level 3 qualifications, such as A-levels and BTECs. Higher education providers usually make offers to these applicants that are conditional on the results achieved later that academic year. In some cases, providers make offers without academic conditions. These are known as unconditional offers. UCAS have defined three categories of offers with an unconditional component.

### Offers with an unconditional component

- **‘Conditional unconditional’ offer:** Offers which are conditional at the point of offer and adjusted by the provider from conditional to unconditional when selected as an applicant’s firm choice. These are identified in the admissions system through free text fields that providers can use to communicate any additional information to applicants. The offer conditions are analysed at the point the applicant replies to the offer, or if this is not available, 30 June.
- **‘Direct unconditional’ offer:** Offers which are unconditional at the first point of offer.
- **‘Other unconditional’ offer:** Offers which are conditional at the point of offer and become unconditional before 30 June – the final date on which main scheme applications can be submitted, but which are not identified as ‘conditional unconditional’ from offer conditions.

21. UCAS reported an increase in the proportion of English 18-year-old applicants with at least one offer with an unconditional component in each year from 2014 to 2020.<sup>9</sup> In 2013, 1.1 per cent of applicants received at least one offer with an unconditional component but by 2019 this had risen to 39.1 per cent. At the OfS we wanted to understand whether this change to offer-making had an impact on student outcomes and therefore have been reporting the

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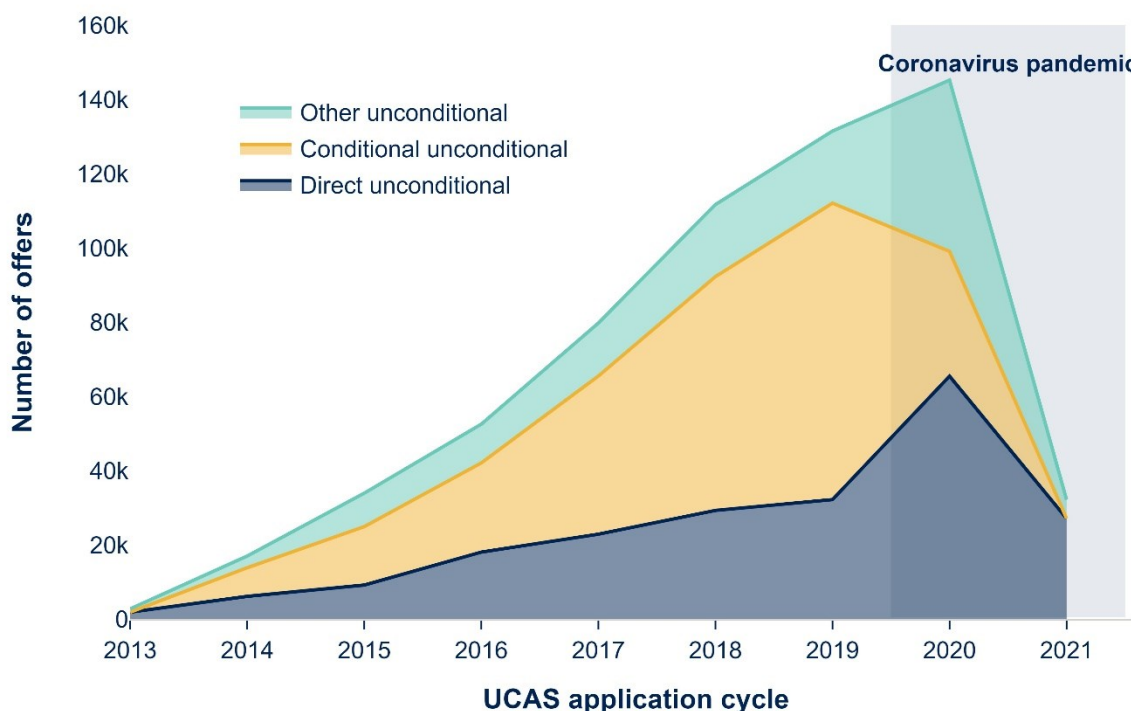
<sup>8</sup> July 2020 update to data analysis of unconditional offers available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/).

<sup>9</sup> Unconditional offers available at [www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021](http://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021).

continuation outcomes of these students once the relevant higher education data becomes available.

22. Figure 1 shows the number and type of unconditional offers made by UK higher education providers to English 18-year-olds between 2013 and 2021, as reported by UCAS.<sup>10</sup> In each year from 2013 to 2019 the number of each type of unconditional offer increased. However, there were changes to the number and type of unconditional offers made in 2020 and 2021.

**Figure 1: Number and type of unconditional offers to English 18-year-olds, 2013 - 2021**



23. The coronavirus pandemic was declared during the 2020 admissions cycle, at the point when providers were still making offers to applicants. At the end of March 2020, the Universities Minister announced a moratorium on unconditional offers. Following this, OfS consulted on and introduced a time-limited condition of registration, condition Z3, that prohibited the use of ‘conditional unconditional’ offers and other unconditional offers to UK students that could materially affect the stability and integrity of the English higher education sector.<sup>11</sup>
24. The number of offers made with an unconditional component for 2020 admissions increased slightly overall, but a greater proportion were ‘direct unconditional’ offers. In 2021, the number of offers with an unconditional component decreased for the first time in this time series, so that only 10.1 per cent of applicants received at least one of these offers in that year (40.3 per cent in 2020). This coincided with the introduction of the time-limited condition of registration, Z3.

<sup>10</sup> Unconditional offers available at [www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021](http://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-sector-level-end-cycle-data-resources-2021).

<sup>11</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-5-condition-z3-temporary-provisions-for-sector-stability-and-integrity/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-5-condition-z3-temporary-provisions-for-sector-stability-and-integrity/).



## Analysis in this report

25. This analysis reports the difference in continuation rates of English 18-year-olds entering higher education through unconditional offers compared with those entering through conditional offers. We consider English-domiciled entrants only, as most of their applications will be made to OfS-registered providers. More details about the populations of students used in this report can be found in the 'Methodology' section.

26. The continuation rate analysis includes:

- a. A summary of the headline continuation rates for students entering through three entry routes: conditional offer route, unconditional offer route and 'other UCAS routes'.
- b. An examination of how the continuation rates for the different entry routes vary for students with different predicted entry grades.
- c. Statistical modelling that assesses whether applicants placed through an unconditional offer are more or less likely to continue with their studies after the first year, while considering other factors that we have previously identified as being related to continuation rates for full-time students.
- d. Statistical modelling that considers how continuation rates vary between the different types of unconditional offer for students that entered with A-level qualifications.

27. This analysis includes two additional cohorts of entrants compared with the previous report. It also includes several other changes. The most significant are listed below with more details in the 'Methodology' section:

- a. We have improved our linking which means that we have approximately an additional 1,500 students in each year of the analysis of continuation rates.
- b. The data from UCAS includes information about predicted A-level grades for around 7,500 to 8,000 applicants in each year of the analysis of continuation rates that did not have predicted A-level grade information in the previous data supply.
- c. We have included an additional four student characteristics in the modelling of continuation rates and replaced the participation of local areas (POLAR4) measure with the TUNDRA measure to align with the recent updates to ABCS for full-time continuation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students-abcs-2021/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students-abcs-2021/).

## Continuation rates

28. One of the early signs of success in higher education is whether a student continues studying into a second year following their entry year. This is measured by continuation rates. To measure continuation rates, we need data for both the year of entry and the next year. This means that the most recent entrant cohort for whom we can measure continuation is the 2019-20 entrant cohort, continuing studies in 2020-21.

### Continuation rate analysis findings

- This update finds broadly the same results as previously reported. For entrants with A-levels, the continuation rate of those that entered through an unconditional offer was lower than those with a conditional offer. This difference is small, but statistically significant. However, the difference has decreased in the latest two years. We estimate that the difference for entrants in 2019-20 is between 0.0 and 0.6 percentage points. For context, the difference for those placed through 'other UCAS routes' in 2019-20 is between 0.5 and 1.0 percentage points.
- The previous update also estimated that 2017-18 BTEC entrants with unconditional offers were between 0.3 and 2.6 percentage points more likely to continue with their studies, compared with entrants placed through a conditional offer. The cumulative effect of the changes to the data and model in this update mean that we no longer detect any statistically significant difference for BTEC entrants.
- The analysis also shows that continuation rates increased by between 0.8 and 0.9 percentage points for each entry route in 2019-20, the year where the coronavirus pandemic could have affected continuation rates, potentially contributing to higher continuation rates. This was the biggest increase seen across the five years in the analysis, where the largest increase previously was 0.5 percentage points.
- For A-level entrants, 'direct unconditional' offers have the largest estimated negative difference in continuation rates of all the different types of unconditional offer in each year. They are the only unconditional offer route where this estimated difference was statistically significant in four of the five years, but not for entrants in 2019-20.

29. Students are counted as continuing in higher education whether they remain at the same course at the same provider or transfer to a different course or provider. Transferring to another higher education course at a lower level of study is also counted as a positive continuation outcome in this report. More detail about how we calculate continuation rates, which is consistent with the March 2022 Access and Participation dashboard, is available in the 'Methodology' section.

## How do continuation rates vary by entry route?

### Definitions of entry routes to higher education in this report

This analysis compares students entering higher education with unconditional offers with those from other entry routes recorded by UCAS. Applicants who applied outside of the UCAS main scheme, either by applying directly in Clearing without having applied earlier in the cycle, or Records of Prior Acceptance (RPA) recorded as being accepted by the provider without applying in the UCAS scheme, are not included in the analysis.<sup>13</sup> Applicants who were accepted for deferred entry are also not included.

All remaining applicants who were recorded as successfully placed to start higher education are assigned to one of three entry routes in this analysis:

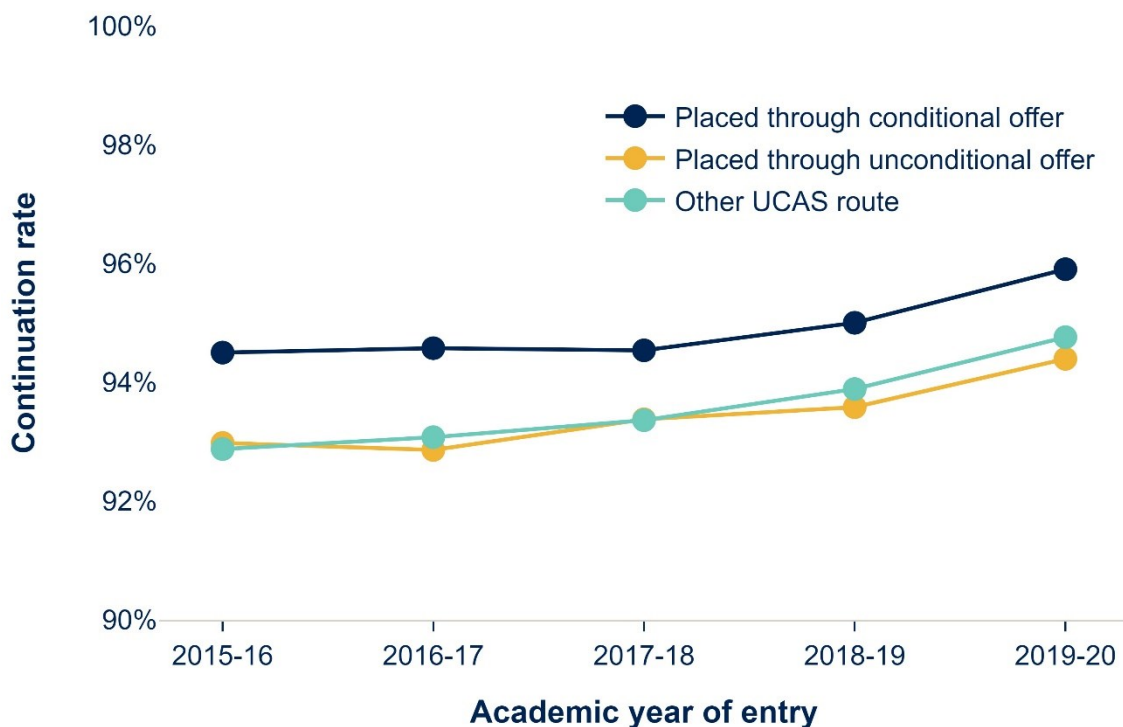
- **Placed through conditional offer:** these were placed through the UCAS firm (first choice) or insurance route (back-up choice) and to a choice that was not identified as unconditional. Approximately 87 per cent of these are firm (first) choice. This includes those who received 'conditional unconditional' offers that they selected as an insurance choice, since these offers remained conditional, usually on the applicant's Level 3 attainment.
- **Placed through an unconditional offer:** these were placed through the UCAS firm (first choice) or insurance (back-up choice) route and to a choice that was identified as unconditional. Approximately 97 per cent of these are firm (first) choice.
- **'Other UCAS route':** These are applicants who applied in the main scheme and were then placed through a different route, including Clearing (88 per cent), Adjustment (2 per cent), Extra (7 per cent) and other main scheme routes (usually where a provider decision has not been made or the applicant has not replied to an offer by 30 June) – 3 per cent.

30. Figure 2 shows the continuation rates of entrants placed through conditional offers, unconditional offers and 'other UCAS routes'. The 2019-20 entrants were the only cohort whose continuation rates could have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. For all three entry routes the continuation rates increased for those that entered in 2019-20, by between 0.8 and 0.9 percentage points. This is a bigger increase than seen in any earlier year, where the largest increase previously was 0.5 percentage points.
31. The continuation rate of entrants placed through conditional offers is consistently higher (between 1 and 2 percentage points) compared with those placed through unconditional offers or 'other UCAS routes'.

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<sup>13</sup> This amounts to 1,965 Direct Clearing applicants and 2,435 RPA applicants in the 2019 cycle.

**Figure 2: Continuation rates by entry route**



32. This observed difference in continuation rates does not account for other differences between the entrants placed through each of these routes. For example, they may have different types and levels of entry qualifications and be studying a different mix of subjects at a different range of providers.

### Predicted entry qualifications as context

In our analysis of continuation rates, we control for predicted entry grades, instead of achieved qualifications, so that the model estimates include the impact, reported by UCAS, of unconditional offers on Level 3 attainment. Our previous publication also contained results from an alternative model which controlled for achieved entry grades instead.<sup>14</sup> This model found no statistically significant association between unconditional offers and continuation for A-level entrants in all entrant years available. This would be consistent with what would be found if poorer performance at A-level relative to predicted grades, for those placed through unconditional offers, were driving the lower continuation rates of these entrants.

33. Continuation rates have historically varied by level and type of entry qualification.<sup>15</sup> In particular, students who have entered higher education with BTEC qualifications have tended

<sup>14</sup> Datafile with July 2020 update available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/).

<sup>15</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/sector-level-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/sector-level-data/).

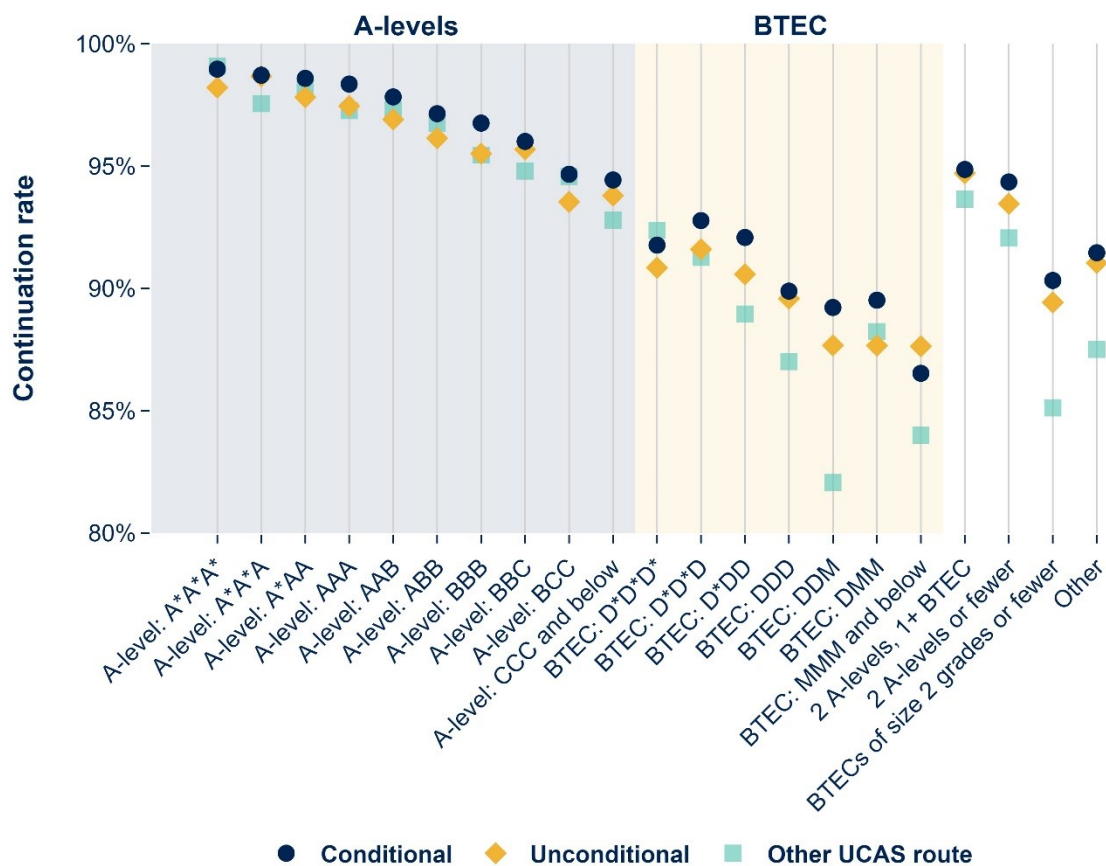
to have lower continuation rates than those who entered with A-level qualifications. The level of attainment is also important.

34. UCAS reported that applicants with A-levels and an unconditional offer in the 2019 cycle were, on average, 11.5 percentage points more likely to miss their predicted grades by three or more grades (than if they had received a conditional offer).<sup>16</sup> The model used by UCAS controlled for other factors known to be associated with the difference between predicted and attained A-level grades, including: achieved prior GCSE attainment, predicted A-level grades and subjects, applicant background (including the type of school or college they attended), and the higher education provider and subject where the firm offer was held.
35. If holding an unconditional offer is associated with lower A-level attainment, relative to predicted grades and controlling for other factors including GCSE attainment, this could then have a negative impact on the continuation rates of entrants placed through unconditional offers.
36. Figure 3 shows the continuation rates for different predicted entry grades by route into higher education for 2019-20 entrants. It shows that for most predicted entry grades continuation rates were lower for those placed through unconditional offers compared with conditional offers. The difference for entrants with A-levels is mostly between 0.5 and 1 percentage point.

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<sup>16</sup> See page 7, 'End of cycle report 2019: Unconditional Offers – The Applicant Experience', available at [www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2019-end-cycle-report](http://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2019-end-cycle-report).

**Figure 3: Continuation rates for different predicted entry grades by route into higher education (2019-20 entrants)**



37. It is important to note that some of the predicted qualification groups are relatively rare among these students and others are more common. For example, in 2019-20 66.6 per cent of entrants were predicted three or more A-levels, compared with 8.6 per cent who had been predicted BTECs of size 3 grades. This means that the continuation rates shown in Figure 3 are based on varying numbers of entrants and those from small groups will be less well estimated than those from larger groups. In Annex B, we present the number of entrants and their continuation rates by entry route and by entry grades for entrants in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 academic years. Similar data for entrants in the 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18 academic years can be found in the datafile associated with this report.<sup>17</sup>

### Statistical modelling of continuation rates

38. Other factors influence the chance of continuing with study, such as the provider where the student is registered and the subject of study, and some student characteristics. To evaluate whether the unconditional offer route leads to lower continuation rates in the context of these other factors, we have modelled the likelihood of entrants continuing in higher education, for each year from 2015-16 to 2019-20.

<sup>17</sup> Datafile available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-to-data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-to-data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers/).

39. Notable changes to the data and statistical modelling in this update are as follows:
- a. The data from UCAS has been updated. There were changes to the information about predicted entry grades for around 7,500 to 8,000 students in each year in the analysis population.
  - b. We also improved our linking of UCAS applicants to higher education data and this added an additional 1,500 entrants in each year.
  - c. We have also included four additional characteristics in the statistical modelling and replaced the POLAR4 measure with the TUNDRA measure to align with the recent updates to ABCS for full-time continuation.<sup>18</sup>
40. These changes mean that the results are changed compared with the previous publication. The changes are described in the 'Methodology' section.
41. Our results show that, for entrants with A-levels between 2016-17 and 2019-20, being placed through an unconditional offer is associated with a small, but statistically significant, negative difference in continuation rates (relative to being placed through a conditional offer). The analysis controls for a range of other factors, but it should be noted that there could be some unobserved factor correlated with both entry route and continuation that is behind this difference, and all model-estimated differences we report. This modelled difference has gradually reduced each year from 2016-17 to 2019-20.

In our modelling of continuation rates, we control for predicted entry grades, instead of achieved qualifications, so that the model estimates include the impact, reported by UCAS, of unconditional offers on Level 3 attainment. Our previous publication also contained results from an alternative model which controlled for achieved entry grades instead.<sup>19</sup> This model found no statistically significant association between unconditional offers and continuation for A-level entrants in all entrant years available. This would be consistent with what would be found if poorer performance at A-level relative to predicted grades, for those placed through unconditional offers, were driving the lower continuation rates of these entrants.

42. We found no statistically significant difference in continuation for BTEC entrants placed through unconditional offers (relative to being placed through a conditional offer) in any of the five years.
43. Figure 4 shows the model-estimated difference in continuation rates by being placed through unconditional offers and 'other UCAS routes', relative to being placed through a conditional offer. 95 per cent confidence intervals are indicated by the error bars.<sup>20</sup>
44. For A-level entrants, unconditional offers were consistently associated with lower continuation rates, after controlling for other factors, for entrants in 2016-17 to 2019-20. However, the

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<sup>18</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students-abcs-2021/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students-abcs-2021/).

<sup>19</sup> Datafile with July 2020 update available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/).

<sup>20</sup> There is no adjustment for multiple comparisons in the calculation of confidence intervals throughout this report.

model-estimated difference has decreased across these four years. The model estimates that the continuation rate of 2016-17 entrants with A-levels who were placed through unconditional offers (95.2 per cent) was between 0.4 and 1.2 percentage points lower than it would have been if they had been placed through a conditional offer instead. However, for similar entrants in 2019-20 the model estimates that the continuation rate of 95.8 per cent was between 0.0 and 0.6 percentage points lower than it would have been if they had been placed through a conditional offer instead. For 2019-20 entrants this translates to between 0 and 155 of the 25,345 A-level entrants placed through unconditional offers in that year, who would have continued with their studies if they had instead been placed through a conditional offer.<sup>21</sup>

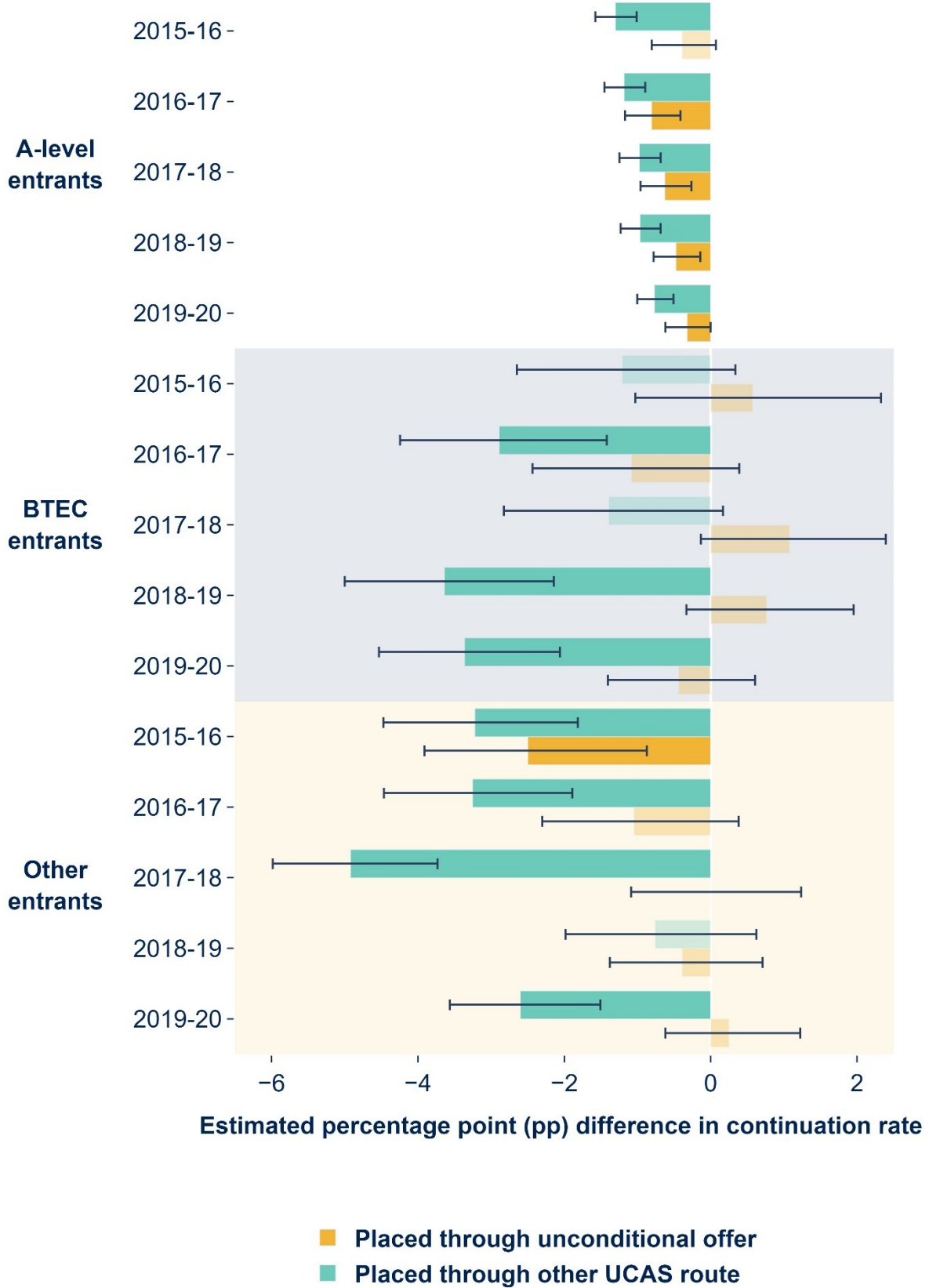
45. The model also estimates that in most years, being placed through 'other UCAS routes' regardless of entry qualification type, was associated with a lower continuation rate than being placed through conditional offers. For A-level entrants in 2019-20, the model estimates that the continuation rate of those placed through 'other UCAS routes' (96.0 per cent) was between 0.5 and 1.0 percentage points lower than it would have been if they were placed through conditional offers instead. This difference translates to between 120 and 235 A-level entrants, out of the 23,425 placed through 'other UCAS routes' that year, who would have continued with their studies if they had been placed through a conditional offer instead.
46. The coronavirus pandemic is another context for the 2019-20 entrants. Continuation rates increased by between 0.8 and 0.9 percentage points for each entry route in 2019-20. This was the biggest increase seen across the five years in the analysis, where the largest increase previously was 0.5 percentage points.

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<sup>21</sup> Restricted to those in the modelling population, details of which can be found in the 'Methodology' section.



**Figure 4: Model-estimated differences in continuation rates from being placed through unconditional offers and 'other UCAS routes' relative to conditional offers**



47. Many other factors associated with continuation rates are included in the model,<sup>22</sup> so that we can assess the difference between unconditional and conditional offers after they have been considered. There may be other relevant factors for which there was no data readily available for this population.
48. The OfS's regulatory interest in continuation rates extends to all students. We consulted on our approach to regulating student outcomes, including for different groups, in January 2022 and will publish the outcomes of that consultation in summer 2022.<sup>23</sup> As part of the information published to support the consultation we published 'Exploring student outcomes data dashboard',<sup>24</sup> an experimental measure that shows the extent to which historical differences in continuation (and other outcomes) can be accounted for by other underlying factors. Differences in continuation between student groups are also regulated through access and participation plans, with the data that supports this available in the 'Access and participation dashboard'.<sup>25</sup> Also we have published, 'Associations between characteristics of students',<sup>26</sup> that presents a measure of classifying groups of students across a range of characteristics associated with differences in continuation.
49. Using the analysis in this report, we can compare the model-estimated differences in continuation rates for other student characteristics included in our model with the difference estimated for unconditional offers relative to conditional offers (between 0.0 and -0.6 percentage points in 2019-20 for A-level entrants). For example, in 2019-20, the estimated difference in continuation rates, between entrants reporting a mental health condition and those reporting no disability is between -1.7 and -2.7 percentage points; and the estimated difference between men and women is between -0.9 and -1.3 percentage points; and the estimated difference between FSM entrants and non-FSM entrants is between -0.9 and -1.5.
50. The full model results for 2019-20 can be found in Annex D, while the results for all years and the model estimated differences for additional characteristics can be found in the datafile associated with this release.<sup>27</sup>

## **Continuation rates for different types of unconditional offer**

51. We also investigated whether the size of the model-estimated differences in continuation rates, relative to those placed through conditional offers, varied for the different types of unconditional offer route ('conditional unconditional', 'direct unconditional', and 'other unconditional'). We looked at A-level entrants only, partly because we have already shown there to be a persistent negative relationship between unconditional offers and continuation for A-level entrants, and

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<sup>22</sup> See Annex C for details, available here [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-to-data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-to-data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers/).

<sup>23</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/).

<sup>24</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/exploring-student-outcomes-dashboard/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/exploring-student-outcomes-dashboard/).

<sup>25</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/).

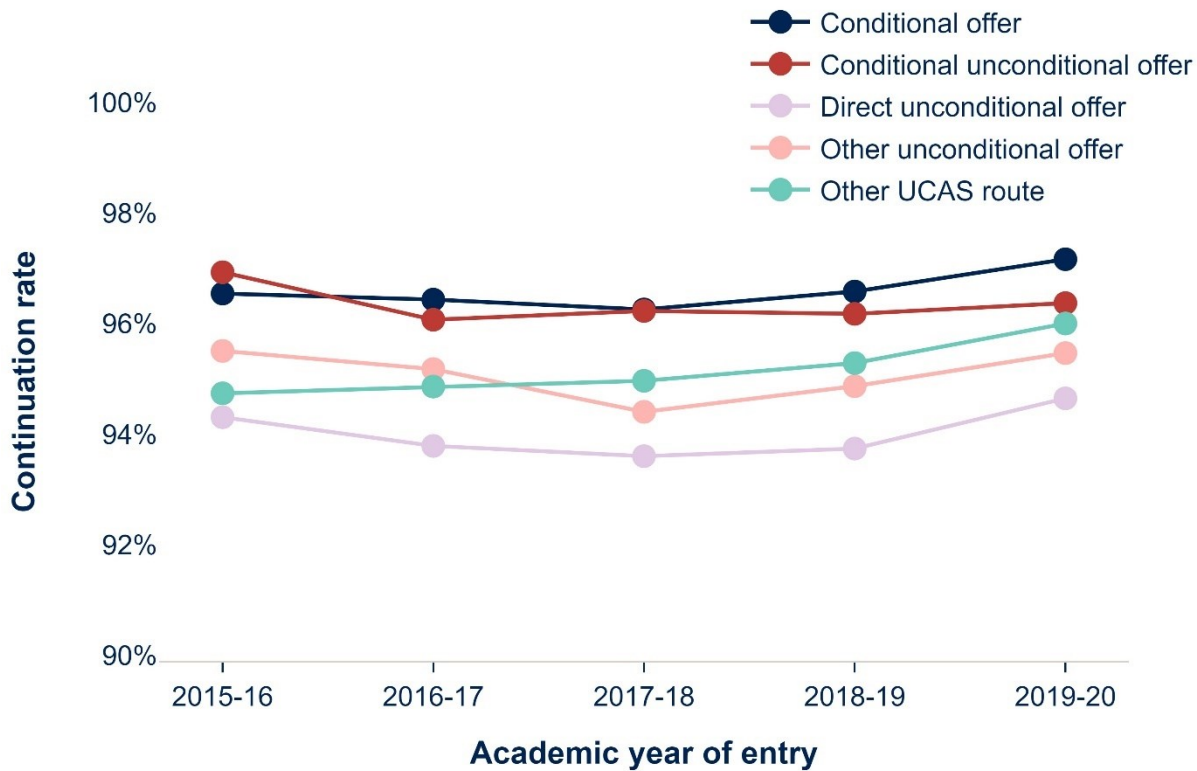
<sup>26</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/).

<sup>27</sup> See Annex D for details, available here [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-to-data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-to-data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers/).

because A-levels are the most common entry qualification type in our population, so there were sufficiently large groups of students to analyse.

52. Figure 5 shows how continuation rates vary for A-level entrants placed through different types of unconditional offer routes.

**Figure 5: Continuation rates of A level entrants placed through different offer routes**



53. Continuation rates of A-level entrants placed through ‘direct unconditional’ offers are consistently lower than those of entrants placed through any other route. By contrast, the continuation rates of entrants placed through ‘conditional unconditional’ offers are similar to entrants placed through conditional offers. Some of the groups of entrants in Figure 5, particularly those who were placed through unconditional offers in the 2015 cycle, are quite small and therefore subject to more variability.

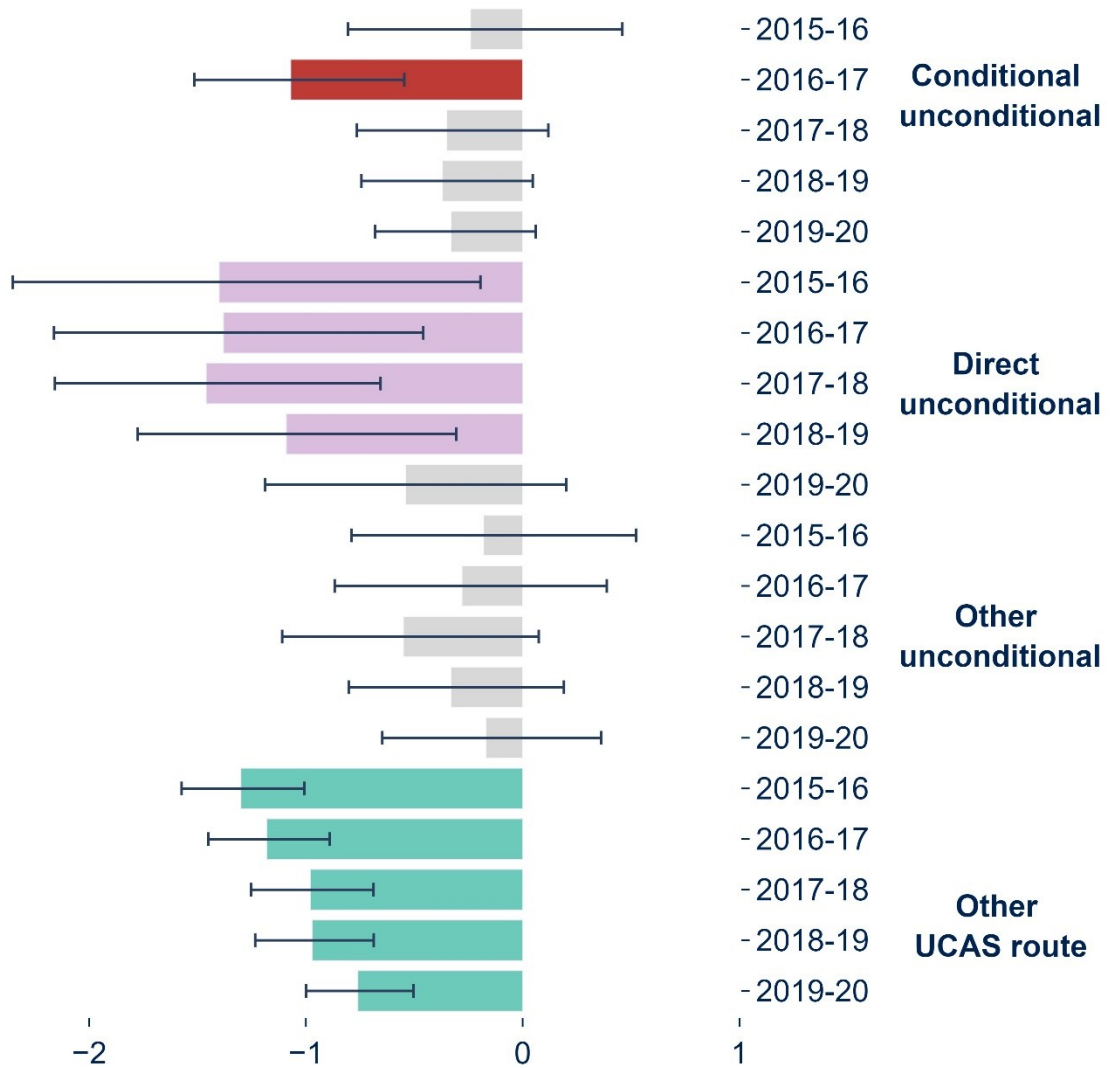
54. Table B4 in Annex B shows the number of A-level entrants and providers with A-level entrants placed through different types of unconditional offers between 2015-16 and 2019-20.

55. To see whether these patterns persist after controlling for other factors, we used a model as in the previous section. However, instead of modelling the relationship between continuation and the broad route of entry into higher education (conditional offer, unconditional offer or ‘other UCAS route’) we considered the different types of offer routes: conditional offer, ‘conditional unconditional’ offer, ‘direct unconditional’ offer, ‘other unconditional’ offer or ‘other UCAS routes’.

56. Figure 6 shows the model-estimated difference in continuation rate by different offer types, relative to being placed through a conditional offer. 95 per cent confidence intervals are indicated by the error bars. Although the model used to estimate these differences included

entrants with all types of predicted qualifications, this analysis only presents results for entrants with A-levels, for the reasons outlined at the start of this section.

**Figure 6: Model-estimated differences in continuation rates for different types of offer route, relative to being placed through a conditional offer (A-level entrants only)**



**Estimated percentage point (pp) difference in continuation rate**

57. In each year, ‘direct unconditional’ offers have the largest estimated negative difference in continuation rates of all the different types of unconditional offer. They are the only unconditional offer route where this estimated difference was statistically significant in four of the five years. In 2018-19, the last year where the difference was statistically significant, the model suggests that the observed rate of 93.7 per cent was between 0.3 and 1.8 percentage points lower than it would have been if those placed through ‘direct unconditional’ offers had instead been placed through conditional offers.

58. 'Conditional unconditional' offers were shown to be statistically significantly associated with lower continuation rates for A-level entrants in 2016-17 only (between 0.6 and 1.5 percentage points lower).
59. No statistically significant difference is detected for A-level entrants placed through 'other unconditional' offers. This group are interesting because UCAS analysis suggests that up to 59 per cent of 'other unconditional' offers chosen as an applicant's first choice appeared to be 'conditional unconditional' offers that could not be reliably identified.<sup>28</sup>
60. Full details of this model and its results can be found in Annex D under Model 2.

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<sup>28</sup> See page 8, 'End of cycle report 2019: Unconditional Offers – The Applicant Experience', available at [www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2019-end-cycle-report](http://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2019-end-cycle-report).

# Methodology

## Populations

61. The data used for the continuation rate analysis in the rest of the report includes applications from English 18-year-olds applying through the UCAS undergraduate scheme. We then track individuals from the UCAS data into the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Individual Learner Record (ILR) student records. All tracking methods are dependent on the quality of the personal data used for matching, and therefore we could be missing some individuals in the continuation rate analysis. Full details of the number of placed applicants identified as entering higher education for the years used in the analysis are shown in Annex A.
62. The base population for this analysis is defined as: English 18-year-old UCAS applicants placed at an OfS-registered provider between the 2015 and 2019 application cycles and identified as starting a course at that provider in the same year in the higher education data.
63. Applicants who applied outside of the UCAS main scheme, either by applying directly in Clearing without having applied earlier in the cycle, or Records of Prior Acceptance (RPA) recorded as being accepted by the provider without applying in the UCAS scheme, are not included in the analysis. Applicants who were accepted for deferred entry are also not included.
64. We have used the full-time continuation indicator definition and coverage as described in the 2022 'Methodology and rebuild instructions for March 2022 access and participation data resources' document.<sup>29</sup> We have recently consulted on the construction of student outcome and experience indicators for use in OfS regulation. The descriptions and definitions of indicators proposed in the consultation do not align directly with those currently used and therefore they are not used in this analysis. Our future approach to measures will be confirmed following conclusion of the consultations, at which time the technical documentation webpages will be revised.
65. Table B3 and Figure 2 use this same population, for all entrant years from 2015-16 to 2019-20.
66. Table B2 also uses this population, but for entrants with predicted A-level qualifications only, as do Table B4 and Figure 5, for all entrant years from 2015-16 to 2019-20.
67. The modelling population, which applies to Figure 4 and results from Model 1 and Model 2, is identical to that used in our descriptive analysis of continuation rates, with one additional restriction. Providers must have at least 10 entrants in the year being considered. This excludes roughly 200 students in each year.
68. Finally, Figure 6 and Table D7 use this same modelling population, but for entrants with predicted A-level qualifications only.

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<sup>29</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/institutional-performance-measures/technical-documentation/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/institutional-performance-measures/technical-documentation/).

## Changes since the last update

69. The last update to this analysis was published in July 2020 and included analysis of continuation rates for entrants in 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18.<sup>30</sup> This update adds another two cohorts of entrants, those from 2018-19 and 2019-20.

### The coronavirus pandemic

70. The admissions cycle for both cohorts would have been completed before the coronavirus pandemic was declared in March 2020.

71. The pandemic affected continuation for the two cohorts in different ways.

- a. The continuation outcomes for most of the 2018-19 cohort would have been decided before March 2020. The only exception would be anyone who started their course after March 2019.
- b. The final cohort who entered higher education in 2019-20 would have entered their second year of study after March 2020 and therefore their continuation rates could potentially have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic. For the students in the statistical modelling, continuation rates increased by between 0.8 and 0.9 percentage points for each entry route in 2019-20. This was the biggest increase seen across the five years in the analysis, where the largest increase previously was 0.5 percentage points.

### Changes to the data

72. The data supplied by UCAS is updated each year. This update included additional data about predicted A-level qualifications for years reported in the previous publication. There were approximately 7,500 to 8,000 applicants in each year with predicted A-level qualifications who had no predicted A-level qualifications in the earlier data supplied.

73. The OfS received two items of information from UCAS for each applicant, one with predicted A-level grades and one with predicted BTEC grades. The predicted entry qualification profiles are a combination of information from these two items of information. Most of the applicants with new information about predicted A-level grades have moved from the 'Other qualifications' group to '2 A-levels or fewer' and the rest have moved from the 'BTECs of size 2 grades' group to '2 A-levels or fewer'.

74. During this update we improved the linking of placed applicants in the UCAS data to students in the higher education data. Through this improvement we have identified approximately 1,500 additional entrants in each year in the modelling population. This means that we now identify more than 98 per cent of all placed applicants (excluding deferred entry), who applied in the UCAS main scheme, in the higher education student data.

75. To illustrate the consequence of the combination of improved linking and the additional predicted qualification information in the data used for the modelling, these are the changes to the entrants in 2017-18 (171,200 total):

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<sup>30</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/).

- a. There are 1,100 more 3 grade A-level entrants, increase of 1 per cent.
- b. There are 165 more 3 grade BTEC entrants, increase of 1 per cent.
- c. There are 7,900 more 2 A-levels or fewer entrants, increase of 117 per cent.
- d. There are 5,100 fewer BTECs of size 2 grade entrants, decrease of 50 per cent.
- e. There are 2,500 fewer 'other' qualification entrants, decrease of 20 per cent.

### Changes to the statistical modelling

76. There were changes to the specification of the modelling to align with the latest iteration of the ABCS for full-time continuation.<sup>31</sup>
- a. We have replaced POLAR4 (participation of local areas) in the models with TUNDRA (tracking underrepresentation by area).<sup>32</sup> The latest iteration of TUNDRA has been used, based on tracking cohorts of 16-year-olds who completed their Key Stage 4 between the summers of 2012 to 2016.
  - b. We have included free school meal (FSM) status, parental higher education, National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC) and care experience as additional characteristics in the modelling.
  - c. The Index of multiple deprivation (IMD) was previously based on the 2015 version; it is now based on the 2019 version.

### Modelling notes

77. We used a multi-level logistic regression model based on entrants who applied through the UCAS main scheme, either with a conditional offer, an unconditional offer or 'other UCAS route', to assess whether the chance of continuing into the second year of study varies if the student enters through an unconditional offer.
78. When choosing the factors included in the model, we considered those that have previously been used in the benchmarking of continuation rates and which our recent consultation proposed to continue using for this purpose, or in the ABCS full-time continuation statistics where we have shown they have a relationship with continuation.
79. In the model, the entry route variable (conditional offer, unconditional offer, 'other UCAS route') is interacted with a variable for predicted qualification type (A-levels, BTECs, Other) to estimate the association between unconditional offers and continuation separately for A-level and BTEC entrants. This was done because unconditional offers are associated differently with continuation for A-level and BTEC entrants. As such, combining the groups would have masked this.

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<sup>31</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students-abcs-2021/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students-abcs-2021/).

<sup>32</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-tundra/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-tundra/).



80. In our modelling of continuation rates, we control for predicted entry grades, instead of achieved qualifications, so that the model estimates include the impact of unconditional offers on Level 3 attainment. Our previous publication contained results from an alternative model which controlled for achieved entry grades instead.<sup>33</sup> This model found no statistically significant association between unconditional offers and continuation for A-level entrants in all entrant years available. This would be consistent with what would be found if poorer performance at A-level relative to predicted grades, for those placed through unconditional offers, were driving the lower continuation rates of these entrants.
81. To ensure model stability, the model population used throughout was limited to entrants at providers with at least 10 UCAS entrants in the entrant year being modelled.
82. The model included a random intercept for providers, meaning that the multi-level element of the model was entrants nested within providers. Other factors included as fixed effects in the model were type of offer, subject studied, level of study, predicted entry grades, ethnicity, sex, disability, whether the student was a local or distance learner or neither, parental education, free school meal status, NS-SEC, care experience, TUNDRA and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The details of the factors used are shown in Annex C and the details of the model are shown in Annex D.
83. While we have controlled for all these factors, it cannot be guaranteed that the relationship we have identified is causal. It is possible that there remains some unobserved factor, correlated both with an applicant's route into higher education and the likelihood of continuation, which is driving the relationship between continuation rates and unconditional offers. As such, we have avoided referring to any 'effect' throughout this report.

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<sup>33</sup> Datafile with July 2020 update available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-analysis-of-unconditional-offers-update/).



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