

The landscape for humanities and social sciences in higher education: the current picture

Key findings

- Enrolment in language higher education programmes has been in decline and has seen many departments close or downsize provision over the past 10 years. However, this is complemented by a steady rise in elective language courses as part of or alongside degrees.
- Some historical and philosophical subjects have seen declines in student numbers since 2012, particularly theology and religious studies and archaeology.
- Enrolment on education-related courses have been in decline since 2010-11 both in teacher training courses (largely the result of changes to how Initial Teacher Education is provided) but also other non-training-based education courses.
- Access to subjects like law and modern languages outside the most selective universities is narrowing. Provision of law courses has seen significant decline in post-92 institutions while it has seen growth in pre-92s. Continued provision of other humanities subjects may also be at risk in post-92s in the future if recruitment in pre-92s continues to expand.
- There is evidence of closures or downsizing of humanities departments, particularly modern languages but also in theology and religious studies. However, evidence is currently patchy and requires further investigation to get a more accurate picture.
- There are some regional differences in the spread of provision of humanities and social science subjects, but from the available evidence there are no obvious major gaps. Scotland does appear to have the healthiest provision of humanities and social science subjects, particularly in areas of national need such as modern languages.

Rationale and method

There have been concerns within the higher education sector and more widely about the health of subjects in the humanities and social sciences (HSS), particularly in terms of declining student numbers and the closure of departments at some institutions.

This report consists of a rapid analysis of student enrolment data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)¹ and student applications and acceptances data collected by the University and College Admissions Service (UCAS). Additionally, a quick review of available information on course and departmental closures is included. This information was obtained from various sources, mainly institution websites and online articles.

The analysis is focused on trends in student enrolment in the humanities and social sciences since 2012, with the aim of identifying which, if any, subjects may be at risk in the current and future environment of the UK higher education sector.

This evidence should not be considered comprehensive but provides a basis for identifying areas of interest for further research to examine potential issues and trends in more detail, work which the British Academy intends to carry out during 2018-19.

¹ Use of HESA data in this document is done so under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0). The data is available at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>

Further information about the data sources and definitions of terms used in this report can be found in Appendix A.

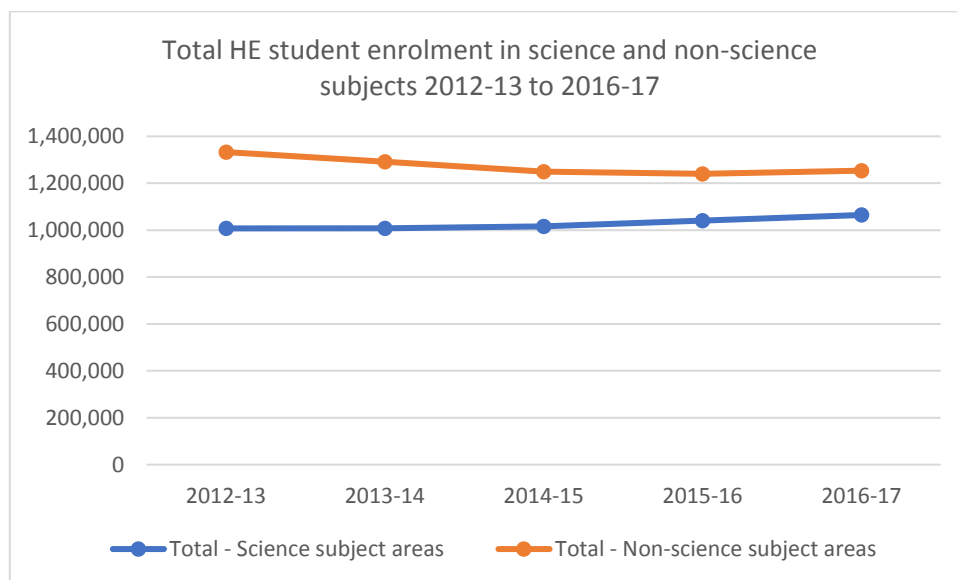
Student enrolment in the humanities and social sciences

Over the past five years, since the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees for first degrees, the sector has seen growth in full-time undergraduate student numbers, while overall student numbers have fallen because of a collapse in part-time study and large reductions in students taking other undergraduate programmes such as PGCEs, foundation degrees, HNCs and HNDs (see Appendix A).

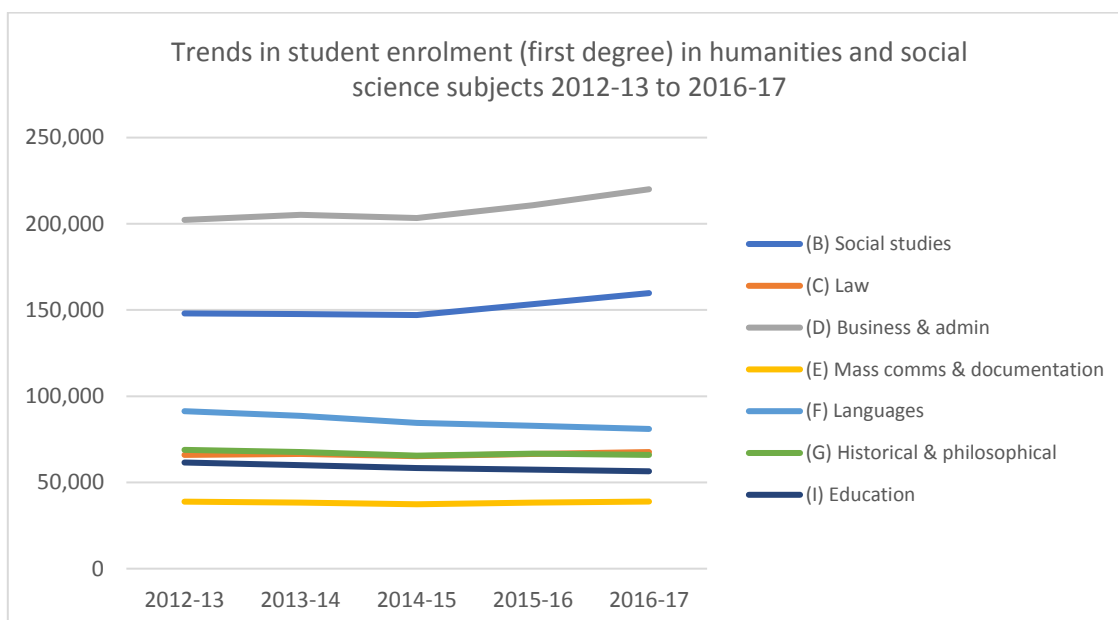
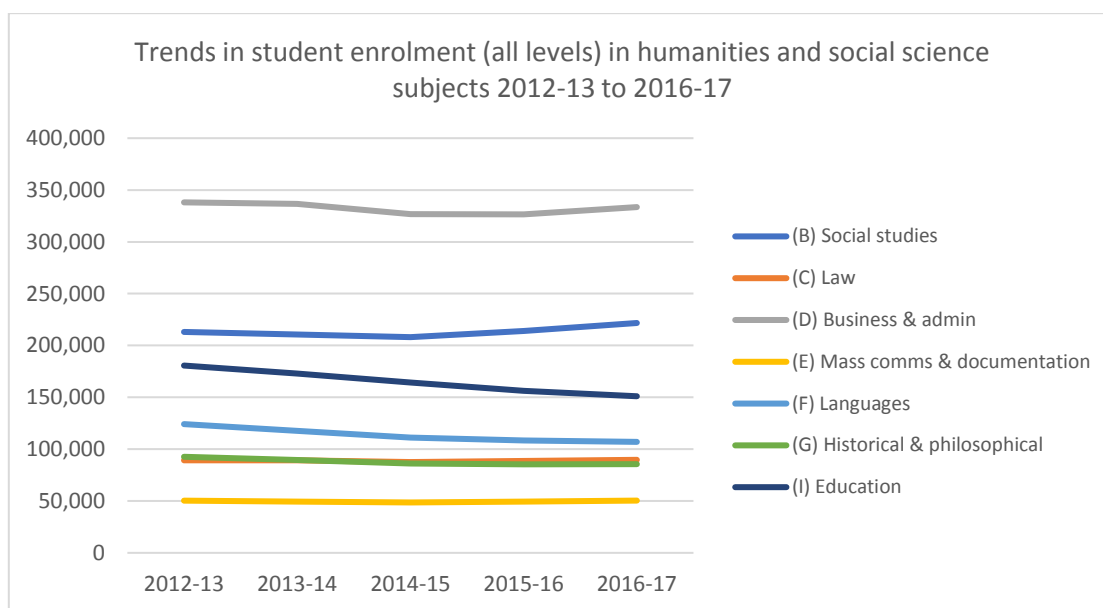
Both science and non-science subject areas have, overall, seen growth in undergraduate first degrees (i.e. bachelor's degrees) but the growth has been faster in science subjects, particularly computer science and biological sciences. Across all levels of study, non-science subjects have seen a decline overall since 2012, a loss of around 80,000 students. Much of this loss, however, is down to a drop of around 33,000 students in programmes identified as combined subject studies.

An analysis of HESA student enrolment figures suggests that student numbers in most humanities and social science subjects have largely held up over the past five years, particularly in undergraduate first degree and postgraduate research programmes. Social sciences and business & administration subjects have seen considerable growth in student numbers in their first degree programmes.

The main HSS subject areas in decline are languages, education, and parts of historical and philosophical studies. These subject areas have enrolment numbers which are considerably smaller than they were ten years ago.



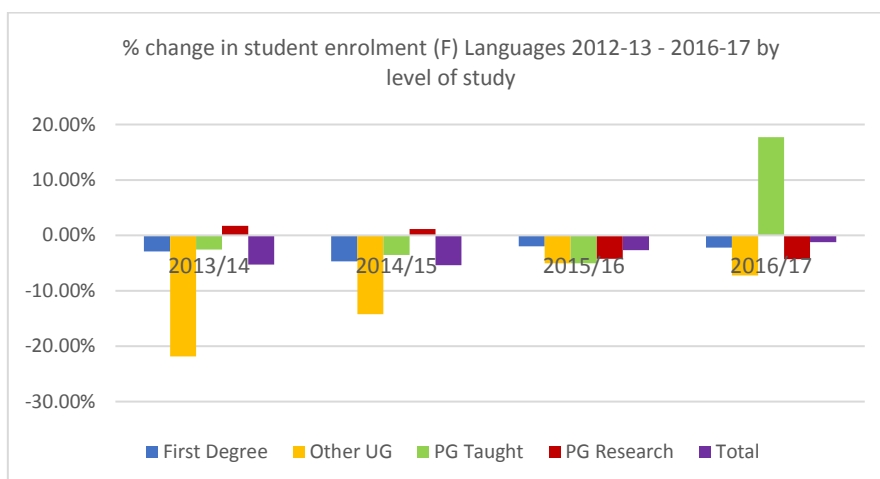
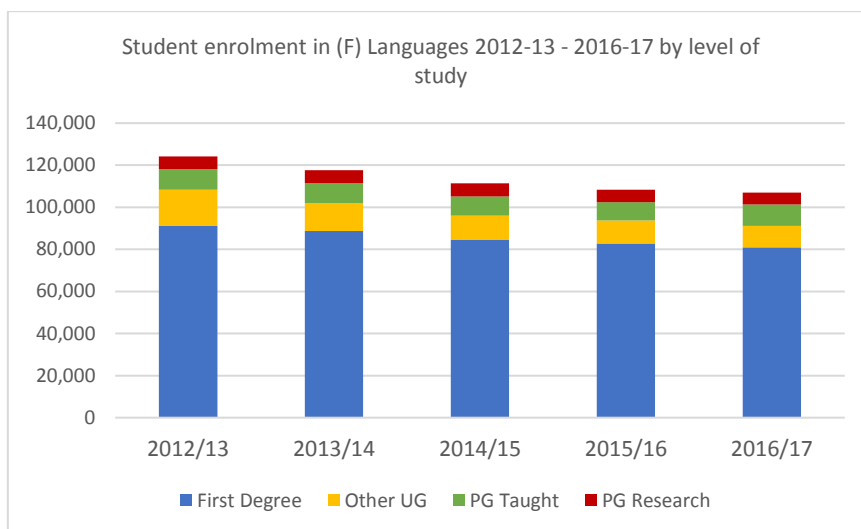
Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)



Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

Languages

Enrolment in language degrees has been in decline for several years, and particularly from 2012-13 onwards. Between 2012-13 and 2016-17, the overall number of students on undergraduate or postgraduate courses in languages fell by 13.8%. The only exception was in 2016-17, which saw a sudden sharp increase in postgraduate taught (PGT) student numbers. However, this follows a wider trend in increased PGT student enrolment resulting from the introduction of an income-contingent loan for taught master's degrees, and overall numbers across all levels of study are still lower than in 2015-16.



Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

Although there has been a decline in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in languages, higher education providers are filling this gap by expanding their provision of ‘institution-wide language provision’ (IWLP), which comprises elective language modules/courses either for academic credit as part of a degree or as a supplementary course alongside a degree. The latest survey by the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) and the Association of University Language Centres in the UK and Ireland (AULC) suggests a growing number of students are opting for these courses and provision within institutions is expanding. The survey revealed that, in 2016-17, there were 62,455 students enrolled on IWLP courses at 62 reporting institutions in the UK compared to 49,637 from 61 reporting institutions in 2012-13.²

Looking at language provision in more detail, the largest declines in both proportional and absolute terms are in modern European languages like French, German, Italian and Spanish. English studies, the largest subject in the languages field, has seen a 19.1% decline, which in absolute terms is around 12,000 fewer students in 2016-17 compared with 2010-11.

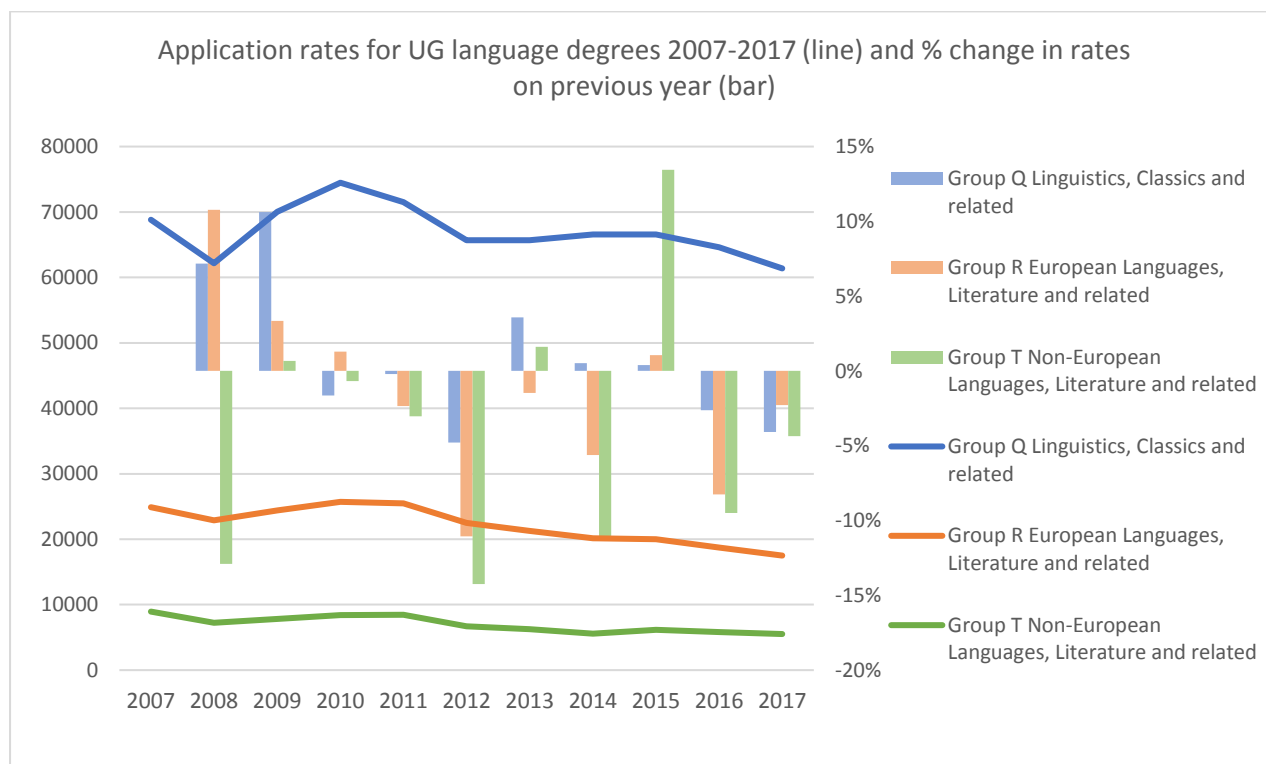
² http://www.aulc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/UCML_AULC_2016-2017.pdf

Classical Studies is one of the few subjects that has seen an increase in students, up 13.4% between 2010-11 and 2016-17. Linguistics has also seen an increase of 15.1%.

Selection of larger subjects in (F) Languages subject area	2010-11	2016-17	Difference	% change
(Q1) Linguistics	5,525	6,360	835	15.1%
(Q3) English studies	63,245	51,190	-12,055	-19.1%
(Q8) Classical studies	5,205	5,900	695	13.4%
(R1) French studies	11,300	6,215	-5,085	-45.0%
(R2) German studies	4,340	2,490	-1,850	-42.6%
(R3) Italian studies	2,960	1,110	-1,850	-62.5%
(R4) Spanish studies	8,875	5,600	-3,275	-36.9%
(T1) Chinese studies	1,870	1,420	-450	-24.1%
(T2) Japanese studies	1,540	1,240	-300	-19.5%
(T6) Modern Middle Eastern studies	1,810	1,225	-585	-32.3%
(T7) American studies	3,060	2,285	-775	-25.3%

Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

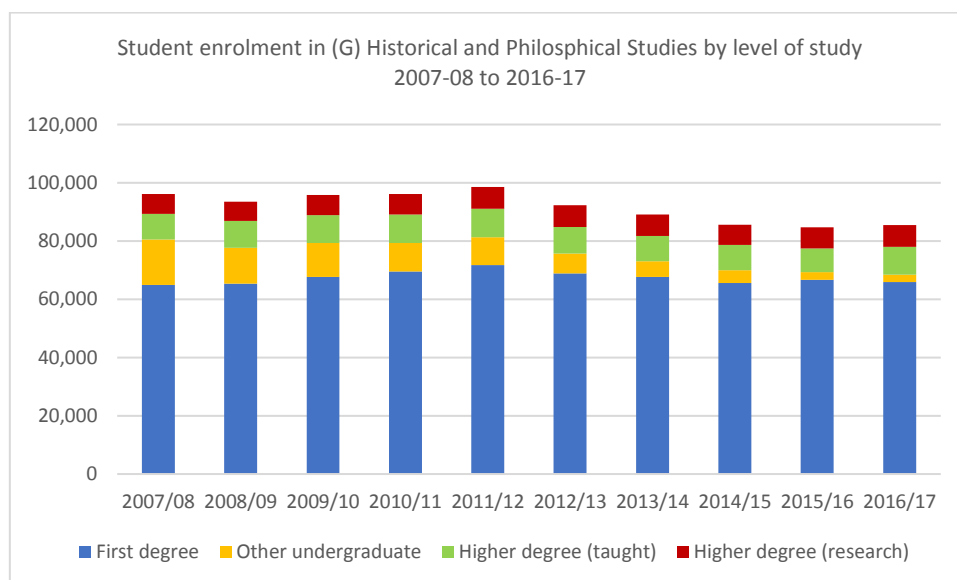
UCAS data on application rates to Language courses suggests that declining enrolment could be related to falling demand for the subjects, i.e. fewer people are applying to take the subject and so the recruitment pool is smaller. After a drop in applications around 2012, the year that £9,000 tuition fees were introduced, applications failed to pick back up in subsequent years. The declines in Group Q (Linguistics, Classics & related) and Group R (European Languages, Literature and related) applications appear to have accelerated in the past two years and may need to be monitored more closely.



Historical and Philosophical Studies

Overall, the category of historical and philosophical studies has seen a 13.8% fall in student numbers across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes between 2011-12 and 2016-17. The declines are concentrated in undergraduate programmes, with an 8.1% fall in first degree enrolment and a 73.6% fall in other undergraduate enrolment over the period. The dramatic fall in ‘other undergraduate’ enrolment (see Appendix A for definition) is part of a widespread decline in these programmes across all subjects and driven in part by the closure of many continuing education departments where many of these courses were provided as well as wider economic and market pressures that have led to falling rates of part-time and mature students.

In contrast, enrolment on postgraduate taught programmes, namely master’s degrees, has been sustained in 2016-17 by the introduction of the master’s loan scheme (previously they were in decline) while postgraduate research numbers have remained more-or-less static over the period.



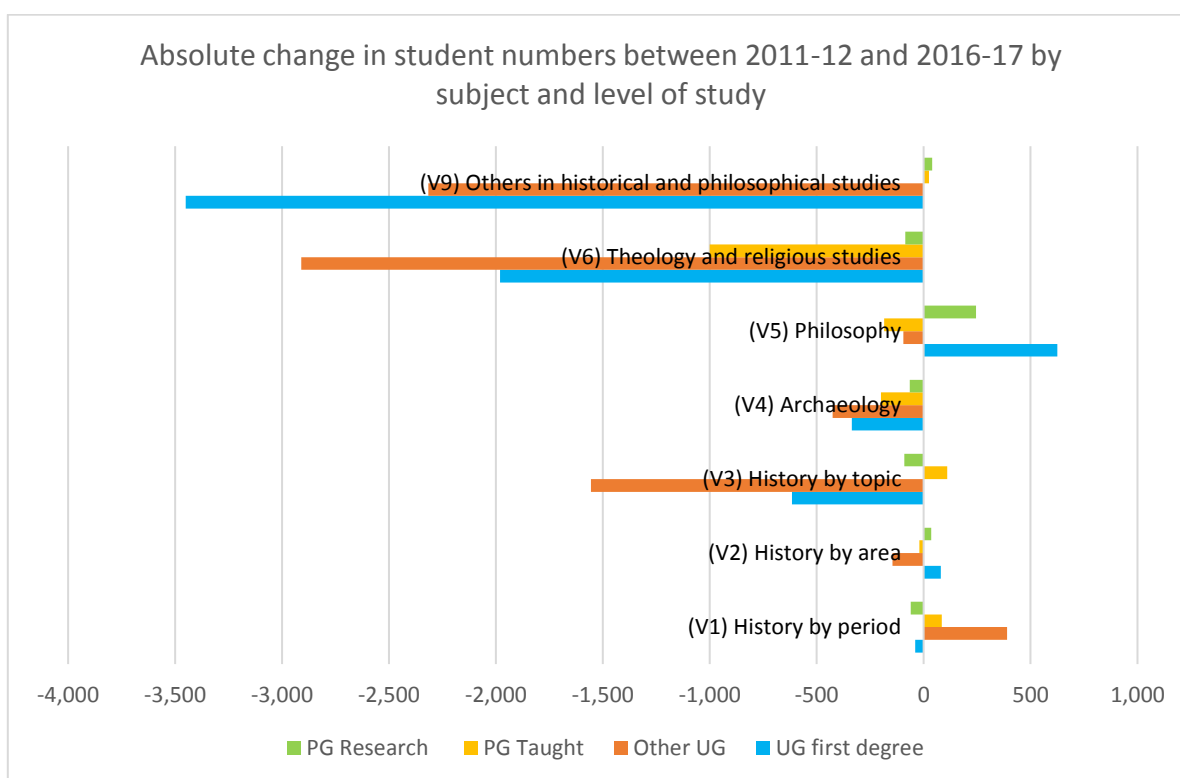
Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

Whilst most historical and philosophical subjects have seen declines in student numbers, there is some significant variance between subjects, suggesting that some ought to be monitored more closely. The sharp decline in the “Others in historical and philosophical study” appears to relate to the general fall in part-time student numbers, as the majority of students in this category study part-time. Other steep declines appear in Theology & Religious Studies, Archaeology, and History by topic. In contrast, both Philosophy and History by period – the largest subjects in the category – have seen small increases in student numbers overall.³

³ The comparison here is between 2011-12 and 2016-17 data. There may be some discrepancies in comparing students in subject areas due to changes in JACS (Joint Academic Coding System) codes in 2012-13. Heritage

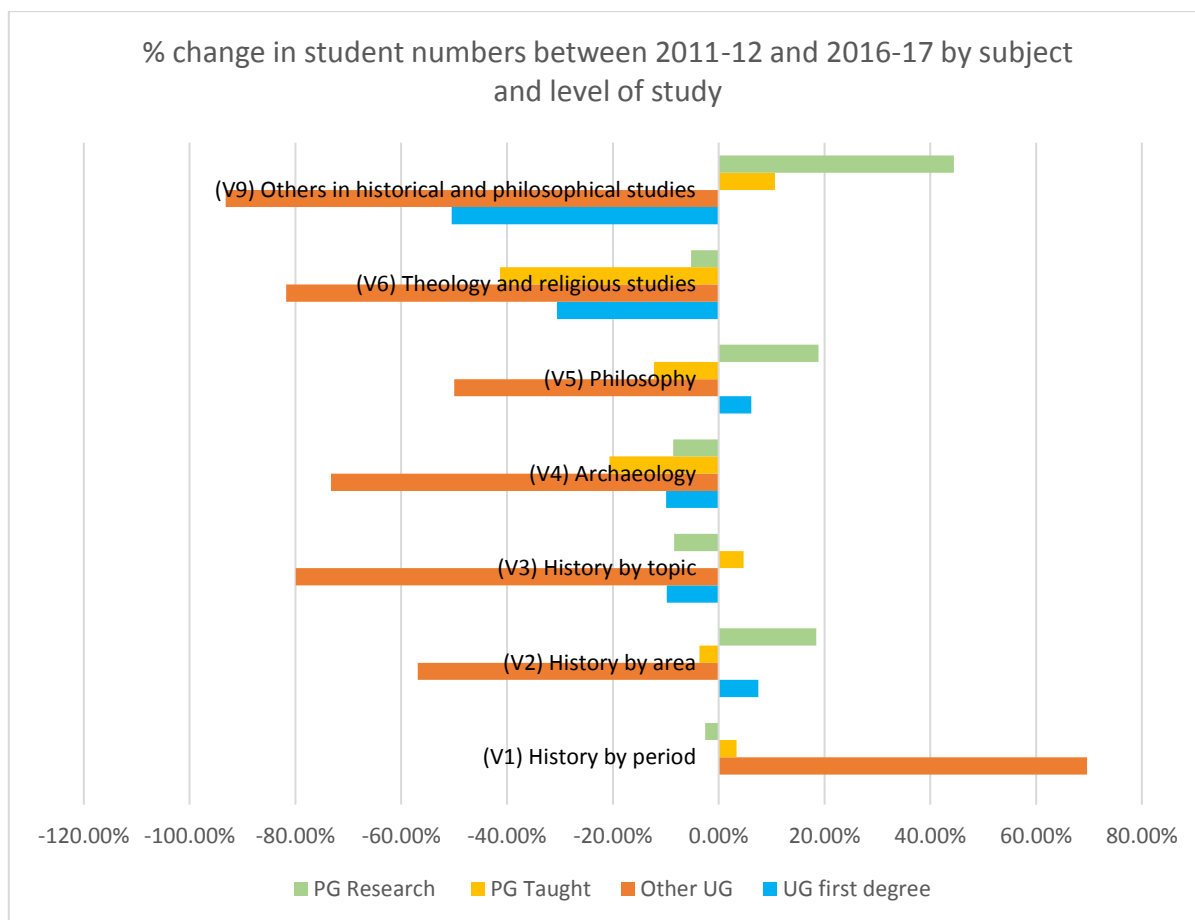
Student enrolment (all levels) on historical and philosophical courses 2011-12 and 2016-17	2011-12	2016-17	% change
Broadly-based programmes	390	300	-23.1%
History by period	42,525	42,895	0.9%
History by area	2,060	2,005	-2.7%
History by topic	11,620	9,470	-18.5%
Archaeology	5,680	4,645	-18.2%
Philosophy	13,170	13,770	4.6%
Theology & religious studies	14,080	8,115	-42.4%
Others in historical & philosophical studies	9,650	3,950	-59.1%

Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)



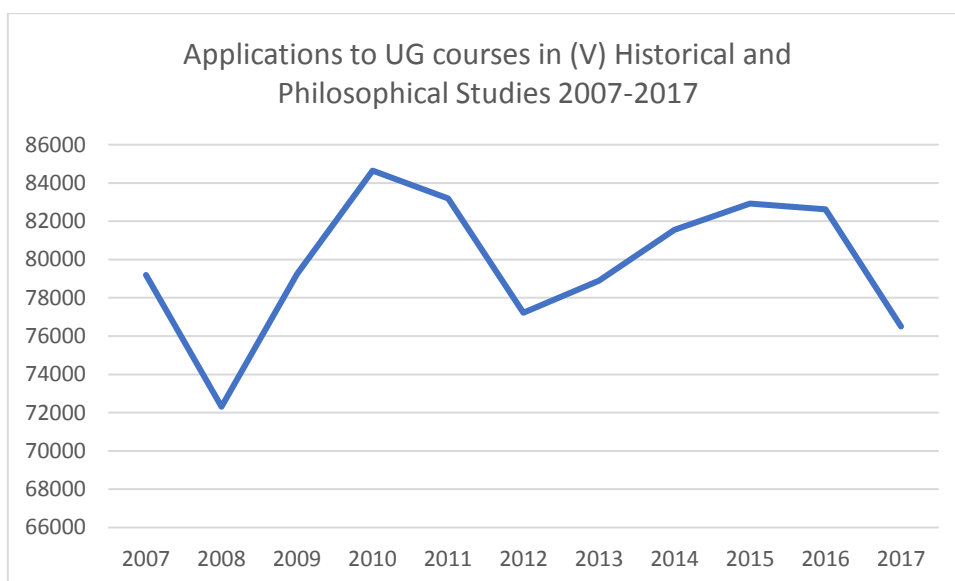
Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

studies became a separate subject area in 2012-13 and was subsequently omitted as it could not be accounted for in 2011-12. A total of 295 students were coded as studying heritage studies in 2016-17



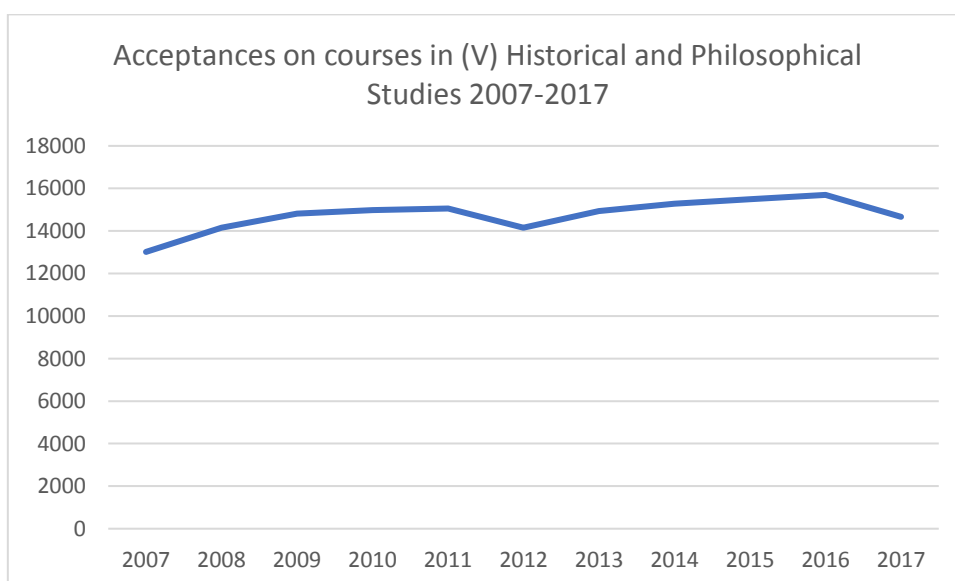
Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

An analysis of UCAS application data has revealed a double-dip in applications to historical and philosophical undergraduate programmes. A sharp fall in applications in 2012 corresponds to wider trends resulting from the introduction of £9,000 fees. Applications then picked up, returning to their 2011 level by 2015. However, a similarly large fall in applications was seen in 2017. Such a sudden, sharp fall was not apparent for other HSS subjects that year. This fall was largely down to a drop in applications from English, Welsh and Scottish students and therefore does not appear to be a consequence of the outcome of the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU.



Source: UCAS (2017) End of Cycle Report for 2017

Applications in the 2018 cycle for entry in 2018-19 appear to have continued to dip. As of the January 2018 cut-off, by which time most applications are made, applications to Historical and Philosophical studies were down 3% (2,330 applications) on the previous year.



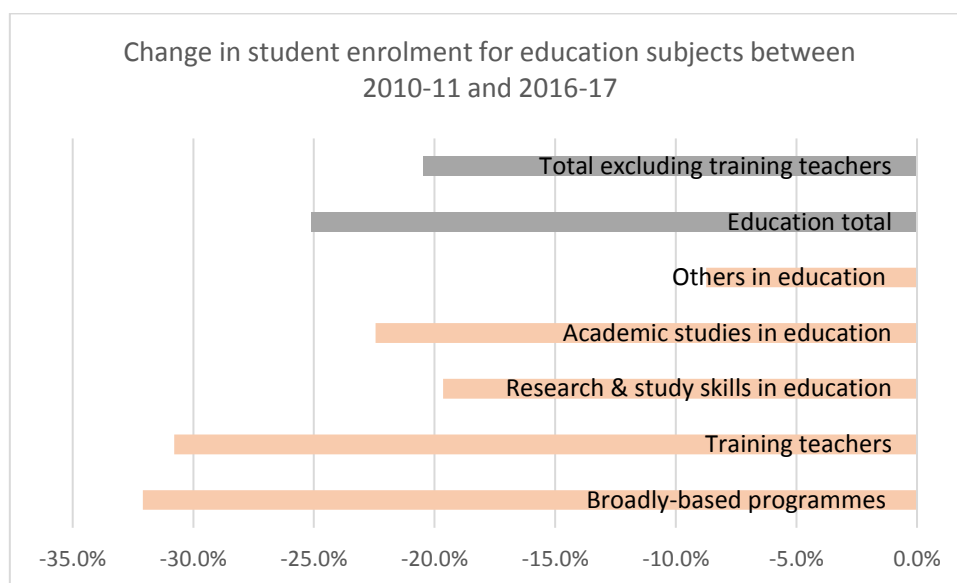
Source: UCAS (2017) End of Cycle Report for 2017

Acceptance rates on to courses have seen a gradual upward trend but were affected by the sharp fall in applications during the 2012 and 2017 cycle. Acceptance rates (the proportion of applicants being accepted on a course) have been similar over the period and since 2013 have remained at or around 19%.

Education

Enrolment on education related courses have been in decline since 2010-11 both in teacher training courses and other education courses. Between 2010-11 and 2016-17, enrolment on teacher training courses fell by 30.8% and by 20.4% in all other courses.

While Initial Teacher Training (ITT) first degree level courses saw declining numbers of around 20%, enrolment on non-ITT first degree level courses was up 11% between 2010-11 and 2015-16. There were declines of 50% or more in foundation and other undergraduate programmes for both ITT and non-ITT related courses in the same period.



Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

Institutional differences

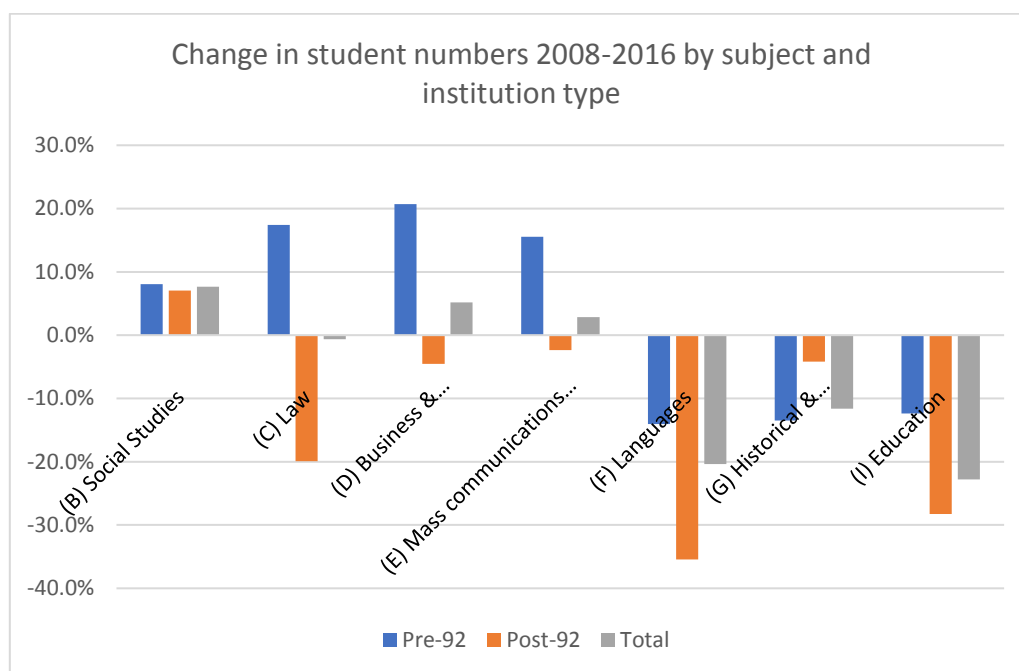
There is a clear difference in trends between pre-92 and post-92 universities. Overall, pre-92 institutions saw a much smaller decline in numbers of HSS students compared to post-92 institutions.

Pre-92 institutions saw just over a 1% (7,200) fall in HSS students overall compared with a 10% (51,440) fall in post-92 institutions between 2012-13 and 2015-16. In 2015-16, pre-92 institutions had 2.3% more students in HSS than they did in 2007-08 whereas post-92s had 12.2% fewer.

Within subjects, there are major differences too. In Law, the post-92 and pre-92 trends are moving in opposite directions: post-92 institutions recorded a 20% fall in student numbers between 2007-08 and 2015-16 compared with a 17.4% *increase* in enrolment at pre-92s. This may have profound implications on widening access, as the majority of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and the majority of black and minority ethnic (BAME) students are situated in post-92 institutions.

The differences in business and in mass communications subjects are less stark but in both areas, post-92s saw modest declines compared to significant increases in student numbers at pre-92s. Social studies subjects have held up in both types of institution.

In languages, education and philosophical subjects, declines in numbers are seen in both post-92 and pre-92 institutions. Declines in languages are sharpest in post-92 institutions (-35.4% [-14,195]) but pre-92s saw large declines too, with similar numbers in absolute terms (-14.1% [-13,500]). Similarly, in education, post-92s saw a much sharper fall in student numbers compared with pre-92s. The situation is reversed in historical and philosophical studies, where pre-92 institutions saw a much larger decline (-13.5% [-10,435]) compared with post-92s (-4.2% [-805]).



Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

Department closures

Information about department and school closures is patchy. Some information is picked up in the press or on institution websites but there is no definitive single source of information on this.

Publicly available information can provide an incomplete but intuitive picture over the past 10 years.

The most common departmental closures are in modern languages. Between 2007 and 2017 at least 10 modern language departments were closed at UK higher education institutions and at least nine more had significantly downsized their undergraduate provision.

Several theology and religious studies departments have also closed, downsized or merged during this period, and Heythrop College is due to close at the end of the 2017-18 academic year.

Most closures identified have been at post-1992 institutions although there have also been several closures in pre-92 institutions including some in the Russell Group.

Regional differences

After accounting for the total size of the undergraduate first degree cohort in each region, HSS subjects feature in similar proportions across the UK, at least at broad subject level. A full breakdown of regional provision, by broad HSS subject area, is provided in Appendix B.

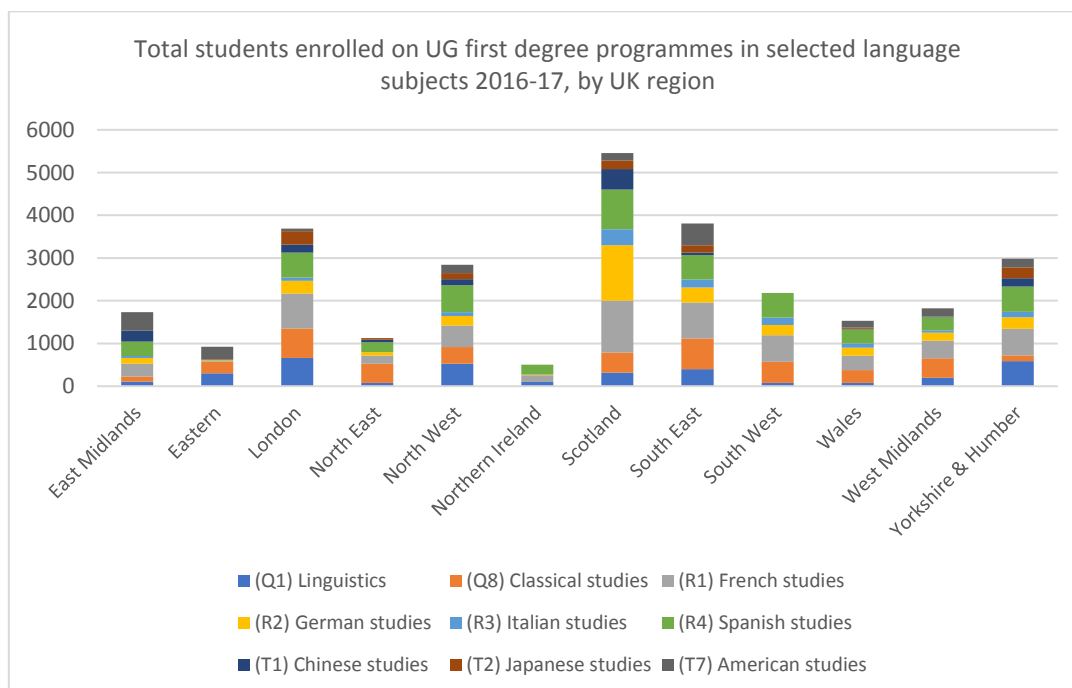
Northern Ireland appears to have slightly smaller numbers of undergraduate students in historical and philosophical subjects and in languages compared to other parts of the UK. Other factors may be at play here. Many Northern Irish students choose to cross the border for study in the Republic of Ireland as tuition fees are lower and they can receive student finance to cover them. Changes to the scoring of A Levels in the Irish admissions scoring system have also increased the number of Northern Irish students opting to study in the Republic of Ireland since 2016. However, access to these subjects may be more challenging for students in Northern Ireland who are less geographically mobile, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Looking deeper into the subject areas identified above as being at risk within the UK as a whole, there are some important regional gaps in provision of certain subjects.

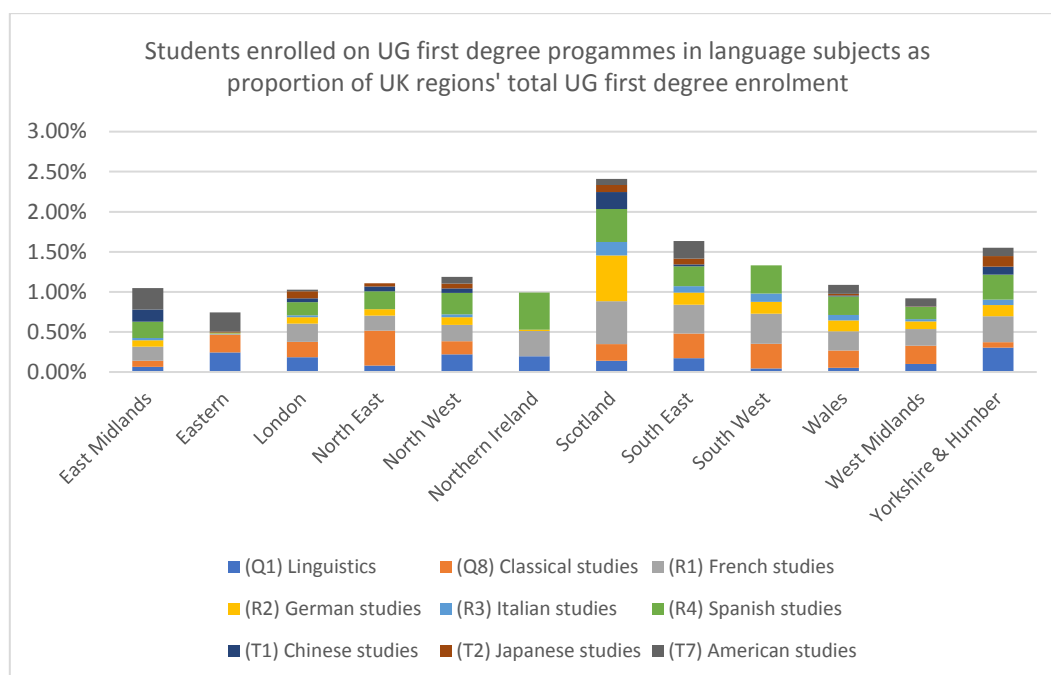
The charts below draw out the regional spread in some of the larger language subjects (excluding English), both in absolute numbers and proportional to the student population in the region.

Scotland appears to have much stronger undergraduate provision of languages than any other part of the UK. Provision is also relatively strong in the South East and Yorkshire.

In modern languages, there is very little undergraduate provision in Eastern England or Northern Ireland. Provision of undergraduate programmes in German and Italian are particularly patchy across the country. Linguistics provision is patchy in the North East, South West and Wales.



Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

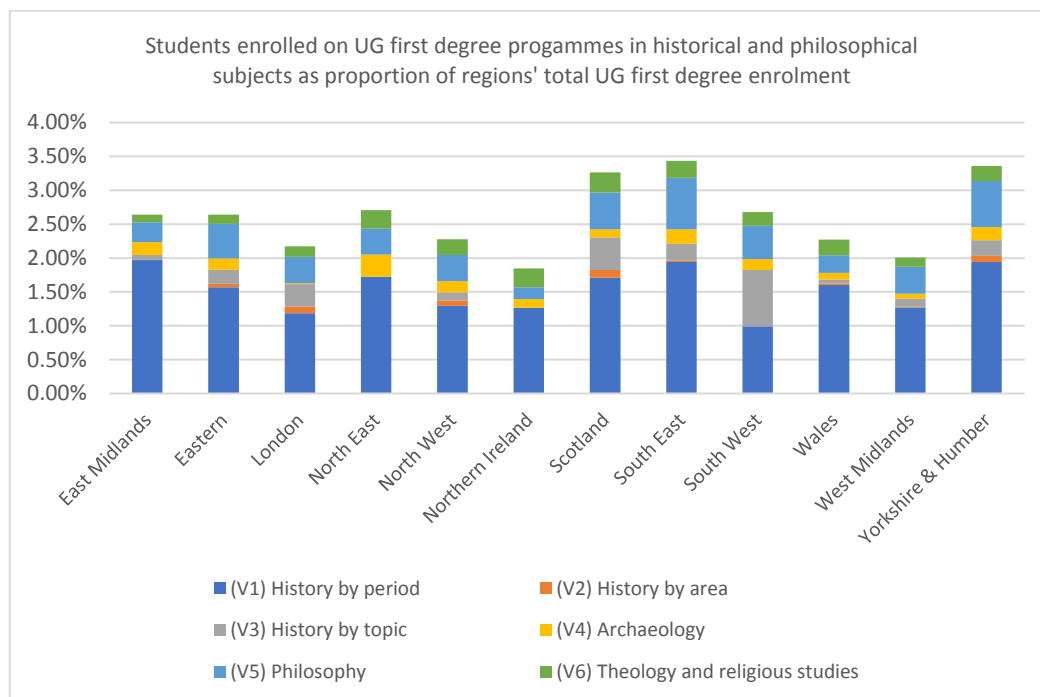
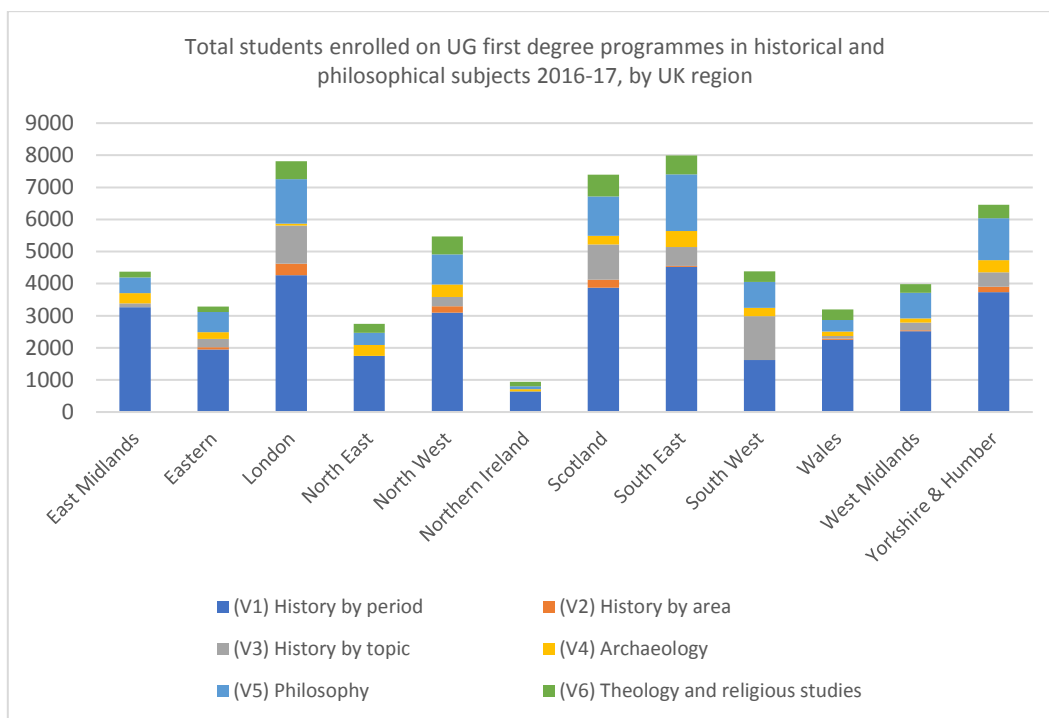


Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

The picture in historical and philosophical subjects is similar, with Scotland, the South East and Yorkshire having the largest proportional shares of students. London has a high absolute number of students in historical and philosophical subjects, but in relative terms this is a smaller proportion than most other regions. Northern Ireland and the West Midlands appear to have the smallest proportional shares of students in this subject area.

The figures suggest there are several cold spots for particular subjects within the broad subject area. For instance, there appears to be less philosophy provision in Wales and Northern Ireland and very little archaeology provision in either London or the West Midlands.⁴

⁴ For archaeology in particular, we must be cautious with the data as some courses in archaeology, typically BSc courses, are coded as F4 (Forensic and Archaeological Sciences) in the Joint Academic Coding System and will therefore not show up in this analysis.



Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

Appendix A: Data and terminology

Data sources

HESA Student enrolment data

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collect data on the number of students studying at undergraduate and postgraduate levels of higher education. The enrolment figures analysed in the report include the total number of students enrolled on different programmes of study. For three-year programmes like most undergraduate first (bachelor's) degrees, the figures include the students in every year of study, not just those starting the course in that academic year.

Enrolment data can also be broken down to look only at those enrolled in the first year of an undergraduate first degree. This is helpful when comparing application and acceptance rates to the number of students starting a programme in the following year. Where expedient, such breakdowns have been used in the paper and are clearly labelled.

Enrolment data is published a year behind applications data, so the latest available enrolment data is for the 2016-17 academic year.

HESA enrolment figures are “full-person equivalent (FPE)”, meaning that they count a student as a whole unit regardless of whether they are studying full-time or part-time, as opposed to ‘full-time equivalent (FTE)’ in which a part-time student would be counted as a proportion of a unit; for example, a part-time student studying at 50% intensity (i.e. half the time of a full-time student) would count as 0.5 FTE but would be 1 FPE.

HESA student data is subject to a rounding methodology, which rounds the numbers to the nearest multiple of five. This is to ensure compliance with data protection as student and staff data can be considered ‘personal data’ in its raw form.

The HESA data used in this report is done so under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0) and available at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>.

UCAS applications and acceptances data

The University and College Admissions Service publish data at different stages of the annual application cycle. This covers the vast majority of applications to full-time undergraduate programmes from people living in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and around two thirds of young applicants to full-time undergraduate programmes in Scotland. Around a third of undergraduate provision in Scotland, largely those programmes based in further education colleges, is not covered by UCAS data, but most programmes in Scottish higher education institutions are.

Two sources are used in the report. The first is end of cycle data, which shows the number of applications to courses as well as the number of applicants who received a place on a course at the end of the UCAS cycle (acceptances), including applications and acceptances made through the summer Clearing process.

The data can be found in the UCAS [End of Cycle Report](#) for 2017. This covers applications made in 2017 for entry to higher education in the 2017-18 academic year.

Data is also drawn from a second source, which is the application rates at the end of January application cut-off. This is the latest data source and includes applications made in the 2018 cycle. As

most applications are made by January, this gives a good indication of applications for entry in 2018-19 and can be compared to rates at the same cut-off in similar years.

Acceptance rates differ from actual enrolment in two ways: enrolment numbers cover all students on a course including those who did not apply through UCAS, while enrolment numbers do not include people who accepted a course and met the entry requirements but, for some reason, did not actually start the course or dropped out in the first two weeks.

UCAS data is also subject to a rounding methodology, which rounds the numbers to the nearest multiple of ten. This is to ensure compliance with data protection as student and staff data can be considered 'personal data' in its raw form.

Key Terminology

Undergraduate First Degree – An undergraduate degree, also known as a Bachelor's degree, which will normally be a three-year programme if studied full-time. First degrees make up the largest proportion of higher education provision.

Other Undergraduate – Undergraduate level courses that are not first (bachelor's) degrees and include the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), foundation degrees, diplomas in higher education (such as those for nursing, social care, and veterinary science), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and Higher National Certificates (HNCs), and the Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE).

Postgraduate Taught (PGT) – Courses at postgraduate level, usually taken after completing an undergraduate first degree or equivalent, and include Master's degrees, Postgraduate Certificates, and Postgraduate Diplomas, of which there is a taught element.

Postgraduate Research – Courses that require a student to produce and present original research, usually under the supervision of an academic staff member. These include Master's by research or dissertation, Master of Philosophy (MPhil), research doctorates (PhD, DPhil), and professional or specialist doctorates.

Combined subjects – Courses in which there is general study across a broad subject area, where there is a study of research methods, or where institutions offer a flexible course where students can choose a diverse set of subjects.

Appendix B: Full regional breakdown of student enrolment in HSS

The table below gives the enrolment figures for undergraduate first degree programmes in the humanities and social sciences in each geographical region of the UK.

Source: HESA student enrolment data, available at www.hesa.ac.uk (CC BY 4.0)

<i>Undergraduate first degree students 2016-17 by HSS broad subject area and UK region</i>						
Region		(B) Social studies	(C) Law	(F) Languages	(G) Historical & philosophical studies	(I) Education
East Midlands	Subject total	15705	7935	6030	5210	10730
	% region total	9.47%	4.79%	3.64%	3.14%	6.47%
Eastern	Subject total	12670	5410	5990	4410	7485
	% region total	10.17%	4.34%	4.81%	3.54%	6.01%
London	Subject total	37625	15700	14190	12275	20090
	% region total	10.46%	4.37%	3.95%	3.41%	5.59%
North East	Subject total	9840	4245	5520	3425	4740
	% region total	9.68%	4.18%	5.43%	3.37%	4.66%
North West	Subject total	20465	8745	9435	6660	17185
	% region total	8.53%	3.64%	3.93%	2.78%	7.16%
Northern Ireland	Subject total	4305	2120	1625	1135	6165
	% region total	8.45%	4.16%	3.19%	2.23%	12.10%
Scotland	Subject total	19015	8130	11000	10465	14705
	% region total	8.40%	3.59%	4.86%	4.62%	6.49%
South East	Subject total	24895	8795	12745	10965	16100
	% region total	10.70%	3.78%	5.48%	4.71%	6.92%
South West	Subject total	15025	5390	7570	5540	9125
	% region total	9.18%	3.29%	4.63%	3.39%	5.58%
Wales	Subject total	11115	4400	7125	4125	10260
	% region total	7.91%	3.13%	5.07%	2.94%	7.30%
West Midlands	Subject total	20605	7240	7090	5190	13965
	% region total	10.39%	3.65%	3.58%	2.62%	7.04%
Yorkshire & Humber	Subject total	19885	6000	11400	8030	13400
	% region total	10.34%	3.12%	5.93%	4.17%	6.97%