

Research Briefing

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# Higher education around the world: Comparing international approaches and performance with the UK



## Summary

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- 4 Student access, participation, and outcomes
- 5 Higher education, research, and development
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- 7 Conclusion

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## Summary

This briefing examines higher education systems across the world in order to compare policy approaches and performance in other countries with the UK. It builds on the Commons Library briefing [Higher education in the UK: Systems, policy approaches, and challenges](#).

## System management and coordination

While the higher education systems in England, Scotland, and Wales are characterised by the existence of an intermediary public body between government and providers, such as the [Office for Students in England](#), these bodies are rare in other OECD countries, where higher education is more likely to be co-ordinated through a government department. In some federal countries, such as Germany, Canada, and the US, these departments are found at the regional level.

Another structural difference between the UK and most other OECD countries lies in the types of higher education providers that exist. While the UK can be described as a ‘university-led system’, in which the majority of higher education providers are universities offering courses with both research and vocational elements, most OECD countries have a ‘binary system’. In binary systems, higher education providers are generally categorised as either ‘academic’, meaning they have a research focus and teach subjects with more theoretical elements, or ‘vocational’, meaning they offer courses more focused on labour market needs and designated professional areas.

## Student and graduate numbers

Over 235 million higher education students were enrolled globally in 2020, [more than double the 100 million students enrolled in 2000](#). This increase has been driven by Asia in particular.

The UK has the highest entry rate (percentage of the population who start higher education by age 24) in the G7 at 58%. Between 2000 and 2022, the UK saw the biggest increase among G7 nations in [the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds who have completed tertiary education](#) (equivalent to higher education qualifications at [level 4 and above](#) in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland). The UK is currently above the OECD and G20 average on this measure.

## Funding

While higher education is a policy priority across the world, levels of public investment differ significantly. As a percentage of overall spending on higher education, the UK has the lowest public spending and the highest private spending of OECD countries. This difference reflects the comparatively large contribution that is made through tuition fees paid by students in England (albeit often through government loans) to the overall amount spent on higher education.

The complexity of tuition fee liability in many countries, with variations by subject, type of course, type of institution, students' circumstances, and whether there is any state support to meet fees, means direct comparisons between fees are not straightforward. However, [global tuition fee policies can be generally categorised into four broad types](#), which include:

- free tuition
- low tuition fees
- high tuition fees supported by a student loan system
- 'dual track' policies, where some students receive free/low cost entry based on academic performance, while others must pay more.

The nature and amount of living cost support similarly varies around the world, but is generally means-tested to some degree. Most OECD countries provide a combination of maintenance grants and student loans on favourable terms.

## Student access, participation, and outcomes

In the UK, most students apply to higher education providers and receive offers of places before they sit their exams (Scotland is generally an exception to this). This is a pre-qualification admissions system and is quite unique across the OECD. Other wealthy countries are more likely to have post-qualification admissions systems, when offers from higher education providers are made after students have sat exams.

As well as producing significant amounts of access and participation data, the UK also has a comparatively high level of policy commitment to widening higher education participation. The [World Access to Higher Education Day](#) initiative has brought together information on the policies of national governments in this area to produce '[The Global Equity Policy Map](#)'. It shows that, unlike in England and Scotland, very few countries have specific policies focused on access and success and/or targets related to participation by those from low income or other disadvantaged groups.

The UK is well above the OECD and EU22 averages for employment levels where holders of short cycle qualifications, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees are concerned. However, it is much closer to these averages when it comes to earnings by qualification.

## Higher education, research, and development

In terms of funding, the UK's gross spending on research and development, which is defined as the total expenditure (current and capital) on R&D carried out by all resident companies, research institutes, university and government laboratories in a country, has increased in recent years, [surpassing the average for OECD countries in 2017](#).

The [UK performs strongly when it comes to research output compared to its peers](#), but while its annual count of research publications is increasing, this growth is not as fast as some other countries, leading to the UK's share of world publications decreasing slightly in 2022.

## Global ranking systems

International university ranking systems have become more numerous, sophisticated, and influential in recent years. The five major rankings systems are:

- [Academic Ranking of World Universities \(ARWU\)](#)
- [Times Higher World Rankings](#)
- [QS World University Rankings](#)
- [Webometrics Ranking of World Universities](#)
- [U-Multirank System](#)

The first four of these systems compile overall university league tables in which the UK performs well.

The focus on research and reputation in global university rankings [has led some to criticise their worth](#), especially when they influence the policies of governments and universities. Such criticisms have led to a [wider range of systems and the use of more diverse criteria](#), including measuring performance against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

# 1 System management and coordination

## 1.1 The role of governments in managing higher education

A common characteristic of the higher education systems in England, Scotland, and Wales is the existence of an intermediary, hands-off public body between government and higher education providers. In England there is the [Office for Students](#), in Scotland the [Scottish Funding Council](#), and in Wales the soon-to-be-operational [Commission for Tertiary Education and Research](#).<sup>1</sup>

However, while such bodies are commonplace in the UK, they are rare in other wealthy countries, where higher education is more likely to be co-ordinated as part of a wider government department. This is most commonly a Department/Ministry of Education, or sometimes a more narrowly focused Department/Ministry of Higher Education.

The table below summarises how higher education systems are co-ordinated in the 38 countries of the OECD.

System co-ordinator	Countries	Number
Department/Ministry of Education	Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Slovak Republic, Chile, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Korea, Lithuania, United States	18
Department/Ministry of Higher Education.	Austria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Iceland, Portugal, Poland, Slovenia, Colombia, Italy, Spain,	11
Intermediary Body	Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, Costa Rica, Israel, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom (England, Wales, and Scotland)	9

<sup>1</sup> More information on these bodies can be found in the Commons Library briefing [Higher education in the UK: Systems, policy approaches, and challenges](#). The [Higher Education Division of the Department for the Economy](#) oversees higher education in Northern Ireland.

## Federal models of higher education

As the table above shows, in most countries, higher education is under the direct control of government departments. In some countries, these departments are found at the regional level. This is most notable in Germany, Canada, and to an extent Australia and the United States, where higher education is the responsibility of a devolved tier of government.

Federal models of higher education reflect wider approaches to governing that extend beyond higher education itself. In Canada, for example, there are 10 provinces that have wide ranging powers in areas including taxation, health care, and schools. The Länder in Germany and the states of the United States of America have similar powers.

Federal models of higher education may be of particular interest to the UK in the context of increasing devolution of powers to regional governments, including the devolution of the Adult Education Budget in England to mayoral combined authorities and the Greater London Authority.<sup>2</sup>

### South Korea RISE plan

Alongside countries that are federal in nature, other countries are actively looking to insert more regionalisation into their higher education systems by devolving management and funding to a local government level.

In February 2023, the Ministry of Education in South Korea announced the Regional Innovation System and Education (RISE) plan, which aims “to delegate greater authority to local governments over higher education support, thereby empowering them to facilitate shared growth of the region and higher education institutions.”<sup>3</sup>

The plan is an attempt to transition South Korea’s centralized higher education support system to a more regional system that promotes higher education institutions in accordance with the demands of local industries and communities.

One of the key aspects of the RISE plan is to strengthen universities as hubs of local innovation in order to drive regional development. The ministry aims to allocate more than half its total university grant budget to local governments and let local authorities develop plans to support individual institutions based on local needs. The RISE plan will also support ‘glocal’ universities to develop programmes with global companies, linked to local economic priorities.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Commons Library briefing [Further education funding in England](#) for more information on the devolution of the Adult Education Budget.

<sup>3</sup> South Korea Ministry of Education, [Government Policies and Goals: Innovating higher education by breaking barriers](#)



## 1.2

## Types of higher education system

Another structural difference between the UK and most other OECD countries lies in the diversity of higher education provider type.

No country in the OECD has just one type of higher education provider. Each system has a range of providers offering courses of different lengths, with some specialising in particular subject areas and others offering different types and levels of qualifications. However, broadly speaking systems can be divided into those that are binary or university led.

### Binary systems

In binary systems, higher education providers are generally categorised as ‘academic’ or ‘vocational’.

- Academic providers have a research focus and teach subjects with more theoretical elements. They generally include ‘university’ in their title.
- Vocational providers offer courses that are more focused on labour market needs and designated professional areas. They may also offer shorter qualifications. Vocational institutions have a range of names including polytechnics, universities of applied sciences, higher professional schools, and technological universities.

### University-led systems

In university-led systems, the majority of the higher education providers are universities offering courses with both research and vocational elements. A university-led system lacks the defined vocational higher education providers found in the binary model.

The table below shows the countries in the OECD that have a predominantly binary structure and those which are university led.

System Type	Countries	Number
Binary	Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Japan, Ireland, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, Finland, Greece, Latvia, Korea, Lithuania, Switzerland, Turkey	32
University-led	Australia, Iceland, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, United States	6

## What model does the UK have?

As the table above shows, the UK is one of only six countries in the OECD that has a university-led system. Instead, most systems within the OECD are binary ones, with specific vocationally oriented providers existing alongside universities that have a more academic/theoretical focus.

Prior to 1992, the UK can be seen as having something of a binary system, with universities existing alongside polytechnics in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and central institutions in Scotland. Polytechnics and central institutions, which were unable to award their own degrees, primarily focussed on teaching rather than research, and offered higher education courses in professional vocational subjects.

Following the passage of the [Further and Higher Education Act in 1992](#), polytechnics and central institutions were able to become universities. During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the criteria to be granted university status was relaxed further, and a number of university colleges and other higher education institutions gained degree-awarding powers and a university title. These developments have led the UK to resemble more closely a university-led model.

However, while the university/polytechnic division present in the UK before 1992 does to some extent resemble the binary model, it is important to note the UK's polytechnics had also long offered 'academic' subjects. Furthermore, binary higher education systems, especially in Europe, generally build upon similarly modelled compulsory education systems in which children and young people select an explicitly vocational- or academic-themed school at age 11 or 14, sometimes following an exam.

Such a model has not existed in the UK since the early 1970s, at a time when virtually all young people went straight into work after school. Even then, the grammar, comprehensive, and secondary modern system was a tri-partite one. Introducing a binary higher education system in the UK, as some have advocated in recent years,<sup>4</sup> would likely require accompanying reform to the school system in order to establish the designated academic and vocational pathways seen in other OECD countries.

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<sup>4</sup> IPPR, [Bring back polytechnics, says Future of HE Commission](#), 10 June 2013; "[It's time to bring back the polytechnics](#)", TES, 13 September 2018

## Moving beyond the binary/university-led model

### ISCED levels

ISCED level 5 refers to short-cycle tertiary education (HNCs and HNDs in the UK), ISCED level 6 to bachelor's level, ISCED level 7 to master's level, and ISCED level 8 to doctoral level.

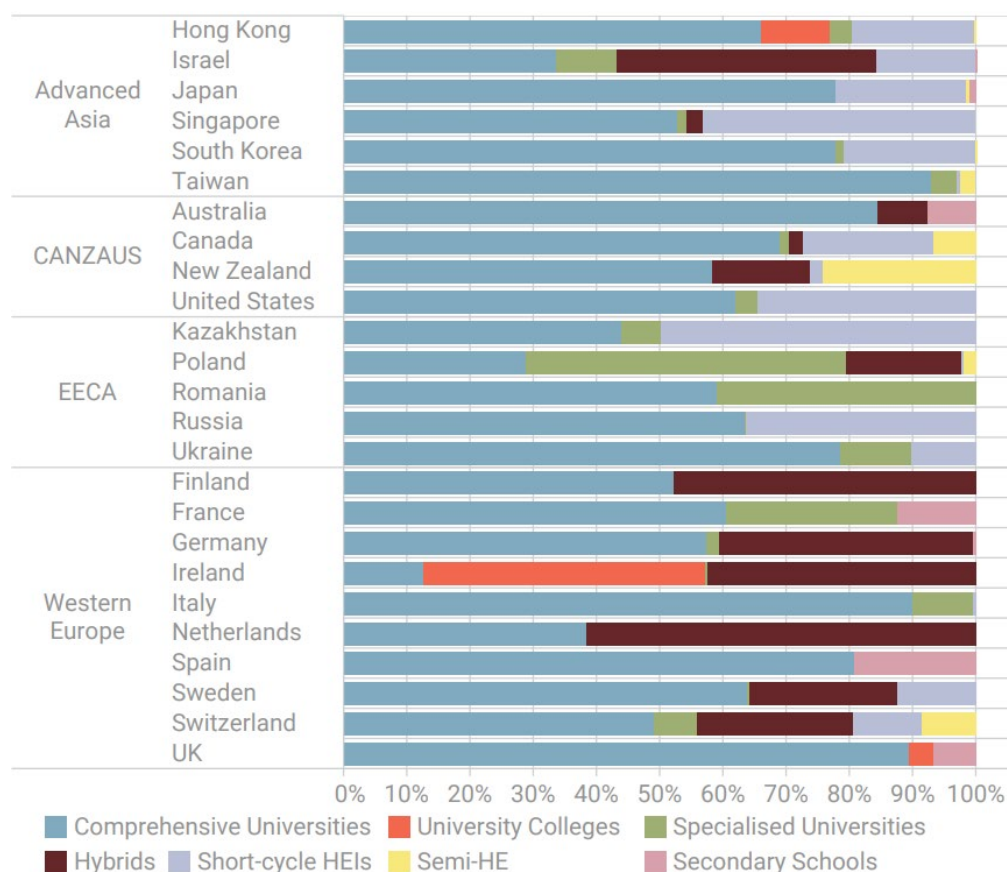
In a report published by the education consultancy Higher Education Strategy Associates, Jonathan Williams and Alex Usher produced a more detailed breakdown of the type of higher education provider across countries in the global north.<sup>5</sup> Their five-category classification adds more nuance to the binary/university-led model discussed above. The classification includes:

- **Comprehensive universities:** These institutions deliver programmes predominantly at [International Standard Classification of Education \(ISCED\)](#) level 6 or higher in four or more discrete fields of study. These fields of study should include science subjects (for example, biology, chemistry, engineering) and arts or social science subjects.
- **Specialised universities:** These institutions offer programs at ISCED level 6 or higher and award their own degrees in a narrow set of disciplines. These disciplines are usually concentrated on a certain theme, such as education, religion, engineering, agriculture, fine arts, or business.
- **University colleges:** These institutions deliver programmes at ISCED level 6 or higher but do not award their own degrees. Instead, their degrees are awarded by an affiliated university. International branch campuses are included in this category.
- **Hybrids:** Hybrids are a diverse group of vocationally oriented institutions, which may offer programs at multiple ISCED levels.
- **Short-cycle institutions:** These institutions offer programs at ISCED level 5 and generally not above ISCED level 6. A substantial minority share of their enrolments are often below ISCED level 5.

The chart below, taken from the Williams and Usher report, shows the share of total enrolments by type of higher education provider and by country in the Global North.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> J. Williams and A. Usher for Higher Education Strategy Associates, [World Higher Education: Institutions, Students and Funding](#) (PDF), 2022

<sup>6</sup> J. Williams and A. Usher for Higher Education Strategy Associates, [World Higher Education: Institutions, Students and Funding](#) (PDF), 2022, p25, Figure 2.8



Source: J. Williams and A. Usher for Higher Education Strategy Associates, [World Higher Education: Institutions, Students and Funding](#) (PDF), 2022, p25, Figure 2.8

The chart re-affirms the above points about how the UK higher education system is a clear university-led one compared to its peers in the developed world. Of all the 26 countries from the ‘Global North’ included in the chart, the UK is the least diverse in terms of institutional type, dominated as it is by ‘comprehensive universities’ that predominately offer undergraduate level degrees in a range of subjects.

## 1.3 Institutional autonomy

The way higher education systems are managed and co-ordinated in a country can affect the level of institutional autonomy enjoyed by its universities and other providers.

In 2023, the European University Association published a university autonomy scorecard based on data from 30 countries covering four key dimensions of autonomy:

- **Financial:** includes the ability to charge tuition fees for home/international students and the capacity to borrow money and own property.

- **Recruitment/promotion of staff:** includes the ability to decide on staff promotions, dismissals, recruitment, and salaries.
- **Organisational:** includes the ability to decide on academic structures and composition of governing bodies.
- **Academic:** includes the ability to decide on overall student numbers, student recruitment, and course offering.

Data was collected via a twofold process involving questionnaires and interview sessions in 2021 and 2022, and countries were given scores for each dimension, with 100% being seen as ‘complete autonomy’ and thus the maximum a country could achieve.<sup>7</sup> The scores for the top ten countries in each dimension are shown below.

<b>Financial</b>		<b>Staffing</b>	
1	Latvia	90	
2	<b>England</b>	<b>89</b>	1 Estonia
3	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>80</b>	100
4	Estonia	77	2 Czechia
5	Luxembourg	75	98
5	Romania	75	3 Sweden
7	Flanders - Belgium	74	97
8	Switzerland	72	<b>4 England</b>
9	Georgia	71	<b>96</b>
10	Italy	70	4 Georgia
			96
			4 Luxembourg
			96
			<b>4 Scotland</b>
			<b>96</b>
			8 Finland
			92
			8 Netherlands
			92
			10 Switzerland
			91
<b>Organisational</b>		<b>Academic</b>	
<b>1</b>	<b>England</b>	<b>100</b>	1 Estonia
<b>1</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>100</b>	95
3	Finland	93	2 Finland
4	Belgium	90	90
5	Lithuania	88	<b>3 England</b>
6	Denmark	87	<b>89</b>
7	Netherlands	83	3 Ireland
8	Portugal	80	89
9	Austria	78	3 Luxembourg
9	Norway	78	89
			<b>3 Scotland</b>
			<b>89</b>
			7 Hesse – Germany
			88
			7 Germany
			88
			9 Brandenburg - Germany
			87
			10 Austria
			85

Source: European University Association, [University Autonomy in Europe IV: The Scorecard 2023](#), March 2023, pp54-69

<sup>7</sup> A full description of the methodology and indicators used can be found at European University Association, [University Autonomy in Europe IV: The Scorecard 2023](#), March 2023.

While institutional autonomy cannot be measured entirely objectively, and the development of a scorecard necessarily involves value judgements about indicators and weighting, on all these dimensions England and Scotland rank at or near the top.

However, it should be noted the Office for National Statistics is currently reviewing whether universities in the UK should be reclassified into the public sector for the purposes of the UK national accounts.<sup>8</sup> This may have implications for the levels of institutional autonomy in the UK's four respective higher education systems.<sup>9</sup>

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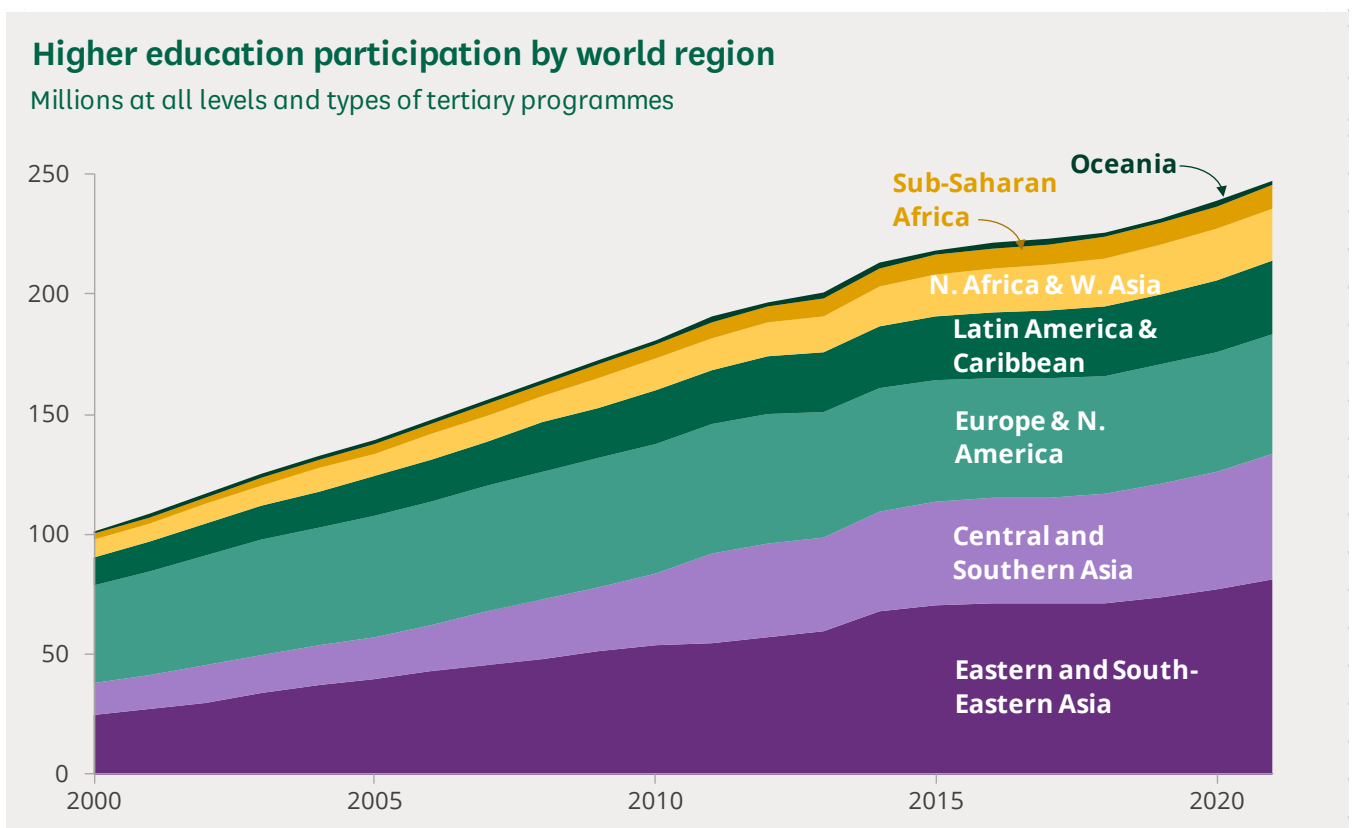
<sup>8</sup> ONS, [Public sector classification guide and forward work plan](#), 28 March 2024

<sup>9</sup> HEPI blogpost, [Are universities really at risk of ending up in the public sector?](#), 21 March 2023

## 2 Student numbers

Around the world the number of higher education students has increased in recent decades, and it is estimated student numbers will increase further in the coming decades.<sup>10</sup>

Almost 250 million higher education students were enrolled globally in 2021, more than double the 100 million students enrolled in 2000.<sup>11</sup> However, while all regions have experienced growth since 2000, the increase in student enrolments is being driven by Asia in particular, as the chart below shows.



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, [Enrolment by level of education \(tertiary education, all programmes\)](#)

The number of students in Europe and Northern America increased by 22% between 2000 and 2021, but at the same time their overall share of the world's student enrolments halved from 41% in 2000 to 20% in 2021.<sup>12</sup> Over the same period, the number of students in Central and Southern Asia

<sup>10</sup> World Bank blogs, [Higher Education: Understanding demand and redefining values](#), 15 November 2022; Higher Education Strategy Associates, [Global Higher Education to 2050](#), 3 October 2022

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, [Enrolment by level of education \(tertiary education, all programmes\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, [Enrolment by level of education \(tertiary education, all programmes\)](#)

increased by 192%, which was the highest rate among regional groupings, meaning the region went from representing 13% of world students in 2000 to 21% in 2021.

In 2021, the largest share (about a third) of higher education students worldwide were enrolled in Eastern and South Eastern Asia.<sup>13</sup> Looking forward, it has been estimated that by 2040 there could be as many as 600 million higher education students in the world, with over 60% in Asia.<sup>14</sup> This growth is underpinned by countries seeking to expand their systems, both by establishing new institutions and increasing the capacity of existing ones. This is most notable in India, which is already the country with the most higher education students in the world and is aiming to double its enrolment rate to 50% by 2035.<sup>15</sup>

However, while some countries look likely to expand their student populations, numbers in other countries are more likely to contract because of demographic change. Japan is already facing a decline in its number of 18-year-olds, which is putting pressure on the sustainability of some of its universities.<sup>16</sup> South Korea is facing the same problem. The regionalisation of its system described above is driven to a significant degree by demographic decline. The US, one of the largest systems in the world, is also facing this challenge and it is predicted that enrolment will stay flat into the late 2020s,<sup>17</sup> before potentially declining significantly into the mid-2030s.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.1

# Comparing student and graduate population sizes

There are a number of ways to compare the size of the UK student population to the rest of the world.

## Student numbers by country

The simplest form of comparison is to look at the actual number of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level across countries. The total number of students has implications in both the long term – for the shape of the future labour market – as well in the short term – for the capacity of a country to support its student population financially or provide adequate accommodation.

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<sup>13</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, [Enrolment by level of education \(tertiary education, all programmes\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> A. Calderon, [Massification of higher education revisited](#), June 2018

<sup>15</sup> Government of India Ministry of Education, [National Education Policy 2020](#), p35

<sup>16</sup> “[Japan Expected to Lose 140,000 Students by Midcentury](#)”, Inside Higher Ed, July 2023

<sup>17</sup> National Centre for Education Statistics, [Projections of education statistics to 2030. Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions](#), February 2024

<sup>18</sup> “[Birth Dearth Approaches](#)”, Inside Higher Ed, 14 December 2020



The table below shows the most recent data available on the number of students in the countries in the G7. It also shows entry and enrolment rates. The UK's 2.9 million students placed it between France and Germany on total student populations. The entry rate (percentage of the population who start higher education by age 24) was highest in the UK at 58%. The proportion of the population aged 20 to 24 in higher education in 2021 (the enrolment rate) was just under 28% in the UK, below rates in France, Germany, and Italy.

Higher education students in G7 countries			
	All students in 2021 <sup>a</sup> (millions)	Entry rate <sup>b</sup> in 2020 or latest (%)	Enrolment rate <sup>c</sup> in 2021 (%)
Canada	1.7	51.8	27.1
France	2.7	..	31.1
Germany	3.2	48.9	32.5
Italy	2.1	50.3	34.9
Japan	3.8	..	..
UK	2.9	58.2	27.8
US	17.8	43.1	24.8

Notes: a) Includes all full- and part-time students across all levels and domiciles  
b) Estimated proportion of the population who have started any level of tertiary education by age 24  
c) Total number of students age 20-24 as a proportion of the population, excludes short-cycle tertiary

Sources: OECD Education statistics, [Enrolment by age](#) and [Graduation and entry rates](#); OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023 \(Table B1.2\)](#)

## Graduate numbers by country

An alternative form of comparison is to consider the percentage of 25 to 34-year-olds who have completed tertiary education in OECD countries.

The OECD defines 'population with tertiary education' as those having completed the highest level of education, by age group. This includes both theoretical programmes leading to advanced research or high skill professions, such as medicine or engineering, and more vocational programmes leading to the labour market. This is equivalent to higher education qualifications at [level 4 and above](#) in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and [Higher National Certificates and other qualifications at level 7 and above](#) in Scotland.

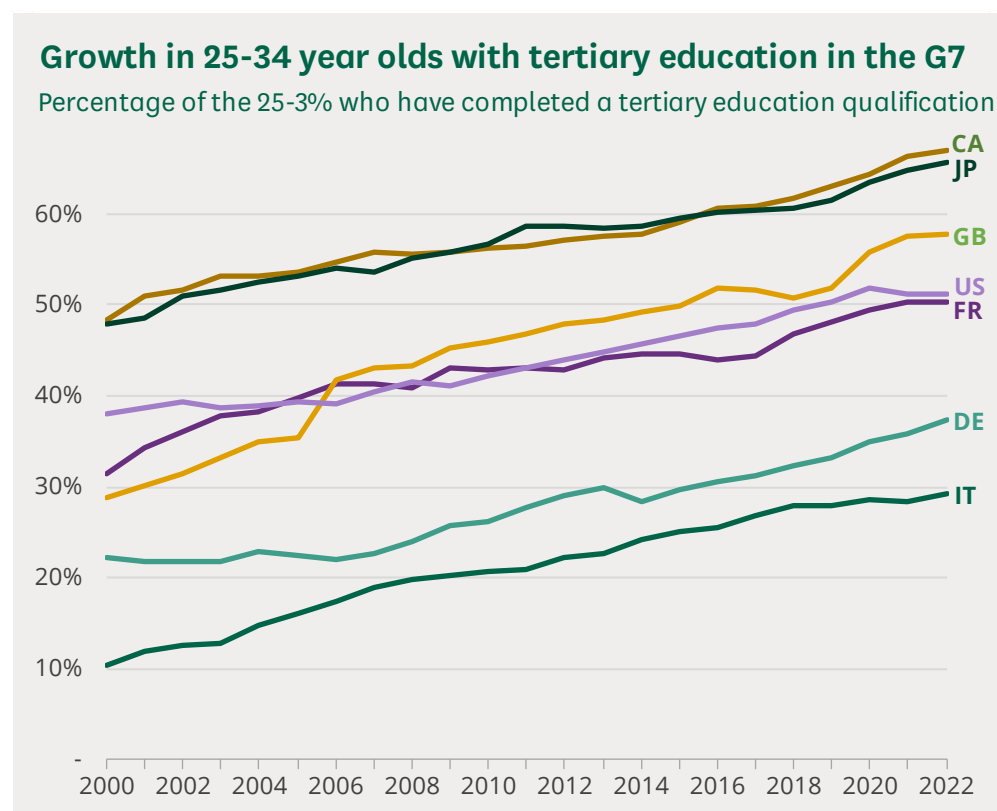
On this indicator the UK had the seventh highest rate in the OECD in 2022 and was above the OECD average by around ten percentage points as the table below illustrates.

### Percentage of 25-34 year-olds with a Bachelors degree/equivalent in the OECD 2022 or latest available year

Korea	69.6	Latvia	45.9
Canada	67.0	Greece	45.2
Japan	65.7	Portugal	44.4
Ireland	63.3	New Zealand	44.1
Luxembourg	60.0	Estonia	43.9
Lithuania	58.2	Austria	43.1
United Kingdom	57.7	Türkiye	41.3
Norway	56.4	Iceland	40.9
Netherlands	56.4	Finland	40.8
Australia	55.9	Chile	40.5
Sweden	52.3	Poland	40.5
Belgium	51.4	Slovak Republic	39.1
Switzerland	51.3	Germany	37.3
United States	51.3	Czechia	34.6
Spain	50.5	Colombia	34.2
France	50.4	Hungary	31.9
Denmark	49.0	Costa Rica	31.0
Slovenia	47.3	Italy	29.2
Israel	46.3	Mexico	27.3
<b>OECD - Average</b>	<b>47.4</b>		

Source: OECD (2024), [Population with tertiary education \(indicator\)](https://doi.org/10.1787/0b8f90e9-en). doi: 10.1787/0b8f90e9-en (Accessed on 08 April 2024)

As well as looking at the overall percentage of the young population with tertiary level qualifications, it is also interesting to note the direction of travel across countries. The chart below looks at how the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with a tertiary education qualification in the OECD has changed over time for countries in the G7.



Source: OECD (2024), [Population with tertiary education \(indicator\)](#). doi: 10.1787/0b8f90e9-en (Accessed on 09 April 2024)

Between 2000 and 2022 the UK had the fastest growth in the population of 25- to 34-year-olds with tertiary education in the G7. This rate increased by 29 percentage points in the UK, while the increase in the rest of the G7 was 13 to 19 points. The UK also saw the fastest growth between 2010 and 2022, but the differences were much smaller; growth was 12 percentage points in the UK and 8-11 points elsewhere.

It is also noticeable that the US has experienced the slowest growth in this measure over the 2000 to 2022 period, and the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with tertiary education in the US is now clearly lower than the UK.

In the UK, the number of 20- to 24-year-olds is projected to increase over the next ten years, but it will then start to fall, and by 2040 is forecast to be back around current levels.<sup>19</sup> Despite the projected growth in the UK's young population in the medium term, however, there is no guarantee participation levels in higher education will similarly continue to rise, particularly if young people decide to pursue other options as a result of policymakers looking to steer them away from university to more vocationally oriented pathways.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> ONS, [Principal projection - UK population in age groups](#), 30 January 2024

<sup>20</sup> [Prime Minister Rishi Sunak speech to the Conservative Party Conference](#), 4 October 2023; “[People go to university because they don't know what else to do](#)”, says Education Secretary”, The Telegraph, 20 August 2023; “[Ministers to ditch target of 50% of young people in England going to university](#)”, The Guardian, 9 July 2020

## Growing student numbers: The Australian Universities Accord

Australia is one country looking to establish a new vision for its higher education system focussed on growing student numbers.

Following the election of a new Labour government in 2022, a major review of the university system, the [Australian Universities Accord](#), was launched and its final report was published in February 2024.<sup>21</sup> This said Australia must “significantly increase” tertiary education participation, meaning both higher education and vocational education and training, in order to meet current and future skill needs and ensure a resilient economy.<sup>22</sup>

The report proposed targets to increase the number of places in the tertiary education system including:

- Lift the tertiary education levels of the working age population from 60% to at least 80% by 2050.
- Increase the proportion of university-educated Australians aged 25 to 34 from 45% to 55% by 2050.
- Increase the number of university places partially subsidised for students by the Australian Government from 860,000 to 1.8 million by 2050.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2

### Numbers of higher education institutions

In their 2022 report for the education consultancy Higher Education Strategy Associates on global higher education, Jonathan Williams and Alex Usher estimated there were nearly 90,000 higher education institutions in the world in 2018 providing short-cycle tertiary education and degree-level education.<sup>24</sup>

Over three-quarters of these institutions are in the Global South. Since 2006, the number of higher education institutions has increased by 51%, with the change almost entirely due to the 78% increase in the number of institutions

<sup>21</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#), 25 February 2024. The report is discussed in a Wonkhe article: “[A bluffer’s guide to the Australian Universities Accord](#)”, 17 March 2024

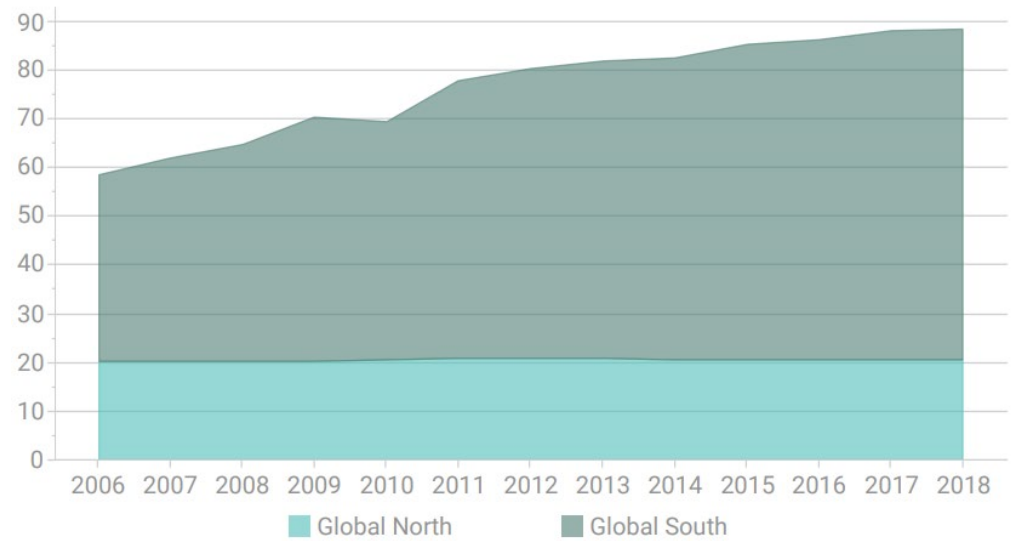
<sup>22</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#), 25 February 2024, p2

<sup>23</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#), 25 February 2024, p2

<sup>24</sup> J. Williams and A. Usher for Higher Education Strategy Associates, [World Higher Education: Institutions, Students and Funding](#) (PDF), 2022, p15

in the Global South. As the chart below shows, the number of higher education institutions has hardly increased in the Global North since 2006.

### Number of HEIS in the world from 2006 to 2018, thousands



Source: J. Williams and A. Usher for Higher Education Strategy Associates, [World Higher Education: Institutions, Students and Funding](#) (PDF), 2022, p15, Figure 1.1

## 3 Funding

### 3.1 Comparing levels of investment

Spending on higher education can be compared in a number of ways, including the level of investment into a country's higher education system and the level of investment in relation to the size of a country's student population.

#### System level investment

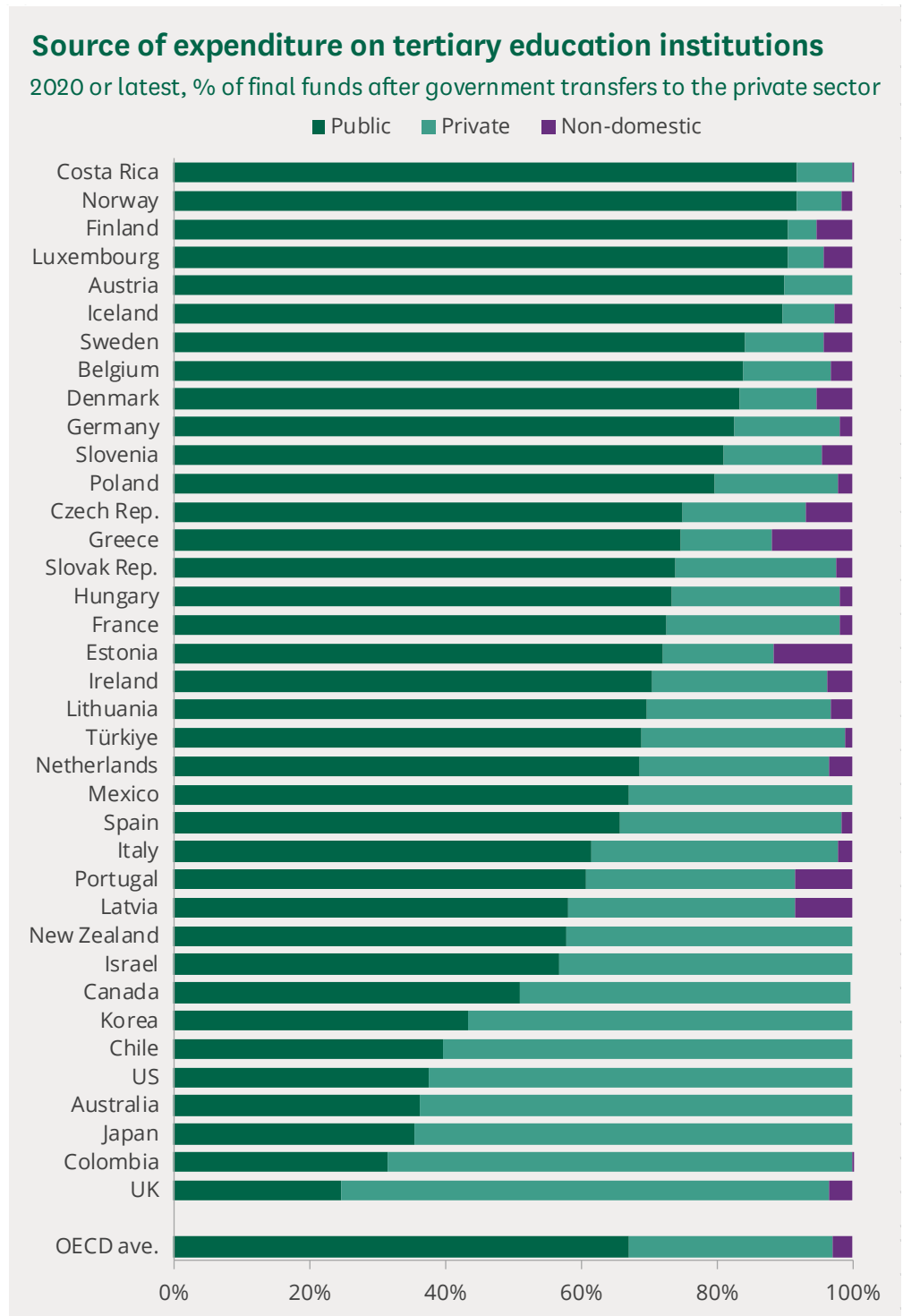
While higher education is a policy priority across the world, levels of public investment differ significantly.

The chart below shows the funding for tertiary education institutions across the OECD. For most countries, this is made up of direct public investment and private expenditure (for example, tuition fees paid by students). The definition used in the chart looks at the final source of funds before they go to the institutions. It therefore counts government transfers to the private sector (such as loans, subsidies, and grants which ultimately go to the institutions) as coming from the private sector itself.<sup>25</sup> This means that in the UK tuition fees funded through loans are counted as a private source of funding. The data also only considers funding for institutions. It does not cover expenditure on students which does not go to institutions, such as support for living costs.

On this basis, the tertiary institutions in the UK clearly had the highest share of private sector funding at 72% and the lowest direct public funding at 25%. The OECD averages were 67% public and 30% private.

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<sup>25</sup> The alternative definition, which looks at the initial source of the funding, is not available for around one-third of OECD countries.



Source: OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023 \(Table C3.2\)](#)

If higher education funding is analysed by its initial source, which counts tuition fee loans as public spending, then 51% of tertiary education funding in the UK came from public sources in 2020. This was still among the lowest rates in the OECD (for those countries with estimates).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023 \(Table C3.2\)](#)

## Investment per student

Another way of examining relative levels of investment in higher education at the system level is to examine national-level data on total expenditures per student, including that from both public and private sources.

The chart below shows spending per student across all types of tertiary education institutions. The UK ranked third highest among the countries with data in 2020 at \$23,800, or almost 90% above the OECD average.



Source: OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023 \(Table C1.1\)](#)



## 3.2

### Tuition fees

The extent to which students need to contribute to the cost of higher education is related to the social, historical, and political context of a country's education provision. In some countries, beliefs about what education is for, and who should be able to benefit from it, may outweigh concerns about the funding and sustainability of a system, while in other countries economics may prevail.

Tuition fee liability in many countries is complex, and includes variations by subject, course, institution, students' circumstances, and whether there is any state support to meet fees. These means direct comparisons between tuition fee policies in different countries are not straightforward. Even within the UK the differences are marked. While undergraduate students who ordinarily live in England pay fees of up to £9,250 a year, many undergraduate students in Scotland have their £1,820 a year fees covered by the Scottish Government.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of understanding how student finance policies compare across the world, a 2019 report by Ariane de Gayardon and Lucia Brajkovic categorised global tuition fees into four different types.<sup>28</sup> These types are explained in the table below alongside examples of countries that have adopted such policies as well as their implications for access.

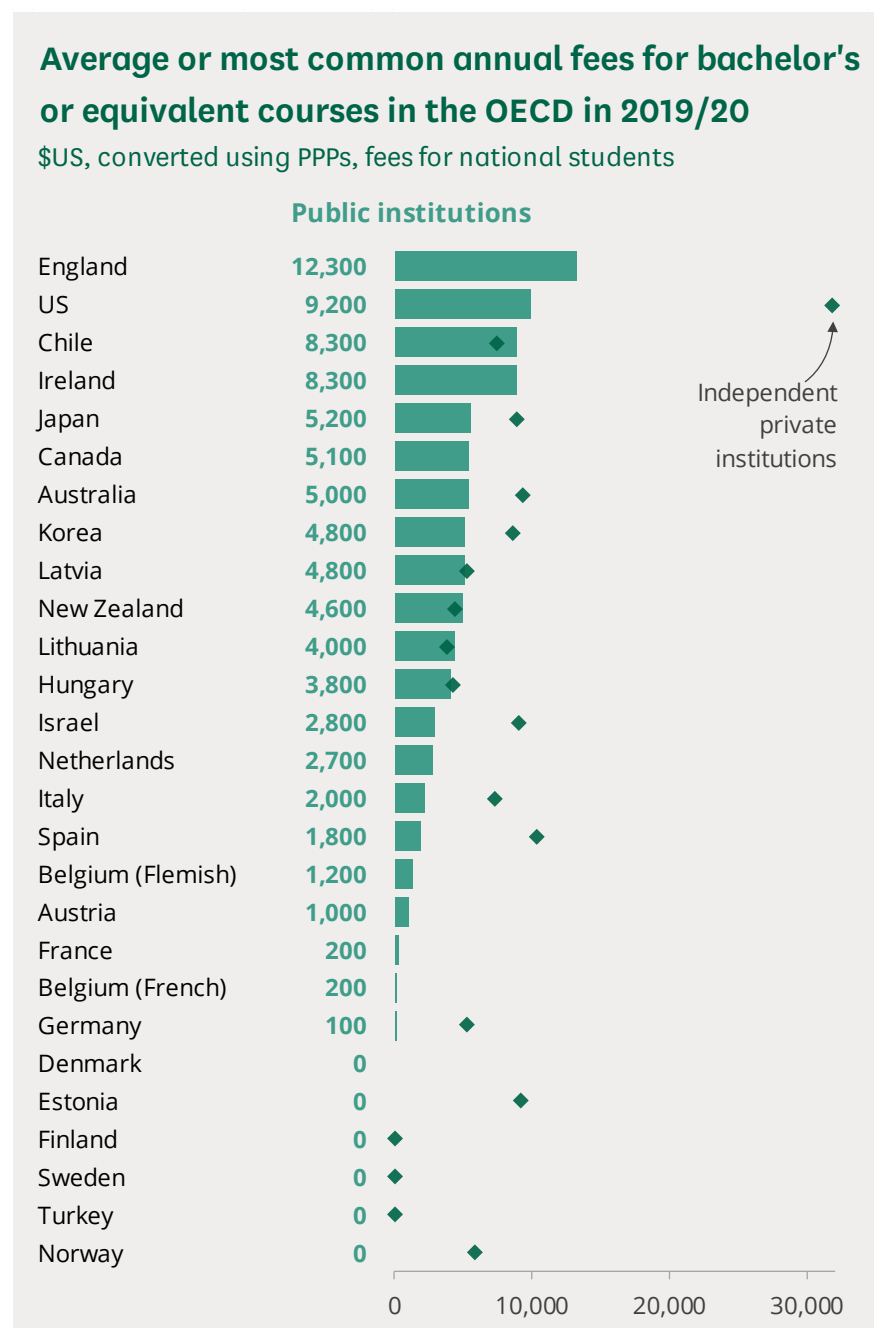
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<sup>27</sup> Scottish Parliament Information Centre, [Student support and fees in Scotland](#), 23 February 2024

<sup>28</sup> A.D. Gayardon and L. Brajkovic for the American Council on Education, [Student Finance Policies Worldwide: Leveraging funding for attainment and equity in higher education](#) (PDF), 2019

Tuition Fee model	Description	Regions/Countries where present	Implications for access
Free tuition	No financial cost to any student. Can be associated with open access countries, where all students who finish high school are entitled to a place in higher education, or countries where restrictions are in place, such as through exam performance.	Countries concentrated in Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, Northern Africa and the Middle East, and Latin America. For example, Argentina, Germany, and Greece.	No consistent evidence that access is more equitable.
Low tuition fees	The level of fee differs but is usually only a small percentage of the cost of higher education to the government, and levied at a level which is perceived not to be a barrier to students choosing to enter higher education.	European countries such as France, Portugal, and Spain.	No consistent differences between these systems and others where equity is concerned.
High tuition fees supported by student loan systems	High tuition fees paid for by either ‘mortgage style loans’, where students have to repay the total amount borrowed over a fixed period of time, or ‘income contingent loans’, which tie repayment rates to income.	Colombia, Australia, Canada, the United States, England.	In some countries, such as England and Australia, progress in increasing the numbers of students from lower socio-economic groups progressing to higher education has been made.
Dual track policies	These systems offer restricted, merit-based entry to higher education for a limited pool of applicants for free (or a very low cost), and fee-based entry for a second pool of applicants.	Central and Eastern Europe and countries in Africa, including Russia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Romania.	Inequities in access remain high in many of these countries.

The following chart looks at data on typical annual tuition fees for home students in OECD countries.<sup>29</sup> It includes data on fees at public institutions,<sup>30</sup> which are shown in the bars and adjacent numbers, as well as private institutions where fees are generally higher, which are shown in the chart with the diamond markers.



Source: OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023 \(Table C5.1\)](#)

<sup>29</sup> OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023 \(Table C5.1\)](#). The data in the chart are typical fees for students who are nationals of the country. In most countries public universities charge substantially higher fees for foreign students. In the EU/EEA, this distinction is for students from inside or outside the EU/EEA.

<sup>30</sup> The OECD includes government dependent independent institutions in England and Latvia under its public institutions category for this data.

As the chart shows, fees for bachelor's/equivalent courses at public institutions in England – and Wales, where fees are the same as England – were well above those in any other OECD country at \$12,200. Looking beyond the OECD, only Singapore charges higher fees for public institutions in the Global North.<sup>31</sup>

England's and Wales' fees also above typical fees at many private institutions elsewhere in the OECD. The exception to this is the US, where fees at independent private institutions average \$31,900 a year. The OECD data is for annual fees, and therefore it does not account for differences in the duration of courses. In the US, for example, many courses are four years in length, compared to three years in England and Wales, which means an additional year of tuition fee liability.

## Tuition fee case studies

Within the four categories of tuition fee policies delineated by Ariane de Gayardon and Lucia Brajkovic, and outlined in the above table, individual variations exist both between and within countries. The case studies below outline the tuition fee policies in Australia, the US, and Ireland to illustrate how different countries address the issue of students contributing to their higher education and some of the challenges associated with this.

### Australia: payment by subject

In Australia, the Government makes a contribution to higher education providers for the cost of a fixed number of student places. The Australian Government determines the number and allocation of undergraduate 'Commonwealth Supported Places' with each public higher education provider each year. The student also makes a contribution to their higher education. The amount of the student contribution varies by subject, as is shown in the table below.

Band	Subjects	Contribution
1	Agriculture, English, mathematics, education, clinical psychology, Indigenous and foreign languages, nursing, statistics	\$4,445
2	Other health, allied health, built environment, computing, engineering, surveying, science, environmental studies, pathology, visual and performing arts, professional pathway psychology, professional pathway social work	\$8,948

<sup>31</sup> J. Williams and A. Usher for Higher Education Strategy Associates, [World Higher Education: Institutions, Students and Funding](#) (PDF), 2022, p69

3	Dentistry, medicine, veterinary science	\$12,770
4	Law, accounting, administration, economics, commerce, communications, society and culture	\$16,233

Students who ordinarily live in Australia ('home' students) are eligible for a government loan to cover the cost of the student contribution. As in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, this loan is repaid when students earn a certain amount after graduation through the taxation system.

### United States: the 'free' college movement

The US higher education system is federal, which means fees vary greatly between states. Students pay different fees depending on whether they study in their own state or out of state. Providers are also able to set their own fees. There are three main types of provider in the US, and the average annual cost of tuition is below:

- Two-year public community college: \$3,560.<sup>32</sup>
- Four-year public universities: \$9,200.<sup>33</sup>
- Four-year private for-profit universities: \$31, 900.<sup>34</sup>

These averages include big variations, especially for four-year universities.

As one of the largest higher education systems in the world, and one where tuition fees are relatively high and have been for a long time, the national level of student debt in the US stood at \$1.7 trillion at the end of 2023.<sup>35</sup> This level of debt, alongside the argument that higher education participation brings significant benefits for both individuals and society, has led to a call in recent years for greater financial support for students to enter higher education. As a result, the 'free' college movement has gained momentum and there are now forms of free tuition programmes in 30 states. In the main, they focus on offering free tuition at community colleges for students whose families earn below a specific level of income, but each programme is slightly different. Two of the programmes, in New York and New Mexico, are outlined in the box below.

<sup>32</sup> National Centre for Education Statistics, [Average undergraduate tuition, fees, room, and board rates charged for full-time students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by level and control of institution: Selected academic years, 1963-64 through 2021-22](#), July 2023

<sup>33</sup> OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023 \(Table C5.1\)](#)

<sup>34</sup> OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023 \(Table C5.1\)](#)

<sup>35</sup> Education Data Initiative, [Student loan debt statistics](#), 3 March 2024

## New York's Excelsior Scholarship Programme

The Excelsior Scholarship was first launched in 2018 and allows students to attend any higher education provider which is part of the New York state public university system across the whole of the state of New York. It covers the cost of tuition for an undergraduate degree for up to five years. Students must be residents of New York state and their families must earn less than \$125,000 a year to be eligible. It is funded by the regional government of the state of New York from their own resources. By 2022, around 73,000 students had benefitted from the programme.<sup>36</sup>

## New Mexico's Opportunity Scholarship

This programme covers the full tuition costs at New Mexico public colleges and universities. It includes part-time and full-time students and covers students pursuing credit-bearing career training certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees and is available to all New Mexico residents. The programme is open to immigrants, regardless of their immigration status and those who began a higher education qualification and did not complete it but who wish to return. The aim is to create the most inclusive higher education system of any state. As with the programme in New York it is funded by the state and \$75 million was committed to it in 2022 with over 30,000 recipients in 2022.

### Ireland: the student administration fee

In Ireland, most undergraduate students attending publicly funded courses do not have to pay tuition fees. Under the terms of the [Free Fees Initiative](#), the Department of Further and Higher Education pays the fees to the colleges instead.

However, most higher education providers charge what is known as the 'annual student contribution', which was formerly called the student services charge. It is also known as a registration fee, and it covers student services and examinations. The amount of the contribution varies from one institution to another.

The maximum rate of the student contribution for the academic year 2023-2024 is €3,000. It was reduced by €1000 in 2022-23 to €2,000 as part of a package of measures to help students cope with inflationary pressures and the rising cost of living.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> "[Free college is now a reality in nearly 30 states](#)", CNBC, 8 April 2022

<sup>37</sup> Citizens Information, [Third-level student fees and charges](#), 21 March 2023

## 3.3

# Living cost support

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To compare the student support systems of European countries, see the European Commission's [National Student Fee and Support Systems database](#).

In addition to varying tuition fee levels and associated support, the level of support available to students to help with their living costs differs around the world.

The table below considers the loans and grants available to students in a sample of OECD countries. While all these countries offer some form of maintenance grant support, the nature and amount of the total support available varies from country to country. Support in all these countries is means-tested to some degree.

Two of the countries included in the table below – the US and Canada – have federal higher education systems. In addition to grant and loan support being available at the national level, there is also support available at a state/provincial level to students. Once again, the nature of the support can differ depending on the state or province the student is from.

Country	Grants	Loans
US	The Pell Grant is the only grant provided by the federal government to students from all states. The maximum Pell Grant award for 2023-2024 was \$7,395 and the minimum was \$750. <sup>38</sup> Eligibility depends on demonstrating financial need. <sup>39</sup> Most Pell Grants are awarded to students with a household income of less than \$30,000 annually.	There are different types of federal student loan available depending on a student's circumstances. <sup>40</sup> Direct Subsidized Loans are made to eligible undergraduate students who demonstrate financial need to help cover the costs of higher education. Direct Unsubsidized Loans are also available, and eligibility is not based on financial need. The amount available depends on a student's year of study and parental income. <sup>41</sup>
Canada	There is a common grant programme across seven provinces that is means tested. The maximum grant (\$4,200 per year in Canadian dollars in 2023/24) is available when earnings are below \$50,104 and this then reduces to zero when earnings are above \$93,709. <sup>42</sup>	The Canada Student Loan Programme is means-tested and students can borrow up to \$300 per week of study. <sup>43</sup> Loans are also available at a provincial level, but the amount available and the eligibility criteria differ by province. From 2023, all federal Canada Student Loans were made interest-free permanently. <sup>44</sup>
Australia	There is a no state-backed grant system, but students may be entitled to Youth Allowance, which is financial help for students or apprentices aged 24 or younger. These support payments are means-tested. If combined parental income is less than \$55,626 students receive the maximum rate of Youth Allowance. <sup>45</sup>	The Australian Government provides financial assistance to students through the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP). <sup>46</sup> For 2023, the limit is \$162,336 over the full course for students studying medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, and eligible aviation courses, and \$113,028 for all other courses. <sup>47</sup>

<sup>38</sup> [“Everything you need to know about the Pell Grant”](#), U.S. News, 23 March 2023

<sup>39</sup> Federal Student Aid, [Eligibility requirements](#), January 2024

<sup>40</sup> Federal Student Aid, [Federal student loans for college or career school are an investment in your future](#), 2023

<sup>41</sup> Federal Student Aid, [Federal Student Loans](#)

<sup>42</sup> Government of Canada, [Canada Student Grant for Full-Time Students](#), 31 July 2023

<sup>43</sup> Government of Canada, [Budget 2023: Important announcements for student aid](#), 4 July 2023

<sup>44</sup> [“Graduating this year? Here's what you need to know about repaying your student loans”](#), CBC, 30 May 2023

<sup>45</sup> UTS, [Means and assets test](#), 2023

<sup>46</sup> Australian Government, Department of Education, [Higher Education Loan Program \(HELP\)](#), 28 January 2021; Australian Government, [Loan indexation](#), 2023

<sup>47</sup> Parliament of Australia, [Higher Education Loan Program \(HELP\) and other student loans: a quick guide](#), 1 March 2023; Parliament of Australia, [HELP debt – the evolution of higher education contributions](#), 9 June 2023



France	The main student grant (bourse d'enseignement supérieur sur critères sociaux) is available on a means tested basis, with the amount per year ranging from €1,000 to around €6,000 (2022/23). The grant is awarded to students facing material difficulties that prevent them from undertaking or continuing higher education. <sup>48</sup>	The French public investment bank provides loans to students. The amount of the loan may not exceed €20,000 for a duration of at least two years. There is a possibility of deferred repayment. However, the share of state-guaranteed loans is very limited (15,922 students in 2021 borrowed a loan). <sup>49</sup>
Germany	Need-based grants ("BAföG") are available to full-time students. The amount differs individually according to income/parents' income. The average amount is €574 per month. 18% of students received need-based grants in the 2020/2021 academic year. <sup>50</sup>	There are two types of loan available. An education loan (Bildungskredit) covers living costs that are not covered by the BAföG. The maximum amount that can be taken out is €7,200. Repayments of €120 per month commence four years after the start of the loan. The Federal Government guarantees the repayment credit and the interest. <sup>51</sup> A study loan with favourable terms (KfW-Studienkredit) of up to €54,600 is also available. <sup>52</sup>
Ireland	Maintenance grants help students with their living costs. Fee grants can help pay tuition fees for students who do not qualify for the Free Fees Scheme. Fee grants can also help pay the student contribution. The amount available is determined by family income and how far students live from their provider. <sup>53</sup>	There is no state-backed student loan system in Ireland

<sup>48</sup> European Commission, [Higher education funding](#), 27 November 2023

<sup>49</sup> European Commission, [National Student Fee and Support Systems in European Higher Education 2022/2023: France](#), 2022

<sup>50</sup> European Commission, [National Student Fee and Support Systems in European Higher Education 2022/2023: Germany](#), 2022

<sup>51</sup> European Commission, [National Student Fee and Support Systems in European Higher Education 2022/2023: Germany](#), 2022

<sup>52</sup> European Commission, [National Student Fee and Support Systems in European Higher Education 2022/2023: Germany](#), 2022

<sup>53</sup> Citizens Information, [Financial supports for students](#), 7 July 2022; Higher Education Authority, [Student Finance](#)

## 3.4

## Student loan repayments: ‘Peak Debt’ in the USA

Alongside the UK, the USA is one of the more expensive countries in the world to study at higher education level. Tuition fee cost vary considerably, and the annual fee at some private providers can be more than \$90,000 per year. It is important to note that fees are generally much lower for students attending college locally, and there is also an extensive range of financial support programmes. Nevertheless, the national level of student debt in the US stood at \$1.7 trillion at the end of 2023.<sup>54</sup> Around 30% of the population have some form of student debt. The median amount of outstanding education debt in 2021 was between \$20,000 and \$24,999.<sup>55</sup>

These figures have led some to argue in recent years that ‘peak debt’ has been reached, and the issue needs to be addressed by policymakers.<sup>56</sup> In a speech from October 2023, President Biden set out some actions his administration had taken to address the student debt issue:

- Reforming the Public Service Loan Forgiveness programme to help more people. This programme allows student loan debt for schoolteachers, firefighters, social workers, and other public servants to be forgiven if they make 10 years of payments and do 10 years of public service.
- Addressed issues with the Income-Driven Repayment programme. This allows student loan debt to be forgiven for borrowers who have made 20 years of consistent payments.
- Introducing the ‘SAVE Plan’, which is a new Income-Driven Repayment programme that reduces the repayment amounts for many borrowers and ensure the debt balance does not grow if borrowers keep up repayments.<sup>57</sup>

The result of these measures has been a cancellation of \$127 billion in student debts for nearly 3.6 million borrowers. This is a significant sum but less than 10% of all student debt.

President Biden had a more significant student loan forgiveness plan that would have provided \$400 billion in debt relief and seen around \$10,000 cancelled per borrower – and up to \$20,000 in some cases – but it was struck

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<sup>54</sup> Education Data Initiative, [Student loan debt statistics](#), 3 March 2024

<sup>55</sup> Federal Reserve, [Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households \(SHED\)](#), 2 February 2023

<sup>56</sup> “[How student debt became a \\$1.6 trillion crisis](#)”, CNBC, 12 June 2020

<sup>57</sup> US White House, [Remarks by President Biden on the Administration’s Efforts to Cancel Student Debt and Support Students and Borrowers](#), 4 October 2023. On the SAVE Plan, see US White House, [FACT SHEET: The Biden-Harris Administration Launches the SAVE Plan, the Most Affordable Student Loan Repayment Plan Ever to Lower Monthly Payments for Millions of Borrowers](#), 22 August 2023.

down by the US Supreme Court.<sup>58</sup> As a result, the Biden Administration intends to introduce a new student loan forgiveness programme through legislation. Under the proposed new plan, five groups of borrowers could be eligible for student loan forgiveness, including those whose balances are greater than the amount originally borrowed and those who have been repaying their student loans for 25 years or more.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> [“US Supreme Court strikes down student loan forgiveness plan”](#), BBC News, 30 June 2023

<sup>59</sup> [“Biden Administration Releases Major Details On New Student Loan Forgiveness Plan Tied To Hardship”](#), Forbes, 15 February 2024

## 4 Student access, participation, and outcomes

### 4.1 Admissions systems

How students are admitted to higher education in the UK differs significantly from most other comparable countries. Post-qualifications admissions systems are the norm across the OECD, where 20 countries have Post-Qualifications Offers (PQO) systems and 11 have Post-Qualifications Applications (PQA) systems.<sup>60</sup>

#### Post-qualification admissions systems

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, students apply to higher education providers and receive offers of places before they sit their exams. This is a pre-qualification admissions system and is quite unique across the OECD. Other wealthy countries are more likely to have post-qualification admissions systems. These systems can generally be divided into:

- **Post-Qualification Offers (PQO) systems**, in which students apply before they take their examinations/tests and then receive the offer of a place afterwards based on the result.
- **Post-Qualification Applications (PQA) systems**, in which students take their examinations/tests and then both apply and receive the offer of a place or not afterwards.

Most students in Scotland receive offers for higher education places on the basis Higher grades achieved in their Highers the summer prior to application.<sup>61</sup>

A report on international admissions systems published by the Sutton Trust in 2021 classified them into five different types, as set out in the table below.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> G. Atherton for the Sutton Trust, [University admissions: The international picture](#) (PDF), May 2021

<sup>61</sup> The HEPI blogpost [What next for admissions in Scotland?](#) (April 2021) is a good summary of the situation in Scotland.

<sup>62</sup> G. Atherton for the Sutton Trust, [University admissions: The international picture](#) (PDF), May 2021

Name	Description	Size of system	Admission model	Countries
HE as a right	Mainly central/eastern European countries where entry to higher education is a right once a school leaving certificate is obtained.	Mainly smaller systems but France/Germany large	Virtually all PQO	Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic
Big Test	Mainly non-European countries with national entry tests mandatory for most higher education providers and courses.	Larger systems with over a million students	All PQA	Chile, Korea, Japan, Mexico, Turkey, United States
University driven	Mainly European countries where even though students have a school leaving certificate there is a strong emphasis on universities setting entry criteria/tests to enter.	Mainly small to medium sized systems	Mix of PQO and PQA	Belgium, Colombia, Iceland, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Switzerland
Central Application	Scandinavian/West European countries with national application agencies and combination of entry as a right/university tests.	Smaller systems with less than 250,000 students	Virtually all PQO	Denmark, Netherlands, Finland, Norway, Sweden
Anglo Admission	UK linked countries where entry is based on school leaving examinations and grades.	One relatively large (around 1 million students) and 2 smaller systems	All PQO	Australia, Ireland, New Zealand

The main differences between international systems and those of the UK include the timings of examination/tests, and the approach to admissions testing. The UK places a comparatively strong emphasis on national school-leaving examinations, such as A Levels, which are heavily subject content-based and act as de facto university entry tests.

Other countries that have such national examinations of high importance are usually less content heavy, for example they either measure aptitude rather than subject knowledge, and/or assess using shorter responses in the form of multiple choice or specific word limited questions. Another contrast is the use of a baccalaureate-based approach in Europe, which confers the right to enter higher education, and also the use of specific university entrance exams, which measure knowledge at the pre-higher education level. In the UK, these might be found only in certain subjects, such as the BioMedical Admissions Test (BMAT), which is used for entry for certain medical schools.

The case for moving in England and Wales to a PQA system has been considered a number of times by policymakers, most recently in 2021 and 2022, when, following a consultation, the Government ultimately decided not to move forward with moving to a post-qualification admissions system.<sup>63</sup> Any such move would likely require changes in the timetable for level 3 qualification examinations.<sup>64</sup>

To inform the debate in 2022 regarding a PQA admissions system, the Sutton Trust report highlighted above also explored the relationship between forms of admission system and different aspects of system performance in the OECD. The four areas of system performance examined were:

- **Participation:** measured by average percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with tertiary level education;
- **Access:** measured by the average percentage differences between those aged 30 to 44 with tertiary level education between those whose parents who had tertiary level education;
- **Completion:** measured by average levels of student enrolment (%) by the beginning of second year of study
- **Economic returns to a degree:** measured by average levels of graduate earnings for graduates compared to those with upper secondary qualifications only.<sup>65</sup>

Data on system performance is taken from data produced by the OECD in 2020.

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<sup>63</sup> Department for Education, [Post-qualification admissions in higher education: proposed changes and consultation response](#), February 2022

<sup>64</sup> See G. Atherton for the UCU, [Post-qualifications applications: How we can make it work](#) (PDF), April 2021

<sup>65</sup> G. Atherton for the Sutton Trust, [University admissions: The international picture](#) (May 2021), pp13-18

The table below compares the UK with those countries with post-qualification offers (PQO) and post-qualification admissions (PQA) systems. For participation, access, and completion/non-completion performance is shown as a percentage. For example, for PQO systems 52% of 25- to 34-year-olds have tertiary level education. In the case of economic returns to a degree, performance is shown in terms of an index relative to students who leave compulsory education with just upper secondary education who are expressed as 100.

<b>Differences in HE system and outcomes between PQO/PQA systems in the OECD and the UK</b>			
	PQO	PQA	UK
Level of participation (%)	52	49	52
Participation gaps by parental background (%)	32	39	39
Enrolment at second year (%)	85	87	92
Graduate earnings (Index where earnings of those with upper secondary education =100)	131	158	120

Source: G. Atherton for the Sutton Trust, [University admissions: The international picture](#) (May 2021), pp13-18

As the table shows, the UK performs relatively well on all measures compared to PQA and PQO countries apart from graduate earnings. With regards to enrolment rates in particular, the UK's performance is strong. This enrolment rate reflects the UK's performance in terms of completion rates for higher education students undertaking Bachelor's level courses.

## 4.2

### Access and equity in admission

UNESCO have recognised the importance of access to higher education by including equal access to education and lifelong learning opportunities among its global Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. Target 4.3, which is related to Goal 4 on quality education, states:

By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.<sup>66</sup>

The depth, breadth, and availability of the access and equity data produced in the UK makes it one of the leading countries in the world when it comes to

<sup>66</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goals, [Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all](#)

understanding what progress is being made in improving higher education participation among those from under-represented groups.<sup>67</sup>

While data is collected on the different characteristics of students in relation to higher education access, progression, completion, and outcomes across the world, it is done in different ways across countries and regions, and is not collated systematically on a global basis. This means the ability to make effective comparisons across countries is limited and requires significant caveats.

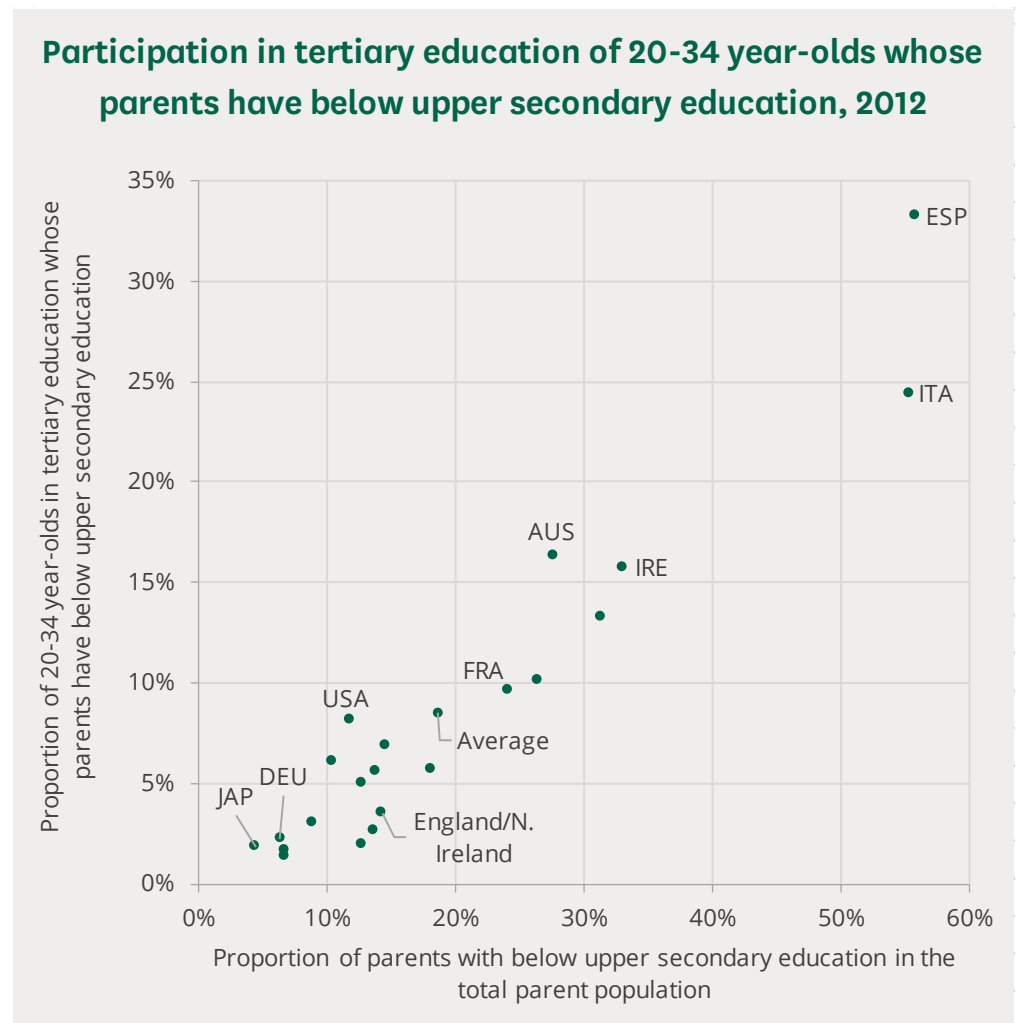
Data collected by the OECD provides a starting point for making comparisons. The chart below plots the percentage of 20- to 34-year-olds in tertiary education in 2012 with parents below upper secondary education against the underlying proportion of parents with below upper secondary education. The following chart shows a clear positive relationship as we might expect; countries where a higher share of parents have below upper secondary education generally have higher shares of young people in tertiary education with parents educated to upper secondary level. England and Northern Ireland were well below the OECD average on both measures.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> G. Atherton, C. Dumangane, and G. Whitty, [Charting Equity: Drawing the Global Access Map](#) (PDF), 2016

<sup>68</sup> England and Northern Ireland were the only two parts of the UK to take part in the first cycle of the OECD's survey of adult skills.





Source: OECD, [Education at a Glance 2014, Indicator A4. To what extent does parents' education influence participation in tertiary education?](#) (PDF)

This data is obtained via the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC). This is an international survey that consists of different rounds covering different countries, with participating individuals in each country interviewed over a twelve-month period. It is a strong comparative survey, but it is not the kind of administratively collected data on higher education participation by different forms of student characteristic that is present in the UK. The results above are from the first cycle of the study and are now somewhat out of date. Data collection for the second cycle started in 2022 with a group of countries including the UK. The first results from this cycle are expected to be published towards the end of 2024.<sup>69</sup>

The UK's own higher education participation by proxy measure of socio-economic background is far more robust, but it is not easily comparable with any data from another country. There is however a range of different initiatives underway that do collect cross-national data on higher education

<sup>69</sup> OECD, [Survey of Adult Skills \(PIAAC\), About PIAAC 2nd Cycle](#)

participation by proxy measures of socio-economic background. The table below describes these different initiatives.

Source of data	Content
Eurostudent	The <a href="#">Eurostudent project</a> , which covers 29 European countries, brings together national student survey data. It uses parental participation in higher education as the marker of socio-economic background. <sup>70</sup> Eurostudent also collects data on students ethnic background and disability.
World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE)	<a href="#">WIDE</a> , which is maintained and developed by UNESCO, uses household surveys to measure inequalities in education across and within countries. Its data comes from the demographic and health surveys, multiple indicator cluster surveys, the EU's Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, and other national household surveys.
Socio-Economic Database for Latin America and the Caribbean (SEDLAC)	<a href="#">SEDLAC</a> , which collates information from national surveys in 24 countries, categorises students' socio-economic background based on parental income.
OECD	The OECD has used information on parental education from its <a href="#">Survey of Adult Skills</a> to indicate a student's socio-economic group. <sup>71</sup>

Apart from the data currently available from the OECD, which, as argued above, is dated, the three other initiatives do not currently cover the UK.<sup>72</sup>

## 4.3 Widening participation policies

As well as producing significant amounts of data, the UK also has a comparatively high level of policy commitment to widening higher education access and success.

The [World Access to Higher Education Day](#) (WAHED) initiative has brought together information on the policies of national governments in this area to

<sup>70</sup> Eurostudent, [Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe: EUROSTUDENT VII Synopsis of Indicators 2018-2021](#) (PDF), 2021, pp58-77

<sup>71</sup> OECD, [Education at a Glance 2015](#), November 2015, pp78-91

<sup>72</sup> The [WIDE access and completion data on the UK](#) is from the 2019 EU-LFS survey.

produce ‘[The Global Equity Policy Map](#)’.<sup>73</sup> This map includes summary information on policy approaches in over 100 countries covering the existence of targets, funding allocations, and specific policies related to higher education equity. The map is based on two studies that show, unlike in England and Scotland, very few countries have specific policies focused on access and success and/or targets related to participation by those from low income or other disadvantaged groups.<sup>74</sup>

A 2018 report, [All Around the World – Higher education equity policies across the globe](#), attempted to classify the 71 countries it examined into four categories that summarised their equity policies:

- **Emerging:** the country has formulated broad equity policy principles and goals but has accomplished little in terms of concrete policies, programmes and interventions (9 countries).
- **Developing:** the country has put in place the foundations of an equity promotion strategy, but has not defined many policies and programs, is not investing much in this area, and has implemented few policies and programs (33 countries).
- **Established:** the country has formulated an equity promotion strategy and has put in place aligned policies, programmes and interventions to implement the strategy (23 countries).
- **Advanced:** the country has formulated and implemented a comprehensive equity promotion strategy. Some countries in this category even have a dedicated equity promotion agency (6 countries).<sup>75</sup>

England and Scotland were among the six countries identified as ‘Advanced’. The role of agreements between higher education providers and the government which establish targets related to access and participation, such as England’s [Access and Participation Plans](#), is highlighted as an example of global innovation. However, the lack of a national strategy related to widening access in England is also noted, but not all countries that have the greatest level of engagement in access and participation have such a strategy.

## Access and participation activities

Across the UK, higher education providers undertake a comprehensive range of activities with schools and colleges to support progression to higher education for those from under-represented groups.<sup>76</sup> Examples of this work

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<sup>73</sup> World Access to Higher Education Network, [The Equity Policy Map](#)

<sup>74</sup> J. Salmi, [All Around the World – Higher education equity policies across the globe](#) (PDF), November 2018; G. Atherton, [ASEM National Equity Policies in Higher Education Study](#) (PDF), September 2021

<sup>75</sup> J. Salmi, [All Around the World – Higher education equity policies across the globe](#) (PDF), November 2018, pp9-10

<sup>76</sup> See Commons Library, [Higher education in the UK: Systems, policy approaches, and challenges](#) for more information.

exist in countries across the world. The table below is taken from a report published by the Sutton Trust in 2019 looking at access to leading universities across the world.<sup>77</sup> It shows some of the work that is going on across the world that is comparable to that in the UK.

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<sup>77</sup> G. Atherton for the Sutton Trust, [Room at the top: Access and success at leading universities around the world](#) (PDF), November 2020

Country	University	Details
Australia	University of Melbourne	The university's access and participation plan from outreach work with primary school pupils through to supporting graduates from low-income, marginalised groups into employment. This work is supported through the Access Melbourne programme, which offers guaranteed entry to certain courses with lower entry grades for mature students and those from an indigenous or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. <sup>78</sup>
Brazil	Universitas Campinas (UNICAMP)	ProFIS is a two-year course offered to those in local public schools that, on successful completion, enables students to enter an undergraduate course at UNICAMP without having to sit an entrance exam. <sup>79</sup> Students cover a range of disciplines encompassing the human, biological, and technological sciences and receive a small scholarship for attending.
Canada	McGill University	McGill delivers a range of activities with schools in their locality focusing particularly on supporting entry for students from indigenous backgrounds. In 2020, a new project was launched called Indigenous Mentorship and Paid Research Experience for Summer Schools (IMPRESS), which hires indigenous high school students to work with a McGill Professor on a summer research project for eight weeks. <sup>80</sup>
France	Sciences Po	The Conventions Éducation Prioritaire (CEP) is a higher education access route for eligible students enrolled in high schools covered by the L'éducation prioritaire policy, which aims to improve education among disadvantaged groups. <sup>81</sup> The CEP was launched in 2001, working in over 100 schools in France from primary level upwards. The programme covers expressive skills; writing, reading, speaking English, methodological research skills and working in a team.

<sup>78</sup> University of Melbourne, [Access Melbourne](#)

<sup>79</sup> UNICAMP, [ProFIS](#)

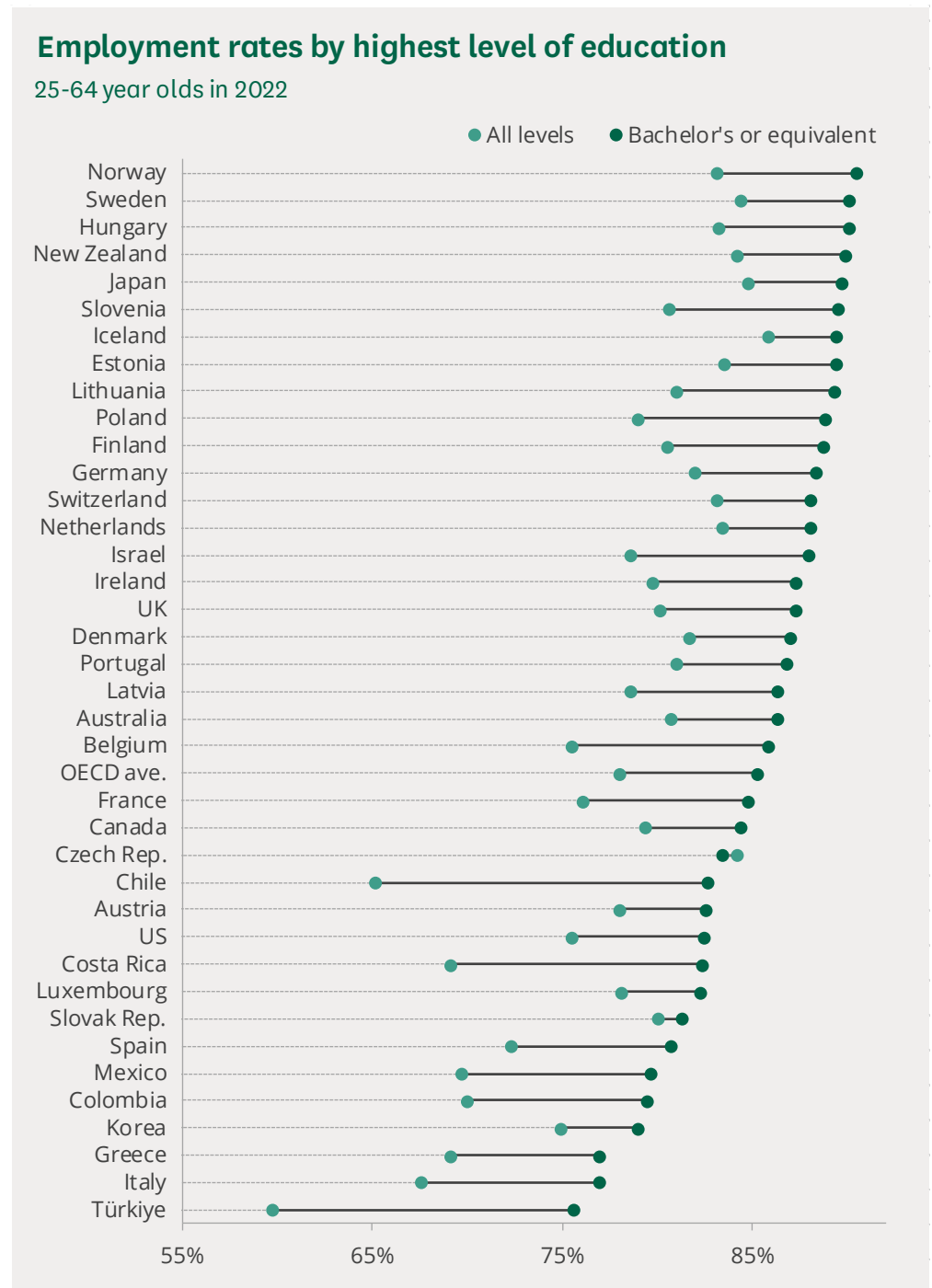
<sup>80</sup> McGill University, [IMPRESS Paid Indigenous Mentorship Program](#)

<sup>81</sup> Sciences Po, [Admission Française en Bachelor: Conventions Éducation Prioritaire \(CEP\)](#)

## 4.4

## Graduate outcomes

The available data on the progression of graduates into employment, again best presented and collected by the OECD, shows the employment rates of UK graduates were somewhat higher than the OECD average at 87%. This was seven percentage points above the UK's overall employment rate; the same size gap as the OECD average.



Source: OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023, Table A3.1](#)

Graduates also tend to have lower unemployment and economic inactivity rates than the general population. In 2022, the unemployment rate for the UK population aged 25-34 with a bachelor's or equivalent qualification was 2.5%. This was among the lowest in the OECD and well below the 3.4% for the population (of this age) overall.<sup>82</sup> The economic inactivity rate for this group was 6% in the UK, again among the lowest in the OECD and around half the rate for the 25-34 population at all levels of education.<sup>83</sup>

Turning to earnings of younger graduates, on average across OECD countries of full-time full-year workers with a bachelor's degree earned 32% more than those with upper secondary attainment in 2021. The following chart looks at how this varied across the OECD.

The 'graduate premium' for this group in the UK at 37% was above the OECD average and clearly above the average of EU members of the OECD (25%). The premium of those with a master's, doctorate or equivalent in the UK, was 52%,<sup>84</sup> or slightly higher than the OECD average of 50%.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023, Table A3.2](#)

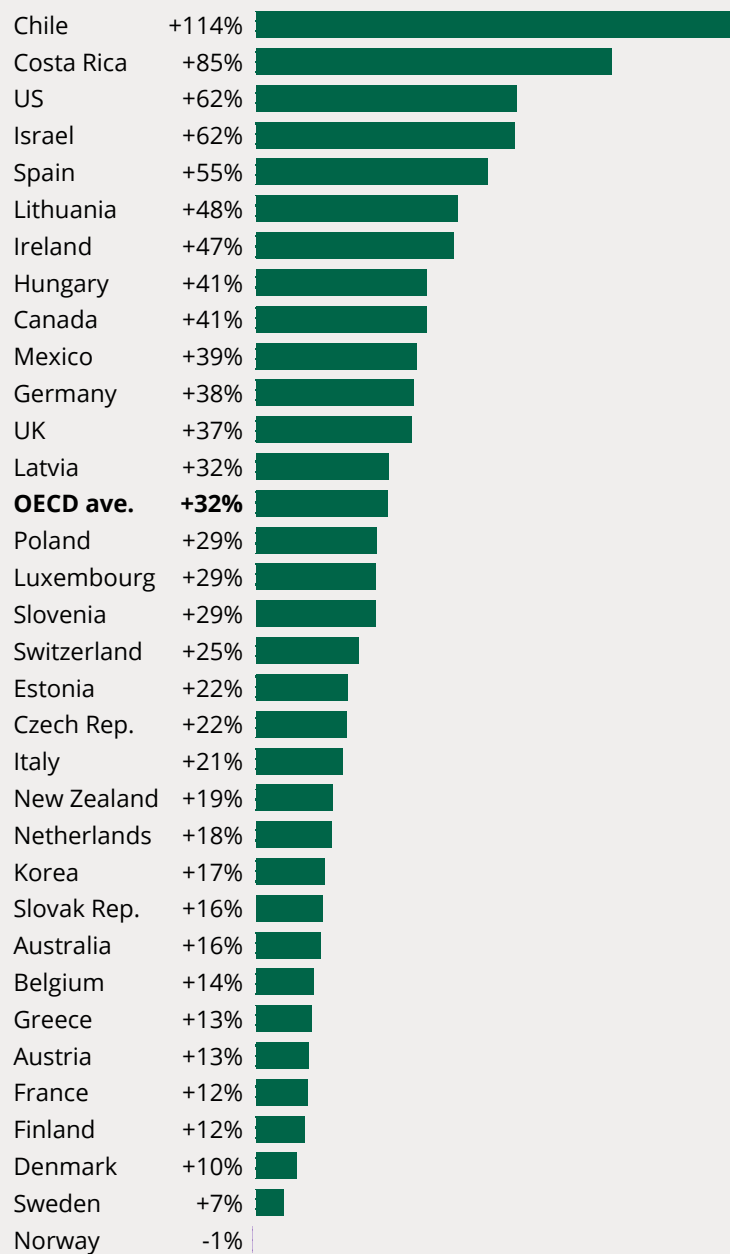
<sup>83</sup> OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023, Table A3.4](#)

<sup>84</sup> Again, compared to those with an upper secondary education.

<sup>85</sup> OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023, Table A4.1](#)

## Earnings premium for graduates aged 25-34 in the OECD, 2021 (or latest)

Earnings of full-time employees with a bachelor's or equivalent compared to those with upper secondary attainment



Source: OECD, [Education at a Glance 2023, Table A4.1](#)

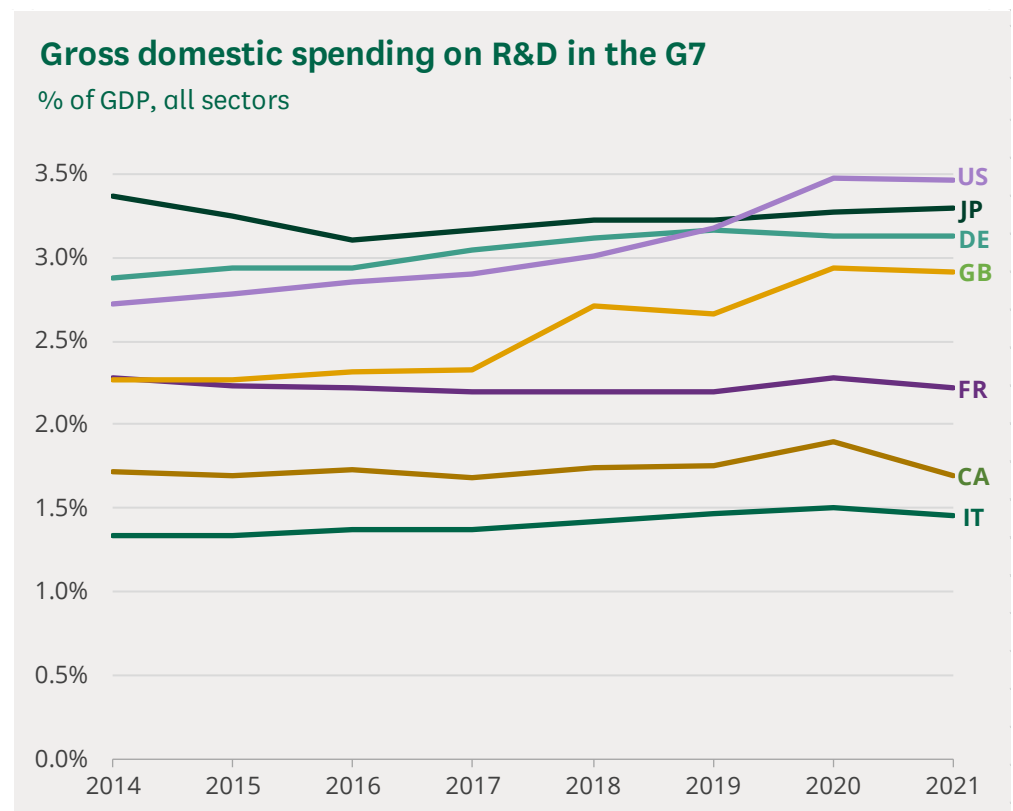


## 5 Higher education, research, and development

The UK is one of the leading countries in the world in terms of the most common metrics of higher education research performance. As discussed in the next section, it is this strength that drives the strong performance of the UK in the major international higher education rankings systems.

### 5.1 Research funding

In terms of funding, the UK's gross spending on research and development, which is defined as the total expenditure (current and capital) on R&D carried out by all resident companies, research institutes, university and government laboratories in a country, has increased in recent years to 2.9% in 2021. It has been above the OECD average since 2018, but, as the following chart shows, is still below levels in the US, Japan, and Germany.



Source: OECD (2024), [Gross domestic spending on R&D \(indicator\)](https://doi.org/10.1787/d8b068b4-en). doi: 10.1787/d8b068b4-en (Accessed on 12 April 2024)

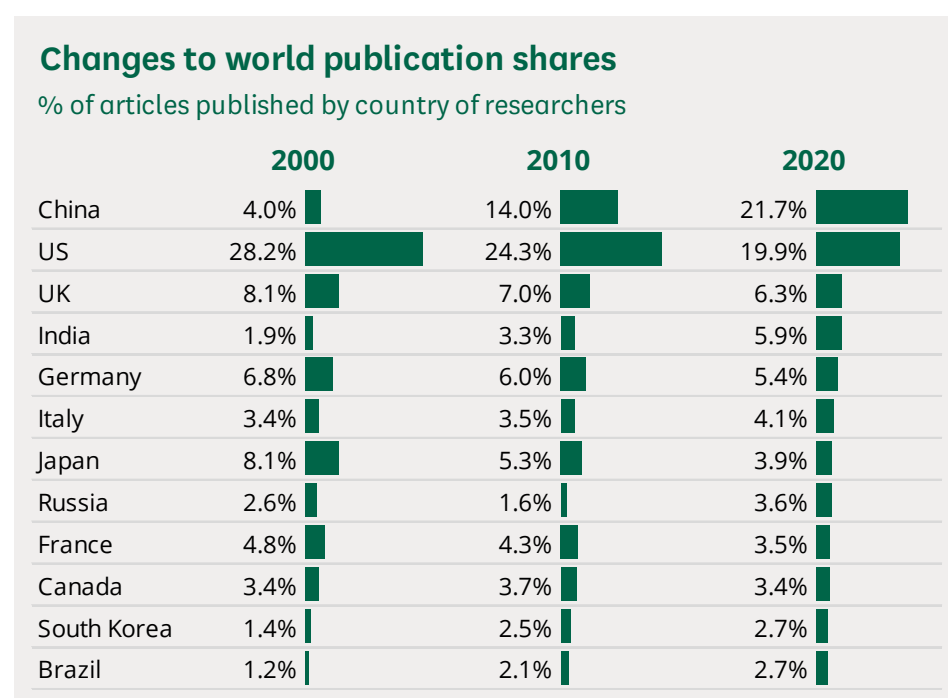
## 5.2

## How does the UK research base compare internationally?

The Government produces periodic updates on how the UK's research output compares to other European countries. The last report was published in 2022 and shows the annual count of research publications is increasing, but this growth is not as fast as some other countries, leading to the UK's share of world publication counts slightly decreasing.<sup>86</sup> The report also shows that the UK's research base has a very high level of international collaboration, with nearly 60% of the UK's publications in 2020 co-authored with at least one non-UK researcher. This is the highest of any country in the G7. It has also increased by nearly 10% over the period 2016 to 2020.

The report states that UK researchers published 225,595 articles in 2020. The UK has ranked third behind the US and China in total publications since 2005. The number of publications from UK researchers increased at an average rate of 1.3% between 2016 and 2020. However, the UK's share of world publications has fallen due do faster growth elsewhere.

The charts below illustrate the growth of China's share of world publications. In 2020 it overtook the US as the largest source of publications. The UK retained its third place in 2020 despite rapid growth in publications by Indian researchers.



Source: DSIT, [International comparison of the UK research base, 2022](#)

<sup>86</sup> Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [International comparison of the UK research base](#), May 2022

## International research collaborations

A key part of the UK's research strength is its international collaborations. In particular, the UK has historically worked closely with partners in Europe through the different iterations of the EU's Horizon research and innovation programme. The Horizon programmes run for seven-year periods and the latest, Horizon Europe, has a budget of €95.5 billion and runs from 2020 until 2027.<sup>87</sup>

The decision to withdraw from the EU led to a period of prolonged uncertainty regarding participation in the Horizon Europe programme. In September 2023, it was announced UK researchers would be once again able to apply for grants and bid to take part in projects under the Horizon programme, with the UK participating as a fully associated member for the remaining life of the programme to 2027.<sup>88</sup> The UK will also be able to join the governance of EU programmes and UK researchers will be able to lead consortia in the next work programme of Horizon Europe projects.

More information is available in the Commons Library briefing [UK participation in EU programmes: Horizon Europe and Copernicus](#).

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<sup>87</sup> European Commission, [Horizon Europe](#)

<sup>88</sup> Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology, [UK joins Horizon Europe under a new bespoke deal](#), 7 September 2023

## 6 Global ranking systems

International university ranking systems have become more numerous, sophisticated, and influential in recent years. The first global ranking system, the Shanghai Ranking, was launched in 2003, but it is estimated there are currently over 20 different international university rankings systems.<sup>89</sup> The five major rankings systems are:

- [Academic Ranking of World Universities \(ARWU\)](#), which is the successor to the Shanghai Ranking
- [Times Higher World Rankings](#)
- [QS World University Rankings](#)
- [Webometrics Ranking of World Universities](#)
- [U-Multirank System](#)

While each ranking system differs, as the table below shows, all feature some form of quantitative metric of research performance. Reputation is also a factor in the Times Higher system and will be a driver of the visibility component of the Webometrics system.

The first four of these rankings – the ARWU, Times Higher, QS, and Webometrics systems – produce a combined, weighted score across different areas of performance and then use these scores to produce a flagship overall table of their highest ranked universities. This is produced alongside a series of other rankings related to varying factors such as subject or region. The emphasis on research, as well as the role played by reputation, mean that that a certain group of universities with strong global reputations and high levels of research intensity tend to dominate in these ranking systems.

The U-Multirank system is the most diverse of the systems. The weighting system is complex, but it does not feature reputation so overtly and places research alongside other factors more equally. Unlike the other four systems, which produce a university league table, the U-Multirank methodology looks at the scores of universities on individual indicators and places these in five performance groups (“very good” through to “weak”).

The table below compares the criteria and – where relevant – weighting by which each ranking is constructed.

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<sup>89</sup> E. Hazelkorn, [Are Rankings \(Still\) Fit for Purpose?](#), in H. van't Land and others (eds), *The Promise of Higher Education* (2001), pp293-299

Ranking System	Number of universities	Criteria for ranking	Weighting (%)
Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)	1,800	Alumni who win Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	10
		Staff who win Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	20
		Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories	20
		Papers published in Nature and Science	20
		Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-expanded and Social Sciences Citation Index	20
		Per capita academic performance of an institution	10
Times Higher World Rankings	1,200	Teaching	30
		Research	30
		Citations	30
		International outlook	7.5
		Industry income	2.5
QS World University Rankings	1,500	Academic reputation	40
		Faculty/Student Ratio	20
		Citations per faculty	20
		Employer reputation	10
		International faculty ratios	5
		International student ratios	5
Webometrics Ranking of World Universities	30,000	Visibility (number of links to institution's webpages)	50
		Excellence (number of paper citations)	40
		Transparency (number of citations from top 310 cited researchers)	10
U-Multirank System	2,200	General	12 indicators
		Teaching and Learning	27 indicators
		Research	14 indicators
		International Orientation	22 indicators
		Regional Engagement	12 indicators
		Knowledge Transfer	12 indicators

The focus on research and reputation in global university rankings has led some to criticise their worth, especially when they influence the policies of governments and universities.<sup>90</sup>

Criticisms regarding the narrowness of some rankings systems has led to the production of a wider range of international rankings, which attempt to gauge the performance of higher education providers in different ways. The Times Higher, for example, now produces rankings that measure performance by global region, against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and by the age of the university.<sup>91</sup>

## 6.1 UK performance in global ranking systems

The table below shows how the UK performed in 2023 in the first four of the ranking systems described above.

Universities in the top 50 of selected ranking systems, by region of university				
	UK	USA	Europe	Other
Times Higher	7	23	9	11
QS World University Rankings	8	16	7	19
Academic Ranking of World Universities	7	28	4	11
Webometrics	5	34	1	10

Sources: [Times Higher World Rankings](#); [Academic Ranking of World Universities](#); [QS World University Rankings](#); [Webometrics Ranking of World Universities](#)

The number of universities in the top 50s for the UK ranges from five to eight, while there is a greater spread in rankings for the USA, Europe, and those from the rest of the world. In terms of the latter, these universities are drawn from China, Australia, Canada, and Japan. None are drawn from South America or Africa.

The UK universities that feature in the rankings are all members of the [Russell Group, a group of 24 research-intensive UK universities](#). As noted above, research performance is a key metric in the main international university rankings. The eight UK universities to feature in the rankings are:

<sup>90</sup> E. Hazelkorn, [Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education. The Battle for World-Class Excellence](#), 2015

<sup>91</sup> Times Higher Education, [About THE's rankings](#), last updated 4 January 2024

- University of Cambridge
- University of Oxford
- Imperial College
- University College London (UCL)
- University of Edinburgh
- London School of Economics (LSE)
- King's College London
- University of Manchester

## 7

## Conclusion

On certain metrics, and where there is data available, the UK compares favourably with many other nations. UK universities have a relatively high degree of autonomy, student completion rates at undergraduate level are the highest in the OECD, and approaches to widening access and participation, based as they are around outcome-related plans and agreements, compare very favourably with how the vast majority of countries approach this issue. The UK's most renowned universities also perform well in terms of research, which acts as a platform for high positions in the major global university ranking systems.

These facts are all interesting because the UK, and especially England, is distinctive in how it organises and co-ordinates its higher education system:

- England, Scotland, and Wales are among the small number of countries in the OECD which have an arms-length co-ordinating body between the state and higher education providers.
- The UK also has one of the least diverse higher education systems in terms of institutional type of any of the richer countries in the world.
- The level of public investment in the higher education system in England (excluded publicly funded student loans) is also the lowest in the OECD.
- England, Wales, and Northern Ireland continue to base admissions to higher education for most undergraduate students on qualifications obtained after application to universities and offers of places are made.

It is important to recognise there are alternative ways of delivering aspects of higher education and they can also have potential strengths. For example, this briefing outlines different approaches to tuition fees and student finance systems. As the discussion regarding how to fund higher education in the UK remains one of concern to many, understanding how this issue is tackled in other countries becomes increasingly important. Similarly, if policy makers hope to strengthen 'vocational routes' at 16, it must be acknowledged that where such strong routes exist in other countries, the schooling system is organised along differentiated academic/vocational lines, and this then feeds into a higher education system with more vocationally orientated providers.

The briefing also sets out how the global higher education context within which the UK is operating is changing. It is clear the future growth in higher education student numbers will be heavily skewed toward the global south, and in particular Asia. As the UK is one of the most internationally engaged higher education systems in the world, with significant numbers of



international students and trans-national partnerships, understanding this context is vital.

Finally, the role of higher education rankings is continuing to grow in importance across the world. While there is an increasing recognition of the limitations of rankings systems too biased toward particular institutional characteristics, it is important this issue is fully acknowledged if they are to be used as a tool to guide policy.

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