

Qualifications Quality Report

Publication Name: Qualifications at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis 2023/24

Department Responsible: Department for the Economy

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1. Introduction

The Department for the Economy (DfE) adheres to the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) and the National Statistician's guidance on quality.

This document provides a summary of how the following Higher Education (HE) publication adheres to the code in terms of quality:

[Qualifications at UK Higher Education Institutions - Northern Ireland Analysis](#)

The evidence on the quality of this publication is reported in Section 3 and is based on the European Statistical System quality dimensions and principles. A summary of methods used to compile this statistical publication is provided in section 4 and an assessment of quality using the UK Statistics Authority Administrative Data Quality Assurance matrix is provided in Section 5.

2. Data Source

Information on Northern Ireland (NI) students studying at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and all students studying at NI HEIs are collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), now part of Jisc, the Designated Data Body for HE in England. HESA collects information for all 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.

Information on Qualifications is based on data from the HESA student data collection system, updated in 2022/23 in their [Data Futures](#) transformation programme. A comprehensive quality assessment has been undertaken on the dataset and this is detailed in HESA's [Student Data Quality Reports](#) and their [Data Quality and Insights](#) resource.

3. Data Quality Report

Dimension – Relevance

The degree to which the statistical product meets user needs in both coverage and content.

Assessment by the Author

Our qualifications statistical tables are designed to give an overview of a) the number of NI domiciled students qualifying at HEIs in the UK, and b) the number of students qualifying at NI HEIs. The information is broken down by a number of variables including – sex, age, mode, level of study, subject, location of institution and domicile. The tables also provide UK figures for comparison and information for the last five years to allow changes over time to be analysed.

Statistical outputs are used by a variety of customers both internal and external. For example, they are used by DfE policy development officials to monitor existing policies, to allocate funding and for future planning; by other government departments and agencies such as NISRA to produce their multiple deprivation measures; by prospective students to inform their choices around higher education; and by local businesses to quantify the supply of graduates in their business area.

The bulletin is divided into two sections. Section 1 focuses on NI domiciled students at HEIs in NI, England, Scotland or Wales. Section 2 concentrates on all students at NI HEIs. This division into two sections reflects the two distinct policy and operational responsibilities of the Minister and the Department. Furthermore, it is clear from the customer feedback, the nature of the questions on HE asked in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the coverage of HE issues in the local media, for example, that these two aspects are of interest to readers.

Further information on how customers' needs are assessed can be found in the section below titled 'Assessment of User Needs and Perceptions'.

Dimension – Accuracy and Reliability

The proximity between an estimate and the unknown true value.

Assessment by the Author

Data Collection

The 2023/24 HESA Student Record was collected using the data submission platform and data model.

A comprehensive quality assessment has been undertaken on the dataset, and this is detailed in HESA'S 2023/24 [Student Data Quality Report](#). A detailed list of findings is available in HESA's [Data Quality and Insights](#) resource, which is also accompanied by provider specific data notes.

Overall, the conclusions of the report suggest limited impact of quality issues at the level of the aggregated data used in the top-level variables and trend data provided in these tables.

The most common type of quality issues identified in the 2023/24 HESA student data relate to recruitment changes resulting in a diversification of student profiles at some

providers, such as sex, age, entry information, level and mode of study, but we are not aware of any significant impact on NI providers top level data.

Following a [compliance check by the Office for Statistics Regulation](#) (OSR), it has been confirmed that the accredited official statistics published by HESA for the 2023/24 student data continue to meet the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value as set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics.

The student record covers all students who attend each institution; therefore, issues of sampling error and estimates are not relevant to this data. Instead, characteristics of the population in question (students) can be measured directly and comprehensively. For this data collection, the accuracy of the information returned, and the scale of missing data are more important. These issues are kept to a minimum by having in place stringent data quality checks and validations procedures.

The HE institution at which each student is registered is responsible for submitting the data to HESA about that student. The institutions data must go through a comprehensive range of validation checks in order for a return to be accepted. These checks ensure that the data are accurate in terms of format and logic. Year-on-year changes are examined closely to see if they fall outside of an expected range.

In terms of missing data items, the majority of data items are collected for all students. Some data items may include categories for 'unknown' or 'information refused' and not all data items are mandatory for a student to provide. In such cases, definitions and notes are provided. The level of unknown entries within data items are routinely monitored during the data collection process. Any HEI recording abnormally high levels of unknown values in key data items are strongly encouraged to reduce this level over time.

DfE also regularly discusses data collection, coverage and quality with the NI HEIs and reviews any issues that arise when they are returning their data to HESA. An online system also allows data quality issues or queries to be raised and shared between HESA, NI HEIs and DfE when the student return is being prepared. These are circulated for assessment, further clarification and any actions required.

Production of statistics

On receipt of data from HESA, DfE statisticians produce NI specific datasets that are cross verified, across a range of variables, with previously published HESA data. Prior to publication, DfE's tables will undergo rigorous checking procedures including peer review of syntax used to analyse data from the HESA databases, parallel production of key data using HESA interactive tables and DfE statistical software packages, and extensive proof reading of commentary, tables, notes to readers and definitions.

Dimension – Timeliness and Punctuality

Timeliness refers to the time gap between publication and the reference period. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.

Assessment by the Author

HESA collects data from the institutions retrospectively in the autumn following the academic year to which the data relates. For each academic year, the data collection process opens in August, with a return date of mid-September. The data quality and validation phase continues through September and October with final sign off at the end of October. HESA then process the data and supply the final data to DfE statisticians.

DfE statisticians create and verify two NI specific datasets: one for NI students at UK HEIs and one for all students at NI HEIs. They then develop and quality assure the statistical bulletins. There continued to be significant delays to the HESA data collection and release this year due to the adoption of the Data Futures programme. For the 2023/24 academic year, HESA published its HE student statistical bulletin on 20th March 2025. DfE published enrolment statistics on the 18th December 2025 and qualification statistics on the 18th December 2025.

DfE's Higher Education publication dates are pre-announced through its [publication schedule](#) on the DfE website and through the National Statistics Gov.uk [release calendar](#) system.

The introduction of Data Futures, involving a new collection system, HESA Data Platform (HDP), and a new data model has brought with it major implementation challenges, both for Jisc, HE providers and their software suppliers. As a result, there have been significant delays in the release of data. This has had knock on effects for DfE, both in terms of the delay and the impact of the new data structure on existing RAP processes.

Dimension – Accessibility and Clarity

Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the metadata, illustrations, and accompanying advice.

Assessment by the Author

DfE's Higher Education statistics are made available on the [Department's website](#) and through a link on the National Statistics [Gov.uk](#) publication system.

Customers who have registered their details with the department will have links to the bulletins emailed to them shortly after release.

Interactive data tables produced in Power BI are published on the DfE website to allow users to carry out further analysis; filters allow greater versatility for users to make custom queries. Tables are also available in Excel and open data format.

Users can also request further breakdowns and analysis of the data, which along with the tables are provided free of charge.

Each statistical bulletin includes a section with definitions and notes to readers addressing issues of methodology, coverage and data quality.

Dimension – Coherence and Comparability

Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain.

Assessment by the Author

Coherence

The information collected by HESA regarding NI students at UK HEIs and students at NI HEIs is the only comprehensive source of information on HE students and their study choices in the UK.

HESA data for NI covers students who study HE through a Higher Education Institution (HEI), however students can also study some HE courses through Further Education (FE) colleges. Therefore, caution must be exercised when comparing HE statistics from different publications, especially across different countries.

Comparability

HESA is the official agency for the collection of information on publicly funded Higher Education (HE) institutions in the UK. This joint approach throughout the UK had ensured direct comparisons between countries and individual institutions can be made.

The specification and definitions of data are subject to a major review every few years. From time to time, it is also necessary to change coverage and definitions which can impact the comparability of time series data. When this does happen any discontinuities in the data are made clear and/or data are backdated to take account of these changes.

In each of DfE's Higher Education statistical outputs comparisons are made over a time series and between NI and other UK countries.

Dimension – Trade-offs Between Output Quality Components

Trade-offs are the extent to which different aspects of quality are balanced against each other.

Assessment by the Author

The HEIs must submit their data to HESA retrospectively at the end of each academic year. The HEIs are given approximately six weeks to get their data passed through HESA's stringent validation procedures. The data collection process allows some tolerance in respect to missing values for certain variables. This trade-off

between timeliness and accuracy allows customers to have information as soon as possible after the period to which it refers.

Dimension – Assessment of User Needs and Perceptions

The processes for finding out about users and uses, and their views on the statistical products.

Assessment by the Author

DfE statisticians ensure that its Higher Education statistical products are relevant to its customers in a number of ways. Discussions and briefings are held with key policy customers in DfE each year to ensure that the outputs are published in a relevant, accurate and timely manner. Views are also sought on any improvements or changes that customers would like to see implemented and where this is possible, it can be incorporated in the next publication. We also carried out a wider [readership survey](#) in 2019 to review user's information requirements and to look at potential future improvements.

All HESA collections undergo a major review cycle every few years to ensure that the data collected is relevant for the current and future needs of customers. DfE statisticians feed into these reviews, ensuring that the requirements of NI government are addressed.

Dimension - Performance, Cost and Respondent Burden

The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the statistical output.

Assessment by the Author

Much of the costs involved in producing and maintaining the datasets and tables would be incurred regardless of whether or not the publications are produced.

The information used to produce these statistics is collected as part of the application, admission and administrative process within the HEIs. Therefore, respondent burden on the students is minimal.

Dimension – Confidentiality, Transparency and Security

The procedures and policy used to ensure sound confidentiality, security and transparent practices.

Assessment by the Author

The following procedures are in place to ensure that data are kept secure and that information released does not identify individuals:

Data are supplied by HE institutions (HEIs) to HESA via a secure web-based transfer system created and maintained by HESA. HESA supply data to DfE statisticians (and other statutory users) via a secure web-based download system. The data are held in DfE on a secure network that can only be accessed by HE statisticians. To prevent the identification of individuals, figures in publications are rounded to the

nearest 5, in line with HESA rounding strategy, with 0, 1 & 2 rounded to 0. Percentages are rounded to the nearest integer.

4. Summary of methods used to compile the outputs

Data Collection

Data are supplied by HE institutions (HEIs) to HESA via a secure web-based transfer system created and maintained by HESA. The data supplied are subject to an extensive quality assurance process by both HESA and DfE.

The first stage of the quality assurance process in HESA includes a suite of validation checks, which ensure that the data collected meet specification, dates fall within expected ranges and the information provided within fields of data are consistent. Failures at this stage may cause a data return to be rejected, requiring a re-submission from the HEI once corrected. The second stage of quality assurance comprises a verification process whereby frequency counts and cross tabulations are produced automatically from the data submission of each HEI, and these are fed back to the HEI. A team of quality assurance analysts at HESA also scrutinise this material. Year-on-year comparisons provide a summary of changes and the level of change in any particular area is examined closely if it falls outside of an expected range. Any issues arising from this stage of quality assurance are logged within an online system to which the submitting HEIs have access. HEIs must respond to each issue to either confirm that anomalies are genuine or correct the data and re-submit. The final stage of the quality assurance process is a sign-off by the head of each HEI confirming that data meet required quality standards and are fit for onward use.

HESA then supply the final data to DfE statisticians (and other statutory users) via a secure web-based download system.

Contracts in place between HESA and Statutory users (including DfE) require that the data be of sufficient quality for statutory users' funding and policy purposes and sanctions may be applied against HESA and HEIs should these quality standards not be met. The quality standards set by statutory users are deemed more than adequate for the purposes of production of Official Statistics.

Production of statistics

On receipt of data from HESA, DfE statisticians produce two NI specific datasets, one for NI students enrolled at UK HEIs and the second for all students enrolled at NI HEIs. These data sets are cross verified, across a range of variables, with previously published HESA data. Once the datasets are completed and verified, they are then used to prepare the statistical outputs. Prior to publication, DfE's statistical tables will undergo rigorous checking procedures including peer review of syntax used to analyse data from the HESA databases, parallel production of data tables using HESA interactive tables and statistical software packages, and extensive proof reading.

Useful Links: HESA's [summary report on quality](#) for their student data.

Administrative data quality assurance

An assessment of the administrative data provided by HESA was also carried out in accordance with the UK Statistics Authority Administrative Data Quality Assurance matrix and associated toolkit.

The toolkit and matrix are the UK Statistics Authority regulatory standard for the quality assurance of administrative data. The Standard recognises the role that administrative data plays in the production of official statistics and clarifies what producers of official statistics should do to assure themselves of the quality of these data. The toolkit sets out the standards for assessing statistics against the Code of Practice for Statistics. The matrix approach to assessment has two components: namely, separate assessments of public interest in our statistics (low, medium, high) and data quality concern about our statistics (low, medium, high).

Level of risk of quality concerns	Public interest profile		
	Lower	Medium	Higher
Low	Statistics of lower quality concern and lower public interest [A1]	Statistics of low-quality concern and medium public interest [A1/A2]	Statistics of a low-quality concern and higher public interest [A1/A2]
Medium	Statistics of medium quality concern and lower public interest [A1/A2]	Statistics of medium quality concern and medium public interest [A2]	Statistics of medium quality concern and higher public interest [A2/A3]
High	Statistics of higher quality concern and lower public interest [A1/A2/A3]	Statistics of higher quality concern and medium public interest [A3]	Statistics of higher quality concern and higher public interest [A3]

We have assessed the statistical outputs as A1, as the risk of quality concerns has been assessed as low due to the high quality of the data collection processes and quality control procedures. The public interest profile has been assessed as low to medium due to the limited media interest.

5. Further Quality Assurance measures

Quality Assurance procedures documented

The Higher Education Sector Statistics and Research team within Analytical Services in DfE have fully documented the quality assurance checks that must be completed when publishing statistical tables. This process will be updated to incorporate what we have learned from the changes required to implement Data futures.

Metadata

Full metadata on the data used is available online on the HESA website. This explains the data including many variables and derived variables.

Documented audit trail available for checks

The Higher Education Sector Statistics and Research team within Analytical Services in DfE keep a record of the quality assurance procedures and when they are completed and by whom for each statistical publication. This acts as an audit trail to minimise the likelihood of any quality checks being overlooked. This will be updated to incorporate what we have learned from the changes required to implement Data futures.

Quality report published

This quality report is published each year alongside the qualification's statistical publication.

Risk assessment complete

Statistics produced by Analytical Services in DfE undergo an annual risk assessment in order to constantly improve quality assurance measures.

QA toolkit

The Higher Education Sector Statistics and Research team within Analytical Services in DfE also use the Administrative Data QA Toolkit to ensure a high level of quality in the four areas associated with data quality.

Peer review

In 2014, the Enrolments bulletin was subjected to the peer review process in NISRA. This enabled external statistics producers to scrutinise the publication and give feedback on possible changes, which was also used to improve the Qualifications outputs.

GSS review

In 2014, the Enrolments bulletin was also subjected to the GSS review process. This enabled an external agency with quality experts to scrutinise the publication and give feedback on possible changes, which was also used to improve the Qualifications outputs.