



## 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 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 2011-2019.

### Types of Higher Education Institutions

According to Eurydice<sup>1</sup>, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/types-higher-education-institutions-91\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/types-higher-education-institutions-91_en), [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/types-higher-education-institutions-91\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/types-higher-education-institutions-91_en), [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/types-higher-education-institutions-94\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/types-higher-education-institutions-94_en), [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/types-higher-education-institutions-93\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/types-higher-education-institutions-93_en)

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

As mentioned in the previous section, one specific characteristic of the HE system in the UK is that Universities (and here also University Colleges) are legally private institutions, but mostly government-dependent (only one University and one University College 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, and all of them are fully private. In terms of PhD awarding, we can observe that none of the Alternative Providers is PhD awarding, but naturally all of the Universities are. Around 20% of the University Colleges are also allowed to award PhDs, so they usually concentrate on education for the job market and not so much for academic realm. Table 1 below provides a quantitative overview of the main institutional characteristics by HEI type. As mentioned in the previous section, one specific characteristic of the HE system in the UK is that Universities (and here also University Colleges) are legally private institutions, but mostly government-dependent (only one University and one University College 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, and all of them are fully private. In terms of PhD awarding, we can observe that none of the Alternative Providers is PhD awarding, but naturally all of the Universities are. Around 20% of the University Colleges are also allowed to award PhDs, so they usually concentrate on education for the job market and not so much for academic realm.

Table 1. Institutional type and legal status by HEI type, 2019

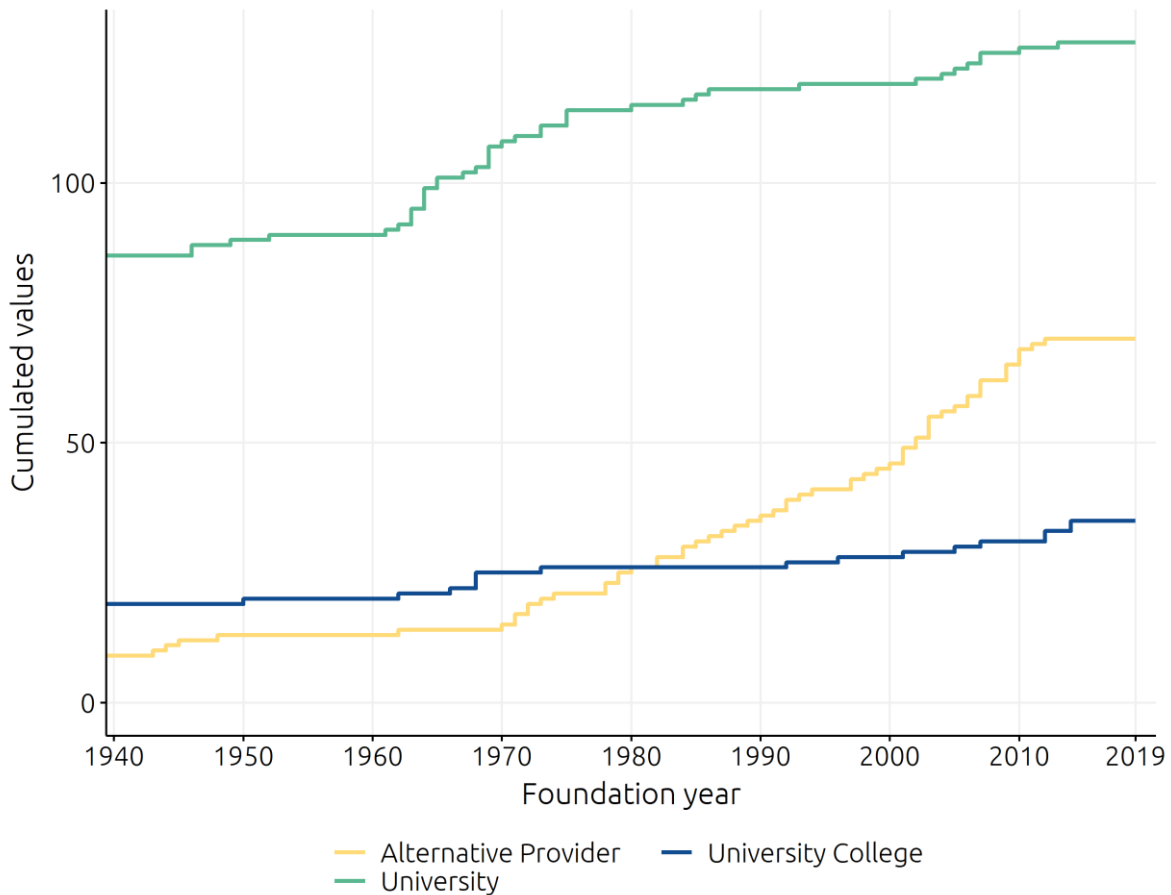
Category	N	Private	Private government-dependent	PhD awarding
Alternative Provider	95	95	0	0
University	127	1	126	127
University College	35	1	34	8
Total	257	97	160	135

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. As well known, UK has one of the oldest universities in the world, and accordingly the HE systems in the UK has deep historical roots. Figure 1 overleaf shows that The University of Oxford, the oldest British university, dates back to 1096. The majority of the Universities and also 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 establishments of Universities after 1960, and after 1992 a further increase related to the upgrading of University Colleges in the context of the important *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*. 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.

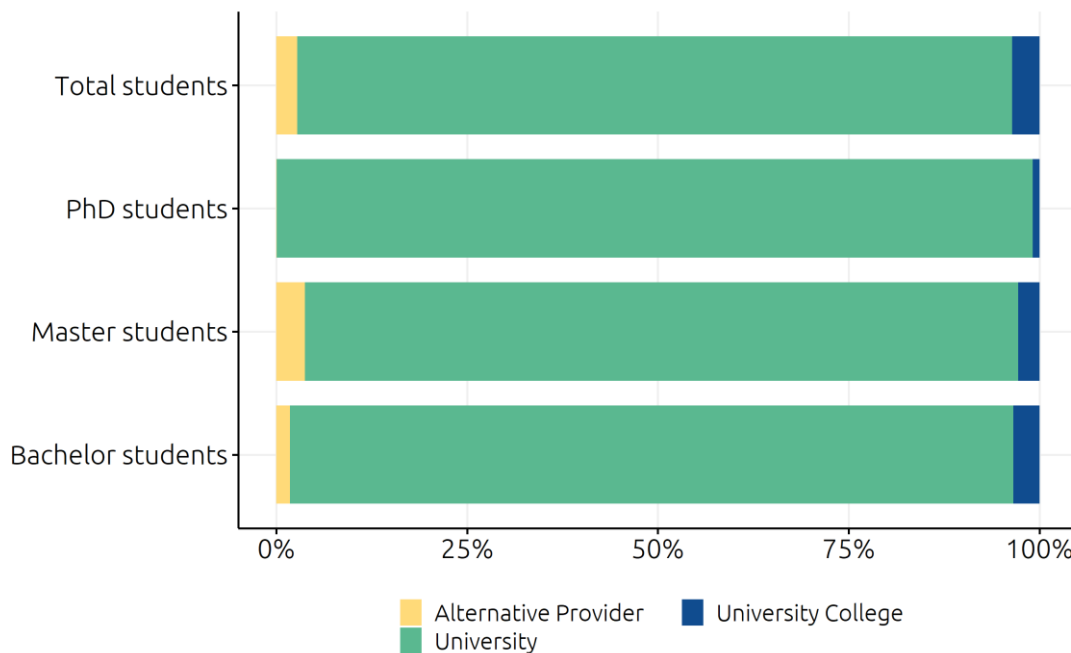
Figure 1. Foundation year of HEIs by type



### How are students distributed?

Figure 2 provides an overview of the number of students enrolled, disaggregated by ISCED level across the main institution types. The vast majority of students is enrolled in Universities. Although Universities account for just around 50% in terms of the number of institutions, they almost account for 95% of total students, and nearly 100% of all PhD students. University Colleges and Alternative Providers account for very low shares. Interestingly, Alternative Providers enroll 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, 2019

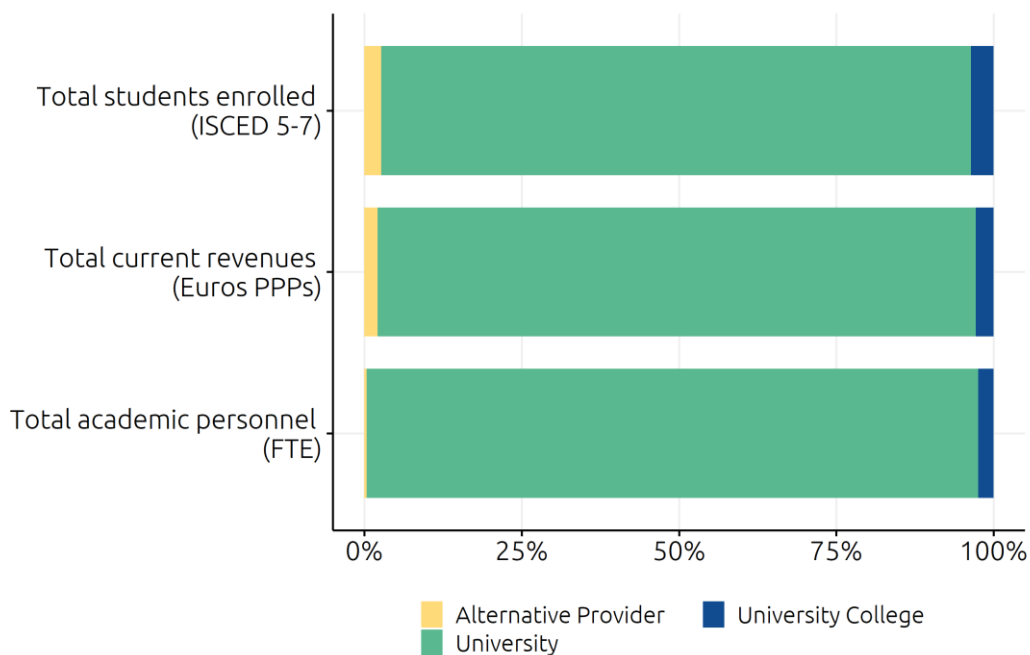


Note: Total students include ISCED 5-7; Data on Alternative Providers partly missing

### Academic personnel and financial resources

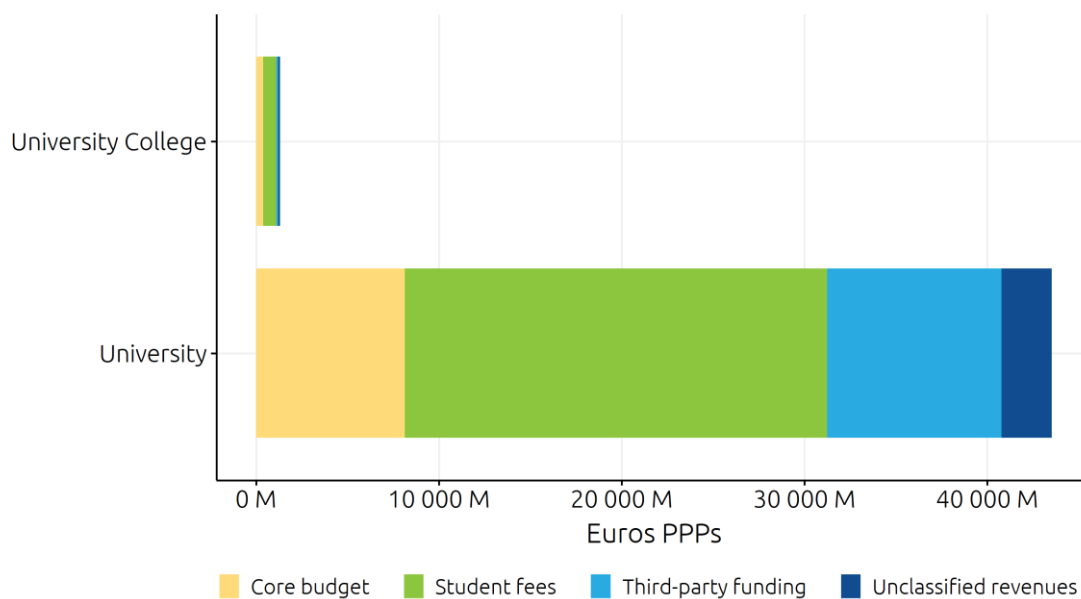
Figure 3 underlines the results from the previous section, showing that in the year 2019 Universities account for the vast majority not only in terms of students enrolled, but also in terms of total revenues and total academic personnel. Accordingly, the student to academic personnel ratio is not lower for universities (at least on average) than for Alternative Providers and University Colleges. Interestingly, Alternative Providers account for an extremely small share of academic personnel (0,42%). Thus, the students to academic personnel relation is lowest for this category. Since they are exclusively of private status, this may be related to the fact that they heavily draw on external education personnel. In terms of the composition of resources (Figure 4), Universities and University Colleges show a quite similar pattern in terms of shares of revenue, with the main income coming from student fees (around two third). Third party funds are relatively more important than core funding for Universities, while for University Colleges the opposite is the case.

Figure 3. Resources, academic personnel and total students enrolled by type of HEI, 2019



Note: Data on Alternative Providers partly missing

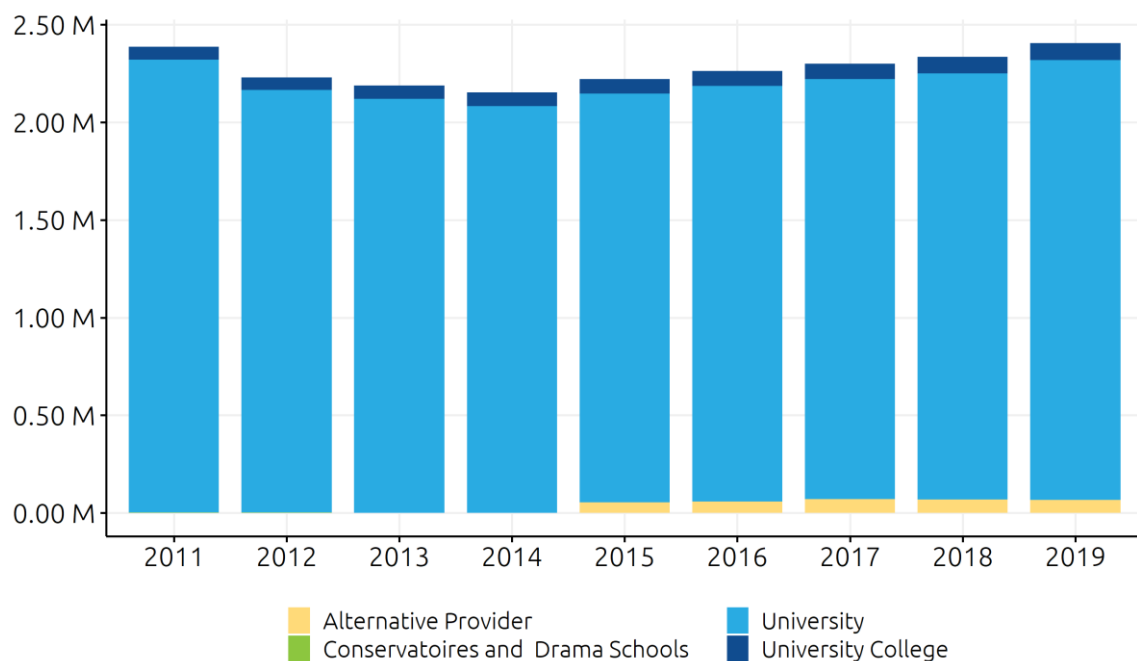
Figure 4. Composition of resources. Universities and University Colleges



## Changing roles over time

When observed through the lens of the number of students, data show a rather stable pattern over the observed time period, as the number of students in 2011 is almost at the same level as in 2019. However, in between we can first observe a slight decrease until 2014, and then an increase from 2015 onwards. This may partly be related to missing data, e.g. Alternative Providers are missing before 2015, to some extent explaining the total decline. The distribution between the different types is subject to very minor changes; the share of students enrolled at university colleges slightly increased in the last two years observed.

Figure 5. Share of students enrolled by institutional type



Note: Data on Alternative Providers partly missing



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