

End of Cycle Report 2017: Qualifications and competition

UCAS Analysis and Research

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Introduction

Entry to higher education is strongly influenced by the academic strength of the applicant. Applicants are often required to meet entry requirements set by providers. This typically involves the ability to demonstrate adequate academic aptitude, usually in specific subject areas. Various types of qualifications are used to demonstrate academic attainment, and often vary by the country and age of the applicant. As UK domiciled 18 year olds are the largest group of applicants (by age and domicile) to UK higher education, the qualifications they hold form the focus of this section.

Entry rates by qualification type

Applicants are grouped according to the qualifications they hold. Those with three or more A levels, and not holding one of the other qualifications, are assigned to the 'A level only' group. Applicants holding a combination of A level and BTEC qualifications, such that their total number of qualifications is greater than or equal to three, are assigned to the 'A level and BTEC' group. Applicants holding Level 3 BTECs, equivalent to three A levels, are assigned to the 'BTEC only' group. Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Highers and Advanced Highers are considered together, and applicants with at least three of these qualifications, and not holding any other qualifications, are assigned to the 'SQA only' group. Finally, applicants holding an International Baccalaureate qualification, and no other qualification, are assigned to the 'IB only' group.

Qualifications reported here are those which applicants state they have achieved on their applications, and those which are awarded during the application cycle. Among UK 18 year olds, A levels are held by 60.6 per cent of applicants (171,020 applicants). BTECs are the next most common qualification, with 11.1 per cent of UK 18 year old applicants holding BTECs only (31,430 applicants), and 7.9 per cent of applicants holding BTECs in combination with A levels (22,290 applicants). SQA qualifications are most commonly taken by applicants from Scotland, and comprise 6.4 per cent of UK 18 year old applicants overall (18,150 applicants). IB only applicants are the smallest group, comprising only 0.9 per cent of UK 18 year old applicants (2,500 applicants).

Entry rates increase for students holding A levels, BTECs, and combinations of A levels with BTECs

The proportion of the 18 year old population accepted into higher education (the entry rate), split by qualification type, is shown in Figure 7.1. Entry rates for A level only students have been increasing since 2014, and are now higher than at any other time in the period. Currently, 20.5 per cent of UK 18 year old students are accepted to higher education with A levels only, up 0.4 percentage points from last year, and up 1.6 percentage points from 2012. However, the rate of increase has slowed slightly – entry rates grew by 2.7 per cent from 2015 to 2016, but only by 1.9 per cent from 2016 to 2017.

This year, 3.5 per cent of UK 18 year old students were accepted into higher education with BTEC qualifications. This is a slight increase of under 0.1 percentage points (1.3 per cent proportionally) from last year. However, when considered across a longer time period, BTEC entry rates have grown substantially – by 1.1 percentage points since 2012, and by 1.7 percentage points since 2008.

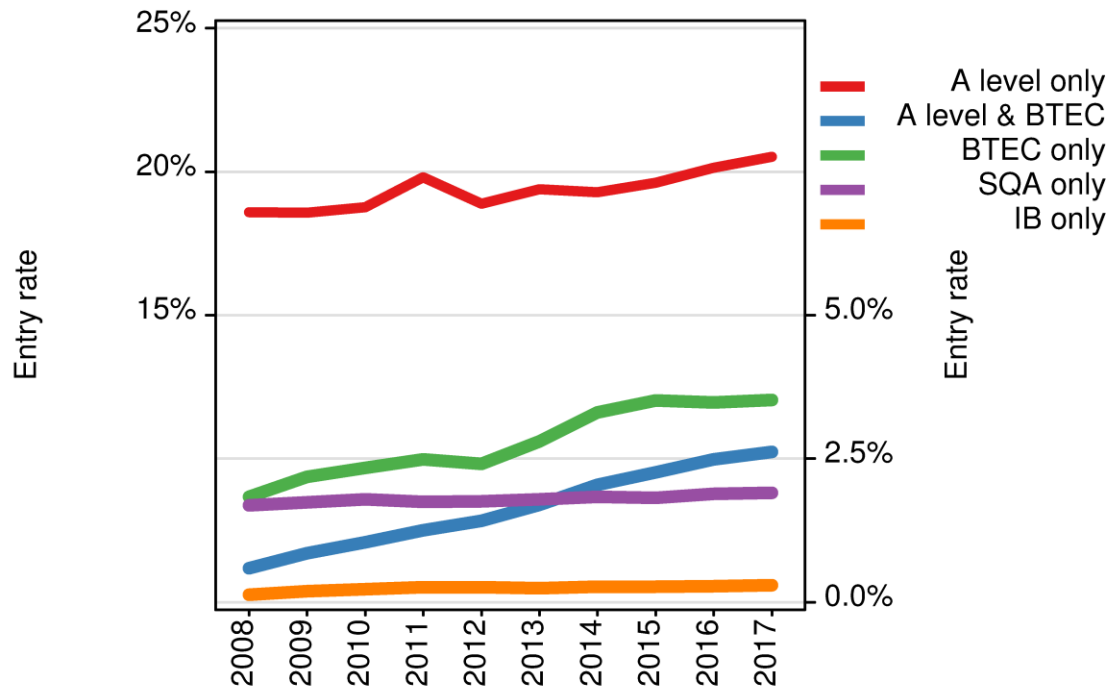
2.6 per cent of UK 18 year old students were accepted into higher education holding a combination of A levels and BTECs. This represents a 0.1 percentage point increase (5.2 per cent proportionally) from 2.5 per cent in 2016. Before this cycle, entry rates for the A level and BTEC combination had grown steadily, by between 0.2 and 0.3 percentage points per year.

Entry rates are largely stable for students holding SQAs and IBs

The majority (94.1 per cent) of Scottish applicants hold SQAs, and almost all applicants with SQAs are from Scotland (over 99.9 per cent). Of all UK 18 year olds, 1.9 per cent entered higher education with SQAs this cycle. The SQA entry rate has remained relatively stable across the reporting period, only increasing by 0.2 percentage points from 1.7 per cent in 2008.

In 2017, there were 2,190 acceptances to higher education from UK 18 year olds holding an IB qualification. This figure has remained relatively stable, from 2,025 acceptances in 2011. However, considered across a longer time period, IB acceptances have more than doubled, from 1,035 acceptances in 2008.

Figure 7.1 UK 18 year old entry rates by qualification type



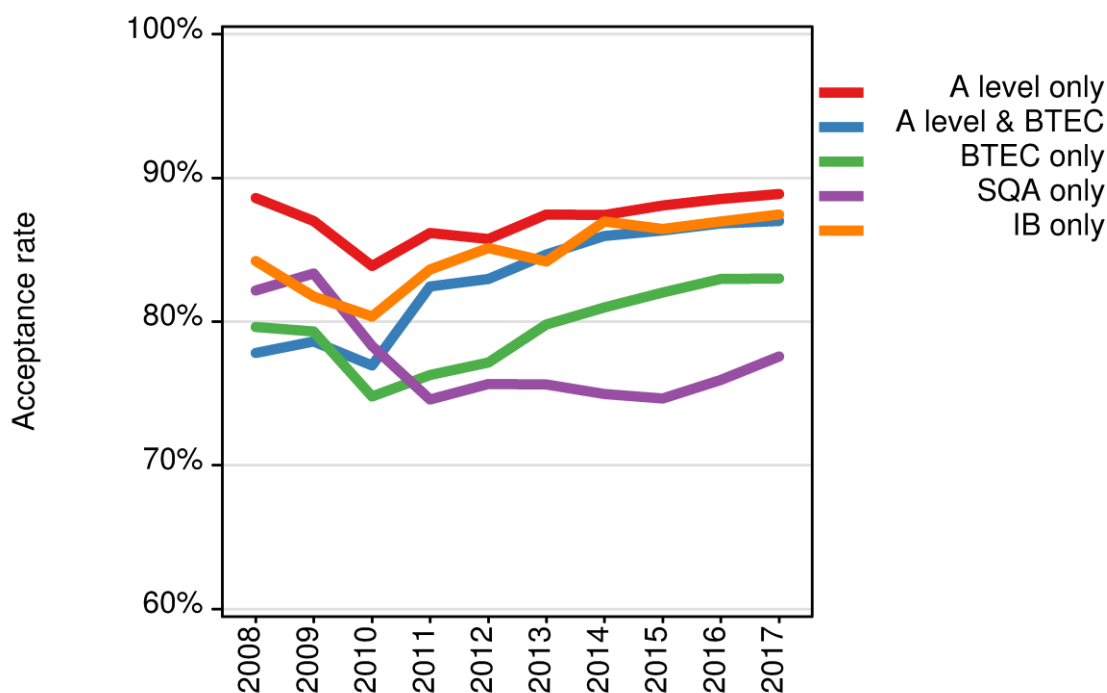
Note: Entry rates for UK 18 year olds are shown from 2008 to 2017 split by qualification type. Entry rates for A levels are higher, and are shown on the left axis. Entry rates for the other qualifications are lower, and are shown separately on the right axis.

Acceptance rates by qualification type

Acceptance rates increase for all qualification types, except BTECs

The acceptance rate is the proportion of applicants who are accepted for entry into higher education. Acceptance rates for UK 18 year olds split by qualification type are shown in Figure 7.2, and have increased for all qualification types. The acceptance rate for A level students is currently at 88.9 per cent, and is higher than the acceptance rate for the other qualification types. The next highest acceptance rates are for IB applicants (87.4 per cent) and for students taking a combination of A levels and BTECs (87 per cent). BTEC only students had an acceptance rate of 83 per cent in 2017, and had the smallest increase since the previous year (less than 0.1 percentage point). Applicants holding SQAs had the lowest acceptance rate of 77.6 per cent, but this group also had the largest increase of 1.7 percentage points (2.2 per cent proportionally) from an acceptance rate of 75.9 per cent in 2016.

Figure 7.2 UK 18 year old acceptance rates by qualification type



Typical attainment by qualification type

A level profiles can be converted into point scores by assigning numerical values to letter grades, using mappings as follows: A* = 6 points, A = 5, B = 4, C = 3, D = 2, and E = 1. The total score across applicants' best three A level grades gives a consistent measure of attainment. Grades for Level 3 qualifications other than A levels – such as SQA Advance Highers (SQA Highers are not considered as they are usually taken at an earlier age, and are used for entry into Scottish HE at an earlier degree stage than A levels), IBs, and BTECs – can be converted into A level equivalent point scores using a grade equivalency mapping process. This involves identifying applicants on individual courses at particular providers from 2012 onwards, and mapping the typical A level point scores of the A level students on that course to the students with other qualifications on that same course. These mappings are averaged across all courses to create equivalency tables which allow for the range of grades on various qualifications to be converted to A level equivalent points. A level point equivalencies are not calculated for SQA Highers, as they usually taken at an earlier age than A levels, and are typically used for entry into Scottish higher education at an earlier degree stage than A levels.

Typical attainment is calculated as the average attainment (in terms of A level equivalent points) across UK 18 year old acceptances for each qualification. Where an individual has multiple qualifications, the qualification with the highest A level equivalent point score is used.

Average attainment has increased for 18 year old BTEC applicants, but has generally remained stable or decreased for applicants with other qualifications

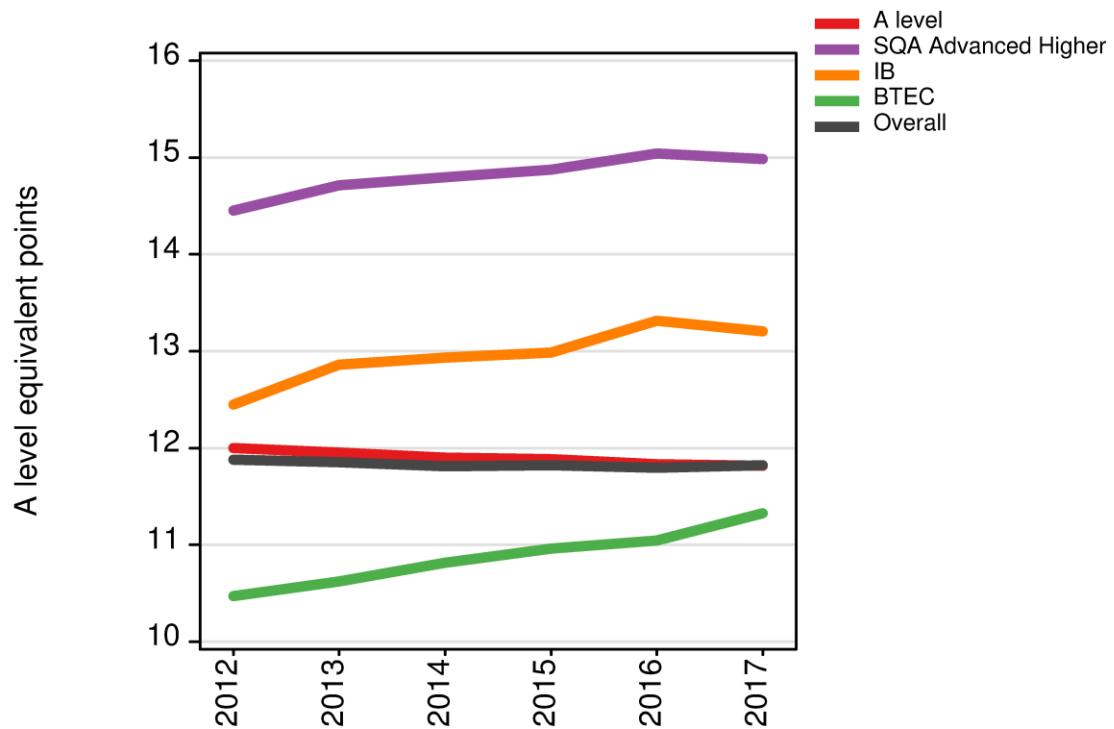
Figure 7.3 shows the typical attainment for UK 18 year olds accepted by qualification type. Acceptances with SQA Advanced Highers had the highest typical attainment of 15 A level equivalent points in 2017, which is stable from last year. However, this represents an increase from 14.4 points in 2012.

Acceptances with the IB qualification had an average attainment of 13.2 A level equivalent points in 2017, which represents a 0.8 per cent decrease from 13.3 points in 2016. Across a longer timescale, typical IB attainment has increased from 12.4 points in 2012.

A level acceptances had a typical attainment of 11.8 points in 2017, but average attainment has very gradually declined across the time period, decreasing from 12 points in 2012. A level students make up the majority of UK 18 year old acceptances, so the overall typical attainment (across A levels, SQA Advanced Highers, SQA Highers, IBs, and BTECs) largely follows the trend in average attainment seen for A level students. However, the contribution of A level only students (with at least three grades) to overall attainment has decreased in recent years. These students comprised around 70 per cent of UK 18 year old acceptances in 2012, but only around 65 per cent of these acceptances in 2017.

BTEC acceptances present with the lowest average attainment of 11.3 A level equivalent points, but this group has also shown the largest increase from the previous year, increasing from 11 points in 2016. Since 2012, average attainment for BTEC acceptances has increased from 10.5 points.

Figure 7.3 Average attainment (A level equivalent point scores) of UK 18 year old acceptances by qualification type



Note: A level equivalent points translate grades for various qualifications into point scores that are comparable to A level points. The overall line shows average attainment across A level, SQA Advanced Higher, IB, and BTEC qualifications. Changes to the grading and structure of qualifications in 2012 means that earlier years are not comparable, and so are excluded from the timeseries.

Typical attainment by tariff group

Increase in average attainment at lower tariff providers contrasts with a decrease of average attainment at medium tariff providers

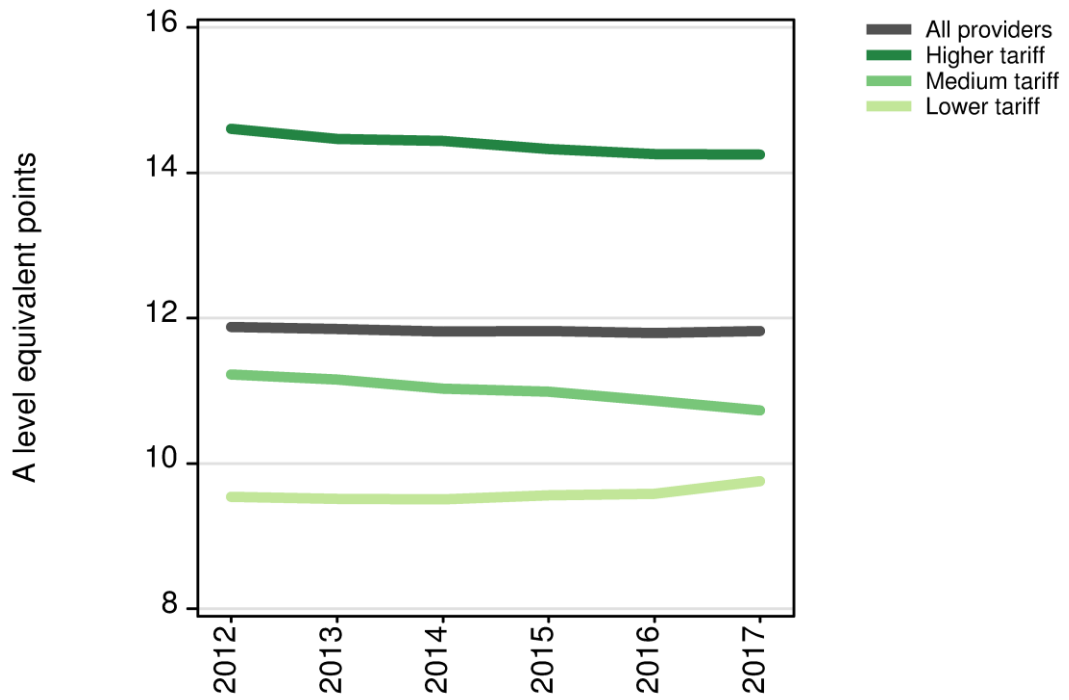
A level equivalent point scores can also be used to gauge the typical attainment of applicants placed at providers in each tariff band (see Figure 7.4). Lower tariff providers receive applicants with the lowest typical attainment – 9.8 A level equivalent points in 2017. However, typical attainment at lower tariff providers increased from 9.6 points in 2016, and from 9.5 points in 2012. In 2017, of the UK 18 year old acceptances to lower tariff providers, around 45 per cent held A levels (with at least three grades), and around 20 per cent held BTECs (with at least three grades) as their main qualification.

UK 18 year old acceptances to medium tariff providers had a slightly higher typical attainment of 10.7 points. However, average attainment of medium tariff acceptances has decreased consistently across the time series. Since 2012, the average A level equivalent points of medium tariff acceptances has fallen from 11.2 points. In recent years, the fall of typical attainment at medium tariff providers contrasts with the increase of typical attainment at lower tariff providers.

Higher tariff providers also had consistent decreases in the overall typical attainment of UK 18 year old acceptances. In 2017, higher tariff acceptances had 14.3 A level equivalent points on average, which represents a small decrease from 14.6 points in 2012. A greater proportion of acceptances to higher tariff providers hold A levels (around 80 per cent) compared to medium and lower tariff providers (around 65 per cent and 45 per cent, respectively). Only around 2 per cent of UK 18 year old acceptances to higher tariff providers hold BTECs as their main qualification: The proportion of BTEC acceptances to higher tariff providers is around ten times less than the proportion of BTEC acceptances to lower tariff providers.

The overall average attainment across all UK providers is 11.8 A level equivalent points, and has remained broadly stable across the time period.

Figure 7.4 Average attainment (A level equivalent point scores) of UK 18 year old acceptances by tariff group



Acceptance rates and number of acceptances by tariff group across A level points

Across low grade profiles, acceptance rates decrease to lower tariff providers, but increase to medium tariff providers

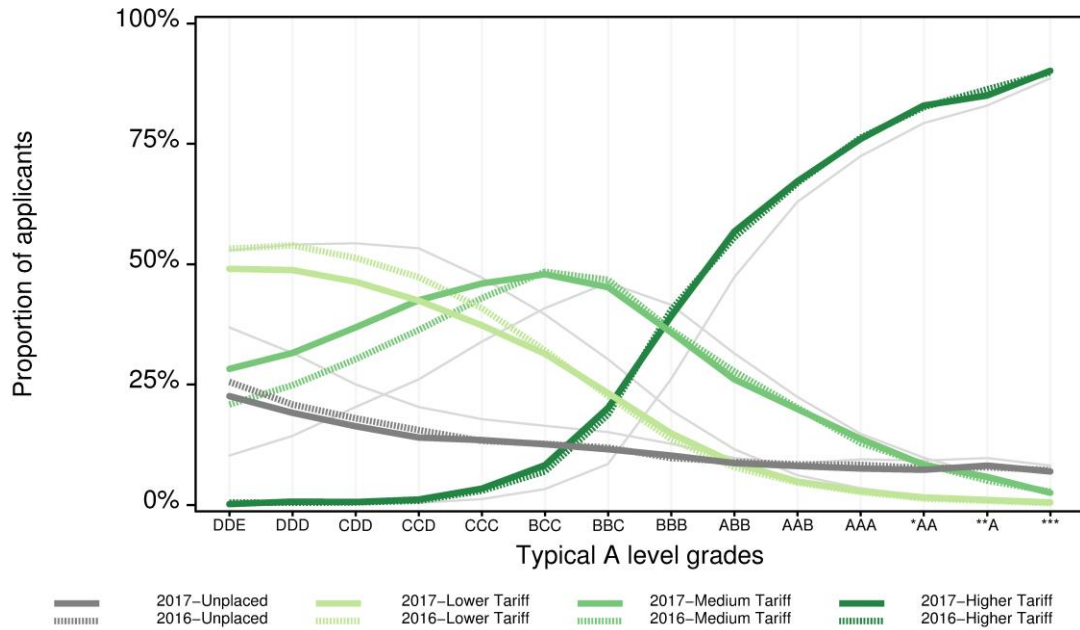
Applicants with the highest grades are most likely to enter higher tariff providers, those with the lowest grades are most likely to enter lower tariff providers, and those with grades in between are most likely to enter medium tariff providers. As such, the proportion of applicants placed in each tariff group varies according to the level of attainment. These patterns are shown in Figure 7.5, where attainment is given as the typical A level grades associated with the point score from the applicant's best three A levels.

The proportion of placed applicants (holding three or more A levels) entering higher tariff providers has remained relatively stable across the levels of attainment. There is some evidence of a slight fall in the proportion of placed applicants with typical grades of A*A*A (-1.3 percentage points, -1.5 per cent proportionally). However, this is negligible when compared to the large increases since 2012 for grade profiles above CCC.

Medium and lower tariff providers showed little change in proportions of placed applicants with grades at or above the level of BCC. However, below this level of attainment, lower tariff providers had reductions in the proportions of placed applicants, which contrast with increases at medium tariff providers across equivalent grade profiles. For the grades DDD to CCC, lower tariff providers had decreases of between -5.2 to -3.6 percentage points, while medium tariff providers had increases of between 3 to 6.7 percentage points.

Of the UK 18 year old acceptances to lower tariff providers with A levels, 56.2 per cent were from applicants with grades at or below CCC in 2017. This represents a 3.2 percentage point decrease (-5.4 per cent proportionally) from 59.4 per cent in 2016. In contrast, 35.1 per cent of acceptances to medium tariff providers were from applicants with grades at or below CCC in 2017, and this is an increase of 3.7 percentage points (11.6 per cent proportionally) from 31.4 per cent in 2016.

Figure 7.5 Acceptance rates of English 18 year old applicants to higher, medium, and lower tariff English providers, by A level profile points



Reduction in acceptances with lower A level grades to lower tariff providers, but increased to medium tariff providers

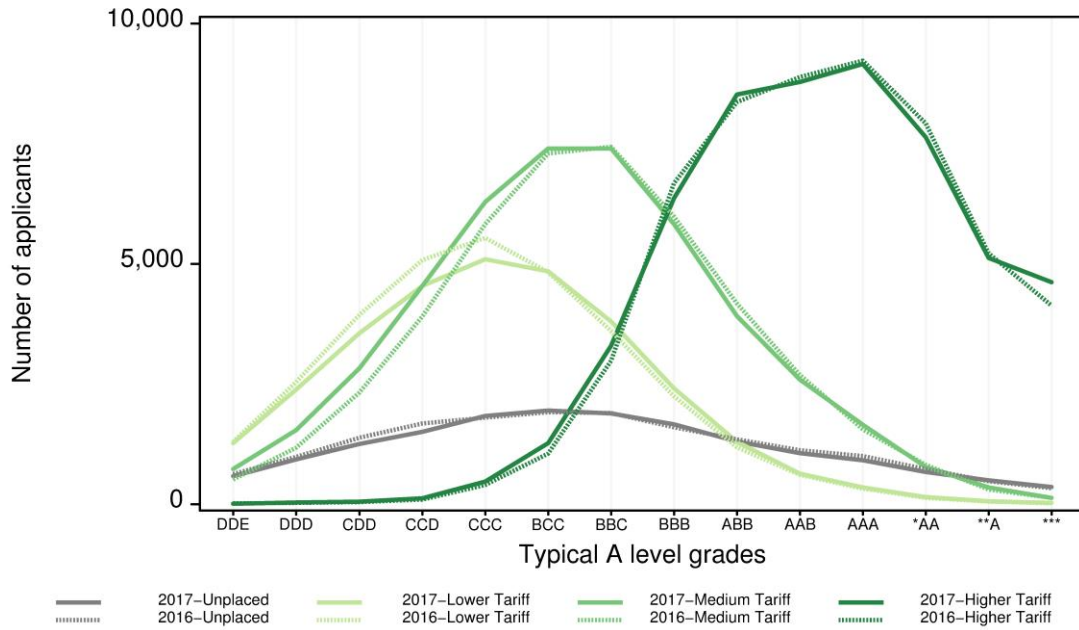
Providers in each of the tariff groups differ in terms of the number of acceptances they typically receive from each band of A level attainment (Figure 7.6). Out of all attainment levels, higher tariff providers accept the most applicants with AAA (16.5 per cent of UK 18 year old A level acceptances), medium tariff providers accept the most applicants with BCC (16.1 per cent), and lower tariff providers accept the most applicants with CCC (16.8 per cent). For unplaced applicants, BCC is the most common level of attainment (11.9 per cent of unplaced applicants).

Overall, there were 55,400 acceptances holding three or more A levels to higher tariff providers in 2017, which is an increase of 410 from 2016. There were 4,610 acceptances holding A*A*A* in 2017, an increase of 485 (11.8 per cent proportionally) from 2016. This contrasts with a fall of 500 acceptances holding this grade profile between 2015 and 2016¹.

The patterns of acceptances by grade profile for lower and medium tariff providers are similar to those seen in Figure 7.5. UK 18 year old A level acceptances to lower tariff providers decreased by 3.2 per cent to 30,930 acceptances in 2017, while acceptances to medium tariff providers increased by 4.4 per cent to 46,200. Most of the changes in A level acceptances for these tariff groups are attributable to differences in placed applicants holding grades CCC or below. Between the grades of DDD and CCC, medium tariff providers had an increase of 1,970 acceptances (14.9 per cent proportionally) from 2016 to 2017. This increase in UK 18 year old A level acceptances to medium tariff providers with lower grade profiles comprises around half of the overall increase in acceptances to medium tariff providers in 2017. In contrast, lower tariff providers had a fall of 1,530 UK 18 year old acceptances (9 per cent proportionally) holding these grades, and this fall comprises around a quarter of the overall decrease in acceptances to lower tariff providers in 2017.

¹ [UCAS Undergraduate End of Cycle Report 2016](#)

Figure 7.6 English 18 year old acceptances to higher, medium, and lower tariff English providers, and unplaced applicants, by A level profile points



Acceptance rates and number of acceptances by tariff group across BTEC profiles

Lower tariff providers receive the highest proportions of BTEC acceptances across all grade profiles

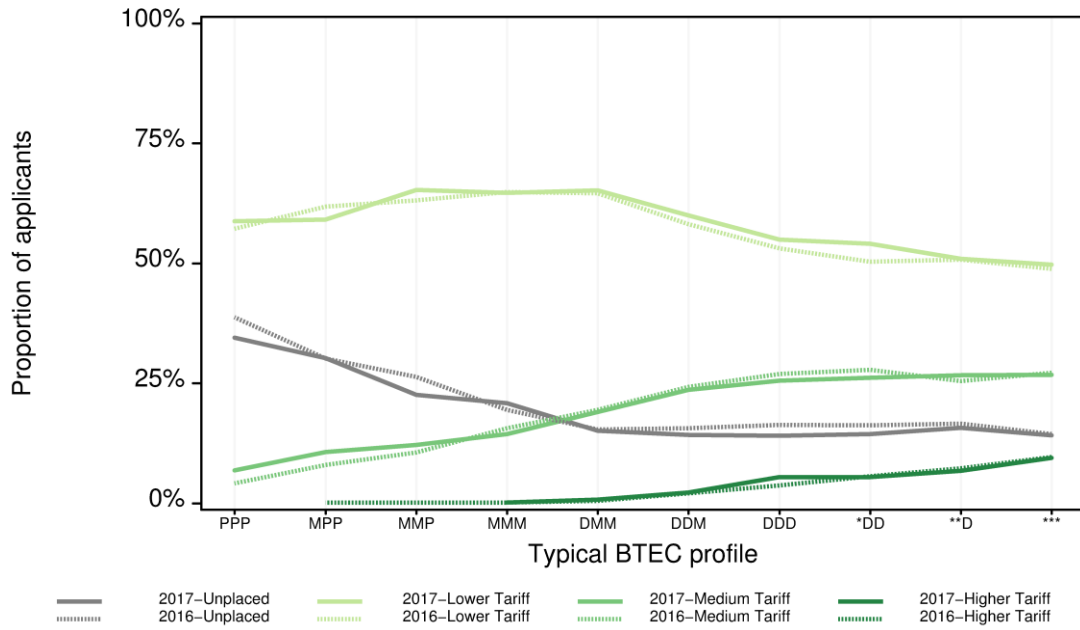
Applicants holding Level 3 BTEC qualifications (equivalent in size to three A levels) are most likely to enter lower tariff providers, followed by medium then higher tariff providers. Figure 7.7 shows the proportion of English 18 year old applicants with BTEC qualifications accepted to English providers in each tariff group, split by the BTEC grade profile of the applicant.

In 2017, English 18 year old BTEC applicants with grade profiles² of MMP to DMM were most likely to be accepted to English lower tariff providers (around 65 per cent of applicants at each of these profiles). At the highest BTEC grade profile of D*D*D*, just under half (49.7 per cent) of BTEC applicants were placed at lower tariff providers. For the grade profile of D*DD, there was a 3.7 percentage point (7.3 per cent proportional) increase in the proportion of BTEC applicants placed at lower tariff providers. This was the greatest change for lower tariff acceptances across the time series.

The proportion of BTEC applicants placed at medium and higher tariff providers increases with BTEC attainment, but is always smaller than the proportion placed at lower tariff providers. The highest proportion of applicants placed at medium tariff providers is 26.7 per cent of those with grades D*D*D or D*D*D*. Under 5 per cent of BTEC applicants are placed at higher tariff providers with grade profiles lower than DDD. Only 9.4 per cent of the BTEC applicants holding the highest grade profile of D*D*D* are placed at higher tariff providers.

² BTEC qualifications receive grades of Pass (P), Merit (M), Distinction (D), or Distinction Star (D*). Students taking BTEC qualifications equivalent in size to three A level grades (typically the BTEC Extended Diploma) receive a grade profile which can range from three passes (PPP) to three distinction star grades (D*D*D*).

Figure 7.7 Acceptance rates of English 18 year old applicants to higher, medium, and lower tariff English providers, by BTEC grade profile



A greater number of BTEC applicants are holding the highest BTEC grade this year

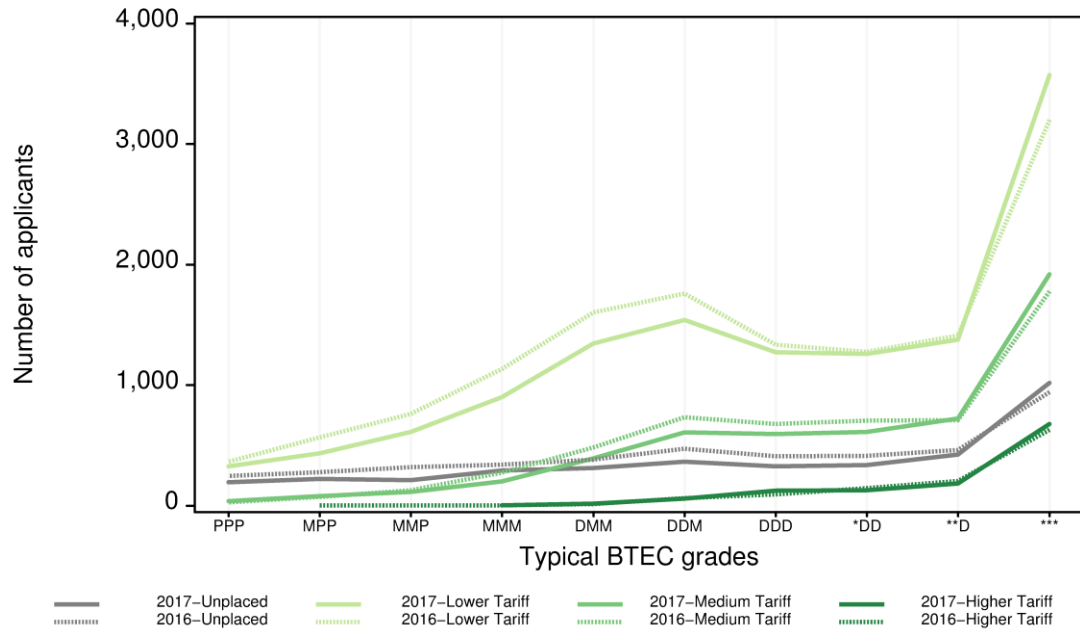
The number of English 18 year old Level 3 BTEC acceptances to each of the tariff groups, split by BTEC grade profile, are shown in Figure 7.8. Across all tariff groups, the number of acceptances has generally decreased for BTEC grade profiles lower than D*D*D, while the number of D*D*D* acceptances has increased by 10 per cent, from 5,605 in 2016, to 6,170 in 2017.

Overall, there were 12,630 BTEC acceptances to English lower tariff providers in 2017, a 5.7 per cent decrease from 13,400 BTEC acceptances in 2016. The largest decreases for this group were of placed applicants with BTEC grade profiles between MMM to DDM (decreases of between 220 and 260 acceptances). This year, there were 3,570 acceptances to lower tariff providers with the highest BTEC grade of D*D*D*, a 11.7 per cent increase from 3,200 in 2016. In the context of the overall decrease in all lower tariff acceptances, the fall in English 18 year old BTEC acceptances with grades at or below DDD comprises around 20 per cent of the reduction.

The patterns in the number of BTEC applicants placed at medium tariff providers are similar to those for lower tariff providers, but the number of acceptances are smaller. Overall, there were 5,270 BTEC acceptances to medium tariff providers, which represents a 5.8 per cent fall from 5,580 acceptances in 2016. This year, there were 1,920 BTEC applicants placed at medium tariff providers with the highest grade of D*D*D* – an increase of 145 applicants with the highest grade from last year.

Only 1,185 English 18 year old BTEC applicants were placed at higher tariff providers this year – an increase of 40 acceptances compared to last year. Over half of the BTEC acceptances to higher tariff providers have the highest grade of D*D*D* (675 applicants in 2017).

Figure 7.8 English 18 year old acceptances to higher, medium, and lower tariff English providers, and unplaced applicants, by BTEC grade profile



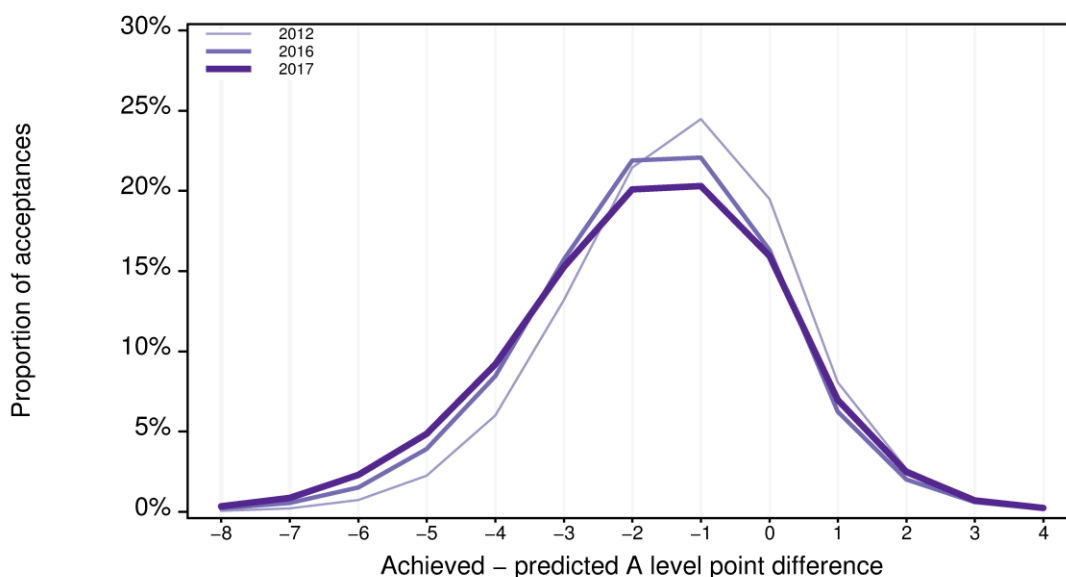
Differences between predicted and achieved A level attainment

Just over a quarter of A level students meet or exceed their predicted grades

A level students are typically predicted higher A level grades than they later achieve. Distributions of differences between achieved and predicted A level points for UK 18 year old acceptances are shown in Figure 7.9. In 2017, 73.4 per cent of UK 18 year old acceptances holding A levels achieved lower A level grades than predicted, and only 26.6 per cent met or exceeded their predicted grades. These proportions are slight improvements from 2016, where 74.4 per cent achieved lower than predicted, and 25.6 per cent met or exceeded their predicted grades. However, across a longer timescale, differences between predicted and achieved grades have widened considerably compared to 2012, where 68.4 per cent achieved less than predicted, and 31.6 per cent met or exceeded their predicted grades.

This year, 55.7 per cent of UK 18 year old acceptances achieved between one and three points fewer than predicted. This is fall of 4 percentage points from 59.7 per cent of acceptances in 2016. However, there has also been a 2.5 percentage point increase in the proportion of acceptances achieving between four and six points lower than predicted, from 13.9 per cent in 2016, to 16.4 per cent in 2017.

Figure 7.9 Distribution of differences between achieved and predicted A level attainment



Acceptances to higher tariff providers are more likely to meet or exceed their predicted grades, than acceptances to medium or lower tariff providers

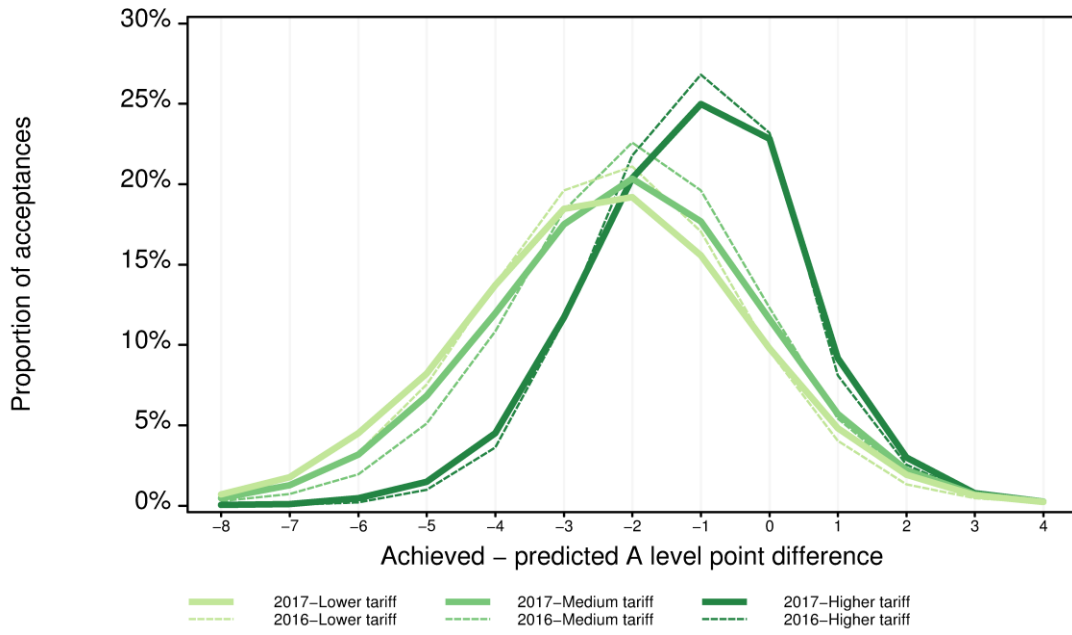
Distributions of differences between achieved and predicted A level attainment for UK 18 year old acceptances can be examined for each provider tariff group individually (Figure 7.10). In 2017, students accepted to higher tariff providers were more likely to meet or exceed their predicted grades (36.4 per cent of higher tariff acceptances) than students accepted to medium tariff (20.6 per cent) or lower tariff (17.6 per cent) providers.

Compared to the previous year, the proportion of lower tariff acceptances who met or exceeded their predicted grades increased by 1.9 percentage points, from 15.7 per cent in 2016. The next largest improvement was seen for higher tariff acceptances, where the proportion meeting or exceeding their predicted grades increased by 1.3 percentage points from 35.1 per cent. Medium tariff acceptances showed negligible change from last year in the proportion of students meeting or exceeding their predicted grades.

For higher tariff providers, the proportion of acceptances achieving between one and three points fewer than predicted has fallen 3 percentage points, from 60.1 per cent in 2016, to 57.1 per cent in 2017. In contrast, the proportion of acceptances dropping between four and six grades has increased by 1.6 percentage points, from 4.8 per cent in 2016, to 6.4 per cent in 2017.

These trends are similar but more pronounced for lower and medium tariff providers. From 2016 to 2017, the proportion of acceptances dropping one to three grades decreased from 57.7 per cent to 53.2 per cent at lower tariff providers, and from 60.5 per cent to 55.5 per cent at medium tariff providers. However, the proportions of acceptances dropping between four and six grades also increased from 24.6 per cent in 2016 to 26.4 per cent in 2017 at lower tariff providers, and from 17.9 per cent in 2016 to 22.0 per cent in 2017 at medium tariff providers.

Figure 7.10 Distribution of differences between achieved and predicted A level attainment, by Tariff group



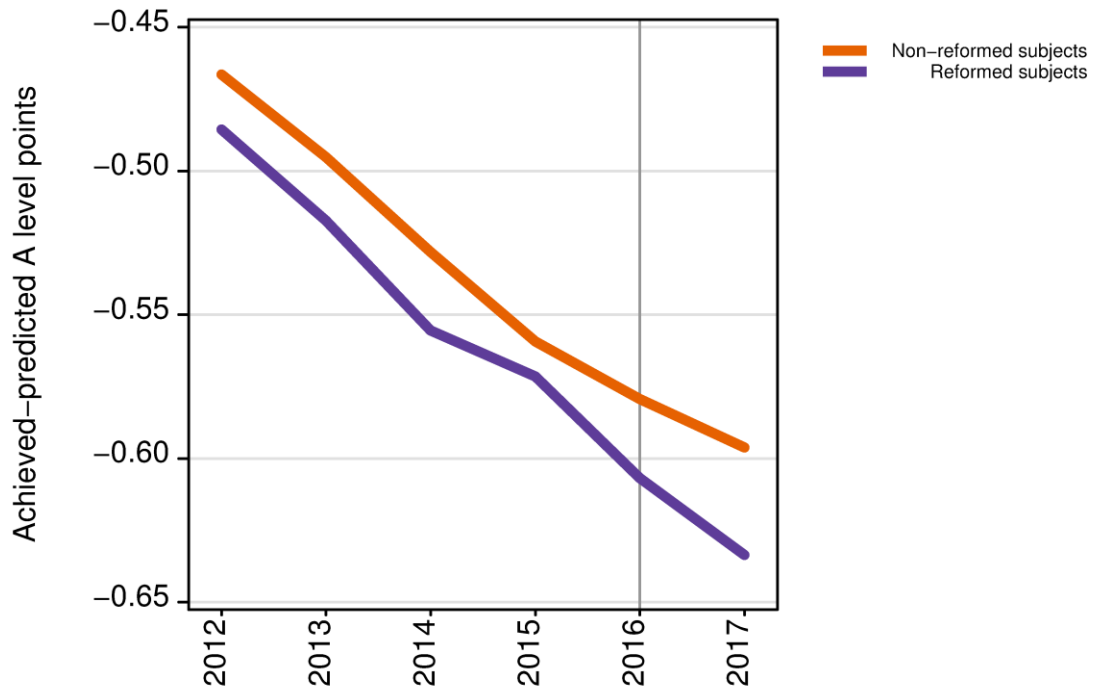
Gap between achieved and predicted A level grades, among those accepted to HE, continues to widen

A level reforms to certain subjects were introduced in England in 2015. These reforms have led to a greater focus on exam assessment at the end of the course, a decoupling of AS levels and A levels (such that AS levels no longer count towards the A level), and a review of the content of the courses. The first results for the reformed A levels were available in 2017.

Differences between the achieved and predicted grades of English 18 year old acceptances are plotted across time separately for A level subjects that have been reformed (and have first results from the reformed qualifications in 2017), and for those that have not yet been reformed (see Figure 7.11). Specifically, the weighted mean differences of achieved A level points minus predicted A level points are calculated for subjects by reformed status. In this context, the results in 2017 are from the new A levels, whereas previous years show the results from the as yet unreformed A levels.

Between 2012 and 2016, differences between achieved and predicted grades widened at a similar rate for the subject groups containing non-reformed qualifications and reformed qualifications (before the first results for the new A levels were available). With the appearance of the first results from the reformed qualifications in 2017, the gap between achieved and predicted A level points has continued to widen for both subject groups – the achieved minus predicted gap widened by 2.9 per cent to a grade point difference of -0.60 in 2017 for non-reformed subjects, while the gap for the reformed subjects group widened by 4.4 per cent to a grade point difference of -0.63.

Figure 7.11 Average differences between achieved and predicted A level attainment by reformation status of A level subject



Note: Achieved minus predicted A level points refer to the weighted mean difference between achieved and predicted A level points across subjects in both the reformed and non-reformed groups. Weighting is performed with respect to the number of students taking each subject. The first results for the reformed subjects were available in 2017, and so previous years show the results from the same subjects before they were reformed. Subjects are only included if more than 5,000 students taking that subject in 2017 were accepted to higher education. Grades on the individual subjects are only taken from English 18 year old acceptances.

Recruitment changes for providers

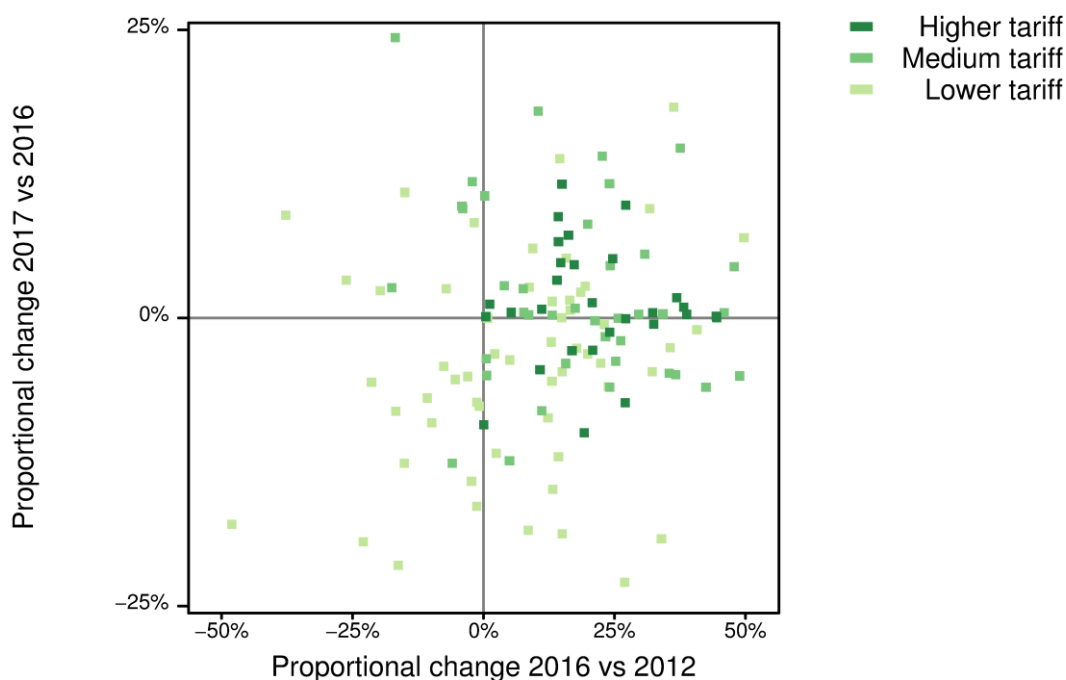
Most providers have increased recruitment since 2012

Variations in recruitment have been common among providers since changes to student numbers controls and tuition fees were made in the 2012 entry cycle. Some providers have increased their acceptances, some have decreased, and others have remained relatively stable. Such patterns are investigated for the 140 providers with stable data across the past five years, and with an average intake of over 500 acceptances (see Figure 7.12). Since 2012, this subset of providers has received between 94 and 95 per cent of all acceptances.

Across the selected providers, 60 (43 per cent) had historic increases in acceptances between 2012 and 2016, along with recent increases between 2016 and 2017 (top right quadrant of Figure 7.12). 49 providers (35 per cent) had historic increases, but not recent increases in acceptances (bottom right quadrant). Thirteen providers (9 per cent) had recent increases only (top left quadrant), and 18 providers (13 per cent) had historic and recent declines in acceptances (bottom left quadrant).

All higher tariff providers (32 out of 32) showed historical increases in acceptances, and two thirds of these also showed recent increases in acceptances from 2016 to 2017. Similarly, the majority of medium tariff providers (40 out of 46) showed historical increases, and just over half of these (24 out of 40) also showed recent increases. A close majority of lower tariff providers also had historical increases (37 out of 62). However, most of these providers (22 out of 37) went on to show recent decreases in acceptances between 2016 and 2017.

Figure 7.12 Selected provider-level changes in recruitment between 2016 and 2017, relative to recruitment changes between 2012 and 2016



Recruitment to lower tariff providers falls, but typical attainment of those accepted increases – medium tariff providers have the opposite pattern

As with the variation in acceptances over time, there can also be variation in the typical academic strength of acceptances to providers over time. In this way, there can be changes to the quantity of a provider's intake, along with changes in their academic strength (in terms of average A level equivalent point scores). For example, some providers may choose to increase the volume of their intake, perhaps at the expense of average attainment across applicants. Other providers may focus on improving the average attainment of their intake, and possibly see reductions in the quantity of their intake as a result. Finally, some providers may show either increases or decreases to both the quantity and average attainment of intake simultaneously.

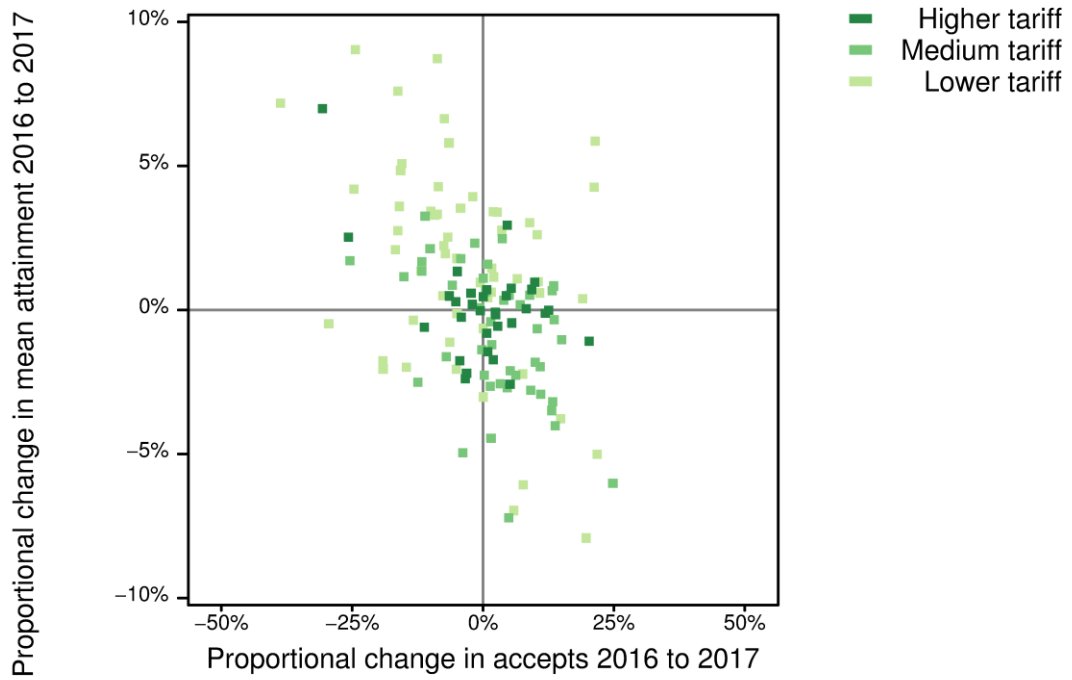
Patterns of change in average attainment, versus quantity of UK 18 year old acceptances from 2016 to 2017, are depicted for a selected subset of providers in Figure 7.13. Change in quality across entry cycles is shown as the proportional change in average attainment (in terms of A level equivalent points), and change in quantity is the proportional change in the number of acceptances. The largest quadrant, containing 44 out of 137 providers, is the top left quadrant for providers that showed an increase in average attainment along with a decrease in the number of acceptances. Most of the providers in this quadrant are lower tariff providers (27 out of 44 providers). 27 out of the 59 lower tariff providers are in this quadrant; more than in any of the other quadrants.

The next largest quadrant, with 37 out of 137 providers, is the bottom right quadrant, containing providers that have increased quantity but declined in terms of average attainment. Most of these are medium tariff providers (21 out of 37), and more medium tariff providers belong to this quadrant than to any of the other quadrants (21 out of 46 medium tariff providers).

The quadrant for providers that have increased in terms of both quantity and average attainment of acceptances contains 36 out of 137 providers. This quadrant contains 16 out of the 59 lower tariff providers, 11 out of the 46 medium tariff providers, and nine out of the 32 higher tariff providers. The smallest quadrant contains providers that have declined in terms of both average attainment and quantity of acceptances (20 out of 137 providers). This quadrant contains ten lower tariff providers, four medium tariff providers, and six higher tariff providers.

In summary, lower tariff providers are typically recruiting fewer applicants, but improving in terms of average attainment. Medium tariff providers show the opposite pattern of growth in acceptances, combined with a reduction in average attainment. Higher tariff providers are more spread out across the quadrants, with roughly similar numbers increasing in terms of quantity alone, and in terms of both quantity and average attainment of acceptances (ten and nine, respectively).

Figure 7.13 Provider-level proportional changes in average attainment, against proportional changes in UK 18 year old acceptances, from 2016 to 2017



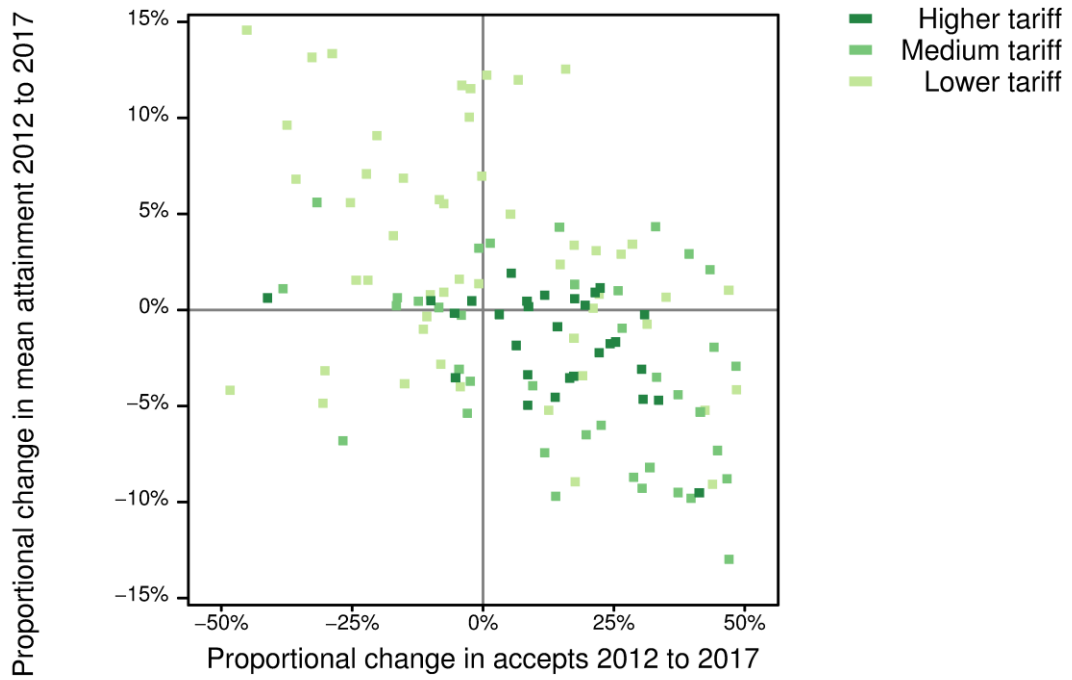
Since 2012, medium and higher tariff providers have increased the quantity of acceptances, while average attainment has typically decreased

Patterns of change in the academic strength of a provider's intake, versus the size of the intake, may vary when considered across a longer timescale. Figure 7.14 shows proportional changes in average attainment against proportional changes in the number of UK 18 year old acceptances for providers from 2012 to 2017. Over this timespan, the largest quadrant contains 55 out of 137 providers that had increases in the number of acceptances, combined with decreases to the average attainment of those acceptances. This has been the most common quadrant for both medium and higher tariff providers, comprising 59 per cent and 56 per cent of these groups, respectively.

The next largest quadrant contains the 37 out of 137 providers that had increases in average attainment, coupled with decreases in the quantity of acceptances. A greater number of lower tariff providers fall into this quadrant than into any of the other quadrants (27 out of 59 lower tariff providers).

For the final two quadrants, 30 out of 137 providers showed increases to both average attainment and quantity of acceptances across the timespan, while 15 out of 137 providers showed decreases to both average attainment and quantity. In general, lower tariff providers have been more likely to show increases in the average attainment of acceptances, but also a decrease in the number of acceptances. Conversely, medium tariff providers more often show increases in quantity coupled with decreases in average attainment. Both these patterns are evident when assessing provider-level changes across both longer (2012 to 2017) and shorter (2016 to 2017) timespans. Higher tariff providers have been more likely to show increases in only their quantity of acceptances in the longer term, but a larger number of providers have also shown increases in the average attainment of acceptances in the shorter term.

Figure 7.1. Provider-level proportional changes in average attainment, against proportional changes in UK 18 year old acceptances, from 2012 to 2017



A note on numbers in Scotland

UCAS covers the overwhelming majority of full-time undergraduate provision for people living in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, so the statistics on acceptances or entry rates can be taken as being very close to all recruitment to full-time undergraduate higher education. In Scotland, there is a substantial section of higher education provision not included in UCAS' figures. This is mostly full-time higher education provided in further education colleges, which represents around one third of young full-time undergraduate study in Scotland, and this proportion varies by geography and background within Scotland. Accordingly, figures on entry rates or total recruitment in Scotland reflect only the part of full-time undergraduate study that uses UCAS.

In 2014, there were fewer very late acceptances than in other cycles recorded in the UCAS data for some Scottish providers. These changes may mean the number of applicants and acceptances to Scottish UCAS providers in 2014 recorded through UCAS could be understated by up to 2,000, compared to how applicants and acceptances have been reported in recent cycles. This means that comparing 2014 applicants and acceptances for Scottish providers (or those from Scotland) to other cycles, may not give an accurate measure of change.

In 2015, around 120 courses at Scottish providers which were previously part of the UCAS Teacher Training scheme, moved into the UCAS Undergraduate scheme. As such, the number of applicants and acceptances to Scottish providers in 2015 recorded through UCAS will include those which were previously part of UCAS Teacher Training. This means that comparing 2015 applicants and acceptances for Scottish providers (or those from Scotland, particularly those aged 21 or over) to previous cycles, may not give a like-for-like measure of change.

Glossary

Acceptance	An applicant who, at the end of the cycle, has been placed for entry into higher education.
Acceptance rate	The number of acceptances divided by the number of applicants.
Age	This analysis uses country-specific age definitions that align with the cut-off points for school and college cohorts in the different administrations of the UK. For England and Wales, ages are defined on 31 August, for Northern Ireland on 1 July, and for Scotland on 28 February the following year. Defining ages in this way matches the assignment of children to school cohorts. For applicants outside the UK, a cohort cut-off of 31 August has been used.
A level points	A level grades are assigned points such that A* = 6 points, A = 5, B = 4, C = 3, D = 2, and E = 1. Achieved A level grade profiles of applicants are assigned the total number of points of their best three achieved grades, for example, a grade profile of AAB would be worth 14 A level points.
Applicant	A person who has made an application in the UCAS system. Counts of applicants include those applying through the main scheme, late applicants direct to Clearing, and Records of Prior Acceptance (RPAs).
Application rate	The number of applicants divided by the estimated base population.
Base population estimate	The population estimates are based on Office for National Statistics mid-year estimates, and national population projections (published in June 2015). For 16 to 20 year olds, the estimates are obtained by ageing 15 year olds from the appropriate number of years earlier. This approach avoids the estimates being susceptible to changes in net migration (including overseas students) during these ages. Older ages are obtained from the mid-year estimates, and national population projections without ageing. In both cases, the estimates are adjusted from age at mid-year to age on the country-specific reference dates using the monthly distribution of births. Analysis of application and entry rates by area-based background are supported through small area population estimates, available from the Office for National Statistics, National Records for Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency. These small area population estimates have been revised to be consistent with the national level population estimates.
BTEC	Originally Business and Technician Education Council, BTECs are qualifications now offered by Pearson. The Level 3 BTECs covered in this analysis include the following from the NQF framework: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Awards • National Certificate • National Diploma • Subsidiary Certificates They also include the following qualifications in the QCF framework:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended Diploma • Diploma • Subsidiary Diploma • 90-credit Diploma <p>The majority of BTECs are awarded to applicants from England.</p>
Domicile	Declared area of permanent residence.
Entry rate	Number of acceptances from a UCAS application cycle divided by the estimated base population.
Firm choice	An offer made by a provider which has been confirmed by the applicant as their first choice. These can be either conditional (dependent on achieving specified conditions), or unconditional (applicant has met specific conditions and assumed to be accepted or placed at the provider).
HE	Higher education.
Higher tariff provider	A provider that belongs to the higher tariff group, from the grouping of providers based on the average levels of attainment of their UK 18 year old accepted applicants (summarised through UCAS Tariff points) in recent cycles. The other two groups are medium tariff providers and lower tariff providers. Each group of providers accounted for around a third of all UK 18 year old acceptances in recent cycles.
IB	International Baccalaureate Diploma.
Provider	A higher education provider – a university or college.
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority – Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications taken by young people in Scotland when applying to higher education.
UK	United Kingdom. Excludes the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.