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"Turn on, Tune in, Drop out": Why are more UK students dropping out?

February 21, 2020

The idea of dropping out was attached to some ideological aim in the past. The title is a quotation from Timothy Leary to a large crowd of young idealists in San Francisco in 1967. He said it was a *"metaphor of the present"*. He later said that to drop out was a *"commitment to mobility, choice, and change"*. Times have changed and to drop out today is, in the eyes of universities, an admission of being beaten and failing. But the reality for most is that it is a cry for help and support in a grossly unfair system afflicting the few who are vulnerable.

Recent media reports of increases in student drop-out rates since the introduction of higher fees in England and Wales in September 2012 have caused some concern (Express and Star 'Two thirds of universities and colleges see rise in drop-out rates' 3rd January 2020). The analysis was

carried out by the Press Association and used HESA statistics from last year to compare the first-year dropout rates between those entering HE in 2011/12 and those entering in 2016/17. The conclusion was that there had been a significant increase in 67% (or 100 in total) UK institutions. Those universities affected the most are the so-called post-92 universities who accept students with lower attainment. But there are many students make the decision to leave early and this has been going on for as long as there have been universities. The Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) sums it up well with *"Leaving a course early does not always mean someone should not have had a go".* However, the situation was not put into its full context by the various media reports.

Dropout rates in context.

The first important observation regarding context is the UK position when compared to other countries. This tells us that the UK is one of the best performing countries regarding completion of university degrees. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) gathers valuable data on many aspects of countries across the globe. The most advanced economies value higher education and accumulate a vast array of statistical data to inform their strategies and decisions. In the UK, there is focus by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) on non-continuation rates known also as 'dropout rates'. These, in turn, consider mostly those that leave after one year of a degree. The OECD, in contrast, puts its main emphasis on completion rates. This is a more useful measure that concentrates upon success and not failure. Its latest data was released in September 2019 and is based upon students entering in 2017 (see OECD 'Education at a Glance 2019').

Figure 1. 2019 OECD data on university degree completion rates (%) by country

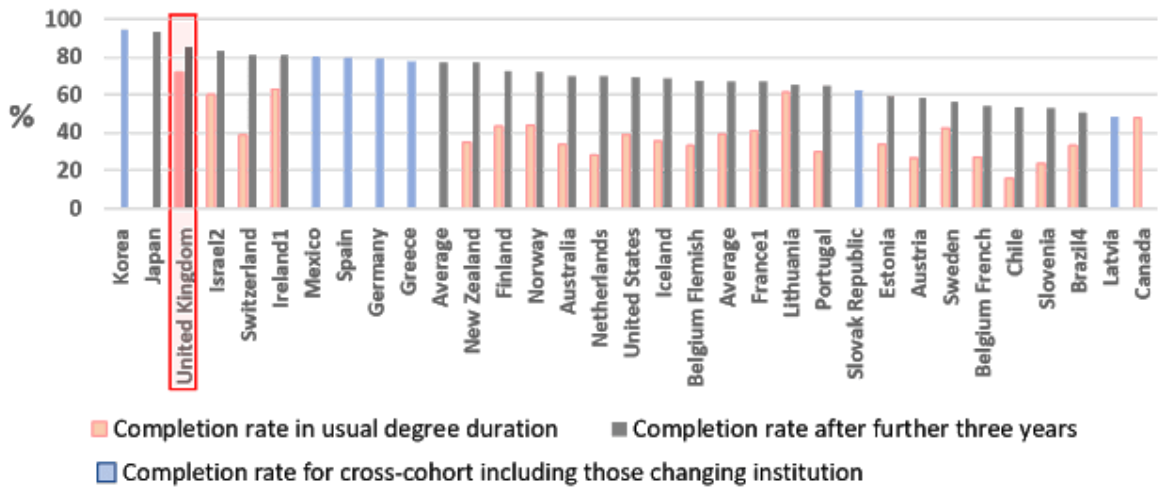
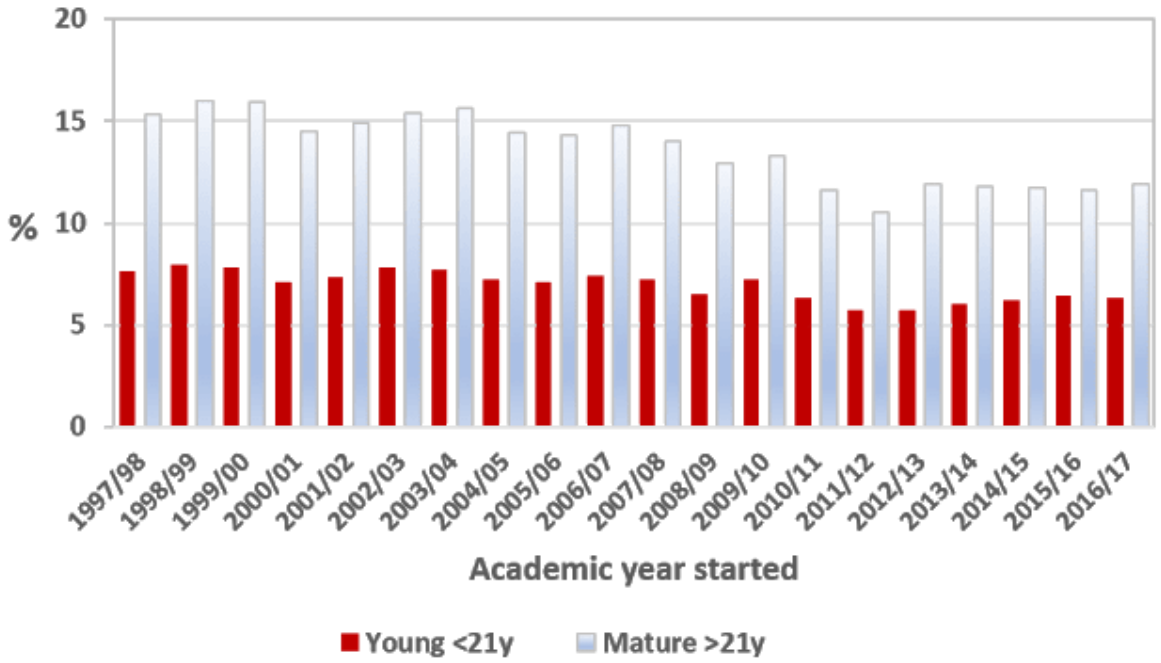


Figure 1 shows the latest OECD data from last year for thirty-two countries ranked by completion rate and shows that the UK has a very good record by this measure. It is the best in terms of those that record completion of a degree within the normal period expected. It is also highly ranked amongst those that eventually complete after completing further years. Some countries (pale blue) use cross-cohort data that catches students that move institution and eventually succeed. This approach tends to produce a more accurate view of success. The other countries, including the UK, only consider single cohorts within the institutions. The OECD also notes that, overall, around 12% leave after one year but notes that the rate increases by another 12% over subsequent years. The UK is no different and the first-year drop out rate of 6.3% for young students (Figure 2) does not fill the gap of those not completing after three years or later, as indicated in the OECD data. Mature students fare worse and there are many that leave over subsequent years.

Figure 2. Non-continuation rates after first academic year %



Source: HESA March 2019. Non-continuation summary: UK Performance Indicators 2017/18

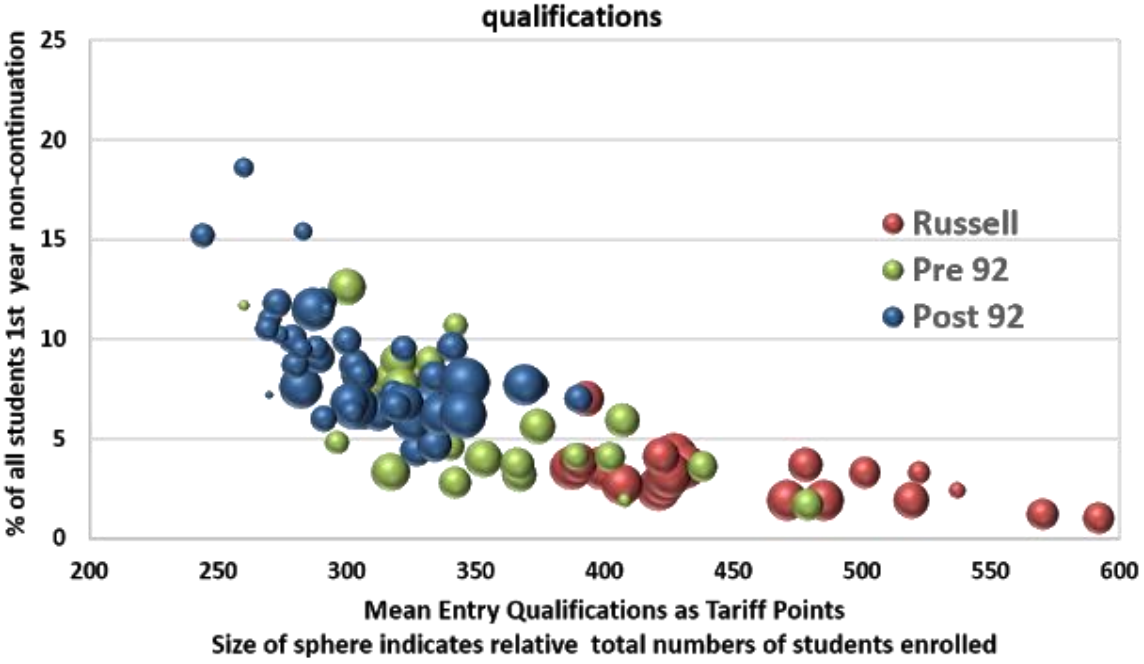
The favourable position of the UK is no reason to be complacent. Although the situation in many countries, especially the USA, is a serious one, the UK should only view itself as 'less worse' overall. We should be mindful that there has been a slight rise in the overall drop-out rate in the UK in recent years and find out why. However, the overall drop-out rate across the UK has remained relatively steady over the years but has generally declined since 1997/8 (Figure 2). It is clear that mature students entering over the age of 21 have suffered much higher attrition rates than younger students for many years. Could it be that the reasons for this are slowly filtering down to younger students where most of the evidence is concentrated?

The pattern of non-continuation across universities.

HESA has been gathering copious data on this for many years and its latest offering was in March of last year (HESA Non-continuation data 7th March 2019). It is important to consider how these students are defined by HESA. Generally, the main measure is of young students (< 21 years old) and they *"simply look at whether or not a student is still in HE (registered at a HEP) after a year"*. Bearing in mind the limitations of the data, some valuable comparisons can still be made. Figure 3 shows the fate of students from the 2016/17 entry across institutions in the UK excluding Scotland's universities. These were not added here because POLAR classifications

(*see note below) are not used in Scotland and a comparison to Figure 4 could not be made. The figures are constructed from HESA statistical data tables released last year.

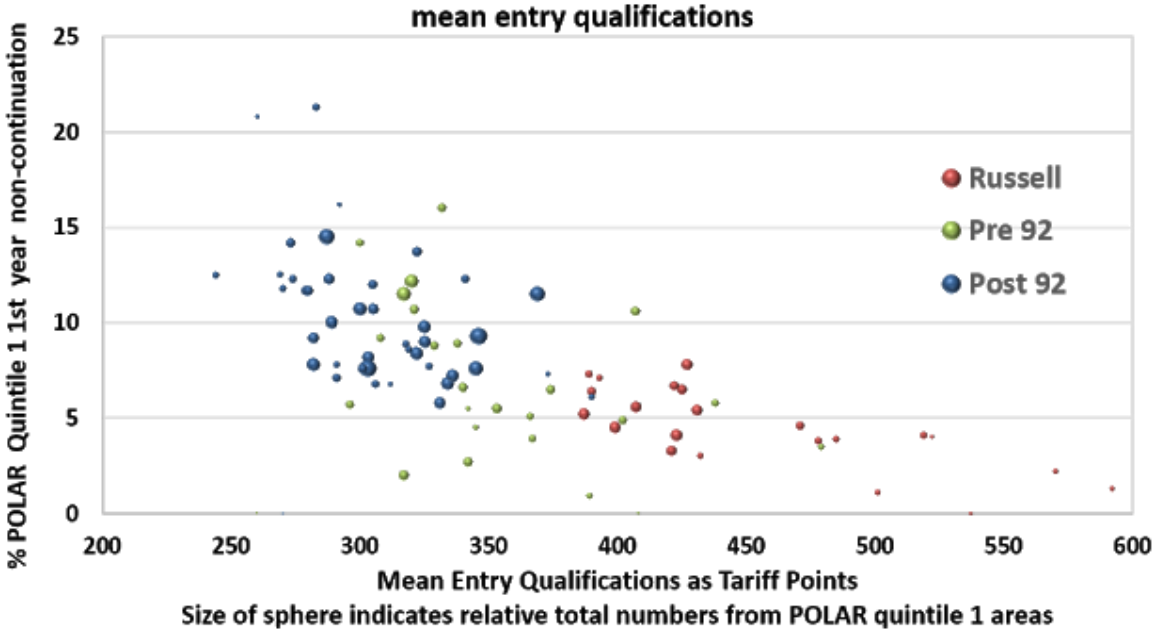
Figure 3. Non-continuation rates (%) of all young students (<21y) by type of institution entering in 2016/17 and their mean entry qualifications



Sources: HESA March 2019. Non-continuation summary: UK Performance Indicators 2017/18
Note: Excludes Scotland Universities as they do not use POLAR classifications
UCAS and The Complete University Guide 2018

The first observation apparent is that drop-out rates rise in institutions that set lower tariff point entry standards. Basically, UCAS translates qualifications and grades onto a single tariff point scale The elite Russell Group Universities set higher entry attainment standards than the pre-92 universities and the post 92 newer universities. The highest in Figure 3 are Cambridge and Oxford universities. Therefore, it would seem that past school attainment is a major cause of dropping out. Indeed it is my experience that the possibility of failure or a lower class degree, for whatever reason, is bringing with it a crisis of confidence. But the HESA data also compares students from lower participation areas (POLAR Quintile 1 areas -* see note below) to the others and it seems that those students are more likely to drop out. It is currently 8.8% as opposed to 6.0% for students from other POLAR Quintile areas. This gap has persisted for many years and the government's response has been to blame the universities for the poor provision and a 'bums on seats' mentality. (see TEFS 8th March 2019 '"Bums on seats": The government's cynical view').

Figure 4. Non-continuation rates (%) of POLAR Quintile 1 young students (<21y) by type of institution entering in 2016/17 and their mean entry qualifications



Source: HESA March 2019. Non-continuation summary: UK Performance Indicators 2017/18
Note: Excludes Scotland Universities as they do not use POLAR classifications
UCAS and The Complete University Guide 2018

Figure 4 shows the distribution of students from POLAR Quintile 1 areas dropping out of different universities. The pattern is largely the same as in Figure 3 but with generally higher rates across the board. Those that make it to the elite universities are less likely to drop out, but their numbers are low. The pattern still suggests that prior attainment is a key factor. It also indicates that standards and expectations are high across many institutions (see also TEFS 19th April 2019 'Grade inflation and contextualised admissions to university are stirring up a wasp's nest').

What causes a student to leave a university early without a degree? Is it simply attainment?

This appears to be a tough question with many possible answers. However, in my experience, the basic answer is a simple one. A lack of attainment and lower grades means that many decide to leave. This decision is automatically balanced against high fees and accommodation costs and the prospect of a large debt. The reality of possibly achieving a lower-class degree doesn't outweigh the costs for some students. However, I have persuaded many to stick with it and calculate their position more fully before making a final decision. Low marks in the first year do not always translate into a lower-class degree. Often the opposite is the case as

students later ‘catch themselves on’, as they say in Belfast. Many need a little more time to adjust. However, those that leave after the second year find the step up to more difficult work too much to cope with along with the greater time demands. It would help if more such advice was available early on and directly from the tutors they know.

The question of why attainment slips at university is the real question.

The causes of attainment not being as a student expects, or hopes for, are more complex. One reason that dropout rates are higher and increasing in some universities could be simply down to the introduction of 'access courses'. Students may be more likely to leave at this point.

For the rest of the students, tutors only see their grades and have to proactively ask them why. This reveals that many causes afflict students regardless of their past school attainment. Loss of a close family member, caring responsibilities, loss of a part-time job, illness of all kinds and broken relationships can each have their defining effect. A mismatch between past school subjects, attainment and the expectations of the university can also affect the decision. Sometimes they discover they are simply in the wrong course. Furthermore, exposure to a poor lecturer early on can affect the confidence of many students. Although they are in the small minority, they do exist and they sap the confidence of many students. I once overheard one tell students that *"I know that you are all lazy dossers and I don't care if you fail or not"*. Another, only interested in their own research career, insulted and patronised a large first-year class to such an extent that they voted with their feet by not attending the lectures. I had to coax them back with promises of action. The lecturer achieved what he wanted. He was taken off the large class and gained his prize of a reduced teaching load. I suspect this is not so uncommon. Repairing the damage cost some of us a lot of time and effort. Perfunctory lectures, based only on the lecturer's own narrow interests and designed to fly over the heads of students, cause incredible damage to confidence (see TEFS 29th June 2018 'Research and Teaching: The price of researchers not teaching'). This phenomenon has been observed elsewhere. A detailed research report, published by the Australian National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) last September, 'Success and Failure in Higher Education on Uneven Playing Fields', showed the crucial importance of encouragement in the first year. Offering bad experiences is not the way to success with students. This analysis should be read by all staff assigned to

first-year students.

Many of the problems noted above can be addressed by the university and tutors, but it is time-consuming when there is a large cohort. However, other problems are very hard to fix or even impossible. Outside of careless lecturing, a major reason for poor attainment is often a lack of time to study. Asking a student how much time they have available reveals a lot of hidden issues. Holding down a part-time job, commuting from home, or both, saps energy and time to complete assignments. In my experience, this often becomes more critical in the more demanding second and third years of study. Then there are the students who have no family support and may also be estranged from their family. They have no financial security, no one to turn to and are constantly stressed. They may simply fold under the pressure. TEFS has looked at this aspect for some time and seeks to find more financial support for students who are diverting too much time to part-time jobs (e.g. TEFS 23rd August 2019 'Students working in term-time: Commuter students and their working patterns'). The aim is to make sure that all students have an equal chance by giving them the same amount of time for their studies.

It seems that fear of failing and balancing this against the costs and projected debt must be affecting student decisions. There are many reasons why attainment can be affected. For those with little or no family support, this looks like a mountain to climb with dangerous precipices to scale. It is only a natural concern where the future seems uncertain. Of course, university staff can help and encourage students more. That should be the normal default position. However, there is a clear shortfall and there should be more time given to staff and more staff employed to achieve this. Equality of study time and financial security for students will be harder to achieve, but it should be the aim in a fair society.
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*NOTE. POLAR refers to Participation of Local Areas and there are now four versions. The data used here is based upon POLAR Version 3. The POLAR3 classification is formed by ranking 2001 Census Area Statistics (CAS) wards by their young participation rates for the combined 2005 to 2009 cohorts.

This gives five quintile groups of areas ordered from '1' (those wards with the lowest participation) to '5' (those wards with the highest participation), each representing 20 per cent of UK young cohort. Students have been allocated to the neighbourhoods on the basis of their postcode. Those students whose postcode falls within wards with the lowest participation (quintile 1) are denoted as being from a low participation neighbourhood. See HESA Definitions and benchmark factors: definitions.