

Dropping Out: A Study of Early Leavers From Higher Education

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**Research Report
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SUMMARY AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

During the last decade the proportion of UK students who started a full time first-degree course yet did not obtain a qualification has remained relatively stable. Despite the expansion in participation within higher education and the growing output of graduates throughout this period, recent estimates indicate that approximately 17 per cent of UK students who started a full time first degree course in 1997/98 will obtain no qualification. However, this now amounts to a considerable number of people who do not obtain degrees. There is therefore a legitimate concern about the effects of withdrawal from higher education (HE) upon the individuals concerned and how this rate could be reduced.

But who are these leavers? Why do they leave and what happens to them subsequently? To address these questions the former Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned the Warwick Institute for Employment Research to conduct an enquiry on its behalf, specifically to collect relevant information from a sample of higher education non-completers and to pursue in-depth enquiry with such individuals.

A sample of persons regarded as 'withdrawers' was obtained from a database of student records maintained by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Potential 'withdrawers' were identified for the years 1996/97 and 1998/99 at 30 selected institutions of higher education. Approximately 16,400 former students were identified. Questionnaires were mailed to approximately 15,200 of these people. The postal questionnaire was designed to provide information, particularly in terms of labour market outcomes, that could be compared with an earlier survey of graduates who completed their first degree in 1995 (Elias *et al.*, 1999). Additional information was also collected via a follow up telephone survey of 100 respondents to the postal questionnaire.

At 10 per cent, the response to the postal enquiry was low. This is perhaps unsurprising given that people are less willing to provide information about activities that they did not complete. Furthermore, it was found that those who had responded had higher entry level qualifications than the average non-completer. This potential response bias must be borne in mind when considering the results of the enquiry. Where we paint a bright picture, the underlying reality may not be so colourful. Where we show the negative consequences of discontinuing one's higher education, these findings should be regarded as minimum estimates. Despite these problems, we are reasonably confident that the findings presented in this report can be generalised to the wider population of persons who withdrew from higher education.

Main Findings

The main findings from this enquiry are as follows:

Labour market outcomes

Approximately half of the institutions selected for the present enquiry also participated in an earlier study of 1995 first-degree graduates. Interesting

comparisons could therefore be made between the labour market outcomes of withdrawers in the years following their time spent attending HE and those who completed their studies. Significant differences in these outcomes are observed in terms of both the experience of unemployment and the types of employment gained by these two groups.

- While the experience of unemployment remains relatively low amongst respondents to the survey of non-completers, they report unemployment at approximately twice the level of that prevailing in the early career paths of graduates. Approximately 6 per cent of non-completers recorded that they were unemployed during the year immediately following withdrawal. Unemployment amongst graduates falls rapidly to approximately 3 per cent one year after graduation.
- Some three and a half years after leaving HE, approximately 25 per cent of respondents to the non-completion survey remain in 'non-graduate' type occupations; i.e. occupations that do not require high level qualifications such as catering, cleaning, driving, bar work, low level security jobs and such like. This compares to approximately 10 per cent from a similar sample of graduates.

Both the current survey of early withdrawers from HE and the 1998 survey of graduates asked respondents to indicate whether or not the job they held at the time of the survey yielded a range of positive attributes. Comparing responses from the two surveys, they express virtually the same distribution of positive attributes despite the fact that many fewer of the withdrawers are working in graduate or graduate track occupations than graduates. Detailed investigation of the earnings of withdrawers and graduates revealed that it was not possible to conclude that there is evidence of a significant financial penalty associated with non-completion.

Applying to higher education

The low response rate to the present study means that we were not able to infer with complete confidence the causes of withdrawal from HE. However, those respondents who applied to HE through clearing reported a number of factors in their choice of course that were not conducive to successful completion of HE. These respondents generally consulted fewer sources of information prior to application, whilst their choice of course and institution was less likely to be influenced by attributes that can be regarded as positive. Insights from the telephone survey however give the clearest indication as to how respondents felt that process of applying to HE contributed to their decision to withdraw.

- Respondents are critical of a system of applying to HE where course choices were based upon predicted grades rather than actual performance. Where results exceed original expectations, respondents had to accept a place on courses that were in effect, not their primary choices.
- Many respondents felt that they had been pushed by their schools to enter university. They felt that they would have benefited from a year out of education to think about their choices more carefully and to enter HE with greater maturity.

- Schools were also criticised as failing to present more vocational methods of learning as viable alternatives to university. Some respondents felt that more practical and vocationally orientated methods of learning would have better suited their abilities and interests.
- Whilst respondents were aware of the availability of careers advice, they felt that meetings with careers advisers should have been made compulsory and more frequent.

However, some respondents to the telephone survey also indicated that no amount of additional advice could have helped them to make a better choice of course and institution. It was not until they attended HE that they realised that they had made a mistake. Some degree of mismatch and subsequent withdrawal from HE appears to be inevitable.

Withdrawing from higher education

The influences on the decision to withdraw most commonly cited by respondents to the postal questionnaire were:

- a mistaken choice of course (24 per cent of respondents);
- financial problems directly related to participation in higher education (18 per cent);
- and personal problems (14 per cent).

The emphasis placed upon these influences varied between different groups of survey respondents. Financial problems directly related to participation in HE were cited as the most important influence upon withdrawal by male respondents and those over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal.

There is some evidence to indicate a tendency amongst respondents to under-report the importance of academic difficulties upon the decision to withdraw. The importance of academic difficulties may be further under-estimated due to higher rates of non-response to the survey amongst those with lower entry qualifications. Alternatively, respondents may regard academic difficulties as having arisen ultimately due to a mistaken choice of course.

A majority of respondents were aware of the availability of personal tutors and counselling services whilst attending HE. Approximately half of survey respondents indicated that they had drawn upon the services of personal tutors, although views regarding their usefulness were mixed. Respondents with specific needs or personal problems were particularly critical of the ability of personal tutors to provide support. The most common sources of advice sought before deciding to withdraw from HE were parents/relatives and friends. One in five respondents sought no advice before deciding to withdraw from HE.

Student support mechanisms and withdrawing from higher education

Although there are problems in making comparisons between the two sampled groups of early leavers (those who left in 1996/97 and those who withdrew in 1998/99), no evidence was found to indicate that withdrawers who had entered HE during 1998 (and who therefore were liable for the payment of tuition fees) had an increased

propensity to report that they had withdrawn due to financial problems. However, those for whom student loans were the main source of income were more likely to report that they had withdrawn due to financial problems compared to those whose main source of income was derived from grants. Respondents who stated that they had felt well informed about the costs of HE were less likely to report that they had withdrawn due to financial problems. When asked what factors would have most helped them to remain in HE, the most common response given by all respondents was better financial support.

Finally, there is no evidence of an increase in the propensity of respondents to undertake paid employment during term time when comparing the 1996/97 withdrawers with the 1998/99 sample. However, there is some evidence to indicate that the 1998/99 early leavers had been working longer hours, and were increasingly missing lectures in order to undertake this work.

Policy recommendations and directions for future research

This enquiry into the causes and consequences of early withdrawal from HE has helped to delineate both the nature of the process and the scale of the associated effects. Some of these seem obvious, particularly the labour market disadvantage faced by those who start but do not complete a course of higher education compared to graduates. However, it is important to note that we find no clear evidence of a significant earnings 'penalty' in the subsequent employment of those who withdrew in 1996/97 compared with a similar group of graduates. But equally important are the feelings of personal failure and the stigma attached to the early withdrawal from HE. Coupled with the effects of non-completion upon the effectiveness and the efficiency of the higher education system, the desirability of reducing rates of early withdrawal from HE becomes apparent.

The clearest policy recommendations relate to the process of applying to HE. Respondents to the telephone survey were very critical of the advice they were given at sixth form when applying to higher education. Many felt that they were pushed into university to the detriment of other alternatives. (See 'Main influences upon choice of course', pages 37-40). We conclude that ***better advice could be made available to year 12 and 13 pupils who are considering entry into higher education.*** This advice should firstly consider whether pupils wish to follow what is being seen as the 'natural progression' from school to HE. Schools need to encourage pupils to think about whether an immediate transition to HE is most appropriate for them. However, pupils cannot be expected to make an informed decision if they are not provided with information regarding viable alternatives to university; including more vocationally orientated learning opportunities and the option of a gap year. To this end, ***the importance of careers advice should also be underlined and participation more actively encouraged.*** (See 'Sources of information consulted upon application to higher education', pages 29-31).

We also conclude that ***preparation for entry to HE should extend beyond the choice of course and institutions.*** Those respondents who felt well informed about the costs of higher education were less likely to report that they (a) withdrew due to financial problems related to participation in HE, (b) had experienced difficulties in budgeting whilst studying and (c) that better financial support would have most helped them to remain in HE. Further evidence of the potential importance of financial management

upon withdrawal is the finding that those whose main source of income was derived from student loans were more likely to report withdrawing from HE due to financial problems than those whose main source of income was derived from student grants. (See 'Support mechanisms and withdrawal from higher education', pages 58-61). ***Preparation for entry into HE should also provide information on the costs of higher education and advice on managing finances.*** Such advice is likely to be particularly helpful to male students.

Regarding the process of withdrawal from HE, 1 in 5 people seek no kind of advice before withdrawing from HE. Furthermore, given that the sources of advice most commonly sort amongst those deciding to withdraw were parents/relatives and friends, the ratio of people who fail to seek advice from academic or support staff within the HEI will be greater. (See 'Seeking advice before and after withdrawal', page 51). This absence represents a missed 'last chance' for both the institution and the individual to discuss the decision to withdraw and the possibility of taking action to prevent withdrawal from HE. ***Greater efforts should be made to ensure that students who wish to withdraw from HE have discussed this decision with academic or support staff at the HEI.*** Awareness amongst students as to the availability of student support mechanisms and the importance of consulting these services needs to be promoted.

Respondents indicated that personal problems were the third most important reason for withdrawal from HE. It is difficult to provide broad policy recommendations that may assist respondents who experience specific personal misfortune. Given that the respondents to our enquiry withdrew from university, they are naturally more likely to be critical of the support services offered. However, it is when faced with specific personal problems that personal tutors are found most wanting. (See 'Support mechanisms and the decision to withdraw', pages 49-51). ***Although personal tutors cannot be expected to provide support for all personal problems, they need to be equipped with the skills required to effectively direct students towards appropriate sources of help.*** To this end, there is a need to train specialist personal tutors in counselling skills and to ensure that personal tutors are fully aware of the sources of advice and support available for students with non-academic problems. Some respondents also reported difficulties in actually being able to make contact with personal tutors. Against a background of increasing student numbers, ***the degree of accessibility to this most frequently consulted support mechanism needs to be maintained.***

Finally, the present study has indicated that those who apply to HE through the clearing process report characteristics that are clearly not conducive to their successful completion of higher education. Those who entered through clearing generally report consulting fewer sources of information and are less likely to be motivated in their choice by factors that could be regarded as positive. Furthermore, those survey respondents who entered HE through the clearing process were more likely to report mistaken choice of course and mistaken choice of institution as influences upon their decision to withdraw. However, due to the partial nature of the present enquiry, we are unable to infer that the clearing process contributes to early withdrawal. The present study is further hindered by the low response rates amongst those with lower qualifications upon entry to HE. ***There is a need for additional research into the effects of applying to university through clearing on subsequent withdrawal from HE.***

CHAPTER ONE *DEFINING, LOCATING AND CONTACTING EARLY LEAVERS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION*

Introduction

As participation in higher education has expanded and the output of graduates has grown, so has the number of people who do not complete a course of higher education. To provide information on the performance of the higher education (HE) sector, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has developed a set of performance indicators which include non-completion rates for the 169 publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom. Considering the most recently available projected outcomes¹, it is estimated that approximately 17 per cent of students who started at an HEI during 1997/98 will leave without obtaining a qualification. While this proportion has remained relatively stable over the last decade, the higher rate of participation in HE means that many thousands of those who start a degree course fail to complete their studies.

But who are these early leavers from higher education? Why do they leave and what happens to them subsequently? How different are their later labour market outcomes compared with, say, graduates from similar institutions? To address these questions the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned the Warwick Institute for Employment Research to conduct an enquiry on its behalf, specifically to collect relevant information from a sample of higher education non-completers and to pursue further enquiries with such individuals. The information presented in this report was collected between August 2000 and March 2001.

Structure of the report

From earlier research in this area (Yorke, 1999) we were aware that a major survey of early leavers would face a number of difficulties. We anticipated a low response/co-operation rate, given that people are not generally predisposed to volunteer information about activities they may not have completed. We also faced a number of additional difficulties, related to the methods used to identify the target population for this study and legislative restrictions linked to issues of data protection. As a result of these problems we have a low response rate to our enquiry. At just under 10 per cent, we must determine why such a large proportion failed to respond and to find out whether or not the respondents are in any way different from non-respondents.

This is an important issue, hence our decision to place full details of our attempts to answer these questions within this opening chapter. Without this information to guide the reader we are in danger of creating the impression that this report is a comprehensive survey of 'non-completers' from higher education and that the results we portray from analysis of this survey are fully representative of those who fail to complete a course of higher education. This is not the case. What we will show in this chapter is, firstly, the difficulty in defining and identifying a sample of non-completers from courses of higher education and secondly, that the group who

¹ As published within HEFCE (2000). There are significant variations between HEIs in these estimates, reflecting the different patterns of recruitment of students in terms of age, social background, entry qualifications, etc.

responded to our enquiry is not truly representative of all of those persons who did not complete a course of higher education. It contains disproportionately more women than men, a higher than average response from non-completers from the 'old' universities as opposed to the 'new' universities and, most importantly, those who responded had higher entry level qualifications than the average non-completer. We include in this chapter an assessment of the effect of non-response and the associated biases on the interpretation of our findings.

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. Chapter Two attempts to fill one of the major gaps in our knowledge about early leavers from HE. Here we show what they do subsequently – their experiences of employment and unemployment, the nature of the jobs they take and their earnings. To assist the reader in interpreting these findings, we present them along side similar information from a survey of graduates we conducted two years earlier.

Having considered the impact of withdrawal from HE upon survey respondents, we then take a step back and consider the processes of application to and withdrawal from HE for non-completers. Chapter Three focuses first upon their application to higher education and considers the reasons and influences behind the choice of course and institution made by respondents to the non-completion survey. Chapter Four examines the process of withdrawal and describes the timing of withdrawal from higher education, reasons for withdrawal and advice sought prior to withdrawal. Evidence is also provided as to the impact of changes in student support mechanisms upon reasons for early withdrawal from HE.

Annex One provides further information on the low response rate to this enquiry from an enquiry of non-respondents. Annex Two presents a short review of research related to the process of withdrawal from higher education.

The reader should bear in mind that the scope of Chapters Three and Four is partial in so far that we are describing the characteristics of a sample of early leavers from HE. Whilst it may appear that certain characteristics are clearly not conducive to progression through HE, we are unable to infer that these characteristics actually *cause* withdrawal from HE. It should therefore be considered that one of the important contributions of the material presented within these chapters is to assist in the formulation of hypotheses regarding the causes of withdrawal from HE that can direct future research in this area.

Throughout this report we also present information from a related telephone survey of 100 respondents to the postal survey. These interviews were structured to explore in detail many of the brief responses to the postal survey. In each of the following chapters we include relevant material in boxes.

Defining and sampling a population of non-completers

In total, 30 HEIs were selected for participation within the present enquiry. Selection of 16 of these HEIs was based upon their participation in an earlier study of first-degree graduates who qualified in 1995 (Elias, *et al.* 1999). A further 14 institutions were also selected for the enquiry. In selecting these institutions, attempts were made to maintain both a good geographical spread of HEIs and a balance between pre-1992 and post-1992 universities. Specialist HEIs and very

small institutions from which dropout is likely to be minimal were excluded from the selection process.

Not all students who leave a course of higher education before obtaining a qualification should be regarded as 'withdrawing from higher education'. As other studies have shown (Yorke, 1999 and NAO, 2002), a significant number of those who do not continue a particular course of higher education will continue their studies elsewhere or will resume full-time study after a short break.

To identify a potential sample of persons who may be regarded as 'withdrawers' as opposed to 'discontinuous full-time students', we obtained information from a database of student records maintained by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This database enabled the HEFCE to identify two groups of potential withdrawers from higher education. The first group consists of all domestically-domiciled students who were enrolled in a course of full-time higher education in 1996/97, who did not subsequently gain a qualification from that institution and who were not re-registered for full-time study in any higher education institution in England or Wales in the two following years. Students who were known to have died before completing their course were removed from this list. We term this population '1996/97 withdrawers'.

The second group consists of domestically-domiciled first degree students who were recorded as having withdrawn from higher education during 1998/99 by the higher education institution at which they studied. Due to the later date selected here, no further checks could be conducted by the HEFCE to determine whether or not they had simply transferred to another higher education institution. This group is termed '1998/99 withdrawers'. The concurrent survey of these two cohorts was undertaken to provide early evidence as to the possible importance of changes to student support upon early withdrawal from HE. These changes have entailed both the gradual replacement of the student grant by a loans system, and, from 1998, the introduction of means-tested tuition fees.

The process of contacting these two groups was complicated by the fact that their addresses were held by the institutions they had attended, not by the HEFCE, and personal information held by the institutions was protected under data protection legislation. It was therefore necessary for the HEFCE to send the relevant student identifiers directly to the institution holding the address record, for the institution to then match student identifiers to their address records, and finally label and mail blank questionnaires supplied to them for this purpose.

Not all higher education institutions found the matching process straightforward. This may have been due to the fact that some institutions had subsequently updated their records. In other cases, clerical and computing difficulties exacerbated the difficulties of matching student identifiers to address records. In total, 94 per cent of the selected student identifiers were matched to address lists held at the HEIs, though success in matching at the institutional level ranged from 60 per cent to 100 per cent. The process of matching, extracting address data and mailing the questionnaires took place between July and December 2000.

From the 30 selected HEIs, 16,416 persons who had been full-time students were identified as withdrawers by the HEFCE according to procedures listed above. The

overall response rate to the survey was low. Approximately 15,200 questionnaires were mailed out to the identified addresses, but only 1,510 (10 per cent) replied. The reasons for this low response rate are examined and explored in more detail in this chapter.

We will show that there is a variety of possible reasons associated with the low response rate. Foremost amongst these are the difficulties of defining and locating potential survey respondents. For the '1998/1999 withdrawers' we will show that this was a particularly acute problem. For all potential respondents, the address records held by HEIs were usually parental addresses. A significant proportion of these were out of date by the time of our enquiry. Furthermore, many ex-students would have left the parental home. Although we requested that questionnaires should be forwarded, we have little idea how often this occurred. Finally, by focussing upon a process that many regard as a negative experience, the survey may have been viewed by recipients as an intrusion into their lives. We provide further details on the reasons for and impact of non-response in the following sections and in Annex One.

Survey data from the sampled population and response bias

'Response bias' is the term we use to describe the fact that people who display a certain characteristic (eg age, gender) may be more or less likely to respond to the survey. If this characteristic is also related to the factors we are studying in the survey, this creates potential bias in our interpretation of the survey results. For example, if women are more likely to respond than men, and if women have different reasons for men for leaving a course of higher education, then analysis of the reasons for leaving will be biased by the fact that the gender structure of the survey results will be skewed towards women. An obvious solution in this instance is to present separate results for men and women.

To study response rates in detail, we need to be able to identify who, from the two groups of ex-students identified by HEFCE, has responded to the survey. Again this was complicated by the fact that seven HEIs refused to record student identifiers on the questionnaires they sent out. This prevented us from matching questionnaires returned from non-completers who attended these HEIs with the administrative records provided by the HEFCE for sampling purposes. In what follows, therefore, we focus upon the responses from the 23 HEIs for which questionnaires could be matched to administrative records (1,161 responses from the potential 13,521 respondents identified by HEFCE in these 23 HEIs).

Table 1.1 shows response rates by gender, type of institution attended and year of withdrawal. Women appear almost twice as likely to respond to the survey as men. There appears to be a strong institutional type effect. The potential respondents identified in the pre-1992 university sector are more likely to respond than those in the post-1992 university sector. Furthermore, there is a response rate effect associated with the time that has elapsed since withdrawing from a course of higher education. The '1998/99 withdrawer' group is more likely to respond than the '1996/97 withdrawer' group.

Table 1.1: Response rates by gender, type of institution and year of withdrawal

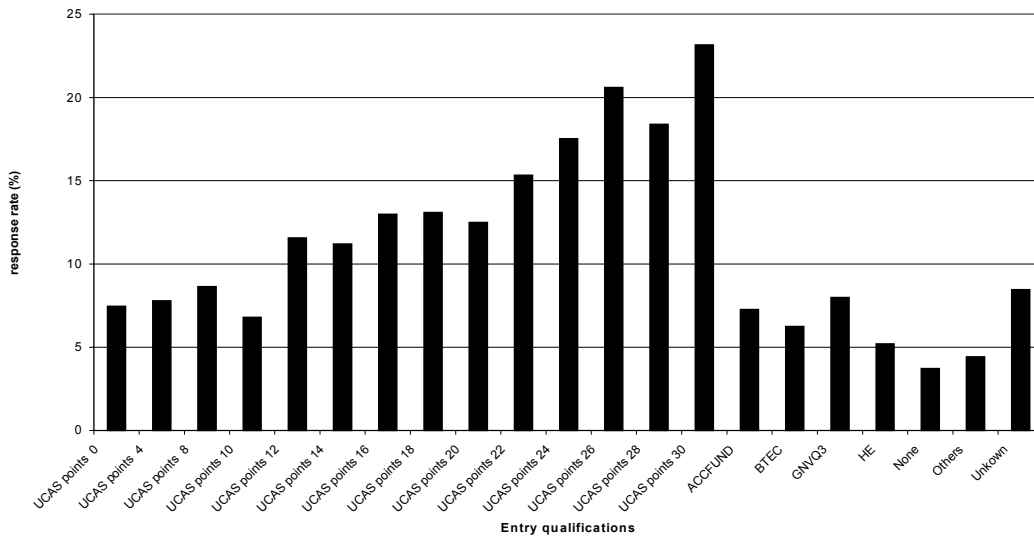
	Response rate (%)	Total (=100%)
Gender		
Women	11.9	5,811
Men	6.1	7,710
Type of Institution		
Post 1992 university	7.9	11,424
Pre 1992 university	13.7	1,514
College of Higher Education	8.7	583
Year of withdrawal		
1996/97	6.2	5,447
1998/99	10.2	8,074
Total	8.6	13,521

Note: Based upon information from 23 HEIs only
Overall response rate (30 HEIs) in 10%

An important factor that might influence response rates is the level of pre-university entrance qualifications held by the respondent. Using information supplied by the HEFCE², we were able to analyse response rates according to the level of pre-entry qualifications. Figure 1.1 shows the result, with a strong and positive gradient between the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) point score that an individual has and their response to the survey. Those who have 24 points or more appear to be more than twice as likely to respond than those with 10 points or fewer. While this might appear to be a serious source of potential bias, the scale of the problem is not great. Those who withdraw from higher education before completing their course tend to have lower than average entry qualifications. From an analysis of data supplied by the HEFCE, we estimate that between 3 and 4 per cent of ex-students that they identify as 'non-continuers' in higher education had 23 or more A-level/AS-level or Scottish Highers points. Among respondents to the survey this rate is approximately double at 8 per cent. This compares with the distribution of A/AS/SH point among the population of young full-time first-degree entrants, which shows that 27 per cent had 23 or more points in 1998/99.

² We are grateful to Mark Corver at the HEFCE for supplying these data.

Figure 1.1: Response rates by entry qualifications



To assess further the factors influencing survey response, we undertook a multivariate analysis of the response record for each potential respondent. This allowed us to measure the separate statistical significance of a variety of factors that could affect response. In this analysis we included as factors the following:

- age (grouped as under 21, 21-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, 45 and over);
- pre-entry qualifications (21 categories showing UCAS points scores and other pre-entry qualifications);
- gender;
- sample category (1996/97 or 1998/99 withdrawer);
- subjects studied (14 categories);
- institution attended (23 categories);
- type of institution attended (3 categories).

The analysis revealed that the associations between response rates and gender, sample category, and pre-entry qualifications shown in Table 1.1 and Figure 1.1 are strong, separate and statistically significant effects. Additionally, the analysis revealed that young withdrawers from higher education (under 21 years in the September following their withdrawal) were more likely to respond than other age groups. Interestingly, no association is revealed between response rates and subject studied. The apparent pre-1992 and post-1992 university effect disappears in the presence of individual institutional variables.

Non-completers and returners

We were aware of the possibility that a number of persons contacted via the postal survey would have returned to higher education on a full-time basis subsequent to their withdrawal. It was also possible that some never withdrew from higher education in the first place. Due to administrative errors in record keeping, or problems with the contact procedures, some of those we contacted may not be early leavers from higher education.

In an attempt to screen out such individuals we included the following question on the front of the questionnaire:

Which of the following statements most closely applied to you?
(withdrawing from a course includes a situation where you complete a particular year, but do not subsequently return to complete the course)

I withdrew from a course of higher education in 1996/97

I withdrew from a course of higher education in 1998/99

I withdrew from a course of higher education in _____ (state year)

None of the above is true (i.e. I never withdrew from a course)

The answers provided by respondents correlate reasonably well with the HEFCE designation of their year of leaving, as shown in Table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2: Respondent's stated year of leaving by HEFCE designated year of leaving

	HEFCE designation of year of leaving		Total sample
	1996/97	1998/99	
Withdrew 1996/97	86.1	5.0	28.5
Withdrew 1998/99	5.9	80.9	58.5
None of above is true (I never withdrew)	7.1	13.4	12.4
Not determined	0.9	0.7	0.7
Total (=100%)	337 ¹	822 ¹	1,520

Note: ¹ Based on matched records for 23 HEIs only

It appears that a considerable number of respondents, about one in eight, stated that they had never left higher education. Such persons were, as expected, more preponderant among the later (1998/99) respondents given that the HEFCE had been unable to determine whether or not any of those designated by their institution as a leaver had restarted their course or switched institutions. In addition, close inspection of completed event histories indicated that a number of respondents who stated that they had withdrawn from a course of higher education had in fact returned (often to another institution) for a significant period. We decided to remove these individuals from our analysis to facilitate our focus upon those who were not 'returners' to higher education. This was achieved by recording the cumulative number of months spent in full-time study following the August of the academic year in which they stated they had withdrawn from higher education (i.e. August 1996 or August 1998). Those who had spent more than 6 months in total in full-time study in the 15 months to two years following these dates were removed

from the sample. In total, 20 per cent of the former group and 38 per cent of the latter had significant periods (6 months or more) of full-time study in the two-year period following the year of their withdrawal. Removing these individuals from the sample of respondents yields 850 persons classified as ‘leavers’.

Since the period of data collection, HEFCE have been able to complete linking between the 1998 and 1999 HESA records³. It is estimated that had this linking been available at the time of sampling, almost half of the original 1998 sampling frame would not have been selected. Furthermore, two thirds of 1998 leavers identified by HEFCE using the latest available information did not appear in the original sampling frame. The 1998 sample therefore consists of a subset of ‘true’ leavers and a group of people who, with the availability of more recent information, would not have been identified as withdrawing from HE. Those who indicate that they had not withdrawn from HE filter out this second group to some extent. However, response to this question is not in the region of 50 per cent because many of these people would have had some kind of withdrawal event (e.g. transfer to another institution).

Of those respondents who were originally designated as leaving in 1998/99 but indicated that they had never withdrew from HE, 80 per cent were found to be attending the same institution and a further 5 per cent had successfully transferred to another institution. Analysis of the remaining responses indicated that these students stated that they had not withdrawn from HE, but had left the university without a qualification awarded. Similar results were found for respondents designated as leaving during 1996/97 but who indicated that they had never withdrawn from HE. Such students may have failed their exams, gained a sub-degree qualification or perhaps are disputing their degree result. Whatever the explanation, it is likely that such respondents do not consider themselves as having ‘voluntarily’ withdrawn from HE. Finally, the perceptions of respondents regarding what constitutes a withdrawal event, and the timing of this event, may also contribute to the mismatch observed between the reported and designated year of withdrawal.

To conclude, the higher propensity of respondents amongst the 1998/99 cohort to indicate that they never withdrew from HE can be explained by the absence of additional information from linking between 1998 and 1999 HESA records. This however does mean that the composition of the 1998/99 respondents is different to that of the 1996/97 respondents, in so far that the later cohort includes students who in hindsight would have not been selected and excludes others who would have been selected. Whilst the filtering condition we employ throughout the remainder of the report will improve the degree of consistency between these two cohorts, biases may remain between these samples and comparisons must therefore be made with caution.

Characteristics of survey respondents: early leavers and graduates compared

In the present report we attempt, where possible, to compare the characteristics of those who withdrew from HE with those who successfully graduated. This is particularly important within Chapter Two where we compare the labour market outcomes of those who withdraw from HE with the outcomes of those who

³ We are grateful to Mark Corver of HEFCE for undertaking this analysis.

successfully completed their degree. In order to make these comparisons, we utilise information collected in a postal survey of 1995 graduates undertaken during winter 1998. Many of the questions asked in the postal survey used in the current study were modelled upon similar questions asked in this national survey of graduates. Also, approximately half of the institutions that participated in the current enquiry also participated in this earlier study of graduates.

The earlier discussion has outlined the difficulties inherent in interpreting the results of the present enquiry due to problems of response bias. It has been noted that response rates varied by gender, institutional type and pre-university entrance qualifications held by the respondent. Further evidence of the impact of response bias upon the results of the present enquiry can be gained by comparing the characteristics of the respondents to these surveys. Descriptions of the personal characteristics of respondents to these surveys are presented in Table 1.3. Information is provided separately for the two cohorts of survey respondents to the present enquiry; '1996/97 withdrawers' and the '1998/99 withdrawers'.

First, we note that in both samples women predominate. Approximately 56 per cent of respondents to the non-completion survey were females. This is a consequence of response bias in both surveys, with women more willing to participate than men. There is little difference in the ethnic composition of these two groups, but a significant difference in their age structure. Over 70 per cent of the 1996/97 withdrawers are still aged under 25 years some three and a half years after withdrawing from higher education. This compares with 50 per cent of the 1995 graduates surveyed at the end of 1998. This is unsurprising, given that most of those who withdraw do so in their first or at the start of their second year of study, often at ages 19 to 20.

The social class distribution of the two samples is also interesting, in that it reveals little evidence to support the hypothesis that those who withdraw from a course of higher education before completing their degree tend to come from a poorer social background than those who completed their degrees. Considering both the '1996/97 withdrawer' group and the '1998/99 withdrawer' group', approximately 50 per cent of survey respondents were from classes 1 and 2 of the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification; managerial and professional occupations. This compares to approximately 52 per cent of the 1995 graduates⁴. Equally, the information provided by both sets of respondents on their father's economic activity when they were 14 years old shows that the two groups are essentially similar in terms of this aspect of parental background.

⁴ Some evidence to support the existence of a social gradient in rates of non-continuation is provided in a report 'Higher Education: Student Retention' made by HEFCE to the House of Commons Education and Employment Committee. Estimates for young full time first degree entrants indicate non-continuation rates following year of entry of 5 per cent within Social Class I compared to 9 per cent within Social Class III and V.

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Table 1.3: Characteristics of survey respondents: withdrawers and graduates compared

	1996/97 withdrawers surveyed in 2000	1998/99 withdrawers surveyed in 2000	1995 graduates surveyed in 1998
<i>Gender:</i>			
Male	44.4	44.0	41.8
Female	55.6	56.0	58.2
<i>National Statistics Socio-economic Classification:</i>			
Higher managerial, professional	34.7	33.5	29.5
Lower managerial, professional	13.7	16.6	22.0
Intermediate occupations	13.3	9.9	9.1
Small employers and own account worker	14.4	17.3	18.1
Lower supervisory, craft	3.2	5.8	6.2
Semi-routine occupation	8.4	6.5	4.9
Routine occupations	8.8	5.2	8.2
Not working or unemployed	3.5	5.2	1.1
<i>Ethnic background</i>			
White	95.3	94.1	93.9
<i>Age group at time of survey:</i>			
<25 years	70.5	79.7	49.3
25-29 years	14.0	8.8	32.5
30-39 years	7.8	6.5	9.3
40-49 years	4.7	2.9	6.2
50+ years	3.1	2.1	2.7
<i>Long standing disability or illness</i>	9.6	10.1	3.7
<i>Qualifications on entry to HE:</i>			
21+ 'A' level points	17.1	18.7	-
24+ 'A' level points			25.2
<i>Subject studied:</i>			
Arts	12.7	16.6	12.8
Humanities	6.5	6.9	8.3
Languages	3.1	3.1	4.8
Law	4.0	2.9	3.8
Social sciences	12.4	13.8	13.4
Maths, computing	9.3	10.7	6.3
Natural sciences	13.0	9.9	11.3
Medicine and related	4.7	4.2	6.7
Engineering	7.5	6.9	9.0
Business studies	9.9	11.9	9.3
Education	7.8	5.2	7.6
Other vocational	5.9	5.4	4.5
Interdisciplinary	0.9	1.3	2.0
<i>Father's status when respondent was 14:</i>			
Employee	68.6	66.5	73.3
Self-employed	19.6	21.6	20.7
Unemployed	2.5	4.0	1.1
Not seeking paid work	1.2	2.1	0.5
Other or not stated	8.1	1.7	4.4
Total sample	323	523	9,662

A significantly higher proportion of respondents classified as 1996/97 or 1998/99 withdrawers reported that they have a long-standing illness or disability which limits (or may be perceived to limit) the work which they do. We suspect that there is a causal relationship here, insofar as such illness or disability may also impact upon progress through a course of full-time study.

Those who graduated have significantly higher entry qualifications than those who withdrew. Exact comparisons are difficult here, because of differences in the nature of the information that was collected and the response bias noted earlier. However, it is probable that less than 15 per cent of respondents classed as 1996/97 or 1998/99 withdrawers have 24 or more 'AS' level points. This compares with over 25 per cent of graduates surveyed in 1998.

In terms of the broad subject areas in which these two groups were enrolled, there is little evidence of any significant difference between them. The most common disciplinary areas of those who withdrew were from the Arts, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences. The most common disciplinary areas of study reported by the 1995 graduates were the Arts, Social Sciences and Business Studies.

A survey of non-respondents

To gain further information on the reasons for non-response and to check upon the potential biases that it could introduce, we undertook a telephone survey of non-respondents from four of the 30 HEIs that participated in the study. Details of the numbers involved and the procedures we adopted to contact these ex-students are given in Annex One.

The results of this survey were most encouraging when comparing the reasons given for withdrawing between the postal survey respondents from these four institutions with the responses to the same question posed by telephone interviewers. When asked why they had not responded, most of those contacted by telephone could not recollect receiving the original questionnaire some two to four months earlier. Others stated that they felt that the questionnaire was not relevant to them and had not completed it. Some stated that it was too intrusive, yet they were willing to respond to a few brief questions to confirm their status and give their main reason for leaving higher education.

Summary

This chapter describes in detail how we undertook a postal survey of persons who left higher education without completing their course of study in 1996/97 or 1998/99. We focus in the later chapters upon those who did not immediately return to higher education.

As a consequence of a number of compounding factors, we have a low response rate to our enquiry. Firstly, postal surveys do not typically yield high response rates. Additionally, for this postal survey no reminders could be issued and the addresses tended to be parental addresses at the time that a son/daughter was admitted to higher education. Given that a period of more than three years had elapsed for over half of our addresses, these factors seriously affected the delivery of the questionnaire to the addressee. Secondly, not all of our addressees regarded

themselves as 'leavers'. Many had returned to HE or had transferred to another institution and would have regarded the questionnaire as irrelevant. Finally, we suspect that a questionnaire focussed upon the experience of leaving HE prior to graduation may have been regarded by some addressees in a negative light, possibly reducing their willingness to co-operate. Despite these reservations, from a follow up survey of a sample of non-respondents we conclude that the qualification and gender biases we have revealed may not seriously affect our key findings from the postal survey.

It is difficult to be prescriptive in terms of what factors may have enabled us to achieve a higher response rate to the postal questionnaire, whilst collecting both detailed information on the process of withdrawal from HE and the effects of withdrawal upon the subsequent experiences of respondents. Yorke (1999) notes that surveys of withdrawal from HE that have been conducted near the time of withdrawal have yielded response rates of between 25 and 30 per cent. Whilst such studies may be able to gain recent and detailed information on the factors that contributed to withdrawal from HE, they are clearly not able to consider the longer term consequences of withdrawal from HE. Indeed, an analysis of both the causes and longer term consequences of withdrawal from HE may be beyond the scope of a single integrated enquiry.

CHAPTER TWO WHAT HAPPENS TO STUDENT NON-COMPLETERS?

Introduction

This chapter examines the experiences of leavers following their withdrawal from a degree course. It draws heavily on a section of the postal survey that provides a dated account of the main activities that the respondent has been engaged in following withdrawal from higher education in either 1996/97 or 1998/99.

With the exception of the few studies outlined in Annex Two, little is known about the consequences of early withdrawal. Do those who withdraw from higher education before completing a degree earn substantially less in their subsequent careers than those who could have gone to university but chose not to do so⁵? Do they find it more difficult to gain and hold jobs than graduates, and do these jobs offer fewer intrinsic rewards than the jobs held by those who graduated? Are withdrawers from higher education excluded from 'graduate jobs' by virtue of their failure to complete a degree course? These are the issues we seek to address in this chapter.

Clearly, many of these questions cannot be answered conclusively using the data collected for the present investigation. Ideally we would want to examine the consequences of withdrawal from higher education over a longer time-period and for a large and representative sample of the population who were qualified to enter higher education. However, we are helped somewhat in this respect via information collected in a similar postal survey of 1995 graduates undertaken in winter 1998. Many of the questions asked in this earlier postal survey were also used in the current study, including the event history. Furthermore, approximately half of the institutions that participated in the current enquiry also participated in this earlier study of graduates. Results from the report on this earlier survey (Elias *et al.* 1999) indicated that, three and a half years after graduation, these graduates were well-integrated into employment, often in a professional career. It is of interest, therefore, to view the progress of the 1996/97 withdrawers over a comparable three and a half-year period to the date of the current survey.

To achieve the highest level of comparability between these two groups, comparisons should ideally be restricted to survey respondents from both samples who attended HEIs that appeared in both the 1998 survey of 1995 graduates and the current survey of early leavers from higher education. However, such a restriction would compromise the sample size available from the present enquiry. Therefore, respondents from all of the HEIs participating in the non-completion survey are utilised. However, the comparator group of those who responded to the 1998 survey is restricted to graduates from HEIs that participated in both surveys. This restriction should improve the level of consistency between the two samples due to the higher proportion of 'old' universities that participated within the 1998 survey of graduates.

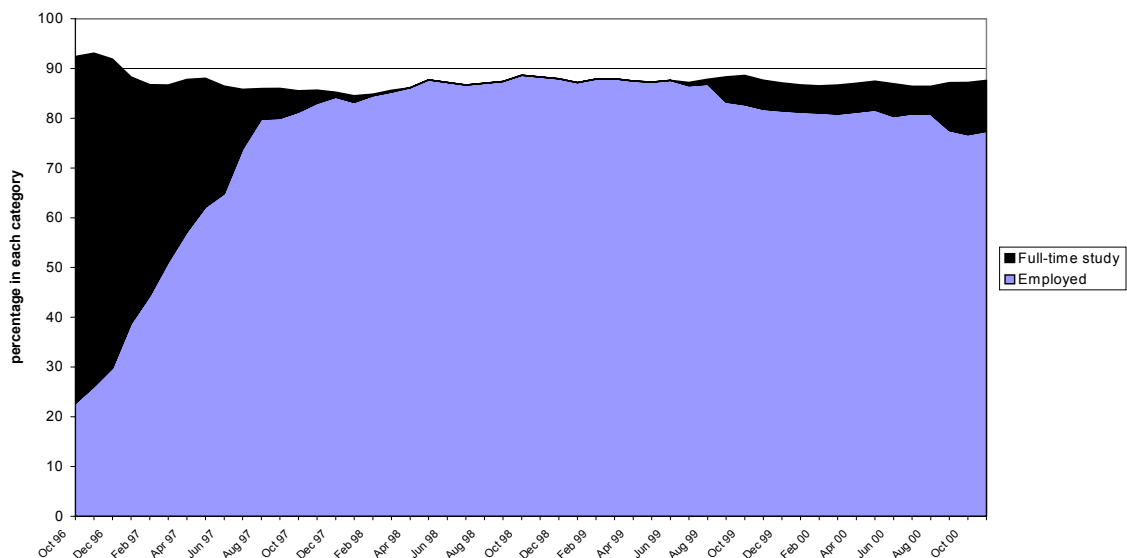
⁵ In a study of qualified 33 year olds surveyed in 1991, Dearden *et al.* (1997) indicated that, for males, there appears to be a 10-percentage point earnings penalty associated with non-completion in comparison with those who had at least one A-level but did not study for a degree.

Finally, comparisons of labour market outcomes between these two groups must be made with caution, given that those who withdraw from higher education are, on average, a few years younger than those who went on to complete their course of higher education. The importance of these age differences in contributing towards observed differences in the level of earnings between these two groups are considered later in this chapter.

Employment and unemployment after withdrawal

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show, for the two groups of withdrawers, the extent of their engagement in employment (full or part-time) after withdrawal from higher education. These figures show that employment rates rise rapidly during the academic year in which they withdrew, indicating that most withdrawers move very quickly into paid employment (or are already in paid employment prior to withdrawal). Amongst both groups employment rates rise to about 85 per cent. Amongst the sample of 1996/97 withdrawers, full-time study begins to reappear towards the end of 1999. Similarly, amongst the sample of 1998/99 withdrawers, full-time study begins to reappear towards the end of 2000⁶. Figure 2.3 shows similar information obtained two years earlier from the comparison group of graduates who did not continue or return to full-time study after graduation in 1995. This reveals that employment rates are slightly higher than for the samples of leavers shown in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, rising to about 95 per cent two years after graduation.

Figure 2.1: The evolution of employment and full-time study among 1996/97 withdrawers



⁶ It must be borne in mind that the two groups represented in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 have been defined via their event histories – to exclude persons who continue in further or higher education on a full-time basis for at least six months in the two years after withdrawal.

Figure 2.2: The evolution of employment and full-time study among 1998/99 withdrawers

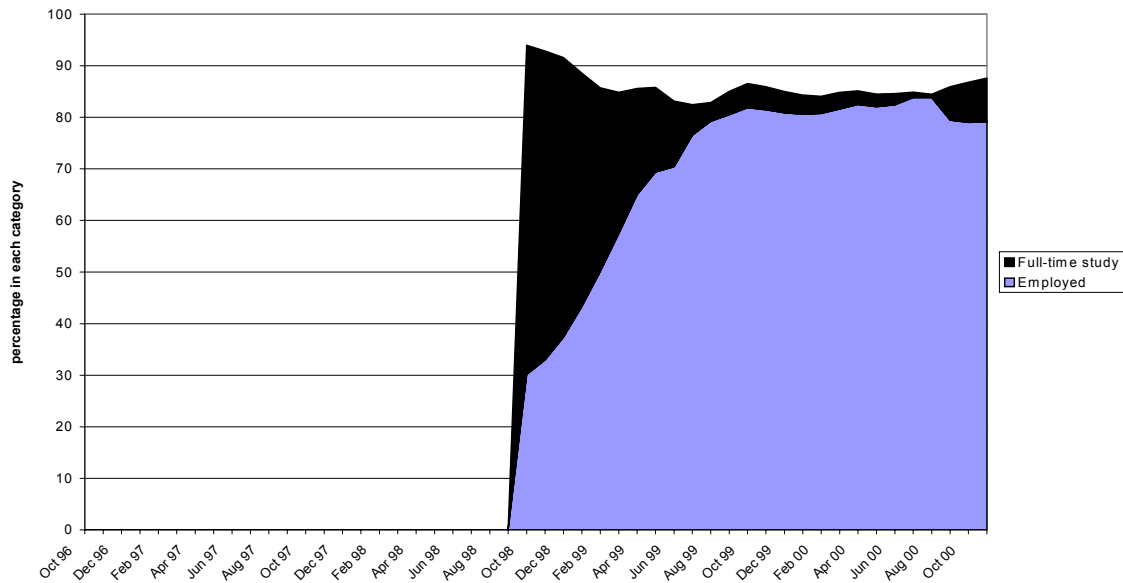
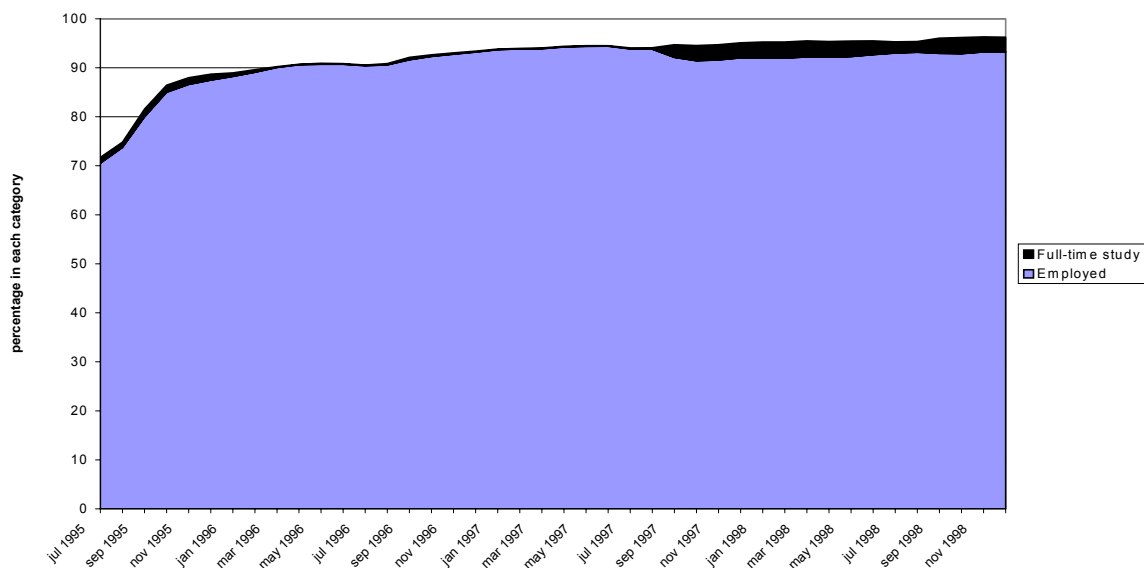


Figure 2.3: The evolution of employment and full-time study among 1995 graduates not continuing in full-time study



Corresponding to these lower employment rates among non-completers, Figures 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6 show that unemployment is more widespread in the work histories of these two groups of withdrawers, with approximately 6 per cent of each group recording that they were unemployed in the year immediately following their withdrawal, falling to approximately 3 per cent two years later, as evidenced in the longer work history available from the 1996/97 withdrawers. Figure 2.6 indicates, for graduates, unemployment falls rapidly immediately after graduation to a level of approximately 3 per cent one year later and under 2 per cent after two years. In other words, while the experience of unemployment remains low for withdrawers,

both cohorts report unemployment at approximately twice the level of that prevailing among recent graduates.

Figure 2.4: The evolution of unemployment among 1996/97 withdrawers

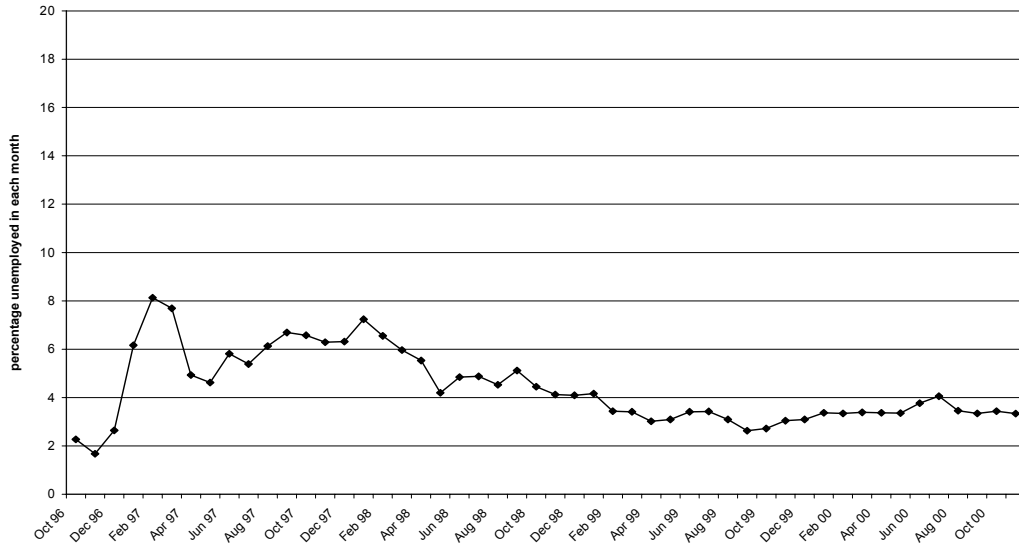


Figure 2.5: The evolution of unemployment among 1998/99 withdrawers

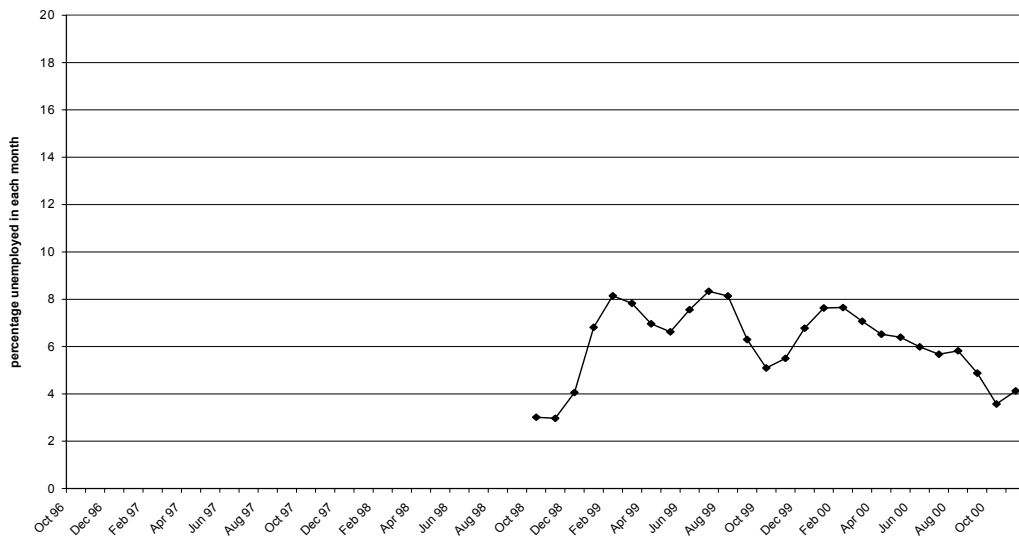
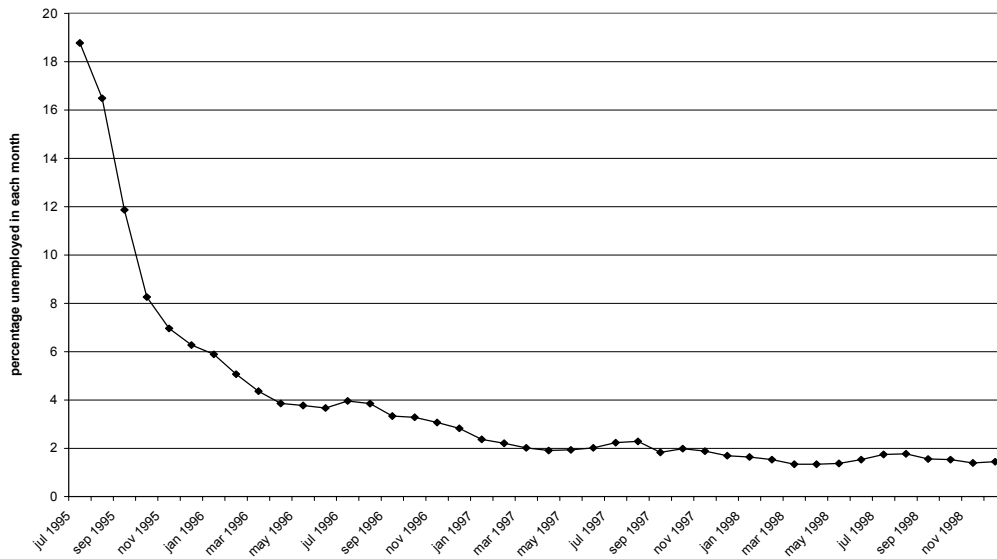


Figure 2.6: The evolution of unemployment among 1995 graduates not continuing in full-time study



What types of jobs do withdrawers take?

Although employment rates among withdrawers are somewhat lower than for a corresponding group of graduates and their experience of unemployment is about double that of completers, the differences between these two groups are relatively modest. However, ‘employment’ is a broadly defined state, covering a range of occupations that may or may not be deemed ‘appropriate’ for persons who have completed, or have attempted to complete, a degree course. In this section we examine the nature of the jobs that withdrawers and completers took following their experience of higher education, classifying occupations from a detailed level to one of three broad groups:

- traditional graduate occupations
employees in occupations classified to this group typically have 5 years of additional education after the age of compulsory schooling and a minimum of 4 years.

- graduate track occupations
employees in occupations classified to this group typically have 3 years of additional education and a minimum of 2.5 years.

- non-graduate occupations
employees in occupations classified to this group typically had 1.5 years of additional education.

The first group consists of those occupations that are typically thought of as ‘graduate jobs’ – doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists, teachers – and high-level managerial jobs. The second group covers a range of occupations which more graduates are moving into nowadays – lower level management, technicians, skilled caring jobs, some higher level clerical jobs, etc. The third group consists of

occupations which do not require high level qualifications – catering, cleaning, driving, bar work, low level security and the like.⁷

Figures 2.7, 2.8 and 2.9 compare and contrast the occupational histories of the 1996/97 withdrawers, the 1998/99 withdrawers and the 1995 graduates after reclassifying all jobs they held after leaving higher education to each of these three groups.

Figure 2.7: Types of job held after withdrawal, 1996/97 withdrawers

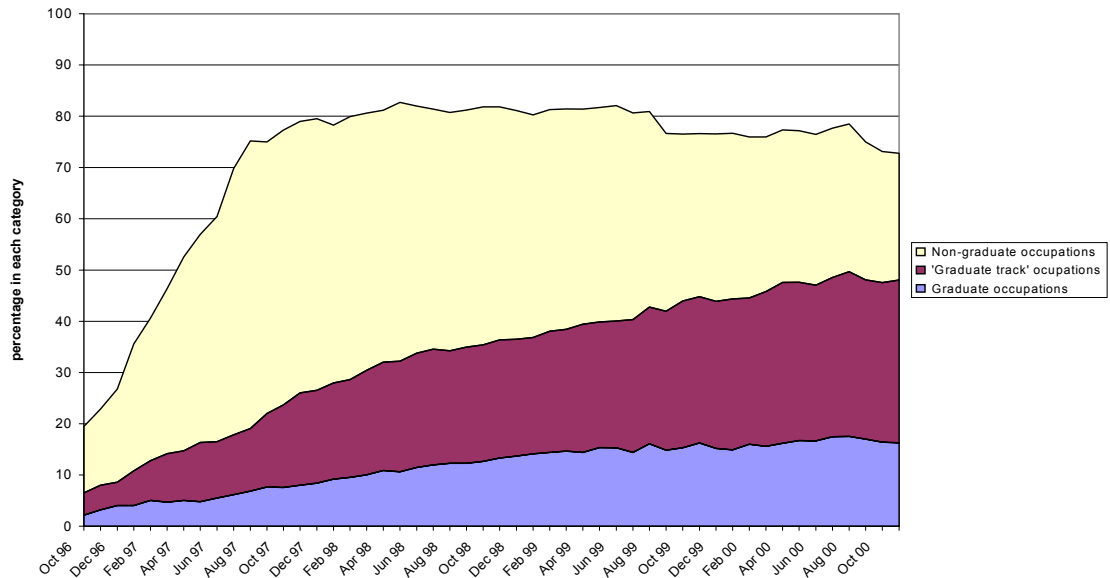
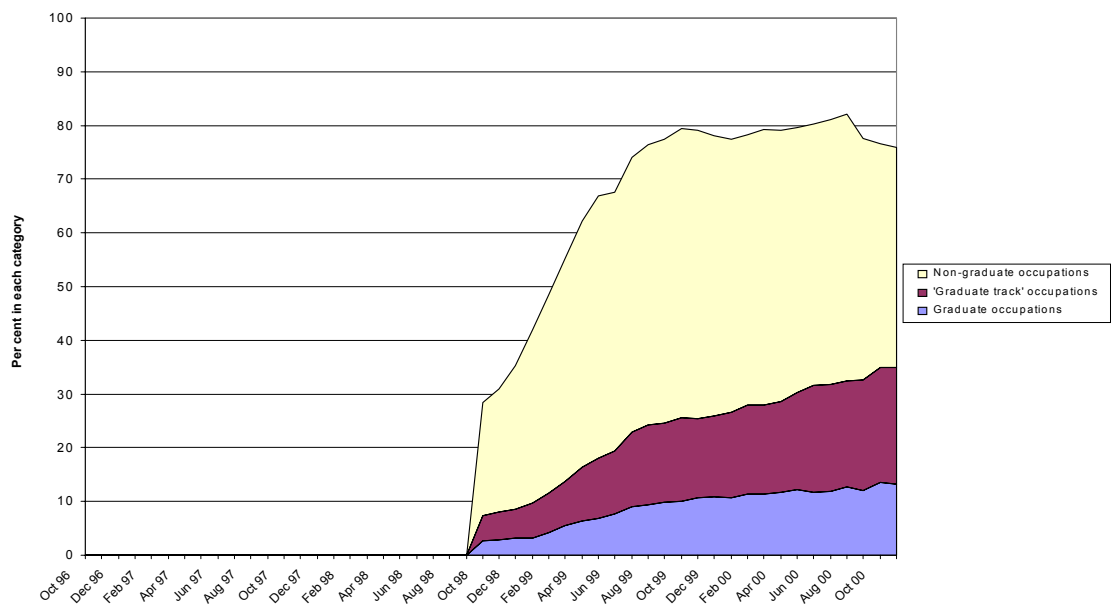
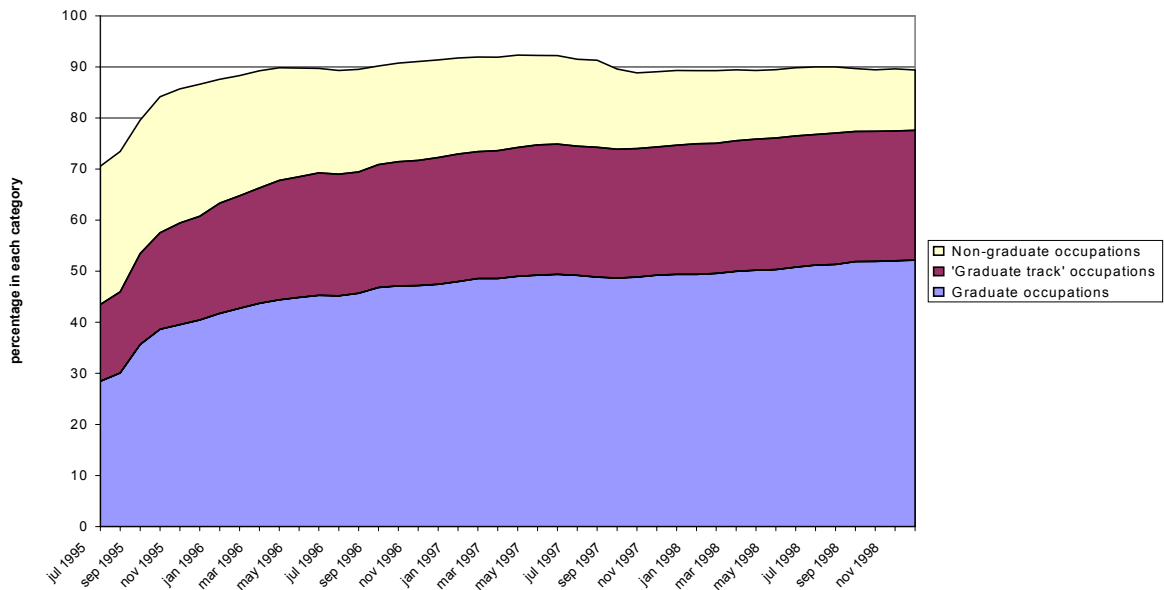


Figure 2.8: Types of job held after withdrawal, 1998/99 withdrawers



⁷ This classification was developed by Abigail McKnight for analysis of graduate career paths in the 1998 survey of 1995 graduates. We are grateful to her for permission to reuse the classification in this study.

Figure 2.9: Types of job held after graduation, 1995 graduates not continuing in full-time study



Comparing first between Figure 2.7 and Figure 2.9, it is apparent that withdrawers are much less likely than graduates to obtain employment in graduate occupations. While this sounds tautological, it can be seen from Figure 2.9 that even graduates take time to become assimilated into the labour market for graduate jobs. Some eighteen months after graduation, only half of all those in employment are working in occupations we classify as graduate jobs. Assimilation continues throughout the three and a half-year period over which we observed these graduates, with only ten per cent remaining in non-graduate occupations after three and a half years. For the comparable group of withdrawers, those who left higher education in 1996/97, the picture looks very different. Eighteen months after leaving, only ten per cent had obtained employment in what we classify as graduate jobs. We anticipated that a significant proportion would find employment in graduate track occupations. What we find is that the majority take employment initially in non-graduate occupations. This proportion reduces over time, mainly via movement into graduate track occupations, though it remains the case that three and a half years after withdrawing approximately one quarter of this group are employed in non-graduate occupations.

Comparing Figures 2.7 and 2.8, we note that the profile of movement into these three types of occupations is virtually identical for the 1998/99 leavers. This is an interesting finding, given that the economy has been on a fairly steady growth path since 1993. Towards the end of the decade, certainly by the time the 1998/99 withdrawers would be seeking employment as an alternative to full-time study, there was evidence that the labour market for qualified labour had become 'overheated'. Shortages of various types of skilled worker had begun to appear, particularly in health, teaching, computing and engineering. There is no evidence from our enquiry to support the view that the prolonged and continuing growth of the economy has created circumstances in which non-graduates are finding it easier to gain access to graduate or graduate track occupations.

Box 2.1

Insights from the Telephone Survey – Perceptions of withdrawal on career prospects

Survey respondents have mixed views regarding the effect of withdrawing from HE upon their career prospects. Those in relatively good jobs tend to play down the importance of a degree upon their career prospects.

CL withdrew from HE in 1996 and now works as a trainee financial adviser. He does not feel that withdrawing will have an adverse effect on his career. “It has enabled me to take a step back, analyse my life and think about what I want to do. Provided that I get my professional qualification, I think I can be successful with or without a degree”.

IB is currently running his own business providing internet web design and IT solutions for business. Prospective clients have not asked him whether he has a degree or not. “Once you are doing a job, and you can prove that you are doing a good job, then degrees don’t arise”.

FB is working in a call centre. She has considered the idea of returning to university, but has abandoned the idea for the foreseeable future. She feels she is earning good money and doesn’t think that having a degree is important for her. Leaving her course has not prevented her from securing a good, well paid job that she enjoys.

AWA works as a systems developer within a call centre. Not having a degree has not affected him in getting his current job. “I have a good job with a good future. I don’t regret leaving the course”.

LS works in arts administration. He feels that provided he stays in his current job for a few more years, then there should be no adverse effects on him. “A degree is not the only thing that counts. What really counts is that you don’t sit back and do nothing. Building your career, one way or the other, is what needs to be done”.

Other respondents express concerns about how their time within HE will be viewed by employers.

AS left HE in 1998 and now works as a post office clerk. “Leaving the course has wrecked my future prospects”. He feels annoyed at seeing his friends coming up to completion. “It was definitely the right decision to leave – but it was a waste of a year”.

VT withdrew in 1998 and now works as a bank cashier. She worries how the misspent time looks on her CV “as if I have no staying power”.

JM withdrew in 1997 and is now works for a web design consultancy. He is concerned about the attitudes of recruiters “I know that some companies do look for degrees rather than for experience – I do kick myself sometimes”.

MN states that all the employers she has subsequently met at interviews have wanted to know why she left her degree course and feels that they were asked personal and intrusive questions about it. “It was like a big black mark over me. They were judgmental, they asked disgraceful questions and had awful attitudes. It has left her wondering if she shouldn’t take it off her CV.

JW feels that he may lose out at work to those with a degree. “I don’t have a degree; most of the people I work with do. At the next round of promotions, and if it gets tight, maybe the job would go to a person with a degree”.

The current employment of withdrawers

Here we examine in more detail the nature of the jobs held by respondents at the time of the survey. Two aspects of their current employment are of interest. First, we examine the *quality* of the employment relationship. For this purpose we make use of an index of positive job characteristics developed and constructed for the research connected with the 1998 survey of 1995 graduates.

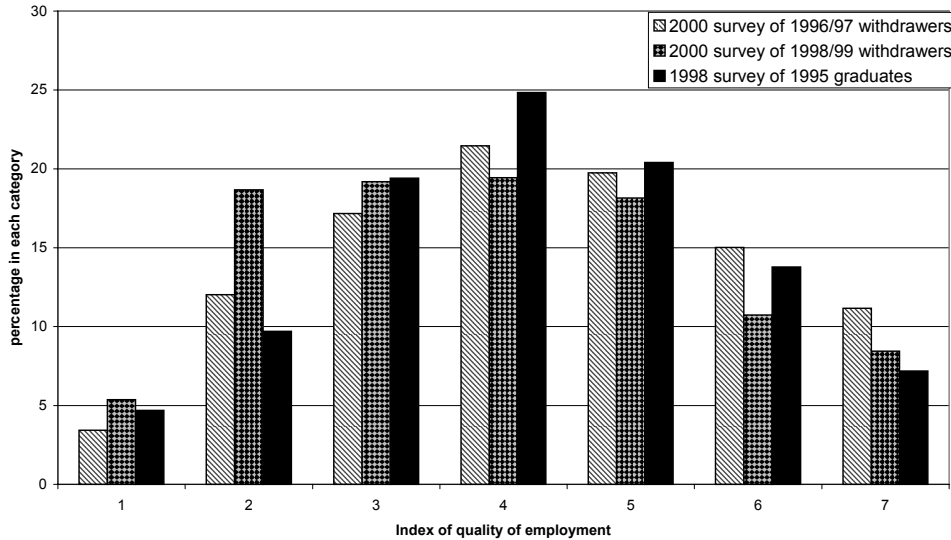
We included in both surveys a question that asked the respondent to state whether or not the job they held at the time of the survey provided any of the following attractive features:

- **competitive salary**
- **continual skills development**
- **interesting and challenging work**
- socially useful work
- **long term security**
- opportunities for an international career
- opportunities to reach managerial levels
- **progressive and dynamic organisations**
- **working with people you enjoy socialising with**
- other (PLEASE SPECIFY)

The six characteristics shown in bold type above were deemed to be positive job attributes. An index was constructed from these six factors by assigning the value 'one' to each factor and summing across all six. Additionally, those respondents who failed to tick any of the first nine, but provided details of a positive aspect of their job in response to the 'Other' category, scored one point on this constructed index.

Figure 2.10 shows the distribution of this derived index constructed from responses to these questions in the current enquiry, contrasting responses for the two groups (1996/97 withdrawers and 1998/99 withdrawers) with those from the 1998 survey of graduates. Comparing first the situation of the 1996/97 withdrawers in 2000 with the 1995 graduates in 1998, we note that the distributions are fairly similar. About one quarter of the graduates listed four positive features of their current jobs whereas one fifth of the withdrawers gave this as their modal response. This indicates that, although many fewer of the withdrawers are working in graduate or graduate track occupations, they express virtually the same distribution of positive attributes associated with their jobs as do the graduates. For the 1998/99 withdrawers the situation is different. A much higher proportion lists only two positive attributes. This could relate to the fact that this group is still in the process of finding employment commensurate with their educational background.

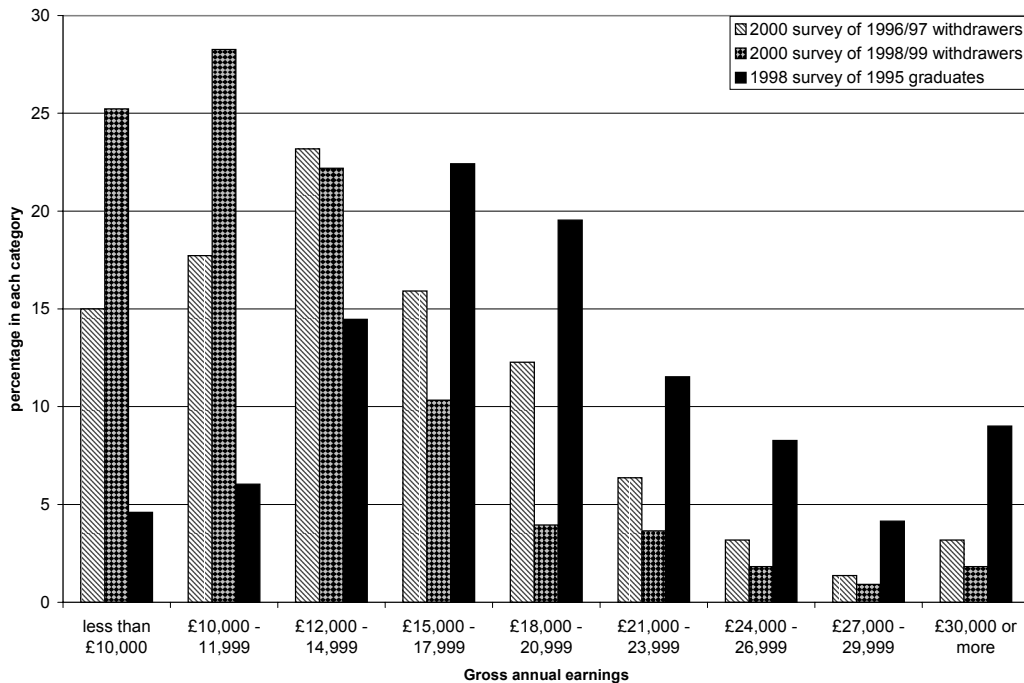
Figure 2.10: Index of quality of current employment, 1995 graduates compared with 1996/97 and 1998/99 withdrawers



Next, we examine the earnings of withdrawers and compare these with the earnings of graduates. Figure 2.11 shows the distribution of earnings for the 1996/97 and 1998/99 withdrawers and compares them with similar information obtained two years earlier from 1995 graduates. No adjustment has been made for the general growth of earnings over the two years 1998 to 2000, which could inflate the earnings of 1995 graduates by approximately 8-10 per cent⁸. The comparison is restricted also to those who were in full-time employment. Not surprisingly we note that the earnings of the withdrawers are significantly less than that of completers. The 1998/99 withdrawers show much lower earnings than the 1996/97 withdrawers, indicative the rapid growth in earnings which young people experience in their late teens and early twenties. The three categories that fall under £15,000 account for well over half of all those non-completers who were in full-time employment at the time of the survey. For the graduates, only a quarter of the sample earned below this amount. We must caution here about the interpretation of these earnings distributions. As was shown in Table 2.1, the average age of the 1996/97 withdrawers is well below that of the 1995 graduates. A part of the difference that is observed in Figure 2.11 undoubtedly reflects this age difference.

⁸ Earnings information in the two surveys was collected in identical banded groups, making adjustment for inflation impossible.

Figure 2.11: Comparison of gross annual earnings of persons currently in full-time employment, 1995 graduates and 1996/97 withdrawers



A comparison of the earnings of 1995 graduates and 1996/97 withdrawers

To gain a better understanding of the difference revealed in Figure 2.11 between the earnings of graduates and those who withdraw from higher education in 1996/97, we undertook more detailed analysis using multivariate methods to control for differences in earnings between these two groups which may be due to other factors, such as their lower level of entry qualifications, variations in social class background, age, etc.

Although the multivariate analysis of earnings included all of the factors indicated on the horizontal axes of Figures 2.12 and 2.13, we show them as two separate sets purely for expositional convenience. The factors are shown in sets of categories, with one category excluded in each set as the reference category. For example, the first set consists of gender, with males as the reference category. The second set is age, with respondents under 25 years as the reference category. Where the bar drops below the horizontal axis, this indicates that the associated category has lower earnings than the reference category. Where it lies above, the category has higher earnings than the reference category. Black bars indicate statistically significant effects. Grey bars show an effect that is not statistically significant.

Figure 2.12 reveals the impact of various personal characteristics on the earnings of these two groups. As was shown in the earlier report (*op.cit.* p. 45) female graduates and withdrawers earn significantly less than males, and older respondents earn more than younger respondents. Entry qualifications also relate to later earnings. High 'A' level points (20+ in the survey of withdrawers and 23+ in the

survey of graduates) yield a higher level of earnings three and a half years after graduating or withdrawing from higher education. The relationship between parental social class and earnings is not particularly strong, with the exception of those whose father (or mother if the respondent had no father at age 14 years) worked in semi-routine or routine occupations, whose earnings are reduced by about 5 percentage points below the reference category (low managerial and professional occupations).

After controlling for the varying effect of the influences shown in Figure 2.12, Figure 2.13 shows the impact of educational experience on the earnings of these two groups. Of most interest here is the effect of having completed a degree course. Those who gained a degree show a 18 percentage premium on their earnings compared with those who did not complete, having taken account of differences in other characteristics of these individuals that could impact upon their earnings.

Figure 2.12: The impact of personal characteristics on the earnings of those in full-time employment, three and a half years after graduation or withdrawal

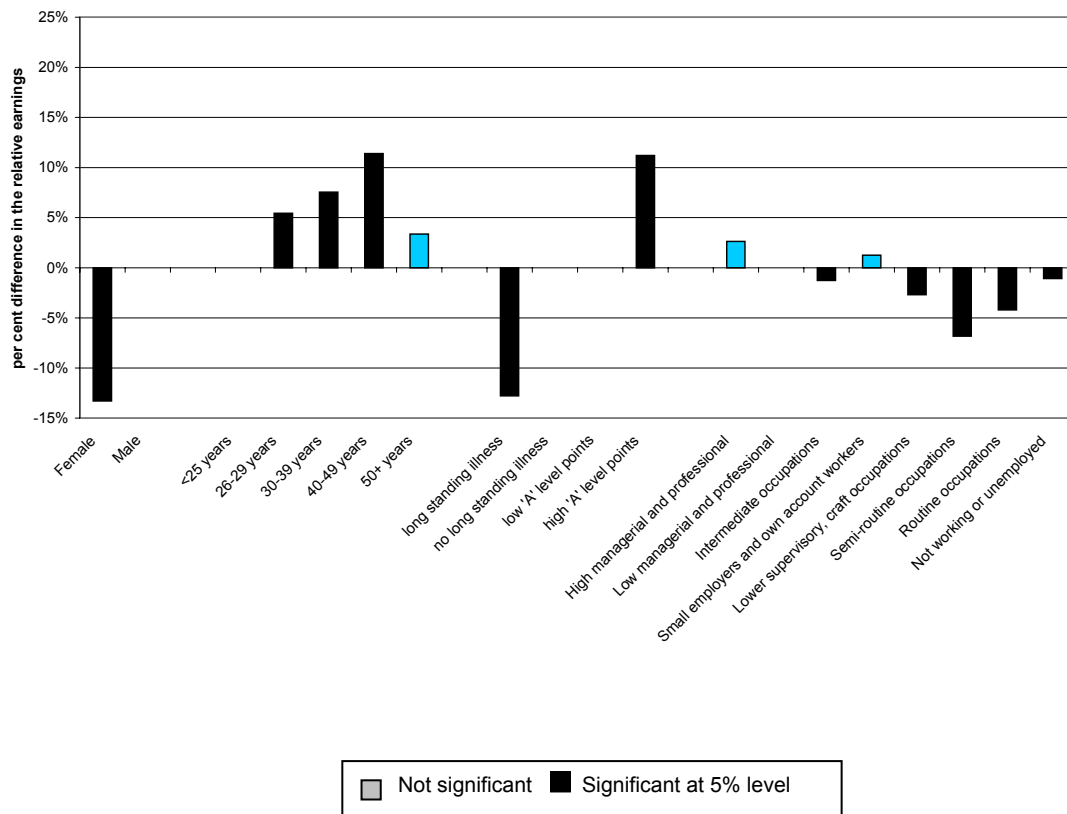
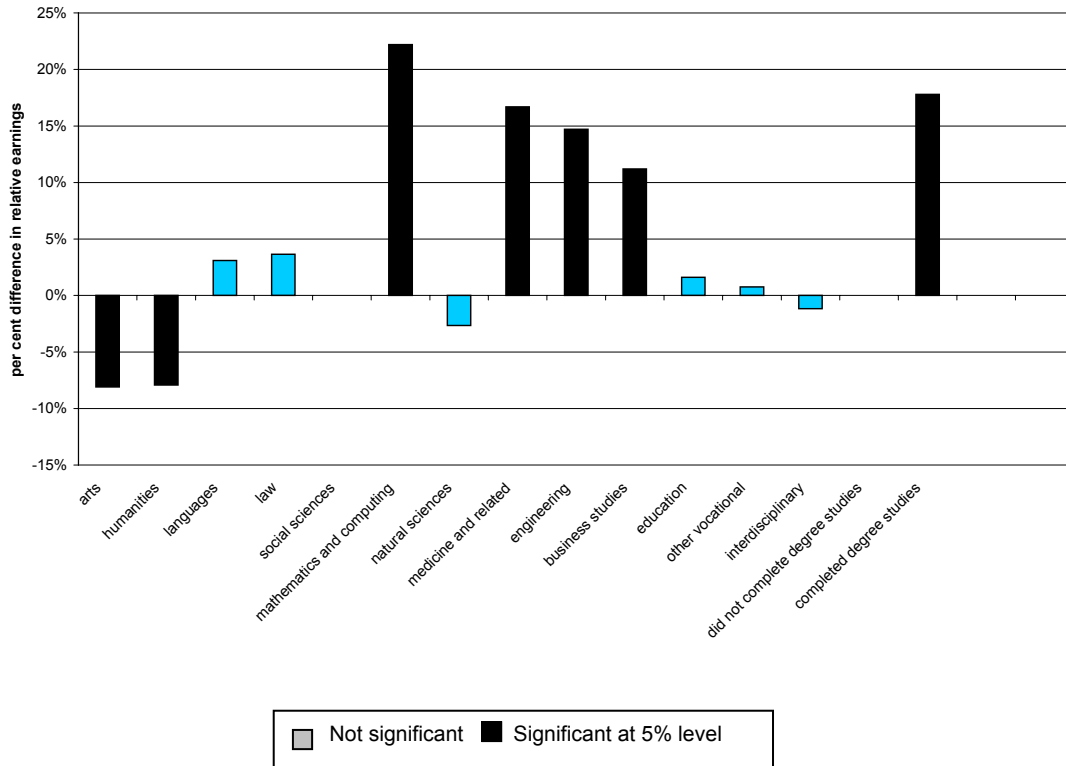


Figure 2.13: The impact of degree characteristics on the earnings of those in full-time employment, three and a half years after graduating or withdrawing from higher education



This difference, an average of 18 per cent higher earnings for the survey respondents who had graduated compared with those who had withdrawn does not accurately reflect the ‘cost of withdrawal’ in terms of the lower earnings. The earnings reported from the two enquiries relate to two different points in time. Between 1998 and 2000 the earnings of young graduates grew by approximately 6 per cent. Adjusting for this inflation would raise the differential to 24 per cent. However, the respondents to the survey of early leavers who are included in this analysis are, on average, a few years younger than the graduates. While the statistical procedures used here have attempted to correct for such differences, we are limited by the fact that the earlier survey of graduates did not measure their age with precision. For young people, earnings increase rapidly with age in the early twenties. From other sources of information⁹ we have computed that the earnings of those aged 21-23 and without a degree, but with A-level qualifications, would have grown by approximately 22 per cent as they aged to 24-26 years. Therefore, the earnings progression that is likely to have been experienced by the early leavers from HE between the ages of 21-23 and 24-26 would have put their earnings on a par with the graduates. From these considerations it is not possible to conclude that there is evidence of a significant financial penalty associated with non-completion *in the short term*.

⁹ Quarterly Labour Force Surveys, 1999-2000.

Summary

The information presented in this chapter shows that the subsequent career paths of those who withdrew from a course of higher education are, as one would expect, different from those who graduate. While the comparisons made here must be treated cautiously, given that the people we have information from tend to be a few years younger on average from the graduates we compare them with, we note a somewhat higher experience of unemployment amongst the non-completers. Three and half years after graduation between one and two per cent of graduates are unemployed. When this much time had elapsed after withdrawing from higher education, unemployment was between three and four per cent.

The occupational profiles shown by non-completers are interesting. More than half move into graduate or 'graduate-track' type occupations. We find little evidence to support the hypothesis that they earn significantly less than graduates. While the distribution of earnings of 1996/97 non-completers shows that they generally earn less than those who gained their degrees in 1995, this difference can be accounted for by their younger age. However, we have no information about the longer-term financial impact of early withdrawal from higher education.

CHAPTER THREE APPLYING TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Introduction

This chapter considers the process of application to HE as described by survey respondents. The sources of information consulted by respondents prior to application and the reasons stated for choosing a particular course and institution are described. The discussion culminates in a description of the main factors that are considered by respondents to have influenced their original choice of course. This chapter also draws heavily upon material gained from the follow-up telephone survey of one hundred respondents to the postal questionnaire. Participants in the telephone survey have highlighted six broad themes that are pertinent to the process of applying to HE. This material considers:

- ‘inflexibilities’ in the process of applying to HE;
- the importance of careers advice prior to applying to HE;
- factors that lead to an inappropriate choice of course;
- how survey respondents who have since re-entered HE applied for their course second time around;
- the potential importance of a gap year between school and university;
- and the promotion of more vocationally orientated alternatives to universities by schools and sixth form colleges.

Methods of applying to higher education

The method of application to HE may be expected to have an important influence upon how the choice of course and institution is made and subsequent reasons given for withdrawal. In particular, one may infer that those who enter HE through the clearing system have fewer opportunities to consider their choices in detail. Methods of application reported by respondents to the non-completion survey are presented in Table 3.1. Some differences in the method of application are observed by age. Of those survey respondents who were under the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal, 77 per cent applied through the UCAS¹⁰ application procedure and 16 per cent entered through clearing. Of those survey respondents who were over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal, less emphasis is placed upon application through both the UCAS (60 per cent) and clearing (7 per cent) systems. Instead, 31 per cent of this older group of non-completers apply to directly to their chosen college or university.

Table 3.1: Methods of applying to higher education

	(Column %)		
	21 or under	over 21	All ages
UCAS/UCCA/PCAS application	77.0	59.7	71.7
Through ‘clearing’	16.0	6.6	13.3
Direct application to college or university	5.5	30.5	12.8
Other	0.9	2.1	1.3
No Answer	0.7	1.2	0.9
Group Total	586	243	829

¹⁰ We use the term UCAS to refer to application to HE through either UCCA, PCAS or UCAS.

Box 3.1
Insights from the Telephone Survey – Inflexibility in Applying to Higher Education

The importance of the match between student ability and course content is highlighted by those respondents whose academic performance prior to entry to HE exceeded their original expectations. Despite having achieved the required grades for courses that are more suited to their interests and abilities, such respondents may have to accept places on courses that are in retrospect second choice. These respondents point to a lack of flexibility in the process of applying to HE, where course choices are based upon predicted grades rather than actual performance.

JK withdrew from HE in December 1998. “I did better at A-levels than I thought I would. So I didn’t apply to the good universities because I thought I wouldn’t do well enough to get accepted. Then when I did well I was stuck”. She feels that she needed better feedback at 6th form to make more appropriate choices. “I got no feedback from tutors on how well I was expected to do. Careers guidance didn’t seem to have a clue as to my capabilities at A-level”.

TS had underestimated his A-level grades. He had done much better than he had thought and had got the grades to enable him to choose whatever university he liked. But by then it was too late and he had applied to universities that would accept lower grades. The course on offer had not come up to his expectations. “It was the wrong course for me. It didn’t challenge me....it was the same level as A-levels”. TS feels that a different university might have enabled him to have a more challenging course, and he might then have completed.

MH chose his course based upon predicted A-level grades, but had done better than expected. Once on the course, he found that the level of study was about the same as A-levels, but it was costing him a lot more. He felt that the cost of taking the course was not commensurate with what he was being offered content wise. MH feels that being able to have more flexibility in the choice of course after his A-level grades were known, or more realistic predictions for these grades, would have helped him to make a better choice.

CR found that she did not enjoy her course and subsequently had problems once she was on it. “The problem was that I was not doing very well at school when I was taking A-levels and I was not totally sure what it was that I wanted to do. I should have done physics but at the time I doubted that I could get the necessary grade in physics. In the end, I got a good grade; much better than I expected. I could have got on to a physics course anywhere, but by then I had accepted a chemistry course so I stayed with it. That was a mistake in hindsight”.

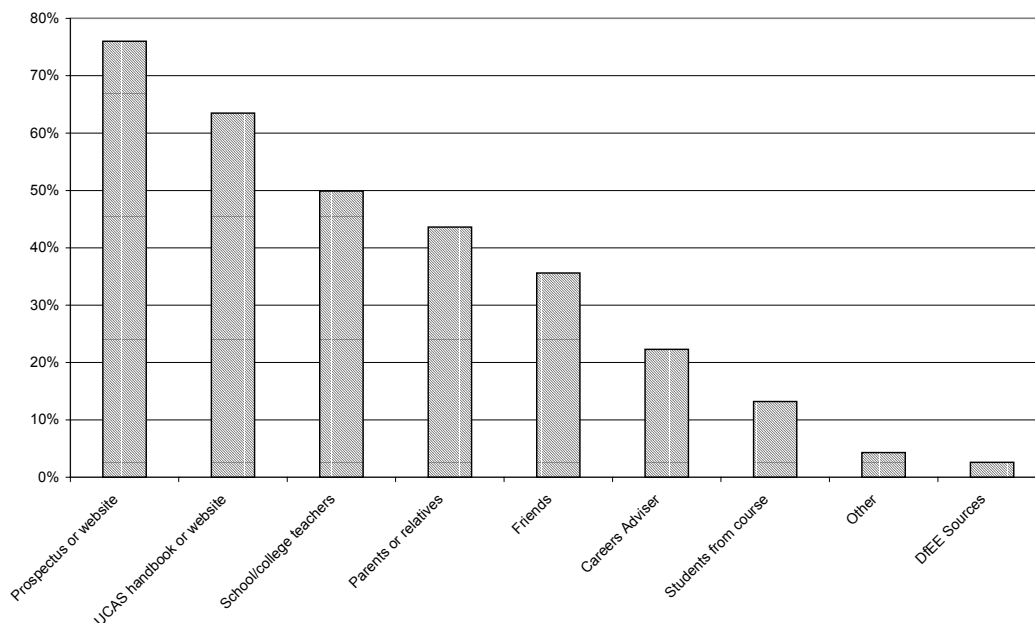
KJ had underestimated the level of grades she would get from her A-levels. She had accepted a place at X, when instead she would have been better off in accepting a place at Y, who had asked her for a higher grade in one of her A-levels – a grade which she hadn’t thought she would get but which she did get. KJ feels that she would have chosen a more appropriate course if she could have accepted a place after she had received her A-level grades.

Sources of information consulted upon application to higher education

Figure 3.1 outlines what sources of information were consulted by survey respondents before deciding to apply for their chosen course. It can be seen that the most commonly consulted sources of information were university prospectuses or websites (76 per cent), the UCAS handbook or website (63 per cent) and school or college lecturers (50 per cent). Consulting with parents or relatives (44 per cent) and friends (36 per cent) were also regarded as important sources of information before deciding to apply for a course.

Some variations were observed in the propensity of different groups of survey respondents to consult different information sources before deciding to apply for their chosen courses. Comparing male and female survey respondents, the proportion of survey respondents who consulted university prospectuses/websites and the UCAS handbook/website were similar. However, females are more likely to discuss their choice of course with school or college lecturers (53 per cent compared to 47 per cent), parents or relatives (47 per cent compared to 40 per cent) and careers advisers (25 per cent compared to 18 per cent).

Figure 3.1: Sources of information consulted before application to course (all withdrawers)



Comparing survey respondents by age at time of withdrawal from HE, those who were over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal consulted fewer sources of information before deciding to apply for a course. Eighty per cent of the younger group consulted university prospectuses or websites, compared to 68 per cent of those who were over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal. The lower emphasis placed upon UCAS handbook or website by the older survey respondents can probably be explained by the different methods of applying to higher education. This older group of survey respondents also placed less reliance

Box 3.2

Insights from the Telephone Survey – Advice Prior to Application

Survey respondents suggest that not enough emphasis was placed upon the importance of careers advice at school. Whilst respondents were aware as to the availability of careers advice, they feel that these sessions should have been made compulsory and more frequent.

AM is critical of the careers advice he received at school. “It was the worst advice I have ever had. I had wanted to do graphic design when I was at school, and they said that it was a cut-throat business and that I would not be able to hold down a job... They put me onto engineering; they hadn’t a clue about me”.

NC was discouraged from her first choice of course by her careers teacher “hard to get in – few jobs”. She was therefore encouraged to opt for her second choice course but was unhappy. She feels she needed better advice at school; encouragement to go for her first choice degree rather than being pushed towards something she didn’t want.

MR feels that not enough emphasis was placed upon the importance of careers advice in helping to make the transition from school to university. “There was careers advice at school. They were there but did not put much effort into it; it was certainly not forced on us. Moving from school to university is such a big thing; the sessions could have been made more important and compulsory. They were not that much help”.

KC feels that more careers advice was what might have most helped to have made a better choice at school. “They were okay but we only got one interview with them, and I needed a lot more help than that so I could have talked things over with someone. That would have been useful”.

AF feels more careers advice might have helped her to make better choices. “We only had one meeting with them and that was at the time we were filling in our UCAS forms. So, they were really just vetting the choices we had already made, not helping us to make those choices. We could go and see them whenever we wanted to, but only one meeting was compulsory. I think we could have done with more”.

However, some survey respondents indicate that no amount of additional advice could have helped them to make a better choice of course. They feel that they could have not known that they had made a mistake until they actually attended HE.

RS felt that she had made the right choice at the time. “I don’t think that there was any way that I could have known that things would go the way they did; that I wouldn’t like the course and that I would have trouble living away from home”.

NP thinks that nothing extra would have helped her to make a better choice of course. “I had loads of help from everyone; good advice from school. That’s what I wanted to do at the time, and I had to be there to realise that it was wrong for me”.

CL feels that probably nothing would have helped her to make a better choice of degree or institution. She considers that the careers advice she received at school, whilst general in nature, was okay. “They (the careers service) could not have known how awful it would be. I think I had to go there to experience it and to know that it was the wrong choice. Picking the right course out of a row of prospectuses is such a chancy thing; such a lottery”.

VS withdrew from a course in August 1999; “It was the wrong course, not put together very well”. She felt she got very good advice from teachers and thought that the course was going to be right for her. It wasn’t until she tried it that she realised it was wrong.

upon advice from school or college lecturers (44 per cent compared to 53 per cent) and careers advisors (15 per cent compared to 25 per cent). These differences may reflect the greater detachment of mature students from secondary education and the reduced choices of HEIs available to those who have limited geographical mobility due to domestic commitments.

Finally, differences in information sources consulted amongst survey respondents were also observed by mode of application to higher education. Survey respondents who applied through clearing were less likely to consult university prospectuses or websites before deciding to apply to their chosen course (70 per cent compared to 78 per cent). Those applying through clearing were also less likely to consult with school or college teachers. Fifty two per cent of survey respondents who applied directly to higher education consulted school or college teachers compared to 34 per cent who applied through clearing.

These results seem to indicate that survey respondents who applied to HE through clearing have less opportunity to consult certain sources of information. This may be related to the need to make a rapid decision or the reduced availability of teaching staff during August. In turn, one could hypothesise that such entrants are therefore more likely to make a mistaken choice of course and subsequently withdraw from HE. However, in the absence of information on rates of withdrawal for those who enter HE directly or through clearing, it is not possible to infer from the present analysis that application to HE through clearing contributes to early withdrawal.

Reasons for choosing course

Figure 3.2 provides information on reasons for the choice of course provided by the survey sample of early leavers from HE. Considering all survey respondents, the most popular reasons given for choosing a course were an interest in the subjects (65 per cent), a belief that the course would lead to a good career (50 per cent), an enjoyment of studying the courses at school (45 per cent) and having a particular career in mind (44 per cent). No significant differences in the reasons given for choice of course were observed between male and female survey respondents.

We may expect reasons for choice of course to vary between mature students and young entrants. Mature students may have different motivations for study than school leavers, including a desire for personal development and pursuing topics of interest. However, reasons for the choice of course given by survey respondents also showed little variation by age of withdrawal. The only noticeable difference was that a higher proportion of survey respondents who were aged 21 or under at the time of withdrawal reported that they chose the course because they had enjoyed studying the subjects at school (52 per cent compared to 28 per cent of the older group of early leavers).

Box 3.3

Insights from the Telephone Survey – Choosing the Wrong Course

Early leavers indicated that they made the wrong choice of course due to a lack of research prior to application. Many felt that they lacked the maturity to make appropriate choices. Instead, they took the opinion that any course would be okay.

HB thought any course would be ok: “I didn’t realise how important it is to get on the right course – how important that choice would be”. She felt that she was not as mature and aware of her own preferences for the future. She ‘needed better information and advice in order to have made better choices at that time”

HD felt he should have scrutinised his possible course options more carefully. “My A-levels were geared towards accounts and economics, and I just carried on in that direction and didn’t think of anything else. I should have researched it all a bit more”.

TM hadn’t realised how important it was to visit the universities. “I know I should have gone and asked them a lot of questions – but I didn’t... At that age I didn’t want to have a career or work. I wasn’t thinking about long term career prospects. I was just having a good time”.

In the absence of adequately researching their choice of course, early leavers indicated that their choice became motivated by factors such as getting away from home, location of institution or friends/family attending the institution.

CL needed to be much more aware as to the importance his choice of course would be. ‘I just wanted a route out of my home town: I didn’t research the courses available to me. I never appreciated how important it was to work at getting it right”.

“I wanted to go to university: to get on with it and not waste time, to get away from home. You need to be more focussed – you need to want to get a degree”

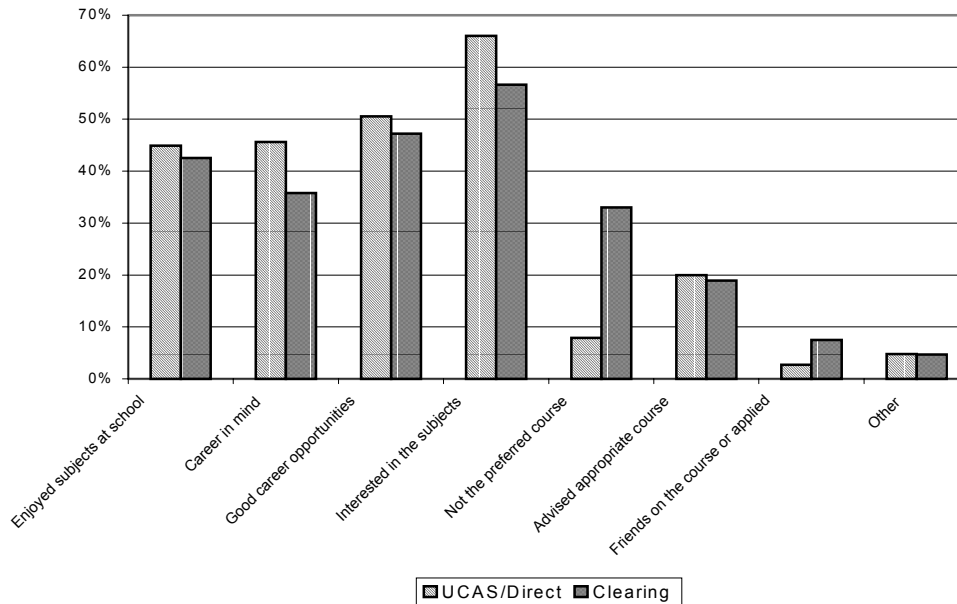
At age 18, RS felt that she was not ready for the whole process of being at university. “I wanted to go to university and get on with life. I didn’t know what I really wanted to do and I didn’t give enough thought to the course subject”.

Despite advice to the contrary from his family, TH ‘stubbornly’ chose to study at X because he had friends going there and he loved the city.

FB rushed her decision after falling ill during her A-levels. She didn’t think thoroughly enough about her choice of course and didn’t realise how much this would matter. Instead of researching her choice of universities, she went to the same place as her sister who appeared to be enjoying herself.

JH wanted to go to university X and finding a course became a secondary activity. “Any course would do provided it was at X. I just went about it all the wrong way”.

Figure 3.2: Reasons for choosing course: by mode of entry



Variations in reasons for the choice of course were shown to exist amongst the survey respondents by mode of application to higher education. It can be seen in Figure 3.2 that those who applied to higher education through clearing were less likely to report that they chose the course due to having a particular career in mind (36 per cent) compared to those who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution (46 per cent). An interest in the subject area was the primary motivation in choosing a particular course for both these groups of survey respondents. However, only 57 per cent of survey respondents who applied through clearing indicated that they were interested in the subject area compared to 66 per cent of those who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution. The most obvious difference between these two groups is the higher proportion of survey respondents who indicated that they chose their course because they could not get on the course they wanted to do (33 per cent of entrants via clearing compared to 8 per cent of entrants who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution). In making this choice, a higher proportion of respondents who applied through clearing state that they had friends either on the course or applying for the course.

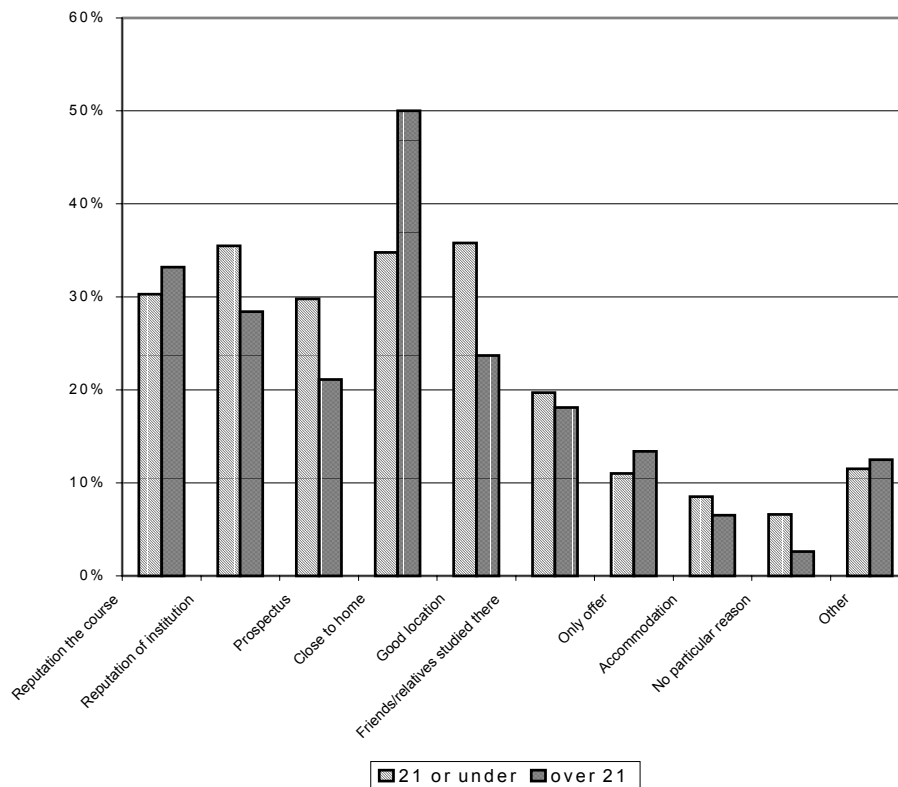
Reasons for choosing institution

Considering all survey respondents, the most important reasons given for the choice of institution were that the institution was close to home (39 per cent), the general reputation of the institution (33 per cent), the institution was located in a good place to live (32 per cent) and the reputation of the course (31 per cent). Analysis by gender revealed that female survey respondents place greater emphasis upon proximity to home as a reason for the choice of institution (43 per cent compared to 35 per cent). However, the choice of institution for male survey respondents was more likely to be guided by the importance of friends or relatives who were either

studying at the institution or had attended the institution in the past (23 per cent compared to 17 per cent).

More significant variations in the reasons for choosing an institution are observed between survey respondents by age at withdrawal and by mode of application. Figure 3.3 highlights the differences in reasons given by survey respondents for choosing an institution by age at withdrawal from higher education. It can be seen that the younger group of respondents place greater emphasis upon the importance of the reputation of the institution, institution location and the contents of the prospectus or website as reasons for choosing a particular institution. In contrast, those who were over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal place greater emphasis on the importance of closeness to home as a reason for the choice of institution. Thirty five per cent of early leavers who were aged 21 or under at the time of withdrawal stated that closeness to home was important to their choice of institution, compared to 50 per cent of those over the age of 21 at time of withdrawal.

Figure 3.3: Reasons for choosing institution: age at withdrawal

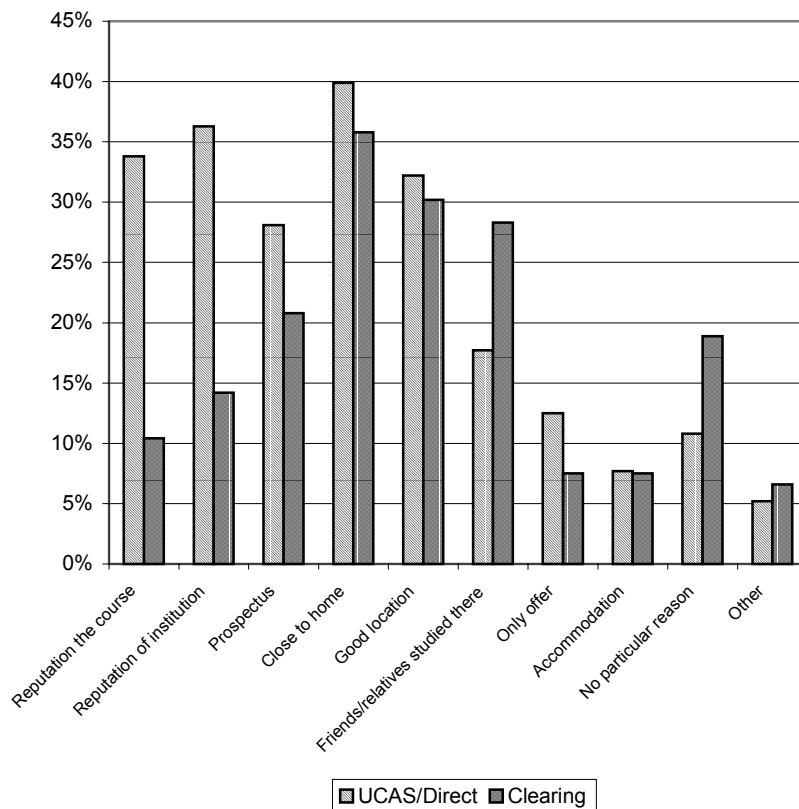


Reasons given by survey respondents for the choice of institution by mode of application to HE are presented in Figure 3.4. It can be seen that the reputation of both the course and of the institution are reported to be of less importance to survey respondents who applied to higher education through clearing compared to those who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution. Thirty seven per cent of survey respondents who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution state that they were attracted by the reputation of the institution. This compares to just 14 per cent of respondents who applied to higher education through clearing. Similarly, 34

per cent of those who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution state that they were attracted by the reputation of the course. This compares to just 10 per cent of those who apply to higher education through clearing. Those who apply through clearing are also less likely to be attracted to an institution by the contents of the prospectus.

The choice of institution for those survey respondents who applied to higher education through clearing was more likely to be guided by friends or relatives who were either studying at the institution or had attended the institution in the past. Twenty eight per cent of those who apply through clearing state that the influence of friends/relatives was a reason for choosing the institution. This compares to just 18 per cent of survey respondents who applied to higher education through UCAS or direct to the institution. Most strikingly, almost one in five respondents who applied through clearing indicated that they had no particular reason for their final choice of HEI.

Figure 3.4: Reasons for choosing institution: by mode of entry



Box 3.4

Insights from the Telephone Survey – Choosing the Right Course

Survey respondents are more thorough in applying for a second course in HE. They are more assertive in their application and consult a number of information sources, often including tutors at the new institution. Particular attention is paid to course structure and content. Respondents are generally confident that they will pass a second course. This is largely due to increased motivation resulting from undertaking a course that is more suited to their needs.

Withdrawing made SC research more thoroughly second time round. He consulted industry contacts, high school careers service and the prospective university. Despite finding the work hard, he hopes to complete the course. “This is what I want to do and that makes it easier to do the work”.

In applying for his second course, BM took nothing for granted. “I don’t believe everything in the prospectus. I was going to be a bit more careful, find out a lot more about it this time”. He contacted the course administrator and asked lots of questions. He is confident he will pass this course as he has the background ability and prefers the course structure and content.

In changing courses, WS consulted tutors, prospectuses and family. She feels she will complete this course due to the excellent tutors, the mix and choice of modules, the practical orientation of course and being able to live at home. “It is the course I wanted, with a better balance between theory and practice”.

RS consulted prospectuses and the Internet to help her find a better course. She was “more assertive” in her second application in that she knew what questions to ask. She expects to complete due to greater motivation and a more suitable course structure/content. She also regards herself as matured and better able to cope with university.

Choosing the second course, HT was much more focussed on the course itself. “I needed to get it right this time. I did a lot more research and was in a much better position to know what to go for”. HT visited institutions, spoke to tutors, looked at prospectuses and asked lots of questions about course content. HT feels she will complete this time due to her greater maturity, confidence and direction.

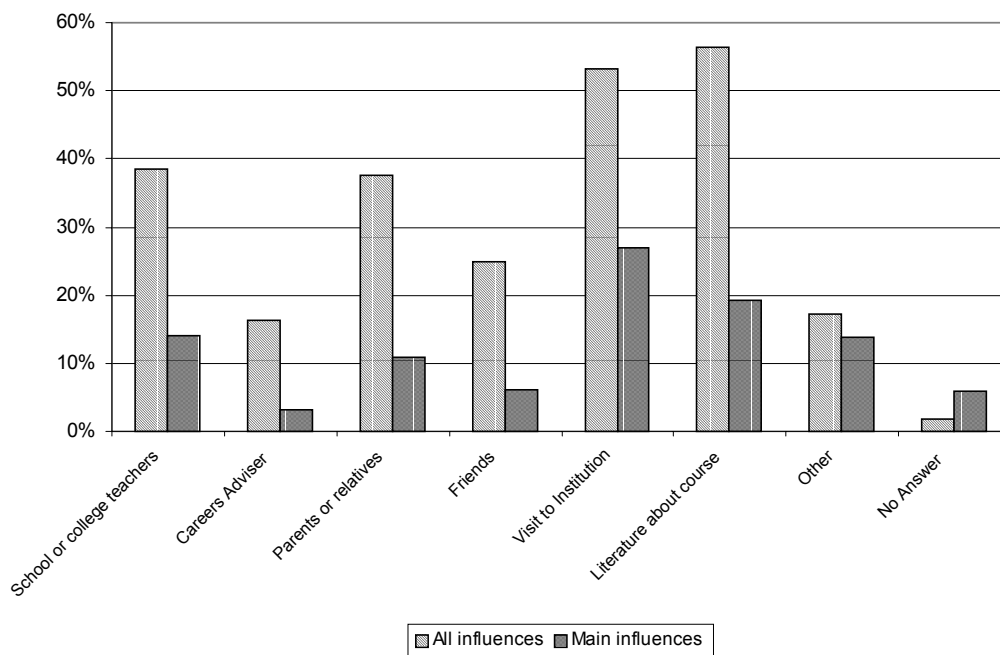
In re-applying, NL went back to her school for advice, consulted prospectuses and visited several institutions. “I had a clear idea what I was looking for this time”. NL states she was very thorough in checking out the course options and was careful about the type and structure of courses. She should complete as she feels older, has determination and the course is more in line with her capabilities.

TM wanted to be sure that his next course was right for him and to not make the same mistake again. “I looked very hard at the course structure and thought whether I’d enjoy doing it”. He is much happier about his current course. The practical nature of the course suits his abilities.

Main influences upon choice of course

Having considered the various reasons for their choice of course and institution attended, survey respondents were then asked who or what actually influenced the choice of their course. The emphasis here is less upon the innate characteristics of the course or institution that appealed to the survey respondent, but the factors that drew these characteristics to the attention of respondents. The influences given by all survey respondents upon the choice of course are presented in Figure 3.5. The two most common influences regarding the final choice of course given by survey respondents were literature about the course (56 per cent) and being able to visit the institution prior to accepting a place (53 per cent). The relative significance of the various influences was similar for males and females. Comparing influences by age at withdrawal from higher education, those who were aged over 21 at withdrawal generally placed less emphasis on the influence of school or college teachers, careers advisers and parents or relatives.

Figure 3.5: Influences upon choice of course



Comparing factors that influenced the choice of course by mode of entry, survey respondents who applied through clearing reported being less influenced by school or college teachers (26 per cent compared to 40 per cent of those who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution), visiting the institution prior to accepting a place (31 per cent compared to 57 per cent) or by literature about the course (48 per cent compared to 59 per cent). Those survey respondents who applied through clearing are however more likely to report the influence of friends upon the decision to choose a course. Thirty three per cent of respondents who applied through clearing reported being influenced by friends compared to 24 per cent of those who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution. These influences upon the choice of course are consistent with differences in the reasons for choice of course and institution by mode of application discussed earlier in this chapter.

Box 3.5

Insights from the Telephone Survey – Perceived Value of a Gap Year

Many survey respondents felt that they had been pushed by their schools to enter university, when instead they would have benefited from a year out of education. This year out would have given them the opportunity to think about their choices more carefully and to enter HE with greater maturity.

HD withdrew during May 97. “I should have taken a year out after A-levels...to develop more as a person and mature a bit”. He would have liked more information from his school about taking a year out – but it was not presented to him as an option. All his friends were going on to university straight away and so he went along with the general movement. “I was feeling rushed and pressured at that time.... I was inexperienced and made the wrong decision”.

SD found the change from attending a small school and living at home overwhelming. She needed better advice from 6th form teachers “If I had been given a range of options, including a year out, and more information to help me understand my own needs, I would have realised what would have suited me”.

VT feels she would have benefited from better guidance at 6th form regarding the possibility of taking a year out. “I felt pushed – the school pushed university to the exclusion of everything else...I needed help to do what I wanted to do, but what I got was pressure to do what they wanted me to do”

TM withdrew from HE in May 1999. He feels that he needed much better guidance and advice at school when thinking about university “They really pushed you to go to university, but I should have had a year out. Then I would have been a bit older and would have known more about what I wanted to do”.

TF felt that the changes in his lifestyle upon entering HE were too many and too quick for him to cope with successfully at that time in his life. “I had a tightly knit group of friends and it was taken for granted that we would all go to university and have a great time and get our degrees”. This peer pressure was too strong to resist. “Maybe if someone had said to me –stop! Is this really what you want to do?”.

At the time of entering HE, RS feels that she was too young to go straight from home into a “large impersonal environment”. RS feels she needed someone to have made her stop and think about taking a year out. “I needed a lot more experience of ordinary living, to grow up a bit; and then I might have been okay for university”.

GM feels that at the age of 18, she was too young to enter HE. “At the time it was wrong to do a degree. At 18 I had no life experience”. Her school teachers were very single minded about options for their pupils after A levels. “You went to university, and you chose your best subject at school for your degree course. There was absolutely no mention of any of us taking a gap year”.

AM wanted more time to make the right decision. She was finishing her A levels and being asked to consider her future, and to do it quickly. AM stated that all effort of the 6th form tutors went into getting pupils into university. “I feel a year out would have been the best option (but) at no time did anyone put the idea of a year out with time to think and grow up a little”.

Box 3.6

Insights from the Telephone Survey – Promotion of Vocational Alternatives

Survey respondents felt that pressure to attend university meant that more vocational methods of learning were not presented to them as alternatives. These respondents often indicated that they struggled with the content of more theoretical degree programmes and felt that more practical courses would have better suited their abilities and interests.

MH feels that he should have gone into retail management which would have been more in line with his personal goals. But his teachers pushed him into university. “There were no other options in their minds”. MH feels he needed access to information on a wider range of options. “I could have done with information on other work-study programmes. No one was telling us about these kind of things”.

LM feels that she may have completed her degree if she had chosen a more practical based course. “It was a very theory based course in the end; it was a bit of a strain and I wasn’t ready for such a hard course; it was too intense”.

MN feels that schools should have a different approach to student options. “They need to take a broader view.....at the present time their view seems to be that it has got to be university or you’re a waster. NVQs, college, apprenticeships don’t exist for them; we got no information on anything other than going to university”.

JC struggled with work whilst at university. “I did a year of the course but failed my first year exams. I didn’t go back for the re-sits”. His A-level results were the bare minimum required for entry and he feels that he should never have really gone to university. “I would have been better going for an apprenticeship”.

ALS would have preferred a more practically based course. “The problem was that I was on completely the wrong course. It was all maths; all theory; there were no practical elements”. He thought he would be doing practical interesting things “like pulling washing machines apart”, but the course was nothing like that.

KE feels that she allowed herself to be pushed into a degree course by her tutors at FE college. She wanted to do more practical short courses but was instead pushed into something she never really fancied. “I didn’t think that university was for me, but I let myself be pushed into it. I tried to make the best of it whilst I was there....It wasn’t the course, that was okay if that is what you really wanted”.

Those who have since undertaken more practical programmes of study report having a greater motivation and purpose to completing these courses.

AB withdrew from a course in May 1999 but has since returned to HE. His previous course was mostly theory and history, and saw no application to any kind of setting. AB regards that everything he learns on his new course, and all course assignments, have a practical application. “There are loads of different things to do, I do something different every day so I never get tired of it”.

ZC has undertaken a number of short courses since leaving HE, mostly in IT packages. She has successfully completed all of these courses. She feels she had more of a purpose in getting through these courses and was therefore more interested in completing them. ZC feels that she should have done a degree course that was far more career orientated. “I should have done something which would have been beneficial to my career”.

TF now works as a trainee accountant and attends FE college on day release to study for professional qualifications which are linked to NVQs. He is doing well and is confident that he will pass his remaining exams. He feels this is because the course fits with what he wants to do for a career and so he “sees a motive for working hard”.

Having been asked which factors influenced their choice of course, survey respondents were then asked which of these factors were regarded as being most important. Responses to this question by all survey respondents are also presented in Figure 3.5. It can be seen that the main influence over the choice of course was being able to visit the institution prior to accepting a place with 27 per cent of survey respondents regarding this as the main influence. Literature about the course was regarded as the second most important influence with 19 per cent of survey respondents regarding this as the main influence.

Being able to visit the institution was regarded as being the most important influence to the choice of course for both male and female survey respondents, for young entrants and mature students and for those who applied to higher education through UCAS or directly to the institution. However, 'other' influences were reported as the main influence for those survey respondents who applied to higher education through clearing and were also of significance amongst those respondents aged over 21 at the time of withdrawal from higher education. For those who applied to higher education through clearing, the main influences given by respondents under the 'other' category included a perceived lack of alternatives and a general desire to go to university. For those respondents over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal, the main influences given by respondents under the 'other' category were a desire to study a particular subject or to follow on from previous qualifications.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the process of application to HE as reported by survey respondents. The three sources of information most commonly consulted prior to application to HE were college prospectuses/websites, the UCAS handbook and school/college teachers. The most important reasons for choosing a course were an interest in the subject, a belief that the course would lead to a good career and an enjoyment of studying the courses at school. Choice of institution was guided by proximity to home, the reputation of the institution and the institution being located in a good place to live.

As discussed in Chapter One, the partial nature of the present study means that we were not able to infer with complete confidence the causes of withdrawal from HE. However, those respondents who applied to HE through clearing report a number of factors in their choice of course that are clearly not conducive to successful completion of HE. These respondents generally consult fewer sources of information prior to application, whilst their choice of course and institution are less likely to be influenced by attributes that can be regarded as positive. However, insights from the telephone survey give the clearest indication as to how respondents felt that process of applying to HE contributed to their decision to withdraw.

- Respondents are critical of a system of applying to HE, where course choices were based upon predicted grades rather than actual performance.
- Many respondents felt that they had been pushed by their schools to enter university. This is set against a background of peer pressure to attend HE. They instead felt that they would have benefited from a year out of

education to think about their choices more carefully and to enter HE with greater maturity.

- Schools also failed to present more vocational methods of learning as viable alternatives to university. Some respondents felt that more practical vocationally orientated courses would have better suited their abilities and interests.
- Whilst respondents were aware as to the availability of careers advice, they feel that these sessions should have been made compulsory and more frequent.

CHAPTER FOUR WITHDRAWING FROM HIGHER EDUCATION

Introduction

This chapter considers issues surrounding withdrawal from HE. The discussion begins with a description of factors identified by survey respondents that influenced their decision to withdraw. The awareness and use of support mechanisms at the time of withdrawal and sources of advice sought by respondents prior to withdrawal are then considered. Survey respondents were also asked about their experiences of HE and to identify what factors would have most helped them to remain in HE. The discussion then considers the perceived benefits gained by respondents in attending HE, and whether respondents have either returned, or intend to return to HE in the future. In order to achieve the largest possible sample size, the analysis of withdrawal from higher education combines responses from the 1996/97 and 1998/99 cohorts of survey respondents. Preliminary analysis indicated that responses regarding the process of withdrawal from HE and their experiences of HE did not tend to vary significantly between these two groups.

The concurrent survey of these two cohorts is utilised within the final two sections of this chapter which consider changes in student support mechanisms and their influence upon the decision to withdraw. Multivariate techniques are used to consider the influence of different forms of financial support and the introduction of tuition fees upon the reasons given for withdrawal from HE. The propensity of survey respondents to undertake paid employment during term time is also considered.

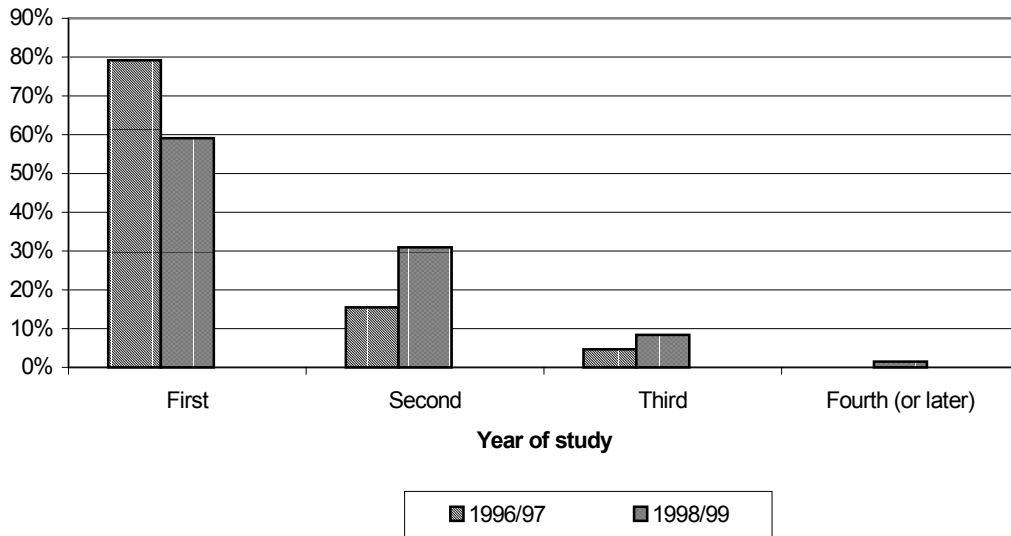
This chapter also draws upon material from the follow-up telephone survey. Three themes highlighted by participants in the telephone survey linked to the process of withdrawal from HE have been identified. This material considers;

- personal perceptions of withdrawing from HE;
- benefits gained by survey respondents from attending HE;
- and the usefulness of student support mechanisms.

The timing of withdrawal

McGivney (1996) finds that the reasons for withdrawal from higher education tend to vary by the timing of withdrawal. Early withdrawal is more likely to be associated with factors such as inappropriate choice and difficulties in settling into the social and academic life of an institution. Factors associated with later withdrawal from a course place more emphasis upon changes in personal circumstances, domestic commitments and financial problems. Figure 4.1 presents information on the timing of withdrawal for the sample of survey respondents. It can be seen that 67 per cent of all survey respondents withdrew from their course during their first year of study. In contrast, less than 8 per cent of survey respondents reported that they withdrew in their third year of study or later. Some variation in the timing of withdrawal is observed between the two cohorts of survey respondents, it can be seen that 59% of 1998/99 respondents withdrew during their first year of study compared to 79% of 1996/97 respondents.

Figure 4.1: Year of withdrawal from higher education



Reasons for withdrawing from higher education

Respondents to the non-completion survey were asked what factors had influenced their decision to withdraw from HE. Figures 4.2 to 4.5 report the effects of these influences upon the decision to withdraw by gender, age at time of withdrawal, mode of application to HE and year of withdrawal. Considering reasons for withdrawal by gender in Figure 4.2, financial problems were the most common influence upon the decision to withdraw reported by males. Fifty two per cent of male survey respondents reported this as influencing the decision to withdraw. This is compared to 40 per cent of female early leavers. Amongst females, mistaken choice of course was the most commonly reported influence upon the decision to withdraw. Forty eight per cent of female respondents reported this as influencing the decision to withdraw. Of the remaining reasons, female survey respondents generally placed greater emphasis upon a range of non-academic influences such as caring for dependants, illness and, most significantly, personal problems.

Figure 4.3 considers reasons for withdrawal by age at time of withdrawal. Mistaken choice of course is the most commonly reported influence upon the decision to withdraw reported by survey respondents who were aged 21 or under at the time of withdrawal. Fifty five per cent of this group considered mistaken choice of course as influencing the decision to withdraw. This is compared to just 28 per cent of survey respondents who were over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal. Amongst those aged over 21 at the time of withdrawal, 56 per cent reported financial problems directly related to participation in higher education as influencing the decision to withdraw. This group of survey respondents also place greater emphasis upon caring for dependants, illness or disability and personal problems as influences upon the decision to withdraw.

Figure 4.2: Factors influencing decision to withdraw: by gender

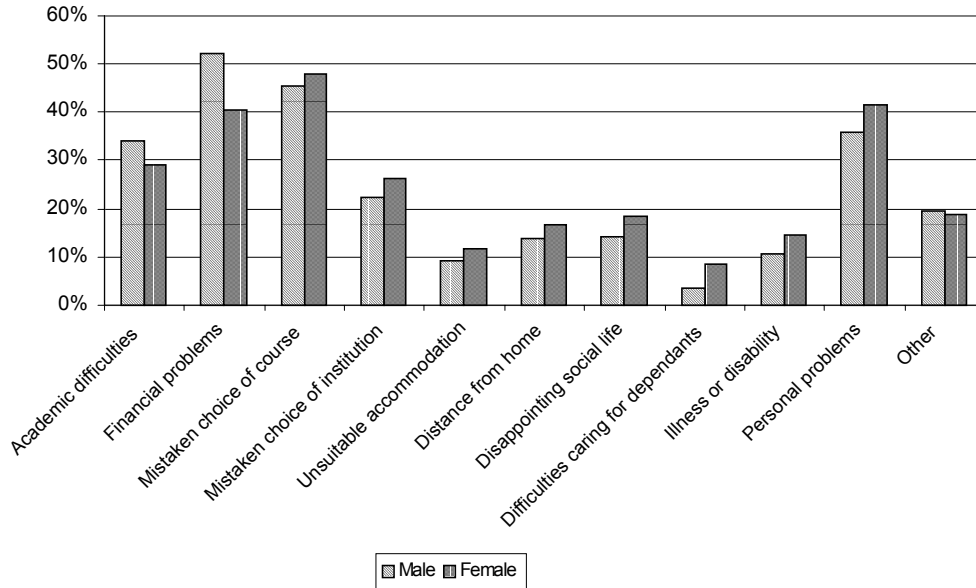
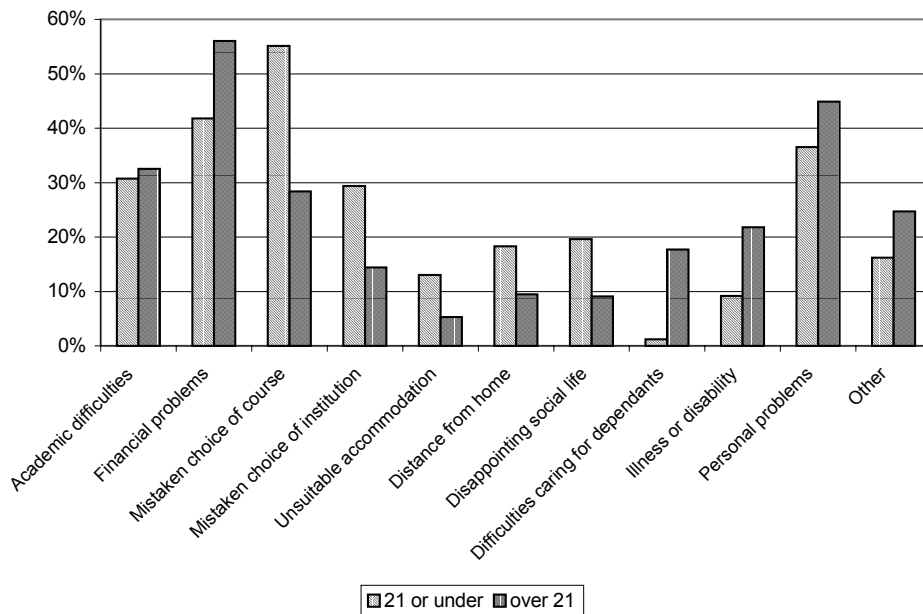


Figure 4.3: Factors influencing decisions to withdraw: by age at withdrawal



Box 4.1

**Insights from the Telephone Survey – Personal Perceptions of Early
Withdrawal from higher education**

Early leavers from HE tend to have mixed views regarding their withdrawal from HE. Some feel that the process of withdrawal has had positive outcomes in terms of personal development and providing an opportunity to consider the future. However, there can be a stigma attached. Many respondents feel that they have let their families down.

AM withdrew in 1997 and is now works as a Sales Support Assistant. She was glad to have the experience of being at university – it “broadened my outlook”. However she regards withdrawing as having a positive outcome, enabling her to “take a different view on things and explore different avenues...Since university I have had other opportunities and successes”

Whilst RB is glad that he left his course, he feels there is a “stigma” to not completing. “I feel that I have left my family down. They have all been very good but I know that the older generation is disappointed in me. I have an air of failure”.

GD withdrew in 1999 and now works at a FE college. “I felt gutted at the time; I felt I’d let my parents – let myself down. It was all very emotional”. On the positive she feels she has developed greater personal maturity and has learned a lot about life and what is important to her.

JH feels that whilst withdrawing from HE has put him back careerwise, the worst thing is that he feels his parents have lost confidence in him. “I feel that I have let my family down, they put a lot of work in getting me into university.”

TL regrets not getting a degree. “I felt I’d failed; having to tell others you have dropped out. I was the only one in the family to go to university so there was no one else to understand why I had done what I had done”.

DR withdrew from HE in 1997. “My parents were the biggest concern. In my whole family I was the first to go to university; there was a lot of pressure from extended family to make a success of it”. DR however feels that he has become a stronger person as a result of withdrawing. “I got the strength to make better decisions, and to challenge things openly and to the people concerned”.

MN states that withdrawal had adverse effects upon her relationships with her family. “My family did not talk to me for a long time; they said I’d let them down. They had huge expectations of me; I was the brightest one; the first in the family to go to university”.

SB feels the effects of withdrawal have been mixed. “Telling Mum and Dad was the worst thing I had to do. They were so chuffed that I’d gone to university in the first place. They were so disappointed for me. They were very supportive though”. On the positive side.... “I have learned a lot about myself, about people, and about situations, and that experience should be very useful. I have benefited socially, financially and my self esteem is higher”.

CL withdrew from university in October 1996. “It has enabled me to take a step back in life and think about what I want to do. I think I can be successful with or without a degree”.

Figure 4.4 considers reasons for withdrawal by mode of application to HE. It is clear that survey respondents who applied to higher education through clearing are more likely to report mistaken choice of course and mistaken choice of institution as influences upon the decision to withdraw. Sixty one per cent of those who applied through clearing report mistaken choice of course as an influence upon the decision to withdraw. This is compared to 45 per cent of survey respondents who applied through UCAS or directly to the institution. Similarly, 36 per cent of survey respondents who applied through clearing report mistaken choice of institution as an influence upon the decision to withdraw. This is compared to 23 per cent of those who applied through UCAS or directly to the institution. In addition, 37 per cent of those who applied through clearing reported academic difficulties as an influence upon the decision to withdraw. This is compared to 30 per cent who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution. This appears to indicate the increased academic difficulties faced by those with lower entry qualifications.

Finally, figure 4.5 considers how the reasons for withdrawal from higher education vary according to the timing of withdrawal. Considering those survey respondents who withdrew during their first year of study, the most commonly reported influence upon the decision to withdraw was a mistaken choice of course. Approximately 52 per cent of survey respondents who withdrew during their first year of study reported mistaken choice of course as an influence upon the decision to withdraw. This is compared to 38 per cent of those who withdrew from their course after the first year. Of those survey respondents who withdrew from their course after the first year, the two most commonly reported influences upon the decision to withdraw were financial problems and personal problems. Whilst the incidence of survey respondents who reported financial problems as influencing the decision to withdraw did not vary significantly between these two groups, a significant increase in the propensity to report personal problems as influencing the decision to withdraw is observed amongst those who withdrew after the first year.

Figure 4.4: Factors influencing decision to withdraw: by mode of application

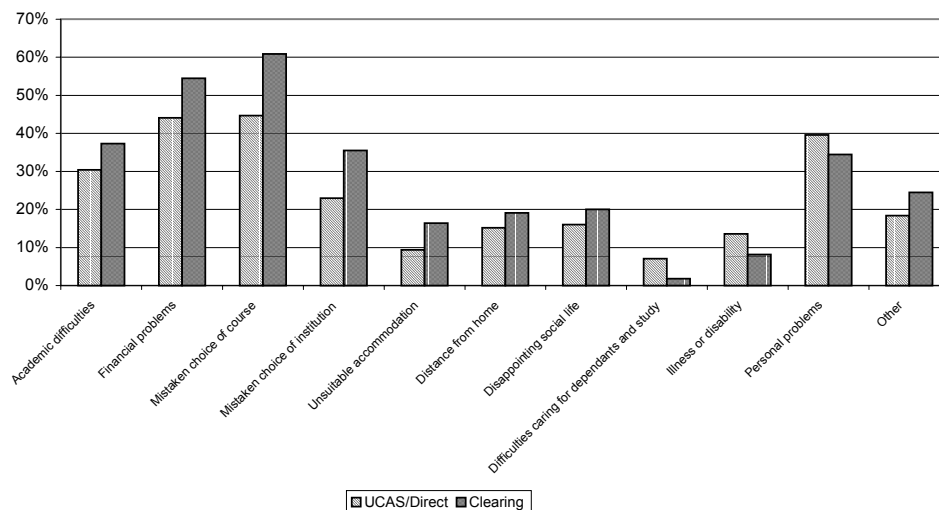
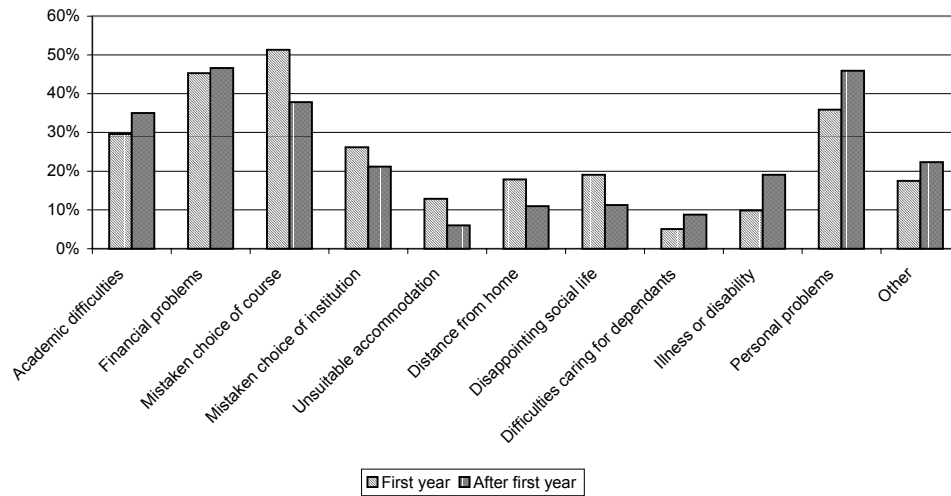


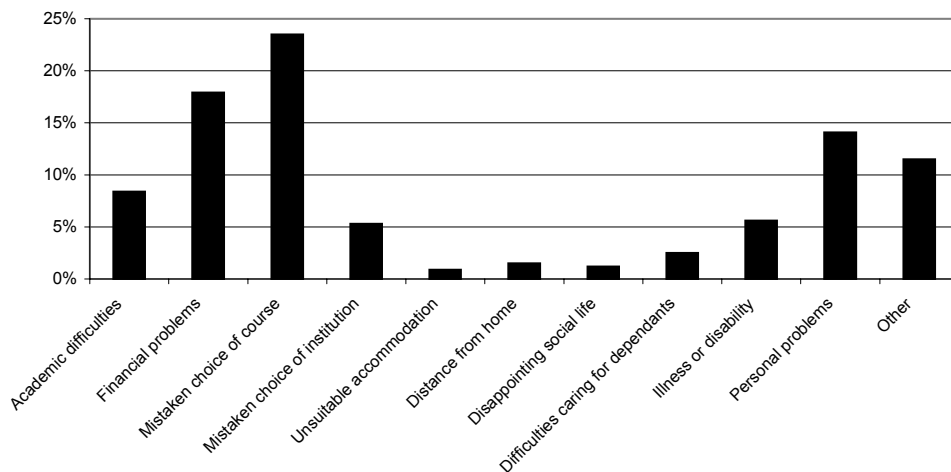
Figure 4.5: Factors influencing decision to withdraw: by year of withdrawal



Main reason for deciding to withdraw from higher education

Having been asked which factors influenced their decision to withdraw from higher education, survey respondents were then asked which of these factors was regarded as being most important. Considering all survey respondents, the main influence upon the decision to withdraw was a mistaken choice of course, reported as the main influence by 24 per cent of survey respondents. The next most important influence were financial problems directly related to participation in higher education, reported as the main influence by 18 per cent of survey respondents. The third most significant influence was personal problems, reported by 14 per cent of survey respondents.

Figure 4.6: Main factor influencing the decision to withdraw



The three main influences upon the decision to withdraw from HE across different groups of survey respondents are presented in Table 4.1. The importance of mistaken choice upon the decision to withdraw is underlined by this being reported as the main influence upon the decision to withdraw by 6 of the 8 sub-groups presented in Table 4.1. Some variations are however observed. The most important influences reported by male survey respondents were financial problems (24 per cent) and mistaken choice of course (21 per cent). However, female respondents reported that the most important influence upon the decision to withdraw was a mistaken choice of course (26 per cent) followed by personal problems (15 per cent). Twenty nine per cent of those aged 21 or under at time of withdrawal reported mistaken choice of course as the main factor influencing the decision to withdraw. However, those survey respondents aged over 21 at the time of withdrawal reported financial problems to be most important (23 per cent), followed by personal problems (17 per cent).

Table 4.1 Main influences upon the decision to withdraw

Gender	Males	%	Females	%
1 st	Financial problems	24.0	Mistaken choice of course	25.5
2 nd	Mistaken choice of course	21.1	Personal Problems	15.4
3 rd	Personal Problems	12.5	Financial Problems	13.1
Age at Withdrawal	21 or under		Over 21	
1 st	Mistaken choice of course	29.2	Financial problems	23.0
2 nd	Financial problems	16.0	Personal Problems	16.5
3 rd	Personal Problems	13.0	Other	14.8
Method of Application	UCAS etc or Direct		Clearing	
1 st	Mistaken choice of course	22.8	Mistaken choice of course	29.1
2 nd	Financial problems	17.4	Financial problems	21.8
3 rd	Personal Problems	14.4	Other	11.8
Year of Withdrawal	First Year		After First Year	
1 st	Mistaken choice of course	26.0	Mistaken choice of course	18.7
2 nd	Financial problems	17.9	Financial problems	18.0
3 rd	Personal Problems	12.4	Personal Problems	17.7

Mistaken choice of course was considered as the most important influence upon the decision to withdraw regardless of method of application. However, this was more commonly reported as the main influence for those survey respondents who entered HE through clearing (29 per cent) compared to those who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution (23 per cent). Mistaken choice of course was also considered the most important influence amongst survey respondents regardless of the year of withdrawal, although this was more commonly reported as the main influence for those withdrew during their first year of study (26 per cent) compared to those who withdrew after the first year (19 per cent).

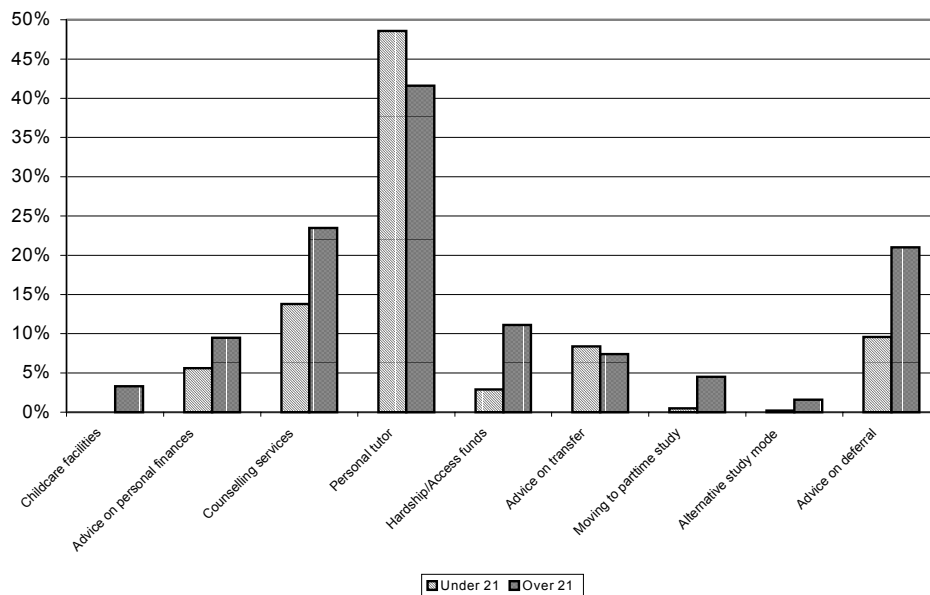
Support mechanisms and the decision to withdraw

Survey respondents were found to be aware of a variety of support mechanisms available to them. In particular, there was found to be a general awareness as to the availability of personal tutors (79 per cent) and counselling services (71 per cent).

Despite the importance of mistaken choice of course upon the decision to withdraw, relatively few survey respondents were aware of the availability of specialist advice pertaining to the transfer to another course and/or institution (27 per cent). Respondents were also generally unaware of advice regarding the possibility of temporarily deferring their studies (33 per cent), the possibility of moving to part time study (17 per cent) or the availability of alternative modes of study (10 per cent).

Figure 4.7 indicates that the support mechanism most commonly utilised by respondents was the personal tutor (46 per cent). Despite a relatively high awareness as to the availability of counselling services, only 17 per cent of survey respondents reported that they utilised such support services. Figure 4.7 also highlights variations in the utilisation of support services by age at time of withdrawal. It can be seen that personal tutors are most commonly utilised by both groups of respondents. However, those over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal place a greater emphasis upon the a range of support services including advice on personal finances, counselling services, hardship access funds and advice on deferral.

Figure 4.7: Support mechanisms used by early leavers: by age at withdrawal



When asked to rate the usefulness of support mechanisms, 13 per cent of survey respondents who used personal tutors regarded this support mechanism as ‘very useful’. However, 24 per cent of survey respondents who used personal tutors regarded them as being ‘not useful at all’. Similarly, of those survey respondents who used counselling services, 21 per cent regarded this support mechanism as not useful at all compared to 12 per cent who regarded it as very useful. It must be noted however that the low levels of usefulness attributed to these services are based upon a biased sample, in so far that these respondents decided to withdraw. One would expect the perceived usefulness of such services to be higher amongst students who may have been helped to remain in HE by these services.

Box 4.2

**Insights from the Telephone Survey – Usefulness of higher education
Support Mechanisms**

Survey respondents gave mixed views regarding the usefulness of support mechanisms. Personal tutors were generally regarded as being unhelpful to survey respondents who had specific requirements or personal difficulties at the time of withdrawal.

HB consulted the campus counselling service to review her personal reasons for changing courses. She was able to talk with someone who “was focussed on her needs rather than wanting to plug a particular course or way forward”.

LT discovered that university life was not what he hoped for. Despite deciding to withdraw, “help from personal tutor, counselling services and GP was good”.

LS feels that he might have completed the course if there was more tutor time. “There was no real one-on-one tutor to talk about in-depth issues on the course subjects. They were always too busy with too many students wanting to talk to them in a short time”.

LD feels she got no help from tutors when she tried to transfer to another course. “Leave if you want to was the attitude”. LD feels that “someone to care and help with a transfer” would have helped her to stay at university. “I am still angry that no help was given”.

IB withdrew from HE due to financial reasons. He made known his financial difficulty to his course tutor, who told him that there was nothing that he could do to help. He was not aware that the Students Union or any other agency would have advice services which might have been able to help, so, at the time, he took things no further, and left his course.

EG withdrew from HE because she could not afford to carry on with a course. She feels she needed better advice on what to do or who to consult about her financial problems. Tutors were inaccessible; the ones on the course were “distant and there was no-one for me to go to for help”. No one put her in touch with any helping agency, on or off campus.

As a mature student, TL feels she needed more help from tutors. “I had to be re-orientated to studying and needed help... (however) the tutors have no time for you; they don't listen to problems you are having with the work, and that makes you feel very alone”. TL felt her tutor was unsympathetic. “She said if you can't cope then leave, and leave now”.

MN withdrew when she became ill with depression. She feels she needed immediate access to professional counselling. “I think everything would have been alright then; I would have seen things clearer if I had the chance to talk things through”. MN feels that the campus counselling service was under resourced and that she would have had to wait 6 weeks for an assessment. “In my state of mind at that time, I just couldn't wait that long”.

Upon returning to her studies after a period of illness, GD felt very let down by the university, which showed a general lack of interest in her plight. “They did not seem to care at all, or to be prepared to change things a little to help me back on my feet. If I'd have got that little bit of support, I probably would have stayed with the course”.

AA was having difficulty balancing his studies and work commitments, but found “absolutely no support or any level of empathy from his personal tutors on his course”. AA was not doing as well as he should have been but was not getting the help he needed to do better. The only way he could think of lifting the pressure was to leave the course.

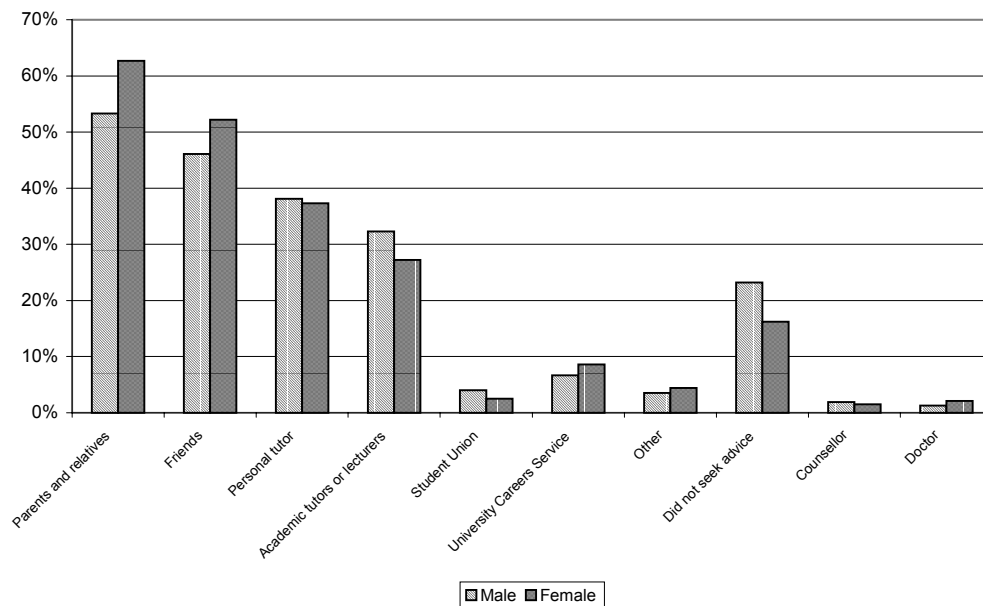
FS withdrew after becoming pregnant during her first year of study. She feels that more support from her tutors and university may have helped her to remain in HE. “I did go to my course tutor and told her my dilemma and she explained my options, which was leave or stay. I didn't find this attitude particularly helpful. If I had had more information and support, then I could have made a more informed decision”.

Seeking advice before and after withdrawal

The most common sources of advice sought by survey respondents before deciding to withdraw from higher education were parents and relatives (59 per cent of survey respondents), friends (50 per cent), personal tutors (38 per cent) and academic tutors/lecturers (29 per cent). It is worth noting that only half of the respondents who were aware of the availability of personal tutors actually sought advice from this source prior to withdrawal.

Some variation is observed in the sources of advice sought between both males and females and by age at time of withdrawal. Figure 4.8 indicates that female survey respondents were more likely to seek advice from family (63 per cent compared to 53 per cent) and friends (52 per cent compared to 46 per cent) before deciding to withdraw. However, male survey respondents were more likely to seek advice from academic staff at university prior to withdrawal (32 per cent compared to 27 per cent). Finally, one in five respondents did not seek any advice before deciding to withdraw from HE. This figure rises to almost one in four amongst male respondents.

Figure 4.8: Seeking advice before deciding to withdraw: by gender



Some differences were also observed in the propensity of survey respondents to seek advice prior to withdrawal by age at time of withdrawal. Survey respondents aged 21 or under at the time of withdrawal are more likely to seek advice from family and friends prior to withdrawal (67 per cent compared to 41 per cent). Although those aged over 21 at the time of withdrawal are more likely to seek advice from academic staff at university (35 per cent compared to 28 per cent), approximately one in four do not seek any advice before deciding to withdraw. This is compared to approximately one in seven survey respondents aged 21 or under at the time of withdrawal who do not seek any advice before deciding to withdraw. Approximately 14 per cent of survey respondents received some kind of

careers advice on leaving HE. The propensity to seek careers advice after withdrawing from higher education was similar for males and females and between younger and older groups of survey respondents.

Experiences of higher education

Survey respondents were asked about the applicability of ten statements regarding their time at higher education. These statements covered a mixture of academic, financial and personal circumstances. Responses to these statements are provided in Table 4.2. Regarding their choice of course, about half of the respondents indicate that the course from which they withdrew was not as interesting as they had expected. Thirty four per cent suggested that they would have liked more careers advice prior to entering their course and 11 per cent stated that they wish they had visited the university before deciding to study there. The emphasis placed upon the course being less interesting than expected is consistent with respondents reporting mistaken choice of course being the main reason behind withdrawal.

Table 4.2: Experiences of higher education

Statements Applicable to Survey Respondents (N=850)	(%)
I had to re-sit exams during the course	20.2
Keeping up with the course academically was not a problem for me	47.8
I found it very difficult to combine the workload of the course with my other commitments	26.1
The course was more difficult academically than I expected	27.2
I felt well-informed about the financial costs of higher education	24.5
The course was not as interesting as I had expected	49.3
I found it very difficult to budget while I was a student	42.2
Moving away from my family and friends was difficult for me	18.5
I would have liked more careers advice prior to entering my course	34.0
I wish I had visited the university before I decided to study there	10.5

Regarding the content of their course, 27 per cent of respondents indicated that the course was more difficult academically than expected, whilst 20 per cent stated that they had to re-sit exams during the course. However, these responses understate the level of academic difficulty experienced by early leavers with only 48 per cent of early leavers indicating that that keeping up with course was not a problem. These observations may indicate that respondents to the present enquiry understate the importance of academic difficulties upon withdrawal. Approximately 30 per cent of respondents reported academic difficulties as influencing the decision to withdraw, with only 8 per cent of survey respondents regarding academic difficulties as the main influence upon withdrawal (see Figure 4.6). Alternatively, some respondents may regard their academic difficulties as having arisen from a mistaken choice of course.

Considering financial and personal circumstances whilst studying, 42 per cent of respondents indicated that they found it very difficult to budget whilst studying. Twenty six per cent of early leavers stated that they found it difficult to combine the workload of the course with other commitments. Finally, 19 per cent indicated that moving away from family and friends was difficult for them.

Responses regarding the choice of course were similar for males and females. Male early leavers report greater academic difficulties once on the course. Forty four per cent of males indicate that keeping with the course was not a problem compared to 52 per cent of females. Furthermore, 26 per cent of males indicated that they had to resit exams during their course compared to 15 per cent of females. Considering non-academic factors, males are more likely to report experiencing financial difficulties during their course. Fifty one per cent of males stated that they had found it difficult to budget as a student, compared to 35 per cent of female respondents. On the other hand, 23 per cent of females indicated that moving away from family and friends was difficult for them compared to just 13 per cent of males. These responses reflect the differences in the factors influencing the decision to withdraw reported by males and females (see Figure 4.2).

Some interesting variations in responses to these statements were also observed by age at withdrawal. Of those aged 21 or under at the time of withdrawal, 20 per cent indicated that they had found it difficult to combine the workload of the course with their other commitments. This compared to 44 per cent of those who were over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal. However, 57 per cent of this younger group stated that the course was not as interesting as they had expected, with 39 per cent suggesting that they would have liked more careers advice. Of the older group of early leavers, only 35 per cent indicated that the course was not as interesting as they had expected, with 22 per cent suggesting that they would have liked more careers advice.

Significant variations in these responses observed by mode of entry emphasise the choice of course and institution. Sixty per cent of those who applied through clearing indicated that the course was not as interesting as they had expected. This is compared to 48 per cent who applied through UCAS or direct to the institution. In choosing the course, 44 per cent of those who applied through clearing stated that they would have liked more careers advice before applying to higher education, compared to 32 per cent of those who applied directly. Finally, 22 per cent of early leavers who applied through clearing indicate that they wished they had visited the university before deciding to study there. This is compared to just 9 per cent who applied directly. Again, these responses reflect the disadvantages faced by those who apply through clearing in making their choice of course and/or institution.

Factors that would have most helped respondents to remain in higher education

Survey respondents were asked what most would have helped them to remain in HE. Responses to this question are provided in Table 4.3. Nineteen per cent of survey respondents suggested that better financial support would have most helped them to remain in HE. Twelve per cent stated more encouragement and support from tutors. In line with the emphasis placed upon mistaken choice of course as a reason for withdrawing from higher education, 9 per cent stated that more assistance with changing courses would have helped them remain in higher education. Similarly, 4 per cent stated a better choice of courses or a wider choice within courses would have most helped them to remain in higher education. A further 9 per cent of respondents also emphasised the importance of more and better advice about appropriate courses and universities prior to applying to higher

education. Finally, it is important to note that one in ten respondents indicated that nothing would have helped them to remain in HE.

Whilst the importance of financial support and personal tutors was reported amongst all groups of early leavers, emphasis varied. Better financial support was regarded of particular importance amongst males and those who were over the aged of 21 at the time of withdrawal from higher education (21 per cent and 27 per cent respectively). The younger group of early leavers placed greater emphasis upon factors regarding choice of course. Ten per cent of those aged 21 or under at the time of withdrawal indicated that more appropriate advice prior to entry to would have helped them to remain in higher education. This is compared to 5 per cent of those over the age of 21 at the time of withdrawal. Greater emphasis was also placed upon the ability to change courses amongst the younger group of early leavers. Considering different modes of application to higher education, 17 per cent of early leavers who applied through clearing stated that more advice regarding appropriate courses and institutions would have helped them to remain in higher education. This is compared to 7 per cent of those who applied either through UCAS or direct to the institution.

Table 4.3: Factors that would have helped respondents to remain in higher education

Factors that would have helped respondents to remain in higher education	(%)
More financial support	18.7
Encouragement from tutors	12.2
Awareness to change course	9.4
More advice prior to entry	8.8
Nothing	8.6
More support	6.5
Better lecturers	4.0
I'm still in HE	3.9
Better choice of courses	3.6
Better financial guidance	2.2
Better accommodation	1.9
Accommodation provided	1.2
Help with childcare	0.9
Lighter workload	0.6
Passing exams	0.6

Perceived returns from higher education

It is not clear that student withdrawal should necessarily be viewed as a failure. Yorke (1998) outlines the contextual considerations. At the one extreme it can be argued that if a student does not complete a course both public and private resources have been wasted. On the other hand, a 'liberal humanist' approach could argue that most students experience of higher education is in some way beneficial. Even if the formal qualification originally aimed for is not gained, early leavers may gain consumption benefits (i.e. an enjoyment of learning) from the education they received whilst at HE. Early leavers may also gain accreditation for the skills

they acquired, such as intermediate qualifications or credits that can count towards the attainment of future qualifications.

To consider the perceived benefits received by early leavers during their time at HE, survey respondents were asked how beneficial their period in HE had been to them in terms of (a) getting an interesting job, (b) securing a good income and (c) becoming a widely educated person. These questions were also asked of respondents to the 1998 survey of graduates. We are therefore able to make a comparison of the perceived benefits from HE for early leavers and graduates. In order to achieve the highest level of comparability regarding both the timing of attendance at HE, and of the time lapsed after leaving HE, the following comparisons are based upon the respondents to the non-completion survey who withdrew from HE in 1996/97.

It can be seen in Table 4.4 that respondents to the non-completion survey regard their time within HE as being less beneficial compared to the sample of graduates. In terms of ‘getting an interesting job’, 68 per cent of the sample of respondents to the non-completion survey replied ‘not at all’ beneficial. Similarly, 74 per cent of the sample of respondents to the non-completion survey reported that their time at HE had not been at all beneficial in terms ‘securing a good income’. The figures compare to just 15 per cent of graduates who indicated that their university qualification had not been at all beneficial in terms of getting an interesting job, and 23 per cent who indicated that their university qualification had not been at all beneficial in terms of securing a good income.

Table 4.4: Benefits of higher education

	Not at all	A little	A lot	A great deal
Getting an interesting job				
95 Graduates (9177)	14.3%	21.6%	24.5%	39.6%
96/7 Leavers (322)	68.1%	20.4%	7.6%	3.9%
Securing a good income				
95 Graduates (9110)	22.8%	25.3%	23.1%	28.8%
96/7 Leavers (322)	74.3%	17.8%	4.0%	4.0%
Becoming a widely educated person				
95 Graduates (9550)	4.1%	24.1%	35.8%	36.0%
96/7 Leavers (322)	34.3%	40.4%	18.6%	6.7%

Note: Sample size in parentheses

The respondents to the non-completion survey were not so critical in terms of the consumption benefits to higher education. In considering how beneficial their time in higher education had been to them in terms of ‘becoming a widely educated person’, only 34 per cent replied not at all. A majority of early leavers can therefore be regarded as having derived at least some benefits from their experience of higher education. However, this is compared to just 4 per cent of the sample of graduates who indicated that their university qualification had not been at all beneficial in terms of becoming a widely educated person.

Box 4.3

Insights from the Telephone Survey – Benefits from higher education

Older survey respondents tended to place greater emphasis upon the enjoyment they gained from participating in HE. Despite not gaining the qualification originally enrolled for, these respondents are glad that they had the opportunity to attend HE.

JP is retired and feels cheated in that she could no longer afford to do a degree now that the grant system has gone. “The challenge is still inside me. I would love to get back into education. I would love to go back and finish my degree; I loved it. But I doubt I could afford to do it now”.

MR does not feel disappointed at withdrawing from HE. “I was so excited to go to university, not having had the opportunity earlier and it satisfied my curiosity. I have no regrets that I do not have a degree. I have satisfied myself that I could reach a certain level, and that has given me a boost”.

CM was a mature student who withdrew because she ran out of money and could not get any financial support to help her through her studies. “It was a superb experience. I now know what it is all about and having experienced it, I now feel I could go on and do other things. It has given me a different kind of self confidence”.

TL feels glad that she had the experience of university life, if only for 18 months, and feels that she learned a lot from that experience. “I wish I had done a course I could have completed, so I am slightly regretful. But I met loads of nice people, and I’m glad I had the opportunity to go. I just wish I could have completed.”

Returning to higher education

Despite many survey respondents reporting that their time within higher education had not been beneficial, well over half (56 per cent) indicated that they had either returned to higher education (29 per cent) or were intending to return to higher education (27 per cent). However, intentions to return to higher education varied by age. Fifty three per cent of those who were aged over 21 at the time of withdrawal from higher education indicated that they did not intend to return to higher education. This compared to 38 per cent of those who were aged 21 or under at the time of withdrawal. Of those who had either returned or intended to return to higher education, 53 per cent indicated that this would be on a part time basis. This compares to just 2 per cent of survey respondents who were registered as part time on the degree from which they withdrew.

The reasons given for not wishing to return to higher education are shown in Table 4.5. Of those survey respondents who did not intend to return to higher education, 42 per cent stated that this was because they had a good job that they did not want to give up. Forty four per cent of respondents also stated that they could not afford to return to higher education because of the cost of tuition fees and student loans.

Similarly, those survey respondents who stated that they had either returned, or were intending to return to HE, were asked about the reasons behind this decision. These responses are also presented in Table 4.5. Interestingly, greater emphasis is placed upon skills development as opposed to career and employment prospects as reasons for return to HE. The three most common reasons for returning to HE

given by respondents were to develop more specialist skills/knowledge, interest in the content of the course and to develop a broader range of skills and knowledge. Only 7 per cent of respondents who indicated that they had returned or were intending to return due to being unable to find a suitable job.

Table 4.5: Returning to higher education

	(%)
Reasons for Not Returning to HE (360)	
I cannot afford to return to HE because of the cost of tuition fees and student loans	43.9
I have a good job and don't want to give it up	42.2
I prefer to study for a professional or vocational qualification	26.3
I cannot return to HE because of caring responsibilities	4.3
I don't want to/am unable to move house and there is no HE institution nearby	3.5
Other	16.2
Reasons for Returning/Intending to Return to HE (479)	
To develop more specialist skills and/or knowledge	49.6
Because I was interested in the content of the course	46.7
To develop a broader range of skills and/or knowledge	42.3
I thought it would improve my job prospects	40.6
To change my career options	36.8
Successful completion of the course is a prerequisite for my chosen career	31.6
I had been unable to find a suitable job	6.9
Other	7.7

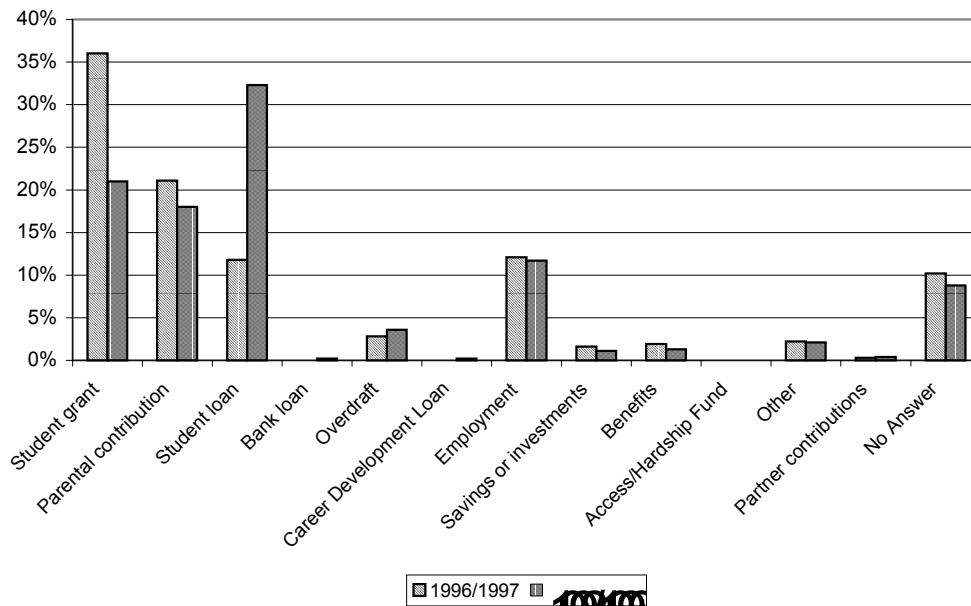
Note: Sample size in parentheses

Student support mechanisms and withdrawal from higher education

As outlined in Chapter One, the student non-completion survey focussed upon 2 cohorts of early leavers from higher education: those who withdrew from their course in 1996/97 and those who withdrew in 1998/99. These two cohorts were sampled in order to allow for comparison between the causes of non-completion 'before' and 'after' the introduction of university tuition fees. However, this period was also characterised by the continued phasing out of means tested student grants and an increased take-up of student loans. We may therefore also be able to observe differences in sources of income between the two cohorts of early leavers.

Figure 4.9 compares the main reported source of income for those who withdrew during the academic year 1996/97 to those who withdrew in the academic year in 1998/99. During 1996/97 the main sources of income reported by survey respondents whilst they were studying were the student grant (36 per cent) and parental contribution (21 per cent). By 1998/99, reliance upon the student grant as the main source of income fell to 21 per cent whilst the proportion who reported that student loans were the main source of income increased to 33 per cent. The emphasis placed upon parental contribution and income from employment as main sources of income remained relatively stable over this period.

Figure 4.9: Main source of income whilst on course



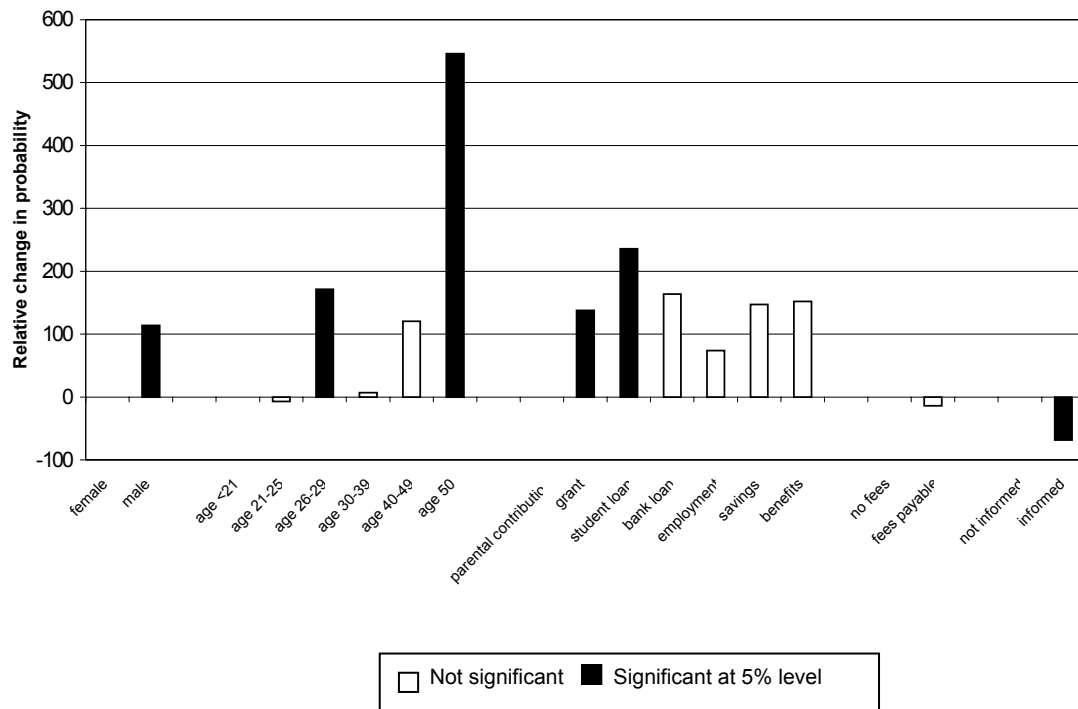
Despite this clear shift in the patterns of financial support between these two cohorts of survey respondents, no significant differences are observed in comparing factors that were reported to have influenced the decision to withdraw. In particular, 47 per cent of survey respondents who withdrew from HE in 1996/97 reported that financial problems influenced their decision to withdraw. This is compared to 44 per cent of survey respondents who withdrew from HE in 1998/99. Of those survey respondents who withdrew in 1996/97, the main influence upon the decision to withdraw was financial problems directly related to participation in HE (20 per cent), followed by mistaken choice of course (17 per cent). The main influence reported by early leavers in 1998/99 was a mistaken choice of course (28 per cent) followed by financial problems (16 per cent).

It therefore appears that the introduction of tuition fees and the continued phasing out of student grants have not had a significant influence upon the reasons for withdrawal from HE between these 2 cohorts. However, such a simple comparison may obscure significant separate influences of tuition fees and student loans upon the reasons for withdrawal from HE. To gain a better understanding of the influence of student loans and of tuition fees upon reasons for withdrawal, we have undertaken a more detailed analysis using multivariate methods. Such techniques enable us to simultaneously control for a range of factors that may affect reasons for withdrawal from HE.

Figure 4.10 reveals the impact of various characteristics upon the likelihood of a survey respondent indicating that financial problems directly relating to participation in higher education was the main reason influencing the decision to withdraw from HE. As with the analysis of earnings in Chapter Two, the factors are shown in sets of categories, with one category excluded in each set to act as a reference category. The impacts of these characteristics are expressed in terms a percentage rate relative to the reference category. The black bars represent the estimation of statistically significant relationships. For example, it can be seen that

male survey respondents are more than 100 per cent more likely (or twice as likely) than females to report that financial problems directly related to participation in HE were the main reason influencing the decision to withdraw.

Figure 4.10: Factors determining the probability that financial problems are reported as the main reason influencing the decision to withdraw from higher education



Of most interest to the present analysis are the effects of different sources of income and of the introduction of tuition fees upon reasons for withdrawal. The reference group for comparisons by source of income are those survey respondents who indicated that parental contribution was their main source of income whilst on their course. It is estimated that those for whom the main source of income was derived from student grants are approximately 140 per cent more likely to indicate that financial problems were the main reason influencing the decision to withdraw. However, those for whom the main source of income was derived from student loans are approximately 240 per cent more likely to indicate that financial problems were the main reason influencing the decision to withdraw. No statistically significant relationships were estimated for other sources of income.

The above results indicate that those respondents whose main source of income was derived from grants and student loans were more likely to indicate that financial problems were the main reason influencing the decision to withdraw than those who depended upon parental contribution. However, differences in the sizes of these estimates may also indicate that the propensity of people on these two forms of government funding to cite financial problems as the main influence upon withdrawal are significantly different from each other. Additional estimates were undertaken that instead utilised student grants as the reference category for income. It was found that those for whom the main source of income was derived from student loans were approximately 65% more likely to indicate that financial problems were the main reason influencing the decision to withdraw compared to

those on student grants. This relationship was statistically significant at the 5% level.

Only survey respondents who entered HE during 1998 would have been affected by the introduction of tuition fees. These respondents account for approximately 60 per cent of the 1998/99 cohort. No significant difference is estimated in the likelihood of these respondents indicating that financial problems were the main reason influencing the decision to withdraw. Finally, it is estimated that those respondents who felt well informed about the costs of HE were 70 per cent less likely to indicate that financial problems were the main reason influencing the decision to withdraw.

Two further questions may provide additional insight in comparing the financial pressures faced by different groups of survey respondents. Firstly, respondents were asked whether they felt the statement 'I found it very difficult to budget while I was a student applied to them'. Secondly, respondents were asked what factors (if any) would have most helped them to remain within HE. The most common response to this question was more financial support.

The analysis of the responses to these questions yielded similar results to those presented in Figure 4.10. The introduction of tuition fees was not estimated to have a significant effect on the propensity of respondents to indicate that they found it difficult to budget whilst studying, or to indicate that greater financial support would have most helped them to remain in HE. Those respondents who reported that they felt well informed about the costs of HE were approximately 60 per cent less likely to indicate that they found it difficult to budget whilst studying. Similarly, such respondents were also approximately 60 per cent less likely to report that greater financial support would have most helped them to remain in HE. Finally, those respondents whose main source of income was derived from either student grants or loans were respectively 140 per cent and 180 per cent more likely to indicate that they found it difficult to budget whilst a student compared to those who indicated that parental contribution was their main source of income. Both of these groups were estimated to be 170 per cent more likely to report that greater financial support would have most helped them to remain in HE.

To conclude, the introduction of tuition fees does not appear to have affected the propensity of survey respondents to report that financial problems were the main influence upon their decision to withdraw. However, students who depend upon government funding were more likely to report financial problems as the main influence upon the decision to withdraw compared to those who depend primarily on parental contributions. Furthermore, those for whom student loans were the main source of income were more likely to report that they had withdrawn due to financial problems compared to those whose main source of income was derived from grants. Finally, respondents who felt well informed about the costs of HE were less likely to report that they (a) had withdrawn due to financial problems, (b) had experienced difficulties in budgeting whilst studying and (c) that better financial support would have most helped them to remain in HE.

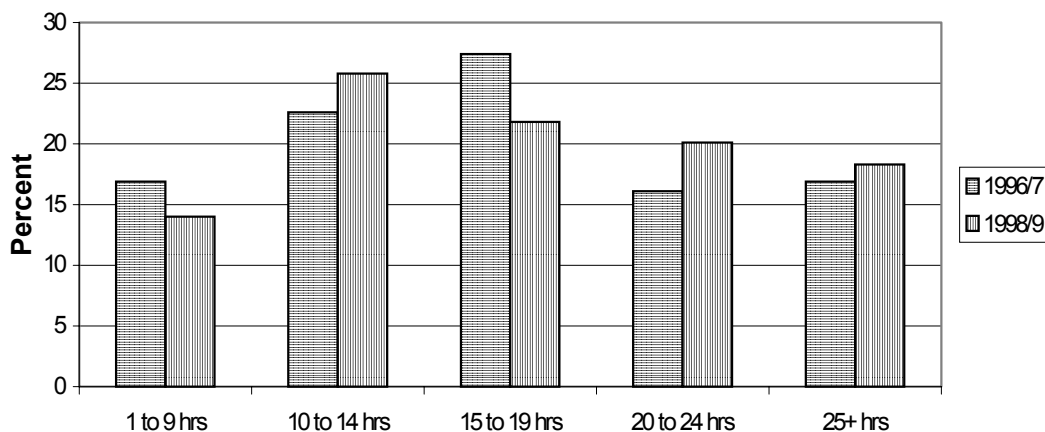
Employment during term time

The introduction of tuition fees and a shift in patterns of financial support away from grants to loans may encourage those in HE to undertake paid employment. Respondents to the non-completion survey were asked whether they had undertaken any paid employment during term time in the year that they withdrew from HE. Of those respondents who withdrew from HE during 1996/97, 39 per cent indicated that they had undertaken paid employment during term time. This is compared to 44 per cent of survey respondents who withdrew in 1998/99.

Whilst only a small increase was observed in the incidence with which survey respondents undertook paid employment between the 2 cohorts, an increase was observed in the number of hours worked between these 2 groups of respondents. The average number of hours worked by survey respondents who undertook paid employment (as described by the mode) increased from 15 hours per week in 1996/97 to 20 hours per week in 1998/99. However, it can be seen in Figure 4.11 that there is not a simple rightward shift in the distribution of hours worked between the 2 cohorts. Within both cohorts, approximately 40 per cent of respondents work less than 15 hours per week. The most significant change observed in the distribution of hours worked is observed in the decline in the number of respondents working between 15 and 19 hours per week; 27 per cent in 1996/97 compared to 21 per cent in 1998/99. This has been accompanied by an almost one to one increase in the proportion of people working 20 hours or more; 33 per cent in 1996/97 compared to 38.4 per cent in 1998/99.

An increasing propensity to miss lectures to undertake paid employment during the year of withdrawal is also observed between these 2 groups of respondents. Twenty six per cent of survey respondents, who withdrew from HE in 1996/97 and undertook paid employment during term time, missed lectures in order to do so. This is compared to 38 per cent of survey respondents who withdrew from HE in 1998/99 and undertook paid employment during term time.

Figure 4.11: Hours of paid work during term time



Summary

This chapter has considered the process of withdrawal from HE. The three main influences upon the decision to withdraw reported by respondents were a mistaken choice of course, financial problems directly related to participation in HE and personal problems. There is some evidence to indicate that respondents are under-reporting academic difficulties as a reason for withdrawal. Furthermore, it is likely that this reason may be further under-estimated by non-response to the survey given the higher rates of response amongst those with higher entry qualifications (see Figure 1.1). When asked what factors would have most helped them to remain in HE, the most common response given was better financial support.

Approximately half of respondents indicated that they had drawn upon the services of personal tutors, although views regarding their usefulness were mixed. Respondents to the telephone survey with specific personal needs or problems were particularly critical of the ability of personal tutors to provide support. The most common sources of advice sought prior to withdrawal were parents, relatives and friends. One in five respondents sought no advice before deciding to withdraw.

The introduction of tuition fees was not found to have an impact upon the propensity of respondents to report that they had withdrawn from HE due to financial problems. However, those for whom student loans were the main source of income were more likely to report that they had withdrawn due to financial problems compared to those whose main source of income was derived from grants. Respondents who stated that they had felt well informed about the costs of HE were less likely to report that they had withdrawn due to financial problems.

Finally, there is no significant increase in the propensity of respondents to undertake paid employment during term time between 1996/97 and 1998/99. However, there is some evidence to indicate that students are working longer hours, and are increasingly missing lectures in order to undertake this work.

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ANNEX 1: A survey of non-respondents

To gain further information about potential bias that could have arisen due to the low response rate to the postal survey, a telephone survey was conducted among non-respondents from the two groups identified by the HEFCE ('1996/97 withdrawers' and '1998/99 withdrawers'). This survey was, of necessity, restricted to four institutions that were able to supply the research team with names and addresses they held for members of these two groups. The four institutions which gave such information were three 'post 1992' universities and one pre 1992 city-based university. In total, names and addresses for 2,408 persons were supplied to the research team.

The first task was to locate telephone numbers for these persons. This was achieved in 36 per cent of cases. Nationally, about 43 per cent of people are listed in the telephone directory. The slightly lower than average percentage of telephone numbers located reflects the fact that most of the addresses given are parental addresses and about 2-3 per cent of this population will change addresses each year.

Out of the 864 telephone numbers obtained, 437 persons (51 per cent) were contacted after a maximum of two attempts at calling. Most of the respondents were parents of the ex-students and willingly co-operated in answering a few questions about the reason their son or daughters had given for leaving higher education.

Over one hundred (104; 24 per cent) stated that their son/daughter had not left a higher education institution. Three quarters of this group were '1998/99 withdrawers' and one quarter were '1996/97 withdrawers'.

A significant number (55; 13 per cent) stated that they (or their son/daughter) had withdrawn and had subsequently returned to higher education. Again, this was predominately within the group identified as '1998/99 withdrawers'.

Of those who had left, Table A1 shows the reasons they gave for withdrawing as follows:

Table A1: Reasons for withdrawing: a comparison of telephone and postal survey results

	<u>1996/97 withdrawers</u>		<u>1998/99 withdrawers</u>	
	Phone	Post	Phone	Post
Academic difficulties	11.7	13.2	4.3	10.4
Financial problems	18.2	22.4	14.4	17.9
Mistaken choice	32.1	27.6	28.8	29.9
University accommodation	0.7	2.6	1.4	-
Distance from home	2.2	1.3	2.9	6.0
Illness or disability	0.7	-	7.2	3.0
Personal problems	5.8	15.8	7.2	10.5
No information available	28.5	17.1	33.9	22.3
Total (= 100%)	137	76	139	67

In this table, the results from the telephone enquiry are compared with results from these same four institutions for the postal survey. Comparisons should be made cautiously, because of the problem of equating what was given as the 'main reason for leaving' (postal survey) with the interviewer coding of responses to a question (often from a proxy respondent) about an ex-student's main reason for leaving. Nonetheless, the comparisons are illuminating.

For the 1996/97 withdrawers, the proportions stating that they left because of academic difficulties, financial problems and mistaken choices are virtually identical. A higher proportion gave 'personal problems' as a reason for withdrawing in the postal survey than over the phone, possibly because those contacted by phone were often the parents of the student who withdrew. There is more variation between categories with the '1998/99 withdrawers', but the lower proportion compared with the 1996/97 withdrawers who stated that left because of financial difficulties is also observed in the telephone survey.

Summary

This limited analysis of non-respondents indicates that there is a high proportion of persons among the sample provided by the HEFCE who are recorded as 'never having left' higher education. At 24 per cent of all those contacted, this is higher than the 12 per cent in the postal survey who indicated that they had not withdrawn from a course of higher education. We conclude, therefore, that a significant element of the high non-response rate relates to the fact that our selected population does not accurately represent the target population. In the case of the population of '1998/99 withdrawers', we recognised from the outset that this group were poorly defined. Indeed, the majority of these 'non-leavers' are located in this group. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of those deemed '1996/97 withdrawers' were also found to be non-leavers.

A second major source of non-response relates to the fact that the addresses located by HEIs may be out-of-date. Most of these are the parental addresses registered by students on starting their studies. Unlike alumni address records, which many HEIs maintain for contact purposes, these address records will lapse rapidly through movement. It also appears to be the case that many questionnaires were simply not forwarded by parents to the named recipient.

Despite these sources of non-response, it is interesting to note that potential non-response bias does not appear to have seriously affected the distribution of responses within the postal survey to a question on reasons for leaving.

ANNEX 2: Overview of other research into early withdrawal from higher education

The theoretical model provided by Tinto (1975, 1987) has provided the basis for a number of studies considering non-completion over the last couple of decades. A resume of this model is provided by Sagy (2000). The model asserts that a student comes to a particular institution with a range of background characteristics and goal commitments. These characteristics influence both academic performance of the student and how the student becomes integrated into the institution's social and academic systems. It is this process of integration that most directly relates to continuance within an institution. Tinto (1987) claims that the dynamic nature of the social and intellectual life in the community of an academic institution means that background characteristics have a minimal influence upon the drop out decision.

Tinto's model has directed much research on student non-completion over the last three decades¹¹. Examples include Pascarella and Terenzini (1980), Allen and Nelson (1989) and Sagy (2000). Due to the need to employ survey tools to provide measures of academic and social integration, much of this research has been limited to small institutional studies. These studies generally conclude that the experiences of the student after arrival at the academic institution have a greater impact upon the probability of completion compared to background characteristics or personal commitments.

Empirical studies that utilise large data sets focus upon the importance of background characteristics in determining withdrawal. Naylor and Smith (2001) provide recent evidence on undergraduate non-completion for the UK for a cohort of students enrolling for three-year full time degrees in the academic year 1990/91 (approximately 300 thousand students)¹². Performance at A-level was found to have a significant effect upon the probability of non-completion. An extra point in the student's A-level score reduces the drop-out probability by 4 percentage points in the case of men and by about 2 percentage points in the case of women. Related to this, the probability of non-completion was significantly lower for those students who had previously studied subjects related to their degree course. For males, students who had previously attended independent schools were 2.5 per cent points more likely to drop out compared to those who had attended state schools. Drop out probabilities were also estimated to vary according to personal characteristics. Probability of non-completion is estimated to be higher for younger students, married students and for students from low ranked occupationally defined social class categories. Finally, considerable variation in withdrawal probabilities remains across universities and degree subject areas for both males and females. Subject effects are greater for females with computing studies and engineering both associated with increase in non-completion probabilities of 17 percentage points.

Whilst Naylor and Smith (2001) provide detailed information on the characteristics of those who decide to withdraw from higher education, they do not consider the

¹¹ An alternative perspective is provided by Manski and Wise (1983) and Manski (1989) who suggest college entry can be considered as an experiment that does not necessarily lead to a degree.

¹² Other British evidence using large-scale data sets is limited to an analysis of completion and withdrawal rates of British PhD students by Booth and Satchell (1995). Ehrenberg and Mavros (1994) consider completion probabilities of US doctoral students.

causal mechanisms behind the process of non-completion. McGivney (1996) provides recent evidence on the causes of non-completion within the United Kingdom amongst mature students. Common factors associated with early withdrawal were found to include inappropriate choice, insufficient background knowledge in subject area, general lack of academic skills (essay writing, note taking) and difficulties in settling in and integrating into the social and academic life of an institution. Factors associated with later withdrawal from a course placed more emphasis upon changes in personal circumstances, domestic commitments, work-related factors and financial problems or a lack of financial support. Whilst withdrawal in the early stages of a course highlights the importance of pre-entry information and advice, McGivney (1996) also emphasises the importance of induction strategies and the institutional environment in improving retention rates through the promotion of good staff student relations and the provision of both personal and academic support.

The most comprehensive recent study of undergraduate non-completion in higher education was undertaken by Yorke (1999). The research team considered the reasons and nature of non-completion in six institutions in the Northwest of England during the academic year 1994-95. The five most significant reasons for non-completion were:

- incompatibility between the student and their course or institution, possibly due to insufficient information on the institution or course upon application;
- lack of preparation for the higher education experience: either in terms of the self management skills to live away from home or the study skills to cope with higher education;
- lack of commitment to the course with parental or peer group expectations being the main reasons for applying to higher education rather than obtaining a degree;
- financial hardship;
- poor academic progress.

The reasons for non-completion were found to differ for different groups of students. Traditional young entrants tend to leave higher education due to a lack of preparation, commitment or compatibility. In contrast, mature students tend to leave higher education because of external circumstances related to their home life or job. For students entering higher education through the clearing process, the choice of institution has a greater influence upon the decision to withdraw than the choice of course. Students leaving pre-1992 universities are more likely to do so because of a poor choice of course than students leaving the new universities. Finally, students from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to withdraw because of financial difficulties than students from the professional and managerial socio-economic groups.

In 2002 the National Audit Office published a report entitled "Improving student achievement in English higher education". This study was carried out in light of their equivalent report on further education and the Education Select Committee's expectation of a report on the higher education sector. The report focuses on completion and achievement.

In addition to quantitative analysis of student data records they 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, they surveyed all institutions on their management practices and visited six institutions.

HESA data shows that most students appear to withdraw because of “personal” reasons or academic failure. In most cases no specific reason is recorded. The qualitative research found that other factors affecting the decision to leave were: a lack of preparedness of higher education; changing personal circumstances or interests; financial matters; the impact of undertaking paid work; and dissatisfaction with the course or institution. The most important factor affecting institutions’ achievement rates is students’ entry qualifications.

The report’s recommendations are summarised below.

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;
- ii) to minimise the risk of early withdrawal, institutions should consider how best to make available additional guidance and information to students who come through the clearing process;
- iii) the Funding Council should press ahead with plans to supplement the publicly available data on graduate destinations and employment at six months after graduation with further information, if necessary, on a sample basis, on leavers after a further two years; and
- iv) for those students who are succeeding in their studies, but who may have difficulties 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. Such testing should be concentrated on those students, or group of students, whom institutions judge to be most at risk of underperformance 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.

The full report can be downloaded from

http://www.nao.gov.uk/publications/vfmsublist/vfm_edu.htm