NISRA
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
Gníomhaireacht Thuaisceart Éireann um Staitistící agus Taighde

Department for the Economy
An Roinn Geilleagair
www.economy-ni.gov.uk

Further Education Sector Activity in Northern Ireland: 2021/22 to 2025/26



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 2021/22 to 2025/26. 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: Further Education Statistics and Research
Department for the Economy, 39-49 Adelaide Street, Belfast BT2 8FD
Date of Publication: 25 November 2026
Theme: Children, Education and Skills
Author: Brian French
Frequency: Annual

Introduction

The six Further Education (FE) Colleges are the main providers of further education and training in Northern Ireland (NI). They play a central role in raising literacy and numeracy levels and in up-skilling and re-skilling the population through a broad range of general, vocational, access and leisure courses. As is covered in more detail in a later section, through their multi-campus network, FE Colleges make an important contribution to the four pillars of the Department for the Economy's Economic Vision (regional balance, good jobs, raising productivity and decarbonising) and meeting the changing skills needs of learners, employers and the wider economy, including its Priority Sectors.

Counting Regulated and Non-regulated FE Enrolments and Students

Most FE sector courses are regulated enrolments, relating to qualifications listed in the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and Register of Regulated Qualifications (RRQ), regulated by Ofqual and CCEA Regulation, and those in the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ). The RQF contains nine ascending levels, Entry Levels 1-3 and Levels 1-8, and the comparable RQF and FHEQ Levels 4-8 constitute higher education (HE). "These are assigned to Sector Subject Area Tiers 1 and 2." Non-regulated enrolments include non-regulated qualifications, access and leisure courses.

As students can enrol on more than one course in the same academic year, perhaps including some at different qualification levels, our student-based analyses are based on highest level of study. The typical enrolment to student ratio is around 1:8; although it is lower for HE enrolments.

Key Points

Students

- The number of FE sector students rose by a net 12% between 2021/22 (61,695) and 2025/26 (69,300), including a 4% increase in 2025/26.
- In 2025/26, 4% more students were enrolled on regulated courses (53,405) than in 2021/22 (51,485).
- The age structure of the student population on regulated enrolments is becoming younger, with the aged 19 and under share of students enrolling on regulated courses increasing from 46% in 2021/22 to 54% in 2025/26.
- The number of students achieving regulated qualifications increased by a net 7%, from 34,710 in 2021/22 to 37,180 in 2025/26.

All enrolments

- The number of FE College enrolments rose by a net 8% between 2021/22 (110,835) and 2025/26 (120,115), including a 3% increase in 2025/26.
- The regulated share of enrolments decreased from 82% in 2021/22 to 76% in 2025/26.
- Nearly two-fifths (38%) of 2025/26 enrolments were mainstream funded by the Department for the Economy, down from 54% in 2021/22.

Regulated enrolments

- Almost three-quarters (73%) of regulated enrolments in 2025/26 were part-time, while males were more likely than females to study full-time.
- Of the 91,465 regulated enrolments in 2025/26, 80% were at Level 2 or above, down from 83% in 2021/22.
- Higher Education enrolments increased by a net 1%, from 9,780 in 2021/22 to 9,830 in 2025/26.
- In 2025/26, the most popular Sector Subject Areas were: Preparation for Life and Work (28,525 enrolments); Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (9,630); Health, Public Services and Care (9,285); Construction, Planning and the Built Environment (8,735); and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (7,555).
- Three-fifths (60%) of regulated enrolments at North West Regional College in 2025/26 came from the two most deprived areas (Quintiles 1 and 2), whereas South Eastern Regional College's largest proportion (23%) came from the least deprived areas (Quintile 5).

Qualifications and Performance

- The success rate (the percentage of final year regulated enrolments of students who complete and achieve a qualification) increased from 77% (2021/22) to 79% (2025/26) and 7% more qualifications were awarded in 2025/26 (56,710) than in 2021/22 (53,230).

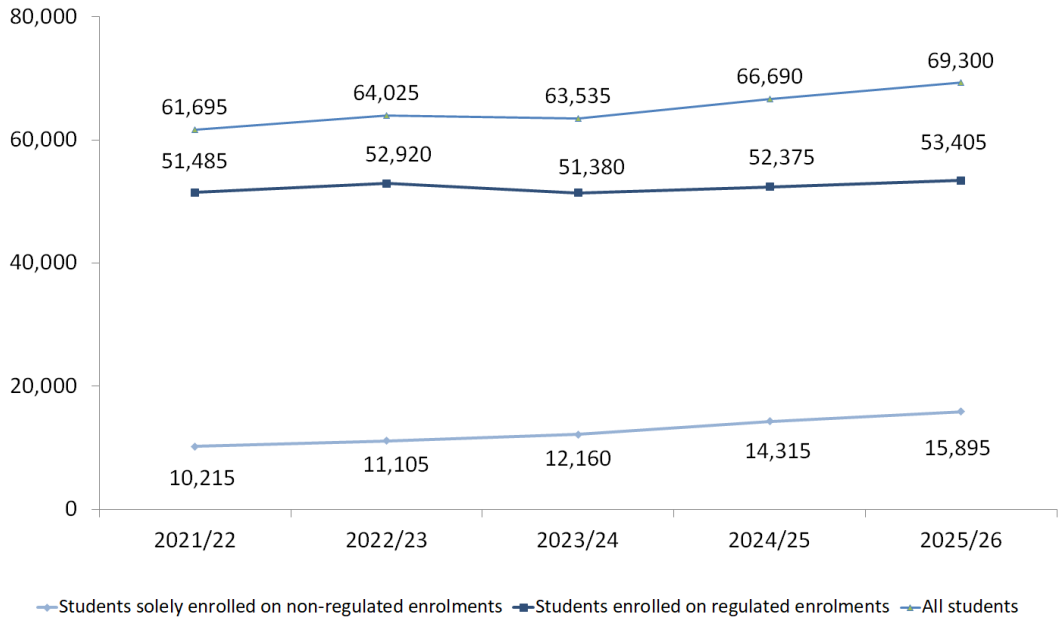
1. Changing learner demographics

The number of FE Sector students is 12% higher than five years ago.

The number of FE sector students rose by a net 12% between 2021/22 (61,695) and 2025/26 (69,300), including a 4% increase in 2025/26. Over the same period, the number of students solely enrolled on non-regulated courses increased by 56%, from 10,215 to 15,895, while those enrolled on regulated courses increased by a net 4% from 51,485 (2021/22) to 53,405 (2025/26) (Table 7).

Figure 1: The number of FE sector students is 12% higher than five years ago

Number of FE Sector students by regulated status (2021/22 to 2025/26)



Students enrolled on regulated courses by age

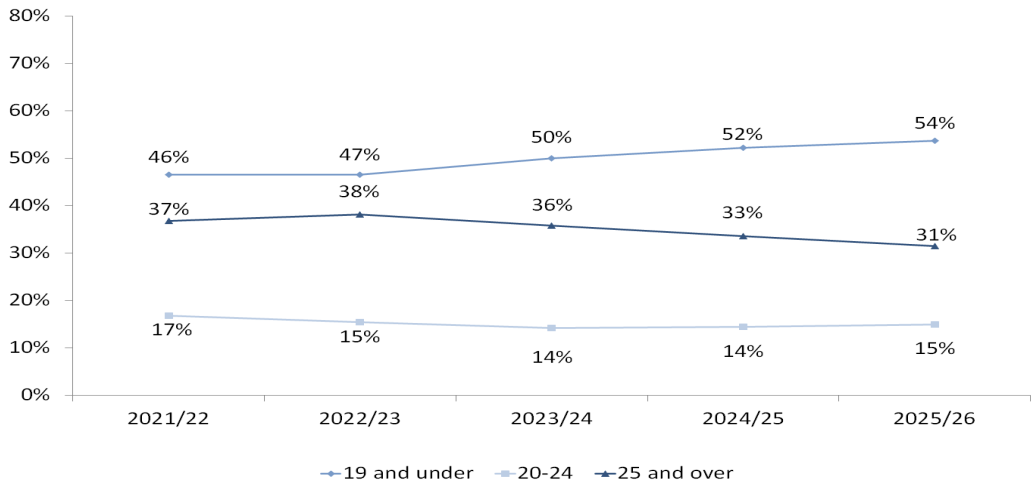
More students are enrolling on regulated courses, although this does not apply across all age groups.

Since 2021/22, the aged 19 and under share of students enrolled on regulated courses has increased from 46% to 54%, whereas the proportion of those aged 25 and over has decreased from 37% to 31% (Table 7).

Part of the increase in younger students relates to a 10% rise in the estimated number of 16-19-year-olds in Northern Ireland between 2021 (90,300) and 2025 (99,255), marking a continued recovery from a prolonged demographic dip, which, along with pandemic-related grading arrangements and low unemployment rates, had seen FE numbers drop relative to those in sixth forms and UK HE Institutions.

Figure 2: Increase in share of students enrolled on regulated courses aged 19 and under and decrease in those aged 25 and over

Proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses by age band (2021/22 to 2025/26)



Please note enrolments with unknown ages (<1%) are excluded from the chart but are included in Table 7.

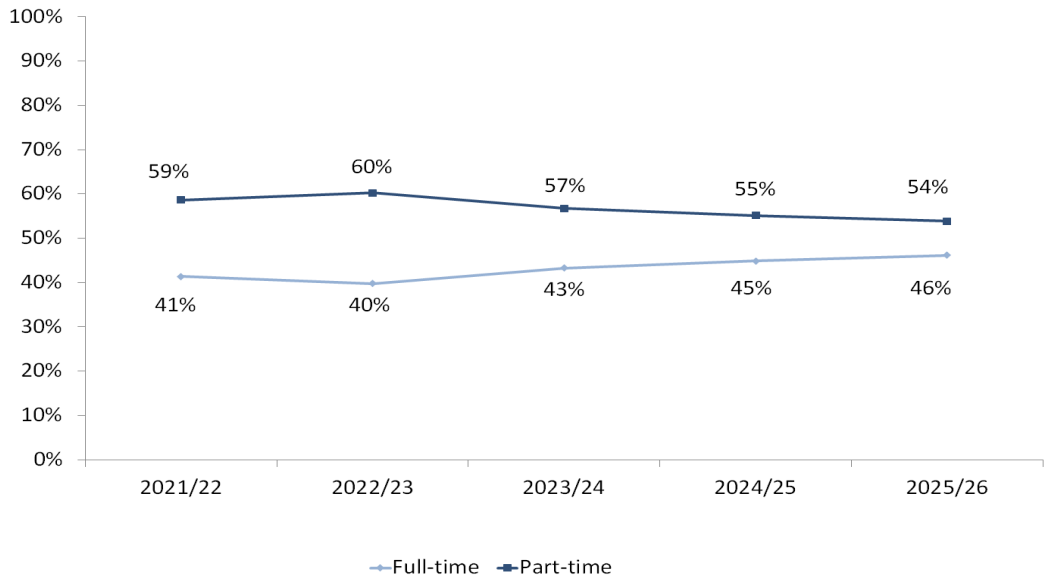
Students enrolled by mode of attendance

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 2021/22 to 46% in 2025/26, while the number of full-time students enrolled on such courses has increased by a net 16% from 21,285 to 24,655 (Table 9).

Figure 3: Increase in the full-time proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses over the period 2021/22 to 2025/26

Proportion of students enrolled on regulated courses by mode of attendance (2021/22 to 2025/26).



Students achieving qualifications by highest level of study

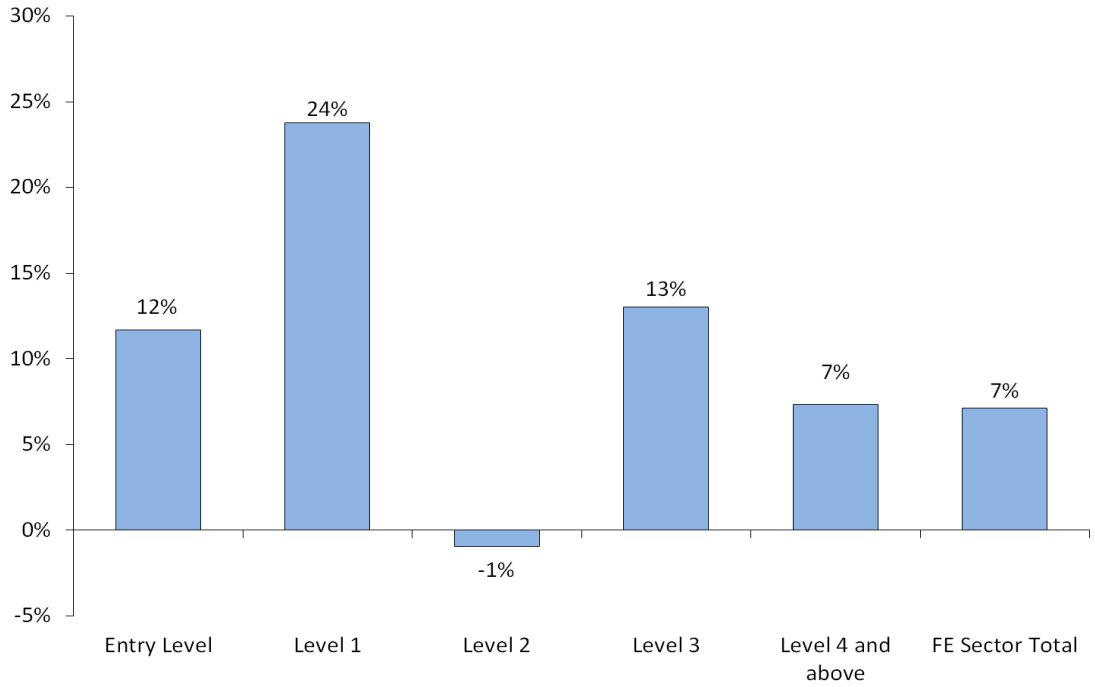
More students achieving qualifications, particularly at lower levels of study.

The number of students achieving regulated qualifications at FE Colleges has increased by a net 7%, from 34,710 in 2021/22 to 37,180 in 2025/26. This included a 6% increase to 2022/23 (36,710), followed by a 2% decrease to 2023/24 (35,935) (Table A62).

Over the period 2021/22 to 2025/26, the percentage of students achieving regulated qualifications has increased in net terms at each level of study except Level 2, ranging from 7% at Level 4 and above to 24% at Level 1. There was a 1% decrease in net terms at Level 2.

Figure 4: More students achieving regulated qualifications, particularly at lower levels of study, over the period 2021/22 to 2025/26

Net percentage change in students achieving regulated qualifications by highest level of study (2021/22 to 2025/26)



Enrolments

The number of enrolments is 8% higher than five years ago, the bulk of which related to non-regulated courses.

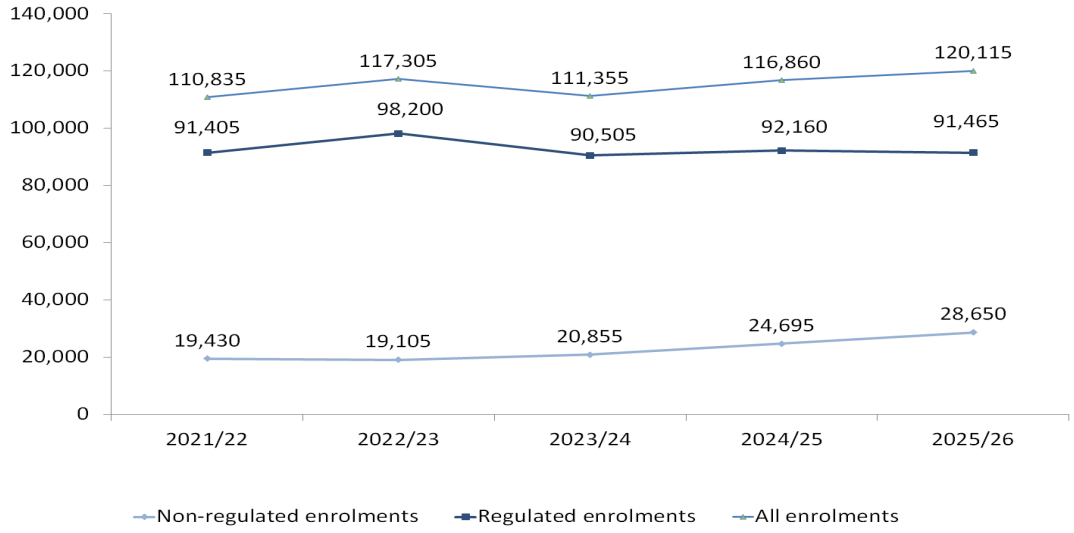
The number of FE College enrolments rose by a net 8% (9,285) between 2021/22 (110,835) and 2025/26 (120,115), much of this since 2023/24 (111,355). Notable increases over the period occurred in NWRC (up 29%), from 12,800 to 16,545, and SWC (up 28%), from 18,765 to 23,950 (Table A2).

The bulk of the net 8% (9,285) increase in enrolments between 2021/22 and 2025/26 were non-regulated (up 9,220) and / or relating to enrolments of those aged 19 and under (up 10,495) (Table A8).

The number of non-regulated enrolments increased by a net 47% between 2021/22 (19,430) and 2025/26 (28,650), whereas there was no net change in regulated enrolments. As a result, the regulated share of enrolments has decreased in net terms from 82% to 76%.

Figure 5: The number of enrolments rose by a net 8% between 2021/22 and 2025/26

Number of FE College enrolments by regulated status (2021/22 to 2025/26)



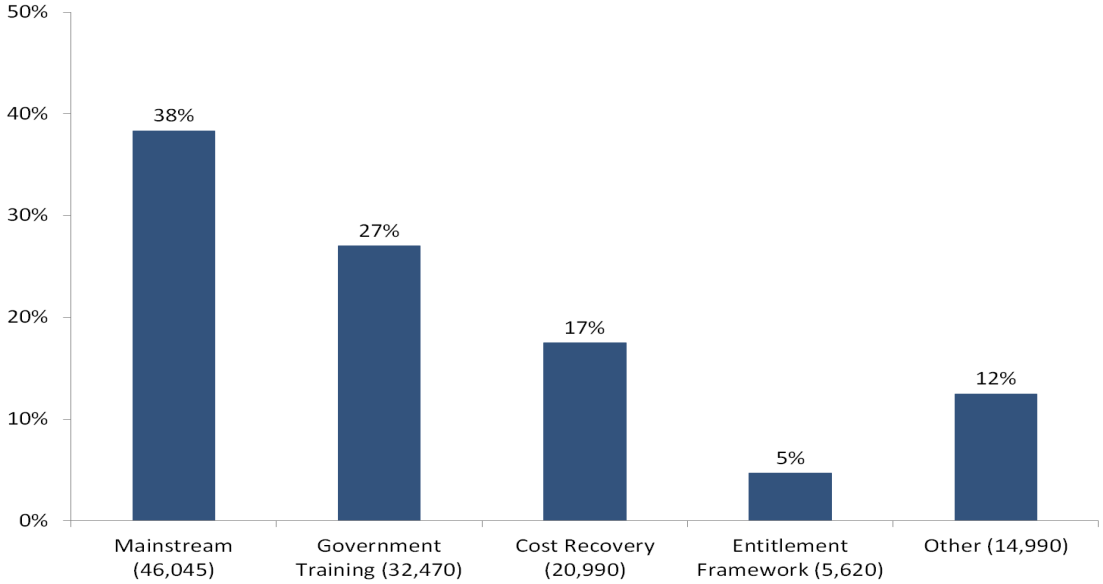
Funding streams

The Department for the Economy mainstream funds nearly two-fifths of enrolments.

Of the 120,115 enrolments in 2025/26, nearly two-fifths (38%) were mainstream funded by the Department for the Economy, 27% were funded through government training programmes, 17% were cost recovery and 5% were funded through the Entitlement Framework programme. The remaining 12% 'Other' enrolments included programmes like Skill Up and Skills Focus (Table A10).

Figure 6: Most enrolments were either mainstream funded by DfE or through government training programmes

Proportion of all enrolments by funding stream in 2025/26



Full-time and part-time trends

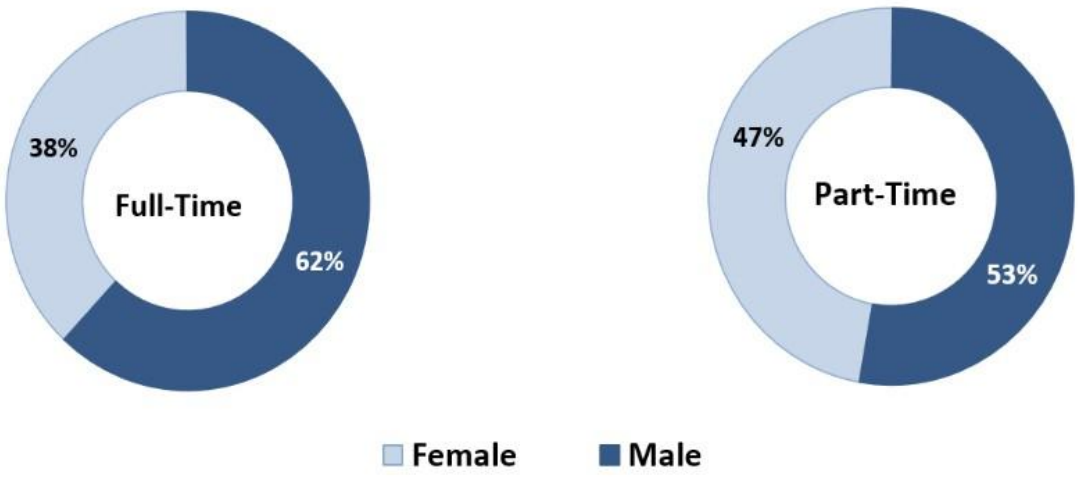
Almost three-quarters (73%) of regulated enrolments are part-time, while males are much more likely than females to study full-time.

Most regulated enrolments are part-time; although this proportion has reduced from 75% in 2021/22 to 73% in 2025/26. The number of part-time regulated enrolments decreased by a net 2,590 (4%) between 2021/22 (68,935) and 2025/26 (66,350). This included an 11% 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 2025/26, whereas part-time regulated provision was more evenly split by sex.

Figure 7: Males accounted for over three-fifths of full-time regulated enrolments in 2025/26, whereas part-time regulated provision was more evenly split by sex

Proportion of regulated enrolments by sex and mode of attendance in 2025/26



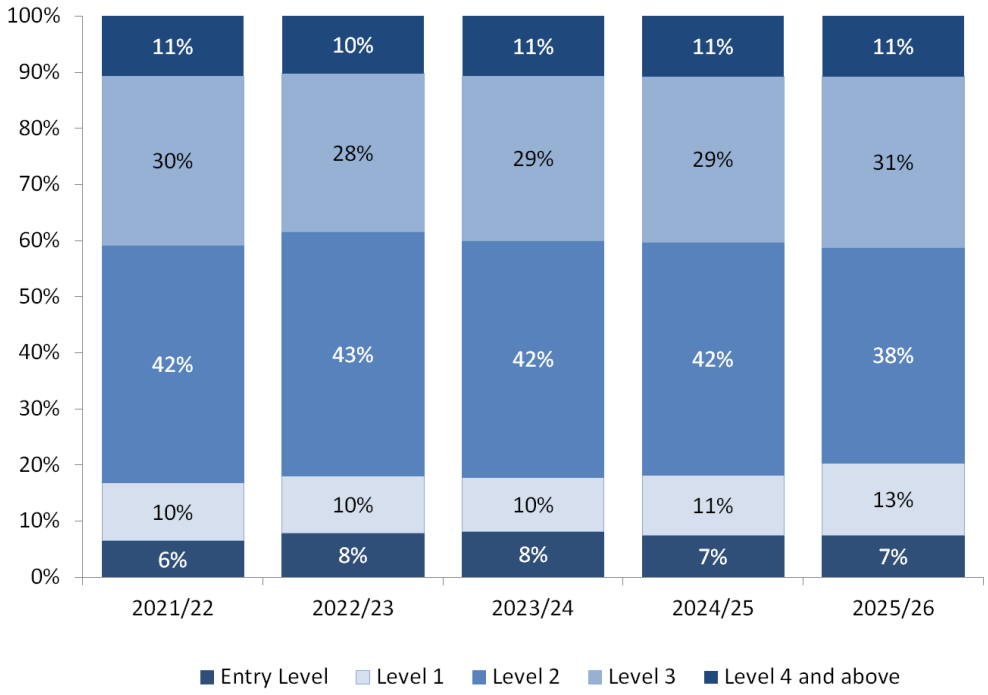
2. Qualification levels

Regulated enrolments were less likely to be at Level 2 or above in 2025/26 than in 2021/22.

Of the 91,465 FE Sector regulated enrolments in 2025/26, four-fifths (80%) were at Level 2 or above, down from 83% in 2021/22. Those at Entry Level accounted for 7% (6,815), 13% (11,795) were at Level 1, 38% (35,110) were at Level 2, 31% (27,910) were at Level 3 and 11% (9,830) were at Level 4 and above (Table A19).

Figure 8: Regulated enrolments were less likely to be at Level 2 or above in 2025/26 than in 2021/22

Proportion of regulated enrolments by level of study (2021/22 to 2025/26)



The Department for the Economy publication Further Education Outcomes illustrates the immediate added value of a Level 3 or below FE qualification through a survey-based snapshot of the destinations of leavers around six months after they qualify, including whether they are working in a Priority Sector or studying at a higher level.

For information regarding how Apprenticeships and Traineeships have contributed to the development of the technical skills required by the economy, please see publications at: Apprenticeships, Traineeships and other training.

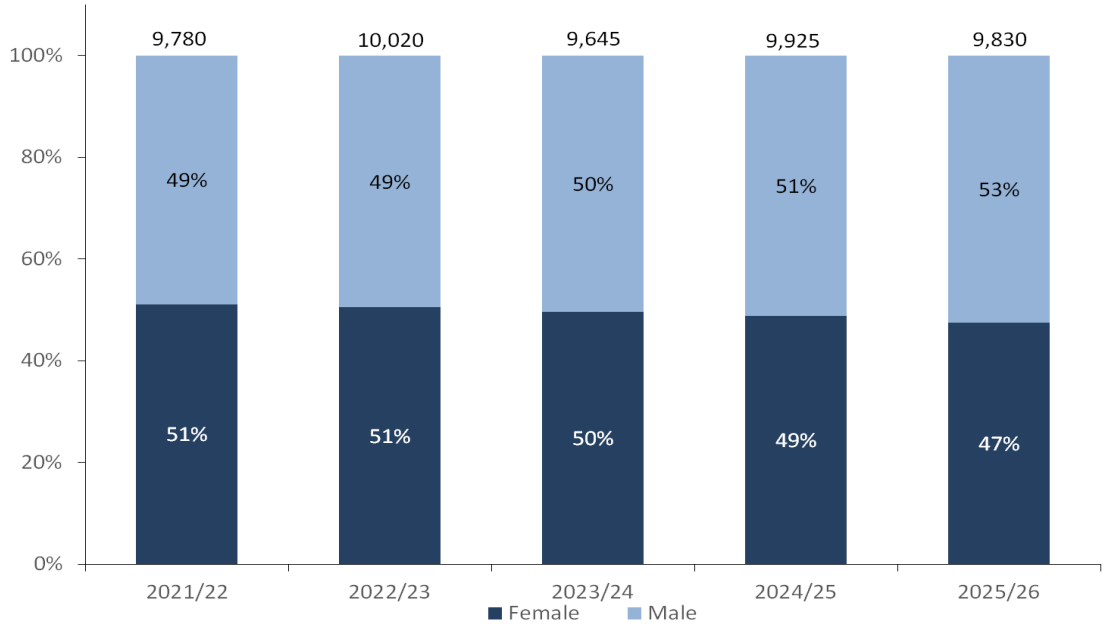
Higher Education

More Higher Education enrolments and a fairly even split by sex.

Higher Education enrolments at FE Colleges increased by a net 1%, from 9,780 in 2021/22 to 9,830 in 2025/26, accounting for around 13% of HE provision in Northern Ireland. Although males increased their share of such enrolments to 53% in 2025/26, there has been a fairly even split by sex over most of the period since 2021/22 (Table A24).

Figure 9: More Higher Education enrolments and a fairly even split by sex

Higher Education enrolments by sex (2021/22 to 2025/26)



HESA publishes survey-based statistics on the destinations of HE graduates from FE Colleges around 15 months after they qualify, including whether and where they are working or engaged in further study at: Graduate Outcomes Data. This Department publishes HESA-based statistics on enrolments and qualifications at HE Institutions.

For information regarding how Higher Level Apprenticeships undertaken at FE Colleges have contributed to the development of the higher technical skills required by the economy, please see publications at: Higher Level Apprenticeships.

3. How FE Colleges are contributing to the local economy

Through their multi-campus network, the six FE Colleges make an important contribution to the four pillars of the Department for the Economy's Economic Vision (regional balance, good jobs, raising productivity and decarbonising) and meeting the changing skills needs of learners, employers and the wider economy, including its Priority Sectors.

What are the most popular FE Sector subjects?

FE Colleges have an extremely broad remit, from access and leisure courses through to postgraduate qualifications across a wide spectrum of subjects. Their students can enrol on more than one enrolment, perhaps at different qualification levels, in the same year. Regulated enrolments, the focus of our subject-based analysis, relate to qualifications listed in the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) or the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) and are assigned to Tiers 1 and 2 of a Sector Subject Area (SSA).

As mentioned in the Enrolments section, the overall number of regulated enrolments changed little in net terms between 2021/22 (91,405) and 2025/26 (91,465); as did the top 5 Tier 1 SSAs.

In 2025/26, the most popular Tier 1 SSAs for all regulated enrolments were:

- Preparation for Life and Work (28,525);
- Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (9,630);
- Health, Public Services and Care (9,285);
- Construction, Planning and the Built Environment (8,735); and
- ICT (7,555).

The HE in FE enrolment totals for 2021/22 (9,780) and 2025/26 (9,830) were also similar, as were the top 4 Tier 1 SSAs.

In 2025/26, the most popular Tier 1 SSAs for HE in FE enrolments were:

- Business, Administration and Law (2,580);
- Health, Public Services and Care (2,065);
- Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (1,325);
- ICT (1,175); and
- Construction, Planning and the Built Environment (925)

Which subject areas are most aligned with Priority Sectors.

In relation to providing the skills industry needs, Department for the Economy economists have identified seven Priority Sectors "as having strong potential to drive the economy in Northern Ireland and as such are considered ripe for priority focus". These are: agri-tech; life and health sciences; advanced manufacturing, materials and engineering; fintech / financial services; software; screen industries; and low carbon (including green hydrogen).

While these sectors have been aligned (all or in part) to Standard Industrial Classifications (SIC), work is at an early stage to align them to subjects taught in FE Colleges.

Over the period 2021/22 to 2025/26

- the number of HE in FE enrolments in the Tier 1 SSAs most relevant to the Priority Sectors rose by 405 (8%).
- the number of regulated enrolments in the most relevant Tier 1 SSAs rose by 1,820 (6%),

The increase in HE in FE enrolments in the Tier 1 SSAs most relevant to the Priority Sectors was in part due to the expansion of Higher Level Apprenticeships. The largest numerical increases occurred in Construction, Planning and the Built Environment (400; 76%) and Science and Mathematics (75; 45%). In contrast, those in the less or not relevant SSAs fell by 355 (8%), with the largest numerical decreases happening in Health, Public Services and Care (225, 10%), Languages, Literature and Culture (100, 93%) and Education and Training (75, 48%).

The largest numerical increases among all regulated enrolments in the most relevant Tier 1 SSAs occurred in Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (1,170; 14%), Science and Mathematics (735; 20%) and Construction, Planning and the Built Environment (215, 3%). In contrast, those in the less or not relevant SSAs fell by 1,755 (3%), with the largest numerical decreases happening in Health, Public Services and Care (2,320, 20%), ICT (1,685, 18%) and Retail and Commercial Enterprise (1,520; 20%); a notable exception, related to the expansion of programmes such as Skills for Life and Work and Traineeships, was the increase of 3,630 (15%) in Preparation for Life and Work enrolments.

For the purposes of this bulletin, we can say that almost all Tier 2 SSAs in Science and Mathematics, Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies, Construction, Planning and the Built Environment, Arts, Media and Publishing and Business, Administration and Law are aligned with one or more Priority Sector. Elements of Health, Public Services and Care, ICT, Leisure, Travel and Tourism, Social Sciences, and Retail and Commercial Enterprise are also relevant.

An initial analysis reveals that around three-quarters of HE in FE (Level 4 plus) enrolments and two-fifths of all regulated enrolments were in Tier 2 SSAs relevant to the Priority Sectors. As some courses in these SSAs may not be relevant, while some in other SSAs may be, further development work is necessary to gauge more accurately the FE Sector's contribution to the Priority Sectors (Table A73).

4. Inclusion and Widening Participation

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

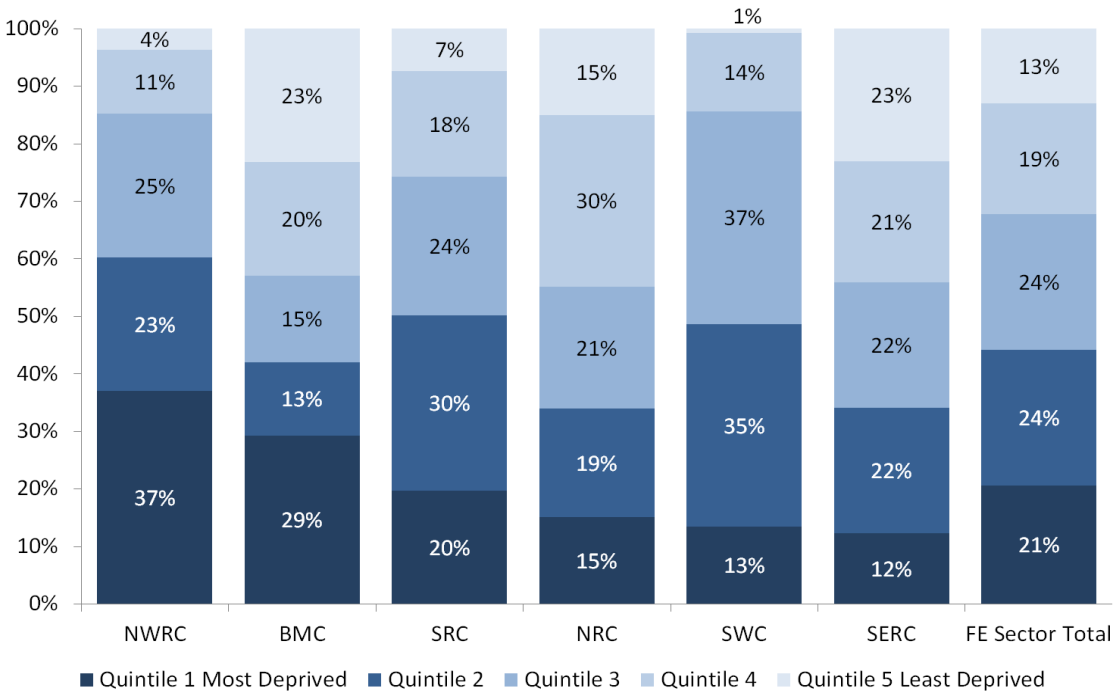
In 2025/26, while regulated enrolments were fairly evenly spread across the four most deprived relative multiple deprivation quintiles, much variation occurred at college level (Table A22).

For instance, three-fifths (60%) of regulated enrolments at NWRC 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).

Over a third (37%) 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.

Figure 10: 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 2025/26



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

Subject area and sex

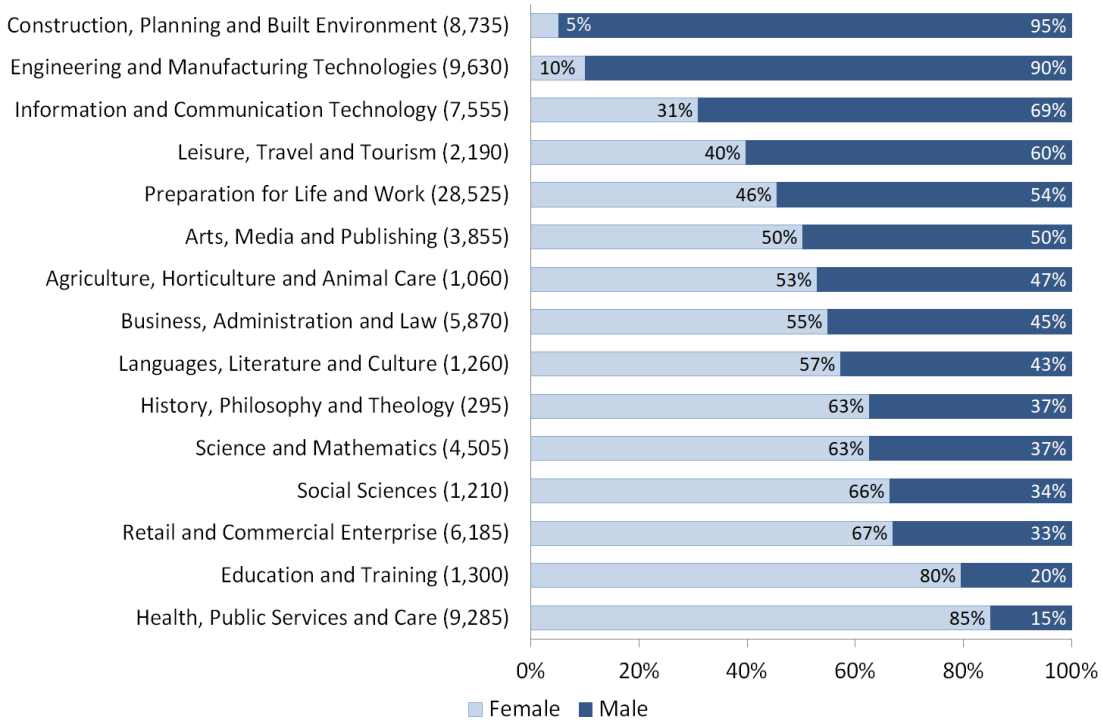
The popularity of different subject areas varies by sex.

Despite a net numerical decrease of 395 (1%), the female share of regulated enrolments remained at 45% for most of the period between 2021/22 (41,350) and 2025/26 (40,955); in contrast, the total for males increased by 460 (1%), from 50,050 to 50,510.

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 (80%). Male-dominated subject areas included 'Construction, Planning and the Built Environment' (95%) and 'Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies' (90%) (Table A20).

Figure 11: The popularity of different subject areas varies by sex

Regulated enrolments by subject area and sex in 2025/26



For both sexes, Preparation for Life and Work accounted for the largest numerical increases in regulated enrolments between 2021/22 and 2025/26, up 2,335 (22%) for females and 1,295 (9%) for males. For females, the next largest increases occurred in the Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (405), Education and Training (400), Science and Mathematics (325), Construction, Planning and the Built Environment (220) SSAs, all bar one of which are aligned strongly with the Department for the Economy's Priority Sectors. For males, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (up 765) and Science and Mathematics (up 410) also featured among the next largest increases.

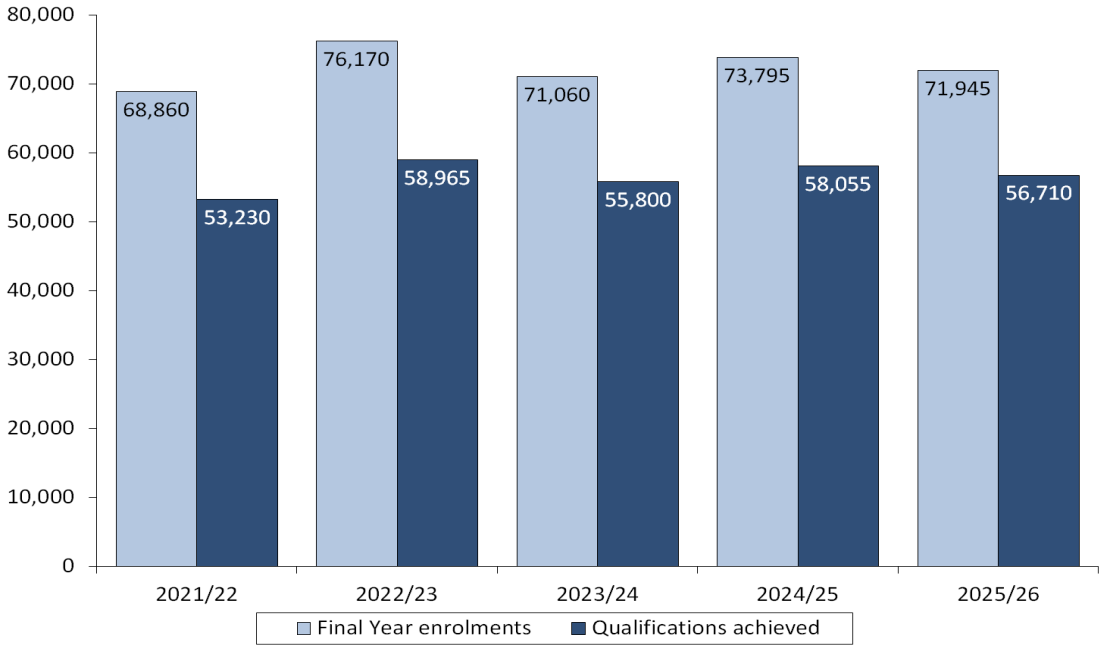
5. Learner outcomes and impact

More qualifications are being achieved generally.

Around 7% more qualifications were awarded in FE Colleges in 2025/26 (56,710) than in 2021/22 (53,230). This included an 11% increase to 2022/23 (58,965), followed by a 5% decrease to 2023/24 (55,800) (Table 5).

Figure 12: 7% more qualifications were awarded in 2025/26 than in 2021/22

Final Year enrolments and qualifications achieved (2021/22 to 2025/26)



Performance rates

The retention rate, achievement rate and success rate increased in net terms.

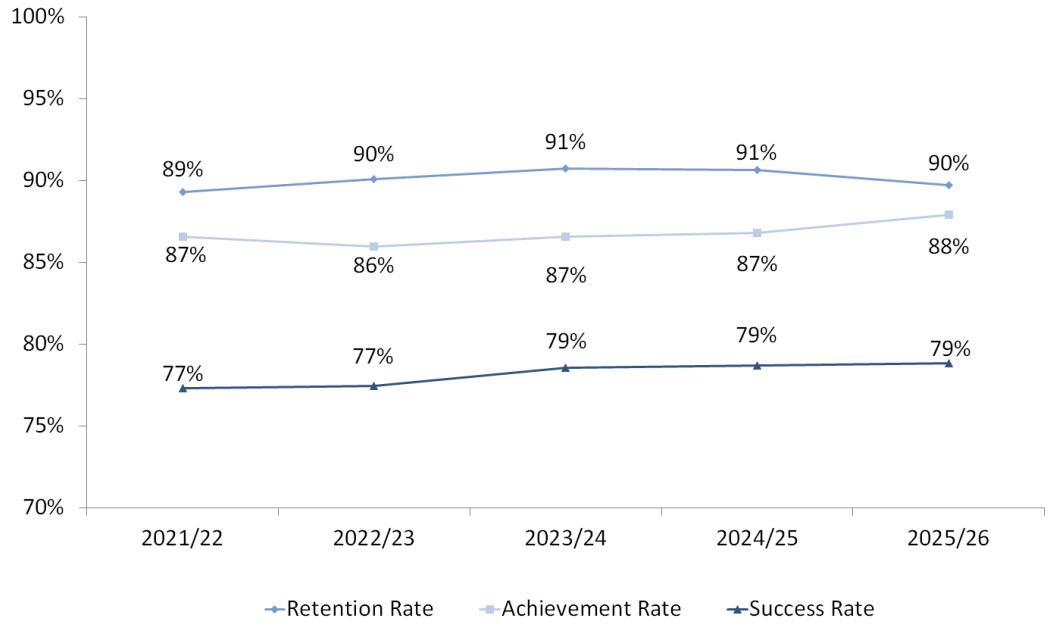
The retention rate at FE Colleges has increased by around 1 percentage point, from 89% (2021/22) to 90% (2025/26). This shows that a greater proportion of people stayed on and completed their course in the most recent year (Table A30).

Over the period 2021/22 to 2025/26, the achievement rate at FE Colleges has increased by a net 1 percentage point, from 87% to 88%. In other words, of those who completed their course, proportionately more people achieved their qualification in 2025/26 than in 2021/22.

The success rate (that is, the percentage of final year regulated enrolments of students who complete and achieve a qualification) has increased by 2 percentage points from 77% (2021/22) to 79% (2025/26).

Figure 13: Over the period 2021/22 to 2025/26, the retention rate, achievement rate and success rate at FE Colleges have increased in net terms

Performance rates of final year regulated enrolments (2021/22 to 2025/26)



Further Information

For information regarding Further Education Sector Statistics and Research, including data collection, data quality and data usage and other contextual information, please see the document:

Further Education Sector Statistics and Research

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

Further Education Sector Activity in Northern Ireland: 2021/22 to 2025/26

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:

Allan Matthews
Further Education Sector Statistics and Research
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

Media enquiries should be made to the Department's Press Office:

Telephone: 028 9052 9604
Email: pressoffice@economy-ni.gov.uk

This statistical bulletin and others published by Further Education Sector Statistics and Research are available to download free from:

https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/statistics-and-economic-research/higher-and-further-education-and-training-statistics

CROWN COPYRIGHT

Information (excluding logos) from the bulletin may be re-used free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v.3.

To view this licence visit http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/ or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

Where we have identified any third party copyright information, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

OGL

© Crown copyright 2026