Improving student achievement in English higher education

summary & recommendations

1 The Department for Education and Skills (the Department) is committed to ensuring that the country has higher education institutions that can compete with the best in the world in teaching, research and technology transfer and that they link closely with business to generate jobs and wealth. Its targets are to:

- increase participation towards 50 per cent of those aged 18-30 by the end of the decade, while maintaining standards;

- make significant, year-on-year progress towards fair access;

- bear down on rates of non-completion; and

- strengthen research and teaching excellence.

2 The Department, through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (the Funding Council), spends some £4.8 billion a year on higher education. In 2001-02 the Funding Council funded 131 higher education institutions (53 pre-1992 universities, 37 post-1992 universities, and 41 higher education colleges/institutes) and 229 further education colleges[1]. Just over £3 billion is for teaching, and almost a billion for research. Just under five per cent goes on higher education delivered by further education colleges. The Department also distributes through institutions some additional financial support for particular groups of students, such as lone parents, and to help any students in financial difficulty. This funding amounted to £110 million in 2001-02.

3 Over recent years, student numbers have increased to around 1.7 million. There are currently around 745,000 students studying for first degrees, of which almost 90 per cent are full-time. Although in recent years the funding per student has been maintained in real terms, over the last decade it has declined by over a third.

---

1   *This includes 27 further education colleges funded through funding consortia recognised by the Funding Council.*

We found that:

■ Overall achievement rates are very impressive. Some 77 per cent of full-time first degree students were projected to achieve a degree at the institution at which they started. One per cent achieve a different qualification, and five per cent transfer to another institution. This compares well with other countries.

■ Nearly all higher education institutions are performing in line with benchmark for achievement and employability, taking account of factors which are not considered to be part of institutional performance.

■ In order to achieve government targets institutions will need to encourage wider participation, maintain standards and raise achievement rates. Fulfilling all concurrently, and ensuring opportunities are made available for all who can benefit from higher education, poses challenges because of the need to provide different and more resource intensive support for those students who may find it more difficult to achieve their qualifications.

4 The related topic of widening participation amongst lower-participating groups is the subject of a separate report (HC 485). It concludes that there are high levels of participation in higher education amongst women and ethnic minorities; that the Department, the Funding Council and higher education providers are acting to remove obstacles to participation; and that wider implementation of existing good practice in the higher education sector would be beneficial.

5 We carried out this study in the light of our equivalent report on further education, and the Education Select Committee's expectation of a report on the higher education sector. Our report focuses on completion and achievement - from selecting courses of study to achieving qualifications and making progress towards chosen careers. We considered why students withdraw from their studies, and recommend ways in which completion and achievement rates may be improved. Achievement is defined as the proportion of students[2] who go on to attain a degree or other higher education qualification.

6 In addition to quantitative analysis of student data records we carried out qualitative work in universities and colleges, holding focus groups with, or interviewing, a number of students, staff, and ex-students (over 100 in all). In addition we surveyed all institutions on their management practices and visited six institutions. This enabled us to build upon the many existing areas of good practice within the sector and make recommendations on how higher education providers can further assist their students. Our methodology is set out in Appendix 1.

Why students do not achieve their desired qualification (Part 2)

7 Some 77 per cent of full-time undergraduate students are projected to achieve a degree at the institution at which they started. A further one per cent will obtain a different qualification, and five per cent are expected to transfer to another institution. This compares well with other sectors and higher education in other countries. Especially in the light of the increase in the number of students over recent years, the fact that the achievement rate has remained steady is a credit to the commitment of staff and students. However, the sector will have to recruit more students and maintain or improve achievement rates if it is to meet the Government's national learning targets.

summary & recommendations

2   Those still pursuing their studies at 1 December in their year of entry.

8 Ninety per cent of full-time first degree students continue into their year after entry[3]. Young students (those under 21 at the start of their year of entry and who represent about three-quarters of the undergraduate population) are more likely to continue (92 per cent) than mature students (84 per cent). Students who withdraw tend to have lower prior academic qualifications. They are also more likely to have entered through clearing, though this factor is itself associated with prior academic qualifications.

9 Some students transfer to other institutions and others obtain a lower qualification, which leaves over 30,000 who start full-time first degree courses each year failing to get a qualification, either at degree or sub-degree level. Although most of them will have received some benefit from the experience of higher education, they may have wasted valuable time in attempting unsuitable study rather than moving up the career ladder. Institutions therefore need both to encourage wider participation and to raise achievement rates whilst maintaining standards. Fulfilling both concurrently, and ensuring opportunities are made available for all who can benefit from higher education, poses challenges because of the need to provide different and more resource intensive support for those students who may find it more difficult to achieve their qualifications. Institutions should guard against bringing into higher education students who, even with appropriate support, are very unlikely to get a qualification and for whom failure may represent a significant personal cost.

10 Information gathered by institutions shows that most students withdraw because of "personal" reasons or academic failure. In most cases, no specific reason is returned. Our qualitative research showed that other factors affecting the decision to leave were:

■ a lack of preparedness for higher education;

■ changing personal circumstances or interests;

■ financial matters;

■ the impact of undertaking paid work; and

■ dissatisfaction with the course or institution.

How performance varies between institutions and subject areas (Part 3)

11 Some institutions lose only one or two per cent of their full-time first degree students during the first year, while others lose more than one in five. Non-continuation rates tend to be lower in pre-1992 universities than in post-1992 universities and "other" institutions. However, the most important factor affecting institutions' achievement rates is students' entry qualifications.

12 The Funding Council compares institutional performance with a "benchmark" which allows for factors which are not considered to be part of institutional performance[4]. Although variations appear to be wide **(Figure 1)**, performances tend to be close to benchmark[5].

---

3   *National Audit Office analysis of Funding Council performance indicators.*
4   *Students' prior academic achievements and age, and the subject mix at the institution.*
5   *For students entering institutions in 1998-99 or, in the case of the employment rate, graduating in that year.*

1 The wide variation in institutions' performance

	Institution range	Overall national rate
	Per cent	Per cent
Continuation rate after first year for full-time degree students	77-100	90
Projected achievement for full-time first degree students	48-98	77
Graduates in employment or further study after 6 months	74-100	94

13 Students of medical sciences, education, languages and humanities tend to have better continuation rates than those studying engineering, technology and mathematical or computer sciences. Graduates from some courses are also much more likely than others to be in employment six months after graduation. Vocational and quantitatively skilled graduates find it easier to get jobs where their qualification is required than graduates with more general degrees.

Matching students to courses (Part 4)

14 Potential students need good pre-enrolment information about courses to ensure that their higher education experience meets their expectations and enables them to progress along their chosen career path. Information about higher education, individual institutions and courses offered is more widely available than ever before, through websites as well as prospectuses and open days. Nevertheless, our focus groups and interviews showed that some student dissatisfaction might stem from initial descriptions of the course[6].

Providing effective preparatory activities, induction, teaching and support (Part 5)

15 Institutions do not identify separately those students most at risk of withdrawal because of their academic background but seek to identify and address the support needs of all students. Initiatives to improve completion and achievement undertaken at the point of entry, or before students start their courses are particularly effective. Many run formal "preparation for higher education courses", and support these with a broad range of induction activity in the first few weeks of term. Research[7] suggests that full-time students particularly value the opportunity to live in institution-provided accommodation during their first year as it helps them integrate better. The great majority of institutions also offer study skills workshops, often focusing upon numeracy skills, which are widely recognised as an area of concern.

16 The approach to pastoral care varies widely both between and within institutions. Many students in our focus groups were concerned about the lack of availability of staff, and some institutions have devised student mentoring schemes as a supplement to existing support mechanisms.

summary & recommendations

6   *National Audit Office focus groups with students.*
7   *MORI/UNITE "Student Living Report" 2001.*

17   While self-discipline and a desire to learn are expected for higher education students, most institutions have some form of attendance policy, including arrangements for contacting students who are absent from a certain number of lectures or tutorials. Tutors recognise that students may be absent because of the need to do part-time work to help finance their studies. The Department introduced new financial support arrangements in 1999-00, including quadrupling of discretionary funding. Some students told us that they were reluctant to apply for discretionary funding because of uncertainty about how much, if any, they might get and also because such support was seen only as a temporary reprieve[8]. Nevertheless, most institutions make strenuous efforts to identify students who may need help from discretionary funds and to ensure that vulnerable students access the financial help to which they are entitled.

18   The Funding Council supports institutions through a Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund. This funds institutions to deliver aspects of their learning and teaching strategies. It also provides funding towards special projects, a network of subject centres, a scheme to recognise excellent teachers, good practice guidance and an Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (the Institute).

19   Higher education lecturers are not required to have a teaching qualification, but they are encouraged to do so. The majority of institutions have introduced certificate programmes in higher education teaching, which are often mandatory for probationary staff. The Institute was established in 1999 to enhance the status of teaching and support innovation across the sector. Many institutions support staff membership of the Institute, which now has around 8,000 qualified members.

Helping students prepare for employment (Part 6)

20   Almost all institutions build key employment skills into the curriculum, and most (although only around 50 per cent of pre-1992 universities) provide accredited work-related modules as part of their programmes. Work experience prior to leaving higher education is a key factor in facilitating the transition into employment - but it must not get in the way of degree studies.

21   The Department's review of careers services[9] concluded that there is considerable variation in the careers resources provided, and in the type of activity carried out. The position of the careers services within the institution's management structure has a key impact on the status of the service. The report formed the basis of on-going consultation with stakeholders. Most importantly, it suggests that there should be a core set of services provided by all institutions.

---

8   *National Audit Office focus groups.*
9   *"Developing Modern Higher Education Careers Services", Department for Education and Employment January 2001.*

Recommendations

On helping students to identify the right course:

i)   Institutions should ensure that they provide for all prospective students comprehensive information about courses to help them make informed choices about their courses and likely progress along their career path. Details should include course content, methods of assessment, use of work placements, the amount of time students should expect to spend on studies, ancillary financial costs, success rates of past students and employment destinations of those who gained qualifications. Institutions should also ensure that they update their details with organisations providing centralised information, like UCAS[10] and ECCTIS[11];

ii)   to minimise the risks of early withdrawal, institutions should consider how best to make available additional guidance and information for students who come through the clearing process;

iii) the Funding Council should press ahead with proposals to supplement the publicly available data on graduates destinations and employment at six months after graduation with further information, if necessary on a sample basis, on leavers after a further two years. Availability of data on subject or course level would help students make more informed decisions on how their choice of degree affects their career intentions; and

iv)   for those students who are succeeding in their studies, but who may have difficulty completing their courses, institutions should consider alternative exit routes, enabling students to secure a qualification at a different level from that originally intended.

On providing effective preparatory activities, induction, teaching and support

v)   given that many institutions are recruiting students with a wider range of prior qualifications, they should consider more formal action to identify those students who may benefit from extra academic support, such as the use of diagnostic tests. Since such testing is resource-intensive, it should be concentrated on those students, or groups of students, whom institutions judge to be most at risk of under-performance or non-completion;

vi)   to encourage students to discuss and resolve matters of concern to them, institutions should ensure students have a regular schedule of meetings with their personal tutors, and are aware of how and when they may contact tutors outside of planned meetings. Personal tutors should be trained in advising students and should know where within the institution to refer students with specific problems; and

vii) institutions should build upon existing good practice in the sector and develop reward mechanisms for those who are innovative and effective in their teaching.

On helping students prepare for employment

viii) institutions should consider the use of job shops or other schemes working alongside their own careers departments to help those students who wish to find suitable part-time jobs; and

ix)   institutions should promote more widely student access to careers services prior to the final year of study.

10   *Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.*
11   *The Department's on-line database of courses in the United Kingdom, managed by a private consortium.*