

# Undergraduate courses other than first degrees

**An analysis of recent trends**

April 2014  
2014/08c

## Summary

1. This analysis is a supplement to HEFCE's recent report 'Higher Education in England 2014: Analysis of latest shifts and trends'<sup>1,2</sup>. It provides a more detailed look at the decline in the number of entrants to undergraduate courses other than first degrees at publicly funded higher education providers in England. These are referred to as '**other undergraduate**' (OUG) entrants.
2. The key findings of this report are:
  - a. Of the decline in part-time undergraduate entrants between 2008-09 and 2012-13, only 6 per cent is accounted for by changes in numbers of entrants to first degrees. The remainder of the decline was in entrants to other undergraduate courses.
  - b. Of the decline in full-time undergraduate entrants in between 2010-11 and 2012-13, only 34 per cent is accounted for by first degrees. The remaining 66 per cent is accounted for by falling numbers of entrants to other undergraduate courses.
  - c. The number of full-time equivalent other undergraduate entrants registered at English higher education institutions has declined by 47 per cent in the three years to 2012-13.
  - d. The number of full-time equivalent foundation degree entrants has declined by 46 per cent in the three years to 2012-13, and there is a similar pattern in full-time and part-time numbers
  - e. For all foundation degree subject areas except for biological sciences and subjects allied to medicine, the highest numbers of entrants were recorded in 2009-10. All foundation degree subject areas have declined by at least 23 per cent since then except for biological sciences.
  - f. It is likely that these changes reflect, to some extent, changing practice in registering students rather than real shifts in activity, for example:
    - students being entered onto first degree programmes with the foundation degree as a possible earlier exit route for those who do not complete the full first degree programme
    - institutions registering more students for qualifications including where previously they were registered as studying for institutional credit
    - institutions ceasing to offer institutional credit for short courses of study without changing the substance of what they provide.
  - g. It is unlikely that changes to reporting practice account for all of the declines reported here; but even if they do these changes would still represent a major shift in the way study options are signposted to students, with an increasing emphasis on first degrees and a sharply declining focus on institutional credit and foundation degrees

## Introduction

3. In April 2014, HEFCE's report 'Higher Education in England 2014: Analysis of latest shifts and trends' (HEFCE 2014/08) highlighted a decrease in the number of entrants to undergraduate courses other than first degrees at publicly funded higher education providers in England. This report considers these declines in more detail.

4. 'Other undergraduate' study considers a wide range of qualification types, as it encapsulates all credit-bearing undergraduate qualifications other than first degree.

### Examples of 'other undergraduate':

- foundation degrees
- diplomas and certificates of higher education
- Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and Higher National Certificates (HNCs)
- institutional credit<sup>3</sup>.

5. This report considers the decline in other undergraduate entrants at publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) in England, and in further education colleges (FECs) where data are available. It draws on analysis of student data submitted to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, by HEIs) and the Data Service (and its predecessors, by further education colleges).

6. Care has been taken to exclude the possibility that the headline findings of this report may reflect changes specific to the Open University, which, because of its size can dramatically influence national figures. In 2012-13, 15 per cent of part-time other undergraduate entrants were registered at the Open University (OU) (this proportion is down from 24 per cent in 2010-11). We note where effects specific to the OU affect the overall trend, and for some data we show the OU separately.

## Declines in entry

7. As has been widely reported, numbers of full-time entrants to higher education fell between 2010-11 and 2012-13 by 33,000. These falls were felt disproportionately in OUG (which means that the impact on degree study was less than the headline figures suggest). Even though the great majority of full-time entrants are degree students, two-thirds of the overall decrease in full-time entrants was in OUG (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Change in full-time undergraduate entrants to English HEIs and FECs, 2010-11 to 2012-13**

Level of study	Number of entrants		Change between 2010-11 and 2012-13		Contribution to total full-time change
	2010-11	2012-13	Percentage	Number	
First degree	378,000	367,000	-3%	-11,000	34%
Other undergraduate	67,000	45,000	-33%	-22,000	66%
<b>Total</b>	<b>445,000</b>	<b>412,000</b>	<b>-7%</b>	<b>-33,000</b>	

Source: Analysis of the HESA standard registration population at English HEIs, and the equivalent population at English FECs. Figures include UK, other EU and international entrants. Note that figures have been rounded to the nearest 1,000. Percentages are based on unrounded figures.

8. Part-time study has been in decline since 2008-09 and to understand the contribution of OUG to this decline, it is necessary to use an earlier comparator year. Table 2 shows the extent to which the decline in part-time study since 2008-09 was concentrated in the other undergraduate segment: the decline accounts for 94 per cent of the total decline in entrants to part-time undergraduate courses reported in this period; and numbers of other undergraduate entrants fell by more than a half compared to the 13 per cent fall observed for first degree study. The reported decline of 127,000 part-time other undergraduate entrants since 2008-09 could arguably be one of the most dramatic changes in higher education in England over the period.

**Table 2: Change in part-time undergraduate entrants to English HEIs and FECs, 2008-09 to 2012-13**

Level of study	Number of entrants		Change between 2008-09 and 2012-13		Contribution to total part-time change
	2008-09	2012-13	Percentage	Number	
First degree	61,000	53,000	-13%	-8,000	6%
Other undergraduate	231,000	104,000	-55%	-127,000	94%
<b>Total</b>	<b>292,000</b>	<b>158,000</b>	<b>-46%</b>	<b>-134,000</b>	

Source: Analysis of the HESA standard registration population at English HEIs, and the equivalent population at English FECs. Figures include UK, other EU and international entrants. Note that figures have been rounded to the nearest 1,000. Percentages are based on unrounded figures.

9. Trends for the Open University (OU) differ from other institutions. It has seen an increase in part-time first degree entrants between 2008-09 and 2012-13 compared with a 13 per cent decrease across all English institutions. However, for other undergraduate entrants, the Open University has seen a 68 per cent decrease compared with a 55 per cent decrease across all institutions. This fall in other undergraduate study at the Open University accounts for 27 per cent of the total drop in part-time students.

10. This almost certainly reflects, in part, a change in the way students' study aims are recorded – in particular students who would previously have been recorded as studying for credit being recorded as aiming for first degrees.

**Table 2a: Change in part-time undergraduate entrants to the Open University, 2008-09 to 2012-13**

Level of study	Number of entrants registered at the OU		Change between 2008-09 and 2012-13		Contribution to total part-time change at the OU
	2008-09	2012-13	Percentage	Number	
First degree	32,000	34,000	+4%	+1,000	-4%
Other undergraduate	50,000	16,000	-68%	-34,000	104%
<b>Total</b>	<b>82,000</b>	<b>49,000</b>	<b>-40%</b>	<b>-33,000</b>	
<b>OU share of part-time undergraduate populations</b>					<b>OU contribution to total part-time change</b>
First degree	53%	63%			-16%
Other undergraduate	21%	15%			27%
<b>Total</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>31%</b>			<b>24%</b>

Source: Analysis of the HESA standard registration population at English HEIs, and the equivalent population at English FECs. Figures include UK, other EU and international entrants. Note that figures have been rounded to the nearest 1,000. Percentages are based on unrounded figures.

11. It is important to be cautious in interpreting this decline. We do not know the extent to which the figures reflect artificial factors such as:

- a. More students being entered onto first degree programmes with the foundation degree as an exit route for those who do not complete the full first degree programme.
- b. Institutions – especially the OU - registering more students for full qualifications where previously they were registered as studying for institutional credit.
- c. Institutions ceasing to offer institutional credit for short courses of study without changing the substance of what they offer.

12. The decline in full-time OUG study will have been exacerbated by the decision to make degrees the standard entry qualification into the nursing profession (which will have boosted demand for nursing degrees at the expense of diplomas).

13. These factors are extremely unlikely explain all of the declines – most obviously because the decline in OUG is too broad based to be explained away by highly specific factors.

### **Every type of OUG study has declined since 2009-10**

14. The decline in other undergraduate entry affects all study types, part-time and full-time students and, in the case of foundation degrees, most subject areas.

### **Declines are not driven by the Open University**

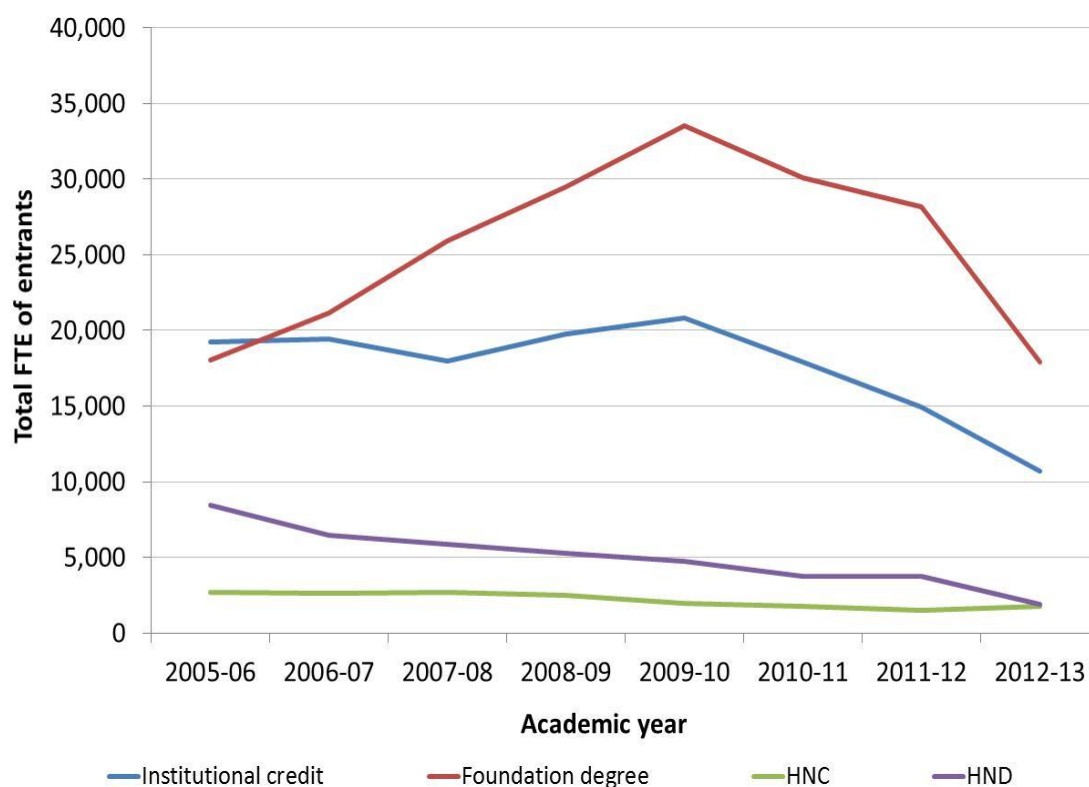
15. The Open University does not offer HNCs and HNDs, and accounts for only 4 per cent of foundation degrees. However it accounts for 24 per cent of students studying for institutional credits in 2012-13. When considering institutional credit at the Open

University separately from other institutions, the decrease between 2009-10 and 2012-13 has been 56 per cent compared with 46 per cent for other institutions. The patterns reported here would therefore not be substantially different if the OU were excluded from the analysis.

### Declines are not specific to particular types of OUG study?

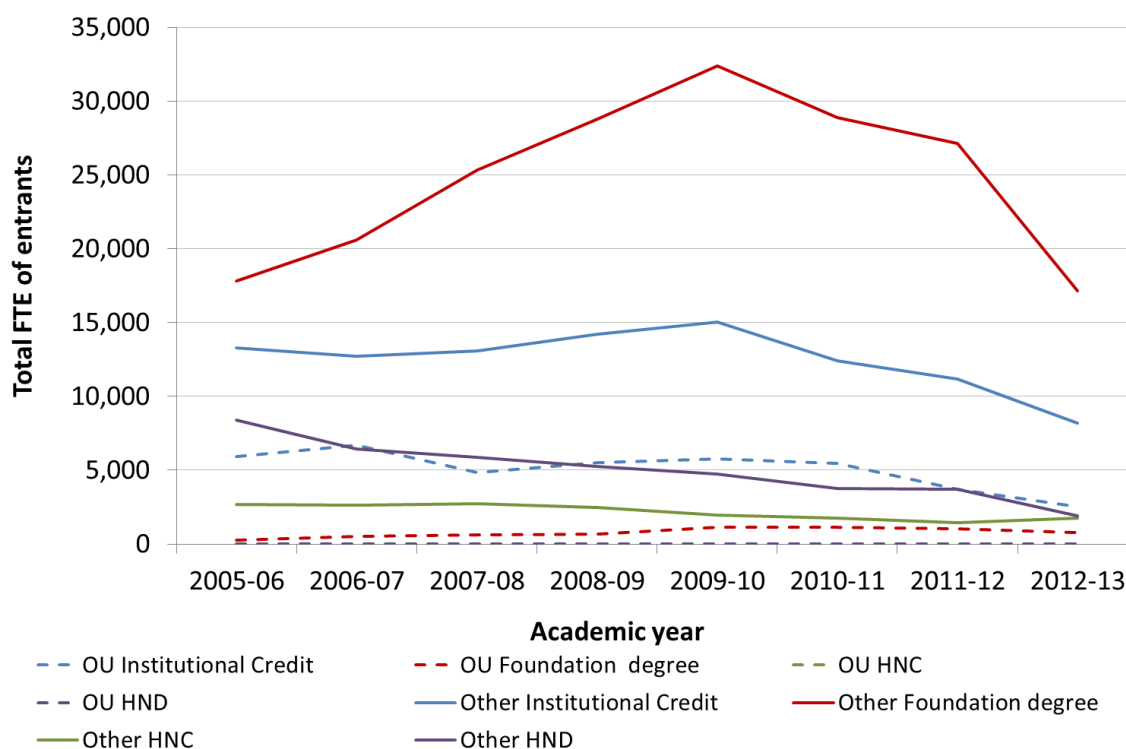
16. Figure 1 shows full-time equivalent (FTE) study for different kinds of award. It shows that prior to 2009-10 foundation degree numbers were rising rapidly; study for institutional credit without a specific qualification aim was flat; and HNDs and HNCs were declining. Since 2009-10, however, all types of OUG study have been in decline.

**Figure 1 Full-time equivalent undergraduate entrant numbers for OUG study 2005-06 to 2012-13 (English HEIs only)**



Source: Analysis of the HESA standard registration population at English HEIs. Figures include UK, other EU and international entrants.

**Figure 1a Full-time equivalent undergraduate entrant numbers for OUG study 2005-06 to 2012-13 (English HEIs only, OU separately identified)**



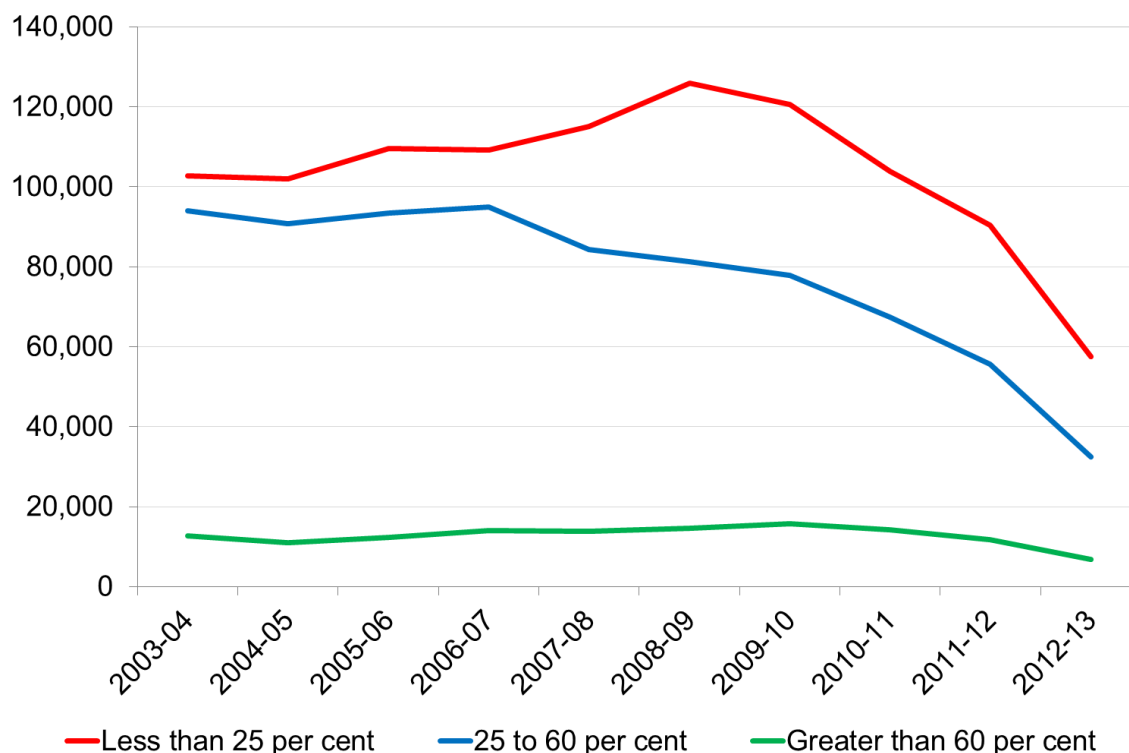
Source: Analysis of the HESA standard registration population at English HEIs. Figures include UK, other EU and International entrants.

17. The declines shown in Figure 1 are dramatic: between 2009-10 and 2012-13, other undergraduate entry declined by 47 per cent. Even if study for institutional credit is excluded (to take account of the possibility that much of it may have simply been reclassified as non-credit bearing) the decline is virtually the same at 46 per cent.

### **Are part-time declines specific to high- or low-intensity provision?**

18. We considered whether the declines in part-time OUG study reflect a pattern specific to high- or low-intensity part-time study. Figure 1b demonstrates that high-, medium- and low-intensity study have all fallen since 2009-10. It also, however, reveals that the decline in medium-intensity study (25-60 per cent intensity) begins earlier, in 2006-07, possibly reflecting the impact of the funding reforms introduced in that year. Of all the analyses performed for this report, this is the only one which shows a discontinuity in 2006-07.

**Figure 1b Full-time equivalent part-time other undergraduate entrant numbers 2005-06 to 2012-13 (English HEIs only)**



## Are foundation degree and HND declines specific to full- or part-time study?

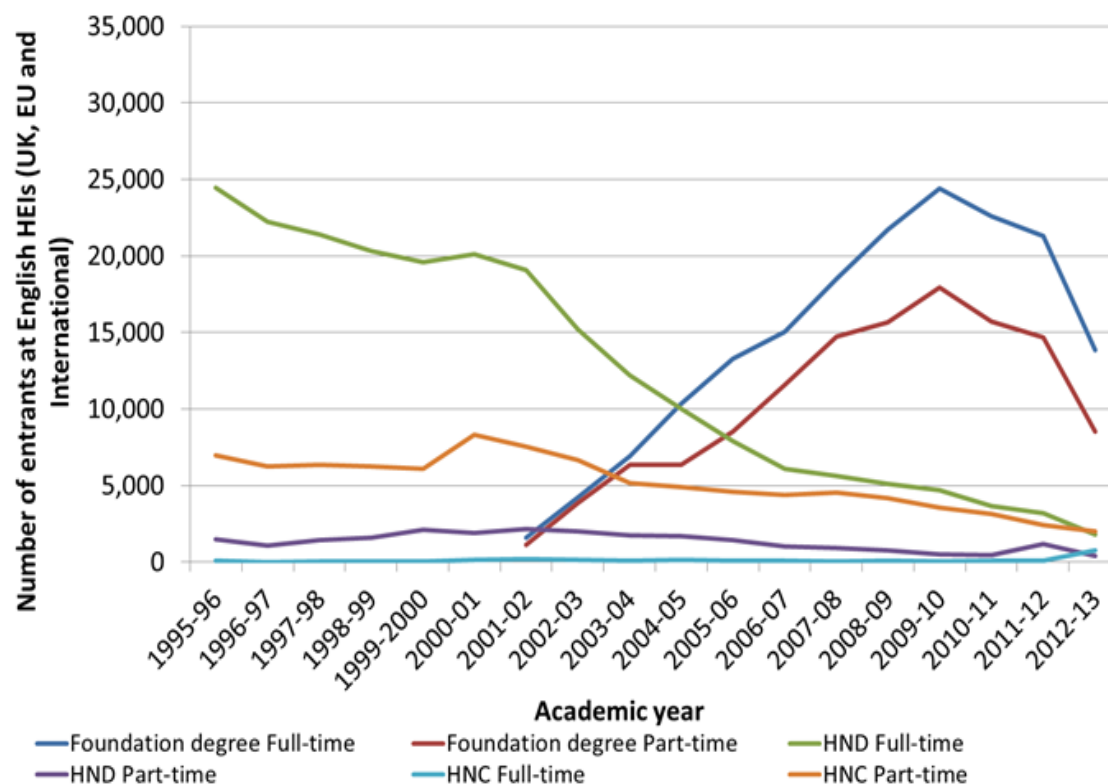
### Study in HEIs

19. While it is tempting to talk about a 'part-time effect' or the effects of the 2012 reforms on full-time study, we are likely to learn more by asking a slightly different question of the data – just what has happened to other undergraduate study? Inevitably, the data can give us only partial answers, and to get those answers it is necessary to go back further than 2008-09.

20. Figure 2 shows numbers of full-time and part-time entrants to foundation degrees, HNDs and HNCs registered at English HEIs between 1995-96 and 2012-13. It demonstrates that the pattern for HNDs and HNCs in HEIs is one of prolonged and persistent decline in both modes. The similarity between the trends in full-time and part-time foundation degree is striking given that the economics of full-time and part-time study have been differentially affected by policy changes over the period. This suggests that OUG change is driving changes in both modes of study, rather than the reverse.



**Figure 2: Entrants to foundation degrees, HNDs and HNCs registered at English HEIs, 1995-96 to 2012-13**



Source: Analysis of the HESA standard registration population at English HEIs. Figures include UK, other EU and International entrants.

21. From 1995-96 to 2001-02, numbers of entrants to HNDs and HNCs steadily declined. The introduction of foundation degrees appears to have accelerated the decline in HNDs as many were converted into foundation degrees. From 2006-07 to 2009-10 growth in numbers of entrants to foundation degrees was much more rapid than the decline observed in entrants to HNDs. This finding may suggest that HEIs were accessing new markets during this period. From 2009-10 there was a rapid decline in numbers of entrants to foundation degrees at HEIs, and a continued erosion of HND and HNC provision.

#### Potential to enrol students directly onto first degree programmes

22. In 2009-10, 45 per cent of foundation degree qualifiers in HEIs and 61 per cent of HND qualifiers in HEIs progressed to a first degree in the same institution. (The figures for FECs were 31 per cent and 10 per cent on a much lower base). There was therefore some scope for institutions to enrol foundation degree and HND students directly onto first degree courses, employing foundation degrees or HNDs as exit routes where necessary. This would be a rational response to the existence of student number controls; and its effect would be to lower numbers of entrants to foundation degrees.

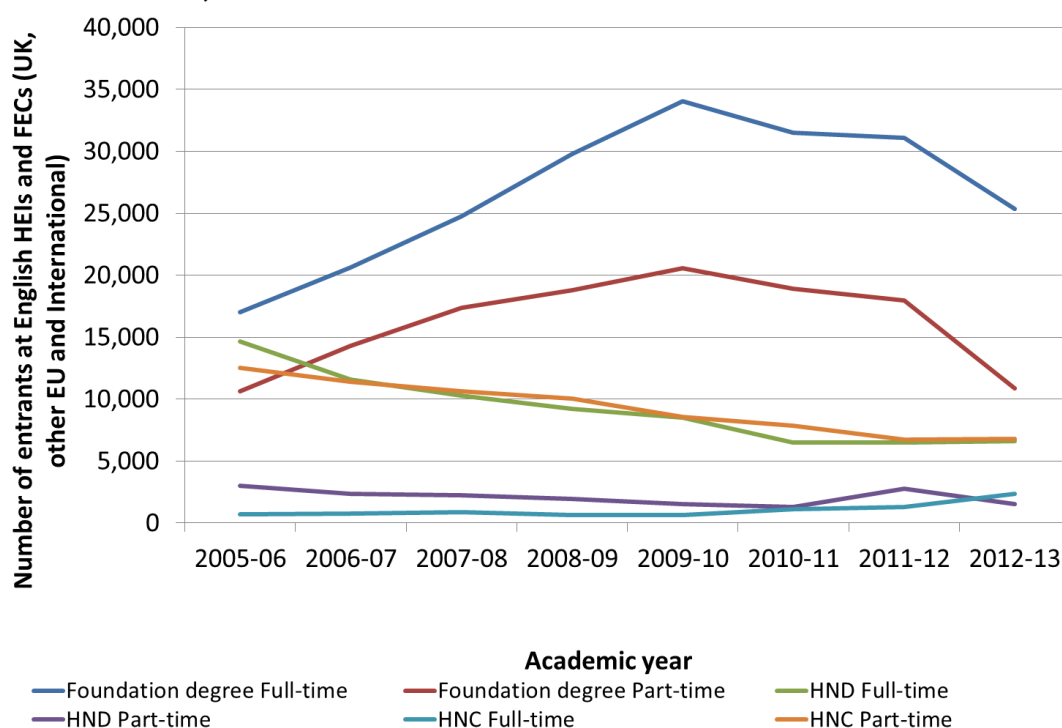
## Study in further education colleges

23. It would be reasonable to ask whether the declines in other undergraduate entrant numbers there are offset by increases in further education colleges.

24. The overall falls in other undergraduate entrants between 2010-11 and 2012-13 were partly offset by an increase of 5,000 registering at further education colleges, made up of around 3,000 additional entrants to foundation degree courses and 2,000 additional entrants to HNDs.

25. As Figure 3 shows, however, when FECs are included in the analysis, the overall picture is very similar to that seen when HEIs are considered on their own.

**Figure 3: Entrants to foundation degrees, HNDs and HNCs registered at English HEIs and FECs, 2005-06 to 2012-13**



Source: Analysis of the HESA standard registration population at English HEIs, and the equivalent population at English FECs. Figures include UK, other EU and international entrants.

## Study in alternative providers

26. Unlike HEIs and FECs, alternative providers of higher education have not been the subject of systematic data collections over a period of years. The principal sources of information are not directly comparable and their coverage varies (nor are their comparable to the standard datasets covering HEIs and FECs).

a. Data from the Student Loans Company show that there were 18,000 students at alternative providers accessing student support in 2012-13. Most of these students will be studying for HNDs.

b. The inaugural Higher Education Alternative Providers Early Statistics survey (HEAPES) conducted by HEFCE in 2013, indicated that there were around 25,000 students eligible for student support in alternative providers in 2012-13. The

estimated figure for 2013-14, based on recruitments and planned recruitments, was just under 60,000. With student number controls based upon 2012-13 figures set to be applied on alternative providers in 2014-15, that can be expected to fall back.

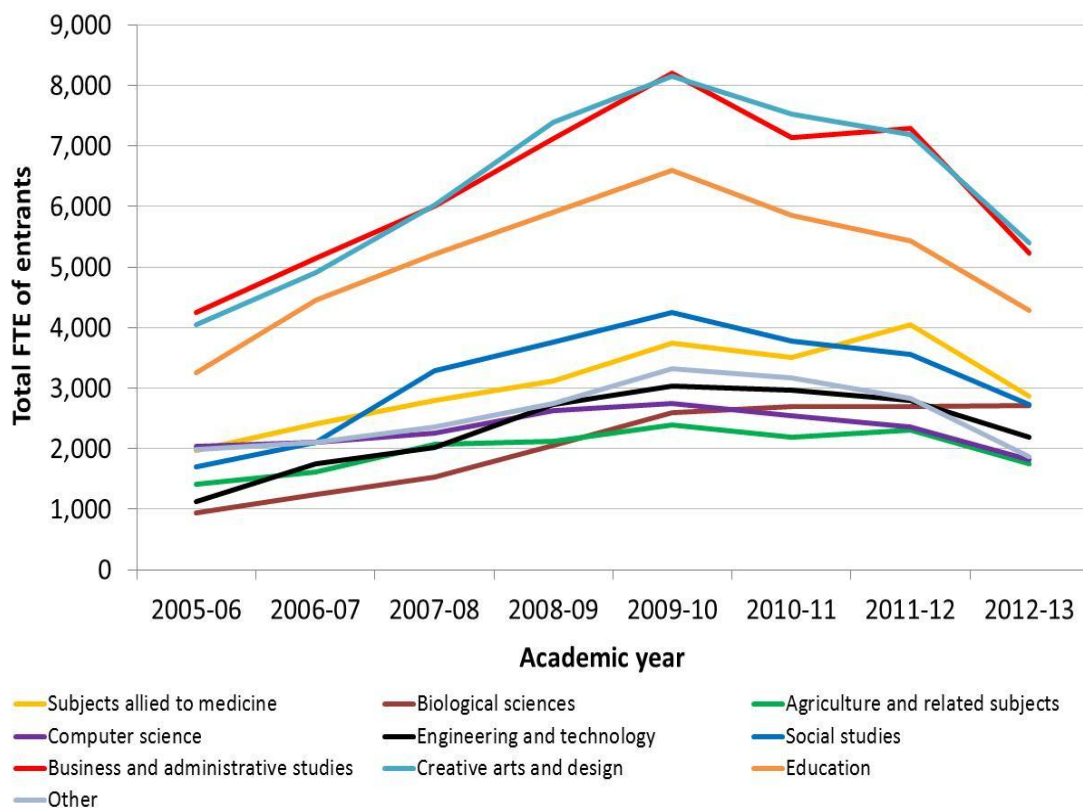
c. A study conducted for the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills identified 674 alternative providers active in 2011-12 and estimated that 160,000 learners were studying with them, around half of whom were from the UK.

27. Until more is known about what is being taught by alternative providers and for whom, it is difficult to say whether they are in direct competition with HEIs or FECs or are developing new markets.

### Are the declines subject-specific?

28. Figure 4 shows foundation degree study at English HEIs and FECs by subject. While numbers of entrants to foundation degrees generally peaked in 2009-10, subjects allied to medicine saw numbers of entrants peak in 2011-12 and biological sciences were higher in 2012-13 than any previous year. Entrants to subject areas other than biological sciences declined by at least 23 per cent between 2009-10 and 2012-13. The largest decrease between 2009-10 and 2012-13 is of 36 per cent in both social studies, and business and administrative studies.

**Figure 4: Full-time equivalent foundation degree entrants to English HEIs and FECs by subject**



Source: Analysis of the HESA standard registration population at English HEIs, and the equivalent population at English FECs. Figures include UK, other EU and international entrants.

## Possible causes

29. The fact that the general pattern of decline in OUG since 2009 covers all types of study and all modes is significant. It is hard to think of a single causal factor that affects all equally. This points to a general turn in sentiment against OUG – either on the supply side or the demand side, or both – rather than a single predominant cause.

30. The area most dramatically affected by the turning point in 2009 was foundation degrees. The simplest explanation is that foundation degrees expanded in many HEIs in the 2000s without becoming core activity; and that enrolments suffered from the cumulative effect of factors such as:

- a. Withdrawal of premiums for part-time study and foundation degrees.
- b. Introduction of student number controls (and the incentive to enrol full-time students directly onto degree programmes).
- c. The exhausting of finite markets for 'catch-up' study: older employees seeking formal qualifications to meet new norms in their professions.
- d. The effect of the recession on employer and employee demand for vocationally based courses.
- e. The anticipation of the 2012 reforms and a perception of the inability of OUG and part-time to command the same pro-rata fee level as full-time first degree study.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> HEFCE (2014) 'Higher education in England 2014: Analysis of latest shifts and trends' (HEFCE 2014/08), [www.hefce.ac.uk/heinengland/2014/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/heinengland/2014/)

<sup>2</sup> In HEFCE 2014/08 we generally report changes in entrants since 2010-11. In this analysis, we employ a range of dates in order to explore significant phenomena; and use analysis of full-time equivalents alongside unweighted entrant numbers.

<sup>3</sup> Students on non-credit-bearing courses are not included in these data.

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