

Executive Summary

Non-completion at the University of North London and London Guildhall University: a case study

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1. Most of the increasing attention paid to widening participation recently has been focused on issues concerned with attracting students from a wider range of backgrounds to enter higher education. There is also a focus on differences between the universities attended by those students from poor background who do enter higher education and those attended by better off students.
2. One aspect of widening participation that has not been given the attention it should receive concerns the outcomes of students once they have entered higher education, and in particular the question of non-completion. The level of non-completion in this country is low by international standards, and a recent OECD study¹ showed a non-completion rate in the UK of just 17 per cent compared to an average rate of nearly double that in the OECD as a whole. This is a clear indication of the success of many HEIs that have worked hard to widen participation in HE amongst students from non-traditional backgrounds, whilst maintaining low rates of non-completion.
3. Nevertheless, for most students who fail to complete their studies this represents a source of disappointment, and a reduction in their life chances. Indeed, there is research evidence (from the Wider Benefits of Education Group at the Institute of Education) which suggests that in many respects those who begin a higher education course and fail to complete are worse off than those who never go to university at all. Those who are concerned with widening participation need to be concerned about non-completion too, particularly as those who fail to complete their studies are disproportionately from poor backgrounds (although the most direct correlation is between non-completion and previous educational attainment, which is in turn correlated with social background).
4. London Metropolitan University, which was created as a result of the merger of the University of North London (UNL) and London Guildhall University (LGU) was concerned about the apparently very different rates of non-completion of its two constituent parts. London Metropolitan has a strong commitment to widening participation, and more generally to ensuring that students from the widest range of backgrounds have as good a prospect as possible of succeeding in their studies. The relatively large number of students apparently failing to complete was therefore of concern, to the extent that it might imply that the university was not providing the best possible experience for the students affected.
5. The apparent difference in non-completion of the two constituent universities suggested that if the performance of the new combined university could match the best practice and achievements of each then the student experience of the whole would be improved. This study was therefore commissioned to investigate what could be learned about the different non-completion rates of London Guildhall and the University of North London, with a view to learning lessons for the future. It represents an interesting case-study with the possibility of wider lessons for the sector as a whole.

¹ Education at a Glance, OECD 2004

6. The performance indicators published by HEFCE allow non-completion to be looked at from several points of view, and on most of these the overall student outcomes at the two institutions were more similar than might be apparent. For example, the study established that non-completion from the second year in the two universities was broadly the same. However, there was one important and significant respect in which the non-completion rates between the two universities differed, and where there did appear to be a real problem at UNL: the proportion of students who dropped out from UNL in their first year was very much higher.

7. Having established that there were indeed significant differences in non-completion between the two universities, the characteristics of the students of the two universities were considered. This was first to try and identify if there were significant differences between the student bodies that might explain the differences in non-completion. It is known, for example, that on a nation-wide basis, students with better prior educational achievements are less likely to drop-out than students with poorer previous educational achievements. Secondly it was to try and identify in more detail if there were particular characteristics that distinguished the students who dropped out, for example, those studying particular courses or routes of entry.

8. A large number of characteristics were therefore examined, beginning with those that form the basis of the published performance indicators, and their associated benchmarks. The PIs and benchmarks look at a limited number of student characteristics: age, subject, and qualifications on entry - those that account for the great majority of the differences between students at a national level. It was possible that other differences would be uncovered, however, that were not recognised in the performance indicators, and which might go some way towards explaining the variation in first year non-completion rates. The study therefore went on to look at other data, and carried out a number of analyses not previously performed through a more detailed look at age, subject, and qualifications on entry, and by looking at additional factors such as ethnicity, qualification aim, and application route.

9. Few significant differences were found in the characteristics of the two student populations. In fact, they were similar to a considerable extent, and differences of performance could not be attributed to this. The most important finding was that the entry qualifications of students were broadly similar. Previous qualifications on entry, despite being known to be the factor most closely correlated to non-completion, did not account for the variation in first year non-completion rates. The age and social profiles (as far as the data allowed conclusions in this area) of the student bodies were also similar. While there were differences in the academic profiles of the two student bodies, the differences in subjects studied did not explain the different first year drop-out rates. The minority groups that made up the student population were also similar, and non-completion rates were disproportionately high at UNL across students from all types of ethnic background.

10. Examples of two of these analyses are given below: The first considers whether differential drop-out rates might be explained by differences in the nature of the entry qualifications of the students attending the universities.

Non-continuation of young, full time first degree entrants 2000-01 following year of entry by entry qualification

	LGU		UNL		Sector
	No. of students	% non-continue	No. of students	% non-continue	% non-continue
A-level points 26 and above	13	30	12	0	3
A-level points 24	17	6	9	0	4
A-level points 22	20	5	13	17	5
A-level points 20	48	19	26	12	6
A-level points 18	70	9	37	24	6
A-level points 16	91	10	54	28	8
A-level points 14	99	13	79	19	8
A-level points 12	124	8	93	16	10
A-level points 10	122	9	105	14	11
A-level points 8	220	11	136	16	11
A-level points 4	115	17	97	14	12
A-level points not known	8	25	55	15	14
Access / foundation course	29	10	29	18	8
BTEC / ONC	52	17	109	13	15
GNVQ level 3	290	16	247	21	15
HE qualification	40	13	63	17	12
None	*	50	5	40	17
Others	32	19	64	32	18
unknown	30	24	--	0	18
All qualifications	1422	13	1237	18	8

Note: Where the number of students was less than 5, this is displayed as *

11. This table demonstrates that the types of qualifications on entry of young students entering the two institutions were broadly similar. LGU had around 200 more A-level students, but this did not have a significant impact on the benchmark calculated for non-completion for young students in comparison to UNL. This was because the majority of these additional A-level students were entrants with low level A-level points where the sector average non-completion rate is not dissimilar to the non-completion rates for entrants with non-A-level qualifications. The data show that with few exception, non-completion rates were higher at UNL across all of the different types and levels of qualifications. The broad conclusion to be drawn from this table is that no one type of entry qualification caused the high levels of non-completion at UNL.

12. A similar analysis was carried out for the subjects studied by students at the two universities, with similar conclusions. The results are shown in the table below. The overall message from this table is that there was no one subject that caused the high rates of non-completion at UNL. Mathematical sciences and computer sciences stood out as a major subject area that had particularly high non-completion rates, and this was highlighted in the comparison with LGU (and the sector). However, each of the major subject areas, with the one exception of biological sciences and physical sciences, had high non-completion rates that were considerably higher than at LGU and far from the sector averages (the two other

subject areas where UNL matched or outperformed LGU – Engineering and Languages – were very small).

Non-continuation of young, full time first degree entrants 2000-01 following year of entry by subject

	LGU		UNL		Sector
	No. of students	% non-continue	No. of students	% non-continue	% non-continue
Medicine, dentistry and veterinary science	0		0		3
Subjects allied to medicine	0		52	6	6
Biological sciences and physical sciences	56	13	152	14	6
Agriculture and related subjects	0		0		8
Mathematical sciences and computer sciences	149	13	267	23	9
Engineering and technology	27	15	17	12	9
Architecture, building and planning	0		9	22	8
Social studies and law	232	13	115	19	7
Business and administrative studies and librarianship and information sciences	318	11	251	16	9
Languages and humanities	20	20	64	20	6
Creative arts and design	110	14	100	18	9
Education	0		41	17	8
Combined and Invalid subject of qualification aim	510	15	169	19	8
All subjects	1422	13	1237	18	8

13. So drop-out rates were higher at UNL than at LGU, and these differences were not accounted for by differences in the nature of the student body. The study then looked to see if there were particular groups of student at UNL whose drop-out rates were particularly high compared to LMU. If there were, then this would suggest where to focus attention in trying to deal with the problem. The variables examined included age, subject, qualification on entry, ethnicity, route of entry, and qualification aim. A number of groups were identified who appeared to have particularly high drop-out rates, in particular:

- Older 'young' entrants and mature entrants aged 21-23
- Some major subjects such as Business Studies, Business Administration, English, Applied Psychology, Computing, Environmental and Social Studies
- Young GNVQ entrants, entrants whose highest qualification recorded is GCSEs and mature entrants with an existing HE qualification
- Students on foundation years

- White and Black females and females from 'other' ethnic groups
- Male entrants, in particular Black males and males from 'other' ethnic groups
- Direct entrants, in particular mature direct entrants

14. Although these groups did have relatively high drop-out rate, they by no means accounted for the whole discrepancy. Even if all these students were excluded from the analysis, a substantial unexplained difference remained.

15. The analysis so far confirms that differences existed between the two universities and confirms that the differences were real and substantial, and not explained by any obvious factors revealed through data analysis. It appears that it was probably not differences in the characteristics of the two student bodies that gave rise to the different rates of drop-out, and this suggests that it was something about the way the two universities were organised or about their culture and direction that was the cause. In particular, because the very great majority of drop-out took place in the first year - and the entire difference between the two was accounted for by the difference in the first year² - further investigation probably ought to be focused on the differences in the provision made by the two universities for first-year students, including the admissions and induction processes. These are matters that the university has subsequently followed up.

16. The culture and ethos of a university are difficult to capture in data. However, there were some clues which the study identified, which suggested that despite the apparent similarities of their student bodies the two universities were in fact very different in their philosophy and academic approach, to an extent which may be significant in explaining the differences in non-continuation. In particular, although both institutions had a clear commitment to widening participation, UNL showed some highly distinctive attributes in this respect. In particular:

- a. A much higher proportion of students were admitted without formal qualifications – for example 113 were admitted to UNL on the basis of GCSE as their highest qualifications, compared to 26 at LGU; and 70 were admitted to UNL on the basis of experience, without formal Accreditation of Prior Learning, compared to 42 at LGU.
- b. A much higher proportion of enrolments resulted from direct application, and did not go through the central UCAS process (18 per cent at UNL, compared to 7 per cent at LGU), suggesting a more active outreach programme.
- c. A remarkably high proportion of students were drawn from the immediate locality. 13 of the 15 most important recruitment postcode areas were immediately contiguous to UNL, whereas the 15 most important postcodes for LGU were dispersed around London and the South East. UNL was much more of a neighbourhood university.

17. This suggests that UNL might have been taking on a higher proportion of entrants who might not have applied elsewhere – and indeed might not have been accepted had they applied - and might have a higher propensity not to complete. At this stage, this is

² In fact, UNL's drop-out rate in year 2 is slightly lower than LGU's.

speculation and needs further investigation.

18. An earlier HEPI report³ looked at differences in non-completion in the UK and the USA and concluded that the higher non-completion rates in the USA were explained in part at least by the much greater open access ethos that existed there, where students are admitted to university who almost certainly would not be admitted in the UK. It appears that similar differences in philosophy may have been at work between UNL and LGU, which would go a long way to explaining the otherwise unexplained differences in non-completion. Open access has a price which is paid by those institutions with the greatest commitment to widening participation, and we need to recognise this in interpreting non-completion rates.

19. There may be a relationship between non-completion and the motivation and commitment levels of the student. These factors could not be measured in this analysis – two students that look the same in terms of their entry qualifications, age, subject studied etc, could have very different levels of commitment and motivation. In theory, it is possible that this could be the significant difference between the two groups of students that otherwise look very similar. It is possible that if the open access philosophy at UNL is allowing students to enter with lower levels of commitment and motivation, this could be contributing to the higher rates of first year non-completion at UNL. At this stage, this remains speculation.

20. The study did not consider pedagogic issues, but identified a number of these that would also warrant further investigation to establish if these may have contributed to the different non-completion. In particular, the Departmental structure at LGU was much stronger than at UNL, and there was a close relationship between courses and departments. There is no suggestion at this stage that these differences caused different rates of drop-out, but they are differences that were observed and ought to be investigated in any follow-up. One approach ought to be to identify which parts of the two universities performed most similarly, and which most differently, and to explore in qualitative terms how behaviour and practices differed in these areas between the two universities.

21. The specific analysis contained in this report, and the tentative conclusions, are particular to UNL, LGU and London Metropolitan University. However, the overall approach is one which should be adopted by any institution concerned about non-completion. In particular, plentiful data are available in this country to allow detailed analysis of whether non-completion is particularly high in respect of certain categories of student or provision made by the university. And if such analysis does not provide explanations, this study has provided pointers of the sorts of further aspects of a university's approach and provision that might be examined.

³ New Dogs and Old Tricks: What Can the UK Teach the US about University Education in -- HEPI 2004