

# Higher Education in the United Kingdom

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By combining demographic data with different economic variables, PAXTER has developed a forecasting tool for tertiary enrolment worldwide. It covers 76 countries across the five continents, representing over 90% of the world's youth.

Additionally, the present research work rests on an in-depth analysis of each country's higher education system. The most relevant features of the UK's higher education, both qualitative and quantitative, are presented in this article.

N.B.: The most significant differences within the education structures of the United Kingdom occur in the Scottish system.

## United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK)

2022 population: 66,971,395 (World Bank)

The UK comprises:

- > The island of Great Britain, which consists of England, Scotland, and Wales,
- > Northern Ireland.

It consists of three distinct legal jurisdictions:

- > England and Wales
- > Scotland
- > Northern Ireland (NI).

Scotland, Wales, and NI have had their own devolved governments and legislatures since 1998.

Constitutional monarchy

Ranked 6th for GDP, and 10th for GDP, PPP (World Bank, 2022)

Permanent member of the UN Security Council

**2016 referendum: 51.9% of voters voted to leave the European Union. The UK left the organisation in 2020 – the so-called Brexit. The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement came into force on 1, May 2021.**

## Higher education (HE): who is responsible ?

The responsibility for higher education has been devolved to a national level over the last thirty years. Education policy at large and regulation is a devolved matter that is the responsibility of the UK Government in England, and of the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Milestones:

- 1992: Separate higher education funding councils are established in England, Scotland, and Wales.
- 1998: The [Northern Ireland Act 1998](#) and the [Scotland Act 1998](#) are passed, which devolve responsibility for HE to NI and Scotland respectively.
- 2006: The [Government of Wales Act 2006](#) makes Wales responsible for HE.

**This devolution has led to an increasingly contrasting higher education picture across the UK.**

**Government departments responsible for higher education:**

|                          |                                                                                   |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| In England:              | The Department for Education (DfE), a ministerial Dpt of the Government of the UK |
| In the devolved nations: |                                                                                   |
| Northern Ireland         | The Department for the Economy – Higher Education Division                        |
| Scotland                 | Education Scotland, a Scottish Government executive agency                        |
| Wales                    | The Department for Education and Skills                                           |

Each national entity has now its own body with responsibility for the management of higher education:

| Responsible authority                                                                                 | Legal framework                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Functions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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| <b>ENGLAND</b><br><br>The <u>Office for Students</u> (OfS)                                            | Established by the <u>Higher Education and Research Act 2017</u> (HERA 2017).<br><br><div>Regulation-based approach</div>                                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>Responsible for HE only, exclusive of research.</b><br>> HE regulator: operation of a register of HE providers, awarding of degree awarding powers and the title of university, assurance of quality and standards, oversight of data collection and publication, etc.<br>> Competition authority.<br>> Secondary role in funding matters (primarily high-cost subjects).<br><br><b>OfS' 2022-25 strategy:</b> OfS' two areas of focus are quality and standards, and equality of opportunity.                                                                                         |
| <b>SWALES</b><br><br>The <u>Commission for Tertiary Education and Research</u> (CTER)                 | Established by the <u>Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022</u> .<br><br>From August 2024, it will take over functions from many post-16 education areas currently within the Welsh government and replace the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).<br><br><div>Overall strategic vision</div> | <b>Responsible for the whole post-compulsory education and training sector: apprenticeships and training, school sixth forms, adult community learning, further education, HE, and government funded research and innovation.</b><br><br>For the first time, <b>funding, planning and regulation</b> (registration of providers, quality assurance, ...) of post-16 education and research will be managed and coordinated by one body.<br><br><b>This comprehensive structural reform aims to create a tertiary education system and develop a global approach of post-16 education.</b> |
| <b>SCOTLAND</b><br><br>The <u>Scottish Funding Council</u> (SFC)                                      | Established by the <u>Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005</u> .<br><br><div>Overall strategic vision</div>                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>Responsible for further education (FE) and HE, including research.</b><br><br>The SFC is mainly a funding body. It is not a regulator.<br><br>Undergraduate students who normally reside in Scotland do not pay tuition fees. Consequently, <b>the funding of learning and teaching for HE providers comes predominantly from the SFC, which gives this body a critical role in the management of HE in Scotland.</b>                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>NORTHERN IRELAND</b><br><br>The <u>Higher Education Division of the Department for the Economy</u> | There is no specific body responsible for HE in NI.<br><br><div>Oversight from a government department</div>                                                                                                                                                                                                             | The HE Division's role is to formulate policy and administer funding to <b>support education and research in the HE field</b> . It also acts as a regulator (quality, governance...).<br><br>The Department for the Economy is also responsible for wider economic policy, the operation of a range of employment and skills programmes, employment law, etc.                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Widening access to HE is a priority in all four parts of the UK.</b>                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

## Keys to understanding UK's higher education system(s)

### Higher education providers

HE providers comprise **all institutions who offer programmes at higher education level**, either academic or vocational oriented. HE institutions are exclusively those who belong to the HE sector.

The following figures include exclusively legally recognised providers.

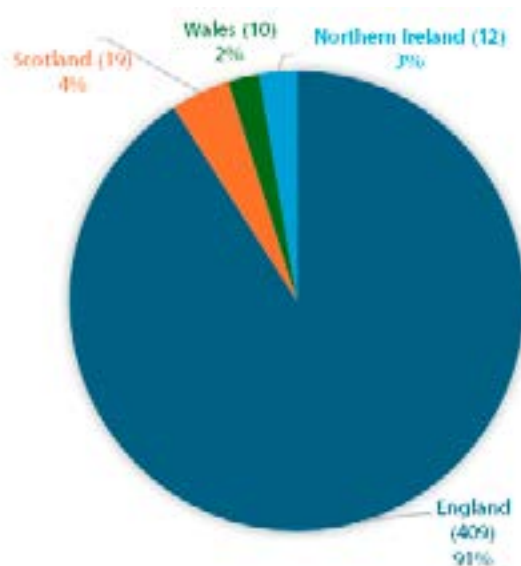
### Where is higher education provided in the UK?

#### Location

Due to the respective sizes of each part of the UK, and for historical and political reasons, most of the higher education provision concentrates in England.

**Over 9 in ten HEIs, and over 8 out of 10 HE students, are in England.**

**Uneven distribution of HE providers (total 450) across the UK in 2023**



There are over 20 times more providers in England than in Scotland, and 40 times more than in Wales and NI.

*Note: The number of HEIs in England had reached 423 in April 2024.*

*Source: House of Commons Library, [Higher education in the UK: Systems, policy approaches, and challenges](#), 18 April 2023, p.13.*

**The distribution of HE students by home country was slightly less unbalanced between England and the other parts of UK in 2021/22:**



Total HE enrolment for the academic year 2021/22: 2,861,475 (after excluding HE level students enrolled at FE colleges in Wales – see next section).

*Source: HESA, [HE student enrolments by domicile and region of higher education provider. Academic years 2014/15 to 2021/22](#).*

**The cross-border flows of first year students from the UK shows that the majority of students stay in their home country**, although those from Wales and Northern Ireland are more likely to cross borders than those from England and Scotland.

*Source: HESA, [Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22](#) – “Where students come from and go to study”.*

## Higher education institutions and further education colleges offering HE courses

Although students primarily study for higher education qualifications in **higher education institutions**, a significant share of them, especially in Scotland and Northern Ireland, are enrolled in **further education colleges**.

In FE colleges, higher education is offered alongside further education (and other) courses.

### Students enrolled in HE courses by type of provider and home country in 2021/22:

| <p><b>The proportion of HE students enrolled in a further education college ranges from 1% in Wales to 13% in Scotland, for a total of 5% for the whole of UK.</b></p> | England                   |                  |             |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|-------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                        | HE providers              | 2,342,775        | 96%         |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>FE providers</b>       | <b>90,120</b>    | <b>4%</b>   |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | Scotland                  |                  |             |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | HE providers              | 301,230          | 87%         |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>FE providers</b>       | <b>45,025</b>    | <b>13%</b>  |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | Wales                     |                  |             |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | HE providers              | 147,905          | 99%         |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>FE providers</b>       | <b>1,140</b>     | <b>1%</b>   |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | Northern Ireland          |                  |             |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | HE providers              | 69,565           | 88%         |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>FE providers</b>       | <b>9,780</b>     | <b>12%</b>  |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>Total HE providers</b> | <b>2,861,475</b> | <b>95%</b>  |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>Total FE providers</b> | <b>146,065</b>   | <b>5%</b>   |
|                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>TOTAL</b>              | <b>3,007,540</b> | <b>100%</b> |

In HESA statistics, «HE student enrolments» do not include HE level students enrolled at FE colleges, except for Wales (included from 2015/16).

Source: HESA, *Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22* (Figure 4).

## Types of higher education institutions

|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
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| Types of institutions | <p>HEIs comprise of three main categories of organisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Universities</b> (including a few Open Universities).</li> </ul> <p>Some prestigious institutions (Oxford and Cambridge in England, St Andrews, Glasgow, and Aberdeen in Scotland) have existed since the Middle Ages.</p> <p>16 universities in Scotland. They all belong to the public sector.</p> <p>124 universities in England</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>University Colleges</b></li> <li>• <b>Specialised schools/institutes.</b></li> </ul>         |
|                       | <p>Since 2011 and the election of the Conservative-led coalition, the <b>development of a competitive market in higher education has been strongly encouraged in England</b>. From the creation of the Office for Students, which became operational in 2018, HEIs previously known as 'alternative providers' (AP - private) have been able to register, which has led to a significant expansion of the HE sector. The surge in the number of HE institutions in official statistics, from 162 in 2015/16 to 423 in 2023/24, is primarily due to the inclusion of these organisations.</p> |
| Governance            | <p>They are <b>autonomous institutions, with a high degree of self-governance and financial and academic independence</b>. They are responsible for appointing and employing their own staff and setting their own policies and procedures.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

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|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Status | <p>11 genuine UK degree courses are approved by a university or other legally recognised degree-awarding body, which will award the final qualification.</p> <p><b>Across UK, HEIs divide into:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>‘Recognised bodies’:</b> These institutions <b>have the power to award UK degrees</b> – the DAPs (Degree Awarding Powers – see below). There are around 175 of them. <b>All UK universities and university colleges belong to this category.</b></li> <li>• <b>‘Listed bodies’:</b> HEIs that are approved to provide full higher education programmes on behalf of recognised bodies with which they have agreements. They do not in themselves have the right to award degrees. The overwhelming majority of recent HEIs belong to this category.</li> </ul> <div style="border: 1px solid red; border-radius: 15px; padding: 10px; text-align: center;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>List of legally recognised HEIs:</b></li> </ul> <p>In <a href="#">England</a>   <a href="#">Northern Ireland</a>   <a href="#">Scotland</a>   <a href="#">Wales</a></p> </div>                                                         |
|        | <p><b>England: Registration with the Office for Students (focus)</b></p> <p>Under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, <b>registration with the OfS is a requirement to enjoy three major benefits:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public funding:</b> All registered providers can recruit students who can access student loans. Registered providers in the Approved (fee cap) category (see p.9) of registration can also receive direct funding (teaching and general research activities). As publicly-funded, they are sometimes referred to as “public”.</li> <li>• <b>Recruiting international students:</b> Registration allows to apply for a licence to recruit international students.</li> <li>• <b>Power to award degrees and university title:</b> all registered HEIs can apply for the right to award their own degrees* or for the right to use the word “university” in its name.</li> </ul> <p>*For older universities, the authorisation was originally made under Royal Charters or Acts. The OfS is now the body in charge for all HEIs.</p> <p><i>For more information, see QAA, <a href="#">The Right to Award UK degrees</a>, 2018.</i></p> |

### The different levels of Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs):

- **FDAPs:** The “Foundation Degree Awarding Powers” grant the power to award ISCED level 5 degrees.
- **TDAPs\*:** The “Taught Degree Awarding Powers” authorize the awarding of ISCED level 6 degrees, as well as some ISCED level 7 diplomas, such as Taught master’s degrees.

\*For institutions in England, TDAP can include authorisation to grant awards up to and including bachelor degrees only (that is up to and including level 6) or all taught awards (that is up to and including level 7).

- **RDAPs:** The “Research Degree Awarding Powers” grant the power to award doctorates (ISCED level 8) and research masters (ISCED level 7) degrees.

The distinction between the TDAP and the RDAP is based on whether or not the institution carries out a research activity intensive enough to justify the right to award Master’s or Doctorate degrees.

\*\*

Institutions in the UK applying for university title or university college title must already hold full authorisation for TDAP. In Scotland and Northern Ireland they are also expected to hold RDAP.

The overwhelming majority of FE colleges do not have the DAPs. In England, only 6 colleges have FDAPs, 3 colleges have the bachelor’s degree awarding powers, and 2 colleges have taught degree awarding powers. These are registered with the OfS.

Source: Association of Colleges, [College Key Facts 2023/24](#), p.12.

\*\*

In England, out of 432 registered providers in December 2023, 163 had DAPs. Among these, 105 providers had the RDAPs.

Source: Office for Students, [English Higher Education 2023](#), p.16.

## Degrees and qualifications

**In the UK, higher vocational and academic education do not constitute separate systems: TVET programmes are offered by all kinds of HE providers, and all short-cycle qualifications (vocational orientation) presented hereafter enable to join a bachelor's degree.**

Higher TVET qualifications comprise vocational training qualifications and work-based qualifications (apprenticeships). They range from ISCED level 5 to 7.

### Awarding of degrees:

Further education colleges mainly focus on vocational qualifications below degree level (ISCED level 6). For qualifications of a higher level, they are usually in partnership with universities.

Universities award foundation degrees, bachelor's and postgraduate degrees, and degree/graduate apprenticeships.

### Academic higher education divides into:

- Undergraduate study
- Postgraduate taught study (the student spends more time on taught or guided study than on original research)
- Postgraduate research (the student spends more time on original research than on taught or guided study).

|               | Main qualifications and degrees at HE level                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|               | England – Wales – NI                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Scotland                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|               | <p>The following HE levels are defined by the <u>Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland</u> (FHEQ). HE comprises education at levels 4 to 8.</p> <p>HE credits are referred to as CATS credits, from the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p>The following levels refer to the <u>Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework</u> (SCQF). HE comprises education at levels 7 to 12.</p> <p>HE credits are referred to as SCQF credits.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|               | HE starts at the theoretical age of 18.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Theoretical age for starting HE: 16                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| ISCED level 5 | <b>Short-cycle programmes</b><br><b>They are vocational orientated, and most of them belong to higher TVET. They are taught primarily in FE colleges, especially for HNCs, but also, for a significant proportion, in universities.</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|               | <p><u>Level 4:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Higher National Certificate (HNC)</b></li> </ul> <p>Duration: 1 year. 120 CATS. Practice-based.</p> <p><i>Gives access to the 2nd year of a relevant HND or bachelor's programme.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Higher Apprenticeship</b></li> </ul> <p><u>Level 5:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Higher National Diploma (HND)</b></li> </ul> <p>Duration: generally, 2 years. 240 CATS. Practice-based.</p> <p><i>Gives access to the 2nd or 3rd year of a relevant bachelor's programme.</i></p> | <p><u>Level 7:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Higher National Certificate (HNC)</b></li> </ul> <p>Duration: 1 year. 96 Scottish credits.</p> <p><i>Gives access to the 2nd year of an honours bachelor's programme or HND.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Modern Apprenticeship</b></li> </ul> <p><u>Level 8:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Higher National Diploma (HND)</b></li> </ul> <p>Duration: 2 years. 240 Scottish credits.</p> <p>Usually practical and profession-oriented courses, and sometimes scientifically oriented subjects.</p> <p><i>Gives access to the 3rd year of an ordinary bachelor's programme.</i></p> |

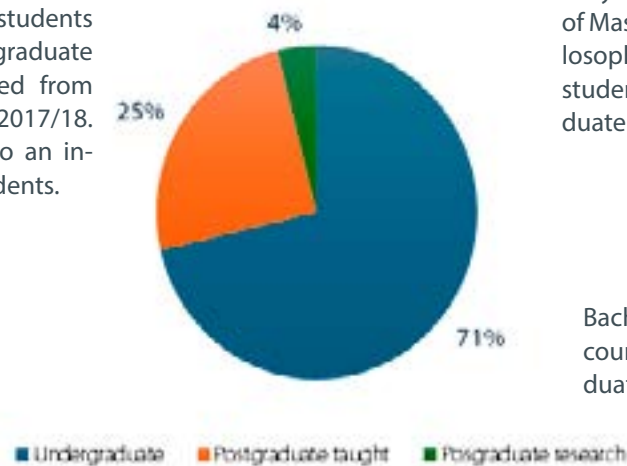
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|                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Foundation degree (FD)</b></li> </ul> <p>Duration: 2 years. 240 CATS. It focuses on a particular job or profession, generally involving a mix of academic study and workplace experience.</p> <p><i>Gives access to the 3rd year of a relevant bachelor's programme.</i></p> <p>In England, FE colleges deliver:</p> <p>80% of HNCs    53% of HNDs    61% of FDs</p> <p><i>Source: Association of Colleges, op. cit., p. 12.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">**</p> <p>There are also exit or <b>intermediate awards</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At level 4: The <b>Certificate of higher education</b> (CertHE) is delivered after successful completion of the 1st year (120 CATS) of an FD programme or an honours programme.</li> <li>• At level 5: The <b>Diploma of Higher Education</b> (DipHE) is delivered after successful completion of the 1st and 2nd years (250 CATS) of an honours programme.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Higher Apprenticeship, or Technical Apprenticeship</b></li> </ul> <p><i>Apprenticeships mean working whilst receiving a formal programme of training at a college or a university. The apprentice is not required to fund their apprenticeship, as their employer and the government will do so, and they are paid throughout the programme. Considering how high tuition fees are in most of the UK (see p.10-11), apprenticeships can be advantageous.</i></p> |
|                      | <p><b>24% of all new entrants into tertiary education had chosen short-cycle tertiary programmes in 2021.</b></p> <p><i>Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2023, Figure B4.1.</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>ISCED level 6</b> | <p><u>Level 6:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Bachelor (Honours) degree</b> (FD)</li> </ul> <p>Duration: most often, 3 years.</p> <p>For example: Bachelor of the arts (BA) hon, Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) hon, Bachelor of Engineering (BEng) hon, Bachelor of Law (LLB) hon, Bachelor of science (BSc) hon.</p> <p>But also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4-year « sandwich programmes”, which include an extra year of work experience.</li> <li>• In some subjects, an undergraduate programme takes 5 to 6 years: medicine, veterinary medicine, dentistry, and architecture.</li> </ul> <p>120 CATS per year.</p> <p><i>Gives access to Master's programmes.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">**</p> <p><b>The Bachelor (Ordinary) degree</b> is an <b>exit or intermediate award</b>. It is delivered after obtaining at least 300 CATS of an honours programme. It takes at least 2 years.</p>                                              | <p><u>Level 9:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Bachelors degree</b></li> </ul> <p>Duration: 3 years. At least 360 Scottish credits.</p> <p><i>Gives access to Master's programmes.</i></p> <p><u>Level 10:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Bachelors degree with Honours</b></li> </ul> <p>Duration: 4 years. At least 480 Scottish credits.</p> <p><i>Gives access to Master's programmes.</i></p>                                                                  |
|                      | <p><b>74% of all new entrants into tertiary education had chosen a Bachelor's programmes in 2021.</b></p> <p><i>Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2023, Figure B4.1.</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

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|                      | <p><u>Level 6:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Degree Apprenticeship</b></li> <li>• <b>Graduate Certificate</b> or Advanced Certificate</li> </ul> <p>60 (rarely 90) CATS in total.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Graduate Diploma</b> or Advanced Diploma</li> </ul> <p>120 CATS in total.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <p><u>Level 9:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Graduate Apprenticeship, or Technical Apprenticeship</b></li> </ul> <p><u>Level 10:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Graduate Apprenticeship, or Professional Apprenticeship</b></li> </ul> <p><u>Level 9 or 10:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Graduate Certificate</b></li> </ul> <p>At least 60 Scottish credits in total.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Graduate Diploma</b></li> </ul> <p>At least 120 Scottish credits in total.</p> |
|                      | <p><b>Graduate Certificates and Diplomas</b> are higher education qualifications at the same level as a bachelor's degree but more limited in scope and duration. They are generally taken by those who have already graduated with a bachelor's degree in another discipline. They are available in a limited range of work-related subjects (management, counselling, law...). They are often taught in universities.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>ISCED level 7</b> | <p><u>Level 7 in England, Wales and NI, level 11 in Scotland:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Taught Master's degree</b></li> </ul> <p>Duration: 1 year. Worth 180 CATS / Scottish credits.</p> <p>Example: Master of Arts (MA), Master of Engineering (MEng), Master of Physics (MPhys).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Master's integrated degree</b></li> </ul> <p>A combination of a bachelor's and a master's degree programme. Students only obtain a master's degree.</p> <p>&gt; Duration in England, Wales and NI: 4 years, or 5 years for students enrolled in a sandwich programme (one year of work placement). Worth 480 CATS.</p> <p>&gt; Duration in Scotland: 5 years. Worth 600 Scottish credits.</p> <p>They cover mainly technical specialist courses. Example: Master of Engineering (MEng).</p> <p>Both type of master's can be profession-oriented or research-oriented.</p> <p><i>Both give access to MPhil or a PhD programme.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Master of Research (MRes)</b></li> </ul> <p>Duration: 1 year. 180 CATS / Scottish credits. The thesis work is worth 120 CATS. In some cases, the MRes programme has no credits and consists solely of research-skill development and writing a thesis.</p> <p><i>The MRes sometimes counts as the 1st year of the PhD. In terms of research, the programme is the same as the 1st year of a MPhil programme.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Master of Philosophy (MPhil)</b></li> </ul> <p>The term "philosophy" does not refer to the study of the discipline, but rather to its foundation in conducting research. The level is higher than that of all master's degrees. MPhil programmes may be found in any branch of studies.</p> <p>Duration: generally 2 years (sometimes 9 months or 1 year).</p> <p>No CATS / Scottish credits: students do not complete coursework (except at the University of Cambridge).</p> <p><i>Gives give access to a PhD programme.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">**</p> <p>Postgraduate certificates and diplomas are taught postgraduate qualifications at the same level as master's degrees, but they take less time to complete, and they do not include a research project.</p> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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|                      | <p><b>Exception: The postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) takes one year to complete.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Postgraduate Certificate</b><br/>Takes one term (15 weeks) to complete. Worth 60 CATS in total.</li> <li>• <b>Postgraduate Diploma</b><br/>Takes two terms (30 weeks) to complete. Worth 120 CATS in total.</li> <li>• <b>Graduate Apprenticeship, or Professional Apprenticeship</b><br/>In Scotland only.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>ISCED level 8</b> | <p><u>Level 8 in England, Wales and NI, level 12 in Scotland:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)</b><br/>Duration: 3 years.</li> <li>• <b>Professional Doctorate</b><br/>They are professionally oriented PhD programmes. They are awarded in the medical and paramedical sectors, in health care and for programmes in the domains of architecture, theology, psychology and business.<br/>Duration: at least 3 years.<br/>In Scotland, these programmes are worth at least 540 Scottish credits. In the other parts of UK, doctoral degrees are not credit-rated.<br/>In the UK, <b>1.7% of the 25-64 year-olds hold a doctoral degree</b>, above the OECD average of 1.3% (OECD, "United Kingdom", in <i>Education at a Glance 2022 – Figures for the year 2022</i>).</li> </ul> |

The proportion of students enrolled on postgraduate courses has increased from 24% to 29% since 2017/18. This is mostly due to an increase in non-EU students.

7 in 10 students were enrolled at undergraduate level in 2021/22



Only 8,290 students enrolled of Masters of Research and Philosophy, for a total of 104,645 students enrolled on postgraduate research programmes.

Bachelor's degree students accounted for 92% of undergraduate enrolment that year.

Source: HESA, *Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22* (Figure 3). Enrolment at HEIs plus HE level students in Wales.

# Higher education funding: what is at stake?

In the UK, **tuition fees** and **grants for teaching and research** (direct funding) are the most significant sources of income for most higher education providers.

## England's 2012 reform

Prior to 2012, most funding for England universities came from a central Government teaching grant paid through the relevant funding councils. In 2012/13, an increase in the maximum tuition fee level from £3,000 to £9,000 was accompanied by a reduction to the teaching grant. Due to higher fees and more students, the balance of these two sources of income has shifted over time. The share of tuition fees surged from about one third in 2010-11 to about three thirds by 2022-23.

Source: House of Commons Library, *op.cit.*

This reform has first been offset by a robust loan and grant scheme. However, maintenance grants, which do not have to be paid back, have disappeared from August 2016 onwards. Grants for undergraduate study are still available in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

The proportion of students who receive government support through student loans is extremely high in England: 96% of English students for short-cycle tertiary and bachelor's programmes in 2019/20. Yet, 7 out of 10 students benefit from some form of loan forgiveness, and 40% of loans are not repaid (OECD, 2020).

Source: OECD (2022), «United Kingdom», in *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/2d088c0c-en>

### Funding of tertiary education in % of the GDP: high or low?

**Total public and private spending on tertiary education was 2% of UK's GDP in 2019.** This was **the second highest figure in the OECD** after the US (2.5%), and well above the OECD average of 1.5%. **However**, the nature of the funding model in much of the UK (England having a dominant role in the HE landscape), with most public funding going to students as loans, means **direct funding to institutions was much smaller, at 0.5% of GDP, compared to the OECD average of 0.9% of GDP.**

In the UK, the share of private expenditure at tertiary level reached 73% after public-to-private transfers in 2019. This was significantly above the OECD average of 31%.

Source: OECD, *ibid.*

## Tuition fees at undergraduate level in the different parts of the UK

The situation is very contrasted across UK for home students. Scotland's policy is unique.

| Figures are for the academic year 2023/24.                                                                     |                               |                                                     |                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                | England                       | Wales                                               | Northern Ireland                                                                        | Scotland                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Maximum annual amount of tuition fees for an undergraduate degree programme in publicly supported institutions | <b>£9,250 for UK students</b> | <b>£9,000 (Wales)</b><br><b>£9,250 (rest of UK)</b> | <b>£4,710 (Northern Ireland)</b><br><b>£9,000 (Wales)</b><br><b>£9,250 (rest of UK)</b> | <b>£0 (Scotland)</b><br><br>The fees of eligible, full-time undergraduate students resident in Scotland, when studying for a first tertiary degree, have been covered by the Scottish government since 2007 (£1,820).<br><br><b>£9,250 (rest of UK)</b><br><br>The annual number of funded places offered to eligible students is capped. There is no cap on the number of fee-paying students from the rest of the UK. <sup>10</sup> |

Source: House of Commons Library, *op. cit.*

In **Scotland**, the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) pays directly the “tuition fee payment” to universities for each eligible funded student. The funding comes from the Scottish government.

In **Northern Ireland**, the number of local students is controlled using the Maximum Aggregate Student Number (MASN) cap, which depends on available funding. This system has been criticised in recent years. In 2022, the MPs mentioned the possibility of raising the MASN to “enable the retention of home-grown talent and an expansion of the high-skilled sectors of its economy».

Source: John Campbell, “NI Education: Student number cap acts as ‘economic handbrake’”, 8 November 2022, in [www.BBC.com](http://www.BBC.com). [www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-63543566](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-63543566)

### England: Registration with the OfS and tuition fees

HE providers can choose to apply to register in one of two categories:

- Approved (fee cap): These institutions are entitled to charge students fees up to the higher statutory fee limit.
- Approved.

The right to charge the apply the highest fee level depends on whether institutions have an **approved access and participation plan**.

Out of 423 registered providers in December 2023, only 78 were in the ‘Approved’ category, yet designed to help ‘alternative providers’ (see p.4), and 345 were in the ‘Approved (fee cap)’ category. This is under half of the predicted number for 2021/22.

## Financial pressures on HEIs

In response to the Draft Budget 2023/24, the organisation Universities Wales warned both teaching and research in Wales are no longer covered by the income from government grants and tuition fees. This type of warning has been heard in all parts of the UK in recent years. **The threat to the financial stability of the HE sector** is due to a combination of factors, including:

In a context of budget cuts, there have been **reductions to government teaching grants in all parts of the UK over the last decade**. According to the HESA (Higher Education Student Data), funding body grants fell by 20% between 2005/06 and 2020/21. In England, the 2012 reform combined a reduction in the teaching grant and a rise of tuition fees (see above). The organisation Universities Scotland has argued that between 2014/15 and 2022/23, the teaching grant allocated by the Scottish Funding Council has been reduced by 27% in real terms. This is projected to grow to a 37% reduction in real terms by 2024/25 (source: House of Commons, op. cit., p. 26).

**The income available to universities from tuition fees has not kept up with inflation over the last decade**, especially because of the freezing of fee caps. In Scotland, the fee has not changed since 2009/10. In England, tuition fees have been capped at £9,250 since 2017, and they will remain at this level until at least 2025. This amount has been estimated to be worth around £6,000 in real terms by 2025, due to inflation.

### Following Brexit, the HE sector has lost EU structural funds.

To learn more about the Brexit and its consequences for higher education see [Paxter’s publication on the subject](#).

### Brexit: what to replace the Erasmus+ programme?

The UK chose to leave the EU's Erasmus+ programme, which has been replaced by [the UK-wide Turing Scheme](#). Yet the situation is contrasted across the UK:

- In **Wales, a domestic education exchange programme, the [Taith Programme](#) has been created** to run alongside the Turing Scheme. Launched in February 2022, it aims to “fill the gaps” the latter leaves (announcement of the Welsh government in March 2021).
- **The Scottish government has been working at developing its own international education exchange programme.** It also has the ambition to re-join Erasmus+.
- Under an **arrangement with the Irish government**, announced as a “permanent commitment” by the Irish Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science in July 2023, **HE students in Northern Ireland continue to have access to the Erasmus+ programme** (through temporal registration with an Irish HEI)– in addition to be eligible to apply to the Turing Scheme.

### Consequences:

- While the income of HE providers has more than doubled between 2005/06 and 2020/21, due to higher fees and more students, **the income per student that universities receive for teaching has declined** over the same period. In May 2022, the Russell Group, which represents 24 research intensive universities across the UK, estimated the average deficit for teaching each undergraduate student would increase to approximately £4,000 in 2024/25, from £1,750 in 2021/22 for universities in England. That same year, the organisation Universities Scotland estimated there was a £4,000 to £7,000 funding gap, depending on the subject studied, between what it cost a university to teach a Scottish-domiciled student and the level of funding universities receive from the Scottish government.
- **Tuition fees are likely to suffer a significant new increase in the coming years.** In Northern Ireland, for example, The Department for the Economy has modelled a number of scenarios to anticipate budget shortfalls, which include increasing tuition fees to £7,200, from 4,620 at present. Another proposed solution consists in reducing the number of university places available to local students. Both decisions could negatively affect access to higher education.

## International students: benefits and concerns

In this context of financial pressures, HEIs are increasingly willing to attract international students. The tuition fees paid by international students are a major source of income for many universities. And as they are not capped in the same way as fees of “home” students, providers can charge significantly more.

**Total fee income from non-EU overseas students increased from less than £1 billion (5.6% of the sector's income) in 2001/02 to £11.8 billion in 2022/23, which was 23% of total income.**

Source: HESA data, in House of Commons Library, op. cit., p.30., and <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7976/>

**In 2023, tuition fees for international students range from £11,400 to £38,000 at undergraduate level.**

Source: <https://study-uk.britishcouncil.org/moving-uk/cost-studying>

This strategy raises growing concerns, about the financial risk of relying on international tuition fees and predictions for future inflow on the one hand, and the risk of expanding the number of international students universities recruit, at the expense of home students, on the other hand.

### UK, one of the major global hubs for international students

In 2021, the UK was the second-most popular country for international students, with 600,589 students enrolled in the country, accounting for **over 9% of all students attending a university overseas worldwide**, behind the USA (833,204 international students). The ambition of the UK Government's International Education Strategy, set at 600,000 international students by 2030, was met a decade earlier.

Source: UNESCO database.

It is interesting to note that, **across the UK, Scotland has the highest percentage of international students**, followed by Northern Ireland (figures for the academic year 2021/22):

| Scotland   | Northern Ireland | England | Wales | UK  |
|------------|------------------|---------|-------|-----|
| <b>27%</b> | 25%              | 24%     | 17%   | 24% |

Source: HESA, Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22 - Where students come from and go to study

That year, international students coming from the EU accounted for 4% of total enrolments. **First year EU domiciled enrolments dropped by 53% from 2020/21 to 2021/22, to their lowest historical level.** The country of origin of **international students** has undergone **a shift away from the EU to non-EU countries since 2020**. Northern Ireland is an exception to this pattern, where the number of new EU full-time undergraduates has increased since 2020 (+95% between 2020 and 2022).

## Higher education efficiency

### Remarkable coincidence of access and attainment at tertiary level

#### Youth tertiary enrolment rate\*

**UK**      **Europe\*\***

**58.4%**   **73.9%\*\*\***

**France**

**68.2%**

\*The PAXTER tertiary enrolment rate is the ratio of the number of students to the population aged 18-22 (considered student-aged according to international standards).

\*\*19 European countries covered by PAXTER's study, among a total of 76.

\*\*\*Median value of tertiary enrolment rates of the 19 European countries covered by PAXTER's study.

Source: PAXTER, year 2020

#### Completion rate of full-time students enrolled in a bachelor's or equivalent programme

**By the theoretical duration of the programme:**

**UK**      **France**   **OECD**

**69%**   **36%**   **39%**

**By the theoretical duration of the programme plus 3 years:**

**UK**      **France**   **OECD**

**85%**   **79%**   **62%**

**UK has the highest rates among OECD countries** with available data.

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2022, Table B5.1.

#### Educational attainment among the 25-34 age group

**Tertiary education:**

**UK**      **France**   **OECD**

**57.7%\***   **50.4%**   **47.4%**

UK ranks 8th among OECD countries for progress between 2000 and 2021.

**Upper secondary (or post-secondary non-tertiary ed.):**

**UK**      **France**   **OECD**

**29.6%**   **38.7%**   **39.2%**

**Below upper secondary education:**

**UK**      **France**   **OECD**

**12.7%**   **10.9%**   **13.9%**

Source: OECD database, year 2022

The level of UK's youth access to higher education is one of the lowest among the European countries covered by PAXTER's study. It is close to that of Switzerland (63%).

**The UK distinguishes by the efficiency of its higher education**, especially from ISCED level 6.

Completion rates for short-cycle tertiary programmes are well above OECD averages too, but the difference is less, especially by the theoretical duration plus 3 years, and UK does not rank first.

Another indicator of this efficiency is **the very high continuation rates among full-time students in England:**

#### Figures for 2019/20 (academic year of entry)

|                                   |       |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| Undergraduate first degree        | 91.1% |
| Postgraduate taught masters       | 93.9% |
| All undergraduate apprenticeships | 88.9% |
| All postgraduate apprenticeships  | 86.8% |

Source: Office for Students, Annual Review 2023, Figure 2, 2023. [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/annual-review-2023/](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/annual-review-2023/)

## A double selection for entering tertiary education

Admission to higher education is arranged via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which is a central application and placement body. Prospective students submit an application to the UCAS one year prior to the start of the academic year.

**The UK distinguishes by high levels of selectivity to proceed to academic higher education, combining selection by the secondary education paths and selection at the entry.**

### In England, Wales and Northern Ireland:

1. Direct admission to academic HE programmes is restricted to students holding a **General Certificate of Education (GCE) with A levels (GCE A levels)**.
2. For the students, **UCAS' general requirements** are as follows;
  - A General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) with a pass for at least 5 subjects; and
  - A GCE with at least 2 subjects at Advanced Level (A levels)
1. The **HEIs impose additional course requirements**, which often include the following:
  - 3 GCSE subjects assessed with an A\*, A, or B;
  - A GCE with a minimum of 3 subjects at A level; and
  - The A levels must be completed with an A\*, A, or B.

Students who do not meet the UCAS requirements can choose to obtain an **Access to HE Diploma** at a further education college. **The function of this one-year programme (60 credits) is to lead students to meet the admission requirements for a study programme in higher education.**

Admission requirements: typically, 1 or more GCSE subjects (A\*-C), usually English and/or maths and/or science. Students sometimes have to pass an admission test.

Access to HE Diplomas are recognised by universities throughout the UK.

### In Scotland:

Requirements for admission to most Scottish universities are:

- the Scottish Qualifications Certificate (SQC) with 4 Highers in 4 different curriculum areas with a score of A or B, often expressed as a letter combination, for example AB BB or AA BB;
- plus sometimes certain subjects (generally mathematics and English) as a National 5 qualification.