



# Higher Education Students and Qualifiers at Scottish Institutions 2020-21



Scottish Funding Council  
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

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## Higher Education Students and Qualifiers at Scottish Institutions 2020-21: Executive Summary

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Summary: This release contains information on HE provision and attainment in higher education institutions (HEIs) and colleges in Scotland from 2011-12 to 2020-21

FAO: Principals and Chairs of Scotland's colleges and universities, students, parents, guardians and the general public.

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The UK Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

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## **Adverse Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic**

1. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020 by the World Health Organisation, part way through the 2019-20 academic year. The pandemic did not have any notable impact on student enrolment figures for 2019-20, however it did impact on students who were studying at the time and their ability to complete their qualification as planned. Therefore, some qualifications that were not reported in 2019-20 were carried over in to 2020-21 or future academic years.
2. Throughout the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years, numerous issues impacted students' ability to complete their qualification, such as:
  - Students may have been medically affected by the pandemic either directly or via their families and/or dependants.
  - Students who have childcare or caring responsibilities were also impacted by the pandemic, and this may have made it more difficult for these students to complete their course as originally intended.
  - Colleges and HEIs did act quickly to move provision online where possible, however, students on courses containing a practical element or a work placement may not have been able to complete their course as intended, and therefore had to defer receiving their qualification to the following academic year.
  - The entire student population was also affected by the 'softer' impacts of the pandemic on their education, such as losing access to peer support and in-person lecturer support. While institutions took steps to address digital poverty, supported by additional funding, in the immediate aftermath of lockdown some students did not have readily-available access to the necessary equipment to immediately start learning online.
3. In spite of the challenges faced by the two sectors and their students, 108,715 students successfully achieved a higher education (HE) qualification in 2020-21 from Scotland's colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Other students who may initially have expected to graduate in 2019-20 or 2020-21 but were impacted by the pandemic are instead expected to obtain their awards in future years.

**For the reasons outlined above, this publication does not make direct comparisons between 2019-20 and 2020-21 qualifier figures and previous years due to the vastly different circumstances these students were faced with.**

4. In this report, qualifier data for 2019-20 and 2020-21 is separated in tables by a grey row indicating a break in the time series and is represented in charts by a dashed line.
5. The data on HE qualifiers and deferrals in the college sector is the latest we have available at the time of publication. The [College Performance Indicators 2020-21](#) report was published on 26 April 2022 and provides further information on qualifiers from Scotland's colleges.

## Executive Summary

- There were 332,815 higher education (HE) students in Scotland's universities and colleges in 2020-21 (HE being courses at SCQF level 7 and above like HNCs or undergraduate degrees). This is the highest number on record and 25,600 more students than in 2019-20; an increase of 8.3%. The largest increase was at Taught Postgraduate level, which grew by 22.4% (+12,525) from 2019-20. This may be a reflection of the challenging economic circumstances at the time, with Postgraduate study becoming an increasingly attractive option to students given the contracting labour market at the time. An increase in the number of students undertaking First Degrees (+8,815/5.1%) also contributed to this increase in student numbers. See Table A.
- In 2020-21, females accounted for 58.1% of students studying HE, 16.5pp more than males at 41.6%. At HEIs, females accounted for 59.1% of students whereas at colleges, females account for 52.4% of students. See Table B.
- In 2020-21, there were 163,710 entrants to HE courses at Scottish institutions, an increase of 16,550 (11.3%) since 2019-20. Just over three quarters (76.9%) of these were entrants to HEIs, at 125,900 (up 14,055/12.6% since 2019-20), and colleges delivered just under a quarter (23.1%) of entrants to HE courses in Scotland in 2020-21. In colleges, there were 37,805 new entrants (up 2,490/7.1%) year on year. See Table D.
- Following SQA Results Day 2020, more young candidates held suitable qualifications for undergraduate HE university and college entry than in previous years given larger Higher and Advanced Higher pass rates, as a result of the SQA's COVID-19 pandemic moderation process. This has been reflected in the increase in university First Degree entrant numbers. SFC funded [1,297 additional places](#) for 2020-21 to reflect the increase in qualified applicants.
- There were 82,850 HE Qualifiers from universities and 25,865 from colleges in 2020-21, despite the direct impact the Coronavirus pandemic had on the higher education sector in Scotland and the inability for students to successfully complete the practical element of their courses. See Table G.
- Of the HE qualifiers, 69.6% achieved a First Degree or Postgraduate qualification (either research or taught). See Table G.

A record  
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HE students  
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