

UCAS FAIR ACCESS SNAPSHOT:

STUDENTS IN RECEIPT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

UCAS



INTRODUCTION

In 2023, UCAS introduced seven new questions into the application enabling students to flag a wider range of circumstances and support needs, including: students estranged from their parents, those with parenting or caring responsibilities, students from UK Armed Forces families, UK Armed Forces Service leavers and veterans, refugees and asylum seekers, and students in receipt of free school meals. This new data not only helps higher education (HE) providers connect students to the right support, but also provides the sector with valuable insight into groups of students about whom we have previously had minimal information.

These Fair Access Snapshots offer an at-a-glance overview of this new data. This sixth Snapshot [in the series](#) focuses on 2023 applicants who shared that they were in receipt of free school meals (FSM) during their secondary education.

FSM FEE WAIVER

For the 2025 cycle, UCAS is pleased to share that we are removing the application fee for any student who is or has received free school meals (FSM) during the last six years, up until the end of their final year at school or college.

[Find out more and access our resources to support advisers with implementing the changes.](#)



OVERALL 2023 UCAS APPLICANT DATA

599,930

UK applicants

482,895

UK accepted applicants

35.8%

of UK 18 year olds accepted

APPLICANTS FROM IN RECEIPT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

77,185

UK applicants

60,410

UK accepted applicants

12.5%

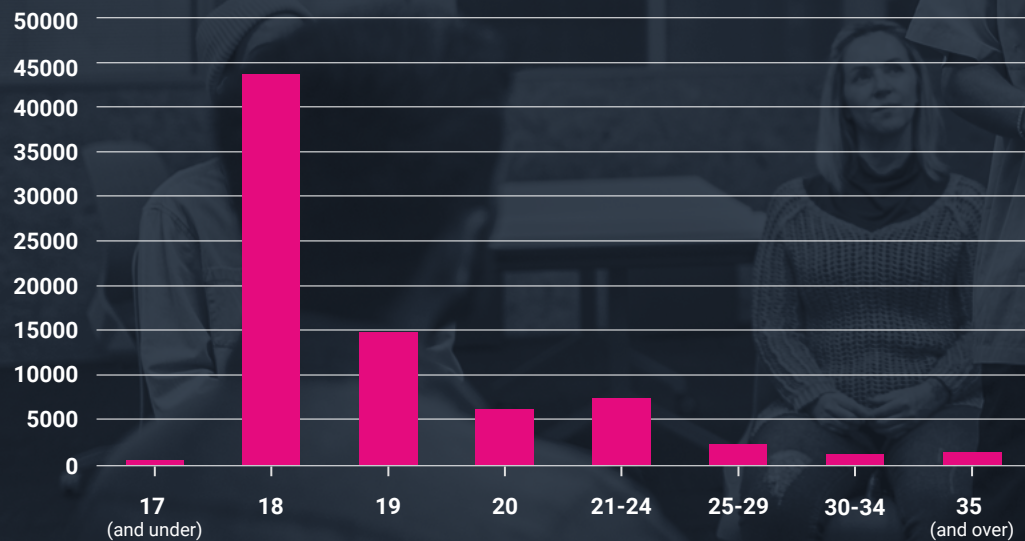
of UK accepted applicants



BREAKDOWN BY UK DOMICILE

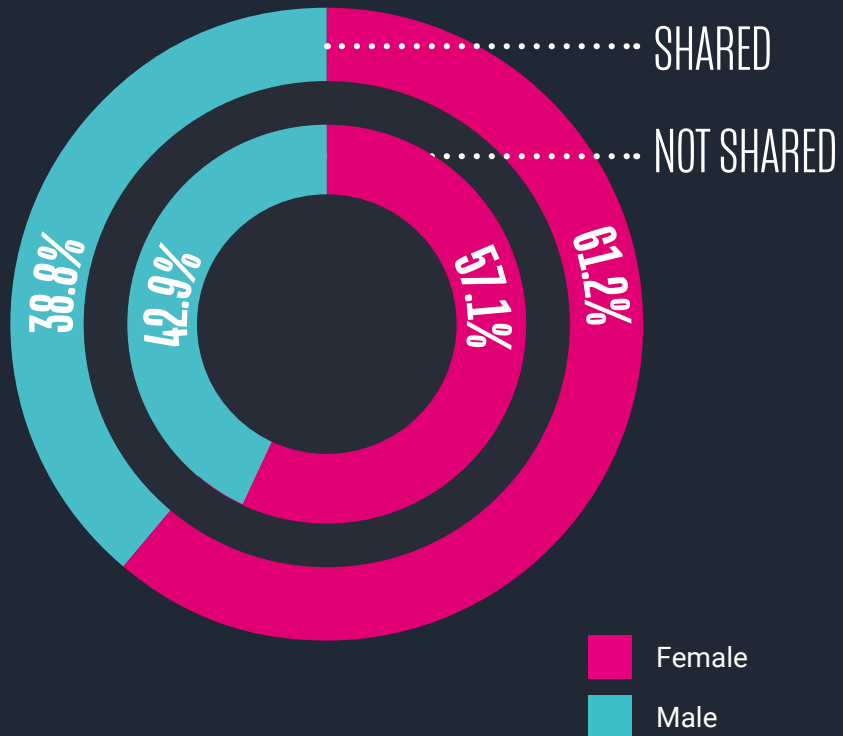
In receipt of FSM	Applicants	Accepted applicants
England	66,425	52,590
Northern Ireland	3,740	2,525
Scotland	4,460	3,240
Wales	2,560	2,055

INTERSECTIONALITY: AGE



Over three quarters of applicants in receipt of FSM during their secondary education were age 19 or below. The number sharing this information reduces as the age group increases – this partly reflects the proportion of applicants in each group but may also indicate that older applicants are less likely to recall their FSM eligibility.

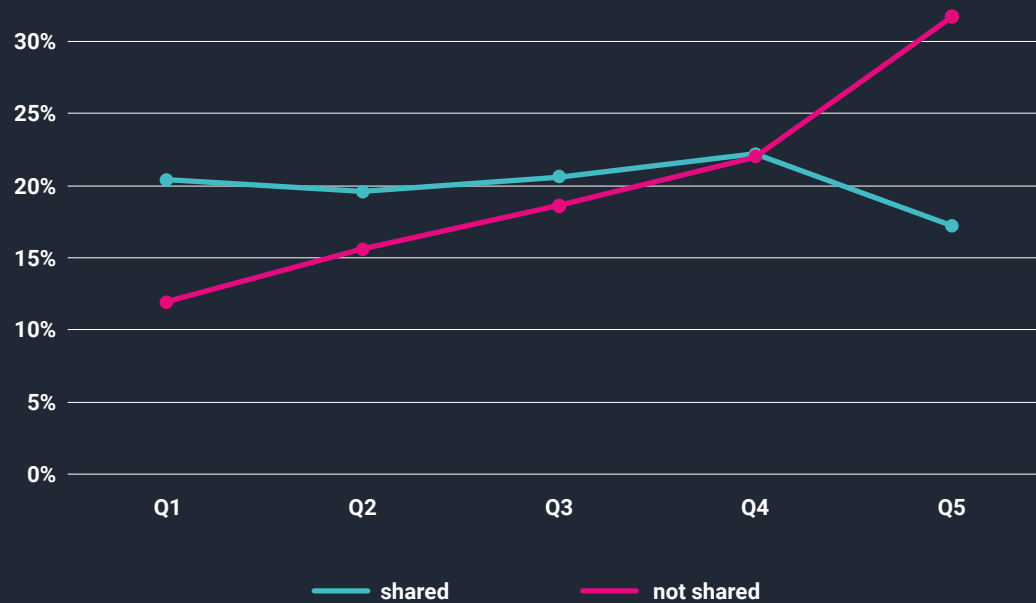
INTERSECTIONALITY: GENDER



The gender imbalance seen overall is magnified for applicants in receipt of FSM, indicating that men from low income backgrounds are less likely to progress to HE.



INTERSECTIONALITY: SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

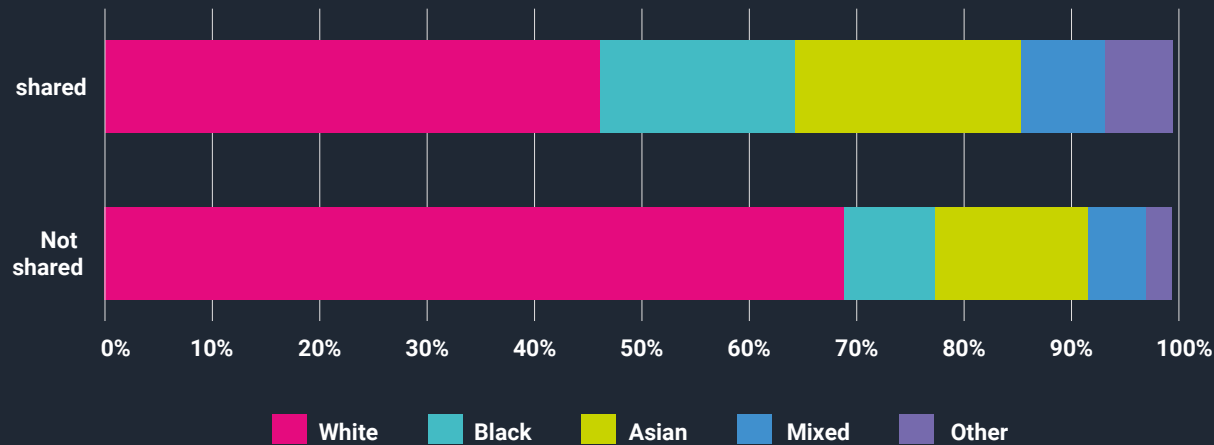


Looking at FSM alongside postcode measures of disadvantage (here using POLAR4¹), it is not surprising to see applicants in receipt of FSM to be more likely to come from the least advantaged areas (Q1 and Q2). While they are much less likely to come from the most advantaged areas (Q5), they are about as likely to come from a Q4 area as those who are not in receipt of FSM. Postcode measures can mask pockets of deprivation, so relying on these measures alone can mean fair access opportunities are missed. Many admissions teams take an applicant's FSM status into account because it is felt to be a more reliable indicator of socio-economic disadvantage.

¹POLAR is a measurement which classifies areas across the UK into five groups according to their level of 18 year old participation in HE. Each group represents around 20% of young people and is ranked from quintile 1 (areas with the lowest participation rates, considered the most disadvantaged) to quintile 5 (highest participation rates, most advantaged).

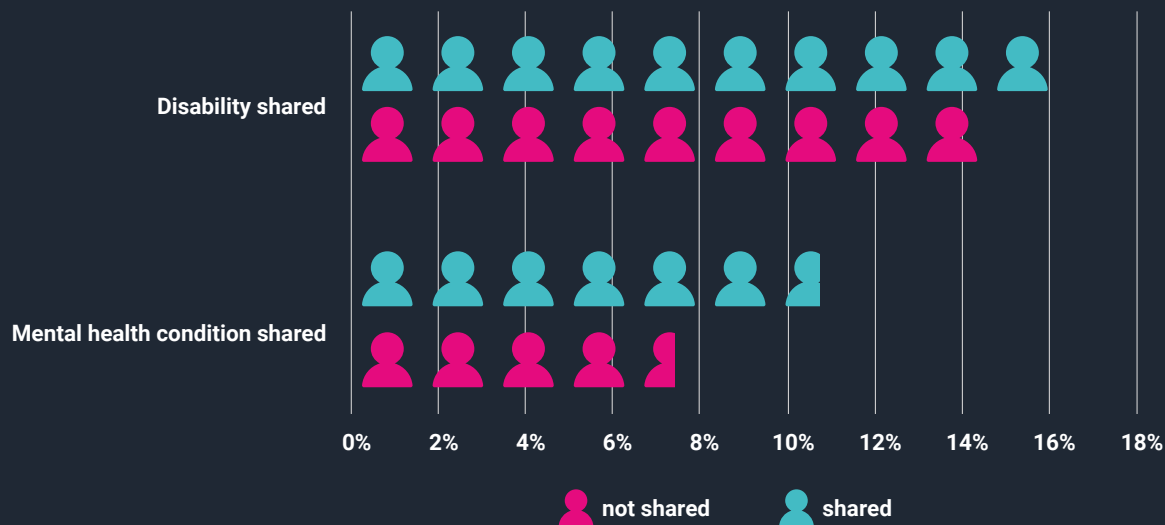


INTERSECTIONALITY: ETHNICITY



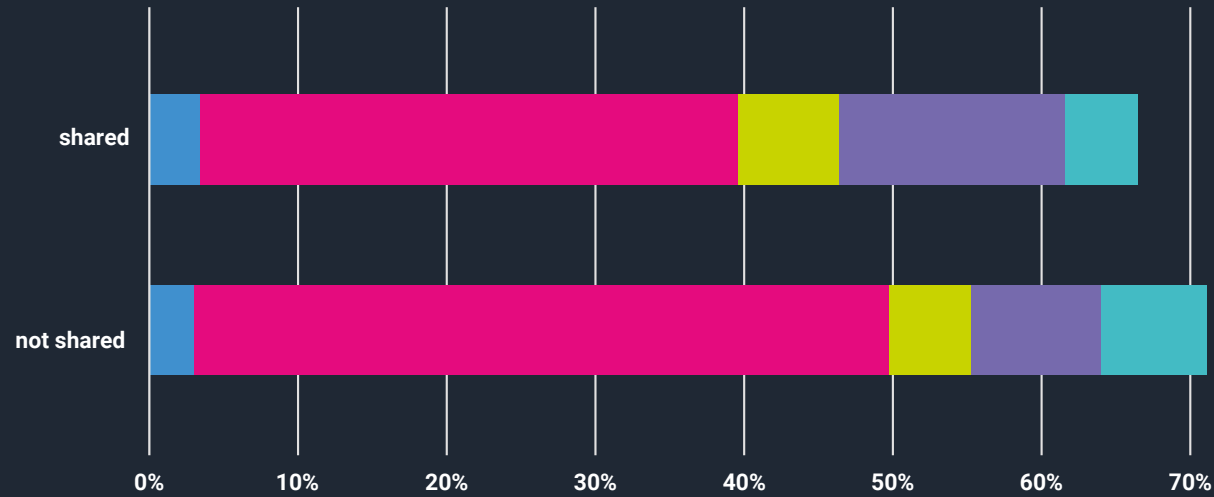
Applicants in receipt of FSM are over-represented in all groups other than the White ethnic group. This is seen particularly strongly for Black applicants.

INTERSECTIONALITY: DISABILITY AND MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS



Applicants in receipt of FSM are more likely to share a disability and/or a mental health condition. [UCAS research](#) on disabled students' progression to HE has highlighted the need to address intersectional challenges and all support along the journey to HE must take into account their needs holistically.

ENTRY QUALIFICATIONS

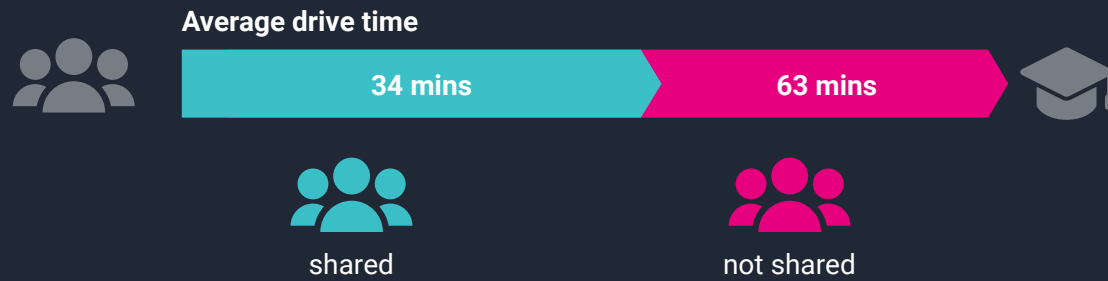


■ Access to HE Diploma ■ A Levels only ■ A level/BTEC combination ■ BTEC only ■ SQA highers only

Overall, students in receipt of FSM are less likely to enter HE with A levels or Highers, and more likely to hold BTECs (either alone or in combination with A levels).



APPLICANTS IN RECEIPT OF FSM **STAY CLOSER TO HOME**



Applicants in receipt of FSM are much more likely to study closer to home. This may indicate that these applicants are more inclined to live at home while studying to reduce costs, particularly in light of the cost-of-living crisis and rising accommodation fees.

SUBJECTS AND COURSES



As with many of the groups covered in our [Fair Access Snapshots](#), we see a proclivity for health-related courses – perhaps indicating a preference for courses with a defined career progression path. Similarly for Law, there is a clear and definable pathway into a career.



CONCLUDING COMMENT FROM UCAS

In this first cycle, over 77,000 applicants shared they had been in receipt of FSM during their secondary education. This is a strong indication that the messages around sharing individual needs are reaching students as we continue to work towards a culture of positive disclosure. We want all applicants to holistically research the right options for them, understand the benefits of sharing their individual circumstances, and feel confident they will get the support they need to succeed in their application and on their course – and beyond.

All UCAS applicants are invited to self-declare whether they were in receipt of FSM during their secondary education. This is in addition to verified data we provide to HE providers about FSM status for 18 year old applicants in state schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland from devolved governments. The self-declaration option enables applicants not captured in these datasets, giving HE providers a more complete picture of their circumstances.

FSM is an important measure of socio-economic disadvantage and, in recognition of this, UCAS is [waiving the application fee](#) for students who has received free school meals (FSM) during the last six years, up until the end of their final year at school or college – starting with the 2025 cycle. We hope this will help encourage applicants from low-income backgrounds to see HE as a viable option and remove an early barrier to entry.

THE UCAS FAIR ACCESS PROGRAMME

[The Fair Access Programme](#) aims to add further value to the sector's efforts to widen access and participation. UCAS' data and insights are central to our understanding of how different under-represented and disadvantaged groups progress to HE – and the barriers and challenges they face along the way. This new data will help us to extend our understanding of these groups, identify hidden challenges, and work with the sector to improve their experiences and outcomes.

We recently launched the Outreach Connection Service which will help link students to the diversity of outreach opportunities offered by HE providers and third-sector organisations. Initially, this will be available via the Adviser Hub where teachers can filter the opportunities to find what is best for their students. However, we are already working on making the service available directly to students for a future cycle. Outreach providers can [register their interest](#) in the OCS now.



UCAS RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS IN RECEIPT OF FSM

Find targeted information and advice for under-represented students on ucas.com:

- ▶ [Student-facing information and advice](#) – for students who have received FSM, including financial guidance, application support, information about accommodation, and making a UCAS application.
- ▶ [Applying to HE with individual needs](#) – information and advice for a range of circumstances and support needs
- ▶ [Mental health and wellbeing support](#) – information and advice for all students
- ▶ [Teacher and adviser toolkit](#) – how to support students who have been in receipt of FSM from research through to transition
- ▶ [All teacher and adviser toolkits](#) – for supporting under-represented students from a variety of backgrounds
- ▶ [Adviser guide to the FSM fee waiver](#) – how schools and colleges can ensure eligible applicants receive the fee waiver
- ▶ [Good practice briefing for HE providers](#) – implementing support for students in receipt of FSM following the introduction of the new FSM question

