

BULLETIN

Dropping Out: The Causes and Consequences of Withdrawal from Higher Education

Introduction

As participation in higher education has expanded and the output of graduates has grown, so has the number of people who do not complete their course.

Recent estimates indicate that approximately 17 per cent of UK domiciled students who started a full-time first degree course during 1997/8 will obtain no qualification. Despite the rate of non-completion remaining relatively stable over the last decade and seemingly low compared to other countries in The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, there is a legitimate concern about the effects of withdrawal from Higher Education on the individuals concerned and how this rate can be reduced.

But who are these leavers? Why do they leave and what happens to them subsequently? To address these questions, the Department for Education and Employment commissioned the Warwick Institute for Employment Research to conduct an enquiry on its behalf, specifically to collect relevant information from a sample of higher education non-completers and to pursue an in-depth enquiry with such individuals.

A sample of people regarded as 'withdrawers' was obtained from a database of student records maintained by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Potential 'withdrawers' were identified for the years 1996/7 and 1998/9 for 30 selected institutions of Higher Education. Approximately 16,400 'withdrawers' were identified and questionnaires were mailed to about 15,200 of these. A follow up telephone survey was conducted for 100 respondents to the postal questionnaire. This Research Bulletin provides a summary of the findings¹.

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Labour Market Outcomes

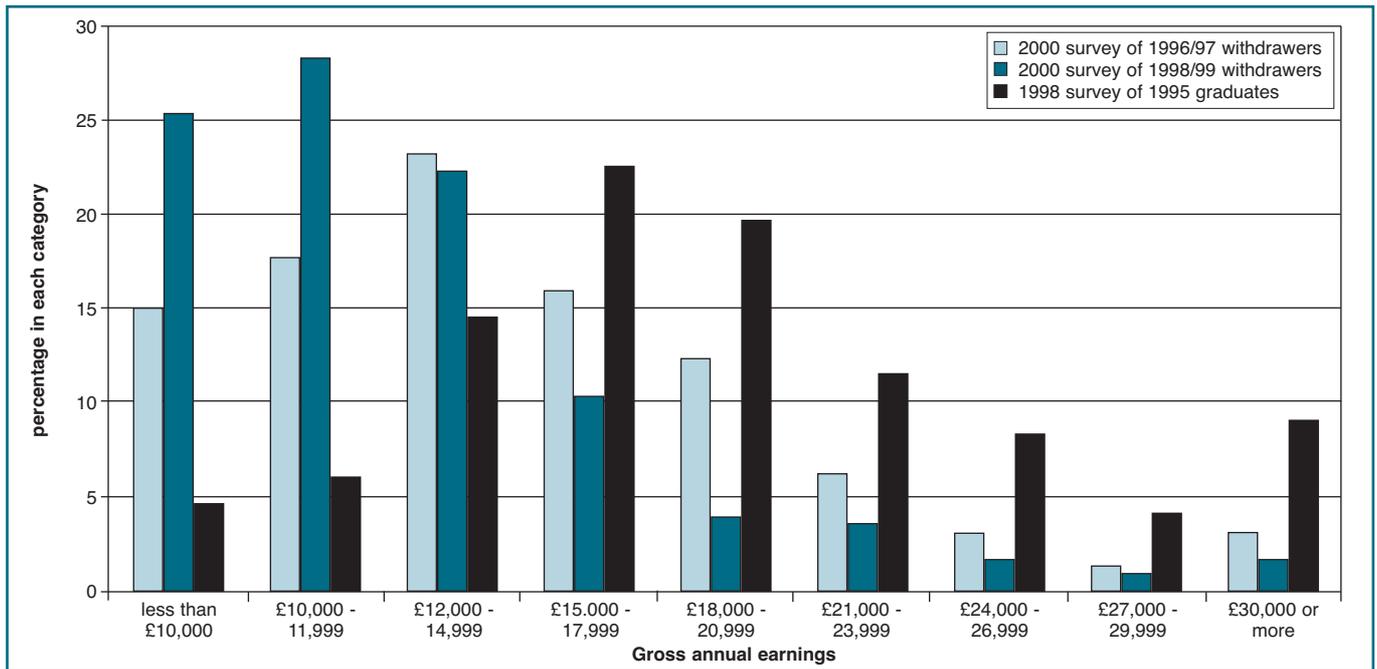
Approximately half of the institutions selected for the enquiry also took part in an earlier study of 1995 first-degree graduates entitled: *Moving On: Graduate Careers Three Years After Graduation*. (Manchester: CSU/DfEE 1999). Comparisons could therefore be made between the labour market outcomes of withdrawers in the years following their time spent attending Higher Education against a comparable group of graduates. Significant differences in these outcomes were observed in terms of both the experience of unemployment and the types of employment gained by these two groups.

Whilst unemployment remained low among respondents to the non-completion survey, it was still about twice the level of that prevailing in the comparable group of graduates. Approximately six per cent of withdrawers said they were unemployed at some stage during the year immediately following withdrawal. In comparison, unemployment among graduates falls rapidly to approximately three per cent one year after graduation.

Observing the sample of graduates at three-and-a-half years after leaving Higher Education, only one in 10 remain in occupations classified as 'non-graduate'; ie. occupations such as catering, cleaning, driving, bar work and low level security that do not require high-level qualifications. This compares to one in four respondents to the non-completion survey who remain in 'non-graduate' type occupations at three-and-a-half years after leaving Higher Education.

Both the survey of early withdrawers from Higher Education and the *Moving On* survey of graduates asked respondents about various attributes of the job they held at the time of the survey. Comparing responses from the two surveys, it was found that although more of the withdrawers were working in non-graduate or graduate track occupations, they express virtually the same distribution of positive attributes associated with their jobs as did the graduates. There was no indication that early withdrawers

Fig 1:
Comparison of gross annual earnings of people in full-time employment: 1995 graduates, 1996/97 withdrawers and 1998/1999 withdrawers



were less satisfied with their employment compared to recent graduates. It was also not possible to conclude that there was evidence of a significant financial penalty associated with non-completion at this early stage in their careers.

Applying to Higher Education

It is not possible to infer with complete confidence the causes of withdrawal from Higher Education. However, those respondents who applied to Higher Education through clearing reported a number of factors in their choice of course that were not conducive to successful completion of Higher Education.

These respondents generally consulted fewer sources of information prior to application and their choice of course and institution was less likely to be influenced by attributes that can be regarded as positive. However, insights from the telephone survey gave the clearest indication as to how respondents felt that process of applying to Higher Education contributed to their decision to withdraw.

- Respondents were critical of a system of applying to Higher Education where course choices were based on predicted grades rather than actual performance. Where results exceed original expectations, respondents had to accept a place on courses that were, in retrospect, second choice.
- Many respondents felt they had been pushed by their schools to enter university. They instead felt that they would have benefited from a year out of education to think about their choices more carefully and to enter Higher Education with greater maturity.
- Some also criticised their schools for failing to present more vocational methods of learning as viable alternatives to university. These respondents felt that more vocationally

orientated methods of learning would have better suited their abilities and interests.

- Whilst respondents were aware of the availability of careers advice, many felt the sessions should have been made compulsory and more frequent.

Withdrawing from Higher Education

The influences on the decision to withdraw most commonly cited by respondents to the postal questionnaire were:

- A mistaken choice of course (24 per cent);
- Financial problems directly related to participation in higher education (18 per cent); and
- Personal problems (14 per cent).

Table 1 opposite shows how the emphasis placed on these influences varied between different groups of survey respondents. Most notably, financial problems directly related to participation are cited as the most important influence on withdrawal by male respondents.

The importance of financial problems and personal problems is also observed amongst those over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal. However, mistaken choice of course predominates in six of the eight sub-groups presented in Table 1.

The greater emphasis placed on mistakes in their choice of course by those entering Higher Education through clearing points towards the potential problems faced by such entrants in choosing an appropriate course.

These possible disadvantages were further alluded to in other areas of the survey. Sixty per cent of those who applied through clearing

Table 1:
Main influences on the decision to withdraw from Higher Education

Gender	Males	%	Females	%
1 st	Financial problems	24.0	Mistaken choice of course	25.5
2 nd	Mistaken choice of course	21.1	Personal Problems	15.4
3 rd	Personal Problems	12.5	Financial Problems	13.1
Age at Withdrawal	21 or under		Over 21	
1 st	Mistaken choice of course	29.2	Financial problems	23.0
2 nd	Financial problems	16.0	Personal Problems	16.5
3 rd	Personal Problems	13.0	Other	14.8
Method of Application	UCAS etc or Direct		Clearing	
1 st	Mistaken choice of course	22.8	Mistaken choice of course	29.1
2 nd	Financial problems	17.4	Financial problems	21.8
3 rd	Personal Problems	14.4	Other	11.8
Year of Withdrawal	First Year		After First Year	
1 st	Mistaken choice of course	26.0	Mistaken choice of course	18.7
2 nd	Financial problems	17.9	Financial problems	18.0
3 rd	Personal Problems	12.4	Personal Problems	17.7

indicated that the course was not as interesting as they had expected. This compares with 48 per cent who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution.

In choosing the course, 44 per cent of those who applied through clearing stated that they would have liked more careers advice before applying to Higher Education, compared with 32 per cent of those who applied directly. Finally, 22 per cent of early leavers who applied through clearing indicate that they wished they had visited the university before deciding to study there. This compares with just nine per cent who applied directly.

There was some evidence to indicate a tendency amongst respondents to under-report the importance of academic difficulties on their decision to withdraw. It is likely the importance of academic difficulties may be further underestimated due to higher rates of non-response to the survey amongst those with higher entry qualifications. Alternatively, respondents may regard academic difficulties as having arisen ultimately due to a mistaken choice of course.

A majority of respondents were aware of the availability of personal tutors and counselling services whilst attending Higher Education. Approximately half of survey respondents indicated they had drawn on the services of personal tutors, although views regarding their usefulness were mixed.

Respondents with specific needs or personal problems were particularly critical of the ability of personal tutors to provide support. The most common sources of advice sought before deciding to withdraw from Higher Education were parents and relatives or friends. One in five respondents sought no advice before deciding to withdraw from Higher Education.

Financial Support and Withdrawing from Higher Education

The concurrent survey of the 1996/7 and 1998/9 cohorts was undertaken to provide early evidence of the possible importance of changes to student support on early withdrawal from Higher

Education. These changes have entailed both the gradual replacement of the student grant by a loans system and, from 1998, the introduction of means-tested tuition fees.

The introduction of tuition fees was not found to have affected the propensity of survey respondents to report that financial problems were the main influence upon their decision to withdraw. However, students who depended on Government funding were more likely to report financial problems as the main influence on the decision to withdraw compared to those who depended primarily upon parental contributions.

Furthermore, those for whom student loans were the main source of income were more likely to report that they had withdrawn due to financial problems compared to those whose main source of income was derived from grants.

Finally, respondents who felt well informed about the costs of Higher Education were less likely to report that they had

Table 2:
Factors that would have helped respondents to remain in Higher Education

Factors that would have helped respondents to remain in higher education	
More financial support	18.7
Encouragement from tutors	12.2
Awareness to change course	9.4
More advice prior to entry	8.8
Nothing	8.6
More support	6.5
Better lecturers	4.0
I'm still in HE	3.9
Better choice of courses	3.6
Better financial guidance	2.2
Better accommodation	1.9
Accommodation provided	1.2
Help with childcare	0.9
Lighter workload	0.6
Passing exams	0.6

withdrawn due to financial problems or had experienced difficulties in budgeting whilst studying. They were also less likely to suggest that better financial support would have most helped them to remain in Higher Education.

No significant increase between 1996/97 and 1998/99 was found in the propensity of respondents to undertake paid employment during term time. However, there was some evidence to indicate that students were working longer hours and were increasingly missing lectures in order to undertake this work.

Finally, when asked what factors would have most helped them to remain in Higher Education, the most common response given by all respondents was better financial support (*see table 2*).

Implications and Directions for Future Research

This enquiry into the causes and consequences of early withdrawal from Higher Education has helped to delineate both the nature of the process and the scale of the associated effects.

Some of these seem obvious, particularly the labour market disadvantage faced by those who start but do not complete a course of Higher Education compared to graduates. However, equally important are the feelings of personal failure and the stigma attached to the early withdrawal from Higher Education.

Coupled with the effects of non-completion on the effectiveness and the efficiency of the Higher Education system, the desirability of reducing rates of early withdrawal from Higher Education becomes apparent. A number of policy recommendations surround the process of applying to Higher Education.

For example, better advice needs to be made available to year 12 and 13 pupils who are considering entry into Higher Education. This advice should firstly consider whether pupils wish to follow what has become the 'natural progression' from school to Higher Education. Schools also need to encourage pupils to consider whether an immediate transition to Higher Education is most appropriate for them.

Pupils cannot be expected to make an informed decision if they are not provided with information regarding viable alternatives to university; including more vocationally orientated learning opportunities and the option of a gap year. To this end, the importance of career advice should also be underlined and attendance more actively encouraged.

Those respondents who felt well informed about the costs of higher education were less likely to report that they withdrew due to financial problems related to participation in Higher Education. Preparation for entry into Higher Education should therefore extend beyond the choice of course and institutions and include information on the costs of higher education and advice on managing finances.

A number of recent policy initiatives are addressing some of these issues. In his speech "Modernising Higher Education: Facing the Global Challenge", David Blunkett announced proposals for a new two-year Higher Education qualification.

The Foundation Degree aims to offer: "a new vocationally-focussed route into higher education", developing a Higher Education qualification for intermediate level skills. A total 40 Foundation Degree courses are currently being offered throughout

England by 21 consortia, involving 35 higher education institutions, 70 further education colleges, employers and other organisations.

In terms of providing extra information for young people, the development of the Connexions service aims to provide integrated information and guidance to young people on their progress through education, Further Education and Higher Education. The Connexions service will also contribute towards the Government's proposals for widening the participation of young people in Higher Education (as published within the consultation paper *The Excellence Challenge*).

Under these proposals, the Connexions service will provide clear information for young people and their parents about the costs and benefits of Higher Education, including eligibility regarding the payment of tuition fees. The Connexions service is currently being piloted within 12 areas of England.

Finally, the research indicated that those who apply to Higher Education through clearing report characteristics that may not be regarded as conducive to the successful completion of Higher Education.

These characteristics are observed in terms of both their applications to Higher Education, their experiences of Higher Education and their reasons for withdrawal from Higher Education.

However, due to the partial nature of this enquiry, it cannot be determined whether the clearing process is a cause of early withdrawal.

Related IER Research includes:

The Institute for Employment Research has had considerable experience in conducting research into the transition from higher education to employment and the process of change in the graduate labour market.

'Graduate Careers Seven Years On' (ESRC/CSU, in progress)

'Moving On (Two): Graduate Careers Three Years after Graduation' (DfES, in progress)

Elias, P., A. McKnight, J. Pitcher, K. Purcell and C. Simm (1999). *Moving On: Graduate Careers Three Years After Graduation*. Manchester: CSU.

Hasluck, C., J. Pitcher and C. Simm (2001). *Academic Research Careers in Scotland: A Longitudinal Study of Contract Research Staff, Their Jobs and Their Career Patterns*. Edinburgh: Scottish Higher Education Funding Council.

Purcell, K., T. Hogarth, J. Pitcher and C. Jacobs (1999). *Graduate Opportunities, Social class and Age: Employers' Recruitment Strategies in the New Graduate Labour Market*. London: Council for Industry and Higher Education.

Purcell, K. and J. Pitcher (1996), *Great Expectations: the New Diversity of Graduate Skills and Aspirations*. Manchester: CSU.

Purcell, K., J. Pitcher and C. Simm (1999). *Working Out? Graduates' Early Experiences of the Labour Market*. Manchester: CSU.