



Licensed Higher Nationals Annual Institutional Review 2024-25

Pearson Licensed Higher National Qualifications

Contents

Introduction	3
Pearson Licensed Higher Nationals Agreement	3
Executive Summary	5
Licensed Higher National Registrations, Completions, Achievements and Progression	6
Licensed Higher National Registrations	6
Licensed Higher National Recruitment trend	7
Student Profile: Age	8
Student Profile: Mode of Study	9
Licensed Higher National Completions	10
Licensed Higher National Achievements	11
Licensed Higher National Progression	12
Licensed Higher National Programme Delivery	13
Programme Delivery	13
Summary	14
Promotion of Licensed Higher Nationals	15
Employer Engagement	16
Good Practice, Quality Assurance, Enhancements and Future Plans	17
External Examiner Review	17
Notable Changes and Enhancements	19
Dealing with Issues and Complaints	19
Trends, Initiative and Future Plans	20
Conclusion	21
Feedback on IRR and Data Collection	22
Feedback on 2023/24 Report	22
Feedback on Novel Approach to Data Collection for 2024/25	22

Introduction

Pearson Licensed Higher Nationals Agreement

Overview of the Agreement

The Pearson Licensed Higher Nationals Agreement creates a distinctive opportunity for UK providers with Degree Awarding Powers (DAP) to deliver and award Higher National Qualifications under their own brand. Through this agreement, institutions retain full autonomy over all aspects of the programme, including delivery, assessment, quality assurance, awarding, and certification.

Under this arrangement, Pearson is the licensor of the trademark 'Higher Nationals,' permitting approved institutions to design and deliver their own Higher National programmes, as well as use our content directly.

Why do Partners Choose to Deliver Under the Licence Agreement?

There are a range of reasons why institutions partner with Pearson via Licensed Higher Nationals, which include, but are not limited to:

- 1. Market-recognised qualifications:** partners deliver widely recognised, employer-valued Higher Nationals with established progression routes to degrees.
- 2. Speed and flexibility:** Pearson qualifications allow partners to respond quickly to skills needs without developing their own awards from scratch.
- 3. Clear progression pathways:** Higher Nationals support progression to full honours degrees (often via top-up), enhancing student recruitment and outcomes.
- 4. Global credibility:** Higher Nationals is a credible brand that is widely recognised not only in the UK, but across the world.
- 5. Maintaining Brand Integrity and Flexibility:** Partners participating in the Licensed Higher National programme enjoy the flexibility to tailor their offerings while preserving the recognised quality and standards of the Higher National brand. This approach ensures the provision of practical, skills-focused training that meets the needs of both students and employers, ultimately supporting the growth and development of local and regional economies.

History and Growth of the Programme

Since the inception of the Higher National licence agreement in 2004, more than 180,000 students have engaged with Pearson's Higher Nationals through partnerships with over 30 universities and 77 Further Education subsites.



Future Vision

Supported by a robust network of partners and stakeholders, Pearson aims for this unique offering to become the leading choice for HEIs wishing to strengthen their level 4 and 5 programmes. The agreement is designed to increase participation, offer flexible and skills-based learning pathways for students, and address existing skills gaps in the workforce.

What is the Annual Institutional Review Report?

The Annual Institutional Review Report (IRR) is an important part of our quality assurance and governance framework. It gathers anonymised student and sector data from partners to inform analysis of trends, challenges, and opportunities in higher education. Partners use the IRR to refine strategies, adopt innovative practices, and improve efficiency.

The 2024/25 IRR includes qualitative and quantitative data from 26 registered partners, focusing on core analytic findings. This approach enables partners to compare results with their own data and HESA.

*No identifiable information is included in this report.

Executive Summary

The 2024/25 Annual Institutional Review Report highlights the continued strength and relevance of Pearson Licensed Higher Nationals within the higher education sector. Student registrations have increased, particularly through on-campus Higher National programmes, reflecting strong demand for applied, skills-focused learning. Provision is increasingly attracting younger learners and aligning more closely with mainstream undergraduate study.

Licensed Higher Nationals remain predominantly delivered on-campus, supporting face-to-face learning, employer engagement, and practical teaching, which is also reflected in the 63% growth in HTQ recruitment. The inception of LLE in 2027, with improved awareness among all stakeholders will see further growth in 2025/26 and 2026/27. While patterns of completion and progression vary across institutions, the overall picture reflects the impact of sector-wide pressures and changing learner pathways.

As the student cohort becomes younger, there is greater focus on effective progression, comprehensive support, retention, and smooth transition to degree-level study. The changing demographic means institutions must offer targeted support at key stages of the student journey to meet evolving needs.

This shift explains why progression activity is largely concentrated on on-campus routes, which provide structured pathways and resources suited to younger learners.

Quality and academic standards remain a key strength. External Examiner feedback consistently confirms that programmes are delivered at the appropriate level and that student performance meets expectations. Employer engagement, authentic assessment, and strong student support continue to underpin positive learner outcomes.

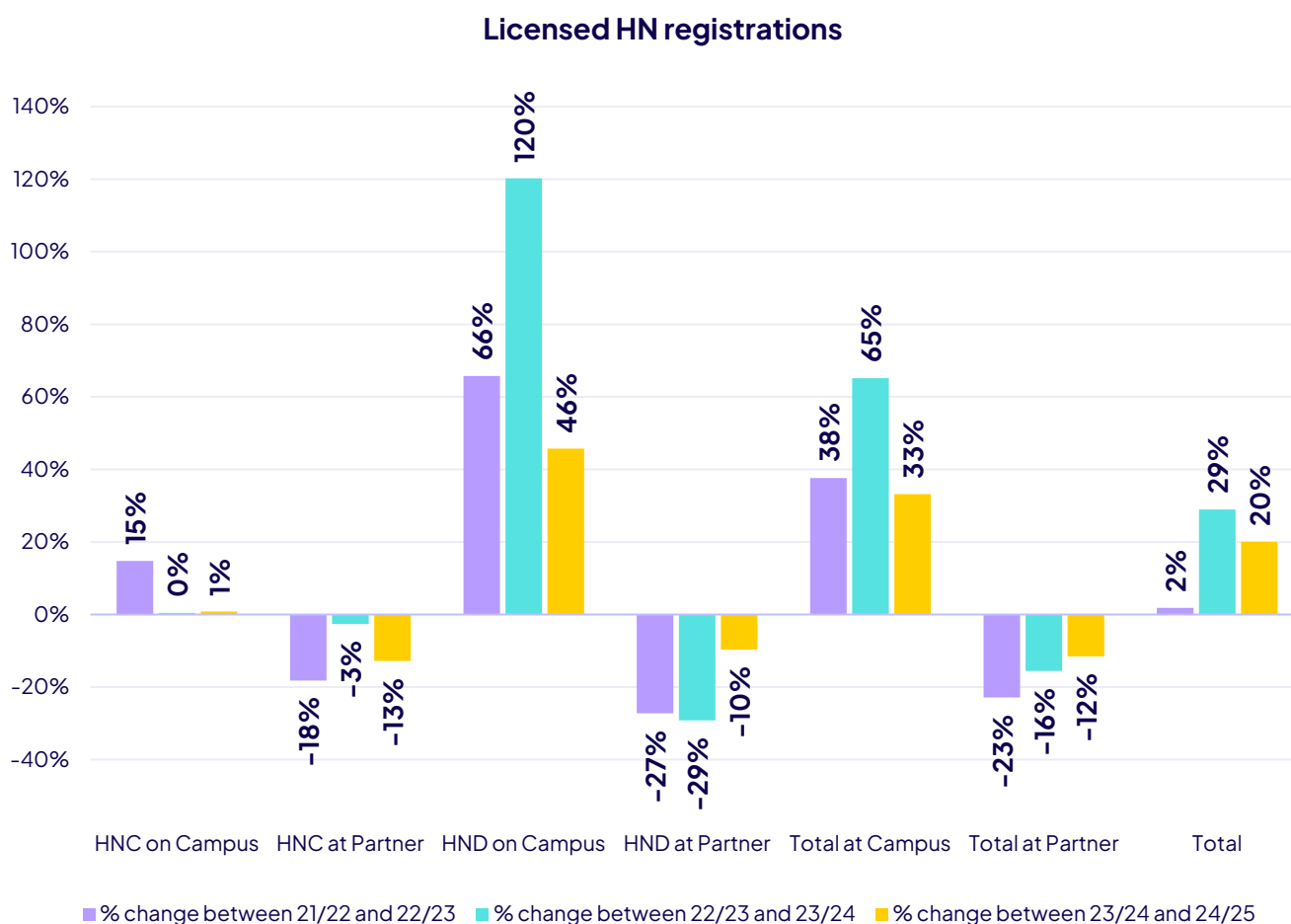
Overall, the report confirms that Licensed Higher Nationals offer high-quality, vocationally relevant education that supports progression into employment and further study. Ongoing focus on progression pathways, delivery models and effective data collection will help ensure the continued success and sustainability of the Licensed Higher National model.

Rosa Wells, Deputy Vice Chancellor at University College Birmingham describes her experience of delivering Licensed Higher Nationals for one of their programmes as:

“The Pearson Licensed Higher National (HN) enabled University College Birmingham and local employer CPW to create a customised HNC in Building Services Engineering for apprentices. The adaptable HN framework made it possible to align modules with industry needs, boosting workforce development and broadening access for other employers. Its formidable reputation has quickly made it a preferred choice across the region. CPW’s recognition at the Skills West Midlands & Warwickshire event highlights how employer-led learning through the licensed HN framework addresses regional skill gaps.”

Licensed Higher National Registrations, Completions, Achievements and Progression

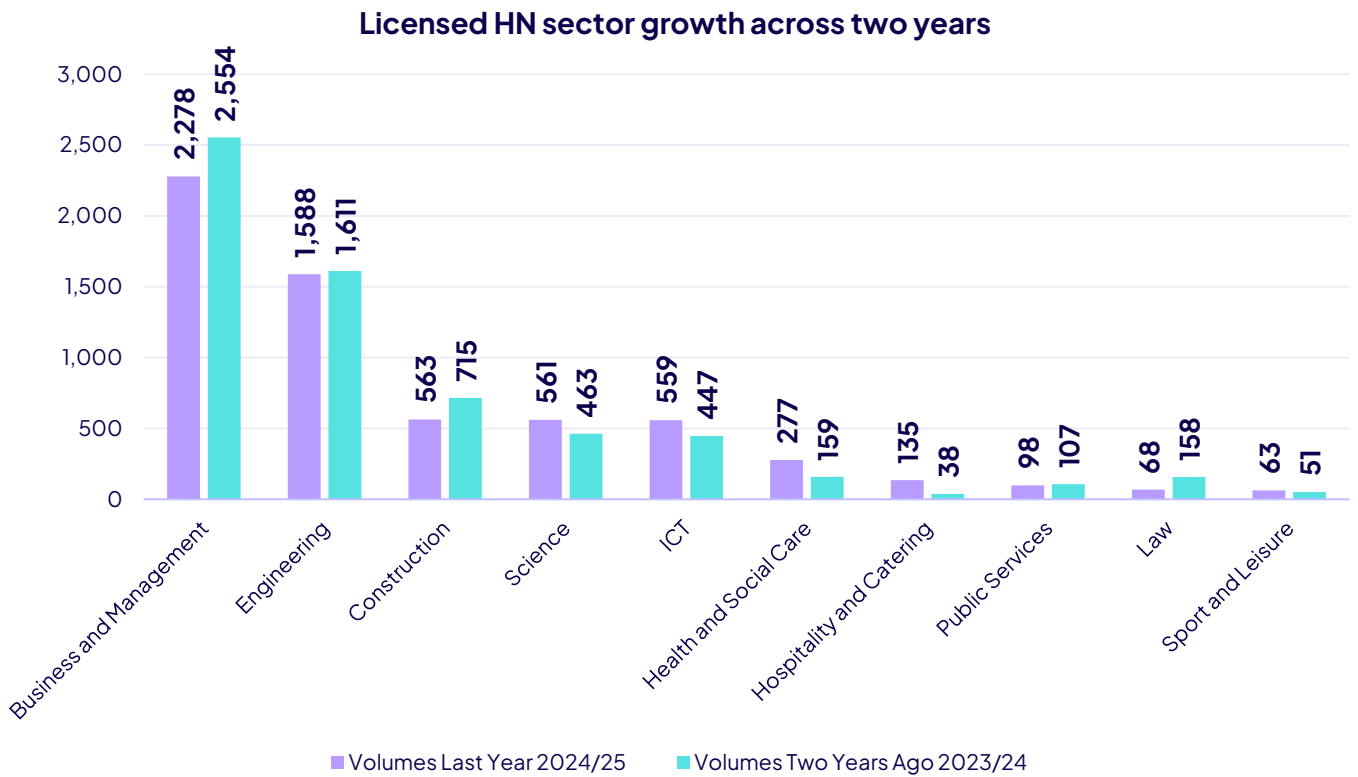
Licensed Higher National Registrations



Total Licensed Higher National registrations continue to grow strongly, driven almost entirely by on-campus Higher National Diploma provision, while partner-based registrations decline.

- Total registrations increase year-on-year
- Growth is highly concentrated in HND on-campus, **exceptional growth** at +120%
- HNC on-campus is broadly flat with marginal growth
- Partner delivery declines across both HNC and HND
- Among the HNC and HND registrations, the HTQ recruitment grew by 63%.

Growth across sectors reflects historical trends, with Business, Engineering, and Construction continuing to rank among the ten most prominent industries.



Licensed Higher National Recruitment trend

The 2024/25 distribution of licensed Higher National recruitment is mainly ‘stable’, with fewer institutions seeing ‘decreasing’ or ‘increasing’ trends.

Student numbers vary due to sector pressures, policy shifts, and local models:

↑ Increasing

Growth in engineering, construction, and technical courses reflects rising industry demand, strong employer links, expansion into HTQs/apprenticeships, and subject-specific growth.

→ Stable

Consistency is driven by solid employer partnerships, established vocational programmes, and strategic consolidation after previous growth, with ongoing quality investment, but no immediate expansion.

↓ Decreasing

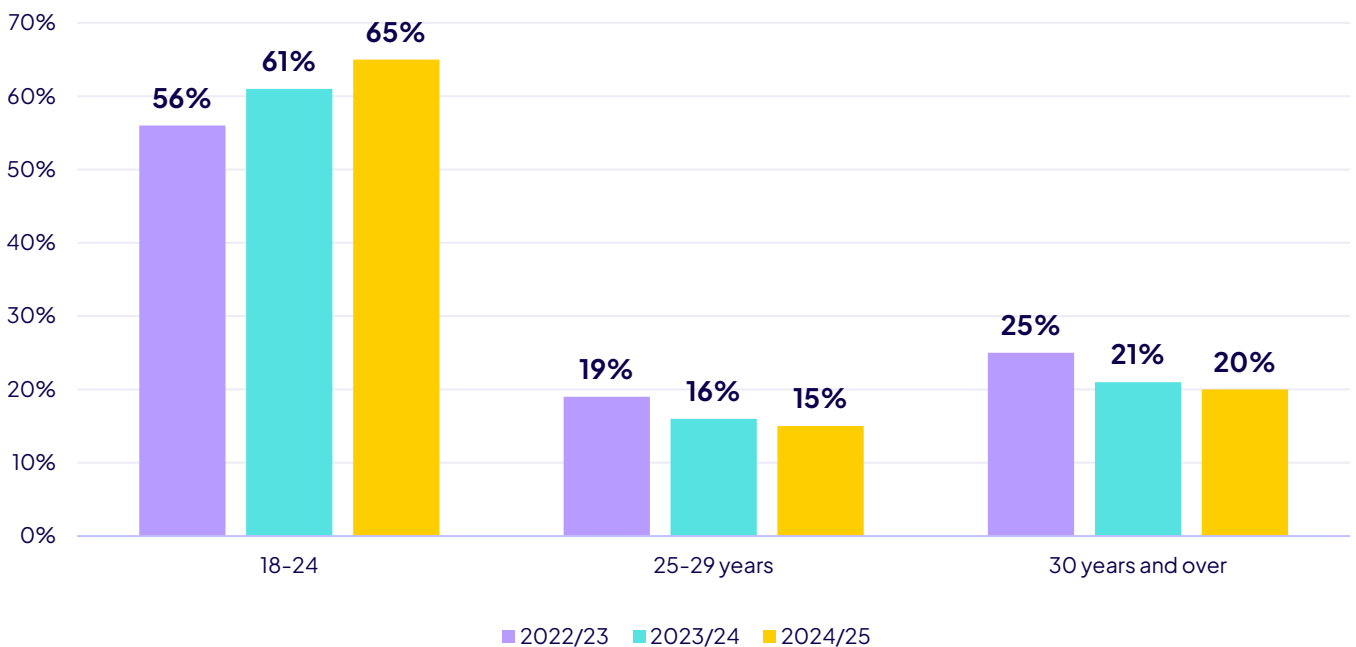
Declines stem from more competition (universities, foundation years), preference for three-year degrees, financial challenges, reduced awareness of Higher National value, programme closures/revalidation, and planned phase-outs or partnership changes.



Student Profile: Age

Licensed Higher National provision is increasingly concentrated among 18–24-year-olds, showing a shift toward a traditional undergraduate profile.

Student profile by age 2022–2025



The proportion of 18–24 learners on Licensed Higher Nationals increased from 56% in 2022/23 to 65% in 2024/25, while the 25–29 and 30+ cohorts remained small and broadly stable year on year.

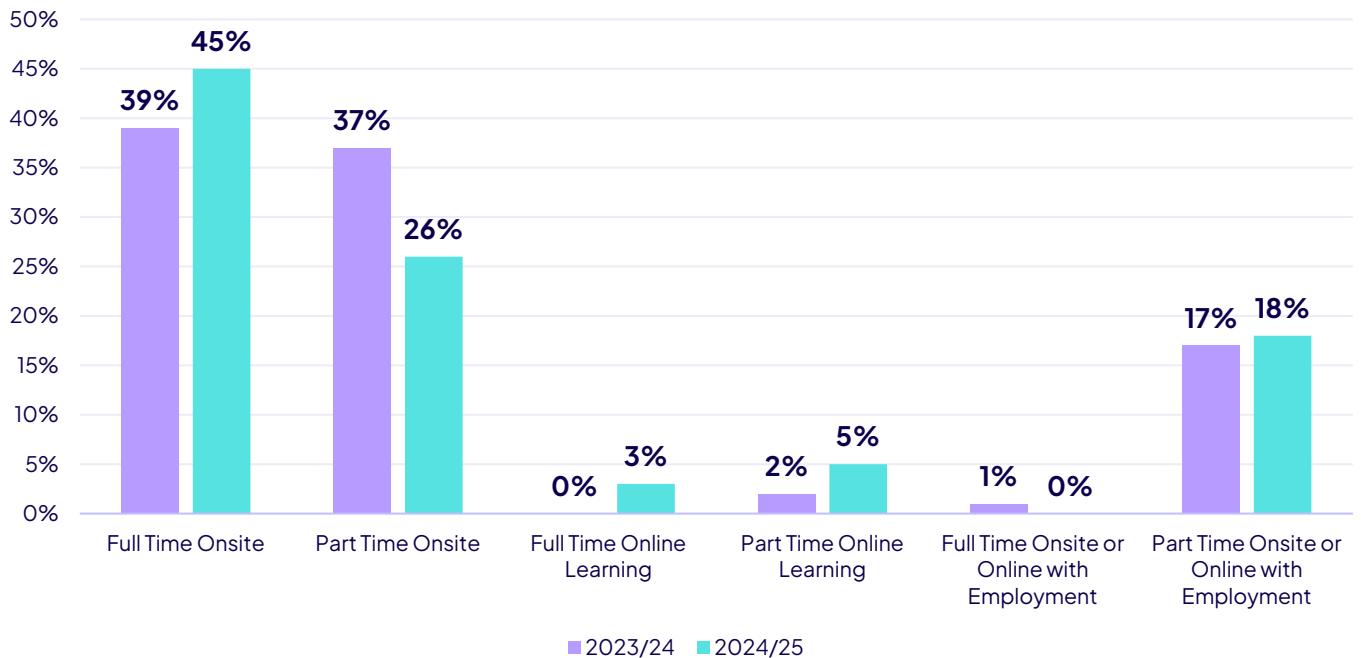
This trend reflects a move toward younger learners and mainstream undergraduate routes, away from mature-learner profiles.

Younger students now make up the majority of higher education participants, while mature learners contribute less to national growth. As the age profile shifts downward, there is greater focus on progression, support, retention, and transition to degree study. This shift explains why most progression activities are campus-based, as noted in the IRR.

Student Profile: Mode of Study

Licensed Higher National delivery remains strongly campus centred, with full-time onsite study increasing and only limited growth in online provision.

Student Profile: Mode of study

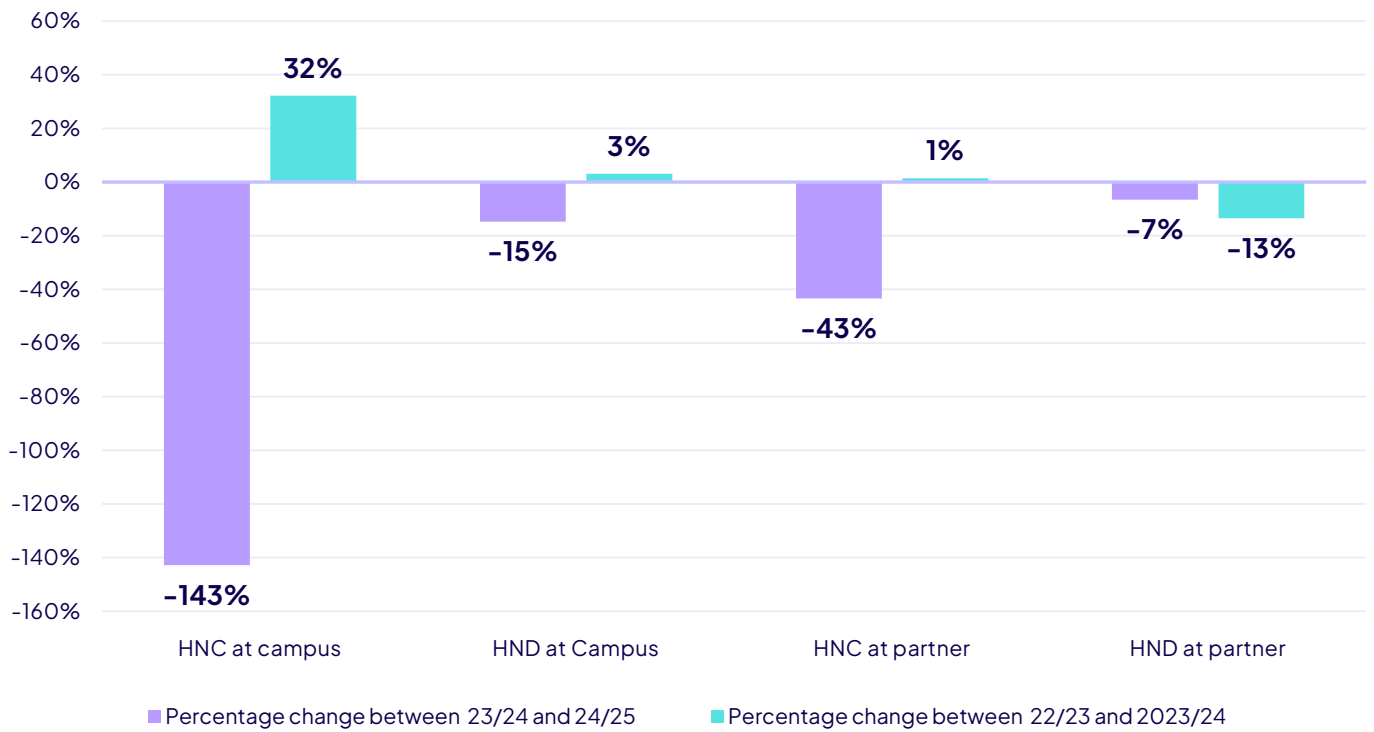


There is a clear shift toward full-time onsite delivery, which increases year-on-year and becomes the dominant mode in 2024/25. At the same time, part-time onsite provision declines, indicating reduced use of more flexible campus attendance models. Online delivery grows slightly but remains a small minority overall. Routes aligned with employment (part-time onsite or online with employment) remain broadly stable.

Overall, the delivery profile reinforces that Licensed Higher Nationals are predominantly campus based, with no evidence of a significant move toward digital first provision.

Licensed Higher National Completions

Licensed HN Completions variations over 2 years



Completions have rebounded after the Covid-related dip in 2022/23 but remain volatile, especially for campus delivery.

Completion rates are **less predictable** than registrations, with **retention and assessment challenges** evident amid rapid growth. The biggest drop was in HNC completions on-campus from 23/24 to 24/25 (**-143%**), showing sensitivity to delivery factors.

Partner provision had smaller, more stable changes, with flat performance in some areas.

Overall, completions are **less consistent than registrations**, pointing to pressure points in retention, assessment, or learner support during rapid expansion.

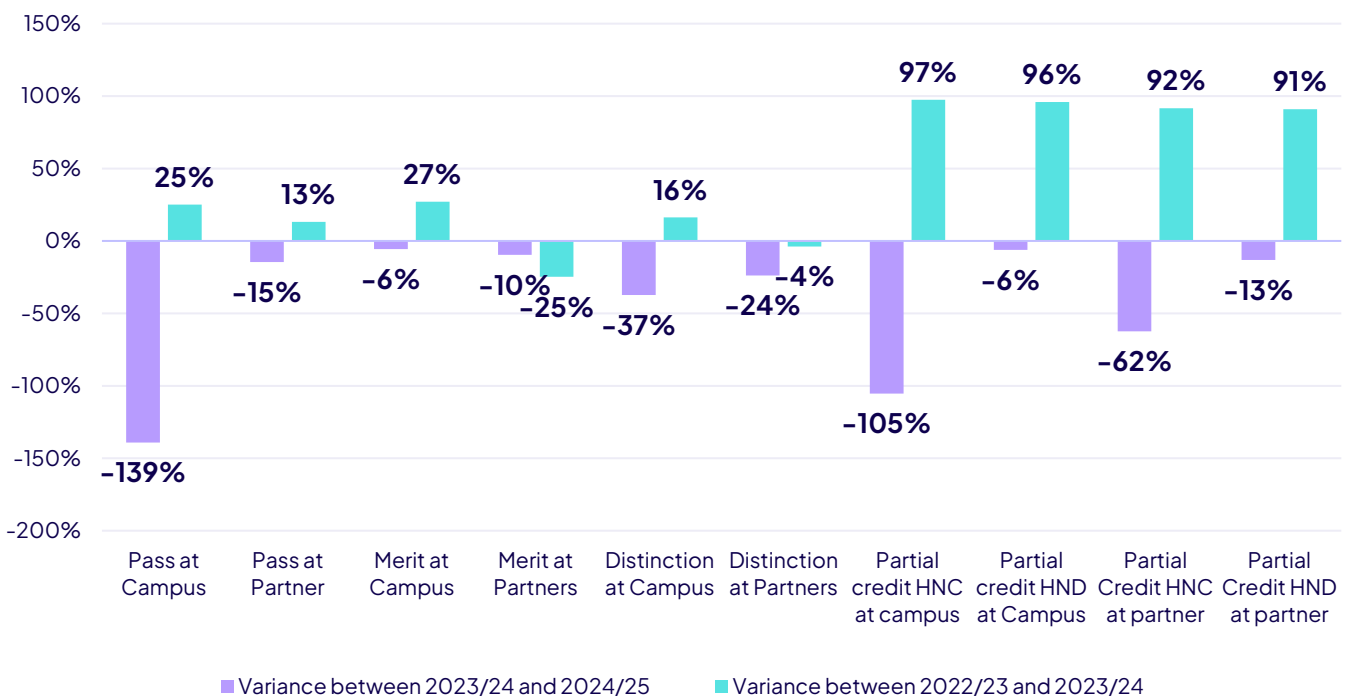




Licensed Higher National Achievements

Achievement data for 2024/25 is incomplete and heavily skewed towards partial credits, limiting comparability. Achievement trends **cannot yet be interpreted confidently for 2024/25**. The visible shift towards partial credits may indicate **assessment timing effects rather than true attainment change**.

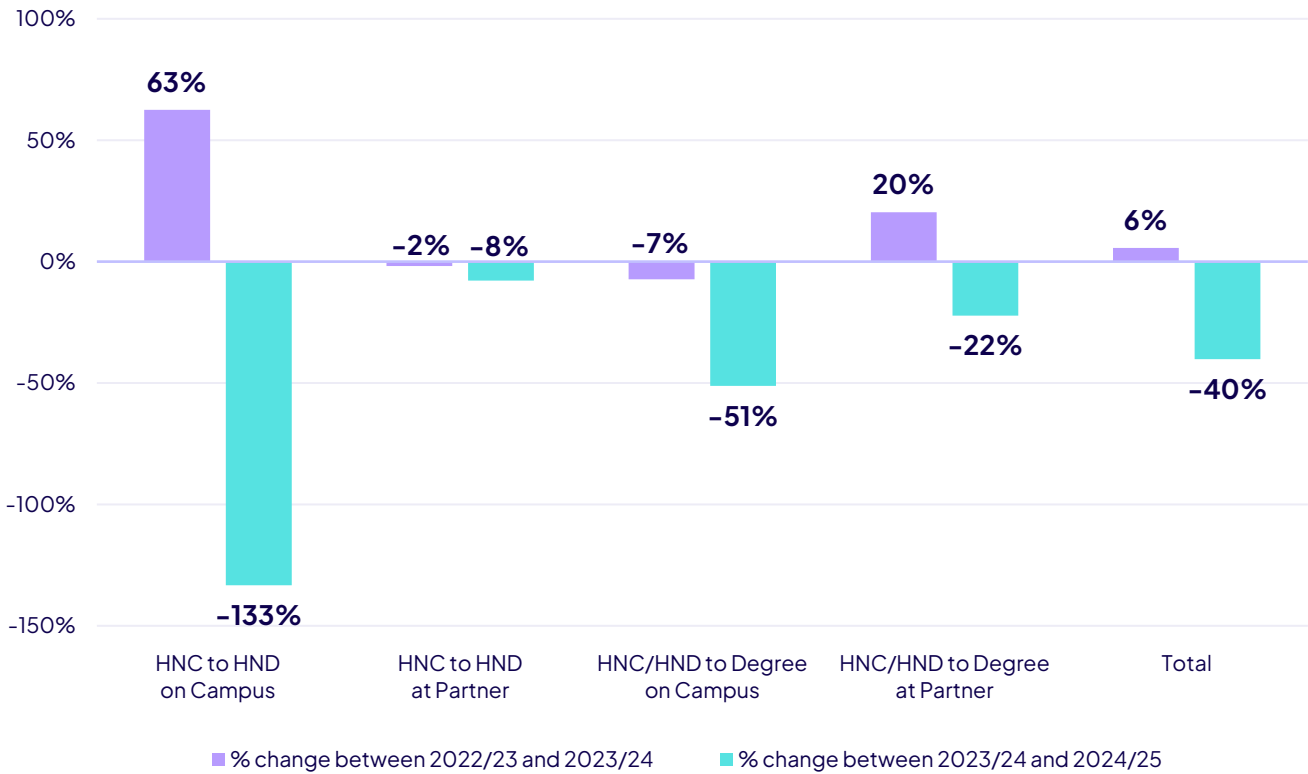
Achievement Grades over 2 years



'Pass at Campus' saw a **decline** from 2023/24 to 2024/25, while other categories remained unchanged due to incomplete data. Unlike the previous year's broad gains, the 2024/25 achievement data should be treated with caution, likely reflecting timing, and completion factors rather than a true drop in attainment.

Licensed Higher National Progression

Licensed HN Progression trend over 2 years



Progression declines sharply in 2024/25, driven by a collapse in on-campus routes.

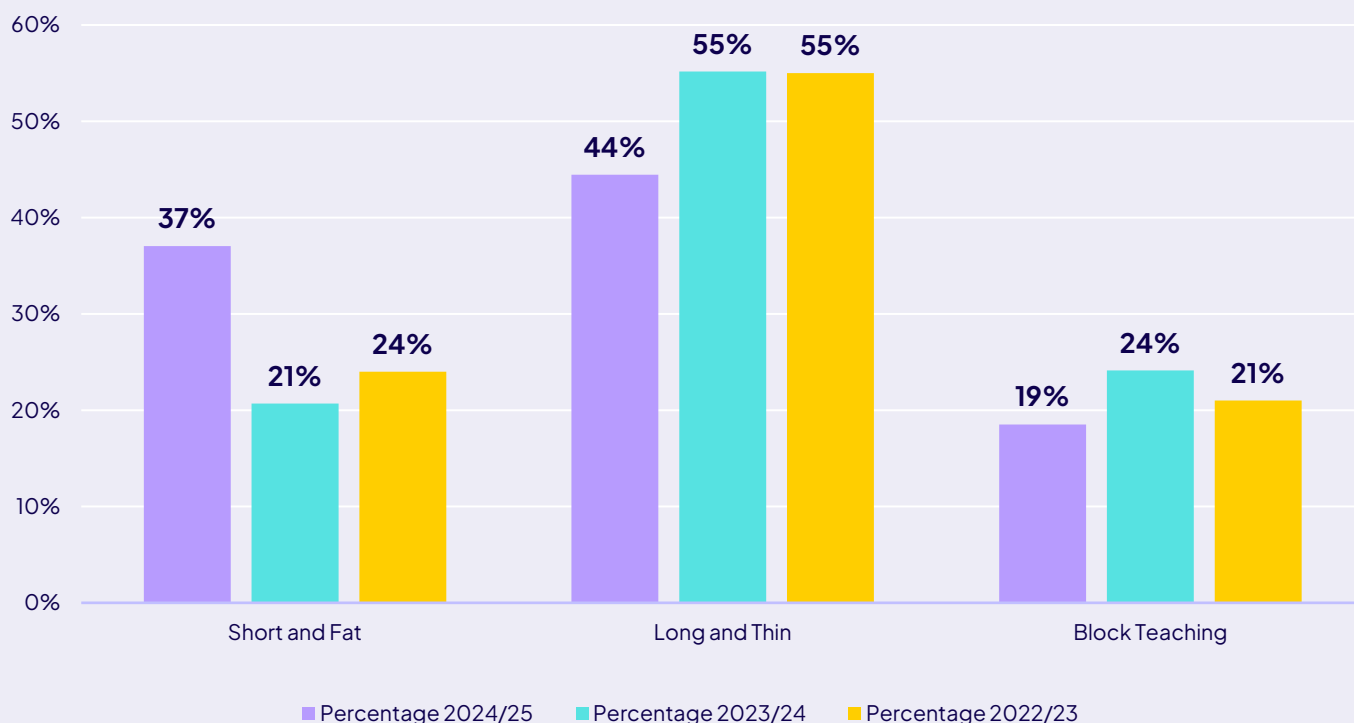
- Progression volumes have dropped in 2024/25 across all pathways.
- The steepest falls were in HNC to HND on-campus (-133%) and HNC/HND to Degree (Campus) (-51%). Declines were led by campus-based degree progression. Because this is the largest-volume route, its decline has a disproportionate impact on overall progression outcomes.
- Despite more registrations, progression—especially to on-campus degree study—has weakened, indicating a pipeline risk.
- Partner routes also declined but remained more stable than campus routes.
- There was a clear downturn from 2023/24 to 2024/25 across all routes.



Licensed Higher National Programme Delivery

Programme Delivery

Delivery structure for Licensed HNs trend over last 3 years



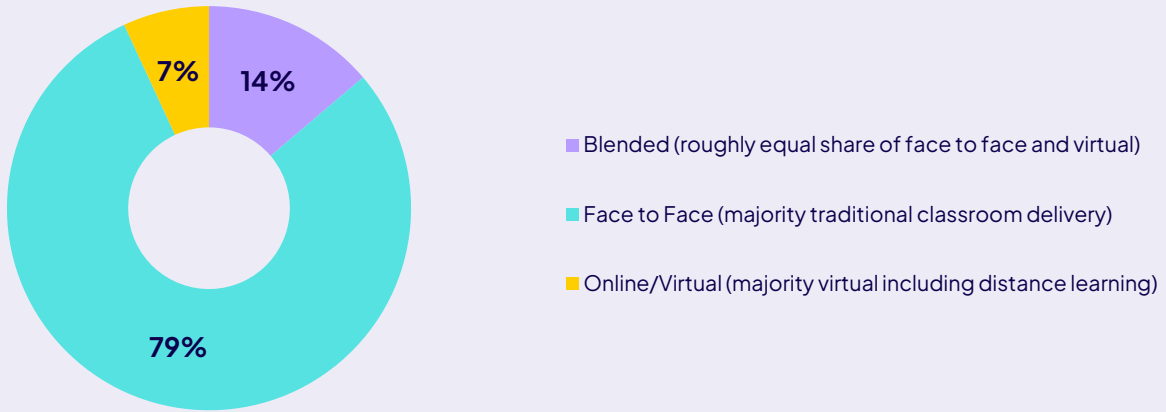
Delivery remains predominantly 'long and thin', with a modest shift toward more concentrated teaching in 2024/25.

Data show '**long and thin**'* delivery is still the **dominant** model in Licensed Higher National programmes, though it declines slightly in 2024/25, reflecting rebalancing rather than major change. '**Short and fat**'* delivery grows in 2024/25, likely as a response to capacity or timetabling demands. **Block teaching** remains stable with no significant expansion. Overall, structures adapt incrementally, remaining mostly cohort-based and traditional.

*'**Long and thin**' means fewer guided learning hours over a longer time and vice versa for '**short and fat**'.

Licensed Higher Nationals delivery remains overwhelmingly **face-to-face**, with limited use of blended and minimal fully online provision.

Mode of Delivery 2024/25



Summary

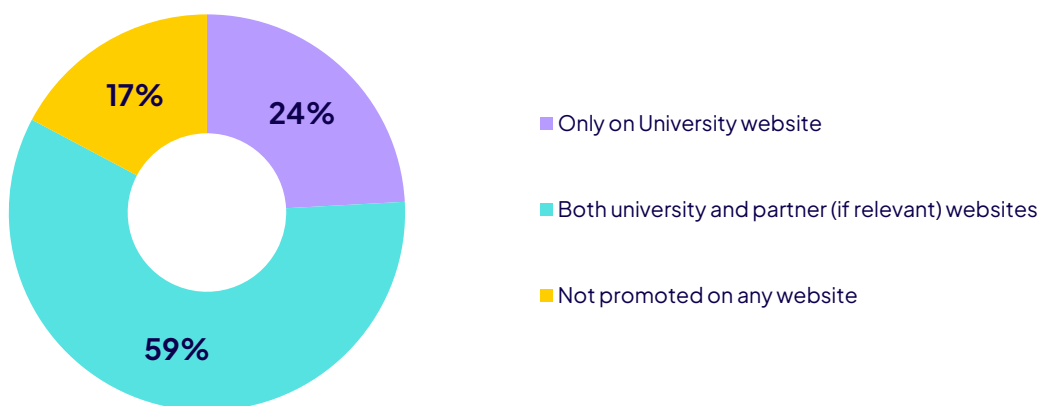
Overall, the delivery profile reinforces that Licensed Higher Nationals are strongly campus-led, with growth and activity concentrated in physical delivery rather than digital or distance models, implying continued reliance on-campus capacity, staffing, and in-person learner engagement.

The delivery model aligns with earlier findings: growth and activity are concentrated on-campus and face to face, not digitally distributed.

Promotion of Licensed Higher Nationals

Licensed Higher Nationals are mainly promoted through UCAS, institutional websites, open days, applicant events, and outreach activities like taster sessions with schools and colleges. In collaborative arrangements, partner colleges lead marketing, often hosting programme details on their own sites. The 'ladder of learning' message is central, outlining Higher Nationals as pathways from Level 3 to degree-level study, while also highlighting their value as standalone qualifications relevant to the job market.

Promotion of Licensed HNs



Institutions sometimes use newsletters, emails, social media, and employer engagement to broaden reach.

Joint web promotion by universities and partners is common, reported in 59% of surveyed institutions. Most approaches combine core online channels, partner-led marketing, and targeted outreach. Where Higher Nationals programmes are not promoted, reasons include programme closure, no recruitment, or strategic withdrawal from HNC/D provision.





Employer Engagement

Ongoing employer engagement in Licensed Higher National programmes, keeping courses industry-relevant and aligned with professional standards is clearly evident.

Employers contribute to curriculum design, course review, accreditation, and work-based assessment approvals. Many programmes are offered as apprenticeships, where students receive paid employment and regular support from programme leaders.

Employer involvement includes industrial liaison committees, guest lectures, workshops, site visits, live projects, work placements, and networking events. Partnerships with professional bodies and employers shape programme development and improvement. Teaching staff have industry experience, and assessments reflect real workplace scenarios.

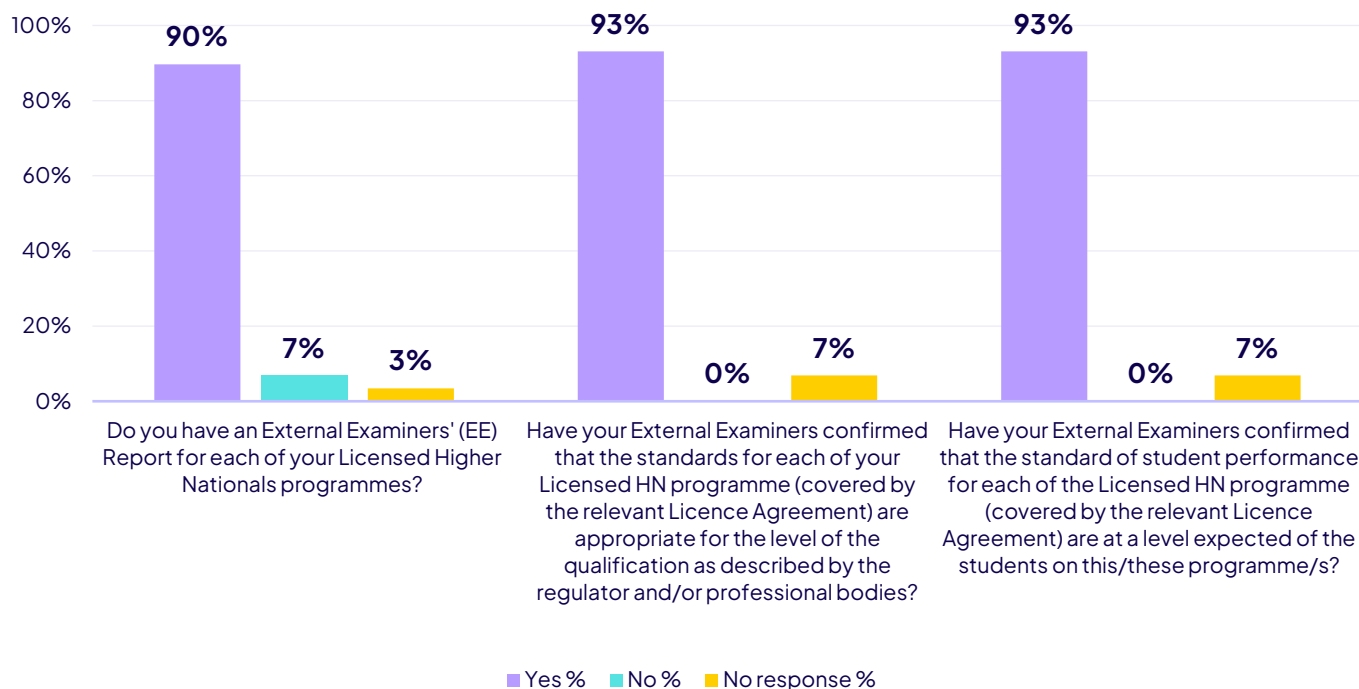
Students benefit from careers support, coordinated work experience, enrichment activities, and employer-led initiatives that build technical, professional, and employability skills. Together, these strategies ensure Higher National programmes provide relevant learning and prepare students for industry progression.

Good Practice, Quality Assurance, Enhancements and Future Plans

External Examiner Review

This indicates that the **majority of Licensed Higher National programmes (90%)** have an External Examiner report in place. Where “No” responses were recorded, explanatory narrative is provided in the document. Specifically, it is stated that External Examiners are allocated **by module rather than by course**, which is intended to ensure alignment of specialist expertise with subject matter. In addition, the document confirms that reports **are outstanding** and that the Quality Team is actively engaging with the relevant External Examiners to secure these reports.

External Examiner Review 2024/25



Academic Standards of Licensed Higher National Programmes

This demonstrates **universal positive confirmation among respondents**, with no recorded instances where standards were judged inappropriate. The small number of non-responses does not detract from the overall conclusion that academic standards are considered appropriate across Licensed Higher National provision.

Student Performance Standards

This indicates consistent assurance that student performance aligns with expectations for the level of study. No concerns regarding underperformance are recorded in the dataset.

Areas for Improvement Identified by External Examiners

Where respondents answered “No” to the availability of EE reports, explanatory commentary was provided. No negative judgements were recorded in relation to academic standards or student performance. The outstanding actions relate solely to **administrative completeness**, namely the receipt of a small number of pending External Examiner reports.

Overall, the evidence demonstrates **strong and consistent External Examiner assurance** across Licensed Higher National programmes. The vast majority of programmes have EE reports in place, with clear institutional processes to manage exceptions. Academic standards and student performance are unanimously confirmed as appropriate where responses are provided. The key risk identified is limited to **outstanding documentation**, not academic quality, and mitigating actions are already in progress.

Exceptional practices with university and/or partners

Although very few new practices were implemented this period, External Examiners consistently highlight high assessment standards, dedicated staff, excellent pastoral support, strong student retention and achievement, and effective integration of employability and industry engagement in the HNC/HND portfolio, reflecting ongoing academic excellence and continuous improvement.

Institutions maintain a robust portfolio of established practices within its Licensed Higher National (HNC/HND) provision and maintain the integrity of the ‘Higher Nationals’ trademark. External Examiners consistently commend the use of authentic assessments, which mirror real-world professional tasks and enhance industry-relevant skills. Assessment design aligns well with programme levels and supports high-quality learning and employability.

Academic support is delivered through the targeted interventions, strengthening student engagement, retention, and completion. The institution's commitment to quality assurance is evident in improved internal standardisation and systematic use of External Examiner feedback. Events like the annual Critical Friend Day foster collaborative enhancement and peer support.

Industry engagement is central, especially in Construction and Engineering, where employer-led projects, site visits, guest lectures, and professional accreditation bolster practical delivery and recognition. Flexible learning combines face-to-face and online instruction, while diverse assessment methods cater to different learning styles.

Progression routes into Level 5 and Degree Apprenticeships and alignment with PSRBs enhance student career development. Examples such as the South Coast Institute of Technology strengthening employer collaboration and access to industry-standard facilities, supporting graduates' readiness for work.

Overall, External Examiners continue to praise sustained academic practice, staff dedication, and strong employability integration across the HNC/HND portfolio.

Notable Changes and Enhancements

This section outlines notified changes to Licensed Higher Nationals provision during the reporting period.

Overall, responses indicate that **changes are primarily programme level**, with **limited impact on partnership structures**. Where changes have occurred, these are largely linked to programme closures, teach-out completion, or planned non-delivery from September 2025.

A number of centres confirmed changes relating to the **cessation or non-delivery of programmes**, effective from September 2025.

Responses show **no material change** to partnership structures and overall partnership arrangements remain stable across the reporting cohort.

Dealing with Issues and Complaints

During the reporting period, a total of 29 responses were received regarding appeals or complaints related to licensed Higher National programmes, with **5** reporting 'Yes', **23** reporting 'No', and 1 provider giving no response. Of the five 'Yes' responses, only one substantive case was identified and satisfactorily resolved

All remaining providers confirmed that no appeals or complaints were received, and no matters were referred to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.



Trends, Initiative and Future Plans

Future plans vary by institution but show several common strategic themes:

No Change/Managed Continuity

Several providers report no immediate plans to expand Higher National provision, focusing instead on:

- Maintaining current offer
- Supporting existing cohorts through teach-out arrangements
- Ensuring quality and student support during periods of stability or decline.

Targeted Growth and Enhancement

Where growth is planned, it is typically selective and demand-led, including:

- Strengthening recruitment activity through earlier promotion, face-to-face outreach, and employer engagement
- Expanding delivery to additional partner sites where demand is evidenced
- Developing clearer progression routes into degree level study with university partners
- Exploring international recruitment opportunities to support long term sustainability.



Strategic Realignment

Some institutions are:

- Moving away from Trademark Higher National post 2027 but HTQs remain a priority
- Revalidating provision into alternative qualifications (e.g. Cert HE models)
- Prioritising HTQs, apprenticeships, and Institute of Technology provision

Partnership restructuring is also evident, including:

- Ending some longstanding partnership agreements while strengthening others
- Appointing new external examiners and refreshing governance arrangements.



Conclusion

The 2024/25 Annual Institutional Review Report confirms that Pearson Licensed Higher Nationals remain a high-quality and strategically significant component of the higher education landscape. Registrations continue to grow, driven primarily by on-campus Higher National Diploma provision, while partner delivered provision continues to decline. Growth is increasingly concentrated in a younger 18–24 learner cohort, aligning Licensed Higher Nationals more closely with traditional undergraduate entry routes.

Delivery remains predominantly campus-based, with limited expansion in online provision. While completions have recovered from earlier volatility, performance remains uneven, particularly in campus delivery. Progression to degree study declined sharply in 2024/25, most notably in the largest-volume campus pathways, presenting a material pipeline risk despite rising registrations.

Quality assurance remains a clear strength. External Examiner feedback provides consistent confirmation of academic standards and student performance, with no systemic academic concerns identified. Risks are limited to administrative completeness and data timing rather than educational quality.

Looking forward, institutional strategies are characterised by sustained continuity and targeted expansion, with an emphasis on progression pathways, apprenticeships, Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), and Institute of Technology initiatives. These findings underscore the importance of enhancing progression alignment, overseeing campus-driven growth, and increasing the usability of data collection processes to support governance and strategic decision-making.

Feedback on IRR and Data Collection

Feedback on 2023/24 Report

Feedback on the **2023/24 Institutional Review Report (IRR)**, while drawn from a relatively small sample of respondents, presents a **clear and consistent narrative**.

Overall, the report is regarded as a **valuable, informative, and strategically useful resource**, particularly for understanding **sector-wide trends** and the **wider context of Higher National provision**. Respondents highlighted the report's strength in presenting **dynamic sectoral change** and its usefulness in supporting **future planning and decision-making**.

In summary, the **2023/24 IRR is highly regarded for its insight, relevance, and analytical value**, particularly in relation to Higher National provision.



Feedback on Novel Approach to Data Collection for 2024/25

The principal opportunity for enhancement was identified **not in the content**, but in **how that content is collected and presented by the partners**, especially for qualitative sections.

A recurring issue was the Excel-based format of Part B, which is suitable for quantitative data but difficult and unwieldy for qualitative input. Respondents found it hard to navigate multiple tabs, enter and share narrative content, and manage complex layouts, leading to higher error risk—especially for inexperienced users.

There was a strong preference for returning to the previous format/s using Microsoft Word and Microsoft Forms or splitting the approach (using Excel for quantitative data, and Word/Forms for qualitative information).

Addressing format and usability concerns—particularly for Part B for 2025/26 data collection—would significantly improve the user experience while preserving the strong strategic value of the reports in the future.

