New Dogs and Old Tricks: What Can The UK Teach the US about University Education?

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Executive Summary

1. For the past forty years federal higher education policy in the United States has focused on helping students enter higher education, annually providing billions of dollars in grant and loan assistance to help them finance their education. What happens after students enter postsecondary education - whether they complete their studies - has received far less attention, and it is a question nearly absent from federal higher education policy. In the past few years, however, both advocacy groups and politicians in the US have focused increasing scrutiny on low rates of completion in higher education. Some have proposed that the US should look for guidance to the UK, where higher education policies place greater emphasis on the completion of a degree, both by penalising institutions for students who fail to complete, and by compiling benchmarked graduation rate scores for each publicly funded university.

Study Questions

2. This paper examines whether the UK does, in fact, have substantially higher rates of university completion, why these differences exist, and what lessons the US might learn from the experience of the UK. It is written by an American, and from an American perspective.

Measurement and Definitions

3. The UK has one authoritative measure of degree completion, calculated each year by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Drawing upon individual student record data from all publicly funded higher education institutions, HEFCE produces a projected rate of completion among all UK-domiciled, full-time entrants to bachelor degree programmes. Among these

students who entered UK universities in 2000-2001, 82 per cent were projected to complete a bachelor's degree at the institution where they began their studies, or at another university. For individual institutions, the proportion of full-time students starting on first degree courses in 2000-2001 who were projected to leave without transferring to another institution or taking a higher education qualification ranged from 1 to 39 per cent.

4. The US federal government lacks student record data with which to calculate completion rates for each of the nation's universities. However, using data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics 'Beginning Postsecondary Student Study', one can identify a subset of US students who closely resemble the UK university population measured by HEFCE: all first-year students who began at a university, enrolled full-time during their first year, and reported that they intended to complete a bachelor's degree. Among these students, an estimated 65.6 per cent completed a bachelor's degree within six years of beginning their studies. Using a slightly different subset of students contained in the National Educational Longitudinal Study, one obtains an eight year bachelor degree completion rate of 67.3 per cent. In sum, by measures of university completion conventionally used within the US higher education community, about 66-67 per cent of US university students appear to complete their degree, a level that is measurably lower than the UK's rate of 82 per cent. Differences in the rates of completion among university students in the US and UK appear to be real, substantial, and persistent.

Government Policies Towards Completion

5. State and federal policies in the US concerning degree completion are very different to those of the UK. Only one federal law directly addresses degree completion, and it does not authorize the federal government to calculate league tables, institutional benchmarks, or otherwise employ these data to shape the

performance of the nation's universities. American states are responsible for the organisation and funding of public universities, but they have played only a modest role with respect to university completion. The funding methodologies employed by US states are not completion-related. Although most states collect information about university graduation rates, these measures are typically incomplete (omitting part-time students and those who interrupt their studies), they often ignore successful outcomes (because the data do not include students who move from one institution to another), and they impose a "one size fits all" metric upon institutions with very different missions and admissions policies. State legislatures appear to make little use of this graduation rate information.

6. Degree completion plays a more prominent role in England's policies for university funding and performance measurement than it does in the US. Universities are funded not on enrolments per se, but on completed enrolments: students are funded as a full-time equivalent enrolment only if they undergo assessment in, regardless of whether they pass or fail, all modules on which the student has enrolled within the year of study. The sharpest contrast in government policy can be found in the use of institutional completion rates as a measure of university performance. The UK eschews a "one-size fits all" metric, creating instead an institutional benchmark for each publicly funded university against which its performance is measured, and annually reported. Performance indicators for completion provide an opportunity for all within the higher education community to assess how each of the nation's universities compares to the others, and against its own benchmark.

7. Though policy differences exist, they probably play a modest role in explaining why the rates of university completion are dissimilar. Although funding arrangements in the US and UK do treat student dropout differently, in practice it appears that neither universities in the US nor the UK often feel the effects of lost dollars or pounds as a consequence of student dropout. Moreover, the UK had a consistently high rate of university completion well before the government

introduced a completion-related funding system in 1992, or adopted higher education performance indictors in 1999. Rather than causing high rates of completion, these policies are better understood as initiatives aimed at sustaining the practices and traditions that led to high rates of completion despite the swift expansion of English higher education.

The Economics of Completion

8. A lower rate of university completion in the US may be attributable to a set of economic factors: the level of resources invested in the two university systems; the economic benefits of university completion; and the level of privation and paid work that students face while at university.

9. Teachers are the key resource within universities, and the most costly. With insufficient academic staff, students may receive inadequate direction in reading, research, and career planning, or find queues for courses; these difficulties might deter all but the most intrepid learner. Hence, the ratio of students to academic staff provides a simple indicator for the sufficiency of university resources. US universities, especially its private universities, have a significantly lower ratio of students to academic staff than do UK universities. Staffing levels at US universities are measurably higher than those of peer English-speaking nations. It seems clear that insufficient resources, as measured by high student/staff ratios, are not responsible for comparatively lower rates of university completion in the US.

10. Students may also drop out of university because they conclude that the costs of continuing - their mounting debts and the wages that they are foregoing - are simply greater than the benefits that they will derive from completing their degree. One international measure of the economic benefits of a university degree is the private internal rate of return on investment in education, which measures the monetary returns obtained over time relative to the initial investment. Both the US and the UK have especially high rates of return to

university education compared to other OECD nations. The US has marginally lower private returns to investment in university education than the UK for males, while rates of return for females are nearly identical. Differences of this magnitude probably explain little about the UK's higher rates of university completion.

11. In 1998-1999, 46 per cent of UK full-time university students reported that they were engaged in paid term-time work, and that they worked an average of 11 hours per week. US students report undertaking significantly more paid work. Among full-time students at US universities 73 per cent worked, and those who did worked an average of 21 hours per week. With levels of work this extensive, students who work at or above the average weekly rate are at a measurably increased risk of being unable to continue with their studies. Taken by itself, this difference is part of the reason that US university students less frequently complete their studies than do those in the UK. Viewed more broadly, the fact that US students are more often occupied by paid work while at university is one part of a larger set of differences in the culture and practice of university education in the two nations.

The Culture and Practice of University Education

12. In comparison to the United States, two aspects of the English university system - student entry and student progression - are marked by a continuing, albeit attenuated, persistence of elite thinking, policy, and practice. Taken together, elite practices concerning entry and progression have permitted the UK to maintain university completion rates that are substantially higher than those of the US.

13. Since the mid-1980s there have been significant changes in patterns of entry to English universities. Nonetheless, viewed in comparison to the US university system, the English university system appears to have more consistent standards of entry and a much closer alignment of its upper secondary

curriculum and assessment to the needs of university education. It may also have a slightly narrower range of preparation among its entrants, and, on average, a somewhat higher level of preparation. These differences between university entry in the US and UK appear to underlie, at least in part, the lower rates of completion found in US bachelor degree study.

14. The patterns of student progression through UK universities are sharply dissimilar to those in the US. Although UK universities have adopted the nomenclature of modules and credits, most university students in the UK are engaged in study on one course, at one institution, for a fixed and limited period of time - as they were decades ago. US students are five to ten times more likely than UK students to change courses, to change universities, to vary their rate of work between full and part-time study, and interrupt their studies. For example, 34 per cent of US university students alternate between full-time and part-time study; in the UK an estimated 3 per cent do.

15. Taken as a whole, about 65 percent of US bachelor degree graduates who began their study at a university follow a full-time and continuous path to completion; in contrast, an estimated 86 percent of UK bachelor degree students at institutions other than the Open University are projected to follow a fulltime and continuous path to completion. Universities and government policy in the US combine to afford significantly wider flexibility to learners, permitting large numbers of them to depart from a path of continuous full-time study in a single course at their institution of origin.

16. If a more flexible pattern of attendance in the US results in wider accessibility to bachelor degree study for non-traditional students, then we should expect to find that a significantly larger share of US bachelor degree students are older, working, disabled, caring for dependents, and married than is the case in the UK. To the extent that the limitations of data make these comparisons possible, these expectations are consistently borne out. For

example, a significantly larger share of US bachelor degree students are 25 or older (27.4 per cent v. 18.2 in the UK), or to have a reported disability (7.7 per cent vs. 4.8 in the UK).

17. Among mature students who do study, some may be constrained to make choices that poorly suit their needs. While 21.2 per cent of students beginning full-time first degree study in the UK are 21 years and older, in the US only 8.5 per cent of students beginning full-time first degree study are 21 and older, since mature bachelor degree students in the US often enrol on a part-time, rather than full-time basis. If mature students have similar obligations in both nations, then those in the UK appear to be induced by student aid policies and university restrictions on the availability of part-time degree programmes to study in ways that they might not if afforded greater flexibility and choice.

18. Flexibility in provision has costs as well as benefits. In particular, it appears to diminish rates of degree completion. Permitting intermittent enrolment or variation between full and part-time enrolment lowers barriers to entry for those populations who are at highest risk to drop out of university, such as parents with young children. It also permits students to engage in activities - such as extensive paid work - that jeopardise their prospects for degree completion. Finally, flexibility in provision diminishes students' integration into their course and sense of group cohesion, both of which reduce students' prospects of completion. With students interrupting their studies, varying their rate of work, and selecting dissimilar module combinations, US students rarely move as a cohort through a course.

19. One century of experience with modularized and credit-based education in the US has shaped the culture of higher education and the labour market. Students, educators, employers and politicians tend to think of a degree as something that consists of discrete skills and capabilities, and they believe that there is some benefit to acquiring part of a degree. In the US view, completing a

degree is better than not, but something is better than nothing. Research in the US suggests that there are returns to having a credential over and above the skills acquired in postsecondary education; it also shows that there is a wage premium for skills obtained even without degree completion.

20. A credit-based culture has not been assimilated into UK higher education, labour markets, and policy planning. A university degree continues to be viewed as an indivisible experience and qualification. This is reflected in the continuing use of the term "course" as an integrated or unitary experience, and in the detailed practices of assessment and grading. Crucially, it is also reflected in labour markets. Students and graduates in the UK commonly express a view that is nearly the opposite of that expressed in the US: that nothing is better than something. Research suggests that men who begin a university course but do not finish it are, in fact, worse off than those who do not begin. Because there appear to be greater labour market penalties attached to non-completion in the UK than in the US, extending access to those whose circumstances put them at risk to drop out may be comparatively less beneficial in the UK than it is in the US, both individually and socially.

21. If mature, disabled, or working adults who could have succeeded at university do not study, there are both social and personal costs to their exclusion. These costs appear to loom larger in the calculation of politicians and the higher education community in the US than in the UK. Although the United States lacks a social democratic tradition, its political culture does contain an egalitarian strain, in which opportunities for self-sufficiency and advancement through competitive individualism are to be widely dispersed, and second chances to those who initially fail are to be generously provided. For the past half century this promise of opportunity has been embodied by providing broad access to public postsecondary education, and by offering remedial education for those in need of a second chance. Seen in this light,

any willing student who has any prospect of success should be given a chance - and a second chance - to study.

22. It might be argued that universities in the UK achieve their high completion rates by choosing not to take enough chances on students who might succeed at university, thereby excluding some who would have gone on to graduate. However, this argument has rarely been ventured in UK policy debates. Unrestricted access to university is not native to the social democratic tradition of the UK, or to Britain's larger culture.

Implications for Policy

23. What can US policymakers learn from the UK's experience as it has attempted to balance its historic commitment to low rates of "wastage" with higher rates of participation? HEFCE's completion policies and England's experience at aligning secondary to university education hold promise of improving rates of completion while sustaining broad access and flexibility for students. US state governments have put forward measures of institutional accountability and degree completion that fail to recognize differences in the students they are teaching. Criticized by universities as inappropriately applying a single standard to diverse institutions, these measures of performance have generated little lasting enthusiasm from legislators. HEFCE's benchmarked performance indicators offer, in comparison, the promise of meaningful and appropriate accountability for universities.

24. Evidence from the United States suggest that non traditional students, such as mature students with children or students with disabilities, are especially likely to avail themselves of the flexibility permitted in a system of enrolment that is credit-based, and in which part-time study is given (proportionately) equal financial support to full-time study. England's higher education policymaking community may wish to re-examine whether it can widen participation while at

the same time maintaining government policies and university practices that support an elite model of progression that is continuous, intensive, and exclusive of other obligations.

25. English universities wishing to respond to the needs of non-traditional students may not be able to do so successfully within a policy framework and a larger university culture that is committed to the maintenance of an elite model of progression and to a unitary system of university education. Unlike their US counterparts, UK universities that take substantial numbers of non-traditional students and permit them to depart from a traditional model of progression are at risk, since the institution's measures of efficiency or quality may suffer, sometimes to the serious detriment of the institution.

Introduction

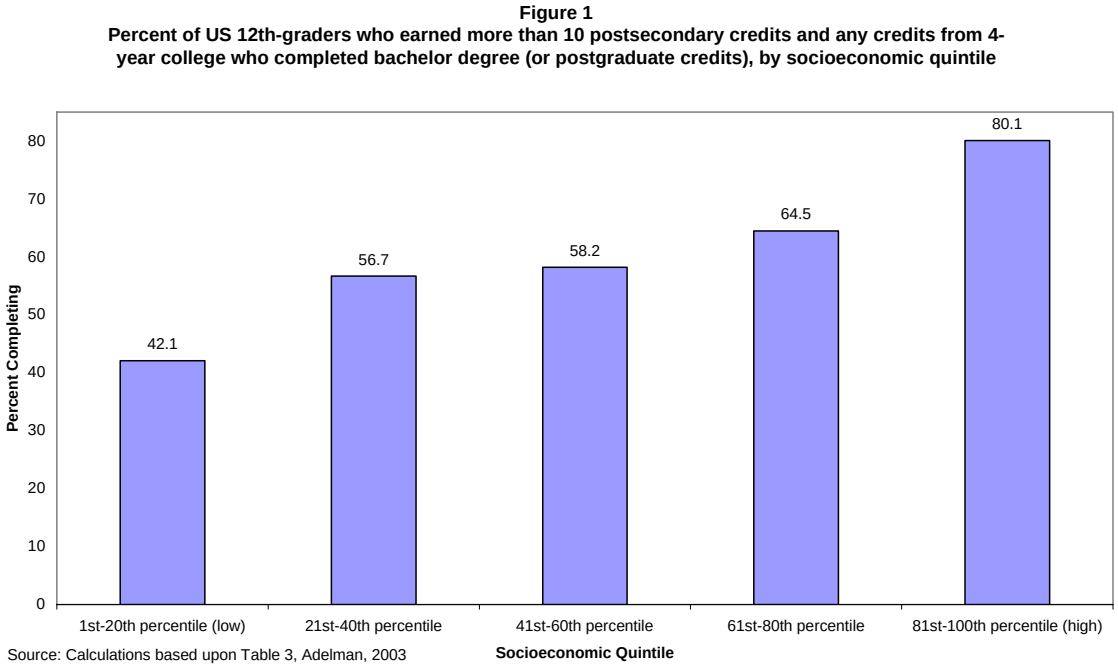
26. For the past forty years federal higher education policy in the United States has focused on helping students *enter* higher education, annually providing billions of dollars in grant and loan assistance to help them finance their education. What happens *after* students enter postsecondary education has received far less attention in legislative debates, and is nearly absent from federal policy. In the 374 pages of the Higher Education Act that authorize federal student aid programmes,[1] no mention is made of degree completion as a goal or objective of these programmes.[2]

27. In the past few years, however, both advocacy groups and politicians in the US have focused increasing attention on low rates of completion in higher education. Those who advocate on behalf of low income students argue that higher education cannot deliver on the promise of widening opportunities for advancement without first addressing the sharp class bias in university non-completion.

[1] Title IV of the Higher Education Act, as amended through October 2002.

[2] To receive federal financial aid students must be enrolled in a degree or certificate program, and maintaining satisfactory academic progress. These requirements were not established to reward or penalize completion, but rather to prevent students using federal funds to engage in leisure or hobby learning activities.

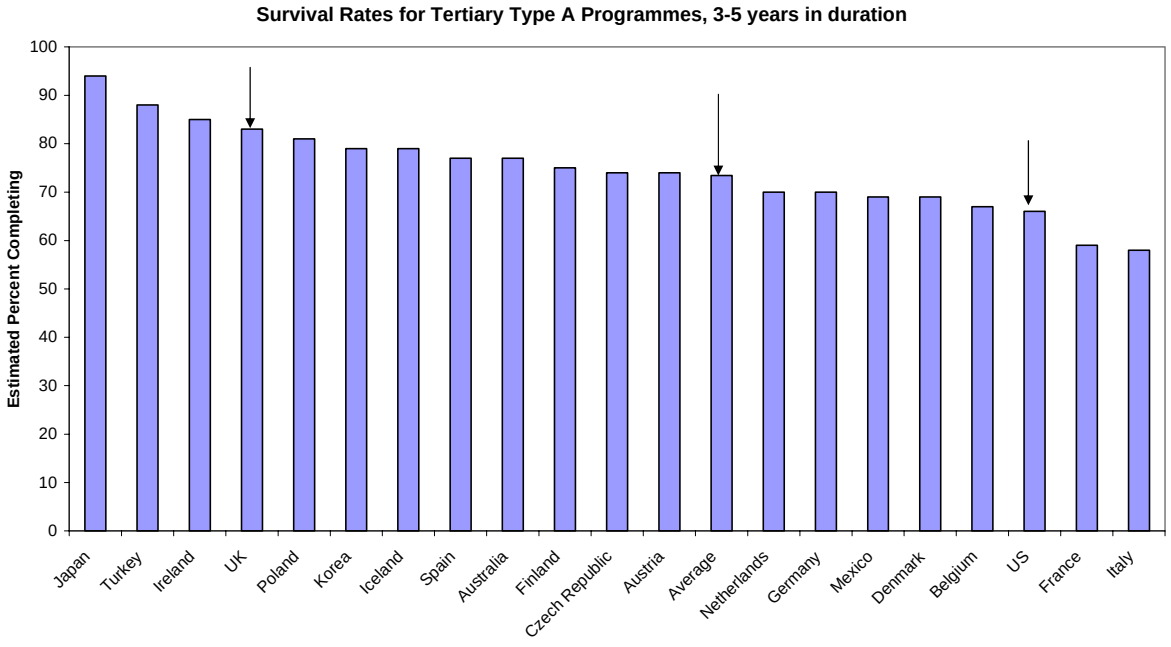
Figure 1



28. Politicians, in turn, have framed the question of completion as one of holding institutions accountable for their performance in the use of federal funds. Senator Joseph Lieberman, for example, has charged that federal policy "remain[s] focused primarily on helping students start college, not helping them finish," and proposed that postsecondary institutions be held accountable for graduation rates.[3] A similar measure has been proposed by the Bush administration.[4] Figure 2 shows that viewed in international perspective, rates of university completion in the United States are below average.

[3] "How the Democratic Candidates View Academe," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 23, 2004.
[4] "Education Department Wants to Create Grant Program Linked to Graduation Rates," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 3, 2003; "A Common Yardstick? The Bush Administration Wants to Standardize Accreditation, Educators Argue," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 15, 2003.

Figure 2



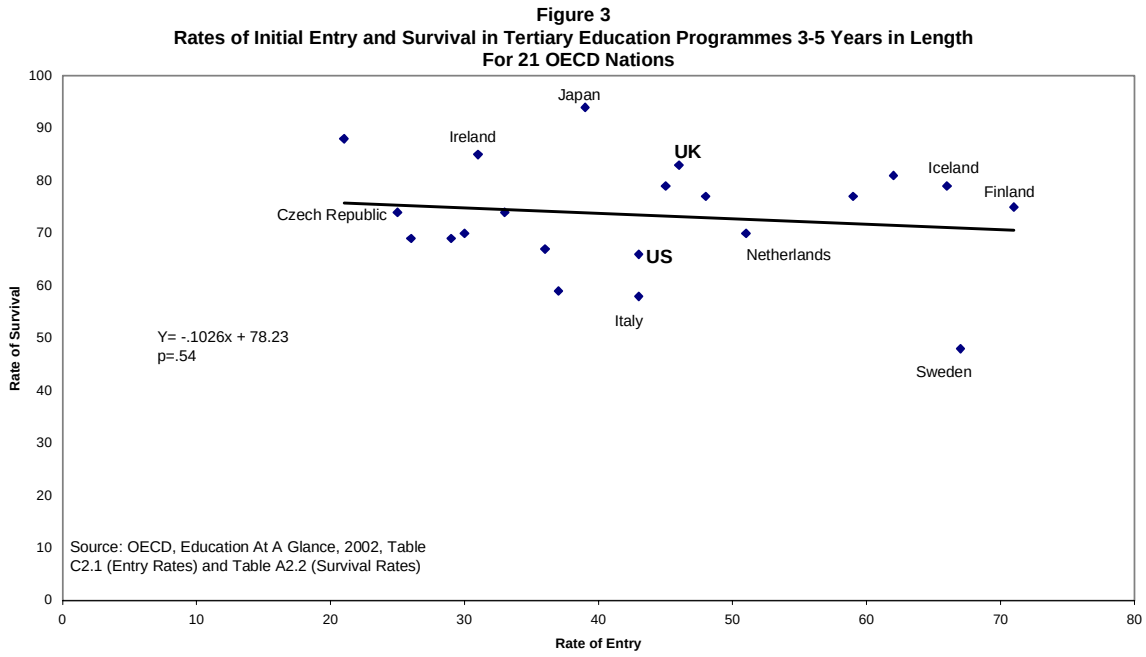
OECD, Education at a Glance, 2002, Table A2.2

Survival=nmber of graduates /number of new entrants in the typcial year of entrance

29. While the US higher education community could long take comfort in the fact that entry to university was dramatically broader than elsewhere in the world - and that lower rates of completion must stem from the much broader intake of US universities - this easy comfort is no longer available. According to data compiled by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the US is no longer alone in providing wide access to university education, and the assumption that low rates of completion are an inevitable companion of high rates of entry is unsubstantiated.[5] As figure 3 shows, there appears to be no relationship between rates of entry and completion.

[5] OECD data should be interpreted with caution. Owing to differences in definition and measurement across nations, they do not always compare like with like. According to the OECD, the UK has a higher rate of entry into tertiary type A (bachelor degree) education than the US. Using a modified age participation index produced by the DfES (excluding students studying for higher education qualifications below the bachelor degree level), 31.5 percent of the UK's 18-19 year old age cohort enters bachelor degree study. In the US approximately 30.5 percent of this age cohort enters bachelor degree study. This rate would increase significantly if it included young people who enter university indirectly, from community colleges.

Figure 3



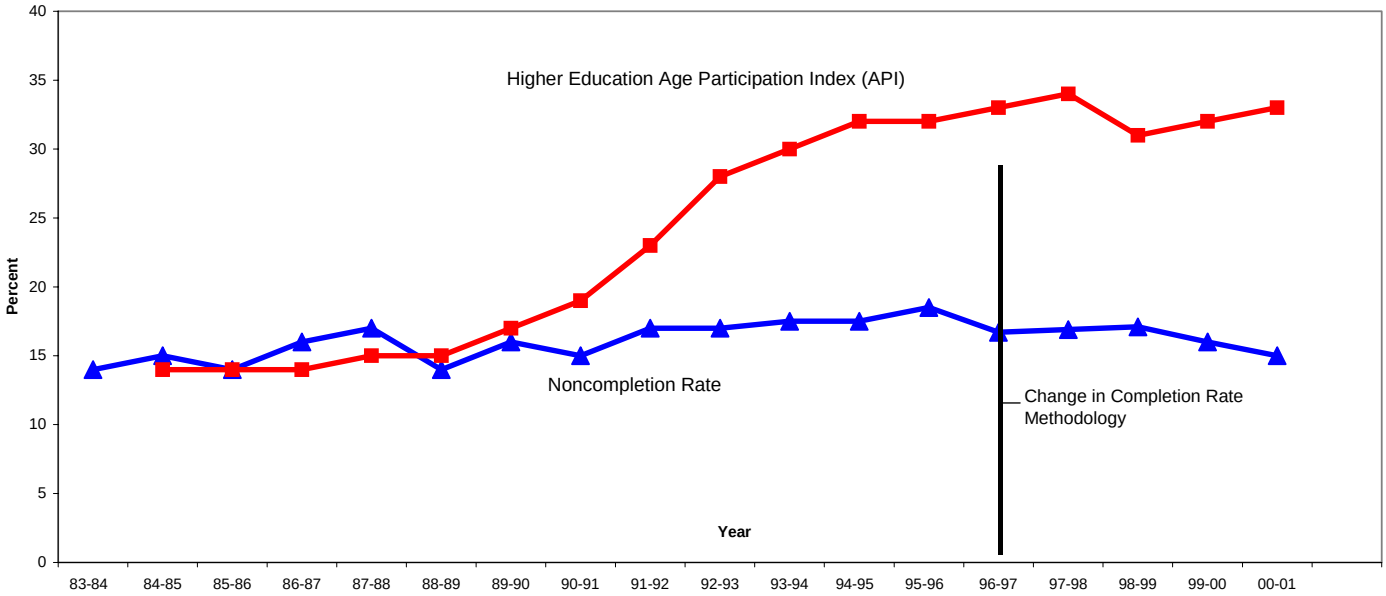
30. Some higher education analysts have proposed that the US should look for guidance to the UK, where higher education policies place greater emphasis on the completion of a degree, both by penalizing institutions for students who fail to complete, and by compiling benchmarked graduation rate scores for each publicly funded university. [6] On its face, borrowing from the experience of the UK makes sense. As government ministers and university leaders in the UK proudly point out, the UK "is one of the most successful countries in the world for students completing their courses."[7] More impressive still, the UK has massively expanded university enrolments - from 400,000 in the 1960's to 2,000,000 at the end of the century - with what appears to be only a small increase in the share of university entrants who fail to complete a degree.[8] Viewed in comparison to other OECD member nations, the UK now has a university system with moderate to high levels of participation (or, "rates of entry") and a very high level of

[6] Arthur M. Hauptman, *Using Institutional Incentives to Improve Student Performance*, July 25, 2003.
[7] "Performance Indicators Show Small Reduction in Drop-Out Rates," http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2003/perfind.asp.
[8] Select Committee on Education and Employment, *Higher Education Student Retention*, March 2001.

completion. Indeed, as figure 4 shows the UK appears to exemplify a surprising and hopeful relationship: that high levels of noncompletion may not inevitably accompany high rates of university participation.

Figure 4

Rates of Participation in Higher Education and Noncompletion in UK Higher Education Institutions



API: the number of home domiciled young (under 21) initial entrants into full-time courses of higher education, expressed as a proportion of the averaged 18-19 year old-population of Great Britain.

Noncompletion Rate: For 1983/4 to 1995/6 the rate is based upon a DfES comparsion of the number of starters and qualifiers. For 1996/97 and later the rate is based upon HEFCE projections applied to entering cohort of students. HEFCE noncompletion calculations are more precise and reliable than those of DfES, and any apparent post-1997 improvement in completion rates is likely to be the result in changes in measurement, rather than underlying results.

31. Should the US - which had the world's first mass system of higher education - now look to the UK for guidance on how to ensure that the promise of entry into higher education is more often fulfilled by the actual completion of a university degree? To address this question, I begin by examining whether rates of university completion in the UK truly higher than those in the US, or whether differences between the two nations are merely an artefact of how they organize education and collect data. I conclude that differences in reported rates of completion are significant and persistent, and turn next to explore why they might be dissimilar, focusing on government policies towards completion in the US and England, differences in the economics of university education, and, finally, on the

persistence of an elite culture and practice in English university education. I argue that the persistence of elite practices of university education - albeit with a greatly expanded and increasingly diverse university sector - has permitted England's university system to maintain comparatively high rates of degree completion. I suggest that it has done this at some cost. Some who might enter and succeed at higher education - most especially those are mature, disabled, working, or responsible for dependents - may be deterred from study. Among mature students who do study, many may be compelled to study in ways poorly suited to their personal needs. I conclude by identifying a few lessons that the US higher education community might learn from the UK, and by posing for the UK higher education community a set of questions about the persistence of a unitary elite system of university education.

University Completion in UK and US - Is It Really Different?

32. Are there real differences in the proportion of university students who complete their studies in the US and UK, or are their dissimilar rates of university completion simply an artefact of measurement and classification, or the collection of data? Identifying measures of university completion that can appropriately be compared requires that we first settle matters of nomenclature (what is a university?) and questions of measurement and conceptualisation (which students should be included in our calculations?).

33. The bachelor's degree is a broadly similar qualification in the UK and US, though different institutions award it in the two nations. In the UK, a university confers the degree; in the US, either universities or "four-year" colleges may award bachelor degrees. For the sake of simplicity, students at both types of US institutions will be described as university students.

34. The UK - unlike the US - has one authoritative measure of degree completion, calculated each year by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Drawing upon individual student record data from all publicly funded higher education institutions, HEFCE produces a projected rate of completion among all UK-domiciled, full-time entrants to first degree (i.e. bachelor degree) programs.[9] Among these students who entered UK universities in 2000-2001, 82 percent were projected to complete a bachelor's degree at the institution where they began their studies, or at another university.[10] For individual institutions, the proportion of fulltime students starting on first degree courses in 2000-2001 who were projected to leave without transferring to another institution or taking a higher education qualification ranged from 1 percent for Cambridge University to 39 percent for the University of North London. Calculated annually, this measure is used primarily as an indicator of the performance of individual higher education institutions funded by HEFCE. It also

[9] *Performance Indicators in Higher Education*, at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Learning/PerfInd/2003
[10] http://ww.hefce.ac.uk/learning/perfind/2003/guide/t5.asp

provides a summary of student progression within the UK's university system, taken as a whole. [11]

35. Responsibility for the organisation, funding, and governance of public universities in the US is a matter of state law, rather than federal law. Hence, to the extent that individual student data sufficient to calculate a rate of university completion exist, they are held by individual states, not by the federal government. The first calculation of a national-level university completion rate was assayed by the private testing firm, ACT, which in 1983 began to calculate what it described as a "national graduation rate." Using data provided to it by most of the nation's accredited colleges and universities, the ACT reported an institutional completion rate: the percentage of first-year students who completed within five years a bachelor's degree at the institution where they began their studies. According to this measure, 51.6 percent of freshmen students entering a US university in the fall of 1998 had completed a degree at the institution where they began their studies by the end of the 2003 academic year.[12] However, five or six year rates of *institutional completion* provide a poor measure of completion for a nation in which many students change universities, and many students stop out from their studies or enrol on a part-time basis. This can cause substantial underestimation of the proportion of university students who complete their studies.

36. In response to the absence of student record data, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the US Department of Education has created a series of nationally representative collections, some of which are cross-sectional, and others of which are longitudinal, tracking a panel of students from secondary school through postsecondary education (the National Longitudinal Education

[11] The DfES, the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee, the National Audit Office, and other government bodies use these data in their work, and take them to be authoritative.

[12] Author's calculations from ACT Institutional Data File, 2003. One can calculate a six-year institutional completion rate using institutional data provided by universities to the US Department of Education. The data yield a broadly similar rate of 54 percent. Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) 2001 Graduation Rate Survey.

Survey, NELS), or for a period of six years after matriculation in postsecondary education (the Beginning Postsecondary Students survey, BPS). Table 1 shows the results. Using BPS data, one can select a subset of sampled US students that closely resembles the UK university population measured by HEFCE - all first-year students who began at a university, enrolled full-time during their first year, and reported that they intended to complete a bachelor's degree. For these students, an estimated 65.6 percent completed a bachelor's degree within six years of beginning their studies.[13] Using a slightly different subset of students from the NELS panel - all students who completed 10 or more postsecondary credits, some of which were at four-year institutions - one obtains an eight year bachelor degree completion rate of 67.3 percent.

37. By measures of university completion conventionally used within the US higher education community, about 66-67 percent of US university students appear to complete their degree, a level that is measurably lower than the UK's rate of 82 percent. Differences in the rates of completion among university students in the US and UK appear to be real, substantial, and persistent.

[13] Table 9, *Descriptive Summary of 1995-96 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Six Years Later*, NCES, 2002, p.16.

Table 1

Alternative Measures of Completion Rates in the US

Cohort	Duration	Completion At	Number of Postsecondary Credits Completed	Percent Completing Bachelor's Degree
freshmen beginning at four-year institutions	5 yrs (1998-2003)	same institution		51.6
first-time fulltime students beginning at four-year institutions	6 yrs (1995-2001)	same institution		54.0
all students in Beginning Postsecondary Study who began as full-time first-year students at four-year institutions, with bachelor's degree goal	6 yrs (1995-2001)	any 4-year		65.6
all students in High School and Beyond sample who enrolled in four-year institution	11 yrs (1982-1993)	any 4-year		62.9
all students in High School and Beyond sample who enrolled in 4-year institution at any time and completed > 10 postsecondary credits and	11 yrs (1982-1993)	any 4-year	>10 credits completed	64.7
all students in National Education Longitudinal Study who completed >10 postsecondary credits and any credits from 4-year institution	8 yrs (1992-2000)	any 4-year	>10 credits completed	67.3

Is it government policies towards completion?

38. It is an article of faith among those in government, especially among those responsible for funding and monitoring university education, that their efforts shape the performance of universities. Does the UK have policies that are dissimilar to those of the US, and might the UK's policies be the source of its distinctively higher rates of university completion? Below I lay out some key differences in government policies, and suggest their likely implications.

US Policy towards Completion

39. The 1992 Higher Education Act authorized the creation of State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPREs), and charged them with developing quantified performance standards in five basic areas, one of which was graduation rates. Fiercely critical of the "federalisation" of academic accreditation, historically an exercise in university self-regulation, the higher

education community found succour among Republicans disposed to protect aggrieved constituencies, even universities, against federal regulation. When Republicans gained control of Congress in 1995, they swiftly ended funding for SPREs.[14]

40. The 1990 Student Right to Know Act is the only US federal law that directly addresses degree completion. It requires universities to submit to the federal government data about graduation rates as a condition of participating in federal student aid programs. Conceived of as a consumer protection measure, the Act requires that institutions disclose to prospective students the proportion of full-time first-time students who complete a bachelor's degree from the institution within six years. However, it does not authorize the federal government to calculate league tables, institutional benchmarks, or otherwise employ these data to shape the performance of the nation's universities.

41. Although the American states are responsible for the organisation and funding of public universities, they, too, have played only a modest role with respect to university completion. State funding of public universities is based upon student enrolments, measured as credit-based "full-time equivalent students" (FTEs), typically counted in a census of enrolment taken early each academic term, often on the tenth day of semester. Some states fund enrolments by employing a formula that associates student enrolments with inputs (e.g. staffing levels) and dollars. Others employ an incremental strategy, in which FTE's have an historical association with funding level. Spending begins from last year's base, and marginal adjustments are made to reflect additional enrolments, higher salaries, or other changes since the previous budget.

42. Student dropout could, potentially, result in a loss both of the state

[14] David D. Dill, "Accountability, Assessment, and Anarchy? The Evolution of Quality Assurance Policies in the US," Ch. 2 in J. Brennan et. al., Standards and Quality in Higher Education.

appropriation for the student FTE, and the loss of the student's tuition fee.[15] However, student dropouts typically have little - or no - effect on a US institution's revenue stream. Patterns of dropout are predictable, and institutions can plan for an expected rate of attrition, arranging either to add offsetting enrolments or to reduce costs to accommodate the annual loss of enrolments. For example, universities may replace a lost student by admitting a student transferring from another institution, or by enrolling a new student at mid-year, thereby maintaining the number of FTEs for which they were funded. As one state budget official noted:

> "Retention or graduation rates do not really matter, as long as the enrolment target is being met. Dropouts are OK if they can be readily replaced, and the number of transfer students is a lever that can be adjusted for this."[16]

43. While universities sometime fail to meet their funded enrolment totals - and sometimes fall sufficiently short enough that legislators feel compelled to claw back funds (or, reduce the next budget's appropriation) - degree completion rarely impinges on a university's cash flow.

44. Recognizing that the financing of higher education does not provide institutions with incentives to mitigate noncompletion, and gripped with a desire to hold universities accountable for their performance, US state legislatures began in the 1990's to push for the collection of information about university graduation rates. By 2002 about half of US states had devised their own measures of university completion, while the remainder continued to rely upon data submitted by universities to the federal government. Universities typically greeted these completion measures with antipathy, alleging that they were

[15] Student tuition fees provide about one-quarter of current fund revenues of public universities. Table 334, Digest of Education Statistics, 2002, Current Fund Revenue of Public Degree-Granting Institutions, 1999-2000.
[16] Personal interview, senior budget analyst, state higher education agency, January 2004.

incomplete (due to the omission of part-time students and those who interrupt their studies), that they ignored successful outcomes (because the data do not include students who move from one institution to another), and that these measures imposed a "one size fits all" metric upon institutions with very different missions and admissions policies.[17]

45. Given these limitations of the information collected, state legislatures choose to make little use of this graduation rate information.[18] Although four-fifths of state higher education agencies report graduation rates to state legislatures, only rarely, in seven states, is information about graduation rates included as a factor in performance funding schemes - which typically apply to a very small portion of total state higher education funding.

England's Policy towards Completion

46. Degree completion plays a more prominent role in England's policies for university funding and performance measurement than it does in the US. Universities are funded not on enrolments *per se*, but on *completed* enrolments: students are funded as a full-time equivalent enrolment only if they undergo assessment in, regardless of whether they pass or fail, all modules on which the student has enrolled within the year of study. If a student unexpectedly fails to complete their year of study, the university is left with a gap between its notional formula-based award (known as the "standard resource") and actual resource. In contrast to the US universities, UK universities cannot easily compensate for unanticipated dropouts, since the number of students entering university through transfers and mid-year starts is miniscule. The shortfall in completed enrolments - if it places the institution outside the upper limit of a plus or minus 5 percent

[17] Only one state captures part-time students in its reporting, and only three are able to calculate a rate that includes students who have begun at one institution but completed at another public or private institution within the same state. State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) Survey, September 2002.
[18] As a comprehensive national survey of state higher education officials concluded, "performance reports are not widely used by state and campus policy makers. To date, reporting resembles more a symbolic than a substantive reform. Joseph C. Burke and Henrick Minassians, *Performance Reporting: Real Accountability or Accountability Lite? Seventh Annual Survey, 2003.*

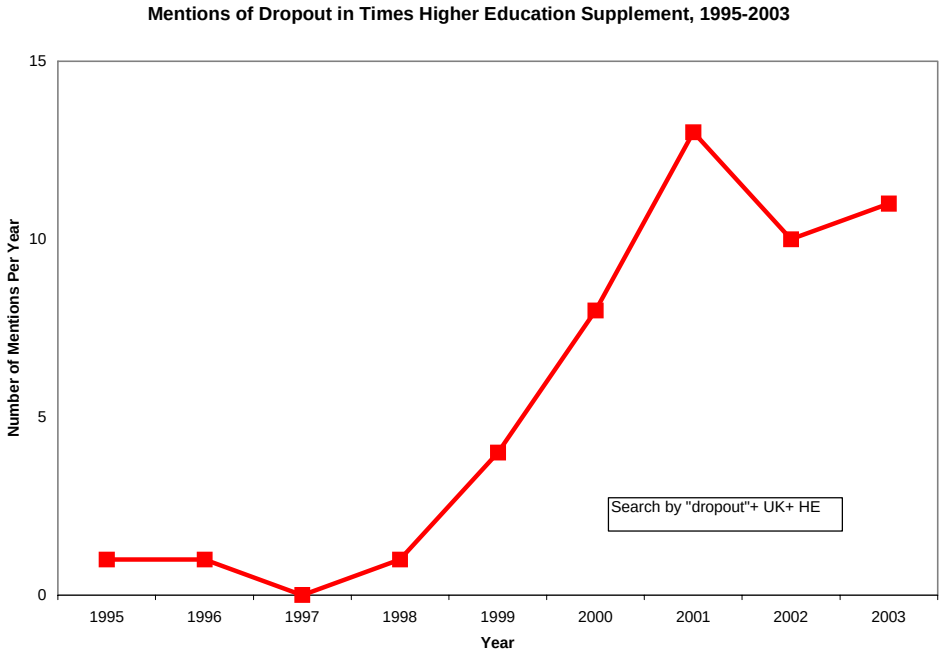
band of tolerance - will result in a reduction in funding. As a practical matter, only a handful of institutions ever find themselves in this position and universities are able to forecast their rates of noncompletion fairly accurately. Most institutions typically operate sufficiently close to the levels of funding predicted by the formula that student dropouts do not result in funding losses.[19]

47. Perhaps the sharpest contrast in government policy can be found in the use of institutional completion rates as a measure of university performance. Like the US states, the view of institutional performance adopted in the UK is oriented towards the traditional university student who is enrolled fulltime and studying for an honours degree. Those students who study part-time, or who study for higher education qualifications below the bachelor's level are not counted in the analysis of completion. In contrast to the US states, the measurement of institutional performance in the UK does largely capture movement from one university to another. Most importantly, it departs from US practice by eschewing a "one-size fits all" metric; rather, it creates an institutional benchmark for each publicly funded university against which its performance is measured, and annually reported.[20] Performance indicators for completion provide an opportunity for all within the higher education community with an opportunity to assess how each of the nation's universities compares to one another, and against its own benchmark.

48. The introduction of the measures, coupled with the policy direction from the government, has increased the attention devoted to completion within the higher education community

[19] Furthermore, for 2004-05 the HEFCE has modified its rules and will in future reinstate withheld funds if an institution manages to recover its position in the following year. The policy is intended to strike a balance between funding enrolments and qualifications obtained. Howard Newby, Chief Executive HEFCE to Barry Sheerman, Chairman Select Committee on Education and Skills, 6 August 2003.
[20] Roderick Floud, "Policy Implications of Student Non-Completion: Government, Funding Councils, and Universities," in *Failing Students in Higher Education*.

Figure 5



49. Moreover, in contrast to the US states, where the release of university performance indicators typically rouses no press interest, the publication of university performance indictors in the UK stands elicits a flurry of news stories in the national newspapers, ranging from the tabloid's breathless "Crisis as 41% of uni students drop out" to the more sober broadsheet headline, "Dropout issue puts universities to the class test."[21] More important still, these figures are monitored by government, forming the basis for committee hearings, policy audits[22], and policy guidance from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).[23]

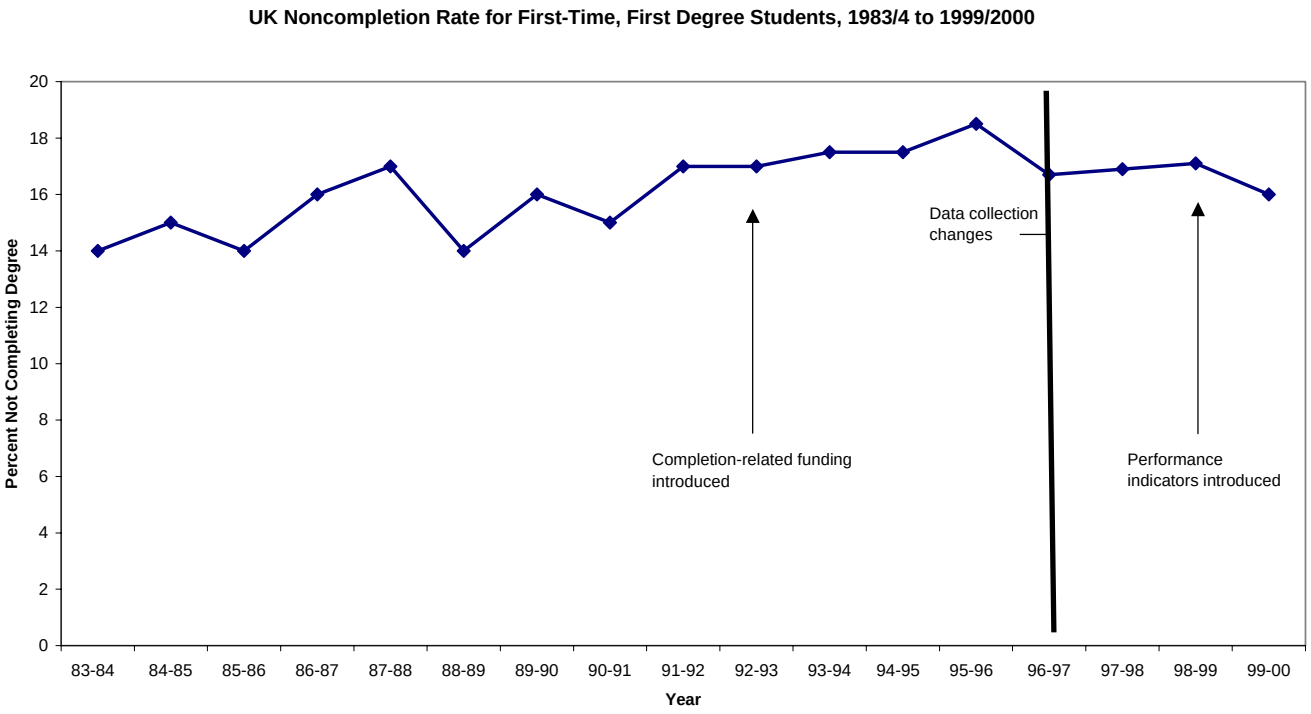
50. To what extent, then, can one attribute the UK's higher levels of university completion to these differences in its funding and accountability policies? Though policy differences exist, they probably play a modest role in explaining why the

[21] Mantz Yorke, *The Prejudicial Papers? Press Treatment of U.K. Higher Education Performance Indicators, 1999-2001*, pp. 159-184 in Access and Exclusion, Volume 2, 2003.
[22] National Audit Office, *Improving Student Achievement in English Higher Education*, January 2002.
[23] See, for example, the Higher Education Funding and Delivery, 2004-05, paragraph 14, Student Retention. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2004/grant04/letter.asp

rates of university completion are dissimilar. Although funding arrangements in the US and UK do treat student dropout differently, in practice it appears that neither universities in the UK nor the US often feel the sting of lost pounds or dollars as a consequence of student dropout.

51. More importantly, as figure 6 demonstrates, the UK had a consistently high rate of university completion well before the government introduced a completion-related funding system in 1992, or adopted higher education performance indictors in 1999. These policies are better understood as initiatives aimed at *sustaining* the practices and traditions that led to high rates of completion in the face of swift changes in English higher education, rather than its cause. To understand why there are large differences in the completion rates of the US and UK, we must look to other ways in which the two university systems differ.

Figure 6



Is it the economics of university education?

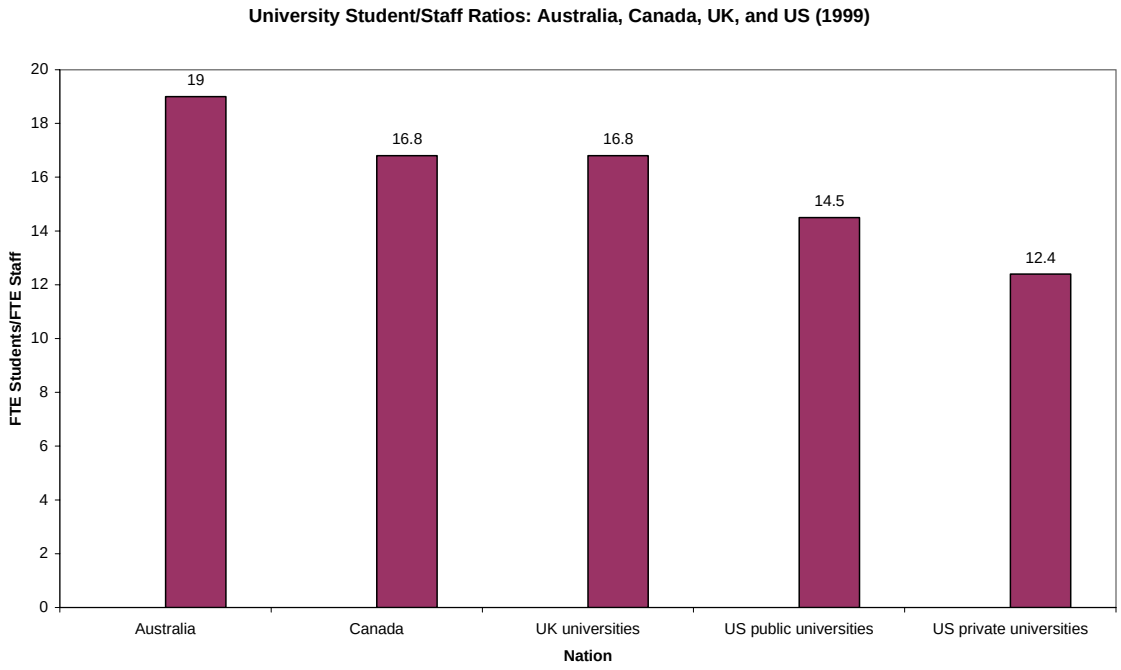
52. That the US has a lower rate of university completion may be attributable to a second set of factors that might be broadly described as economic: the level of resources invested in the two university systems; the economic benefits of university completion; and the level of privation and paid work that students face while at university.

53. Students may fail to complete their studies because universities are inadequately resourced. The key (and costly) resource within universities is faculty. With insufficient faculty, students may receive inadequate direction in reading, research, and career planning, or find queues for courses that deter all but the most intrepid learner.[24] Hence, the ratio of students to faculty provides a

[24] "A Darwinian Selection Process Drives Italian Students to Despair," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 12, 2002.

simple indicator for the sufficiency of university resources.[25] As figure 7 shows, US universities, especially its private universities, appear to have a significantly lower ratio of students to faculty than do UK universities. As the addition of university systems in Canada and Australia indicates, staffing levels at US universities are measurably higher than those of peer English-speaking nations. Insufficient resources, as measured by high student/faculty ratios, appear unlikely to be responsible for comparatively lower rates of university completion in the US.

Figure 7

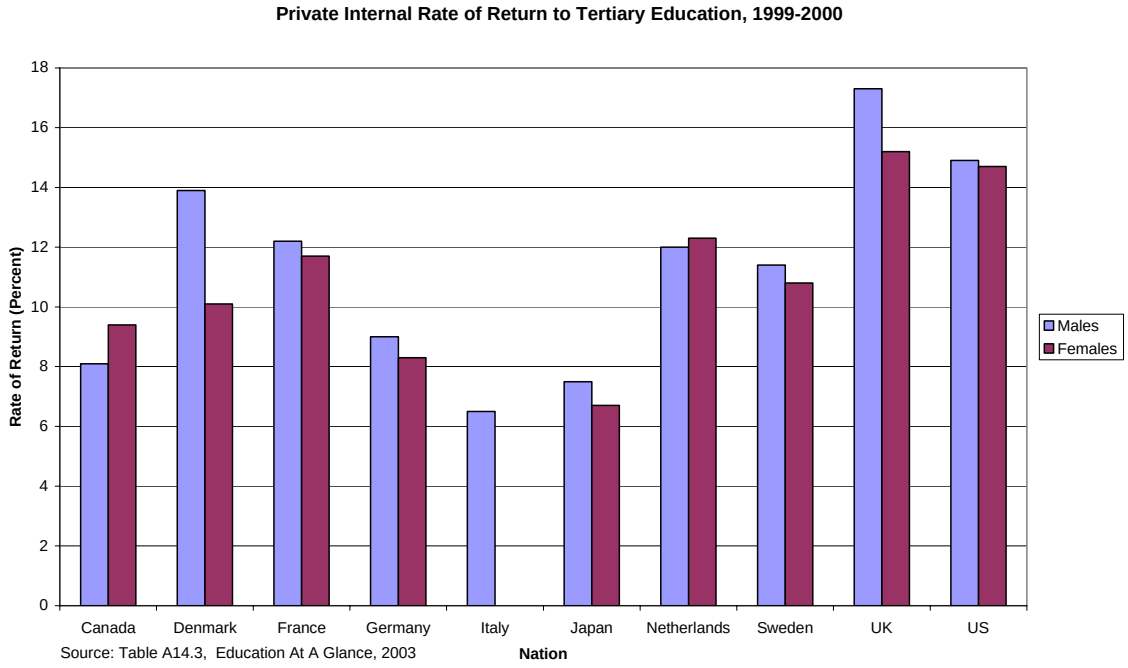


54. Students may also drop out of university because they conclude that the costs of continuing - their mounting debts and the wages that they are foregoing - are simply greater than the benefits that they will derive from completing their degree. Perhaps more US students fail to complete their studies because the completion of a university degree holds smaller rewards, relative to its cost, than

[25] Because nations may not follow consistent definitions and measurements instructional staff, comparisons should be treated with caution.

it does in the UK. One international measure of the economic benefits of a university degree is the "private internal rate of return on investment in education," which measures the returns obtained over time relative to the initial investment in education.[26] As figure 8 indicates, both the US and the UK have especially high rates of return to university education compared to other OECD nations. The US has marginally lower private returns to investment in university education than the UK for males, while rates of return for females are nearly identical. Differences of this magnitude probably explain little about the UK's higher rates of university completion.

Figure 8



55. Students may opt to leave university because of the privations of student life, or because they are unable to manage their studies while meeting the demands of paid work. US researchers have consistently found that paid work is

[26] OECD describes the private internal rate of return as measuring "the costs equal tuition fees, foregone earnings net of taxes adjusted for the probability of being in employment less the resources made available to students in the form of grants and loans. The benefits are the gains in post-tax earnings adjusted for the higher employment probability less the repayment, if any, of public support during the period of study."

positively associated with noncompletion, and that this relationship persists when controlling for a range of student characteristics, including age, family income, and prior academic qualifications.[27] Research in the UK has shown that term-time work and dropping out of university completion may be linked[28], and that term-time work and higher education achievement is negatively associated. Taking a range of other factors into account, working sixteen hours or more a week, when compared to not working, results in a decrease in the chance of getting a "good degree" estimated to be between 10 and 60 percent.[29]

56. In which nation do student hardship and work appear most likely to burden university completion? Although student hardship is too poorly documented to permit comparison, student work is not. In 1998-1999, 46 percent of UK full-time university students reported that they were engaged in paid term-time work, and that they worked an average of 11 hours per week.[30] US students report undertaking significantly more paid work. Among full-time students at four-year institutions, both public and private, 73 percent worked, and those who did worked an average of 21 hours per week. (Among fulltime students enrolled at private 4-year institutions, 73 percent worked for an average of 19 hours per week).[31] With levels of work this extensive, students who work at or above the average weekly rate are at a measurably increased risk of being unable to continue with their studies.

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[27] There is disagreement about the how much paid work must be undertaken before the probability of completion is diminished. Estimates typically range from 15 hours per week to 25 hours per week. See, for example, National Center for Education Statistics, *Low-Income Students: Who They Are and How They Pay For Their Education*, p. 48.

[28] Supplementary memorandum from Professor Claire Callender, South Bank University (HE 154), Sixth Report of the Education and Employment Select Committee, Appendix 36, p. 264.

[29] "Debt, Term-Time Work, and Attainment," Ruth Van Dyke, Brenda Little, and Claire Callender, UUK (forthcoming, 2004). For similar results in the US, see Stinebrecker and Stinebrecker, "Working During School and Academic Performance," http://www.ssc.uwo.ca/economics/econref/html/WP2000/wp2000_9.pdf

[30] Callender and Kemp, Changing Student Finances: Income, Expenditure and the Take-up of Student Loans among Full- and Part-time Higher Education Students in 1998/9, RR213, 2000. By 2002 the proportion of fulltime students engaged in term-time work rose substantially, to 58 percent. (Callender and Kemp, 2003).

[31] NCES, *Low-Income Students*, p. 36.

57. Here, at last, is a substantial difference between university education in the US and UK: US university students engage in levels of paid work that are likely to contribute to substantially lower levels of degree completion. That US students are more often occupied by responsibilities while at university is one part of a larger set of differences in university education in the US and England. As I show below, relatively lower levels of work among UK university students are a product of an elite tradition of university education; one that is attenuated, but not gone.

Is it Differences in the Culture and Practice of University Education?

"The British move toward mass higher education extended elite criteria to the non-elite sector of polytechnics and colleges of education, thus giving rise to a far greater degree of homogeneity in patterns of access between the two sectors - university and non-university - than had ever existed. In short, mass higher education in Britain was elite higher education written a little larger." --Guy Neave, 1985

"The expansion on UK higher education has yet to produce the culture change normally associated with the shift to a mass system. Many of the detailed practices of British universities remain rooted in an elite past. Many higher education teachers continue to see the system in terms of a core characterized by selective entry, specialized academic disciplines, low wastage, and high standards. " -Peter Scott, 1995

58. In a series of highly influential essays written in the 1970's and 1980's, Martin Trow argued that national systems of higher education faced social and economic pressures for expansion, and that other nations would follow the US, moving from an elite system of higher education to mass system, and finally to a universal system of higher education. The transition from an elite system of education, Trow argued, would compel England to move away from a unitary university system marked by selective entry, an intimate and intensive

pedagogical relationship between students and instructors, and high and consistent degree standards, towards a system that was marked by much higher levels of differentiation in the cost, mission, and standards of higher education institutions - the apotheosis of which was the United States. Highly selective entry and consistent degree standards would jeopardize continued growth in higher education enrolments, while the tradition of an intimate and intensive pedagogy would simply be too expensive for a mass system of higher education to sustain. In the future, he forecast, English higher education would either openly embrace differentiation, or become a "reluctant and resentful sector of mass higher education" marked by a "genuine stratification, though with unclear boundaries and disputed functions."[32]

59. Like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, the UK higher education community has spent two decades waiting for - or dreading the collapse of - a unitary elite system of university education. Although student numbers have grown to mass quantities, in important respects the English university system of the early 21st century retains many characteristics of an elite system, at least when viewed from a US perspective. It is, to borrow an especially clever formulation, a "crowded elite system" in which "values and structures have been slower to change than rates of participation."[33]

60. Below I show that, in comparison to the United States, two aspects of the English university system - student entry and student progression - are marked by a continuing, albeit attenuated, persistence of elite thinking, policy, and practice. These characteristics are summarized in Table 2, below. Taken together, I argue, elite practices concerning entry and progression have permitted the UK to maintain university completion rates that are substantially higher than those of the US. High rates of completion are not a free good. Rather, I argue, the UK has accomplished this at a price: diminished flexibility

[32] Martin Trow, Academic Standards and Mass Higher Education, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 1987, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 269-292.
[33] David Robertson, "Social Justice in a Learning Market," Ch. 5 in Repositioning Higher Education, 1997.

and access for non-traditional university students.

Table 2

A Typology of Elite and Mass Education (adapted, from Trow)		
	Elite	**Mass**
Student Entry	• Limited and selective entry from secondary system closely aligned to demands of university study; • Sharp separation from other forms of post-compulsory education and training	• Broad entry and highly variable selectivity, and secondary system weakly aligned to demands of university curriculum; • Close links between university and other post-compulsory institutions
Student Progression	• Homogeneous, motivated, and young student body • Ecclesiastical study: continuous and full-time, to the exclusion of other activities; • Pedagogical frame set by instructors	• Entrants range widely in age, academic preparation; motivation; • Credit and module framework resulting in variable patterns of attendance and relatively open pedagogical frame marked by student choice
Outcomes	• High and common degree standard • Low and common rates of "wastage"	• Highly variable degree standard • Moderately high noncompletion, high variation across institutions.

Entry to First Degree Study in England: Still an Elite System

There is....[a] common level of minimum achievement, two A level passes, required for admission to universities and polytechnics…[T]he requirement of two A-levels passes itself is a very considerable barrier to entry to higher education. Fewer than a quarter (22 percent) of the age grade currently take these examinations, and only 15 percent pass in the two or more subjects that is the minimum entry qualification for entry to a degree course."

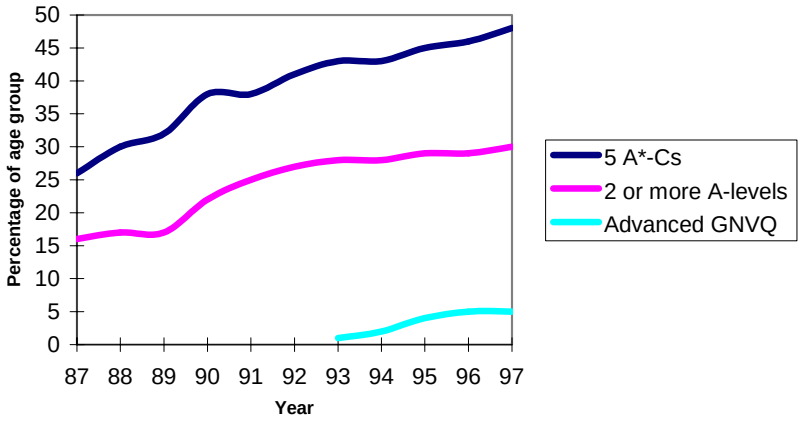
--Martin Trow, 1987

61. Since 1987, entry to first degree study in English universities has undergone sweeping changes in its *selectivity,* the share of the age cohort continuing from upper secondary academic education to university; in its *exclusivity,* the proportion of university entrants who come from outside the upper secondary academic path; and in the *alignment of secondary to university education,* the closeness with which upper secondary curriculum and assessment are linked to the needs of university education.

62. Following the adoption of changes to the secondary curriculum and national examinations in 1988, the traditional path to university expanded swiftly: the share of the age cohort entering A-level study and obtaining two A-level results roughly doubled.[34] (Figure 9)

[34] Supply and Demand in Higher Education, HEFCE, 01-62, October 2001.

Figure 9

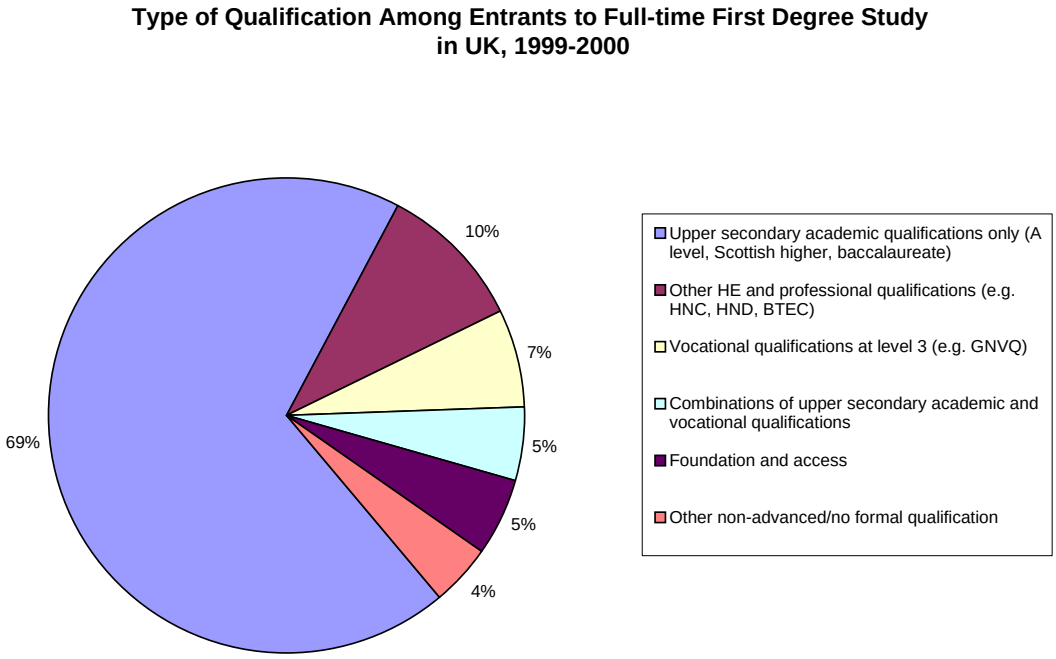


63. In addition, the share of students who obtained two A-level results who subsequently continued to university increased from 80 percent to nearly 100 percent.[35]

64. No less important, the share of entrants to fulltime first degree study who do not follow the traditional path from upper secondary academic study - the A level or Scottish Higher- to university is now sizeable. In 1999-2000, about three in ten entrants to university did not rely solely upon upper secondary academic qualifications for university entry. An estimated 22 percent entered university through a vocational path, entering with either a GNVQ or similar qualification, or with a vocational higher education qualification of a shorter duration (e.g. a HND), while the remaining 9 percent entered with either foundation or access qualifications (5 percent), or with no formal qualifications (or, a lower secondary qualification) (Figure 10)

[35] idem.

Figure 10



65. Finally, during the past two decades there has been a weakening of alignment between the upper secondary curriculum and university education. Originally "an entrance examination controlled by universities and geared to serve their needs,"[36] the A-level examination became in the late 1980's and 1990's increasingly subject to the control of bodies other than the universities - and as a consequence, the upper secondary curriculum did as well. In A-level maths, for example, this resulted in the introduction of modules that were not linked to the university maths and engineering curriculum, such as statistics, and a diminished emphasis on calculus. The result, university math and engineering faculty aver, was a growing mismatch between the skills set of university entrants and the university curriculum in maths and engineering, including entrants with full points on the A-level examination.[37] Other academic disciplines in which learning is highly linear, such as modern languages, report similar mismatches. By the late 1990's diagnostic testing for students entering university in these

[36] *Measuring the Mathematics Problem*, Engineering Council, 2000.
[37] *Measuring the Mathematics Problem*, Engineering Council, 2000.

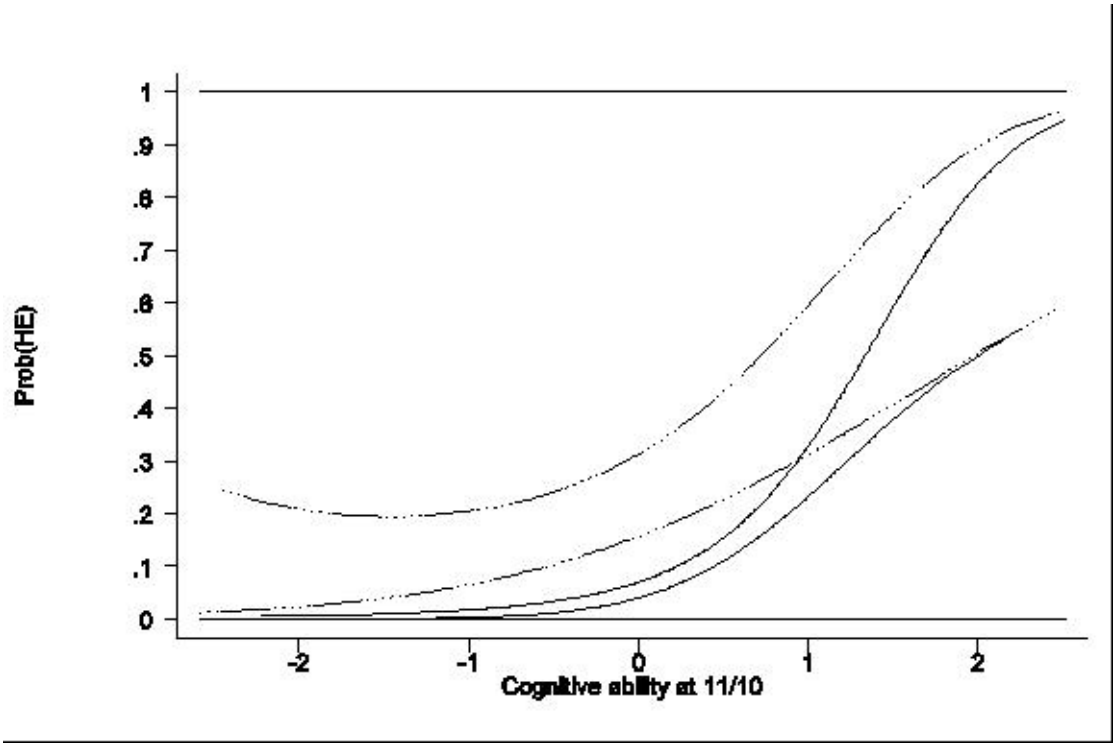
disciplines had become widespread. By 1999 sixty departments of maths, engineering, and physics reported to Engineering Council that they were administering diagnostic testing to entering university students. As Mike Tomlinson observed during his review of secondary education, "it isn't that young people at university aren't able to do this - it's not been an integral part of their programme and it has not been encouraged and supported by the way in which they are assessed. It's not their fault, and it's not the fault of their teachers."[38]

66. What are the implications of these changes to the selectivity, exclusivity, and the alignment of secondary to university education? There is, most likely, a wider range of abilities among university entrants after the sharp expansion of participation in higher education, post-1989, than there was before. In a recent examination of the relationship between early cognitive ability, parental background, and higher education attainment, Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles examined birth cohorts from 1958 and 1970, who would have been 21 in 1979 and 1991, respectively.[39] As the solid lines in figure 11 show, among males in the 1958 cohort, the probability of completing a higher education qualification was very low for all but those whose cognitive ability at age 11 was well above average. As the broken lines show, the probability that students with average (or below average) examination results obtained a higher education qualification rose substantially for males in the 1970 birth cohort, although chiefly among those in the top income quintile. These results imply that between 1979 and 1991, as higher education participation rates roughly doubled, the range of abilities among students obtaining higher education qualifications significantly widened.

[38] Diploma on the Cards for 14 to 19's, *The Guardian*, Tuesday, February 17, 2004.
[39] "The Declining Relative Importance of Ability in Predicting Educational Attainment," Fernando Galindo-Rueda and Anna Vignoles, October 2003.

Figure 11

Estimated probability of obtaining a higher education qualification, by ability, for the highest income quintile of men (top line) and lowest quintile (bottom line) for 1958 birth cohort (continuous line) and 1970 birth cohort (discontinuous line)



67. The second consequence of these changes has been the emergence of a core of university students who are not yet fully prepared to begin their course at the point they have been admitted to university.

68. During the past 15 years UK universities have adopted a host of practices to assist admitted students in readying themselves for the demands of the first degree courses they aim to enter. Some universities provide offers of enrolment that are contingent upon successful completion of a summer-length module (or, modules), or bridging modules to students entering years two or three from HND or foundation degree programmes. Others now offer remedial instruction within year one. Mathematics students, for example, have been provided with “lower

level transition modules, additional assessed modules, and supplementary lectures" to assist them in acquiring the skills they need on their course.[40]

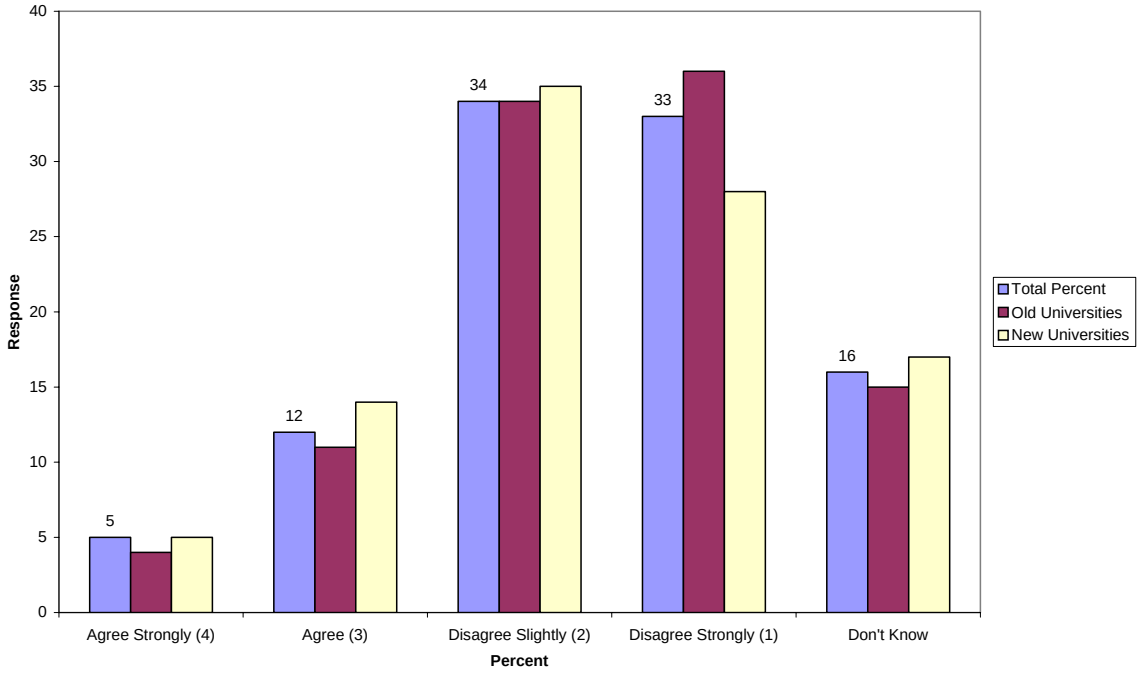
69. How many entering university students need assistance to ready themselves for their course? There is no comprehensive and reliable answer to this question. There are no national data on these sorts of preparatory instruction. The UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency does not keep data at a modular level, and universities do not have a common definition of which modules are "preparatory" or not; hence, there are no national data on the scope or depth of preparatory instruction. Some experts estimate that approximately 15 to 20 percent of entering university students are now assessed for readiness to enter their courses. If even half of those students who are subject to diagnostic assessment subsequently undertake some preparatory work, then perhaps 10 to 15 percent of university entrants now participate in preparatory work during year one. The least precise answer of all is supplied by university instructors, who when surveyed in March 2003 were asked, among other things, whether they agreed with the statement that "students are better prepared for higher education than they were years ago."[41] Two-thirds disagreed, many strongly. As figure 12 shows, although responses varied across academic disciplines, instructors at pre and post-1992 universities do not differ sharply in their responses.

[40] Engineering Council, 2002. In November 2003 address to head teachers, Mike Tomlinson noted that "students' basic literacy and numeracy skills are so lacking that universities are having to lay on remedial courses for students in English and maths 'to enable them to progress in their degree studies," see "Revival of Essay Likely in Exam Reforms," *The Guardian*, November 12, 2003.

[41] Academics Survey, Prepared for the Times Higher Education Supplement by ICM Research, March 2003.

[43] There are no national data that allow one to identify when students select their course of study; hence this characterisation rests upon the informed judgments of university administrators and researchers. Students

Figure 12



70. In conclusion, there have been important changes to university entry in England - diminished selectivity, exclusivity, and articulation - that have resulted, most likely, in a wider range of student abilities and a lower average level of readiness among entrants to university. In respect of entry, the English university system has become considerably more a mass system, both in student number and its detailed practices. Compared to the US university system, however, it retains important elements of elite practice - which have helped to sustain higher levels of degree completion.

University Entry in the US

71. Perhaps no nation can boast a system of secondary education that is less closely linked to the demands of university education than the US. US secondary education has no distinct period of specialized study within upper secondary education; rather, students are expected to continue their studies in all subjects until the end of secondary schooling. Absent a system of upper secondary specialisation, students who continue to university do not enter either

a course, as in England, or a faculty, as in Scotland; rather, they enter the university. Students enter university with little if any familiarity with the course that they will undertake at university. For most US students the first year of bachelor's education is a time for academic sorting and experimentation, during which they acquire, through introductory classes or modules, feedback about their aptitude for and enjoyment of a course. Students typically enter their course of study at the beginning of the second year at university.[43]

72. US secondary students have not been assessed against curriculum-based and externally set examinations that have been aligned to university education. Throughout the past half century the statewide academic requirements for the completion of secondary education - if they exist at all - been based upon the years that a subject must be studied, rather than course content or level. In 2002, for example, only 16 states establish requirements about both the duration and the content of mathematics required for high school graduation.[44] In the majority of states, students are able to complete secondary education without taking courses that are likely to prepare them for university study. Even though course content requirements exist in some states, "in almost no state is there consensus across the two systems [of secondary and postsecondary education] on the courses students should take in high school."[45] Although states have in the past decade begun to introduce externally - set curriculum-based examinations, these examinations have as yet no bearing on students' entry into postsecondary education: they are often administered well before the end of secondary education, in only a few subject areas, and higher education institutions, which played no role in their development, have not chosen to use them in weighing which students to admit.[46] The transition from secondary education to university can be a puzzling and unsettling experience for US students. Many find that they are moving "from one set of [secondary]

[44] "Aligning K-12 and Postsecondary Expectations: State Policy in Transition," 2002, p. 4.
[45] "Aligning K-12 and Postsecondary Expectations: State Policy in Transition," 2002, p. 3
[46] "Linking K-12 Standards to College Gets Mixed Reviews," Education Week, January 29, 2003.

expectations and standards to another very different set in three months."[47]

73. University entry in the US is also much less exclusive than it is in the UK: in addition to enter university from a college preparatory program of secondary education, students may also enter from a vocational secondary course, or from a two-year degree-granting institution, typically a community college. Only about 6 percent of entrants to fulltime first degree study in the UK enter with shorter-term higher education qualifications, such as the BTEC, HNC, or HND (or ONC/OND) programmes.[48] With a highly integrated postsecondary sector and credit framework in the US, movement from two-year institutions to universities is common. In some states where community college systems are especially extensive, nearly half of bachelor degree graduates may have begun their education at a two-year institution. In Washington State, for example, 41 percent of bachelor degree graduates have taken more than one year of coursework at a community college, and 30 percent have first taken an associate's degree at a community college.[49]

74. Among the more than 2,000 higher education institutions in the US that award bachelor's degrees, there are no common standards of entry; rather, these range widely from open admissions to highly selective entry. Most bachelor degree students enter modestly selective institutions. For example, California's highly touted University of California system enrols 154,000 undergraduate students, who are must be in the top 1/8th of their high school class to qualify for regular admission. Its enrolments are dwarfed, however, by the far less selective California State University system, which enrols 319,000 undergraduate students, who must be in the top third of their high school class to qualify for entry.

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[47] Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations," Stanford University Bridge Project, 2003.

[48] This is the result, in part, of higher rates of movement between further and higher education in Scotland, where an estimated 34 percent of HE students are enrolled in FE colleges. *Higher Education in Further Education Colleges: The Scottish Experience*, CIHE, 2003.

[49] Report of Washington State Community and Technical College Board to Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2003, p. 8.

75. Given often-modest entry standards of US universities, the absence of a close link between secondary and higher education, and the many pathways to university, students often begin their studies without having completed a set of courses that are widely regarded to be vital to success at university. An analysis of US high school course transcripts by the US National Center for Education Statistics reveals that only 18.7 percent of university entrants completed what it characterized as a "rigorous curriculum," while another 50.3 percent completed what is described as "midlevel curriculum." The remaining 31 percent, however, completed a so-called "core curriculum": a high school curriculum that did not include courses widely shown to be central to success at university, such as algebra.[50] Among those students whose parents had a high school education or less, about four in ten (39.4 percent) entered university with a core curriculum or less.[51]

76. Predictably, many US university entrants appear to be deficient in their preparation for university, and require one or more modules intended to remedy in maths, writing, or other skills. Approximately one quarter of US universities, those that are moderately to highly selective institutions, do not provide remediation for students. In less selective institutions, however, remediation is widespread. In the California State University system, for example, 37 percent of first year students entering in 2002 required remediation in maths, while 49 percent required remedial instruction in English.[52] In Cal State system, 59 percent of entering students needed some form of remedial instruction. At

[50] US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995-1996 BPS Longitudinal Study, First Follow-up (BPS: 96/98). Students were classified as having had a rigorous curriculum if they completed 4 years of English, 3 years of a foreign language, 4 years of mathematics (including pre-calculus or higher), and 3 years of natural science (including biology, chemistry, and physics). A midlevel curriculum consisted of algebra and geometry, 1 year of a foreign language, and 2 courses from among biology, chemistry, and physics. Students completing a core curriculum had 4 years of English, and 3 of social studies, maths, and science, but in courses at such a rudimentary level that the student did not complete algebra or geometry, and a laboratory course in the natural sciences.

[51] NCES, 2001, High *School Academic Curriculum and the Persistence Path through College*, Table 1, Page 10.

[52] "Remedial Rolls Fall at Cal State," The Chronicle of Higher Education, February 28, 2003. "Remedial Instruction," at www.pacificreresearch.org/pu/sab/educat/03_ed_index/09_remedial.htm

California State University at Los Angeles, with a large population of students who are either adults whose skills at classroom algebra have waned or students whose first language is not English, 74 percent of entrants required remediation in maths, and 76 percent in English.

77. National data indicate that an estimated 25 percent of entrants needed *some* sort of remedial work upon entering university. About two in ten entrants (19.1 percent) needed what might be construed as *serious* remediation: either a remedial reading module, or more than two remedial modules that included maths or writing. While many students who need only a module to refresh skills in English composition or algebra will go on to complete their degree, those who need assistance in both, or face difficulty reading English are at a much greater risk to drop out of university.[53]

Entry to University in England and the US: Conclusion

78. Researchers in the UK and US have shown that the entrant's academic preparation, as measured by "entry qualifications" or "academic preparation" is the most important factor in understanding whether students will complete a university degree[54]and, if they do, how they fare in their studies.[55] Since 1987 there have been significant changes in patterns of entry to English universities, and these have marked significant departures from the practices of an elite system. Nonetheless, viewed in comparison to the US university system, the English university system appears to have more consistent standards of entry and a much closer alignment to secondary education. It may also have a slightly narrower range of preparation among its entrants, and, on average, a somewhat

[53] Clifford Adelman, *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000*, Table 7.1, National Center for Education Statistics, January 2004.
[54] On the relationship between academic preparation and completion in US higher education, see Clifford Adelman, *Answers in the Toolbox: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor Degree Attainment*, US Department of Education, 1999; "Adding A Timing Light to the Toolbox," Stephen L. DesJardins, Brian P. McCall, Dennis Ahlburg, and Melinda J. Moyne, Research in Higher Education, February 2002, pp. 83-114.
[55] *Who Does Best At University?* Bahram Bekhradnia and John Thompson, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/whodoes/

higher level of preparation. These differences between university entry in the US and UK appear to underlie, at least in part, the lower rates of completion found in US bachelor degree study.[56]

[56] Part of the difference in completion rates arises from differences in the organisation of education. To draw an appropriate comparison of completion rates that reflects these differences in the relationship between secondary and university education in the US and UK, one might adopt a different measure of completion, following a cohort of US university students not from the point at which it first enters university, but from the point at which students conventionally enter their course, after one year of postsecondary study. Using the NCES High School and Beyond study, which tracked a nationally-representative cohort of high school sophomores (typically age 16) to the age of 30, one can estimate a bachelor degree completion rate among all members of the cohort who: (a) entered postsecondary education; (b) successfully completed 30 or more postsecondary credits, the equivalent of one year of fulltime study; and (c) attended a four-year college at any time. For this cohort of students, the US completion rate is an estimated 71 percent.[56] Using this measure, one eliminates about one-third of the commonly reported difference in completion rates between the US (66-67 percent) and UK (82 percent).

Student Progression: The Persistence of Elite Practice?

The credit framework attempts to undermine the central assumption of the UK higher education system; namely, that learning best takes place within one institution, over a fixed and limited period of time, according to rules that are best determined by the academic staff.

--Geoff Layer

79. An English university education was - and in many respects, still is - expected to be a dense, compact, sharply bounded, concentrated, and intimate experience. That is, students are to be engaged in fulltime (dense) study on a continuous (compact) basis, in residence at a university free from worldly concerns of family, work, and other responsibilities (concentrated, and sharply bounded). At university students are to have, through their course, an intimate pedagogical relationship with faculty, within a "pedagogical frame" that is relatively closed: students follow the course provided them, according to rules determined by the academic staff.[57]

80. Although reality is at odds with this vision of university education, it nonetheless remains the dominant account within elite universities, and among journalists, career civil servants and members of Parliament - many of whom took degrees at these universities. It is also the vision of university education that remains embedded in government policy, data collection, and analysis. Fulltime higher education students have access to heavily subsidized government loans that are unavailable to part-time students. Public debates over university access centre solely on the social class of young fulltime university students on honours degree courses, heedless of the four in ten higher education students who are mature, part-time, or studying for shorter-term higher education

[57] The idea of the pedagogical frame is developed in Ronald Barnett, "Three Ideas of Higher Education: Some Implications for Policy and Practice," paper presented to DfES annual research conference, December 2003.

qualifications. Dense and compact study - resulting in a three-year honours degree-is the standard by which student progression is measured.

81. To be sure, the *formal* structures of teaching and learning in UK universities have undergone a sea change in the past quarter century. Nearly all English universities have adopted a framework of modularized instruction and assign credit to completed modules of instruction. First given an official imprimatur in the Robbins Report, and then put into practice by the University of London's science courses and the Open University, modularisation and credit initially found wide adoption in polytechnics, and later in the UK's pre-1992 universities.[58] By 1996 "approximately 90% of higher education institutions" had adopted "a modular or unitised curriculum framework."[59]

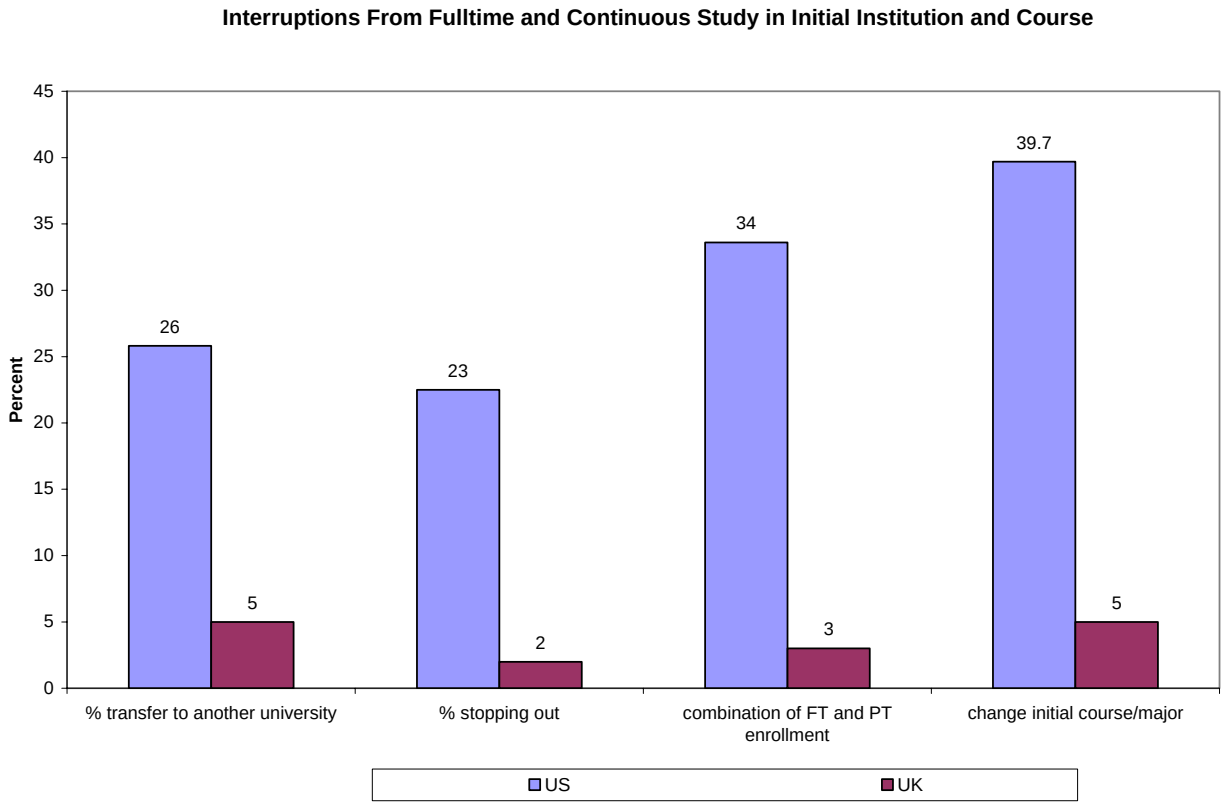
82. Proponents of a credit-based system of higher education allege, however, that this change has been superficial, rather than substantive. "We have adopted the veneer of a credit system without any of the dynamism; we have what looks like a credit system, but really isn't."[60] Evidence about student progression and mobility suggests the accuracy of this characterisation. Whatever the formal changes to English universities - the adoption of semesters, modules, and credits - they have had only a modest effect on how students progress through universities in the UK, leaving the patterns of elite study largely intact.

83. As figure 13 shows, the patterns of student progression through UK universities are sharply dissimilar to those in the US. In spite of the nomenclature of modules and credits, university students in the UK are engaged in study on one course, at one institution, for a fixed and limited period of time, as they were decades ago. US students are five to ten times more likely to change courses, to change universities, to vary their rate of work between full and part-

[58] Robertson, *Choosing to Change, Extending Access, Choice, and Mobility in Higher Education*, 1994; Allen and Layer, eds., *Credit-Based Systems as Vehicles for Change in Universities and Colleges*, 1995.
[59] Understanding Academic Standards in Modular Frameworks, HEQC, 1996.
[60] Interview, Professor David Robertson, January 2004.

time study, and interrupt their studies than are students in the UK.

Figure 13



84. In addition, it appears to be more common for university students in the UK to be engaged in study to the exclusion of other activities than is the case in US. While it is not possible to compare students' family obligations, one can compare paid work undertaken by university students in the UK and US. This comparison reveals, as we have seen, that university students in the UK are both less likely to work, and to work fewer hours.

85. A closer look at just one of these differences - variation in the rate of work, or the combination of full-time and part-time study - reveals some of the deep and persistent differences between university students in the US and UK. An

estimated 3 percent of UK university students will change from a full-time to part-time programme of study (or, *vice versa*) by the time they complete their studies, while in the US about ten times this proportion, 34 percent, will combine full and part-time enrolment. Why is this the case?

86. US universities do not typically offer separate full-time or part-time programmes of study for a course. While in rare instances programmes will insist upon a certain rate of work (i.e. students must enrol full-time), students typically choose the rate of work they wish to undertake each semester, ranging from one module to five (or, more, if they choose). Students will vary their rate of work over the course of their career, as circumstances warrant. If students in receipt of financial aid opt to enrol on a part-time basis, they continue to receive funding from federal and state government aid programmes, on a pro-rated basis.[61] Students view part and fulltime study as a continuum of activity, and neither employers nor postgraduate programmes view spells of part-time study with particular disfavour.

87. Students in English universities must typically enrol either in a part-time programme of study or a full-time programme of study. Some universities permit students to take only a part-time courseload (4 modules) or a fulltime courseload (6 modules), but offer no other possibilities, e.g. enrolment in 1-3 modules. While a handful of institutions specialize in part-time study, such as the Open University, at many universities few degrees are on offer to those who study part-time.[62]

88. Government policy undergirds institutional practice: government maintenance loans are not available to those who study on a part-time basis,

[61] See *Federal Student Aid: Expanding Eligibility for Less Than Halftime Students Could Increase Program Costs, but Benefits Uncertain*, U.S. GAO, September 2003. Students who enrol on a less than halftime basis (one module) are ineligible to participate in the Stafford student loan programs.

[62] At Bristol University, for example, only 12 out of 172 bachelor degree programmes (7 percent) permit part-time study. University administrators suggest that this figure is probably broadly representative of Russell Group institutions, while most degree courses in post-1992 institutions are open to both full and part-time study.

providing a severe financial penalty to part-time students. Because local education authorities in England reckon eligibility for financial assistance on an annual basis, universities must ensure that students do not complete more or fewer modules per semester than is appropriate to their mode of study and its corresponding aid status. As a consequence, varying the rate of work within the academic year, from one semester to the next, may not be possible, or it may require administrative permission, making it impossible for students to use variations in workload as a means to adapt to changing personal circumstances. Even at Oxford Brookes University, a modern university with a history of innovation and flexibility, students are advised that they may "change from part-time to full-time study, and the reverse, if your circumstances change. Changes are normally agreed only for each financial year *and are not allowed on a termly basis*."[63] Predictably, university students in the UK rarely switch between full and part-time programmes of study.

89. Taken as a whole, about 65 percent of US bachelor degree graduates who began their study at a university follow a full-time and continuous path to completion; in contrast, an estimated 86 percent of UK bachelor degree students at institutions other than the Open University are projected to follow a fulltime and continuous path to completion. Universities and government policy in the US combine to afford significantly wider flexibility to learners, permitting large numbers of them to depart from a path of continuous fulltime study in a single course at their institution of origin.[64] However, given the enormous level of differentiation within US bachelor degree education, there is wide variation in the continuity and intensity of study across institutions and sectors (e.g. public vs. private and university vs. college).

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[63] *Guide for Part-time Students*, Oxford Brookes University, http://www.brookes.ac.uk/courses/currentug/studentguides/partime_student/page2.htl

[64] For example, among 1,830 bachelor degree graduates at four US universities who first enrolled at age 24 or older, one-half had more than one spell of less-than-halftime enrolment (i.e. a semester where they took between one and five credits, typically one module). See *Federal Student Aid: Expanding Eligibility for Less Than Halftime Students Could Increase Program Costs, but Benefits Uncertain*, U.S. GAO, September 2003, p. 17.

90. One useful proxy for the intensity and continuity of study is the length of time it takes for an undergraduate student to complete a bachelor's degree: a degree that requires four years if undertaken on a fulltime and continuous basis. So great is the variation among institutions that some had only 1 percent of all entrants completing their degree within four years, while others had 89 percent of entrants completing within the same time. On average, 67.1 percent of students at private colleges and universities completed their degree within four years, while at public institutions 24.3 percent did.[65] If one looks instead at the proportion of graduates who complete their bachelor's degree within four years, this ranges equally widely, from 10 to 92 percent. For example, at Princeton University 92 percent of graduates complete their degrees within four years. At the University of Oregon a far lower 37 percent do so, while only 10 percent of graduates at California State University at Long Beach complete their degree within four years. At CSU-Long Beach, the average time to the completion of a bachelor's degree was 7.1 years.

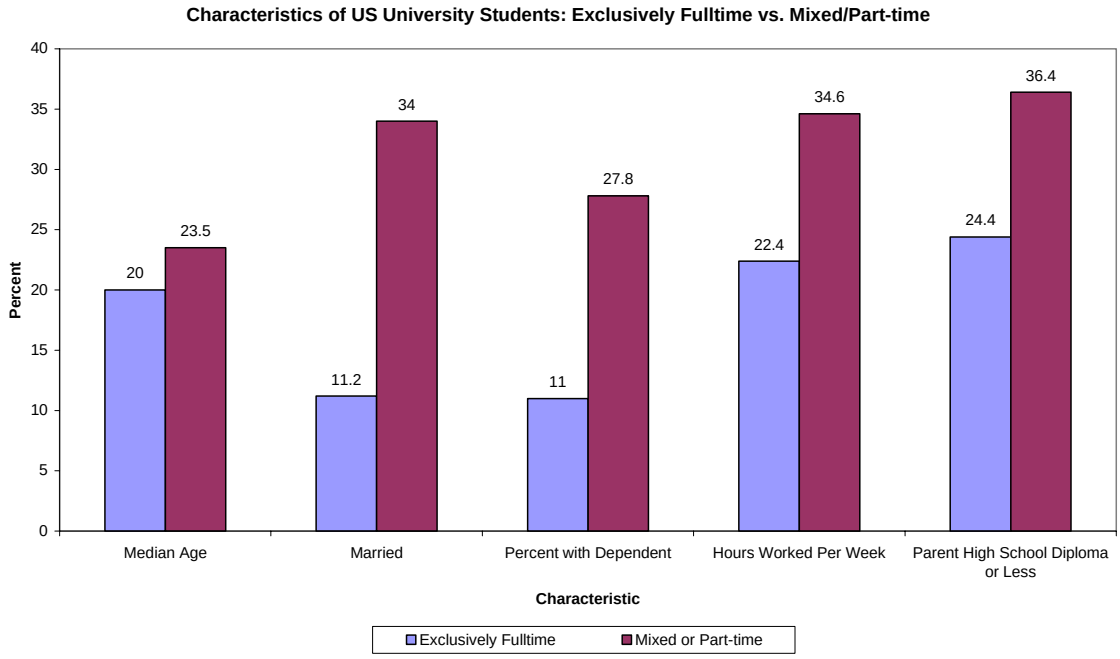
91. What are the implications of permitting this sort of flexibility to university students? Highly flexible university provision reduces barriers to entry onto degree-level study for students who must adapt to the exigencies of life beyond university, including the demands of family life, employer expectations, or bouts of ill health. It allows some students to attend who might not otherwise have been able to do so, including mature students, those with children, and those who are in paid work. It also permits some students who might have otherwise attended to make choices that might have been previously unavailable to them, such as remaining in their previous job.

92. If one compares US university students who combine full-time and part-time enrolment (or, who enrol exclusively part-time) to those who enrol exclusively fulltime, clear differences emerge. Compared to university students who combined full and part-time enrolment (or who enrolled part-time), those who

[65] Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, "Degree Attainment Rates at Colleges and Universities."

studied exclusively fulltime were substantially younger, less likely to be married, less likely to have a dependent, and less likely to have parents who had no experience of postsecondary education (see figure 14).

Figure 14



93. If a more flexible pattern of attendance in the US resulted in wider accessibility to bachelor degree study for non-traditional students, then we should expect to find that a significantly larger share of US bachelor degree students are older, working, disabled, caring for dependents, and married than is the case in the UK. To the extent that the limitations of data make these comparisons possible.[66] Table 3 shows that this expectation is consistently borne out.

[66] US data based upon 1999-2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study; UK data, 1999-2000 HESA student record. HESA will begin to collect information on dependents and marital status in 2004/2005, but only for Northern Ireland.

Table 3

Characteristics of Bachelor Degree Students		
Student Characteristic	**US**	**UK**
25 and older	27.4	18.2
Paid work during term	73	46
Reported disability	7.7	4.8
Has dependent(s)	18	not available
Married	14.8	not available

94. Flexibility in provision has its costs. A primary cost is diminished rates of degree completion. This appears to be the result of three factors. First, permitting intermittent enrolment or variation between full and part-time enrolment lowers barriers to entry for those populations who are at highest risk to drop out of university, such as parents with young children. Second, it permits students to engage in activities - such as extensive paid work - that jeopardize their prospects for degree completion. Finally, flexibility in provision diminishes students' integration into their course and sense of group cohesion, both of which reduce students' prospects of completion. With students interrupting their studies, varying their rate of work, and selecting dissimilar module combinations, US students rarely move as a cohort through a course.[67] In sum, the benefit of flexibility is inclusiveness, and its price appears to be an increase in the incidence of noncompletion.

95. What rates of completion might the US university system have if universities were organized as their counterparts were in the UK, with three years of study in a course, and if continuous and fulltime study received the same preference as it does in England? Using the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1992, one can isolate a subset of students who look much like fulltime first degree students in the UK, selecting US students who: (a) began their studies at university, and never attended any other kind of postsecondary institution; and (b) progressed far enough in their studies to enter their course. Using these two

[67] US universities have experimented with the creation of so-called "learning communities" to mitigate these effects, and research has shown their benefits to students. However, learning communities remain a very limited experiment within the US university system.

criteria, one also obtains a population of students who almost exclusively studied on a fulltime and continuous basis: among students who did not change their course, the average time to the completion of the bachelor's degree was 4.08 years.[68] Among this subset of students, an estimated 83.5 percent completed a bachelor's degree - a rate equal to (or slightly higher than) full-time first-degree students in the UK.[69]

96. What remains open to question is whether the benefits of increased access for non-traditional students outweigh the costs, to the student and the public, in light of the fact that these students are at risk not to complete their studies. Students must pay both direct costs (tuition fees) and opportunity costs (earnings foregone), and costs must be borne by the public, too (in subsidizing the cost of education). In many respects, these costs are likely to be broadly similar in the US and UK. The key difference between the US and UK may well lie in the benefits.

97. One century of experience with modularized and credit-based education in the US[70] has shaped the culture of higher education and the labour market. Students and educators - and, crucially, employers and politicians - tend to think about a degree as something that consist of discrete skills and capabilities, and they believe that there is *some* benefit to acquiring *part* of a degree. In the US view, completing a degree is better than not, *but something is better than nothing*. Perhaps this is why the term "wastage" - freely used in the UK - appears never to have been used in a public debate to describe leaving university without a degree in the United States.

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[68] Imposing these selection criteria undoubtedly selects for other unmeasured characteristics as well, such as social class and academic preparation, which are associated with fulltime and continuous study at a four-year institution. These contribute as well to the resulting high rates of completion among this population--just at they do among university students in the UK.

[69] Special calculations provided by Clifford Adelman, Senior Research Analyst, U.S. Department of Education, and based on Adelman, C. *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2004.

[70] *How The Student Credit Hour Shapes Higher Education: The Tie That Binds*, Jane V. Wellman and Thomas Ehrlich, eds., Josey-Bass, New Directions for Higher Education, No. 122, Summer 2003.

98. It is true that part of a professional qualification is as good as none at all, but undergraduate programmes in the United States rarely (relative to the UK) result in the acquisition of a professional qualification (in whole or part). While research in the US suggests that there are returns to having a credential over and above the skills acquired in postsecondary education,[71] it also shows that there is a wage premium for skills obtained even without degree completion.[72]

99. Although the UK has adopted the nomenclature of credits, a credit-based culture has not been assimilated into UK higher education, labour markets, and policy planning. As a consequence, "the degree" continues to be viewed as an indivisible experience and qualification. This is reflected in the continuing use of the term "course" as an integrated or unitary experience, and in the detailed practices of assessment and grading (which often continue to follow the schedule of the entire course, rather than the semester-length module).

100. Crucially, this view is reflected in labour markets and government policymaking. Students and graduates in the UK commonly express a view that is nearly the opposite of the US: that nothing might be better than something. Better not to have tried than to have tried and left a course, since employers will view one as feckless. This thinking is reflected within government, as well. In a letter to Barry Sheerman, Chair of the House Select Committee on Education, the Executive Director of HEFCE, Sir Howard Newby, perfectly captured this thinking:

101. There is evidence that for men the only thing worse than not participating in HE is to participate but fail to complete. The 1997 report 'Higher Education, Employment and Earnings' by the Institute of Fiscal Studies found negative

[71] Degrees Matter: New Evidence on Sheepskin Effects in the Returns to Education, *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, November 1996; Credits and Attainment: Returns to Postsecondary Education Ten Years After High School, *Education Statistics Quarterly*, NCES, Summer 2001

[72] Labour Market Returns to Two- and Four-Year College Degrees: Is a Credit Really a Credit and Do Degrees Matter? Kane and Rouse, 1993.

rates of return to non-completion of an HE course. The study found that men who started but did not complete their HE course had at least 9 per cent lower wages on average than those who never attempted an HE course, after controlling for other factors. Clearly it is in nobody's interest, but especially the students, to provide incentives for institutions to recruit students who are unlikely to complete.[73]

102. Nomenclature notwithstanding, the "lack of portability of attainment below degree level"[74] and labor market penalties attached to noncompletion mean that the balance of benefits and costs of extending access to students whose circumstances put them at risk not to complete is different in the UK than it is in the US. Barring the assimilation of a modularized and credit-based culture into universities and labor markets, it is likely to remain this way.

103. Common to both nations, of course, is a cost Sir Howard does not mention: the personal and social cost of failing to admit students to university who would have succeeded had they entered. This cost appears to loom larger in the calculation of politicians and the higher education community in the United States than it does in the United Kingdom. Although the United States lacks a social democratic tradition and a politics of redistribution, its political culture does contain an egalitarian strain. In this tradition, opportunities for self-sufficiency and advancement through competitive individualism are to be widely dispersed, and second chances to those who initially fail are to be generously provided. For the past half century this promise of opportunity has been embodied by providing broad access to public postsecondary education, and by offering remedial education for those in need of a second chance. Seen in this light, *any* willing student who has *any* prospect of success should be given a chance - and a second chance - to study. This is scarcely the only vantage point on higher education within the

[73] Sir Howard Newby to Barry Sheerman, 6 August 2003, "Funding for Students Who Fail to Complete."
[74] DfES response to the Education and Employment Committee, 2 May 2001, response to question 5.

United States, and attempts to limit entry to university and restrict remedial education within universities have their proponents. Nonetheless, those who would do so labour against this egalitarian tradition, and find themselves branded as "un-American" for betraying it.[75]

104. Unrestricted access to university is not native to the social democratic tradition of the UK, or to Britain's larger culture. Some evidence of just how alien this idea is can been seen by perusing the pages of the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES), the weekly newspaper of Britain's higher education community. Only once since 1995 has an argument appeared in the pages of the THES that the UK's completion rate is *too low*, and that the social costs of restricting university entry outweigh the efficiency benefits of high rates of completion. Writing in the THES Dylan William, Professor of Educational Assessment at King's College, London, argued:

> *The traditional burden of proof should be reversed. Instead of students having to show that they have the capacity to benefit from higher education, we should accept all of those who want to go, unless there is clear evidence that it would not be in their interests. This will mean that many will drop out, but also that a number who would otherwise not have gone into higher education will graduate. [We must] accept that the increase in false positives [dropouts] is the price we have to pay for reducing the number of false negatives [students excluded who would otherwise have taken a degree]…The fact that no British university has a dropout rate of more than 50 percent suggests that we simply are not taking enough chances.*[76]

105. If one person's thinking were likely to be labeled un-British, would it be that of Sir Howard Newby, or Dylan William?

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[75] "End of the Second Chance? The Crusade against Remedial Education" Peter Schrag, *The American Prospect*, Vol. 10, No. 44, 1999.

[76] Dylan William, Why I Believe Dropout Rates Are Too Low," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, February 21, 2003.

Conclusion

106. High rates of degree completion achieved in the UK appear to be rooted the persistence of elite practices of entry and progression within university education, and the modest impact of modularisation and credit accumulation on universities, students, and employers. The UK's comparatively greater unwillingness to enrol substantial numbers of students who are initially unprepared to meet the demands of university study and its reluctance to accommodate students who depart from a path of continuous and fulltime study in a single university, and who carry a heavy burdens of responsibilities outside of their studies, have yielded a measure of completion that the US university system cannot, on present policies, expect to equal. The continuing understanding of a course of study as a unitary experience, rather than the accumulation of relatively discrete skills and competencies contained in modules and measured in credits, militates against mobility and noncompletion, imposing penalties for both that do not exist in the United States.

107. It is possible to combine elite practice and with moderately high rates of entry to university education. Doing so, however, has its costs. First, some who might enter and succeed at higher education - most especially those who are mature, disabled, working, or responsible for dependents - may be deterred from study. Second, among mature students who do study, some may be compelled to make choices that they otherwise might not. While 21.2 percent of students beginning fulltime first degree study in the UK are 21 years and older, in the US only 8.5 percent of students beginning fulltime first degree study are 21 and older (since mature bachelor degree students in the US often enrol on a part-time, rather than full-time basis). If mature students have similar obligations in both nations, then those in the UK appear to be induced by student aid policies and university restrictions on the availability of part-time degree programmes to study in ways that they might not if afforded greater flexibility and choice. Finally, whether elite practice and mass entry can continue remains open to question. Paid work among UK university students during term time has increased during

the past decade. It has become an important financing strategy, especially among lower income students. To the extent that paid work continues to grow, it will become increasingly difficult for these students to successfully balance the demands of work against the expectations of elite - fulltime and continuous - study.

108. What can US policymakers learn from the UK's experience of the past two decades, as it has attempted to balance its historic commitment to "low rates of wastage" with higher rates of participation? Both HEFCE's completion policies and England's experience at aligning secondary to university education hold promise of improving rates of completion while sustaining broad access and flexibility for students. State governments have put forward measures of institutional accountability and degree completion that fail to recognize differences in the students they are teaching. Criticized by universities as inappropriately applying a single standard to diverse institutions, these measures of performance have generated, fortunately, little lasting enthusiasm from legislators. HEFCE's benchmarked performance indicators offer a way past an argument about the inadvisability of a single standard, and the promise of meaningful and appropriate accountability for universities.

109. US state policymakers should carefully study England's experience at joining upper secondary to university education - both for evidence that alignment can help to ensure that students are prepared to meet the challenges of university education, and for proof of what happens when this alignment erodes. For the US states, however, the question of aligning secondary education to needs of higher education is fraught with complexities that do not exist in England. Given that the US has no system of specialized upper secondary education - and wildly diverse postsecondary institutions - states must first address the questions of "alignment *for whom*, to *what*?"

110. What are the implications of this analysis for higher education policy and practice in the UK? I know far too little to tell a British audience much more expert than I am how to think about higher education, or what to do about it. Instead, I will conclude by posing four sets of questions arising from this study that seem to merit serious attention.

111. Do politicians, journalists, and the public have an evidence-based picture of higher education in England that reflects the range of student experience within higher education - as opposed to fulltime honours degree education? And, even for honours degree students, can an information system that relies almost exclusively upon student record data provide a sufficient picture of their experience as students? Would policy deliberation be improved by the adoption of longitudinal samples that include both student record information and survey information about (for example) paid work, family obligations, and degree intentions?

112. Can England succeed in widening participation, as opposed to increasing participation, while at the same time maintaining government policies and university practices that support an elite model of progression that is continuous, intensive, and exclusive of other obligations? Given the propensity of some students to finance their education from current earnings rather than borrowing, can a funding system that relies increasingly upon student financing remain wedded to a traditional model of study?

113. Can the English universities that want to adapt to the needs of non-traditional students successfully do so within a policy framework and a larger university culture that is committed to the maintenance of an elite model of progression and to a unitary system of university education?

114. Setting aside the question of *desirability*, is a unitary and (sort of) elite system of university education *possible*? Martin Trow argued that England's

unitary and elite system of university education was based upon: (1) a common unit of resource across institutions, coupled with no (or, flat) tuition fees and similar amenities across institutions (save Oxbridge); (2) an examination system that yielded common levels of ability and achievement among entering students; (3) a national pay scale and common appointment procedures; (4) a restrictive policy on university title; and (5) a common degree classification and standards supported by external examination and quality assurance. Supposing Trow to be correct, how many of these conditions remain? Of those that persist, how many are likely to remain by the end of this decade?