A short guide to non-continuation in UK universities

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Introduction

Non-continuation in higher education is rising up the political agenda. The Office for Students plans, for example, to judge the quality of courses at English higher education institutions by their continuation rates as well as the proportion of graduates progressing to managerial and professional employment or higher-level study.[1]

There has been extensive discussion on the pros and cons of assessing courses by the destination of graduates.[2] But this has not been matched by a similarly close consideration of using continuation rates as another proxy for quality. This matters because there is no consensus on important issues, such as what an acceptable non-continuation rate is, whether it is damaging for individuals to leave a course before the original learning objective is met and how policymakers should respond to the issue.

There is not even a consensus on the best way to describe the phenomenon whereby some students enrol in higher education but then leave before completing their original target qualification.

In the vernacular, it is often described negatively as 'dropping out'. Policy experts sometimes speak of 'non-retention' and the published data for UK institutions from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) are described as showing 'non-continuation rates'. England's Office for Students sometimes refers to 'non-completion', while a report for the Welsh Government used 'withdrawal' and also noted the high number of possible alternative terms in academic literature on the issue:

> *Morgan (undated) adds 'departure', 'unsuccessful' and 'failed' to this list, and points out that Leys (1999) suggested there were 'nine definitions associated with drop-out or withdrawal', while Foster (2000) had identified thirteen possible definitions.[3]*

Some of the terms describe slightly different things – for example, HESA's UK Performance Indicators track students from the year they enter to the following year (or the following two years for part-time students), while the OECD uses the original theoretical duration of a course as well as another measure that adds a further three years.

But despite the terminological confusion, all such measures describe a gap between learners' original stated intentions and their situation when they leave their course. A number of terms are used interchangeably in some of the pages that follow.

Rising up the agenda

Even before the COVID-19 crisis put so much extra pressure on students and staff, there was more focus on non-continuation than at any point in living memory. This was for at least three reasons.

1. **Regulatory changes:** The shift from having a Director for Fair Access within the old Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) to having a Director for Access and Participation in the new Office for Students, and the fact that governing bodies now look over their institutions' Access and Participation plans before submission, signals a new approach. In short, the access issue has broadened to become an access, retention and progression issue.

2. **Resources:** Recent years have seen a squeeze on teaching income, with – for example – only one increase in the English home tuition fee cap since 2012 (meaning a reduction in real terms). The income lost when a student departs earlier than expected therefore matters more than before, and it is widely thought that there could be further freezes or perhaps even cuts in the resources available for educating each student.

3. **Metricisation:** In response to the consensus that says courses should not be judged simply through the earnings their graduates receive, policymakers have been searching for useful alternative or additional metrics. Continuation data has been used in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), is provided on the Discover Uni website as information for potential students and is set to be part of the Office for Students' new quality regime. Moreover, such existing datasets may become more rather than less important if the change to the National Student Survey weakens that existing source of information.

The current position

The UK has a positive record on student retention relative to other places, at least overall. International comparisons suggest the UK has the highest completion rates for students on bachelor's degrees among comparable developed countries. At 72%, it is significantly above the average of 39%.

The proportion of students who complete their course rises if extra time is added to the original predicted end date: for example, some students who appear in non-retention data may have taken a short break from studying but later return or have opted to study at a lower intensity than originally expected. Adding an additional three years to the original duration of students' courses boosts the data for all comparable countries, although it generally raises the results of the lower-performing countries more. In some instances, such as New Zealand, the Netherlands and Chile, it more than doubles the completion rate. The extra time adds relatively little to the UK total but the UK continues to perform better than all other OECD countries, with a completion rate for the original duration plus three years of 85% compared with the OECD average of 67%.

*Completion rate of full-time students who entered a bachelor's or equivalent programme (2017)[4]*

Completion rate by the theoretical duration   ● Completion rate by the theoretical duration plus three years
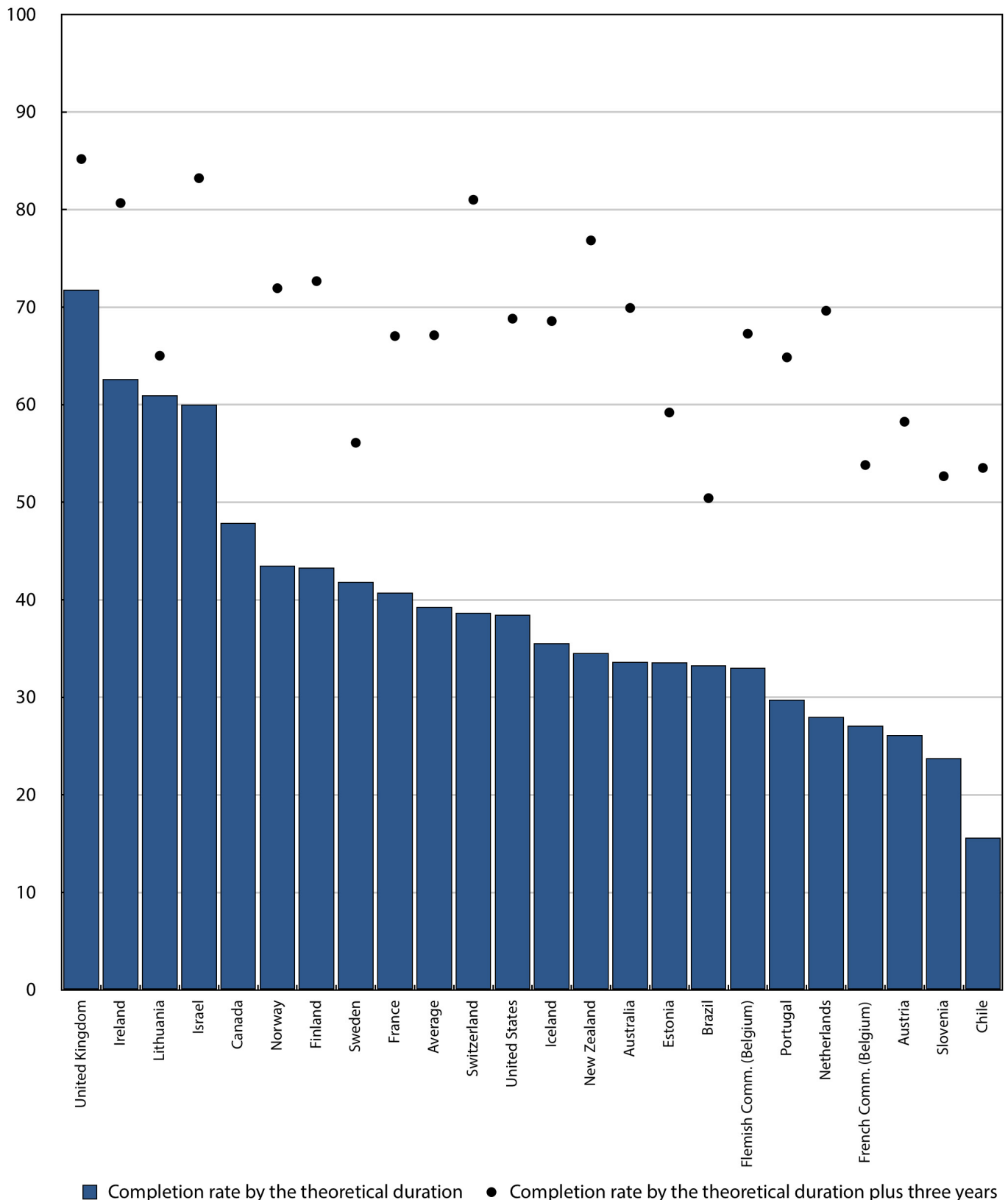
Four-year programmes at community colleges in the US have such high non-continuation that they are sometimes referred to as 'dropout factories'.[5] The new First Lady of the United States, Jill Biden, earned her PhD for a study of the phenomenon and how to tackle it entitled *Student retention at the community college: meeting students' needs*. Her recommendations included improved mental health services for students.[6]

UK non-retention rates are so low relative to some other countries that policymakers have been known to suggest in private that they could represent a policy failure rather more than a success. One way of reading the data is to regard the UK as taking insufficient risks in terms of who it enrols in higher education. This is at one with the observation that, 'The English style is to select and restrict entry, nurture carefully and expect high completion and low dropout rates.'[7]

Recent data show an increase in non-continuation among some types of students – most consistently for mature first-degree students. The data for other groups have seen less consistent trends: between 2016/17 and 2017/18, the non-continuation rate for young full-time first degree home entrants increased from 6.5% to 6.8% after a fall in the previous year but the figure for 'young other undergraduate' declined from 16.9% to 15.7% after a much smaller decline in the previous year.[8]

Percentage of UK-domiciled entrants who did not leave within 50 days of commencement who did not continue in higher education after their first year by academic year
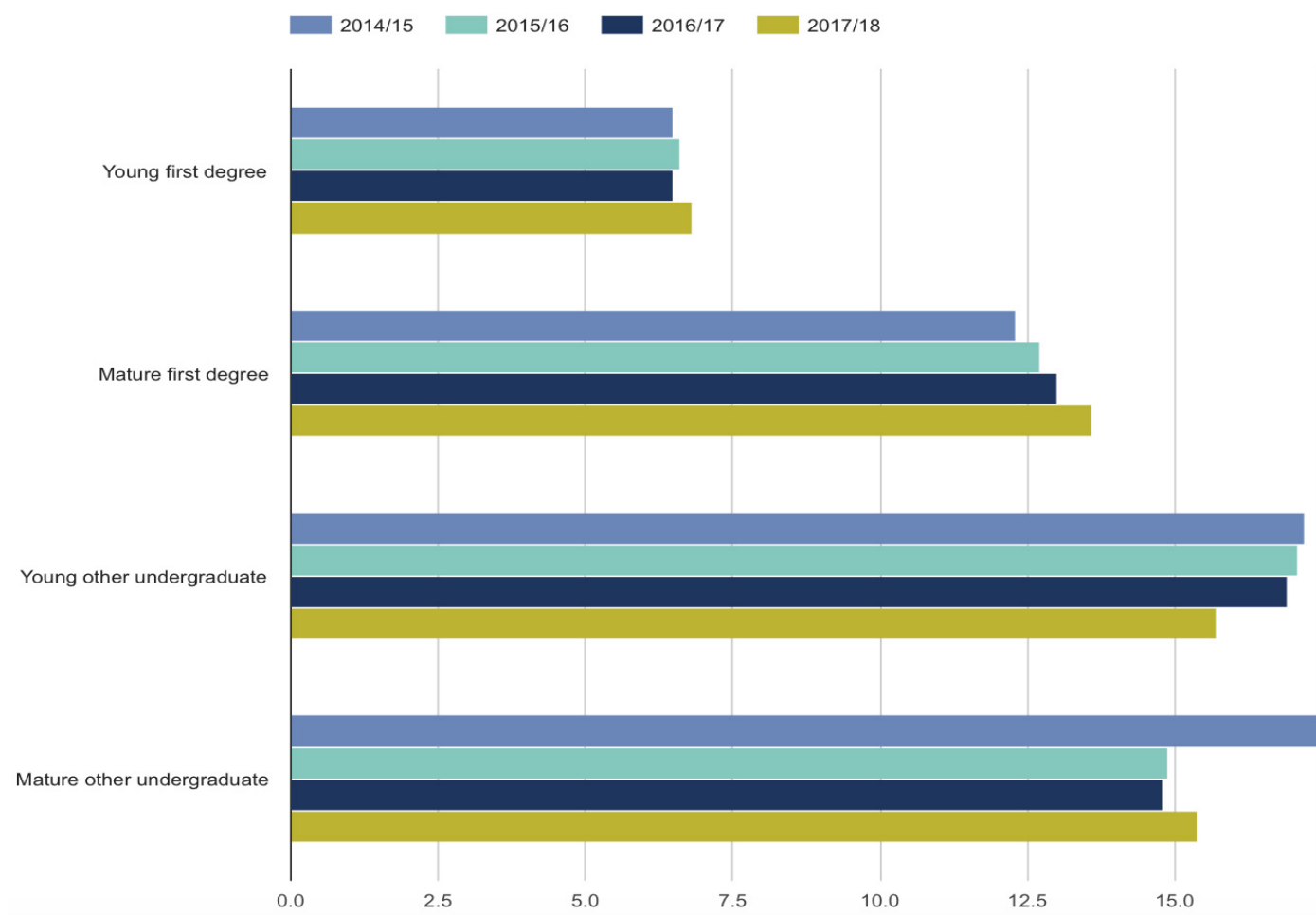
These official non-continuation data from HESA do not reveal the whole picture, however. For example, they exclude some people who have not met the original expected learning goals, people who leave in their first 50 days, people who qualify 'with an other undergraduate qualification' and people who change course within their institution.[9] Experimental data published by the Office for Students confirm small but significant

numbers of students transfer to another course at the same provider (either with or without credits).[10]

During 2020, there was concern that the pandemic would raise non-continuation rates.[11] Yet neither polling of students on their intentions nor early out-turn data showed such an increase.[12] This is presumably because, even though higher education has been adversely affected by the pandemic, the alternatives to higher education have also been adversely affected. Moreover, factors such as the grade inflation in school-leaving results that was a consequence of the A-Level fiasco may also have ensured more students obtained their first-choice place, potentially making early departure less likely.

Nonetheless, it would be rash for university planners to rule out a potential increase – for example, the staggered return arrangements for the first term of 2021 could conceivably encourage some students not to return to their course.[13] Institutions are therefore prudently continuing to model short-term increases in their non-continuation rates.

Who is most likely to leave?

Looking at the issue in a more granular way proves many students are more likely to drop out than the average numbers suggest. Completion rates differ according to all sorts of variables, some of which are listed below.

> **Gender:** According to the OECD, 'In all countries with available data, women have higher completion rates than men in bachelor's programmes.'[14] There is a gap of 11 percentage points in the completion rates of men and women whether assessed against the theoretical duration of the courses (33% versus 44%) or the theoretical duration plus three years (61% to 72%).

> **Ethnicity, disadvantage, sexual orientation and having a disability:** One student newspaper recently revealed a fairly typical picture when it noted 'University of Leeds students from various minority groups – including disabled students, BAME students, LGBT+ students, mature students and students who had undertaken BTEC courses before university – dropped out of university at a distinctively higher rate than their peers.'[15]

> **Institution type:** Data provided by the Office for Students to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities confirm more selective higher education institutions have lower non-continuation rates. The gap in continuation rates ranges from 7.0% for white students at higher tariff providers (96.1%) and white students at other providers (89.1%) to 11.3% for Black students at higher tariff providers (94.3%) and Black students at other providers (83.0%).[16]

> **Mode of study:** Part-time students are considerably more likely not to complete than full-time students, while some online provision has particularly high non-completion rates. Younger part-time first degree home entrants have a non-continuation rate

that is five times higher (33.9%) than young full-time first degree home entrants (6.8%). Non-continuation rates additionally differ according to discipline.

Commuting time: One small study of institutions in London found, 'travel, or commuting, time remained a significant predictor of student progression or continuation for England-domiciled full time undergraduates at three of the six London institutions participating in the study, after accounting for the expected influence of subject and other factors such as entry qualifications.'[17]

The complexity of the issue is also evident in the fact that there is considerable diversity among those institutions with the lowest non-continuation rates as well as those institutions with the highest non-continuation rates. Those with the lowest rates range from ancient foundations (the University of Cambridge), through specialist institutions (the Royal Agricultural University) to so-called 'alternative providers' (the University of Law). Those with higher rates include modern, specialist and alternative providers.

The small squares in the HESA chart below show institutional benchmarks for non-continuation rates, which each institution might have been expected to achieve given the characteristics of their students, and the columns show actual institutional performance. The fact that so many institutions underperform relative to their benchmarks, and by a considerable margin at some institutions, while many others overperform relative to their benchmarks suggests institutions are able to take action to affect their own record.

Percentage of UK domiciled full-time entrants who did not leave within 50 days of commencement not continuing in HE after their first year (2014/15 to 2017/18)
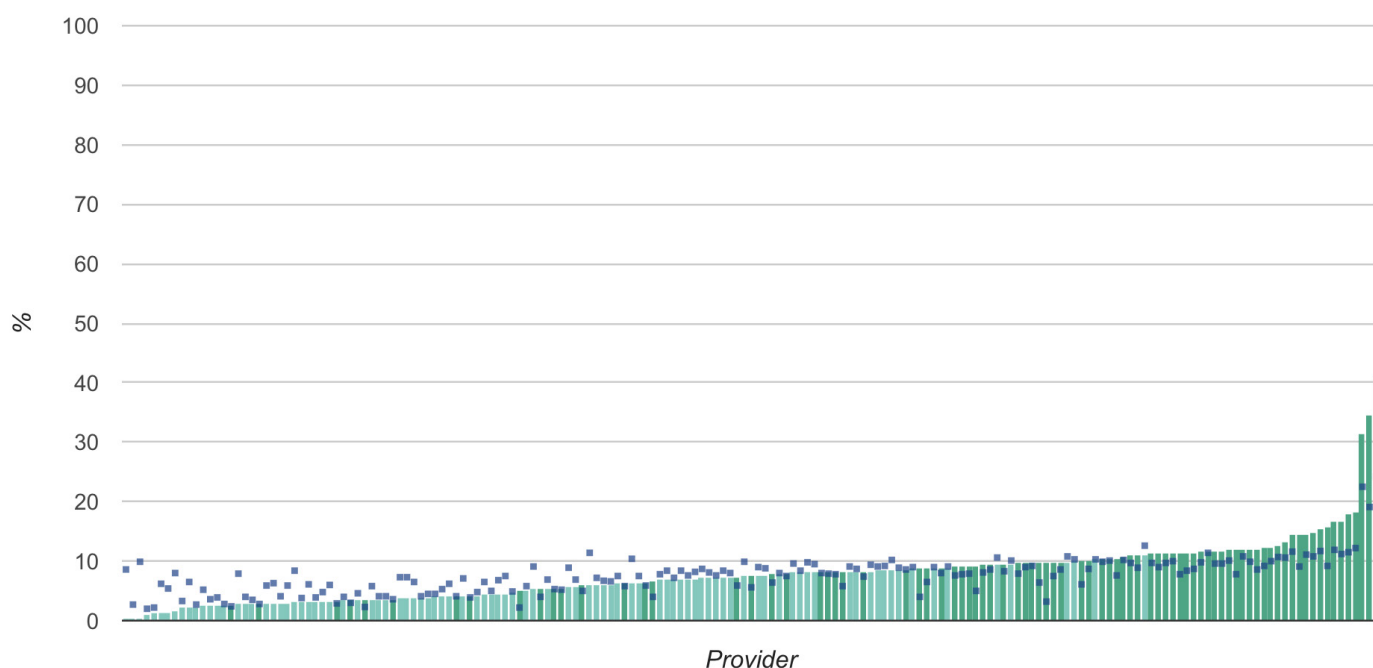
How do students who do not complete fare?

At one level, it seems obvious that the education sector should seek to avoid a situation where someone starting a course is unable to complete it. On the other hand, it is not appropriate to push people to complete courses that are not fulfilling their needs for whatever reasons. It can be bad for their wellbeing, have a negative impact on their fellow students and lead to a waste of resources (time and money). Just because most students' choice of higher education works out does not mean each student's choice will work out. This is encapsulated in the headline on one magazine article, 'Dropping out of university was the best decision I ever made'.[18] Famously, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg all dropped out of college.

People often leave a course early for good reasons.

- Even if a course is the best fit for an individual at the point of application, circumstances can change.

- It will never be possible to deliver perfect information at the point of application, so there are always likely to be some people who end up on a course that they regret joining or who find there is another option that is more attractive.

- In addition, the student funding rules may have pushed some people to apply for a whole course when their original intention and personal preference might have always been to study individual modules.[19]

There is an unclear evidence base to claim that starting and then not completing a course of study is better than not starting at all. Media headlines claiming 'A Bit of College Can Be Worse Than None At All' are not well supported by academic studies.[20] As Sylke Schnepf's work notes, human capital theory suggests dropping out can be positive (because affected students receive more education than if they had never enrolled) and so does signalling theory (as people have been successful in winning a place). Only 'credentialism' (or 'the sheepskin effect') whereby someone with a completed qualification is regarded as being more employable than others who are otherwise comparable suggests dropouts do not gain from their initial enrolment.

At a practical level, research among people starting higher education in the UK towards the end of the last millennium concluded, 'we find no clear evidence of a significant earnings "penalty" in the subsequent employment of those who withdrew in 1996/97 compared with a similar group of graduates.'[21] Schnepf's more recent research, covering 15 European countries, similarly concludes: 'In general, tertiary educated dropouts have similar chances of employment and progressing to professional positions as non-dropouts.'[22]

One clue as to why this is so was provided by a small and rather old qualitative study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the phenomenon of 'working-class "drop out"', which found, 'Only one student interviewed said they would never want to return to university'.[23]

Schnepf's approach of tracking people over time similarly shows, first, that '38% of tertiary dropouts attain a tertiary education degree' (33.8% in the UK) and then fare similarly to those who never dropped out and, secondly, that those who drop out permanently 'fare often better and never worse in terms of career progression than those who never enrolled.'[24]

So it seems wrong to assume people who do not complete their current course will avoid returning to education and similarly wrong to assume that those who do not return are likely to fare worse than if they had never enrolled.

Challenges

While, in general terms, it is positive to encourage as high a proportion of students as possible to complete their original learning goals, how to encourage this through new policy initiatives is less obvious. In particular, there is a risk of unintended consequences and conflicting policies.

> **Unintended consequences:** Some actions to reduce drop-out rates potentially risk unwelcome outcomes. For example, any institution which believes it will be punished financially for a high or increasing drop-out rate may seek to limit their recruitment of people with characteristics that put them at higher risk of not completing their course. In other words, putting too much focus on retention could affect access because of the tension between willing all students to do similarly well and accepting some students face much greater barriers to learning. The Office for Students' *Consultation on regulating quality and standards in higher education* says: 'We do not accept that students from underrepresented groups should be expected to accept lower quality, including weaker outcomes, than other students.'[25] Yet the same organisation concurrently encourages universities to provide contextual offers to applicants from different backgrounds because it recognises that someone's context does tend to affect their academic achievements.

> **Conflicting policy goals:** There has long been a desire to encourage more flexible learning patterns, with more bitesize, modular and roll-on / roll-off options. In work conducted for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Vice-Chancellor of Bath Spa University, Sue Rigby, has asked people to envisage qualifications 'made of stickle-bricks, not Lego – an apparently messy, individual structure, rather than a neat set of uniform components.'[26] In autumn 2020, the Government responded to such ideas by committing to a more flexible entitlement to student loans 'to allow courses to be taken in segments.'[27] But there is tension between reducing non-completion rates and promoting flexible lifelong learning pathways, where people are encouraged to access learning in bitesize chunks through modularised, unbundled and short courses. The Dearing report noted, 'Non-completion will become an increasingly difficult concept to measure if more students undertake higher education programmes in a flexible way, over a long period of time.'[28]

Other relevant data

The HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* has for many years included a question asking its full-time undergraduate respondents whether their experience in higher education has matched their prior expectations.[29] This is true for only around one-in-ten students. While it seems unlikely that it will ever be possible to secure a perfect match between prior expectations and actual experience, reducing the proportion of students who feel their experience is worse than they expected could reduce the proportion who go on to leave their course.

Experience compared to expectations
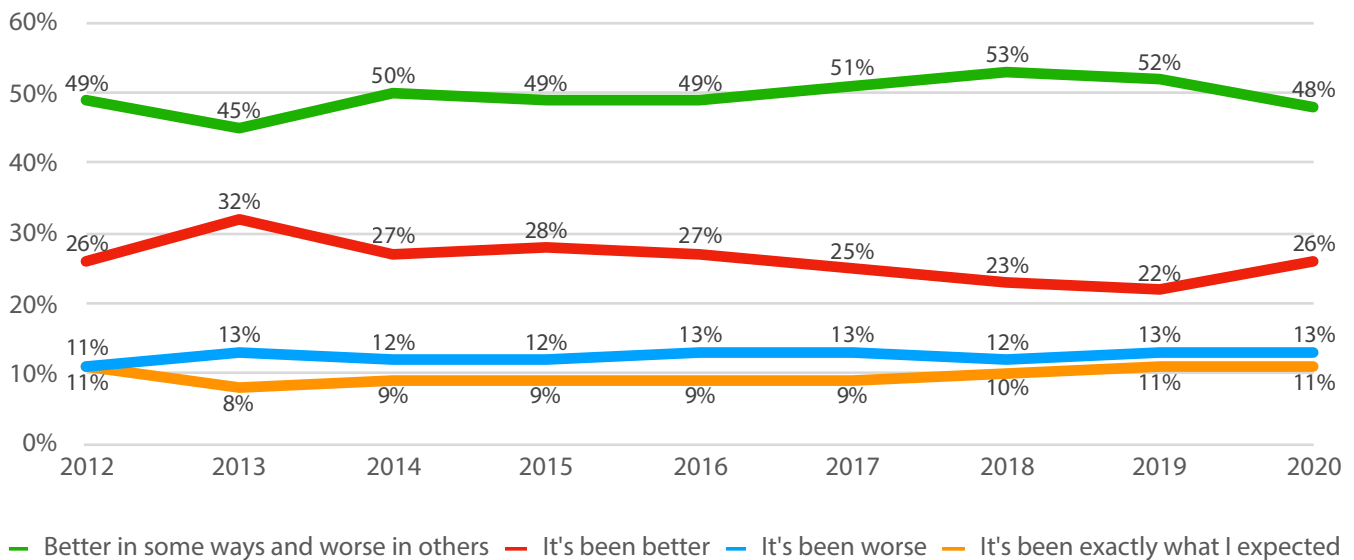
The *Student Academic Experience Survey* has in recent years also included a question asking students if they would make the same choices again. Around two-thirds (64%) of students would stick with their choice and only a small proportion (5%) say they would not undertake higher education. Yet a significant minority, amounting to one-in-four students, would choose a different university, a different course or a different university and a different course.

Whether would choose same course and university again
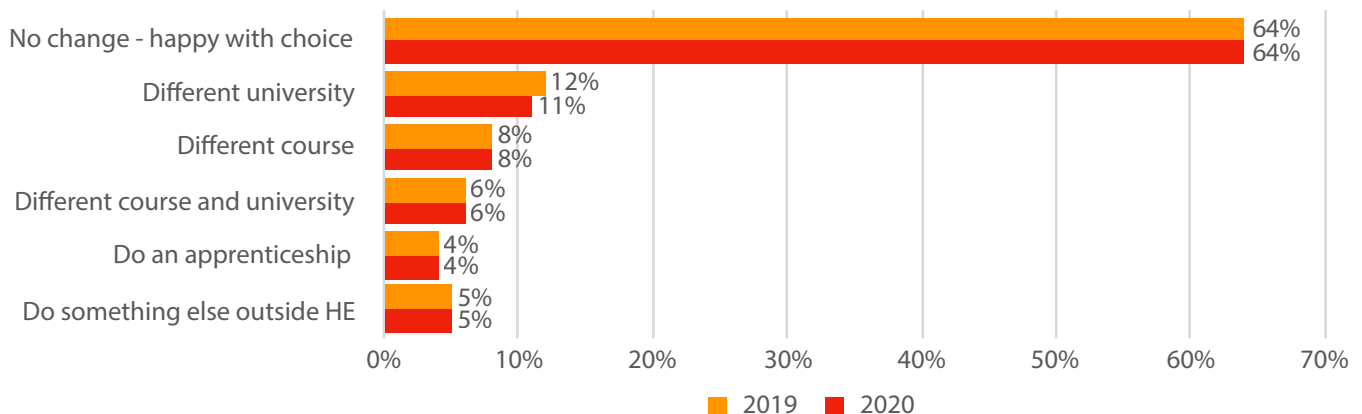
The *Survey* additionally reveals which groups feel less well placed. For example, while 68% of white students would choose the same course and institution again, under half (45%) of Black students would.

What should be done?

Notwithstanding the caveats already expressed, it would clearly be beneficial to improve the support available for students who are at risk of dropping out and who would benefit from successful completion of their course. This non-exhaustive list of ideas is designed to provide national policymakers and people linked to higher education with a deeper sense of the sort of initiatives that provide quick, cost-effective and efficient ways to help students stay the course.

1. **Use data better:** In general terms, we know the characteristics of students who are more likely not to complete. However, we do not always understand which factors are the key ones in raising their non-continuation rates. For example, commuter students, disadvantaged students and Black students are all more likely to drop out, but the relative contribution to higher non-continuation rates of accommodation status, socio-economic status and ethnic background is not always clear. An earlier HEPI report on commuter students found: 'students' residency options and choices, and the many variables that might intersect with these (including class, ethnicity and finances), do bear some relationship to students' sense of satisfaction and happiness with their university experience.'[30] Even if it were clear exactly which characteristics matter most overall, we might need to know the patterns at individual institutions to make a substantial dent on the data.

2. **Focus on specific groups:** Small tweaks can have a notable effect on non-completion rates when they are well targeted. For example, it has been suggested that better accommodation for Clearing students would pay dividends: 'For institutions reliant on Clearing to boost intake, having rooms available late in the admissions cycle can aid recruitment and retention.'[31] It is also likely that targeted support for commuter students in London could help shift their non-continuation rates down towards the national average. In 2019, a Social Market Foundation report on student retention in London recommended 'Improving the experience of commuters including: Timetabling, flexible accommodation, more appropriate facilities on campus for universities, and making it easier for students to use the facilities of other London universities.'[32] Such initiatives cost money and will be much harder to deliver if the unit of resource for teaching each undergraduate continues to erode.

3. **Ensure easy re-entry routes:** Given a high proportion of students who do not continue wish to return to education at some point, we need to ensure re-entry routes are smooth and that the student funding rules facilitate this – including via the new lifetime loan entitlement and further relaxation or complete reversal of the ELQ (Equivalent or Lower Qualification) rules, which can hamper people re-entering education. A more flexible higher education system needs a more nuanced understanding of non-continuation, whereby people re-entering education are not routinely regarded as 'drop outs'.

4. **Consider staging qualifications within higher-level courses:** The Augar report recommended English higher education institutions should award 'one interim qualification' to students on bachelor's courses to 'motivate students who may be struggling or have decided to leave' and 'make credit transfer easier'. The

subsequent debate on rejuvenating Level 4 and Level 5 courses has largely ignored this recommendation, which is worth further consideration. Interim qualifications could make it easier for students who do not complete their whole original target qualification to obtain some credit, which could be useful in the labour market or when returning to study. However, it is also plausible that they could encourage some people to stop before achieving their original full target, so further research is necessary.

5. **Provide a sense of belonging:** StudentCrowd, which provides information on student accommodation, have shown there is 'a statistically significant relationship between students who express "I'm having a poor social experience in halls" AND students who leave university.'[33] As well as improving accommodation options, deepening and spreading a sense of belonging may need to include ensuring more people get their first choice course and ensuring the right support for those who end up at their second, third, fourth or fifth place or through later entry, such as clearing, given the known links between entry through Clearing and not completing.

6. **Organise exit interviews:** For a deeper understanding of the reasons why students withdraw from specific institutions, we need to supplement the quantitative evidence with more qualitative evidence. It is standard practice to conduct exit interviews with departing staff in order to learn why someone has opted to leave their role and to find out whether anything could have been done to stop them leaving. There is an equally strong case for routinely doing something similar with departing students when the affected student is willing and wherever this is feasible.

7. **Reassess the suitability of maintenance support:** The Augar panel noted the range of evidence which shows students worry more about day-to-day living costs than their tuition costs (which are generally entirely covered for home students by income-contingent loans). The Augar report expressed concern about the level of maintenance support while simultaneously comparing it favourably with the past and other countries: 'we do not doubt that the cost of living is a problem for students but are mindful that the overall level of support provided is high by historical standards, and competitive by international standards'.[34] They also joined the long list of people, including the author of this paper, who have called for the reintroduction of maintenance grants in England.[35] Given the priorities of students, it seems that some of the energy spent on debating the right level of tuition fees would be better spent on improving the maintenance package.

Conclusion

Concern about high drop-out rate is unlikely to disappear. There are often sorry tales behind the inability of individual students to complete their original target qualification and more support could usefully be delivered to those at particular risk of dropping out. But there is also much misunderstanding on the whole issue and rough-and-ready measures to address the problem may reflect confused policy intentions and risk being counter-productive.

While it would be wrong to ignore drop-out rates, putting undue weight on the issue may end up as an example of 'Goodhart's Law', which is commonly expressed as 'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.'

Endnotes

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