



United Kingdom

This report describes the structure of the national higher education system in the United Kingdom, focusing on the institutional types as defined by national categories. It builds on the former Eurydice Reports on the higher education systems of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but complements it with quantitative information on the role of higher education institution (HEI) types in national systems, based on data derived from the European Tertiary Education Register (<http://www.eter-project.eu>) for the period 2011-2020.

Types of Higher Education Institutions

According to Eurydice¹, we can identify the following main types of HEIs:

- Universities
- University colleges
- Other publicly funded higher education providers (not included in ETER)
- Alternative providers

Universities and other directly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) are autonomous, independent organisations, with their own legal identities and powers, both academic and managerial. Although they are dependent on government funding, they are not owned or managed by the state. They are government-dependent private institutions. Higher education is also provided by government-independent private institutions, termed 'Alternative Providers'. The growth in Alternative providers began as a result of government policy aspirations to meet the increased and differentiated demand for higher education. University colleges (England and Wales only) must be registered with the Office for Students (OfS), continue to satisfy its ongoing conditions of registration, and have obtained degree awarding powers (DAPs) to grant taught awards and research awards. Providers applying for the right to use 'university' title must, in addition, have a specified percentage of full-time equivalent students who are on courses at Level 6 or above on the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (FHEQ). Note that with the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, a major change in UK higher education occurred, mainly characterised by the abolition of the "binary divide" between universities and polytechnics, and the polytechnics and the Scottish central institutions all became universities.

¹https://web.archive.org/web/20220316112013/https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/national-description_en

Main institutional characteristics. Legal status and the right to award a PhD

Table 1 below provides a quantitative overview on the main institutional characteristics by HEI type. As mentioned in the previous section, one specific characteristic of the HE system in the United Kingdom (UK) is that Universities (and here also University colleges) are legally private institutions, but mostly government-dependent (only one University and one University college is fully private). In total about two thirds of all institutions (162) are Universities or University colleges. About one third of all institutions (95) are Alternative providers. All of them are fully private. While all Universities have the right to award PhDs, none of the Alternative providers is PhD awarding. Around 20% of the University colleges are also allowed to award PhDs. Thus, they usually concentrate on education for the job market and do not focus so much on the academic realm.

Table 1. Institutional type and legal status by HEI type, 2020

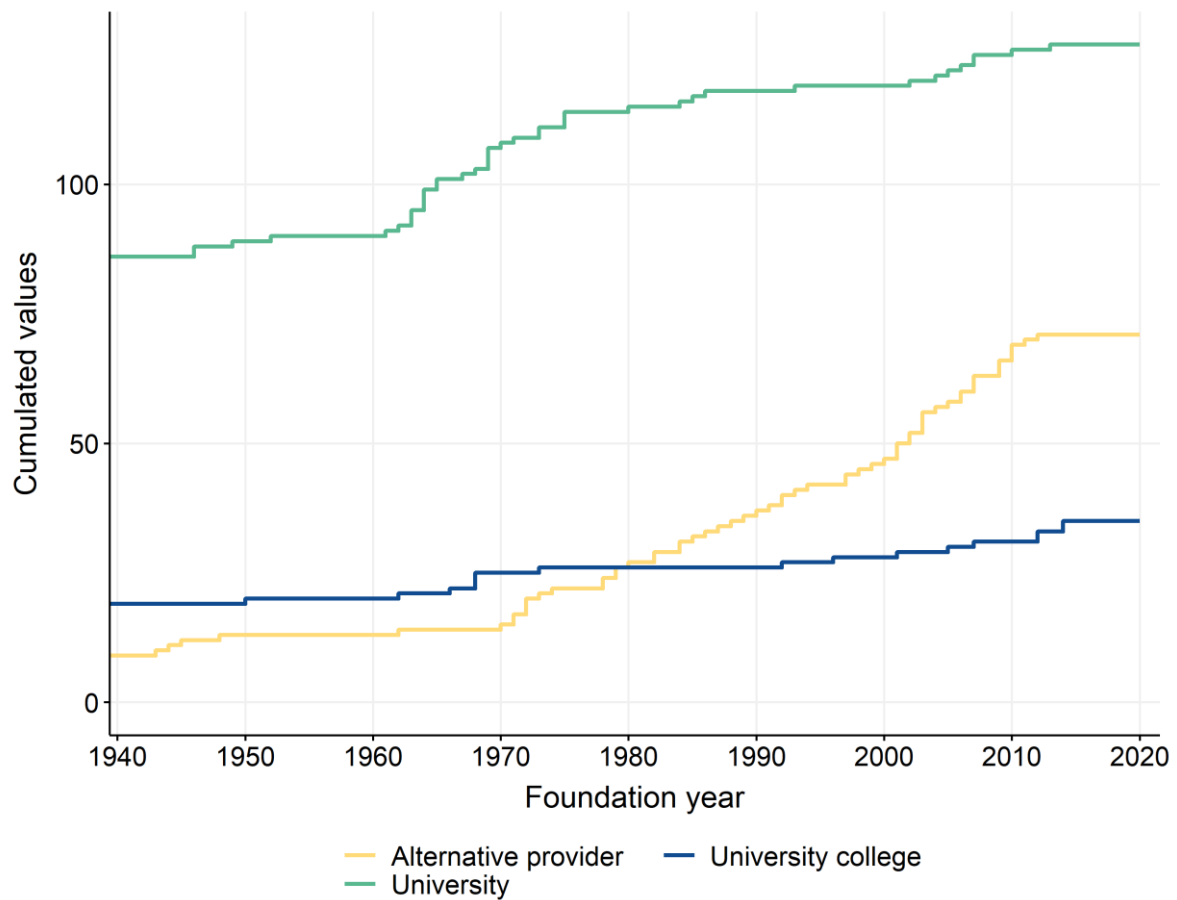
| Category | N | Private | Private government-dependent | PhD awarding |
|----------------------|-----|---------|------------------------------|--------------|
| Alternative provider | 95 | 95 | 0 | 0 |
| University | 127 | 1 | 126 | 127 |
| University college | 35 | 1 | 34 | 8 |
| Total | 257 | 97 | 160 | 135 |

Note: Numbers reflect inclusion in ETER

Institutional history. Older and younger institutional types

Data on the HEI foundation year provide information on the history of the United Kingdom's higher education and its evolution over time. Figure 1 overleaf shows the evolution of the number of institutions by type of HEI. As well known, one of the oldest universities in the world, the University of Oxford, is located in the United Kingdom dating back to 1096. The majority of both the Universities and the University colleges were established before 1940. While only very few additional University colleges have been established after 1940, we find a steady increase in the number of University foundations after 1960. After 1992 a further increase related to the upgrading of University colleges in the context of the important *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* is visible. Not surprisingly, Alternative providers are rather recent phenomena (at least as compared to Universities and University colleges) whose number of institutions has steeply increased starting in the 1970s until 2010. This is related to an increased and differentiated demand in the education system.

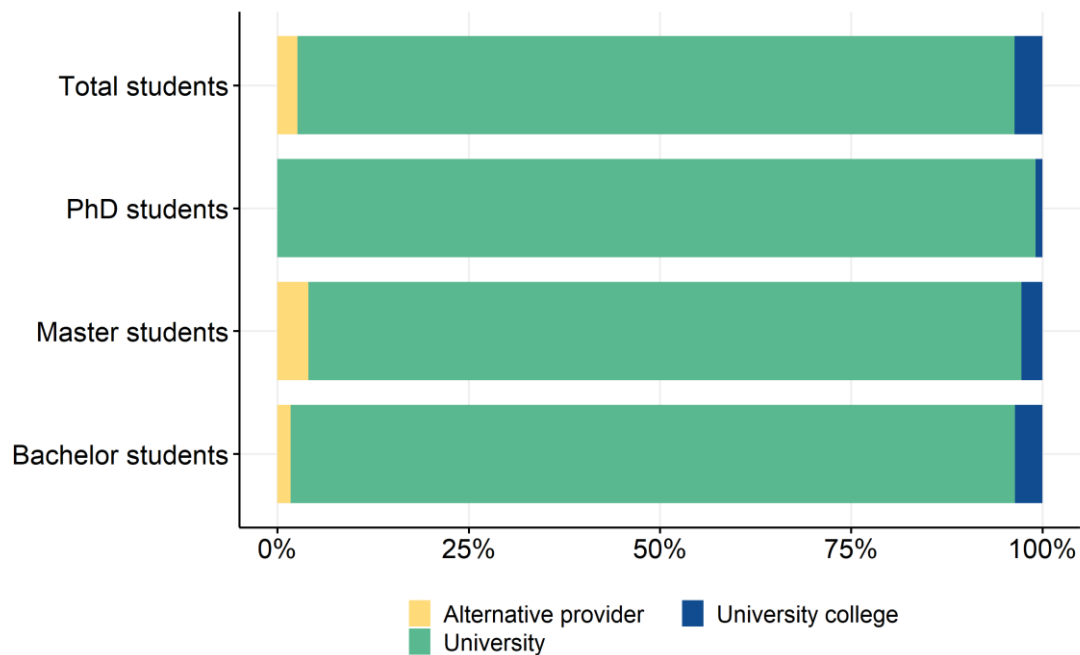
Figure 1. Foundation year of HEIs by type



Students

Figure 2 provides an overview on the number of students enrolled, disaggregated by ISCED level across the main institutional types. The vast majority of students are enrolled in Universities. Although Universities account for just around 50% in terms of the number of institutions, they almost account for 94% of total students, and nearly 100% of all PhD students. Interestingly, Alternative providers enrol more students at the master level than University colleges, while the opposite is the case for bachelor students. However, there are only 35 University colleges, which is about a third of all Alternative providers. Thus, the number of students per institution is clearly the lowest for Alternative providers.

Figure 2. Students by level and type of HEI, 2020



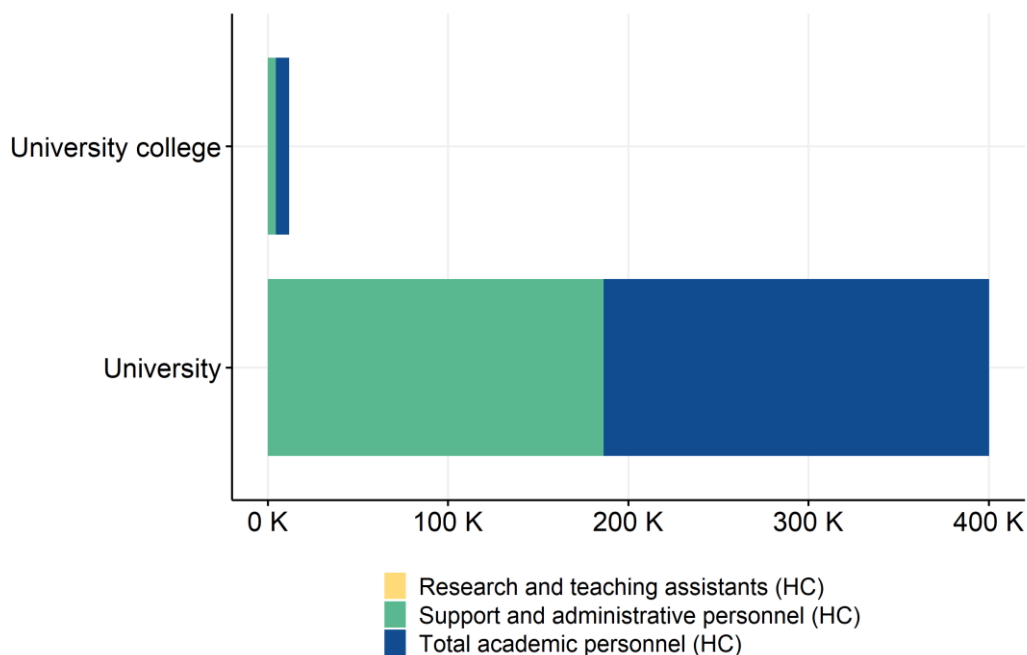
Note: Total students include ISCED 5-7; Data on Alternative providers partly missing

Personnel

People are a core resource for HEIs, as their competences are essential for teaching, undertaking research and producing scientific output. In that respect, ETER provides a rich set of data moving beyond the information available in EUROSTAT, which allows to analyze the composition of personnel by type of HEI and characteristics such as gender, nationality, educational field and, from 2020 onwards, levels of seniority.

As shown by Figure 3, there are major differences between HEIs in size, as measured by total personnel in full time equivalents (FTE). The 127 Universities combined employ over 330,000 FTE. With an average of about 3,000 FTEs. They are significantly larger than University colleges which have an average of about 350FTEs. For both Universities and University colleges slightly more than 50% of personnel is classified as academic personnel (including research and teaching assistants) while just under 50% are support and administrative personnel. Personnel data for Alternative providers is mostly missing.

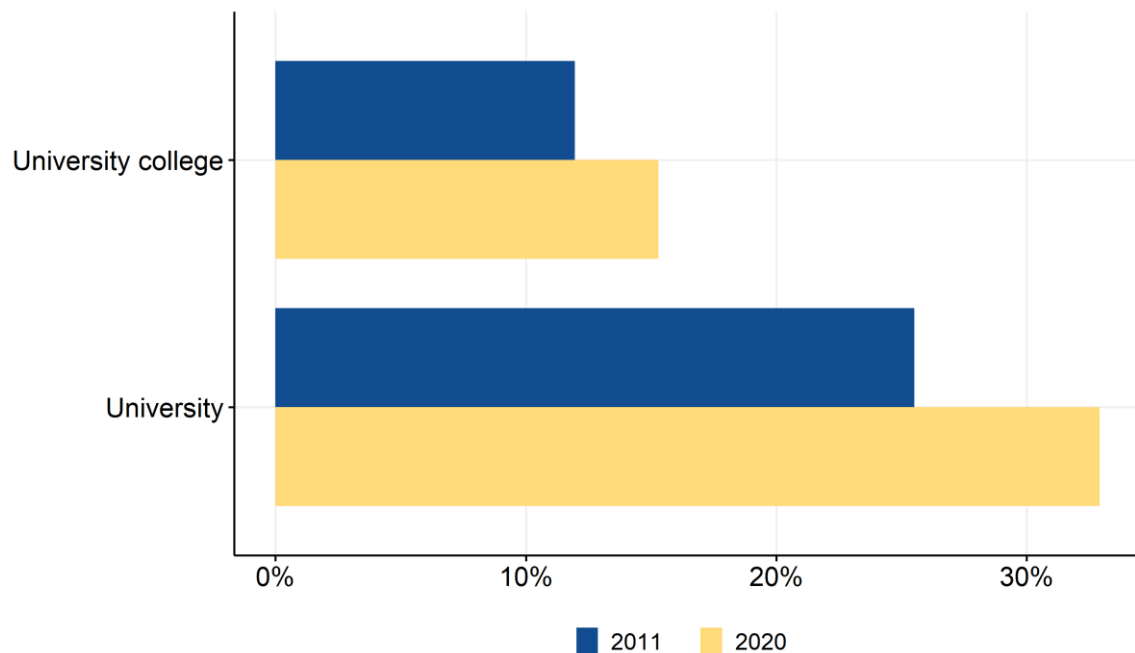
Figure 3. Personnel (FTE) by category and type of HEI, 2020



Note: RTA included in academic staff, data are not available separately

Another important dimension is internationality since it is generally considered as beneficial for the quality of research and education. In ETER, this is measured by the share of academic personnel not having the citizenship of the country ('foreigners'). As shown by Figure 4, the higher education system of the UK is characterized by a relative high level of internationality with about one third of foreign academic personnel working at Universities and about 15% of foreign academic personnel employed at University colleges in the year 2020. A significant increase over the last ten years can also be observed.

Figure 4. Share of foreign academic personnel (HC) by type of HEI, 2011 and 2020



Financial resources

Figure 5 underlines the results from the previous sections, showing that in the year 2020 Universities account for the vast majority not only in terms of students enrolled and academic resources, but also in terms of total revenues. Focusing on the composition of resources (Figure 6), Universities and University colleges show a quite similar pattern with the main income coming from student fees (around 50%). Third party funds are relatively more important than core funding for Universities, while for University colleges the opposite is the case.

Figure 5. Resources, academic personnel and total students enrolled by type of HEI, 2020

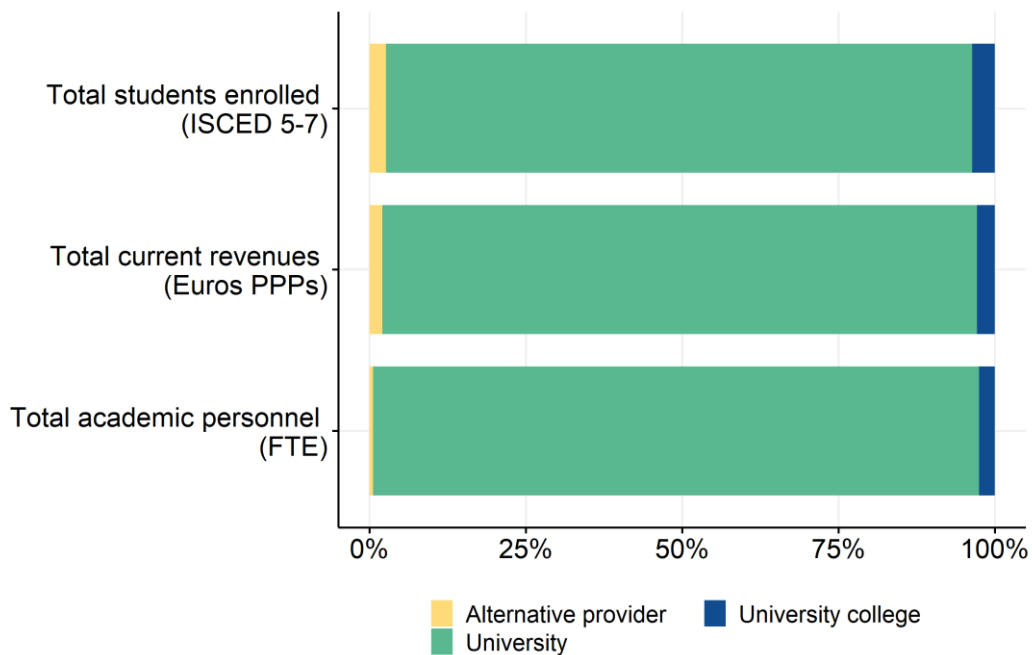
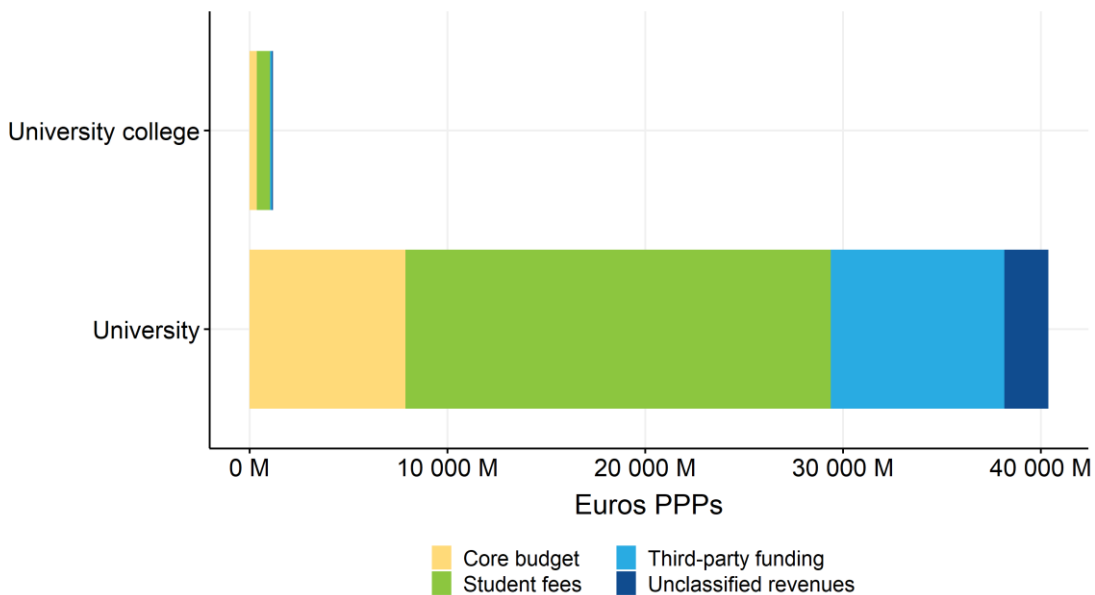


Figure 6. Composition of resources. Universities and University colleges, 2020

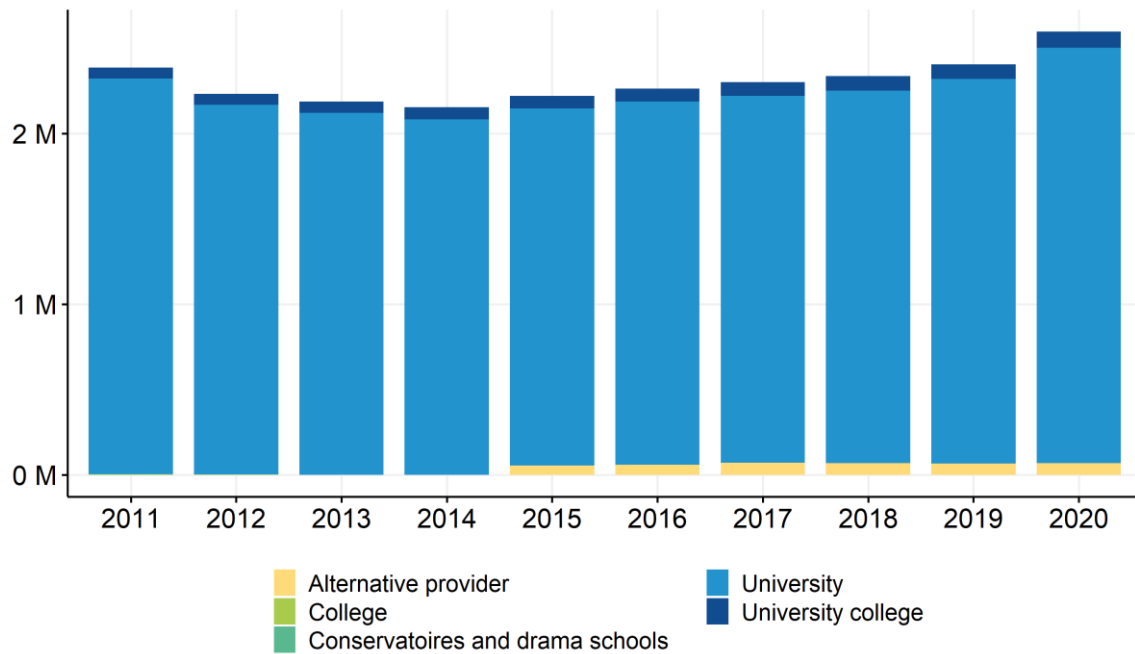


Changing roles over time

Figure 7 shows the development of the number of students over time. Notably, there has been a slight growth in the student body of about 9% from 2011 to 2020. However, examining the period between 2011 and 2020 in more detail, a slight decrease until 2014 can be observed, followed by an increase from 2015 onwards with

the highest growth from 2019 to 2020. Overall, the distribution between the different types is subject to very minor changes with about 94% to 97% of all students enrolled in Universities in all recent years.

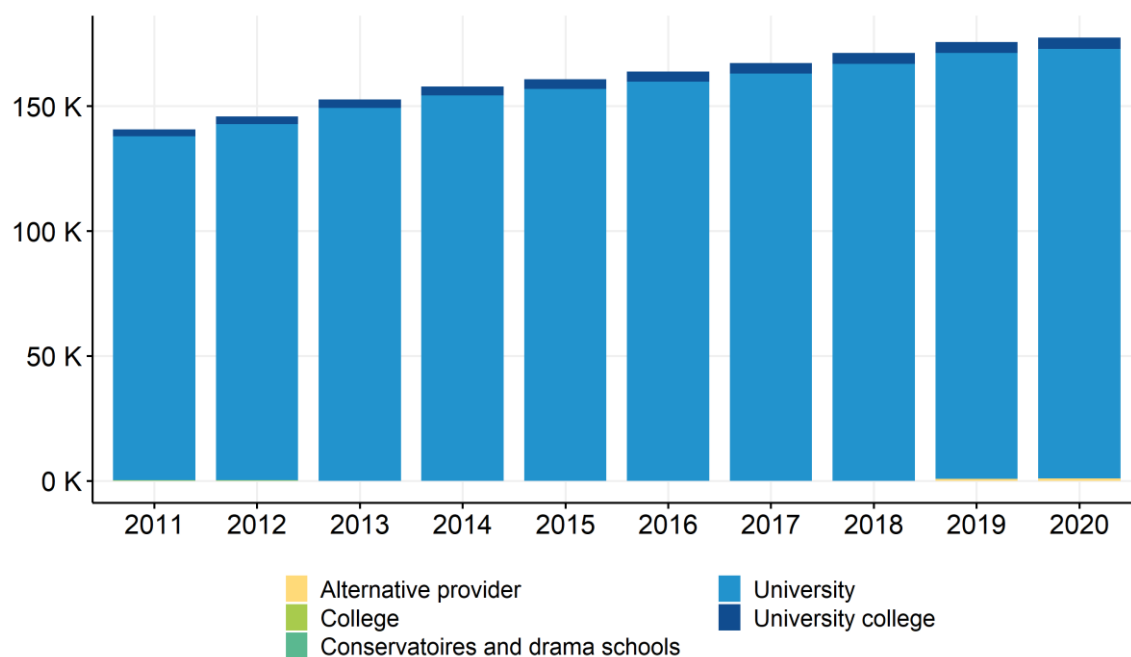
Figure 7. Students enrolled by type of HEI, 2011-2020



Note: Data on Alternative Providers partly missing

As shown by Figure 8, in contrast to the number of students, academic personnel increased constantly over the whole time period. Compared to the growth in the number of students, the rise in academic personnel was significantly larger increasing by around 26% from 2011 to 2020. However, as for students, the distribution between the different institutional types remained stable over the whole time period.

Figure 8. Academic personnel (FTE) by type of HEI, 2011-2020



Note: Data on Alternative Providers partly missing



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