Higher Education Statistical Fact Sheet: First Degree and Postgraduate Students with Narrow STEM Qualifications gained at NI HEIs – 2020/21 to 2024/25

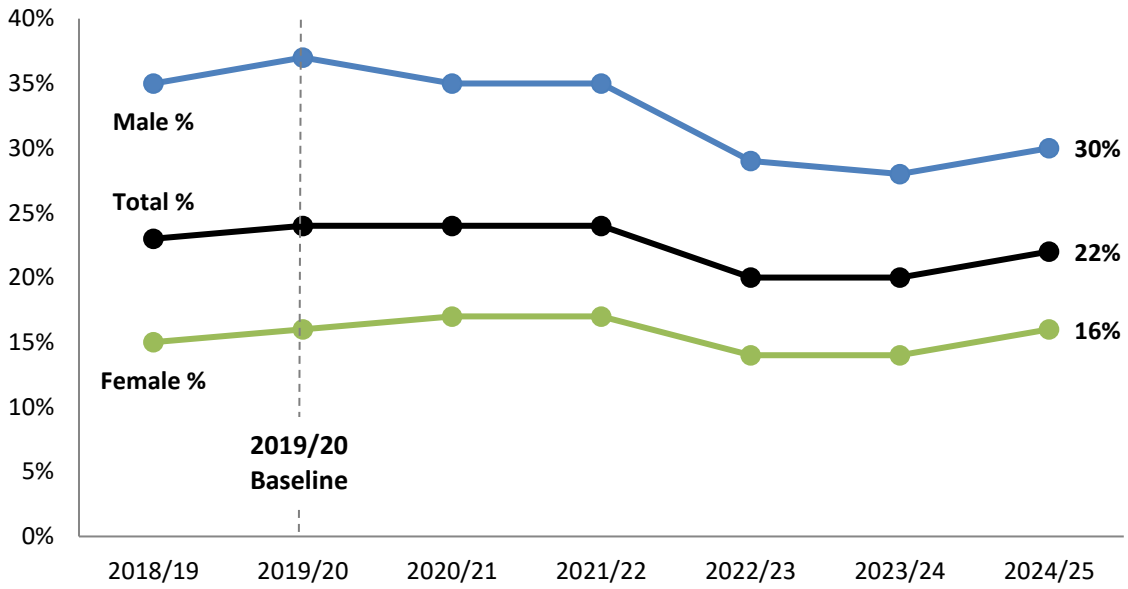
The Department for the Economy's (DfE) Skills Strategy contains a strategic goal to "increase the proportion of individuals leaving Northern Ireland higher education institutions with first degrees and postgraduate qualifications in Narrow STEM subjects". The baseline is set at the 2019/20 proportion of 24%, with a target of 27% by 2030.

Key points

- 22% of first degree and postgraduate students leaving NI HEIs in 2024/25 gained qualifications in Narrow STEM subjects. This is 2 percentage points below the baseline.
- Males, first degree qualifiers, NI domiciled students, or students with a disability were more likely to gain a Narrow STEM qualification than their counterparts.
- There was no difference between part-time and full-time students, or by deprivation quintile, in proportions of students gaining a Narrow STEM qualification.

Approximately a fifth of all students gain a first degree or postgraduate qualification in Narrow STEM

Figure 1: Percentage of first degree and postgraduate students gaining qualifications at NI HEIs in Narrow STEM subjects by sex



- 22% of first degree and postgraduate students leaving NI HEIs in 2024/25 gained qualifications in Narrow STEM subjects; 2 percentage points higher than the previous year, but 2 percentage points lower than the 2019/20 baseline.
- The number of NI HEI students achieving Narrow STEM qualifications has increased from 3,565 to 4,425 (24% from the baseline), Non-STEM qualifiers increased from 8,065 to 11,420 (42% from the baseline).
- Males were almost twice as likely (30%) as females (16%) to gain first degree or postgraduate Narrow STEM qualifications at NI HEIs in 2024/25, a pattern similar to previous years.

Males were almost twice as likely as females to gain first degree or postgraduate Narrow STEM qualifications

Year	Narrow STEM Qualifications						All First Degree and Postgraduate Qualifications
	Male		Female		Total		
2020/21	2,650	35%	1,825	17%	4,475	24%	18,480
2021/22	2,620	35%	1,790	17%	4,405	24%	18,185
2022/23	2,420	29%	1,665	14%	4,095	20%	19,990
2023/24	2,695	28%	1,945	14%	4,645	20%	23,360
2024/25	2,645	30%	1,770	16%	4,425	22%	19,920

The proportion of Narrow STEM postgraduate qualifiers is consistently lower than that of first degree qualifiers.

Year	Narrow STEM Qualifications						All First Degree and Postgraduate Qualifications
	First degree		Postgraduate		Total		
2020/21	2,750	26%	1,725	22%	4,475	24%	18,480
2021/22	2,590	27%	1,815	21%	4,405	24%	18,185
2022/23	2,505	25%	1,590	16%	4,095	20%	19,990
2023/24	2,655	26%	1,995	15%	4,645	20%	23,360
2024/25	2,650	26%	1,775	18%	4,425	22%	19,920

Postgraduate research students are more than twice as likely to gain a Narrow STEM qualification in 2024/25.

Year	Narrow STEM Qualifications				All Postgraduate Qualifications	
	Postgraduate research		Postgraduate taught		Total Postgraduate research Qualifications	Total Postgraduate taught Qualifications
2020/21	215	43%	1,515	21%	490	7,215
2021/22	235	44%	1,580	20%	535	8,070
2022/23	250	46%	1,340	14%	550	9,380
2023/24	310	48%	1,680	13%	650	12,470
2024/25	205	40%	1,570	17%	505	9,130

With UU Birmingham and London students excluded, 26% of all students gain a first degree or postgraduate qualification in Narrow STEM in 2024/25; 2 percentage points higher than the 2019/20 baseline.

Excludes UU Birmingham & London	Narrow STEM Qualifications						All First Degree and Postgraduate Qualifications		
	First degree		Postgraduate		Total		Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
2020/21	2,740	25%	1,725	24%	4,465	25%	10,745	7,255	18,000
2021/22	2,565	27%	1,815	25%	4,380	26%	9,540	7,370	16,910
2022/23	2,465	25%	1,590	21%	4,055	23%	10,015	7,580	17,595
2023/24	2,615	26%	1,995	25%	4,605	25%	10,190	8,090	18,280
2024/25	2,620	26%	1,680	26%	4,300	26%	10,250	6,490	16,735

The most popular Narrow STEM subjects were Computing (34%) and Engineering and Technology (22%) for first degree and postgraduate qualifiers at NI HEIs in 2024/25.

Subject Area	2021/22			2022/23			2023/24			2024/25		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Biological and sports sciences	11%	15%	13%	11%	16%	13%	%12	17%	14%	12%	17%	14%
Psychology	4%	30%	14%	5%	29%	15%	5%	29%	15%	5%	31%	16%
Physical sciences	6%	7%	6%	6%	7%	6%	7%	7%	7%	6%	7%	6%
Mathematical sciences	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	2%	3%	3%	4%	3%
Engineering and technology	30%	15%	24%	32%	14%	25%	30%	15%	23%	28%	12%	22%
Computing	41%	20%	33%	38%	22%	32%	39%	23%	33%	42%	21%	34%
Geography (natural sciences)	4%	8%	6%	4%	8%	5%	4%	7%	5%	4%	8%	5%

NI domiciled students were more likely than those from elsewhere to gain a Narrow STEM qualification.

Year	Narrow STEM Qualifications						All First Degree and Postgraduate Qualifications		
	NI		Non-NI		Total		NI	Non-NI	Total
2020/21	3,650	25%	825	20%	4,475	24%	14,415	4,070	18,480
2021/22	3,390	27%	1,020	19%	4,405	24%	12,770	5,415	18.185
2022/23	3,025	24%	1,070	15%	4,095	20%	12,825	7,165	19,990
2023/24	3,190	25%	1,455	14%	4,645	20%	12,975	10,385	23,360
2024/25	3,085	25%	1,340	18%	4,425	22%	12,450	7,470	19,920

There was little difference in the proportion of full-time and part-time students gaining a Narrow STEM qualification in 2024/25.

Year	Narrow STEM Qualifications						All First Degree and Postgraduate Qualifications
	Full-time		Part-time		Total		
2020/21	3,545	26%	930	20%	4,475	24%	18,480
2021/22	3,520	25%	885	22%	4,405	24%	18,185
2022/23	3,305	21%	785	19%	4,095	20%	19,990
2023/24	3,810	20%	840	20%	4,645	20%	23,360
2024/25	3,605	22%	820	21%	4,425	22%	19,920

A higher proportion of students with a disability gain a first degree or postgraduate qualification in a Narrow STEM subject.

Disability status	Narrow STEM Qualifications									
	2020/21		2021/22		2022/23		2023/24		2024/25	
Disability declared	650	28%	600	26%	675	25%	670	26%	745	28%
No disability declared	3,825	24%	3,755	24%	3,205	21%	3,805	19%	3,450	21%
Total	4,475	24%	4,405	24%	4,095	20%	4,645	20%	4,425	22%

There was no difference in the proportion of students from each of the deprivation quintiles gaining a Narrow STEM qualification.

MDM Quintile	Narrow STEM Qualifications									
	2020/21		2021/22		2022/23		2023/24		2024/25	
Q1 (Most deprived)	480	25%	450	26%	390	24%	445	26%	400	24%
Q2	675	25%	595	26%	555	23%	575	25%	550	23%
Q3	775	25%	700	26%	615	23%	625	23%	650	25%
Q4	835	25%	830	27%	750	25%	810	26%	735	25%
Q5 (Least deprived)	885	26%	810	27%	710	23%	720	24%	750	26%
Total	3,650	25%	3,390	27%	3,025	24%	3,190	25%	3,085	25%

Notes:

1. Enrolment and qualification data is sourced from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) annual student returns.

2. Narrow STEM includes the following subject areas: Biological and sport sciences; Psychology; Physical sciences; Mathematical sciences; Engineering and technology; Computing; and Geography, earth and environmental studies (natural sciences). The STEM groupings are based on the approach developed by HESA to categorise subjects into science/non-science subjects. Their science grouping is an aggregation of relevant CAH v1.3.4 level 1 subject codes (derived from HECoS), with the exception of CAH26 (Geography, earth and environmental studies), which has been split into natural sciences and social sciences. The natural science element is categorised into the science grouping and the social sciences element into the non-science grouping.

3. The Department for the Economy's (DfE) Skills Strategy contains a strategic goal, "to increase the proportion of individuals leaving NI HE institutions with first degrees and postgraduate qualifications in Narrow STEM subjects". The baseline is set at the 2019/20 proportion of 24%, with a target of 27% by 2030. As this strategic goal relates only to students receiving first degree and postgraduate qualifications, the stated proportions differ from the Narrow STEM proportions published in our existing qualifications tables.

4. Those whose disability status is unknown are not presented separately but are included in the total.

5. NIMDM information is available for NI domiciled qualifiers only, so the proportions and figures presented for the total will not match those that relate to all qualifiers.

6. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation in March 2020, just over halfway through the 2019/20 academic year, and impacted on qualifications in several ways during the rest of that academic year and into 2020/21. These included course extensions, delays in awards in 2019/20 and the subsequent reporting of these awards in 2020/21. The figures presented in this bulletin, in particular time series analyses, should be viewed in the context of these past pandemic-related issues and care taken with the wider interpretation of the statistics.

7. Figures are rounded to the nearest 5. Due to rounding, figures may not sum to totals. Percentages are based on unrounded figures and rounded to the nearest integer.

Links:

More detailed statistics are available in open data format at the following link: Higher Education Statistical Factsheets

Additional Higher Education statistics are available from: Higher Education Statistics and Research