

Redefine the finishing line

Attempts to judge institutions by how many students actually complete their degrees are misleading and outdated. Frank Gould and Lee Harvey explain why

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As higher education has expanded, "drop-out" rates have risen. But is non-completion the disaster some commentators claim it to be?

Later this week the Funding Council of England will be publishing the first, UK-wide, government-sponsored performance indicators on higher education. It is quite predictable that the league table that emerges will show those universities whose students are mainly white and middle-class, entered at 18 or 19 and have 3 A levels have the highest completion rates.

At the lower end will be those universities whose students are largely "non-traditional", with substantial numbers of students from ethnic minorities or lower socioeconomic groups, who are mature and who have a variety of qualifications, including some with no formal qualifications.

The statistics will present each university's progression rate in relation to the average for other universities with which it can be compared - although, of course, even within a group of apparently comparable universities, there may be substantial differences. This will not, however, prevent the inference being drawn that higher non-completion rates are a bad thing.

Government (and the Funding Council), and various parts of the public, have expressed their concern that non-completion rates have been rising and that if a student does not complete his or her course then public funds have been wasted. There is also a feeling that non-completion implies that some students should never have been accepted on to the course in the first place because they are not able to benefit from it.

When the UK had an elite system of higher education (until about 1990), the government, DfEE and other groups trumpeted the low non-completion rates in the UK compared to Europe and North America, which had both mass higher education systems and higher non-completion rates. Thus it was as inevitable as night follows day that, as the UK moved towards a mass higher education system, non-completion rates would rise.

The government cannot have it both ways - a mass higher education system, which is a necessary condition of achieving its "social inclusion" objective and the low non-completion rates of an elite system.

First, we would argue that the statistics will always overstate the true amount of non-completion, because with more flexible (modular) course structures, more students are "intermitting" - that is, taking breaks and even moving institution, possibly taking several additional years to complete their studies.

To obtain an accurate picture of what is actually happening, we would need an effective national student tracking system such as operates in Sweden. There, the equivalent of national insurance numbers plus professional registers allows comprehensive tracking of students and graduate careers.

The national insurance number issued to all 16-year-olds could easily be used as a unique student identifier to track students.

Our second point is that non-completion is wrongly equated with "wastage". In some cases, non-completion occurs when students obtain jobs prior to graduating. In others, students may realise that their best interests are not served by remaining in higher education - for example, the professional course on which they embarked is not the profession for them.

Equally, non-completion does not mean that nothing has been learned, as "wastage" implies. This implied failure could be removed by granting a certificate for the completion of one year of a 3-year course, and a diploma for completion of two years. That would leave most non-completion to those who withdraw during the first year. Statistics at the University of East London show that about half of those who withdraw during the first year do so as a result of financial problems, no doubt exacerbated by the recent introduction of student fees and the abolition of grants.

Others, particularly non-traditional students, may withdraw for a variety of reasons other than straight academic failure - personal or domestic reasons, or lack of support or encouragement from their non-university peer group, family or relatives.

None of this is to argue that non-completion is of no consequence. Within a mass higher education system we need to encourage students to maximise their potential, especially as it is likely that non-traditional students, particularly those from the economically disadvantaged groups, will disproportionately disengage at earlier levels.

It is doubly important that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are given additional support to stay in the system, since we know that students from such backgrounds face greater difficulties in the job market than traditional students, with a degree, let alone without.

Our point is that without taking the risk that more students will not complete, the social inclusion agenda has no chance of being achieved. That evidence exists of non-traditionally qualified students out-performing those with A levels shows that the risk is worth taking.