

Office for
Students



Student characteristics data: student populations – key findings

Students at English higher education
providers between 2010-11 and 2021-22

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Overview

This document summarises some of the sector-level trends in our student characteristics populations data. It sits alongside an interactive data dashboard, datafiles, webpages and a technical document detailing methodology and data definitions.¹

For full definitions of each of the student characteristics and the methodology used to construct the statistics reported in this publication, please see the technical document that accompanies this report.

We are keen to receive feedback on these statistics. If you have any queries or suggestions, please contact official.statistics@officeforstudents.org.uk.

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-characteristics-data/entry-qualification-and-subject-data-dashboard/.

Key findings

The key findings focus on full-time first degree entrants to higher education, in the latest years of data. You can find all the data on our interactive dashboard with splits by population, domicile, level of study and mode of study or subject of study.²

1. It should be noted that a rise in the proportion of students with a certain characteristic does not always mean the number of students has risen. If the number of students with a given characteristic has fallen, the proportion may still rise if the number of students with different characteristics has fallen by a greater amount.
2. Where students have not provided information, or the data is not applicable or otherwise unknown, these students are generally excluded from the calculation of proportions. A small number of students with unknown age are included in the denominator.

COVID-19 pandemic impact

3. The sector-level trends reported in the following summaries include data up to the 2021-22 academic year. There may be some expectation that these statistics will reflect changes due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, particularly given that the UK entered three national lockdowns throughout the period March 2020 to July 2021.³ For example:
 - a. The impact of the pandemic and the consequent changes to the structure of learning and assessment could have affected students' decisions in terms of whether and how they might choose to register on higher education courses.
 - b. The introduction by many OfS-registered providers in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years of a 'no detriment' policy typically ensured no student would be awarded a final grade lower than the most recent provider assessment of their attainment.⁴ This may have affected attainment rates in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years.
4. However, users should not automatically interpret changes seen in the data as having been caused by the pandemic. It is often not possible to attribute cause without further knowledge of the motivations and experiences of the students involved.

² The student populations data dashboard is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-characteristics-data/population-data-dashboard/.

³ See www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/timeline-coronavirus-lockdown-december-2021.pdf.

⁴ See www.hesa.ac.uk/news/25-01-2022/sb262-higher-education-student-statistics/qualifications.

Official statistics⁵

Age⁶

5. Full-time first degree qualifications are most commonly studied by students under the age of 21. In 2021-22, 71.5 per cent of entrants to full-time first degrees were under the age of 21, compared with 71.8 per cent in 2020-21.
6. Part-time first degree qualifications are most commonly studied by students over the age of 21. In 2021-22, 88.0 per cent of entrants to part-time first degrees were aged 21 or over. 25.8 per cent were aged 31 to 40.
7. The business and management subject area has seen considerable growth in proportions of mature (21 or over) entrants to full-time first degree courses. In 2021-22, entrants aged 21 or over accounted for 49.9 per cent of students, a 20.4 percentage point increase since 2014-15.

Disability⁷

8. In 2021-22, 15.7 per cent of full-time first degree entrants had a reported disability, compared with 15.0 per cent in 2020-21.
9. The proportion of full-time first degree entrants reporting a mental health condition in 2021-22 increased to 4.7 per cent of entrants in 2021-22, rising from 0.7 per cent in 2010-11. This represents the largest percentage point increase across disability types.

Ethnicity⁸

10. In 2021-22, 34.1 per cent of UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants were from a minority ethnic group, compared with 33.1 per cent in 2020-21. The proportion of entrants from a minority ethnic group has increased in each year of the time series.
11. 15.0 per cent of UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants were from an Asian background in 2021-22, the highest proportion across the time series and among other non-white ethnic groups.

Sex⁹

12. In 2021-22, 55.7 per cent of full-time first degree entrants were female, compared with 56.7 per cent in 2020-21.
13. In 2021-22, 82.2 per cent of full-time first degree entrants to the 'engineering, technology and computing' subject area were male, compared with 82.8 per cent in 2020-21. This contrasts with the 'nursing, allied health and psychology' subject area, where only 19.1 per cent of full-

⁵ The statistics cover both protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 alongside a broader range of other characteristics. For further information on the protected characteristics, see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/equality-and-diversity/what-does-the-law-say/.

⁶ Age is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

⁷ Disability is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

⁸ Ethnicity is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

⁹ Sex is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

time first degree entrants in 2021-22 were male, this proportion is unchanged from the previous year.

Gender identity

14. In 2021-22, 1.5 per cent of full-time first degree entrants to higher education reported a different gender to their sex registered at birth.¹⁰ This proportion is unchanged from the previous year (2020-21).

Religion or belief¹¹

15. In 2021-22, 45.3 per cent of full-time first degree entrants reported they had no religion or belief, the same proportion as in 2020-21. 30.8 per cent were Christian and 14.7 per cent were Muslim.

Sexual orientation¹²

16. Among full-time first degree entrants in 2021-22, 9.6 per cent reported their sexual orientation as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

17. Subject areas that have seen the largest growth in proportions of lesbian, gay or bisexual students include the 'design, creative and performing arts' and 'humanities and languages' subject areas (19.8 per cent and 18.2 per cent in 2021-22, respectively).

Parental higher education

18. In 2021-22, just under half of UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants (49.5 per cent) had at least one parent with a higher education qualification. The proportions were lower for part-time first degree entrants, with 36.9 per cent of entrants in 2021-22 reporting at least one parent with a higher education qualification.

19. All undergraduate entrants to the medicine, dentistry and veterinary science subject area with at least one parent with a higher education qualification were consistently higher than any other subject area. In 2021-22, they made up 67.4 per cent of entrants, more than any other subject area.

Care experience

20. 1.2 per cent of UK domiciled full-time first degree undergraduate entrants in 2021-22 had been in care at some point prior to their study, compared with 2.1 per cent of part-time first degree entrants.

Estrangement

21. 1.1 per cent of full-time English, Welsh and Northern Irish first degree students aged under 25 in 2021-22 were estranged from their parents.

¹⁰ This is based on the Designated Data Body field Gender identity field. For further details of collection guidance to 2021-22, see [Student 2021/22 - Gender identity | HESA](#). Note that the guidance for collection of this field has been updated for 2022-23 [Data Dictionary | HESA Coding Manual](#).

¹¹ Religion or belief is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

¹² Sexual orientation is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

Eligibility for free school meals

22. In 2021-22, 18.6 per cent of full-time first degree entrants to higher education were eligible for free school meals when they were in key stage 4. This represents a slight decrease from the previous year, when the proportion was 19.6 per cent.

Household Residual Income

23. For UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants in 2021-22 who were dependent on parental income, 40.7 per cent of respondents reported a household residual income of £1 to £25,000, higher than any other income group.

24. For UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants in 2021-22 who were financially independent, 71.3 per cent of respondents reported a household residual income of £0, a proportion that has remained consistently high throughout the time series.

Socio-economic background

25. Nearly half of all UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants entering via UCAS in 2021-22 were either from or had parents from higher (23.2 per cent) or lower (26.0 per cent) managerial and professional occupations.

26. Students were more likely to be from, or have parents from, higher managerial and professional occupations in certain subject areas. For example: undergraduate entrants to the medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences (39.9 per cent), undergraduate entrants to the natural and built environment (29.6 per cent) and undergraduate entrants to the humanities and languages (30.5 per cent).

Participation of Local Areas

27. Full-time first degree entrants were more commonly from areas with high participation rates. In 2021-22, 30.1 per cent of young UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants came from areas with the highest higher education participation rates, while 12.4 per cent of entrants came from areas with the lowest participation rates. Across the time series, the proportion of entrants from areas with the lowest higher education participation rates has increased slightly, from 10.0 per cent in 2010-11.

Deprivation index

28. UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants were more commonly from the most deprived areas. In 2021-22, 22.9 per cent of full-time first degree entrants were from the most deprived areas, more than any other IMD quintile.

29. Across subject areas, proportions of entrants from the most and least deprived areas varied. For example:

a. Subject areas where full-time first degree entrants were most likely to be from the most deprived areas in 2021-22 included: business and management (29.0 per cent from IMD quintile 1), nursing, allied health and psychology (25.2 per cent from IMD quintile 1), education and teaching (24.0 per cent from IMD quintile 1).

b. Subject areas where full-time first degree entrants were most likely to be from the least deprived areas in 2021-22 included: design, creative and performing arts (23.2 per cent

from IMD quintile 5), humanities and languages (26.2 per cent from IMD quintile 5), natural and built environment (25.7 per cent from IMD quintile 5).

Tracking Underrepresentation by Area (TUNDRA)

30. UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants were more commonly from the least underrepresented areas. In 2021-22, 30.1 per cent of entrants were from TUNDRA quintile 5, containing the least underrepresented areas, compared with 12.2 per cent in TUNDRA quintile 1.

Associations Between Characteristics of Students

31. UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants were increasingly more likely to be in the highest ABCS access quintiles. In 2021-22, 34.6 per cent of entrants were in the highest ABCS access quintile, rising from 34.0 per cent of entrants in 2020-21.

32. UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants were least likely to be in the lowest ABCS continuation quintile. The lowest continuation quintile contains students least likely to continue in higher education, based on their characteristics. For 2020-21 qualifiers, 12.7 per cent of UK domiciled full-time first degree entrants were in the lowest ABCS continuation quintile, compared with 22.7 per cent of entrants in the second lowest ABCS continuation quintile. A similar pattern is observed for ABCS completion quintiles.

33. UK-domiciled full-time first degree qualifiers were least likely to be in the highest ABCS progression quintile. For 2020-21 qualifiers, 10.5 per cent of full-time first degree qualifiers were in the highest ABCS progression quintile, compared with 24.5 per cent of qualifiers in the second lowest ABCS progression quintile (and 24.5 per cent of qualifiers in the third lowest ABCS progression quintile).

Experimental statistics

Service child

34. In 2021-22, 0.7 per cent of UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants to higher education were recorded as being the child of service personnel when they were in key stage 4.

Adult higher education

35. UK-domiciled full-time postgraduates from areas in quintiles with higher adult higher education participation rates were more represented than those from areas in lower quintiles. In 2021-22, 32.9 per cent of entrants came from areas with the highest adult higher education participation rates, compared with 12.1 per cent from areas with the lowest rates of adult higher education participation.

36. In the 'medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences' subject area in 2021-22, 43.3 per cent of entrants came from areas with the highest adult higher education participation rates, compared with just 6.9 per cent of entrants who came from areas with the lowest adult higher education participation rates. This represents the largest gap across all subject areas.

37. On the other hand, in the 'education and teaching' subject area in 2021-22, 26.3 per cent of entrants came from areas with the highest adult higher education participation rates, compared

with 14.5 per cent of entrants who came from areas with the lowest adult higher education participation rates. This represents the smallest gap across all subject areas.

Geography of employment quintiles

38. UK-domiciled full-time first degree qualifiers in 2020-21 were least likely to be in areas of highest graduate employment. For 2020-21 qualifiers, 10.6 per cent of full-time first degree qualifiers were in the quintile 5 (the highest geography of employment quintile), compared with 30.5 per cent in quintile 4.

Study location

39. In 2021-22, 75.6 per cent of full-time first degree entrants studied in a different travel to work area from their address prior to entry.

40. 88.4 per cent of part-time first degree entrants were distance learners in 2021-22, a proportion that has increased consistently from 63.5 per cent in 2010-11.



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