

## [A short guide to non-continuation in UK universities.](#)

Summary provided by Dods.

The **Higher Education Policy Institute (Hepi)** have today [released a report](#) in which they look at **the scale of non-continuation (or 'drop-out') rates** and consider which students are **most at risk of not completing their courses**, as well as what changes could be implemented to reduce rates further.

### **Overall summary:**

- The use of non-completion rates came about in part as a response to finding an alternative way of assessing course quality, other than graduate earnings
- One thing the report notes in particular is that the UK has the lowest drop-out rate of any OECD country
- Non-continuation by itself only offers limited information on the quality of the student experience – students do not study in a vacuum, whether in remote or face-to-face environments
- The capacity of students to continue their studies is largely affected by external social factors, and non-continuation rates often say more about that intake of students and their background, than what actually happens on campus
- The low drop-out rate of the UK could reflect a level of selectivity within the system, and could even constitute a “policy failure” as it suggests not enough risks are being taken to spread opportunity
- This also raises questions around current OfS proposals to set minimum baselines for institutions for non-continuation and completion

### **Who is most likely to leave?**

- Across all OECD countries, women tend to have higher completion rates than men
- Those from minoritised backgrounds tended to drop out of university at a distinctively higher rate
- The same appeared to be true of those from disadvantaged or low socio-economic backgrounds
- Data suggests that higher tariff providers have lower non-continuation rates
- Part-time students are considerably more likely to not complete than full-time students
- Commuting time can also be a significant predictor of student progression or continuation in England

### Why do they leave?

- There are plenty reasons, and are all very understandable
- Even if a course is the best fit for an individual at the point of application, circumstances can change
- It's difficult to deliver *perfect* information at the point of application, so some will leave because they regret joining or find a more attractive alternative
- Student funding rules may push some to apply for a whole course when a better route might have been to study individual modules

### Challenges:

- Institutions that believe they will be punished financially for a high or increasing drop-out rate may seek to limit the recruitment of people with characteristics that put them at higher risk
- Putting too much focus on retention could affect access because of the tension between willing all students to do similarly well, and accepting some students face much greater barriers to learning
- The Office for Students (OfS) itself appears to have two contradictory stances on this – it states they don't accept that students from underrepresented groups should be expected to accept lower quality and weaker outcomes than others, but also encourage providers to provide contextual offers to applicants from different backgrounds because it recognises that someone's context does tend to affect their academic achievements
- Reducing drop-out may also conflict with other policy goals, such as promoting modular and flexible learning pathways, which would make non-completion a difficult concept to measure

### Suggestions:

- Use data better: We know the demographics of those most likely to drop-out, but do not always understand the factors are they key ones to rising rates – picking apart the intersectional characteristics and looking at the pattern
- Focus on more specific groups: Targeting support at those who have been identified as needing it most
- Ensuring easy re-entry routes: Perhaps through the new lifetime loan entitlement, or a further relaxation (or reversal) of the ELQ rules

- Consider staging qualifications within higher-level courses, as was recommended in the Augar review
- Provide a sense of belonging: Some research has shown a connection between poor social experience in halls/accommodation and students who leave university
- Reassess the suitability of maintenance report: Day-to-day living costs are high on the agenda of students, and some have called for the reintroduction of maintenance grants across the board in England

You can read the report in full here: <https://bit.ly/3opT7Ib>