

Briefing: HESA 2020-21 Student Statistics

January 2022

Introduction

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) released their 2020-21 student data,¹ which covers the first full academic year since the start of COVID-19. Although a few large changes were observed, most of the effects of the pandemic on the data are too minor to be distinguished from normal yearly variations.

Headline Findings

The main findings are summarized below by theme.

Student numbers and characteristics

- » Overall student numbers for 2020-21 are up by 9% compared to 2019-20, with the majority of the increase being seen for first-degree, first-year students (+8%) and first-year postgraduate taught students (+16%).
- » Some of this increase has to do with population demographics, including increasing numbers of 18-year-olds in the population and rising higher education participation rates. More students also met their A level offer conditions, with a record acceptance rate of 89% of 18-year-old in the 2020 application cycle.
- » UCL has the second highest student enrolments in the UK (total: 45,715), following The Open University. In London, UCL has the highest number of enrolments, followed by King's College (38,445) and Queen Mary (23,870).
- » 57% of all students were female, and female students also make up a larger proportion of part-time students.
- » Enrolment of first-year mature students (25+) increased, but enrolment of first-year students under 20 years of age decreased five percentage points.
- » Continuation rates did not differ substantially from other years. There was a decrease in the number of students who dropped out, but an increase in the number of students who did not gain their intended award and a slight increase in students considered dormant or writing up.

¹ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/25-01-2022/sb262-higher-education-student-statistics/qualifications>

International students

- » There has been an increase in international first-year students, driven by an 8% increase of first-degree EU students and increases in non-EU postgraduate students. Over half of full-time postgraduates are international students.
- » At UCL, the number of international first-degree students rose to nearly 12,000, the highest number of any of the providers surveyed.
- » Italy was the top EU sending country to UK HE providers, followed by France and Romania. For non-EU countries, China was the top sender, accounting for 32% of all non-EU international students. There has also been an increase in students from India.

Subjects and qualifications

- » Business management was the most popular subject, accounting for 17% of students.
- » First-year students choosing to study subjects allied to medicine increased by 20%. Additionally, 79% of the degrees in these subjects were awarded to female students.
- » Computing saw the largest percentage change in female first year enrolments with a 24% increase.
- » Mitigation policies and changes to assessment practices have led to a greater number of first-class degree awards, with 37% of undergraduate qualifiers achieving this (up from 26% in 2016-17).
- » The proportion of postgraduate taught degree awards has grown to 27% of all qualifications (up from 22% in 2016-17). The number of international students earning masters' degrees grew substantially from X to Y.

Location of study and accommodation

- » There were no unusual year-on-year changes in the number of students taking part in work placements or studying abroad (even if remotely). While there was a 54% decrease in the number of students studying abroad, this follows a 31% decrease in 2019-20 and a 50% decrease in 2018-19. The overall trend in fewer numbers of students studying abroad likely has as much to do with other factors, such as Brexit and the UK's withdrawal from the Erasmus scheme, than the impacts of Covid-19.
- » There was a 25% increase in students enrolled on intentional distance-learning courses (i.e., those that would take place remotely even without Covid-19 restrictions in place), but this change is still within normal year-on-year variations.
- » There was a slight decrease in the number of students living in halls, and an increase in the number of students living with parents/guardians.