

UCAS Verification Service Report 2019

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Introduction

UCAS supports around 700,000 applications every year from domestic, EU, and international applicants to higher education in the UK. The role of the verification service is to help check that applications include complete and accurate information, and to support applicants in providing this. Verification activities also help prevent anyone from gaining an unfair advantage or securing a place by deception. UCAS' activities complement those undertaken by universities and colleges, and other service providers, such as the Student Loans Company.

Applications submitted to UCAS are subject to automated checks using fraud detection software, and personal statements are screened using similarity detection software. Universities and colleges or third parties may also identify issues with applications. If information is missing or an issue is raised, the application will be flagged, and applicants or their referees will be asked to provide additional information or clarification. If, ultimately, the issues cannot be resolved, the application may be cancelled. Applicants may appeal cancellation decisions.

As part of our commitment to transparency, we publish an annual report and statistics on the performance of the verification service for the undergraduate admissions service, including numbers of applications that were flagged and cancelled, and an analysis of the characteristics of these applicants. This report also covers UCAS' ongoing programme of work to develop its verification service to better support applicants whose applications are flagged as having missing or incomplete information, or whose applications may be subject to cancellation.

In the 2019 cycle, applications from 1,705 UK domiciled applicants were flagged for further consideration, equating to 0.32% of the total UK applicant population. Of these, 50 applicants ultimately had their applications cancelled (0.01%). This reflects a continuing trend over recent admissions cycles, which has seen fewer applications flagged, and fewer still cancelled, as enhancements have been made to the verification

service, and support for students has been improved to enable applicants the fullest opportunity to present a complete, accurate application.

Development of the verification service

UCAS started a rolling programme of work in 2017, which has included:

- updates to the verification software used (fraud detection and similarity detection)
- cleansing of underlying reference data in line with industry standard data retention policies
- delivering training to admissions teams at our Annual Admissions Conference, to support the spread of good practice and raise awareness of the risks of unconscious bias
- strengthening the voice of black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) students in UCAS' communications, information and advice, and through our advisory groups
- ongoing improvements to information, advice, and communication resources for students, especially mature students and those applying independently (outside the education system)

Our focus on providing more detailed information and advice for mature, independent applicants has been driven by insights gained from [analysis in 2018](#). This showed that, while ethnicity information is not used in any element of the verification service, there were differences by ethnicity in the applicants whose applications were flagged. A greater proportion of flagged applicants were black, compared to the proportion of black applicants in the applicant population. Further investigation showed that older applicants who applied independently (i.e. without the support of a school or college) were more likely to find their applications flagged, and that black applicants made up a significant proportion of this cohort.

Our [mature student web pages](#) have been rated 'useful' by 1,360 people since November 2019, and 78% of people come to the pages from search engines, showing our relevance to their search for information.

For the 2019 cycle, we have made changes to the way we work with applicants whose applications are flagged, giving them more opportunities to complete their applications where information is missing, and to address any issues identified. These changes are summarised below:

Before 2019	2019 onwards
Applicants were given two weeks to respond to requests for missing information or clarification.	Applicants are given a minimum of three weeks to respond to requests for information or clarification.
Applicants received one reminder from UCAS.	Applicants receive a minimum of two reminders from UCAS.
If no response was received by the deadline, the application was cancelled.	If no response is received by the deadline, the application is suspended, but can be reactivated at any point during the cycle if information is provided. Suspended applications are not cancelled until the end of the cycle.

In 2019, UCAS surveyed applicants whose applications had been flagged to ask them how communications and engagement could be improved. As a result, we have updated communications so that they are more explicit about what information is being requested and why, the deadlines for receipt, and actions that could be taken. This is intended to help as many applicants as possible successfully resolve their application queries.

Statistical reporting on the 2019 cycle (UK domiciled applicants only)

For UK domiciled applicants, we publish statistics for flagged applicants and cancelled applicants by the following characteristics:

- age
- Apply centre (independent or from a registered centre)
- area background (POLAR4)
- ethnic group
- gender
- region

The 2019 entry cycle marked the first complete cycle where technological and process enhancements were in place as part of the verification service, following implementation during the 2018 entry cycle.

As a result of these changes, along with continued enhancements to our communication and engagement methods, we have seen a decline in both flagged applicants and cancelled applicants. Equally, when looking at the proportion of certain applicant cohorts that have been flagged, we have observed:

- a reduction in the proportion of flagged applicants who applied independently
- an increase in the proportion of 'young' applicants (aged 20 and under) whose applications were flagged
- an increase in the proportion of flagged applicants who declare their ethnicity as white, and a decline in the proportion of flagged applicants who declare their ethnicity as black. The proportion of flagged applicants who are white has increased from 20% in 2017, to 45% in 2019

- a decline in the overall number of cancelled applications. Similar to the observations made for flagged applicants, we have seen a decline in the proportion of cancelled applicants who are 'mature' (over the age of 21). Independent applicants continue to make up the majority of cancelled applicants – 84% of cancelled applicants were 'mature' in 2019

The overall volume of flagged and cancelled applicants is shown below:

Table 1: Total number of UK domiciled applicants who have had their application flagged or cancelled.

Cycle	Applicant baseline		Flagged		Cancelled	
	No.		No.	%	No.	%
2015	592,915		1,290	0.22%	465	0.08%
2016	591,355		1,185	0.20%	370	0.06%
2017	573,020		1,035	0.18%	370	0.06%
2018	562,260		1,815	0.32%	240	0.04%
2019	565,810		1,705	0.30%	50	0.01%

Further commentary can be found below, and the full data can be found on ucas.com.

UK domiciled applicants by Apply centre (i.e. with the support of a school or college)

Independent applicants are defined as those who apply without the support of a UCAS-registered centre (typically a school or college). In 2019, 31% of individuals applying to higher education were classified as independent applicants. Our figures show these applicants are more likely to have their applications flagged, usually in relation to incorrect or missing information, such as an incorrect qualification. In 2019, while these applicants continue to make up a majority of flagged applicants, the proportion of flagged applicants who apply independently has declined year-on-year since 2017.

As noted above, UCAS has taken a number of steps to increase support for those who are applying independently (typically mature students). This includes content targeted at mature students around the areas that they most commonly raise as challenges, such as the input of qualifications and obtaining replacement certificates.

Table 2: UK domiciled undergraduate applicants, total flagged and cancelled, and relative proportion each Apply centre comprises (2019 cycle)

	Applicant baseline		Flagged		Cancelled	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Apply centre	390,780	69	765	45	10	16
Independent	175,030	31	940	55	45	84

Table 3: Weighting of flagged applicants who apply independently (2015-2019)

	Number of flagged applicants	Percentage of total flagged applications
2015	1,090	85
2016	990	84
2017	860	83
2018	1,375	76
2019	940	55

UK domiciled applicants by age

Mature applicants are defined as those aged 21 and over, and typically account for a quarter of UK domiciled applicants. Our figures show members of this group, who commonly apply without the support of a school or college, are more likely to find their applications flagged. In 2019, the proportion of flagged applicants aged over 21 reduced from 58% to 44%. The proportion of cancelled applicants aged 21 and over has also declined.

As noted above, we have undertaken a number of activities to strengthen the support for these students as they apply to higher education.

Table 4: UK domiciled undergraduate applicants, total flagged and cancelled, and relative proportion each age band comprises (2019 cycle)

Age band	Applicant baseline		Flagged		Cancelled	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
17 or under	2,010	0	5	0	0	0
18	281,120	50	470	28	5	8
19	96,280	17	275	16	5	14
20	38,915	7	195	11	10	20
21 and over	147,485	26	760	44	30	59
All	565,810	100	1,705	100	50	100

Ethnicity

As noted in our [previous reports](#), applicants from the Black ethnic group are disproportionately represented in the mature applicant and independent applicant cohorts.

In 2019, 49% of applicants whose applications were flagged were classified as white. This compares to 45% in 2018, and 20% in 2017. In 2019, 26% of applicants whose applications were flagged were classified as black, compared to 27% in 2018 and 45% in 2017. The proportion of flagged applicants in the Asian ethnic group has remained broadly consistent since 2015. These changes in verification service outcomes are in line with other changes observed for mature and independent applicants.

Table 5: UK domiciled undergraduate applicants, total flagged and cancelled, and relative proportion each ethnic group comprises (2019 cycle)

Ethnic group	Applicant baseline		Flagged		Cancelled	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Asian	72,700	13	265	15	15	27
Black	52,685	9	440	26	15	33
Mixed	26,585	5	60	3	0	0
Other	12,430	2	55	3	5	12
White	389,505	69	830	49	10	24
Unknown/ prefer not to say	11,910	2	55	3	0	4
All	565,810	100	1,705	100	50	100

UK domiciled applicants by region

Our data shows that applicants living in London are more likely to have their applications flagged than those living in other parts of the UK. We believe this reflects the greater densities of populations in London, and higher propensity of people living in London to apply for higher education.

Table 6: UK domiciled undergraduate applicants, total flagged and cancelled, and relative proportion each region comprises (2019 cycle)

Region	Applicant baseline		Flagged		Cancelled	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Unknown	3,685	1	15	1	0	2
East Midlands	33,875	6	95	6	0	2
East of England	46,500	8	135	8	0	2
London	104,780	19	490	29	15	27
North East	19,080	3	40	2	0	0
North West	61,525	11	185	11	10	22
Northern Ireland	18,785	3	30	2	0	0
Scotland	49,605	9	85	5	0	4
South East	72,030	13	205	12	5	14
South West	40,520	7	90	5	0	2
Wales	23,650	4	55	3	0	4
West Midlands	49,940	9	165	10	10	16
Yorkshire and The Humber	41,840	7	110	7	5	6
All	565,810	100	1,705	100	50	100

Annex A: Technical annex

Difference between these figures and UCAS' published statistics

We maintain a comprehensive schedule of publication of statistics pertaining to application and entry to UK higher education. Unless otherwise specified, these statistics do not include cancelled applications. As such, the figures stated in this report will not align to other published End of Cycle statistics.

Treatment of re-appliers and the late flagging of applications

While the number of applicants each admissions cycle is immutable, flags can be raised against applications even after the close of the admissions cycle, which is the reference point for these statistics. In this event, the number of flagged applicants for a cycle will be retrospectively updated. Similarly, should an application be flagged from an individual who has applied in multiple admissions cycles, a flag will be attributed to both the current and previous admissions cycles.

Multiple applications in a cycle

Should an individual submit multiple applications in the same admissions cycle, all but one of these will be cancelled. These statistics are produced at an applicant level, and while an applicant has at least one live application, they will not be classified as having a cancelled application for the purposes of this report.

Further reading

The first UCAS' Verification Service Report, published 30 January 2019, is available [here](#).

An earlier report into the work of our verification service, published May 2018, is [here](#).