NAO
NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE

Improving student achievement in English higher education

Improving student achievement in English higher education

Contents

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.

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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.

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].

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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.*

summary & recommendations

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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.*

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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.*

Part 1

Introduction

Higher education

1.1 Higher education covers all study, training and research carried out at a standard higher than that of GCE A-level or National Vocational Qualification level 3. It includes Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, degree courses and postgraduate courses. This report is concerned with higher education in English higher education institutions, apart from postgraduate courses, but covers only United Kingdom-domiciled students.

1.2 Higher education programmes differ from those which students have pursued either at school or further education college. They require the mastery of more complex ideas, original thought and also the ability frequently to study alone or in small groups rather than being taught in a traditional classroom.

Institutions

1.3 There are 131 higher education institutions in England, at which the majority of students pursue their programmes of study. They fall into three major groupings **(Figure 2)**. In addition, some 229[12] further education colleges offer higher education courses, most of which are at sub-degree level.

2	Types of higher education institution

53 pre-1992 universities

37 post-1992 universities (mainly the former polytechnics)

41 higher education colleges or specialist institutes

Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England

1.4 The institutions vary widely in their size, structure and mission. There are 16 with fewer than 1,000 students, most of which specialise in particular subjects, such as design, dance, music or medical sciences. In contrast, others have well over 20,000 students covering a wide range of subjects. These tend to be highly decentralised, with some faculties or schools able to select, induct and teach students almost independently.

1.5 Institutions, and where appropriate, the individual faculties within them, also vary in the extent to which they select their students. Some are able to set the highest GCE A-level entry requirements, while others have to more actively recruit to fill places on their programmes. The latter tend to have a much higher proportion of mature students or those without a traditional set of prior qualifications.

Courses

1.6 Institutions offer a diversity of programmes, from purely academic subjects such as philosophy or English, to highly vocational ones such as medicine or engineering. Programmes may be delivered either full-time or part-time. Most first-degree courses last for three or four years of full-time study. Sub-degree courses normally last for two years, although students may pursue some courses on a common programme for two years and then decide whether to take the qualification earned up to that point or study further to gain a degree. Many degree programmes are delivered in modular form, where areas of study within the main subject carry a certain number of "credits" towards the final qualification. This allows students to interrupt their studies if desired, to transfer more easily between institutions, and to select the pace at which they learn.

1.7 From September 2001, students may enrol for "foundation degrees". These are two-year courses, combining academic learning with practical skills and workplace experience, designed to be attractive in their own right and as a means to progressing to a full degree. Most foundation degrees are likely to be delivered by further education colleges and be based around part-time study.
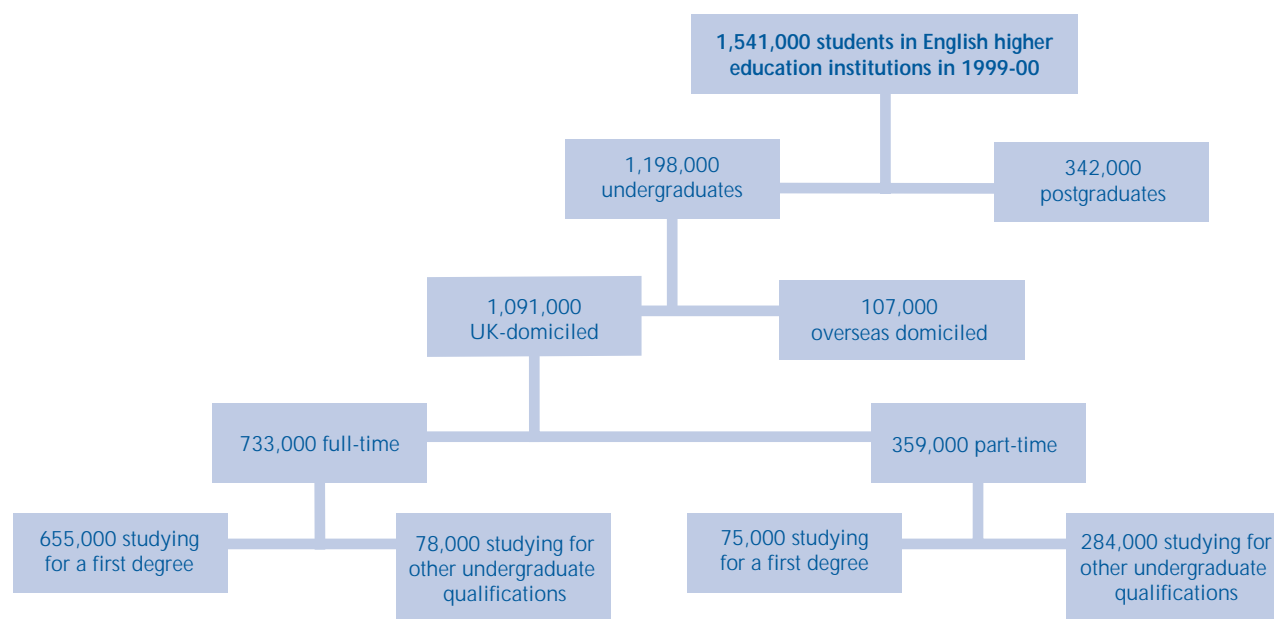
Students

1.8 The higher education sector in England has grown considerably in recent years to almost 1.7 million students in 1999-2000. The breakdown of students by place, level and mode of study is shown in **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**.

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

3 Breakdown of higher education students in English higher education institutions in 1999-00

Almost half of all students in higher education institutions are studying for a first degree. A quarter of all UK domiciled undergraduates are studying for sub-degree qualifications, most of them part-time
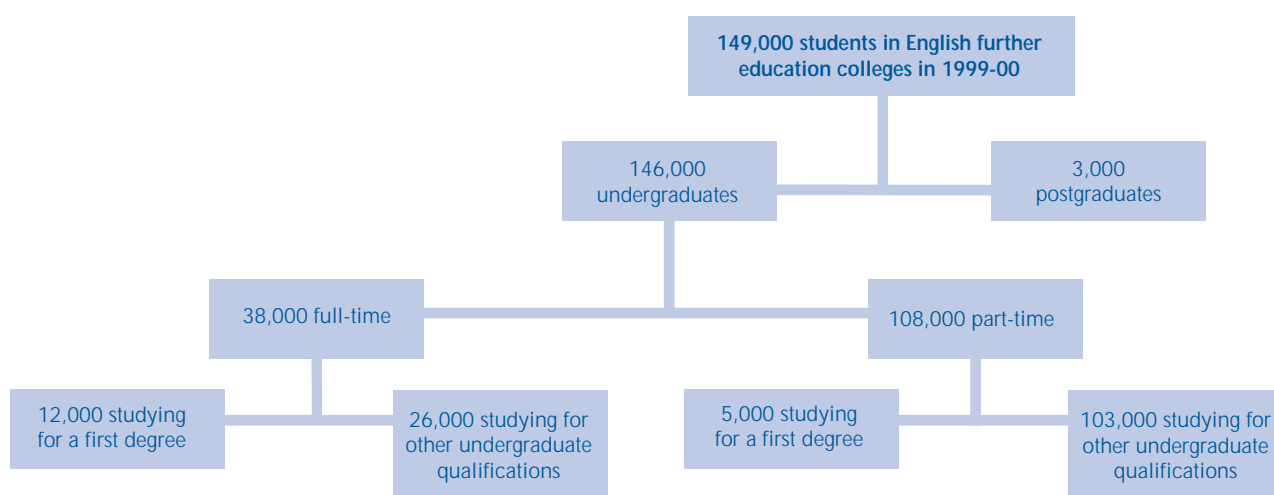
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                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                    │ 1,541,000 students in English│
                    │ higher education institutions│
                    │      in 1999-00              │
                    └─────────────────────────────┘

    ┌──────────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────┐
    │  1,198,000       │                    │    342,000       │
    │ undergraduates   │                    │  postgraduates   │
    └──────────────────┘                    └──────────────────┘

    ┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐
    │  1,091,000       │      │    107,000       │
    │  UK-domiciled    │      │ overseas domiciled│
    └──────────────────┘      └──────────────────┘

    ┌──────────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────┐
    │ 733,000 full-time│                    │359,000 part-time │
    └──────────────────┘                    └──────────────────┘

┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐
│655,000 study-│  │ 78,000 studying  │  │75,000 studying│  │284,000 studying  │
│ing for a     │  │ for other under- │  │for a first    │  │for other under-  │
│first degree  │  │graduate          │  │degree         │  │graduate          │
│              │  │qualifications    │  │               │  │qualifications    │
└──────────────┘  └──────────────────┘  └──────────────┘  └──────────────────┘
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NOTE

Numbers do not add up exactly due to rounding.

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, "Students in Higher Education Institutions, 1999/2000"

4 Breakdown of higher education students in English further education colleges in 1999-00

Over 90 per cent of higher education students in further education colleges are studying for sub-degree qualifications, the majority of them part-time.

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                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                    │ 149,000 students in English  │
                    │ further education colleges in│
                    │      1999-00                 │
                    └─────────────────────────────┘

    ┌──────────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────┐
    │  146,000         │                    │     3,000        │
    │ undergraduates   │                    │  postgraduates   │
    └──────────────────┘                    └──────────────────┘

    ┌──────────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────┐
    │ 38,000 full-time │                    │108,000 part-time │
    └──────────────────┘                    └──────────────────┘

┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐
│12,000 studying│  │26,000 studying  │  │5,000 studying│  │103,000 studying  │
│for a first   │  │for other under- │  │for a first   │  │for other under-  │
│degree        │  │graduate          │  │degree        │  │graduate          │
│              │  │qualifications    │  │               │  │qualifications    │
└──────────────┘  └──────────────────┘  └──────────────┘  └──────────────────┘
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Source: DfEE Departmental Report, 2001

Government policy for higher education

1.9 Government policy is that the higher education sector should make a significant contribution towards national learning targets **Figure 5**. The government also stresses the value of "lifelong learning" - the idea that people should consider the acquisition of formal qualifications at various points during their lives, perhaps by "dipping into" education more frequently but for short periods at a time, building upon previous qualifications or part-qualifications. The government's undertakings for the sector are shown in **Figure 6**.

5   **National Learning Targets for young people and adults**

	Position when targets were launched in 1998	Position in Autumn 2000	Target for December 2002
19-year olds with "Level 2" (5 GCSEs at A*-C, an NVQ[13] level 2, intermediate GNVQ[14] or equivalent)	73.9%	75.3%	85%
21-year olds with "Level 3" (2 A-levels, an NVQ level 3, an Advanced GNVQ or the equivalent)	52.2%	53.7%	60%
Adults with "Level 3" (as above)	45.1%	47.2%	50%
Adults with "Level 4" (NVQ level 4, i.e. having a degree or a higher level vocational qualification)	26.1%	27.5%	28%
Learning participation target - reduction in non-learners	26% of population not in learning	Data not yet available	24% of population not in learning

Source: Department for Education and Skills

6   **Government undertakings for higher education**

Target	Progress
Increase participation towards 50 per cent of those aged 18-30 by the end of the decade while maintaining standards	To be reported in 2002
Make significant year on year progress towards fair access as measured by Funding Council benchmarks	To be reported in 2002
Bear down on rates of non-completion.	The Funding Council will publish a target for the sector in January 2002.
Strengthen research and teaching excellence.	Results of the Research Assessment Exercise published in December 2001 indicate that 55 per cent of research staff now work in departments which contain work of international excellence.
	A new quality assurance method is to be introduced from September 2002.

Source: Delivering Results - A Strategy to 2006, National Learning Targets and Departmental Report 2001-02 to 2003-04

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13   *National Vocational Qualifications*
14   *General National Vocational Qualifications*

How English higher education is funded

1.10 The Higher Education Funding Council for England (the Funding Council) distributes funding on behalf of the Government to institutions in England offering higher education. The Department for Education and Skills determines the Funding Council's total budget (approximately £4.76 billion for 2001-02) and issues broad guidance on Government policies and plans. Prior to reorganisation in June 2001, the Department for Education and Employment had overall responsibility for higher education. We use the term "Department" to refer to the relevant Department before and after reorganisation.

1.11 In 2001-2 The Funding Council will distribute around £3.2 billion for teaching and £0.89 billion for research. Of about 1.7 million students (Figure 3 and Figure 4) around 1.3 million are on programmes supported by the Funding Council. The remaining programmes are funded by the Teacher Training Agency, the National Health Service, the Learning and Skills Council, professional or other bodies and self-funded students.

1.12 The Funding Council makes a series of calculations (Appendix 2) in determining how much teaching grant each institution should receive. The calculation takes account of the number of students at the institution and, crucially, adjusts for the number in place at the end of the year of programme of study. In this way, there is some incentive built into the funding process for institutions to retain students at least until the end of the year.

Initiatives by the Department and the Funding Council which address the issues of completion and achievement

1.13 The Department and the Funding Council have always recognised the importance of student completion and achievement. They have introduced a number of initiatives which relate to these issues or encourage institutions to enhance their teaching and support procedures **(Figure 7)**. In addition, "Action on Access", part-funded by the Funding Council, is looking at differences in practice between institutions, disseminating results and promoting the widening participation strategy.

The scope and methodology of our examination

1.14 We examined:

- why students do not achieve their qualification - Part 2;

- how performance varies between institutions and subject areas - Part 3;

- how students can be matched to courses - Part 4;

- how institutions can provide effective preparatory activities, induction, teaching and support - Part 5;

- how students can be assisted in preparing for employment - Part 6.

1.15 Our work focused upon programmes delivered with the support of the Funding Council, and our methodology is described in Appendix 1. Aspects of student retention for health-related study programmes were dealt with in a previous National Audit Office report, *Educating and training the future health professional workforce for England (HC277, 2000-01)*.

7   Recent initiatives which relate to student completion and achievement

Initiative	Details of initiative
Higher Education Reach-Out to Business and the Community Fund - HEROBC (1999 - present)	Set up by the Funding Council, in partnership with the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment in Northern Ireland. One of its aims is to help higher education institutions build on existing links with business for the benefit of their students' long-term careers.
Performance indicators (December 1999 - present)	The Funding Council first published indicators setting out student continuation and projected achievement rates in December 1999. The indicators are broken down to institutional level, and provide a source of benchmarking information. As such, they are an incentive for institutions to evaluate their performance and take action if necessary.
Access and Hardship Funds: Good Practice in Higher Education (June 2000)	The Department issued a guide to good practice in administering access and hardship funds. It set out the Department's criteria for good practice in administering the funds and a checklist against which institutions could benchmark their arrangements. The guide also has three case studies and examples of application forms.
Action on Access (2000 - present)	The Funding Council has commissioned a team to address access issues, including an examination of why institutions vary in their ability to retain non-traditional students. The team is highlighting good practice and disseminating its results throughout the sector for benchmarking purposes.
UCAS Entry Profiles (2000)	Accessed via the UCAS website, Entry Profiles are designed to provide applicants to higher education with better information about the courses that they might want to study.
Review of careers services (January 2001)	The Department reviewed the range and quality of careers services in the higher education sector.
HERO website (2001)	The Higher Education and Research Opportunities website is a single gateway to information about institutions and courses, guidance on life as a student and career advice.
Connexions service (April 2001)	A new youth support strategy for 13 to19 year-olds being phased in from April 2001. Although it deals with the whole range of potential career paths, it should allow young people access to clear advice on the potential benefits of higher education.
The Management of Students Administration - a guide to good practice (May 2001)	The UK Value for Money Steering Group carried out a study to highlight areas of good practice in student administration and has disseminated the results of the study through a good practice guide.
Strategies for learning and teaching in higher education: a guide to good practice (June 2001)	The Funding Council issued a guide to good practice in learning and teaching. It included a range of case studies, and detailed the range of support available to institutions
Strategies for widening participation in higher education: a guide to good practice (June 2001)	The Funding Council issued a guide to good practice on strategies for widening participation, which included a range of case studies.

Source: National Audit Office

Part 2

Why students do not achieve their desired qualification

2.1 This part of our report sets out the overall rates for student completion and achievement, and compares them with those of other relevant countries. It goes on to evaluate existing data and research on why some students do not successfully complete their programmes of study. We have restricted our analysis of continuation and achievement rates to full-time first degree students which is the group of students about which the Funding Council has the most comprehensive data and performance indicators.

Continuation and achievement rates are high

2.2 Some students withdraw from their studies within the first few weeks as they discover that the course or higher education generally is not for them. Ninety per cent of full-time first degree students complete the first year and continue into their year after entry[15]. Continuation rates have remained steady despite the growth of the student population in recent years. Students who are under 21 at the start are more likely to continue (92 per cent) than mature students (84 per cent). The Funding Council's latest indicators[16] project that 77 per cent of full-time first degree students will achieve a degree at the institution at which they started. One per cent will obtain a different qualification and a further five per cent are expected to transfer to another institution. Most of those who withdraw leave within the first year, but one in five of them will return to the same or another institution within a year.

2.3 Those students who obtain no qualification will have incurred expenses such as tuition fees, rent and living costs. They may also have wasted valuable time, although our qualitative research suggests that most early leavers felt they received at least some benefit from even a short period in the sector. Either they had acquired different learning skills or it had helped them make decisions about their future career path.

Achievement rates compare well with those of other countries

2.4 Full-time first-degree students in other parts of Great Britain perform very similarly to those in England **(Figure 8)**. Comparisons by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggest that the English higher education sector performs well against a range of industrialised countries, with only Japanese students more likely to obtain their degree **(Figure 9)**.

8 **Projected results for full-time first-degree students starting courses in 1998-99, across the United Kingdom**

Students in England, Scotland and Wales perform very similarly, but students at the two Northern Irish institutions do slightly better.

	Gain a degree (%)	Gain a sub-degree qualification (%)	Transfer to another institution (%)	Neither award or transfer (%)
England	77	1	5	16
Northern Ireland[1]	86	1	3	11
Scotland	75	2	6	16
Wales	78	1	6	14

NOTES:

1. Figures for Northern Ireland are for 1997-98 as they are unavailable for 1998-99.

2. Figures do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Funding Council Performance Indicators, HEFCE 01/69 December 2001

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15 *Most institutions additionally lose between one and three per cent of their newly enrolled students before 1 December. (National Audit Office survey of institutions)*

16 *"Performance Indicators in Higher Education in the UK", HEFCE 99/66, HEFCE 00/40 and HEFCE 01/69, include continuation rates for each institution, which set out the proportion of students which remains in higher education at the start of the year after entry. The indicators also include projected learning outcomes (the proportion of students likely to achieve their qualification), based on an extrapolation of actual continuation rates. As the data becomes available for undergraduate courses, the Funding Council expects to produce indicators based on actual outcomes. Students leaving before 1 December are excluded from the indicators.*

9   International comparisons of achievement rates for for degree students

English students do better than their European counterparts throughout the world with the exception of the Japanese, a smaller proportion of whom enter higher education compared with England

■ Percentage of enrolled students who obtain a degree   ■ Percentage of population who enter higher education
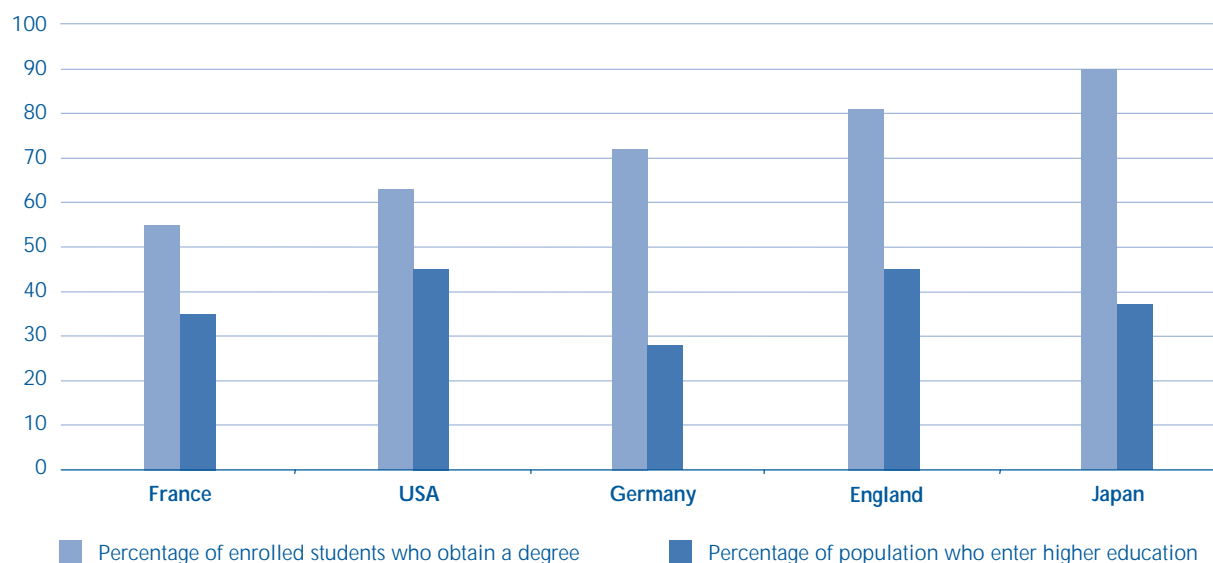
NOTE

The typical length of degree course varies between countries and there are differences in definitions and measurement techniques. The figure for those gaining a degree in England is not derived from the performance indicators, but broadly equates to the number gaining a degree or transferring to another institution.

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Education at a Glance", June 2000

Non-completion among certain groups of students

2.5   Our analysis of data[17] shows that early leavers, compared to those who continue into their second year, have lower A-level grades. They were also more likely to:

- be male;

- be over 21 years old on entry;

- to have entered their higher education institution through clearing;

- live in accommodation other than that provided by the institution; and

- be studying subjects in the business and management area or the mathematics and computing area.

This analysis is based on less than half the leavers, includes about seven to eight per cent who were non-leavers, and it does not take account of associations between the factors. The findings should therefore be treated as provisional.

2.6   Research produced by the Funding Council suggests that levels of non-completion are correlated only very weakly, if at all, with social class[18]. Instead, prior academic record (particularly A-level performance) is a more powerful correlation.

2.7   In recognition of the limitations of its benchmarks, the Funding Council is developing a web-based interactive system which will provide a facility to generate a benchmark derived from a bespoke 'mini sector' of selected institutions. By selecting a group of institutions judged to be similar, an institution will be able to derive a benchmark which is more realistic than national benchmarks.

Specific causes of withdrawal

2.8   Reasons for withdrawal are recorded for 88 per cent of the 26,000 students who were in the first year of their course and were recorded as leaving early in 1999-2000[19] **(Figure 10)**. In practice, students tend to leave for a combination of reasons - but they are notoriously reluctant to disclose their actual ones. In many cases they have considered leaving for some time but attempt to "ride it out". Often the first that staff know about students leaving is their failure to appear after the first one or two terms[20]. Less than half of the non-completers involved in our qualitative research had talked over their decision with staff.

17   *See Appendix 1, paragraph 5.*

18   *See HEFCE submission to the Education and Employment Committee, Sixth Report, 13 March 2001, HC 124, page 121.*

19   *Analysis of the HESA database. "Students recorded as leaving early" does not necessarily include all leavers and may include some who are temporarily recorded as leaving even though they subsequently complete their studies.*

20   *National Audit Office focus groups.*

10 The reasons for leaving recorded by institutions for English domiciled first year undergraduate leavers at English higher education institutions on courses expected to last more than one year

The most common cause of withdrawal is "personal reasons", followed by "failure" and "other" factors
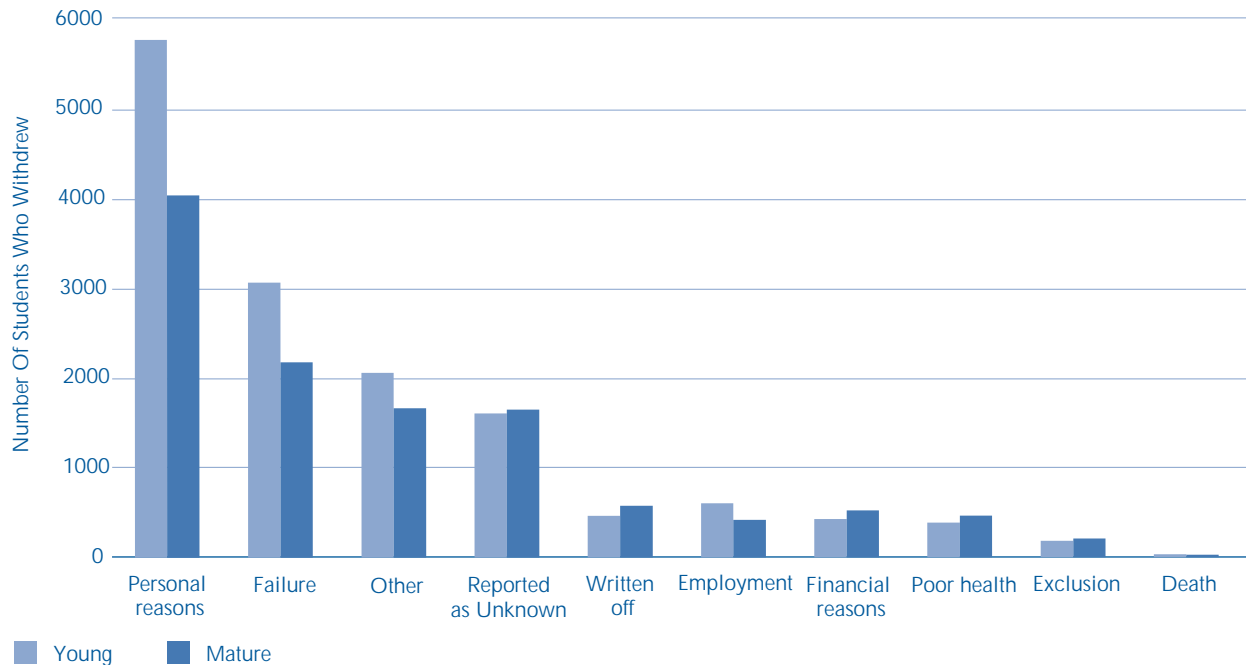
NOTE

1. The Funding Council estimates that around 60 per cent of all withdrawals were not recorded as such (based on 1998-99 data linked to 1999-2000 data). The bar chart above relates to the remainder for which a reason for leaving was recorded.
2. Excludes transfers to other institutions.
3. Mature is taken to be students who are 21 or over on entry to their programme of study.
4. "Written off" covers the situation where an institution has used its discretion to write off an inactive student after a period of time.

Source: Analysis of the 1999-2000 July HESA student record.

2.9 By contrast, our qualitative research amongst current students and staff as well as sixth-form heads in schools, together with other research, indicated that the main reasons for withdrawals are:

■ lack of preparedness for higher education;

■ changing personal circumstances or interests;

■ financial matters;

■ paid work; and

■ dissatisfaction with the course or institution.

a) lack of preparedness for higher education

2.10 There has always been a substantial difference between the self-learning which typifies higher education, and the teaching methods typical in primary and secondary education. Education between the ages of 16 and 18 has traditionally served as a bridge between these two approaches. However, staff at our focus groups suggested that 16-18 education is increasingly becoming a continuation of pre-16 education. They commented that, in the current environment of school and college league tables, students tend to be "spoon-fed" for longer, and are now less well-equipped with individual or self-learning skills. The increase in the number of students with less traditional prior qualifications may contribute to this trend. Institutions are seeking to ease the transition into higher education[21].

21   See paragraphs 5.2-5.6.

b) changing personal circumstances or interests

2.11 The majority of ex-students we interviewed told us that they had first considered withdrawal because of a change in their personal circumstances or interests[22]. Such changes ranged from family or emotional problems, and the development of new academic interests, through to the experience of financial hardship. In some cases, the "change" was simply a realisation that they had taken on more than they could handle in terms of life roles and responsibilities - for example holding down a job and having family responsibilities while studying part-time.

c) financial matters

2.12 Almost all current and ex-students in our research group had been warned that finances would be tight. They knew the extent of their course fees, but were less well-informed about incidental costs and living expenses. Many had not expected to spend as much on:

- books - students complained that they had to buy expensive textbooks because there were not enough copies in the library;

- printing - students were expected to hand in assignments which were fully word-processed, causing problems for those with poor IT skills as well as expenditure on printing;

- equipment - students on vocational courses were more likely to need expensive equipment and materials;

- parking fees - mature students, who normally have other commitments, are often not in a position to rely on public transport.

2.13 These additional financial pressures were unlikely on their own to cause students to withdraw. However, staff and students agreed that financial hardship could easily lead to problems of achievement, by provoking anxiety and reducing the time available for study and socialising, which in turn might persuade the student to withdraw[23].

d) paid work

2.14 Some students told us that they had to work to help pay their way through their higher education, and they were concerned about the effect on their studies. A quarter of undergraduates work part-time during their first year, rising to a third in subsequent years[24]. Research commissioned by the Department found that 47 per cent of full-time students work in term time[25]. Evidence given by the National Union of Students to the Education and Employment Committee in January 2001 suggested that the number of hours worked by full-time students averaged eleven hours a week.

2.15 The majority of those who have worked part-time agreed that this adversely affected their studies[26]. Research carried out at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne amongst its students suggests that around 35 per cent of students who have a job could achieve a higher grade for the year if they were not in employment. A limited amount of paid employment, however, may benefit the student financially as well as being valuable work experience. Nearly one in ten full-timers and over a quarter of part-timers surveyed in 1998/99 believed that working had been beneficial because of its relevance to their studies. The challenge is to find work that fits around these studies.

2.16 There are different problems for students who are working full-time and undertaking part-time study (e.g. working four days a week with one day a week of study). They have to fit in study around work, especially if their workloads are not reduced accordingly, or if they receive less study time than that recommended for the course.

2.17 Limits have been introduced recently in Germany and Sweden to protect student performance. In both countries, students receive grants and do not contribute to their tuition fees. In Germany new regulations introduced in 2001 limit students' earnings to €210 net a month (approximately £131, or £1,570 annually). In the Netherlands, with effect from 2000, student support was reduced for students earning in excess of £5,000 a year.

2.18 Recent evidence suggests that students in England are more likely to be in low paid jobs[27] and earn considerably less than their European counterparts. Were the Government to consider limiting paid work in England, restrictions on income would be less likely to work and limiting hours worked might be more effective. In March 2001, the Education and Employment Committee recommended that institutions should provide guidance that full-time students should not work in paid employment for more than 12 hours a week during term time. The Committee recognised, however that seeking to reduce non-completion by preventing students working long hours might be self-defeating unless better access is available to financial support.

e) dissatisfaction with the institution or course

2.19 In general, information about higher education, individual institutions and courses offered is more

22   *See paragraphs 5.15-5.16 for more information on support offered to students.*
23   *See paragraphs 5.13-5.14 for financial support options*
24   *MORI/UNITE "Student Living Report 2001"*
25   *"Changing Student Finances", Claire Callender and Martin Kemp, South Bank University, December 2000 (summary in DfEE Research Brief No. 213).*
26   *MORI/UNITE "Student Living Report 2001"*
27   *"Changing Student Finances", Claire Callender and Martin Kemp, South Bank University, December 2000 (summary in DfEE Research Brief No. 213)*

widely available than ever before. Students have access to websites as well as prospectuses and open days. Most institutions also employ their own press officers to promote their activities. Nevertheless, our research showed that some student dissatisfaction may stem from initial descriptions of the course. Students described prospectuses which gave out misleading information, perhaps due to "over-selling" and the commercial drive for institutions to increase their student numbers. Other students had learnt that their course was not accredited by the professional body of the industry that they sought to join. A number of current students explained that it was hard to obtain detailed information about forthcoming elements of their courses, and that course modules became unavailable at short notice. Applicants to higher education for 2001-02 have better access to information about courses and progression. The Funding Council has sponsored a private consortium, ECCTIS, to enhance the Course Discoverer software to include details of the links between academic and professional qualifications.

2.20 Some "widening participation" students found their courses too difficult[28]. In contrast, other students thought that the course was insufficiently challenging. In the context of education for which they were having to borrow large sums of money, students felt some resentment that courses might be dragged out.

2.21 None of the ex-students we interviewed said that teaching quality[29] was the main reason for their withdrawal. But many explained that factors such as unevenly paced lectures and the unexplained absence of staff from teaching sessions contributed to their decision. The quality of academic feedback was also a key factor. Effective feedback should be regular, consistent, prompt, reasoned and personal. Students described their dissatisfaction at:

- next assignments falling due before previous work has been marked and returned;

- inconsistency in marking standards between tutors; and

- lack of detail in feedback.

2.22 Several of the staff at our focus groups conceded that there is a gap between the feedback which students expect, as a result of their previous experience at school, college or in the workplace, and that which tutors are able to deliver.

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28   *National Audit Office focus groups - see note to the table in Paragraph 11 of Appendix 1.*
29   *See paragraphs 5.23-5.26 for more about effective teaching and learning*

part two

17

Part 3

How performance varies between institutions and subject areas

3.1 This part of our report examines the performance on completion and achievement by individual institutions, both in absolute terms and after taking account of factors which are not considered to be part of institutional performance. It also examines differences in performance by subject area and explores the information available on employability both by institution and by subject.

Performance by institution

3.2 **Continuation** Some institutions lose only one or two per cent of their students during the first year, while others lose more than one in five (Appendix 3). Among mature students, the variation is even wider, with a small group of institutions losing up to a quarter.

3.3 The Funding Council recognises that differences in withdrawal rates are due, in part, to the differences between the institutions in:

- students' prior academic attainment;

- the balance of young and mature students; and

- subject mix.

The Funding Council produces a benchmark for each institution which takes account of these factors. Most institutions perform at, or close to, their benchmark for all entrants **(Figure 11)**. Three other institutions[30] have particularly good continuation amongst young students. A further five institutions[31] excel with mature students.

3.4 **Achievement** Projected achievement rates[32] are much more widely spread. The proportion of students likely to graduate from each institution ranges from 48 to 98 per cent (Appendix 3). The remaining students in each case either gain another qualification, transfer to a different institution, or leave the sector.

3.5 Our analysis of institution data confirmed the Funding Council's conclusion that the most important factor affecting achievement rates is students' entry qualifications[33]. The Funding Council explains variation in achievement rates by the same factors as for continuation rates[34]. After controlling for them, 20 institutions (one sixth) out-perform and eight under-perform their benchmark to a significant extent (Appendix 4). In January 2001, the Funding Council told the Education Select Committee that it was conducting further research into the reasons for varying performance against benchmark, and the results will be available in 2002.

Variation between subject areas

3.6 Students of medical sciences, education, languages and humanities are less likely to withdraw than those studying engineering, technology and mathematical or computer sciences[35]. Non-continuation by subject[36] varies between 2 and 11 per cent for young students and up to 21 per cent for mature students.

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30   Royal Northern College of Music, Trinity College of Music and Wimbledon School of Art.
31   University of Cambridge, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, University of Plymouth, University of Southampton and University of West of England, Bristol.
32   The proportion of students who are active on 1 December of their start year who are projected to gain a degree at the institution at which they started.
33   See Appendix 1, paragraphs 6-8.
34   paragraph 3.3.
35   Funding Council Performance Indicators, HEFCE 01/69 December 2001
36   1998-99 degree entrants.

11 **Institutions whose non-continuation rate was significantly different from the Funding Council's benchmark figure**

Only seven institutions performed statistically better than benchmark and seven significantly worse than benchmark

	Actual non-continuation rate (%)	Benchmark figure (%)
Better than benchmark		
University College Chichester	7	11
Leeds Metropolitan University	9	12
University of Portsmouth	7	11
Royal Academy of Music	0	11
College of St Mark & St John	7	11
St Martin's College	6	10
University College Worcester	7	13
Worse than benchmark		
Bretton Hall	14	10
Middlesex University	17	14
University of North London	22	16
School of Oriental and African Studies	17	10
Southampton Institute	18	13
South Bank University	22	17
Thames Valley University	21	15

Source: Funding Council Performance Indicators, HEFCE 01/69 December 2001

3.7 The Higher Education Statistics Agency publishes information on the number of graduates obtaining a first class honours degree by subject. For those completing their degrees in 1999-2000 the percentage of first class degrees varied from 2 to 21 per cent for the different subject areas.

Employability

3.8 For most students the primary objective of undertaking higher education is to enhance their career prospects and earning potential[37]. Research on the subject is complicated by the fact that not all students seek to maximise their long-term salary level. But a recent study suggests that in 1986, male and females aged 20-24 who had graduated in 1985 earned on average 17 per cent and 30 per cent respectively higher than for those with A-level qualifications. After ten years, the difference had risen to 44 per cent and 57 per cent respectively[38].

3.9 Published sector-wide data[39] for full-time students graduating in 1999-2000 show that six months after qualification:

■ two-thirds had obtained employment;

■ a fifth were continuing their education or training;

■ five per cent were assumed to be unemployed;

■ the remainder (eight per cent) were not available for employment, study or training because, for example, they were travelling or were ill.

Excluding those not available for work, 94 per cent[40] were in employment or further study in January 2001. Institutions' performance varied from 74 per cent to 100 per cent, but after controlling for certain factors[41], most were very close to their benchmark. Six institutions were significantly above benchmark, and ten significantly below **(Figure 12)**.

37 *MORI survey "Student Living Report 2001" commissioned by UNITE (a specialist provider of student accommodation services), and National Audit Office focus groups.*

38 *"Mapping the careers of highly qualified workers", University of Birmingham, (Belfield, Bullock, Chevalier, Fielding, Siebert, Thomas) published July 1997.*

39 *HESA Statistical First Release 46: "First destinations of higher education students in the United Kingdom for the academic year 1999-00".*

40 *"Indicators of employment", HEFCE 01/21.*

41 *Age on entry; entry qualifications and subject of study; gender and ethnic group; social background; degree classification; whether on a sandwich course; local employment levels and character; and average A-level points of students on entry to the institution.*

12 **Institutions whose employment indicator was significantly different from the Funding Council's benchmark figure**

Only seven institutions performed statistically better than benchmark and seven significantly worse than benchmark

	Actual employment rate (%)	Benchmark figure (%)
Better than benchmark		
Brunel University	97	95
University of Hull	97	94
University of Kent at Canterbury	98	94
Loughborough University	97	95
University of Luton	100	93
Nottingham Trent University	98	94
Worse than benchmark		
Cumbria College of Art & Design	77	85
University of East London	86	90
Falmouth College of Arts	74	85
Harper Adams University College	88	92
Leeds Metropolitan University	91	94
Liverpool John Moores University	90	93
London Guildhall University	87	91
University of Salford	90	93
South Bank University	87	91
University of Sussex	92	95

Source: Funding Council Indicators of Employment, April 2001

3.10 In 1999 the Department undertook research with the Higher Education Careers Services Unit, the Careers Services Trust and the Institute of Employment[42] on the early career paths of graduates and diplomates who qualified in 1995. They found that a number of personal characteristics, as well as characteristics of degree course and class of degree obtained, all had an impact on future earnings potential **(Figure 13).** Graduates who obtained a first class degree earned on average three per cent more than graduates with an upper second. Those with a lower-second class degree earned on average six per cent less, even after taking into account A-level performance. Institutional effects could only be identified after controlling for students' personal characteristics and degree subject, but they concluded that that the highest employability rates were shared between a wide spread of old and new universities[43].

13 **Personal characteristics affecting earnings potential three years after graduation**

- The highest earnings are observed among graduates aged 30-39 years.

- Prior qualifications continue to have an effect on earnings even after controlling for degree class and subject studied. Graduates who entered higher education with 24+ A-level points or a prior degree have on average the highest earnings, and earnings decline with declining A-level points.

- Social class background influences graduate earnings with graduates from social class IV (partly skilled) and social class V (unskilled) on average earning seven per cent less than graduates from social class I (professionals) or social class II (managerial and technical) backgrounds. Graduates who had no parent in work when they were aged 14 earn on average 10 per cent less than graduates from social classes I and II.

Source: "Moving On: Graduate careers three years after graduation" (DfEE, IER, AGCAS, CSU), 1999

42 *"Moving on: graduate careers three years after graduation", Higher Education Careers Services Unit, Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services and the Institute for Employment Research, produced under contract to the Department. Based on postal survey of 5 per cent of leavers in 1995 and subsequent contact with ten thousand graduates three and a half years later, published in1999.*
43 *"Moving On", Figure 2.9, p 48*

3.11 Even after controlling for entry qualifications, the research showed that there was a significant earnings premium associated with a degree in mathematics and computing, engineering, business studies and medicine and related subjects. In contrast lower earnings were associated with arts and humanities degrees[44].

3.12 The researchers concluded that unemployment at 6, 12 and 18 months after graduation was highly correlated with the average number of months graduates spent unemployed over a 42 month period, and so was indicative of difficulties in the labour market over that period. However, for a full picture, the longer-term employment prospects, together with other measures of employability performance, are needed. The research, based on employment three and a half years after graduation, found that graduates with vocational degrees tended to enter the graduate labour market directly and were more likely to be in jobs where their qualification was required than those who had studied more academic courses. Vocational and quantitatively skilled graduates found it easier to get jobs where their qualification had been required than graduates with more general degrees. Graduates in education, engineering, and medicine or related subjects were most likely to be in a job requiring their qualifications whereas those in humanities, arts and natural sciences were least likely to be in such a job[45].
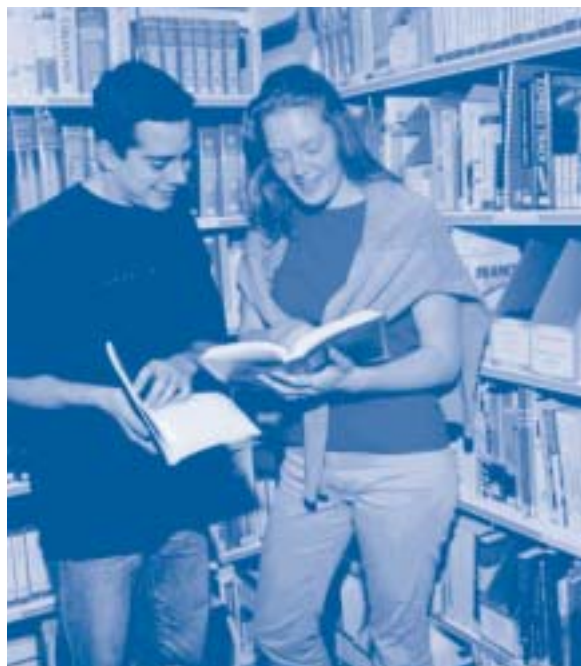
44   *"Moving On", p45.*
45   *"Moving On", p99.*

Part 4

Matching students to courses

4.1 In this part of our report, we consider the importance of initial course selection in helping students to gain their qualification. We examine the work being done by institutions, the Department, the Funding Council and other stakeholders to ensure that potential students are well informed about options available to them, and we draw attention to examples of good practice on:

■ pre-enrolment information about courses;

■ admissions procedures (both in general and through clearing); and

■ course flexibility.

Pre-enrolment information about courses

4.2 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. Our analysis suggested that applicants need access to information on:

■ course content;

■ methods of assessment;

■ whether work placements form part of the course;

■ the amount of time students should expect to spend at their studies;

■ any ancillary financial costs (such as materials, key text books and field trips);

■ success rates of past students; and

■ employment destinations of those who gained the qualification.

4.3 The Department and the Funding Council sponsor provision of some information nationally. The HERO (Higher Education and Research Opportunities) website (www.hero.ac.uk) provides a "one-stop shop" for potential applicants, including advice on choosing a course and profiles higher education institutions and further education colleges, setting out the services they provide. It also contains advice on funding, the student experience, careers and lifelong learning.

4.4 The UCAS[46] website (www.ucas.ac.uk) contains "entry profiles" which provide details of entry routes, selection criteria and benefits of study for specific courses at individual institutions. Entry profiles are a useful way of communicating with potential students, but as the website is still being developed only 24 English institutions have their profiles on-line.

4.5 Information is made widely available through printed prospectuses, on web-sites and in faculty or course booklets. All of the institutions we visited also hold open days when prospective students may visit. Some, including Edge Hill College of Higher Education, provide open evenings and drop-in sessions on term-time afternoons. In recognition of parents' interest in the selection process, most provide information specifically for them. For example, Canterbury Christ Church University College has an annual evening for parents with talks on: introducing higher education, choosing courses, completing UCAS application forms and careers services.

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46   *Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.*

Admissions procedures

4.6 The majority of potential full-time students apply to institutions immediately from school or college, or after a 'gap year'. Most submit their application forms to their chosen institutions through UCAS and admissions tutors sift through the forms to identify suitable students. Institutions make offers of places based on results already obtained, or conditional offers based on predicted grades at A-level or Advanced GNVQ, or other evidence of their suitability. Some institutions, or faculties within them, which attract more applicants than they have places for, make very high offers based on the grades at A-level or the achievement of other qualifications. Others, primarily those who have more difficulty recruiting students, tend to make much lower offers. Applications from students with disabilities or from mature people with less traditional qualifications are usually considered individually.

4.7 Most institutions encourage applicants to attend an open day or otherwise visit the institution to ensure that they will be happy to study there. Institutions told us that especially for subjects which are "new" to students (e.g. computer science) open days, including lectures and opportunities to talk to current students, are critical in helping students understand what the course is about, and what they could expect to do during the course.

4.8 All institutions seek to admit students who are committed to completing the qualification and are able to obtain the qualification for which they have applied. Most institutions accept that interviews are the best way to test an individual's commitment to the course, and their aptitude for it. Especially for returners to education, applicants with lower prior academic qualifications or "widening participation" students[47], interviews help staff assess whether or not any additional support may be needed. Interviews are also very important for helping applicants assess the suitability of the institution and the course for their needs. Interviewers may help students explore other options or advise on additional qualifications (e.g. an Access course at a further education college) before proceeding with the current application.

4.9 In practice, interviewing students is very resource intensive both in terms of staff time and effort, and for most faculties it is impossible to interview all students whom they might be willing to accept. Many target interviews at particular groups. For example, especially for courses which are heavily oversubscribed, some institutions prefer to make offers directly to likely high-achievers, interviewing students whose predicted grades are closer to the minimum offer. A few institutions have

also started to take account of the overall performance of the school or college applicants have been attending, and targeting some of their interviews at students from those schools with low average achievement[48].

4.10 Some students, particularly those from families where they are the first to consider higher education, can find interviews intimidating[49]. In order to lessen students' fears about interviews, some institutions provide advance information about what the interview process will involve (**Example 1**). About two thirds of institutions provide specific training to interviewers to ensure that they put candidates at ease and get the best from the interview.

> Example 1 Bradford College
>
> For many courses, Bradford College issues a short information pack with its invitation to interview. The pack details the mix of interview, group discussion and information session which the candidate can expect on the day. With respect to the interview, it sets out the ideal combination of experience, qualifications, knowledge, attitudes and practical skills, and explains whether these are essential or desirable.

Admissions through "clearing"

4.11 Clearing is the process by which students who have been unsuccessful in achieving a confirmed offer at the institution of their choice (or who did not go through the standard application process) seek acceptance on a course at an institution that has not yet filled all its places. The main 'clearing' activity takes place within a week of A-level results being made known in August **(Figure 14)**. This period is a difficult one for potential students because of their anxiety to get a place as soon as possible. But they are also potentially more at risk of early withdrawal because they have little time to research fully the courses on offer, or visit the institutions. Institutions seek to overcome this by providing additional information or support to students recruited through clearing. Our survey suggests that the new universities are most likely to provide support such as clearing open days and summer schools, accommodation hotlines or specialised study skills packages. Over 60 per cent did, compared to around 30 per cent of "other" institutions and further education colleges. This is in part explained by the greater use of clearing by the new universities compared to the pre-1992 universities.

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47 For an explanation of "Widening Participation" students see the note to the table in paragraph 11 of Appendix 1.
48 More information is contained in our report on Widening Participation (HC 485).
49 National Audit Office focus groups.

14 **Helping students through clearing**

Source: London Guildhall University

4.12 Some institutions told us that they regard interviews as particularly important for clearing students. Many, such as University College London and the University of Salford, strongly encourage such students to visit, since they regard this as the best way to ensure that the course, the ethos and location of the institution meet the students' needs. University College London was prepared to proceed on the basis of a telephone interview as the absolute minimum.

Course flexibility

4.13 Many institutions have found that the introduction of combined honours courses and/or a modular structure have been helpful, particularly in subjects which many students have not pursued before, such as computer science. In some faculties at the institutions we visited, different qualifications had common early years or first semesters.

4.14 Flexibility of course provision may reduce the risk of withdrawal as it allows students to change easily from the course for which they had originally enrolled. Many institutions have retained such flexibility while moving away from a radical "mix and match" modular structure, because this may lead to programmes of study with too little academic coherence, or discourage social integration among students.

Part 5

Providing effective preparatory activities, induction, teaching and support

5.1 This part of our report focuses on the experiences of students just before, and once they begin, their course. We focus on initiatives to help students at risk of withdrawal because they:

■ have difficulty settling into the institution or course;

■ have skills or knowledge gaps as a result of their academic background;

■ need financial assistance or other support.

We also examine initiatives to tackle poor attendance which is often the first indicator of student withdrawal, and quality of teaching and learning which, whilst not a major factor, also affects students' decisions to continue with their courses.

Settling into the institution and course

5.2 Our qualitative research showed that initiatives to improve completion are most effective if undertaken at the point of entry, or even before students enter higher education[50]. Current students, prospective students and heads of sixth form colleges all told us that they welcomed steps taken to help students settle. These generally consist of:

■ pre-term activities;

■ institution-wide freshers' activities;

■ faculty-based freshers' activities;

■ the provision of accommodation.

5.3 *Pre-term activities* are designed to prepare students for higher education, equipping them with self-learning ability and updating any skills that they need in preparation for study. Some institutions run formal "preparation for higher education" courses aimed at key groups of potential students **(Example 2)**. The University of Salford, for example, runs a two-day Summer School

Example 2: Edge Hill College of Higher Education

The Fastrack scheme is a short intensive course, aimed primarily at mature people, designed to give potential students the skills and knowledge to enter higher education. Applicants come onto the course with the aim of pursuing a particular subject. Some 30 hours are devoted to developing subject knowledge through lectures, seminars and tutorials. Over 30 hours are spent developing study skills and learning how to use information technology. Students are assessed at the completion of the course. They are also given guidance on appropriate progression route, particularly where they are unlikely to progress to degree level after assessment. Options may include referral to a local further education college, a one or two year "Access to Higher Education" course or vocational guidance.

for mature students in September which covers four key study skills - organising learning, note taking, critical reading and essay or report writing. Many institutions give pre-course advice, to mature students in particular, about finances, including the facility to apply for bursaries and other help before they enrol.

5.4 *Institution-wide freshers' activities* include introductory lectures for students on the types of financial, health and academic support available. As well as providing leaflets, institutions also gave talks to students in their first week to remind them about the different sources of finance available and who they should speak to if they wanted further advice[51]. Many institutions put together talks and presentations which are actually delivered by the Students' Union, since they believe that new arrivals will be more receptive to other students. On some courses at the University of Plymouth, induction is managed by second-year students, whose recent experience of entering higher education is seen as particularly valuable.

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50   National Audit Office focus groups.
51   National Audit Office visits to institutions.

Example 3: The University of Plymouth
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The University has identified the transition from school, further education and work as a critical issue that can cause early withdrawal if not managed appropriately. A recent paper by the Teaching and Learning Committee states that a managed period of transition to higher education is key to the delivery of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy. It recommends to the Academic board that Stage One of all undergraduate courses should be recognised as a period of orientation, core skill development and an introduction to the discipline, and that the curriculum and the accompanying processes of teaching, learning and assessment should reflect this.

Example 4: Staffordshire University
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The English Department gives new entrants on the degree course an assignment (or "early hurdle") designed to identify whether students are in need of additional support. Tutors discuss the assignment with each student and explain how to access additional support where appropriate.

Example 5: University of Salford
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Salford has a MathScope support unit for students who may experience difficulties with maths, regardless of the subject they are studying. During the induction week all new intake students within the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Environment take a Mathematics diagnostic test. An analysis of Semester 1 Maths exam results offered evidence that regular attendance at MathScope resulted in significantly lower failure rates for students scoring less than 40 per cent in the diagnostic test. Salford is about to set up, on a pilot basis, a support unit for communication skills.

Example 6: Edge Hill
_____

All first year students are asked to complete electronically an individual "skills audit" questionnaire. The results are used as the basis for discussions with tutors, feeding into the student's Personal Development Portfolio which can be used to support the search for post-qualification employment.

5.5   _Faculty-based activities_ vary considerably. All include preliminary sessions on using libraries and information technology but otherwise the emphasis may be either on academic or social activities. Most conduct social events involving new students, existing students and staff, and prefer to give students a fairly easy start to university life. Some institutions have tried to assist the transition to higher education by adjusting the first year of their courses, giving more time to the development of core skills and an introduction to the relevant discipline **(Example 3)**. However, institutions need to balance this against the danger that these courses will start off too slowly, leading the more able students to become disaffected. Our qualitative research revealed that dissatisfaction with the slow pace of teaching might be a significant factor for some of those who withdraw early[52].

5.6   _Accommodation_ arrangements may help to provide the kind of social integration which is important both at the institution and course level. Students see three main advantages of "living in"[53] - ease of meeting people, quality of social life and proximity to the institution - which may all have an impact on the ease with which students settle. Our survey found that 71 per cent of institutions offered accommodation to all students in their first year. This was more common for the older

universities (95 per cent) than for the other types of institution. University College London, for example, offered a place in a hall of residence to all first year students firmly holding offers even if they lived within easy daily commuting distance.

Identifying skills or knowledge gaps

5.7   Young students often have a mix of arts and science subjects and others, especially mature entrants, have no formal qualifications. This may lead to gaps in the skills or knowledge necessary for their course. Through interviews at applications stage (Part 3), through on-going programmes of academic activities and through the personal tutor system, institutions aim to identify and address support needs for all students.

5.8   Some faculties told us that as part of induction they give students diagnostic tests or at least a relatively straightforward assignment early in their course. Tutors use such assignments to identify students who have difficulty writing well-structured reports or essays (or who have dyslexia but were either not aware of it or did not disclose it on their application form) or who lack the necessary mathematical skills for their course **(Example 4 and Example 5)**. One institution had introduced an individual "skills audit" questionnaire **(Example 6)**.

52   _National Audit Office focus groups._
53   _MORI/UNITE, "Student Living Report", 2001._

part five

15 **Giving advice on study skills**
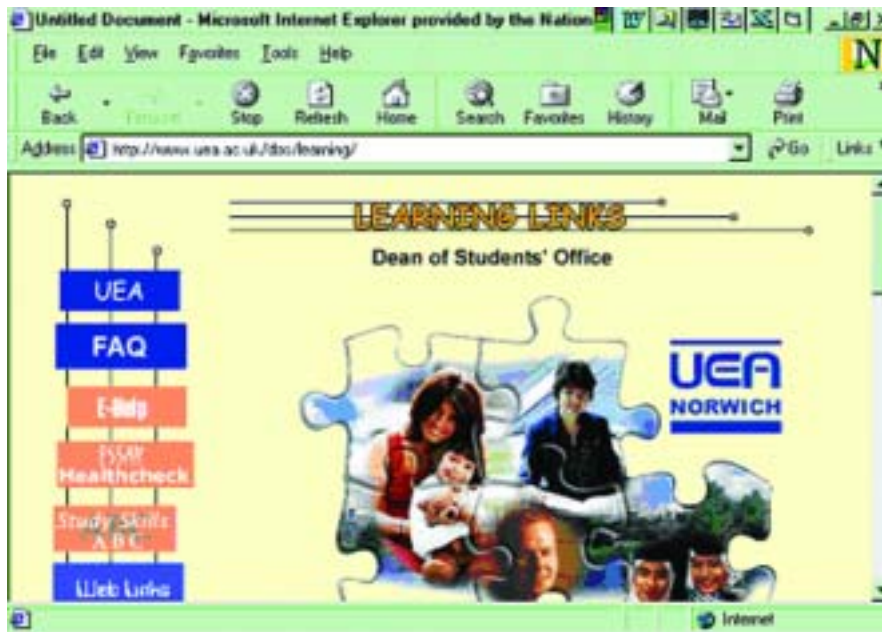
Source: University of East Anglia

5.9 Most of the institutions we visited delivered help with study skills, through on-course activities and central support units (Example 5). Some offer 'elective' courses to help students develop these skills. Many institutions use their web-sites to direct students towards advice **(Figure 15)**. Our survey showed that 86 per cent of institutions (and almost all new universities) provided study skills workshops for their students. Focus groups and discussions with higher education staff revealed a widespread concern over the number of students who struggle with numeracy skills. The Engineering Council has said that unless universities provide additional mathematics tuition to many engineering students there are likely to be more withdrawals from engineering courses in the first year.

5.10 Much of the responsibility for identifying and addressing academic or learning support needs rests with personal tutors - but they also need to know to whom within the institution to refer students who need specialist help, since they are not usually trained in counselling or able to advise on financial support. All institutions allocate students to personal tutors, but there is wide variation both between institutions and between academic subjects on how - and how well - the system works. We found that the number of students allocated to an individual tutor varied considerably between institutions, and that there were often significant differences between faculties[54]. The average number per tutor was 13, but the reported range was from under 10 to more than 70. Some tutors focused on relatively small numbers of students most in need of support. Others

> **Example 7: London Guildhall University**
>
> The University uses 'academically successful' second and third year students to help students in lower years to work with greater confidence, by talking through queries or difficulties, and targeting specific skills needs or referring them on to other services. An evaluation of the scheme found that students who attended a peer support session obtained average grades that were higher than for those who did not.

met regularly to discuss specific work, for example monthly or at least once per term or semester. Some advertised 'surgery hours' when they were available to meet their tutees and left it to the students to make use of the opportunity if they wished.

5.11 Many students in our focus groups told us that they were concerned about the lack of availability of academic staff. They complained that staff were difficult to contact or did not stay around after lectures to answer questions. Surgery hours were often fully booked and consultations were cancelled or cut short[55]. Some students were reluctant to seek support or to admit difficulties, fearing that it might prejudice how they were perceived. Some institutions, however, report that using student mentors for new students is beneficial, both for the first-year and more experienced student **(Example 7)**. Student services staff and Student's Unions are often very experienced in helping students who are having problems. Students are

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54 *National Audit Office survey and visits to institutions.*
55 *National Audit Office focus groups.*

16 Sources of public funding from which students may seek support
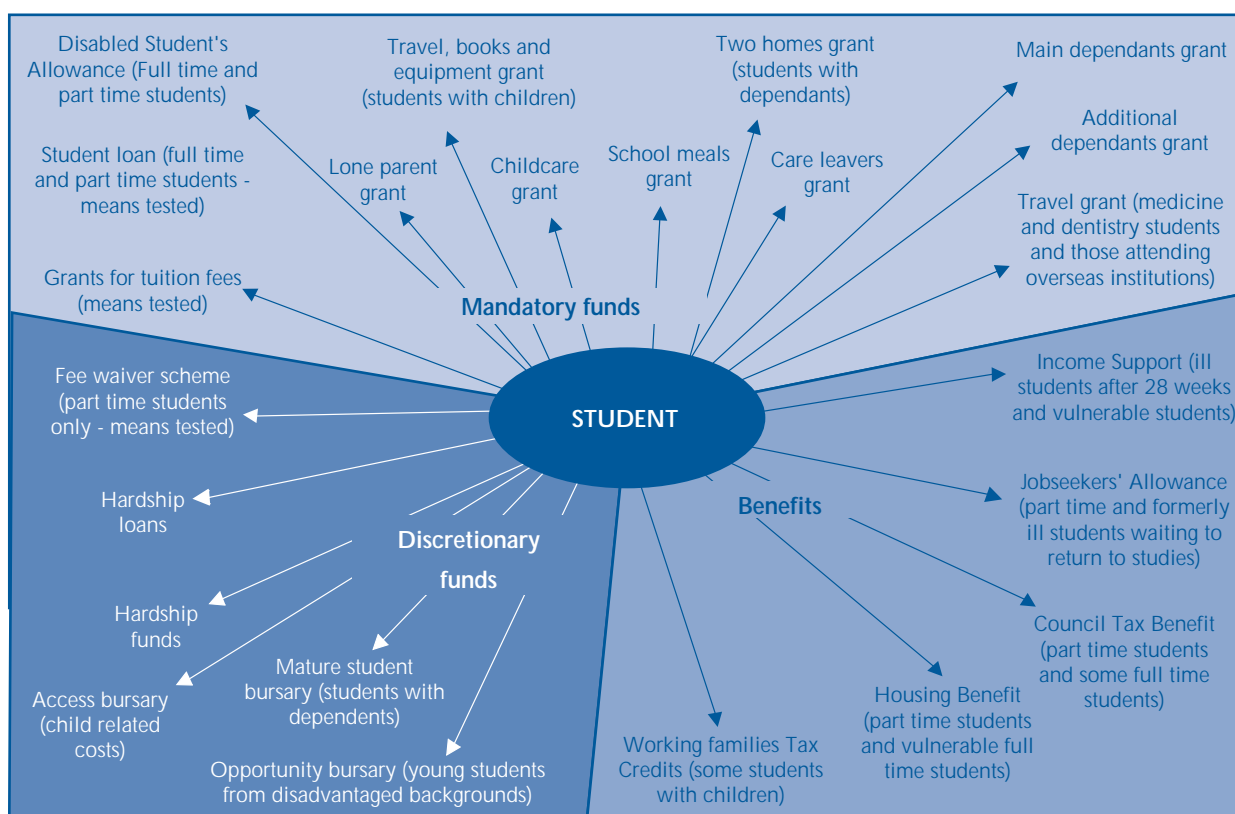
NOTE

Funding is for full-time students except where stated otherwise; some sources have been available only since Septmeber 2001

Source: National Audit Office and National Union of Students

not always aware that they can contact these staff or the unions if they have particular concerns about their studies and their personal tutors are not available.

5.12 Institutions recognise that increasing the numbers of students to meet the national targets, including higher percentages of "widening participation" students[56], may put greater pressures on personal tutors. There will also be greater demands on facilities provided to help support students through their studies. Meeting these demands will require further resources.

Financial support

5.13 The variety of sources of public funding from which students can seek support is shown in **Figure 16**. While various mandatory grants, loans or benefits may be available, depending upon personal circumstances, some students need additional financial help. All institutions therefore have discretion to distribute other centrally-provided funds, subject to guidance from the Department and Funding Council, while some are able to offer financial assistance from their own resources. Discretionary funds comprise:

■ Opportunity Bursaries, for young students from disadvantaged backgrounds;

■ Access Bursaries, for child related costs;

■ Mature Student Bursaries, for those with dependants;

■ Hardship Funds and Hardship Loans; and

■ Fee waivers for part-time students.

5.14 The Department introduced new support arrangements in 1999-2000. As well as new grants for students with dependants the Department has quadrupled the discretionary funding provided to institutions through Access and Hardship Funds and introduced Hardship Loans of £500. New measures have been added to the discretionary support, including fee waivers for part-time students, bursaries for student parents and opportunity bursaries for young students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

5.15 Our qualitative research revealed some reluctance amongst students to use these sources, often because further loans were perceived as simply a temporary reprieve, or because successful application for such help could not be guaranteed. However, institutions find the demand for discretionary funding exceeds the funds available.

56   *For an explanation of "widening participation" students see the note to the table in paragraph 11 of Appendix 1.*

5.16 Effective means of encouraging students to access financial support include:

- pre-enrolment publicity relating to bursaries;

- providing a "one-stop shop", often organised through the Students' Union;

- same-day cash assistance in emergency situations;

- use of posters and website banners; and

- specific targeting via academic departments.

Other support

5.17 There is a core set of support services provided by most institutions. **Figure 17** sets out the proportion of institutions offering specific services, as identified by our survey of the sector.

5.18 Students may access these services directly but tutors are expected to make referrals if it appears that the student would benefit from specialist advice. One institution used a memo system for staff to use to refer a student to the Director of Student Support as 'giving cause for care and concern' (Canterbury Christ Church University College). Another had created a new post with responsibility for interviewing all students in the process of withdrawing or considering withdrawing **(Example 8)**. Where institutions are operating a 'one stop shop', it is very easy for students to access all the various different services themselves without the need for specific referrals. Institutions use techniques such as collection of student loan cheques to encourage students into the advice centres and to identify those who may need further help and advice.

5.19 The institutions we visited obtained pre-entry information about students' actual or likely needs for additional support. For students who declared a disability on their application, such needs are identified through the assessment that is undertaken to establish entitlement to Disabled Students Allowance. Applicants with non-standard qualifications are generally interviewed as part of the application process, but that same interview is used to identify what additional learning support the student may need in order to be successful.

5.20 The most common disability declared on application forms is dyslexia, with more cases being identified by institutions after students have enrolled. Some of the institutions we visited have helped staff to cope better with dyslexic students by producing specific guidance about it **(Example 9)**.

17   Support services offered by institutions

Type of service	Proportion of the 111 survey respondents which offer the service (%)
Professional counsellors	100
Staff acting as financial advisers	95
Chaplaincy	89
Childcare facilities	71 (90 per cent of post-1992 universities but only 43 per cent of "other" institutions)
Psychiatric services	55 (74 per cent of pre-1992 universities but only 38 per cent of "other" institutions)

Source: National Audit Office survey

Example 8: Staffordshire University

Towards the end of 2000-01, the University appointed a Student Guidance Manager to provide advice on academic matters and issues such as appeals, complaints, withdrawal and transfer from a programme of study. A key aim is to be proactive in the retention of students by providing any student who is contemplating withdrawal with focused and specialised support. The appointment of a Guidance Manager has the full support of senior management, who recognise that the success of the post will depend upon close and effective work with the Schools, Students' Union Advice Centre and other support services.

Example 9: Canterbury Christ Church University College

An expert in adult dyslexia and skills development has compiled a guide for lecturers and tutors at the College. It explains:

- what dyslexia is;

- how it might affect a student in terms of reading comprehension, fluency, spelling, writing and organisation;

- why students with dyslexia can still be successful in higher education; and

- techniques which can help, such as: changing the speed of lectures; providing better handouts; presenting in a multi-sensory fashion; allowing the use of personal tape recorder during lectures; encouraging questions to be asked; and taking a flexible approach to student assessment.

Monitoring attendance

5.21 In the past most institutions did not regard it as important to monitor students' attendance at lectures, although attendance at tutorials and practical sessions was always treated as compulsory, with absences being followed up. Non-attendance at lectures alone would not normally lead to disciplinary action if the student were able to demonstrate that they were keeping up with the course.

5.22 Most staff now consider it important to undertake some monitoring of attendance at lectures[57], as non-attendance can often be the first sign that a student is contemplating withdrawal. They told us that their faculties had common procedures for contacting students who had missed a number of consecutive lectures, or other sessions, and that they then took further action if the student did not provide a satisfactory reason for the absences. The Faculty of Law at University College London had also successfully piloted peer assessment of students' contribution towards project work, which took account of team members' attendance record.

Effective teaching and learning

5.23 Good teaching and appropriate learning methods are important to student completion and achievement. The Quality Assurance Agency, amongst other things, evaluates student progression and achievement at programme level within institutions, grading performance over a five-point scale. Analysis of published subject reviews in 1999-2000 shows that nearly all programmes examined were awarded the top two grades available. In the same year, all institutions received funding from the Funding Council's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund to deliver aspects of their learning and teaching strategies. As a result, by June 2000, all higher education institutions had developed and were implementing an institutional learning and teaching strategy. Funding for 2001 and future years is conditional on institutions producing an approved statement of progress showing that the strategy is being implemented and monitored effectively, and is either meeting or making progress towards measurable targets and outcomes. The Fund also supports: the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme; the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning; the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme; and the Learning and Teaching Support Network (a network of 24 subject centres and a centre dealing with generic issues).

The centres have developed on-line resources for teachers, including case studies of good practice in teaching and assessment. In addition, the Funding Council produced a good practice guide in June 2001[58], which included a large number of case studies from individual institutions.

5.24 Higher education lecturers are not required to have a teaching qualification, but they are encouraged to do so. The majority of institutions have now introduced certificate programmes in higher education teaching, which are often mandatory for probationary staff. The University of Warwick, for example, through its Centre for Academic Practice, has a well-established postgraduate programme, with almost a hundred participants, a number of whom undertake it as a requirement of probation. At Staffordshire University, staff may apply to become Learning and Teaching Fellows. The Fellowship scheme rewards excellent teachers with an honorary title and a salary increase. Good practice in teaching is also disseminated across the institution.

5.25 The Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education was established in 1999 to enhance the status of teaching, improve the experience of learning, and support innovation across the sector. It is a UK wide, independent professional body for all who teach and support learning in higher education. The organisation also develops and maintains professional standards of practice, being an important and well-respected, external accreditor of teaching programmes within higher education institutions. It is also becoming the main source of professional recognition for all staff engaged in teaching and the support of learning with 8,000 qualified members.

5.26 The Education Select Committee[59] was concerned that teaching may take a secondary role behind research and recommended that institutions should ensure that staff participate in appropriate teaching development programmes. One institution we visited, while primarily known for its research work had developed a clear policy of identifying and promoting staff who had developed particularly innovative teaching and tutoring techniques **(Example 10)**. At Staffordshire University, good practice in teaching is disseminated by a University publication "Learning Matters" and within several schools by "Learning and Teaching" bulletins, with the aim of improving standards across the institution.

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57   *National Audit office visits to institutions.*
58   *"Strategies for learning and teaching in higher education", HEFCE 01/37, June 2001.*
59   *House of Commons Education and Employment Select Committee 2000-2001 6th report, HC124.*

Example 10: University College London

University College London has made it clear that staff may be promoted to professorial level as the result of excellence and innovation in teaching (with a satisfactory record in research). Quality of teaching, while hard to measure precisely, will be assessed with respect to: the portfolio of work, including curriculum design and details of methods of teaching; evidence of reflection on teaching; range of new courses; peer observation; and student feedback.

The institution has also developed a secondment scheme, whereby an academic is seconded from his/her department to the central department, Education and Professional Development, in order to develop some specific good practice in teaching. The secondment usually lasts for around a term, resulting in a report and a workshop or conference to determine whether the good practice can be applied more widely.

Part 6

Helping students prepare for employment

6.1 This part of our report considers what institutions can do to help prepare students for employment and assist them in finding employment after graduation. There are three main activities through which institutions can assist their students:

■ developing relevant skills during the course;

■ facilitating appropriate work experience during the course; and

■ providing long-term careers advice which allows students to make good choices once they graduate.

Developing relevant skills for employment

6.2 Institutions use a variety of activities to help develop relevant skills for employment[60]. Almost all higher education institutions and 58 per cent of further education colleges told us that they build key employment skills into the curriculum **(Example 11)**. Accredited work-related modules are also used in almost all post-1992 universities responding to our survey, half of pre-1992 universities and two thirds of "other" institutions. This may reflect the prevalence of vocational programmes provided by newer institutions. Good practice identified during our visits included:

■ enterprise programmes for students on business related courses;

■ independent learning modules to support work placements; and

■ projects to encourage group working and presentational techniques.

Example 11: The University of Salford

Sociology students have careers planning elements embedded in the curriculum. These include assessed Curriculum Vitae, guidance interviews and encouragement to develop a career action plan in Year 2 of their programme.

Work experience prior to graduation

6.3 Many graduates feel that it takes some time to feel at home in the labour market because they lack sufficient experience of the workplace environment[61]. They perceive access to more structured, relevant work experience opportunities and accruing further qualifications and skills via employment-related training as important in 'getting ahead' in the graduate labour market[62]. But, as we explain in Part 2, there is a risk that part-time work - and particularly long hours of work - may adversely affect students' achievement.

6.4 Staff at institutions we visited told us that they encouraged students to think carefully about the academic implications of working part-time during term-time - but they recognise that many students will do so anyway because they feel it necessary to help finance them through their studies. Under the circumstances institutions consider that the best way forward is to run schemes themselves through which they can help advise students on suitable employment that will be beneficial to the student's career and find work which will not cut across study commitments. Our survey showed that 77 per cent of institutions have established "Job Shops" **(Figure 18 and Example 12)** to assist students wishing to find part-time paid employment during term-time, or had arranged for a private company to run one for them. The job shops also help students to find vacation jobs.

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60   National Audit Office survey.
61   "Moving On: graduate careers three years after graduation", p76.
62   "Moving On", p77.

Services include advertising vacancies (both on websites and on noticeboards), matching students to jobs and providing guidance and support, and some notify students of particular jobs if they are registered as seeking work[63]. Job-seekers at Staffordshire University's "employment exchange" are asked to bring their course timetables so that the exchange can check that demands of jobs do not clash with course work or attendance requirements.

6.5 The best of these schemes work alongside careers departments and seek to place students in jobs which are relevant to their studies or link directly to their chosen careers. Students can also gain valuable work experience from voluntary jobs or group projects which assist the wider community **(Example 13)**.

6.6 In 1999, the Funding Council (in partnership with the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment in Northern Ireland) established its Reach-Out to Business and the Community Fund. Since then it has funded 135 projects at a cost of over £82 million, covering almost all universities and higher education institutions, to help them build on existing links with business.

18 **Activities undertaken by Job Shops**

An example of some of the services offered by Job Shops.

Source: University of Salford

Example 12: University of Sussex

The University has a Career Development and Employment Centre. Students may look through part-time vacancies in the Centre or may use an interactive website[64] listing an average 300 jobs each week. Students may register to be contacted about job opportunities that match what they are looking for, saving the student some of the hassle of finding a job. Back-up services include a subsidised telephone service. The Centre also arranges regular recruitment fairs on campus and offers advice on employment related issues to recruiters and students. The Centre places over 4,000 casual, temporary and part-time jobs each year, some of which are on campus. Jobs may be during term-time or the vacations.

Example 13: Universities in Greater Manchester

UMIST, Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Salford and the University of Manchester jointly fund a unit called Community Exchange. This unit produces a directory of "Not-for-Profit" (voluntary and public sector) organisations with which students may make links, to carry out projects, placements or dissertations as part of their coursework or work experience. The opportunities are classified according to the kind of skill or academic background which students should possess, or would like to develop, such as: art and design, conservation and the environment, business, finance and management, health, housing, information technology and marketing. Full information and listings of opportunities can be found on the Community Exchange website.

63   Universities of Sussex and Salford.
64   University of Sussex website, Undergraduate Propspectus "Helping you to find part-time work".

Initiatives to help students find jobs after graduation

6.7 Institutions should encourage students to consider their long-term careers well before the end of their programme of study. However, research suggests that over half of all students do not visit their institution's careers service before the final year[65]. Some institutions deal with this by devising special careers activities late in the day - the University of Plymouth, for instance, runs a "Desperado Day" for students close to their final examinations who have done no career planning.

6.8 Other initiatives include careers workshops (run by 95 per cent of our survey respondents); providing opportunities for work placements (89 per cent); involving employers in course design and/or course management (77 per cent) and explaining to potential employers the qualities developed in students (77 per cent).

6.9 Our survey suggested that, in terms of the number of different initiatives, post-1992 universities appear to do most to help prepare students for employment and assist them in finding suitable work[66]. But analysis of our survey results, against the percentage of students in employment six months after graduation for individual institutions published by the Funding Council[67], showed that there is no correlation between any particular measure and higher levels of employment[68].

6.10 In January 2001, the Department published a review of careers services across the sector[69]. It 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 suggests that there should be a core set of services provided by all institutions. The Quality Assurance Agency has also contributed a draft Code of Practice for careers education, information and guidance.

65   "Moving On", p 104.
66   National Audit Office survey of institutions.
67   "Indicators of employment" HEFCE 01/21.
68   Appendix 1, paragraph 10.
69   "Developing Modern Higher Education Careers Services", Department for Education and Employment, January 2001.

Appendix 1 Study Methodology

Introduction

1   Much of our research for this study was undertaken alongside that for the sister study on "Widening Participation in Higher Education". As far as possible, we endeavoured to work together to minimise any disruption for the sector.

2   During the study we took account of the key groups with an interest in student completion and achievement in higher education, including students and ex-students; senior management and staff at higher education institutions and further education colleges; the Higher Education Funding Council for England; the Department for Education and Skills; Universities UK; the Standing Conference of Principals; research organisations with an interest in educational issues; and other stakeholders.

3   In particular our report is based on:

■   quantitative analysis of the Funding Council's published data;

■   quantitative analysis of data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency and processed and enhanced through links with UCAS data by the Funding Council;

■   qualitative research amongst current and ex-students, undertaken on our behalf by IFF Research, focusing on the factors affecting students' decisions to enter higher education, and to continue with or withdraw from their course;

■   qualitative research amongst higher education staff;

■   a postal survey of 123 of the 131 higher education institutions, to identify differences in their management practices and in their collection of data on student recruitment, progress and achievements. We excluded those institutions which have very few HEFCE-funded students, or which focus exclusively on postgraduate study;

■   visits to six higher education institutions to identify examples of good practice;

■   analysis of the substantial amount of existing research - items to which we refer in the report are listed within the bibliography;

■   consultation with an expert panel; and

■   meetings with staff of the Department, the Funding Council, Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals and other interested individuals or organisations.

Quantitative analysis

4   We undertook analysis of the Funding Council's published performance indicators and benchmarking data, and its extensive database of student records for students in higher education either at universities or in other higher education institutions in 1999-2000. We excluded from our analysis those students pursuing higher education at further education institutions and those whose courses were expected to last not more than one year. We also excluded from the analysis all students from the Open University because, as an institution, it is very different in nature from any other. All its students are part-time and a large proportion of them are not intending to gain any formal qualification. To determine whether there were any characteristics more common amongst early leavers compared to students continuing with their studies, we compared the data for the cohort of early leavers with similar data for all those students continuing. We then analysed the characteristics of universities to determine whether completion and achievement rates vary according to the characteristics of the students they educate.

5   The analysis of the continuers and leavers cohorts was undertaken for those students commencing their courses in the academic year 1999-2000, as that was the most recent year for which such information was available. A student was identified as a 'leaver' if the record for that student showed a leaving date in that academic year and as a 'continuer' if the record for that student showed no leaving date. However, the Funding Council has advised us that these entries in the student records do not always accurately represent whether a student did in fact return to the institution for the following academic year. For the year 1998-99 the Funding Council established that about 7 to 8 per cent of the students who were recorded as 'leavers' did in fact return, and that only about 40 per cent of those who actually left were included. This is the most recent year for which this analysis is possible. The results of analysis of the leavers and continuers cohorts, as recorded for 1999-2000, which are shown below, should therefore be treated as provisional.

| Factor[4]	Criterion[5]	Mode of attendance	Percentage of students meeting this criterion	Percentage of students with this criterion who continue after the first year	Percentage of students without this criterion who continue after the first year	Difference the presence of the criterion makes
A-level points on entry[6]	More than 10 points	Full-time	77	95	90	+5
Gender	Female	Full-time Part-time	54 66	92 93	90 88	+2 +5
Age[6]	Under 21 on entry	Full-time	76	92	89	+3
Social class[6]	From top two classes	Full-time	61	94	92	+2
Home area	Not from a low participation neighbourhood	Full-time Part-time	86 84	94 94	93 93	+1 +1
Term-time accomm-odation[6]	Accommodation provided by the institution	Full-time	49	94	89	+5
How entered[6,7]	Did not enter through clearing	Full-time	85	93	89	+4
Subject area	Business and management	Full-time	12	89	92[8]	-3
	Business and management	Part-time	13	88	92[8]	-4
	Mathematics and computing	Full-time	11	89	92[8]	-3
	Mathematics and computing	Part-time	5	83	92[8]	-9

NOTES

1   Source: 1999-2000 July HESA Student record.

2   English domiciled undergraduates withdrawing from, or after, their year of entry (excluding transfers to other institutions) at English higher education institutions on courses expected to last greater than one year.

3   Excludes Open University, students with an island and overseas fundability status and dormant, sabbatical and writing-up students.

4   Percentages relate only to the students for whom the factor was known and for A-level points excludes those who had no A-level qualifications.

5   The criteria in the table are not independent of each other.

6   Little or no information is available for part-time students either because it is not relevant or because it is not recorded.

7   Clearing analysis restricted to students entering through UCAS in 1999.

8   This is the percentage of students whose subject area is other than "Business and management" or "Mathematics and computing".

9   This analysis was also undertaken for full-time students studying for first degrees and the results were very similar to those shown above for all full-time students, which include those studying for other qualifications such as diplomas.

6 We used multiple regression to quantify the extent to which variations in the percentage of students at an institution on full-time first degree courses who are projected to neither gain an award nor transfer (a performance indicator calculated and published by the Funding Council) could be explained by certain factors[70]. We based our analysis on 1998-99 data from the Funding Council, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the Universities and Colleges Central Admissions Service, and the Times Good University Guide. It included:

- proportion of students from low participation areas;

- the proportion of students which came through the "clearing" process;

- the proportion of students which were over 21 on entry;

- the average A-level point scores of students on entry, where a student's best three A-levels are counted and A = 10 points, B = 8, C = 6, D = 4, E = 2;

- student staff ratios;

- average of the teaching assessment scores given by the Quality Assurance Agency;

- library and computing spend per student;

- facilities spending per student;

- percentage of permanent staff;

Impact of average A-level points on percentage of students who neither achieve an award nor transfer to another institution

There is a strong correlation between the average A-level points of students entering universities and the percentage of students at those universities who neither achieve an award nor transfer to another institution.

Average A-level points on entry
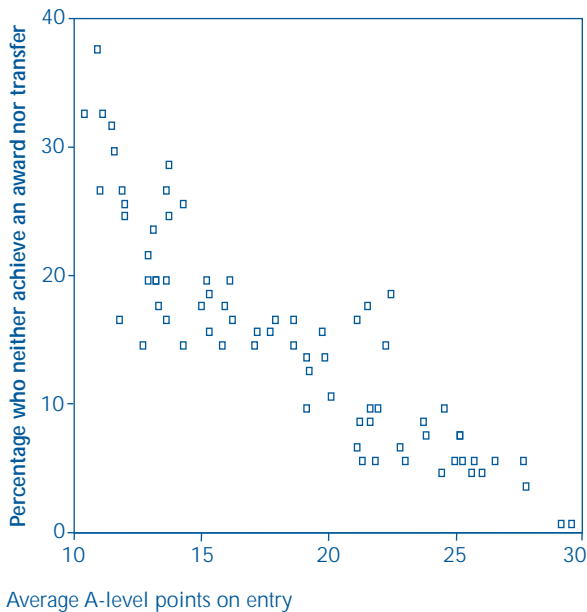
Source: National Audit Office

- teaching and research staff as percentage of total staff;

- average score from the Research Assessment Exercise.

7 We found that the only important explanatory factor for the variation in the percentage of students who are projected to neither gain an award nor transfer at the university level (significant at the 95 per cent level) was the average A-level points on entry.

8 Details of the ordinary least squares regression of completion rate on average A-level points are given in the table below.

Variable	Unstandardised coefficients	95% confidence interval
(Constant)	41.8	(38.5, 45.2)
Average A-level points on entry	-1.43	(-1.60, -1.25)

Adjusted R^2 = 0.79; n= 73; F = 264.7 (p < .001).

We found that most of the other factors considered were themselves strongly correlated to the average A-level points score on entry. For example, those universities which have a high average for A-level points on entry are generally those which also have a high average Research Assessment score and fewer mature students.

9 We found that the indicator for the percentage of students who were not in higher education after their first year was strongly correlated to the percentage of students on full-time first degree courses who are projected to neither gain an award nor transfer, and have therefore not included the details of the analysis based on that indicator.

10 In our survey we asked institutions whether they undertook any of the following activities:

- Accredited student tutoring and mentoring

- Careers workshops

- Accredited work-related modules

- Building key employment skills into the curriculum

- Opportunities for work placements

- Partnership degrees with employers

- Employer involvement in course design/ management

- Running interview and assessment sessions/ workshops

70 *The analysis only covers 73 universities.*

- Helping students to articulate their skills relevant to employment

- Explaining to potential employers the qualities developed in students

Analysis of the institutions' responses about these activities showed there is no correlation between the presence of these activities in an institution and the level of employment of graduates from the institution.

Focus groups with current students

11　Our consultants, IFF Research, ran eight focus groups, each with 6-10 current students, at four institutions, as shown in the table below.

12　All groups were held at the institutions concerned. Factors discussed included the decision to enter higher education, choice of institution and course, and level of satisfaction with the student experience. Any students who had previously left higher education were also invited to comment on what encouraged them back.

Focus groups and interviews with staff

13　IFF Research conducted focus groups with staff at the three higher education institutions detailed above, and a paired interview with staff at Bradford College. Topics covered included support for students, teaching and learning styles, reasons for withdrawal, and other matters which provided a staff perspective on student completion and achievement.

Interviews with students who had withdrawn from higher education

14　IFF Research also undertook one-to-one in-depth interviews with 26 students who did not complete their studies. Topics covered included their decision to opt for their particular institution and course, factors contributing towards their decision to withdraw, and the extent to which their institution had tried to persuade them to stay. We used the results from this work to illustrate some of the reasons why students decide to leave before they have completed their course.

Institution	Type of student	Composition
Bradford College (a Further Education college)	Traditional	6 in total - 3 male and 3 female; 5 full-time and 1 part-time; 3 minority ethnic; 2 mature
Bradford College	Widening participation	6 in total - 4 male and 2 female; 3 full-time and 3 part-time; all mature
Edge Hill College of Higher Education	Traditional	10 in total - 4 male and 6 female; all full-time; 1 mature; one minority ethnic
Edge Hill College of Higher Education	Widening participation	7 in total - 2 male and 5 female; all full-time; all mature; 2 with disabilities
University of Plymouth	Traditional	6 in total - 2 male and 4 female; all full-time; all young
University of Plymouth	Widening participation	9 in total - 5 male and 4 female; all full-time; 1 minority ethnic; 6 mature; 7 with dyslexia
University of Salford	Traditional	8 in total - 3 male and 5 female; all full-time; 4 minority ethnic; 5 mature
University of Salford	Widening participation	8 in total - 5 male and 3 female; 1 full-time and 7 part-time; 2 minority ethnic; 7 mature

NOTE

"Widening Participation" students include those who:

- do not come straight from school or post-school full-time education;

- often had gained few qualifications at 16 and/or 18;

- come from a family social background with little or no previous experience of higher education.

15 As part of the Widening Participation study (HC 485) IFF Research also conducted focus groups amongst "potential students" currently in their final year of courses at schools and further education colleges that could lead to higher education; staff at schools and further education colleges, and recent leavers from schools and further education colleges who chose not to continue to higher education.

Survey of higher education institutions

16 We undertook a survey of 123 out of the 131 higher education institutions in England. We excluded certain specialist institutions and those focusing exclusively on postgraduate study. The aim of the survey was to identify any differences in the admissions, support and management practices of the institutions, and in the information that they hold on student withdrawal and non-achievement.

17 The survey was conducted during June and July 2001. Responses were received from 111 institutions in time for analysis - a 90 per cent response rate. The breakdown of respondents between the different types of institution was as follows (number responding but after the closing date is shown in brackets):

Type of institution	Number included	Number responding by closing date
Pre-1992 universities	47	43 (2)
Post-1992 universities	36	31 (2)
"Other" institutions	40	37 (1)
Total	123	111 (5)

18 In interpreting the responses to our questionnaire, we can be 95 per cent confident that responses mirror those for the population as a whole, subject to a precision adjustment of no more than 3 per cent. For example, in paragraph 5.12 we say that 86 per cent of institutions provided study skills workshops for their students. In practice the actual percentage of colleges doing so may be slightly different from this value, as we did not receive a response from every institution. However we can be 95 per cent confident that the population value is within 2 per cent of this estimate, i.e. between 84 per cent and 88 per cent.

Survey of further education colleges

19 We undertook a survey of 60 further education colleges in England. We selected those which offered a significant level of higher education programmes. The aim of the survey was to identify any differences in the admissions, support and management practices of the colleges.

20 The survey was conducted during June and July 2001. Responses were received from 40 colleges in time for analysis - a 67 per cent response rate.

Visits to institutions

21 We visited six institutions with a range of completion and achievement rates in order to identify examples of good practice and any differences in approach and management. The institutions we visited were:

- Canterbury Christ Church University College;
- Edge Hill College of Higher Education;
- University of Plymouth (post-1992 university);
- University of Salford (pre-1992 university);
- Staffordshire University (post-1992 university); and
- University College London (pre-1992 university).

22 During the visits, we conducted over 50 interviews with senior management, admissions staff, tutors, support staff and those with pastoral responsibilities. Where staff represented a particular faculty or department, we endeavoured to draw them from three contrasting subject areas - computer science, English and law.

23 We also drew on information from visits to the following institutions, which were made primarily for our parallel study on *Widening Participation in higher education in England*:

- Bradford College;
- University of East Anglia; and
- London Guildhall University.

24 We also made brief visits to other institutions at an early stage of the study to gain initial insights into student completion and achievement and the sector in general. The institutions we visited were:

- University of Central Lancashire;
- Liverpool John Moores University;
- University of Newcastle upon Tyne; and
- Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication.

Research by others

25 We examined some of the substantial amount of research in this area (see Bibliography).

Expert panel

26 We convened a panel to act as a sounding board for the development of the study methodology, and to comment on the draft report. The panel met twice during the course of the study and individual members also commented in writing. The members of the panel are as follows:

Consultation with interested organisations

27 We held meetings with key staff at the Department and the Funding Council on current initiatives, and with other organisations who have an interest in student completion and achievement, including Universities UK, SCOP, the Quality Assurance Agency and the National Union of Students.

Name	Organisation/Position
Patricia Ambrose	Executive Secretary, Standing Conference Of Principals
Professor John Field	Professor of Lifelong Learning, University of Warwick
Antony Fielding	Senior Lecturer in Social Statistics, University of Birmingham and Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Education
William Locke	Policy Adviser, Universities UK
Bernard Longden	Liverpool Hope University College
John Thompson	Analytical Services, HEFCE

Appendix 2

## Statement by the Higher Education Funding Council for England on recurrent funding

1   The Funding Council distributes funding on behalf of the Government to institutions in England offering higher education. The Department for Education and Skills determines the Funding Council's total budget (approximately £4.76 billion for 2001-02) and issues broad guidance on Government policies and plans. The Funding Council distributes most of the funding as recurrent funding for teaching and research. Funding for teaching (£3.16 billion) is allocated with reference to each institution's profile of students, reflecting their total numbers, and their mix between different subjects and other student-related and institutional characteristics. The principle underlying the funding method is that institutions should receive similar resources for similar activities. Funding for increases in student numbers is allocated through an annual bidding exercise. Funding for research (£0.89 billion) is distributed according to the quality and volume of research in different subjects at each institution. The quality of research is assessed every four to five years through a Research Assessment Exercise. The research councils also provide funding for specific research projects.

2   In addition to Funding Council grant, institutions also receive funding through student tuition fees. For full-time undergraduate students, the fee level is £1,075 and represents about one quarter of the average cost of tuition. Students apply to their local education authority to be means-tested for student support. The Student Loans Company may pay some or all of the fee according to the outcome of the means test, with the student paying the balance. For part-time and postgraduate students, institutions are free to set their own fee levels. However, the research councils pay some postgraduate fees at a level of £2,805.

3   The Department is responsible for determining the regulations governing student support that is not part of the Funding Council block grant for teaching and research. As well as covering the tuition fees payable to institutions, these also cover maintenance support for students while they study. For full-time undergraduate students, such maintenance is provided through loans, which are repayable after graduation once the student passes a certain income threshold. Some part-time undergraduate students are also eligible for smaller loans. Some postgraduate students may receive maintenance support through Research Council scholarships. Further student support entitlements are available for childcare and for those with disabilities. Finally, the Department also makes available hardship and bursary funding for those in particular financial need. This funding is allocated to the Funding Council for distribution to higher education institutions but is not part of Funding Council's block grant for teaching and research. The Funding Council allocates these funds on behalf of the Department according to their instructions and similarly, institutions distribute it to their students according to the criteria set by the Department.

Appendix 3 Variations in institutions' performance

Continuation and projected achievement rates are highest among the pre-1992 universities, followed by "other"[71] institutions. Within each institutional type, there is a relatively wide spread of performance, although, in each case the middle ranking group all perform within a few percentage points of each other.

First year continuation rates by type of institution for 1998-99 full-time first degree entrants
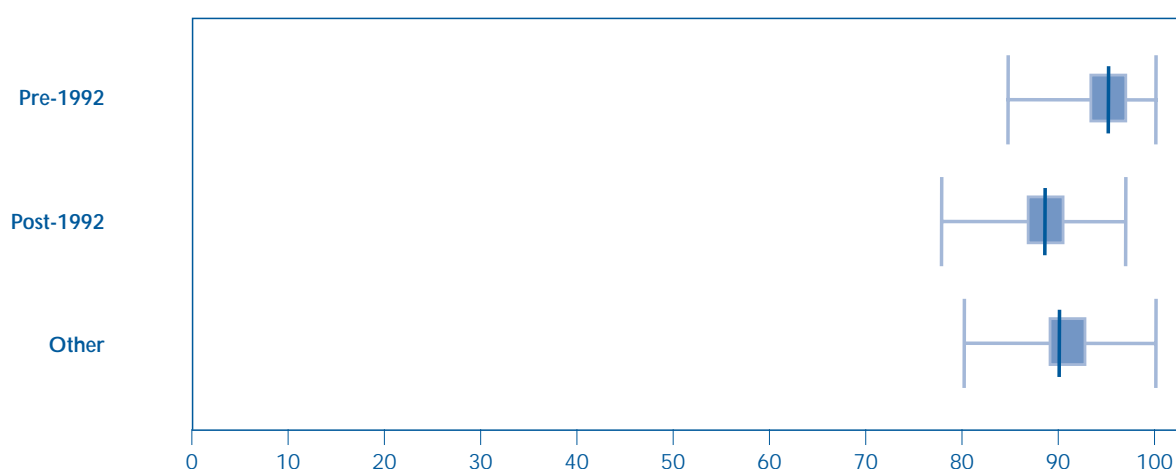
Source: NAO analysis of the Funding Council's Performance Indicators, HEFCE 01/69 December 2001

Projected achievement rates by type of institution for 1998-99 full-time first degree entrants
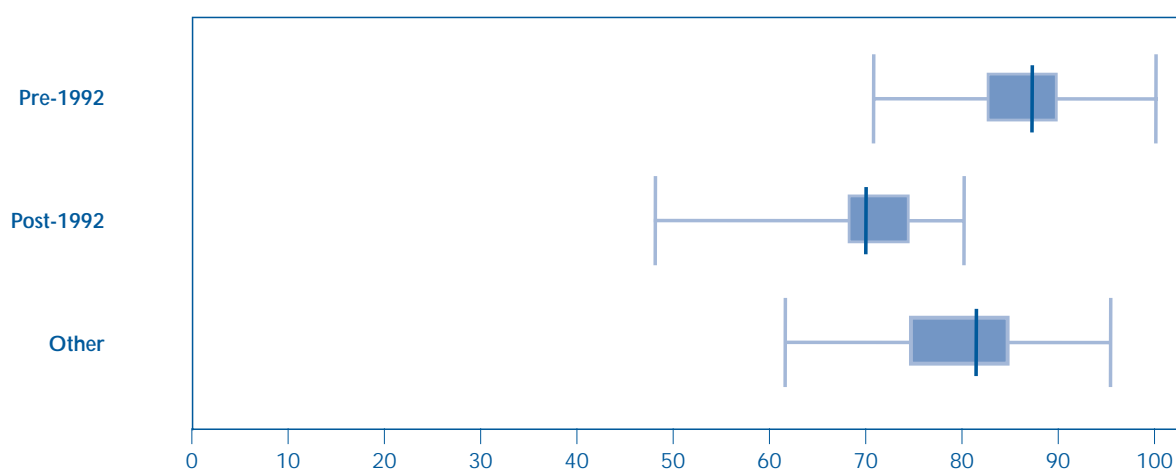
NOTE

The shaded boxes show the 25th and 75th percentiles, and the bar within each box is the median value. The vertical lines extend to the highest and lowest values for that type of institution

Source: NAO analysis of the Funding Council's Performance Indicators, HEFCE 01/69 December 2001

71   Higher education colleges or specialist institutes.

Appendix 4
Projected outcomes for full-time students starting first degree courses in 1998-99

Institution	Projected to gain degree		Neither award nor transfer	
	Projected (%)	Benchmark (%)	Projected (%)	Benchmark (%)
Better than benchmark				
University of Bath	91	86	6	9
Bath Spa University College	80	74	15	19
Bournemouth University	79	75	15	18
Bretton Hall	81	76	13	18
Canterbury Christ Church University College	80	74	14	19
University College Chichester	82	74	11	19
University of East Anglia	86	81	9	13
Edge Hill College of Higher Education	80	73	15	19
University of Hull	89	81	5	12
King Alfred's College, Winchester	83	76	13	17
Lancaster University	87	80	8	13
Leeds Metropolitan University	77	71	18	21
University of Lincoln	77	71	18	21
The London Institute	81	76	15	18
University of Northumbria at Newcastle	79	75	14	17
University of Portsmouth	79	71	14	20
Sheffield Hallam University	77	74	15	19
University of Southampton	89	83	7	11
Trinity & All Saints	82	76	11	16
University of Warwick	91	87	5	8

Institution	Projected to gain degree		Neither award nor transfer	
	Projected (%)	Benchmark (%)	Projected (%)	Benchmark (%)
Worse than benchmark				
Anglia Polytechnic University	68	73	25	20
Bolton Institute of Higher Education	61	68	31	23
De Montfort University	67	69	26	22
University of Derby	69	72	27	20
University of Huddersfield	69	72	25	20
Kent Institute of Art & Design	73	78	24	17
London Guildhall University	62	67	28	24
University of Sunderland	70	72	24	20

Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England

NOTE:

The Funding Council's published **performance indicators** showed the standard deviation for the percentage of students projected to neither transfer nor qualify (including obtaining a lower award than a first degree), rather than for the percentage projected to a gain a degree. Institutions are shown as being better than or worse than their benchmark for the percentage of students who neither transfer nor qualify. The Funding Council also advises against comparing institutions with very different benchmarks and, for this reason, do not publish ranked tables.

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