

Annex I Completion and non-completion

1. This annex explains how to determine the completion status of a year of instance. It includes a number of examples and issues found by our auditors.
2. Completion is defined in terms of modular programmes of study. It applies to all institutions, including those that may not consider their programmes to be modular. For HESES purposes a module is taken to mean a discrete component within a programme of study, sometimes referred to as a unit, course or option. Where a student is studying a number of modules that can all count towards the same qualification, this should be treated as a single instance.
3. Where a student has a clear intention of completing a specified activity within the year of instance, completion is measured against this intention. Therefore institutions should collect information on students' study intentions for the year so that completion status can be assessed appropriately. A student who fails to complete any module counted in the year of instance is to be returned as a non-completion for all activity in that year. Thus, if a student starts the year intending to follow a certain pattern of activity but does not complete all of it, then that student would be a non-completion. However, if a student formally switches mode from full-time to part-time as defined in paragraph 9 of Annex M, their completion status should be determined with reference to their revised study intentions. If the pattern of activity within the year is not specified, then, provided that the student completes all activity countable in the year, they would be considered as completing. An exception is allowed for full-time students where the module is in addition to the standard requirements for full-time study. In this case, a student who completes the number of modules normally required in the year for full-time study may be treated as a completion for the year of instance, even if they fail to complete other modules in the year that are in addition to the standard requirement.
4. Within overall study intentions students may substitute modules without affecting their completion status. In order to be counted as substitute modules:
 - a. The total number of credit points in the substituted module(s) would need to be greater than or equal to that of the original module(s).and
 - b. Either the fees charged will need to remain the same (this will commonly be the case for full-time students), or the entire fee for the original module(s) would need to be refunded and a separate fee charged for the substitute module(s).
5. In order to be counted as a completion (and thus be included in Column 4 of Tables 1, 2 or 3), a student must complete all the modules they intended to complete in the year of instance within 13 calendar months of the start of the year of instance: that is to say within 13 calendar months of the anniversary of their commencement date that defines the start of the year of instance. In order to complete a module, the student must either:

a. Undergo the final assessment of the module (this refers to the activity of the student in sitting an exam or submitting coursework rather than the activity of an assessment board in assessing the achievement of the student)

or

b. Pass the module, where this can be achieved without undergoing the final assessment because they already have enough marks in that module to be awarded credit for it. In some cases institutional regulations allow credit to be given because of the level attained in other modules; this would not be treated as completion for funding purposes, even though the institution may allow the student to progress.

Example 1

6. A standard year of instance commences on 28 September 2011. Final assessment (which may be either an examination or submission of a final piece of coursework) for a particular module counted within the year of instance takes place in June 2012, with an opportunity to resit/resubmit in September 2012. The student does not take the assessment in June 2012 (for whatever reason and without necessarily agreeing this in advance), but does so for the first time at the resit/resubmission opportunity in September 2012. The module would be treated as completed, because the assessment was taken within 13 calendar months of the 28 September 2011 start of the year of instance.

Example 2

7. A standard year of instance commences on 28 September 2011. Final assessment for a particular module counted within the year of instance takes place only in June each year. The student does not take the assessment in June 2012 (for whatever reason) and has not otherwise passed the module, but does take the assessment at the next opportunity in June 2013. The module would be treated as not completed, because the assessment was not taken within 13 calendar months of 28 September 2011, the start of the year of instance. This would be the case whether or not the student had been given permission to defer their assessment for a year.

Example 3

8. A student studies for eight modules in a year of instance. They undergo the final assessments in seven modules, but do not undergo the final assessment in one, on the basis that they know that they have already passed the module, based on the marks already achieved in that module. In this case, the student would be treated as a completion, because they underwent the final assessments in seven modules and passed the remaining module, where it was possible to pass without undergoing the final assessment.

Example 4

9. A student studies for eight modules in a year of instance. They undergo the final assessments for all modules, but in one module their performance is insufficient to meet

the academic standards required to pass that module. Nevertheless the institution's academic regulations relating to progression allow credit to be awarded for the one failed module on the basis of the student's overall performance across all modules studied in the year. In this case, the student would be treated as a completion, because they underwent the final assessments in all modules. The fact that credit was awarded for a module that was failed is not relevant in determining the student's completion status.

Example 5

10. A student studies for eight modules in a year of instance. They undergo the final assessments for seven modules, but do not undergo the final assessment in one, with the consequence that they do not have enough marks in that module to be awarded credit for it. Whether or not the institution's academic regulations relating to progression allow credit to be awarded for the one incomplete module on the basis of the student's overall performance across all modules studied in the year, the student would be treated as a non-completion for funding purposes for all activity in the year, because they did not undergo the final assessment in a module. The fact that credit was awarded for the module under the institution's academic regulations on the basis of the student's overall performance across the year of instance is not sufficient to meet the completion definition.

Example 6

11. A full-time student has a clear intention of studying for eight modules in a year of instance. Their intention initially was to include one particular module (A), but although they started the module they decide to switch to a different module (B) of equal value. The completion status for the instance then depends on completion of module B (rather than module A), together with the other seven modules taken by the student.

Example 7

12. A full-time student starts in September intending to study eight modules within a year of instance. At the end of the first semester they interrupt the course having completed four modules and return 12 months later to complete the remaining four modules. The student would be a full-time non-completion for the first year of instance, because they did not complete four of the modules that they intended to take within the year of instance. They will be a completion for the second year of instance although this will normally be part-time because they will not normally meet the attendance requirements to be full-time.

13. For the purposes of determining completion, the final assessment is the one that has its first occurrence on the latest normal due date: that is, the timing of re-sits and coursework extensions should be disregarded. Whether an assessment is considered the final assessment does not depend on the weight associated with it. For example, if a module is assessed by an exam which accounts for 90 per cent of the marks and the remainder via coursework, with the coursework due after the exam (and not solely by virtue of an extension having been granted), completion should be determined by

submission of the coursework rather than attendance at the exam. Where two assessments fall due on the same day and these are the last assessments for the module, undergoing either would constitute completion. A viva-voce examination should not be treated as the final assessment unless all students are required to undertake it.

14. In some cases, a year of instance which counts towards a qualification taken over several years may not contain any formal assessment, for example where assessment will take place at the end of a later year. In this case, where there is no such assessment opportunity within 13 calendar months of the start of the year of instance, then continued attendance throughout the year of instance would constitute completion. Institutions should therefore ensure that adequate evidence of attendance exists, such as class registers.

15. When a student undertakes a module that can lead to a qualification or institutional credit, but does not undergo assessment for that module, in general that student will be treated as a non-completion for all their activity in the year. This applies where assessment is optional (for example on open programmes, including continuing education provision). However, an exception is allowed where the student has entered into a binding and irreversible commitment before the commencement of that module that they will not undergo assessment for it. In this case, the module would not be reported at all in HESES, and the completion status of the student would not be affected by their completion or non-completion of the unassessed module.

16. Where the pattern of activity within the year is not specified, students will occasionally register for modules and subsequently withdraw before the start of the module. Provided the fee for this module is refunded in full, the module would not be reported at all in HESES and the module may be disregarded in determining completion and FTE. Full-time students will not fall into this category as it will not be possible to refund the fee while retaining the full-time fee status of the student.

17. In some cases a student may undertake a module more than once within a year of instance. In determining completion status, institutions must ensure that the module is counted only once. Where the module has been completed on one or more occasions and has also been non-completed, the completion should be counted for determining completion and FTE, and the non-completion of the module ignored. Exceptionally a student may take a module in two years of instance and complete the module for the second year of instance within 13 months of the start of the first year of instance. In this case the institution may count the module in either but not both of the years.

18. Where a student's study intentions change part way through the year of instance due to being awarded accredited prior experiential learning (APEL) equivalent to one or more modules, the student's completion status should be judged against these revised study intentions. In some cases the reduced study intentions might mean that the student no longer meets the attendance requirements to be full-time. Provided the student meets the requirements to be treated as a mode switcher (see paragraph 9, Annex M) they should be treated as a part-time student with completion judged against their revised study intentions.

Example 8

19. A part-time student on a standard year of instance begins a module in October, but withdraws from it after undertaking some activity and before completing the final assessment. The following February (within the same year of instance) the student retakes the module and completes it. The first attempt at the module from October would not be reported at all in HESES and should be disregarded in determining the completion status for the year of instance.

Example 9

20. A full-time student on a standard year of instance has a clear intention of completing eight modules within the year. One particular module that they start in the first semester is not completed, but the student retakes the module again in the second semester in place of another one, and completes it. Overall, in the first semester, the student completed three modules and began a fourth, which was not completed, and would not be reported in HESES and which is disregarded for the purposes of determining completion status; in the second semester, the student completed four modules, one of which was a second attempt at the module that was not completed in the first semester. In this case, the year of instance would be a non-completion, because the student completed only seven modules, rather than their overall study intention of eight.

21. In completing the HESA record, some students may still have opportunities after 31 July to submit to the final exam within the 13 months from the start of their year of instance. Wherever possible, institutions should seek to update their HESA record to reflect the latest known completion status of the student. In doing so, institutions will need to have due regard to HESA's data collection timescales and the need to ensure high-quality returns. We may seek further information from institutions that have high numbers of students with undetermined completion status. Students should only be recorded with undetermined completion status where an opportunity still exists for the student to undergo the final assessment within 13 months. They should not be treated as undetermined completion status simply because the 13 months has not fully elapsed.

Partial completion weighting

22. Where students are reported as non-completions their activity may still count towards the partial completion weighting in our funding method if it amounts to at least one-sixth of an FTE.

Estimates of non-completions and historical data

23. Institutions should ensure that estimates of non-completion are supported by historical data. Any historical data used in this way should not be skewed by exceptional circumstances such as industrial action affecting exams. Where such exceptional circumstances occur, institutions should ensure that the completion status of students on the HESA record accurately reflects their actual completion status.

Audit issues

Estimation of non-completions

24. The audits identified a common misconception that withdrawals notified from an academic department are the sole source of data for that department's non-completion estimate. Estimates of the number of non-completions should normally be based on the non-completion rate for the previous year for the particular course. Where this is not the case, there should be a clear rationale for any alternative methods used or adjustments made. Where the non-completion rate used in the return differs significantly from past data, there should be a clear rationale for the change. We found cases where institutions were using rates significantly lower than evidence from both their own data and audit, with no reasoning behind this.

25. In some institutions, the continued recording of a student as current on the student record system at an arbitrary date, for example, 1 May or 31 July, is being taken as a proxy for assessing the student completion status for the year. This is not a correct approach.

26. Another misconception is that the completion status of a student should be determined by the institution's individual academic regulations and rules on student progression, and not in accordance with the funding rules for assessment of a student's completion status. Incorrect application of the FUNDCOMP status to student records returned in institutions' HESA returns has produced incorrect data on which subsequent HESES return forecasts have been based.

27. In using the previous year's non-completion rate for a course as the basis of the current year estimate, it is important to make sure that the non-completion rate for the previous year is accurately known. We found examples where this has not been the case. Non-completion status should be recorded for the year of instance. Continuation of study to the following year should not be taken as evidence of, or a proxy for, completion in the previous year. In addition, simply because a student has not formally withdrawn from the institution by the year-end does not make the student a completion. Completion must be assessed by reference to submission of the final assessment, or otherwise passing, all modules the student intended to complete at the outset of their year of study.

28. Institutions may also find it useful to demonstrate the validity of their non-completion estimates by analysing the non-completion rates for different courses over, say, three to five years. This would help to identify trends, and years where the result is atypical compared with the trend.

29. A review of the outturn compared with the estimate should be made at the year-end, and reasons sought for any discrepancies. This knowledge can then be used to inform the estimate for the following year.

30. Non-completions should be reported in a timely fashion, and the student record system updated to reflect the student's change in status. Systems should be in place throughout the year to enable identification of students who are missing from or

struggling with the course, and steps taken to try to retain them at the institution. Reconciliations should be made with the student record system to ensure that it is up to date and accurately reflects what is being reported elsewhere. We found examples where additional students were on mark sheets but not on the student record system. There were also cases where students had clearly withdrawn, but their records had not been amended on the student record system.

31. Students' records not being updated in a timely fashion has led to their being included in the return when they had already left the institution by the census date.

32. Sufficient data should be recorded at the module level on the main student record system to allow accurate assessment of a student's completion status. This should include, but not necessarily be limited to, identification of the final assessment and the student's submission to it, and the overall outcome for the module. Coding should distinguish between non-submission to an assessment and a very low mark for poor academic performance or misconduct. This level of detail should be readily available to ensure accurate reporting of a student's completion status.

33. In the HESA data, the MODOUT status (module outcome field) of a module should be completed in accordance with these funding rules. The FUNDCOMP status of a student should in turn reflect the overall position of the whole student record for the year.

34. Exception reports should be used to establish whether unlikely combinations of MODOUT and FUNDCOMP status are being reported, so that corrections can be made before data are submitted.

35. It is essential that HESA data, the outturn position for the year, are correct, to enable accurate forecasts of non-completion rates in the following year's HESES return. We consistently find issues with both MODOUT and FUNDCOMP, which are leading to under-reporting of non-completions in subsequent HESES returns.

Assessment of headcount and completion status for part-time students

36. Sometimes, both headcount and completion status of part-time students, particularly those on continuing education courses, are based incorrectly on an individual module extract which does not take into account that a student may be taking more than one module during the year. This will inflate the headcount and may inflate the number of completions as the completion status is judged on a single module rather than an assessment of all modules undertaken by an individual student within the year.