

The first-year experience of higher education in the UK

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FINAL REPORT



Acknowledgements

This project has depended on the support of many people, to whom we express our appreciation.

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As is evident from the interim report (Phase 1) and from this Final Report, the success of this project 'on the ground' has depended on the commitment of participating institutions, and relied utterly on those colleagues within them who have helped in various ways to organise the collection of the data.

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Executive summary

This report details the findings from Phase 2 of the study of the first-year experience, which focused on students who did not return in 2006-07 for the second year of full-time undergraduate study at their original institution. It also alludes to the findings from the on-course experiences of first-year students in the preceding academic year (Phase 1), and makes some comparisons with a study of non-completion that was conducted in the mid-1990s.

In middle of the academic year 2005–06, students in a variety of institutions were generally very positive about their first-year experience, judging by some 7000 responses to the Phase 1 survey conducted roughly six months after enrolment. There was a high level of confidence that successful completion of the programme would result in the gaining of graduate-level employment. However, a number of factors were identified which indicated that, for some, student continuation was at risk, the main factors being inadequate prior information about the programme and/or the institution, and a concern regarding the financing of studies. Free-text responses indicated that the social side of higher education was particularly important to new students.

Perhaps rather surprisingly, the responses to the Phase 1 survey of students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds did not differ greatly from those of their more advantaged peers. The opportunity was taken in the present report to subject the Phase 1 data to further analyses which suggested that, although overall differences were small, there were signs that the relatively disadvantaged were less positive about some aspects of their experience.

The Phase 2 study consisted of a postal questionnaire to all students who did not return for their second year at 25 varied institutions, based on 44 closed items similar to those used a decade earlier. The number of usable responses was 462. The general pattern of responses was quite similar to that obtained a decade ago from students who discontinued their studies in the mid-1990s, the major influences on non-continuation being: poor choice of programme; lack of personal commitment to study; teaching quality; lack of contact with academic staff; inadequate academic progress; and finance. Within this broad similarity, however, there were some hints that the issue of contact with academic staff was becoming more significant for continuation, and that finance was declining in significance.

Consistent with the earlier study, nearly three-quarters of the respondents either had already re-engaged, or intended to re-engage with, higher education.

The responses were analysed with respect to different demographic variables: qualitative findings are presented in this report, with detailed statistics being available on the Higher Education Academy's website (www.heacademy.ac.uk). The inclusion on the survey form of spaces for students to write freely about their personal experiences encouraged some vivid descriptions of experience which, while not necessarily representative, complement the statistical analyses of the responses to the closed questions.

The findings of Phase 2 are discussed with reference to the possibility of the enhancement of the student experience. Some aspects, such as the adoption of teaching approaches that actively engage students from the outset, are within institutions' compass. Others, such as the choice-making of potential students, are partially amenable to institutional interventions. The projected downturn in the number of young people in the UK from around 2011 suggests that, for some institutions at least, a clear focus on the first-year experience of students will be vital.

Background and rationale

Previous work by Yorke *et al.* (1997) showed that poor choice of field of study, financial stress, and aspects of the student experience were the most frequently cited reasons given for non-completion by students in six varied institutions in the north-west of England. With the funding regime in the UK having changed substantially since the time of that study, and being about to change further as 'top-up' fees were introduced in England, there was an opportunity to assess whether there had been any change in the kinds of reason students give for discontinuation of their studies.

The establishment of the Higher Education Academy, with its strong emphasis on the student experience, offered the prospect of expanding the original methodology used by Yorke *et al.* to give a stronger focus on aspects of the student experience that may be impacting on discontinuation. This was particularly pertinent in a context of widening participation, since work by Action on Access (2003) had pointed to aspects of the student experience (broadly interpreted) that appeared to be assisting some institutions to retain students to a greater extent than their computed benchmarks would lead one to expect. The student experience has been remarkably under-researched in the UK at the level of the higher education sector, although a number of institutions have for many years conducted internal surveys for the purposes of quality assurance and enhancement. This contrasts with the position in the US and Australia, where studies of the student experience have been conducted for many years at sectoral level.

What the literature suggests

The literature on the student experience suggests a number of broad areas of institutional activity through which the chances of student success can be enhanced. The following list (the majority of which is discussed at greater length in Yorke, 2007) is based on a number of sources (Action on Access, 2003; Carey, 2005; Kuh *et al.*, 2005; Long *et al.*, 2006; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Reason *et al.*, 2006; The Pell Institute, 2004, 2007), although not every item on the list appears in each of the sources:

- an institutional commitment to student learning, and hence to student engagement
- proactive management of student transition
- treating the curriculum as an academic milieu, and also one in which social engagement is fostered
- choosing curricular structures that increase the chances of student success

- placing an emphasis on the first-year experience (including the provision of resources)
- systematically monitoring and evaluating student achievement, and acting on the evidence thereby collected
- academic leadership (although in some of the cited sources this is implicit rather than explicit).

The earlier sources influenced the study reported here, albeit often indirectly.

An outline of the Project

The project reported here was based on first-year full-time undergraduate students in a number of contrasting institutions, with an original intention (in the end, not quite achieved) of having at least two institutions in any sub-group in order to preserve anonymity in reporting. The focus was on first-year students since the first year has, to date, been the most critical for discontinuation. While the sample of institutions spanned a variety of types, care was taken to include a number of institutions that had substantial proportions of disadvantaged students, since this would respond to the policy emphasis on widening participation.

The project had two main phases:

1. A survey was undertaken of the first-year full-time undergraduate students in a number of contrasting subject areas during term 2 (i.e., around late February or March 2006) regarding their perceptions of their experience as students. At this point in their studies they were expected to have had feedback on assessments conducted in the first semester or term of the academic year. The cost was that Phase 1 could not pick up students who left their institution early in the academic year.
2. In the spring term of 2007, when institutions should have been in a position to confirm which students had not re-enrolled in year 2, a survey was undertaken of all those who were recorded as not continuing their studies in their original institutions, in order to ascertain their reasons for discontinuing. The opportunity existed to pick up the very early leavers retrospectively in Phase 2. Phase 2 is essentially an exit survey substantially similar to that used by Yorke *et al.* (1997), which allows for some comparison with the findings from the mid-1990s.

The opportunity arose, with students from some of the participating institutions, to undertake a small follow-up study testing whether their perception of aspects of their first-year learning experience had undergone any change between the spring of 2006 and the spring of 2007.

The surveys

The base for the two surveys consisted of students who were full-time first-year undergraduates in nine broad subject areas, spread across 23 varied institutions. Two further institutions joined the project for the survey used in Phase 2, and this survey was widened to include all students who were recorded as having not returned for their second year, since for some institutions the number surveyed would otherwise have been very small. The subject areas included in this study were:

- subjects allied to Medicine
- Biological Sciences
- Psychology
- Computer Science
- Engineering and Technology
- Social Studies
- Business and Administration
- Humanities (represented by Historical Studies and English¹)
- Creative Arts and Design.

In Phase 2, students were offered options to record their programme of study as a combined programme in arts, humanities and social sciences; combined programme in science-based subjects; combined programme involving both sciences and arts etc.; or to write in the title of the subject if none of the provided categories were suitable. Ideally it would have been desirable to have followed students through from Phase 1 to Phase 2, since this would have allowed a clear link to be made between what the students said about their first-year experience in the spring of 2006 and their reasons given a year later for non-continuation. Data protection considerations and administrative complexity militated against this, and the weaker option of making an inferential and more general comparison between the findings from the two surveys had to be adopted. It was possible, however, to follow up a small sample of continuing students (see below).

Phase 1

The method employed in Phase 1 is described in Yorke and Longden (2007), and is only briefly summarised here. In most institutions surveying took place in three of the nine subject areas, although in smaller and/or more specialist institutions the number of areas surveyed

1 These appear in different subject area groupings according to the HESA Joint Academic Coding System (JACS).

was smaller. The survey, which contained a mixture of pre-tested demographic and Likert-type items, was conducted in class time and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Spaces were provided for students to add written comments, but the time constraint was such that these would at best be brief.

The number of usable responses was 7109, which represented a response rate of around 95 per cent, judging by the number of blank or unusable returns. If there is a significant bias in the results, it will lie in the extent (known to be very varied) to which institutions distributed survey forms in classes: it is impossible to estimate this.

Headline findings from Phase 1

The picture that emerged from the Phase 1 survey was generally one of a good experience in respect of teaching and learning, with over 80 per cent of students reporting their studies as stimulating and over 70 per cent indicating that the teaching they received was supportive. Nearly 60 per cent said that feedback had helped them in their learning: however, 29 per cent said that feedback on their work had not been prompt.

Most students claimed to have understood what was expected of them academically, although their perception of coping with the demand tended to be somewhat lower. Roughly one-third of respondents said that academic work was harder than they had expected it to be. On the whole, there seemed to be a limited willingness to 'read around' the subject of study: the data suggested that older students were more motivated than their younger peers in this respect. Over half of those who were having difficulty in coping with academic study had considered withdrawal.

There was, generally, a highly positive view of the level of provision of institutional resources.

The responses indicated that there were a number of differences according to the subject of study. However, caution needs to be taken not to jump to conclusions since the circumstances impacting on the teaching of subjects vary considerably (for example, the use of practising professionals as part-time teachers and the high demand placed on students who combine practical placement with academic study).

There was evidence of two potentially strong influences likely to make students consider withdrawing: worry over financing their studies and lack of good information about the institution and/or the programme they had entered. Nearly 60 per cent were worried about financing their studies. Although funding was an issue for students of all ages, the survey showed that it was more significant for older than for younger students. Again,

nearly 60 per cent said that they had had to undertake paid work in order to support themselves while in higher education, and 39 per cent said that they had difficulty in balancing academic and other commitments. Forty per cent of those who had little or no prior knowledge of their programme had considered withdrawal, whereas only 25 per cent of their better-informed peers had done so.

While finance and prior information were the issues most likely to cause students to question their continuation, unhappiness or dissatisfaction with other aspects of the first-year experience were also risk factors. Analysis of the responses showed that the greater the number of risk factors in a student's experience, the greater was the chance that the student would have considered withdrawing from the course.

Differences based on demographics were rather muted on the whole, save for the generally more positive responses of older students regarding teaching and learning. With the 'widening participation agenda' in mind, there were only very small differences in response from the different (self-reported) social groups regarding their academic experience. However, those from more advantaged backgrounds had less recourse to part-time employment (with potential advantage to their academic studies).

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents were confident that their studies would lead to an appropriate graduate-level job.

The 'free text' responses provided by the students point to making friends as a crucial element of a positive higher education experience: something that is more difficult for those who engage as 'commuter students'. Institutions can assist in friendship formation through the approaches they adopt to teaching; for example, by engaging students early on in activities that involve collaboration. Students also commented (favourably and unfavourably) on various aspects of the quality of their experience in higher education.

Surveys of the first-year experience have been undertaken in Australia at intervals over the past decade. Making allowances for differences in student demographics, the experiences of students in Australian higher education appeared remarkably similar to those evidenced in the Phase 1 survey.

Further analyses of Phase 1 data relating to widening participation

The opportunity to present some of the Phase 1 findings at the European Access Network Conference in June 2007 provided a stimulus to take a further look at the data relevant to widening participation.

Students from backgrounds in which there is limited or no experience of

higher education often lack the familial support usually available to those from backgrounds that are more advantaged in this respect, and which helps in coming to terms with the expectations of higher education. This applies particularly to students from lower socio-economic groups (SEGs) and to those from some ethnic backgrounds, towards whom policy regarding the widening of participation in higher education is addressed, albeit not exclusively. Analyses of the Phase 1 data were extended in order to explore in more detail some of the issues. Comparisons were made between:

- students from managerial or professional backgrounds and students from relatively routine supervisory, technical, service or manual backgrounds²
- white students and non-white students (the latter group being 'collapsed' because of the small numbers in more finely disaggregated ethnic groups).

Table 1 shows some broad comparisons between the selected groups where the differences were sufficient to give pause for thought (gaps in the table indicate that differences were extremely small). Although the differences shown in the table are small when compared with the broad thrust of the findings from Phase 1, they hint that there may be some scope for institutions to improve the first-year experience for entrants from backgrounds that are under-represented in higher education.

Table 1: Some selected group differences regarding aspects of the first-year experience.

Reaction to the first-year experience	Truer of which of the two SEGs?	Truer of which ethnic grouping?
Less positive re teaching/learning	Supervisory etc	Non-white
Lower confidence in study skills	Supervisory etc	Non-white
Less likely to cope with academic demand		Non-white
More likely to say resources are inadequate	Supervisory etc	Non-white
Less likely to say staff are friendly		Non-white
Less likely to make friends		Non-white
More likely to worry about finance	Supervisory etc	

² Students from intermediate backgrounds were excluded because of the fuzziness of the descriptor, as were those from backgrounds where there was long-term unemployment or no employment, and those who could not assign their socio-economic status to one of the provided categories.

The ethnicity-related analysis in Table 1, by taking a dichotomous approach because of relatively small numbers of non-white students, inevitably loses the variation that exists here and there in the general results, such as the greater propensity for Chinese students to do more than the required background reading, and for black and black British students to express greater confidence that they would obtain a graduate-level job.

Follow-up to Phase 1

Some of the students who responded to Phase 1 of the project indicated that they would be willing to complete a follow-up questionnaire, providing either an e-mail contact address or a student identification number. Several of the participating institutions were willing to assist in making contact with these students, either by providing fuller contact details or by mailing out questionnaires on behalf of the project. A very short questionnaire was devised containing 12 of the Phase 1 items relating to students' learning experience, and inviting comment on the best and worst aspects of their first year, and on what the student thought would improve the first year. This questionnaire was distributed, electronically or in hard copy, depending on the arrangements with institutions, in the late spring of 2007 and elicited 51 responses.

Although the representativeness of this sample is distinctly problematic, the data the respondents provided invite further exploration. The responses from this short questionnaire (here labelled 'Phase 1b', for convenience: the questionnaire is provided as at www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/fye), and the relevant responses from the Phase 1 questionnaire, were collapsed from the five categories to three ('strongly agree' and 'agree' being combined, as were 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree'), and the same scoring was used for each set of items. This allowed shifts of response to be readily apparent: a two-point shift represented a shift from positivity to negativity, or vice versa, with a one-point shift representing a move to or away from the mid-point of the scale.

There was an overall trend in the Phase 1b results, across all items and responses, towards negativity. One in five responses made a two-point shift from positivity to negativity, and a similar proportion made a one-point shift in the same direction, whereas the shifts in the opposite direction were much less strong, at three in a hundred and one in ten, respectively. Just under half of the responses indicated no change in the student's position. One interpretation of the overall shift could be that it is a statistical artefact (i.e., 'regression towards the mean'), since the respondents were continuing students who generally gave positive responses to Phase 1 and hence there was more scope for their responses to move in a negative direction than in a positive direction.

However, the patterns in the data suggest that there may be more than a statistical artefact in operation. In respect of item 31 ('Feedback on my work has been prompt'), 42 of the 47 who responded indicated a shift in the direction of negativity, and none in the opposite direction. The responses to Phase 1 showed that promptness of feedback attracted less strongly positive responses than most of the items relating to teaching and learning, implying a lower potential for regression towards the mean.

The qualitative comments provided by the respondents echoed a number given in response to Phase 1 and to the survey of 'non-continuers' reported below: hence none are included in this report.

It was noticeable that there were differences between institutions as regards shifts of perspective, with one in particular attracting close to two in three shifts towards negativity. While this could be due to the particular very small sample of respondents, it ought to give the institution concerned a prompt to determine whether this is a signal of something more than a happenstance of sampling.

Phase 2

As noted earlier, for Phase 2 it was decided to survey all first-year first-degree undergraduate students from the participating institutions who had left their programmes of study during, or at the end of, the academic year 2005-06. This decision was based on two considerations.

1. It would be easier for institutions to identify all 'non-returners' than to pick out those from the broad subject areas surveyed in Phase 1. Identification would have been particularly difficult for students enrolled on multi-subject programmes, especially if some of their studies fell outside the selected subject areas.
2. In some institutions the number of 'non-returners' could be expected to be very low.

Two further institutions, one pre-1992 and one post-1992 university, were included in Phase 2 at their own request.

The instrument used in the previous study by Yorke *et al.* (1997) was adapted for use in Phase 2. Although some of the items could have been improved, it was felt that the advantages of retaining, for the purpose of comparison, as much as possible of the earlier instrument outweighed the disadvantages of more substantial change.

The instrument (attached as Appendix 1) asked for the subject area and

time of leaving the institution, for demographic details, and for responses to 44 possible influences on the student's departure using a four-point scale running from 'not at all' to 'very' influential. It also included two spaces for free-response comment. The first invited respondents to elaborate on the responses they had given to the 'tick-box' items, and the second asked them to indicate what differences they would have liked to have seen in their first-year experience.

Administration of this survey required participating institutions to identify the 'non-returners' from institutional records, to prepare labels for mailing to home addresses, and to affix the labels and mail out survey packs to the identified individuals. Contrary to expectations (since institutions would have returned enrolment data in December 2005 because of the HESSES requirement), the identification of the 'non-returners' proved not to have been entirely straightforward in some institutions. Some mailings took place very close to the date specified for the return of questionnaires, and in at least three cases after this deadline³. This is likely to have prejudiced the return of the questionnaires. As is to be expected in a study of this sort, a number of mailed envelopes were returned unopened because the addressee was no longer resident at the provided address: 347 fell into this category, with this number being likely to under-represent undelivered questionnaires. Responses were received from 28 students who had either completed a one-year programme of study or the single module for which they had enrolled (and hence could not be included as 'non-returners').

After removing invalid responses, the total number of usable questionnaires returned was 462. The uncertainty regarding the students to whom questionnaires should have been sent makes it impossible to give an accurate response rate, but it is probably around 10 per cent overall, although this figure masks a considerable variation between institutions. At the lower end, for example, no responses were received from non-returning students who had studied at two institutions (in respect of which the number of such students was in any case expected to be low).

Results of the Phase 2 study

The low response rate means that considerable caution needs to be used when interpreting the results. The possibility of post hoc rationalisation, self-deception and so on in responding to a survey needs also to be borne in mind. However, some respondents made it clear that they appreciated the opportunity to communicate (perhaps 'get off their chests') why they had decided to discontinue their programme of studies: indeed, some

3 In one case notification of the delay enabled an amendment to the deadline to be affixed to the envelopes before sending them in bulk to the relevant institution for mailing.

comments could not be used in this report because they would have enabled their author to be identified.

Despite the various methodological issues, but nevertheless consistent with the focus on the use of the survey findings for enhancement purposes, there is quite a lot that invites institutions to consider whether the findings of the survey chime with their own experiences with first-year students, and whether they provide a prompt for further enhancement activity. Where response numbers made it sensible to do so, individual institutions were provided with results from their own ex-students set against those from all respondents: these institution-specific findings are not included in this report.

The broad picture

The responses to the 44 closed-response items regarding the influences on leaving were (paralleling the earlier study by Yorke *et al.*, 1997) collapsed into two categories: on one hand, 'moderately' and 'very' influential were combined; on the other, 'not at all' and 'a little' were combined. The findings reported here are based on the percentage of responses in the moderately/very influential category.

Table 2 presents the overall pattern of responses, together with a breakdown by broad subject area (for groupings where the numbers merited it). The responses deviating by between 10 and 19 percentage points from the overall mean percentage are shaded lightly, with deviations of 20 or more points being shaded more deeply. This allows the larger deviations to be identified at a glance, but the caution over interpretation (especially where numbers are smaller) should be borne in mind.

Table 2: Percentages of respondents, subdivided by broad subject area indicating that aspects of their experience were moderately or very influential in their non-continuation.

Possible influence	Subject area (maximum number of responses)										
	ALL (N=440)	Subjects allied to Medicine (N=55)	Biological Sciences (N=19)	Psychology (N=22)	Computer Science (N=14)	Engineering & Technology (N=19)	Social Studies (N=31)	Business & Administrative Studies (N=34)	Humanities (N=29)	Creative Arts & Design A&D (N=60)	Combined Arts (N=37)
I simply realised that I had chosen the wrong field of study	41	48	56	41	29	50	48	32	38	30	56
The programme was not sufficiently relevant to my intended career	28	20	29	24	29	33	32	18	36	26	35
The difficulty of the programme	20	28	50	19	36	17	13	24	10	13	19
A lack of personal engagement with the programme	37	37	61	38	29	33	33	41	52	38	32
The programme was not what I expected	45	41	63	52	43	41	48	41	48	52	41
The way the programme was taught did not suit me	40	26	39	35	43	33	52	29	50	60	23
The general quality of the teaching	30	15	28	24	50	11	35	24	28	60	21
The amount of contact with academic staff	37	30	47	29	36	22	43	26	45	68	26
The quality of the feedback on my work	27	22	11	19	36	28	30	15	10	52	18
The speed with which I received feedback on my work	21	17	6	27	21	17	17	12	10	38	12
The overall organisation of the programme	35	29	47	24	36	11	33	26	34	60	23
Class sizes that were too large	24	17	56	19	38	22	39	15	21	35	24
The timetabling of the programme did not suit my needs	19	21	6	38	7	17	10	24	28	18	6
Too heavy a workload on the programme	20	30	28	14	29	22	16	26	10	13	14
The level of provision of library / learning resources facilities	9	7	0	5	14	5	13	3	7	11	14
The level of provision of computing facilities	11	9	0	5	7	5	16	9	7	14	14
The level of provision of specialist equipment for the programme (e.g. studio/lab equipment)	11	4	0	5	21	5	0	3	7	39	9
The level of provision of social facilities (e.g. student union activities, sports facilities)	13	8	11	23	7	11	23	6	7	16	11
The institution was not what I had expected	28	15	33	36	36	11	32	32	32	30	27
I felt I was making insufficient academic progress	35	29	41	14	43	42	26	35	41	48	35
A lack of appropriate study skills (e.g. note taking, exam preparation, essay writing)	14	8	6	0	8	21	19	32	24	18	20
I needed a break from education	23	17	24	14	21	22	29	24	31	11	34
A lack of commitment to the programme	31	27	44	24	14	33	26	41	59	23	46
Not enough time spent on studying outside timetabled sessions	22	18	35	19	7	26	13	26	24	24	28
Stress related to the demands of the programme	25	31	33	19	14	28	26	41	24	20	20
A lack of personal support from other students	25	15	22	29	21	11	23	32	41	20	27
A lack of personal support from staff	32	24	22	33	43	16	39	32	34	52	29
A lack of personal support from family, partner, etc	13	13	18	14	7	22	13	15	14	13	17
Financial problems	29	35	26	38	14	28	42	41	31	25	33
Personal health problems	22	18	28	29	21	33	26	15	21	16	17
Problems with drugs and/or alcohol	3	4	0	0	0	0	6	6	7	2	9
The needs of dependants (e.g. family, partner)	16	34	0	24	7	22	10	15	14	16	17
Emotional difficulties involving others (e.g. family, partner, friend)	23	20	22	33	14	22	23	21	24	16	34
The demands of employment whilst studying	15	11	33	32	0	22	13	29	10	17	11
Problems with accommodation	19	17	29	24	14	17	29	24	31	4	20
Travel difficulties (e.g. cost, time)	22	23	12	20	7	22	26	32	38	16	14
Dislike of the city/town in which I studied	21	19	33	14	14	11	32	29	14	22	20
Fear of crime	6	8	6	0	29	6	3	3	3	7	9
Homesickness	17	12	18	24	14	17	19	15	31	11	20
I found it difficult to make friends	19	11	19	33	7	17	26	29	41	13	25
Taking up employment	11	11	18	9	7	13	3	21	3	13	24
Pregnancy or partner's pregnancy	5	4	0	0	7	6	6	0	0	6	14
Bereavement of someone close to me	7	7	6	14	0	18	10	6	3	4	15
I failed one or more assessments	13	26	12	5	7	17	7	18	7	13	12

Coding: High v ALL Low v ALL
 Very high v ALL Very low v ALL

Note: Some responses were received in respect of subject areas not included in the table. These are included in the 'All' column. There were too few responses from combined programmes in sciences and in a mixture of science-based and arts/humanities-based subjects to merit separate inclusion in the Table.

Analyses based on demographic variables

The dataset was analysed with reference to a number of demographic variables. The number of responses was too small to subdivide more finely and to obtain robust comparisons, so what is provided here is a sequence of different ‘cuts’ of the full dataset.

In respect of the analyses that follow, it needs to be noted that there are a number of reasonably strong correlations between the demographic variables included in this study: the contingency coefficient (Siegel and Castellan, 1988) has been used for the categorical data. Table 3 shows, for example, the strong associations between age, responsibility for dependants and previous experience of higher education, and the statistically significant but less strong associations between institutional type and a number of demographic variables.

Table 3: Correlations between demographic variables.

Variable	Inst Type	Age	Prev HE	Depend's	PT employ	Entry Q	Ethnicity	Disability	1st Family	SEG	Gender	Prior Kn	Domicile	Match EO
Age	0.166	#												
Previous HE experience	0.140	0.496	#											
Dependants	0.145	0.493	0.300	#										
PT employment	0.165	0.249	0.167	0.109	#									
Entry Qualifications	0.217	0.477	0.406	0.380	0.162	#								
Ethnicity	0.086	0.210	0.181	0.163	0.214	0.149	#							
Disability	0.049	0.118	0.115	0.139	0.110	0.105	0.026	#						
1st in family to enter HE	0.146	0.054	0.026	0.008	0.037	0.085	0.090	0.068	#					
Socio-economic group	0.185	0.096	0.053	0.081	0.242	0.092	0.065	0.063	0.211	#				
Gender	0.048	0.012	0.034	0.080	0.050	0.004	0.055	0.037	0.001	0.103	#			
Prior Knowledge of HE/Prog	0.108	0.013	0.008	0.053	0.139	0.055	0.074	0.106	0.124	0.163	0.004	#		
Domicile	0.072	0.063	0.097	0.029	0.102	0.103	0.103	0.022	0.045	0.123	0.126	0.087	#	
Match of Ent Qual to Prog	0.027	0.057	0.038	0.057	0.135	0.017	0.036	0.104	0.049	0.094	0.092	0.052	0.076	#
Entry through Clearing	0.091	0.041	0.014	0.011	0.131	0.008	0.064	0.028	0.002	0.105	0.049	0.044	0.078	0.048

Key: p<.001 p<.01 p<.05

All variables are dichotomised except PT employment and Socio-economic group which are in five categories. One university excluded from Inst Type column on the grounds of atypicality.

The findings are presented as a narrative here: those with an interest in the statistics are directed to the additional statistical tables that are available on the Higher Education Academy website at www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/fye/.

Age

Younger students (i.e., aged less than 21 on enrolment), more frequently than older students, said that they had made a poor choice of field of study, found their programme and/or the institution not as they had anticipated, lacked commitment, and felt that they were making insufficient academic progress. They also suffered to a greater extent in respect of transition, indicating greater difficulty with making friends with fellow students, accommodation and homesickness, and indicating lower levels of enthusiasm regarding the city or town in which they were studying.

As expected, the aspects of the first-year experience found difficult by older students included: financial problems; the demands of employment while studying; the needs of dependants; and the lack of support from family and/or partner.

Gender

The only difference (of modest note) is a slightly greater propensity for males to cite financial problems as influential in their non-continuation.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is dichotomised into white/non-white for the analysis reported here, because of the small numbers in the different ethnic groupings. This may mask some inter-group differences.

White students more frequently said that they had made the wrong choice of field of study and had lacked personal engagement with it. The biggest difference between the two groups related to financial problems, which were more influential in the non-continuation of non-white students. Non-white students (who tended to be older on enrolment) more often cited as influential in their decision to discontinue their programme the quality of the teaching and feedback, and class sizes that were too large. Beyond the institution, these students more frequently cited the demands of employment while studying; the needs of dependants; difficulties with travel; and a lack of support from family and/or partner.

Disability

There is no surprise in finding that, for the students who had declared a disability (N=38), personal health was most frequently cited as an influence on their non-continuation: 61 per cent (N=23) compared with 18 per cent of those who had not declared a disability. Students with disabilities also had a higher rate of citing a lack of support from both staff and students, and showed a greater tendency to cite large class size as an influence. They also tended, more than others, to cite the heaviness of their workload and provision of computing and specialist resources by the institution. They had a lower propensity than other students to admit that a lack of commitment

to their studies, the way that their programme was taught, and a failure to make academic progress had been influential in their decision not to continue with their programme. They cited travel difficulties less frequently.

Socio-economic status

The data from Phase 1 suggested, perhaps surprisingly, that the first-year experience was relatively uninfluenced by the student's socio-economic status. The data from Phase 2 tell much the same story. However, students from backgrounds labelled 'intermediate occupation'⁴ and 'relatively routine supervisory, technical, service or manual occupation' had a greater propensity than did their peers from managerial and professional backgrounds to cite workload, large class size and stress related to the demands of the programme. They also tended to mention the lack of support from family and/or partner: there is a weak association of such lack of support with age (contingency coefficient 0.16, $p < .01$). There was a gradation in the tendency to cite the difficulty of the programme between students from managerial and professional backgrounds (low) to those from supervisory etc. backgrounds (relatively high). Students from managerial and professional backgrounds cited marginally more often the lack of relevance of the programme for their future career and problems associated with accommodation.

First in family to enrol in higher education

As with socio-economic status, being the first in one's family to enrol as a UK-domiciled student in higher education seems not to result in perceptions of the first-year experience that differ from those whose backgrounds are more familiar with higher education. The only difference of any note is a marginal tendency to cite financial problems as influential in non-continuation.

Prior experience of higher education

Roughly one-third of UK-domiciled respondents claimed to have had prior experience of higher education. Those who had not had such experience admitted more often to having made the wrong choice of field of study, to have lacked commitment to their programme, and to have felt the need for a break from education. On the social front, they more frequently pointed to difficulty in making friends, to have perceived a lack of support from fellow students, and to have been homesick. Those with prior experience more frequently cited financial problems and the needs of dependants. They also cited more often the quality of feedback and the level of provision of specialist resources as influential in their departure.

4 This grouping was exemplified as administrative role, running small business, self-employment – all of which are relatively fuzzy categories.

Responsibility for dependants

UK-domiciled students with dependants, as expected, cited far more often than others the needs of their dependants as an influence on their departure, and also financial problems. They had a greater propensity to cite emotional problems involving others, lack of support from family and/or partner, and the pregnancy of themselves or their partners. On the academic front, they more frequently cited stress associated with the programme and the heaviness of the workload.

Students without such responsibilities much more frequently cited the programme as not being what they had expected and their lack of personal engagement with it. They also had a higher tendency to cite: a wrong choice of field of study; the lack of relevance of the programme to their intended career; the institution not being as they had expected; that the teaching was unsuited to them; that they were making insufficient academic progress; and that they needed a break from education. They more often said that they disliked the city or town in which their institution was located, and that they had found difficulty in making friends and had lacked support from fellow students.

Domicile

For this analysis, the responses were dichotomised into students resident in the UK at the time of application and those enrolling from outside the UK. The small number of the latter (N=18), to a greater extent than their UK-domiciled peers, cited as influential in their departure: the relevance of their programme to their intended career; the quality of the teaching; the quality and speed of feedback; the organisation of their programmes; the provision of a range of institutional resources; and fear of crime. UK-domiciled students showed a lower propensity to be committed to their programmes, and more frequently cited emotional problems with others.

Entry qualifications

A-level entrants, to a greater extent than those who enrolled in higher education with other qualifications, acknowledged a number of influences on their departure. They showed a greater tendency to have chosen the wrong field of study, to have lacked commitment, to have needed a break from education, and to have found the programme and/or the institution not to have been as they expected. Socially, they more often had found difficulty in making friends; had lacked support from other students; had been homesick; and had disliked the city or town in which their institution was located.

Those entering with 'other' qualifications marginally more often noted that the quality of the feedback they had received had played a part in their discontinuation of study, and that they had found the demands of employment while studying and the needs of dependants to have been influential.

Entry through Clearing

Not surprisingly, entrants through the Clearing process more frequently than other UK-domiciled students said that the programme not being as they had expected had been influential in their departure. More often than their peers they claimed that problems with finance, personal health and travel had been influential in their decision to leave.

Match of entry qualifications to the programme

The number of respondents whose entry qualifications did not match their programme in higher education was fairly small (N=27). However, it was this group, rather than those with good or moderate matches, for whom a number of influences on their departure were relatively powerful. These included citing the teaching of the programme as not suiting them; class sizes that were too large; the organisation of the programme; the amount of contact with staff; the quality and speed of feedback, and aspects of institutional resourcing. They also showed a greater tendency to cite lack of academic progress. Those whose qualifications had moderate or no relationship to the programme of study more often cited a lack of personal engagement with the programme, and there was an increasing propensity to cite the wrong choice of field of study with decreasing connection between entry qualifications and the programme of study.

Prior knowledge of institution and/or programme

Although Phase 1 of this study suggested that weak knowledge of the programme and/or institution was a risk factor as regards continuation, the evidence from non-continuing students provides only limited support. Although students with a low level of prior knowledge more often indicated a lack of commitment to their studies and the unsuitability of the timetabling for their needs, the greater number of differences were found in respect of matters beyond the institution concerned. These students, to a greater extent than their better-informed peers, noted financial problems, problems with travel and accommodation, and emotional difficulties involving others as influential in their discontinuation of study.

Institutional type

There were some marked differences in the cited influences on non-completion between students from pre-1992 universities and those from post-1992 universities and colleges, probably reflecting their differing entry profiles⁵. Respondents from pre-1992 universities tended, to a greater extent than the comparator group, to say that they had made the wrong

5 One institution was omitted from this analysis because, although it is a pre-1992 university, its profile is in many respects closer to that of a post-1992 university. Since it had provided 34 respondents, its inclusion would have blurred the distinction being made by this analysis.

choice of field of study; that their programme was not relevant to their future career; and that they lacked commitment to their programme.

Respondents from the post-1992 universities and colleges, on the other hand, more frequently cited financial problems and issues relating to the learning experience itself (teaching quality, programme organisation, quality and speed of feedback, and amount of contact with academic staff).

Accommodation while studying

Students who lived at home, in a flat or in other private accommodation, much more frequently than those in institution-run accommodation, cited financial problems as influential in their departure. They had a greater tendency to point to a lack of personal support from family and/or partner; the demands of employment while studying, and difficulties related to travel. They also cited more often the quality and suitability for them of the teaching, and the amount of contact with academic staff. In addition, those based at home expressed concern about programme organisation; the heaviness of the workload; and stress related to the programme. On the other hand (and not surprisingly), they had a lower incidence of suffering from problems with accommodation or homesickness.

Those in a flat or other private accommodation more often cited their lack of academic progress. Students in university-run accommodation more frequently disliked the city or town in which their institution was located.

Missing timetabled sessions

Students who missed more than the occasional timetabled session exhibited, in respect of a number of possible influences, higher frequencies relating to their departure than those whose attendance was superior. More frequently than their peers they cited: a lack of commitment to their programme; a lack of studying outside timetabled sessions; a sense that they were making insufficient academic progress; the stress associated with their studies; the lack of study skills; and academic failure. They were also more inclined to feel that they needed a break from education. Outside the learning experience, they had a greater propensity to cite: financial problems; personal health problems; emotional problems involving others; difficulty in making friends; a lack of support from fellow students; and problems with accommodation and travelling.

When the student left the programme

The data were divided into four bands of leaving date: by the end of November 2005; between 1 December 2005 and 28 February 2006; between 1 March and 30 June 2006; and from 1 July 2006. As would be expected, the influences that students reported varied to some extent over time.

The earliest leavers more frequently cited problems with accommodation. Leavers in the two earliest leaving groups more often cited difficulty in making friends and a lack of support from fellow students.

There was a weakish tendency for a gradation, decreasing with time, regarding the institution not being as expected.

Students who left around Christmas 2005 most frequently cited the programme not being as expected and a lack of personal engagement with it. At this time, problems with personal health seem to have been at their greatest. Concern about their study skills, and about a perceived lack of studying outside timetabled sessions was at its highest in the spring of 2006, by which time most, if not all, students would have undergone assessment of some importance.

The quality and speed of feedback became more of an issue for respondents from around Christmas 2005 onwards, as did feelings of not making adequate academic progress.

Lack of relevance to the student's career became most apparent in the later half of the year, as did the failure of assessments.

Part-time hours worked

When the number of hours per week committed to part-time employment exceeded 12 there were marked divergences from the respondents as a whole. Students with relatively high levels of part-time employment much more frequently than their peers cited financial problems and the demands of employment while studying as influences on their non-continuation. When the number of hours worked rose above 18 per week, emotional difficulties involving others and the needs of dependants became markedly prominent. Long *et al.* (2006) found that, for Australian students of all ages who enrolled in 2004, the effect of paid work on attrition was negligible unless the number of hours worked per week exceeded 19. A slightly earlier study by McMillan (2005), focusing on younger students, indicated that the deleterious effect of part-time employment began when the number of hours worked reached around nine.

Factor analysis

The original responses from the 44 closed-response items were subjected to exploratory principal components analysis with varimax rotation. A few items (mainly those relating to quasi-random, adventitious events such as illness, pregnancy and bereavement), while of obvious relevance for particular students, added little to the output and hence were omitted from the analysis. They are, however, picked up at various points in this narrative.

The most satisfactory solution to the analysis produced seven factors that accounted for 60.9 per cent of the variance. The structure of the factors is reasonably well defined (see Appendix 2), and the factors were interpreted as in Table 4.

Table 4: The seven factors and their characteristics.

Factor	Percentage variance	Interpretation
I	16.6	Poor quality learning experience
II	9.6	Not coping with academic demand
III	8.7	Wrong choice of field of study
IV	7.0	Unhappy with location and environment
V	6.8	Dissatisfied with institutional resourcing
VI	6.3	Problems with finance and employment
VII	5.9	Problems with social integration

Although the items were not designed with the production of scales in mind, the main loadings on each of the seven factors produced scales with reliabilities (Cronbach alpha) sufficient for the purpose of organising a broad summary of the findings, if not for that of formal psychometric research.

T-tests and analyses of variance were used, as appropriate, in separate comparisons involving the full dataset in order to identify the differences between sub-groups of the respondents that might be statistically significant if the criteria regarding sampling and statistical procedure had been met⁶. Since the criteria were not met, the identified differences can be regarded as flagging differences that are the most likely to stand up.

Quality of the learning experience

Unhappiness with the quality of the learning experience was more often cited by the following:

- students entering higher education with qualifications other than A-level rather than A-level entrants
- students with prior experience of higher education rather than those without it
- students in post-1992 universities and colleges rather than those in pre-1992 universities.

⁶ It should be noted that multiple 'cuts' of the same dataset exaggerate the chances of obtaining an apparently significant difference.

The propensity of citing of this increased steadily with time until the end of June 2006, after which time it fell back slightly.

Coping with academic demand

Students with a low level of prior knowledge about their programme and/or institution indicated more often than their better-informed peers that difficulties in coping with the academic demand were influential in their departure from their institution.

Difficulties in coping were most frequently cited by students who left after 1 December 2005, with the level of citation peaking in the late Spring/early Summer 2006. Such difficulties surfaced least frequently before December 2005 (i.e., before much, if any, assessment had taken place).

Wrong choice of field of study

Having chosen poorly regarding study in higher education tended to be more influential in the departure of:

- younger rather than older students
- students with A-level entry qualifications rather than those with other qualifications
- students in pre-1992 universities rather than post-1992 universities and colleges
- students without dependants rather than those with them
- white students rather than non-white students
- students with low prior knowledge of their programme and/or institution rather than those with a higher level of knowledge
- those with no prior experience of higher education rather than those with it.

Poor choice of field of study was most frequently cited by students leaving between December 2005 and the end of June 2006; for many of them, the period stretching from assessments in semester 1 to the end of semester 2.

Location and environment of the institution

Aspects of the student experience related to the location and environment of the institution tended to play a part in the withdrawal of:

- younger rather than older students
- A-level entrants rather than entrants with other qualifications
- students without prior experience of higher education rather than those with it
- students without dependants rather than those with them
- students with low prior knowledge of their institution and/or programme rather than those with such knowledge.

The importance for student departure of location and environment of the institution generally declines with increasing number of hours worked. This is understandable since the number of hours worked per week in part-time employment is correlated with the kind of accommodation used by the student while attending higher education (contingency coefficient 0.39, $p < .001$). The point is exemplified by the percentage in each accommodation group that undertook 13 or more hours per week of employment: for students living at home, the percentage was 38; if living in other private accommodation, 49; if living in institution-run accommodation, only 12.

Dissatisfaction with institutional resourcing

Institutional resourcing seems not to have been an issue over which sub-groups of the respondents differed greatly. The strongest differences were between students from post-1992 institutions and their peers in pre-1992 universities, and between students who had had prior experience of higher education and those who had not. Students from post-1992 institutions and those who had had prior experience of higher education (two overlapping groups, as shown in Table 3) more often than their peers cited resourcing as having been influential in their departure. Students whose ethnicity was other than white had a greater propensity than white students to cite aspects of institutional resourcing as being influential in their departure.

Problems with finance and employment

Finance and employment-related issues were of greater influence on the non-continuation of:

- older rather than younger students
- male rather than female students
- students whose ethnicity was other than white rather than white students
- students in post-1992 universities and colleges rather than those in pre-1992 universities
- students with prior experience of higher education rather than those without it
- students with dependants rather than those without
- students with low prior knowledge of institution and/or programme rather than those with such knowledge.

There was a relatively low level of citation of finance and employment-related issues by students undertaking six hours or less of part-time employment per week, but the level of citation climbed sharply for those undertaking 13 or more hours of such work per week.

Problems with social integration

Problems involving social integration with other students were implicated in the withdrawal of:

- younger rather than older students
- A-level entrants rather than entrants with other qualifications
- students in pre-1992 universities rather than those in post-1992 universities and colleges
- students without prior experience of higher education rather than those with it
- students without dependants rather than those with them.

There were higher levels of citation of problems with social integration up to the end of February 2006, with a slight peak in December 2005.

What the students said

Over 400 of the respondents provided 'free-response' comments on their questionnaires, a few writing at considerable length and choosing to attach additional material to the questionnaire. Some responses cannot be included, even in paraphrased form, since the anonymity of the individual and/or the institution could not be ensured. There are many similarities with comments made by Australian students who responded to the survey conducted by Long *et al.* (2006, p.101ff), and with those from 'first generation' entrants who were interviewed as part of the study reported by Thomas and Quinn (2007).

Very many of the responses, paralleling those given to the closed items, indicate that withdrawal was the result of a combination of circumstances, rather than attributable to a single cause. The quotations featured in this report do inadequate justice to this complexity. In order to provide some structure to the narrative, the quotations are organised with reference to the factors previously identified, but it is readily apparent that a number span more than one of the factors.

Readers should recall the strong caveat entered earlier — that this part of the project focused on student departure and is therefore necessarily biased towards negativity. The project overall demonstrated, as the National Student Survey has done, that the large majority of students have a very positive view of their experiences in higher education in the UK.

Poor quality learning experience

Some students pointed to their sense of isolation. For some, this was associated with large-scale lectures that allowed little, if any, interaction with academic staff or fellow students⁷.

I felt quite isolated in terms of studying. Lecturers spoke during lectures and then would leave the room, with no time for questions. During my entire first year I never once met my personal tutor.

— F U21 Social Studies, Post-1992 institution

The lecture sizes were extremely large which made it difficult to make friends. Other than furthering my knowledge of [Subject], I hated attending uni as the atmosphere of lectures and attitudes of most students was disheartening and very disappointing [sic] to me.

— F U21 Psychology, Post-1992 institution

Felt that lectures were far too impersonal for my liking. There were too many students and you felt that you couldn't ask questions. If you missed something there was nothing you could do about it. Seminars did not summarise lectures and topics discussed did not seem relevant to them.

— F U21 Combined Arts/Humanities, Pre-1992 university

This student went on to add, as a possible improvement and with hints of Vygotsky's theorising:

Lecturers not to presume that we know their way of teaching and the uni way of learning. Go through topics more thoroughly and then gradually reduce the amount of aids to student—not all of a sudden!

— F U21 Combined Arts/Humanities, Pre-1992 university

The last comment picks up the extent to which students are inducted into the expectations of higher education: the need to use formally timetabled sessions as starting-points for academic work, rather than allowing them (through *laissez-faire*) to believe that it is sufficient to understand (and possibly re-present) the content of lectures and other sessions. For some, the onus was clearly seen as lying on academic staff:

The main reason for leaving ... was the vast contrast of teaching styles between university and college. At university, I felt there was little concern as to whether or not I understood the lectures as well as a presumption I had

⁷ All quotations are coded by gender, age-band, subject area(s) of study, and institution type. In a few instances, the nature of the subject area has been blurred in order to avoid the risk of personal identification. The term 'Post-1992 institution' has been used, in a somewhat ungainly way, to include those universities designated as such in 1992, those which became universities as this project developed, and specialist institutions.

a substantial understanding of the course matter before I began. I failed to see how I needed to pay over one thousand pounds for a few hours listening to lecturers doing little more than read aloud.

— M U21 Humanities, Pre-1992 university

The occasional comment on teaching suggested that it had been less than inspirational:

I was unimpressed with the teaching. There were a lot of tutors, the majority in fact, that did a powerpoint presentation copied straight out of a textbook and read it to us, getting us to fill in the blanks on a worksheet! I felt this wasn't the quality of teaching expected in higher education & was very disappointed. I became quite depressed as I felt I was paying a lot of money to be at uni without making any progress on the course due to the way it was being taught.

— F 21-25 Geography, Post-1992 institution

The sense of isolation felt by some students related to a perceived lack of contact with academic staff outside teaching sessions, with personal tutoring being a focus:

I did NOT enjoy my experience what so ever, due to the lack of support from staff. I was never introduced to my personal tutor and felt like a number – not a person in a new [overwhelming] environment. Not one of my tutors spoke to me as an individual ...

— F U21 Social Studies, Post-1992 institution

My personal tutor was intimidating, uncaring and cold. I felt that that sort of experience for the next 3 years was not worth the debt I would face when left.

— F U21 Psychology, Post-1992 institution

For the following mature student, the difference between an Access course and higher education evidenced itself as a lack of personal support:

I really enjoyed my 'Access' course at [FE college] and looked forward to university. [At university] I found the staff very unhelpful with the problems of a middle-aged woman who needed to work and travel to college. When a family member became ill, I found no support at all, even when I suggested I should leave, the reply seemed to be 'whatever'. Everything seemed to be geared to rich 18-year old kids and their social needs.

I never met my tutor and they never bothered to try and meet me and I felt that once they had my enrolment fee nothing else mattered.

— F 40+, Humanities, Post-1992 institution

This was not the only mature student who felt that the level of support they had received was inadequate.

On occasion, the experience of the programme as a whole was unsatisfactory:

The course ... was a mixture of tutors not showing up, lack of tuition and when there were tutors available the work load would be huge then long lengths of nothing.

— F 40+ Subject allied to Medicine, Post-1992 institution

For the following student, the problems associated with the provision of information about a combined subjects programme were of significance:

Due to being on a combined course, no information given to us. It was 'lost in translation' between the two subjects.

— F U21 Combined Arts/Humanities, Post-1992 institution

Coping with academic demand

A few students found their first-year studies to be lacking in challenge (the two examples are from students who had attended different institutions):

I spent the previous 2 years doing a BTEC in the same subject and the work we did then was in a lot greater detail than at university! Complete waste of time.

— M U21 Sports Science, Post-1992 institution

Throughout the 8 months I attended this course, I believe I learnt nothing that I didn't already know, which is not what I was expecting. Therefore I found it boring and not worth the expenses.

— M U21 Sports Science, Post-1992 institution

One European student was scathing about both the programme and the cohort of students:

Before attending university, I had expected a demanding course. I had also hoped to study with able and motivated students. Both hopes were disappointed. The entry requirements for my course were AAA (A-levels), but the course contrary to my expectations was very easy (a step down (or two) from school in [Country]). Moreover, most other students were neither motivated nor very clever.

— M U21 Business & Administrative Studies, Pre-1992 university

For another student, the issue was being insufficiently motivated to work in the time not allocated to formal teaching:

The course was great, as was the teaching, but I only had 3hrs lectures a

wk [sic] and found it hard to motivate myself for the rest of the time.

— F U21 Humanities, Pre-1992 university

More often, though, students found it difficult to make the transition into higher education. Two quotations point to the difference between school and higher education:

Not well enough prepared for the difference between school life and university.

— M U21 Engineering & Technology, Pre-1992 university

I did not feel prepared for study at university, it was very different from what I had been used to at grammar school.

— F U21 Combined Arts/Humanities, Pre-1992 university

The latter provides a faint echo of findings from other studies that suggest that pupils who are coached strongly to deal with the demands of A-levels may not be best equipped for the greater independence expected in higher education (see HEFCE, 2003, 2005; and Yorke *et al.*, 2005)

The expectation of independence in learning created a difficulty for the following student, who clearly felt the need for stronger guidance regarding how to approach academic work:

Would rather attend 9-5 lectures as [I] find it difficult to study privately in my own time. We were told what we had to know rather than going through each topic, which I found difficult.

— F U21 Business & Administrative Studies, Post-1992 institution

An older student, returning to education after a break, felt the need for greater structure to the learning experience:

I went to university at the age of 24, having been in full-time employment since I left school at 16. I found returning to education very difficult & university is, of course, so different to school. I disliked the lack of structure and discipline: I was not confident in managing my time & knowing what I should be doing & when. I was extremely conscientious & wanted to do well but I became depressed & felt I could not continue, despite good exam/assessment results. I felt completely overwhelmed.

— F 21-25 Business & Administrative Studies, Post-1992 institution

More obliquely related to academic demand are the difficulties experienced by one student in respect of orienting herself to academic work.

I felt like I was thrown in the deep end when lectures started. Freshers week was to introduce you to the social side of university life but there was

no proper introduction to studies. The week lectures started, I still hadn't settled down and learned everything I wanted to from freshers week. In no way do I blame the institution as I recognise I should have had more self-discipline but by the time I was ready to settle down & start working it was too late, I was so far behind with the work. It just became a downhill struggle from then on.

— F U21 Business & Administrative Studies, Pre-1992 university

Wrong choice of field of study

Despite the necessity for students, in 2005, to consider the implications of the tuition fees payable in various ways in the countries of the UK (which might have been expected to sharpen their thinking about the programmes they might select), some students still entered higher education because it was expected of them, or because they were pressured by others to do so:

I had no idea what I wanted to do so I thought I better try university in case I regretted not going. [...] I realised in the summer that I didn't want to make a career out of what I was studying. I didn't see the point of getting deeper into debt for something I wasn't sure I really wanted.

— F U21 Business & Administrative Studies, Post-1992 institution

I only went to university because I didn't know what to do after college. Once I decided what my future plans were, it didn't include uni, so I quit.

— F U21 Sports Science, Post-1992 institution

Pressure from school teachers and others around me at the time of my A-levels pushed me into doing a degree that would fully justify my A-level grades. Therefore I ended up doing a degree in [Subject] and realized this was definitely not what I wanted to do.

— F U21 Subject allied to Medicine, Pre-1992 university

Looking back, I feel that I went to university partly because the rest of my friends were & because I didn't want to get a full-time job. My course choice was also largely decided upon because I had studied Law at college – it was unlikely that I was going to get a job in the law profession in future and so when I began the course my heart wasn't totally in it as I wasn't 100% sure that it was what I wanted to do. After failing to give in an important assignment I realised that I was wasting time & money, and that it would be better for me to take a break from education & decide what I really wanted to do.

— F U21 Law, Pre-1992 university

The last of these chose Law because of previous study at college. Others chose their courses because the grades they had gained at A-level seemed to point to particular programmes. However, as the financial services sector never fails to

remind investors, past performance is no guarantee of future success. The best grade may be an untrustworthy signal for success in the longer term.

I chose to do [Subject] ... because I thought that my A-level in [Subject A] would be the highest. However, I did equally well in [Subjects A and B]. Once I got to uni I realised that I had made a large mistake in choosing a [subject related to A] as [Subject B] is where my main interest lies. Am now going to university this year to study [Subject B].

— F U21 Combined Arts/Humanities, Pre-1992 university

In one instance, the student had been denied their first choice of programme because of inadequate grades at A-level. A re-mark of one subject resulted in a raised grade, but this became known only after the student had opted for their second preference. The institution was unable belatedly to give the student their first preference because the relevant programme had already been over-subscribed.

Choosing the university rather than the programme was a mistake for this student (who was not the only one to exemplify the point):

I wanted to do Economics but did not get a place as I didn't quite have the required grades. I was offered Computer Science and as I really wanted to attend [university] I thought I would try it, but it did not suit me and [university] would not allow me to change course so I had to move to a different uni.

— M U21 Computer Science, Pre-1992 university

Rushed choices do not always turn out well. Three respondents specifically mentioned the pressure to choose during the Clearing process; the following provides an illustration:

I chose to attend a course through clearing after not getting my expected A level results. Therefore, the course I started was a very different choice of subject than I had planned, and I probably would have been better to take some time before deciding on a different area of study. I feel that the pressure of results day contributed to me making a rushed and not very well-thought out decision!

— F U21 Subject allied to Medicine, Post-1992 institution

A few felt that what was actually provided by their institution did not match the expectations that they had been encouraged to have. Two rather different examples of this are the following:

I enrolled [sic] on the course with the knowledge of how difficult it may be to juggle university and family life. I was reassured that it would be fine

as this was a family friendly course, designed to help mothers due to such a large number of them enrolling in recent years. This however was not the case, and when it came to it, I had to put my family first which meant leaving the course.

— F 31-35 Subject allied to Medicine, Post-1992 institution

I would [have] wanted to do the courses that I had chosen but I got there on registration day and was told that my finance class had been cancelled due to lack of students, so I had to pick another subject that I did NOT want to do. I did not find this fair as [the cancelled course] was the career path I wanted to pursue [sic].

— F U21 Business & Administrative Studies, Post-1992 institution

The occasional student realised that another life-choice offered more than did continuation of a programme of study:

I felt the programme of study wasn't particularly relevant to what I wanted to do, and wouldn't be any practical use. I left to set up my own business...

— F U21 Mathematics, Pre-1992 university

One feature of the responses to the survey, that is borne out by the statistical data, is the substantial number of students who expressed satisfaction with their second enrolment in higher education. For many of these students their first enrolment provided a basis from which to reorient their thinking about their participation in higher education (although in most cases this will have been at a cost).

Dissatisfaction with institutional resourcing

The most frequently mentioned dissatisfaction in the general area of institutional resourcing related to the standard of halls of residence:

The university accommodation was appalling – old, cold, cracked window and extremely run down. Very expensive and cost of living very high.

— M U21 Sports Science, Post-1992 institution

... the awful student accommodation at [university] made the few weeks I did stay far worse than they needed to be.

— F U21 Combined Arts/Humanities, Pre-1992 university

The accommodation was poor, as were the facilities for recreation and studying.

— F U21 Combined Sciences, Post-1992 institution

The quality of food in institution-run accommodation came in for some criticism: one student remarked that the food provided was very high in carbohydrates and hence did not provide a good diet; another wrote of the limited availability of fruit.

For some (and as noted further below), the problem with institutional accommodation lay as much with fellow students as with the infrastructure:

Did not enjoy living in student halls. Too much noise, fire alarms going off in the night etc. Accommodation [sic] small & dirty and paid a lot per week for it.

— M U21 Engineering & Technology, Post-1992 institution

However, dissatisfaction with halls was not universal:

[University] was a beautiful university, the accommodation was great & I had fun in the 2 short weeks. Brilliant staff!

— F 21-25 Combined Arts/Humanities, Post-1992 institution

This particular student lacked confidence and, looking back, commented “I think I should have stuck it out longer than 2 weeks”.

The other issue that attracted more than a single comment related to the provision of computer resources. Students who did not have access (or cheap access) to the internet from their rooms found themselves obliged to use general institutional facilities, which were not always available to them:

Didn't have a computer in my room so found it very difficult to concentrate in a computer room, very busy one to concentrate.

— M U21 Teacher Education, Post-1992 institution

There was very little computer facilities, when trying to access the ... network, they were all being used. Internet connection at my university accommodation ... was very expensive so I couldn't afford not to use the 60 or so computers at the college campus.

— F U21 Humanities, Post-1992 institution

This student would have liked:

not to have to wait literally over an hour just to use a computer because they are all being used.

— F U21 Humanities Post-1992 institution

A problem for one student was the implicit presumption that students have ready access to electronic communication where they live:

I didn't like how they put homework on the internet, not everyone had access [to] a computer with internet.

— F U21 Performing Arts, Post-1992 institution

Set against these is a comment from another 'non-completer':

I found [university] teaching staff and facilities excellent.

— F 40+ Combined Arts/Humanities, Post-1992 institution

Location and environment of the institution

The environment of their institution, or where students lived in relation to their institution, was an influence on some of those who left their programme. Whereas for one respondent the problem was 'the big city', for another it was the opposite — being located too far from what a major centre had to offer:

It was a big shock being away from home, living in a big city when I was from a small countryside town.

— F U21 Media Studies, Pre-1992 university

The university was 'out of the way' and not close to any real decent amenities.

— M U21 Business & Administrative Studies, Pre-1992 university

Location and personal safety were considerations that a few took into account:

I found [the university] was poorly situated and much of the university was in need of refurbishment. Safety [sic] was an issue with the university being spread across the city.

— F U21 Social Studies, Post-1992 institution

I ... didn't like the area as we were burgled twice.

— F U21 Teacher Education, Post-1992 institution

One student noted a problem with car parking, feeling it was not safe for a female to be on her own late at night.

In a couple of instances, the location of a placement, rather than the institution, was the problem. One student wrote:

On my placement I was located to a hospital [where] the accommodation was disgusting, there were no facilities to study. There was a library but we were not allowed to use it in the evening. The location was dangerous at night and it was miserable.

— F 40+ Subject allied to Medicine, Post-1992 institution

The location of the student's accommodation reflected personal circumstances in varying ways, and accommodation distant from the institution could cause difficulty:

I wanted to attend a uni closer to home so less travelling time & I now really enjoy my new uni.

— F U21 Business & Administrative Studies, Post-1992 institution

The main reason that I left university was the difficulty with travelling. It took me over 2 hours to get to university, that along with a part time job (18 hrs), made it impossible to do both. I had to keep my job due to financial reasons, which meant I couldn't attend university all the time, which affected my grades.

— M U21 Sports Science, Post-1992 institution

I had to live in rented accommodation far from the university because I did not sort out halls of residence in time, this made it very difficult for me, especially in a new city not knowing the buses. Also homesickness was a major issue for me.

— F 21–25 Social Studies, Pre-1992 university

Quite a few students mentioned that they had been homesick. Sometimes they were unhappy away from family and general friends, and sometimes they badly missed a person with whom they had a close relationship. The accommodation a student was in could exacerbate the situation:

The house I was living in was a dump and I was homesick.

— F U21 Social Studies, Pre-1992 university

Problems with finance and employment

A number of students pointed to the problems that they had found in financing their studies:

Found it very difficult to maintain employment and academic study. The more I wanted to progress at Uni – the more money I needed – so worked more to get more money – I recieved [sic] NO grants.

— M U21 Combination of subject study and Teacher Education, Post-1992 institution

The main reason I had for leaving my university programme, was financial as my entire student loan didn't cover my tuition fees and accommodation ... so money I had saved was used to pay the rest and even by working weekends and over 35 hours whenever I had a week off I still had very little for food, books or clothes etc. And I couldn't handle the fact that I was 18 and in debt...

— F U21 Sports Science, Post-1992 institution

I was enrolled on [course] recieving [sic] a bursary. I had two small children at nursery and the bursary barely covered the fees, as a family we

struggled for six months until we had to finally give up before we became deeply in debt.

— F 26-30 Subject allied to Medicine, Post-1992 institution

One switched to an institution nearer home, largely on financial grounds:

The main reason for me leaving was that I realised that I could study the same course closer to home, and to save money, I could move back to home and live with my parents again.

— F U21 Creative Arts & Design, Post-1992 institution

One drew attention to the difficulties arising from her disability:

I am a mature disabled student—that in itself is difficult enough—but the real reason I had to take a year out was because of money—'normal' students have to have some other income, i.e. work or partner help. I cannot work—when I came home each evening I would have to go to bed for ease of pain—then do my work—by the end of the first year—I had got myself in debt—because no-one can just live on a student loan—and run a home without financial help—it broke my heart not being able to do my second year.

— F 40+ Combined Arts/Humanities, Post-1992 institution

Problems with social integration

Some respondents indicated that they had found it difficult to integrate socially into their community. This was expressed as a personal dislike of a 'partying' culture:

The girls I lived with loved partying a lot, while I preferred having a decent night's sleep. This resulted in a fall out and I moved home, though I still travelled to the university.

— F U21 Social Studies, Pre-1992 university

One student who clearly enjoyed a lively environment nevertheless felt that this had been excessive in her accommodation:

The main reason was that I didn't feel comfortable in my accommodation. I am an outgoing person and up for a night out as much as the next person, but it was impossible to sleep there. The noise was unbearable. I didn't want it to be silent, but it was unbelievable. Plus, I'm in a long term relationship so I just felt I couldn't commit to it being so far from home.

— F U21 Psychology, Post-1992 institution

Some – particularly those living at home – felt that they had 'missed out' on what they saw as a full student experience:

I felt that living at home excluded me from a lot of the 'student life' that I wanted to experience.

— F U21 Combined Arts/Humanities, Pre-1992 university

Living at home made it hard to make friends and there were not many likeminded people on the course.

— F U21 Humanities, Post-1992 institution

I felt I did not fit and make friends. As a student living at home I found it much harder to connect as most students on the course lived in halls, giving them time to get to know each other outside lectures.

— F U21 Combined Arts/Humanities, Post-1992 institution

My main regret about my first stab at university was that I stayed so close to home and didn't move away. I felt like I was constantly missing out and I found it hard to socialise as I had my own friends that I spent time with.

— M U21 Humanities, Post-1992 institution

Living at home meant I didn't find it as easy to make friends and to live life like a proper 'student'. I decided after a couple of weeks it wasn't for me and changed to a different university where I didn't live at home that also turned out I went on to a better course.

— F U21 Business & Administrative Studies, Post-1992 institution

One felt that she would have liked to engage socially to a greater extent than she had:

I would have placed a significant amount of more effort into the social side of university as I was at that point a quiet, shy person and being a non-drinker the other students held it against me, plus I didn't drink to save money so I was regarded as a bit of a stiff.

— F U21 Sports Science, Post-1992 institution

Occasionally, the student seems to have found him- or herself in a group with whose members they felt themselves to be incompatible:

Issues arising from being a mature student in an environment geared towards school leavers.

— F 40+ Creative Arts & Design, Post-1992 institution

I was assigned to a hall which was all girls, most of whom had just left school, and I felt very isolated, and found I had very little in common.

— F U21 Humanities, Pre-1992 university

I lived in a house full of females who I had artistic differences with. No one shared the same interests – like really going out & causing mischief. Also

found northerners to have a chip on their shoulders about southerners.

— M U21 Humanities, Pre-1992 university

Unforeseeable circumstances may militate against social engagement:

The people I lived with in halls went home all the time and other friends lived at home so felt isolated at times.

— F U21 Social Studies, Post-1992 institution

Adventitious and quasi-random events

Students' continuation was adversely affected by a variety of understandable but unpredictable events, such as illness, accident, pregnancy, the bereavement of someone close, and so on. Some students remarked on the support that they had received from their institution. The first of the following quotations relates to a bereavement shortly before enrolment, whereas the other three relate to the handling of health-related issues:

The staff & the university could not be faulted and were very helpful in the short time of which I attended.

— F U21 Social Studies, Post-1992 institution

Support at [institution] was fantastic from all departments.

— F U21 Social Studies, Post-1992 institution

Staff at my university have been very supportive and I am due to start a new course at the same university in September '07.

— F U21 Creative Arts & Design, Post-1992 institution

I was really enjoying the course. [Institution was] very supportive to me as a mature student. However, unfortunately I had to stop my course after being taken seriously ill and having to undergo an emergency operation.

— F 36-40 Subject allied to Medicine, Post-1992 institution

Judging by comments from other students, other institutions might have handled broadly analogous situations with a higher level of care and sympathy.

A handful of students pointed to what they saw as weaknesses in institutional systems, including difficulties experienced with the institutional computer system for advising of success or failure in deferred assessments (the student concerned did not find out, and "finally gave up on re-starting my course"); problems with an appeal regarding submitted work for which there was no record of submission (at the time of responding, the student was unsure whether re-enrolment would be permitted, or whether she wanted to re-enrol); late notification of failure at the end of year 1;

unwillingness of the institution concerned to accredit the student's prior

learning in higher education; and inadequacy in providing support for disability (in the case of dyslexia, because of the time taken to obtain a report from an educational psychologist; in that of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, the confirmation of support arrived after the student had decided to discontinue; and in that of deafness, the disability “not being properly taken into account”).

Two students reported bullying or harassment in halls of residence, which they felt had been handled inadequately by the institution.

Two students reported having been adversely affected by problems relating to clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau. One lost a place in a hall of residence because of an alleged delay of more than three months after the institution concerned had received CRB clearance. The other switched institutions late in the enrolment process when the first institution raised a concern regarding this student’s CRB status.

One overseas student commented on difficulties in obtaining a visa.

Comparisons with earlier findings

Influences on departure

A comparison was made between data collected in the present study and of data from the study of non-completion that was conducted by Yorke *et al.* (1997) for HEFCE, which was based on six institutions in the north-west of England (Table 5). Data from the HEFCE-sponsored study have been reanalysed in order to bring the two sets of findings into close alignment. In Table 5, only data from students in the present study who left their programmes by the end of June 2005 are included, to allow the closest comparison with the earlier data, for which the selected category is students who left before completing their first year of full-time study. The influences that students cited have varied little across the decade (Table 5). Disregarding the items which were included in the present study but not in the previous one, the rank correlation (Spearman's rho) between the two sets of data is a remarkable 0.92.

There are, however, two differences that, with due caution, bearing in mind sampling issues, give pause for thought. First, financial problems were less salient for the students who responded to the present survey than for those who responded to that of a decade earlier. This can be seen in the extent to which they were influential in non-completion, and by their standing relative to other influences. This prompts speculation that, with finance being more overtly an issue than it was in the mid-1990s, it has been factored into students' thinking regarding participation in higher education to an extent that had not previously been the case⁸. Second, a perception of some weakness in the level of staff support appears to have gained strength between the two surveys, in both absolute and relative terms. This may reflect, *inter alia*, increases in various pressures on staff and enhanced levels of expectation stimulated by a strengthened perception on the part of students regarding their entitlement to staff support (perhaps fuelled in part by a sharper focus on value for the money being committed in respect of participation).

8 While finance is obviously an issue in higher education in the US, it tends not to figure highly in empirical and theoretical work in the field of retention – perhaps because it is an accepted part of the 'landscape'.

Table 5: A comparison of findings from the present study and from a decade ago.

Item	FYE Phase 2(N=312)		HEFCE 1997 (N=982)	
	Mean %	Rank	Mean %	Rank
The programme was not what I expected	48	1	45	1=
The way the programme was taught did not suit me	42	2=	35	5
I simply realised that I had chosen the wrong field of study	42	2=	45	1=
A lack of personal engagement with the programme	39	4	n/a	n/a
The amount of contact with academic staff	36	5	22	12=
I felt I was making insufficient academic progress	35	6	29	7
The overall organisation of the programme	34	7=	27	8
A lack of personal support from staff	34	7=	22	12=
A lack of commitment to the programme	32	9	41	3
The institution was not what I had expected	31	10=	23	10=
The general quality of the teaching	31	10=	22	12=
Financial problems	29	12	36	4
A lack of personal support from other students	27	13=	16	21=
Stress related to the demands of the programme	27	13=	20	16=
Class sizes that were too large	26	15=	18	19=
The quality of the feedback on my work	26	15=	n/a	n/a
I needed a break from education	25	17	30	6
The programme was not sufficiently relevant to my intended career	24	18=	25	9
Emotional difficulties involving others (e.g. family, partner, friend)	24	18=	23	10=
Dislike of the city/town in which I studied	23	20=	16	21=
Personal health problems	23	20=	19	18
Travel difficulties (e.g. cost, time)	22	22=	18	19=
Not enough time spent on studying outside timetabled sessions	22	22=	n/a	n/a
I found it difficult to make friends	22	22=	12	28=
Problems with accommodation	21	25=	21	15
The speed with which I received feedback on my work	21	25=	n/a	n/a
Too heavy a workload on the programme	20	27	16	21=
The difficulty of the programme	20	28=	20	16=
The timetabling of the programme did not suit my needs	19	28=	13	27
Homesickness	18	30	15	25=
The needs of dependants (e.g. family, partner)	16	31=	15	25=
A lack of appropriate study skills (e.g. note taking, exam preparation, essay writing)	16	31=	16	21=
The demands of employment whilst studying	14	33	12	28=
The level of provision of social facilities (e.g. student union activities, sports facilities)	13	34=	10	31
A lack of personal support from family, partner, etc	13	34=	11	30
The level of provision of computing facilities	11	36	9	32=
The level of provision of specialist equipment for the programme (e.g. studio / lab equipment)	10	37=	7	36=
Taking up employment	10	37=	8	34=
I failed one or more assessments	10	37=	n/a	n/a
The level of provision of library / learning resources facilities	9	40	8	34=
Bereavement of someone close to me	7	41	3	39
Fear of crime	6	42	9	32=
Pregnancy or partner's pregnancy	5	43	4	38
Problems with drugs and/or alcohol	4	44	7	36=

Comparison at the level of the subject area is difficult because the academic subject categories used in the earlier study are different from the codings currently used for subject areas and specific subjects (according to the Joint Academic Coding System, JACS, which was introduced in the academic year 2002-03). Nevertheless, some of the subject groupings are broadly similar, and hence cautious comparisons can be advanced between the HEFCE-funded study of the mid-1990s and the present data. The subject areas for which comparisons are reasonably well warranted are:

- subjects allied to Medicine
- Engineering and Technology
- Creative Arts and Design
- Business and Administrative Studies
- Social Science
- Humanities.

In the first three of these areas there was more than the occasional change in the extent to which the findings deviated from the norm.

In subjects allied to Medicine, students tended not to say that the teaching did not suit them. In some other aspects (the programme not being as expected; lack of commitment to the programme; and the making of insufficient academic progress) there seems to have been a shift from relatively low levels of influence on their departure towards the overall norm.

When their responses were compared with those from the whole body of responding students, those leaving programmes in Engineering and Technology during their first year in the academic years 1994-95 and 1995-96 were more likely to point to the difficulty of the programme, the heavy workload, and their lack of appropriate study skills. Responses to the present survey suggest that these deviations from the norm no longer obtain. However, there is a hint in the current data that lack of academic progress is an issue for students in this subject area.

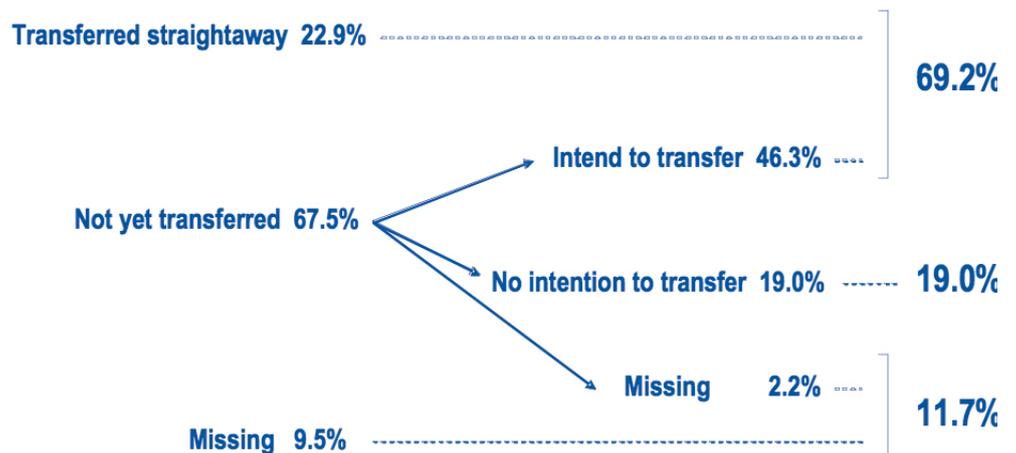
For Art and Design, the findings are fairly consistent over the decade. Students in this subject area tend not to have made a poor choice of field of study; are unlikely to express a lack of commitment to their studies; and are unlikely to cite the workload as an influence on their departure. On the other hand, they have been consistent in saying that the programme was not as they had expected it to be; in expressing dissatisfaction with the teaching they have received, and with the organisation of their programmes; and that insufficient academic progress had been influential in their departure.

Drop out or stop out?

An important issue for policy is whether students who leave a programme are to all intents and purposes lost from higher education (in common and pejorative terms, whether they 'drop out'), or whether they re-enter higher education after a relatively short break (termed 'stopping out' in the US literature). The levels of non-continuation and non-completion recorded by the HESA performance indicators are consistently low compared with other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and make allowance for relatively short periods of 'stopping out'. The data from the HEFCE study of a decade ago suggested that nearly three-quarters of full-time students who had discontinued a programme of study either had returned, or intended to return, to study at the same or another institution (Yorke, 1999, p.54). The responses to the present study (N=462) paint a very similar picture (Figure 1).

For some, the first year was a period of orientation to higher education without substantial financial implications, since they had been able to transfer to another programme and/or institution without difficulty. For others, the reorientation process will have incurred costs without the benefits contingent on immediate transfer.

Figure 1: Flow diagram indicating intentions of respondents regarding further engagement in higher education (figures do not sum up to 100% due to rounding).



What does the evidence say and suggest?

The majority of students are positive about their first year

The criticisms of those who discontinued their programmes must be seen in the light of the generally positive reaction of the first-year students surveyed in Phase 1 of this study. Further, the criticisms are spread across the institutions from which the respondents came and may often represent isolated and perhaps idiosyncratic reactions to a situation which, for some, is in any event stressful.

Phase 1 of this study showed that there was a minority of students for whom the potential for non-continuation was evident in the number of 'risk factors' detectable in their responses. The potential was higher where financial stress intersected with a lack of prior knowledge about the institution and/or programme that the student had joined.

The data from Phase 2 suggest that these risk factors may have played a part in some students' withdrawal, even though lack of prior knowledge appears to have been less influential than would be anticipated from Phase 1. Whereas most students indicated in Phase 1 that they understood what was expected of them by way of academic demand, they tended to find coping with that demand to be more problematic⁹. This is picked up in the responses of both continuing students (Phase 1b) and non-continuing students (Phase 2), where it is evident that the transition from a previous approach to teaching and learning to an approach based more on self-reliance and undergirded by different kinds of expectation caused considerable difficulty for some. Since unnecessary student departure is to the disadvantage of both student and institution, it falls to the latter to manage the students' transition into higher education as effectively as possible. Some suggestions to this end are offered later in this report.

Non-continuation: not a lot of change

The first point to note is that, broadly, the issues raised by the respondents show considerable similarity to those raised by the respondents to the survey conducted for HEFCE a decade ago (Yorke *et al.*, 1997). Broad similarities include the following:

9 Compare Figures 4 and 5 in Yorke and Longden (2007, p.11).

- young students choose programmes less well than older students.
- young students are more likely than older students to be unhappy with various aspects of the geographical environment in which they live and/or study.
- older students tend to be more critical than younger students of their experience in higher education.
- older students have greater problems with finance, with the demands of part-time study, and with the needs of dependants.
- students from managerial and professional backgrounds are less likely to experience financial difficulties than those from other socio-economic groups.

Given previous findings from higher education in the UK, none of these are surprising since all are readily susceptible to plausible interpretation. Some, however, might ask the question: "Since there has been so much political attention given to retention and completion since the late 1990s, should not things have changed?" In the above areas, probably not, since the differences are deep-seated characteristics of students, and in any case are outside the influence of institutions. It might be more profitable to focus the question on matters such as the quality of the students' learning experience, but here it would be more difficult to provide an answer since improvements might be matched by rising expectations. As the tide rises, so do the boats floating in a harbour.

Pointers from this study

Taken together, Phases 1 and 2 of this study point to a number of aspects of the first-year experience where enhancement activity might lead to more positive student experience and success. Some of the opportunities for enhancement have implications for organisations and individuals outside higher education.

Poor choice-making

On the evidence of both phases of this study, some students — predominantly the younger ones — made poor choices regarding their programme of study. While for many the making of a poor choice offers a learning opportunity, the costs that this incurs can be quite high. Some mitigation of the financial cost to students of discontinuing may be feasible if the full potential of credit transfer is realised: Long *et al.* (2006) noted that this was not yet being achieved in Australian higher education.

Pressure to enter higher education, 'drift' and an uncritical acquiescence to the message of A-level grades may all lead to ill-considered choices. For some, a poor match between entry qualifications and programme seems to have been a factor in their departure. Some respondents only realised after they had enrolled that the institution or its location were, for various reasons, not to their liking. The making of a good choice is primarily the responsibility of the intending student, implying a significant level of personal research (including institutional visits) prior to application. So-called 'league tables' of institutions and books purporting to offer guidance are *ignes fatui* that can attract the unwary into the marsh of misdirected choice¹⁰. The methodologically more robust findings from the National Student Survey (which form part of the TQi website) may also mislead because they do not focus narrowly on particular programmes. There thus remain, a decade on from earlier research, some pertinent 'messages' for intending students.

A couple of the respondents to Phase 2 acknowledged that they would have been better served by taking a break before entering higher education, by which time they might have had a clearer idea of what they really wanted to do (they might also have been able to save money from earnings in order to help with the costs of higher education). Institutions have a contribution to make to student choice-making, but there is a tension for some between the desire to recruit and the interests of the potential students. There is

10 This point is discussed at greater length in Yorke and Longden (2005).

also a need to be accurate in describing what is on offer. Some respondents to Phase 2 (and there were more than those cited above) felt that there had been a discrepancy between institutional rhetoric and reality: a few expressed it more forcefully.

The greater contribution to pre-entry guidance is probably from those in a position to offer guidance when initial entrance to higher education is being considered. For schools and colleges, there is also a tension between their desire to be seen to be performing well (with regard to students' entrance into higher education) and the interests of those they advise.

The quality of teaching

For some respondents to Phase 2 (and as evidenced in Table 2 and in comments cited above), aspects of teaching quality proved to have been poor enough to have exerted an influence on their non-continuation. This was particularly the case for older students, many of whom had had prior experience of higher education and presumably had formed views regarding the general quality of provision. Given the political and practical 'push' in recent years towards the enhancement of teaching, it must be disappointing news that there are still a few pockets of the academy in which weakness in teaching quality seems to have been perceived.

There is a broader issue than a few manifest weaknesses. The transition into higher education means that many students have to come to terms with an approach to teaching and learning that is markedly different from their previous experience¹¹. The first year is one of reorientation, and some students manage this more successfully than others. As Harvey *et al.* (2006, p.41ff) pointed out from their extensive survey of the literature on the first-year experience, there is a tendency for first-year students to overestimate their knowledge and abilities, which can spill over into levels of performance in higher education that can give students an unwelcome (and, it might be surmised, demoralising) surprise.

It is in the interests of both the student and the institution that the former should achieve success (signalled by having at minimum satisfied the requirements for progression). This implies a mode of teaching in which students are quickly engaged in academic work and are given formative feedback from an early stage, so that they can begin to gain an appreciation of expectations and standards in a way that cannot be achieved by statements of learning outcomes and exhortations alone. Low

11 The STAR (Student Transition and Retention) project, now completed, has produced a range of booklets dealing with aspects of the transition into higher education. See www.ulster.ac.uk/star/

levels of contact hours may initially be insufficient to motivate students to undertake the expected levels of independent study. There is a corollary: cost. However, if the stance is adopted (as it has been in some institutions) that the first year is critically important for student success, then at least four things follow:

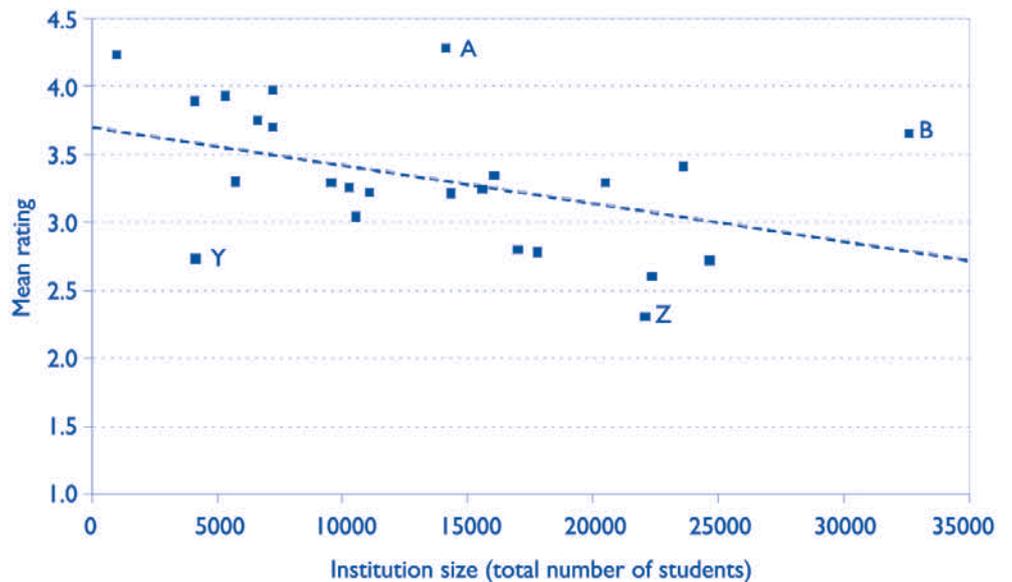
- the allocation of resources has to reflect the importance of the first year (often the most favourable student/staff ratios are found in the final year by which time, if all has gone to plan, students should be demonstrating their independence in learning)
- the teaching approach has to be focused on student development within the subject area(s) concerned
- ways need to be found to enhance the chances of students developing the supportive network of peers that can sustain them when difficulties arise (both Phases of this study have pointed to the importance of friendship formation and, for some, to unhappiness that this had not happened)
- those teaching first-year students should have a strong commitment to teaching and student learning.

Social integration

Pressure on students' finances means that studying from home offers the prospect of some mitigation of cost. However (and as exemplified above), home-based students tend to find making friends more difficult than do those who have the advantage of communal living, and consequently are likely to have weaker support networks. The University of Manchester has taken the initiative in designing 'Homestart' — a project aiming to help students not in university accommodation to meet up (initially, before registration week) and hence avoid feeling isolated. Shearer and Richardson (2006) describe this initiative, which has received positive reactions from students.

Data from the Phase 1 survey provide food for thought. Students were asked to respond to the statement: 'At least two members of the academic staff know me by name'. The responses varied across institutions (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Institutional mean student ratings (high is positive) in response to the statement 'At least two members of the academic staff know me by name'. The dotted line, determined by regression, is the 'line of best fit' for the data-points.



There is a broad tendency for the positivity of the institutional mean responses to the item to decline with increasing institutional size (the Pearson r correlation coefficient is -0.45). Some institutions' means fall some distance from the line, indicating that they had been more (A and B) or less (Y and Z) successful in respect of students' perceptions of academics' knowledge of them as individuals. If, as Figure 2 suggests, small tends to be beautiful in the eye of the beholder, how can large institutions encourage a perception of smallness? The comparative success of institution B shows that size is not an insurmountable barrier to achieving positive perceptions from students regarding academics' engagement with them.

Resources

For some, resources were an issue, although in general student reaction in this study to the resources available for their programme was very positive¹². Some institution-run accommodation was criticised quite fiercely for the standard of the infrastructure and/or for the quality of the food provided. In a couple of instances, students felt that the response of the institution to harassing behaviour was inadequate. The apparent ubiquity of computers may

12 However, Bekhradnia *et al.* (2006) found that a quarter of their respondents opted to make the provision of better library, laboratory or specialist academic facilities their top priority for institutional investment.

be leading institutions towards an assumption that 'putting things on the web' is sufficient by way of communicating with students. While this might be true in the vast majority of cases, the evidence from this survey, from the US and from Australia¹³ suggests that it has yet to reach universality. Those who find difficulty in accessing electronic resources and communications are likely to be amongst the most disadvantaged of the student cohort.

Managing expectations

Programme organisation figured highly amongst the influences on students' non-completion, and particularly strongly in Art and Design where, as noted earlier, the curricular style and the staffing profile may give rise to perceptions of lack of organisation. For a few (but highly critical) students, the failure to give advance warnings of cancelled sessions was criticised strongly, especially when they had travelled into the institution from a distance only to find that the scheduled session was not going to take place. It should be possible for modern communications systems to be applied in order to minimise the chances of such occurrences. Delays in the provision of support for students who declare disabilities at the time of application should not happen.

The dissatisfaction in these areas draws broader attention to 'the deal' between the institution and the student (which some years ago was to some extent addressed through the introduction of student charters). Both parties have a slew of rights and responsibilities in this respect. From the institutional perspective, the management of student expectations is an important matter. Students need to know what they can expect, what the limitations on provision are, and that they will be treated with consideration.

Two possible trends

There are, however, hints of two trends since the HEFCE study (Yorke *et al.*, 1997; Yorke, 1999). First, although finance remains problematic for many students, it may be becoming a less salient issue in student departure. Second, there is perhaps a growing perception that the value students receive for the money that they commit is prejudiced by the level of staff engagement with them. As Bekhradnia *et al.* (2006) noted in their survey of the student experience, institutions varied widely in the amount of substantive interaction that took place on an unscheduled basis, and nearly one-third of their respondents made reduction in class size their top priority. With fees and other expenses being factored into an increasingly consumer-like expectation on the part of students, a challenge to institutions is how to deal with the 'value for money' issue in the future.

13 See, in respect of the US, Saenz and Barrera (2007) and, in respect of Australia, Nelson *et al.* (2005).

Two issues for the future?

There are a couple of issues to which some institutions may need to give greater consideration for the medium and longer term.

The first stems from the downturn in the number of people aged 18 in the UK that is predicted to occur around 2011 (Bekhradnia, 2006). This implies that, for some institutions, greater attention will need to be given to the recruitment of mature students if numbers are to be maintained. The evidence from this study suggests that not all mature students feel that their needs and expectations are currently being met, and therefore hints that some institutional practices might need to be developed (for example, treating mature entrants in a way that integrates them into higher education and demonstrates that they are valued; and offering flexibility in timetabling so that their extra-institutional needs can be accommodated¹⁴). As Tony Cook of the University of Ulster is quoted as saying: "we need to teach the students we recruit, not the ones we would have liked to recruit" (NAO, 2007, p.30). A changing demographic will add force to Cook's point. The issue of flexibility cannot be divorced from the arrangements for funding full-time and part-time students.

The second issue is that that students from overseas who responded to the present study tended to be more critical than UK-domiciled students regarding the quality of their experience of the first year in higher education in the UK. To a greater extent than UK-domiciled students, those from overseas said that matters such as the quality of teaching, feedback, and programme organisation had been influential in their departure. While some of the students' concerns relate to matters beyond the institution's control (such as the acquisition of a visa), those relating to the programme are within the purview of institutions. On the evidence of the mere 18 respondents who were domiciled overseas, this would be no more than a straw in a fickle wind. However, these limited findings echo quite strongly those of Bekhradnia *et al.* (2006) who found that students from outside the European Union were three times as likely as their UK and EU based peers to say that their course represented poor value for money.

14 On this point, one mature student wrote that she would have liked to have been "able to adjust my timetable to work around my life. I was scheduled 4 one-hour sessions on 4 different days. There was no flexibility and I was trying to travel one hour each way to college and work part-time". F 40+ Humanities, Post-1992 institution.

Another wrote: "The sole reason I did not attend the 2nd year at uni was [because of timetabling]. The 2 days study for my course were non-consecutive weekdays & this was totally unacceptable for me. I live 100 miles away from the uni & this gave me no scope to attend. What a great shame." F 36-40 Psychology, Post-1992 institution.

Bending the odds

The well-known complexity of the causes of student attrition, further exemplified both quantitatively and qualitatively in this report, underscores the argument that there is no simple way in which the chances of student non-completion can be reduced. As Harvey *et al.* (2006) point out, there is not a monolithic 'first-year experience' (although the monolithic shorthand has some utility) but a plurality of first-year experiences that reflect the diversity in students' lives in the academic and extra-academic arenas. The challenge for institutions is to find ways of optimising the chances of individual students' success.

There is no quick fix. What is feasible, however, is for institutions to draw on the evidence of this report and from elsewhere in reviewing policies and practices, and through the exercise of professional judgement find ways of 'bending the odds' in favour of student success (note here the emphasis on encouraging student success rather than on retention: if an institution succeeds with the former, then the latter should follow). Particularly for entering students, these ways include: assisting students in the making of choices; being clear about what is on offer; ensuring adequacy of resources; and managing the transition into higher education such that students gain an early appreciation of what higher education is asking of them. With finance becoming more visibly a factor in students' engagement in higher education, considerations of value for money rise in significance. Students will not put up with what they perceive to be a poor quality experience when they are committing substantial amounts of money to their education. Value for money is another aspect of the student experience in which bending the odds in favour of student success is, for all involved, likely to pay off.

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Appendix 1: Phase 2 Questionnaire

▼

▼

**Higher Education Academy Follow-up Questionnaire
regarding the First Year Experience**

Please respond to the questions as accurately as you can. If a question doesn't apply to you, or you prefer not to answer it, simply leave it and move on to the next question.

Please use a ballpoint pen to complete the questionnaire. Do not use fountain or felt pens, as the ink may be visible on the other side of the page. The completed questionnaire will be read with the help of a scanner, so please fill it in exactly as described. Please put an 'X' in the appropriate box, keeping within the boundary of the box. For example: [X]. Do not spend too long on each item. If you make a mistake and cross the wrong box, please block out your answer and then cross the correct box.
For example:

1. Which **one** of the following **best** describes the programme on which you were studying?
(If none of these options fits your circumstances, please go to Question 1a instead.)

Subjects allied to medicine.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Biological sciences.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Psychology.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Computer science.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Engineering & technology.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social studies.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Business & administrative studies.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
English or History.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creative arts & design.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Combined programme in arts, humanities, social sciences.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Combined programme in science-based subjects.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Combined programme involving both sciences and arts etc.....	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 1a. If your programme didn't fit one of the categories provided in Question 1, please write in the subject name(s) here:

2. When did you leave the institution? (Please cross **one** box only)

By the end of Oct '05	In Nov '05	In Dec '05	In Jan or Feb '06	Between 1 Mar and 30 Jun '06	On or after 1 Jul '06
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Yes | No |
| 3. If you left on or after 1 July 2006, did you pass all your assessments?.... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Did you transfer straightaway to another institution?..... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. If 'no' to Question 4, have you thought about returning to another programme at either the same or another institution?..... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

6. On average, approximately how many hours did you spend per week during term time on part-time employment? (Please cross **one** box only)

None	1-6 hours	7-12 hours	13-18 hours	More than 18 hours
<input type="checkbox"/>				

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Yes | No |
| 7. Did you miss more than the occasional timetabled session for your programme?..... | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

▼
8. How influential were the following on your leaving your programme? ▼

(a) Programme-related reasons

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Very
I simply realised that I had chosen the wrong field of study.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The programme was not sufficiently relevant to my intended career.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The difficulty of the programme.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A lack of personal engagement with the programme.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The programme was not what I expected.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The way the programme was taught did not suit me.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The general quality of the teaching.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The amount of contact with academic staff.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The quality of the feedback on my work.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The speed with which I received feedback on my work.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The overall organisation of the programme.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Class sizes that were too large.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The timetabling of the programme did not suit my needs.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Too heavy a workload on the programme.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(b) Institution-related reasons

The level of provision of library / learning resources facilities.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The level of provision of computing facilities.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The level of provision of specialist equipment for the programme (e.g. studio / lab equipment).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The level of provision of social facilities (e.g. student union activities, sports facilities).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The institution was not what I had expected.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(c) Personal reasons

I felt I was making insufficient academic progress.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A lack of appropriate study skills (e.g. note taking, exam preparation, essay writing).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I needed a break from education.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A lack of commitment to the programme.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not enough time spent on studying outside timetabled sessions.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stress related to the demands of the programme.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A lack of personal support from other students.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A lack of personal support from staff.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A lack of personal support from family, partner, etc.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Financial problems.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal health problems.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Problems with drugs and/or alcohol.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The needs of dependants (e.g. family, partner).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Emotional difficulties involving others (e.g. family, partner, friend).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The demands of employment whilst studying.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Problems with accommodation.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Travel difficulties (e.g. cost, time).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dislike of the city/town in which I studied.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fear of crime.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Homesickness.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found it difficult to make friends.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Taking up employment.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pregnancy or partner's pregnancy.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bereavement of someone close to me.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I failed one or more assessments.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

▼

9. How old were you when you enrolled on your programme in 2005? *(Please cross one box only)*

Under 21	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	40+
<input type="checkbox"/>					

10. Please indicate your gender

Male Female

11. Which of the following categories most closely describes your ethnicity? *(Please cross one box only)*

White	Black or Black British	Asian or Asian British	Chinese	Other
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

12. Which of the following most closely describes your occupational background? (If you are under 25 years of age, please interpret this question in terms of your family background, giving only the higher-level occupation if, say, parents differ in this respect. If you are aged 25 or over, please interpret it with reference to your own situation). *(Please cross one box only)*

Managerial or professional occupation.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Intermediate occupation (e.g. administrative role; running small business; self-employment)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relatively routine supervisory, technical, service or manual occupation.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Long-term unemployment or Never worked.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not sure or Other, not easily categorised as one of the above.....	<input type="checkbox"/>

13. When you applied for a place at the institution in which you enrolled in 2005, in which country or part of the world were you living? *(Please cross one box only)*

England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	Europe other than the UK	Outside Europe
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>				

	Yes	No
14. Were you the first person in your immediate family (i.e. parents, brothers, sisters) to attend university?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Did you declare a disability to the institution at any time during 2005-06?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Had you attended any course in higher education before enrolling in 2005?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Did you have dependants (e.g. children or elderly relatives) in 2005-06?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Were you enrolled at an associate college (e.g. an FE/HE college) of a major higher education institution in 2005?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

19. Where were you living during the period when you were attending the institution? *(Please cross one box only)*

At home.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
In other private accommodation (e.g. flat).....	<input type="checkbox"/>
In university/institution-run accommodation.....	<input type="checkbox"/>

(Please cross one box only in each row)

	Nothing	Very little	A moderate amount	A lot
20. How much did you know about the institution before you enrolled in 2005?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. How much did you know about your programme of study before you enrolled in 2005?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

22. What was the main basis of your application to enrol on your programme? *(Please cross one box only)*

A-level passes	Other qualifications
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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23. In retrospect, how well did your entry qualifications match the programme on which you enrolled?
(Please cross **one** box only)

Closely	Moderately	Not at all
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

24. Did you enter your programme through 'Clearing'?..... Yes No

25. If you were enrolled on a programme with more than one main subject discipline, was there a **marked** difference between your enjoyment of the different subject disciplines?..... Yes No

26. A 'tick-box' questionnaire can only give a limited depiction of a person's reasons for leaving a programme. Please use this box to elaborate on anything about your experience of higher education during the academic year 2005-6 which would help us to gain a fuller understanding of the reasons for your discontinuing the programme. Continue on a **separate** extra sheet of paper if you wish.

27. If you wished that your first year experience had been significantly different in some way(s), what would you have liked the main change(s) to have been?

Thank you very much for filling in this questionnaire. We would like to have the opportunity to follow up some of the responses to this questionnaire. If you'd like to talk to one of the project team about your experience of the year 2005-6, please give your name and telephone or e-mail contact details below.

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Appendix 2: Factor analysis

Details of the exploratory factor analysis

Table A2.1: Factor analysis of responses to items relating to possible influences on students' non-continuation.

Item	Factor							
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	
The general quality of the teaching	0.87	-0.02	0.06	0.15	0.08	-0.01	0.03	
The overall organisation of the programme	0.84	0.04	-0.01	0.16	0.04	-0.04	0.01	
The amount of contact with academic staff	0.83	0.14	0.05	0.06	0.04	-0.01	0.10	
The quality of the feedback on my work	0.81	0.13	0.04	0.16	0.09	0.05	-0.10	
The speed with which I received feedback on my work	0.73	0.08	-0.01	0.17	0.09	0.08	-0.12	
The way the programme was taught did not suit me	0.73	0.08	0.28	0.06	0.01	0.02	0.11	
A lack of personal support from staff	0.69	0.11	-0.00	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.37	
Class sizes that were too large	0.49	0.24	-0.00	-0.03	-0.04	0.08	0.33	
The institution was not what I had expected	0.48	-0.10	0.24	0.36	0.35	-0.02	0.31	
The difficulty of the programme	0.02	0.76	0.23	0.08	-0.15	-0.17	0.10	
Too heavy a workload on the programme	0.13	0.75	0.04	0.19	-0.14	-0.03	0.12	
I failed one or more assessments	0.08	0.68	-0.03	-0.06	0.10	0.09	-0.21	
A lack of appropriate study skills (e.g. note taking, exam preparation, essay writing)	0.09	0.62	0.18	-0.04	0.08	0.26	0.07	
Stress related to the demands of the programme	0.10	0.62	0.05	0.11	-0.11	0.21	0.36	
I felt I was making insufficient academic progress	0.31	0.53	0.33	0.05	0.13	0.14	-0.01	
I simply realised that I had chosen the wrong field of study	-0.09	0.14	0.74	-0.02	-0.04	-0.13	-0.03	
The programme was not sufficiently relevant to my intended career	-0.04	-0.05	0.72	0.16	-0.07	-0.04	0.01	
The programme was not what I expected	0.41	0.10	0.64	0.12	0.01	-0.03	0.07	
A lack of personal engagement with the programme	0.25	0.29	0.64	-0.05	0.03	0.04	0.15	
A lack of commitment to the programme	0.07	0.28	0.63	-0.18	0.09	0.29	0.10	
The level of provision of library / learning resources facilities	0.12	0.10	0.01	0.82	0.09	0.10	0.02	
The level of provision of computing facilities	0.21	0.19	-0.07	0.80	0.11	0.11	-0.04	
The level of provision of social facilities (e.g. student union activities, sports facilities)	0.20	-0.10	0.20	0.58	0.16	0.09	0.21	
The level of provision of specialist equipment for the programme (e.g. studio / lab equipment)	0.41	-0.02	-0.02	0.57	-0.15	0.16	-0.01	
Dislike of the city/town in which I studied	0.24	-0.03	0.10	0.05	0.71	-0.07	0.15	
Homesickness	-0.10	-0.05	-0.07	-0.05	0.69	-0.03	0.22	
Fear of crime	0.14	0.10	-0.02	0.06	0.68	0.02	-0.16	
Problems with accommodation	0.00	-0.09	-0.05	0.19	0.62	0.10	0.24	
Taking up employment	0.02	0.01	0.10	0.09	0.05	0.77	-0.01	
The demands of employment whilst studying	0.06	0.07	-0.05	0.14	-0.13	0.76	0.11	
Financial problems	0.01	0.15	-0.14	0.15	0.06	0.68	0.07	
Not enough time spent on studying outside timetabled sessions	0.00	0.44	0.32	-0.13	0.08	0.46	0.03	
A lack of personal support from other students	0.18	0.12	0.04	0.10	0.15	0.13	0.81	
I found it difficult to make friends	0.02	0.06	0.14	0.00	0.33	0.03	0.75	
		Poor quality learning experience	Not coping with academic demand	Wrong choice of field of study	Dissatisfied with institutional resourcing	Unhappy with location and environment	Problems with finances and employment	Problems with social integration
Percentage variance in rotated solution	16.4	9.7	8.4	7.3	6.8	6.5	6.1	
Scale reliability (Cronbach alpha)	0.87	0.73	0.70	0.68	0.58	0.59	0.64	

Excluded on grounds of not fitting factor structure

The timetabling of the programme did not suit my needs

I needed a break from education

A lack of personal support from family, partner, etc

Personal health problems

Problems with drugs and/or alcohol

The needs of dependants (e.g. family, partner)

Emotional difficulties involving others (e.g. family, partner, friend)

Travel difficulties (e.g. cost, time)

Pregnancy or partner's pregnancy

Bereavement of someone close to me

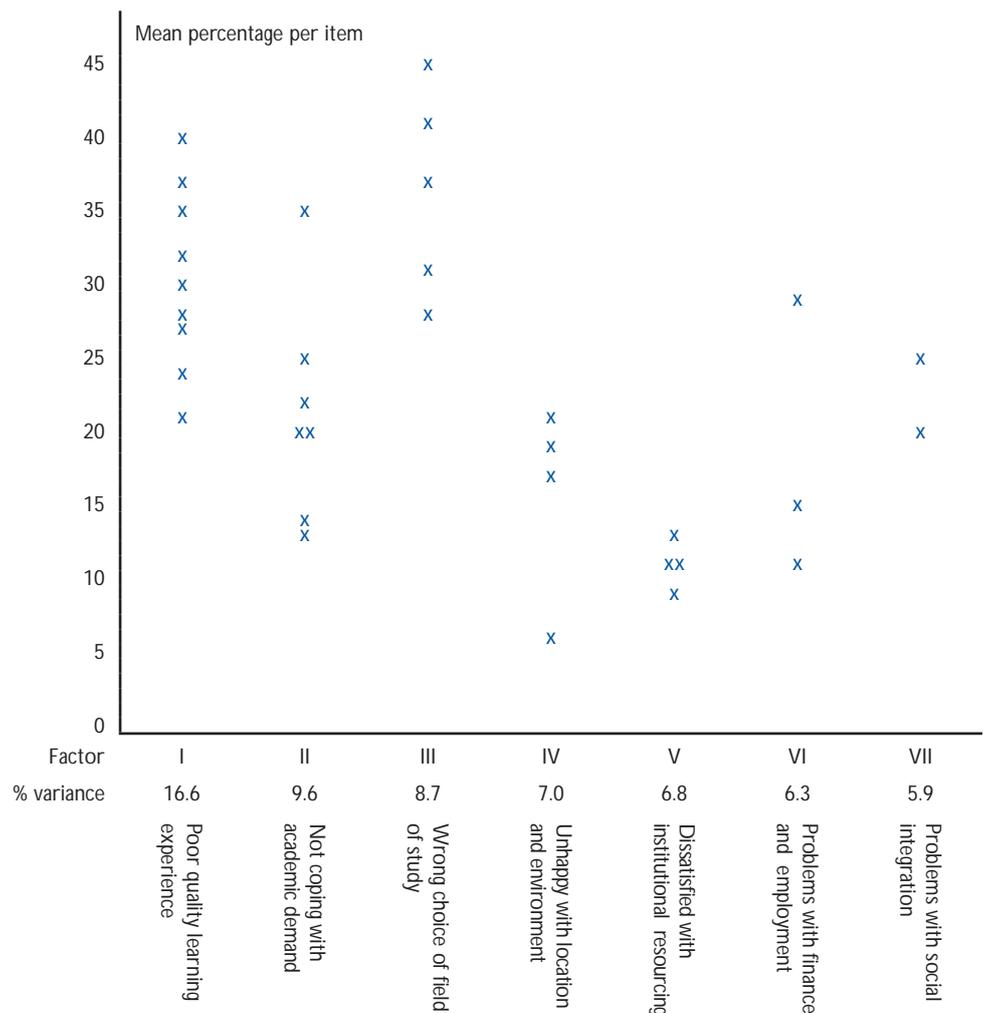
Notes: The exploratory principal components analysis with varimax rotation was based on a matrix of rank correlations (Spearman's rho) because of the asymmetric distributions in the raw data. In practice, it made only a very marginal difference compared with the default use, in SPSS, of the Pearson r correlation matrix.

Factor loadings of 0.40 and above are highlighted. Scale reliabilities relate to the items with highlighted loadings.

For technical reasons, the Cronbach alpha reliabilities are based on dichotomised levels of influence on departure: the responses 'not at all' and 'a little' were combined, as were 'moderately' and 'very'.

Too much should not be read into the actual amount of variance explained by the seven factors, since the amount of variance does not necessarily relate to the perceived level of influence on students' non-continuation. Figure A2.1 draws on Tables 2 and 4 to show, for example, that the level of influence reported by respondents in respect of individual items is generally low for the items bundled in Factor V, and that two items in Factor VI and both in Factor VII were more influential in departure than any in Factor V.

Figure A2.1: An illustration that the percentage variance explained by a factor does not necessarily indicate the salience for non-continuation of the items subsumed by the factor.



Notes: The crosses represent the mean percentages of 'moderately' and 'very' influential responses (combined) for each item within the respective factors. For example, 'Financial problems' at 29 per cent is the highest of the three points in Factor VI.

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