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Further Education Sector Activity in Northern Ireland: 2018/19 to 2022/23



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 2018/19 to 2022/23. The statistics presented cover the characteristics of those enrolling in FE Colleges, along with analysis of areas of deprivation, funding streams and performance.

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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 34% decline between 2018/19 (148,000) and the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 (97,530), the number of enrolments has increased by 20% over the two most recent years, to 117,305 in 2022/23.
- The regulated share of enrolments increased from 80% in 2018/19 to 84% in 2022/23.
- Over half of 2022/23 enrolments were mainstream funded by the Department for the Economy.

Regulated enrolments

- Of the 98,200 regulated enrolments in 2022/23, 82% were at Level 2 or above, up from 79% in 2018/19.
- The student population on regulated enrolments is becoming older, with the aged 20 and over share increasing from 39% in 2018/19 to 42% in 2022/23.
- Most regulated enrolments are part-time, while more males than females study full-time.
- Higher Education enrolments fell by a net 6%, from 10,705 in 2018/19 to 10,020 in 2022/23.
- FE Sector regulated enrolments are fairly evenly spread across relative multiple deprivation quintiles, although considerable variation occurs at college level.

Qualifications and Performance

- Over a fifth fewer qualifications were awarded in 2022/23 (58,965) than in 2018/19 (74,580).
- The proportions of people who stay on and complete their course and of those who complete their course and achieve a qualification have not changed.

Students enrolled and Qualifications achieved

- Following a 27% decline between 2018/19 (76,670) and 2020/21 (55,970), the number of students has increased by 14% over the two most recent years, to 64,025 in 2022/23.
- In 2022/23, fewer students were enrolled across all age groups than in 2018/19.
- The number of students achieving regulated qualifications decreased by a net 17%, from 44,105 in 2018/19 to 36,710 in 2022/23.

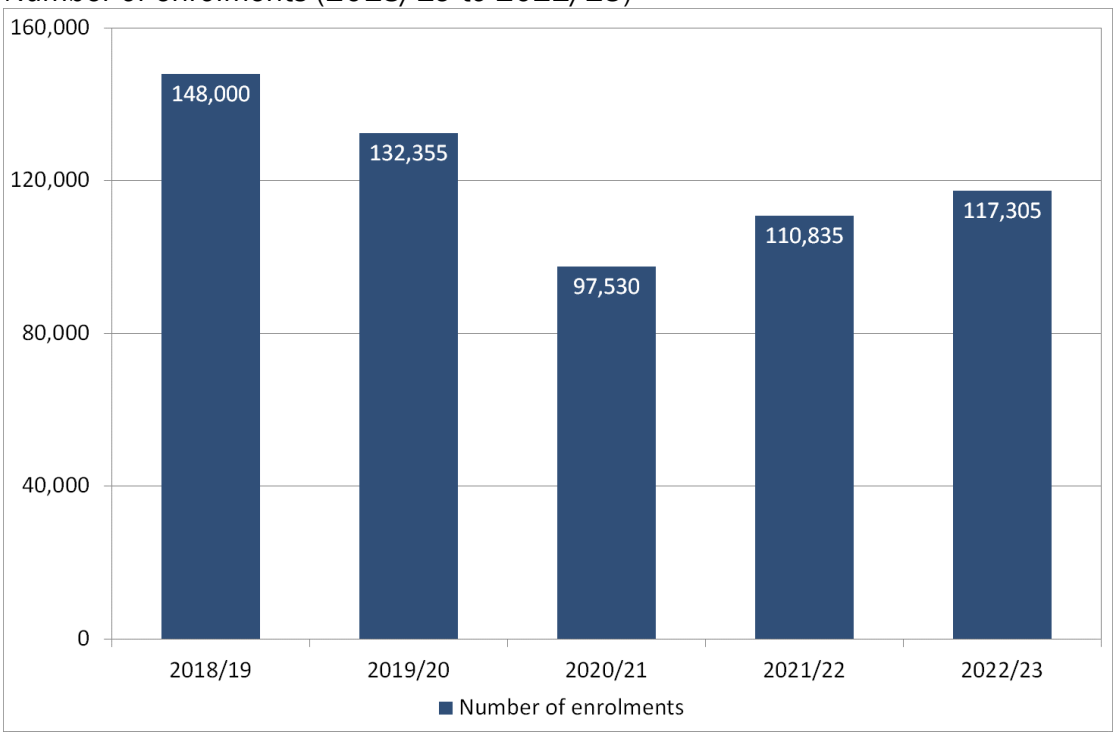
Enrolments

Following a period of decline (34%) between 2018/19 and 2020/21, the number of FE College enrolments increased (20%) from 2020/21 to 2022/23.

Following a 34% decline between 2018/19 (148,000) and the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 (97,530), the number of enrolments has increased by 20% over the two most recent years, to 117,305 in 2022/23 (Table 1).

Figure 1: 34% decline in the number of enrolments between 2018/19 and 2020/21 before a 20% increase from 2020/21 to 2022/23

Number of enrolments (2018/19 to 2022/23)



While much of this recent increase related to part-time study and to students aged 25 and over, overall enrolments continued to be impacted by a longer-term decrease in part-time enrolments, the relatively low number of 16-19 year-olds and the transition back to pre-pandemic-related GCSE and GCE grading arrangements.

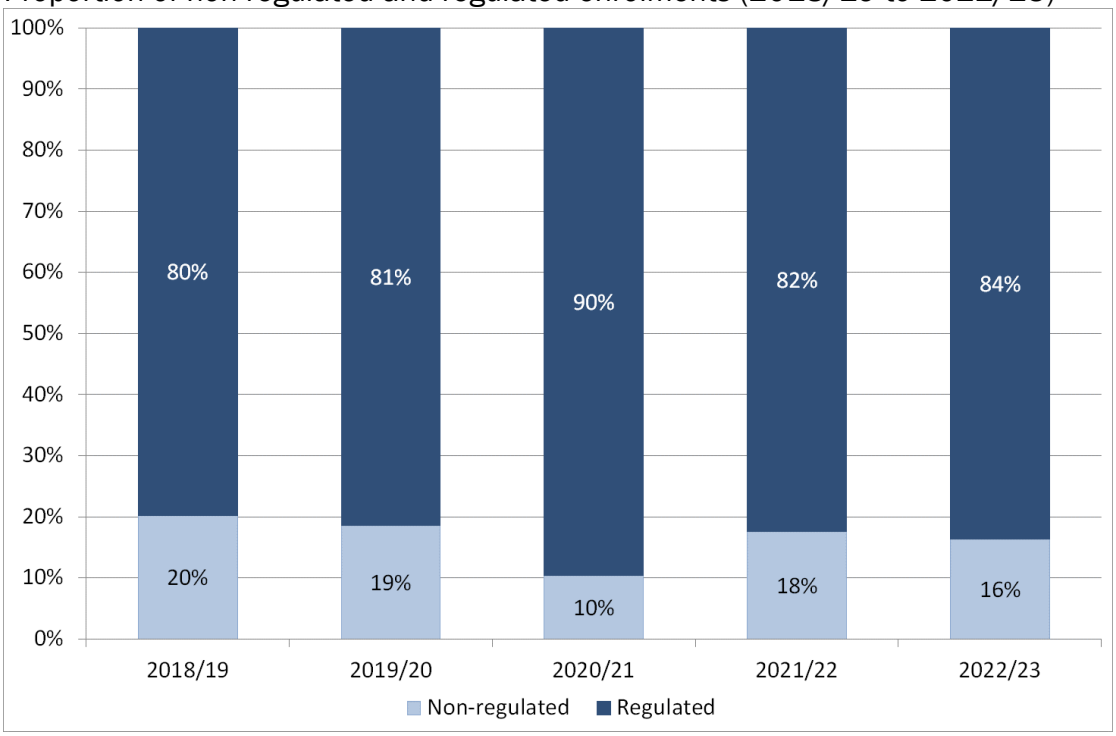
Regulated share of enrolments

Over the period 2018/19 to 2022/23, the regulated share of enrolments has increased.

Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, the regulated share of enrolments has increased in net terms, from 80% to 84%. This included an upward spike to 90% during the pandemic-impacted 2020/21 (Table A5).

Figure 2: Regulated share of enrolments has increased in net terms from 80% in 2018/19 to 84% in 2022/23

Proportion of non-regulated and regulated enrolments (2018/19 to 2022/23)



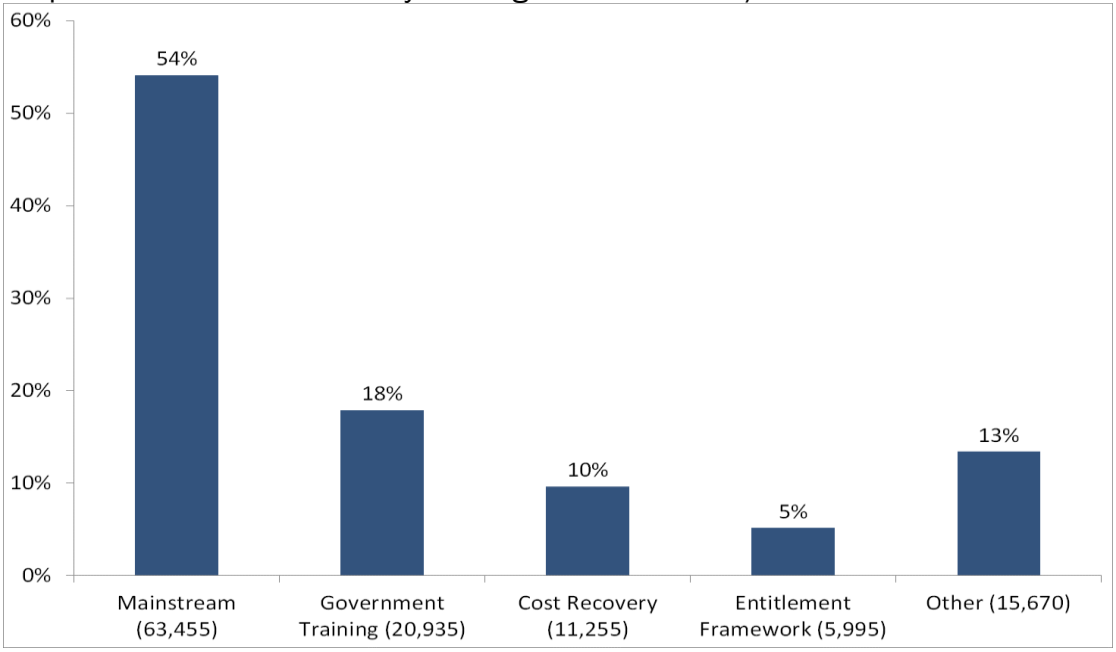
Funding streams

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

Of the 117,305 enrolments in 2022/23, over half (54%) were mainstream funded by the Department for the Economy, 18% were funded through government training programmes, 10% were cost recovery and 5% were funded through the Entitlement Framework programme. The remaining 13% 'Other' enrolments included programmes like Skills Up, Skills Focus, European Social Fund and Assured Skills (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 2022/23



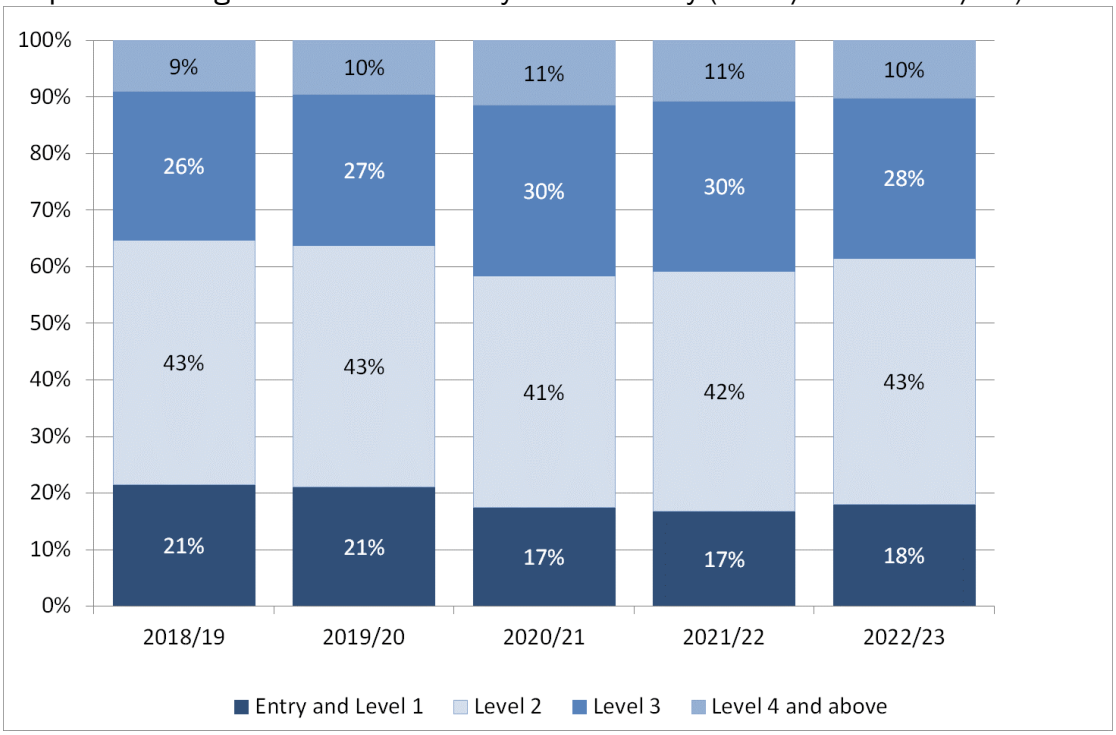
Level of study

More regulated enrolments were at Level 2 or above in 2022/23 than 2018/19.

Of the 98,200 FE Sector regulated enrolments in 2022/23, over four-fifths (82%) were at Level 2 or above, up from 79% in 2018/19. Those at Level 1 and below accounted for 18% (17,725); 43% (42,685) were at Level 2, 28% (27,775) were at Level 3 and 10% (10,020) were at Level 4 and above (Table A19).

Figure 4: Regulated enrolments were more likely to be at Level 2 or above in 2022/23 than in 2018/19

Proportion of regulated enrolments by level of study (2018/19 to 2022/23)



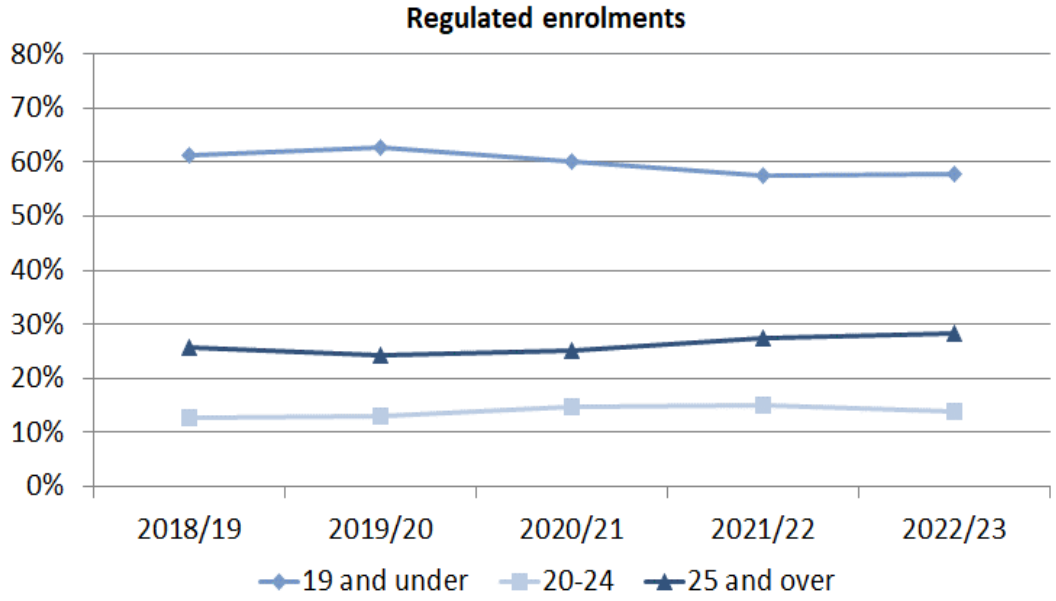
Age

The student population is becoming older, with the aged 20 and over share increasing.

Since 2018/19, the aged 20-24 and aged 25 and over shares of regulated enrolments have increased from 13% to 14% and 26% to 28%; conversely, the proportion of those aged 19 and under has decreased from 61% to 58% (Table A15).

Figure 5: Increase in regulated share of enrolments of students aged 20 and over and decrease in those aged 19 and under

Regulated enrolments by proportion of age band (2018/19 to 2022/23)



Mode of attendance and sex

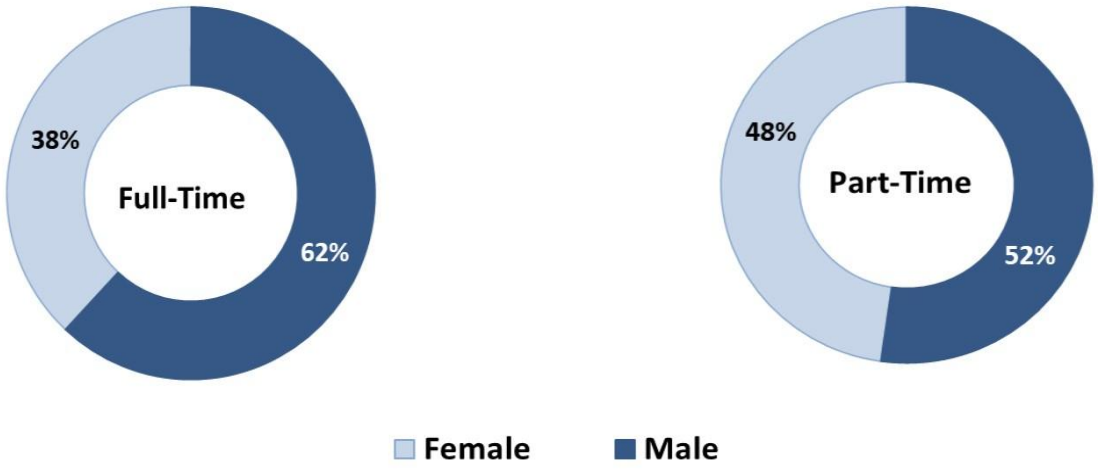
Most regulated enrolments are part-time, while more males than females study full-time.

Most regulated enrolments are part-time, although this proportion has reduced from 79% in 2018/19 to 78% in 2022/23. The number of part-time regulated enrolments has decreased by 17,230 (18%) between 2018/19 (93,660) and 2022/23 (76,430). This included a 31% decrease to 2020/21 (64,495), followed by a 19% increase to 2022/23 (76,430) (Table A17).

Males accounted for over three-fifths (62%) of full-time regulated enrolments in 2022/23, whereas part-time regulated provision was fairly evenly split by sex (Table A17).

Figure 6: Males accounted for over 60% of full-time regulated enrolments in 2022/23 whereas part-time regulated provision was fairly evenly split by sex

Proportion of regulated enrolments by sex and mode of attendance in 2022/23



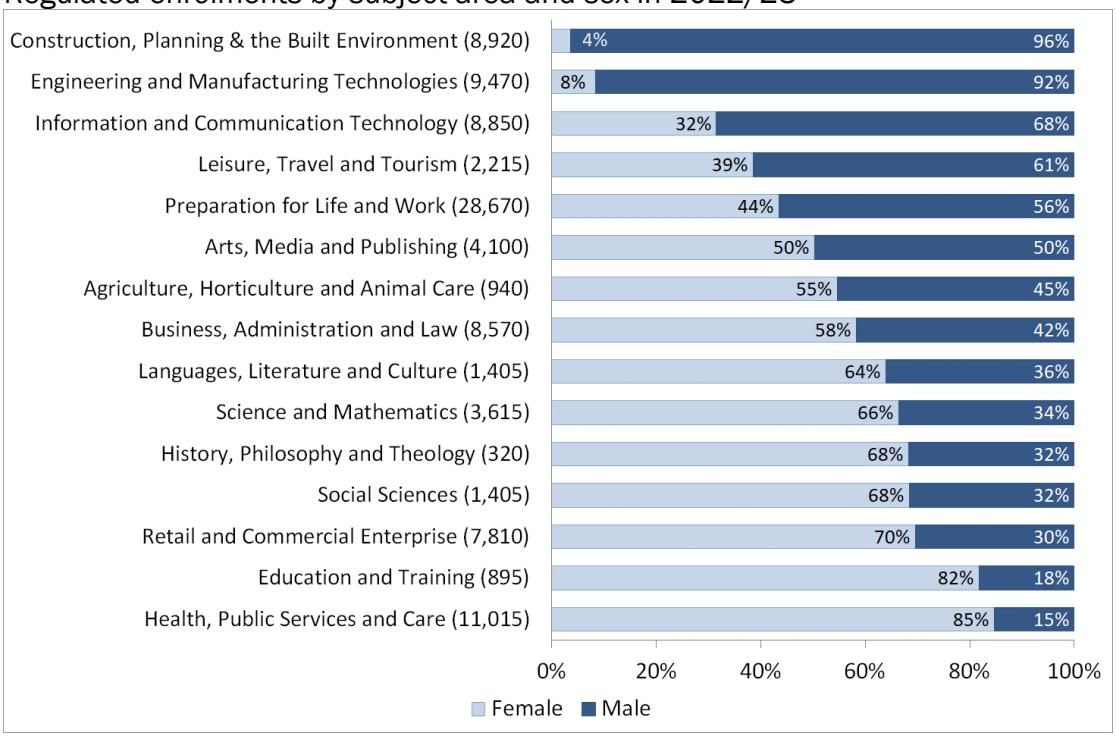
Subject area and sex

The popularity of different subject areas varies by sex.

Although regulated enrolments were fairly evenly split by sex in 2022/23, wide variation occurred between male and female enrolments across the subject areas. Females accounted for the vast majority of 'Health, Public Services and Care' (85%) and 'Education and Training' enrolments (82%). Male-dominated subject areas included 'Construction, Planning and the Built Environment' (96%) and 'Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies' (92%) (Table A20).

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

Regulated enrolments by subject area and sex in 2022/23



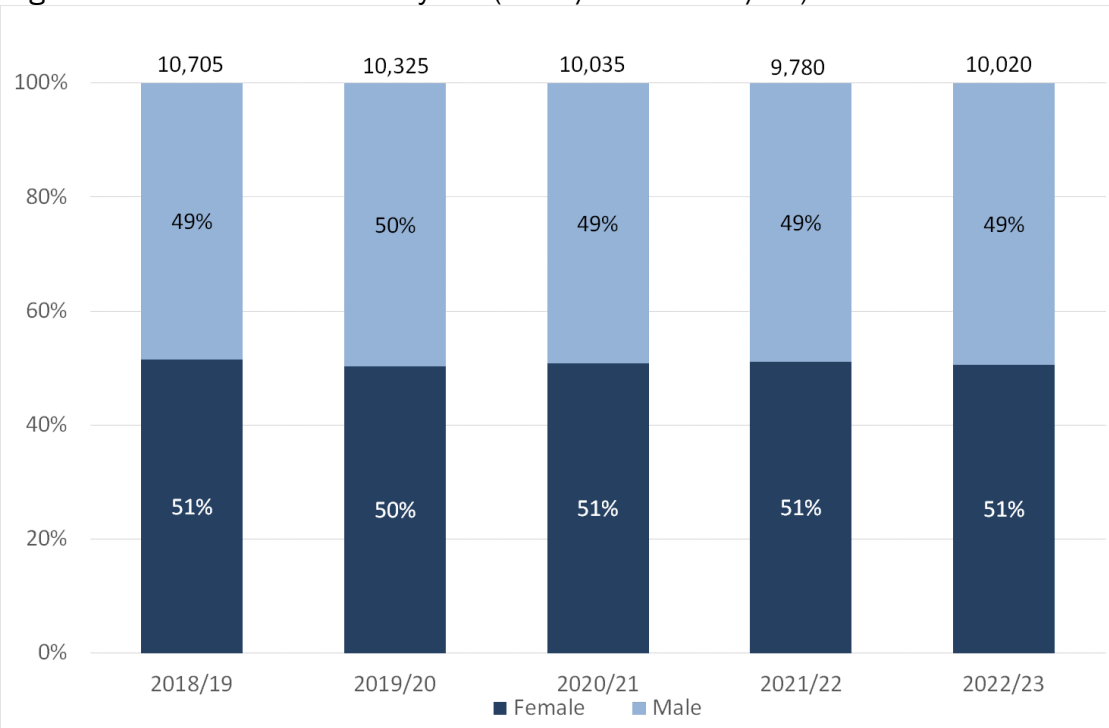
Higher Education

Fewer Higher Education enrolments and an even split by sex.

Higher Education enrolments at FE Colleges fell by a net 6%, from 10,705 in 2018/19 to 10,020 in 2022/23. Over the period, HE in FE enrolments were fairly evenly split by sex, at 51% female and 49% male (Table A24).

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

Higher Education enrolments by sex (2018/19 to 2022/23)



Deprivation

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

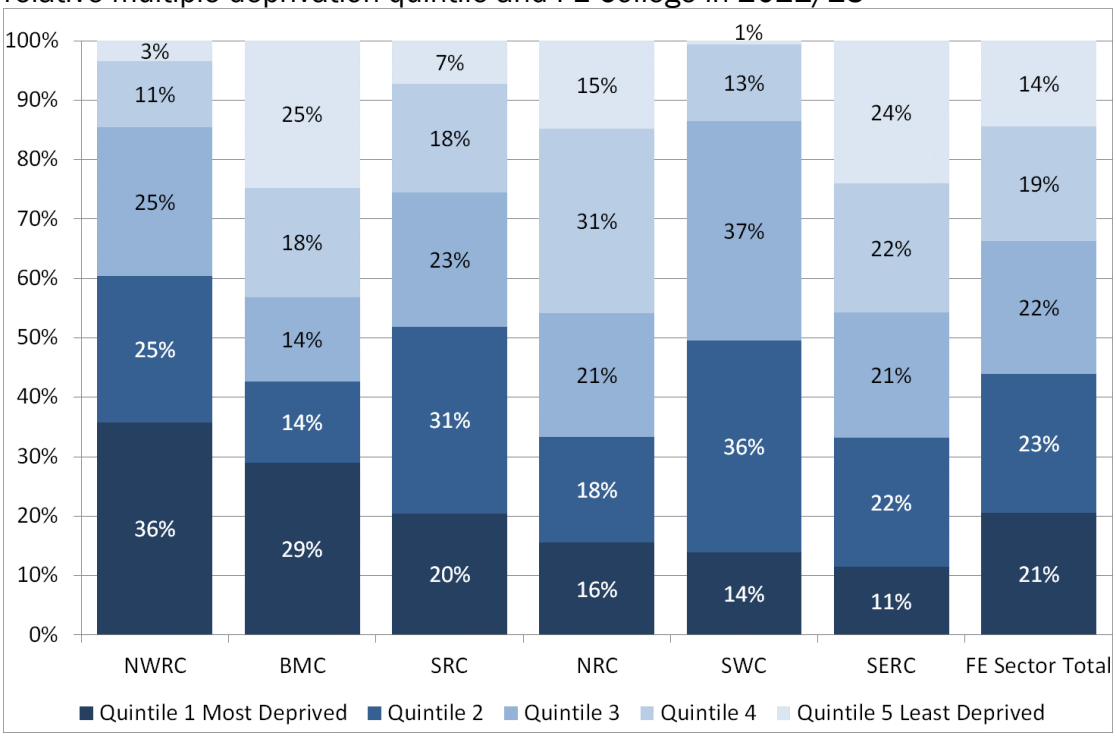
In 2022/23, while regulated enrolments were fairly evenly spread across the relative multiple deprivation quintiles, much variation occurred at college level (Table A22).

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 (24%) came from the least deprived area (Quintile 5) (Table A22).

Over a third (36%) 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 2022/23



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

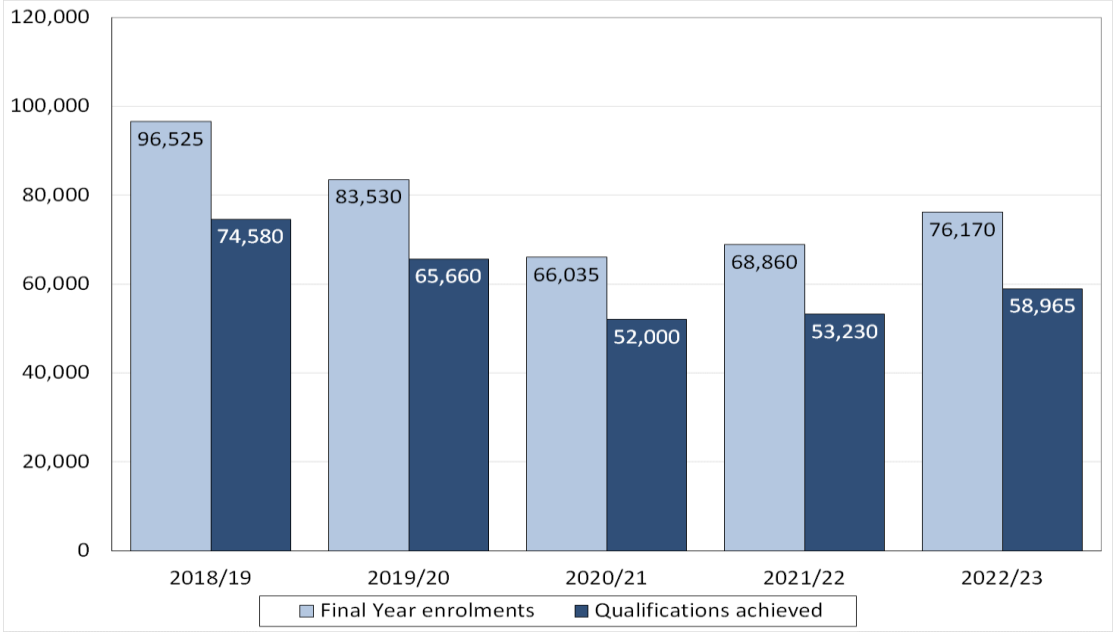
Qualifications

Fewer qualifications are being achieved generally.

Over a fifth (21%) fewer qualifications were awarded in FE Colleges in 2022/23 (58,965) than in 2018/19 (74,580); this includes a 30% decrease between 2018/19 and 2020/21 (Table 5).

Figure 10: Over a fifth fewer qualifications were awarded in 2022/23 than in 2018/19

Final Year enrolments and qualifications achieved (2018/19 to 2022/23)



Performance rates

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

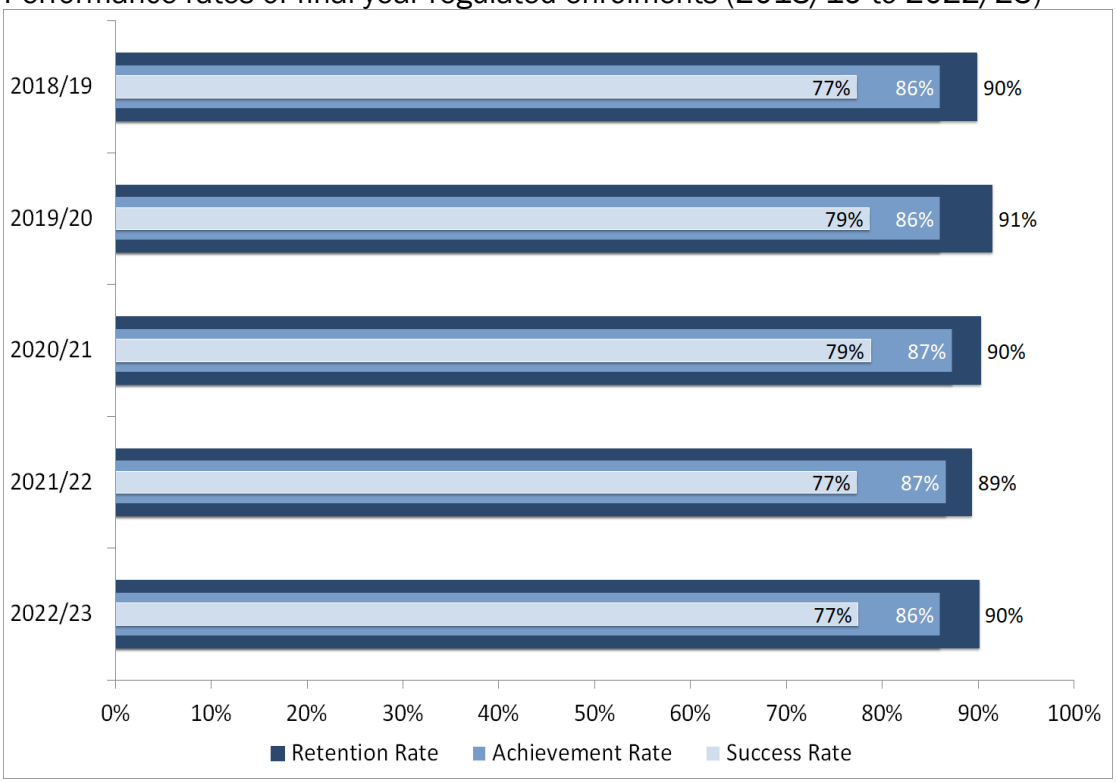
Over the period 2018/19 to 2022/23, the retention rate at FE Colleges has not changed in net terms (90%). Compared with 2018/19, this implies that the same proportion of people stayed on and completed their course in the most recent year (Table A30).

The achievement rate at FE Colleges has not changed in net terms (86%) from 2018/19 to 2022/23. This indicates that, of those who completed their course, the same proportion of people achieved their qualification in 2018/19 and 2022/23 (Table A30).

At 77%, 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 2018/19 to 2022/23 (Table A30).

Figure 11: Over the period 2018/19 to 2022/23, the retention rate, achievement rate and success rate at FE Colleges have not changed in net terms

Performance rates of final year regulated enrolments (2018/19 to 2022/23)



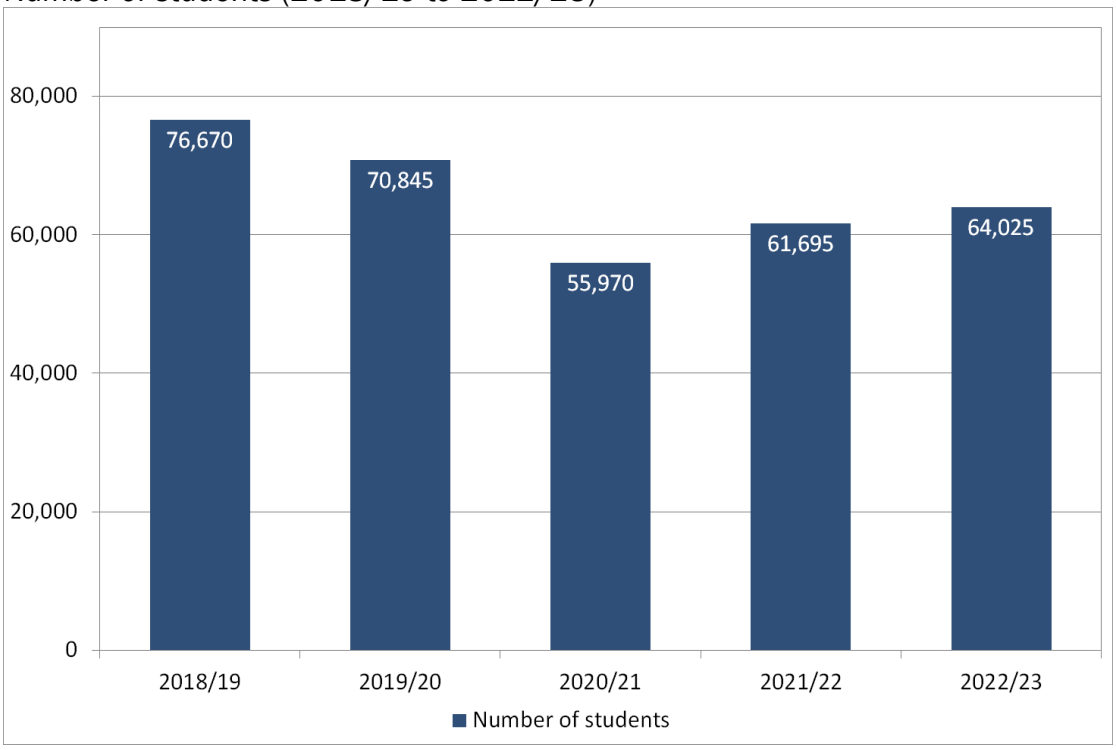
Students

Following a 27% decline between 2018/19 and 2020/21, the number of FE College students has increased by 14% over the two most recent years.

Following a decline of 20,700 (27%) between 2018/19 (76,670) and 2020/21 (55,970), including a pandemic-related 14,875 (21%) drop between 2019/20 and 2020/21, the number of FE College students has increased by 8,055 (14%) over the two most recent years to 64,025 in 2022/23 (Table 6).

Figure 12: Following a 27% decline between 2018/19 and 2020/21, the number of students has increased by 14% over the two most recent years

Number of students (2018/19 to 2022/23)



Students enrolled by regulated status and age

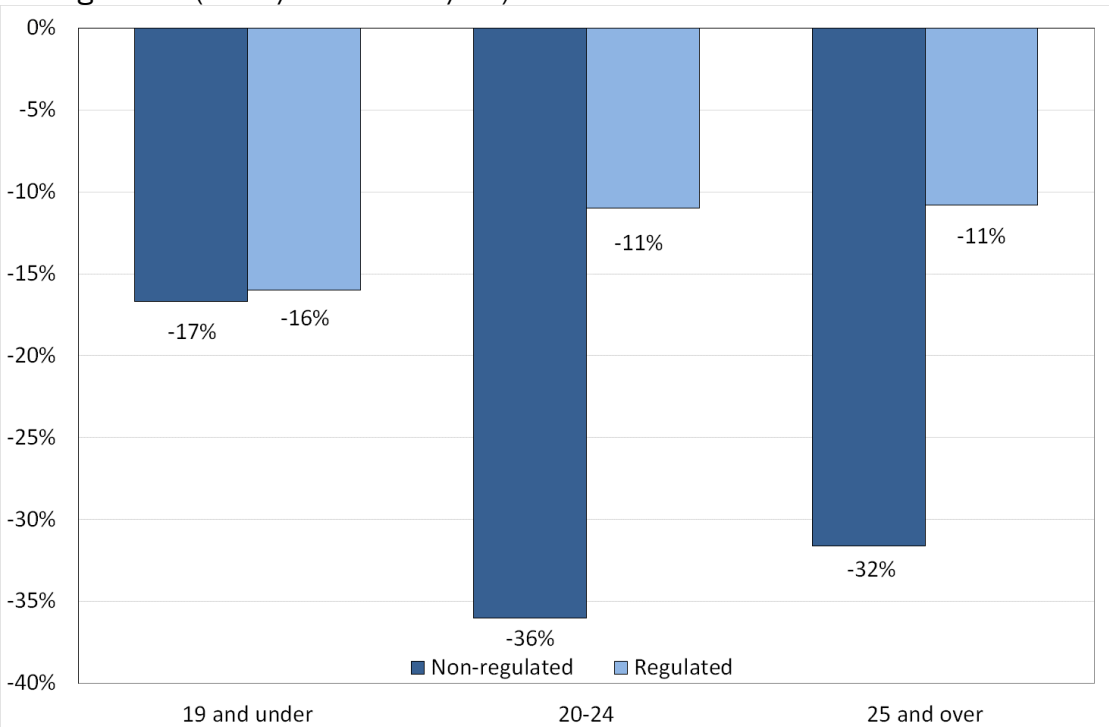
Fewer students are enrolled across all age groups.

Over the period 2018/19 to 2022/23, the number of students enrolled solely on non-regulated courses has decreased in net terms in each of the age bands, ranging from 17% in the 19 and under age band to 36% among those aged 20-24 (Table 7).

Since 2018/19, the number of students enrolled on regulated courses has decreased in net terms in each of the age bands, ranging from 11% in both the 20-24 and 25 and over age bands to 16% among those aged 19 and under (Table 7).

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

Net percentage change in students enrolled at FE Colleges by regulated status and age band (2018/19 to 2022/23)



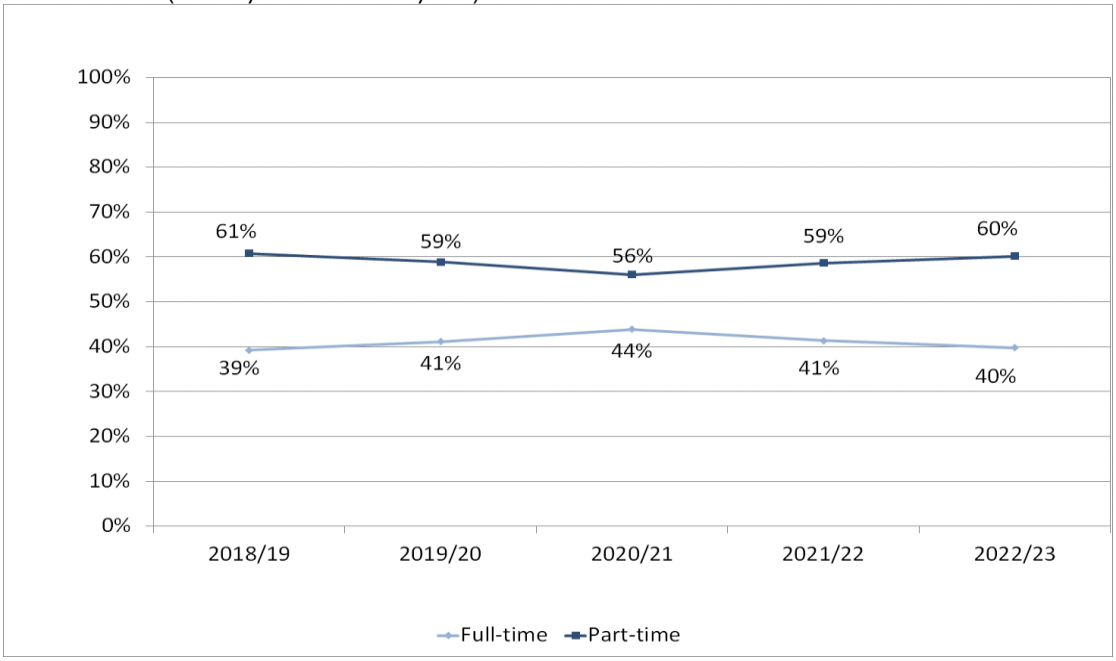
Students enrolled by mode of attendance

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 39% in 2018/19 to 40% in 2022/23 (Table 9).

Figure 14: Increase in the full-time proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses over the period 2018/19 to 2022/23

Proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses at FE Colleges by mode of attendance (2018/19 to 2022/23)



Students achieving qualifications by highest level of study

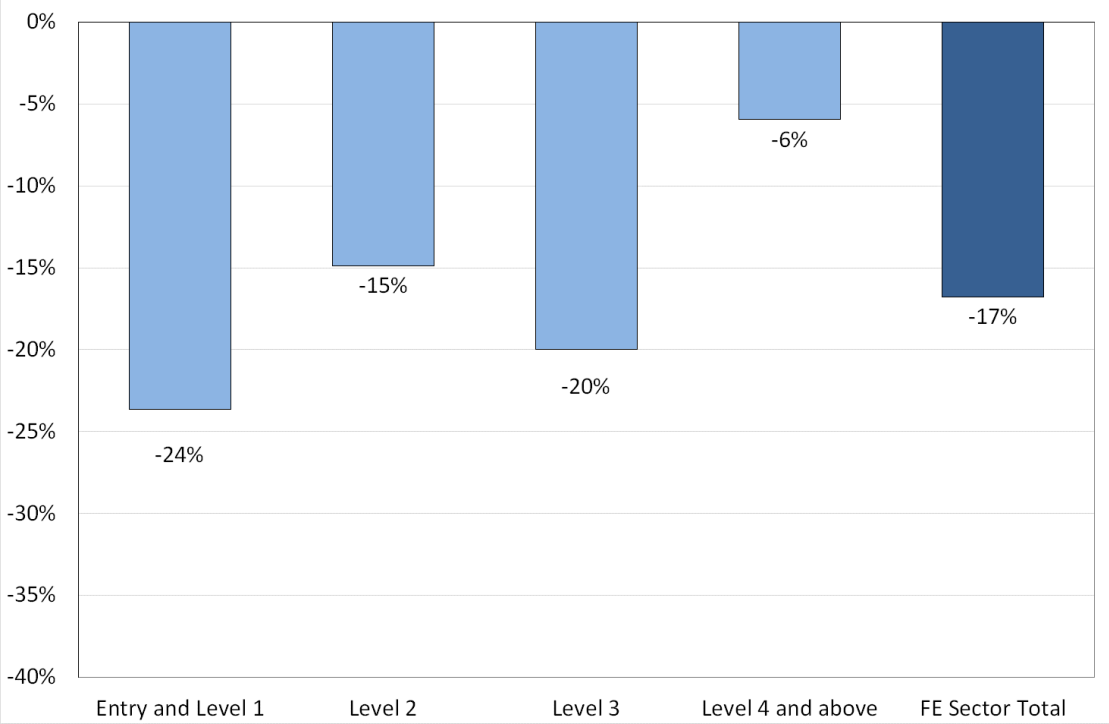
Decrease in the number of students achieving qualifications, although less so at higher levels of study.

The number of students achieving regulated qualifications at FE Colleges has decreased by a net 17%, from 44,105 in 2018/19 to 36,710 in 2022/23. This included a pandemic-impacted dip to 33,925 in 2020/21, followed by an upturn over the two most recent years (Table A60).

Over the period 2018/19 to 2022/23, the number of students achieving regulated qualifications has decreased in net terms at each level of study, ranging from 24% at Entry and Level 1 to 6% at Level 4 and above (Table A60).

Figure 15: Decrease in the number of students achieving regulated qualifications, particularly at lower levels of study, over the period 2018/19 to 2022/23

Net percentage change in students achieving regulated qualifications by highest level of study (2018/19 to 2022/23)



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: 2018/19 to 2022/23

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:

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