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Further Education Sector Activity in Northern Ireland: 2019/20 to 2023/24



This statistical bulletin presents a range of analysis regarding enrolments and students (both regulated and non-regulated) in the Northern Ireland Further Education Sector covering academic years 2019/20 to 2023/24. The statistics presented cover the characteristics of those enrolling in FE Colleges, along with analysis of areas of deprivation, funding streams and performance.

Published by: Statistics and Research Branch (Tertiary Education)
Department for the Economy, 39-49 Adelaide Street, Belfast BT2 8FD
Date of Publication: 12 December 2024
Theme: Children, Education and Skills
Contact: Allan Matthews
Telephone: 028 9025 7727
E-mail: allan.matthews@economy-ni.gov.uk
Frequency: Annual

Introduction

Further Education (FE) Colleges are the main providers of further education and training in Northern Ireland (NI). The sector plays a central role in raising literacy and numeracy levels and in up-skilling and re-skilling the population through a broad range of courses leading to qualifications, particularly at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) levels 2 and 3 and equivalents. Higher Education (at level 4 and above) is also delivered across the FE Colleges.

It should be noted that students may be enrolled on more than one course at a given time and may, therefore, be counted as having two or more enrolments.

Key Points

All enrolments

- Following a 26% decrease between 2019/20 (132,355) and the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 (97,530), the number of enrolments increased 20% over the next two years, before falling 5% to 111,355 in 2023/24; resulting in a net 16% decrease since 2019/20.
- Over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24 the regulated share of enrolments has not changed in net terms (81%).
- Almost half of 2023/24 enrolments were mainstream funded by the Department for the Economy.

Regulated enrolments

- Of the 90,505 regulated enrolments in 2023/24, 82% were at Level 2 or above, up from 79% in 2019/20.
- The student population on regulated enrolments is becoming older, with the aged 25 and over share of such enrolments increasing in net terms from 24% in 2019/20 to 27% in 2023/24.
- Most regulated enrolments are part-time, while more males than females study full-time.
- Higher Education enrolments fell by a net 7%, from 10,325 in 2019/20 to 9,645 in 2023/24.
- FE Sector regulated enrolments are fairly evenly spread across the four most deprived relative multiple deprivation quintiles, although considerable variation occurs at college level.

Qualifications and Performance

- Although the success rate (the percentage of final year regulated enrolments of students who complete and achieve a qualification) remained at 79% in net terms, 15% fewer qualifications were awarded in 2023/24 (55,800) than in 2019/20 (65,660).

Students

- Following a 21% decrease between 2019/20 (70,845) and 2020/21 (55,970), the number of students increased 14% over the next two years, to 64,025 in 2022/23, before falling 1% to 63,535 in 2023/24.
- In 2023/24, 10% fewer students were enrolled on regulated courses across all age groups (51,380) than in 2019/20 (57,185).
- The number of students achieving regulated qualifications decreased by a net 9%, from 39,575 in 2019/20 to 35,935 in 2023/24.

Enrolments

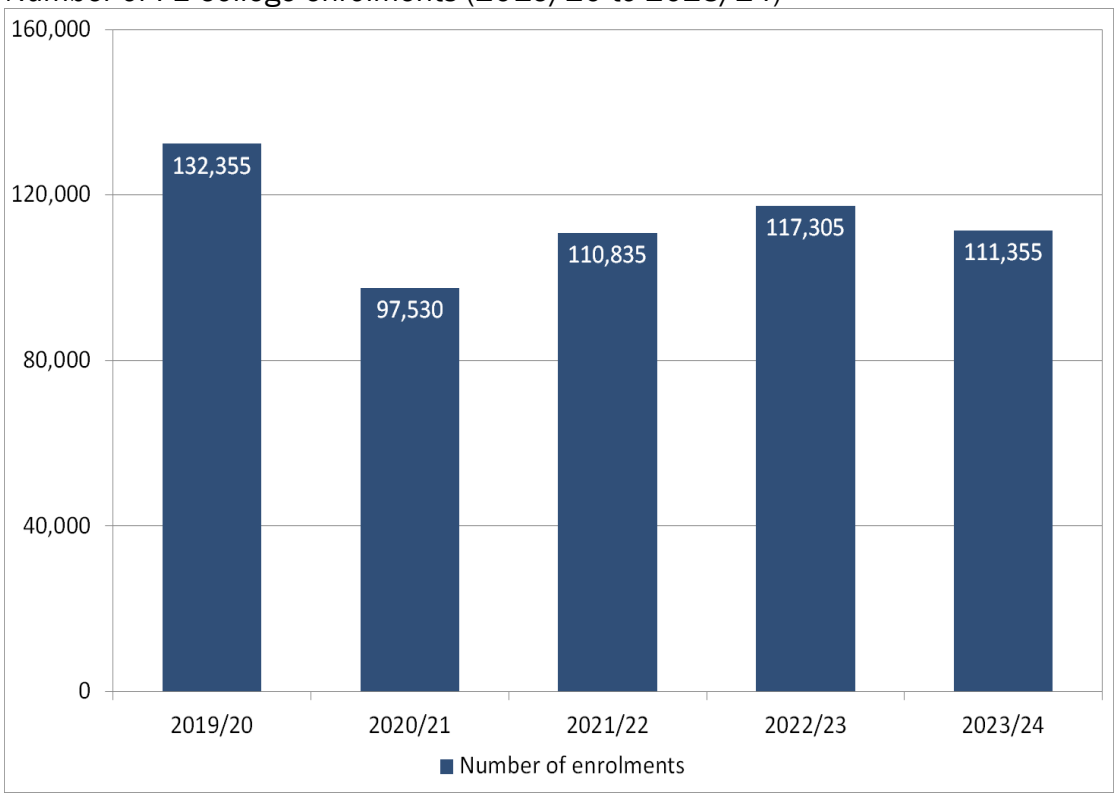
Following a 26% decrease between 2019/20 and 2020/21, the number of enrolments increased 20% over the next two years, before falling 5% in 2023/24.

Following a 26% decrease between 2019/20 (132,355) and the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 (97,530), the number of FE College enrolments increased 20% over the next two years, to 117,305 in 2022/23. Much of the subsequent 5% reduction to 111,355 in 2023/24 occurred in NRC (down 17%, to 12,360) and BMC (down 13%, to 21,645) (Table 1).

The bulk of the net 16% (20,995) reduction in enrolments between 2019/20 and 2023/24 were part-time (down 19,765), regulated (down 17,255) and / or relating to students aged 19 and under (down 14,695). Medium-term factors include a lengthy period with a relatively low number of 16-19 year-olds and the transition back towards pre-pandemic-related grading and course provision arrangements (Table A2 and Table A8).

Figure 1: 26% decrease in the number of enrolments between 2019/20 and 2020/21 before a 20% increase over the next two years and a 5% fall in 2023/24

Number of FE College enrolments (2019/20 to 2023/24)



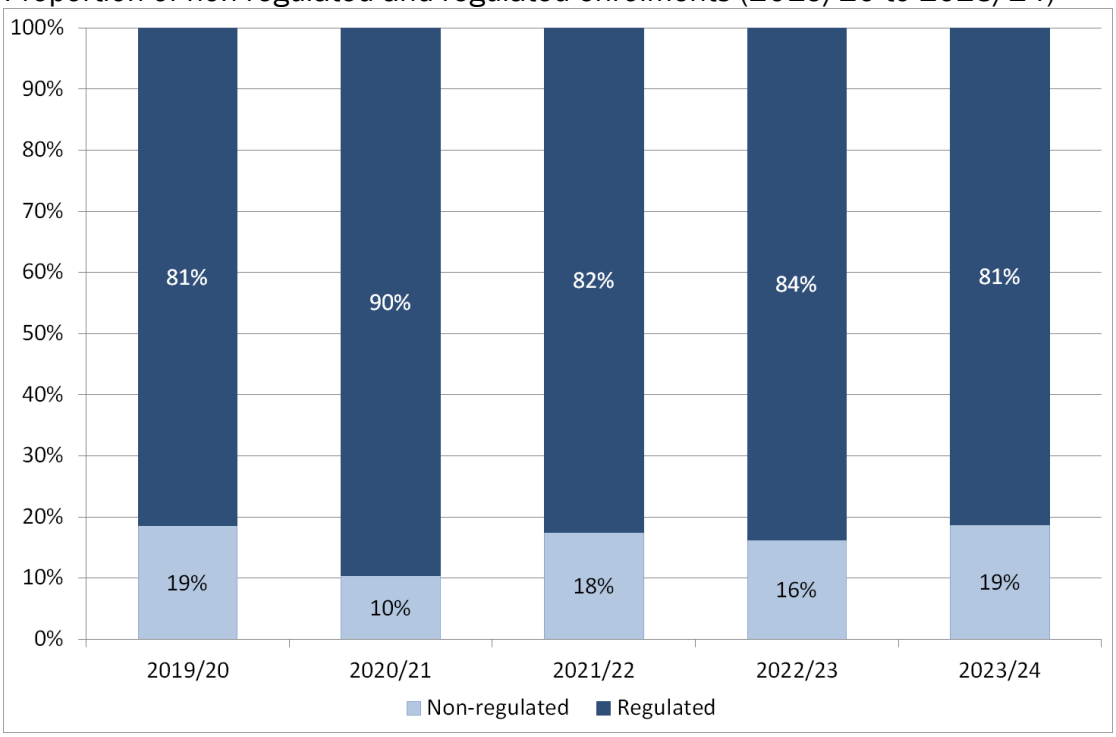
Regulated share of enrolments

Over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24, the regulated share of enrolments has not changed in net terms.

Between 2019/20 and 2023/24, the regulated share of enrolments has not changed in net terms (81%). During the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 there was an upward spike to 90% (Table A5).

Figure 2: Over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24 the regulated share of enrolments has not changed in net terms (81%).

Proportion of non-regulated and regulated enrolments (2019/20 to 2023/24)



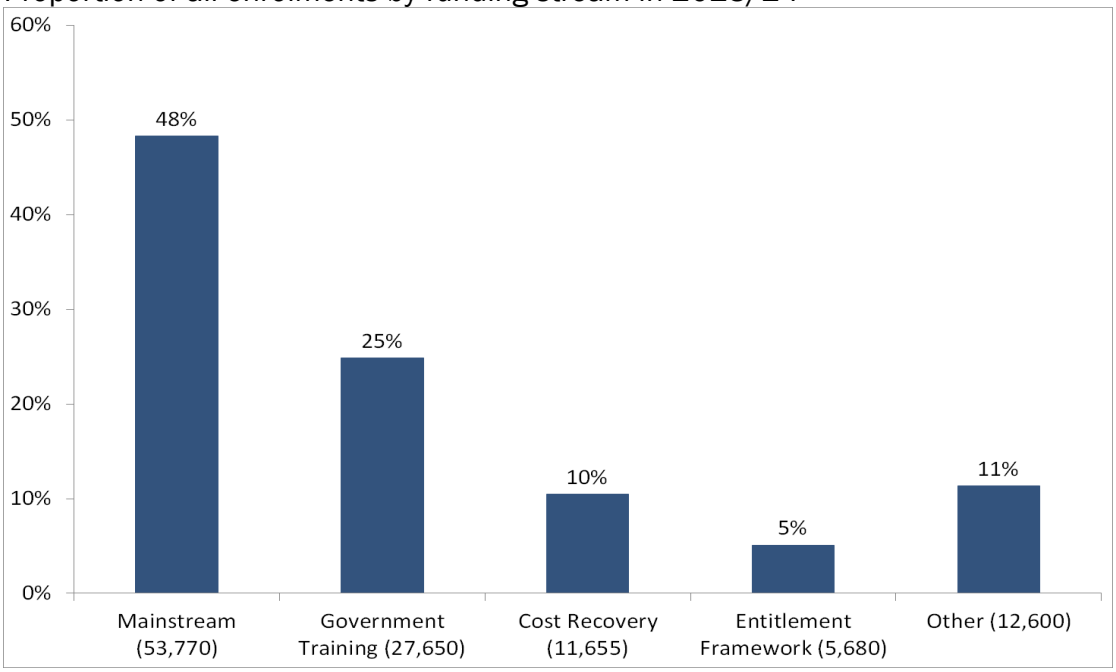
Funding streams

Almost half of enrolments are funded by the Department for the Economy.

Of the 111,355 enrolments in 2023/24, almost half (48%) were mainstream funded by the Department for the Economy, 25% were funded through government training programmes, 10% were cost recovery and 5% were funded through the Entitlement Framework programme. The remaining 11% 'Other' enrolments included programmes like Skill Up and Skills Focus (Table A10).

Figure 3: Most enrolments were either mainstream funded by DfE or through government training programmes

Proportion of all enrolments by funding stream in 2023/24



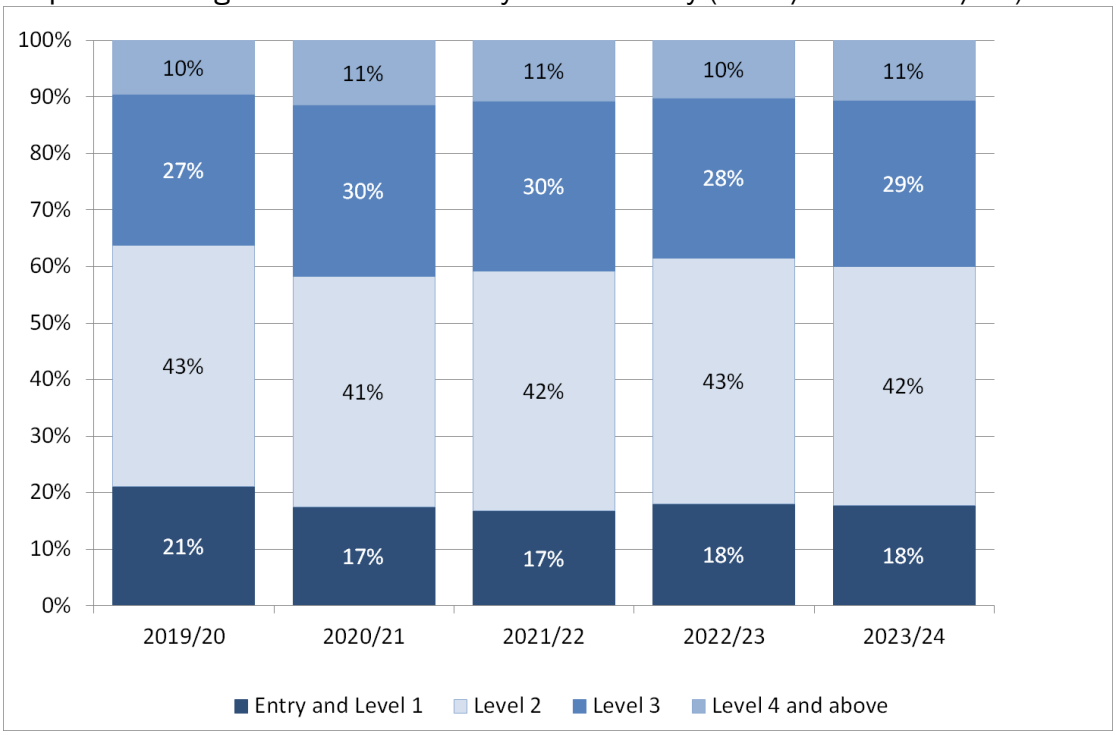
Level of study

More regulated enrolments were at Level 2 or above in 2023/24 than 2019/20.

Of the 90,505 FE Sector regulated enrolments in 2023/24, over four-fifths (82%) were at Level 2 or above, up from 79% in 2019/20. Those at Level 1 and below accounted for 18% (16,090); 42% (38,220) were at Level 2, 29% (26,545) were at Level 3 and 11% (9,645) were at Level 4 and above (Table A19).

Figure 4: Regulated enrolments were more likely to be at Level 2 or above in 2023/24 than in 2019/20

Proportion of regulated enrolments by level of study (2019/20 to 2023/24)



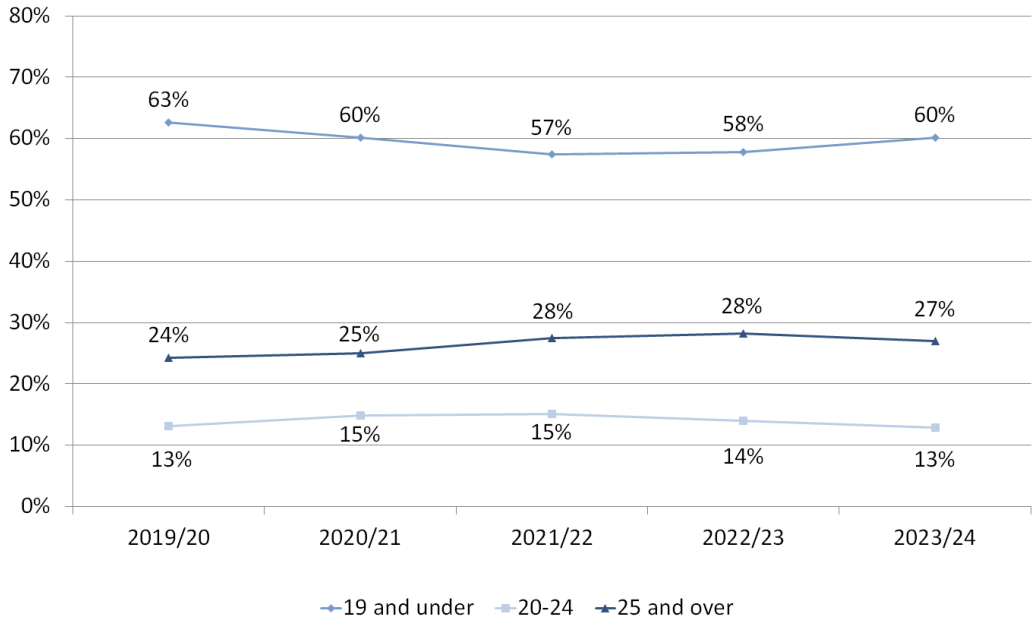
Age

The student population is becoming older, with the aged 25 and over share increasing.

Since 2019/20, the aged 25 and over share of regulated enrolments has increased from 24% to 27%; conversely, the proportion of those aged 19 and under has decreased from 63% to 60% (Table A15).

Figure 5: Increase in regulated share of enrolments of students aged 25 and over and decrease in those aged 19 and under

Regulated enrolments by proportion of age band (2019/20 to 2023/24)



Mode of attendance and sex

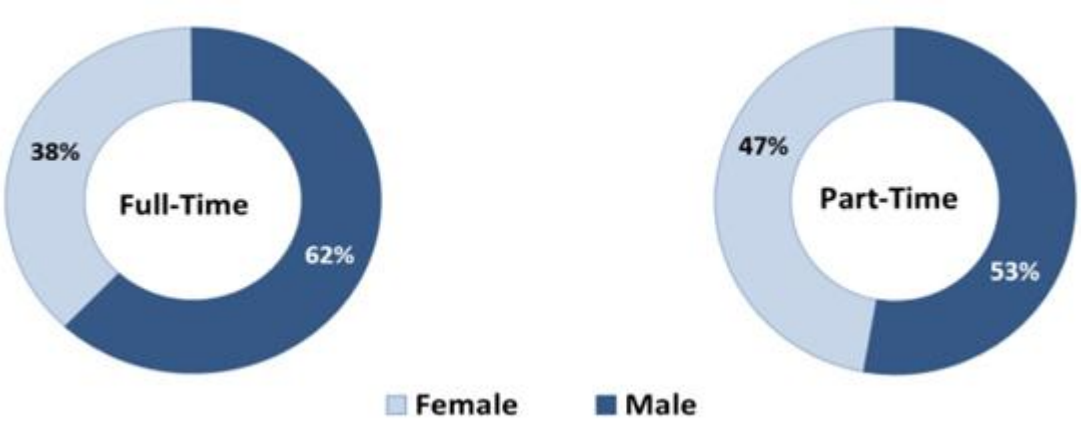
Most regulated enrolments are part-time, while males are much more likely than females to study full-time.

Most regulated enrolments are part-time, although this proportion has reduced from 78% in 2019/20 to 75% in 2023/24. The number of part-time regulated enrolments decreased by 15,805 (19%) between 2019/20 (83,655) and 2023/24 (67,845). This included a 23% decrease to 2020/21 (64,495) (Table A17).

Males are much more likely than females to study full-time, accounting for over three-fifths (62%) of full-time regulated enrolments in 2023/24, whereas part-time regulated provision was more evenly split by sex (Table A17).

Figure 6: Males accounted for over three-fifths of full-time regulated enrolments in 2023/24, whereas part-time regulated provision was more evenly split by sex

Proportion of regulated enrolments by sex and mode of attendance in 2023/24



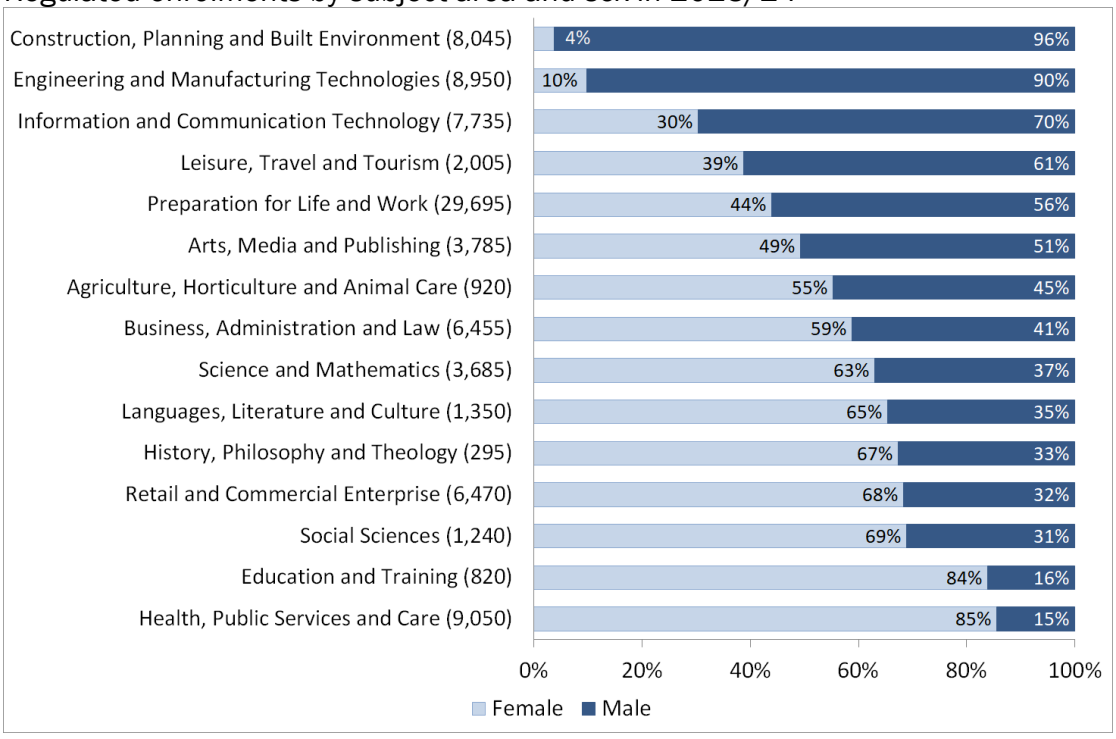
Subject area and sex

The popularity of different subject areas varies by sex.

Although regulated enrolments were fairly evenly split by sex in 2023/24, wide variation occurred between female and male enrolments across the subject areas. Females accounted for the vast majority of 'Health, Public Services and Care' (85%) and 'Education and Training' enrolments (84%). Male-dominated subject areas included 'Construction, Planning and the Built Environment' (96%) and 'Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies' (90%) (Table A20).

Figure 7: The popularity of different subject areas varies by sex

Regulated enrolments by subject area and sex in 2023/24



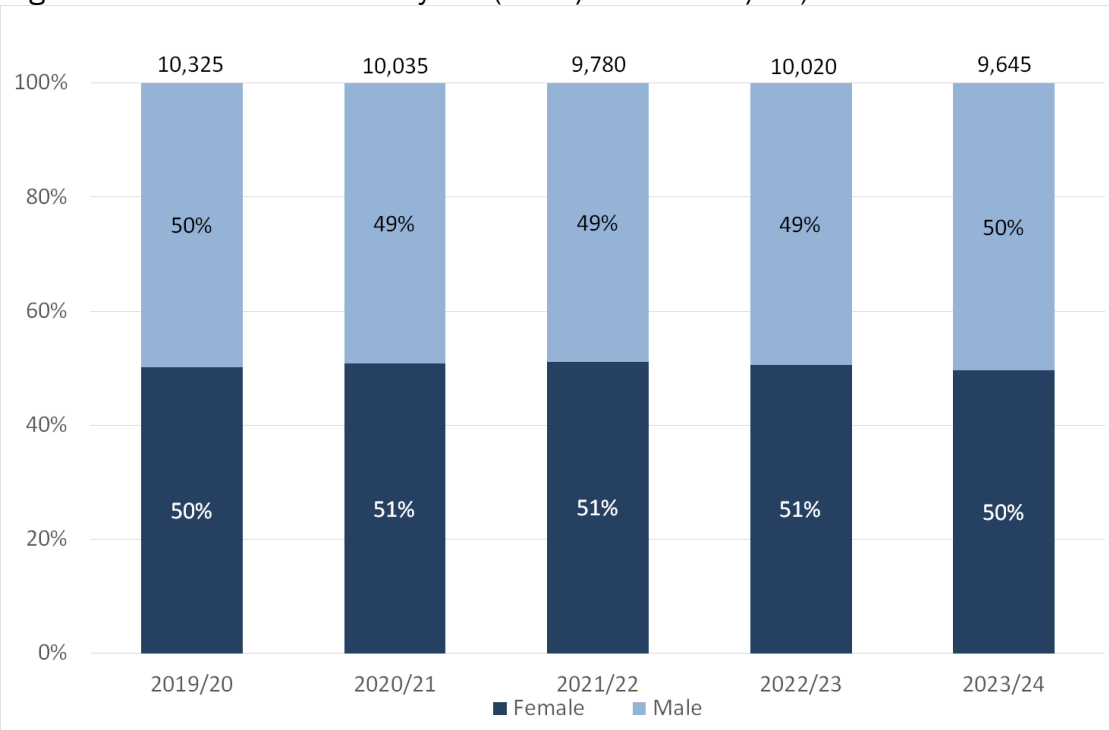
Higher Education

Fewer Higher Education enrolments and an even split by sex.

Higher Education enrolments at FE Colleges fell by a net 7%, from 10,325 in 2019/20 to 9,645 in 2023/24. Over the period, HE in FE enrolments were evenly split by sex, at 50% female and 50% male (Table A24).

Figure 8: Fewer Higher Education enrolments and an even split by sex

Higher Education enrolments by sex (2019/20 to 2023/24)



Deprivation

FE Sector regulated enrolments are fairly evenly spread across the four most deprived relative multiple deprivation quintiles although considerable variation occurs at college level.

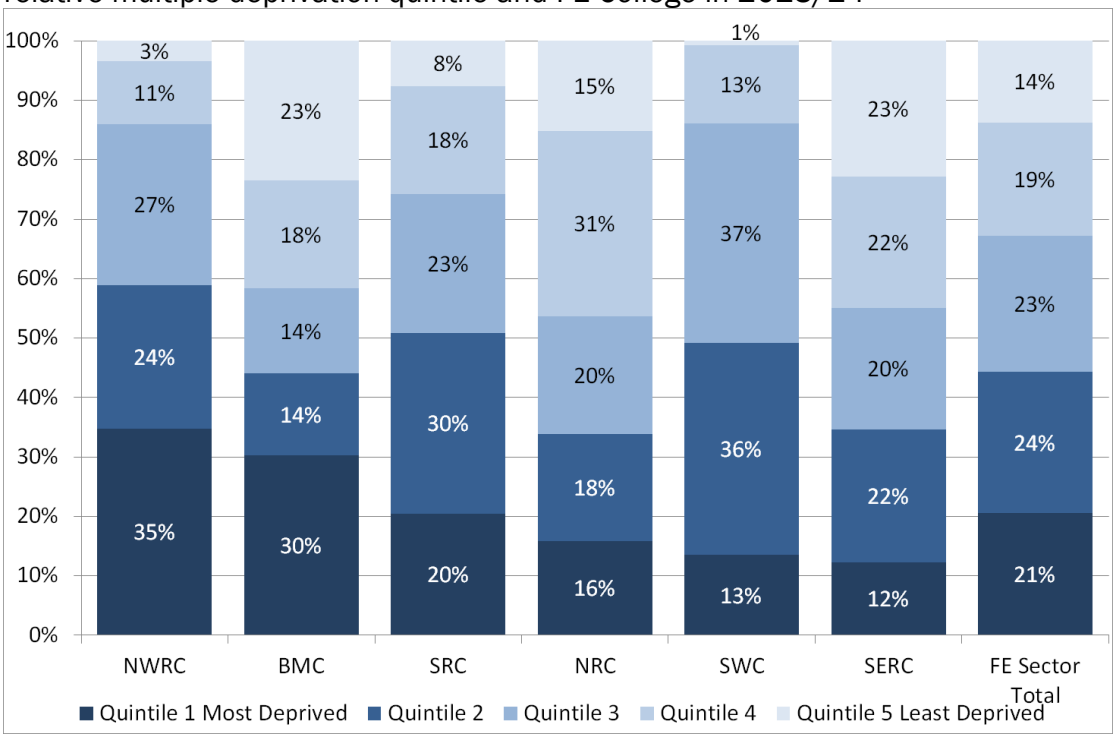
In 2023/24, while regulated enrolments were fairly evenly spread across the four most deprived relative multiple deprivation quintiles, much variation occurred at college level (Table A22).

For instance, over 50% of regulated enrolments at NWRC and SRC came from the two most deprived areas (Quintiles 1 and 2), whereas SERC's largest proportion (23%) came from the least deprived area (Quintile 5) (Table A22).

Over a third (35%) of NWRC's regulated enrolments were from Quintile 1, with 3% from Quintile 5. BMC enrolments were quite polarised, in that 54% were from either Quintiles 1 or 5 (Table A22).

Figure 9: Considerable variation in regulated enrolments across the relative multiple deprivation quintiles at college level

Proportion of regulated enrolments of Northern Ireland domiciled students by relative multiple deprivation quintile and FE College in 2023/24



Please note enrolments with unknown or invalid postcodes are not reflected in the chart and are excluded from Table A22.

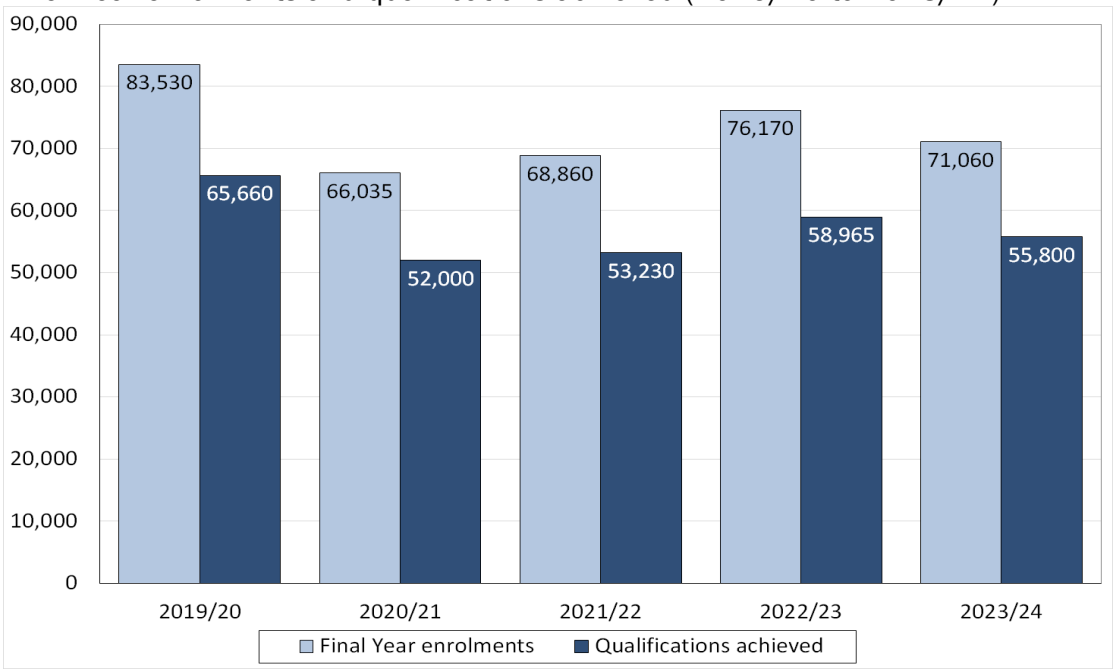
Qualifications

Fewer qualifications are being achieved generally.

15% fewer qualifications were awarded in FE Colleges in 2023/24 (55,800) than in 2019/20 (65,660); this includes a 21% decrease between 2019/20 and 2020/21 (Table 5).

Figure 10: 15% fewer qualifications were awarded in 2023/24 than in 2019/20

Final Year enrolments and qualifications achieved (2019/20 to 2023/24)



Performance rates

The proportions of people who stay on and complete their course and those who stay on, complete their course and achieve a qualification have not changed.

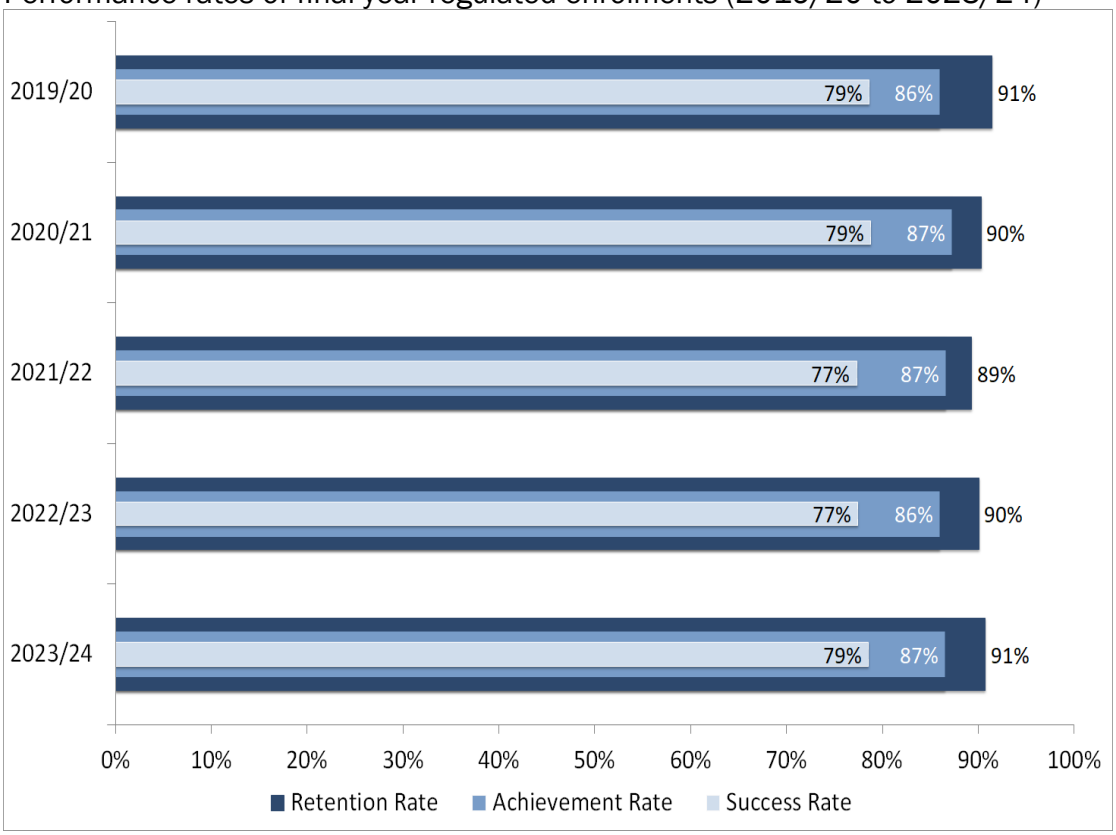
Over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24, the retention rate at FE Colleges has not changed in net terms (91%). Compared with 2019/20, this implies that the same proportion of people stayed on and completed their course in the most recent year (Table A30).

The achievement rate at FE Colleges has increased by a net 1 percentage point, from 86% (2019/20) to 87% (2023/24). This indicates that, of those who completed their course, proportionately more people achieved their qualification in 2019/20 than in 2023/24 (Table A30).

At 79%, the success rate (that is, the percentage of final year regulated enrolments of students who complete and achieve a qualification) has not changed in net terms over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24 (Table A30).

Figure 11: Over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24, the retention rate and success rate at FE Colleges have not changed in net terms

Performance rates of final year regulated enrolments (2019/20 to 2023/24)



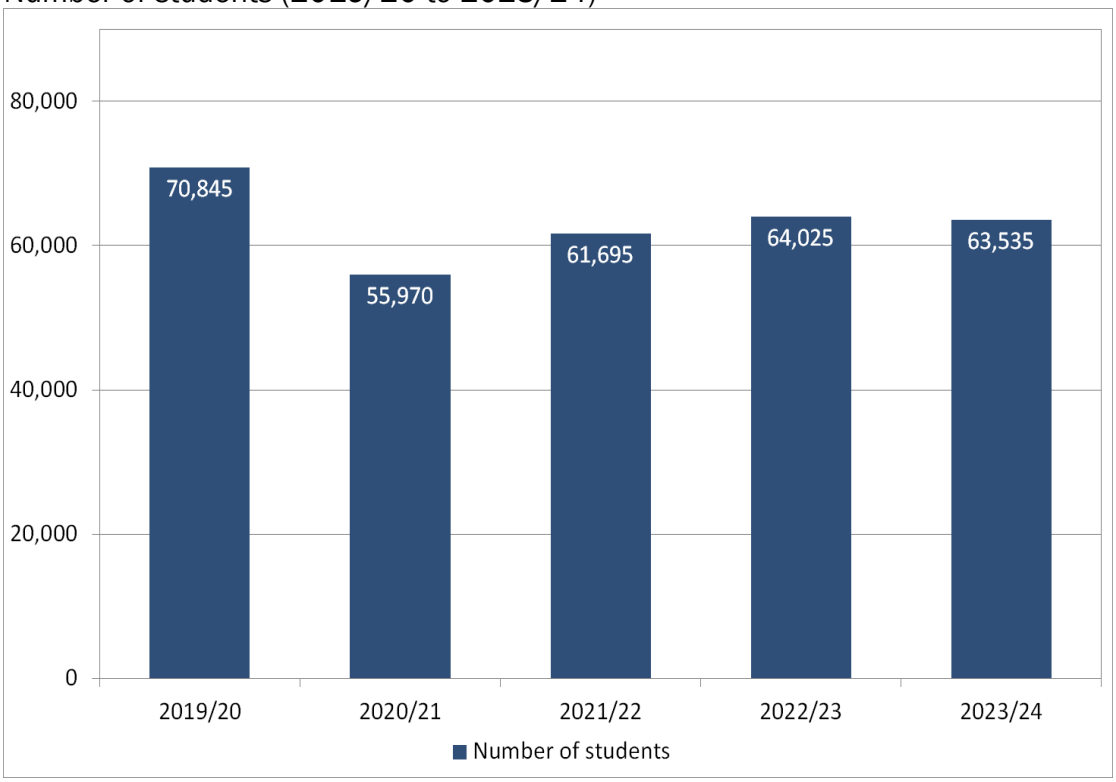
Students

Following a 21% decrease between 2019/20 and 2020/21, the number of FE College students increased 14% over the next two years, before falling 1% in 2023/24.

Following a pandemic-related decrease of 14,875 (21%) between 2019/20 (70,845) and 2020/21 (55,970), the number of FE College students increased 14% over the next two years, to 64,025 in 2022/23, before falling 1% to 63,535 in 2023/24; resulting in a net 10% decrease since 2019/20 (Table 6).

Figure 12: Following a 21% decrease between 2019/20 and 2020/21, the number of students increased 14% over the next two years, before falling 1% in 2023/24

Number of students (2019/20 to 2023/24)



Students enrolled by regulated status and age

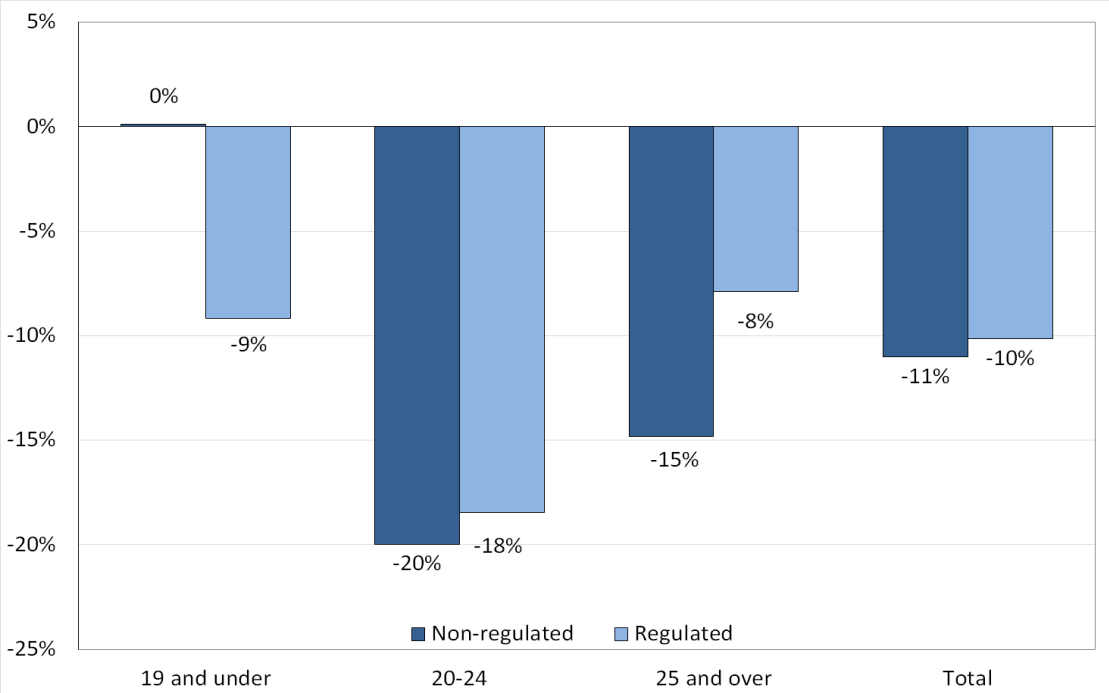
Fewer students are enrolled on regulated courses across all age groups.

Over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24, the number of students enrolled solely on non-regulated courses has decreased in net terms in the 25 and over age band (15%) and among those aged 20-24 (20%), while there was no change in net terms in the 19 and under age band (Table 7).

Since 2019/20, the number of students enrolled on regulated courses has decreased in net terms in each of the age bands, ranging from 8% in the 25 and over age band to 18% among those aged 20-24 (Table 7).

Figure 13: Fewer students are enrolled on regulated courses across all age groups

Net percentage change in students enrolled at FE Colleges by regulated status and age band (2019/20 to 2023/24)



Please note students with unknown ages (<2%) are not shown in the chart but are included in the Total.

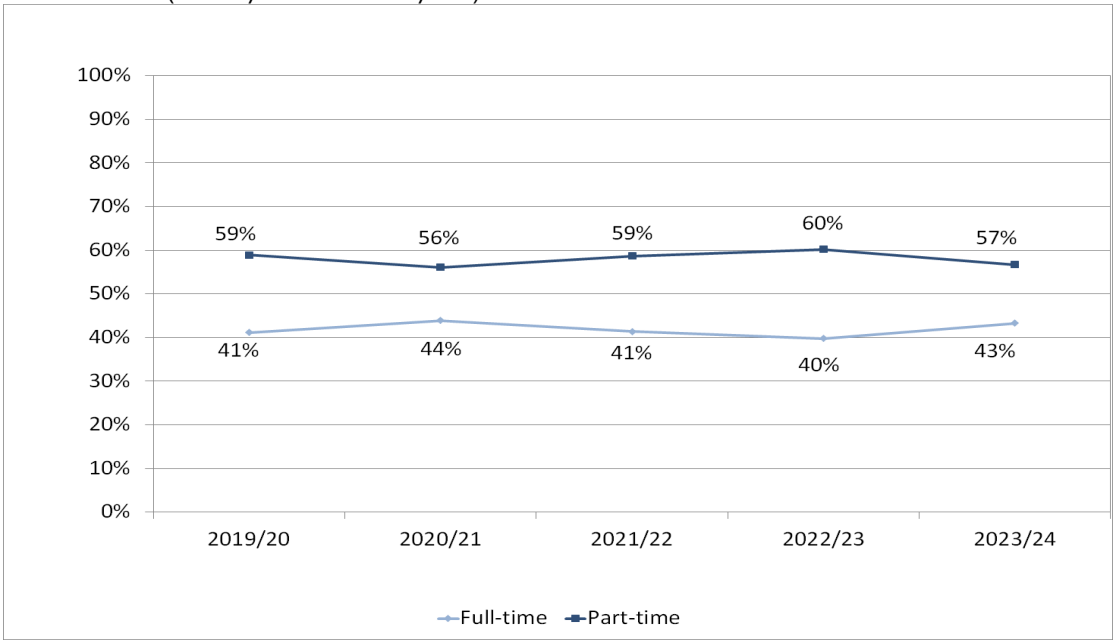
Students enrolled by mode of attendance

The full-time proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses has increased.

The full-time proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses has increased from 41% in 2019/20 to 43% in 2023/24 (Table 9).

Figure 14: Increase in the full-time proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24

Proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses at FE Colleges by mode of attendance (2019/20 to 2023/24)



Students achieving qualifications by highest level of study

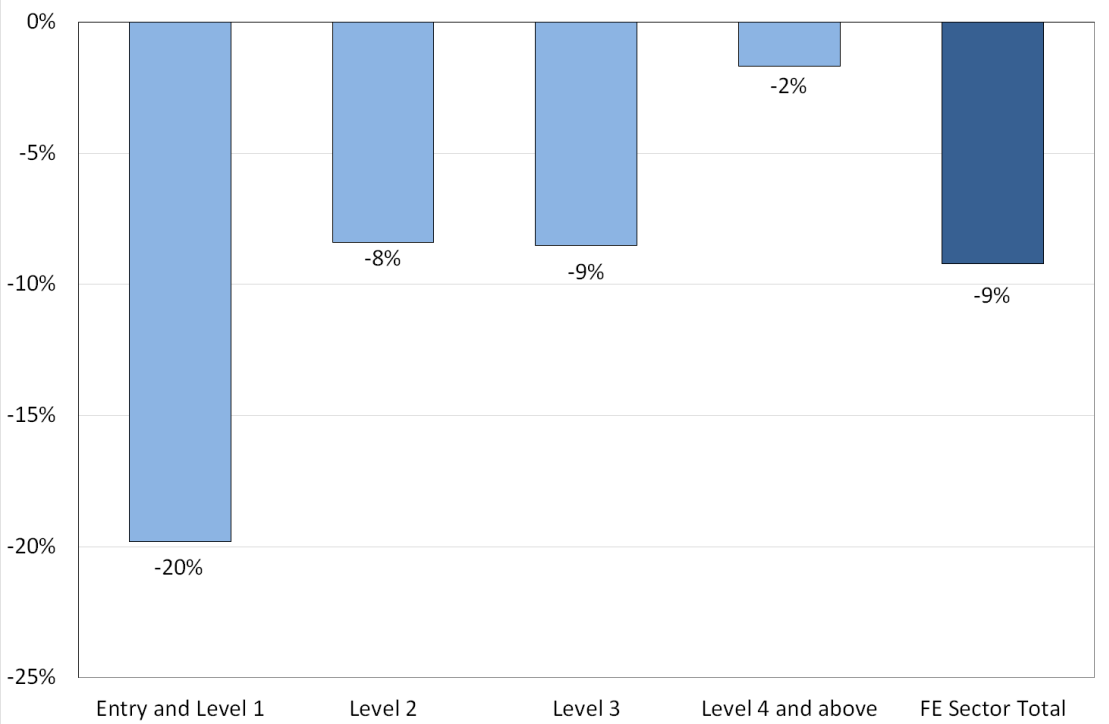
Decrease in the number of students achieving qualifications, although less so at higher levels of study.

The number of students achieving regulated qualifications at FE Colleges has decreased by a net 9%, from 39,575 in 2019/20 to 35,935 in 2023/24. This included a pandemic-impacted dip to 33,925 in 2020/21, followed by an 8% upturn over the next two years to 36,710 (Table A62).

Over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24, the number of students achieving regulated qualifications has decreased in net terms at each level of study, ranging from 2% at Level 4 and above to 20% at Entry and Level 1 (Table A62).

Figure 15: Decrease in the number of students achieving regulated qualifications, particularly at lower levels of study, over the period 2019/20 to 2023/24

Net percentage change in students achieving regulated qualifications by highest level of study (2019/20 to 2023/24)



Further Information

For information regarding the Statistics and Research Branch (Tertiary Education), including data collection, data quality and data usage and other contextual information, please see the document.

Statistics and Research Branch (Tertiary Education)

Detailed Annex and Supplementary Tables are available on the DfE web page:

Further education sector activity in Northern Ireland: 2019/20 to 2023/24

For information regarding definitions of the terms within the report, please see the document: Annex A Definitions.

For information regarding 'Technical Notes' on the methodology used to produce the statistics, please see the document: Annex B. Technical Notes.

Further Enquiries

Further details about any of the statistics in this statistical bulletin can be obtained from:

Allan Matthews
Statistics and Research Branch (Tertiary Education)
Department for the Economy
Adelaide House
39/49 Adelaide Street
BELFAST
BT2 8FD

Telephone: 028 9025 7727
E-mail: allan.matthews@economy-ni.gov.uk

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