Year one outcomes for first degree students

This report identifies and quantifies the outcomes of UK-domiciled, full-time first degree students at English higher education institutions at the end of their first year of study. It identifies seven different year one outcomes and shows that one in five students do not continue straight on to the second year of their degree.

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To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions
Of interest to those responsible for	Student opportunity, Planning
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Executive summary

Purpose

1.   This report identifies the outcomes for undergraduate students at the end of the first year of their first degree course. This is done for all UK-domiciled entrants to full-time first degrees at English higher education institutions over an eight-year period between 2007-08 and 2014-15, so that the number and proportion of students with each outcome can be quantified. The report is intended to shed light on the different pathways that can be followed by first degree students with a view to informing understanding of the possible causes of differences in retention and degree outcomes.

Background

2.   Non-continuation rates have been published on an annual basis as part of the UK Performance Indicators for higher education since 1999. The rates are calculated by the Higher Education Statistics Agency using a census cohort approach. The Performance Indicators identify the number and proportion of first degree entrants who have each of three year one outcomes: continuing at the same higher education institution, transferring to a different institution, or leaving higher education.

3.   This report uses the same methodology, but defines a wider set of year one outcomes that enables identification of whether a student stays in the same subject area and what their year of study is in the next academic year. This makes it possible to identify, for example, what proportion of students who continue at the same institution are retaking their first year.

Key points

4.   The most common outcome for students is to continue into year two in the same subject at the same institution. More than 80 per cent of students do this each year, but this means that approximately one in five students do not continue straight on to the second year of their degree course.

5.   The second most common outcome is to leave higher education (between 6.6 and 8.4 per cent of students each year), but almost as many students repeat year one in the same subject at the same institution as leave.

6.   More students change subject each year than switch between universities. The least common outcome is to switch university, stay in the same subject area and enter at a year beyond year one. This is the outcome that would most likely involve the transfer of academic credit.

7.   The proportions of students with each outcome are fairly stable over the time period. However, the rates at which students leave higher education, repeat year one in the same subject at the same institution and transfer into year one at a different institution are all lowest for students entering in 2011-12, which suggests that the change in undergraduate funding regime had a transitional effect on student behaviour and choices.

Action required

8.   This document is for information only.

Introduction

9.   Every year approximately 300,000 UK-domiciled students start full-time first degree entrants at English higher education institutions (HEIs). The vast majority of these students progress through their course by staying at the same HEI and qualifying for a degree at the earliest opportunity. However, there are still many others who repeat years, change subject, switch institution or leave higher education entirely. The aim of this report is to gain an understanding of the outcomes that students have at the end of their first year of study.

10.   This report examines in detail the different progression pathways taken by first (bachelor) degree students between their first and second years in higher education. By tracking students through their course we show what proportion of UK-domiciled full-time first degree entrants to English HEIs take each of seven different paths at the end of their first year of study.

11.   As part of the UK higher education Performance Indicators, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) publishes annual institution-level statistics on what proportions of students: have continued at the same HEI; have transferred to a different HEI; and are no longer in higher education.

12.   In this report, we break these three year-one outcomes into seven, to identify when a student changes subject and which year of study they enter in the next academic year. The report presents a time series to show how the frequency of these stage one outcomes has changed between 2007-08 and 2014-15, and how behaviour may have been affected by changes in the undergraduate funding regime.

13.   The identification and quantification of these year one outcomes sheds light on the pathways that first degree students take through higher education, but it raises further questions about student behaviour and choices. In the final section of this report we identify research questions that explore this and consider opportunities for further analysis.

Background and methodology

14.   Non-continuation rates have been published annually as part of the UK Performance Indicators for higher education since 1999[1]. These rates are part of a wider set of performance measures intended to provide consistent and comparable data at institutional level for different measures of performance. These published rates show the proportions of students at each institution in a given year who: continue or qualify at the same provider; transfer to a different provider; and leave higher education. Rates are published by higher education provider and are also benchmarked according to subjects studied and student entry qualifications. The rates at which students leave higher education (non-continuation rates) are also used as a metric in the Teaching Excellence Framework.

15.   The contribution of this report is to consider the paths that students take through their degree in more detail, and to compare them across cohorts. This is done by tracking students from their year of entry into the next academic year. We use the same census cohort approach as that outlined in the HESA performance indicators publication, and a full description of this

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[1] Published on the HESA website under table series T3a – see www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/2072/141/.

methodology is available on the HESA website in 'Non-continuation rates – technical details'[2].
The analysis in this report is for all UK-domiciled students who entered full-time first degree
courses at HEFCE-funded HEIs between 2007-08 and 2014-15. The analysis is conducted at a
sector-wide level, so that, unlike the performance indicators, no rates are calculated for individual
institutions.

16.   The approach used in the report differs from HESA in that we define a larger number of
possible outcomes at the end of year one. Seven different year-one outcomes are identified and
these are shown in Figure 1. These split the three outcomes defined in the performance
indicators, so that there are three different outcomes for students who continue at the same
institution and a further three for those who transfer to a new institution. These additional
outcomes identify when a student changes subject and their year of study[3].

17.   The outcomes are defined as follows:

1.   Continue – Year 2. All students who progress beyond year one at the same
institution, regardless of the subject they are studying.

2.   Continue – Year 1 same subject. Students who are studying at the same institution
and in the same subject area as previously, but who stay in year one. Subject areas are
identified using the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) classification[4]. Level 1,
principal subject codes, is used.

3.   Continue – Year 1 different subject. Students who stay at the same HEI, but who
switch to a subject in a different JACS level 1 area and start year one of the new
programme.

4.   Transfer – Year 1 same subject. Students who transfer to a different HEI, who stay
in the same JACS level 1 area as previously and start year one again.

5.   Transfer – Year 1 different subject. Students who have transferred to a different
institution in a different JACS level 1 area, but not in a later year.

6.   Transfer – Year 2. All students who transfer to a different HEI into a year of study
beyond year one, regardless of the subject they are studying.

7.   No longer in higher education. All students who are not in higher education in the
next academic year.

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[2] For full details of the methodology, see https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-
indicators/non-continuation/technical. Note that a difference in linking methodology has led to a small
discrepancy between HESA total figures and the analysis presented here.
[3] Since this includes whether a student changes subject, full-person equivalents (FPE) are used to
represent the headcount of a student allocated proportionally by each subject studied on a course.
Each student contributes an overall FPE of one.
[4] Version 3.0. For more information, see https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs.

Figure 1: Year one outcomes
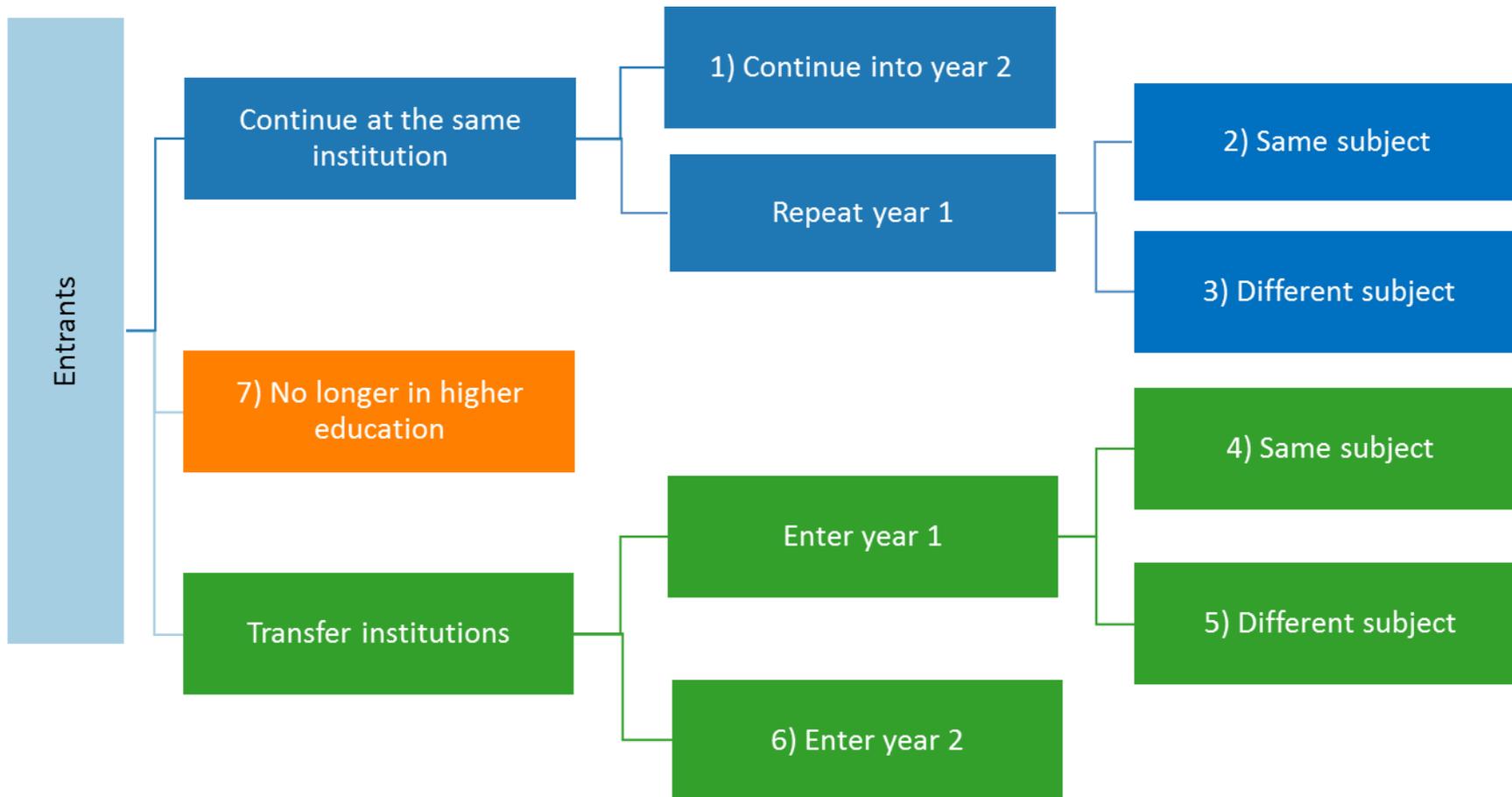
Findings

18.   Tables 1 and 2 present the number and proportion of entrants who have each of the seven outcomes described above for the academic years 2007-08 to 2014-15. Overwhelmingly, the most common outcome is for students to continue into year two in the same subject at the same institution. More than 80 per cent of students do this each year, with the highest rate in 2011-12 when 84.4 per cent of students continued into year two.

19.   The second most common outcome is to leave higher education. This non-continuation rate varies across the time period, with a lowest rate of 6.6 per cent in 2011-12 and a highest of 8.4 per cent in 2009-10.

20.   The third most common outcome is for students to repeat year one at the same institution in the same subject area. This is only slightly less common than leaving higher education, and more than one in 20 first degree entrants do this every year. These students must be sufficiently happy with their choices to continue studying the same subject at the same institution, but have obviously been unable, for either personal or academic reasons, to pass sufficient modules to progress to year two.

21.   A relatively small proportion of students change subject, although this is slightly more common than changing HEI. In total, between 2.2 and 3.5 per cent of entrants change subject at either the same HEI or a different one. Of these, roughly twice as many students stay at the same HEI as transfer to a different HEI.

22.   Of all students who transfer between HEIs, more stay in the same subject area than change, but very few progress directly into year two at their new institution. This is by far the least likely outcome at the end of year one, with only about 0.5 per cent of students doing this each year.

23.   The data is relatively stable across time, although comparing only the years at the beginning of the period with those at the end, it can be seen that the proportion not continuing is lower and that relatively fewer students transfer in the most recent years.

24.   A more noticeable time effect is in the middle of the time period, as the rates at which students leave higher education and repeat year one in the same subject are lowest for students entering in 2011-12. This is suggestive of the change in funding regime in 2012-13 causing a transitional impact on behaviour. It could be that since students knew that the cost of higher education was going to be higher in the future they were more likely to persist with their original choices.

Table 1: Number of students over time by year one outcome

		2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Total entrants		*272,945*	*292,725*	*303,375*	*303,450*	*326,675*	*291,335*	*317,970*	*328,550*
Continuing	*Total*	*242,125*	*261,570*	*270,890*	*275,365*	*298,480*	*264,125*	*287,910*	*296,490*
	Year 2	218,880	235,820	246,670	253,785	275,815	242,075	261,635	268,090
	Year 1 same subject	17,355	19,970	19,115	17,185	17,710	17,335	20,565	22,335
	Year 1 different subject	5,890	5,775	5,105	4,390	4,960	4,710	5,710	6,065
Transfer	*Total*	*8,160*	*8,555*	*7,010*	*6,100*	*6,625*	*6,820*	*7,315*	*7,860*
	Year 1 same subject	2,990	3,070	2,630	2,290	2,445	2,755	3,100	3,475
	Year 1 different subject	3,595	3,545	2,945	2,510	2,655	2,680	2,960	3,165
	Year 2	1,570	1,940	1,430	1,295	1,525	1,385	1,255	1,220
No longer in higher education		*22,660*	*22,605*	*25,480*	*21,985*	*21,575*	*20,390*	*22,745*	*24,205*

Note: All numbers rounded to the nearest 5 full person equivalent.

Table 2 Percentage of students over time by year one outcome

		2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Continuing	*Total*	*88.7%*	*89.4%*	*89.3%*	*90.7%*	*91.4%*	*90.7%*	*90.5%*	*90.2%*
	Year 2	80.2%	80.6%	81.3%	83.6%	84.4%	83.1%	82.3%	81.6%
	Year 1 same subject	6.4%	6.8%	6.3%	5.7%	5.4%	6.0%	6.5%	6.8%
	Year 1 different subject	2.2%	2.0%	1.7%	1.4%	1.5%	1.6%	1.8%	1.8%
Transfer	*Total*	*3.0%*	*2.9%*	*2.3%*	*2.0%*	*2.0%*	*2.3%*	*2.3%*	*2.4%*
	Year 1 same subject	1.1%	1.0%	0.9%	0.8%	0.7%	0.9%	1.0%	1.1%
	Year 1 different subject	1.3%	1.2%	1.0%	0.8%	0.8%	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%
	Year 2	0.6%	0.7%	0.5%	0.4%	0.5%	0.5%	0.4%	0.4%
No longer in higher education		*8.3%*	*7.7%*	*8.4%*	*7.2%*	*6.6%*	*7.0%*	*7.2%*	*7.4%*

Discussion and conclusions

25. A student's outcome at the end of year one is a combination of their performance, academic judgement and the choices that they make about their future study. In this report we have defined seven different year one outcomes that allow for a student to change subject and to be in different years of study. The data presented in the previous section shows how common each of these seven year-one outcomes are for UK-domiciled, full-time, first degree students.

26. Previous work by HEFCE and others has shown that non-continuation rates vary considerably across student groups (Crawford, 2014; HEFCE, 2017/20), and it is not known to what extent this is the case for other outcomes. Nor is it known to what extent final degree outcomes vary across the different pathways that might be taken to achieve a degree. These are important questions, as they have implications for the understanding of differences in student success.

27. In a companion report (HEFCE 2017/26), we analyse students who transfer institution, but stay in the same subject area. This report describes the scale of these transfers and identifies which students are more likely to switch between institutions. It also investigates when the transfer of academic credit is more likely and examines the qualification rates of transferring students.

28. Beyond this, there are opportunities for other analyses that could be conducted using this data and which would shed light on student outcomes. For example, while some students decide to have a fresh start in a different subject, and possibly at a different HEI, others choose to leave higher education. It would be of value to know what differences exist between student groups in the likelihood of a student starting afresh relative to leaving higher education, and whether this persists if we allow for time to return to higher education.

29. Other analysis might focus on students who repeat year one in the same subject at the same institution. As noted, a similar proportion of students do this as leave higher education altogether, yet these students have not been researched. It is not known how well these students ultimately do or how their degree outcomes compare with other students who might have failed to pass all their year one modules, but who nevertheless progressed to year two.

30. Finally, relatively little is known about those students who leave higher education. HESA publishes data on what proportion of students who leave higher education re-enter a year later, but it is not known how this changes if more than one year is allowed for re-entry. It would be useful to establish whether the change in the undergraduate funding regime has impacted on the decision-making of these students. So far there has been no analysis of who these students are, what factors make it more likely that someone will return to higher education, or how well these students fare relative to others.

31. Overall, we believe that the creation of this dataset for cohorts over eight academic years might shed light on known differences in degree outcomes across student groups. The set of year one outcomes defined in this report are finer than those previously used and they offer the potential to create a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the pathways taken by first degree students through their degrees.

References

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