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Department for the Economy
An Roinn Geilleagair
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Further Education Sector Activity in Northern Ireland: 2020/21 to 2024/25



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 2020/21 to 2024/25. 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: 4 December 2025
Theme: Children, Education and Skills
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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

- The number of FE College enrolments rose by a net 20% between the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 (97,530) and 2024/25 (116,860), including a 5% increase in the most recent academic year.
- The regulated share of enrolments decreased from 90% in 2020/21 to 79% in 2024/25.
- Over two-fifths (42%) of 2024/25 enrolments were mainstream funded by the Department for the Economy.

Regulated enrolments

- Of the 92,160 regulated enrolments in 2024/25, 82% were at Level 2 or above, down from 83% in 2020/21.
- The age structure of the student population on regulated enrolments is becoming more polarised, with the combined aged 19 and under and 25 and over share of such enrolments increasing from 85% in 2020/21 to 87% in 2024/25.
- Three-quarters (74%) of regulated enrolments are part-time, while more males than females study full-time.
- Higher Education enrolments decreased by a net 1%, from 10,035 in 2020/21 to 9,925 in 2024/25.
- 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, 12% more qualifications were awarded in 2024/25 (58,055) than in 2020/21 (52,000).

Students

- The number of FE sector students rose by a net 19% between 2020/21 (55,970) and 2024/25 (66,690), including a 5% increase in 2024/25.
- In 2024/25, 3% more students were enrolled on regulated courses (52,375) than in 2020/21 (50,810).
- The number of students achieving regulated qualifications increased by a net 9%, from 33,925 in 2020/21 to 37,070 in 2024/25.

Enrolments

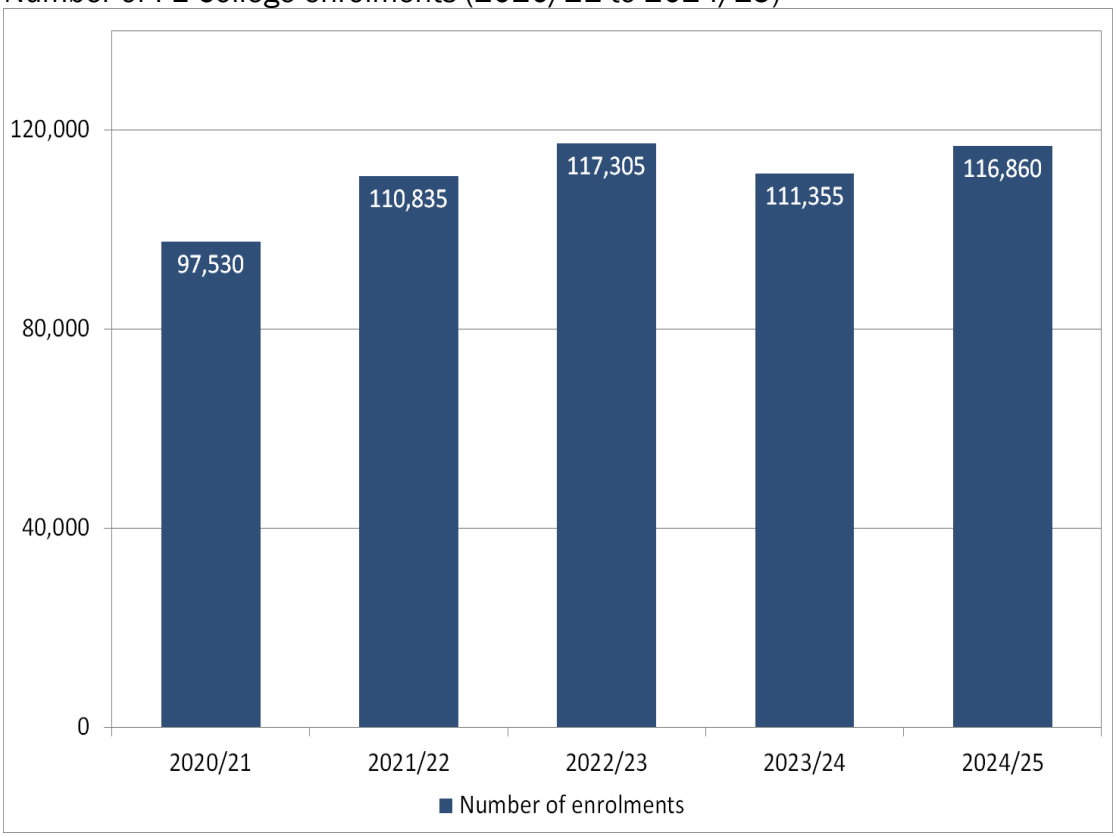
The number of enrolments rose by a net 20% between 2020/21 (97,530) and 2024/25 (116,860).

The number of FE College enrolments rose by a net 20% between the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 (97,530) and 2024/25 (116,860), including a 5% increase in the most recent academic year. Notably in 2024/25 were increases in NRC (up 26%, to 15,565), NWRC (up 21%, to 15,455) and SWC (up 14% to 23,245) (Table 1).

The bulk of the net 20% (19,325) increase in enrolments between 2020/21 and 2024/25 were part-time (up 18,205), non-regulated (up 14,535) and / or relating to students aged 19 and under (up 12,695) (Table A2 and Table A8).

Figure 1: The number of enrolments rose by a net 20% between 2020/21 and 2024/25

Number of FE College enrolments (2020/21 to 2024/25)



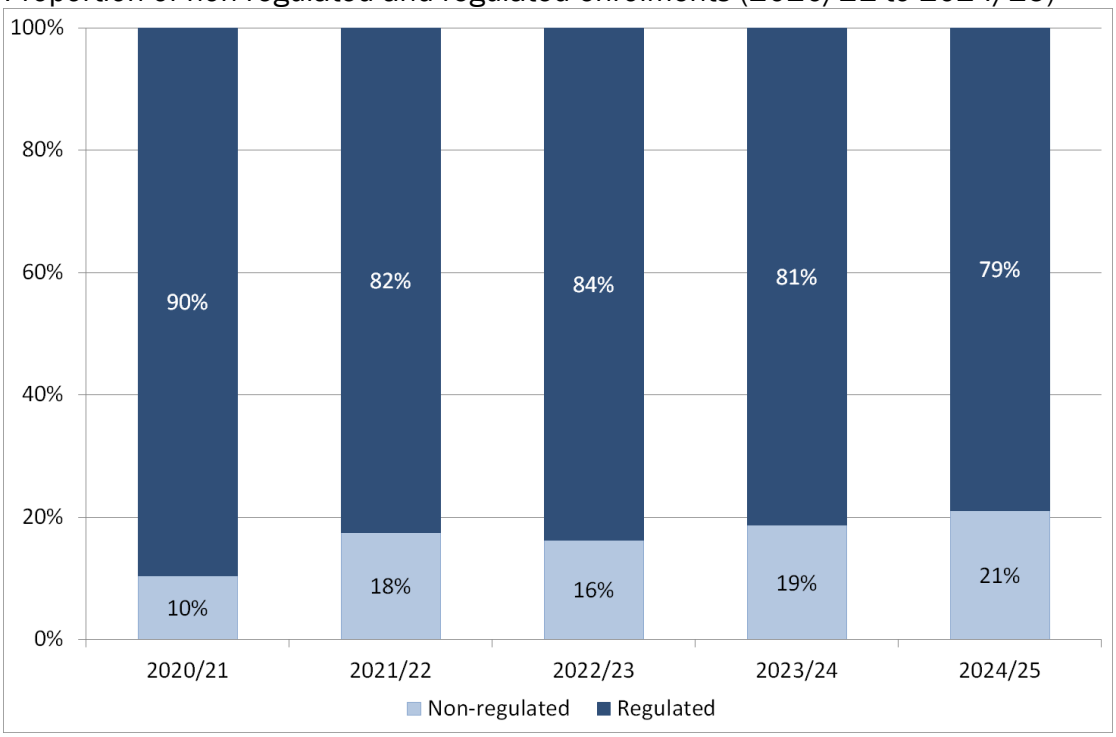
Regulated share of enrolments

Over the period 2020/21 to 2024/25, the regulated share of enrolments has decreased.

Between 2020/21 and 2024/25, the regulated share of enrolments has decreased in net terms from 90% to 79%. This included a downward spike to 82% in 2021/22 following the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 (Table A5).

Figure 2: Regulated share of enrolments has decreased in net terms from 90% in 2020/21 to 79% in 2024/25

Proportion of non-regulated and regulated enrolments (2020/21 to 2024/25)



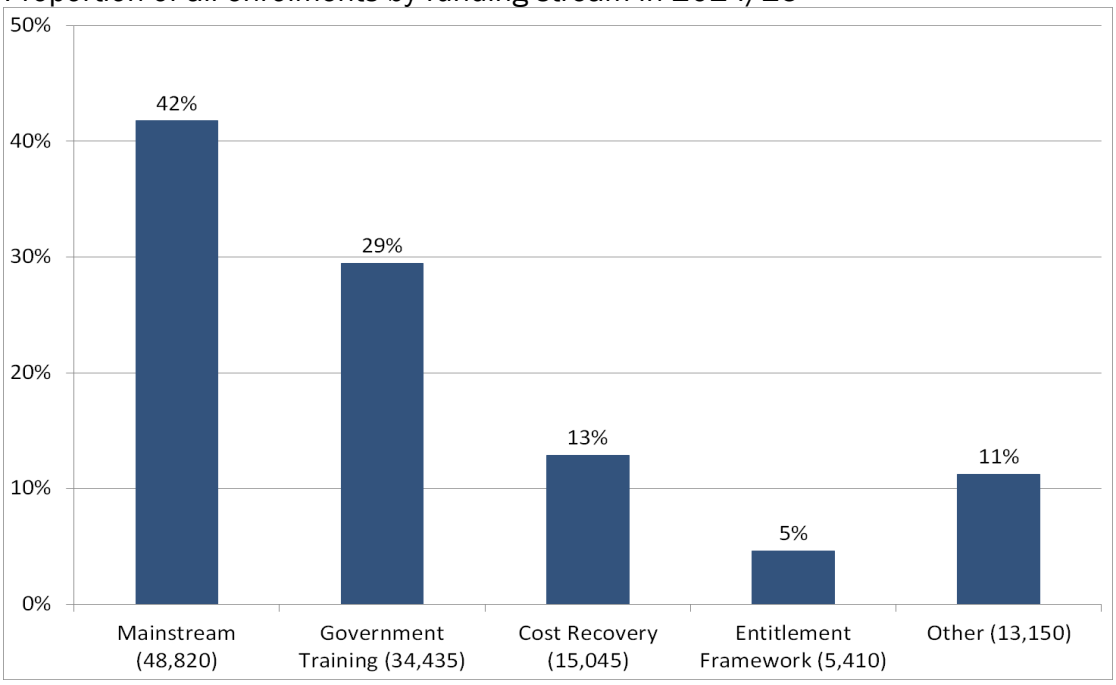
Funding streams

Over two-fifths of enrolments are funded by the Department for the Economy.

Of the 116,860 enrolments in 2024/25, over two-fifths (42%) were mainstream funded by the Department for the Economy, 29% were funded through government training programmes, 13% 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 2024/25



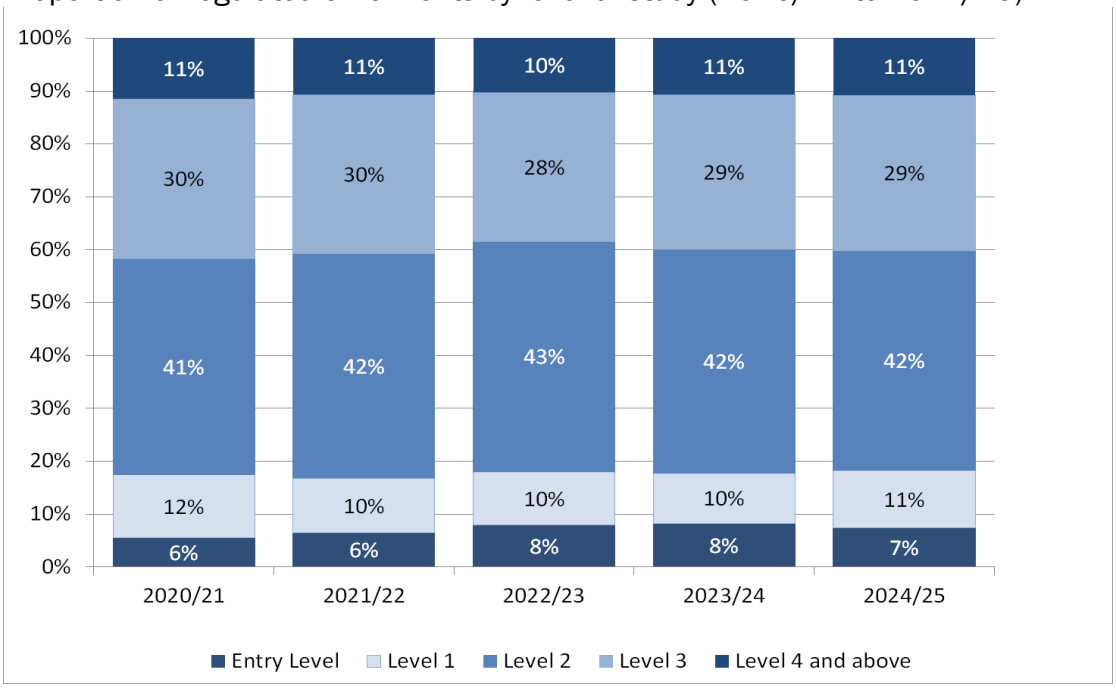
Level of study

Fewer regulated enrolments were at Level 2 or above in 2024/25 than 2020/21.

Of the 92,160 FE Sector regulated enrolments in 2024/25, over four-fifths (82%) were at Level 2 or above, down from 83% in 2020/21. Those at Entry Level accounted for 7% (6,850), 11% (9,960) were at Level 1, 42% (38,255) were at Level 2, 29% (27,175) were at Level 3 and 11% (9,925) were at Level 4 and above (Table A19).

Figure 4: Regulated enrolments were less likely to be at Level 2 or above in 2024/25 than in 2020/21

Proportion of regulated enrolments by level of study (2020/21 to 2024/25)



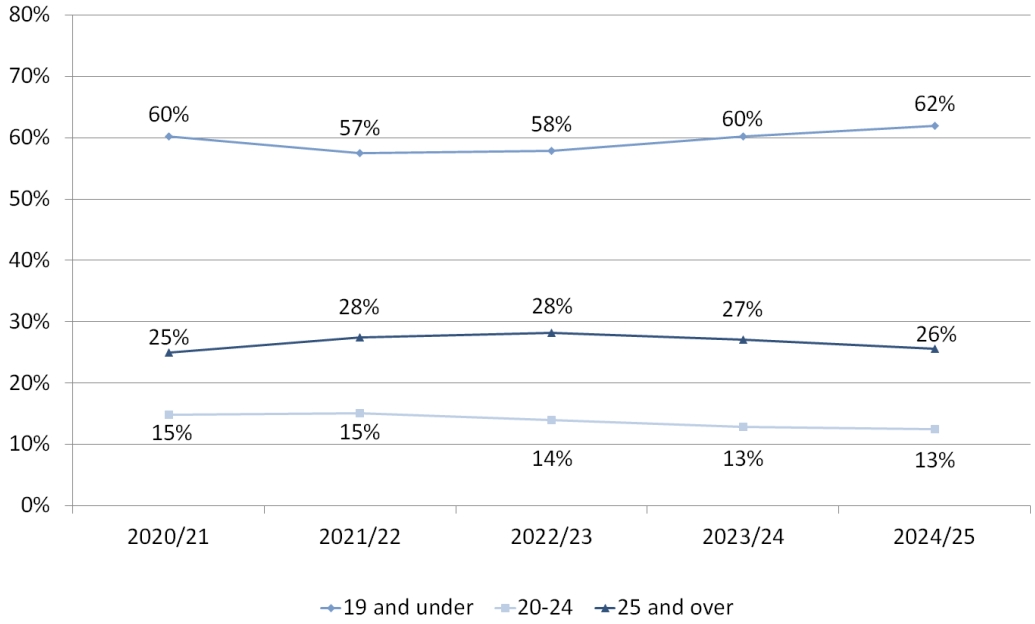
Age

The age structure of the student population is becoming more polarised, with the aged 19 and under and the 25 and over shares increasing.

Since 2020/21, the aged 19 and under and aged 25 and over shares of regulated enrolments have increased from 60% to 62% and 25% to 26% respectively, while conversely, the proportion of those aged 20-24 has decreased from 15% to 13% (Table A15).

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

Regulated enrolments by proportion of age band (2020/21 to 2024/25)



Mode of attendance and sex

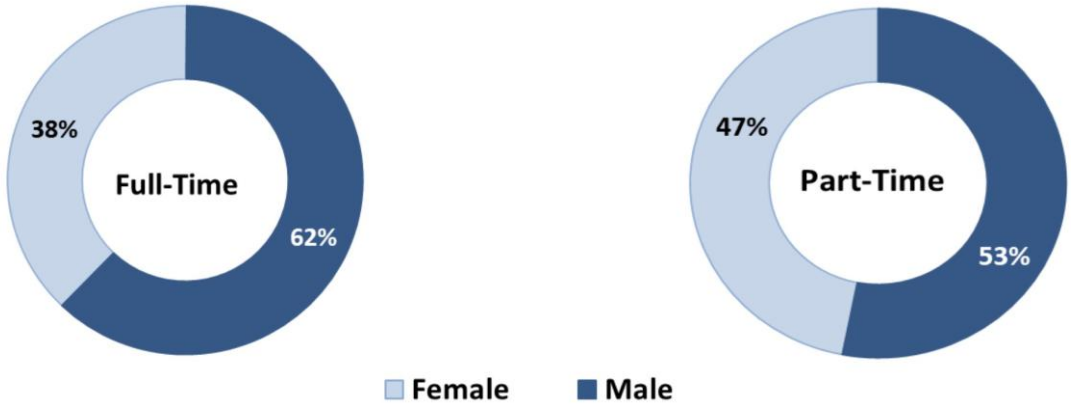
Three-quarters (74%) of regulated enrolments are part-time, while males are much more likely than females to study full-time.

Most regulated enrolments are part-time; over the period 2020/21 to 2024/25, this proportion has remained at 74% in net terms. The number of part-time regulated enrolments increased by 3,630 (6%) between 2020/21 (64,495) and 2024/25 (68,125). This included a 19% increase to 2022/23 (76,430) followed by an 11% decrease to 2023/24 (67,845) (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 2024/25, 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 2024/25, whereas part-time regulated provision was more evenly split by sex

Proportion of regulated enrolments by sex and mode of attendance in 2024/25



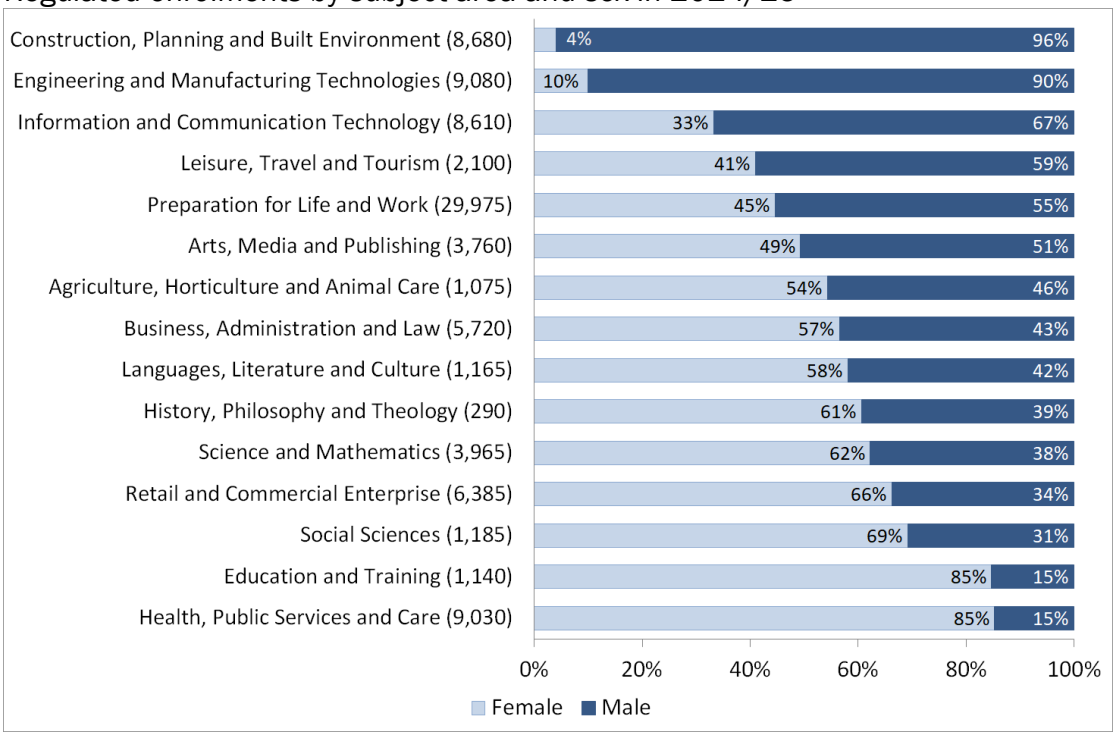
Subject area and sex

The popularity of different subject areas varies by sex.

Although regulated enrolments were fairly evenly split by sex in 2024/25, 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 (85%). 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 2024/25



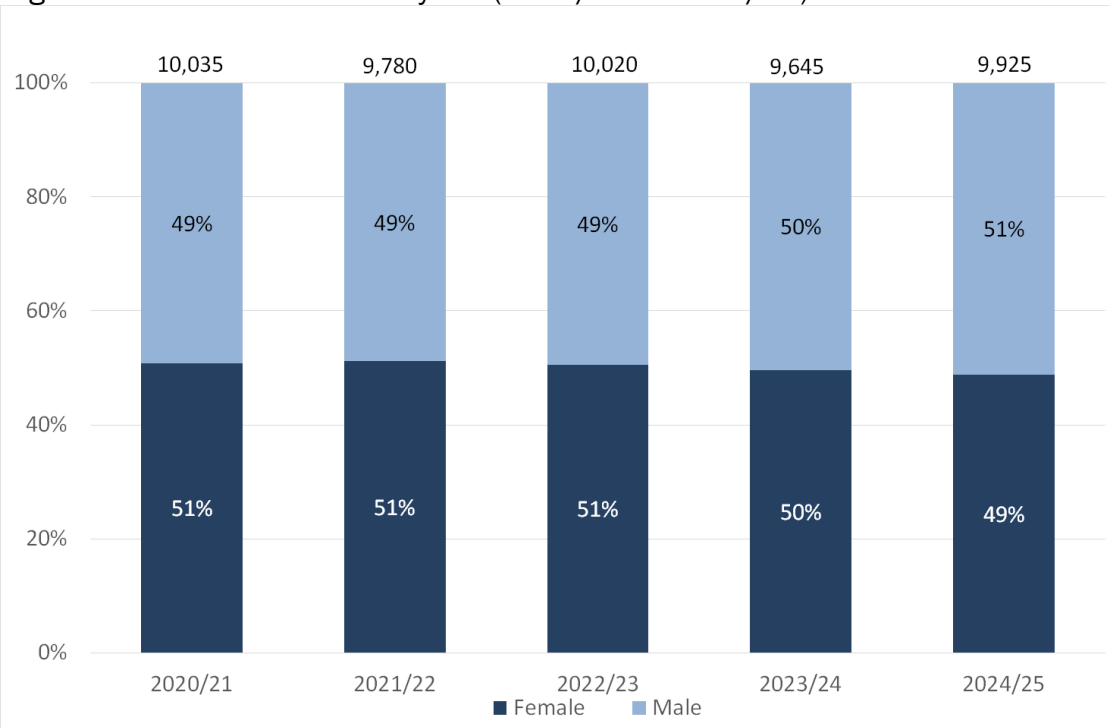
Higher Education

Fewer Higher Education enrolments and an even split by sex.

Higher Education enrolments at FE Colleges fell by a net 1%, from 10,035 in 2020/21 to 9,925 in 2024/25. Over the period, HE in FE enrolments were fairly evenly split by sex, at 49% female and 51% male (2024/25) (Table A24).

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

Higher Education enrolments by sex (2020/21 to 2024/25)



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.

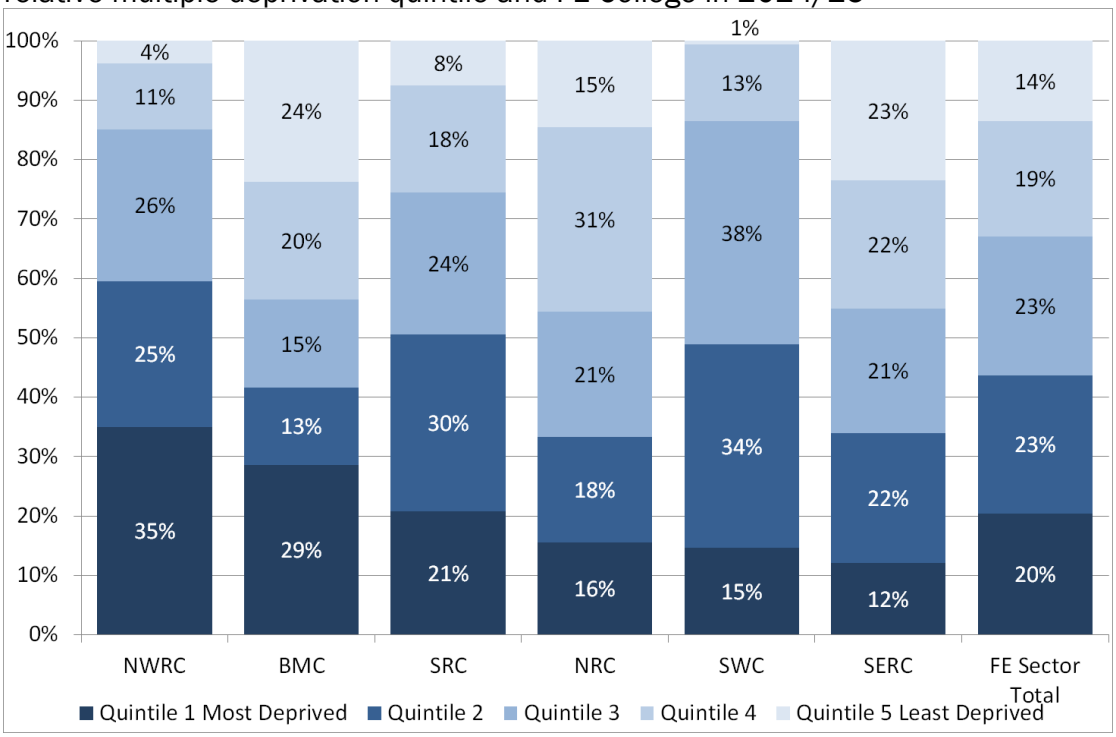
In 2024/25, while regulated enrolments were fairly evenly spread across the four most deprived relative multiple deprivation quintiles, much variation occurred at college level (Table A22).

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 4% from Quintile 5. BMC enrolments were quite polarised, in that 52% 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 2024/25



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

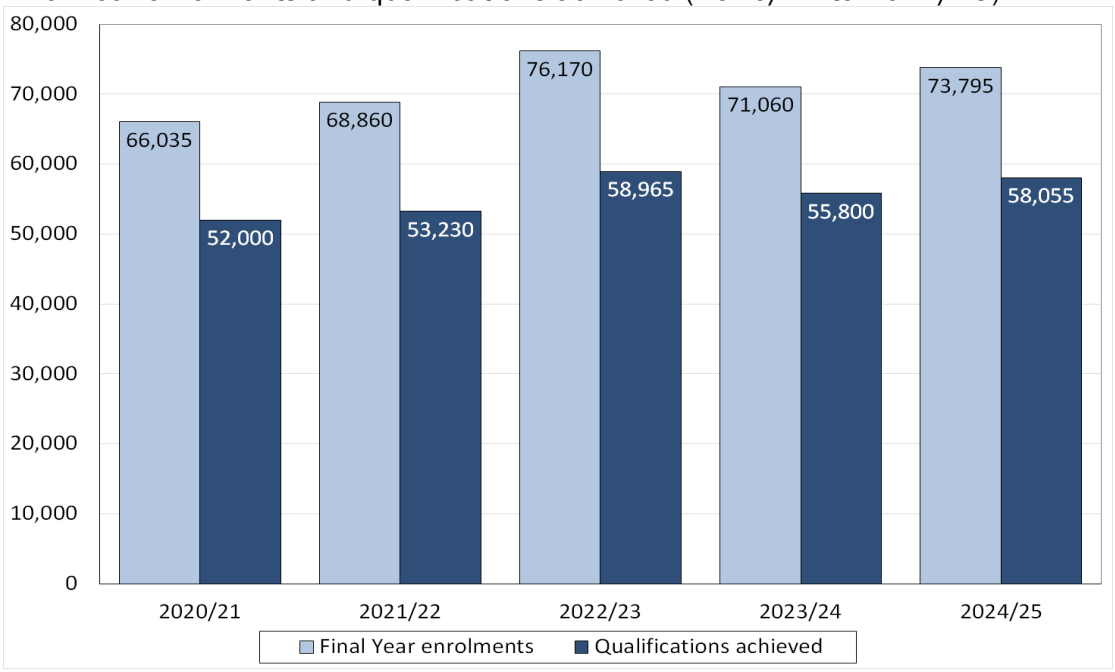
Qualifications

More qualifications are being achieved generally.

12% more qualifications were awarded in FE Colleges in 2024/25 (58,055) than in 2020/21 (52,000). This included a 13% increase to 2022/23 (58,965), followed by a 5% decrease to 2023/24 (55,800) (Table 5).

Figure 10: 12% more qualifications were awarded in 2024/25 than in 2020/21

Final Year enrolments and qualifications achieved (2020/21 to 2024/25)



Performance rates

Although the retention rate has increased in net terms, the achievement and success rates are unchanged.

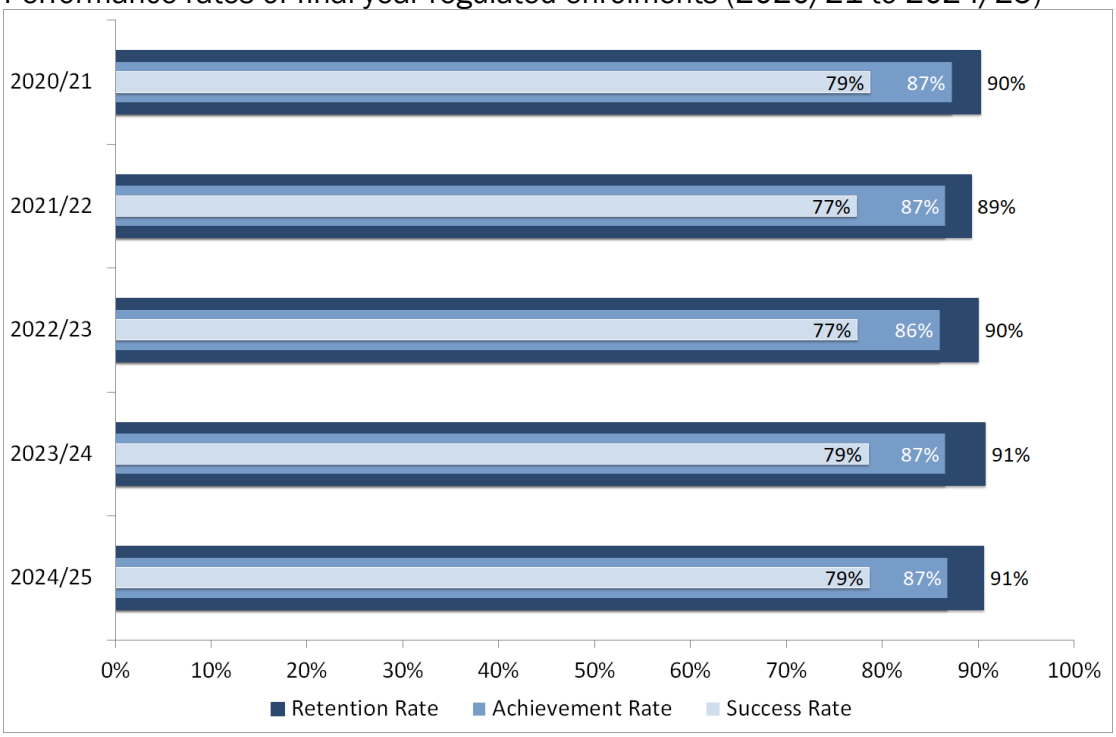
The retention rate at FE Colleges has increased by almost 1 percentage point, from 90% (2020/21) to 91% (2024/25). This indicates that a greater proportion of people stayed on and completed their course in the most recent year (Table A30).

Over the period 2020/21 to 2024/25, the achievement rate at FE Colleges has not changed in net terms (87%). In other words, of those who completed their course, the same proportion of people achieved their qualification in 2020/21 and 2024/25 (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 2020/21 to 2024/25 (Table A30).

Figure 11: Over the period 2020/21 to 2024/25, the achievement rate and success rate at FE Colleges have not changed in net terms

Performance rates of final year regulated enrolments (2020/21 to 2024/25)



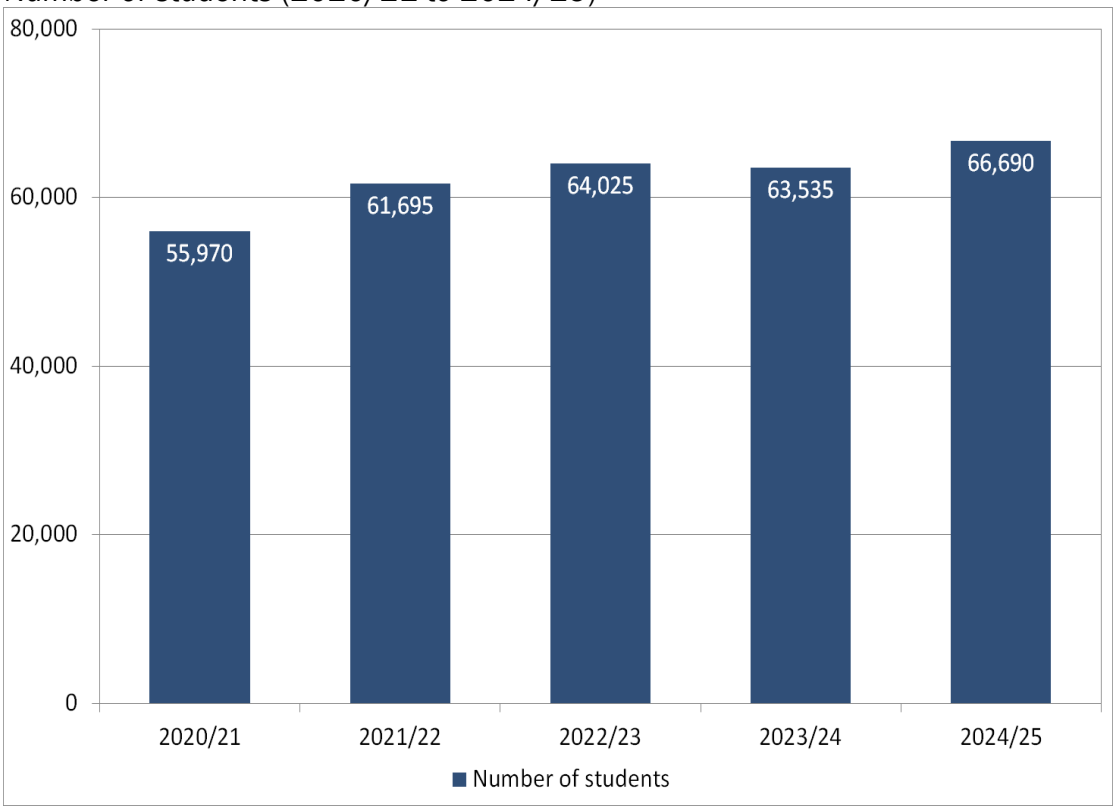
Students

The number of FE sector students rose by a net 19% between 2020/21 (55,970) and 2024/25 (66,690).

Following an increase of 8,055 (14%) between the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 (55,970) and 2022/23 (64,025), the number of FE College students fell 1% to 63,535 in 2023/24, before increasing 5% to 66,690 in 2024/25; resulting in a net 19% increase since 2020/21 (Table 6).

Figure 12: Following a 14% increase between 2020/21 and 2022/23, the number of students fell 1% to 2023/24, before increasing 5% in 2024/25

Number of students (2020/21 to 2024/25)



Students enrolled on regulated courses by age

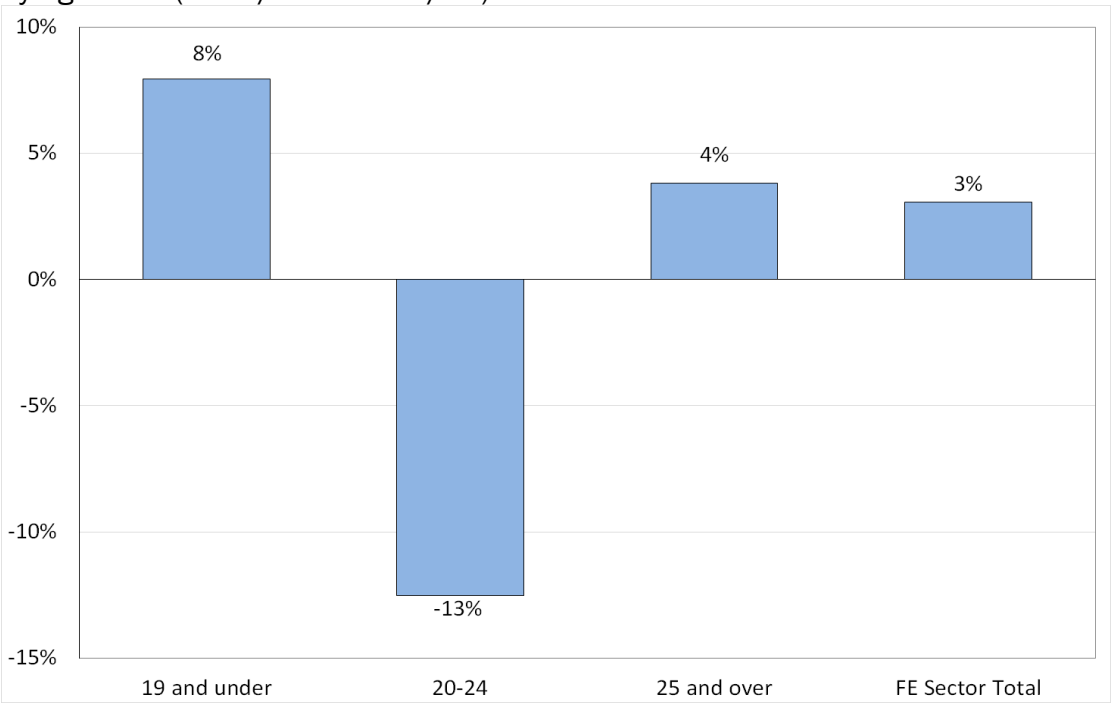
More students are enrolling on regulated courses, although this doesn't apply across all age groups.

The number of students enrolled on regulated courses has increased by a net 3% from 50,810 in 2020/21 to 52,375 in 2024/25. This included a 4% increase to 2022/23 (52,920), followed by a 3% decrease to 2023/24 (51,380) (Table 7).

Over the period 2020/21 to 2024/25, the number of students enrolled on regulated courses has increased in net terms in the 19 and under age band (8%) and among those aged 25 and over (4%), while there was a 13% decrease in net terms in the 20-24 age band (Table 7).

Figure 13: More students are enrolling on regulated courses, although this doesn't apply across all age groups

Net percentage change in students enrolled on regulated courses at FE Colleges by age band (2020/21 to 2024/25)



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

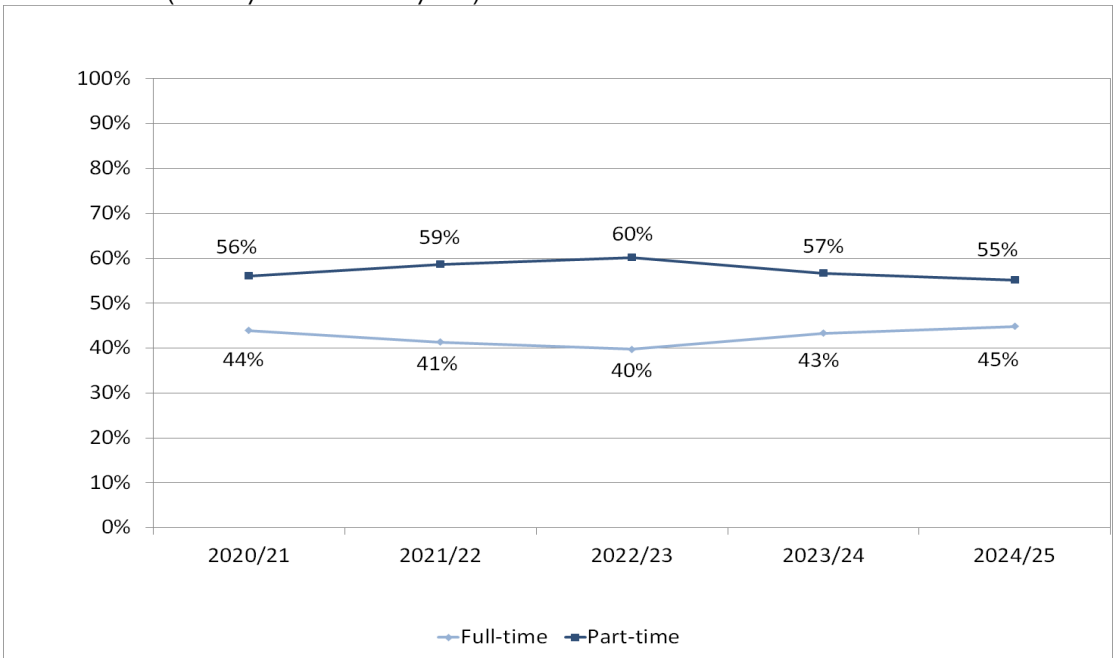
Students enrolled by mode of attendance

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 44% in 2020/21 to 45% in 2024/25 (Table 9).

Figure 14: Increase in the full-time proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses over the period 2020/21 to 2024/25

Proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses at FE Colleges by mode of attendance (2020/21 to 2024/25)



Students achieving qualifications by highest level of study

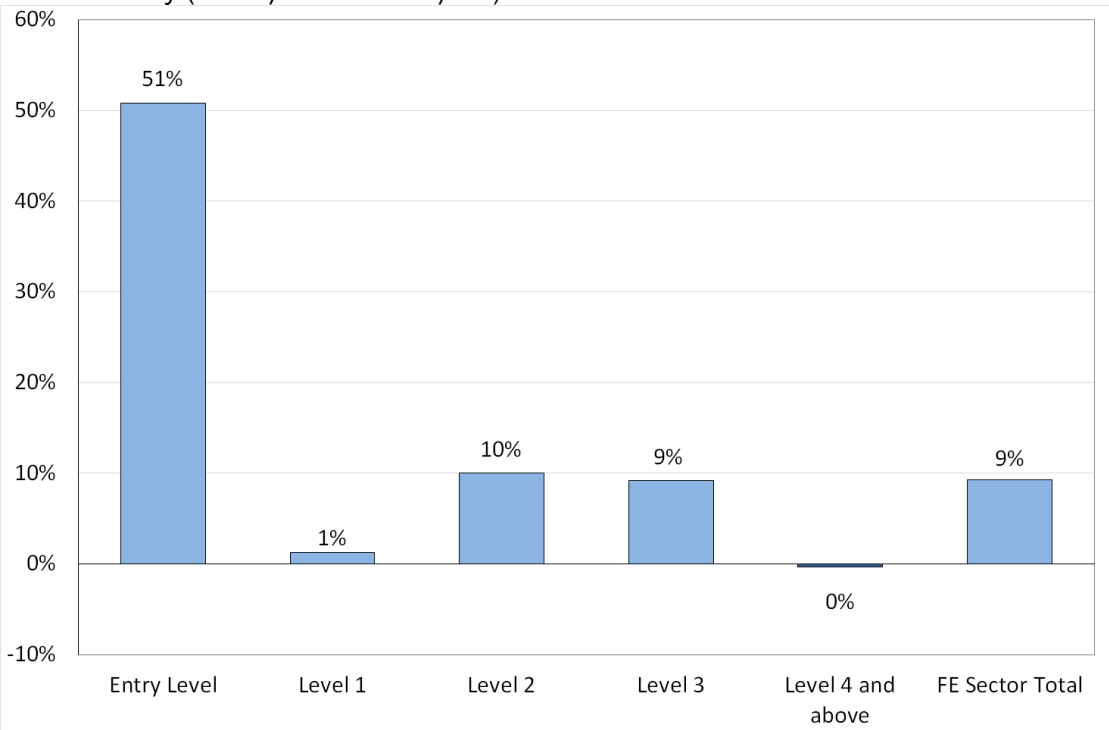
More students achieving qualifications, particularly at lower levels of study.

The number of students achieving regulated qualifications at FE Colleges has increased by a net 9%, from 33,925 in 2020/21 to 37,070 in 2024/25. Following the pandemic-impacted 2020/21, this included an 8% increase to 2022/23 (36,710), followed by a 2% decrease to 2023/24 (35,935) (Table A62).

Over the period 2020/21 to 2024/25, the percentage of students achieving regulated qualifications has increased in net terms at each level of study up to Level 3, ranging from 1% at Level 1 to 51% at Entry Level. There was no percentage change in net terms at Level 4 and above (Table A62).

Figure 15: More students achieving regulated qualifications, particularly at lower levels of study, over the period 2020/21 to 2024/25

Net percentage change in students achieving regulated qualifications by highest level of study (2020/21 to 2024/25)



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: 2020/21 to 2024/25

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.

With regards to the FE Sector Data Quality Report, please see information at:

Further Education Sector Activity Data Quality Report

Further Enquiries

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

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