

Qualifications Gained at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis 2019/20



This statistical bulletin provides information on qualifications gained by Northern Ireland (NI) students at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and all students at NI HEIs.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	Page 2
Key Statistics	Page 3
Introduction	Page 5
Structure of Report	Page 7
Section 1: Northern Ireland domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK Higher Education Institutions	Page 8
1.1 Change over the last 10 years	Page 8
1.2 Breakdown of qualifications gained	Page 9
1.3 NI Multiple Deprivation Measure quintiles	Page 10
1.4 Subject of study	Page 10
1.5 Classification of first degree	Page 12
1.6 Qualifications gained at UK Alternative Providers	Page 13
Section 2: Students gaining qualifications at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions	Page 14
2.1 Change over the last 10 years	Page 14
2.2 Breakdown of qualifications gained	Page 14
2.3 Subject of study	Page 15
2.4 Classification of first degree	Page 17
2.5 Institutional breakdown	Page 18
2.6 UK comparison	Page 18
Annex A: Data Quality and Uses of Data	Page 19
Annex B: Policy and Operational Context	Page 21
Annex C: Notes and Definitions	Page 23
Further Information	Page 28
Detailed Excel and OpenData Tables (External link)	

KEY STATISTICS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND DOMICILED QUALIFIERS FROM UK HEIs

The number of NI domiciled qualifiers has decreased slightly over the decade.....	Although fluctuating over the decade, the number of NI domiciled qualifiers from UK HEIs has decreased by a net 1.1%, from 17,650 in 2010/11 to 17,460 in 2019/20 (Tables 1a and 1b).
.... but there has been a substantial drop from the previous year	At 17,460, the number of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs in 2019/20 has decreased by 7.2% since 2018/19 (18,810) (Tables 1a and 1c). This may be due to both administrative changes and a number of Covid-19 related factors, such as delays in completion of courses and the awarding of qualifications at some HEIs.
Most qualifications are through full-time study...	Four-fifths (79.8%) of the 17,460 qualifications gained by NI domiciles from UK HEIs in 2019/20 were through full-time study (Table 2f).
...with more females qualifying than males.	In 2019/20, of the 17,460 NI domiciled students gaining qualifications, three-fifths (60.3%) were female (Table 2e).
‘First degree’ qualifications make up the majority of those gained.....	‘First degree’ qualifications made up two-thirds (66.8%) of those gained, followed by ‘postgraduate’ qualifications (26.8%) and then ‘other undergraduate’ qualifications (6.4%) (Table 1d).
...while three-tenths of all qualifiers who graduated in GB	Around three-tenths (30.5%) of NI domiciled students who graduated received their qualifications from GB HEIs in 2019/20 (Tables 1a).
The top three subject groups make up almost two fifths of qualifications...	The most popular subject groups in 2019/20 were ‘Subjects allied to medicine’ (17.4%), ‘Business and management’ (12.5%) and ‘Social sciences’ (10.0%) (Table 4a).
...with nearly half of students qualifying in a science subject...	Almost a half (48.9%) of qualifications gained by NI domiciles were in a Broad STEM related subject and nearly a quarter (24.0%) were in a Narrow STEM related subject (Table 4b).
...but a higher proportion of NI domiciled males qualify in a STEM subject	Males were more likely than females to qualify in a STEM related subject. While 52.8% of males qualified in a Broad STEM related subject compared with 46.3% of females, males (37.0%) were more than twice as likely as females (15.5%) to obtain a Narrow STEM related qualification (Table 4d).
There was a record high of qualifiers with a first class or second class upper degree.	Over four-fifths (84.4%) of first degree qualifiers achieved either a first class or upper second class honours degree, a record high (Table 5b). This increase is possibly due to the ‘no detriment’ approach adopted by some universities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which ensured that students would be awarded a final grade no lower than the most recent provider assessment of their attainment.

KEY STATISTICS FOR QUALIFIERS FROM NORTHERN IRELAND HEIs

The number of qualifiers from NI HEIs has increased since 2010/11...	The number of qualifiers has increased over the decade, with 15,985 qualifications gained by students from NI HEIs in 2019/20, a net rise of 2.4% since 2010/11 (15,610) (Tables 7b).
...but has fallen sharply over the past year.	There has been a 6.5% decrease in the number of qualifications awarded between 2018/19 (17,095) and 2019/20 (15,985) (Table 7e), which may be due to both administrative changes and a number of Covid-19 related factors, such as delays in the completion of courses and the awarding of qualifications at some HEIs.
The vast majority of qualifications gained at NI HEIs are through full-time courses.....	Most (73.7%) of the 15,985 qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs in 2019/20 were through full-time study. (Table 8f).
...with more females qualifying than males at NI HEIs.	Females gained three-fifths (60.5%) of qualifications awarded in 2019/20 (Tables 8e and 8f).
....and at 'First Degree' level.	'First degree' (56.9%) was the most popular qualification awarded, followed by 35.3% awarded a 'postgraduate' qualification and 7.7% awarded an 'other undergraduate' qualification (Table 7d).
Almost half of qualifications were in a science related subject...	Almost half (49.5%) of students gained a qualification in a Broad STEM related subject and almost a quarter (23.3%) were in a Narrow STEM related subject (Table 9b).
...but a higher proportion of males qualified in a STEM subject at NI HEIs.....	Males were more likely to qualify than females in STEM related subjects. In 2019/20, 53.4% of males qualified in a Broad STEM related subject, compared with 47.0% of females, while males (36.4%) were more than twice as likely as females (14.8%) to gain their qualification in a Narrow STEM related subject (Table 9d).
A record proportion of NI qualifiers graduated with a first class or second class upper degree...	A record 84.7% of 'first degree' graduates at NI HEIs achieved either a first class or upper second class honours degree (Table 10b). This increase is possibly due to the 'no detriment' approach adopted by some universities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which ensured that students would be awarded a final grade no lower than the most recent provider assessment of their attainment.
... and almost a quarter of qualifiers were domiciled outside NI.	Over three-quarters (75.9%) of students gaining a qualification at NI HEIs were from NI, while 7.5% were from GB, 5.2% from RoI, 0.9% from other EU countries and 10.6% from non-EU countries (Table 8c).

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 UK HEIs. It was set up in 1993 following the White Paper 'Higher Education: a new framework', which called for more coherence in HE statistics. In this context, HEIs include all publicly-funded universities. 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) using data from HESA's [Student record](#) and presents information on HE qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs in the 2019/20 academic year, and by all students at NI HEIs in the same time period.

In 2019/20, HESA made a notable change to its coverage of the data in its [Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2019/20](#) release, combining for the first time data submitted by HEI providers to the HESA [Student record](#) and now also that submitted by Alternative Providers to the HESA [Student alternative 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. As this coverage change by HESA will require significant changes to our systems and processes to incorporate the new record, this publication retains the old data coverage and we plan to adopt the new data coverage in the 2020/21 bulletin. However, we have provided summary outputs on the number of NI domiciled qualifications from Alternative Providers in 2019/20. More information on the proposed 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 Annex A: Data Quality and Uses of Data.

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 based on unrounded figures. Percentages have also been rounded to one decimal place. More information on the rounding strategy can be found in [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#).

2019 Readership Survey – Acknowledgements, Analysis and Next Steps

Alongside the 2018/19 edition of the bulletin, we published an analysis of the HEI Enrolments and Qualifications statistical bulletins readership survey we conducted in September 2019. We have given careful consideration to the feedback and endeavoured to improve the quality and usability of our Higher Education statistics. For this edition, we have restructured the bulletin, giving attention to the layout so that the statistics are the key focus. Reflecting the priorities of our customers, we have reduced the main commentary and provided more information in the key statistics section of the bulletin. Information summarised in previous editions of the bulletin is still available in the comprehensive online tables, the element most frequently used by customers.

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. HESA has noted that there are two known areas in which the pandemic has had some impact in regards to qualifications:

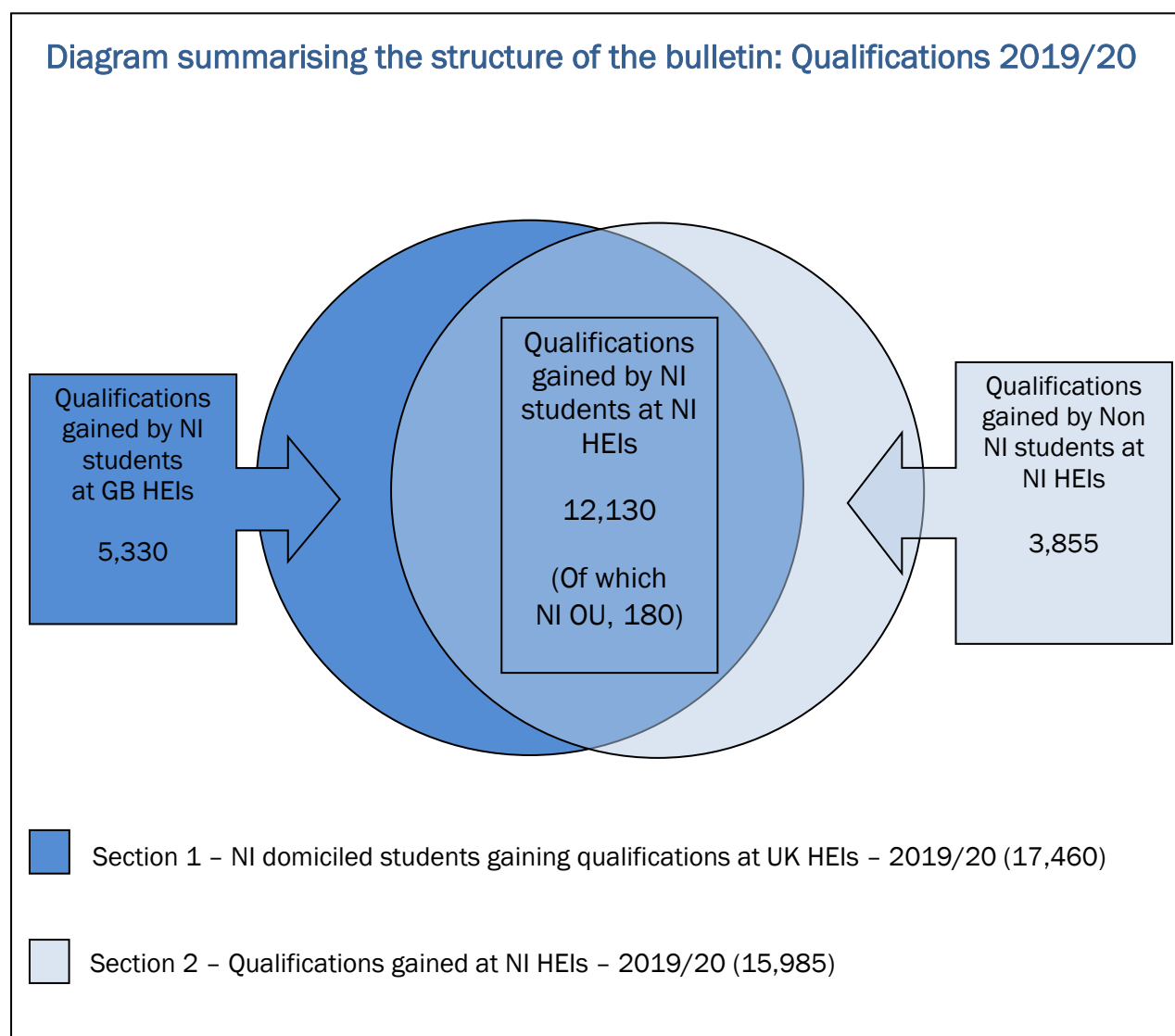
- There is evidence to suggest that among a few providers, administrative hold-ups related to the pandemic resulted in many qualifications awarded this year not being reported. The impact of this under-reporting is believed to explain some of the decrease in the number of qualifications achieved in the UK in 2019/20 compared with 2018/19, and the impact is most noticeable in the number of part-time qualifications awarded.
- In relation to classifications of first degrees and other awards, many providers issued public statements that a 'no detriment' approach would be adopted when it came to assessment. This typically ensured that students would be awarded a final grade no lower than the most recent provider assessment of their attainment. This is likely to have contributed to the increase in the proportion of 'first degree' graduates achieving either a first class or upper second class honours degree.

The figures presented in this bulletin, in particular time series analyses, should therefore be viewed in the context of these issues and care taken with the wider interpretation of the statistics.

STRUCTURE OF REPORT

The bulletin is divided into two sections. Section 1 focuses on NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at HEIs in NI, England, Scotland or Wales. Section 2 concentrates on all students gaining qualifications 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 qualifications gained by NI students enrolled at NI HEIs are included in both sections of the bulletin. See the diagram below for details:

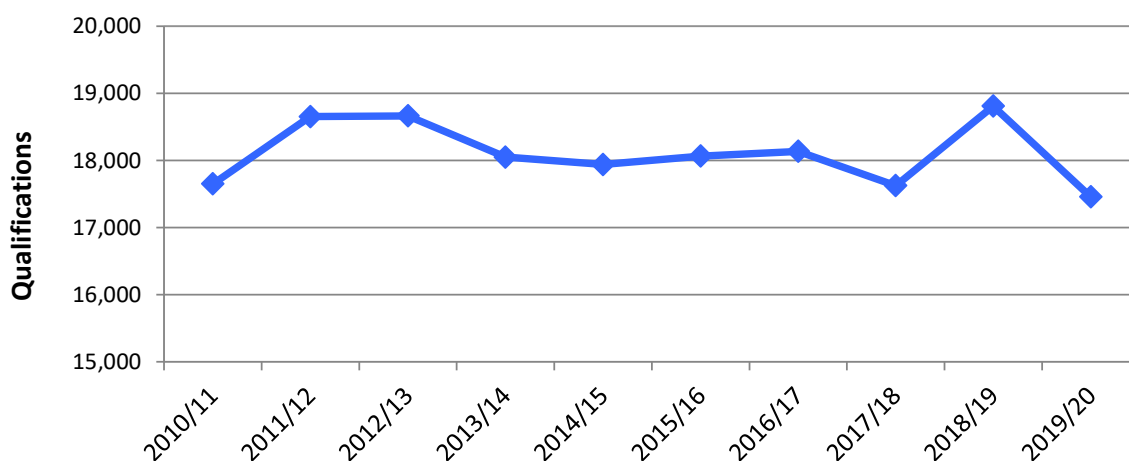


Section 1: Northern Ireland domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK Higher Education Institutions (Tables 1 to 6d)

1.1 Change over the last 10 years – 2010/11 to 2019/20 (Tables 1 to 1f, Figure 1)

Although fluctuating over the past ten academic years, the number of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs has decreased by a net 1.1%, from 17,650 in 2010/11 to 17,460 in 2019/20. There was a large increase in the number of qualifications gained between 2017/18 and 2018/19 (from 17,625 to 18,810). However, the number of qualifications gained then fell to 17,460 in 2019/20 (Table 1). This decrease may be due to both administrative changes and a number of Covid-19 related factors, such as delays in completion of courses and the awarding of qualifications at some HEIs.¹

Figure 1 : NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs - 2010/11 to 2019/20



In terms of the level of qualification gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs, ‘postgraduate’ qualifications have experienced the largest percentage increase (11.0%) over the last ten years, from 4,220 to 4,685. ‘First degree’ qualifications, have seen a smaller increase (7.8%), from 10,810 to 11,655 over the same period. In contrast, the number of qualifications gained by students enrolled on ‘other undergraduate’ courses (such as foundation degrees, diplomas, HNDs and HNCs) has fallen by 57.2%, from 2,620 in 2010/11 to 1,120 in 2019/20. This drop is due to a fall in the number studying part-time ‘other undergraduate’ courses (Tables 1d and 1e).

¹ See [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) points 8 and 9

1.2 Breakdown of qualifications gained – 2019/20 (Tables 1f to 2f, Figures 1 and 2)

All Higher Education Qualifications

In 2019/20, 17,460 qualifications were gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs; a 7.2% decrease from 18,810 in 2018/19 (Tables 1a and 1c).

Mode of study – Of the 17,460 qualifications gained in 2019/20, four-fifths (79.8%) were through full-time study (Table 2f).

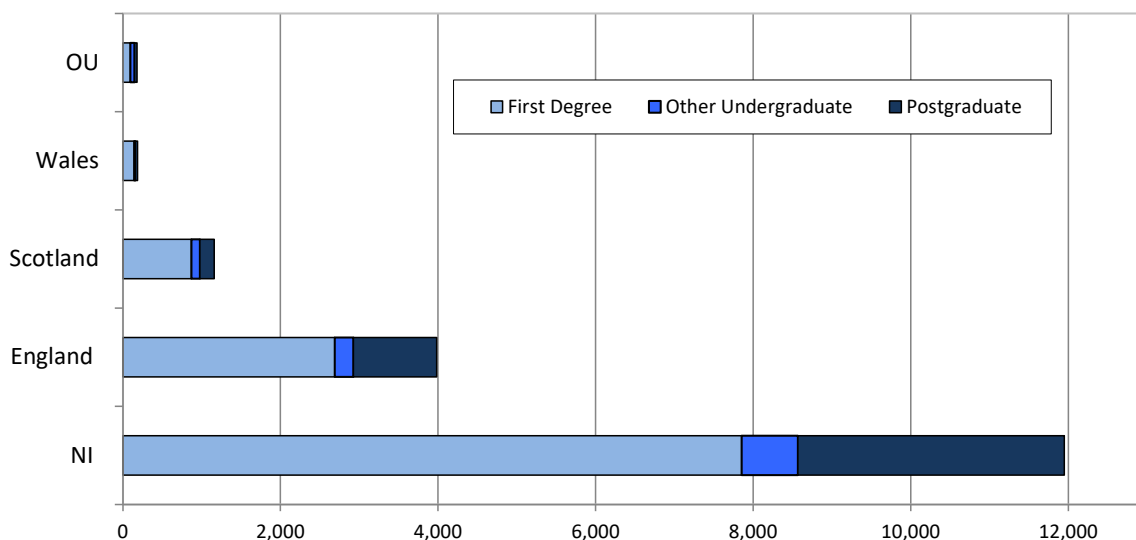
Between 2018/19 and 2019/20, the number of full-time students gaining qualifications decreased by 3.3%, from 14,395 to 13,925. The number of part-time qualifiers decreased by 20.0%, from 4,415 to 3,530, over the same period (Tables 1a and 1c).

Sex – In 2019/20, of the 17,460 NI domiciled students gaining qualifications, around three-fifths (60.3%) were female. (Tables 2e and 2f).

Location of study – In 2019/20, of the 17,460 NI domiciled students who graduated from UK HEIs, 69.5% received their qualifications from NI HEIs (including 1.0% studying locally at the OU) and 30.5% received theirs from GB HEIs (Tables 1a and 2c and Figure 2).

Level of Qualification - Of the 17,460 qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs in 2019/20, 11,655 (66.8%) were ‘first degree’ qualifications, 1,120 (6.4%) were ‘other undergraduate’ qualifications and 4,685 (26.8%) were ‘postgraduate’ qualifications (Table 1d).

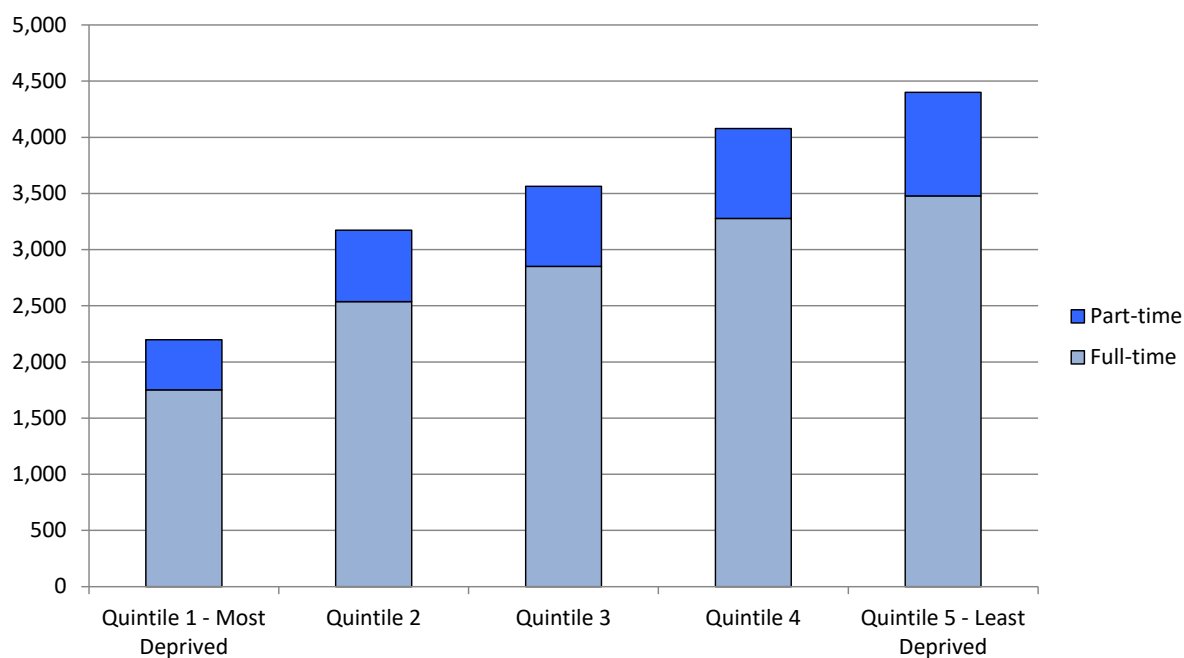
Figure 2 : NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs by location of study and level of qualification - 2019/20



1.3 NI Multiple Deprivation Measure quintiles 2019/20 (Tables 3 and 3a, Figure 3)

Of the 17,415 NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs in 2019/20 for whom a Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) quintile could be assigned, over a quarter (25.3%) were from the least deprived quintile (Quintile 5 in Figure 3), while the lowest proportion (12.6%) were from the most deprived quintile (Quintile 1 in Figure 3) (Tables 3 and 3a).

Figure 3: NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs by mode of study and multiple deprivation measure quintile - 2019/20

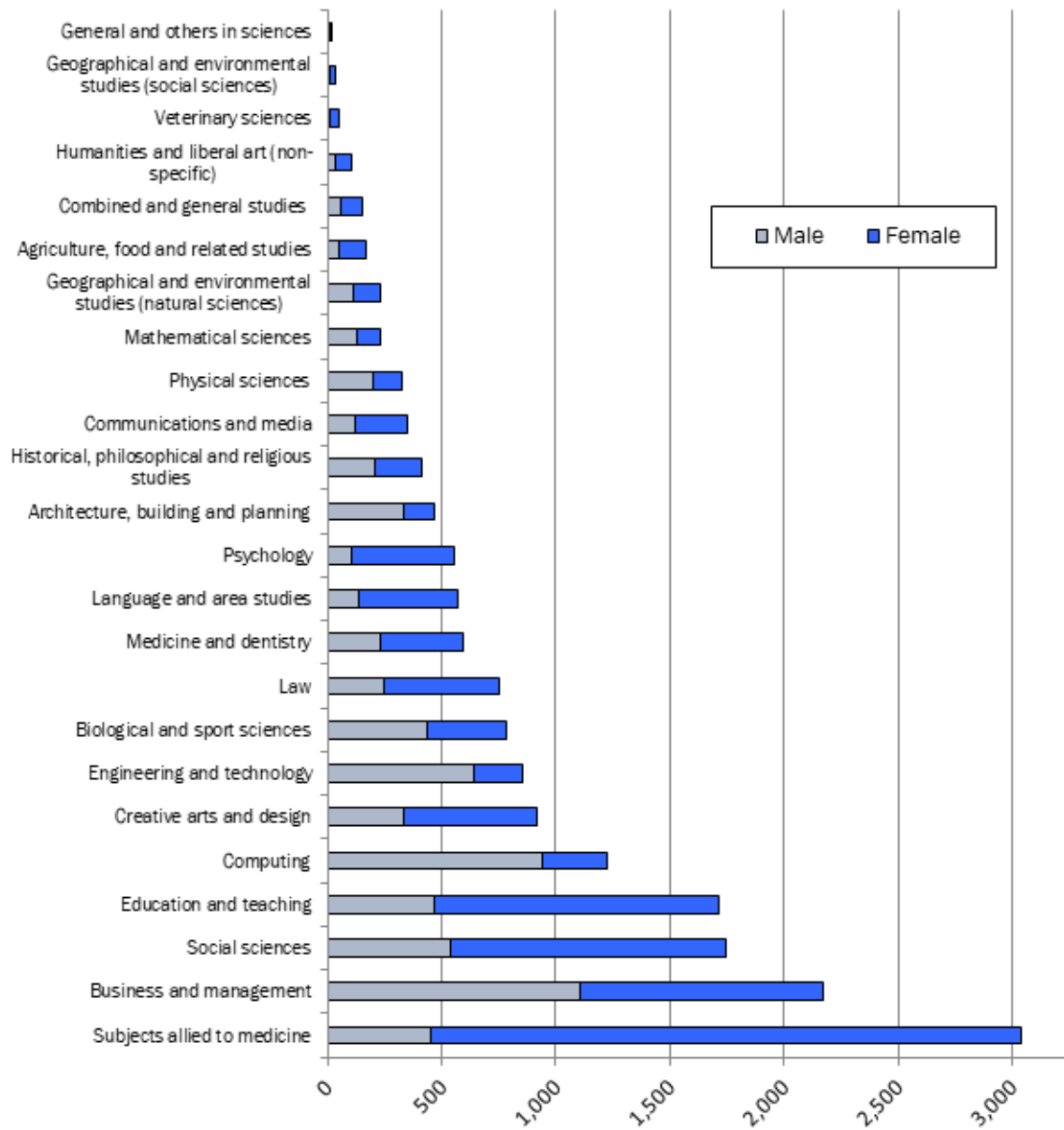


1.4 Subject of Study 2019/20 (Tables 4 to 4d, Figures 4 and 5)

The most popular subject groups for NI students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs in 2019/20 were 'Subjects allied to medicine' (17.4%), 'Business and management' (12.5%) and 'Social sciences' (10.0%) (Table 4a).

In 2019/20, females accounted for 85.0% of qualifications gained in 'subjects allied to medicine', 81.4% of those gained in 'psychology' and 75.8% of those gained in 'language and area studies'. In contrast, males accounted for 76.8% of qualifications gained in 'computing', 75.4% of 'engineering and technology' qualifications and 72.3% of 'architecture, building and planning' qualifications (Table 4c and Figure 4).

Figure 4 : NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs by sex and subject area - 2019/20



In 2019/20, 48.9% of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs were in a Broad STEM² related subject. A higher proportion of males than females gained their qualification in a Broad STEM related subject; 52.8% compared with 46.3%. (Tables 4b and 4d).

In 2019/20, 24.0% of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs were in a Narrow STEM related subject. Males (37.0%) were more than twice as likely as females (15.5%) to gain their qualification in a Narrow STEM related subject. (Tables 4b and 4d).

² Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths – see [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) point 19

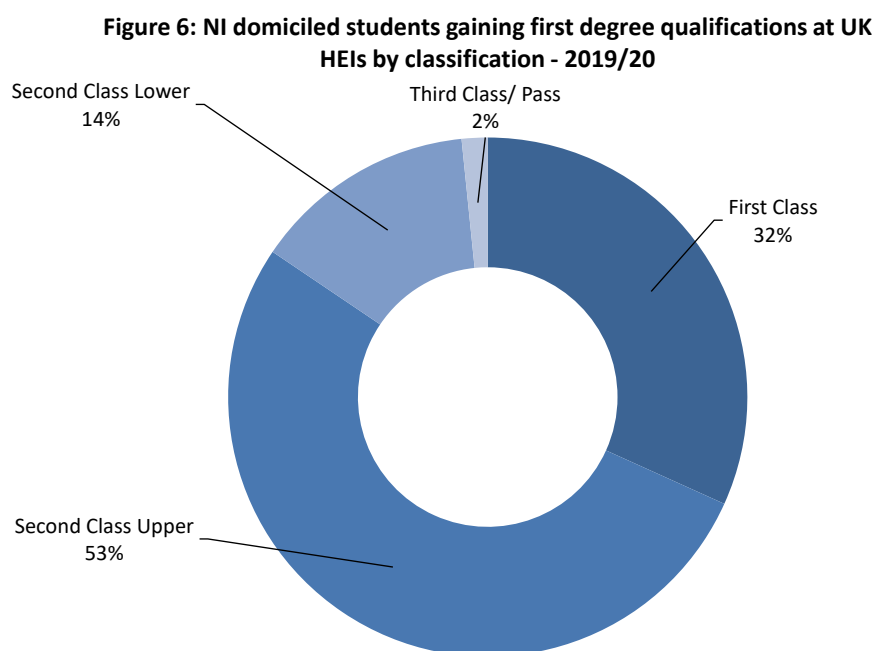
Figure 5: Proportion of NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs in Broad and Narrow STEM subjects by sex – 2019/20

STEM qualifications	Male	Female	Total
Broad STEM	52.8%	46.3%	48.9%
Narrow STEM	37.0%	15.5%	24.0%

1.5 Classification of first degree³ (Tables 5 to 5b, Figure 6)

In 2019/20, 84.4% (9,380) of NI domiciled ‘first degree’ graduates (excluding those 550 attaining an unclassified ‘first degree’) achieved either a first class or upper second class honours degree (Tables 5a and 5b and Figure 6). This is a record high and may potentially be related to the impact of the ‘no detriment’ approach to assessment adopted by some universities at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which ensured that students would be awarded a final grade no lower than the most recent provider assessment of their attainment.

Females (85.9%) were more likely than males (82.4%) to achieve a first class or upper second class honours degree (Tables 5a and 5b).



³ See [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) point 16

1.6 Qualifications gained at UK Alternative Providers – 2019/20 (Tables 6 to 6d)

As discussed in the introduction, HESA made a notable change to its data coverage in its [Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2019/20](#) release, combining for the first time data from both UK HEIs and Alternative Providers in the UK. 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. This coverage change has not been included in this edition of the bulletin, but the figures below present information on the number of NI domiciled students awarded qualifications from Alternative Providers in 2019/20. We plan to adopt this new data coverage in the 2020/21 bulletin.

In 2019/20, 60 qualifications were gained by NI domiciled students at Alternative Providers in the UK, of which 83.6% were obtained on a full-time basis. Of these 60 qualifications, over half (55.7%) were 'postgraduate' qualifications. A further 29.5% were 'first degree' qualifications and 14.8% were 'other undergraduate' qualifications (Tables 6, 6a and 6b).

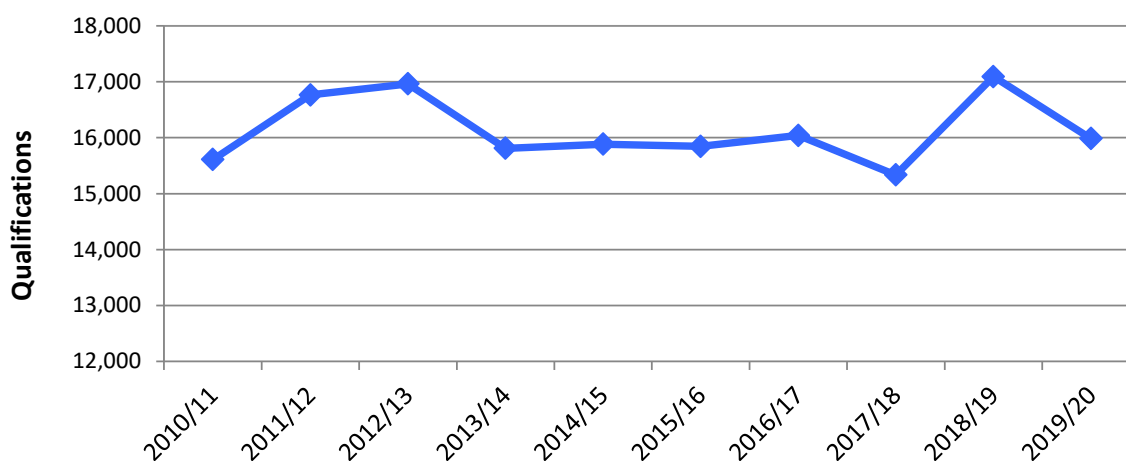
In total, combining qualifications from UK HEIs and those from Alternative Providers, 17,520 qualifications were awarded to NI domiciled students during 2019/20 (Table 6c and 6d).

Section 2: Students gaining qualifications at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions (Tables 7 to 13b)

2.1 Change over the last 10 years – 2010/11 to 2019/20 (Tables 7 to 7f, Figure 7)

The number of qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs has increased by a net 2.4% over the past 10 years, from 15,610 in 2010/11 to 15,985 in 2019/20; although this has been subject to fluctuation. The number of qualifications gained reached a 10-year peak in 2018/19 (17,095), but fell sharply by 6.5% to 15,985 in 2019/20. This decrease may be due to both administrative changes and a number of Covid-19 related factors, such as delays in the completion of courses and the awarding of qualifications at some HEIs.⁴ (Tables 7a, 7b and 7c, Figure 7).

Figure 7 : Qualifications gained at NI HEIs - 2010/11 to 2019/20



In terms of level of qualification, 'Postgraduate' qualifications gained have increased by 22.2%, from 4,620 in 2010/11 to 5,645 in 2019/20, while 'first degree' qualifications gained have increased by 9.4%, from 8,320 to 9,100 over the 10 year period. In contrast, qualifications gained by students on 'other undergraduate' courses (such as foundation degrees, diplomas, HNDs and HNCs) have decreased by 53.6%, from 2,665 in 2010/11 to 1,235 in 2019/20; mainly due to a fall in the number studying these courses part-time (Tables 7d and 7e).

2.2 Breakdown of qualifications gained – 2019/20 (Tables 7 to 7f and 8a to 8f, Figure 8)

All Higher Education Qualifications

In 2019/20, 15,985 qualifications were gained by students at NI HEIs; a decrease of 6.5% from the 2018/19 figure of 17,095 (Tables 7a and 7c).

Mode of study – Of the 15,985 qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs in 2019/20, 73.7% were through full-time study (Table 8b).

⁴ See [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) points 8 and 9

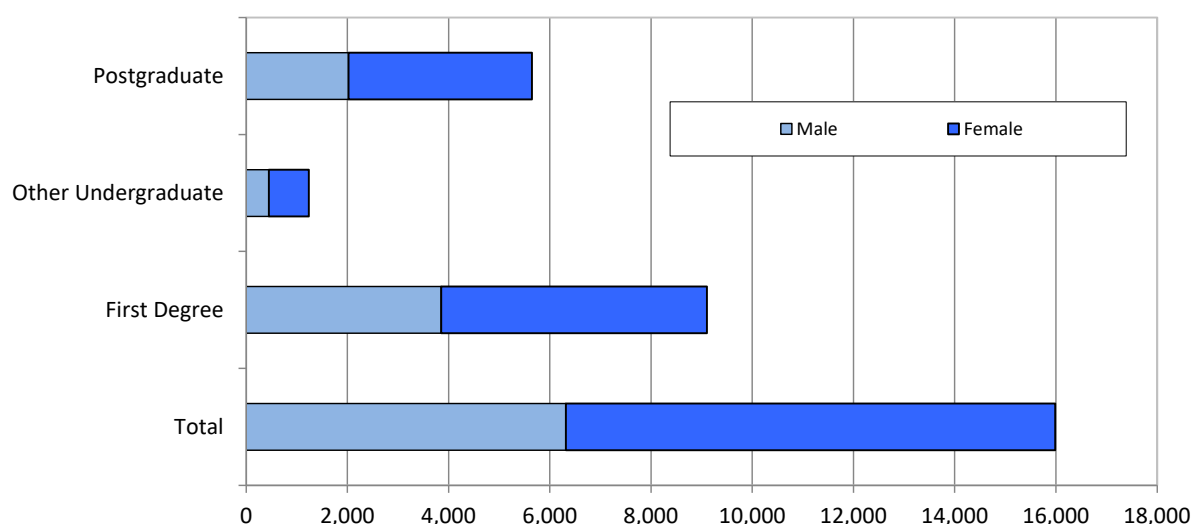
Between 2018/19 and 2019/20, the number of full-time students gaining qualifications decreased by 1.7%, from 11,980 to 11,785, while part-time numbers decreased by 17.8%, from 5,110 to 4,205, over the same period (Table 7a and 7c).

Sex – In 2019/20, of the 15,985 students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs, three-fifths (60.5%) were female. (Table 8e and 8f and Figure 8).

Domicile – In 2019/20, of the 15,985 students gaining a qualification at NI HEIs, 75.9% were from NI, 7.5% from GB, 5.2% from RoI, 0.9% from other EU countries and 10.6% from non-EU countries (Table 8c).

Level of Qualification - Of the 15,985 qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs in 2019/20, 9,100 (56.9%) obtained a ‘first degree’ qualification, 1,235 (7.7%) an ‘other undergraduate’ qualification and 5,645 (35.3%) obtained a ‘postgraduate’ qualification (Table 7d).

Figure 8 : Students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs by level of qualification and sex - 2019/20

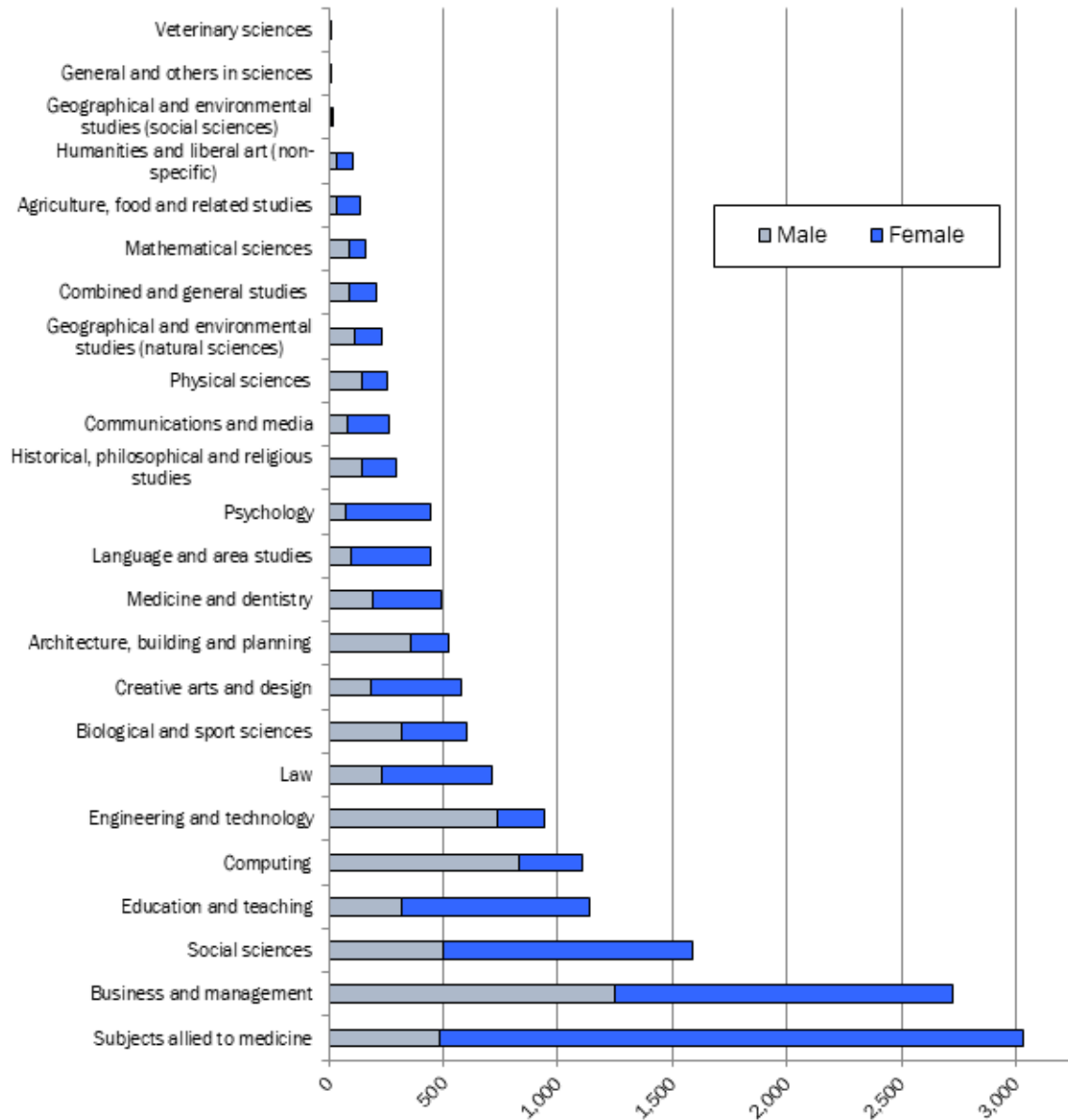


2.3 Subject of study (Tables 9 to 9d, Figures 9 and 10)

The most popular subject groups for students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs in 2019/20 were ‘Subjects allied to medicine’ (19.0%), ‘Business and management’ (17.0%) and ‘Social sciences’ (9.9%) (Table 9a and Figure 9).

In 2019/20, females accounted for 84.0% of qualifications gained in ‘subjects allied to medicine’, 83.7% of those gained in ‘psychology’ and 78.0% of those gained in ‘language and area studies’. In contrast, males accounted for 78.5% of qualifications gained in ‘engineering and technology’, 75.0% of ‘computing’ qualifications and 69.2% of ‘architecture, building and planning’ qualifications (Table 9c and Figure 9).

Figure 9 : Students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs by sex and subject area - 2019/20



In 2019/20, 49.5% of qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs were in a Broad STEM⁵ related subject. A higher proportion of males (53.4%) than females (47.0%) gained their qualification in a Broad STEM related subject (Tables 9b and 9d and Figure 10).

In 2019/20, 23.3% of qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs were in a Narrow STEM related subject. Male students (36.4%) were more than twice as likely as female students (14.8%) to gain their qualification in a Narrow STEM related subject (Tables 9b and 9d and Figure 10).

⁵ Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths – see [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) point 19

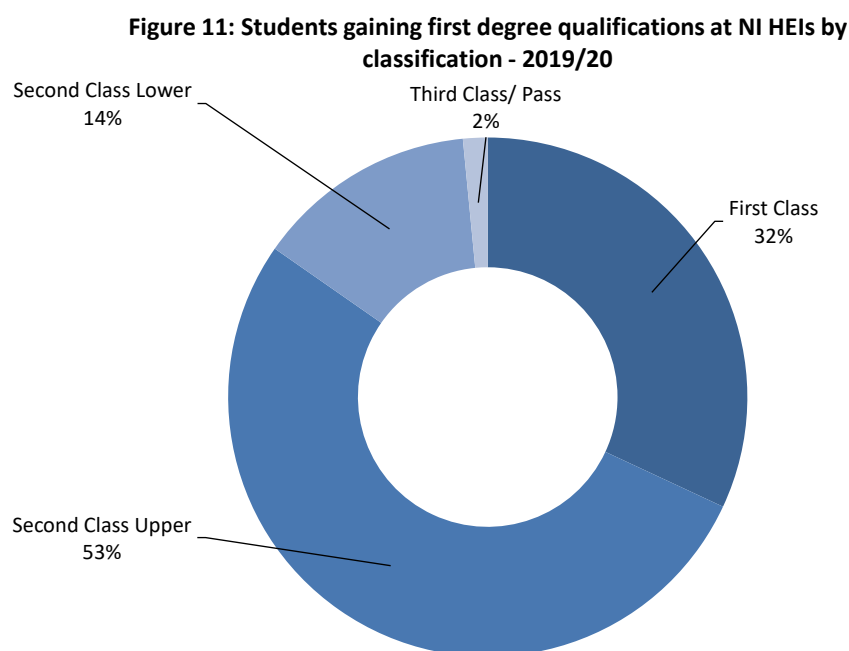
Figure 10: Proportion of students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs in Broad and Narrow STEM subjects by sex – 2019/20

STEM qualifications	Male	Female	Total
Broad STEM	53.4%	47.0%	49.5%
Narrow STEM	36.4%	14.8%	23.3%

2.4 Classification of first degree⁶ (Tables 10 to 10b, Figure 11)

In 2019/20, 84.7% (7,465) of ‘first degree’ graduates from NI HEIs (excluding those 285 attaining an unclassified ‘first degree’) achieved either a first class or upper second class honours degree (Table 10 a and b and Figure 11). This is a record high and may potentially be related to the impact of the ‘no detriment’ approach to assessment adopted by some universities at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which ensured that students would be awarded a final grade no lower than the most recent provider assessment of their attainment.

Females (86.3%) were more likely than males (82.4%) to achieve a first class or upper second class honours degree (Table 10a and 10b and Figure 11).



⁶ See [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) point 16.

2.5 Institutional breakdown (Tables 11 to 11c, Table 12, Figure 12)

Of all qualifications gained at NI HEIs in 2019/20, 48.2% were from Queen's University Belfast (QUB), 47.0% from Ulster University (UU), 2.0% from Stranmillis University College, 1.6% from St Mary's University College and 1.1% from the Open University (Table 11 and 11a and Figure 12).

Figure 12: Students gaining qualifications at NI HEIS by institution and level of qualification – 2018/19 to 2019/20

Level of Study	Academic Year	QUB	UU	Stranmillis	St Mary's	OU (NI)
First Degree	2018/19	3,990	4,580	290	235	290
	2019/20	4,025	4,500	265	220	95
Other Undergraduate	2018/19	455	995	0	0	150
	2019/20	535	650	0	0	55
Postgraduate	2018/19	3,225	2,740	55	45	50
	2019/20	3,150	2,370	55	45	30
Total	2018/19	7,670	8,315	345	280	485
	2019/20	7,710	7,520	315	260	180

2.6 UK comparison (Tables 13 to 13b)

The number of students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs decreased by 3.3%, from 800,955 in 2018/19 to 774,730 in 2019/20 (Table 13a).

Decreases occurred in the number of qualifications gained across all regions of the UK, which suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic affected the reporting of qualifications across the whole of the UK to some extent. Qualifications gained at NI HEIs decreased by 6.5% (17,095 to 15,985), those at English HEIs decreased by 2.7%, from 660,780 to 642,785, those at Scottish HEIs decreased by 7.9% (82,240 to 75,705), while Welsh HEIs experienced a decrease of 1.4% (40,840 to 40,250) (Table 13a).

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 is based on data validated and quality assured by HEIs prior to submission to HESA. 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 their duties; by the NI Assembly and its Committee for the Economy to scrutinise the HE sector; by other government departments and agencies; 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.

Main Uses of HEI statistics

The main uses of these statistics are to monitor HEI qualifications and the characteristics of NI students qualifying from UK HEIs and all students qualifying from 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 HEI sector. Analysis of data trends against key strategic priorities remain 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

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 75 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 HEI 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 parts of the evidence base used to evaluate and shape the strategies and policies of DfE.

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.

Departmental STEM Target

Statistics from this bulletin are used in the measurement of the following key commitment as set in the Department's Northern Ireland Higher Education Strategy – [‘Graduating to Success’](#):

“Increase the proportion of Higher Education graduates qualifying in STEM subjects to at least 22% by 2020, from a baseline of 18% in 2008”.

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 DE sets the numbers required for initial teacher training. The OU is also not subject to MaSN given its wholly part-time offering.

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 £3,206.25 for the 2019/20 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 2019/20](#) on 27th January 2021.

HESA's [Higher Education Student Data 2019/20](#) open data release was published by HESA on 9th February 2021. 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 UK Higher Education institutions (HEIs). It was set up in 1993 following the White Paper 'Higher Education: a new framework', which called for more coherence in HE 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 qualifications gained at FE colleges in NI in its [Further Education Activity](#) statistical bulletin.
3. Further statistics on the Northern Ireland HEI sector, including enrolments, graduate destinations and various higher education fact sheets can be downloaded from the Department's [Higher Education Statistics and Research](#) website.
4. **HESA's change to data coverage** - From 2019/20, HESA has made a notable change to the coverage of data for its [Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2019/20](#) release. In previous issues of this publication, it 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 by HESA will require significant changes to our systems and processes to incorporate the new record, this publication retains the old data coverage and we plan to adopt the new data coverage in the 2020/21 bulletin. However, we have provided summary statistics on the number of NI domiciled qualifications from Alternative Providers in 2019/20.
5. **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.
6. **Allocation of OU students** – The Open University's administrative centre is based in the south east of England. However, qualifications registered at one of the OU's national centres in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland 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.

7. **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 this year to provide a standardised hierarchical aggregation of HECoS codes suitable for the majority of users. The CAH has been developed to provide standard groupings that can 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. 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 level 1, comprising 23 groups; for the purposes of STEM analysis, Geographical and environmental studies has been split into natural sciences and social sciences.
8. Ulster University is engaged in flexible employer and community partnerships in 'Postgraduate taught' and 'Other Undergraduate' course delivery and this flexible provision was susceptible to COVID disruption given the flexible pattern of enrolment across the year, such that both enrolments and completions were both adversely impacted by Semester 2 COVID lockdowns during the 2019/20 reporting period.
9. In 2019/20, The Open University underreported the number of qualifications awarded due to administrative delays as a result of changes to assessment timetabling. These qualifications are expected to be returned in the 2020/21 data return. Most of this drop was seen among part time undergraduate students.
10. Figures for 2019/20 reported in this bulletin are counts of student enrolments associated with the award of HE qualifications during the period 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2020 inclusive.
11. **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.

The HESA rounding strategy changed for the 2013/14 release onwards. Percentages are now suppressed if based on a population of fewer than 22.5 individuals; this is a change from the previous threshold of 52 individuals, used in earlier publications. This change will enable more percentage calculations to be published. 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 fewer individuals are also suppressed;
- percentages and averages are based on unrounded figures;
- percentages are rounded to one decimal place

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.

DEFINITIONS

12. Higher Education

For the purpose of HESA's data collection, HE students for 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).

13. Level of qualification gained

- (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 and PGCE.
- (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.
- (iii) Other undergraduate includes qualification aims equivalent to and below first degree level, such as: Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE); foundation degrees; diplomas in HE with eligibility to register to practice with a Health or Social Care or veterinary statutory regulatory body; Higher National Diploma (HND); Higher National Certificate (HNC); Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE); Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE); foundation courses at HE level; NVQ/SVQ levels 4 and 5; post-degree diplomas and certificates at undergraduate level; professional qualifications at undergraduate level; other undergraduate diplomas and certificates, including post registration health and social care courses; other formal HE qualifications of less than degree standard; institutional undergraduate credit; and no formal undergraduate qualifications.

14. Mode of study

- (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. Applicable to the HESA qualifications obtained population, full-time students also include awards from dormant and writing-up status where the student's mode of study was previously full-time.

- (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. Applicable to the HESA qualifications obtained population, part-time students also include awards from dormant and writing-up status where the student's mode of study was previously part-time, and awards given to those on sabbatical.

15. Sexual identifier

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.

16. Classification of first degrees

The classification of a first degree indicates the qualification class that the student obtained. Certain qualifications obtained at first degree level are not subject to classification of the award, notably medical and general degrees. These, together with ordinary degrees and aegrotat qualifications, have been included within the 'unclassified' category. Third class honours and the pass category have been aggregated as 'third class/pass'. Lower second and undivided second class honours have been aggregated as 'second class, lower division'.

The percentage calculations included in this bulletin are expressed excluding unclassified first degrees.

17. Domicile

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

18. Academic year

The academic year runs from 1st August to 31st July.

19. STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths Qualifications

The STEM groupings used in this bulletin are based on the approach developed by HESA to categorise subjects into science/non-science subjects. Their science grouping is an aggregation of relevant CAH level 1 subject codes (derived from HECoS), with the exception of CAH12 (Geographical 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.

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; General and others in sciences; Mathematical sciences; Engineering and technology; Computing; Geographical 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 Geographical and environmental studies (natural sciences).

20. Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM)

The analysis presented in section 1.4 utilises five groups (quintiles) of Super Output Areas (SOAs) across NI. These five groups are determined based on relative level of deprivation using the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure (NI MDM) 2017.

SOAs ranked 1 to 178 form the most deprived quintiles 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.

NI MDM 2017 is a weighted combination of the seven domains of deprivation. The Income and Employment Deprivation domains account for nearly 50% of the multiple deprivation measure. The Health and Disability Domain, and Education, Skills and Training Deprivation 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 NI please follow this link:

[NI MDM 2017](#)

FURTHER INFORMATION

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