

Performance Indicators in Higher Education: Contextual Information

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Technical and Background information

This document has been produced by the Department for the Economy (DfE), Northern Ireland (NI) and provides technical and background information on the 2019/20 Performance Indicators (PIs) for NI Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

A full set of tables for NI HEIs and all other publicly funded HEIs in the UK are published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and are available to download from the following link – [HESA Performance Indicators](#).



READER INFORMATION

Purpose	Monitor and report on Performance Indicators at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions.
Authors	Conor Gallagher, Michael MacNeill, Kerry McColgan.
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Feedback	As we want to engage with users of our statistics, we invite you to feedback your comments on this publication to: Michael MacNeill – Michael.MacNeill@economy-ni.gov.uk (Tel: 028 90 2 57897) Kerry McColgan – Kerry.McColgan@economy-ni.gov.uk (Tel: 028 90 2 57753) Conor Gallagher – Conor.Gallagher@economy-ni.gov.uk (Tel: 028 90 2 57825)

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). The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) focuses on NI HEIs and NI domiciled students in attendance at any UK HEI. Statistical information is collected routinely from a variety of electronic individual level administrative systems.

The Head of the Branch is the Principal Statistician, Brian French. The Branch aims to present information in a meaningful way and provide advice on its uses to customers in the DfE Committee, FE colleges, universities, Professional Advisory Groups, policy branches within the DfE, other educational organisations, academia, private sector organisations, charity/voluntary organisations, as well as the general public.

The statistical information collected is used to contribute to major exercises, such as reporting on the performance of the Higher Education (HE) and FE sectors, other comparative performance exercises, target setting and monitoring, departmental research projects, development of service frameworks, as well as policy formulation and evaluation. In addition, the information is used in response to a high volume of Assembly questions and ad hoc queries each year.

Information is disseminated through a number of key statistical publications, including: HE enrolments; HE qualifications; Destinations of leavers from Higher Education (DLHE); FE activity; and Essential Skills enrolments and outcomes.

A detailed list of these publications is available from:

Website: [Higher and further education and training statistics](#)

What are Performance Indicators?

Performance Indicators are statistical indicators intended to offer an objective measure of how a HEI is performing. They are not 'league tables' and do not attempt to compare all HEIs against a 'gold standard' or against each other, but rather against sector 'benchmarks'.

What are Benchmarks?

Differences between institutions, such as subject mix or the qualifications on entry of their students, make comparisons across all institutions unreliable. For this reason, benchmarks against which an institution's value can be compared have been produced. The benchmark is a sector average, adjusted to take account of the subject and entry profile of the institution's students. If an institution's indicator is very different from its benchmark, we can say that there is some factor other than subject, entry qualification or age leading to this difference. However, the benchmark represents a sector average and small differences from it are to be expected and may be ignored.

In the tables in this publication a '+' or '-' sign has been included when the indicator is significantly better/worse than its benchmark. Benchmarks are calculated for each institution, but not at a country level.

Where the number of students within a specified population at a HE provider is small, the value of the indicator could be very variable and should be interpreted with care.

Who produces the Performance Indicators?

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) published the Widening Participation 'Performance Indicators in Higher Education in the UK 2019/20' on 11 February 2021. This is the twenty second year of publication and the seventeenth year they have been published by HESA. Copies of previous publications are available from: [HESA UK performance indicators](#)

The Department for the Economy (DfE) publishes the Northern Ireland (NI) specific fact sheet from the HESA Performance Indicators data on the same day.

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 figures.

Coverage of 2018/19 Performance Indicators (PIs)

The PIs published on 11 February 2021 cover:

1. Students who were in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) – all undergraduate students – 2019/20

The PIs published on 24 February 2021 cover:

1. Non-continuation rates – full time 2018/19 entrants and part-time 2017/18 entrants
2. Resumption of study after a year out – 2017/18 entrants
3. Projected learning outcomes – 2018/19 entrants

The PIs cover the four Higher Education Institutions for Northern Ireland, along with the NI campuses of the Open University:

- Queen's University Belfast (QUB)
- Ulster University (UU)
- Stranmillis University College (Stranmillis)
- St Mary's University College (St Mary's)

The coverage of the PIs splits all undergraduate entrants by first degree and other undergraduates, with most entrants being in the former category, first degree.

First degree includes: 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.

Other undergraduate includes qualification aims equivalent to and below first degree level, such as: Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE); foundation degrees; 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; and no formal undergraduate qualifications.

Notes

1. Low participation neighbourhoods

In the full set of tables published by HESA, indicators 1, 2 and 3 include sections on Higher Education entrants from low participation neighbourhoods.

There have been concerns about how appropriate this classification is, particularly for Scottish and Northern Irish HEIs, due to difficulties with the methodology of this measurement, which uses the POLAR4 classification of low participation.

POLAR4 is based on the HE participation rates of people who were aged 18 between 2005 and 2009 and entered a HE course in a UK Higher Education Institution or English or Scottish Further Education College, aged 18 or 19, between academic years 2009/10 and 2013/14.

This low participation measure is based on a UK wide classification of areas into participation bands. The relatively high (in UK terms) participation rate in NI means that the UK participation bands may not be appropriate for NI, and that the figures produced for NI HEIs could misrepresent their contribution to widening participation. Therefore, no analysis of low participation data has been provided for NI HEIs.

2. National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC)

Following a fundamental review of the UK Performance Indicators, the use of the NS-SEC as a measure of the participation of under-represented groups was discontinued across the UK from 2015/16, following concerns about the quality of the data collected for this variable.

Further information on this can be found at the following link:

[HESA Widening Participation](#)

3. Using Benchmarks and Statistical Significance

To compare an institution's indicators with its sector, the benchmark should be used in preference to the overall sector average, because it takes account of the subject and entry qualifications profile. In this publication, a '+' or '-' sign has been included beside the benchmark to show when the difference between the indicator and the benchmark is statistically significant.

When an institution has a high proportion of individuals with unknown information in a benchmarking factor, it can lead to a high proportion of individuals being placed in the unknown groups when benchmarking. However, investigation by HEFCE on a similar issue has determined that a threshold of at least 50% known data would have little effect on the performance indicators.

4. Projected Learner Outcomes

The other method for producing non-completion rates projects what proportion of the full-time first degree starters are likely to be in each of the 'end states' after a period of fifteen years (that is, having gained a qualification, transferred to another institution, or been absent from HE for two consecutive years). The fifteen year period has been chosen as an over-estimate of the amount of time that the majority of full-time first degree students should have reached one of these end states.

The projection is based on the current pattern of students at the institution. Firstly, HESA defines a 'transition population', which consists of students who were active on a full-time first degree course in a particular academic year plus students who were active on a full-time first degree course in the previous year, excluding those who have obtained a degree. For each student in the transition population, they look at their 'state' (mode of study, level of study, institution, year of programme and if applicable, qualification obtained) in the academic year in question and in the following academic year. Assuming that this pattern of students is typical for the institution, this is used to anticipate the status of the full-time first degree starters up to fifteen years on. For further details, refer to the technical notes on the HESA website:

[HESA website](#)

5. Change in methodology for the allocation of Open University students

From 2013/14, HESA has changed the allocation of Open University (OU) students to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Previously, all OU enrolments and qualifications were counted as being within England, where the OU has its administrative centre. HESA decided from their 2013/14 release onwards that enrolments and qualifications registered at one of the OU's national centres in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will contribute to the totals of those countries where statistics are shown by country of provider.

A full public consultation was conducted by DfE, in which 100% of responses were in support of the change of methodology for OU allocation. Consequently, it was decided that DfE would mirror the change of allocation. DfE adopted the new methodology proposed by HESA from 2014/15.

6. Age

Many of the tables are split between young and mature students, defined as follows:

- Young students are those who are aged under 21 at 30 September of the academic year in which they are recorded as entering the institution.
- Mature students are those who are aged 21 or over, also at 30 September of the academic year in which they are recorded as entering the institution.

7. Change in methodology for the entrant population

- From the 2020 release, the combined Higher Education Provider (HEP) and Alternative Provider (AP) population have been used in the calculation of the performance indicators. Prior to this, only HEPs were published as Official Statistics with PIs for the combined population published as experimental).
- From the 2020 release, the entrant population is based on the 50 day method and excludes entrants who left within 50 days of commencement rather than excluding entrants who leave before 1st December as was the previous standard. The method had been published for 3 years prior as experimental, but has been adopted as the standard going forward.