

SLC SP07/2021

25 November 2021

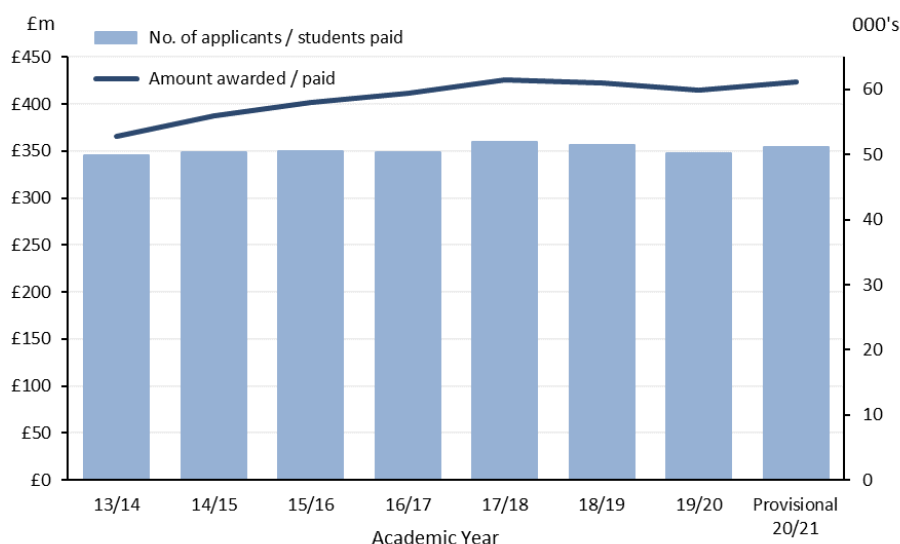
Coverage: Northern Ireland

Theme: Children, Education
and Skills

Student Support for Higher Education in Northern Ireland 2021: 2020/21 full year and 2021/22 early in year

**Higher education student support increased slightly in
academic year 2020/21 to £423.9 million.**

Figure 1: Number of students domiciled in Northern Ireland and EU (outside UK) receiving higher education support and amount awarded / paid



The amount paid out in supporting full-time, part-time and postgraduate higher education students reached £423.9 million in academic year 2020/21, a 2.3% increase from £414.4 million in 2019/20. *See Table 2*

The number of students paid / awarded funding increased to 51,200 students, up 1.9% from 50,300 in academic year 2019/20.

This is the first increase in both the number of paid / awarded students and the amount paid out / awarded since academic year 2017/18.

In the final year of available funding, EU (outside UK) domiciled numbers increased by 6.5% to 530 and the amount paid out, by 9.4% to £2.1 million.

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Introduction

This statistics publication presents figures and observations on the student support awarded to applicants and paid to students or their higher education provider. Figures are shown for the eight academic years up to and including 2020/21. Section 7 gives a high-level, early indication of academic year 2021/22 figures, along with emerging trends of any new policy products. The publication covers applicants and students domiciled in Northern Ireland taking a designated higher education (HE) course at a university or further education (FE) college in the UK, as well as EU (outside UK) applicants and students taking a designated course in Northern Ireland.

What can you use these statistics for?

These statistics can be used as a reference to the number of students awarded / paid and the amount awarded / paid out by the Students Loans Company for students studying in higher education between academic years 2013/14 and 2020/21, along with an early view of academic year 2021/22. The data used in this publication is from Student Loans Company's administrative systems. These systems only hold information on students who have applied for and / or receive funding. Due to this, these statistics cannot be used to analyse trends or to draw conclusions regarding the full UK student population.

Things you need to know

Payments vs. awards

The main aim of this publication is to measure payments to student support recipients funded by Northern Ireland over the course of each academic year. This is effectively what is paid in regard to Maintenance Loans, Tuition Fee Loans, postgraduate loans and Disabled Students Allowance (DSA).

Awards differ from payments as they refer to the decision on how much will be paid if the applicant is present for study for the full academic year. As payments refer to the actual amounts received by students, they can be lower if the student is not in attendance for the full academic year, if the applicant does not attend at all, or if they do not draw down the full amount which was awarded (e.g. they drop out mid-year). For all new types of support an early indication of what has been paid / awarded two months into the latest academic year, in this publication, 2021/22 is provided in Section 7 of the tables. The number of payments / awards made will change markedly between this point and the end of the academic year as current students will receive further payments and additional students apply for student support.

There are data reporting limitations in regard to separating out grant product payments by individual product. For this reason, the breakdowns of spend allocations of Maintenance Grants and other targeted support products e.g. Adult Dependant Grant and Travel Grants etc. are reported as awards.

Undergraduate Maintenance Loans

An undergraduate Maintenance Loan is funding to help with day-to-day costs, such as rent or food, whilst studying. These loans are available to those studying an eligible undergraduate, initial teacher training or postgraduate Certificate of Education course, at an eligible higher education provider on a full-time basis. The amount awarded is dependent on household income.

Full-time Maintenance Loans remain relatively constant in both numbers and amount paid

Figure 2: Number of students domiciled in Northern Ireland receiving full-time Maintenance Loans

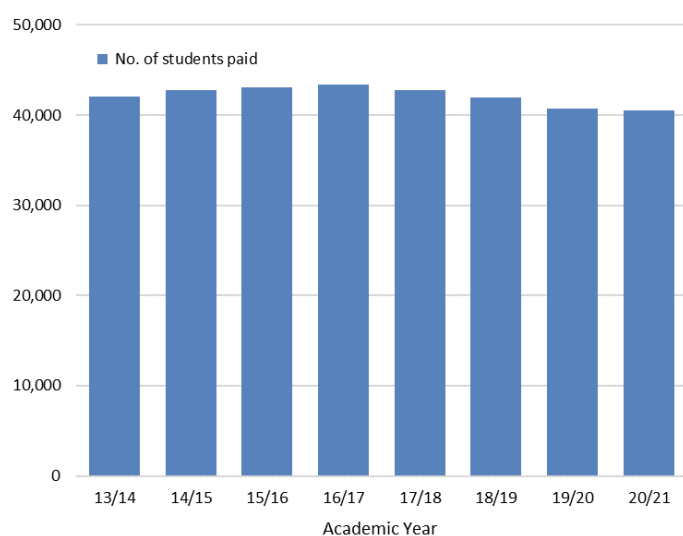
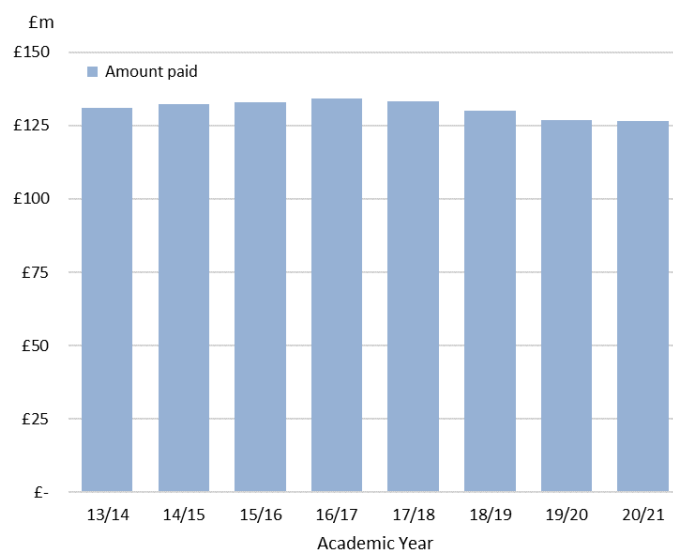


Figure 3: Amount paid out in full-time Maintenance Loans for students domiciled in Northern Ireland



Following an accumulative increase until academic year 2016/17, the number of students taking full-time Maintenance Loans has marginally decreased over the subsequent four academic years.

In Academic year 2020/21 the number of students taking a Maintenance Loan remained relatively constant at 40,500 in comparison to the previous year's figure of 40,700 (- 0.4%). See Table 3A(i)

Mirroring the trend in loan borrower numbers, full-time Maintenance Loan payments also peaked in academic year 2016/17 (at £134.2 million). The total amounts paid out have reduced gradually year-on-year until 2020/21 reaching £126.5 million (- 0.3% in comparison to 2019/20).

Overall, there has been little change in the number of full-time students in receipt of Maintenance Loans since 2013/14.

% take-up of eligible full-time undergraduate students taking out Maintenance Loans remains relatively constant over last three academic years

Figure 4: Full-time estimated eligible population and students in receipt of full-time Maintenance Loans in Northern Ireland

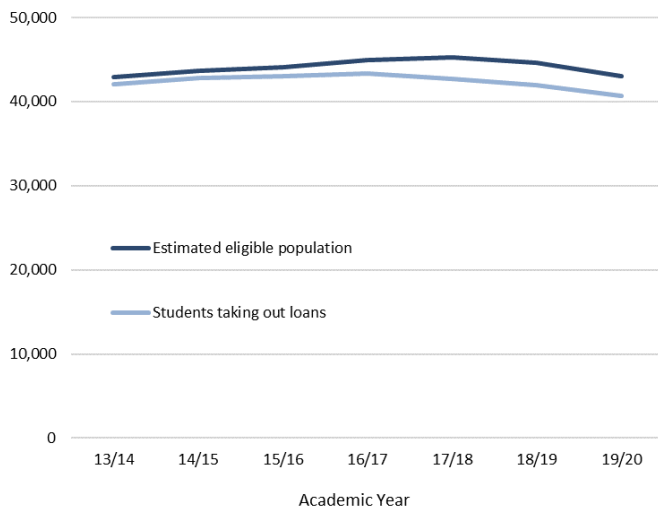
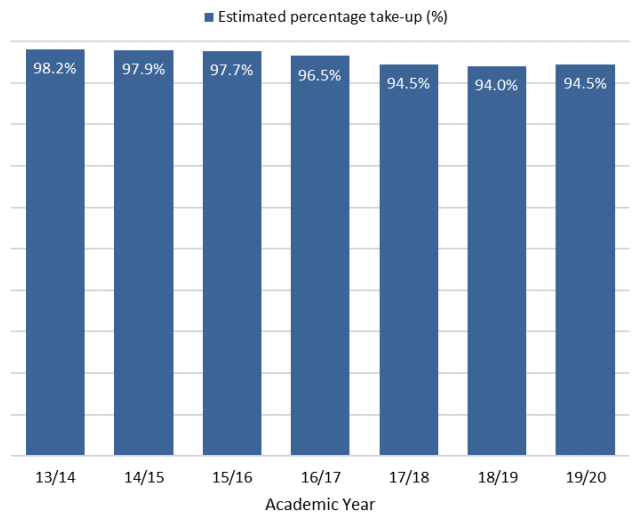


Figure 5: Estimated percentage take-up of full-time Maintenance Loans in Northern Ireland



The 'estimated eligible population' figures indicate the numbers of students that are eligible to apply for student finance (including those who do not apply). These figures are supplied to Student Loans Company by the Department for the Economy (DfE). The take-up rate is calculated from the number of eligible students who choose to apply for a Maintenance Loan.

The reduction in the estimated eligible population from 44,600 in academic year 2018/19 can be partially explained by Queens University Belfast and Stranmillis University College no longer counting foundation degrees that are offered as part of a collaborative arrangement with further education colleges in their data-return. This now avoids any potential double-counting.

The number of full-time students taking a Maintenance Loan started to gradually decrease in academic year 2017/18, by contrast the estimated eligible population continued to increase for a further year, before decreasing for the first time in 2018/19. See Table 3A(ii)

Academic year 2013/14 saw a take-up percentage of 98.2% which has steadily decreased down to 94.5% in 2019/20, meaning that out of the 43,100 students who were eligible to apply for a Maintenance Loan in academic year 2019/20, 40,700 students received a loan payment.

Due to the data availability, figures for the 2020/21 academic year will be presented in our next publication, planned for November 2022.

Undergraduate Tuition Fee Loans

An undergraduate Tuition Fee Loan covers the cost of the tuition fees charged by the university or college. These loans are available to those studying an eligible undergraduate, initial teacher training or postgraduate Certificate of Education course, at an eligible higher education provider on a full or part-time basis. Tuition Fee Loans are not dependent on household income.

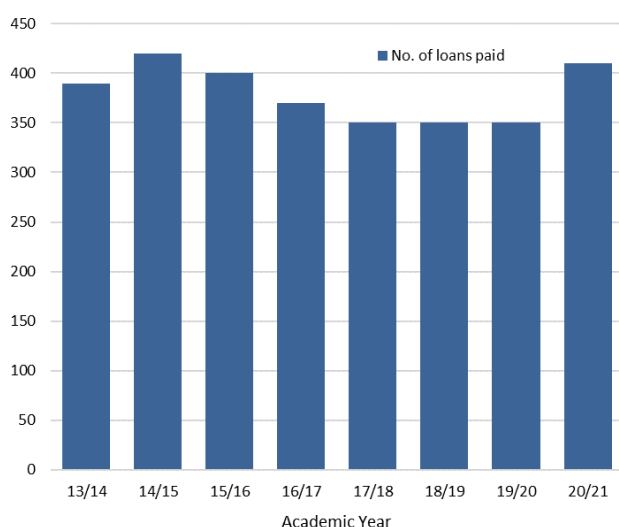
Small increase in numbers taking out full-time Tuition Fee Loans and resulting amount paid out

In line with the overall trend seen within full-time undergraduate student funding in Northern Ireland in academic year 2020/21, the number of students taking a Tuition Fee Loan has slightly increased. See *Table 3B*

Academic year 2020/21 saw a 1.5% increase in the number of students to 40,300 from 39,700. However, this is a 2.1% decrease from academic year 2016/17 when student numbers taking Tuition Fee Loans were at their highest.

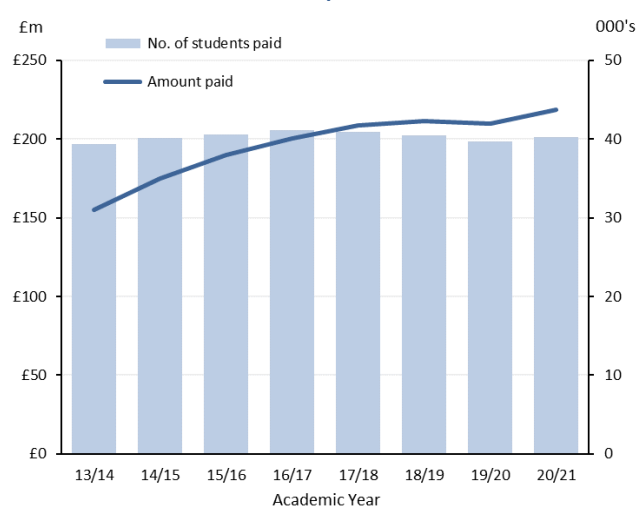
2020/21 saw a total paid in full-time Tuition Fee Loans of £218.5 million. This is a 4.1% increase on 2019/20's figure of £209.9 million. In comparison to 2016/17, the total paid out has increased by 8.9%. causing the average loan paid to increase from £3,900 to £5,400.

Figure 7: Number of Tuition Fee Loans paid on behalf of full-time EU (outside UK) domiciled students.



The later submission of these applications could be related to the 31 December 2020 deadline to apply for the EU Settlement Scheme for UK residency (for more information please see [here](#)), along with travel-limitations and later recruitment by higher education providers as a result of the COVID19 pandemic.

Figure 6: Number of Tuition Fee Loans paid on behalf of full-time Northern Ireland and EU (outside UK) domiciled students and amount paid



The number paid on behalf of EU (outside UK) domiciled increased by 15.3% in academic year 2020/21 to 410.

This increase was unexpected when referencing the early-in-year figures (at 31 October 2020) for the 2020/21 academic year published in the 2020 edition of this **publication**, as the total number of EU (outside UK) students in receipt of undergraduate finance, at that position was 4.9% lower than in the previous year.

The final months of 2020 saw a large influx of EU (outside UK) applications. This may be attributed to 2020/21 being named as the final academic year in which EU (outside UK) domiciled students were eligible for undergraduate tuition fee funding.

Academic year 2020/21 sees first increase in the number of students studying within Northern Ireland taking full-time Tuition Fee Loans since 2014/15

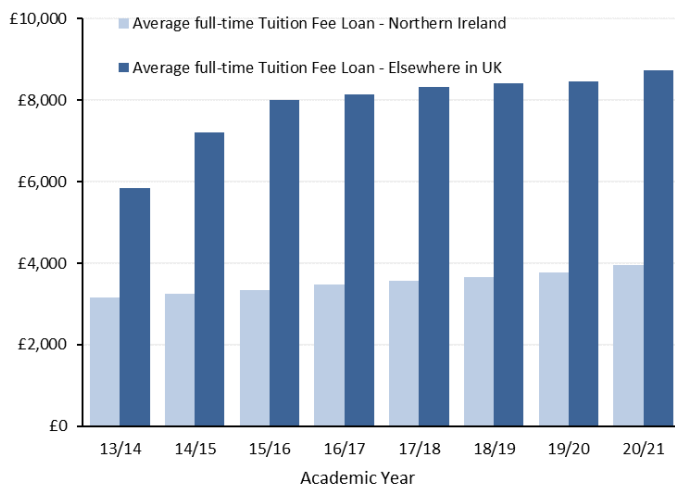
The subset of Northern Ireland domiciled students opting to take a Tuition Fee Loan to study within Northern Ireland has increased in academic year 2020/21 – for the first time since 2014/15.

In comparison to 2019/20, the number taking the loan to study within Northern Ireland has increased by 3.5%, to 27,500. See Table 3C

This could potentially be attributed to COVID-19 restrictions, reducing the opportunity to travel elsewhere in the UK.

In academic year 2019/20, Northern Ireland domiciled students studying outside of Northern Ireland generally account for one third of those taking full-time Tuition Fee Loans funded by Student Finance Northern Ireland. In 2020/21, this reduced by 1.4% to 31.1%.

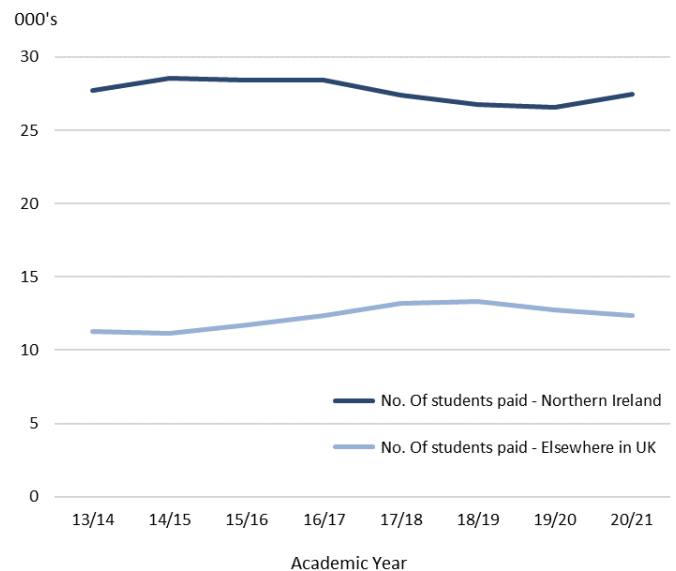
Figure 9: Average full-time Tuition Fee Loan amounts for students domiciled in Northern Ireland by country of study



Whilst in 2020/21, 31.1% of borrowers studied outside of Northern Ireland, the higher tuition fee charged by providers elsewhere in the UK resulted in the total amount paid out being almost half of the total amount loaned for tuition fees (49.8%).

£108.1 million of the £216.8 million paid out on behalf Northern Ireland domiciled students, were to providers in England, Wales and Scotland.

Figure 8: Number of students domiciled in Northern Ireland taking full-time Tuition Fee Loans by country of study



The average amount paid in full-time higher education Tuition Fee Loans differs depending on amounts that the country / provider type in the UK are able to charge for tuition fees.

As tuition fees are much lower in Northern Ireland in comparison to the rest of the UK, particularly England, the average full-time Tuition Fee Loan paid on behalf of a student studying outside of Northern Ireland is more than double than those studying at providers within.

In academic year 2020/21, the average loan paid for study elsewhere in the UK was £8,720 compared to £3,960 for those choosing to study within Northern Ireland.

Substantial increase in Tuition Fee Loans paid on behalf of part-time students in academic year 2020/21

Figure 10: Number of students domiciled in Northern Ireland & EU (outside UK) receiving part-time Tuition Fee Loans

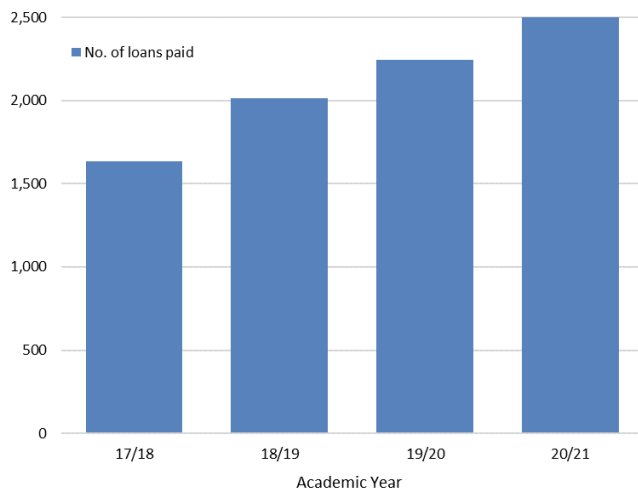
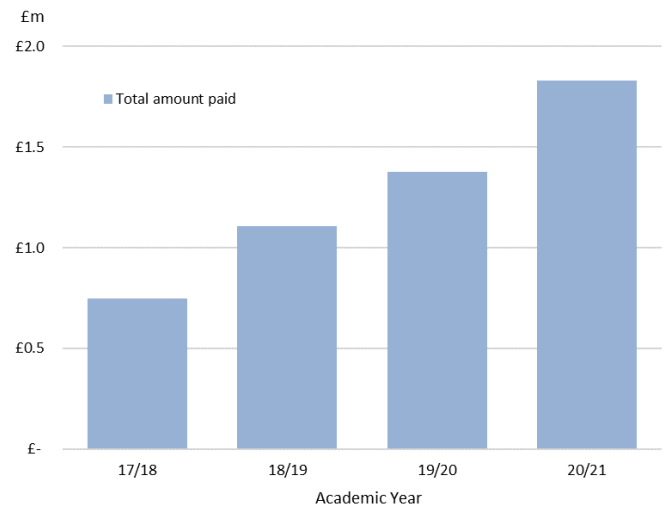


Figure 11: Amount paid in part-time Tuition Fees Loans for students domiciled in Northern Ireland and EU (outside UK)



In academic year 2020/21 there was an increase of 300 students accessing part-time Tuition Fee Loans funded by Student Finance Northern Ireland, from the 2,240 reported in 2019/20 to 2,540 (+ 13.5%). See *Table 5A*

This increase will be due to an additional 300 entrants engaging in part-time Open University courses. This could be as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting some employment sectors.

These additional students can be identified as Northern Ireland-domiciled students.

The amount paid out to part-time students increased from £1.4 million in academic year 2019/20 to £1.8 million (+ 33.2%). This is more significant than the 24.1% increase seen in the previous year.

Tuition fee payments to Northern Ireland-domiciled students increased by 32.8% (to £1.8 million) due to the increase in students. EU (outside UK) students payments increased by 104.5% (variances here are volatile due to very low numbers).

In comparison to academic year 2019/20, the average part-time Tuition Fee Loan paid on behalf of a Northern Ireland domiciled student has increased by 18.0% to £720. The average for an EU (outside UK) student increased by 35.8%, also to £720.

Postgraduate Tuition Fee Loan

A postgraduate Tuition Fee Loan is funding to help with course and living costs whilst studying an eligible postgraduate level course. They are paid directly to the student and are not based on their income or the income of their household. Students studying either a postgraduate Certificate of Education or an initial teacher training course are not eligible for postgraduate funding, they can alternatively apply for undergraduate finance.

Significant increase in Tuition Fee Loans paid on behalf of postgraduate students

Figure 12: Number of postgraduate students domiciled in Northern Ireland and EU (outside UK) receiving Tuition Fee Loans

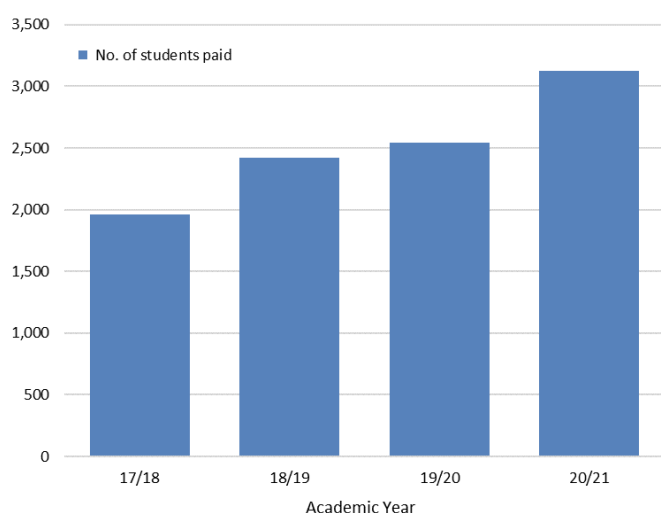
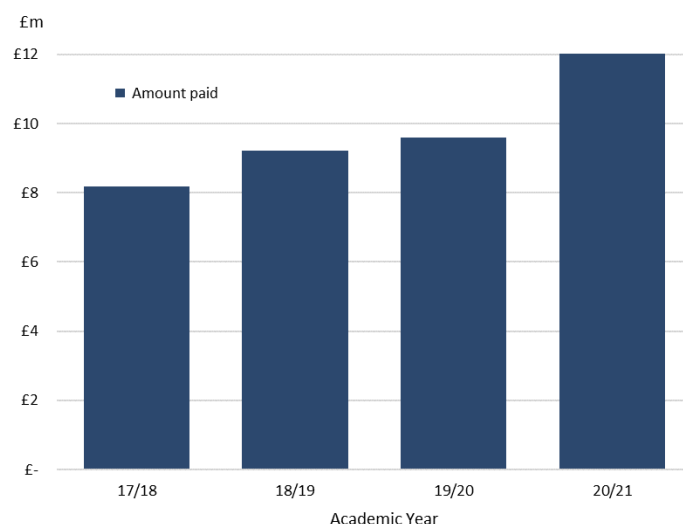


Figure 13: Amount paid to postgraduate students domiciled in Northern Ireland and EU (outside UK) receiving Tuition Fee Loans



The number of Tuition Fee Loans paid on behalf of postgraduate students in academic year 2020/21 was 22.8% higher than in the previous year, reaching 3,100. The amount paid out increased by 28.6% to £12.3 million in comparison to academic year 2019/20, an increase of £2.7 million.

In comparison to the growth seen in the previous year, this is far more significant. This could be as a result of perceived reduced employment opportunity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraging either undergraduates to continue to postgraduate level, or non-students to return to study.

The 25.1% (+ 600) increase in the number of loans paid on behalf of Northern Ireland-domiciled students was slightly offset by the 17.3% (- 25) decrease in those paid on behalf of EU (outside UK) students.

The total paid out for Northern Ireland domiciled postgraduates increased by 31.4% to £11.9 million. The total payments to EU (outside UK) students decreased by 17.9% to £0.5 million.

Disabled Students' Allowance

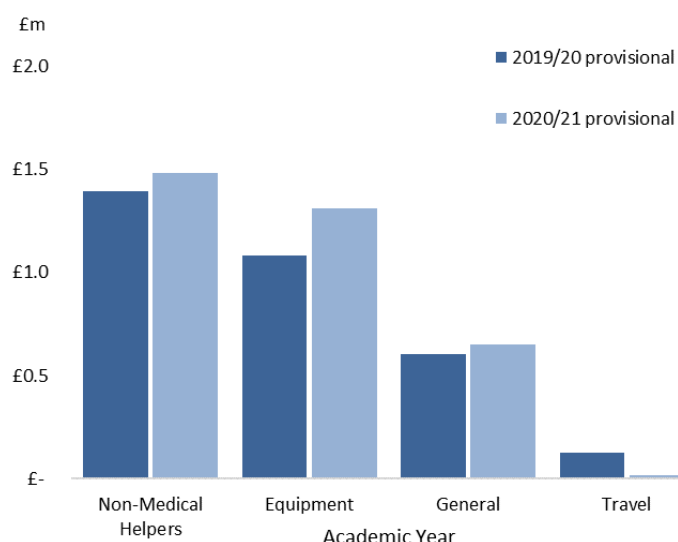
Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) is an additional part of the student finance package and helps pay for extra costs a student might incur in higher education as a direct result of their disability. This includes long-term health conditions, mental health difficulties, specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia or dyspraxia etc. The allowance is non repayable and does not depend on household income. The individual's condition must meet the definition of a disability under the Equality Act 2010. Generally, Disabled Students' Allowance is paid direct to the providers of equipment and services covered by the allowance although students may receive some funding paid directly to them, depending on their circumstances.

The vast majority of DSA is paid to suppliers once the Student Loans Company receive the invoices for equipment or services. Invoices continue to be received well after the end of the academic year which is why we quote figures a year later. Also, the majority of DSA applications are received after the term starts as many students do not become aware that they are entitled to support until they have started their course.

The total number of claimants receiving full-time Disabled Students' Allowance for the 2019/20 academic year increased by 1.7% to 2,120, in comparison to the previous academic year. The total amount paid out also increased by 1.7% (to £3.4 million). See *Table 4B*

Notable changes in Disabled Students' Allowance spend for full-time undergraduates in academic year 2020/21

Figure 14: Amount paid in Disabled Students' Allowance to full-time students by category



As at 31 August 2021, a total of £3.5 million has been paid for academic year 2020/21 for full-time students. This is 8.0% higher than the £3.2 million paid by the same point for 2019/20.

This provisional position for 2020/21 shows that 'Travel' payments are 87.9% lower than at the same point for 2019/20. This may be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, as most charges to this category would be for private hire vehicles to and from the higher education providers, of which the majority were operating via remote-learning.

The total paid out in regard to 'Equipment' is 21.2% higher than at the same point for the previous academic year, and 'Non-Medical Helpers' increased for the first time since academic year 2016/17 (by 6.4%).

These increases may again be attributed to the continued disruption at higher education providers owing to the pandemic, resulting in more home-based learning and therefore reduced access to provider-based equipment.

In terms of the numbers claiming these categories of DSA support, 'Travel' claimants reduced by 60 claimants to 30 (- 66.7%). 'Equipment' claimants increased by 60 to 1,055 (+ 6.0%). The number of full-time undergraduates claiming any category of DSA for academic year 2020/21 is 110 higher than at the same point for the 2019/20 academic year (+ 5.3%) at 2,195.

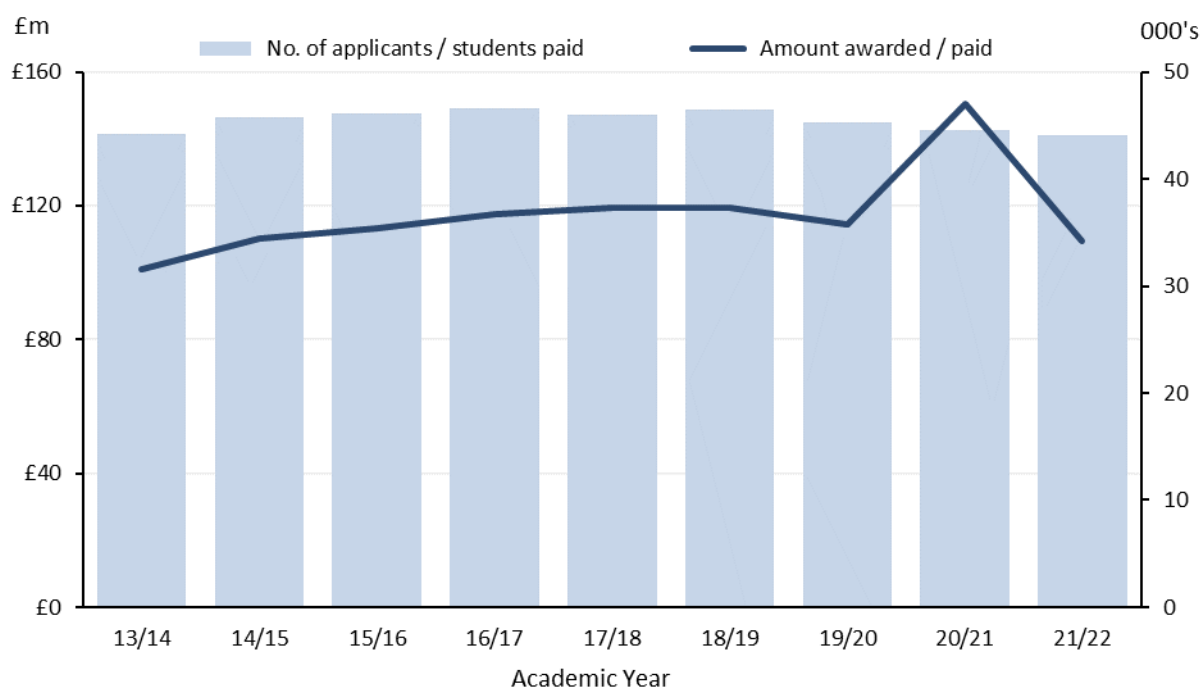
Early in year overview – academic year 2021/22

Table 7C shows an early view of academic year 2021/22 at effective date 31 October 2021. This would be approximately two months into a typical academic year.

These figures will be near-finalised in Table 2 of the publication, due to be released in November 2022.

By end-October 2021, a total of 44,100 undergraduate and postgraduate students have been paid / awarded a total of £109.3 million for AY 2021/22

Figure 15. Early in year - number of students receiving funding and the amount awarded / paid



In comparison to the same point in the 2020/21 academic year, the number of students awarded / paid student finance has remained relatively constant (- 1.2%), whereas the amount paid / awarded has decreased by 27.4%.

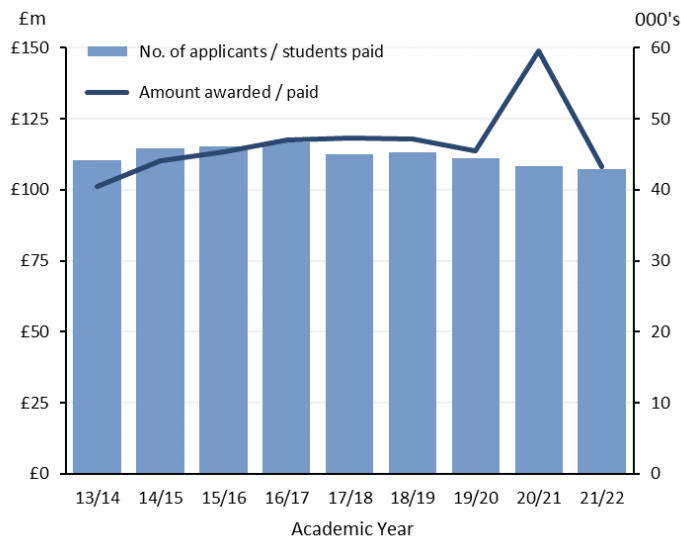
This significant decrease between this point in time in academic year 2020/21 and the same point in 2021/22 can predominantly be attributed to the early payment of the second instalment of undergraduate tuition fees payments made to higher education (HE) providers for the 2020/21 academic year. In October 2020, two payments were made instead of the second being made in February 2021.

As a result, variances in amounts awarded / paid for undergraduates are less representative in comparison to previous years.

For more information on factors affecting 2020/21 early-in-year figures, please see the **Additional Information** section of this document.

Number of undergraduate students paid remains constant early into academic year 2021/22

Figure 16. Early in year - Number of full & part-time undergraduate students awarded / paid and amount awarded / paid



Two months into the 2021/22 academic year, a total of £108.0 million had been paid / awarded to 43,000 undergraduate students.

Numbers paid are relatively as reported at the same point in 2020/21 (- 0.9%), yet the amount paid / awarded decreased by £41.0 million (- 27.5%).

The variance in the amount paid / awarded can again be predominantly attributed to the previously mentioned factors affecting the early 2020/21 undergraduate figures.

Whilst full-time students paid / awarded reduced slightly (- 2.3%), the number of part-time students increased by a significant 57.8% in comparison to the previous academic year.

This can be partially attributed to the additional 300 entrants engaging in part-time Open University courses in academic year 2020/21 who have continued study into 2021/22.

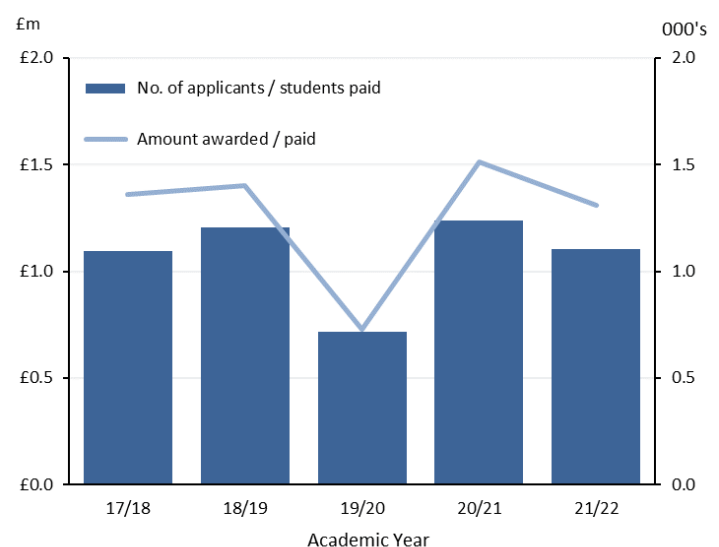
Number of tuition fee loans paid on behalf of postgraduate student reaches 1,100 by end-October for academic year 2021/22

This very early look at the 2021/22 academic year indicates a total of £1.3 million has been paid to 1,100 postgraduate students. In comparison to the same point in 2020/21, there has been a 13.3% (- 200) decrease in the number paid and a 15.8% (- £0.2 million) decrease in the amount paid out.

A potential decrease was also evident at the same point in academic year 2019/20 in comparison to the previous year however, by end-August 2020 an overall increase of 125 (+ 5.2%) students was reported for 2020/21.

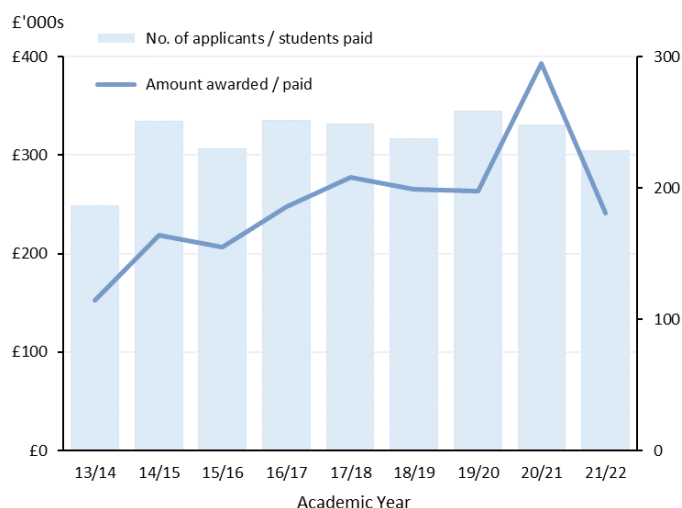
Due to the later start-dates of postgraduate courses in comparison to undergraduate courses, an enhanced picture of each academic year is not evident until much later. A near-finalised view of 2021/22 will feature in *Table 2* and *Section 6* of the 2022 version of this publication.

Figure 17. Early in year - Number of postgraduate students receiving funding and the amount awarded / paid



Early look at the first academic year of new policy indicates reduction in EU (outside UK) students

Figure 18. Early in year - Number of students domiciled in EU (outside UK) receiving funding and the amount awarded / paid



As at end-October 2022, 230 (outside UK) students have been paid a total of £240,000.

In comparison to the same point in academic year 2020/21, the number of students paid reduced from 250 to 230 (- 7.7%). This is likely due to new EU (outside UK) domiciled students in academic year 2021/22 no longer being eligible for tuition fee funding.

The amount paid reduced by 38.7% from £393,000 to £241,000. This larger decrease will also be as a result of the early payment of the second instalment of undergraduate tuition fee payments in academic year 2020/21 (see **Additional Information** section).

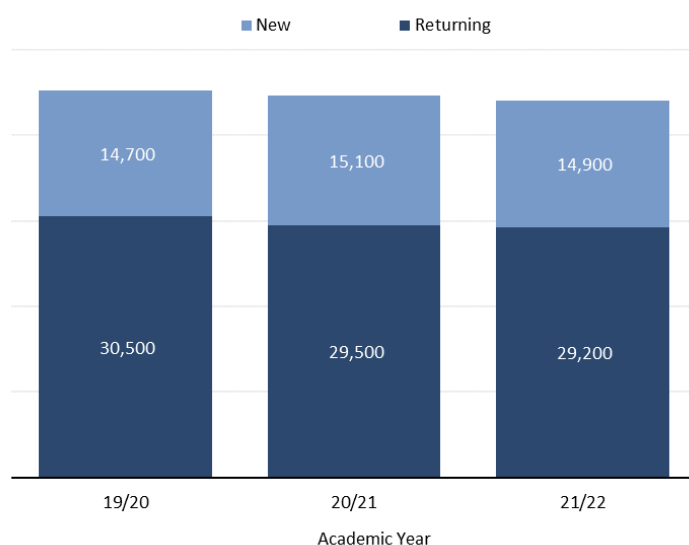
New table introduced to indicate ‘new’ and ‘returning’ students in academic year 2021/22, along with two comparable years

As shown in *Table 7C (ii)*, as at 31 October 2021, the number of students in receipt of funding from Student Finance Northern Ireland for academic year 2021/22, who also applied in 2020/21 (defined as a returning student) remained relatively constant (- 1.1%) in comparison to the previous year.

New students (defined as those who did not apply for any student finance in the previous academic year but not necessarily in their first year of study) show the same variance (- 1.5%).

When comparing the previous year, the number of returning students in 2020/21 was 3.3% lower than in 2019/20 and new students, 2.5% higher.

Figure 19: Early in year - Total number of new and returning students by academic year



There was minimal change (- 0.1%) in the number of new undergraduate students in 2021/22 in comparison to 2020/21, whilst returning applicants decreased by 1.2%.

New postgraduate students in 2021/22 decreased by 17.6% whilst returning increased by a significant 30.2%.

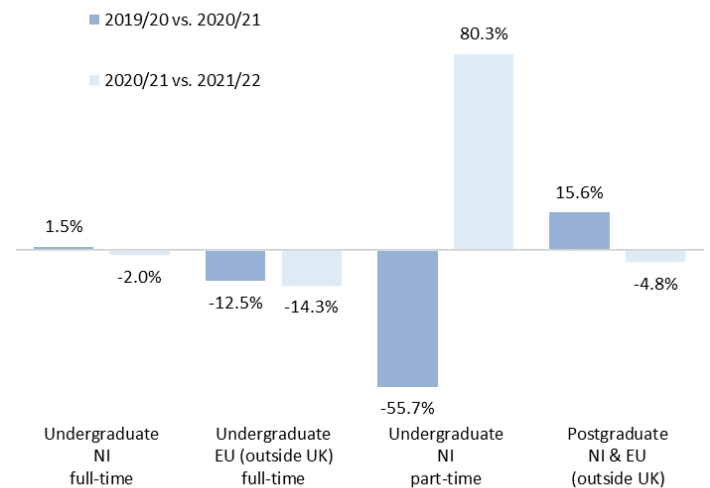
Figure 20 shows the % movement of new students by student support type.

The most significant % change in movement can be seen within new part-time Northern Ireland undergraduate numbers, which decreased considerably in 2020/21 (- 55.7%) and increased by a significant 80.3% in 2021/22.

Other notable variances to the previous year relate to new postgraduate students, where the previous year saw a 15.6% increase, whereas a 4.8% decrease in new students is evident in 2021/22.

The number of new EU (outside UK) full-time undergraduate students in receipt of student finance in 2021/22 reduced by 14.3%, in line with the reduction seen in the previous year (- 12.5%).

Figure 20: Early in year - % change in new students to prior year by student support type



Additional Information

Available student financial support

Details on student support available in academic year 2020/21 and 2021/22 can be found [here](#).

Factors affecting early in year figures academic year 2020/21

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Education and devolved administrations of Wales and Northern Ireland requested that the Student Loans Company revised the schedule of undergraduate tuition fee payments to higher education providers for the 2020/21 academic year. This revision enabled providers to access the second instalment of tuition fee payments early (two paid in October 2020, instead of first paid October 2020 and second in February 2021), while ensuring that students were not impacted by the change. The normal schedule resumed in academic year 2021/22.

These early in year figures for academic year 2020/21 may also have been affected by the Ofqual standardisation of grades, allowing students whose exams were cancelled in the summer of 2020 to receive calculated grades enabling them to progress to further study. For more information please [gov.uk](#).

Definitions

For definitions of terms used in our publication, please see [here](#).

Data Sources

This publication uses data from Student Loans Company (SLC)'s administrative systems. For details of the administrative data sources used in our publications see the [Statement of Administrative Sources](#).

Data Quality

Student Loans Company has published the quality guidelines that it follows. As per those guidelines a quality plan is produced for each publication. The quality plan stipulates two stages of quality assurance. Data is extracted from the administrative systems then reviewed using a standard quality assurance checklist. The statistical tables created using that data are quality assured using the statistical quality guidelines. See our [Quality Guidelines](#) for further information.

Related Statistics Publications

Student Loans Company publish statistics on higher education funding for England and Wales as part of the same series this publication belongs to. These are published at the same time as part of the series **Student Support for Higher Education**.

Student Loans Company also publish statistics on the repayment of student loans for higher education in the series 'Student Loans in Northern Ireland'. The **latest release** of this series, covering tax year 2020-21 was published on 10 June 2021.

The Student Awards Agency for Scotland publish details of higher education funding in Scotland in their publication 'Higher Education Student Support in Scotland'. The **latest release** of this series was published in September 2021 covering academic session 2020/21.

National Statistics

This is a National Statistics publication. National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the National Statistics Code of Practice. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference.

This publication series (publications for England, Wales & Northern Ireland) was awarded **National Statistics status** in October 2011 following a **full assessment** against their Code of Practice.

Since the assessments by the Office for Statistics Regulation we have continued to comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics and have made several improvements. For more information, please see **here**.