

Enrolments at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis 2020/21



This statistical bulletin provides information on the number of Northern Ireland (NI) students enrolled at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the number of students enrolled at NI HEIs.

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KEY STATISTICS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND DOMICILED ENROLMENTS AT UK HEIs

<p>Enrolments of NI students at UK HEIs increased by 5% over the last year, the largest annual increase in the past decade...</p>	<p>Enrolments of NI students at UK HEIs increased by 5% (2,855) between 2019/20 (62,690) and 2020/21 (65,545), the largest annual increase over the past decade, which was mainly due to an increase in students at NI HEIs (Tables 1a and 1d). Some of this sharp increase relates to the change in how A level grades were awarded in 2020 in light of the pandemic, leading to an increase in candidates meeting their offer conditions. Alongside this, there was an increase in the number of available undergraduate places offered by NI HEIs. Uncertainty regarding employment prospects early in the pandemic may also have contributed to an increase in postgraduate study.</p>
<p>Most NI students study full-time...</p>	<p>In 2020/21, 74% of NI domiciled enrolments were full-time. In comparison with 2019/20, full-time enrolments have increased by 6% (from 45,836 to 46,575) and part-time enrolments have increased by 2% (from 16,855 to 17,150). Since 2011/12, full-time enrolments have increased by a net 4% (from 45,835) whereas part-time enrolments have decreased by a net 9% (from 18,765) (Tables 1a, 1b and 1e).</p>
<p>Most NI students study in NI, with the proportion studying in GB decreasing slightly in the last year ...</p>	<p>As highlighted in the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021, after Scotland, NI has the second-highest indigenous student retention rate of all UK regions. Of the 65,545 NI domiciled students enrolled at UK HEIs in 2020/21, 75% (48,920) were enrolled at NI HEIs (including 8% studying locally at the Open University); the proportion studying in GB (25%) was slightly lower than the 27% enrolled in 2019/20 (Table 1a).</p>
<p>Outside of Northern Ireland, the North West of England and Scotland are the most popular regions for NI students...</p>	<p>The most popular regions for NI students who studied in GB were the North West of England and Scotland, with 5,450 and 3,755 NI students enrolled at HEIs in each region respectively (Table 5a).</p>
<p>Among NI students, more females than males have been progressing into higher education...</p>	<p>Females accounted for 58% of NI students enrolled at UK HEIs in 2020/21; with similar proportions of females (73%) and males (75%) studying full-time (Tables 3a and 3b).</p>
<p>Fewer NI students are enrolling on other undergraduate courses at UK HEIs, but more are enrolling on postgraduate courses...</p>	<p>'First degree' enrolments increased in number by 4%, from 47,615 in 2019/20 to 49,490 in 2020/21, 'postgraduate' enrolments increased by 23%, from 10,965 to 13,505, while 'other undergraduate' enrolments decreased by 38%, from 4,110 to 2,550 (Table 1f).</p>
<p>Over a quarter of NI students are enrolled on Narrow STEM courses...</p>	<p>In 2020/21, 28% of NI students at UK HEIs were studying a Narrow STEM related subject and 52% a Broad STEM related subject (Table 7a).</p>

KEY STATISTICS FOR ENROLMENTS AT NORTHERN IRELAND HEIs

<p>Student enrolments at NI HEIs increased by 12% over the last year, the largest annual increase over the past decade...</p>	<p>A 12% (7,170) increase occurred in the number of student enrolments at NI HEIs between 2019/20 (59,075) and 2020/21 (66,245), the largest annual increase over the past decade (Tables 9 and 9g). Some of this substantial increase relates to the change in how A level grades were awarded in 2020 in light of the pandemic, leading to an increase in candidates meeting their offer conditions. Alongside this, there was an increase in the number of available undergraduate places offered by NI HEIs. Increases also occurred in the number of postgraduate students and in part-time overseas students on the Nursing and Midwifery test of competence module at Ulster University.</p>
<p>An increase in students on courses at all levels of study at NI HEIs, particularly postgraduate courses...</p>	<p>Between 2019/20 and 2020/21, 'first degree' enrolments increased by 7% (from 37,860 to 40,615) and 'other undergraduates' increased by 7% (from 7,265 to 7,740). Over the same period, 'postgraduate' enrolments increased by 28% (from 13,955 to 17,890) (Table 9m).</p>
<p>Most students enrolled at NI HEIs were studying full-time...</p>	<p>In 2020/21, two-thirds (66%) of enrolments at NI HEIs were full-time. In comparison with 2019/20, full-time enrolments have increased by 14% (from 38,470 to 44,020) and part-time enrolments have increased by 8% (from 20,605 to 22,225) (Tables 9j and 9k).</p>
<p>Most students at NI HEIs are from NI...</p>	<p>Of the 66,245 students enrolled at NI HEIs in 2020/21, 74% were from NI, 5% from GB, 3% from the Republic of Ireland, 1% from other EU countries and 17% from non-EU countries (Table 9a).</p>
<p>...however, we have students from a wide range of countries...</p>	<p>In 2020/21, students from 137 different countries throughout the world were enrolled at NI HEIs. The non-EU countries with the most students at NI HEIs were India (3,830), China (2,005) and the Philippines (1,585) (Tables 9d and 9e).</p>
<p>More females than males are enrolling at NI HEIs...</p>	<p>Females accounted for 59% of students enrolled at NI HEIs in 2020/21. A higher proportion of males (72%) than females (63%) were studying full-time (Tables 11a and 11b).</p>
<p>A quarter of students at NI HEIs are enrolled on Narrow STEM courses...</p>	<p>In 2020/21, 25% of students at NI HEIs were studying a Narrow STEM related subject and 55% a Broad STEM related subject (Table 13a).</p>

Statistics and Research Branch (Tertiary Education)

Statistics and Research Branch (Tertiary Education) is responsible for the collection, quality assurance, analysis and publication of timely and accurate information derived from a wide range of statistical information returns supplied by the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education (FE) colleges across Northern Ireland (NI) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the latter focused on NI HEIs and NI domiciled students in attendance at any UK HEI. The Head of the Branch is the Principal Statistician, Brian French. Information is disseminated through a number of key statistical publications, including: HE enrolments; HE qualifications; FE Sector activity; and Essential Skills enrolments and outcomes.

A detailed list of these publications is available from:

[Higher and Further Education and Training Statistics](#)

Data Collection

The information presented in this statistical bulletin is based on data supplied by HESA, the official agency for the collection of information on publicly funded universities throughout Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and HE providers in England registered with the Office for Students (OfS) in the Approved (fee cap) or Approved categories. These are collectively called Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the context of this bulletin. HESA was set up in 1993 following the White Paper 'Higher Education: a new framework', which called for more coherence in HE statistics. The HESA statistics presented in this bulletin relate to students at UK HEIs and, therefore, do not include HE qualifications gained at FE colleges in NI or GB, or at institutions in the Republic of Ireland (ROI).

Coverage

This statistical bulletin has been produced by the Department for the Economy (DfE) and presents information on HE enrolments of NI domiciled students at UK HEIs in the 2020/21 academic year, and of all students at NI HEIs in the same time period.

There has been a notable change in data coverage in this bulletin since 2019/20. For the first time it reports on combined data from returns submitted by HEI providers to the HESA [Student record](#) and also that submitted by Alternative Providers (APs) to the HESA [Student alternative record](#). An AP is any provider of higher education courses: not in direct receipt of recurrent funding from UK funding bodies; not a Further Education college; and not registered as 'approved (fee cap)' on the Office for Students (OfS) register.

This follows on from HESA's publication of combined Student and AP data in their [Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2019/20](#) release. As this coverage change required significant adjustments to our systems and processes, it was decided to instead present separate summary outputs on NI domiciled AP qualifications in the 2019/20 bulletin and to adopt the new data coverage in the 2020/21 bulletin. Separate AP summary outputs are also provided this year to allow readers to evaluate the impact of change, but we intend to publish combined figures only from the 2021/22 bulletin onwards. Historical

figures using combined Student and AP data have been produced back to, and including, 2017/18.

Due to this change in data coverage, care should be taken when comparing data from this year's bulletin with that of previously published figures on NI domiciled qualifications gained at UK HEIs.

More information on the Student Alternative record and the change to data coverage can be found in [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#).

National Statistics

The United Kingdom Statistics Authority (the Authority) has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). More information can be found in the Data Quality and Uses of Data section.

Rounding Strategy

To prevent the identification of individuals, figures throughout the report are rounded to the nearest 5, with 0, 1, and 2 rounded to 0. Due to rounding, the sum of numbers in each row or column may not match the total shown. Percentages are calculated on unrounded data and are rounded to the nearest integer. This means percentages may not sum exactly to 100%. More information on the rounding strategy can be found in [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#).

Covid-19 Impact

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation in March 2020, just over half way through the 2019/20 academic year. The 2020/21 HESA student data cover the first full academic year since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

HESA notes a large increase in UK enrolments (over 8%) between 2019/20 and 2020/21; however, it attributes this to a range of factors not all of which are related to the pandemic. It notes that on the demographic level, the number of 18-year-olds in the UK started to rise in 2020 after years of steady decline, leading to an increase in the number of potential 18-year-old higher education applicants. In addition, the young higher education participation rate has been rising steadily across the UK, which leads to an increased demand for HE places. Compounding this, summer 2020 saw a change in how A level grades were awarded in light of the pandemic. After the cancellation of A level exams in spring 2020, the move to centre assessed grades led to an increase in candidates meeting their offer conditions.

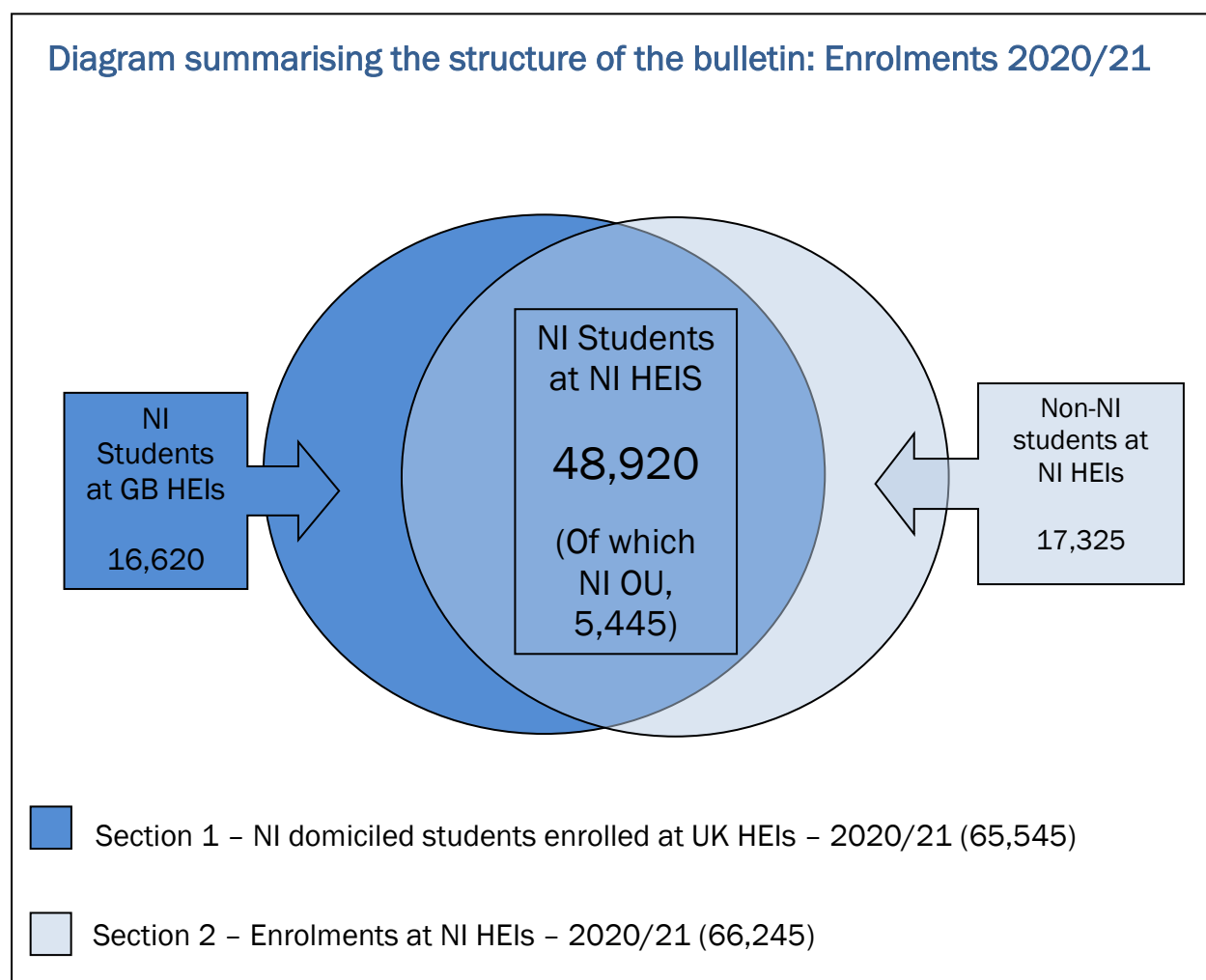
HESA also noted an increase in taught postgraduate enrolments in 2020/21. Uncertainty regarding employment prospects in the early months of the pandemic may have contributed to this increase.

At NI HEIs a cap (known as the Maximum Student Number (MaSN)) is placed on the number of full time undergraduate students that can be enrolled. This cap was increased in 2020 to help accommodate some of the increase in candidates meeting their offer conditions.

STRUCTURE OF REPORT

The bulletin is divided into two sections. Section 1 focuses on NI domiciled students enrolled at HEIs in NI, England, Scotland or Wales. Section 2 concentrates on all students enrolled at NI HEIs. This division into two sections reflects the two distinct policy and operational responsibilities of the Department. Furthermore, it is clear from customer feedback, the nature of questions on HE asked in the NI Assembly, and coverage of HE issues in the local media, that these two aspects are of key interest to readers.

It is worth noting that there is a large overlap between Section 1 and Section 2, namely NI students enrolled at NI HEIs are included in both sections. See the diagram below for details:



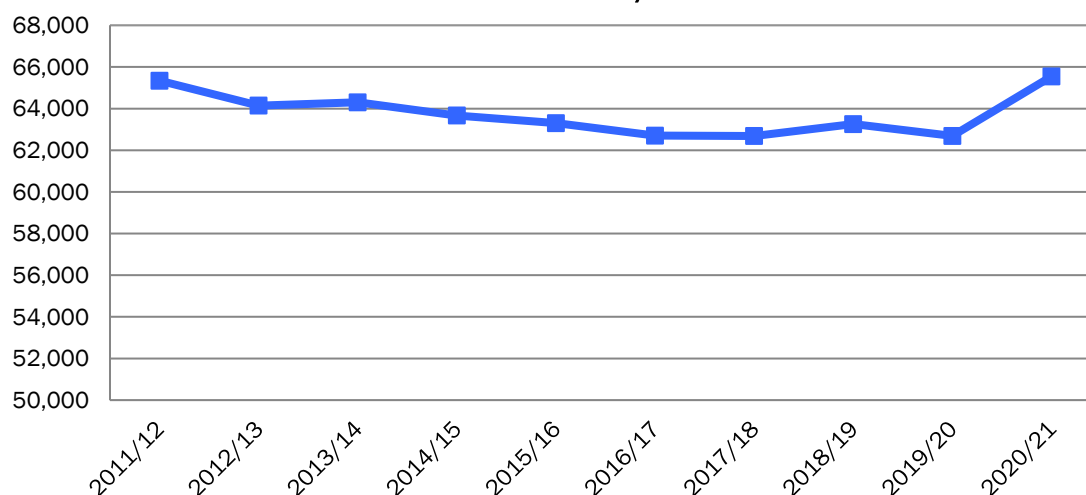
SECTION 1: Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled at UK Higher Education Institutions (Tables 1 to 7)

1.1 Change over the last 10 years – 2011/12 to 2020/21 (Tables 1 and 2, Figure 1)

In 2020/21, 65,545 NI students were enrolled at UK HEIs. This represents a net 5% (2,855) increase from 2019/20, the largest annual increase in enrolments in the last 10 years, which was mainly due to an increase in students at NI HEIs. Prior to this there had been a steady trend of decline in enrolments over the decade, with the recent increase resulting in a net increase of less than 1% (205) in comparison to 2011/12 (Tables 1a, 1b and 1d, Figure 1).

Some of the sharp increase in 2020/21 enrolments relates to the change in how A level grades were awarded in 2020 in light of the pandemic, leading to an increase in candidates meeting their offer conditions. Alongside this, there was an increase in the number of available undergraduate places offered by NI HEIs. In addition, uncertainty regarding employment prospects in the early months of the pandemic may also have contributed to an increase in postgraduate study.

Figure 1 - NI domiciled students enrolled at UK HEIs - 2011/12 to 2020/21



Over the 10-year period covered by this bulletin (2011/12 to 2020/21), the number of NI domiciled students going to GB to study decreased by a net 5%, from 17,510 to 16,620; those studying locally through the Open University (OU) increased by a net 13%, from 4,820 to 5,445 over the same period; while NI enrolments at NI HEIs (excluding the OU) increased by a net 1%, from 43,010 in 2011/12 to 43,480 in 2020/21 (Tables 1a and 1b).

Full-time enrolments increased by 4% over the decade (from 46,575 in 2011/12 to 48,395 in 2020/21), compared with a 9% decrease in part-time enrolments (from 18,765 to 17,150). The drop in part-time enrolments can be attributed to the drop in the number doing part-time 'other undergraduate' courses (Table 1c).

1.2 Breakdown of enrolments – 2020/21 (Tables 1 to 4)

In 2020/21, 65,545 NI students were enrolled at UK HEIs, showing an increase of 5% from 62,690 in 2019/20 (Table 1d).

Mode of study – In 2020/21, 74% of enrolments were full-time. Between 2019/20 and 2020/21, full-time enrolments increased by 6%, from 45,835 to 48,395, while part-time enrolments increased by 2%, from 16,855 to 17,150 (Tables 1e).

Level of study – Around three-quarters (76%) of NI students were enrolled on a ‘first degree’ course, 4% on ‘other undergraduate’ courses and 21% on a ‘postgraduate’ course in 2020/21. ‘First degree’ enrolments increased by 4%, from 47,615 in 2019/20 to 49,490 in 2020/21, while ‘postgraduate’ enrolments increased by 23%, from 10,965 to 13,505, and ‘other undergraduate’ enrolments decreased by 38%, from 4,110 to 2,550 (Table 1f).

Sex – In recent history, more females than males have been progressing into higher education. In 2020/21, 58% of NI domiciled enrolments were female, with similar proportions of females (73%) and males (75%) studying full-time (Table 3a). This gap between the sexes does not begin at the point of entry to HE, but can be observed early on in the educational system. In NI, females are more likely than males to stay on in full-time education after age 16.

1.3 Location of Study (Tables 1 to 3, 5 and Map 1)

As highlighted in the [Northern Ireland Skills Barometer 2021](#), after Scotland, NI has the second-highest indigenous student retention rate of all UK regions.

There are various reasons why students leave NI to study, including their choice of subject, for example, some courses such as veterinary science are not supplied in Northern Ireland. However, available research¹ suggests that the majority of those who plan to leave NI to study do so out of choice.

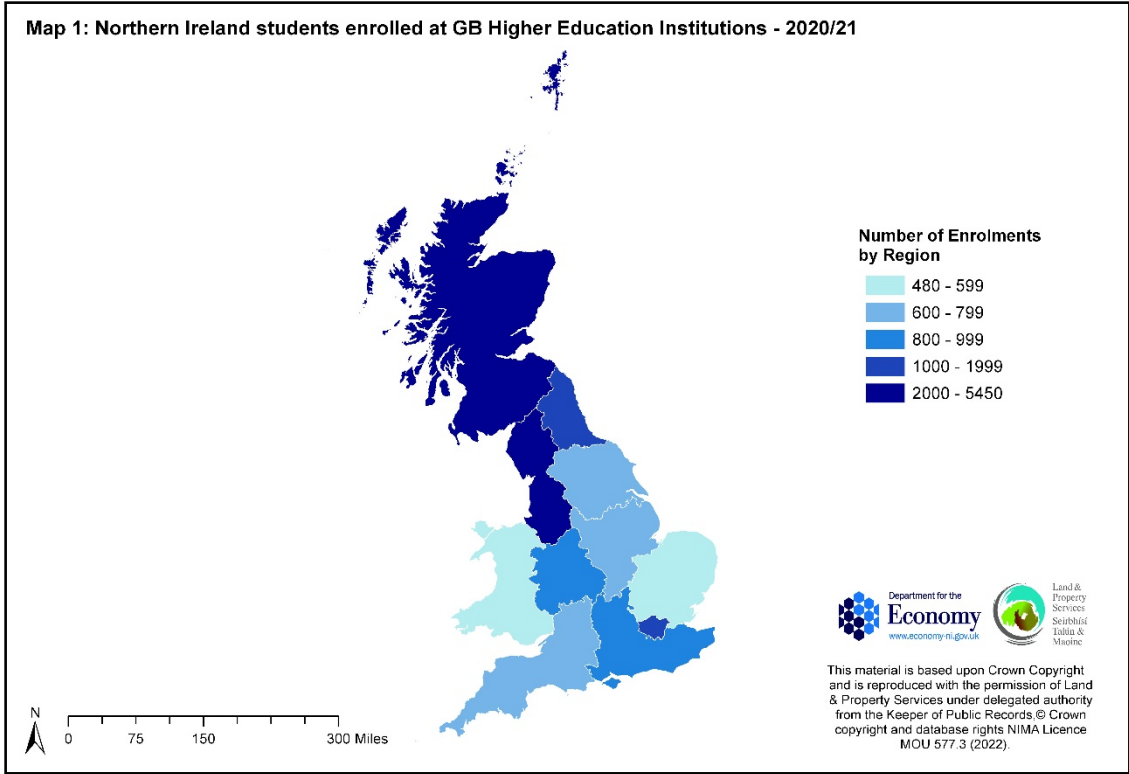
Of the 65,545 NI students enrolled at UK HEIs in 2020/21, 75% (48,920) were enrolled at NI HEIs (including 8% (5,445) studying at the OU) and 25% (16,620) at HEIs in GB (Table 1a).

Map 1 illustrates how many NI students were studying in each region of GB. The darker the shade of blue, the higher the number of NI students enrolled at HEIs in that region.

The most popular regions for NI students studying in GB were the North West of England and Scotland, with 5,450 and 3,755 NI students enrolled at HEIs in these regions respectively. Other popular regions were the North East of England, with 1,385 NI students, and London, with 1,015 (Table 5a).

Similar proportions of NI domiciled males (26%) and females (25%) were studying at GB HEIs in 2020/21 (Table 3d).

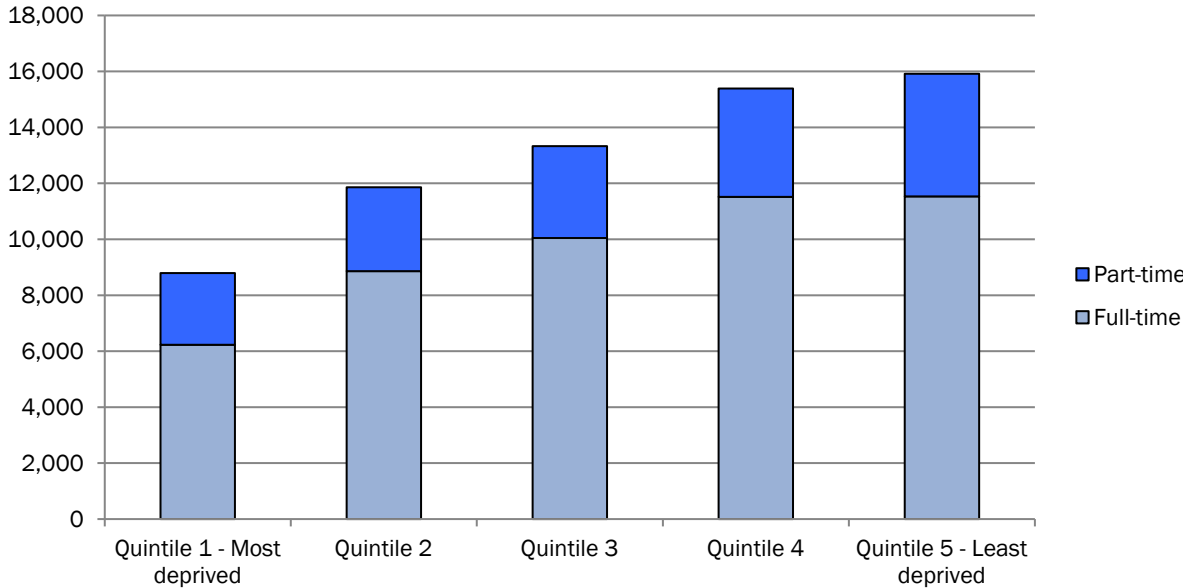
¹[After school: attitudes and perceptions of Northern Ireland school leavers towards higher and further education, training & employment](#)



1.4 Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) quintiles (Table 6, Figure 2)

Of the 65,290 NI domiciled students enrolled at UK HEIs in 2020/21 whose postcodes were known, the highest proportion (24%) were from the least deprived MDM areas in NI (Quintile 5), almost double the proportion (13%) from the most deprived MDM areas (Quintile 1) (Table 6a, Figure 2).

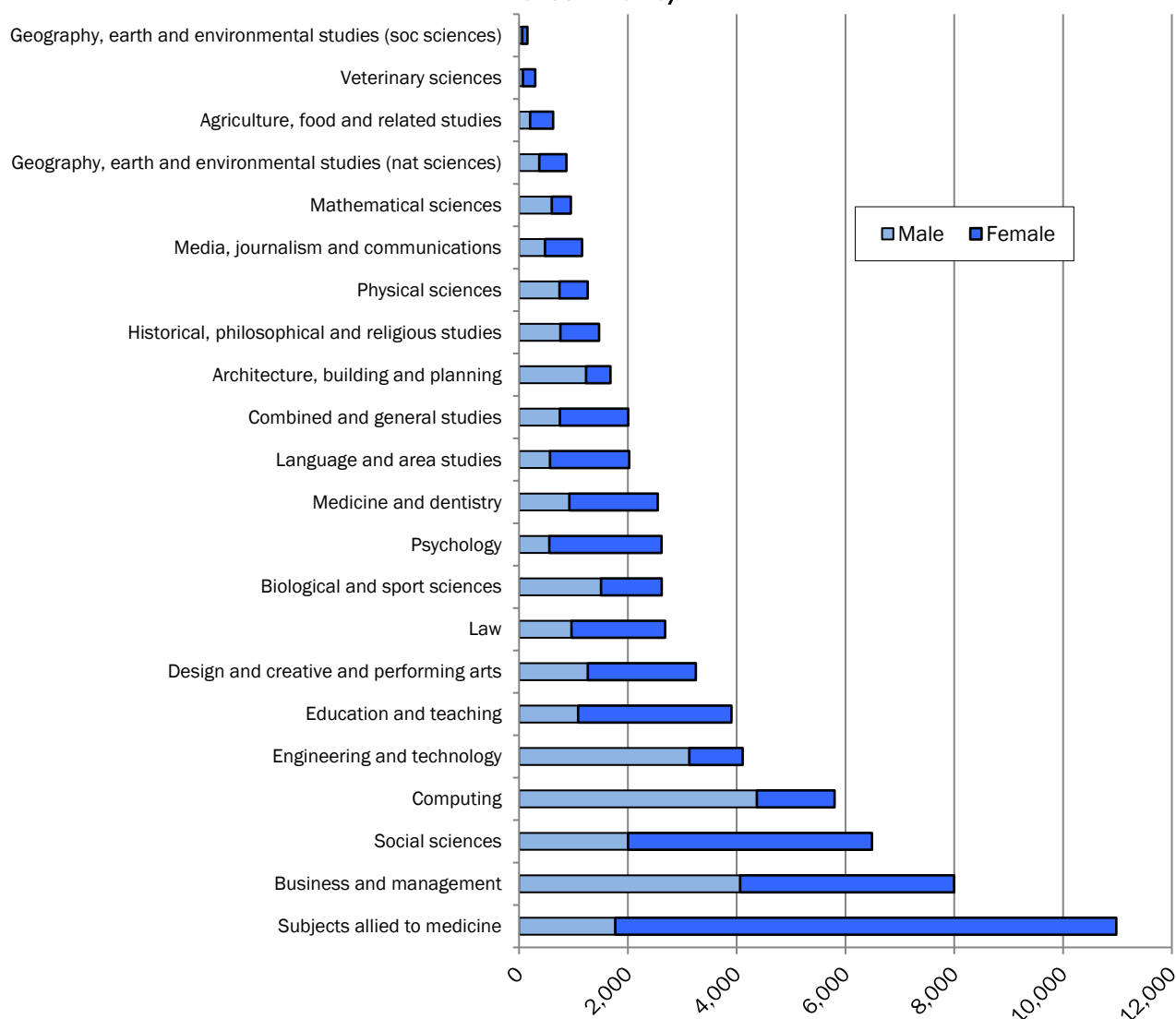
Figure 2 : NI domiciled students enrolled at UK HEIs by mode of study and multiple deprivation measure quintile - 2020/21



1.5 Subject of Study (Table 7, Figure 3)

In 2020/21, the most popular subject areas for NI students studying at UK HEIs were: ‘Subjects allied to medicine’ (which includes subjects such as nursing, pharmacy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy), with 10,985 (17%) enrolments; ‘Business and management’ (which includes subjects such as business studies, management studies, accounting, marketing and finance), with 8,000 (12%) enrolments; and ‘Social sciences’ with 6,485 (10%) enrolments (Table 7c).

Figure 3 : NI domiciled students enrolled at UK HEIs by sex and subject area - 2020/21



In 2020/21, 52% of NI students at UK HEIs were studying a Broad STEM² related subject. A higher proportion of males (56%) than females (50%) were studying Broad STEM subjects. Full-time students (54%) were more likely than part-time students (49%) to be studying Broad STEM subjects (Tables 7a and 7b).

In 2020/21, 28% of NI students at UK HEIs were studying a Narrow STEM related subject. Males (41%) were more than twice as likely as females (18%) to be studying

² Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – see notes to readers for description.

Narrow STEM subjects. Full-time students (29%) were more likely than part-time students (24%) to be studying Narrow STEM subjects (Tables 7a and 7b).

Figure 4: Proportion of NI domiciled students enrolled at UK HEIs in Broad and Narrow STEM subjects by sex – 2020/21

STEM enrolments	Male	Female	Total
Broad STEM	56%	50%	52%
Narrow STEM	41%	18%	28%

1.6 Enrolments at UK Alternative Providers – 2020/21 (Tables 8 to 8d)

As discussed in the introduction, there has been a notable change made to data coverage since the 2019/20 Enrolments bulletin. For the first time, data from both UK HEIs and Alternative Providers (APs) in the UK have been combined. An AP is any provider of higher education courses: not in direct receipt of recurrent funding from UK funding bodies; not a Further Education college; and not registered as 'approved (fee cap)' on the Office for Students (OfS) register. Separate analysis on the number of NI domiciled students enrolled at APs in 2020/21 has been presented below, to allow readers to evaluate the impact of this change. We intend to publish combined figures only from the 2021/22 bulletin onwards.

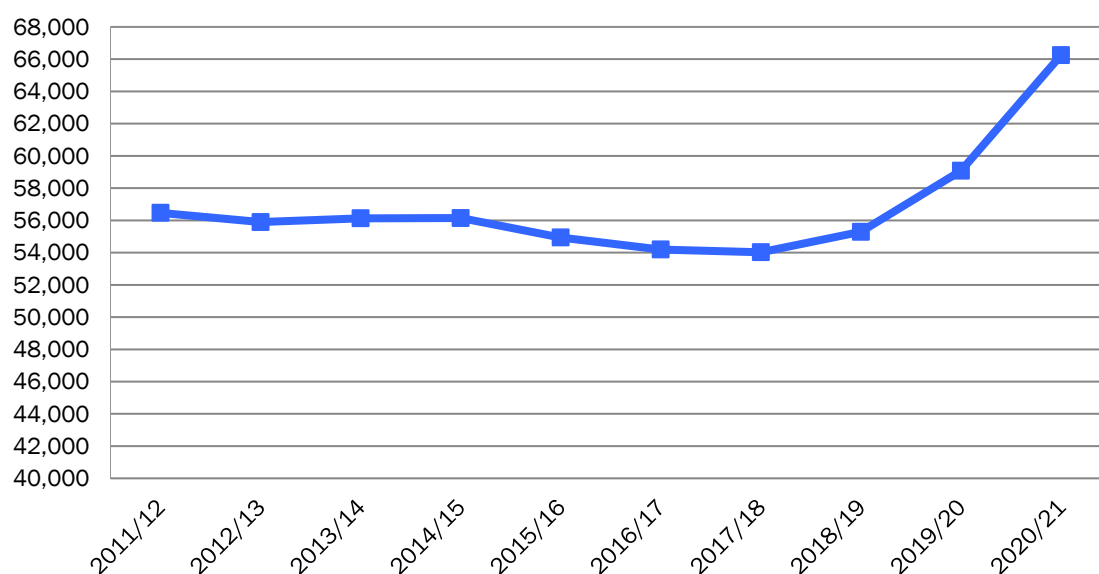
In 2020/21, 220 NI domiciled students were enrolled at Alternative Providers in the UK, of which 63% were full-time. Of these 220 enrolments, 49% were 'first degree', 45% were 'postgraduate' and 5% were 'other undergraduate' (Tables 8, 8a and 8b).

SECTION 2: Enrolments at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions (Tables 8 to 14)

2.1 Change over the last 10 years – 2011/12 to 2020/21 (Tables 8 & 9, Figure 5)

While student enrolments at NI HEIs have increased by a net 17% (9,780) over the decade (from 56,465 in 2011/12 to 66,245 in 2020/21), this is mainly due to increases over the last two years. There was a 7% (3,790) increase in enrolments between 2018/19 (55,290) and 2019/20 (59,075) and a further 12% (7,170) increase in 2020/21 (66,245), the largest annual increases over the last decade (Tables 9, 9f and 9g, Figure 5).

Figure 5 - Enrolments at NI HEIs - 2011/12 to 2020/21



The increase in enrolments over the last two years can partially be explained by a new part time module introduced by Ulster University for students undertaking the Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE) of the NMC Test of Competence (ToC). The ToC is for overseas nurses and midwives seeking registration as a nurse and/or midwife in the UK. More information can be found in the [notes and definitions](#) section.

Excluding those undertaking this new course results in a smaller increase in total enrolments between 2018/19 (55,290) and 2019/20 (56,320) of 2%. However, the increase between 2019/20 and 2020/21 (61,165) remains the largest annual increase over the decade at 9%, due to increases in both postgraduate and first degree students. Some of this increase relates to the change in how A level grades were awarded in 2020 in light of the pandemic, leading to an increase in candidates meeting their offer conditions. Alongside this, there was also an increase in the number of available undergraduate places offered by NI HEIs.

In 2020/21 Queen's University did not provide Open Learning courses due to the impact of Covid-19. This led to a drop of more than two-thirds (67%) in the number of QUB students enrolled on 'other undergraduate' courses, from 2,935 in 2019/20 to 965 in 2020/21. Despite this, 'other undergraduate' enrolments increased by 7% over this

period, largely due to a 58% increase at Ulster University, driven by the OSCE course mentioned above (Table 14e).

Students from NI now account for a smaller proportion of the total population of students at NI HEIs than they did 10 years ago. In 2011/12, students from NI accounted for 85% (47,825) of the total population of students at NI HEIs. However, by 2020/21 this proportion has decreased to 74% (48,920) (Table 9a).

2.2 Breakdown of enrolments – 2020/21 (Tables 8 to 11, Figure 6)

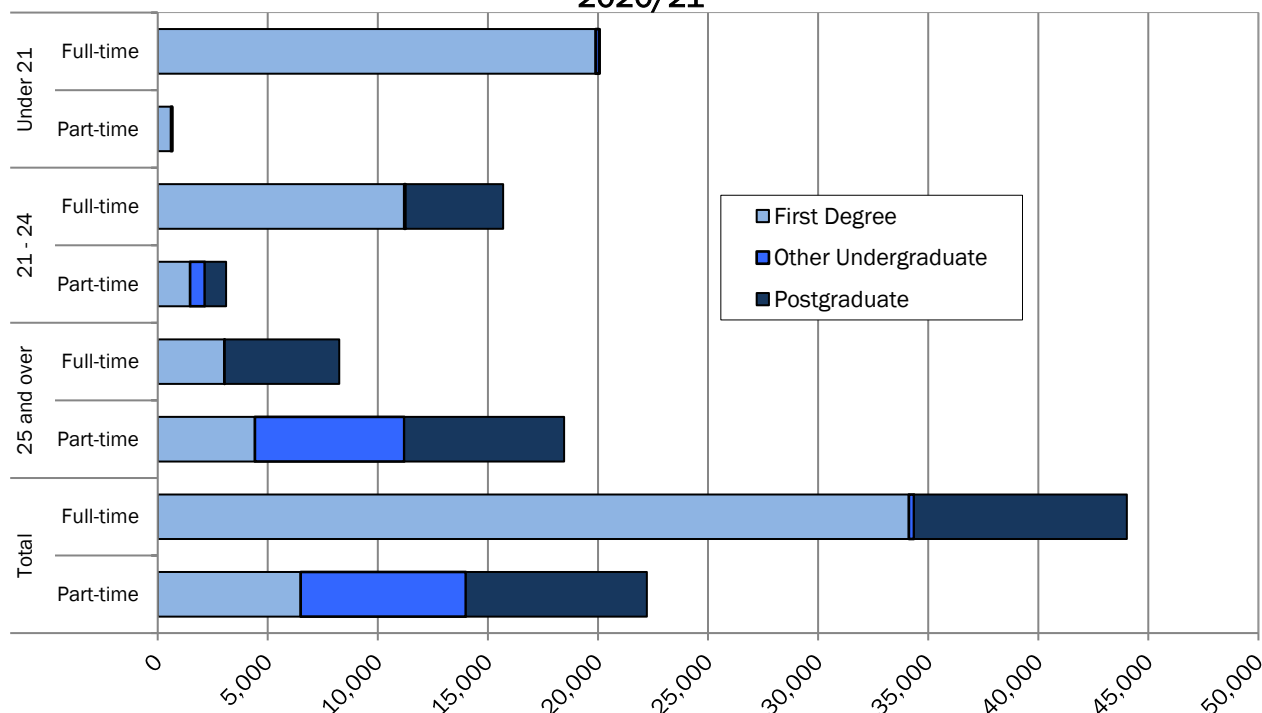
In 2020/21, 66,245 students were enrolled at NI HEIs, showing an increase of 12% from 59,075 in 2019/20 (Table 9g).

Mode of study – In 2020/21, nearly two-thirds (66%) of enrolments at NI HEIs were full-time. In comparison with 2019/20, full-time enrolments have increased by 14% (from 38,470 to 44,020), while part-time enrolments have increased by 8% (from 20,605 to 22,225) (Tables 9j and 9k).

Level of study – In 2020/21, 61% of students at NI HEIs were enrolled on a ‘first degree’ course, 12% on ‘other undergraduate’ courses and 27% on a ‘postgraduate’ course. Between 2019/20 and 2020/21, ‘first degree’ enrolments increased by 7% (from 37,860 to 40,615) and ‘other undergraduate’ enrolments increased by 7% (from 7,265 to 7,740). Over the same period, ‘postgraduates’ increased by 28% (from 13,955 to 17,890) (Tables 9l and 9m).

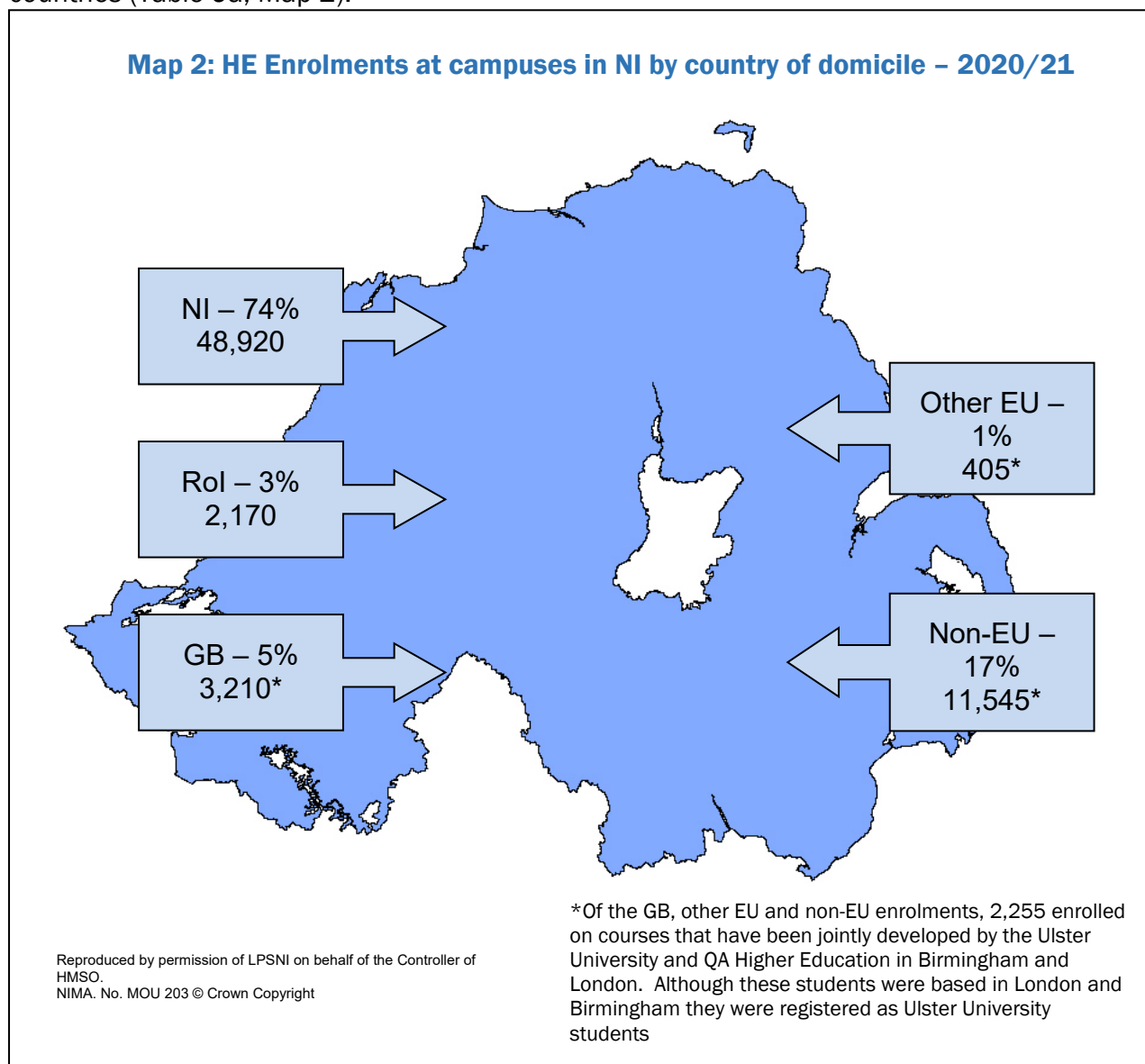
Sex – Females accounted for 59% of students enrolled at NI HEIs in 2020/21. A higher proportion of males (72%) than females (63%) were studying full-time. Over the past ten years, the female share of the student population at NI HEIs has remained relatively stable, with 58% in 2011/12, compared with 59% in 2020/21 (Tables 11a and 11b).

Figure 6: Enrolments at NI HEIs by age group, mode and level of study - 2020/21



2.3 Country of Domicile (Tables 8 to 10, Figure 7)

Of the 66,245 students enrolled at NI HEIs in 2020/21, 74% were from NI, 5% from GB, 3% from the Republic of Ireland (RoI), 1% from other EU countries and 17% from non-EU countries (Table 9a, Map 2).

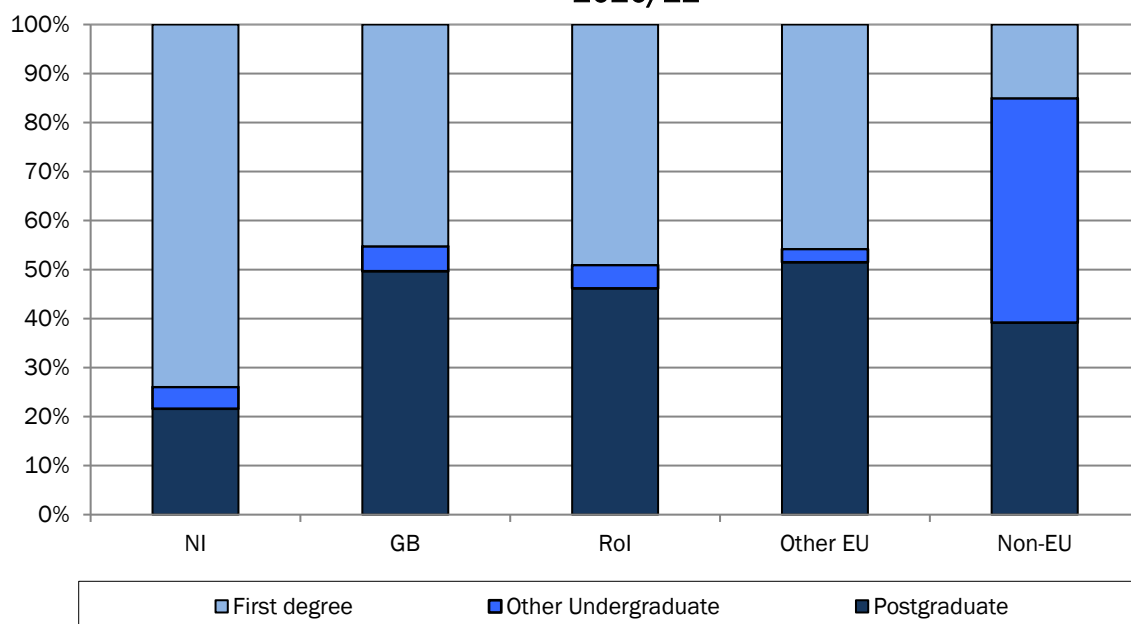


In 2020/21, students from 137 different countries throughout the world were enrolled at NI HEIs. The countries outside NI, GB and the RoI with the most students enrolled at NI campuses (not including those registered to Ulster University but based in Birmingham or London) were India (3,150), China (1,990), Philippines (1,580), Nigeria (550) and Malaysia (280) (Table 9d).

Figure 7 below illustrates the contrast in level of study for NI students and those from other countries in 2020/21. Around half of students at NI HEIs from GB, RoI and other EU countries were enrolled on 'postgraduate' courses, whereas 74% of students from NI were enrolled on 'first degree' courses (Table 9). 2019/20 saw a notable increase in the proportion of non-EU overseas students enrolled on 'other undergraduate' courses (43% compared to 9% in 2018/19) and this has further increased to 46% in 2020/21. This

sharp increase can be explained largely by the part-time module introduced by Ulster University for students undertaking the Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE).

Figure 7 : Enrolments at NI HEIs by domicile and level of study - 2020/21

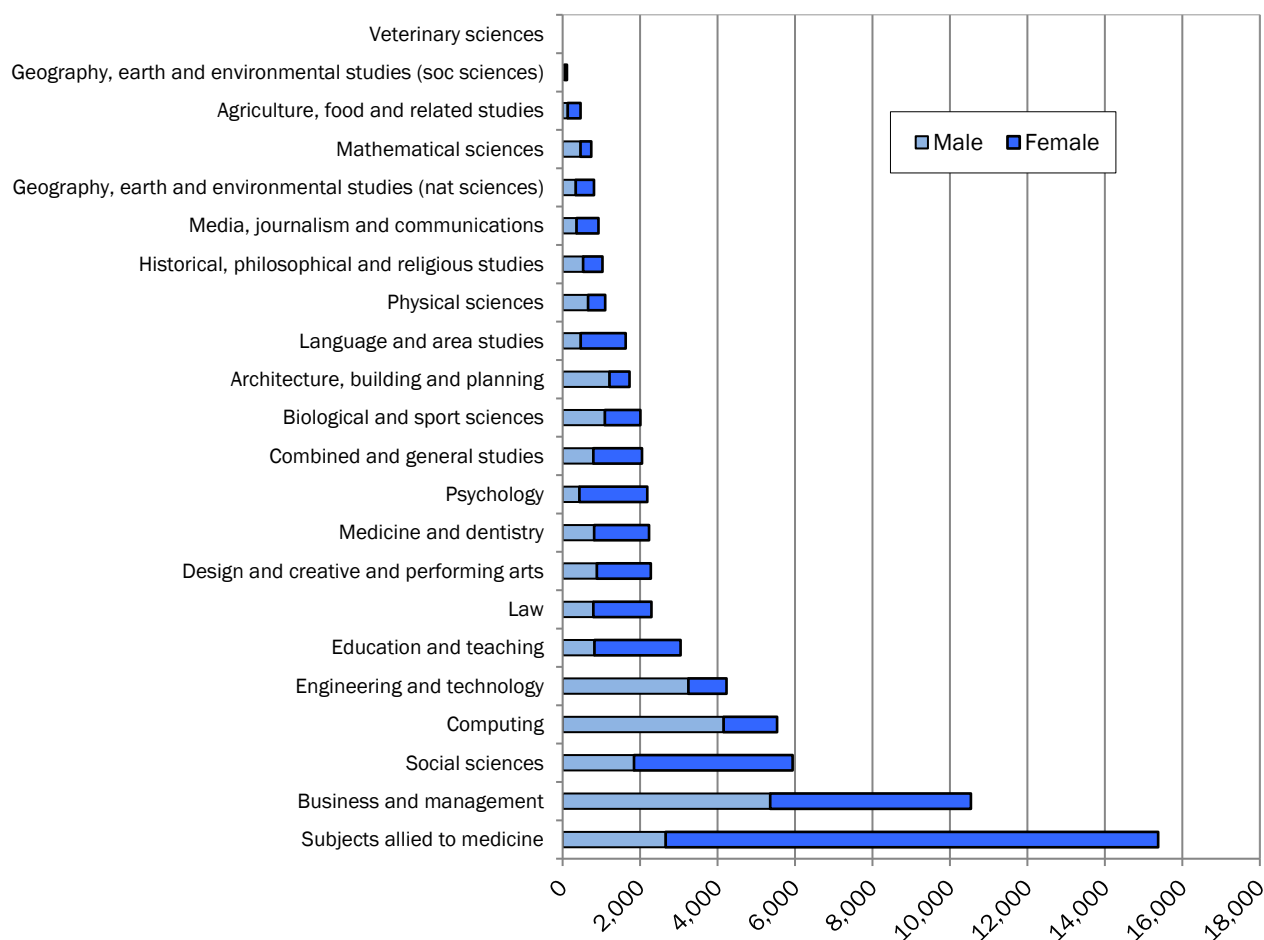


2.4 Subject of Study (Table 13, Figures 8 and 9)

In 2020/21, the most popular subject areas students were studying at NI HEIs were: ‘Subjects allied to medicine’, with 15,375 (23%) enrolments; ‘Business and management’, with 10,540 (16%) enrolments; and ‘Social sciences’, with 5,940 (9%) enrolments (Table 13c).

Females accounted for 83% of 2020/21 enrolments at NI HEIs in ‘Subjects allied to medicine’, 80% of those studying ‘Psychology’ and 73% of those studying ‘Education and Teaching’. In contrast, males accounted for 77% of those studying ‘Engineering and technology’, 75% of ‘Computing’ enrolments and 70% of ‘Architecture, building and planning’ enrolments (Table 13c and Figure 8).

Figure 8 : Enrolments at NI HEIs by sex and subject area - 2020/21



In 2020/21, 55% of students at NI HEIs were studying a Broad STEM³ related subject. A higher proportion of males (56%) than females (54%) were studying Broad STEM subjects. Part-time students (60%) were more likely than full-time students (52%) to be studying Broad STEM subjects (Tables 13a, 13b and Figure 9).

In 2019/20, 25% of students at NI HEIs were studying a Narrow STEM related subject. A higher proportion of males (38%) than females (16%) were studying Narrow STEM subjects. Full-time students (29%) were more likely than part-time students (18%) to be studying Narrow STEM subjects (Tables 13a, 13b and Figure 9).

Figure 9: Proportion of students enrolled at NI HEIs in Broad and Narrow STEM subjects by sex – 2020/21

STEM enrolments	Male	Female	Total
Broad STEM	56%	54%	55%
Narrow STEM	38%	16%	25%

³ Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – see notes to readers for full description.

2.5 Institutional breakdown (Table 14, Figure 10)

Of all students enrolled at NI HEIs in 2020/21, 38% were enrolled at Queen's University Belfast, 50% at Ulster University, 2% at Stranmillis University College, 2% at St Mary's University College and 8% at the Open University (Table 14b).

Figure 10: Students enrolled at NI HEIs by institution and level of study – 2019/20 to 2020/21

Level of Study	Academic Year	QUB	UU	Stranmillis	St Mary's	OU (NI)
First Degree	2019/20	15,380	17,140	1,070	845	3,425
	2020/21	16,560	18,085	1,125	885	3,960
Other Undergraduate	2019/20	2,935	3,725	0	0	605
	2020/21	965	5,870	0	0	905
Postgraduate	2019/20	6,605	6,815	140	200	195
	2020/21	7,840	9,090	185	200	575
Total	2019/20	24,915	27,680	1,210	1,045	4,225
	2020/21	25,365	33,045	1,310	1,085	5,440

2.6 UK Comparison (Table 15)

In 2020/21, 2,751,865 students were enrolled at HEIs throughout the UK. In comparison with 2019/20, student numbers have increased by 9% (from 2,532,385) (Table 15a).

Over this period, all locations of the UK showed an increase in the number of total enrolments - NI HEIs by 12% (from 59,075 to 66,245), English HEIs by 9% (from 2,076,465 to 2,257,580), Scottish HEIs by 9% (from 260,490 to 282,875) and Welsh HEIs by 6% (from 136,355 to 145,170) (Table 15a).

National Statistics

The United Kingdom Statistics Authority (the Authority) has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

National Statistics status means that Official Statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value.

All Official Statistics should comply with all aspects of the Code of Practice. They are awarded National Statistics status following an assessment by the Authority's regulatory arm. The Authority considers whether the statistics meet the highest standards of Code compliance, including the value they add to public decisions and debate. Designation can be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are well explained and readily accessible; are produced according to sound methods; and are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

Once statistics have been designated as National Statistics, it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed. It is DfE's responsibility to maintain compliance with the standards expected of National Statistics. If we become concerned about whether these statistics are still meeting the appropriate standards, we will discuss any concerns with the Authority promptly. National Statistics status can be removed at any point when the highest standards are not maintained, and reinstated when standards are restored.

Data Quality

All information presented in this bulletin has been validated and quality assured by HEIs prior to publication. HEIs are given a set period of time to submit the information to HESA. Following submission, both HESA and DfE perform a series of validation checks to ensure that information is consistent both within and across returns. Trend analyses are used to monitor annual variations and emerging trends. Queries arising from validation checks are presented to HEIs for clarification and, if required, returns may be amended and/or re-submitted. Finally, prior to publication, the data are presented to HEIs for a final sign-off. More information on the methods for collecting and analysing HEI data, the quality of HEI statistics, and links to the quality guidance used in managing the production of HEI statistics can be accessed via the link [Quality of Higher Education Statistics](#)

Who will be interested in this bulletin?

The information presented in this statistical bulletin will be of interest to a wide variety of people. For example, the statistics within and those derived from this bulletin are currently used by: DfE policy officials in their role of assisting and advising the Minister for the Economy to discharge his or her duties; by the NI Assembly and its Committee for the Economy to scrutinise the HE sector; by other government departments such as DoF as a key indicator in the education domain of the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM); by prospective students to inform their choices around HE; by local businesses to quantify the supply of graduates in their business area; and by researchers and

academics to try and understand the underlying trends in HE. Further details about the uses made of HE statistics can be found in the [notes and definitions](#) section.

Main Uses of HE statistics

The main uses of these statistics are to monitor HE enrolments and the characteristics of students enrolling both from NI and to NI HEIs. This helps in assessing HEI performance, corporate monitoring, informing and monitoring related policy, and responding to parliamentary/assembly questions and ad hoc queries from the public.

DfE is responsible for the policy, strategic development and financing of the statutory HE sector. Analysis of data trends against key strategic priorities remains a crucial component of data development within DfE.

The bulletin and further analysis of the data provide an evidence base that is used in a number of DfE policies, strategies and reviews. Some of the most recent examples are: -

- DfE's Higher Education Strategy
- DfE's Widening Participation Strategy
- DfE's [Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10x Economy](#)

Further details on these strategies are available from the DfE website: [Higher Education Strategies Northern Ireland](#)

In addition, HEI statistics are used within other NI departments and their agencies. Some of the most recent examples are: -

- NISRA – as a key indicator in the Education Domain of the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NI MDM).
- Department of Education (DE) – teacher demand model
- Invest NI – to quantify the supply of graduates for potential inward investment to NI

Around 50 HEI statistical enquiries per year are received by the Department from various sources. These include requests for further breakdowns of enrolments, qualifications and destinations data.

There continues to be a lot of media interest in the HE sector and HE statistics. With changes in fee regimes throughout the UK, fluctuations in the strength of the economy and the potential impact of EU exit, the demand for HE is often in the spotlight. DfE is responsible for formulating policy and administering funding to support education, research and related activities in the Northern Ireland HE sector. This bulletin forms part of the evidence base used to shape and evaluate DfE strategies and policies.

Draft Programme for Government (PfG) Framework 2016-2021

The work of the Department is shaped by the draft Programme for Government (2016-2021), which sets the strategic direction of travel for the work of the Executive, expressed in terms of wellbeing-focused outcomes. The document identifies innovation, research and development, and skills and employability as the key drivers of achieving a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy. Higher education has a pivotal role in supporting this aspiration, especially with regard to increasing the skills levels of the Northern Ireland workforce and increasing the proportion of local graduates from local institutions in professional and management occupations, or indeed further study.

Maximum Student Number (MaSN)

Before higher education became a devolved matter, the UK Government introduced an annual cap on the number of students each UK HEI could enrol. Following devolution in 1998, the cap (known as the Maximum Student Number (MaSN)) was maintained in Northern Ireland and is still in use today.

The MaSN applies primarily to full-time home and EU domiciled undergraduates enrolled in Northern Ireland. It does not curtail the recruitment of part-time or postgraduate students (with the exception of PGCE students). Nor does it curtail the recruitment of GB or international (non-EU) students.

Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, both approved to deliver full-time undergraduate provision, receive an annual MaSN allocation from the Department. St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College are not subject to MaSN as the DE sets the numbers required for initial teacher training. The OU is also not subject to MaSN given its wholly part-time offering.

The MaSN allocations for Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University were increased in 2020. This was due to the change in how A level grades were awarded in 2020 in light of the pandemic, leading to an increase in candidates meeting their offer conditions. More places were required to help accommodate some of the NI domiciled students that met their offer conditions.

Part-Time and Postgraduate Student Loans

From the beginning of the 2017/18 academic year, DfE extended its student support package, with tuition fee loans being made available for part-time undergraduate and full-time distance learning study students, and postgraduate students studying certain courses.

Northern Ireland students studying part-time undergraduate (or full time distance learning) courses in Northern Ireland, England, Wales or Scotland could apply for a tuition fee loan of up to £3,296.25 for the 2020/21 academic year. Those starting Postgraduate Certificate, Postgraduate Diploma, or Taught or Research Master's courses in Northern Ireland, England, Wales or Scotland could apply for a loan of up to £5,500 per course to help with fee costs. For both types of loans, the fees are paid direct to the university to cover tuition fees.

HEI Activity Elsewhere in the UK

Summary figures for the four UK administrations were published by HESA in their [Higher Education Statistics 2020/21](#) on 25th January 2022.

HESA's [Higher Education Student Data 2020/21](#) open data release was published by HESA on 10th February 2022. This provides more detailed information about students in higher education across the UK.

NOTES

1. The statistics presented in this bulletin are based on data supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). HESA is the official agency for the collection of information on publicly funded universities throughout Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and Higher Education (HE) providers in England registered with the Office for Students (OfS) in the Approved (fee cap) or Approved categories. These are collectively called Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the context of this bulletin. HESA was set up in 1993 following the White Paper 'Higher Education: a new framework', which called for more coherence in Higher Education statistics. The HESA data presented in this bulletin relate to students at UK HEIs and, therefore, do not include HE qualifications gained at FE colleges in NI or GB, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) or at institutions in the Republic of Ireland.
2. The Department for the Economy (DfE) also publishes information on HE enrolments at FE colleges in NI in its [Further Education Sector Activity](#) Statistical Bulletin.
3. Information on enrolments on HE courses at NI and GB FE colleges, CAFRE and RoI institutions is available via a separate statistical fact sheet, which is published on the Department's website:
[HE Statistical Fact Sheets](#)
4. Further statistics on the Northern Ireland HE sector, including qualifications gained, graduate destinations and various higher education fact sheets can be downloaded from the Department's website:
[Higher Education Statistics and Research](#)
5. **Change to data coverage** - There has been a notable change to the coverage of data in this bulletin since 2019/20. For the first time this release presents combined data from returns submitted by HEI providers to the HESA [Student record](#) and also that submitted by Alternative Providers (APs) to the HESA [Student alternative record](#). This follows on from HESA's publication of combined Student and AP data for its [Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2019/20](#) release. In previous issues of this publication, HESA reported all HEI providers submitting data to the HESA [Student record](#). A later supplement to the release added in separate additional tables and charts relating to data reported within the HESA [Student alternative record](#) (previously known as the Alternative provider record). An Alternative Provider is any provider of higher education courses: not in direct receipt of recurrent funding from UK funding bodies; not a Further Education college; and not registered as 'approved (fee cap)' on the Office for Students (OfS) register. They consist solely of English providers, such as The University of Law, BIMM Limited and BPP University. Due to regulatory changes in England, boundaries between the two HESA student records become less clear cut and HESA made the decision to combine together data submitted via both records from 2019/20.

As this coverage change required significant adjustments to our systems and processes to incorporate this new record, we decided to adopt the new data

coverage in the 2020/21 bulletin. The 2019/20 bulletin retained the old data coverage, but separate summary outputs on NI domiciled AP qualifications were presented. Similar AP summary outputs have also been provided this year to allow readers to evaluate the impact of change, but we intend to publish combined figures only from the 2021/22 bulletin.

Data were first collected for the AP record in 2014/15, but there have been several coverage changes over the years. In 2016/17, APs with degree awarding powers were first required to also return data about students on Masters taught designated courses. Additionally in 2017/18, all providers in the record were required for the first time to return postgraduates on both taught and research courses, thus making it wholly comparable to the Student Record. For this reason, historical figures using combined Student and AP data have only been produced back to, and including, 2017/18. Figures and tables affected by this change include Figures 1 and 5 in this bulletin and Table 1, Tables 1a to 1f, Table 2, Tables 2a to 2f, Tables 3a and 3b and Tables 15, 15a and 15b in the online Excel and OpenData tables.

6. From 2019/20, Ulster University introduced a new part time module for those undertaking the Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE) of the NMC Test of Competence (ToC). In 2019/20, enrolments on this course accounted for 2,760 of the 7,265 other undergraduate enrolments alone. The ToC is for overseas nurses and midwives seeking registration as a nurse and/or midwife in the UK. The NMC Competence Test Centre (CTC) at Magee campus of UU is one of three CTC test centres across the UK and has been open since 2018. However, 2019/20 was the first year this module has been offered alongside registration for the exam. This is a stand-alone, credit bearing course, which means that while students will receive credit for undertaking the module, no qualification will be awarded, and, hence, they will not appear in the qualification statistics.
7. HESA releases separate publications providing information on HE Student Enrolments and Qualifications obtained at HEIs for the whole of the UK. A notable difference in the HESA publications and those released by DfE is that, from 2014/15, HESA uses revised data returns for the time series figures, whereas DfE does not. Consequently, historical figures for the number of enrolments and qualifications at UK HEIs published by DfE may differ from those in HESA's publications. Further information on this can be found in the ['Notes'](#) section of HESA's Student Statistics bulletin 2018/19.
8. **Change to recording practice** - To avoid a duplication of foundation year figures across HE institutions and Further Education Colleges, Queen's University Belfast and Stranmillis University College changed their return to HESA during 2019/20 and no longer report on foundation degrees that are offered as part of a validated collaborative arrangement with Further Education Colleges. Historical figures in this bulletin have been backdated to reflect this change.
9. **Allocation of OU students** – The Open University's administrative centre is based in the south east of England. However, enrolments registered at one of the OU's national centres in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland will contribute to the totals of those countries where statistics are shown by country of provider. Please note that

all non-UK domicile OU students and those who study at postgraduate research level are registered to England.

10. Subject coding - 2019/20 saw the introduction of a new subject coding system, the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS). This replaced the previous subject coding system, the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) used in years prior to 2019/20. In addition to HECoS, a Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) was introduced to provide a standardised hierarchical aggregation of HECoS codes suitable for the majority of users. The CAH was developed to provide standard groupings that could be applied to both HECoS and JACS allowing for consistent analysis across coding frames. It is important to remember though that these are two distinct coding frames.

CAH was subsequently updated from version 1.2 to version 1.3.4 in 2020/21, which has resulted in some changes to the categories. CAH v1.3.4 was introduced to increase the usefulness and intelligibility of detailed subject groupings, but at the highest level of aggregation it provides similar insights to CAH v1.2. For more information, please refer to HESA's webpage on [HECoS and CAH](#).

Where information on subject area is provided in this bulletin, it is based on CAH V1.3.4 level 1, comprising 21 groups; for the purposes of STEM analysis, Geography, earth and environmental studies has been split into natural sciences and social sciences.

11. In 2020/21 there was a notable increase in the number of enrolments available to NI domiciled students at NI HEIs, there were two main reasons behind this increase; (i) at NI HEIs a cap (known as the Maximum Student Number (MaSN)) is placed on the number of full time undergraduate students that can be enrolled, this cap was increased in 2020 to help accommodate some of the increase in candidates meeting their offer conditions due to changes in how A level grades were awarded in light of the pandemic; and (ii) short upskilling courses were offered to those affected by the pandemic either through furlough, redundancy or those unable to gain employment in their field.

12. Rounding Strategy – DfE conforms to the HESA rounding strategy. Due to the provisions of the Data Protection Act (2018) and the Human Rights Act (1998), HESA (and therefore DfE) implements a strategy, in published and released tabulations, designed to prevent the disclosure of personal information about any individual. This strategy involves rounding all numbers to the nearest 5, and suppressing percentages and averages based on small populations.

A full list of the rounding strategy includes:

- 0, 1 and 2 are rounded to 0;
- all other numbers are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5;
- percentages based on fewer than 22.5 individuals are suppressed;
- averages based on a small group of people (7 or fewer) are also suppressed;
- percentages and averages are based on unrounded figures;
- percentages are rounded to the nearest integer

Total figures are also subject to this rounding methodology; so the sum of numbers in each row or column may not match the total shown. Similarly, percentages may not sum to 100%.

DEFINITIONS

Higher Education

13. For the purpose of HESA's data collection, HE students are those on courses for which the level of instruction is above that of Level 3 of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (for example, courses at the level of Certificate of HE and above).

Count of Students

14. The HESA Student Record contains information about individual enrolments, which, because a student can be enrolled on more than one programme of study, will exceed the number of students.

Academic Year

15. HESA data are a count of enrolments across the entire academic year. The academic year runs from 1st August to 31st July.

First year students

16. First year students are based on the HESA standard registration population who commenced their instance in the reporting period relevant to the data collection year. The term 'instance' is used to describe a student's engagement with the institution aiming towards the award of a qualification(s) or credit.

Domicile

17. Domicile refers to a student's permanent place of residence prior to enrolment on a course.

18. Student enrolments recorded with domicile UK region unknown, Channel Islands and Isle of Man are included in the GB category for the purposes of this statistical bulletin.

Level of course

19. Level of study

- I. *Postgraduate* programmes of study are those leading to higher degrees, diplomas and certificates (including Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) and professional qualifications) and usually require that entrants are already qualified to degree level (that is, already qualified at Level 6 of the QCA NQF).
 - Higher degrees include doctorates, master's degrees and higher bachelor's degrees.

- Other postgraduate includes postgraduate diplomas, certificates and professional qualifications, PGCE at Level M, institutional postgraduate credits and no formal postgraduate qualifications.
- II. *First degrees* include: first degrees with or without eligibility to register to practice with a health or social care or veterinary statutory regulatory body; first degrees with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)/registration with a General Teaching Council (GTC); enhanced first degrees; first degrees obtained concurrently with a diploma; and intercalated first degrees.

Mode of study

20. Mode of attendance distinguishes students studying full-time or part-time:

- I. Full-time students are those normally required to attend an Institution for periods amounting to at least 24 weeks within the year of study, on thick or thin sandwich courses, and those on a study-related year out of their institution. During that time, students are normally expected to undertake periods of study, tuition or work experience, which amount to an average of at least 21 hours per week.
- II. *Part-time* students are those recorded as studying part-time, or studying full-time on courses lasting less than 24 weeks, on block release, or studying during the evenings only.

Sexual Identifier

21. In line with AdvanceHE's guidance on equality monitoring (related primarily to the Equality Act 2010), HESA has included 'other' as a valid entry alongside 'male' and 'female' for its sex identifier variable. Due to small numbers and issues of disclosure, students of 'other' sex are included in total figures, but not in separate breakdowns in this publication and associated tables.

Age

22. Age is as at 31st August within the relevant academic year.

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths Enrolments

23. The STEM groupings used in this bulletin are based on the approach developed by HESA to categorise subjects into science/non-science subjects. The science grouping is an aggregation of relevant CAH v1.3.4 level 1 subject codes (derived from HECoS), with the exception of CAH26 (Geography, earth and environmental studies), which has been split into natural sciences and social sciences. The natural science element is categorised into the science grouping and the social sciences element into the non-science grouping. The same approach has been taken when categorising CAH level 1 subject codes into STEM groupings, and maps well to the previous JACS coding of STEM subjects.

24. Broad STEM includes the following subject areas: Medicine and dentistry; Subjects allied to medicine; Biological and sports sciences; Psychology; Veterinary sciences; Agriculture, food and related studies; Physical Sciences; Mathematical sciences;

Engineering and technology; Computing; Geography, earth and environmental studies (natural sciences); and Architecture, building and planning.

Narrow STEM is a subset of Broad STEM and includes the following subject areas: Biological and sports sciences; Psychology; Physical sciences; Mathematical sciences; Engineering and technology; Computing; and Geography, earth and environmental studies (natural sciences).

Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM)

25. The analysis presented in section 1.4 utilises five groups (quintiles) of Super Output Areas (SOAs) across Northern Ireland. These five groups are determined based on relative level of deprivation using the NIMDM.

SOAs ranked 1 to 178 form the most deprived quintile relative to all other SOAs. Those ranked 713 to 890 are the most affluent relative to all other SOAs. SOA is determined using the valid postcode provided on the enrolment record.

NIMDM 2017 is a weighted combination of the seven domains of deprivation. The Income and Employment Deprivation domains combined account for nearly 50% of the MDM. The Health and Disability Domain, and Education Skills and Training Domain combined account for a further 30%, and the remainder is made up of the Access to Services, Living Environment and Crime and Disorder Domains.

For further details on deprivation measurement in Northern Ireland, please follow this link: [NISRA MDM 2017](#)

FURTHER INFORMATION

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