

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



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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KEY STATISTICS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND DOMICILED QUALIFIERS FROM UK HEIs

The number of NI domiciled qualifiers has increased over the past decade.....	Although fluctuating, the number of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs has increased by a net 14% over the past decade, from 18,655 in 2011/12 to 21,245 in 2020/21 (Tables 1a and 1b).
... with a substantial rise from the previous year...	At 21,245, the number of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs in 2020/21 was 21% higher than in 2019/20 (17,520) (Tables 1a and 1c). This substantial increase followed a smaller dip between 2018/19 (18,910) and 2019/20 (17,520), which was partly a result of delays in the awarding of qualifications due to administrative changes and Covid-19 factors. While such delays were responsible for some of the subsequent increase in 2020/21, other factors include the increased number of student places offered during the pandemic and the recent availability of postgraduate loans.
Most qualifications are through full-time study...	Almost three-quarters (74%) of the 21,245 qualifications gained by NI domiciles from UK HEIs in 2020/21 were through full-time study (Table 2f).
...with more females qualifying than males.	In 2020/21, of the 21,245 NI domiciled students gaining qualifications, around three-fifths (61%) were female (Table 2e).
‘First degree’ qualifications make up the majority of those gained.....	‘First degree’ qualifications made up over three-fifths (62%) of those gained, followed by ‘postgraduate’ qualifications (29%) and then ‘other undergraduate’ qualifications (8%) (Table 1d).
...with increases across all levels of qualifications awarded...	‘First degree’ qualifications increased in number by 14%, from 11,670 in 2019/20 to 13,255 in 2020/21, ‘other undergraduate’ qualifications increased by 57%, from 1,130 to 1,770, while ‘postgraduate’ qualifications increased by 32%, from 4,720 to 6,220 (Table 1d and 1f).
...while a quarter of all qualifiers graduated in GB...	A quarter (25%) of NI domiciled students who graduated received their qualifications from GB HEIs in 2020/21 (Tables 1a).
Around a half of students qualifying in a science subject...	Around a half (51%) of qualifications gained by NI domiciles were in a Broad STEM related subject and nearly a quarter (24%) were in a Narrow STEM related subject (Table 4b).
...but a higher proportion of NI domiciled males qualify in a Narrow STEM subject...	While similar proportions of males (52%) and females (50%) qualified in a Broad STEM related subject, males (36%) were more than twice as likely as females (16%) 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.	A record 85% of first degree qualifiers achieved either a first class or upper second class honours degree (Table 5b). This is possibly due to continued mitigating policies, coupled with changes in assessment practices, which were adopted by some universities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

KEY STATISTICS FOR QUALIFIERS FROM NORTHERN IRELAND HEIs

The number of qualifiers from NI HEIs has increased since 2010/11...	The number of qualifiers from NI HEIs has increased by a net 22% over the past decade, up from 16,765 in 2011/12 to 20,400 in 2020/21 (Table 7b).
...and has risen sharply over the past year...	At 20,400, the number of qualifications awarded at NI HEIs in 2020/21 was 28% higher than in 2019/20 (15,985) (Table 7c). This sharp increase followed a smaller dip between 2018/19 (17,095) and 2019/20 (15,985), which was partly a result of delays in the awarding of qualifications due to administrative changes and Covid-19 factors. While such delays were responsible for some of the subsequent increase in 2020/21, other factors include the increased number of student places offered during the pandemic and an increase in international postgraduate students.
The vast majority of qualifications gained at NI HEIs are through full-time courses.....	Most (70%) of the 20,400 qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs in 2020/21 were through full-time study. (Table 8b).
....and at 'First Degree' level...	'First degree' (53%) was the most popular qualification awarded, followed by 38% awarded a 'postgraduate' qualification and 9% awarded an 'other undergraduate' qualification (Table 7d).
...with increases across all levels of qualifications awarded..	First degree' qualifications increased in number by 18%, from 9,100 in 2019/20 to 10,780 in 2020/21, 'other undergraduate' qualifications increased by 55%, from 1,235 to 1,915, while 'postgraduate' qualifications increased by 36%, from 5,645 to 7,705 (Table 7d and 7f).
Over half of qualifications were in a science related subject...	Over half (51%) of students gained a qualification in a Broad STEM related subject and almost a quarter (23%) were in a Narrow STEM related subject (Table 9b).
...but a higher proportion of males qualified in a Narrow STEM subject at NI HEIs...	While similar proportions of males (51%) and females (50%) qualified in a Broad STEM related subject, males (35%) were more than twice as likely as females (16%) to gain their qualification in a Narrow STEM related subject (Table 9d).
Over four-fifths of NI qualifiers graduated with a first class or second class upper degree...	Over four fifths (84%) of 'first degree' graduates at NI HEIs achieved either a first class or upper second class honours degree (Table 10b). This high proportion is possibly due to continued mitigating policies, coupled with changes in assessment practices, adopted by some universities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
... and over three-quarters of qualifiers were domiciled outside NI.	Over three-quarters (78%) of students gaining a qualification at NI HEIs were from NI, while 6% were from GB, 4% from RoI, 1% from other EU countries and 12% 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: Higher Education (HE) enrolments; HE qualifications; Further Education (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 qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs in the 2020/21 academic year, and by all students at NI HEIs in the same time period.

There has been a change to the data coverage in this year's bulletin, as Alternative Provider (AP) data from the HESA [Student Alternative](#) record was combined for the first time with the usual HESA [Student Record](#) data submitted by HEI providers. 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 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 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 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 has noted that there are two known areas in which the pandemic has had some impact in regards to qualifications across the UK:

- At the end of the 2019/20 academic year, administrative delays related to the pandemic led to a number of degrees not being awarded during the normal data collection process. The resulting dip in qualifiers was followed by a corresponding rise in the number of qualifiers in the 2020/21 data, as providers reported those qualifiers whose degree had not been reported for the 2019/20 academic year. Both the dip in 2019/20 qualifiers and the corresponding rise in 2020/21 can be seen across most modes and level of study.
- In relation to classifications of first degrees and other awards, in 2019/20 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 during that academic year. Although many of the blanket 'no detriment' policies were discontinued at the end of the 2019/20 academic year, many providers instituted modified mitigation policies designed to take into

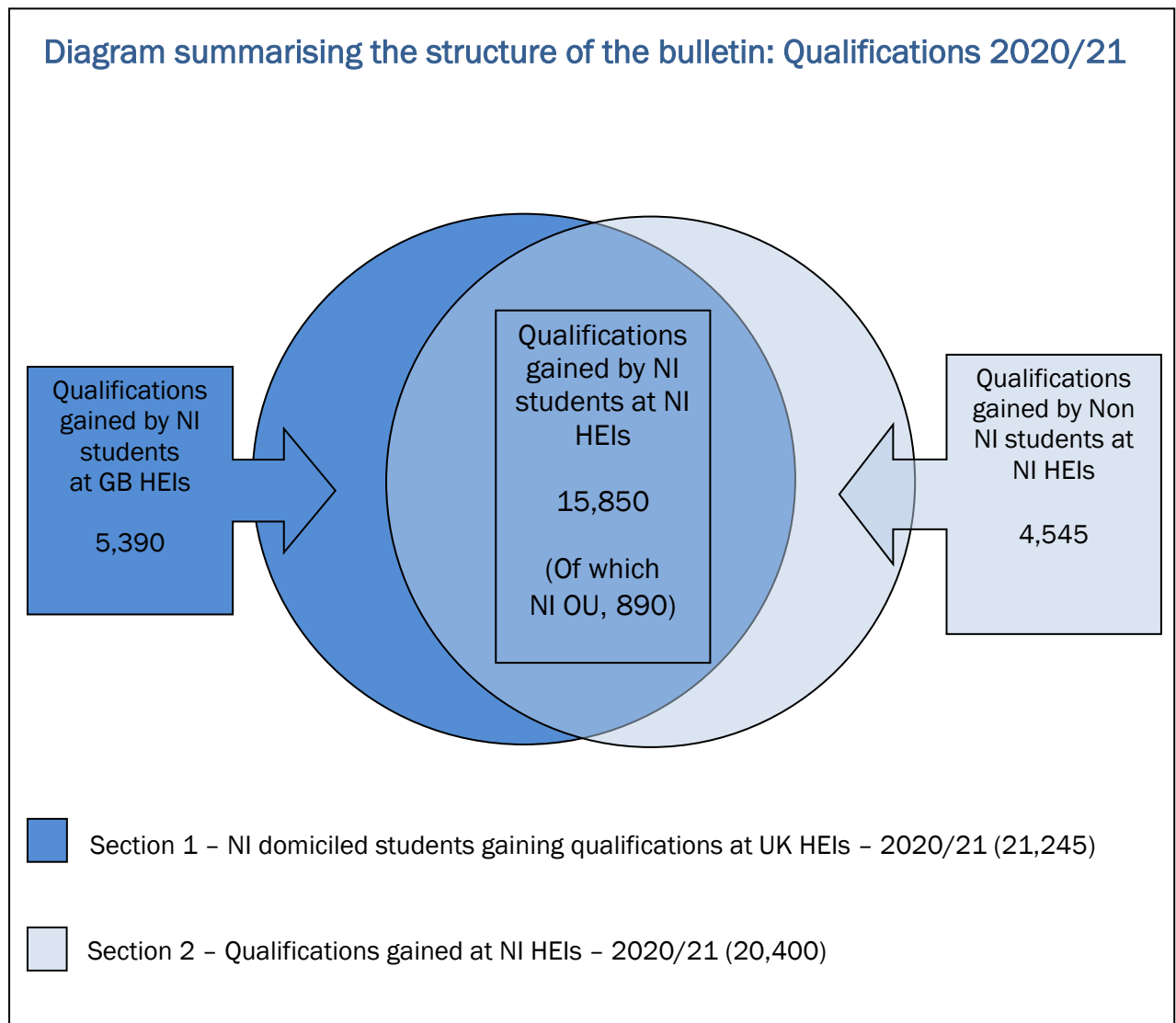
consideration the ongoing difficulties faced by students. The continuation of these mitigation policies, coupled with changes in assessment practices, is reflected in the degree classifications awarded in 2020/21. As a result, the proportion of first class degrees awarded across the UK in 2020/21 is slightly higher than that in 2019/20 and much higher than that in the last pre-pandemic academic year.

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:



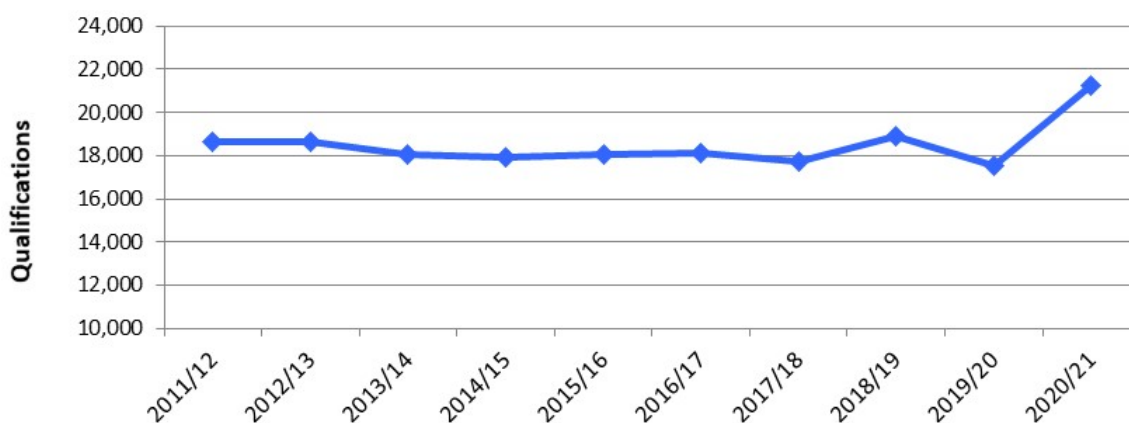
Section 1: Northern Ireland domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK Higher Education Institutions (Tables 1 to 6d)

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

Although fluctuating, the number of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs has increased by a net 14% over the past decade, from 18,655 in 2011/12 to 21,245 in 2020/21 (Tables 1a and 1b).

At 21,245, the number of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs in 2020/21 was 21% higher than in 2019/20 (17,520) (Tables 1a and 1c). This substantial increase followed a smaller dip between 2018/19 (18,910) and 2019/20 (17,520), which was partly a result of delays in the awarding of qualifications due to administrative changes and Covid-19 related factors. While such delays were responsible for some of the subsequent increase in 2020/21, other factors include the increased number of student places offered during the pandemic and the recent availability of postgraduate loans.¹

Figure 1 : NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs - 2011/12 to 2020/21



In terms of the level of qualification gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs, 'postgraduate' qualifications have experienced the largest percentage increase (40%) over the last ten years, from 4,455 in 2019/20 to 6,220 in 2020/21. With 85% (1,500) of this increase occurring between 2019/20 (4,720) and 2020/21 (6,220), this was an important factor in the substantial year-on-year overall increase in NI domiciled qualifiers. While Covid-19 related delays may have accentuated the number of postgraduate awards in 2020/21, the recent availability of postgraduate loans, the increased number of courses offered during the pandemic and uncertainty regarding employment prospects in the early months of the pandemic are likely to have been the main drivers (Tables 1d and 1e).

Another important factor in the year-on-year overall increase in NI domiciled qualifiers was the 14% (1,585) increase in 'first degrees', from 11,670 in 2019/20 to 13,255 in 2020/21; equating to almost all of the net increase since 2011/12 (11,660). A combination of award delays and the upwards trend in degree level participation may

¹ See [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) points 8 to 11

have contributed in this respect. In contrast, reflecting a fall in part-time study, the number of qualifications gained by students enrolled on ‘other undergraduate’ courses (such as foundation degrees, diplomas, HNDs and HNCs) has fallen by a net 30% over the past decade, from 2,540 in 2011/12 to 1,770 in 2020/21. This decline was partially reversed by a 57% (640) increase between 2019/20 (1,130) and 2020/21 (1,770), but this was mainly due the carrying over of awards due to administrative and Covid related factors (Tables 1d and 1e).

1.2 Breakdown of qualifications gained – 2020/21 (Tables 1f to 2f, Figures 1 and 2)

All Higher Education Qualifications

In 2020/21, 21,245 qualifications were gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs; a 21% increase from 17,520 in 2019/20 (Tables 1a and 1c).

Mode of study – Of the 21,245 qualifications gained in 2020/21, almost three-quarters (74%) were through full-time study (Table 2f).

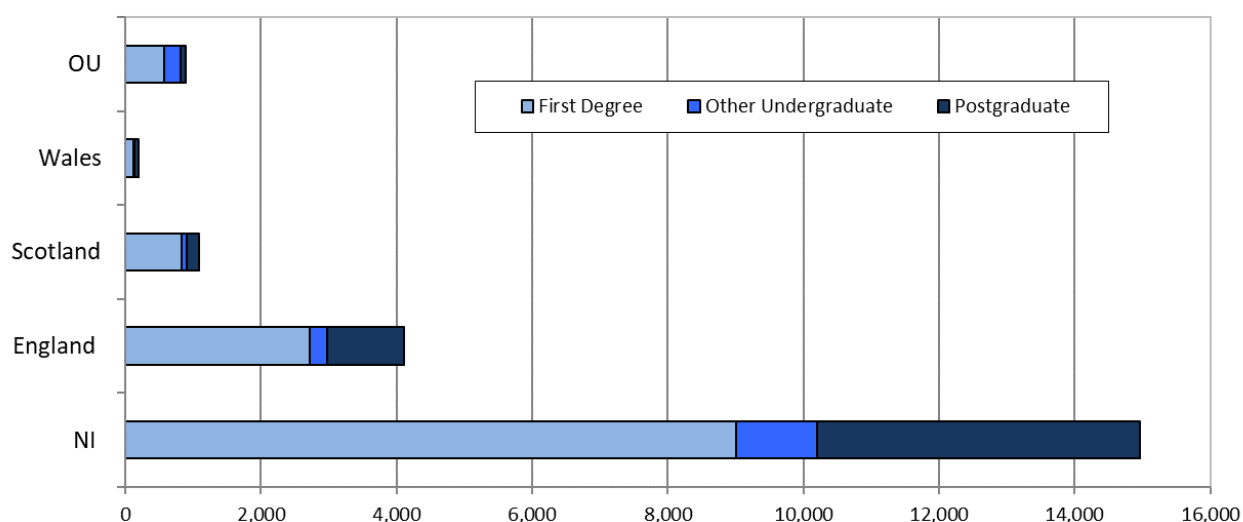
Between 2019/20 and 2020/21, the number of full-time students gaining qualifications increased by 12%, from 13,980 to 15,630. The number of part-time qualifiers increased by 59%, from 3,540 to 5,615, over the same period (Tables 1a and 1c).

Sex – In 2020/21, of the 21,245 NI domiciled students gaining qualifications, around three-fifths (61%) were female (Tables 2e).

Location of study – In 2020/21, of the 21,245 NI domiciled students who graduated from UK HEIs, 75% received their qualifications from NI HEIs (including 4% studying locally at the OU) and 25% received theirs from GB HEIs (Tables 1a and 2c and Figure 2).

Level of Qualification - Of the 21,245 qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs in 2020/21, 13,255 (62%) were ‘first degree’ qualifications, 1,770 (8%) were ‘other undergraduate’ qualifications and 6,220 (29%) were ‘postgraduate’ qualifications (Table 1d).

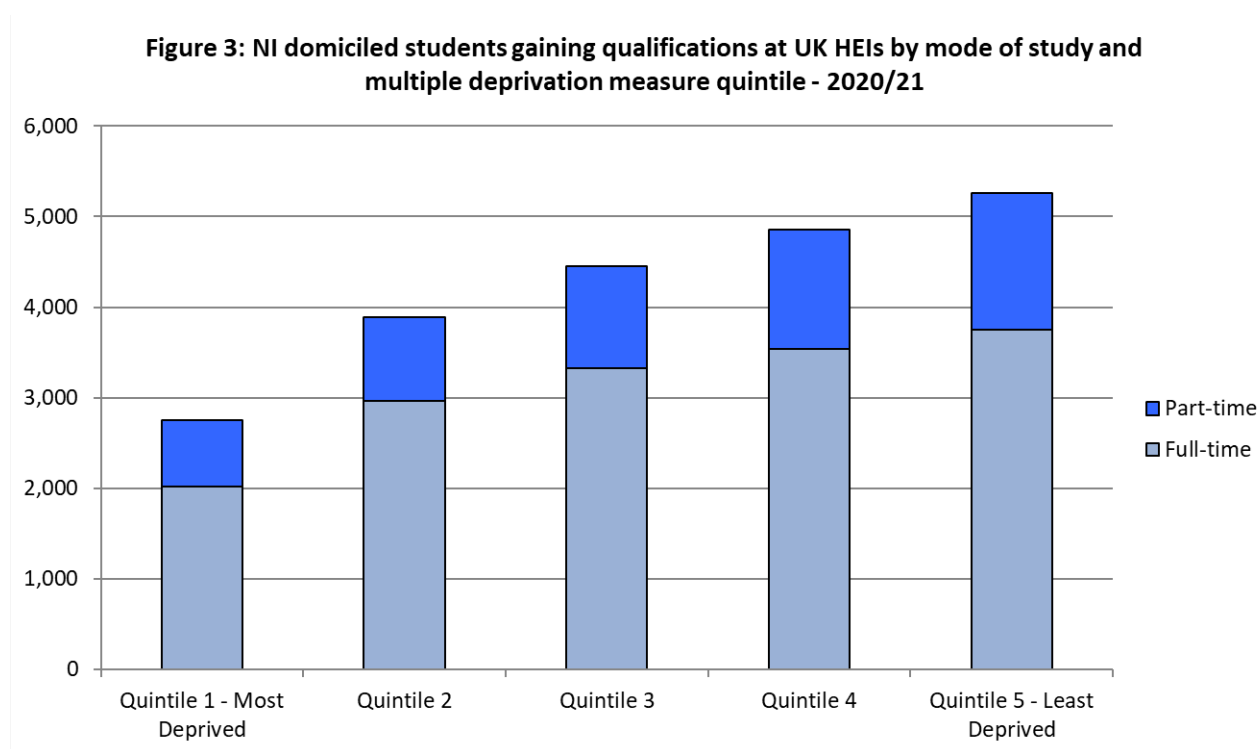
Figure 2 : NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs by location of study and level of qualification - 2020/21



'First degree' qualifications increased in number by 14%, from 11,670 in 2019/20 to 13,255 in 2020/21, 'other undergraduate' qualifications increased by 57%, from 1,130 to 1,770, while 'postgraduate' qualifications increased by 32%, from 4,720 to 6,220 (Table 1d and 1f).

1.3 NI Multiple Deprivation Measure quintiles 2020/21 (Tables 3 and 3a, Figure 3)

Of the 21,205 NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs in 2020/21 for whom a Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM) quintile could be assigned, a quarter (25%) were from the least deprived quintile (Quintile 5 in Figure 3), while the lowest proportion (13%) were from the most deprived quintile (Quintile 1 in Figure 3) (Tables 3 and 3a).

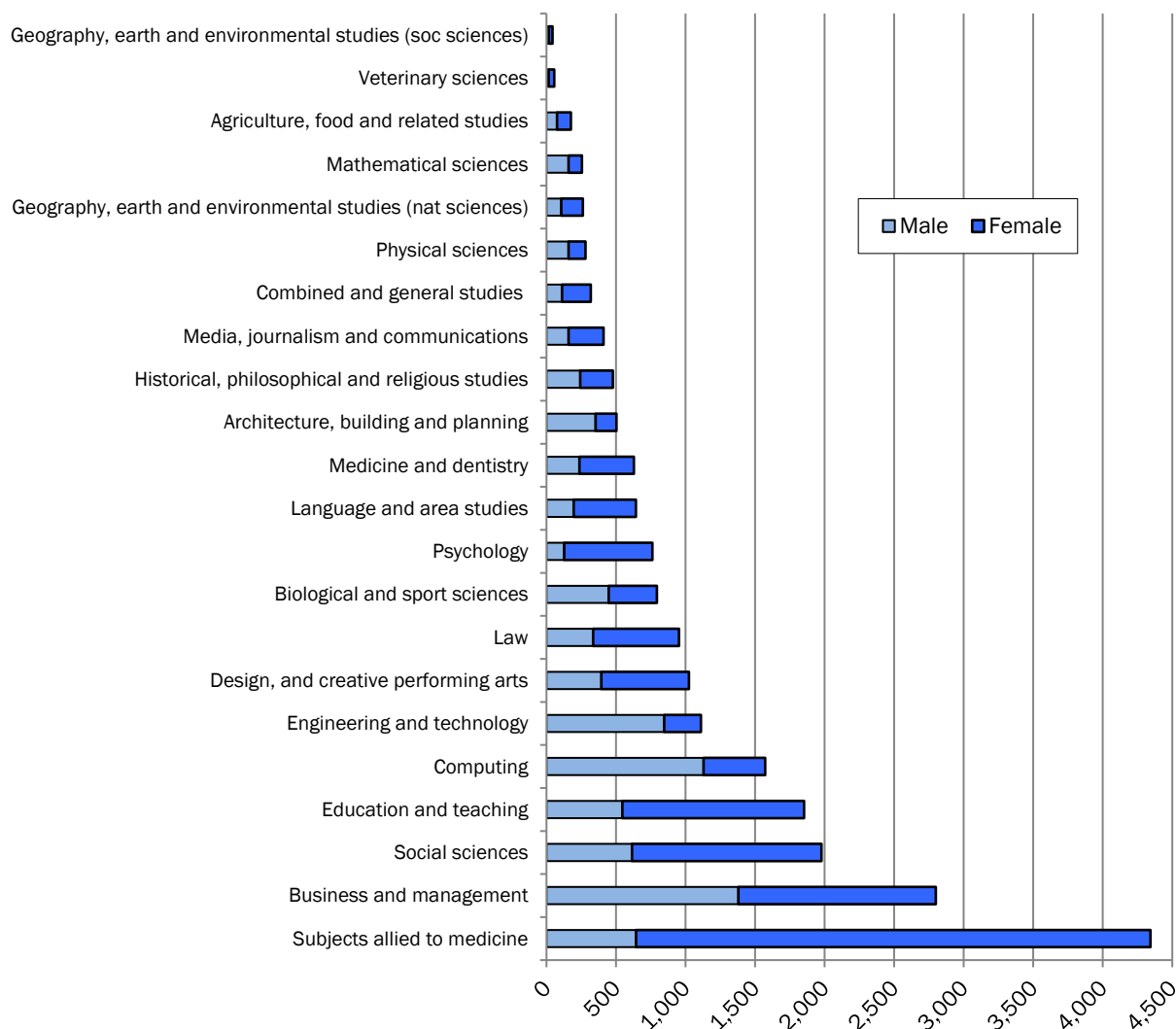


1.4 Subject of Study 2020/21 (Tables 4 to 4d, Figures 4 and 5)

The most popular subject groups for NI students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs in 2020/21 were 'Subjects allied to medicine' (20%), 'Business and management' (13%) and 'Social sciences' (9%) (Table 4a).

In 2020/21, females accounted for 85% of qualifications gained in 'Subjects allied to medicine', 83% of those gained in 'Psychology' and 71% of those gained in both 'Veterinary sciences' and 'Education and teaching'. In contrast, males accounted for 76% of qualifications gained in 'Engineering and technology', 72% of 'Computing' qualifications and 70% 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 - 2020/21



In 2020/21, 51% of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs were in a Broad STEM² related subject. Similar proportions of males (52%) and females (50%) gained their qualification in a Broad STEM related subject (Tables 4b and 4d).

In 2020/21, 24% of qualifications gained by NI domiciled students at UK HEIs were in a Narrow STEM related subject. Males (36%) were more than twice as likely as females (16%) 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 22

Figure 5: Proportion of NI domiciled students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs in Broad and Narrow STEM subjects by sex – 2020/21

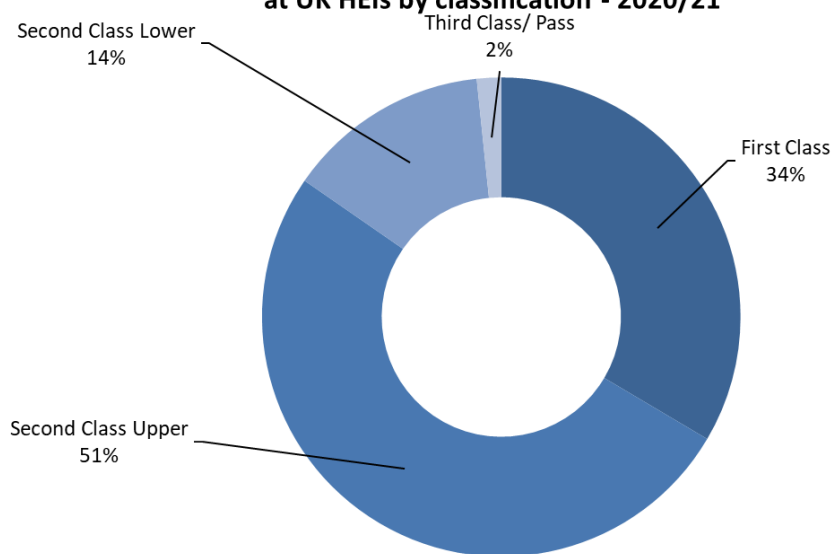
STEM qualifications	Male	Female	Total
Broad STEM	52%	50%	51%
Narrow STEM	36%	16%	24%

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

In 2020/21, 85% (10,765) of NI domiciled ‘first degree’ graduates (excluding those 535 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 continued mitigating policies, coupled with changes in assessment practices, which were adopted by some universities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, designed to take into account the ongoing difficulties faced by students.

Females (86%) were more likely than males (83%) to achieve a first class or upper second class honours degree (Tables 5a and 5b).

Figure 6: NI domiciled students gaining first degree qualifications at UK HEIs by classification - 2020/21



³ See [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) point 19

1.6 Qualifications gained at UK Alternative Providers – 2020/21 (Tables 6 to 6d)

As discussed in the introduction, there has been a notable change made to data coverage since the 2019/20 Qualifications bulletin. For the first time, data from Alternative Providers (APs) in the UK has been combined with that from UK HEIs. 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 awarded qualifications from APs in 2020/21 has been provided in Table 6 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, 85 qualifications were gained by NI domiciled students at APs in the UK, of which 67% were obtained on a full-time basis. Of these 85 qualifications, over two-thirds (67%) were 'postgraduate' qualifications. A further 24% were 'first degree' qualifications and 8% were 'other undergraduate' qualifications (Tables 6, 6a and 6b).

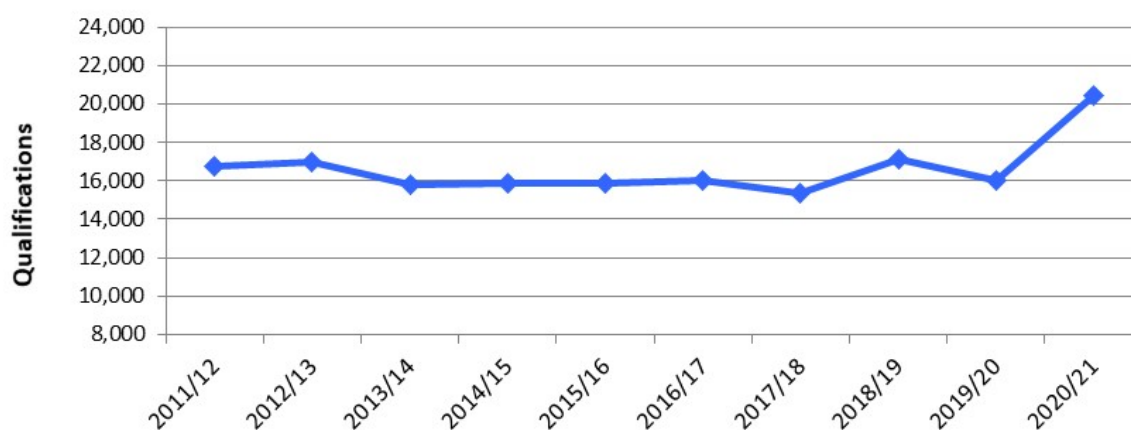
Section 2: Students gaining qualifications at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions (Tables 7 to 13b)

2.1 Change over the last 10 years – 2011/12 to 2020/21 (Tables 7 to 7f, Figure 7)

The number of qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs has increased by a net 22% over the past 10 years, from 16,765 in 2011/12 to 20,400 in 2020/21; although this has been subject to fluctuation.

At 20,400, the number of qualifications awarded at NI HEIs in 2020/21 was 28% higher than in 2019/20 (15,985) (Table 7c). This sharp increase followed a smaller dip between 2018/19 (17,095) and 2019/20 (15,985), which was partly a result of delays in the awarding of qualifications due to administrative changes and Covid-19 factors. While such delays were responsible for some of the subsequent increase in 2020/21, other factors include the increased number of student places offered during the pandemic and an increase in international postgraduate students.⁴

Figure 7 : Qualifications gained at NI HEIs - 2011/12 to 2020/21



In terms of the level of qualification gained by students at NI HEIs, 'postgraduate' qualifications have experienced the largest percentage increase (61%) over the last ten years, from 4,800 in 2011/12 to 7,705 in 2020/21. With 71% (2,055) of this increase occurring between 2019/20 (5,645) and 2020/21 (7,705), this was an important factor in the substantial year-on-year overall increase in qualifiers at NI HEIs. While Covid-19 related delays may have accentuated the number of postgraduate awards in 2020/21, the increased number of courses offered during the pandemic, increases in the numbers of international students studying at postgraduate level, the recent availability of postgraduate loans and uncertainty regarding employment prospects in the early months of the pandemic are likely to have been the main drivers (Tables 7d and 7e).

Another important factor in the year-on-year overall increase in qualifiers at NI HEIs was the 18% (1,675) increase in 'first degrees', from 9,100 in 2019/20 to 10,780 in 2020/21; equating to all of the net increase since 2011/12 (9,100). A combination of award delays and the upwards trend in degree level participation may have contributed in this respect. In contrast, reflecting a fall in part-time study, the number of qualifications gained by students enrolled on 'other undergraduate' courses (such as

⁴ See [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) points 8 to 12

foundation degrees, diplomas, HNDs and HNCs) has fallen by a net 33% over the past decade, from 2,865 in 2011/12 to 1,915 in 2020/21. This decline was partially reversed by a 55% (680) increase between 2019/20 (1,235) and 2020/21 (1,915), but this was mainly due the carrying over of awards due to administrative and Covid related factors (Tables 7d and 7e).

2.2 Breakdown of qualifications gained – 2020/21 (Tables 7 to 7f and 8a to 8f, Figure 8)

All Higher Education Qualifications

In 2020/21, 20,400 qualifications were gained by students at NI HEIs; an increase of 28% from the 2019/20 figure of 15,985 (Tables 7a and 7c).

Mode of study – Of the 20,400 qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs in 2020/21, 70% were through full-time study (Table 8b).

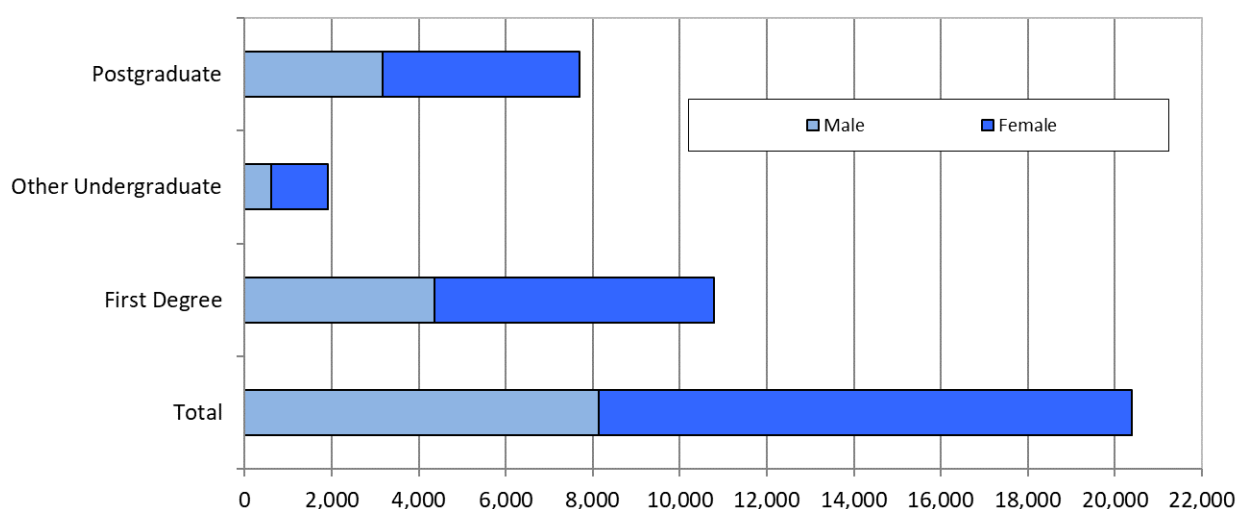
Between 2019/20 and 2020/21, the number of full-time students gaining qualifications increased by 22%, from 11,785 to 14,330, while part-time numbers increased by 44%, from 4,205 to 6,070, over the same period (Table 7a and 7c).

Sex – In 2020/21, of the 20,400 students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs, three-fifths (60%) were female. (Table 8e and 8f and Figure 8).

Domicile – In 2020/21, of the 20,400 students gaining a qualification at NI HEIs, 78% were from NI, 6% from GB, 4% from RoI, 1% from other EU countries and 12% from non-EU countries (Table 8c).

Level of Qualification - Of the 20,400 qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs in 2020/21, 10,780 (53%) obtained a ‘first degree’ qualification, 1,915 (9%) an ‘other undergraduate’ qualification and 7,705 (38%) obtained a ‘postgraduate’ qualification (Table 7d).

Figure 8 : Students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs by level of qualification and sex - 2020/21



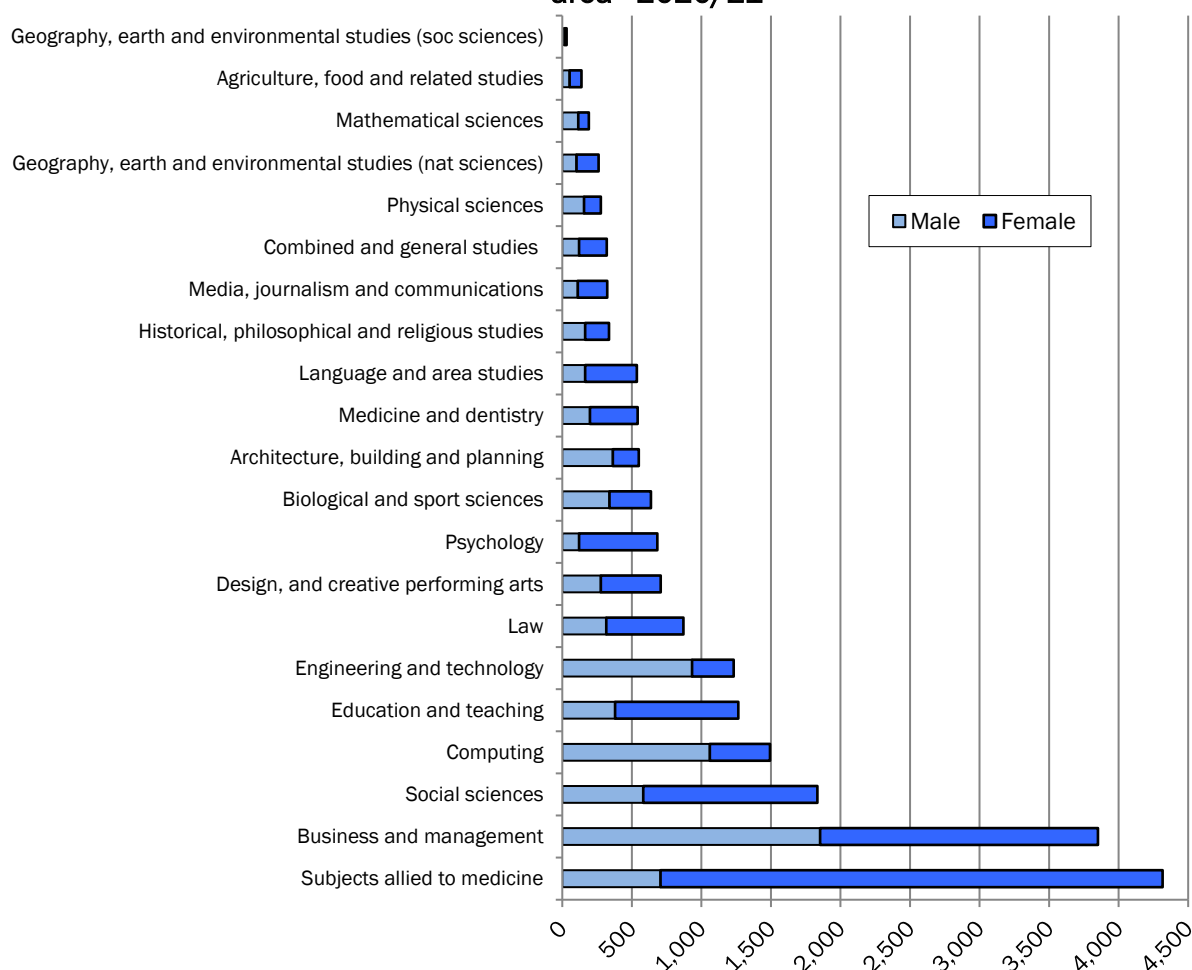
'First degree' qualifications increased in number by 18%, from 9,100 in 2019/20 to 10,780 in 2020/21, 'other undergraduate' qualifications increased by 55%, from 1,235 to 1,915, while 'postgraduate' qualifications increased by 36%, from 5,645 to 7,705 (Table 7d and 7f).

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 2020/21 were 'Subjects allied to medicine' (21%), 'Business and management' (19%) and 'Social sciences' (9%) (Table 9a and Figure 9).

In 2020/21, females accounted for 84% of qualifications gained in 'Subjects allied to medicine', 82% of those gained in 'Psychology' and 70% of those gained in 'Education and teaching'. In contrast, males accounted for 76% of qualifications gained in 'Engineering and technology', 71% of 'Computing' qualifications and 66% of 'Architecture, building and planning' qualifications (Table 9c and Figure 9).

Figure 9 : Students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs by sex and subject area - 2020/21



In 2020/21, 51% of qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs were in a Broad STEM⁵ related subject. Similar proportions of males (51%) and females (50%) gained their qualification in a Broad STEM related subject (Tables 9b and 9d and Figure 10).

In 2020/21, 23% of qualifications gained by students at NI HEIs were in a Narrow STEM related subject. Male students (35%) were more than twice as likely as female students (16%) to gain their qualification in a Narrow STEM related subject (Tables 9b and 9d and Figure 10).

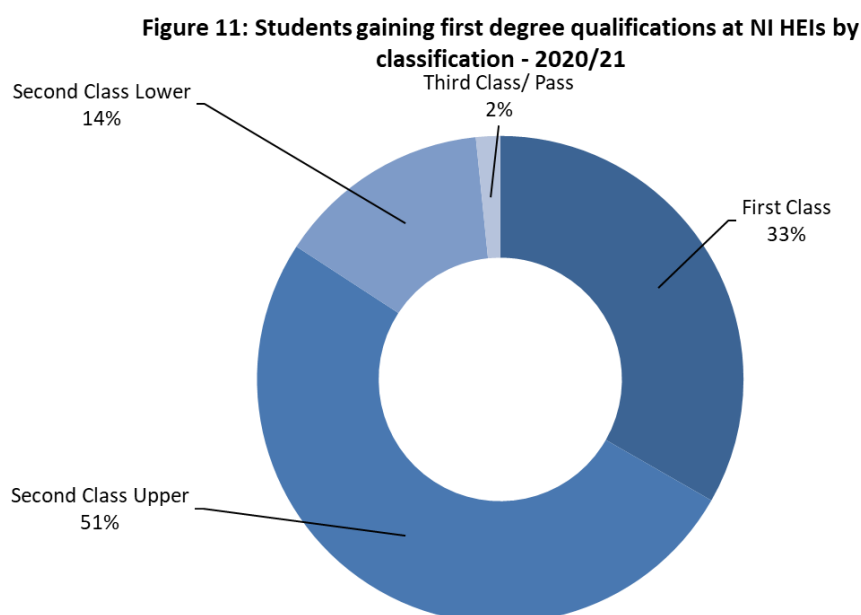
Figure 10: Proportion of students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs in Broad and Narrow STEM subjects by sex – 2020/21

STEM qualifications	Male	Female	Total
Broad STEM	51%	50%	51%
Narrow STEM	35%	16%	23%

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

In 2020/21, 84% (8,795) of ‘first degree’ graduates from NI HEIs (excluding those 330 attaining an unclassified ‘first degree’) achieved either a first class or upper second class honours degree (Table 10 a and 10b and Figure 11). This high proportion may potentially be related to continued mitigating policies, coupled with changes in assessment practices, which were adopted by some universities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, designed to take into account the ongoing difficulties faced by students.

Females (85%) were more likely than males (82%) to achieve a first class or upper second class honours degree (Table 10a and 10b).



⁵ Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths – see [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) point 22

⁶ See [Annex C: Notes and Definitions](#) point 19

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

Of all qualifications gained at NI HEIs in 2020/21, 46% were from Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), 46% from Ulster University (UU), 2% from Stranmillis University College, 1% from St Mary’s University College and 4% 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 – 2019/20 to 2020/21

Level of Study	Academic Year	QUB	UU	Stranmillis	St Mary’s	OU (NI)
First Degree	2019/20	4,025	4,500	265	220	95
	2020/21	4,610	5,080	285	235	565
Other Undergraduate	2019/20	535	650	0	0	55
	2020/21	1,045	625	0	0	245
Postgraduate	2019/20	3,150	2,370	55	45	30
	2020/21	3,745	3,770	50	65	80
Total	2019/20	7,710	7,520	315	260	180
	2020/21	9,405	9,470	335	300	890

2.6 UK comparison (Tables 13 to 13b)

The number of students gaining qualifications at UK HEIs increased by 9%, from 800,335 in 2019/20 to 872,765 in 2020/21 (Table 13a).

Increases occurred in the number of qualifications gained across all regions of the UK. This suggests that, to some extent, qualifications not awarded in 2019/20 due to the COVID-19 pandemic were carried over and reported in 2020/21 across the UK. Qualifications gained at NI HEIs increased by 28% (15,985 to 20,400), those at English HEIs increased by 9%, from 668,395 to 726,130, those at Scottish HEIs also increased by 9% (75,705 to 82,850), while Welsh HEIs experienced an increase of 8% (40,250 to 43,390) (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
- 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 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 Narrow STEM subjects (with an emphasis on physical and biological sciences, mathematical and computer science, engineering and technology) 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 £3,296.25 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 qualifications gained at FE colleges in NI in its [Further Education Sector 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. **Change to data coverage** - There has been a change to the data coverage in this year's bulletin, as Alternative Provider (AP) data from the HESA [Student Alternative record](#) were combined for the first time with the usual HESA [Student Record](#) data submitted by HEI providers. 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 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 was 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 7 in this bulletin and Tables 1, Tables 1a to 1f, and Table 13 in the online Excel and OpenData tables.

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 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 minor 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.

8. In 2019/20, The Open University underreported the number of qualifications awarded due to administrative delays as a result of changes to assessment timetabling. This subsequent awarding of these qualifications in the 2020/21 academic year, combined with the underreporting the previous year, resulted in a large increase in the number of qualifications awarded by this provider between

2019/20 and 2020/21. Most of this increase was seen among part time undergraduate students.

9. There was a large increase in QUB in the number of 'Other Undergraduate' qualification between 2019/20 and 2020/21. This increase consisted largely of part-time Nursing (Continuing Professional Development) students, whose qualifications had been delayed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
10. Ulster University is engaged in flexible employer and community partnerships in course delivery and this flexible provision was subject to COVID disruption, such that both enrolments and completions were both adversely impacted by Semester 2 COVID lockdowns during the 2019/20 reporting period.
11. In addition to the delay in the awarding of some qualifications in 2019/20, other known Covid-19 related factors reported by QUB and UU include the following: (i) some students on courses that included a sandwich year did not partake in this and so and brought forward their exams by a year; 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. There has been an increase in the number of international students participating in postgraduate study at both QUB and UU (particularly the Birmingham and London campuses), which has consequently led to an increase in the number of qualifications awarded in the 2020/21 academic year. There were 1,540 qualifications awarded to international students in 2020/21, compared with 940 in 2019/20.
13. Figures for 2020/21 reported in this bulletin are counts of student enrolments associated with the award of HE qualifications during the period 1 August 2020 to 31 July 2021 inclusive.
14. **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

15. Higher Education

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).

16. 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.

17. 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.

18. 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.

19. 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.

20. 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.

21. Academic year

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

22. 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 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.

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).

23. 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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