

Technical Summary: Investigating the Recent Decrease in HN Certifications

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Background

Higher National (HN) Diplomas and HN certificates are vocationally focused qualifications that equip learners with the practical skills and theoretical knowledge to either enter the workforce directly or continue their education to the second or third year of a university course. When learners complete an HN course, SQA issues an HN certificate. In recent years, there has been a decrease in HN certifications.

Research question

The research aims to understand potential reasons for the decrease in HN certifications between 2009 and 2023.

Methodology

We used secondary analysis to identify which calendar years had changes in HN certifications. Using the wider literature, we explored the factors that could have contributed to the decline in HN certifications.

Key findings

We found several changes to the education sector 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 — a 17% decrease (in real terms) from 2021–22 to 2024–25 academic year
- changes to centre preferences for course delivery

- decrease in awareness of HNs and the subsequent impact on pathway choice
- decline in perceived credibility of HN qualifications
- increases to Scottish domiciled university entrants between 2021 and 2023
- changes in the uptake of university students from European Union (EU) countries associated with Brexit may have affected the uptake of Scottish domiciled entrants
- the cost of living crisis, which may have led potential college or university entrants to choose paid employment over further education or university

Implications

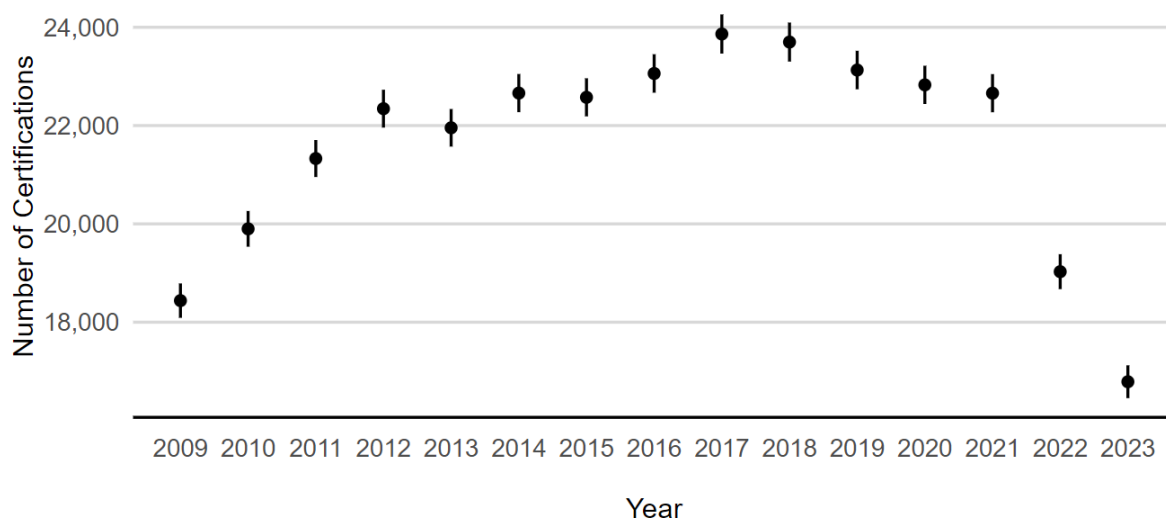
This report highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing declining HN certifications. In particular, there's a need to look into the relationship between HN entries and certifications; the relationship between HN certifications and local authorities; and how HN certifications relate to the wider education sector.

Next steps

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



Access the full report

You can read the [full research report](#) on our website.

This summary is intended for general audiences and simplifies complex research. Please refer to the full report for detailed methodology, complete findings, and technical discussion.