Leaving University Early
A Research Report from the back on course project

December 2012
About

This report presents the findings of joint research by the back on course project and The Open University’s Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships investigating early-leavers from higher education. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) provided data for this study.

back on course was an impartial advice and guidance service for people who had withdrawn from higher education before completing their studies. It was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as a three-year project, and managed by The Open University with contact and data services provided by UCAS.

www.backoncourse.ac.uk

The Open University is a world leader in modern distance learning, the pioneer of teaching and learning methods which enable people to achieve their career and life goals studying at times and in places to suit them.

www.open.ac.uk

The Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships leads the Open University’s widening participation work, partnerships and collaborations with education partners.

www.open.ac.uk/cicp

Acknowledgements

Development and delivery of the research and analysis featured in this report was made possible by the expertise of Joanne Moore of the ARC Network.

Please cite this report as:
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Foreword by
Barbara Stephens OBE

This report presents the data and findings from the three year **back on course** project, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and delivered by the Open University (OU) with support from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS).

The project was established in response to widespread concern in the last 10 years about the number of students leaving higher education before they gained their qualification, and the cost of that non-completion in terms of both money and lost opportunity to the student, the university and the wider economy. Although a great deal of research has been conducted on improving retention within institutions, we have been unable to find significant research amongst the students after they leave the institution, and there has been no systematic attempt to offer these students information, advice and guidance (IAG) on their future direction.

**back on course** was established to address these deficits. In academic year 2009-10, the project was piloted in the North West of England and the interim findings of the pilot were published in December 2010. Although both the number of institutions (6) and the number of former students covered by the research was small, it was sufficient to demonstrate that there was an unsatisfied demand for the IAG service, and that research conducted about these former students had the potential to provide new insights into why students leave early, and what could be done to support them.

During academic years 2010-11 and 2011-12, the project was rolled out across England, and by the time the service closed at the end of September 2012, 107 English higher education institutions had agreed to engage with **back on course**, and the contact details of over 47,000 early-leavers had been passed to the project. We believe this is the largest dataset that has yet been available for analysis. This report looks at all the data gathered in the three-year period and highlights where this reinforces the conclusions and inferences of earlier research, but also where there are new insights. We believe that in doing so, there are useful lessons for institutions and policy-makers.

Finally, the project moved away from using the phrase drop-out, or even non-completer at the end of the first year of operation, and instead adopted the phrase early-leaver to describe this group of former students. This is because both the early descriptors imply failure, and the conversations that the team had with former students suggested that leaving early can be a reluctant response to difficult and complex situations; for many students the decision to leave was personally devastating.

During the final year of the project, we sought to find a funding model which would make the service sustainable after the end of HEFCE funding. A detailed options appraisal established that the only viable approach was a subscription model, and partner institutions were approached to become subscribers. 17 institutions did agree to support the service, but unfortunately this was insufficient to sustain the service going forward. We would like to thank these institutions for their support, as well as the 30 plus institutions who were unable to support the service immediately, but hoped to do so in the future.

The service was supported by the National Role Advisory Board, chaired by Sir Martin Harris, by the Shared Solutions Steering Group within the Open University and by a group of staff within UCAS, all of whom helped us to progress a complex project which broke new ground and had some knotty problems to solve. We would like to thank all of the members of all the groups for their help and support.

Finally, the service was delivered by a small group of skilled and passionate staff within the Open University, who were totally committed to helping their clients get their lives back on track. Without their contribution, the service which helped thousands would not have existed. Thank you.

Barbara M Stephens OBE, Project Director, **back on course**
Executive Summary

About back on course

back on course was a three-year national project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and delivered by and the Open University (OU) with support from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). The project ran from 2009 to 2012 and was established in response to increasing concern about the number of students leaving higher education before they gained their qualification (National Audit Office, 2007), in the context of an increase in student numbers, and increasingly diverse student population, and associated concerns about the cost of non-completion in terms of both money and lost opportunity to the student, the university and the wider economy.

back on course ran over the same timescale as the first phase of the ‘What Works?’ project, which received funding from HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and was managed by the Higher Education Academy. Both projects sought to address the issues of retention in higher education, and ‘What Works?’ worked within higher education institutions, and with students who had considered leaving but had not done so. back on course, on the other hand, offered a service to students who had left higher education. It sought to look at different aspects of Higher Education Institution (HEI) provision, to see what institutions could do to improve their retention rate.

About the research

The overall purpose of the research was to develop responses to two primary research questions:

1. Which students leave higher education early?
2. What characteristics or experiences contribute to early-leaving?

There is a wide ranging and diverse body of qualitative research, and relatively small scale quantitative research, available exploring why students leave university early. This research base provides insight into a wide range of factors associated with leaving early. There has, however, been few studies that used a large dataset to describe and analyse the landscape of higher education with respect to leaving university early.

This research report used data on early-leavers from full-time undergraduate study supplied by 86 of the UK HEIs that were involved in the back on course project. These institutions accounted for 1,399,845 of the total number of accepted applicants in 2006-11, equating to 69.6% of the total of all accepted applicants at UCAS member institutions during the period.

This dataset represents a rich source of information and the size of the dataset makes detailed quantitative analysis possible, which permits inferences to be made about the national picture. The data was augmented by additional data collected by the back on course project from around 2,700 students on their reasons for not completing their studies.

Key findings

Patterns of leaving early

1. Patterns suggest that ‘non-traditional’ students, for example mature entrants without recent A levels, people from lower HE participation neighbourhoods and those from a previous educational institutional in the further education sector, are more likely to be early-leavers compared to ‘traditional’ younger students with recent A levels.
2. Regression analysis, based on a selection of key variables, produced significant associations and differences between institutions based on institutional average tariff scores.
3. Early-leaving appears to be most strongly linked to prior educational attainment, both in terms of tariff scores and previous education type.
4. Distance to study appears to be an important factor for Middle and especially Higher Tariff Group institutions, and appears to be a more important factor for younger students than older students.
5. Applying through clearing or direct to the institution appears to have a relatively weak, but significant, association with early-leaving for both young and older students. Application route may be a more important factor at Middle Tariff Group, and to a lesser extent Lower Tariff Group institutions.
Widening participation indicators in terms of applicants who originate from areas of low HE participation and whose previous education was in the further education sector or `other` were found overall to have relatively weak associations with early-leaving. However, it was found to be significantly associated with early-leaving for younger students and those at Higher Tariff Group institutions.

Reasons for leaving early

1. The largest group of early-leavers did so primarily for personal/financial reasons (including caring for others).
2. Nearly two-fifths (37%) left primarily for HE-related reasons to do with either the course or the institution. There is some evidence that the reason for leaving may be influenced by the reason for choosing the HE institution, and whether the student had access to information, advice and guidance before application.
3. At the same time, relatively many left for more than one reason. In practice, the reasons why individuals left are likely to be multiple and complex.

Re-application to higher education

1. Rates of successful re-application were high at 21.5% of early-leavers, and a further 6.1% had re-applied without success.
2. Non-traditional students are less likely to reapply spontaneously. Proportionally fewer older students, students with fewer qualifications as recorded by tariff points and students who were direct entrants reapplied.
3. Males were less likely to re-apply than females, potentially exacerbating the under-representation of men in HE.

Conclusions

The main headline findings of this study on the whole appear to confirm previous research about patterns of early-leaving. Confirmation of previous findings is important as it validates and updates those previous studies, based on a very large dataset. However, this study has also found additional evidence for considerable variation in the importance of certain variables and their relationship to leaving university early between different types of institutions and student groups. For example, although in general, older students tend to be more likely to leave early, younger students are more likely to leave early where they are from areas of low HE participation or are without A levels at higher tariff institutions. This evidence points to the need to constantly explore the interaction of a wide range of student level and institutional variables, observing where some vary the expected outcome, which will serve to avoid potentially misleading generalisations about certain `types` of students as more likely to leave early.

This research has produced a strong set of findings attesting to the relevance of the tariff group of a university to certain key characteristics associated with early-leaving. Early-leaving at High Tariff Group universities–those having on average students with 390 or more tariff points on entry—is lower overall, but had relatively higher early-leaver rates than lower tariff group universities for `non-traditional` students, including older students, males, those from lower participation backgrounds, those not from independent or state grammar schools, and those without A levels recently acquired. This calls into question whether the aspiration for bright pupils from poor neighbourhoods to attend elite universities is necessarily always the best option for the student.

Some findings of this study relate to areas not well-explored in other research. For example, distance travelled to university for younger students is associated with leaving early. Previous education and qualifications also appears to be relevant, and although it has been the focus of much attention in relation to university access, it has been less so in relation to leaving early.

Findings in this study also suggest that financial considerations are an important factor for students who leave early. Other research appears divided on the relevance of financial pressures, and given the further increases of tuition fees in England, and the effects of the current economic recession, we would suggest this area is a relevant focus for future research.

Finally, the matching process undertaken by UCAS revealed for the first time the high percentage of early-leavers who spontaneously re-apply to university. In the earlier National Audit Office (NAO) study, it was suggested that some 10% of students could return to higher education; this research shows that a higher percentage than this is already doing so, and that those who do not re-apply spontaneously may have more complex and difficult issues to resolve before they can return.
Comment

It is important that the conclusions above, which show that students from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to leave early than ‘traditional’, younger students, are not used as a justification for reversing or slowing efforts to widen participation in higher education; the underlying picture is that the percentage of students that leave without completing their qualification has not increased, despite a significant increase in both the overall participation rate and the diversity of the student population. The overwhelming majority of students successfully complete their qualification, and the UK record on completion is very much better than that of the United States and most other European countries.

It is also worth highlighting that, contrary to much media coverage, many students who leave early spontaneously re-apply; they are not ‘drop-outs’. Instead, both early-leavers and those who re-apply are making considered decisions about their personal circumstances and their futures.

A key issue highlighted is the degree to which early-leavers made ill-informed decisions about their initial choice of university or course. Because the primary source of information for many early-leavers was the HEI to which they applied, it follows that one of the key actions that institutions can take to improve their retention is to ensure that, as far as possible, prospective students understand the expectations that the university has of them, the amount of support they can expect, and what the content of the course is. While the Key Information Set that is being introduced is an important component of this, it also encompasses information about culture. From the experience of back on course, it appears contact time is not a valid proxy for culture; students also need information, for example, about support networks and where they can seek help not related directly to their academic work.

A new area for institutions to consider in their retention strategies is the correlation of distance between home and university, and propensity to leave early. If students are living at home, which may be indicative of financial pressure and/or caring responsibilities, they may have less opportunity to integrate with their institution. They may also experience issues around transport which make it more difficult for them to maintain attendance, especially if lectures are in the evening. Finally, it may be easier for them to leave; if they do not have accommodation contracts into which they are tied, the financial penalties for leaving early will be reduced. It is suggested that institutions could identify those students living at home while studying, and check whether they need particular support to enable them to be successful.

Finally, there is a clear correlation between students from low participation neighbourhoods attending High Tariff institutions and the propensity to leave early. This calls into question the political enthusiasm for encouraging bright students from poor neighbourhoods to apply for highly selective institutions unless there is continued support for them once they join the institution. The literature shows that there has been a shift away from the deficit model of student withdrawal towards a recognition that higher education needs to adapt to ‘a new function and purpose in a changed society’, and it is suggested that some High Tariff institutions may wish to consider afresh their approach.
1. Introduction

The back on course project

back on course was a project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and delivered by the Open University (OU).

The project ran from 2009 to 2012 and was established in response to increasing concern about the number of students leaving higher education before they gained their qualification, and the cost of non-completion in terms of both money and lost opportunity to the student, the university and the wider economy. Although a great deal of research has been conducted on improving retention within institutions, significant research amongst the students after they leave the institution is sparse and there had been no systematic attempt to offer these students information, advice and guidance (IAG) on their future direction.

back on course was established to address these deficits. In academic year 2009-10, the project was piloted in the North West of England and the interim findings of the pilot were published in December 2010. The project expanded to include 107 institutions and ran until 2012.

back on course ran over the same timescale as the first phase of the ‘What Works?’ project, which received funding from HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and was managed by the Higher Education Academy. While both projects sought to address the issues of retention in higher education, ‘What Works?’ worked within higher education institutions, and with students who had considered leaving but had not done so. back on course, on the other hand, offered a service to students who had left higher education. It sought to look at different aspects of HEI provision to see what institutions could do to improve their retention rate.

The Research

The central aim of this research was to provide a landmark study of early-leavers from higher education, in order to update previous research on the topic and to confirm or adjust other findings from smaller scale studies.

The overall purpose of the research was to develop responses to two primary research questions:

- Which students leave higher education early?
- What characteristics or experiences contribute to early-leaving?

The specific objectives for the research were:

- To complete a literature review, drawing on UK, US and other comparable nations’ data to produce a comprehensive picture of the state of knowledge on early-leavers from HE
- To complete a quantitative exploration of the major variables associated with early-leaving
- To provide an evidence based assessment and estimate of the range and scale of issues associated with leaving HE early
- To identify areas for future substantive research
- To make recommendations to key sector partners for areas of focus to support initiatives to reduce the number of students leaving early.

This research builds on previous research reports produced by the back on course project, which are available from www.backoncourse.ac.uk/research.
2. Methods

The study makes use of two large and detailed datasets as its primary data sources. It was recognised at the outset that considerations of these datasets in isolation would be insufficient to provide a robust analysis of the factors for and reasons why students leave university early. A literature review was therefore commissioned prior to analysis of the datasets. The literature review provided valuable context for the analysis and a means of triangulation whereby the findings of the analysis could be reflected back onto the literature and inform and enrich the conclusions and recommendations at the end of this report.

Literature review

A literature review was commissioned to provide an overview of research into students who leave higher education early with the specific intention to identify reasons for non-continuation of studies. This review of the literature was intended to map out the territory of ‘knowns’ in the research and provide a backdrop against which the findings of the present research could be compared.

The initial identification of relevant literature drew on a number of sources:

- reports commissioned by national agencies such as the Higher Education Academy and the National Audit Office,
- existing literature reviews on retention and non-completion, and
- databases of higher education research.

A snowball approach was then used to identify further quantitative and qualitative research on the profile of early-leavers from higher education and the reasons for non-completion.

Clarification of terminology

Early-leavers are defined in this study as ‘students who have left [their] HE course before qualifying’ (back on course, 2011). Within the literature, however, a wide range of terms are used to describe such students, with ‘attrition’ and ‘withdrawal’ being commonly used in the United Kingdom (Harrison, 2006) and the United States (Troxel, 2010). Particular to the UK context are the terms non-completion and non-continuation (National Audit Office, 2007). Non-completion usually refers to the number of students starting in a given year who do not continue with their studies until qualification. Non-continuation is the proportion of students who do not continue past their first year of study. Both groups of students could also be described as ‘early-leavers’. However, non-continuation is not the same as non-completion as this can include students who take a sabbatical from their studies at the same institution or transfer to another course at another institution. In the United States, this distinction between permanent and temporary withdrawal is explained by the terms ‘drop-out’ and ‘stop out’ (Troxel, 2010).

A distinction is also often made between students who leave voluntarily (Quinn et al, 2005) or who face ‘dismissal’ (Troxel, 2010) from the University, often for reasons of poor academic performance. In reality, of course, poor performing students may decide to withdraw before any institutional sanctions are taken, or their performance may be undermined by factors other than capability.

Reliability of data on early-leaving

The United Kingdom is generally felt to have high levels of continuation and completion in comparison to other countries (Thomas, 2012). In 2009/10, the last year for which data are available, 91.6% of full-time students were still enrolled in their higher education institution in the year following their first entry and it was projected that 78.4% would get a degree, with a further 8.3% getting a lower qualification or transferring to another institution (HESA, 2012). These are figures which have remained fairly stable over the past decade and certainly have changed little since the National Audit Office report in 2007. By contrast, the United States and many western European countries have much lower levels of completion, generally at around 50% (Barefoot, 2004; Hovdhaugen, 2009; Lassibille and Navarro Gómez, 2008).

Although statistics on non-continuation and non-completion are widely cited in the literature, and inform retention policy, there has been a lack of consensus on what such terms mean (Thomas, 2012), how such data are collected and the dependability of institutional data (Harrison, 2006) with Buglear (2009) finding a large disparity between Registry and course administration figures on just one programme of study. Quinn et al (2005) also refer to the ‘insuperable problems’ caused to their research on working class drop-out by the inaccuracy of the data (p. 10).
Actual data on student withdrawal may disguise a much larger number of students, estimated at up to around 40% (Thomas, 2012), who consider leaving higher education. As such, comparisons of student retention and withdrawal are problematic, and the reasons cited for withdrawal may, arguably, be much more widely felt than the relatively small numbers who do actually withdraw appear to suggest (Rowley et al, 2008).

The datasets

The back on course project was set up to generate data on early-leavers that could be used for research purposes, as well as part of the delivery of the service. back on course partner institutions uploaded the name and contact details for early-leavers to a UCAS secure server. UCAS was then responsible for writing to early-leavers to introduce the service, and offer the individual the opportunity to opt out of the service. If they did not opt-out their details were passed to the back on course team at the Open University for follow-up. Early-leavers who were successfully contacted had an initial conversation with a Team Assistant, and for many early-leavers, they were able to be given information at that stage which met their needs. However, all early-leavers contacted were given the opportunity for one or more telephone-based information, advice and guidance (IAG) interviews with qualified advisers. Further data was recorded for research purposes at each stage, although early-leavers could opt out of data sharing at any of these points. Figure 1 below gives detail on the number of students associated with each stage.

Figure 1: Numbers of student early-leavers involved in the back on course project, and those matched to UCAS records

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early-leavers referred to back on course</td>
<td>47,171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early-leavers referred to back on course and matched to UCAS records for research purposes</td>
<td>36,574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early-leavers contacted by back on course</td>
<td>c. 22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early-leavers referred to back on course and matched to UCAS records for research purposes</td>
<td>c. 3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back on course clients</td>
<td>2,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back on course clients matched to UCAS records for research purposes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two main datasets were used to analyse patterns of, and reasons for, leaving early:

Early-leavers and all other students at back on course partner institutions

A unique national dataset of accepted applicants provided by UCAS including standard and derived variables for student characteristics and institutional type. The dataset gave a count of the number of accepted applicants and early-leavers referred to back on course who could be matched to UCAS records of UK-domiciled accepted applicants to full-time undergraduate study in English UCAS member institutions between 2006 and 2011.

back on course clients

Aggregate data collected through the Open University’s Customer Management System, containing numeric tabulations of the sum of accepted applicants at back on course partner institutions and early-leavers against set UCAS variables and variables derived from administrative information gathered through the back on course services provided to a subset of early-leavers.

The early-leaver group identified in the analysis of the Main Data only included early-leavers referred to back on course by the participating institutions, which could be matched to UCAS Apply data and who had not opted out of data sharing. In some cases there were a very small number of self-referred students who were counted within the administrative tabulations. The nature of the back on course work and structure meant that the size and duration of the programme varied from one year to the next, which affected the volume of early-leavers recorded across the dataset each year (see Annex 2 for a year on year breakdown). The total early-leaver group included in the analysis therefore is not the same as all early-leavers during the period (this would require follow-up for

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1 In the early stages early-leavers who had re-applied to HE would be removed from the dataset, however from May 2011 onwards the process was changed so that all early-leavers were given the chance to receive IAG.

2 Accepted applicants are defined as those holding places at an institution following their application. For the purposes of this report this group is also referred to as ‘students’.

3 The records were matched on either of two sets of criteria: 1. Forename, surname, date of birth, institution accepted to/ left early from; or 2. Forename, surname, home postcode, institution accepted to/ left early from. Only the last instance of a matched early leaver was used (ie. if an individual was accepted to an institution and left early and was then accepted to another institution and again left early, the student flag was against the second institution).
particular cohorts of accepted applicants). However, the early-leavers captured in the data, aggregated over five application cycles - 2006-11 - is considered to provide a good and relatively unbiased proxy for propensities to leaving early.

**Approaches to using the datasets**

The two datasets described above cover the same population but to different levels of detail, with different categorisations for some variables, and in some cases additional information collected through the back on course project. The approach to using these datasets was pragmatic, although the researchers sought to provide as comprehensive an investigation of the variables as possible:

- The data on early-leavers referred to back on course was mainly used:
  - to make comparisons between the overall profile of all students, students from back on course partner institutions and early-leavers;
  - to make an assessment of the rate of re-application;
  - to run statistical tests of the significance of the data; and
  - for hypothesis testing.

- The data on back on course clients was mainly used to describe reasons for leaving, and additional student information such as employment status and living arrangements.
The key standard UCAS variables used in the analysis for both of these sources are summarized in Table 1 below.

### Table 1: Standard and derived UCAS variables included in the analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Tariff Group</strong></td>
<td>Calculated taking the average Tariff score of the applicants accepted to the institution in 2011, and banded as follows: Lower Tariff Group: 0 – 280 points, Middle Tariff Group: 280&lt; -390 points, Higher Tariff Group: more than 390 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic variables</strong></td>
<td>The analysis included student level variables taken from the application through UCAS made by the students, and based on UCAS definitions of: - age on application, - gender, and - ethnicity. Not all demographic variables (e.g. ethnicity) are compulsory fields in the UCAS application process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UCAS tariff point score</strong></td>
<td>Examination results for select key qualifications used in applying for entry to HE are supplied to UCAS from qualification awarding bodies (the Awarding Body Linkage (ABL) process). ABL data varies by qualification and UCAS does not receive verified results for ‘Access to HE’ or many vocational qualifications. Tariff points achieved from some qualifications and through A levels not taken within the timeframe eligible for verification through ABL will not be calculated within UCAS data (and recorded as ‘0’ points)⁴.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recent A level qualifications</strong></td>
<td>Students were flagged to identify those who had recent GCE A levels, using the ABL process which covers the 18 months prior to the summer of the cycle during which the students applied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Previous educational establishment</strong></td>
<td>Derived from the establishment an applicant had linked to in their UCAS application, with the type used being that which was defined within UCAS by the establishments themselves⁵. Students who had applied as an individual and not through a previous educational establishment were grouped into ‘Other’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HE participation indicator</strong></td>
<td>An indicator of HE participation was derived from the students’ home postcodes stated in their UCAS applications. Two separate measures were applied based on the POLAR measures of participation rates in HE for populations by postcode area: QYPR for those age 19 &amp; under and QAHE for those aged 20 &amp; over⁶.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distance to study</strong></td>
<td>A band value for distance was calculated using the home postcode stated on the application in students’ UCAS applications and the postcode of the main campus of the institution accepted to. The distance used was a straight line between these points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application route</strong></td>
<td>Students were flagged according to whether or not they made a main scheme choice (a choice made on time before June 30 of the cycle) and whether they applied to only one institution or made multiple choices⁷. Those applicants who applied after June 30 in the cycle – i.e. in Clearing or Adjustment – were flagged as making no choices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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⁴ Details of the qualifications within the Tariff can be found at http://www.ucas.com/students/ucas_tariff/

⁵ There was a re-classification exercise on establishments between 2006 and 2011 and where possible, the type was taken from the 2011 type, although if this was unavailable then the type was taken from the cycle the student applied in.

⁶ More information can be found at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/ourresearch/polar/

⁷ Up to 2008 cycle an applicant could make up to 6 choices. From the 2009 cycle onwards an applicant could make up to 5 choices.
3. The National Picture

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) annual performance indicators for higher education include figures for non-continuation of students at HEIs. Non-continuation is presented by the HESA performance indicators in two ways:

- Whether students who started in a particular year are no longer in higher education one year later (for full-time students) or two years later (for part-time students). These figures are given by institution, and include breakdown by age marker and low participation marker. Full-time students who were recorded as leaving before 1 December in their first academic year have been removed from the figures, as were part-time students who leave their programme of study within 50 days of commencement. Supplementary tables give rates by subject and entry qualifications for full-time entrants.

- Projecting outcomes over a longer period for full-time first degree starters (the likely ‘end states’ after a period of fifteen years, i.e. having gained a qualification, transferred to another institution, or been absent from HE for two consecutive years). The projection is based on the current pattern of students at the institution taking account of mode of study, level of study, institution, year of programme and if applicable, qualification obtained and assuming that this pattern of students is typical for the institution.

The HESA figures for UK show an overall non-completion rate after one year after starting of 8.6% for 2009/10 entrants to full-time first degrees. The non-continuation rates are higher for other entrants, older students, young low participation neighbourhood entrants and part-time students, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Non-continuation from UK HEIs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Young</th>
<th>Mature</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total, Number no longer in HE, % no longer in HE</td>
<td>Total, Number no longer in HE, % no longer in HE</td>
<td>Total, Number no longer in HE, % no longer in HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time first degree entrants* (2009/10)</td>
<td>289,345, 20,930, 7.2</td>
<td>81,475, 10,825, 13.3</td>
<td>370,830, 31,755, 8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time other entrants* (2009/10)</td>
<td>23,680, 4,400, 18.6</td>
<td>33,205, 4,845, 14.6</td>
<td>56,905, 9,255, 16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time first degree entrants from LPN based on POLAR2 method* (excludes Scotland) 2009/10</td>
<td>26,910, 2,675, 9.9</td>
<td>NA, NA</td>
<td>NA, NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time first degree entrants** (2008/09)</td>
<td>NA, NA</td>
<td>NA, NA</td>
<td>37,010, 12,385, 33.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*No longer in higher education one year later **No longer in higher education two years later

Source: HESA PIs

Available at http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2064&Itemid=141
Sector projected learning outcomes for full-time students starting first degree courses by academic year is given in Table 3. The longer term projections suggest that 13-16% of full-time first degree students neither got an award nor transferred.

Table 3: Sector projected learning outcomes 2003/04-2009/10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic year</th>
<th>starters</th>
<th>who are mature (%)</th>
<th>obtain a degree (%)</th>
<th>neither award nor transfer (%)</th>
<th>obtain other award (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>360,275</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>82.6%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>343,865</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>83.6%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>324,760</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006/07</td>
<td>309,330</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005/06</td>
<td>323,465</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>304,075</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003/04</td>
<td>303,495</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>81.4%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HESA PIs
4. Describing how representative students at back on course partner institutions are compared to all higher education students

This section reviews the sample of students used in the research, in order to explore the extent to which students at back on course partner institutions are similar or different to higher education students as a whole. back on course partner institutions who transferred datasets included in this research totalled 86 institutions (compared to 221 institutions which were not back on course partners). back on course partner institutions accounted for 1,399,845 of the total number of accepted applicants in 2006-11, equating to 69.6% of the total of all accepted applicants during the period.

Most accepted applicants from back on course partner institutions (i.e. in total and amongst early-leavers) were from post-1992 group institutions (Figure 2). back on course partner institutions flagged in the dataset provided greatest coverage for the 1994 Group of universities and Guild HE universities (92% of accepted applicants at the 1994 Group universities, and 78.9% of the Guild HE universities). Over half (53.4%) of accepted applicants at Russell Group institutions during the period were at back on course partner institutions. It should be noted that back on course partner institutions were mainly universities and there were few Colleges of Higher Education in the programme.

Figure 2: All accepted applicants and back on course partner institution applicants 2006-11 by mission group*

There are some differences in the profile of back on course partner institutions compared to other HEIs. The largest group of accepted applicants in both groups was flagged as being at an institution in the Lower Tariff Group, however, there were proportionally fewer in the Lower Tariff Group amongst back on course partner institutions (45.6% compared to 51.8% at other institutions). The Middle Tariff Group was more strongly represented in back on course partner institutions (over a third of back on course partner institutions were in the Middle Tariff Group compared to a fifth at other institutions) (Figure 3).

*Institutions can belong to >1 mission group and in these cases students are double-counted
There are also some differences between the entrants to back on course partner institutions by demographic and other characteristics compared to the other institutions:

- The profile of students at back on course partner institutions is slightly younger: 72.3% were aged 19 and under, compared to 69.6% at other institutions. Some 60.6% of students at back on course partner institutions had recent 'A' level qualifications compared to 56.2% at other institutions.

- Students at back on course partner institutions were more likely than students at other institutions to have made multiple application choices (86.4% compared to 79.7% at other institutions).

- Students at back on course partner institutions were more likely to travel further to university – 54.7% travelled 30 miles and above compared to 49.6% at other institutions.

- The state sector (excluding grammar schools) accounted for 30.2% of the previous education setting for students at back on course partner institutions compared to 27.0% at other institutions. Students at other institutions were more likely than those at back on course partner institutions to be from the Independent school sector (10.3% at other institutions compared to 7.9% at back on course partner institutions), or from the ‘other’ category (23.2% compared to 19.6%).

- There were slightly higher proportions of students from the areas of highest participation at back on course partner institutions (71.5% from high participation areas compared to 69.6% at other institutions).
5. Re-application to higher education

Key findings

- Rates of successful re-application were high at 21.5% of early-leavers, and a further 6.1% had re-applied without success.

- Non-traditional students are less likely to re-apply spontaneously; proportionally fewer older students, students with fewer qualifications as recorded by tariff points and students who were direct entrants reapplied.

- Males were less likely to re-apply than females, potentially exacerbating the under-representation of men in HE.

The HESA performance indicators relating to resumption of study indicate that 11.1% of first degree entrants who were not in HE in 2008/09 transferred to another UK HEI in 2010/11 after one year out of HE and a further 11.7% resumed at the same HEI.

Data from back on course partner institutions suggested that some 21.5% of early-leavers with records matched to UCAS data successfully reapplied to HE (Table 4), (27.6% of the total reapplied with a success rate of 77.9%). This proportion of re-applicants is above the rate in the 2010 back on course report which quoted a figure of 12% of the total early-leavers in 2006-2010 being successful re-applicants (15% re-applied with 80% success). However, the results appear to be broadly in line with the evidence from the HESA PIs.

Table 4: Re-applicants to HE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early-leavers</th>
<th>Number (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not reapply</td>
<td>26,483 (72.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-application made:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reapplicant accepted</td>
<td>7,861 (21.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reapplicant no outcome</td>
<td>2,230 (6.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All reapplicants</td>
<td>10,091 (27.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Older early-leavers (20 and over in the application cycle) were proportionally less likely to reapply, and be successful, compared to younger students (less than a fifth - 18.8% - of older students reapplied, with a 66.9% success rate, compared to around a third of younger students - 32.3% - an 81.3% success rate). Early-leavers with recent A levels were more likely than average to reapply (36.6%) and this group had a relatively high success rate (83.5%, compared to 20.2% of those without recent A levels who reapplied with only a 69.6% success rate). This data corresponds with previous back on course research reports.

Less than a fifth (19.8%) of early-leavers with zero tariff points reapplied and the data suggests that those with more tariff points were more likely to reapply (Figure 4). Over half of early-leavers with 420 and above tariff points were re-applicants. Rates of successful application demonstrate a similar trend.

Early-leavers who had applied through clearing and UCAS Extra were more likely that average to reapply (32.1% and 41.1% in these groups respectively reapplied), with average success rates (76.2% and 78.8% respectively). Direct applicants were less likely to reapply and had relatively low success (11.3% of this group reapplied and 62.1% were successful).

http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2064&Itemid=141
back on course (2011), Presentation of findings from the first and second years of the back on course project

UCAS Extra is the process by which students who have made their full five choices, but are holding no offers, can make further choices. For further information see http://www.ucas.com/he_staff/admissionsexplained/extra
As reported in previous years, early-leavers who originally were studying close to home were less likely to reapply than those studying further away (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Re-applicant and success rates by UCAS tariff point score of individual

Figure 5: Re-applicant and success rates by distance to study at previous HEI
6. Patterns of leaving early

Key findings

- The patterns appear to suggest that ‘non-traditional’ students, for example mature entrants without recent A levels, people from lower HE participation neighbourhoods and those from a previous educational institutional in the further education sector, are more likely to be early-leavers compared to ‘traditional’ younger students with recent A levels.

- Regression analysis based on a more limited range of variables, produced significant associations and differences between institutions by type based on average tariff scores. Early-leaving appears to be most strongly linked to prior educational attainment (tariff scores and previous education type).

- Distance to study appears to be an important factor for Middle and especially Higher Tariff Group institutions, and appears to be more important when associated with younger students, than older students.

- Application route appears to have a relatively weak, but significant, association with early-leaving for both young and older students. Application route may be a more important factor at Middle Tariff Group, and to a lesser extent Lower Tariff Group institutions.

- Widening participation indicators in terms of applicants coming from areas of lowest HE participation and the previous education type were found overall to have a relatively weak associations with early-leaving. However, it was found to be significantly associated with early-leaving for younger students and those at Higher Tariff Group institutions.

What do we already know about factors that contribute to leaving university early?

Much is written in the retention literature about the need for there to be a good fit between the student and the institution, and particularly between the student’s motivation and academic ability and the institution’s academic and social characteristics (Cabrera et al, 1993). Tinto’s (1975) Student Integration Model has been particularly influential in how institutions and policy makers have viewed the issue of early-leaving and has led to a view of integration as requiring the student to assimilate to the institution and the ways of studying within that institution. More recently, there has been a criticism of this as treating early withdrawal as a failing on the part of the student (Ozga and Sukhanden, 1998; Van Bragt et al, 2011).

Particularly within an era of an increasingly diverse student population, there has been a shift away from the deficit model of student withdrawal (Ogza and Sukhanden, 1998; Young et al, 2007) towards a recognition that higher education needs to adapt to ‘a new function and purpose in a changed society’ (Young et al, 2007, p. 277). However, there are a number of personal or demographic factors which are considered to play a role in the likelihood of a student to leave higher education early. The main factors are discussed in turn, although it should be noted that there is considerable interaction between them.

Age at commencement of studies

The majority of students still start their degrees as young students. However, there are an increasing number of mature students, both full-time and part-time, and this pattern looks set to continue as the number of eighteen year olds reduces (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Continuation and completion rates for this group are generally lower than for young students (Davies and Elias, 2003, p.10), which is often ascribed to older students being more likely to have family responsibilities and face financial difficulties. On a positive note, Yorke and Longden (2008) found that mature students choose their programmes of study better than younger students, although they tend to be more critical than younger students of their experience in higher education.

Gender

Not all studies on early-leavers focus on gender, but those which do indicate that male students are more likely to leave early than female students (Davies and Elias, 2003, p.10). In their discussion of gender differences influencing early-leaving, Quinn et al (2005) found that while male students were more likely to integrate socially into university than their female students, some of whom also had caring roles, they were also less likely to admit difficulties and seek help. There was also a sense that stereotypical views of white working-class men as not having the correct ‘learning dispositions’ (Quinn et al, 2005, p. 35) had resulted in poor careers advice, which left them studying inappropriate courses with which they soon became disillusioned.
Part-time study
The National Audit Office (2007) report found that the single factor most affecting a student’s chance of
continuing in higher education is whether they study full-time or part-time. Part-time students are more likely
to study flexibly and take breaks in their studies and there is also a higher likelihood that part-time students will
also be mature students and thus have greater family and financial responsibilities. In contrast, continuation for
this group was higher than full-time students if registered for a degree in a further education college. Given its
findings, what was most striking about the report is that it is one of very few which focussed specifically on the
experience of part-time students, although a number did include part-time students amongst a wider cohort of
early-leavers.

Non-traditional students
Non-traditional students have been increasingly represented in higher education over the past decade and
include part-time, disabled or mature students and those from minority ethnic and lower socio-economic groups
(Roberts, 2011). Although the widening participation agenda, in particular, has sought to promote equality of
access, there is still evidence that non-traditional students are more likely to leave early (Walker et al, 2004). This
reflects similar findings in other European countries, such as France (Gury, 2011) and Germany (Georg, 2009),
where students from families with no previous background of higher education were more likely to leave early
than students whose parents had a degree.

There is also evidence that non-traditional students may bring with them particular expectations of university life,
which are ‘not congruent with what the unchanging university education delivers’ (Roberts, 2011, p.192). There
is also evidence that events such as summer schools, often organized with a view to engaging non-traditional
students, are unrealistic in the view they present to students of what to expect at university. Quinn et al (2005)
point to the sharp contrast between the small groups prospective students encounter at such summer schools
with the realities of a lecture theatre of three hundred. Quinn et al (2005) go on to argue that continued
higher rates of early-leaving amongst working class students in particular has become a ‘pervasive story that
working class cultures and choices are ‘wrong’ and ‘drop out’ is just another way in which working-class people
demonstrate their failure to succeed’ (p. 14). As a result, there have more recently, as indicated above, been
attempts to consider and problematise the ‘standard’ HE offering in relation to its increasingly ‘non-traditional’
student (Roberts, 2011, p. 184).

What does this study tell us about factors that contribute to early-leaving?
This section describes the results of the analysis of the data on early-leavers, illustrating the patterns which
can be observed between different groups according to student characteristics and institutional factors. The
analysis compares the profile of early-leavers from back on course partner institutions against the profile of
all students at back on course partner institutions. The total number of students represented in the dataset of
back on course partner institutions was 1,399,845, of which 36,528 were flagged as being early-leavers12, which
represents all students which could be matched to UCAS records for the research. It should be noted that more
than 47,000 early-leavers from back on course partner institution were referred to the project.

An Index was calculated showing the extent to which students with particular demographic and other
characteristics are over or under-represented amongst early-leavers. The Index is useful in providing a standard
format for comparing the different groups. It is designed to highlight inequalities in the propensity for different
groups to be early-leavers by illustrating the extent of difference in the proportion of early-leavers with certain
characteristics against what might be expected given the overall population from which early-leavers are drawn
(students at all back on course partner institutions). This is achieved by applying a simple formula which
compares early-leavers at back on course partner institutions against all students at back on course partner
institutions. For example, if there are 1000 students and 500 are male (50%), and there are 100 early-leavers of
which 50 are male (50%), we have parity between early-leavers and the overall population and a comparator
value of 1.00 (50%÷50%=1.00). Variation either side of 1.00 identifies the extent of unequal early-leaving to
inform future planning and action. The figure shows the propensity to early-leaving compared to the average and
can also be considered the relative risk of early-leaving for each group.

---

12 There were a small number of early-leavers identified at other institutions who self-referred to back on course
The analysis does not include these students since they were not attached to a back on course partner institution.
However, these students are included in the data on back on course clients.
**What is the distribution of early-leavers across institutional type?**

The propensity to leave early varied across **back on course** partner institutions grouped by Tariff. The **back on course** partner institutions which were classed as Lower Tariff Group institutions were over represented amongst early-leavers, compared to Middle and Higher Tariff Group institutions. Early-leavers from Lower Tariff institutions accounted for well over half (59.4%) of all early-leavers, compared to 45.6% of all students at all **back on course** partner institutions (Figure 6). Some institutions appeared in the data as 'Unknown' the Tariff data was deemed insufficient to group them. Institutions of unknown type were excluded from this analysis. Statistical tests showed that the differences in the profile of early-leavers by Tariff Group was significant ($X^2=5047.832$, df=3, $p=.000$).

Figure 6: Distribution of students and early-leavers at **back on course** partner institutions by institutional group

![Bar chart showing distribution of students and early-leavers by institutional group.](image)

The differences in the observed profile of early-leavers suggest that the propensity to leave early from Lower Tariff Group institutions is 1.30 times higher than the average for all institutions included in the study (Figure 7). Students at Higher Tariff Group institutions have approximately half the average propensity to leave early compared to **back on course** partner institutions as a whole.

Figure 7: Early-leavers by institution group indexed against all students from **back on course** partner institutions

![Bar chart showing early-leavers by institution group indexed against all students.](image)
Comparing the distribution of early-leavers by the mission group of their institutions with the profile of all students at back on course partner institutions by mission group, shows a higher propensity for those at post-1992, Guild HE and University Alliance member institutions to be early-leavers. Some 68.3% of early-leavers were from post-1992 institutions, above the proportion of all students from back on course partner institutions that are post-1992 institutions (58.1%), and 9.0% and 32.0% of early-leavers (compared to 6.1% and 27.1% overall) were at Guild HE and University Alliance members respectively. Those at Russell Group institutions had the lowest propensity to leave early (6.9% of all early-leavers were at Russell Group HEIs which is almost half the proportion of all students at back on course partner institutions at these Russell Group HEIs (13.4%).

Figure 8: Distribution of students and early-leavers at back on course partner institutions by mission group

What student characteristics are associated with leaving early?

Some key differences were observed in the profile of early-leavers compared to what might be expected given the overall profile of students from back on course partner institutions. Figure 9 summarises comparisons in the propensity to leave early across different student groups by demographic and other characteristics, Indexed to demonstrate the extent to which groups were over or under-represented amongst early-leavers compared to all students at back on course partner institutions. Age stands out as a key area of difference in propensity to leave early, especially for those aged 20-24 years who were a third more likely than average to leave early.

Students whose previous educational establishment was in the Further Education sector were over represented in the early leaver group (this group accounted for 22.5% of early-leavers, compared to 17.3% of all students).

Students from previous educational establishments categorised as ‘other’ also had a higher propensity to leave early (representing the largest group of early-leavers (23.9%) compared to 19.6% of all students). ‘Other’ includes those who were not associated with a centre (which will include some re-applicants), in addition to those applying via centres which did not fit into standard groupings, ie. HE, Adult Education Centre, Language School, Prison Service, Special Schools etc.
Figure 9: Early-leavers indexed against all students from back on course partner institutions

The propensity to leave early for students flagged as not having recent A level qualifications was relatively high. Well over half (55.0%) of early-leavers were non-A level entrants compared to less than two-fifths (39.4%) of all students.

Students of Asian ethnic origin were less likely than average to be early-leavers (9.2% of early-leavers compared to 11.1% of all students from back on course partner institutions). Students of Black and Mixed ethnic origin had above average representation amongst early-leavers.

Students who had made no HE choices (applied through Clearing or Adjustment) are over represented amongst early-leavers (8.9% of early-leavers made no choices compared to 5.3% of all students from back on course partner institutions). Students who applied making only a single choice were also over-represented amongst early-leavers to a lesser extent (and 10.2% of early-leavers fell into this category compared to 8.3% of all students from back on course partner institutions).

Students from the areas of lowest HE participation had a higher propensity to leave early whilst those from areas of higher HE participation had below average propensity to leave early.

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13 The flag covers the 18 months prior to the summer of the cycle applied in (e.g. a 2011 year 13 school leaver would have all results transferred for exams taken in summer 2011, Winter 2011 & Summer 2010). There will be some students who were not flagged as having recent A levels if their exams were taken more than 18 months before the summer of the cycle in which they applied. Students qualified to a greater level than A levels would be flagged as having recent A levels in they have taken exams with the 18 months preceding the summer of the cycle in which they applied. Students who applied through Clearing or Adjustment would be flagged as having recent A levels if exams were taken within 18 months of the summer of the cycle in which they applied.

14 Ethnicity was as stated on the application form in UCAS Apply, which is not a mandatory field, and 3.1% of all students at back on course partner institutions chose the 'prefer not to say' option (and were excluded from this analysis).

15 Students were flagged if they were known to be from areas which lacked a tradition of HE participation using the POLAR2 measure (quintiles 1 & 2). Students classed as ‘Unknown’ (for example with a non-geographic postcode, or no link to Census 2001 geography) were excluded from this analysis.
A more detailed look at variables associated with early-leaving
This section addresses the extent to which learner and university characteristics are quantitatively associated
with differences in early-leaving, as far as possible taking account of the associations between variables and
differences between institutions in Lower, Middle or Higher Tariff Groups. The methodology used in the first
instance was the chi-squared test of no association between early-leaving and each of the variables recorded for
students in the dataset16.

Younger and older students
As noted above, early-leaving was proportionally higher amongst older students. The biggest difference was for
the 20-24 age group. As Figure 10 shows, those aged 20 to 24 years on application accounted for 23.1% of
early-leavers, well above the proportion of this age amongst all back on course partner institution students
(17%). The data demonstrates a statistically significant association between age and early-leaving17. Calculation
of the relative risk suggests that being a mature student (20 and over on application) is associated with a
1.36-fold increase in the relative risk of early-leaving.

Figure 10: Distribution of students and early-leavers at back on course partner institutions by age band

The Higher and Middle Tariff Group institutions had a younger age profile on average compared to Lower Tariff
Group institutions (some 86.7% of all students at Higher Tariff Group institutions were aged 19 and under on
application, compared to 73.7% and 65.3% at Middle and Lower Tariff Group institutions respectively)18. The
pattern of early-leaving across these institution groups was broadly consistent for students by age band (ie. Lower
Tariff Group institutions fared worse across student groups by age), although the propensity for young students
(age 19 and under in the application cycle) to be early-leavers was highest at Lower Tariff Group institutions, and
the propensity for older students (20 and over in the application cycle) was highest at the Higher Tariff Group
institutions (Figure 11). Statistical tests suggest that the association between age (young/mature) and early-
leaving is statistically significant in each Tariff Group of HEIs, and the association is slightly stronger at Higher
Tariff Group institutions.

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16 The greater the discrepancy between the observed and the expected frequencies of particular characteristics in the early leaver group, the higher the value of the test statistic (X2).
17 The smaller the p value the stronger the effect and values below 0.001 suggest that data as extreme as those observed are unlikely to have arisen by chance.
18 Age was derived from the date of birth stated on the application form in UCAS Apply. The grouping of the age was at 31 August in the cycle applied.
Gender

Male students were over represented amongst early-leavers (accounting for 47.7% of early-leavers, but only 44.7% of all back on course partner institution students). The chi-square test indicates a significant association between gender and early-leaving. The propensity for males to be early-leavers was relatively high for both older and younger students (based on age in the application cycle). As Figure 12 shows, the highest propensity of early-leaving was for older male students (aged 20 and over in the cycle applied in) at Higher Tariff Group institutions (over half—51.3%—of early-leavers aged 20 and over from Higher Tariff Group institutions were males, compared to 42.1% of older students as a whole at these institutions) and the association is statistically significant. Being an older male student at a Higher Tariff Group institution increases the relative risk of being an early leaver compared to everyone else at Higher Tariff Group institutions by 2.45-fold (although in absolute terms this group is quite small: males aged 20 and over represented only 5.6% of all students at Higher Tariff Group back on course partner institutions).

Figure 12: Distribution of male students and male early-leavers at back on course partner institutions by age band and institution group
Widening Participation Indicators

Students who were recorded as living in an area of low HE participation on application had a higher propensity to leave early than students from high HE participation areas. Students from low HE participation areas accounted for 32.8% of early-leavers (compared to 28.5% of all back on course partner institution students). Students from low participation neighbourhoods had an older age profile compared to students from areas of highest participation (over a third 34.6% of students aged 20 and over were from low participation neighbourhoods, compared to 26.4% of younger students at back on course partner institutions). The association between age and HE participation areas is statistically significant21.

Proportionally fewer students at Higher Tariff Group institutions were from low participation neighbourhoods. Over four-fifths of students at Higher Tariff Group institutions (81.5%) with known data were from higher participation neighbourhoods, compared to 74.0% and 64.9% respectively at Middle and Lower Tariff Group institutions.

Students from low participation neighbourhoods were more likely than their colleagues from high participation neighbourhoods to be early-leavers across back on course partner institutions by institution group (Figure 13). Students at Higher Tariff Group institutions from low participation neighbourhoods had a greater propensity to leave early (just under a quarter - 24.2% - of early-leavers from Higher Tariff Group institutions were from low participation neighbourhoods, well above their representation amongst all Higher Tariff Group students - 18.5%).

Figure 13: Distribution of students & early-leavers at back on course partner institutions by HE participation category and institution group.

Previous education

Students whose previous educational establishment was in the further education (FE) sector were over-represented amongst early-leavers (22.5% of early-leavers came from FE compared to 17.1% of all back on course partner institution students) and the relative risk of someone from the FE sector leaving early was 1.30 times the average. Students from ‘other’ types of previous education and sixth form colleges were also over-represented amongst early-leavers. The relative risk of early-leaving was high for students from ‘other’ types of provision (1.21) but only slightly above the average (1.04) for former sixth form college students.

Students whose former establishment was in the FE sector had a relative risk of early-leaving of 1.91 if they were studying at Higher Tariff Group institutions (compared to all students at Higher Tariff Group institutions), and 1.35 at Middle Tariff Group institutions (relative to other Middle Tariff Group students), but the risk was much less if they were studying at Lower Tariff Group institutions relative to others in this type of institution.

---

21 X^2=334.046, df=1, p=0.000
Grouping together students whose previous education establishment was in the ‘state’ sector (ie. students whose previous educational establishment was not an independent school, which reflects the methodology used in the HESA performance indicators for widening participation), suggested that the propensity to leave early for these students was in line with the average (relative risk of 1.03). However, there are some differences by Tariff Group of institution. Students who came to HE from the state sector and went to Higher Tariff Group institutions had a slightly higher relative risk of being an early leaver (1.09).

The variable to show whether or not accepted applicants had recent A level qualifications or not is more useful as an indicator in relation to younger students, since the vast majority of older students do not fall into the recent A level group (the variable is derived from the ABL process which only covers 18 months prior to application).

Over eight out of ten young students (80.8%) at back on course partner institutions had recent A levels, but only 7.7% of mature students did so. The propensity for early-leaving by recent A level qualifications for students aged 19 and under on application was relatively high: over a third of young students who were early-leavers (34.4%) did not have A level qualifications (well above the proportion of all students aged 19 and under on entry without A levels (19.1%) (Figure 14). The variable for recent A levels has a strong association with early-leaving in relation to younger students\(^\text{22}\). Not having recent A levels increases the risk for young students of leaving early by 2.22-fold compared to all young students.

Figure 14: Distribution of students and early-leavers at back on course partner institutions with or without recent ‘A’ level qualifications by age band

Students without recent A levels were more likely to be early-leavers across all areas however, as might be expected, not having recent A levels does not appear to make a big difference to mature students (aged 20 and over on application). However, young students without recent A levels were relatively over-represented in the early leaver groups in both lowest and highest participation areas (Figure 15). The propensity to leave early for those without recent A levels was highest for young students from the highest participation areas (index of 1.86 compared to 1.62 for young students without recent A levels from the lowest participation areas).

\(^{22}\) X\(^2\)=3662.233, df=1, p=0.000
Looking at early-leaving by previous qualification level, based on UCAS tariff points, suggested that students who were more highly qualified entrants (with higher tariff points on entry) were proportionally less likely to be early-leavers than those with fewer UCAS tariff points. Statistical tests demonstrate that UCAS tariff points is the variable most strongly associated with early-leaving ($X^2=5047.832, df=3, p=.000$). The association is stronger for younger students ($X^2=5026.928$) compared to older students ($X^2=23.940$). Those with above 281 tariff points on entry had below average propensity to leave early and were under represented amongst early-leavers (accounting for 20.8% of early-leavers and 37.4% of all students). Entrants with no tariff points accounted for 46.5% of early-leavers, well above the proportion of all students (33.4%). Entrants with 1-280 tariff points represented around a third (32.8%) of the early-leaver group, above the share of all students (29.2%). Students with fewer tariff points had a higher propensity to leave early at the Higher Tariff Group institutions compared to the Lower Tariff Group institutions (Figure 16).

23 For the majority of the qualifications which are verified through ABL and attract Tariff points, UCAS will calculate a Tariff score, although there are key exceptions (such as BTEC National), and any tariff points achieved through exams outside the timeframe eligible for verification through the ABL process.
It is important to note that a third of all back on course students had zero tariff points (33.4%), and the results for those with zero tariff points may be hard to interpret (students in this group may have been awarded qualifications which had not been counted in the tariff because they were outside the UCAS tariff, outside the time period for the ABL process, or because the data was supplied in a form which meant it could not be included (as with BTECs)\textsuperscript{24}. Students with 1-280 tariff points had a relative risk of early-leaving of 2.06 at Higher Tariff Group institutions, and 1.30 at Middle Tariff Group institutions relative to all students within these types of institutions, excluding those with no tariff points. The equivalent figure for Lower Tariff Group institutions was 1.12.

**Application route**

As Figure 17 shows, students who made the maximum number of choices were under-represented amongst early-leavers at back on course partner institutions. Students who had come through Clearing / UCAS Extra (i.e. made no choices) or direct to a HEI (i.e. made a single choice) were more likely to be early-leavers compared to back on course partner institution students as a whole. Taken together, students who had come through Clearing / UCAS Extra or direct to a HEI had a relative risk of early-leaving 1.40 times the average for all students.

Figure 17: Distribution of students and early-leavers at back on course partner institutions by number of main scheme choices

Students who were older on entry (20 and over) were proportionally more likely than younger entrants to have made 0 main scheme choices, or a single choice (14.1% of back on course partner institution entrants aged 20 & over on entry had made no choices, and 21.0% had made a single choice, compared to 1.9% and 3.5% respectively of entrants aged 19 and under). The relationship between the number of choices made and early-leaving appears to be more important for younger students. A young student who had made 0 or 1 choice had a propensity to early-leaving of 1.64 relative to all young students (for older students who made 0 or 1 choice the propensity to early-leaving was 1.09 relative to all older students).

**Distance to study**

Distance to study was found to be significantly associated with early-leaving ($X^2=625.710$, df=5, $p=.000$). Overall, students who were studying at a back on course partner institutions within 30 miles of home on application had a relatively high propensity to early-leaving: 29.8% of early-leavers were studying within 30 miles compared to 23.9% of students. Younger students studying within 30 miles of home were more over-represented amongst early-leavers (Figure 18). The association between distance to study and early-leaving was found to be stronger for younger students compared to older students ($X^2=469.622$ and $X^2=25.800$ respectively, df=5, $p=.000$). Young students studying under 30 miles of home had a propensity to leave early of 1.30 (for older students studying within 30 miles of home it was 0.98).

\textsuperscript{24} There are also some inconsistencies in the way the points were applied due to reclassification of qualifications during the period covered by the dataset although the changes only affect a very small number of qualifications.
The pattern of early-leaving and distance to study varied by Tariff Group of back on course partner institution (Figure 19).

Students travelling a relatively short distance to university had a higher propensity to leave early from Higher Tariff Group institutions. Students who were at an institution over 60 miles from home were more likely to leave early from Lower and Middle Tariff Group institutions. As Figure 19 shows, 30.4% of early-leavers from Higher Tariff Group institutions studied within 30 miles compared to 21.3% of all students at Higher Tariff Group institutions (giving a relative risk of early-leaving of 1.42). The propensity to early-leaving was lowest for those at Higher Tariff Group institutions over 60 miles from home: 50.6% of early-leavers from Higher Tariff Group institutions were studying over 60 miles from home, above the proportion of all Higher Tariff Group Students in the sample (60.3%) (giving a relative risk of early-leaving of 0.84).
Statistical modelling was used to explore the relative importance of factors associated with early-leaving. The dependent variable was binary – taking a value of 1 if the person was an early-leaver and 0 otherwise - and a logistic regression was applied to model early-leaving using the institutional, demographic and other variables derived from the dataset of early-leavers and all other students at back on course partner institutions. Two approaches were taken: In the first model, given the differences observed between back on course partner institutions by Tariff Group, separate regression equations were calculated for applicants according to whether the institution was in a Lower, Middle or Higher Tariff Group. In the second model, student groups were categorised by broad age band in order to explore the differences between young and mature early-leavers.

The variable relating to recent A level qualifications was excluded from the analysis as this may be unreliable, especially for older students, and it was considered that the tariff score variable was a better measure. Students with zero tariff scores were also excluded in light of the difficulties with this group (as outlined above). Ethnicity was also excluded for pragmatic reasons (initial regression modelling showed ethnicity to be a relatively important factor however this was most likely due to the way different ethnic groups had been banded (i.e. White, Black or Mixed ethnic origin were 'high propensity' and Asian and 'other' were 'low propensity' groups).

The results of the chi-square test of association were used to determine the order in which these variables were entered into the regression model.

Results for regression model 1: A focus on Lower, Middle and Higher Tariff Group Universities

The most important factor underlying early-leaving is UCAS tariff point score on application. The modelling by institution type suggested that this variable has most impact in Higher Tariff Group institutions.

There is evidence that previous education in the state sector (ie. not from an independent school) increases early-leaving overall in Higher Tariff Group institutions.

Application to the HEI directly or through Clearing / UCAS Extra comes out as the second most important factor underlying early-leaving in Middle Tariff Group institutions, although it appears that this factor is relatively less important in Lower Tariff Group institutions, and not significant in Higher Tariff Group institutions.

Table 5: Regression equations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Tariff Group</td>
<td>Middle Tariff Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution is Lowest Tariff Group</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCAS tariff point score is less than 280 points (excludes 0)</td>
<td>0.422**</td>
<td>0.515**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State sector education</td>
<td>-0.005(ns)</td>
<td>-0.139*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age band (young)</td>
<td>-0.120**</td>
<td>-0.210**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied through clearing/extra or direct</td>
<td>0.155**</td>
<td>0.261**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance to study is less than 30 miles</td>
<td>-0.20(ns)</td>
<td>-0.217**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Areas of lowest participation</td>
<td>0.051*</td>
<td>0.102**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender is male</td>
<td>0.033(ns)</td>
<td>0.081*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R square (Nagelkerke)</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosmer &amp; Lemeshow Test</td>
<td>29.843, df=8, sig=0.000</td>
<td>10.990, df=8, sig=0.510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid cases not early-leaver</td>
<td>336998</td>
<td>307107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid case early-leaver</td>
<td>10047</td>
<td>5999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significance is 0.000, *Significance is less than 0.010, Sig is less than 0.050, ns=not significant at 5% level
Studying at a HEI relatively close to home appears to have a relatively weak, but significant, effect at Higher Tariff Group institutions (coming out as the fourth most important factor for early-leaving at Higher Tariff Group institutions). Studying close to home is inversely associated with early-leaving at Middle Tariff Group institutions. In summary, the following appear to be the variables most closely associated with early-leaving for each of the Tariff Groups:

Figure 20: Results for regression model 1: A focus on Lower, Middle and Higher Tariff Group Universities

**Lower Tariff Group institutions**

- UCAS Tariff Point Score
- Application route
- Age
- HE participation neighbourhood

**Middle Tariff Group institutions**

- UCAS Tariff Point Score
- Application route
- Distance to study
- Age
- Previous education
- Gender
- HE participation neighbourhood

**Higher Tariff Group institutions**

- UCAS Tariff Point Score
- Previous education
- HE participation neighbourhood
- Age
- Distance to study

**Results for regression model 2: A focus on Younger and Older students**

A lower UCAS tariff point score on entry is significant in early-leaving, although the effects are more important for younger students compared to older students. The type of institution studied at also makes a difference, although again the effects are more important for younger students.

Distance to study is the second most important factor in early-leaving for young students. Studying close to home appears to reduce the chances of early-leaving overall for this group. It is not significant for older students.
Coming from state sector education slightly increases early-leaving for young students, but is not a significant factor in the data for older students. Similarly, coming from a low participation area slightly increases early-leaving for young students, but is not significantly associated with early-leaving amongst older students.

In summary, the following appear to be the variables most closely associated with early-leaving for younger and older students:

Figure 21: Results for regression model 2: A focus on Younger and Older students

**Younger students (aged 19 and under on application)**

- Tariff Group
- Distance to study
- Institution type
- Application route
- Previous education
- HE participation neighbourhood
- Gender

**Older students (aged 20 and over on application)**

- Institution type
- Tariff Group
- Application route
7. Reasons for leaving early

Key findings

- The largest group of early-leavers did so for primarily for personal/financial reasons (including caring for others).
- Nearly two-fifths (37%) left primarily for HE-related reasons to do with either the course or the institution. There is some evidence that the reason for leaving may be influenced by the choice of HE.
- At the same time, relatively many left for more than one reason. In practice, the reasons why individuals left are likely to be multiple and complex.

What do we already know about reasons for leaving early?

It is widely acknowledged that the reasons for students leaving their course before qualification are varied and complex (Glogowska et al, 2007). However, large-scale studies into non-continuation and non-completion have revealed a number of key reasons which have changed little over the years (Yorke and Longden, 2008). These reasons are identified here, as is the interaction between them and what might be considered the more personal factors.

Lack of preparedness

Lack of preparedness is a general term which includes preparedness for the general university experience as well as for the course of study (Quinn et al, 2005). It is closely associated with the distinction between academic and social integration (explored below), but focuses on expectations held by students before entry into University. Palmer et al (2009) highlight that the increased diversity of the student population has shifted student expectations of university life away from the single coherent view held by previous generations towards greatly differing and often greatly raised expectations.

For students who have been accustomed to the small groups and structured support associated with school learning and A levels, the high degree of independent learning expected at university can be a difficult transition as students learn to cope with the ‘mass experience and de-personalisation of first-year study’ (Rowley et al, 2008). Goldfinch and Hughes (2007) also state that some students enter university with high confidence in what they perceive to be their key skills and do not understand the levels of skills required in higher education.

A particular issue with students from higher income households and with a family background of higher education is that the decision to go to university, or a particular institution, can be the result of peer, school or family pressure rather than being motivated by a particular course or career aspiration. Harrison (2006) describes this phenomenon of a natural progression into university as a ‘middle class drift’ and his study found that such students had made little effort to research either the institution they would be attending or the course they would be studying.

Wrong choice of course

Making the wrong choice of course is highlighted as one of the single biggest reasons for students leaving HE before qualification (Ogza and Sukhanden, 1998, Yorke and Longden, 2008). Students may choose a particular course on the basis of prior interest or good performance at school and find that, once at university, it does not meet their expectations or places too much of an academic burden on them.

There is a clear relationship between the type of course studied and retention. Students who do not have a clear sense of belonging to their subject, particularly in relation to future career, are more likely to withdraw than students who are enrolled on courses which have a high career focus (Willcoxson and Wynder, 2010). Similarly, different subject areas are associated with different retention rates, even within the same institution. Willcoxson and Wynder (2010) hypothesise that in subject areas where a wide range of career choices is possible, such as the Arts and Social Sciences, even a ‘considered and early choice of major is insufficient to promote persistence when other difficulties arise’ (p. 176). This is a similar situation to that found in Germany (Georg, 2009) and Spain (Lassibille and Navarro Gómez, 2008) where the early-leaver rates for Arts students were up to four times higher than for medical students.

Within the United Kingdom, issues with course choice are exacerbated by the Clearing process (Quinn et al, 2005; Yorke and Longden, 2008) with students often making rushed decisions to do courses which they would not otherwise have countenanced.
**Dissatisfaction with course/institution**

Given that one of the main reasons for students leaving early is the wrong choice of course, it may well be that dissatisfaction with the course or institution is a related consequence. However, Rowley et al (2008) identify that one of the key reasons for dissatisfaction and disengagement is a mismatch between the expectations and the actual experience of higher education.

A particular aspect of dissatisfaction with the institution is associated with a perceived lack of formal support from university structures and particularly from tutors (National Audit Office, 2007). A striking contrast was found by Young et al (2007) between the perceptions of lack of support held by students and staff. In a small study, 13 students identified lack of support as the reason for leaving whereas no staff perceived this as a reason for withdrawal. The National Audit Office (2007) report highlights the increasing reliance on hourly paid staff and the demands of research as reasons why staff may be unable to provide the level of contact with students ‘that can help identify students in difficulty’ (p. 31).

As indicated earlier in the report, mature students are more likely to express dissatisfaction with their course or institution than younger students. This may have particular repercussions given Yorke and Longden’s (2008) assertion that, given the downturn in the number of eighteen year olds, ‘greater attention may need to be given to the recruitment [and retention] of mature students (p. 51).’ It should be said, however, that their study and its conclusions predate the recent rise in student tuition fees which have led to a sharp drop in applications from mature students, at least in the short term (Grove, 2011). Yorke and Longden also identify that overseas students are ‘three times as likely as their UK and EU based peers to say that their course represented poor value for money’ (2008, p. 51). With the increasing reliance in the HE sector on overseas students, this also may present particular difficulties in terms of student recruitment, satisfaction and retention.

**Lack of integration**

Particularly in the United States, the principal model of retention is Tinto’s (1975) model of academic and social integration. In this model, retention is determined by the extent to which students ‘gain meaningful membership of the academic and social worlds of the university’ (Wilcox et al, 2005, p. 708).

Academic factors influencing integration are varied and relate to the level of compatibility between the student and the course and institution, particularly in relation to course choice. Lack of academic skills, such as essay writing, note taking and time keeping, have also been identified as related to poor student performance (Goldfinch and Hughes, 2007). Gibney et al (2011, p. 352), in an Irish study, highlight as the ‘uncertainty’ created by the informal and implicit demands of what they refer to as the ‘hidden curricula’ of many universities.

Wilcox et al (2005) argue that while academic integration has tended to dominate the research agenda, social integration is a significant factor in the first year experience. Social integration is not just about social support within the academic environment, such as relationships with tutors and fellow students, but using social support structures to overcome difficult situations in the early months such as homesickness or living independently.

A particular factor in recent years has been the increasing number of students who study at institutions closer to their home. As a result, social integration is becoming more of a factor in determining whether students continue with their studies (Glokowska et al, 2007). Students who live at home, and are therefore less able to join in with social activities, may well experience a ‘growing sense of not belonging’ (p. 69) to their peer group who have opted to ‘live in’ at the university. Quinn et al (2005) also highlighted difficulties experienced by such students in being able to make contact with staff. Conversely, in institutions where high numbers of students continue to live at home, those students who do ‘live in’ can face isolation, particularly at weekends. For younger students, and particularly for female students, homesickness during the first few weeks of terms was also indicated as a reason for leaving.

**Financial reasons**

The research reported here has taken place against a background of the increasing cost of higher education. However, there is no consistency within the research to imply categorically that financial constraints are influencing students’ decisions to leave. Davies and Elias (2003) found that 18% of students identified financial problems as the reason for leaving early. However, Quinn et al.’s (2005, p.30) study of working-class early-leavers indicated that few students cited finance as the ultimate reason for leaving early, with Yorke and Longden (2008) similarly finding finances a ‘less salient issue in student departure’ (p. 50). Instead, they point to an implicit acceptance by students that they would struggle financially during their university study and that this was just one of the pressures they faced. Similar findings were reported in Glogowska et al’s (2007) study of nursing students, where students reported widespread financial difficulties, including amongst those who chose to...
continue. It should be acknowledged, however that financial reasons for leaving are only given by those who apply to university (Adnett and Tlupova, 2008) and so they may well be a factor in influencing this decision in the first place.

Taking up a more attractive opportunity
Leaving higher education early is often seen as a failing on the part of the student and of the institution. However, there is evidence that some students make an active decision to leave university in order to pursue other interests and aspirations.

For some students the more attractive opportunity may reside in transfer to another course or institution with the UK, HESA (2012) data, as indicated above, indicating that 8.3% of students starting a degree either graduate with a lower qualification or transfer to another institution. In the Australian context, O’Keefe et al (2011)’s study into low re-enrolment on a general Health Sciences course revealed that students were taking a strategic decision to enter the programme as a means of accessing another, more prestigious, course in Medicine. In this case, therefore, non-completion was found to be more associated with students’ success or failure to gain entry to Medicine than it was to do with any failings of the course itself.

Quinn et al (2005) also contest the dominant view of early-leaving as a ‘disaster’ and something that students drifted into. In their study of working-class drop out they found that students made a rational decision to leave higher education and, furthermore, that students felt that, were they to return to study, they could ‘operationalise the knowledge gained through ’dropping out’’ (p. 36). As a result Quinn et al posit the notion that early-leaving can be part of an individual’s lifelong learning rather than a sign of failure.

What does this study tell us about reasons for leaving early?

Original HE choices
Two-fifths (40%) of early-leavers who were back on course clients reported the location of the HEI as the main reason for choosing to apply to that institution (Figure 22). Subject (21.5%) was the next most popular reason and ‘prestige’ was the third most popular reason for choosing the HEI (13.2%). As in earlier studies, personal reasons come out as the least prevalent factor (back on course, 2011).

Figure 22: Early-leavers’ influencing factor on original decision

The influence of higher education institutions was cited by early-leavers as the strongest influence on original HE choices (Figure 23). Family and friends was the fourth most important, which is lower than in previous similar studies (back on course, 2011). A small proportion reported not receiving any guidance prior to application.
Reasons for leaving HE

The most prevalent reason given by back on course clients as to why they left their original HE course was personal/financial circumstances (Figure 24). Overall a third (33.3%) of early-leavers gave this as their primary reason for leaving HE, and 6.3% said it was a secondary reason. Caring responsibilities were a primary reason for leaving for a further 13.5% of early-leavers.

Personal/financial reasons comes out as a particularly prevalent reason amongst those with dependents and employed early-leavers. Around four-fifths (39.3%) of those with dependents gave personal/financial circumstances as their primary reason for leaving HE, and 42.8% of those working over 17 hours a week and 33.1% of those working less than 17 hours a week gave it as their primary reason for leaving. Over half (51.6%) of those whose choice of HE was based on personal factors gave personal/financial circumstances as their primary reason for leaving HE. Well over a third of those whose primary reason for leaving was given as person/financial reasons (including caring) had a job, and a fifth (20%) had dependents.

As might be expected, early-leavers with dependents were more likely than those with no dependents to give personal circumstances as the reason they left HE (29.0% of those with dependents gave caring responsibilities as their primary reason for leaving HE, compared with 11% without dependents), and 13.3% with dependents gave it as their secondary reason (compared to 5.2% without dependents).

Overall 27.8% said they left primarily for course-related reasons, and a further 9.4% gave this as a secondary reason. Students who had chosen the HEI because of prestige or course-related factors were most likely to give course-related reasons as the primary motive for leaving (32.3% and 29.5% respectively). Students with higher tariff points on entry were proportionally more likely than those with fewer tariff points to say that course-related factors were their primary reason for leaving HE. Institutional related reasons were a primary motive for 22.4%, and a secondary motive for a further 8.0%.
HE-related reasons as a whole (taking course-related and institution-related reasons together) were the primary reason for early-leaving for some 37% early-leavers.

**back on course** clients were invited to give the two main reasons for leaving, and well over a fifth (21.1%) of those early-leavers who were asked their reason for leaving HE gave more than one reason, suggesting that it was a combination of a number of issues that led to the student leaving early (the implication being that all of them need to be addressed to ensure future success). Looking at both reasons together indicated that half of the participants (50.3%) left due to dissatisfaction with their HE experience and personal circumstances. Of the remainder, the largest group (29.3%) left for personal reasons and 20.3% for HE related reasons.

As shown in Figure 25, overall, the largest group of **back on course** clients (36.9%) said that IAG did not have any influence on their decision to leave HE — though it would appear that this could mean either that they didn’t receive any IAG or they thought the IAG they did receive did not affect their decision. However, an HEI had been influential in the decision to leave in a third (32.5%) of cases, which may include academic failure, or a prediction of academic failure.
Early-leavers’ intended destinations

*back on course* clients were asked to give their intentions at the start of their engagement in terms of destination (employment, training or study), and again at the end of their guidance intervention. Higher education was given as the preferred destination by the largest group of participants both before and after the intervention, however, the results contrast with findings in previous phases of the *back on course* project: proportionally fewer gave HE as a destination after receiving advice from the service (66.5% compared to 78.7% in 2011), in contrast with earlier findings which showed an increase in the proportion intending to go to HE after engaging with the service (*back on course*, 2011, p.44), but this may have been influenced by the increase in fees that was introduced between the two reports.

The present analysis suggests that the proportion of participants wanting to go into employment/training or Apprenticeship/Level 3 had increased after the *back on course* intervention. However, proportionally more people said they wanted ‘other’ destinations or were undecided. These results may be unreliable as final destination information was only available for less than half (49.0%) of the sample who gave an intended destination at the start of the intervention. At the same time, there is some qualitative evidence drawn from the *back on course* project which suggests that, given the range of issues faced by early-leavers, returning to higher education was not always the best option for students. Some needed some time out of study for financial reasons or health reasons, and others found that they were better suited to a different form of study either instead of, or before going into, full-time higher education.
Figure 26: Early-leavers’ intended destination before & after back on course IAG

![Bar chart showing intended destinations before and after IAG](chart.png)

- **At start of IAG (n=2,572)**
  - Higher Education: 80.0%
  - Other or unsure: 10.0%
  - Employment or training: 5.0%
  - Apprenticeship or Level 3: 5.0%

- **At end of IAG (n=1,261)**
  - Higher Education: 70.0%
  - Other or unsure: 10.0%
  - Employment or training: 20.0%
  - Apprenticeship or Level 3: 10.0%
8. Discussion

The findings described above focus on two key areas of exploration: patterns of leaving early and reasons for leaving early. Both of these areas are supported by significant prior research, although not in all aspects or at exhaustive levels of detail. In this section we reflect on the findings of this study with reference to previous research, indicating and exploring where our findings confirm, contest or extend that previous research. In so doing we can develop a rationale for the final section of this report which makes recommendations for future directions for research into leaving university early.

It is important to note that this study can only observe relationships between variables and demonstrate significant associations and correlations. However, the findings can be related back to the literature and possible reasons can be offered for the observations.

On patterns of leaving early

Age

Previous research has suggested that older students tend to have higher rates of early-leaving compared with younger students. The findings of our study confirm this, finding a strong association between older students and leaving early. However, in addition we found:

- that this association was strongest for older students at higher tariff group universities (those with more than 390 tariff points) and weakest at lower tariff group universities;
- that in areas of lower HE participation, it is younger students who are more likely to leave early;
- that for those without A levels, again it is younger students who more likely to leave early.

This additional evidence provides a richer picture of the relevance of age to leaving university early, and demonstrates which additional variables change the effect of age.

This evidence suggests that older students should be a focus for all institutions in their retention activities, but especially so for higher tariff group universities.

Gender

Davies and Elias (2003) found that male students were more likely to leave early. Our study confirmed this. However, in addition we found that early-leaving amongst male students is highest at higher tariff group universities, and even higher for older males at a higher tariff group university – nearly 2.5 times that of everyone at higher tariff group universities.

Such evidence suggests that males, and older males in particular, could be a useful focus for higher tariff group universities in their retention activities.

Low HE participation backgrounds

Previous studies have found that students from families and areas with low HE participation are more likely to leave early (Gury, 2011; Georg, 2009) and our study confirmed this. In addition, we found that:

- students from lower participation backgrounds were less likely to have A level qualifications;
- associations between participation areas and early-leaving are statistically significant;
- the association between areas of low participation and leaving early was strongest at higher tariff group universities;
- younger students from areas of lower participation are more likely than older students to leave early; and
- younger students without A levels from areas of lower participation are even more likely to leave early.

Such evidence suggests the continuing challenges to universities in supporting students who may be first generation HE entrants, or from areas associated with low rates of HE participation. This challenge would appear to be of greatest importance to higher tariff group universities.

Previous education and qualifications

Our study found that a low tariff points score was the most significant variable associated with leaving early across all types of institution. In addition it found that:

- student from non-grammar state schools and further education colleges were more likely to leave early, especially at Higher Tariff Group universities;
- students who had not recently gained their A Levels were more likely to leave early;
- younger students without A levels were more likely to leave early.
These findings provide evidence of the importance of the most traditional qualification – the A level – recently acquired from traditional school setting to university success. It suggests that student with non-standard entry qualifications could usefully be a focus for universities. For higher tariff group universities, a focus on students from non-grammar state schools and further education colleges could also be a useful focus.

**Distance travelled to university**

The distance between a student’s (family or pre-university) home and their university is a factor underexplored in previous research. Our study found that:

- students who travelled less than 30 miles to university were more likely to leave early, and this association was strongest for
  - younger students travelling less than 30 miles to university, and for
  - students at Higher Tariff Group universities travelling less than 30 miles to university.
- students from Middle tariff group universities who travelled more than 60 miles from home were also more likely to leave early.

A logistic regression analysis demonstrated that distance travelled to university was ranked as the second most important variable associated with leaving early for younger students, which is to us a surprising finding, given the paucity of previous research exploring this factor. This is a new consideration on which universities may wish to consider focussing, particularly as there has been some suggestion that financial pressures may mean more students may consider studying from home.

**Ethnic origin**

Previous research has found that, on the whole, students reporting a white ethnic origin are more likely to leave university early than students reporting a non-white ethnic origin (see for example Davies and Elias, 2003). However, this study found that students most likely to leave early were those reporting a black or mixed ethnic origin, although the differences were only small. Students reporting Asian and Chinese ethnic origin were least likely to leave early.

**Application route**

Yorke and Longden (2008) provide evidence that the rushed decisions on courses taken through the clearing process are associated with early-leaving. Our study confirms that students who had come through clearing or who had entered direct to a HEI were more likely to leave early.

In addition, we found that:

- students who had come through clearing or gained direct entry were more likely to be older, however the early-leaver effect was stronger for younger students who had come through clearing or gained direct entry.
- a logistic regression demonstrated that applying through clearing or gaining direct entry is a more important variable associated with early-leaving for Lower and Middle Tariff Group institutions.

Such evidence would suggest that students who come to an institution through the clearing process could be useful focus for institutional retention activity, especially for lower or middle tariff group universities.

**On reasons for leaving early**

Previous research has established the importance of a number of factors in students' decisions to leave university early. These include a lack of preparedness, individual's expectations, wrong course choice, course dissatisfaction, lack of integration with peers and academic aspects and financial reasons.

Our study was able to provide some small contribution to knowledge on leaving university early. We found that the 'prestige' of an institution was an influential factor in individuals’ decision making, and those students who cited prestige as their reason for choosing the university were also more likely to give course-related reasons as their primary reason for leaving.

We found evidence confirming previous research that cites dissatisfaction with the course or institution as influential – in our study 37% of early-leavers who engaged with the back on course project gave course or institution dissatisfaction as their primary reason for leaving early.

Importantly, we found that financial reasons appeared to be a more influential reason for leaving early than previous studies have found. Previous research is, on the whole, mixed as to the importance of financial pressures on students, and our study appears to suggest a greater, or perhaps increasing, importance.
9. Future directions for research

Studies on early-leavers over the past decade, both qualitative and quantitative, have been highly consistent in reporting the number of students who leave higher education early, the reasons for their departure and the demographic factors influencing these decisions. As such, there has, despite efforts to widen participation and address the social and academic factors affecting integration into university life, been very little change in both the incidence of early-leaving and how these are reported in the literature.

However, the literature detailed here predates the huge changes that have occurred within the higher education sector over the past few years. Although some studies, such as Adnett and Tlupova (2008), do explore the implications of the English funding system on student decision making about higher education, the consequences of the most recent changes are not yet known. Set against a background of on-going recession and increasing graduate unemployment in the United Kingdom, it is difficult to know how relevant existing models of the economic benefits of higher education will continue to be. As a result, while financial concerns have not previously been seen as a major factor, they may well come to play a greater role in students’ decisions to enter higher education or, once there, to remain. It is therefore envisaged that considerations such as the cost of entry into higher education, the requirements of daily subsistence and the perceived financial benefits of that education, and their relationship to early-leaving, should continue to be the focus of more research in the future.

The main headline findings of this study on the whole appear to confirm previous research about patterns of early-leaving. Confirmation of previous findings is important as it validates and updates those previous studies. However, this study has also found additional evidence for considerable variation in the importance of certain variables and their relationship to leaving university early. For example, although in general, older students tend to be more likely to leave early, younger students are more likely to leave early where they are from areas of low HE participation or are without A levels. This evidence points to the need to constantly explore the interaction of a wide range of variables, observing where some vary the expected outcome, which will serve to avoid potentially misleading generalisations about certain ‘types’ of students as more likely to leave early.

This research has produced a strong set of findings attesting to the relevance of the tariff group of a university to certain key characteristics associated with early-leaving. Early-leaving at High Tariff Group universities—those having on average students with 390 or more tariff points on entry—is lower overall, but had relatively higher early leaver rates than lower tariff group universities for ‘non-traditional’ students, including older students, males, those from lower participation backgrounds, those not from independent or state grammar schools, and those without A levels recently acquired.

Some findings of this research are in areas not well-explored in other research. For example, distance travelled to university appears in our study to be one of the most influential variables associated with leaving early. Previous education and qualifications also appears to be relevant, and although it has been the focus of much attention in relation to university access, it has been less so in relation to leaving early.

Findings in this study also suggest that financial considerations are an important factor for students who leave early. Other research appears divided on the relevance of financial pressures, and given the further increases in tuition fees in England, and the effects of the current economic recession, we would suggest this area be a relevant focus for future research.
References


Gibney, A. et al., 2010 The first semester of university life; will I be able to manage it at all?’ Higher Education, 62,3:351–366. Available at: http://www.springerlink.com/content/7633p22705214148/ (Accessed October 23, 2012)


Annexes

Annex 1 – Key Literature

Annex 2 - Accepts to all UK HEIs and back on course partner HEIs, and early-leavers from back on course partner HEIs, 2006-2011

Annex 1 – Key Literature

The key literature has been identified here because it gives a good overview of the issues involved in students leaving higher education early. The literature is drawn from three types: reports, often on large scale studies on student completion or non-completion, reviews or syntheses of the literature and journal articles, often, although not always, on small-scale research.

Reports on large-scale studies


This study seeks to understand the reasons for withdrawal, and the outcomes of that decisions, given by students identified as early-leavers by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England). It identified wrong choice of course as the main reason given for withdrawal and indicated that a lack of preparation and information about university study were factors in this. In addition, financial and personal problems were also identified as influencing the decision to withdraw.


This is a large-scale study involving a mix of institutional data and case studies with twelve universities and colleges. The report provides an overview of retention rates within the UK and other countries, the role of demographic data on the likelihood on retention and the main reasons for withdrawal. The case studies provide institutional accounts of retention policy and practice.

Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L., Thexton, W. and Noble, J. (2005), From life crisis to lifelong learning. Rethinking working-class ‘drop out’ from higher education, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

This study examines the higher levels of working-class drop out through the perspective of 67 working class students from four universities across each nation of the United Kingdom. It examines the reasons given for leaving university and the impact of these decisions on the individual, the institution and the wider community. Far from being a ‘disaster’, the study found that withdrawal from university was the result of rational decision-making and could be seen as part of the individual’s lifelong learning.


This study claims that belonging is a key factor in student engagement and that as around 40% of students consider withdrawing from university, retention practices should focus more widely on developing ways to make students feel respected and supported with their learning environment. The study presents a model of student success and retention, based on the notion of belonging, which involves students, staff and the institution. It recommends that any interventions to improve retention should be proactive and mainstream to ensure that all students benefit.


A large-scale study conducted in two phases. In phase one, 7109 students from across 23 institutions, responded to a questionnaire on the student experience and a second phase focussed on the reasons for withdrawal given by 462 students who were identified as non progressing into their second year of study. Findings showed that, while students were generally happy with their study experience, early-leavers identified poor quality of teaching as factors in their non-continuation, as well as wrong course choice and issues of social integration.
Reviews or syntheses of the literature

Jones, R. (2008), Student retention and success, Higher Education Academy
A thorough synthesis of the key research papers and literature reviews on retention dating back to 2002. Drawing on this literature, it identifies the key factors which contribute to early withdrawal and also identifies what factors contribute to retention, such as pre-entry information, induction and transition support, curriculum development, social engagement, student support and data and monitoring. There is also a comprehensive bibliography.

Troxel, W.G. (2010), Student persistence and Success in United States higher education: a synthesis of the literature, Higher Education Academy
This synthesis provides an overview of retention within the higher education context of the United States and an explanation of the key terms related to retention. It includes a summary of the key research reports on retention and synthesises the literature in three main topic areas: an overview of the literature related to student persistence, institutional retention and academic success, institutional approaches to improving engagement, persistence and retention and accountability pressures from the public, including implications for both policy and practice. A comprehensive bibliography is complemented by reference to relevant portal and websites.

Journal articles

A study which problematizes standard measures of student withdrawal, particularly in relation to the terminology used and the weakness of data, and questions the basis on which student retention policy is made. Using a case study approach in a Business Studies degree, it suggests that the use of ‘electronic footprints’, such as when students access university accounts, is a better indication of the timing of student withdrawal.

This study uses data from the Konstanz student survey of all German universities and universities of applied sciences to examine the factors influencing student withdrawal. It identifies commitment to study, such as low attendance, part-time work and general lack of integration as key factors in withdrawal, and found that social background, particularly the educational experience of the parent, was also influential.

Glogowska, M., Young, P. and Lockyer, L. (2007), Should I go or should I stay? A study of factors influencing students’ decisions on early-leaving, Active Learning in Higher Education, 8, 63-77.
A qualitative study which focuses on the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors influencing Nursing students’ decisions to either withdraw or continue their studies. It identifies that many of the ‘push’ factors, such as the challenges of academic work, lack of support and financial pressures, were the same for both groups but that the ‘pull factors’ of determination, commitment and informal support were vital for those who chose to continue their studies.

A study of 151 early-leavers at a post-1992 institution which focuses on the negative factors influencing withdrawal: Course-related experience, choice of course, settling into the university community and financial issues. The paper concludes by identifying the broad profiles of students who leave early, including academic struggles and career paths reviewers, ‘unsettled’ young students and students with non-A level qualifications.

A Spanish study which draws on longitudinal institutional data to identify the rate of student withdrawal from university and uses demographic and background variables to determine the probability of drop out.

An Australian study which re-examines wrong course choice and lack of vocational focus as the main reasons for student withdrawal, and investigates these in the context of a Health Sciences degree. The findings revealed that enrolment on the course and ultimate transfer to other courses, particularly Medical Sciences, was closely aligned with the career aspirations of the individual student.
This is an influential qualitative study which contests the notion that non-completion is the fault of the student but 'more as a result of interaction between student and institution'. The study compared the experiences of all 169 non-completing students at an institution with completing students matched for year and course of study, gender and class. The factor which was found to most influence non-completion was the extent to which the university and course choice were the result of reactive rather than proactive decision-making on the part of the student.

This qualitative study focuses on the importance of the first year transition in how students adjust to the social and academic demands of university life. In particular, it explores the first year as a ‘betwixt’ space between home and university and examines the turning points experienced by students during this transitional process.

This small-scale study examines the experience of non-traditional students at university and, in particular, the role of teaching practice in continuation or withdrawal. The findings identify the lack of contact with teaching staff and the inflexibility of the timing of seminars and lecturers as key factors in the negative experience of students. The study highlights that the widening participation agenda fails to acknowledge the different expectations and need of non-traditional students, expecting them to be ‘square pegs in round holes’.

Wilcox, P., Winn, S. and Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005), ‘It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people’: the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education, Studies in Higher Education, 30(6), 707-722.
A qualitative study which explores the role of social support in decisions to either remain at or withdraw from university. It found that the reasons for withdrawal were more complex than wrong course choice and were, in fact, closely bound up with the student’s ability to create suitable social support structures whilst at university. It highlights the need for institutions to be aware of the anxiety felt by students on entering the new social, as well as academic, world of university.

This is a mixed method study within one programme of study which seeks to explore attitudes to, and reasons for, withdrawal amongst both students and teaching staff. The study found that teaching staff tended to explain withdrawal in terms of student failure, as opposed to any institutional issues. It concludes with a sense of pessimism about what the findings imply for institutional responses to withdrawal.
## Annex 2 - Accepts to all UK HEIs and back on course partner HEIs, and early-leavers from back on course partner HEIs, 2006-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UK accepts to English HEI present in UCAS data</th>
<th>UK accepts to back on course HEIs</th>
<th>Early-leavers from back on course partner institutions, matched to UCAS data for research purposes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>% change</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>287,409</td>
<td>201,173</td>
<td>1,286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>304,796</td>
<td>212,673</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>340,879</td>
<td>238,095</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>356,029</td>
<td>249,176</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>357,581</td>
<td>247,043</td>
<td>-0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>365,243</td>
<td>251,685</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,011,937</td>
<td>1,399,845</td>
<td>36,574</td>
</tr>
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