'Dropouts or stopouts or comebackers or potential completers?': Non-continuation of students in the UK*

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About the author

Nick Hillman has been the Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) since 2014. His most recent HEPI publications include: _Neoliberal or not? English higher education_ (with Roger Brown, 2023); _The Robbins Report at 60: Essential facts for policymakers today_ (2023) and _'Not heard of this': Employers' perceptions of the UK's Graduate Route visa_ (sponsored by Kaplan, 2023).

His previous HEPI paper on student retention, _A short guide to non-continuation in UK universities_, was published in 2021. This new paper is based in large part on a speech delivered at the 'Exploring Student Progression in Higher Education' conference, hosted by Ireland's Higher Education Authority at Croke Park in Dublin on 29 February 2024.

How good is the evidence base?

Observers of education often assume measuring non-continuation – or, more colloquially, 'drop-out' rates – among students must be straightforward. Seemingly, someone enrols on a course and they then either finish it or they do not. In fact, there are numerous different ways to measure the phenomenon of non-continuation that make it challenging to discuss, including:

1. leaving a course in the first few days or the first few weeks – so early that the student in question makes little burden on the student support system and does insufficient learning for it to be meaningful;

2. not progressing from year 1 to year 2 for full-time students (assuming the course is longer than one year) or not progressing from year 2 to year 3 for part-time students;

3. not completing the original learning objective that a student had when they enrolled;

4. not completing the original learning objective nor another qualification at the same Level;

5. not completing the original learning objective nor another comparable qualification;

6. not completing any form of higher education, even if at a lower Level than the original learning objective;

7. not completing the original learning objective within the original timeframe;

8. not completing the original learning objective within the original timeframe plus three years;

9. not completing the original learning objective at the original institution; and

10. never completing the original learning objective.

Even this list feels incomplete as there can be a very long gap between someone starting a course and it becoming clear whether or not they will finish it. The guitarist Brian May from the band Queen took 36 years to complete his doctorate in Astrophysics at Imperial College London, starting in 1971 and not finishing until 2007. Compared to some people, this was actually quite fast: Nick Axten took 52 years to achieve his PhD from the University of Bristol and Arthur Ross took 54 years to obtain his Bachelor of Arts

degree from the University of British Columbia.[1] Perhaps we can only tell if someone who has stopped their formal learning is a true non-completer when they die.

Another challenge when looking at non-continuation rates is that, as with all higher education data, there is a case for contextualising the information rather than considering it in a raw state. Non-continuation is unlikely ever to be zero because lives change and people's circumstances differ. So non-continuation rates are sometimes published alongside contextual benchmarks on what might be expected depending on circumstances – taking into account, for example, an institution's subject mix, how academically selective it is and the balance between its young and mature students.

Better resourced and more selective UK universities, such as the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, Imperial College and some specialist colleges, tend to have very low non-continuation rates. Meanwhile, some other institutions, including those with lots of online provision and those with a high proportion of widening participation students, tend to have much higher rates. This has not stopped the Westminster Government from sometimes portraying contextualised non-continuation data as excusing failure. In their words, 'we should have the same high expectations for all students, regardless of background or circumstances. Our mission is to close the gap, not to make excuses for it.'[2]

Until the pandemic, the UK-wide Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) published a range of Performance Indicators for undergraduates alongside benchmarked figures reflecting each institution's context.[3] Dozens of institutions underperformed against their benchmarks on non-continuation while dozens more outperformed their benchmarks, raising questions about institutional performance (but also whether the benchmarks were calculated reasonably).

These Performance Indicators were one of the most useful and long-standing data series in UK higher education, pored over by experts for over 20 years. In the words of Mark Corver, Co-Founder and Managing Director of dataHE, they were 'the envy of the world.'[4] So it is unfortunate that they have now been discontinued. HESA, the body that collated and published the data, remains unapologetic, flippantly excusing the break on their website by saying: 'As any student of evolution will know, failure to adapt at sufficient speed can lead some species to extinction.'[5]

This position would be easier to accept if there had been a suitable replacement for the old dataset. Yet the promised replacement has been endlessly delayed. The whole saga is a good case study of how plans to move from fairly straightforward data to more interactive and complex data can end up, in the short term at least, with less data.

Given the spread of devolution that occurred in higher education policy during the lifetime of the Performance Indicators, we now face the added complexity of there no longer being UK-wide data. It has been left to each part of the UK to produce their own numbers and, as this has occurred neither coherently nor consistently, comparisons between different parts of the UK as well as historical comparisons are extremely hard.

Moreover, the available data have other important limitations too. For example, in his first *Annual Report* in 2024, the Commissioner for Fair Access in Scotland, Professor John H McKendrick, complained:

> *More detailed progression data, such as those progressing to each year of a degree is not published. Thus although data on progression is reported, insight is partial.*[6]

One further problem with the data on student withdrawal is that much of the evidence comes from people who say they have considered dropping out in student surveys. However, their inclusion in student surveys means these people have not, at least not yet, actually dropped out and are, rather, opting to continue in formal education. In the meantime, people who have left their course are not only excluded from such surveys but tend to be excluded from separate surveys and other research as well. So there is a clear problem of selection when it comes to the evidence base.

Nonetheless, while the limitations in the available evidence are serious, there is enough information to show a sense of the scale of the problem and help guide policymakers and institutions towards sensible responses.

What is the scale of the problem?

The previous HEPI report on non-continuation, which was produced during the pandemic but used data for the pre-COVID period, noted that the UK had the lowest non-continuation rate in the developed world, as measured by the OECD.[7] Ireland performed second best when measured by the 'theoretical duration' of courses but slipped to a still creditable fourth place in the alternative measure of the theoretical duration plus three years.

The strong performance of the UK and Ireland compares very favourably to, say, the United States, where the 'Some College, No Credential (SCNC) population' has now topped 40 million people – 15 per cent of the entire adult population.[8] The writer Ben Wildavsky notes eight-in-10 of the 1.7 million people who start at a US community college each year hope to obtain a Bachelor's degree but only 14 per cent actually do so within six years.[9]

In one respect, the UK's success in such international comparisons is extraordinary. While there is still considerable progress to be made, UK higher education institutions have gone a long way in opening up higher education to people from a wider range of backgrounds, thereby diversifying their student bodies. For example, it has been said that two-thirds of UK students are the first in their family to attend a higher education institution.[10]

Given that higher education is no longer about skimming off a thin layer of cream and instead directly covers more than half of all young people, it is arguably odd that the non-continuation rate has remained so low. Notwithstanding complaints about falling standards, the higher education sector is educating different people to those in the past but is, arguably, performing comparably well.

The UK's relatively strong performance on continuation rates may stem in part from three sources.

i.   **The level of selectivity:** Entry to the UK university system has generally been more academically selective than entry in some other countries, where it may be easier to enter higher education but where more selection comes after enrolment, perhaps via examinations at the end of the first year. In France, under half of students have historically finished their qualification in the original envisaged timeframe, leading a past French Minister for Education to compare undergraduate life to 'organizing a shipwreck to see who can swim'.[11] This whole argument can be overcooked because the UK has both 'selecting' universities and 'recruiting' universities, not to mention the Open University, but the UK approach has nonetheless generally tended to be relatively selective.

ii. **The short length of degree courses:** Shorter degrees of the sort that have traditionally been common in the UK, with most undergraduate courses lasting just three years (or typically four in Scotland), provide less room for other aspects of life to intervene while studying. In most developed countries, as the OECD data already referred to made clear, there is a bigger jump in the results between completing within the original timeframe of a qualification to completing within the original timeframe plus three years – although even here the UK has been in top place. In the United States, some institutions are moving to shorter degrees, partly in order to improve retention rates. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 'accreditors have recently begun warming to the idea, seeing three-year degrees as a way to shrink spiraling student-debt burdens and reduce stubbornly high dropout rates.'[12]

iii. **The entry to higher education being a bigger transition point:** Typically, enrolling in higher education in the UK direct from school has meant moving away from home and living in another city.[13] This makes the transition from the previous stage of life bigger and it involves all sorts of challenges, but it also means unwinding the step up to higher education may be harder and more soul destroying. Moreover, those who find the transition most difficult may leave within the first few weeks, meaning they will not appear in much of the published evidence on non-continuation, which tends to ignore very early leavers.

Some people may also ascribe the low drop-out rate in the UK to a shift towards students acting more like consumers than in the past, with home undergraduates typically facing the highest fees for local residents of anywhere in the world and with international students often paying much more still. Perhaps students feel like they are buying a service and therefore act as demanding consumers while their institutions respond more transactionally than in the past. Or perhaps the large loans students are taking on discourage second thoughts.

However, the evidence for such contentions is thin because drop-out rates were already low before the era of high fees and they remain low in Scotland, where there are no fees for students who were domiciled in Scotland prior to beginning higher education. Moreover, the argument could just as clearly be articulated in the opposite way: consumerist students could be regarded as more likely to drop out if they feel they are not getting what they have paid for.

What is the current picture?

While the non-continuation trends over time have been fairly steady in the UK, they have not been static. The proportion of home full-time first-degree students who leave without an award and who do not transfer to another institution declined from one-in-seven starters in 2001/02 to one-in-11 starters in 2019/20. Meanwhile, the proportion who obtain an award other than the one for which they originally enrolled rose from 1.2 per cent in 2001/02 to 4.0 per cent 16 years later (though fell back to 3.3 per cent in 2019/20).[14]

Projected outcomes of UK-domiciled full-time first-degree starters by year of entry (Source: HESA)
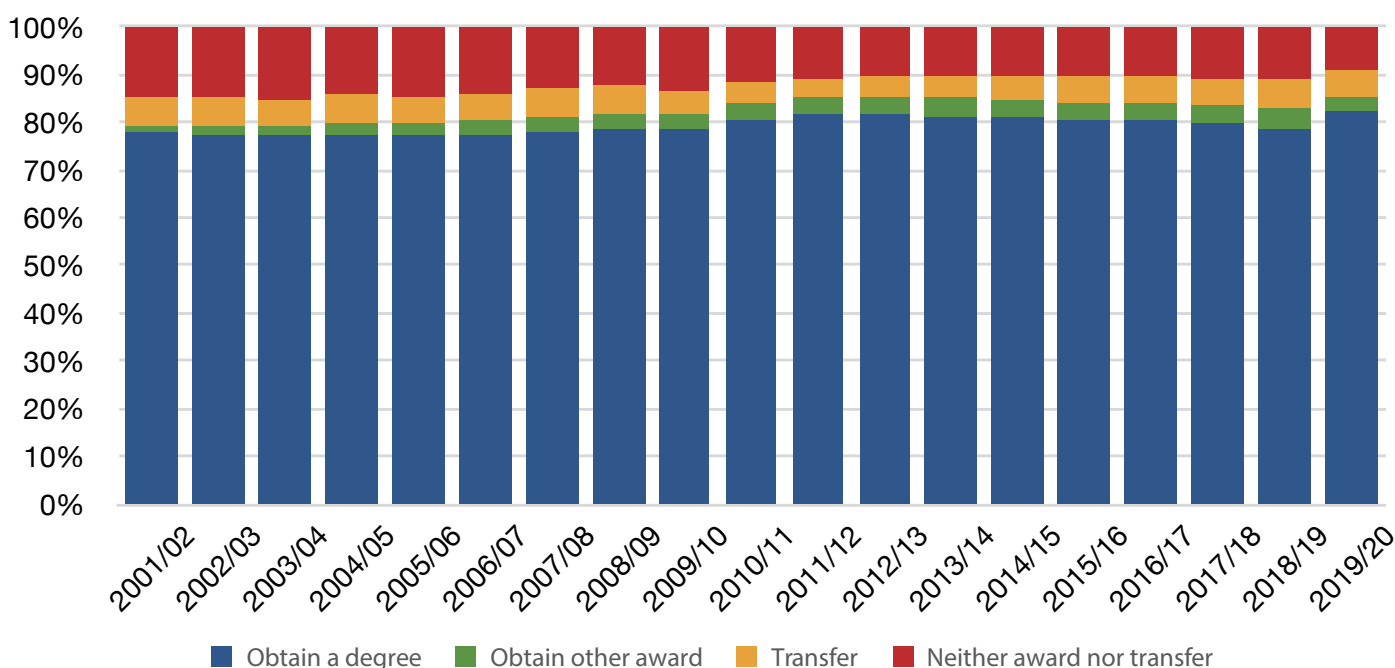
It is possible these trends reflect the wider environment. For example, there seems to have been a reduction in drop-out rates during the difficult economic times of the early 2010s, when the option of sticking with education may have come to look relatively more favourable than either before or after. Similarly, dropping out reduced in the first academic year to be affected by COVID, 2019/20, when higher education may not have been as satisfactory as normal but when the alternatives to higher education were much worse.

Although there is a paucity of timely and consistent data, there is evidence to suggest non-continuation rates increased once the impact of COVID on society reduced. In September 2023, for example, the Student Loans Company published data for England, Wales and Northern Ireland which suggested there had been an increase in the number of students who had signed up for a loan before dropping out in each of three consecutive years.[15] This prompted a headline on BBC News online that read 'University dropout rates reach new high, figures suggest'.[16] Ireland witnessed a comparable rise.[17] However, early experimental UK data for 2023/24 suggest the numbers dropping out of their courses early on have since declined somewhat, though generally remain a little higher than the last pre-COVID year of 2018/19.[18]

The UK's achievement in keeping non-continuation relatively low masks significant variations beneath the average headline data.

i.   **Non-continuation rates differ by institution:** Discounting anyone who leaves in the first 50 days, Oxford and Cambridge universities have a drop-out rate between year 1 and year 2 of less than 1 per cent for UK-domiciled young first-degree entrants. Indeed, the rates at these institutions are so low that

the main question which needs to be asked is whether drop-out rates can be too low – on occasion, staying at an institution may cause more problems to the individuals concerned, for example in terms of mental health challenges, than leaving. At the other end of the spectrum, there are a handful of UK universities where one-in-seven young students or more do not proceed from year 1 to year 2. If we look only at the proportion of UK-domiciled full-time first-degree starters projected neither to obtain an award nor to transfer, then one-third of students at the worst performing institution come away with nothing and at a small handful of others the proportion is around one-quarter.[19] Higher education students in further education colleges have also, historically, had higher non-continuation rates than those in university settings. Moreover, a recent HEPI paper on franchised provision uses data from the Office for Students' Student Outcomes dashboard to show that students taught and registered at the same higher education provider have a continuation rate of 90.9 per cent but students taught at a provider different from the one with which they are registered continue at a rate of 80.2 per cent.[20]

ii. **Non-continuation rates differ by the characteristics of students:** The numbers are generally higher for mature students and, in every country with available data that participates in the OECD's *Education at a Glance*, 'women in bachelor's programmes have higher completion rates than men', although the difference is smaller in the UK than in most countries.[21] Continuation rates in England differ notably by ethnicity (with Black students, for example, having a lower rate than White students), by deprivation (with a lower proportion of students in quintiles 1 and 2 on the Index of Multiple Deprivation continuing compared to students from quintiles 3, 4 or 5), by Free School Meal status (with, again, those from more deprived backgrounds faring worse) and by whether or not a student has a known disability (as disabled students have a slightly lower continuation rate than non-disabled students).[22] Nonetheless, pupils from strongly performing schools have worse outcomes than equally well-qualified pupils from poorly performing schools: 'while the raw differences suggest those from the highest performing schools are less likely to drop-out, more likely to complete their degree and more likely to graduate with a first or a 2:1 than those from the worst performing schools, these relationships are reversed once we hold constant the qualifications, subjects and grades that individuals from different schools have on entry to university.'[23]

iii. **Non-continuation rates differ by qualification:** For Access to HE Diplomas, which are typically offered by further education colleges to people with relatively low prior qualifications, only three-quarters (76.1 per cent) of students complete while over one-third (35.3 per cent) of those who do not complete drop out within the first 43 days.[24] These are courses aimed at people who are not ready to enrol directly on a degree course so, in a sense, they are dipping their toes in the water to see what higher learning feels like and it is questionable whether every drop out should be regarded as a clear failure. Students who enrol on other non-traditional routes to higher education also tend to perform relatively poorly – for example, only around half of those who enrol on a foundation year, which is an alternative entry route to higher education for less well-qualified learners, complete their degree within six years compared to around 80 per cent of first-year undergraduates.[25] Non-continuation ranges by discipline too, with – to take one example – Health and Social Care students continuing at a materially lower rate than Economics students.

iv. **Non-continuation rates differ by route:** Part-time higher education students are less likely to complete than full-time students: the most recent comparable HESA data suggest only one institution had a non-continuation rate of over 20 per cent for UK domiciled full-time entrants by the end of their first year but the comparable number for part-time students over the age of 30 was 29 institutions.[26] This probably represents the greater likelihood that part-time students have other important life priorities, such as full-on jobs and childcare or other caring responsibilities, as well as different reasons for embarking on study.[27] Despite some claims to the contrary, alternative routes like degree apprenticeships, which have been pushed heavily by Ministers, also fare poorly when it comes to non-continuation. Although degree apprenticeships are sometimes portrayed as a key way to engage people with sustained learning, it seems success is not guaranteed: few young people begin them and there is then a high drop-out rate approaching half of all learners.[28]

v. Non-continuation rates differ by learning goal: A few years ago, there was a vogue for MOOCs or Massive Open Online Courses, which were free and typically did not lead to a formal qualification. While these still exist, they are no longer in vogue to anything like the same degree, not least because of the challenges faced in trying to develop a self-sustaining business model as a MOOC provider. One particular problem faced by MOOCs is that they typically have had a drop-out rate of over 90 per cent. A literature review of papers on MOOCs written in English identified five variables affecting drop-out rates: course attributes (such as the design and duration); the status of learners (such as the level of social support); the cognitive ability of learners (such as their previous experience); emotional factors (such as attitude and satisfaction); and learners' behaviour (such as the level of engagement with the teacher and fellow students).[29] Overall, MOOCs provide robust evidence of the policy challenge faced by people who want to improve access to sustained learning via the provision of innovative and less formal routes.

There are similar differences in performance in other countries. In the United States, for instance, which faces a much bigger challenge of high drop-out rates than the UK, there is a particularly large gap according to the ethnic background of learners.[30]

What else do we know?

The annual HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey*, which first occurred in 2006 and covers over 10,000 full-time undergraduate students each year, includes questions looking at experience relative to prior expectations and on whether students have felt tempted to take a break from learning.

The 2023 results show half of full-time undergraduate students (48 per cent) believed their experience had 'been better in some ways and worse in others' than they initially expected, while one-fifth (19 per cent) said it had been better and 16 per cent said it had been worse. Just 16 per cent – one-in-six – said it had been exactly as they expected.[31] This suggests a gap in knowledge among new first-year students on what lies in store.

This is confirmed by other sources, such as the annual surveys of applicants conducted by Unite Students. These have shown notable gaps in applicants' knowledge in areas such as levels of contact time and the breakdown of living costs.[32] While it is unlikely that the stubborn gap between expectations and experience will ever be entirely closed, it could be narrowed through the combined efforts of teachers, careers advisers, parents, universities and others.

The HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* also explores students' thoughts on whether they feel they made the right choice when choosing their course and institution as well as whether they are thinking of withdrawing. In 2023, an overall majority of students said they would choose the same course and the same institution if making their choice again. Moreover, only 5 per cent said they would seek either to move straight into a job or to reject higher education. However, this still leaves over one-third who provided a different answer. Despite the UK's overall low drop-out rate, it seems reasonable to assume such students are more at risk of dropping out than those who are more content with their original choices.
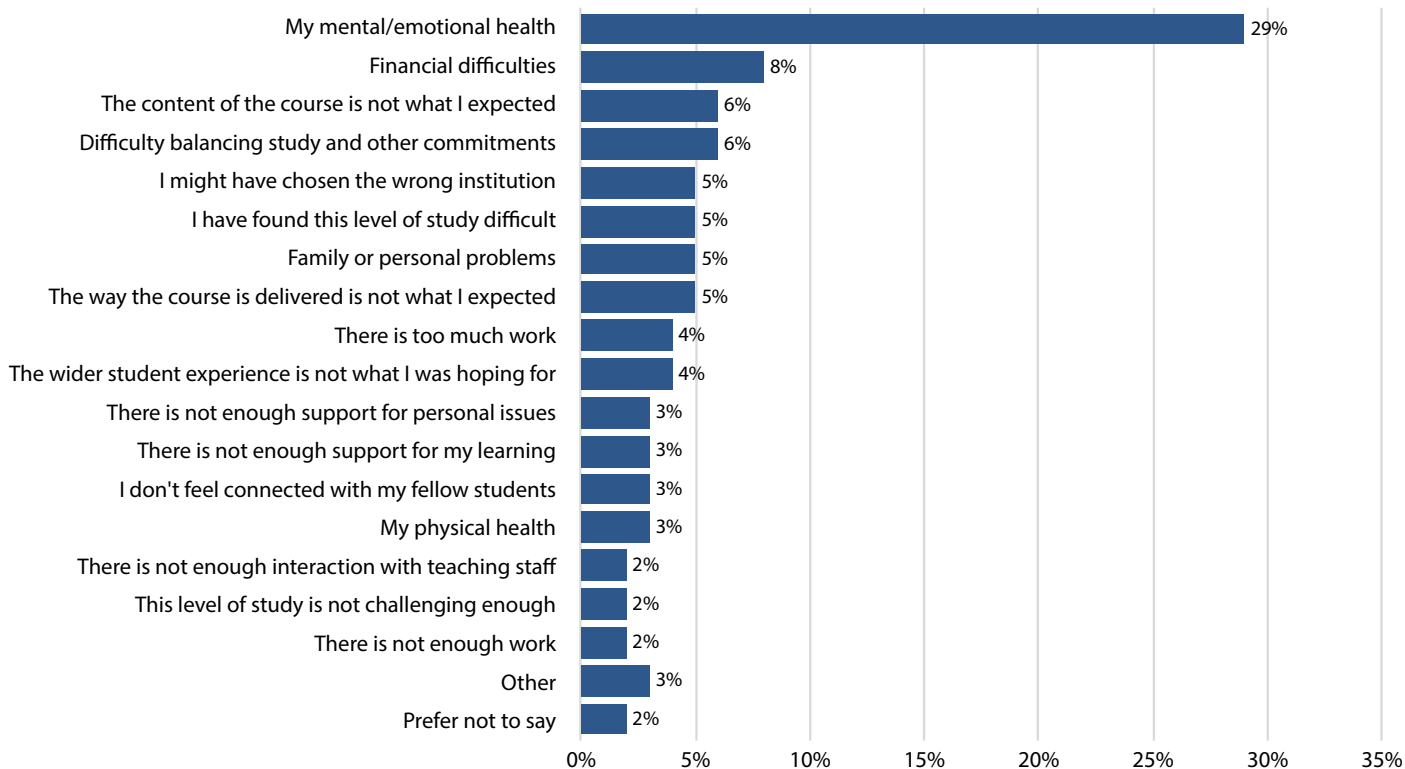
When asked explicitly 'Have you considered withdrawing from or leaving your university?', 28 per cent of students said 'Yes' and 68 per cent said 'No' (with the rest opting for 'Prefer not to say'). Students that have lower workloads, Black students, those struggling with the cost of living, trans students and care-experienced students are more likely to say they had considered withdrawal than students overall.

The students who had considered leaving were then asked a follow-up question asking 'the main (or most recent) reason why'. The most popular option by far was around mental health. We know there has been a clear rise recently in mental ill health, in loneliness and in a sense of a lack belonging and a recent literature review concludes:

> *Post-pandemic, students' mental health and well-being are significantly affecting levels of resilience and coping strategies in personal, professional, academic and societal aspects of daily life, thus impacting on HEI [higher education institution] student retention.*[33]

However, despite being the most preferred option, 'My mental / emotional health' was still chosen by less than one-third (29 per cent) of the relevant group of students, reflecting the fact that there are many other personal and educational reasons why a material minority of students feel unsettled at their place of study. Despite the high number of options provided to respondents in the HEPI / Advance HE survey, other possible reasons exist too, such as problems with accommodation or disliking the subject of study, that were not offered (although there was a catch-all 'Other' category).

What was the main (or most recent) reason that led you to consider leaving? (Source: HEPI / Advance HE)

Reason	Percentage
My mental/emotional health	29%
Financial difficulties	8%
The content of the course is not what I expected	6%
Difficulty balancing study and other commitments	6%
I might have chosen the wrong institution	5%
I have found this level of study difficult	5%
Family or personal problems	5%
The way the course is delivered is not what I expected	5%
There is too much work	4%
The wider student experience is not what I was hoping for	4%
There is not enough support for personal issues	3%
There is not enough support for my learning	3%
I don't feel connected with my fellow students	3%
My physical health	3%
There is not enough interaction with teaching staff	2%
This level of study is not challenging enough	2%
There is not enough work	2%
Other	3%
Prefer not to say	2%

Moreover, without underestimating the challenges faced by today's students, the link between deteriorating mental health and the likelihood of leaving a course is not as straightforward as it may initially seem. Using data from multiple years of the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey*, the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) found:

> both a rise in mental health challenges among students, alongside an essentially flat curve when it comes to students considering dropping out. This suggests that while students' mental health is suffering, this is not manifesting in a change in those considering dropping out.[34]

What other factors need to be accounted for?

Dropping out is not necessarily clear evidence of failure. Indeed, it could be a positive response to serious mental health challenges or unwise decision making or unpredicted changes in circumstances – or just a change of mind. It is also thought, in certain situations, to reflect strong labour market demand. The OECD, for example, notes:

> In some countries, like Lithuania, Norway and Sweden, demand for workers with relevant skills means that students who have partially completed programmes in certain fields – particularly ICT – may find employment without fully finishing their degree.[35]

Moreover, it is not true that students who have left their courses early always have less good outcomes than others, even after discounting the small number of people who have dropped out before going on to be tech superstars (like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg).

Work by Sylke Schnepf tracking people in different countries over time found over one-third of 'tertiary dropouts attain a tertiary education degree' and then fare similarly to those who never dropped out. She also found those who dropped out permanently still fared 'often better and never worse in terms of career

progression than those who never enrolled.'[36] So many people who do not complete their current course will return to education and those who do not return are unlikely to fare worse than if they had never enrolled.

More recent evidence from the US state of Virginia finds students with some college credits but no degree 'tend to experience steadily increasing wages in the years after their break' and also that they typically 'leave fields of study with nonsignificant earnings premia associated with a degree'. The researchers conclude such students could 'be making informed decisions' because the cost of remaining in college could be relatively high compared to their labour market opportunities.[37]

Despite the intense focus on non-continuation by policymakers, it is important to note that this is far from the only challenge facing universities when it comes to student enrolment. Another pressing issue is students who are expected to arrive but never actually arrive. One senior university figure recently contacted HEPI to say:

> I have this year at [University A] and [University B] done some work on predicting and projecting UCAS self release, no-shows and non-enrolments (and taking action where possible) and that is something really worrying Unis at the moment maybe even more than first year drop out – as it has risen since the pandemic and is a £1m problem at a typical Uni – marginal gains can reduce it between July and late September each year. It's particularly challenging for PSRB [Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies] courses like Nursing and related – which is where we have the real existential professional workforce challenges.

What can be done?

In the UK, there has been considerable interest in reducing non-continuation rates. In some ways, this is odd given the rates are so low relative to those in other countries. However, they vary a lot and policymakers often feel the issue is one that they can address more directly than other higher education challenges.

Given the long history of institutional autonomy in the UK, focusing on outcome measures is one way to gain traction over universities without directly demanding changes to admissions or curricula. It is also one way to ensure public resources are not being wasted as, for example, someone who drops out may be less likely to repay their student debt.

In England, policymakers' recent interest in reducing drop-out rates has been most notable in three specific areas:

i. All higher education institutions in the most regulated category overseen by the Office for Students, known as 'Approved (fee cap)', must have **Access and Participation Plans** in place (and even those in the more lightly regulated category, known as 'Approved', must have an Access and Participation Statement). Access and Participation Plans used to be called Access Plans but were rebooted as Access and Participation Plans in 2018/19 because it was felt that 'getting on' should be as important as 'getting in'. In 2020, the then Minister for Universities, Michelle Donelan, told a conference of university access advisers, 'social mobility isn't about getting more people into university. For decades we have been recruiting too many young people on to courses that do nothing to improve their life chances or help with their career goals.'[38] This area of oversight has since been in flux, with – for example – a new Director of Fair Access and Participation, John Blake, entering office in 2022 and quickly insisting that existing Access and Participations Plans be rewritten.

ii. The **Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)**, which was implemented after a commitment in the 2015 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto, aims to put a greater focus on the quality of teaching and learning in universities by badging institutions Gold, Silver or Bronze. Since 2023, there has been a 'Requires Improvement' category as well. The TEF determinations are based on both quantitative and qualitative information and the quantitative information includes 'access to higher education study', 'continuation in, and completion of, the study of higher education qualifications'. This means high non-continuation rates can affect an institution's result but is only one of many factors taken into account. There is a limited link between the TEF and the level of maximum fees institutions can charge, as fees

for full-time undergraduates at providers without a TEF award are limited to £9,000 whereas others may charge up to £9,250.[39] Some people, most notably the former Minister for Universities and Science, the Rt Hon. the Lord Johnson, who presided over the original implementation of the TEF as well as the increase in the maximum fee for TEF-accredited institutions from £9,000 to £9,250 in 2017, want the TEF to be used for future fee increases too.[40] Perhaps because the link to fee levels has been loose, the TEF has not as yet shaken things up as much as it was originally designed to do. It remains a top-level indicator, incorporating lots of inputs to summarise an entire institution's courseload in generally just one word, and applicants use it as less of a guide than was originally envisaged. However, it has become a core metric for university managers and so does influence what they do.

iii. The newest policy lever to incorporate continuation measures is the so-called **B3 Registration Condition**, which relates to the regulation of the quality of courses. The Office for Students considers institutions to have 'positive outcomes' here if they are performing at least as well as three numerical minimum thresholds. For full-time undergraduate study, these are: 80 per cent for continuation, meaning the proportion of students continuing after one year; 75% for completion, meaning the proportion of students that complete a higher education qualification (or are expected to do so); and 60% for progression after study, meaning the proportion of qualifiers thought to have ended up in managerial or professional employment, further study or another positive outcome 15 months after their course ends. Where B3 is breached and the institution's context is not regarded as excusing a relatively low performance, then the Office for Students can impose a fine, take other action (such as limiting access to student support funding) or even deregister the institution. Yet the institutional investigations that have taken place so far have found few serious problems. This has been disappointing for those who wanted B3 to be a wake-up call for universities. For instance, the former political adviser Iain Mansfield, has recently complained, 'Since 2015, I've worked directly on two major drives to strengthen quality in universities, and neither have worked.' On B3 specifically, Mansfield has said: 'Only a handful of courses have been investigated to date, no fines (or other punitive regulatory actions) issued, no courses closed or had recruitment frozen.'[41]
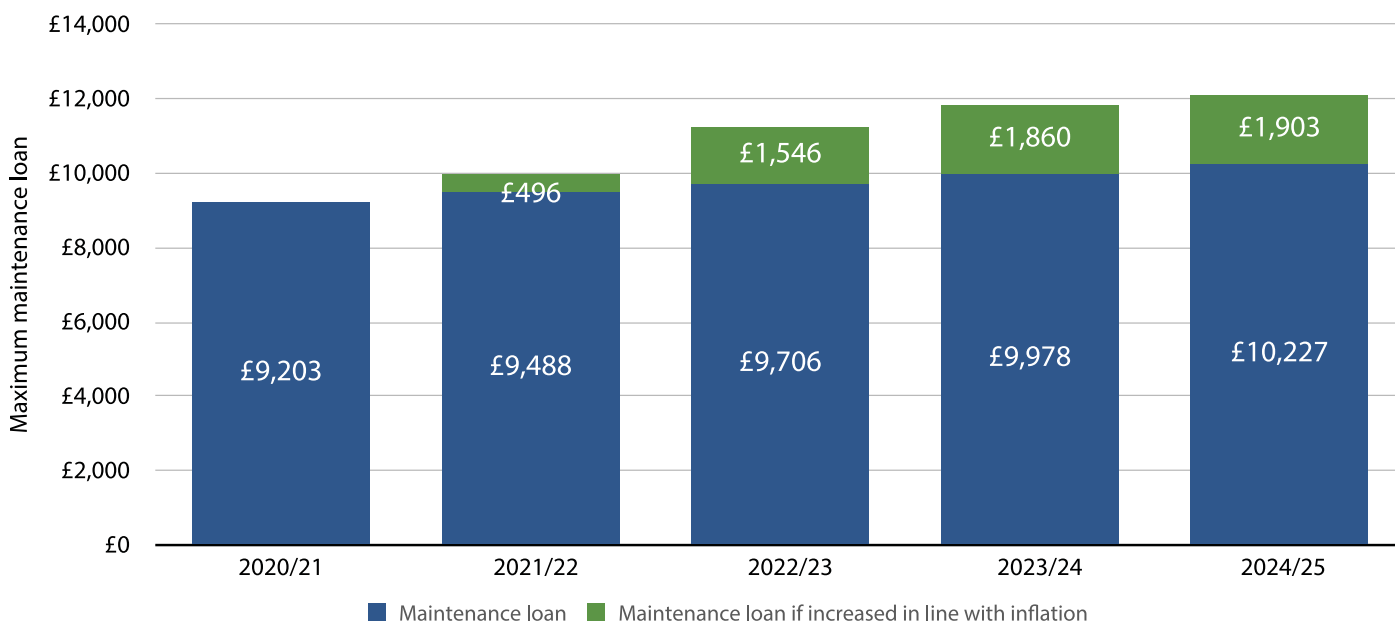
So existing policy interventions focused on reducing non-continuation rates have been part of broader initiatives and have been far from an unqualified success or remain in their infancy. How else might we grapple with the non-continuation problem as far as it exists?

First, we need to consider the quality of information provided to those on the cusp of higher education. As well as working hard to reduce the yawning gap between prior expectations and the actual student experience – on things like independent learning, cost-of-living and accessing support – we might usefully reconsider the sharing of information between schools and universities. This is generally not possible aside from the formal teachers' references via UCAS, because data-sharing is challenging in the modern world and because higher education students are generally regarded as independent adults (except in relation to finance, when their parents are typically expected to contribute). Schools and colleges have information about their pupils that universities could find useful when it comes to engaging and supporting new students. On the one hand, this may seem a step too far for all sorts of legal and practical reasons and because many young people want to start afresh on enrolling in higher education rather than having their past determine their future. But there is a lively campaign to impose a new statutory 'duty of care' on higher education institutions and better information sharing might address some of the concerns of those behind this.

If it is not feasible in practice to share more information with universities prior to enrolment, then applicants can still be encouraged to share more information about their needs with their future higher education institution before matriculation, with a view to getting more support in place in time for a student's arrival, as well as in the early days of people's undergraduate lives. However, stretched financial resources mean less money is available for student support services and the sort of intensive support that can be necessary to stop a student from dropping out is not always affordable to deliver at scale. Moreover, should entry to higher education become more difficult as the number of school leavers continues to grow and as calls for the return of student number controls become louder, then there could be additional disincentives on applicants to share such personal information.

Secondly, policymakers need to pay more regard to students' living costs. Students are on the raw end of the cost-of-living crisis, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the 'cost-of-learning' crisis. According to HEPI / Advance HE data, more than half of students now undertake paid employment during term time and a recent HEPI report recently showed over one-quarter of universities have a food bank and one-in-ten distributes food vouchers.[42] In England, the maximum maintenance support package is lower in real terms than it has been since 2016/17 after a number of years during which it has grown by less than actual inflation. For all but the very poorest students, that is for all those from households on at least £25,000 a year, parents are expected to contribute towards their student offspring's living costs. Yet the thresholds for this support have not increased since Gordon Brown's premiership in 2008. As the Russell Group has shown, students would be receiving around £2,000 a year more (as they do in Wales) if maintenance had kept up properly with inflation in recent years.[43]

Maintenance Support (Source: Based on Russell Group figures)

Legend: Maintenance loan (blue) · Maintenance loan if increased in line with inflation (green)

Year	Maintenance loan	Maintenance loan if increased in line with inflation
2020/21	£9,203	
2021/22	£9,488	£496
2022/23	£9,706	£1,546
2023/24	£9,978	£1,860
2024/25	£10,227	£1,903

Thirdly, we need to think about how higher education institutions can best support individual students' needs, including via the clever use of big data. Professor Edward Peck, the Vice-Chancellor of Nottingham Trent University and the Westminster Government's first HE Student Support Champion, has been focusing on both transitions and student needs and has written:

> There is widespread recognition of the importance of student analytics: using data based on students' interactions with HEPs to understand them better, and thus spot early signs of disengagement and distress. However, the right data are not always held in the right place, in the right combination or seen by the right people. Data about individual students can also only tell us so much; they reveal neither what the specific problem is nor how best to solve it in each unique circumstance. However, as these data become more available and external expectations of the effectiveness of our interventions grow, universities cannot not know what they know. They will be expected to deploy these data in a systematic manner, with clarity about who is expected to do what and when.

Of course, proper interventions cost money and it is not only the student maintenance system but also the income for teaching and learning that has failed to keep up with inflation. There is a gap between all the extra things policymakers want universities to do and their financial wherewithal to do it. Having said that, some non-completers leave after successfully doing much of their course, with some US research finding 'the probability of withdrawal spikes near the finish line.'[44] It is possible that the payoffs from helping such students could be considerable, even if other US evidence suggests 'low-cost nudge interventions [like personalised text messages] may be insufficient for addressing barriers to completion among students who have made considerable academic progress.'[45] Here in the UK, funding has recently been made available to higher education providers from the Cabinet Office's Evaluation Accelerator Fund (EAF), via TASO, to try and answer the question: 'what impact do student-support/wellbeing interventions prompted by analytics have on student outcomes?'[46]

Fourthly, act at an institutional level in response both to the existing evidence base and to information gathered through exit interviews. A deeper understanding of why students withdraw from specific institutions can be offered by structured exit interviews with departing students (whenever the affected students are willing). These enable the quantitative evidence to be supplemented with qualitative evidence. However, exit interviews will only meet their full potential if the information gathered is set alongside other information and then acted upon.

For example, research has shown how important it is for students to have a meaningful relationship with their personal tutor, yet this often does not occur in practice.[47] Other research that focused in part on differences in non-continuation by ethnicity found:

> students with considerably lower entry profiles should be provided with tailored study skills training sessions specific to their course requirements. This recommendation is particularly applicable to Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi undergraduates, who, on average, have a lower level of prior educational attainment than other ethnic groups.[48]

Fifthly, we should consider again the wider use of staging qualifications. The Augar report of 2019 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'.[49] This recommendation is worth further consideration because 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.

As one recent HEPI blogger, Richard Courtney of the University of East London, has put it:

> rather than being a consolation prize, the 'early exit' award should be re-valued in higher education institutions as an achievement with its own specific learning purpose and outcomes. It is like ordering the two-course special and leaving before dessert; maybe you'll come back later for dessert, or possibly go somewhere else to enjoy a different ambience altogether.[50]

And finally …

The Westminster Government's flagship higher education policy, the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), raises a new conundrum. The previous Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Robert Halfon MP, said:

> Regardless of background, income or circumstance, people will have access to a flexi-travelcard to jump on and off their learning as opposed to being confined to a single advance ticket. This is not just a train journey; it is a life journey.[51]

So it seems clear flexibilities provided by the LLE could increase traditional measures of dropping out, especially if a proper credit-transfer system were ever to be implemented alongside, by making the system more flexible. The OECD has found:

> A flexible system tends to increase the number of students who do not graduate 'on time', but could benefit students in many other ways. In countries and other participants that provide relatively broad access to tertiary education, as is the case in the Flemish Community of Belgium, flexibility may be particularly important, giving students more time to meet the standards set by their educational institution.[52]

While the Lifelong Learning Entitlement has been widely welcomed, without due care, its implementation risks being flawed.[53] For the LLE to work as envisaged, there needs to be an entirely new approach to dropping out both within the corridors of power and within the regulators that policymakers oversee. Doing a couple of modules at one institution this year and another couple somewhere else a few years later, all within the LLE wrapper, is exactly how the LLE is meant to work.

The UK's problem is not high drop-out rates across the entire higher education sector. It is the relatively low attendance rate in the compulsory stage of education since the pandemic lessened, insufficient support for sub-degree provision, high drop-out rates among a minority of institutions, courses and students (including degree apprenticeships) and people being unable to make the most of their student experience because they have not got enough money and have to undertake a high number of hours of paid work – even during term time when their studies should be their main priority.

Endnotes

*   The phrase 'dropouts or stopouts or comebackers or potential completers' appeared in an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on 15 February 2024 – see https://www.chronicle.com/article/that-ship-has-sailed

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7   https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/A-short-guide-to-non-continuation-in-UK-universities.pdf

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