

Office for  
Students



# **Annex C: Differences in student outcomes – further characteristics**

**Free school meal eligibility**

**Enquiries to William Rimington at [official.statistics@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:official.statistics@officeforstudents.org.uk)**

**Publication date 26 November 2020**

**This annex should be read alongside the report ‘Differences in student outcomes – further characteristics’ (OfS 2020.30)**

# Contents

<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Differences in continuation</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Differences in degree outcomes</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Differences in employment outcomes</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Quality framework and student populations</b>	<b>10</b>

# Summary

Any questions or feedback related to this publication can be sent to William Rimington at [official.statistics@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:official.statistics@officeforstudents.org.uk). This includes further detail of the results of applying our data quality framework, including specific disclosure rates and inconsistency scores.

1. Students who received free meals when at school are less likely to enter higher education than students who did not. Only 26.3 per cent of state-funded and special school pupils, who received free school meals at age 15, entered higher education by age 19 in 2018-19, compared with 45.1 per cent of students who did not receive free school meals.<sup>1</sup>
2. For 2017-18 entrants, the continuation rate of students who were eligible to receive free meals while at school was 5.4 percentage points lower than those who were not.
3. For qualifiers in 2018-19, the rate of achieving a first or upper second class degree was 13.0 percentage points lower for students who were eligible for free school meals compared with those who were not.
4. For qualifiers in 2016-17, the rate of progression into highly skilled employment or further study at a higher level was 4.8 percentage points lower for students who were eligible to receive free meals while at school when compared with those who were not. This progression data is only available for one year of qualifiers for a reduced student population and more data is required to determine how free school meal eligibility is related to progression rates.
5. The statistics in this annex apply to students who were under 21 when they began their qualification.
6. The statistics included in this report are raw continuation, attainment and progression rates and we have not used weighting or statistical modelling in their calculation to account for other student characteristics that can impact the rates of students with these characteristics.
7. The rates and differences in rates are rounded to one decimal place. Some of these characteristics apply to small populations and we have not performed significance or sensitivity analysis on the raw rates included here. Small differences in rates may not represent statistically significant differences in outcomes for students with those characteristics. Also note the differences in rates were calculated using unrounded rates. As such, the value of the differences can be 0.1 percentage point higher or lower than the difference between the rounded rates included in this report.

---

<sup>1</sup> See DfE's report 'Widening participation in higher education: 2020' at [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education-2020](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education-2020).

8. These statistics on free school meal eligibility apply to England-domiciled students because free school meal eligibility data comes from the Department for Education's (DfE's) National Pupil Database (NPD) which only applies to schools in England.<sup>2</sup>
9. As part of our November 2020 update, the definition of 'state-funded mainstream schools' was changed slightly compared with the definition used in June 2020. The definition was changed to match the definition used in our tracking underrepresentation by area (TUNDRA) measure.<sup>3</sup> While this change resulted in small differences in the numbers of students in the populations of each outcome, it had no impact on the rounded outcome rates. Though the rounded rates were not impacted, the difference in attainment rate in 2016-17 dropped from 11.2 to 11.1 percentage points as these differences are calculated using unrounded rates. The data file published in November 2020 contains the numbers calculated using the updated definition of state-funded mainstream school.

---

<sup>2</sup> The DfE does not accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the NPD data by third parties.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-tundra/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-tundra/).

## Differences in continuation

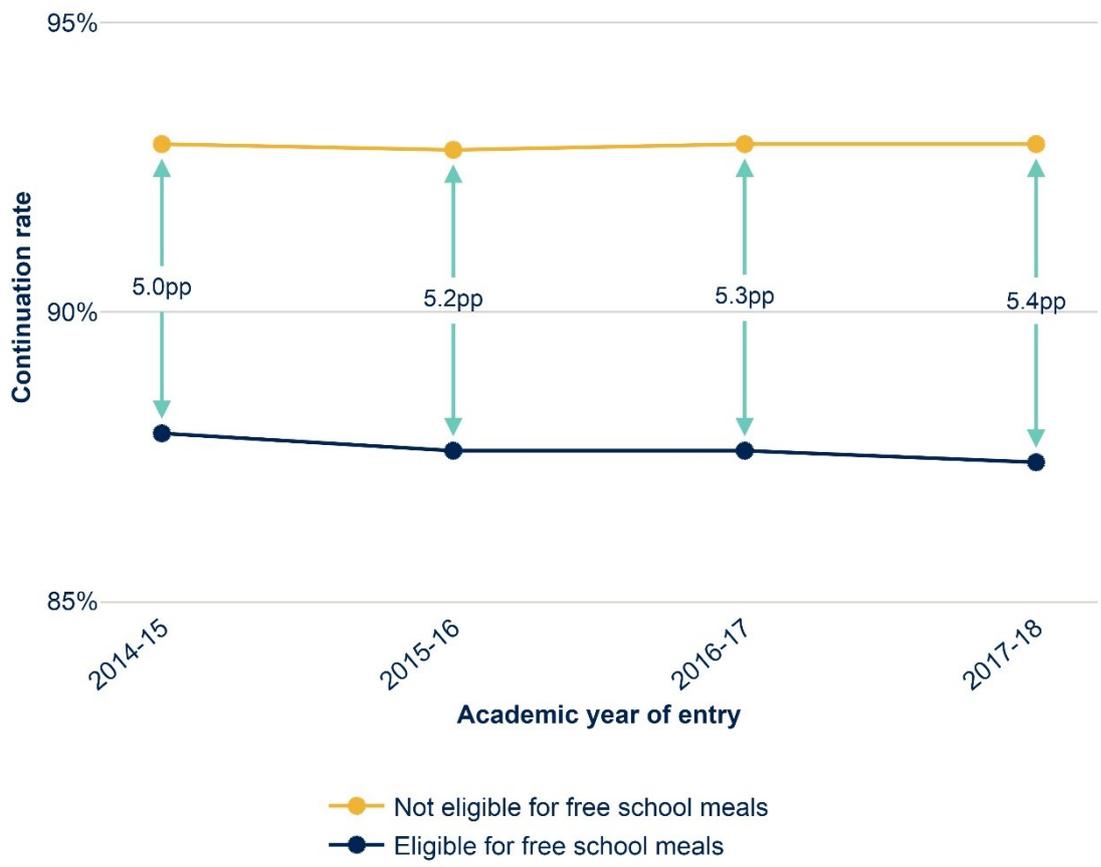
10. Students who were eligible to receive free meals when they were at school have lower continuation rates than students who were not (see Figure C1). For entrants in 2017-18, the continuation rate of students who were eligible to receive free meals while at school was 5.4 percentage points lower than those who were not.
11. Continuation rates are a measure of the proportion of entrants who either qualified, transferred to another higher education provider or continued their studies. All other students are deemed non-continuers. For full-time students this measure is based on student activity one year and 14 days after their commencement date. The population and measure of continuation in higher education are based on our access and participation data algorithms.<sup>4</sup>
12. This data on free school meal eligibility comes from the NPD and was linked onto data reported by the Education and Skills Funding Agency's (ESFA's) Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and the Higher Education Statistics Authority's (HESA's) student record and student alternative record. These statistics apply to England-domiciled full-time undergraduate or apprenticeship students at higher education providers in England who attended a state-funded mainstream school in England. In these calculations around 13,000 students a year are excluded from the access and participation population because they are not domiciled in England.<sup>5</sup>
13. The continuation rate of students who were eligible to receive free meals when at school has been slowly dropping. Continuation has reduced by 0.5 percentage points in the past four years, falling from 87.9 per cent for 2014-15 entrants to 87.4 per cent for 2017-18 entrants.
14. The continuation rate of students who were not eligible to receive free meals when at school has remained stable during this time and was 92.9 per cent in 2014-15 and in 2017-18.
15. The gap between the continuation rates of students who were and were not eligible for free school meals is increasing, growing by 0.4 percentage points in the last four years.

---

<sup>4</sup> See our document 'Technical algorithms for institutional performance measures: Regulatory indicators, methodology and rebuild descriptions' at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/institutional-performance-measures/technical-documentation/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/institutional-performance-measures/technical-documentation/).

<sup>5</sup> See the data file associated with this release, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/), for the numbers of students who have been excluded from the access and participation population based on the population restrictions outlined.

**Figure C1: The differences in continuation rate by free school meal eligibility for full-time, England-domiciled, undergraduate students**



The data used to create this chart can be found in the data file associated with this publication.<sup>6</sup> Details of the student population can be found later in this annex.

<sup>6</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/).

## Differences in degree outcomes

16. Students who were eligible to receive free meals when at school have a lower rate of achieving a first or upper second class degree compared with students who were not (see Figure C2). For qualifiers in 2018-19, the attainment rate was 13.0 percentage points lower for students who were eligible for free school meals compared with those who were not.
17. Attainment rates are a measure of the proportion of students awarded Level 6+ undergraduate degree qualifications (first degree or undergraduate with postgraduate components) who received a first or upper second (2:1). The population and measure of attainment are based on our access and participation data algorithms.<sup>7</sup>
18. This data on free school meal eligibility comes from the NPD and was linked onto data reported by the ILR and HESA student record and student alternative record. These statistics apply to England-domiciled, full-time students who attended a state-funded mainstream school in England prior to higher education and qualified from a higher education provider in England with a first degree or undergraduate with postgraduate components qualification. In these attainment calculations around 10,000 students a year are excluded from the access and participation population because they are not domiciled in England.<sup>8</sup> This value differs from the 13,000 value in paragraph 12 as these attainment statistics are calculated for a different population from the continuation statistics.<sup>9</sup>
19. The attainment rate of qualifiers who were eligible to receive free meals when at school increased between 2016-17 (68.9 per cent) and 2017-18 (69.7 per cent) by 0.8 percentage points. However, the attainment rate dropped by 1.2 percentage points between 2017-18 and 2018-19 (68.5 per cent). As the free school meal data is used for 2014-15 entrants onwards, the data for qualifiers for 2016-17 does not include students who completed their qualification in four years. Given that undergraduate with postgraduate component qualifications typically take four years to complete and have a much higher attainment rate than first degrees<sup>10</sup>, the increase in attainment rate between 2016-17 and 2017-18 will in part result from these additional students being included in the population. As such the rates for 2017-18 and 2018-19 qualifiers are more representative of the student population.
20. The attainment rate of qualifiers who were not eligible to receive free meals when at school also increased between 2016-17 (80.0 per cent) and 2017-18 (81.9 per cent) but by a greater extent (1.9 percentage points). The attainment rate for these students also dropped between 2017-18 and 2018-19 (81.5 per cent) but only by 0.4 percentage points.
21. The gap in attainment rate has increased year on year, from 11.1 percentage points for 2016-17 qualifiers to 13.0 percentage points for 2018-19 qualifiers. Some of the increase in

---

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 4.

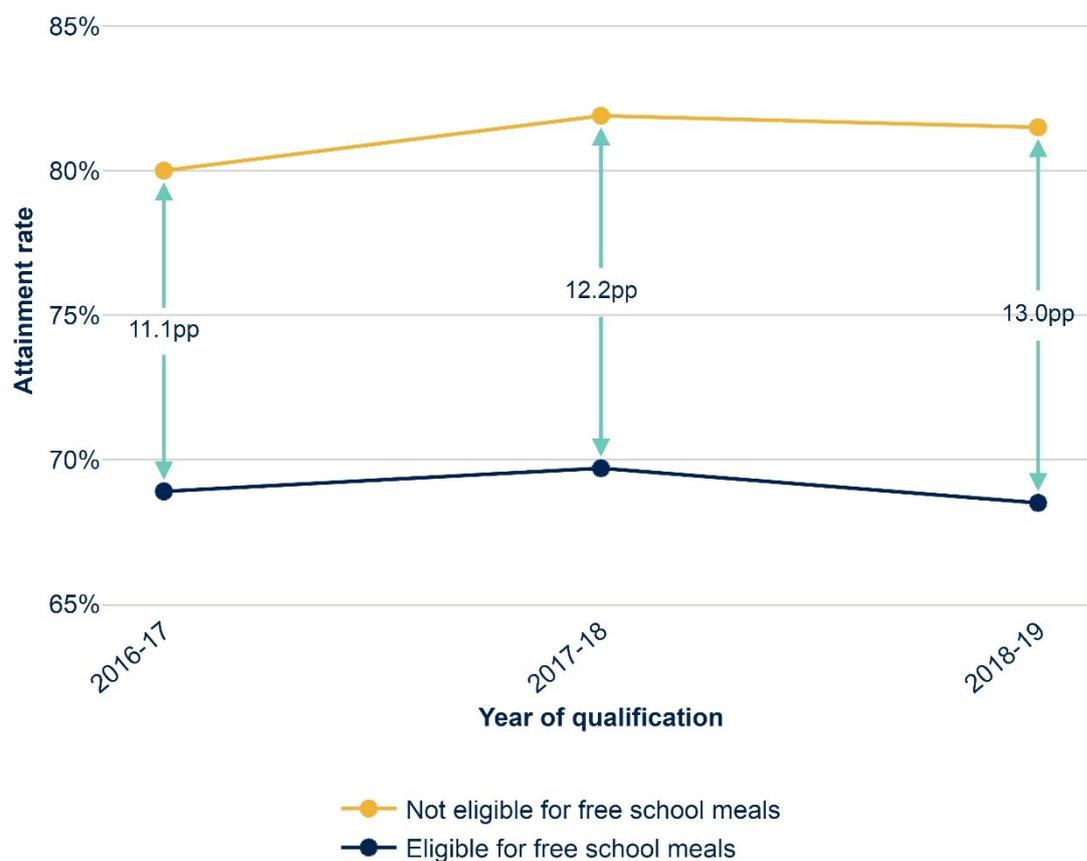
<sup>8</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>9</sup> For further detail of the different populations see footnote 4.

<sup>10</sup> See our access and participation data dashboard at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/).

difference between 2016-17 and 2017-18 may be the result of the different student populations (as mentioned above).

**Figure C2: The differences in rates of achieving a first or upper second class degree by free school meal eligibility for full-time, England-domiciled, first degree and undergraduate with postgraduate components students**



The data used to create this chart can be found in the data file associated with this publication.<sup>11</sup> Details of the student population can be found later in this annex. The data for 2016-17 consists of a reduced population and is less robust than subsequent years; see paragraph 19 for more details.

<sup>11</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/).

## Differences in employment outcomes

22. Progression into highly skilled employment or further study at a higher level appears to be lower for students who were eligible to receive free school meals compared with those who were not (see Figure C3).
23. This data on free school meal eligibility comes from the NPD and was linked onto data reported by the ILR and HESA student record and student alternative record. These statistics apply to England-domiciled, full-time students who attended a state-funded mainstream school in England prior to higher education and qualified from a higher education provider in England with an undergraduate qualification or apprenticeship. In these progression calculations 7,610 students are excluded from the 2016-17 access and participation population because they were not domiciled in England.<sup>12</sup> This value differs from the values in paragraphs 12 and 18 as these progression statistics are calculated for a different population from the continuation and attainment statistics.<sup>13</sup> The population and measure of progression are based on our access and participation data algorithms.<sup>14</sup>
24. Progression rates are based on the proportion of higher education leavers who say they are in highly skilled employment or studying at a higher level (or both) approximately six months after leaving. These outcomes are based on student responses to the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey. The mapping of DLHE responses for progression rates is detailed elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> As the DLHE survey has been discontinued, and free school meal data is available for 2014-15 entrants onwards, this employment progression data is available only for those students who qualified in 2016-17. Additionally, as detailed in paragraph 19, the data for 2016-17 only includes students who completed their undergraduate studies in three years or less so may be less robust than subsequent years had the survey been continued.
25. These caveats aside, qualifiers in 2016-17 who were eligible to receive free meals when at school had a progression rate (63.7 per cent) that is 4.8 percentage points lower than those students who were not (68.5 per cent). However, further data and investigation is required to determine the extent to which this is representative of progression of students who were eligible to receive free school meals.

---

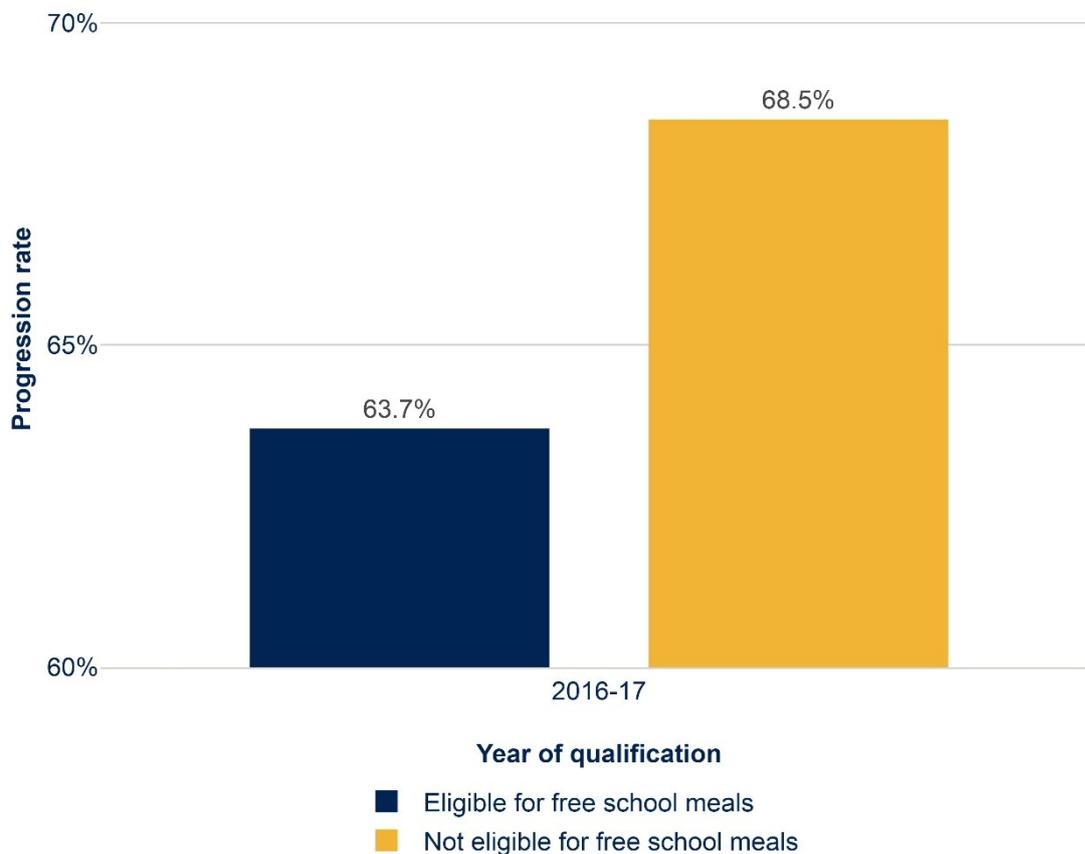
<sup>12</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>13</sup> For further detail of the different populations see footnote 4.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 4.

**Figure C3: The difference in students progressing into highly skilled employment or further study at a higher level by free school meal eligibility for full-time, England-domiciled, undergraduate students**



The data used to create this chart can be found in the data file associated with this publication.<sup>16</sup> Details of the student population can be found later in this annex. This 2016-17 data consists of a reduced student population; see paragraph 24 for more details.

<sup>16</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/).

## Quality framework and student populations

26. A summary of applying our data quality framework<sup>17</sup> to the data on free school meal eligibility can be found in Table C1. It is important to note that this data on free school meal eligibility is already considered high quality and is widely used. As such the primary purpose of applying the framework was to allow a better understanding of this data.

**Table C1: Summary of applying data quality framework to free school meal eligibility data**

Framework criteria	Summary
Data source	National Pupil Database (EVERFSM_6_SPR)
Year data collection started	2009-10
Summary of data field	Whether a pupil has ever been recorded as eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years up to the pupil's current year
Student population data available for	England-domiciled students who attended school in England
<b>Part I – Data availability</b>	
I.A – documentation	Well-documented
I.B – disclosure rate	Available for >99% of appropriate student population
I.C – provider response	NA
<b>Part II – Data quality</b>	
II.A – identified data issues	Data not reported by providers but linked via NPD. Reporting of free school meal eligibility is low for pupils that attended independent schools so population is limited to state-funded mainstream schools.
II.B – reporting consistency	Data not reported by providers so does not reflect whether data is being reported inconsistently. However inconsistency scores are below 2.2 for all years, indicating that there is low variability in the proportions of students who were and were not eligible to receive free school meals attending providers.
II.C – comparisons with public	The proportion of the student population who were ever eligible to receive free school meals is lower than the proportion of the Key Stage 4 state school population who were ever eligible to receive free school meals. Given people who received free school meals are underrepresented in higher education <sup>18</sup> we would anticipate this lower proportion.
<b>Outcome</b>	Data used for 2014-15 entrants onwards.

<sup>17</sup> See Annex A associated with this report, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/).

<sup>18</sup> See footnote 1.

27. The data on free school meal eligibility is collected as part of the NPD. Full details can be found on the associated webpage.<sup>19</sup>
28. The free school meal field used is EVERFSM\_6\_SPR, which records whether the pupil was ever eligible for free school meals during the last six years, recorded at Key Stage 4. The Key Stage 4 free school meals census data is available from 2009-10 onwards. This definition of free school meals is used to be consistent with our access and participation data.<sup>20</sup>
29. The free school meals data was matched to data reported by the ILR and HESA student record and student alternative record. Since pupils are generally 15-years-old in their last year of Key Stage 4, the academic year 2014-15 is the earliest year that a full cohort of young entrants (under 21 on entry) can be tracked back to the NPD. For this reason the student population is limited to students under 21 on entry throughout these free school meal statistics.
30. While the NPD contains data for various school types, reporting of free school meal eligibility is much higher for a state-funded mainstream schools, so the population is limited to only those students who attended these schools. The definition of 'state-funded mainstream school' used is the same as in our TUNDRA measure.<sup>21</sup>
31. Continuation, attainment and progression populations were based on those included in our access and participation data dashboard. Details of these populations can be found in the document 'Technical algorithms for institutional performance measures: Regulatory indicators, methodology and rebuild descriptions'.<sup>22</sup> Where restrictions exist in the availability of this data, beyond those associated with the access and participation populations, then these were also applied. For example the access and participation populations include UK-domiciled students; however the NPD only contains data for pupils attending schools in England. As such, the population is limited to England-domiciled students. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have different systems for allocating free school meals.
32. The first two years of qualifier data available by free school meal eligibility are not presented as these results relate to a small number of students who completed their studies in one or two years – it is not until the third year of data that more robust statistics can be produced. The qualifier population was not limited by the time it took to achieve the qualification. As this free school meal data is available for 2014-15 entrants onwards, this results in qualifier statistics from 2016-17 onwards. As detailed in paragraph 19, the data for 2016-17 does not include students who completed their undergraduate studies in four years and as such the data after 2016-17 can be considered to be more representative of the undergraduate population.

---

<sup>19</sup> See NPD webpage 'Eligible for free school meals in the past 6 years' at <https://find-npd-data.education.gov.uk/en/concepts/d7f8e8e0-6fa7-4aa2-a963-265267c2bed4>.

<sup>20</sup> See our access and participation data dashboard at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/).

<sup>21</sup> See footnote 3.

<sup>22</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/institutional-performance-measures/technical-documentation/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/institutional-performance-measures/technical-documentation/).



© The Office for Students copyright 2020

This publication is available under the Open Government Licence 3.0 except where it indicates that the copyright for images or text is owned elsewhere.

[www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/)