

Research Summary: Investigating the Recent Decrease in Higher National Certifications

Date: February 2025

Why did we do this research?

We began this research after we investigated the relationship between Higher National (HN) certifications and the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) between 2009–10 and 2021–22. We discovered that in 2022–23, the numbers of HN certifications decreased and we wanted to know more about this.

What are we trying to find out?

We want to understand reasons why numbers of HN certifications decreased over time between 2009 and 2023.

How did we do the research?

We studied SQA data to see which years between 2009 and 2023 had large changes in HN certifications. We also studied other research to find out why fewer people were getting HN certifications.

What did we learn?

The education sector experienced changes that may have contributed to the decline in certifications between 2020 to 2022. Changes to the education sector were:

- decrease in the numbers of learners starting HN certifications in the pandemic period (2020–21 academic year)
- funding cuts to the college sector
- changes to HN courses available at centres
- decrease in awareness of HNs and how this relates to what learners want to do after they study
- decline in how much people trust HN qualifications
- increases in the number of Scottish learners entering university between 2021 and 2023
- changes in the numbers of university students from European Union (EU) countries changing the number of Scottish learners entering university

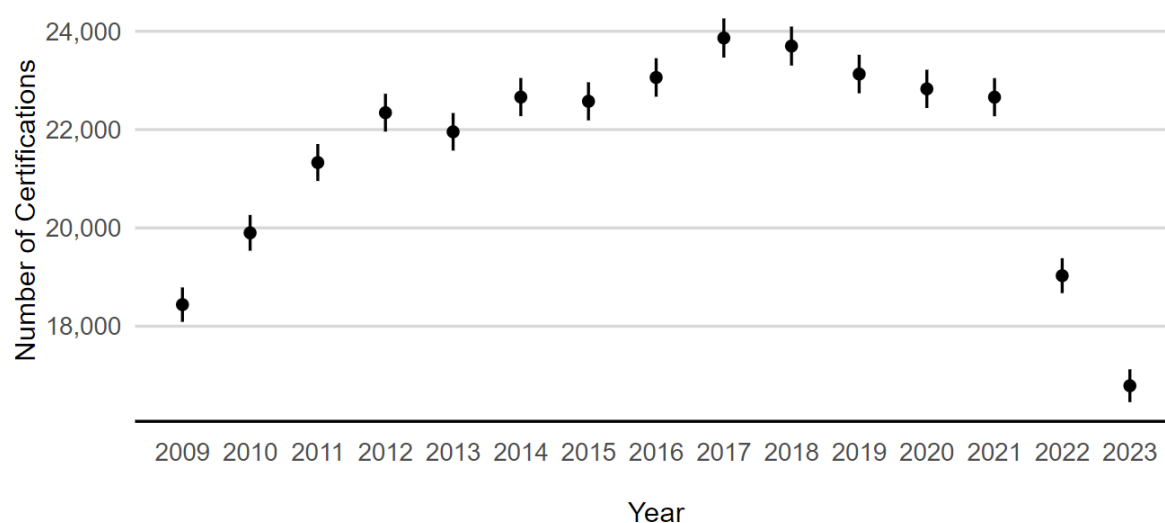
- the cost of living crisis, which may have affected learners choosing paid employment over further education or university

What will change because of the research?

This research highlights several areas for further research. Further research can help improve the perception and accessibility of HNs, promoting them as a valuable pathway to further education and employment.

Visual summary

Numbers of HN certifications between 2009 and 2023



Read the full report

You can download the [full research report](#) from our website.