

Student non-completions project

Final Report to the Association of Heads
of University Administration (AHUA)

June 2008

Executive Summary

Introduction and study rationale

1. SQW Consulting was appointed by the Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA), with support from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in August 2007:
 - to undertake a review of the ways in which individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) define, recognise, record and report on student non-completions, and
 - to produce a report setting out good practice, areas of risk, recommendations for future systematic improvement, and to identify areas where further work might be desirable, if appropriate.
2. The rationale for this study recognised that student non-completion data returns are a perennial issue which affect a relatively small number of HEIs in any given year. It was felt that the issue would benefit from some focused, sector-led research into current practice. The two main aims of this research were, therefore, as follows:
 - to contribute to the evidence base on good practice in relation to the current policies, processes and systems in place for recording and dealing with student non-completions, and
 - to demonstrate to external stakeholders sector-level commitment to continuing to improve performance in this area.
3. The approach comprised: a small number of scoping discussions/interviews; a review of relevant documentation; case study visits to five HEIs (selected against institutional categories determined by the Steering Group); and a consultative seminar for a wider range of HEIs which enabled the project team to triangulate and verify the case study findings.

Defining student non-completions

4. The focus of this study is on processes and good practice in the ways in which HEIs report on student non-completions. It recognises that different parties and stakeholders will have their own particular interests and definitions. HEIs will see this issue within the broader context of their own academic regulations and policies relating to student retention and progression. HEFCE's definition of student non-completion for the purposes of the Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey (HESES) data return has particular regard to the student interest and overall accountability for public funds (see Annex B of the main report for a summary of the HEFCE definition). The HE performance indicators (PIs) published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) provide another perspective on this broad issue via their tables on non-continuation rates for full-time undergraduate students. These are presented in two ways: the first considers students who start in a particular year, and looks at whether they are still in higher education one year later; the second method looks at projected

outcomes over a longer period. Other stakeholders such as the Student Loans Company (SLC) and local education authorities (LEAs) have a primary interest in knowing when a student has withdrawn from study or changed mode of study as this will impact directly on loan repayments and future entitlements.

Key findings

5. Our key findings are briefly summarised below, using the main research questions as themes. Fuller details and examples are provided in Chapter 2 of the main report.

Are student non-completion policies, processes and systems widely understood and consistently followed at all relevant levels within the HEI and its collaborative partners (where appropriate)?

6. All of the case study HEIs were clear about the significance of student non-completion data to the overall performance and position of their institutions. They understood the potential impacts, both in funding and reputational terms, which an increase in student non-completions could have on their HEI. Notwithstanding this awareness, there were still some challenges relating to the communication and ownership of student non-completion data at the institutional level. In general, staff in more strategic and central roles had a greater awareness of the significance of this issue than those in more devolved and operational roles. These views were echoed by the seminar participants.
7. Institutions highlighted the pivotal role played by training and guidance for staff on effective use of the student records system (SRS). There were many good examples of investment in in-house and external training and development as well as ongoing support via helpdesks and troubleshooting services. A more systematic approach to training was found to have benefits in reducing variable practice within institutions, making it easier for staff to cover for others and ensuring that more people within an HEI understood how to complete key data returns such as HESES. In some instances, staff were only allowed access to systems once they had completed the necessary level of training. Institutional processes were well-documented in user and support manuals and other materials which were kept up-to-date and available electronically via institutions' intranets.

How do HEIs monitor their student non-completion systems and processes to ensure that they are operating effectively?

8. All of the case studies demonstrated awareness of the need for regular monitoring and were continually looking for ways to improve their systems and processes. For two of the case study institutions, in particular, internal re-structuring had recently taken place, or was still ongoing, which was partly driven by the need to improve internal systems and data ownership and collection. At all levels, institutions reinforced the importance of monitoring student non-completions within the broader context of student retention and progression. An important overall driver for monitoring effectiveness was the need to develop trust in the data at all levels across the HEI.
9. Monitoring usually took place within a central unit in each institution and involved some form of annual programme of activity based around key census points during the academic

year. While these may differ for each institution, key times normally included late August, late October and mid November (in advance of the HESES return). Institutions were able to produce data quality reports on a regular basis (i.e. daily, weekly, monthly), with a higher frequency of reporting during the main enrolment/registration periods.

What checks and balances might be in place to identify when systems are inadequate or processes are not being followed?

10. Some of the case study institutions had more systematic and regular checking procedures in place, whilst others tended to rely more on the natural checks and balances provided by enrolment, assessment/examination boards and re-enrolment processes; errors or problems were picked up in both systems, but in the latter it was sometimes later in the cycle.
11. Student non-completion was recognised by the case study institutions as a key area of risk both in funding and reputational terms. The ‘social’ risk to students who fail to complete their studies was given a similarly high priority by the HEIs interviewed. Reflecting the serious nature of these risks, all of the institutions had some form of risk register or risk strategy related to student numbers and retention, which was embedded within the responsibilities of the senior management team. The institutions were also exercising greater central control over enrolment and registration processes, so that data were of a better quality, available for analysis in real-time and actions could be taken more swiftly if problems were identified.

How are policies, processes and systems monitored and reviewed at senior management and governing body levels?

12. There was evidence across all the case study institutions that the monitoring and review of student non-completions was built into HEIs’ management and governance structures as part of a strategic and more holistic focus on student retention and progression. This was seen to be a serious issue and there was widespread recognition of the challenges of non-completion for the HE sector more generally, as well as for these particular HEIs.
13. All of the institutions had a nominated individual (or in some cases more than one person) within their senior management team who had designated responsibility for the institution’s performance in terms of student retention/non-completions; this was often linked to one or more of an HEI’s key performance indicators (KPIs). In addition, all case study HEIs had designated a particular committee within their governance structure with the role of monitoring and responding to any non-completion issues as part of their strategic approach to retention. In some cases, this also led to regular reporting to the governing body of the institution.

What is the fit between the HEFCE definition of non-completion and institutions’ own academic regulations?

14. Institutions were asked to comment on the fit between HEFCE’s definition of student non-completion¹ and their own academic regulations and related internal policies. Institutions were clear that their behaviour was not driven by the HEFCE definition; the key driving

¹ See Annex B of the main report for the full HEFCE definition of student non-completion.

factors were their own academic regulations, student progression and success. In some instances, it was noted that staff actively encourage students who are struggling to take only those modules that they feel able to complete, even when this may impact adversely on the number of completions (based on the HEFCE definition). This view was reinforced by the seminar participants.

15. While all case study institutions expressed criticism of the HEFCE definition, some had found ways to develop greater fit between their own academic policies and the definition. For at least one case study institution, and a number of the HEIs that participated in the seminar, the definition had contributed to changes in the assessment of students which aimed to identify potential problem areas and to minimise the risk of subsequent failure to complete. Some institutions were carrying out more formative assessments early on, mainly in the first term for first year undergraduates, in order to build up students' confidence in advance of completing their summative assessments.
16. Case study institutions and seminar participants perceived the HEFCE definition to be predicated on the model of a traditional full-time undergraduate and felt that it presented particular challenges for institutions with large numbers/proportions of: widening participation students; learners studying on part-time and more flexible routes (including postgraduates); and students on particular professional programmes with their own attendance requirements. Institutions' concerns (both case study institutions and seminar participants) also revealed a number of possible misperceptions or misinterpretations of the HEFCE definition. While the definition has expanded and evolved over time in recognition of the need for further guidance for HEIs on this area, these modifications have also contributed to the sector's perception that the definition itself is complex and opaque. This is a significant point for HEFCE and the sector to consider further.
17. As part of this study, the project team interviewed HEFCE staff to explore the rationale for the current HEFCE definition of student non-completion. While the Council will continue to look at the definition in the light of any significant future changes to the T-funding method, staff believe that the current definition enables them to take a neutral stance as to how provision is actually structured within institutions. The HEFCE definition is intended to provide a fair and consistent basis for reporting across the diverse range of institutions and types of provision.
18. A number of suggestions were made by the case study institutions and seminar participants about the way they would like to see the HEFCE definition developing in the future. Key features included the need for more flexibility in the approach to reflect changing patterns of study and assessment, and a greater focus on student achievement (including partial achievement) and outcomes. To some extent, this is being addressed by the measures being introduced by HEFCE in 2009-10 (see Annex B of the main report for further details).

The extent to which existing policies, processes and systems contribute to more robust data collection within institutions

19. Data quality was a priority for the case study institutions and all were making efforts to ensure that their data were cleaner and more reliable, as well as introducing greater rigour into the data collection process. Institutions saw it as their responsibility that students were

properly and accurately enrolled on and attending their modules/programmes; and in some professional subjects (e.g. health), attendance was compulsory for students.

20. The case study HEIs placed significant emphasis on the internal value of analysing and using their own student non-completion data. This helped them to develop a better understanding of what problems, if any, they faced in terms of non-completion. All of the case study HEIs were using data to contribute to a more comprehensive range of strategic documents and reports for the wider benefit of the institution than had been the case a few years previously.

The identification of good practice which could be disseminated for the benefit of the sector as a whole

21. There was considerable evidence of good practice in the ways in which the case study HEIs were recognising the strategic importance of data on student non-completions and ensuring that this was given appropriate status and scrutiny within their governance and management structures. The use of KPIs and senior management champions, combined with effective communication and training for all levels of relevant staff, were recognised as contributing to raising the profile of this issue internally and improving performance. The designation of a committee with responsibility for student retention also enabled central consideration of student non-completion issues and helped to identify good practice for wider dissemination within the institution.
22. There were good examples of institutions making effective use of the data for their own internal purposes, both for monitoring potential problems and for better ongoing reporting of information across the institution. Making sure that the institution invested properly in its student records system and was making full use of the range of ways in which it could configure the system to meet its requirements was also important in this regard. A critical aspect of this process has entailed, for some case study HEIs, the removal of any duplicate or shadow student records systems based at the local, school level which were previously adding to data quality problems.
23. Institutions also highlighted the importance of developing an effective interface between the data and academic issues; front-line academics needed to understand the significance of student non-completion data and its possible impact on the institution. It was noted that some institutions did debate and scrutinise course data and provide staff seminars on the most effective ways to teach and support students and thereby help to reduce non-completions.
24. HEIs were engaged in a range of retention practices designed to identify and support those students felt to be at risk of non-completion or withdrawal. These were often linked to improving overall student engagement both with their programme of study and the institution more generally.
25. Case study HEIs and seminar participants also highlighted a range of other areas of good practice in ensuring a high level of understanding of the issues across an institution. These included:
- highlighting to programme leaders the financial implications of non-submission of key data – which was found to have a positive impact on practice on the ground

- using non-completions data to inform the number of admissions offers made
- making greater use of the data and linking them to relevant student feedback (via the findings of the National Student Survey or, in some cases, institutions' own student satisfaction surveys) with the aim of identifying issues before they become major problems and of targeting resources to support those students most at risk of withdrawal or failure
- the use of key census dates by some HEIs to release full or partial bursary payments. In one institution, its own bursary award was only paid on completion of the year
- the trialling of monitoring systems to ascertain whether students were actively engaged in study or could benefit from some additional support. Sometimes these systems were linked to access to learning resources via the student portal. Concerns were also raised, however, about over-monitoring and the possible use of this information by other bodies. It was felt that information gathered for this purpose should not be seen as a straightforward proxy for student engagement and progression
- the importance of having robust enrolment/registration processes in place for all students, including those at partner colleges or on distance learning programmes. Some HEIs enrol students over the weekend before term starts. Data and information are input centrally beforehand and students then check and validate these and provide necessary proof of identity, academic qualifications etc.
- the need to have regular and systematic clearances of out-of-date deferrals/referrals from institutions' student records systems
- limiting the usual number of attempts to pass any module (one HEI has limited this to two attempts) – with any exceptions being dealt with by a special panel, and
- the use of central points for handing in all coursework; this enables HEIs to have a better overview of student completion and progress.

Conclusions

The extent to which existing HEI policies, processes and systems for capturing student non-completions are effective and fit for purpose

26. Overall, the study portrays a good and improving picture of the ways in which HEIs define, recognise, record and report on student non-completions. The five case study HEIs effectively demonstrated the seriousness with which the sector treats this issue and provided many examples of good practice in the ways in which HEIs ensure that student non-completions data are both robust and also inform their wider strategic developments. Student support mechanisms have also improved and HEIs are generally looking to intervene earlier where problems are identified. Although the sample of five HEIs was small, the consultative seminar provided an excellent opportunity to triangulate the findings with representatives of a much large number of HEIs. There was universal recognition by seminar participants of the picture emerging from the case study institutions.

27. The study provided a timely opportunity to reflect on current practices and to suggest how student non-completion policies, processes and systems may need to be developed in the future to reflect more flexible patterns of study and the increasing diversity of the student body. The current policy emphasis on employer engagement and the development of more ‘bite-sized’ learning opportunities to be delivered in the workplace will add to this agenda. Case study HEIs and seminar participants emphasised the importance of transparency, fairness and a focus on student progression and achievement as key elements to inform future developments.

Suggestions for further work

28. Suggestions for further work and future improvements are summarised below:
- it would be useful for AHUA and HEFCE to consider further ways to encourage the development and dissemination of good practice in this area. This might take the form of some demonstrator projects (perhaps funded via the HEFCE Leadership, Governance and Management Fund) or through relevant sector networks. Our study has clearly demonstrated an interest across the sector in engaging on this issue. Possible areas for further work could include: early interventions to minimise non-completions; electronic logging of coursework; ways of monitoring attendance (including the implications of the new requirements on HEIs to monitor attendance of international students); improving assessment and examination board practices
 - AHUA and HEFCE should also consider working with institutions to produce some user-friendly briefing materials on student non-completions for staff at various levels, and carrying out particular roles, within institutions. These materials might also usefully clarify the range of terminology used in this area of activity
 - a self-evaluation framework or checklist for HEIs could be developed based on an edited version of the questions explored in our case study visits (see Annex D of the main report). The questions relating to governance, management and operational issues would be especially pertinent in this regard. HEFCE, HESA and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) have recently commissioned a project on data efficiency which is looking at the development of a possible tool to assist HEIs in their own data management. This project might usefully take on board the findings emerging from our study
 - in the context of the ongoing review of T-funding, HEFCE may need to consider whether to consult the sector further on any possible changes to the current student non-completion funding definition. While many in the sector clearly feel that the HEFCE definition needs to be reconsidered, it will be important to ensure, should this come about, that any new definition is as neutral, transparent, clear and non-bureaucratic, as possible. It would be helpful to do some modelling of options in advance of any consultation with the sector.
29. AHUA has committed itself to taking these suggestions forward in further discussion with the sector and will look for additional support from HEFCE, where appropriate.

1: Introduction

Rationale for the study

1.1 The robustness of student non-completions data from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is a perennial issue that arises through HEFCE's data audit and the HESES/HESA² reconciliation process, and can occasionally contribute to significant funding adjustments for a small number of institutions in any one year. The rationale for this study recognised that student non-completions is an area which would benefit from some focused, sector-led research into current practice. The two main aims of this research were, therefore, as follows:

- to contribute to the evidence base on good practice in relation to the current policies, processes and systems in place for recording and dealing with student non-completions, and
- to demonstrate to external stakeholders sector-level commitment to continuing to improve performance in this area.

Study purpose

1.2 SQW Consulting was appointed by the Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA), with support from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in August 2007:

- to undertake a review of the ways in which individual HEIs define, recognise, record and report on student non-completions, and
- to produce a report setting out good practice, areas of risk, recommendations for future systematic improvement, and to identify areas where further work might be desirable, if appropriate.

1.3 The approach (see Annex A) asked for a small pilot study based on a cross section of no more than 4-5 HEIs. The key elements of our approach were:

- scoping interviews with members of the project steering group and other stakeholders, and a review of relevant literature/documentation
- visits to a sample of five institutions which involved semi-structured interviews with a cross section of key staff (including senior managers, people in registry and planning offices, faculty and departmental administrators and some academics) to discuss current policies, processes and systems on student non-completion. The work also included a review of institutional documentation to ascertain the systems in place at each HEI and a minimal amount of walk-through testing, though this task was not expected to replicate the detailed data audits carried out by HEFCE, and

² Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey/Higher Education Statistics Agency

- sector-level validation of the emerging research findings via HEIs and AHUA members in the form of a national consultative seminar.

1.4 A fuller account of the methodology is set out in Annex C.

Defining student non-completions

1.5 The focus of this study is on processes and good practice in the ways in which HEIs report on student non-completions. It recognises that different parties and stakeholders will have their own particular interests and definitions. HEIs will see this issue within the broader context of their own academic regulations and policies relating to student retention and progression. HEFCE's definition of student non-completion for the purposes of the Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey (HESES) data return has particular regard to the student interest and overall accountability for public funds (see Annex B for a summary of the HEFCE definition). The HE performance indicators (PIs) published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) provide another perspective on this broad issue via their tables on non-continuation rates for full-time undergraduate students. These PIs are presented in two ways: the first considers students who start in a particular year, and looks at whether they are still in higher education one year later; the second method looks at projected outcomes over a longer period. Other stakeholders such as the Student Loans Company (SLC) and local education authorities (LEAs) have a primary interest in knowing when a student has withdrawn from study or changed mode of study as this will impact directly on student loan repayments and entitlements.

Key research issues

1.6 Building on the rationale and requirements of the project, we set out a number of key research questions and issues that the study should address, which are listed below:

- are student non-completion policies, processes and systems widely understood and consistently followed at all relevant levels within the HEI and its collaborative partners (where appropriate)?
- how do HEIs monitor their student non-completion systems and processes to ensure that they are operating effectively?
- what checks and balances might be in place to identify when systems are inadequate or processes are not being followed?
- how are policies, processes and systems monitored and reviewed at senior management and governing body level?
- what is the fit between the HEFCE definition of non-completion and institutions' own academic regulations?
- the extent to which existing policies, processes and systems contribute to more robust data collection within institutions

- the identification of good practice which could be disseminated for the benefit of the sector as a whole, and
- the overall extent to which existing HEI policies, processes and systems for capturing student non-completions are effective and fit for purpose.

1.7 We have used these key questions and issues as a thematic structure for our research findings in Chapter 2 and conclusions in Chapter 3. The suggestions to AHUA and HEFCE on further work are set out in Chapter 4.

1.8 The report is supported by four annexes:

- Annex A: Terms of reference (extract from original ITT)
- Annex B: HEFCE definition of non-completion
- Annex C: Study methodology
- Annex D: HEI briefing note and questions.

2: Key findings

- 2.1 In this chapter, we present our key findings against the main research questions. Our evidence is drawn mainly from in-depth, semi-structured discussions with staff at the five case study institutions, supported, where appropriate, with feedback from participants at the consultative seminar.

Are student non-completion policies, processes and systems widely understood and consistently followed at all relevant levels within the HEI and its collaborative partners (where appropriate)?

- 2.2 All of the case study HEIs were clear about the significance of student non-completion data to the overall performance and position of their institutions. They understood the potential impacts – both in funding and reputational terms – that an increase in student non-completions could have on their HEI. The importance of maintaining or increasing student numbers was seen as a key factor in institutions' longer-term sustainability and in developing and improving their infrastructure. Institutions accepted that achieving a zero percent student non-completion rate was unrealistic, but they were keen to continue to minimise student non-completions and to achieve better data quality. More generally, information on student non-completions was also informing changes to the types and extent of academic and other support being provided to students in the case study institutions. Measures included: providing more formal contact hours with tutors; greater monitoring of non-attendance; buddies/mentors for first year undergraduates; and providing more opportunities for social events for new students.
- 2.3 Notwithstanding the high level of importance being given to this issue, institutions recognised that there were still some problems and challenges related to the communication and ownership of student non-completion data at the institutional level. While senior managers and staff in central units tended to have a greater strategic awareness of the significance of student non-completion data, this was often less clearly understood by academic and administrative staff in more devolved roles. In particular, staff in some schools/faculties were not always fully aware of the funding implications associated with student non-completions. The case study HEIs recognised the need to communicate more effectively to staff that student non-completion requirements were necessary to ensure the integrity of institutional data, tuition fee invoicing, funding and statistical returns.
- 2.4 These views were echoed by the seminar participants who agreed that many staff in more devolved roles did not fully understand the connection between non-completions and funding. This could lead to problems with academic departments missing data submission deadlines. Participants noted that academics tended to be keener to send through information on student non-completions where they could see a clear link to overall pass rates for their particular module/programme.
- 2.5 Institutions and seminar participants also highlighted the pivotal role played by training and guidance (both initial and ongoing) for all relevant staff to ensure the effective operation of

student records systems (SRS). The case study HEIs were providing their own structured training and support, delivered by a central team/unit which also provided some form of helpdesk, general support or troubleshooting services. Relevant staff were also receiving external training (usually by the SRS software provider). Internal and external training were usually part of a fixed or annual programme of activities which was often linked to key points in the academic calendar; some HEIs had developed a three year training strategy. As well as improving data quality, integrity and analysis, the benefits of more consistent and systematic training on centralised student records systems included:

- reduction in mixed practice at HEIs
- making it easier for staff to cover sick leave in other schools, and
- evidence that more people within the case study institutions were able to complete the HESES return.

2.6 Within HEIs, user group training was provided both within peer groups and also on a one-to-one basis. There appeared to be a wide range of courses on offer, both general and specific, depending on the nature of the data role. Examples of topics covered included: data queries, data maintenance of the student record, registration, applications, adding modules, and adding examination marks. In addition, more informal local training was provided at the school/faculty level, which was particularly beneficial for new staff joining an institution in-between central training courses. Institutions were also making use of super-user champions within schools who could train other users in specific areas.

2.7 In many cases, staff were not allowed on to the overall SRS, or on to certain parts of the system, until they had received the necessary level of training. Where temporary staff were brought in to process enrolments, the same principles and processes were generally applied, with all such staff undergoing training in advance of the enrolment period.

2.8 Central support teams were active in alerting other staff to changes in practices and processes via documents, e-mail messages and, at one HEI, through the use of a newsletter. Processes were well documented in user and support manuals, booklets, and exercises which are kept up-to-date and available electronically via institutions' intranets. In one institution, no paper copies were circulated to ensure that staff used the latest versions of the materials on the intranet.

How do HEIs monitor their systems and processes to ensure that they are operating effectively?

2.9 All of the case studies demonstrated awareness of the need for regular monitoring and were continually looking for ways to improve their systems and processes. For two of the case study institutions, in particular, internal re-structuring had recently taken place, or was still ongoing, which was partly driven by the need to improve internal systems and data ownership and collection. At all levels, institutions reinforced the importance of student non-completions within the broader context of student retention and progression. An important overall driver for monitoring effectiveness was the need to develop trust in the data at all levels across the HEI.

- 2.10 Monitoring usually takes place within a central function/unit in each institution and involves some form of annual programme based around key census points during the academic year. While these may differ for each institution, key times normally include late August, late October and mid November (in advance of the HESES return). Institutions are able to produce data quality reports on a regular basis (i.e. daily, weekly, monthly), with a higher frequency of reporting during main enrolment/registration periods.
- 2.11 Key factors that the case study HEIs cited as important in their monitoring of student non-completions information included:
- holding quarterly meetings to discuss data quality which involve a wide range of staff
 - mapping out when assessment takes place so the central team is aware of the relevant deadlines
 - tailoring reports across administrative units and schools – looking at variations in the retention rates and getting schools to check these and chase up students, as necessary, and
 - linking the data to their own internal student satisfaction surveys to highlight particular problem areas.
- 2.12 One institution mentioned that it was currently considering ways to develop its internal systems to incentivise the timely inputting of marks.
- 2.13 Institutions also emphasised that it took time to communicate to staff about the different internal and external processes and definitions. They recognised that there was some variability in practice between individual schools/faculties which was sometimes linked to the numbers of people needing to be trained in new systems and processes.
- 2.14 The case study institutions were asked to comment on what they perceived to be the appropriate balance between timeliness and accuracy in relation to the recording and reporting of a student non-completion. The consensus was that both accuracy and timeliness were important and necessary, but that accuracy of student non-completion data was the priority. An institution must be in a position to report that its data are fit for purpose regardless of when the data are required. This was seen as particularly significant in the following contexts: possible funding clawback; the need to notify the Student Loans Company of student withdrawals; and to meet the requirements of specific subjects, such as the health professions, where attendance has to be closely monitored.
- 2.15 It was recognised that the timely reporting of student non-completion data (and, in this regard, HE data in general) has become more complex and challenging. Higher education itself is in a major process of change and needs to meet public accountability requirements alongside the different expectations of the widening participation and employer engagement agenda. Some of the case study HEIs have moved away from the model of a traditional academic year and are enrolling students throughout the year. Maintaining the accuracy of data in these more fluid circumstances is becoming increasingly challenging; a one year snap-shot is seen to be less reliable than previously.

2.16 The following examples in Table 2-1 describe how close to the point of activity and how frequently the case study institutions are currently capturing details of student activities which relate to non-completion.

Table 2-1: Examples of capturing student activities relating to non-completion issues

| Institution | Description of the process |
|---|--|
| A – a medium-sized, mixed, post-92 institution | <p>The relevant form is completed by a student who wishes to withdraw, which can be submitted at any time. The student's tutor needs to sign the form which ensures that students cannot just leave the institution and that they are making the right decision. For some schools there are other reporting pressures, for example the Faculty of Education receives a monthly payment from the TDA. Timely information on student non-completions is of a high importance as otherwise the institution incurs the cost of recollecting the bursary monies.</p> <p>Data on non-completion are collected at Exam Boards although the growth in non-standard year courses has caused difficulties in reporting.</p> |
| B – a large selecting institution | <p>Students wanting to leave must speak to their tutor with the process to be followed set out in the student handbook. The institution has found that temporary withdrawal is more common as it tries to retain students where possible. On the SRS, students can be defined as a permanent leaver; temporary leaver (often ill health); or external student (those on their 3rd attempt to re-sit). External students have around 50% return rates so counting these as non-completions may result in an over-estimation of withdrawal rates.</p> <p>Taught students who are 'presumed withdrawn' are sent a letter and the student needs to reply within 10 working days. A leavers' form is enclosed with the letter. For research students, after a 3 month delay in registration the central team at the HEI writes to the relevant school and then contacts the student. Within the student record system, there is a work flow process for withdrawal during the academic year. The leavers' form is filled out online, printed and signed by the student and tutor, and sent to records. This is actioned by central office within 48 hours; usually faster. The online submission of the form on the SRS triggers a Diploma/Cert award (if appropriate), and automated emails are sent to accounts and the Scholarship office.</p> |
| C – a small, new institution | <p>As early as weeks 4-5 in the term staff are checking on student non-completions issues. The cause for concern procedure is the main process for dealing with non-completions at the institution. Initially in the Autumn term the aim is to ensure that students on a course at the HEI are on the system. Then if a student is not attending or there is a problem the process followed is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a) they are sent an email/text to go and see their module tutor • b) if they still do not attend, an appointment is made in writing and as a result an action plan is developed for the student • c) finally, students are offered the right to withdraw or are taken off the course. Different courses have different time periods for deciding when to contact students; there is no set timeframe. <p>The system is dependent on the module co-ordinators identifying if a student is non-attending.</p> <p>The first point of assessment is around Christmas so if a student does not submit then, they will also be sent a form to explain why. A further scheme is used to identify at risk students and they are provided with greater support to stop them becoming student non-completions. This scheme, RAPP (Retention, Achievement, Progression Programme), identifies and supports students that have failed once already and has been reasonably successful.</p> |
| D – a medium-sized, mixed-economy, pre-92 institution | <p>At the end of Semester 1 (Jan/Feb) the HEI will check that all the marks have been entered on to the system. The same checking process takes place again in June/July. A number of schools also have paper registers to record attendance and if students fail to attend three sessions then the students will be contacted. If this non-attendance continues, for example up to 4-5 weeks in total, a letter is sent to the student. If there is no response/continued non-attendance for a further 2-3 weeks then the student may be taken off the course and therefore becomes a non-completion.</p> <p>It is the responsibility of academics to enter students' marks for modules on to the SRS which means that data entry has been pushed to the actual source. This has not been a huge issue as academics have demonstrated that they want to own the marks and they can only enter marks for modules that they teach via a web enabled product; there is double checking by admin staff. Previously there was much double entry of marks by academics and admin staff.</p> |

| Institution | Description of the process |
|--|---|
| E – a large, inner-city based institution with a widening participation mission and a significant part-time student population | Attendance sheets are handed in to course/unit administrators. If a student is away for more than 2-3 weeks, an administrator alerts the course director who then follows up by contacting the student (by letter and/or telephone). If there is no response after 4 weeks, the situation is formalised as a withdrawal at the time of the exam board. The institution is putting significant effort into ensuring that this process is as routine and as consistent as possible; it is particularly critical to have good processes in place during the first year when most withdrawals tend to occur. |

Source: SQW (2008) Student non-completions study

What checks and balances might be in place to identify when systems are inadequate or processes are not being followed?

- 2.17 Some of the case study institutions had more systematic and regular checking procedures in place, whilst others tended to rely more on the natural checks and balances provided by enrolment, assessment/examination boards and re-enrolment processes; errors or problems get picked up in both systems, but in the latter it is sometimes later in the cycle.
- 2.18 Student non-completion was recognised by the case study institutions as a key area of risk both in funding and reputational terms. The ‘social’ risk to students who fail to complete their studies was given a similarly high priority by the HEIs interviewed. Reflecting the serious nature of these risks, all of the institutions had some form of risk register or risk strategy which was embedded within the responsibilities of the senior management team. The institutions were also exercising greater central control over enrolment and registration processes, so that data were of a better quality, available for analysis in real-time and actions could be taken more swiftly if problems were identified.
- 2.19 Some seminar participants expressed concerns that funding could become the major driver rather than focusing on the achievements/progression of the student. Institutions needed to maintain a balance and to ensure that their academic rationale remained at the heart of their policies and processes.
- 2.20 Case study HEIs regarded the tracking of student attendance as a significant and ongoing challenge in this regard. Institutions were using a variety of tools and techniques to obtain better information including: registers; swipe cards; piloting of fingerprint access; and the logging of coursework.
- 2.21 Seminar participants highlighted that some students, especially in their first year of study, found it challenging to cope with a more self-motivated approach to learning and did not always engage as fully with their institution as they might. At the same time, participants recognised that the culture in higher education was one where students have a considerable degree of autonomy and there were concerns about using attendance measures as a proxy for wider student engagement with their studies. Despite these concerns, it was noted that electronic registers had been used with some degree of success and that receiving letters relating to non-attendance could act as a timely ‘wake-up call’ for students. Linking access to student services/on-line learning resources to the portal may also encourage students to complete formal enrolment processes.
- 2.22 Case study institutions were asked how quickly and regularly they notified key external bodies such as the Student Loans Company (SLC) and Local Education Authorities (LEAs)

about student withdrawals or other pertinent changes. All institutions stated that notification would happen as soon as possible and as regularly as necessary; this was an automatic component built in to their systems. It was recognised, however, that different systems and processes within institutions do have some impact on effective and timely notification. To a large extent, institutions are reliant on students and staff in schools/faculties following the processes set out in academic regulations. If a student instigates the proper process (i.e. completing the withdrawal form) then the SLC and/or LEA will be notified more quickly. Otherwise, institutions have to use the types of checks and balances outlined at the start of this section.

- 2.23 Several case study HEIs commented that the process of informing the SLC and/or LEA had improved within their institution. In most cases, this was linked to the introduction of a new student records system which meant that there was no longer a reliance on paper-based, devolved processes to capture this information and pass it through to the centre.
- 2.24 Case study institutions were also asked how they could provide more timely student non-completions data to external bodies. Institutions stated that they had found the processes for dealing with the SLC and LEAs both time consuming and not particularly efficient. They would like to deal with the SLC electronically and felt it would be useful if a web-based portal could be developed to allow information to be transferred on a two-way basis (such a portal is, in fact, currently under development by the SLC). At present HEIs have to upload or download student files which all institutions tend to do at the same time. This is slow and can lead to a loans backlog, with institutions receiving the brunt of any criticism from students even though they have little control over the problem. Although LEAs will have a less direct role in this process in future, institutions noted that authorities still use paper-based systems which can also result in further delays and cause dissatisfaction amongst students. The process of notification is tortuous and circular: if a student changes to a different programme the HEI will inform the LEA, the LEA informs the SLC and then the SLC will discuss the situation with the institution.
- 2.25 Over the last few years and in recognition of the growing problem of student fraud, institutions have introduced more rigorous processes to prevent people from acquiring financial support (e.g. bursaries and student loans) or immigration status to which they are not entitled. Eligibility is carefully checked at the point of registration and on application for each source of funding. Usual institutional practice is summarised below:
- at enrolment, all students are required to provide proof of their identity in more than one form (i.e. original passport and birth certificate)
 - students also have to complete a Student Status Assessment to determine their fee and funding status (Home/EU/Overseas etc)
 - the information included in the assessment is then verified against the documentation that the student provides (i.e. Home Office letters or proof of being in the UK/EEA for the requisite ordinary residence period).
- 2.26 Institutions also work closely with UCAS and Local Authorities to identify and eliminate fraudulent applications and take advice from UKCOSA and DIUS in identifying fraudulent

immigration and identity documentation. Further checks on the status of students occur before allowing them to transfer between full-time and part-time modes (i.e. those with student visas are not allowed to transfer to part-time study as this would be breaking their visa conditions).

How are policies, processes and systems monitored and reviewed at senior management and governing body level?

- 2.27 There was evidence across all the case study institutions that the monitoring and review of student non-completions was built into HEIs' management and governance structures as part of a strategic and more holistic focus on student retention and progression. This was seen to be a serious issue and there was widespread recognition of the challenges of non-completion for the HE sector more generally, as well as for these particular HEIs.
- 2.28 All of the institutions had a nominated individual (or in some cases more than one person) within their senior management team who had designated responsibility for the institution's performance in terms of student retention/non-completions; this was often linked to one or more of an HEI's key performance indicators (KPIs). In addition, all case study HEIs had designated a particular committee within their governance structure with the role of monitoring and responding to any non-completion issues as part of their strategic approach to retention. In some cases, this also led to regular reporting to the governing body of the institution.
- 2.29 Senior managers were also asked whether other factors such as the introduction of variable tuition fees and student bursaries were having an impact on student non-completion data. At the time that this research was undertaken, and bearing in mind the relatively recent introduction of these funding changes, institutions could only point to a few examples of changes which had not, in their view, significantly affected student non-completion figures to date. Although students were aware of the costs involved in delaying withdrawal, there was no real evidence that more students were leaving because of particular financial trigger points.
- 2.30 Some staff commented that the impact of variable fees had resulted in more students being put under pressure by undertaking part-time work while studying. In some cases, students were switching from full-time to part-time modes, to benefit from lower fee rates and to enable them to combine study and work more effectively. One institution was experiencing higher student withdrawal in certain subjects, such as media studies and art and design. These subjects had been previously well subscribed but were now being perceived by some students as less economically valuable; a similar pattern was apparent in language courses involving a year abroad. This limited evidence suggests that variable fees may be having some impact on students' choice of programme, but they are not yet significantly influencing overall non-completion rates. Institutions recognised that there could potentially be greater impacts in the future if the cap on variable tuition fees was substantially raised or removed.

What is the fit between the HEFCE definition of non-completion and institutions' own academic regulations?

- 2.31 All of the case study institutions expressed some criticisms of the fit between HEFCE's definition of student non-completion (see Annex B) and their own academic regulations and related internal policies. They were also clear, however, that their behaviour was not unduly influenced by the HEFCE definition; the key driving factors were institutions' own academic regulations, student progression and success. In some instances, it was noted that staff actively encourage students who are struggling to take only those modules that they feel able to complete, even when this may impact adversely on the number of completions (based on the HEFCE definition). This view was reinforced by the seminar participants.
- 2.32 Some institutions had found ways to develop greater fit between their own academic regulations and the definition. For at least one case study institution, and a number of the HEIs that participated in the seminar, the need to report against the HEFCE definition had contributed to changes in the assessment of students which aimed to identify potential problem areas and to minimise the risk of subsequent failure to complete. For example, some institutions carry out more formative assessments early on, mainly in the first term for first year undergraduates, in order to build up students' confidence in advance of completing their summative assessments.
- 2.33 Case study institutions and seminar participants perceived the HEFCE definition to be predicated on the model of a traditional full-time undergraduate and felt that it presented particular challenges for institutions with large numbers/proportions of: widening participation students; learners studying on part-time and more flexible routes (including postgraduates); and students on particular professional programmes with their own attendance requirements. Institutions' concerns (both case study institutions and seminar participants) also revealed a number of possible misperceptions or misinterpretations of the HEFCE definition. While the definition has expanded and evolved over time in recognition of the need for further guidance for HEIs on this area, these modifications have also contributed to the sector's perception that the definition itself is complex and opaque. This is a significant point for HEFCE and the sector to consider further.
- 2.34 It was also felt that the HEFCE definition was capable of a variety of interpretations on the ground and was not always interpreted strictly or consistently, leading to concerns about overall transparency and fairness. The case study institutions, and particularly academic staff within them, felt that it was unfair for students not to be counted when they had been taught for the whole year. Institutions also expressed a variety of broader concerns about fairness which are briefly summarised below:
- students who have satisfactorily completed the year and are progressing under the HEI's academic regulations may be deemed to be non-completions
 - the definition is taken to rely on a model of a final assessment at the module level which is no longer considered real or valid by a number of institutions, and
 - students who are deemed to be non-completers because they did not take all of their planned assessments may, nonetheless, have successfully attained an HE award.

- 2.35 Case study institutions and seminar participants also expressed some confusion about the range of terms which were used (sometimes interchangeably) to describe this area (including non-completion, non-continuation, and non-progression).
- 2.36 There were some variations in view on the amendments to the HESES reporting arrangements for 2007-8 which were designed to take account of the changes arising from the review of the HESA student record. While one case study institution welcomed the change in reporting arrangements for students on non-standard years of programme of study (to enable the FTE to be split across the relevant academic years of study), others were uncertain about the potential impacts of this change³.
- 2.37 Given the comments made on the current HEFCE definition of non-completion, the case study institutions were questioned as to whether the definition is distorting their institution's behaviour in ways which work against strategic, academic and data management or other priorities. Institutions were clear that the definition does not distort institutional behaviour but misunderstandings or local interpretations do exist, particularly in relation to academic staff not being aware of the HEFCE definition and the financial implications that it can have for institutions.

The HEFCE view

- 2.38 As part of this study, the project team interviewed HEFCE staff to explore the rationale for the current HEFCE definition. While the Council will continue to look at the definition in the light of any significant future changes to the T-funding method, staff believe that the current definition enables them to take a neutral stance as to how provision is actually structured within institutions. The HEFCE definition is intended to provide a fair and consistent basis for reporting across the diverse range of institutions and types of provision.
- 2.39 Key drivers for the current HEFCE definition of student non-completion can be summarised as follows:
- protection of the student interest and minimising any incentive for institutions to oversell their courses to students who are unlikely to complete them
 - the need to strike a balance between input -and output-based measures
 - minimising the accountability burden and the potential compromising of academic standards which might be a risk if funding were linked explicitly to the award of academic credit or qualifications
 - helping HEIs to 'bear down' on rates of non-completion, which has been a regular feature of Government grant letters to HEFCE over the last few years⁴, and
 - keeping non-completions outwith the funding method means that the unit of resource is not further reduced as a result. If non-completions were counted within the funding

³ The changes to HESES reporting for 2007/08 are summarised in the HEFCE Circular letter 15/2007 which is available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/circlelets/2007/cl15_07/.

⁴ See, for example, the Secretary of State's grant letter of 31 January 2006 which stated, "I am particularly keen that you should work with institutions to ensure that any increases in the widening participation allocations are used on the most effective interventions, including those that bear down on non-completion rates."

method this would result in a reduction in the unit of resource of approximately seven per cent.

- 2.40 A number of suggestions were made by the case study institutions and seminar participants about the way they would like to see the HEFCE definition developing in the future. Key features included the need for more flexibility in the approach to reflect changing patterns of study and a greater focus on student achievement (including partial achievement) and outcomes. To some extent, this is being addressed by the measures being introduced by HEFCE in 2009-10 (see Annex B for further details).

The extent to which existing policies, processes and systems contribute to more robust data collection within institutions

- 2.41 Data quality was a priority for the case study institutions and all were making efforts to ensure that their data were cleaner and more reliable, as well as introducing greater rigour into the data collection process (see Table 2-2 for one example). Institutions saw it as their responsibility that students were properly and accurately enrolled on and attending their modules/programmes; in some professional subjects (e.g. health), attendance was compulsory for students.

Table 2-2: Efforts to improve data quality at one HEI

Problem

One institution acknowledged that it previously had major problems with the quality of its data which were partly related to poor internal processes/practices and the culture of the institution. The overall approach to student information management and data quality was regarded as unsustainable. It was also having an adverse impact on the findings of the annual student satisfaction survey. The HEI recognised the need to make data checking more interesting and rewarding, as well as more effective and efficient.

Change

An internal project led by senior staff looked at how to transform all of the data processes within the institution. The outcomes from this project included: changing the submission of marks by academics; the decommissioning of localised systems across the institution; and communication to staff about the importance of data quality. All of these actions were sponsored and championed by the senior management team within the institution. There is now a desire to take student data and turn them into a strategic asset so there is better use of data in reports and less conflicting use of language.

Source: SQW (2008) *Student non-completions study*

- 2.42 The case study HEIs placed significant emphasis on the internal value of analysing and using their own student non-completions data. This helped them to develop a better understanding of what problems, if any, they faced in terms of non-completion.
- 2.43 All of the case study HEIs were using data to contribute to a more comprehensive range of strategic documents and reports for the wider benefit of the institution than had been the case previously. Examples included:
- reporting on a weekly basis during the major phase of student enrolments (i.e. September to December) as part of overall modelling of student numbers against institutional plans
 - identifying trends and patterns, and modelling student numbers at key points in the year (such as December, April [Easter] and June)
 - conducting an annual review of completion across every field and all modules

- embedding the issue of student non-completions as a key component within all other school and institution level reviews
- producing module statistics for examination boards which provided analyses of non-submissions
- increasing scrutiny of the National Student Survey results and responding to any issues raised in a systematic way, and
- developing a retention strategy which monitors the HE performance indicators and leads to the identification of at-risk areas and consequent review of data and attrition rates.

2.44 Despite this increase in the different types of reporting being used to track non-completions, both the case study institutions and seminar participants recognised that there was still further progress to be made. This included addressing the following areas:

- variability in the rates of non-completions year on year, especially for courses with high contact hours (e.g. engineering) or those where there are small numbers, which means there can be relatively large fluctuations in non-completion
- smarter tools and systems for accessing and manipulating the data so that ongoing analysis and testing could continue outside official internal and external reporting deadlines
- the need to take a more tailored, subject-specific approach as direct comparisons between subjects were likely to be inappropriate
- variability internally (between schools/faculties) in the ways students were categorised and in the approaches taken to follow-up on student non-attendance. Also some schools/faculties were still running their own parallel systems
- there can be a time lag within institutions where students will still be on the system even though they have withdrawn.

2.45 The seminar participants added that, in practice, students may drift away over a period of time, so recording a date of last attendance can be difficult. There can also be significant delays in submitting leavers' forms (both because it is difficult to track down students to establish whether or not they have withdrawn, and because forms are not always returned in a timely fashion).

2.46 Seminar participants identified greater variability in practices than was evident in the five case study HEIs. Within some of these institutions, student non-completion data were not used internally and were kept very separate from academic review and regulations. By contrast, and reinforcing the picture emerging from the case studies, other institutions were actively engaged in using student non-completion data alongside other key indicators to monitor the health of programmes, courses and subjects. In some cases, student non-completion figures were used as a key performance indicator and faculties were held to account for their track record.

- 2.47 The case study institutions were broadly positive about their current student records systems (SRS)⁵, seeing them as good investments which were leading to improvements in data quality and in institutions' ability to interrogate student-related data. None of the systems, however, appeared to meet all of the needs of HEIs; they required regular re-configuration and updating to fit with each institution's own circumstances and in response to external factors such as changes to HESA and UCAS requirements. As a result of ongoing configuration issues, institutions recognised that their SRS were not always being used as effectively as possible. These points were echoed by seminar participants.
- 2.48 Case study institutions recognised that moving from one student record system to another caused significant pressures and drops in data quality which were often difficult to mitigate at the time. In some cases, there had been initial problems with data migration which needed careful checking and a lot of work had been done to validate data as they were being transferred from one system to another. In the longer term, this actually put institutions in a stronger position – in terms of overall data quality – than they were previously. For some of the case study institutions, the implementation of a new student record system had been further complicated as other new systems within the HEI were being introduced around the same time.
- 2.49 The case study institutions provided details of actions that they had taken to minimise any drops in data quality, as far as possible. These included:
- undertaking a significant amount of work on cleaning and preparing the data before migration to the new system
 - timing the implementation process to take account of the data reporting requirements of HESES, HESA and SLC
 - introducing more levels of training and communication than were previously in place, such as
 - establishing a 'super-users' group which enabled dialogue between central IT staff and school representatives (and which had remained in place post implementation)
 - obtaining feedback from staff – whereby the views of school staff (i.e. data administrators/inputters) were taken on board when deciding what changes to make (during and post system implementation)
 - participation in any training and support offered by the software providers such as their own 'super-users' groups, and
 - reviewing organisational structures to maximise data use and its influence on senior level decision making.

⁵ Four different types of student record system were being used by the five institutions, namely Aggresso, Banner (two HEIs), SITS and QLS.

Identification of good practice which could be disseminated for the benefit of the sector as a whole

- 2.50 There was considerable evidence of good practice in the ways in which the case study HEIs were recognising the strategic importance of student non-completions data and ensuring that these were given appropriate status and scrutiny within governance and management structures. The use of KPIs and senior management champions, combined with effective communication and training for all levels of relevant staff, were recognised as contributing to raising the profile of this issue internally and improving performance. The designation of a committee with responsibility for student retention also enabled central consideration of student non-completion issues and helped to identify good practice for wider dissemination within the institution.
- 2.51 There were good examples of institutions making effective use of the data for their own internal purposes, both for monitoring potential problems and for better ongoing reporting of information across the institution. Making sure that the institution invested properly in its student records system and was making full use of the range of ways in which it could configure the system to meet its requirements was also important in this regard. A critical aspect of this process has entailed, for some HEIs, the removal of any duplicate or shadow student records systems based at the local, school level which were previously adding to data quality problems.
- 2.52 Institutions also highlighted the importance of developing an effective interface between the data and academic issues; front-line academics needed to understand the significance of student non-completion data and its possible impact on the institution. It was noted that some institutions did debate and scrutinise course data and provide staff seminars on the best ways to teach students and therefore reduce non-completions. Some other examples of good practice are listed below:
- the development of a short and user-friendly summary of relevant terms for circulation to Heads of Department
 - engaging staff across the HEI in clarifying reporting lines and responsibilities, and building a sense of data ownership in individual schools and departments, and
 - regular meetings/briefings between key staff in the central administration and academics/administrative staff in school roles which had helped to build better relationships.
- 2.53 HEIs were engaged in a range of retention practices designed to identify and support those students felt to be at risk of non-completion or withdrawal. These were often linked to improving overall student engagement both with their programme of study and with the institution more generally. One case study institution had set up a student welfare centre staffed by experienced, retired academics who were able to provide a good understanding of university processes. At the consultative seminar, there was a discussion about a scheme developed by one HEI which provides targeted support to young males who are struggling to cope with general life skills in the early weeks of their course. Institutions also recognised that it can be difficult to attribute significance to any one variable in ascertaining the critical

factors leading to withdrawal or non-completion but all were looking to collect more detailed and accurate information on the reason(s) for withdrawal.

2.54 Case study HEIs and seminar participants also highlighted a range of other areas of good practice in ensuring a high level of understanding of the issues across an institution. These included:

- highlighting to programme leaders the financial implications of non-submission of key data – which was found to have a positive impact on practice on the ground
- using non-completions data to inform the number of admissions offers made
- making greater use of the data and linking them to relevant findings from the National Student Survey (and in some cases institutions' own student satisfaction surveys). Student feedback was beginning to have a more significant impact on structures and processes, as well as curriculum content. The aim for institutions was to identify issues before they became major problems and to target resources to support those students in danger of withdrawing
- the use of key census dates by some HEIs to release full or partial bursary payments. In one institution, its own bursary award was only paid on completion of the year
- the trialling of monitoring systems to ascertain whether students were actively engaged in study or could benefit from some additional support. Sometimes these systems were linked to access to learning resources via the student portal. Concerns were also raised, however, about over-monitoring and the possible use of this information by other bodies. As already noted, these types of systems should not be seen as a straightforward proxy for student engagement and progression
- the importance of having robust enrolment/registration processes in place for all students, including those at partner colleges or on distance learning programmes. Some HEIs enrol students over the weekend before term starts. Data and information are input centrally beforehand and students then check and validate these and provide necessary proof of identity, academic qualifications etc
- the need to have regular and systematic clearances of out-of-date deferrals/referrals from student records systems
- limiting the usual number of attempts to pass any module (one HEI has limited this to two attempts) – with any exceptions being dealt with by a special panel, and
- the use of central points for handing in all coursework; this enabled an HEI to have a better overview of student completion and progress.

3: Conclusions

The extent to which existing HEI policies, processes and systems for capturing student non-completions data are effective and fit for purpose

- 3.1 Overall, the study portrays a good and improving picture of the ways in which HEIs define, recognise, record and report on student non-completions. The five case study HEIs effectively demonstrated the seriousness with which the sector treats this issue and provided many examples of good practice in the ways in which HEIs ensure that student non-completions data are both robust and also inform their wider strategic developments. Student support mechanisms designed to reduce the likelihood of non-completions have also improved and HEIs are generally looking to intervene earlier where problems are identified. Although the sample of five HEIs was small, the consultative seminar provided an excellent opportunity to triangulate the findings with representatives of a much larger number of HEIs. There was universal recognition by seminar participants of the picture emerging from the case study institutions.
- 3.2 The study provided a timely opportunity to reflect on current practices and to suggest how student non-completion policies, processes and systems may need to be developed in the future to reflect more flexible patterns of study and the increasing diversity of the student body. The current policy emphasis on employer engagement and the development of more 'bite-sized' learning opportunities to be delivered in the workplace will add to this agenda. Case study HEIs and seminar participants emphasised the importance of transparency, fairness and a focus on student progression and achievement as key elements to inform future developments.
- 3.3 Some of the key operational changes being introduced by the HEIs included:
- greater investment in student support services with some schools running specific interventions to monitor student attendance more effectively with the aim of identifying and mitigating any problems early on
 - standardised training provided to staff to ensure that the student record system is used in a consistent way and to improve the overall accuracy of data, and
 - improved systems and processes for dealing with student enquiries, including how to handle students who want to withdraw and clearly identifying their reasons for reaching this decision.
- 3.4 In relation to data management overall, the case study HEIs appeared to be moving towards a model where the centre has an overarching view of the process (data quality, accuracy and analysis) while most of the data entry is devolved to administrators who sit within schools. At the same time, most of the institutions have removed any duplicate or shadow systems that previously existed within schools; only one case study HEI in our sample was still undergoing

this transition. With only one data system in place, central staff can focus primarily on data quality – whilst the administrative staff in schools are responsible for data entry.

4: Suggestions for further work to AHUA and HEFCE

4.1 The suggestions for further work and future improvements are summarised below:

- it would be useful for AHUA and HEFCE to consider further ways to encourage the development and dissemination of good practice in this area. This might take the form of some demonstrator projects (perhaps funded via the HEFCE Leadership, Governance and Management Fund) or through relevant sector networks. Our study has clearly demonstrated an interest across the sector in engaging on this issue. Possible areas for further work could include: early interventions to minimise non-completions; electronic logging of coursework; ways of monitoring attendance (including the implications of the new requirements on HEIs to monitor attendance of international students); improving assessment and examination board practices
- AHUA and HEFCE should also consider working with institutions to produce some user-friendly briefing materials on student non-completions data and related issues for staff at various levels, and carrying out particular roles, within institutions. These materials might also usefully clarify the range of terminology used in this area of activity
- a self-evaluation framework or checklist for HEIs could be developed based on an edited version of the questions explored in our case study visits (see Annex D for the list of areas covered). The questions relating to governance, management and operational issues would be especially pertinent in this regard. HEFCE, HESA and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) have recently commissioned a project on data efficiency which is looking at the development of a possible tool to assist HEIs in their own data management. This project might usefully take on board the findings emerging from our study
- in the context of the ongoing review of T-funding, HEFCE may need to consider whether to consult the sector further on any possible changes to the current student non-completion funding definition. While many in the sector clearly feel that the HEFCE definition needs to be reconsidered, it will be important to ensure, should this come about, that any new definition is as neutral, transparent, clear and non-bureaucratic, as possible. It would be helpful to do some modelling of options in advance of any consultation with the sector.

4.2 AHUA has committed itself to taking forward these suggestions in further consultation with the sector and will look for additional support from HEFCE, where appropriate.

Annex A: Terms of reference

Extract from the initial invitation to tender

1. The scope of the project is to research, understand and evaluate how individual HEIs define, recognise, record and report a student non-completion; and to make recommendations for systematic improvements.
2. The project approach is broadly as follows:
 - The project is to be overseen by AHUA with a steering group also including UCAS, BUFDG and one or two academics. HEFCE will provide support and funding; the sector will provide membership of the steering group and will nominate institutions for the contractors to undertake fieldwork in.
 - A small pilot study taking a cross section of no more than 4 - 5 HEIs
 - Consultants to interview key registry and other staff and review documentation to ascertain the system in each HEI.
 - Minimal walk-through testing to be undertaken.
 - Draft findings to be validated with the HEIs and with AHUA nationally
 - A report to be published highlighting findings, areas of risk, recommendations for improvement, and identifying areas where further work might be needed.

Annex B: HEFCE definition of non-completion

What constitutes a non-completion for the purposes of HESES?⁶

- B.1 The following extract from HESES07 (HEFCE 2007/26) summarises the HEFCE definition of non-completion:

A student that fails to complete any module that they set out to do in a year of programme of study is considered a non-completion for all activity in that year. Students can complete a module by EITHER a) submitting the final assessment (e.g. exam, coursework) OR b) passing the module.

Examples are:

A student submits the final assessment in all 6 modules they set out to do in a year and fails them all. Status: COMPLETION

A student submits the final assessment in the first 5 of the 6 modules they set out to do, and passes the 6th module despite not submitting the final assessment for it. Status: COMPLETION

A student submits the final assessment in the first 5 of the 6 modules they set out to do, does not submit the final assessment and fails the sixth module but passes the year. Status: NON-COMPLETION

The definition is the same for full-time and part-time students. However, where a full-time student takes a module in addition to the standard requirement for a full-time student they need not complete that module. For example, if full-time students normally take 6 modules a year but a given student takes 7 modules and fails to complete one of them, they are still a completion.

The full definition of non-completion can be found in Annex E of HESES07 (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_26/07_26.doc).

Changes from 2009-10 onwards

- B.2 In view of the responses to the second consultation on changes to the teaching funding method⁷, HEFCE plan to implement the following measures:

- From 2009-10, HEFCE will use HESA data to count, for funding purposes, the modules completed by students that complete less than their initial study intentions for the year. A student must complete a minimum of 20 credits (0.16 FTE) to attract funding. HEFCE will consider reviewing this threshold in 2011, after the proposal has been in operation for two years
- HEFCE will calculate a sector-wide average of credit completed by students that complete less than their initial study intentions. HEFCE will use this, in the short term, when calculating the funding for flexible study in FECs. HEFCE will also

⁶ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/faqs/heses07/#q8>

⁷ 2007/23, Review of the teaching funding method: Outcomes of second consultation on changes to the method from 2008-09 (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_23/07_23.doc)

work with the LSC and FECs to determine how best colleges can return equivalent data – HEFCE aim to enable this to take place as soon as possible

- To control the extent to which this measure leads to a redistribution of funding between institutions, HEFCE will cap the extent to which any individual institution can benefit financially from this proposal. The HEFCE Board will determine the cap in January 2009, once HEFCE has viewed the data submitted to HESA
- HEFCE will continue to monitor and benchmark retention rates through the higher education performance indicators, and will review whether the flexible study measure has a negative impact on retention. It should be noted that it will remain more cost-effective for institutions to retain their students, particularly given that students who do not complete their initial study intentions will not attract targeted allocations.

Annex C: Study methodology

C.1 The methodology for the study used a qualitative approach to review how individual HEIs define, recognise, record and report on student non-completions. The key elements of our approach were:

- scoping interviews with members of the project steering group and other stakeholders, and a review of relevant literature/documentation
- visits to a sample of five institutions which involved semi-structured interviews with key registry and other staff to discuss current policies, processes and systems on non-completion, and
- sector-level validation of the emerging research findings at a consultative seminar for other HEIs and AHUA members.

Scoping phase

C.2 At the outset of the study, the project team discussed the overall scope of the research with members of the AHUA-led Steering Group, which comprised the following organisations and individuals.

Table C-1: Steering Group members

| Representative organisation | Name, position and organisation |
|--|--|
| Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA) and Chair of the Steering Group | Liz Winders, Secretary and Registrar, Sheffield Hallam University |
| Academic Registrars Council (ARC) | Brian Salter, Deputy College Secretary & Academic, Registrar, King's College London |
| British Universities Finance Directors Group (BUFDG) | John Gamble, Exchequer Accountant, De Montfort University |
| Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) | Paul Greaves, Assurance Service, HEFCE |
| Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) | Mark Gittoes, Analytical Services Group, HEFCE |
| UCAS | Janet Pearce, Head of External Relations and Development, Policy and Communications Department, UCAS |
| Universities UK (UUK) | Tim Cobbett, Policy Officer, UUK |
| Other representative | Jennifer Fry, Pro-Vice Chancellor and Registrar, University of Derby |
| Secretariat | Catherine Webb, Executive Secretary, AHUA |

Source: SQW (2008) *Student non-completions study*

C.3 The project team also carried out a small number of individual scoping interviews with representatives from key stakeholder organisations (AHUA, HEFCE, HESA and the Student Loans Company).

C.4 The purpose of this initial scoping phase was to help to clarify some of the key issues and questions for the study and, importantly, to inform the subsequent development of the topic

guide for the visits to the sample HEIs. The issues that emerged from the scoping discussions are highlighted in Table C-2.

Table C-2: Issues emerging in the scoping discussions

| Theme | Issues |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Overall scope of the project | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of the study is not to replicate the work undertaken by HEFCE through its own data audits. • HEFCE needs to have greater confidence in the sector overall (with regard to non-completions), though most of the sector does not have a major problem. • The good practice aspect of the study is important as the work needs to add value to what HEIs are currently doing. |
| Contextual issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 5% of the sector is in the area of significant risk in terms of student non-completions. • However, non-completion does stand out as a regular issue through the HEFCE audit process. This may be due to: the particular student profile of an institution (i.e. a large number of widening participant students); failings of internal systems/processes; or not following the correct guidelines. • The definition is designed to be auditable and non-bureaucratic with one definition being applied across all HEIs. HEFCE is trying to be neutral in relation to how HEIs actually structure their provision. • The line taken by HEFCE on the issue of non-completion is intended to be in the interests of students. • Over the years HEFCE has amplified the wording on non-completions to assist institutions in their reading and interpretation of the rules. The definition itself, however, has not changed. • All of the Student Record Systems broadly provide the same tasks but still need to be tailored for an individual HEI. The training of staff, report writing and implementation are key to the effective use of a system. HEIs need to put sufficient resources into properly configuring and using a system. • Concern that a weakness of the student loan process is the reliance on individual HEIs to let the Student Loans Company know if a student has enrolled or withdrawn. |
| Key research issues to explore | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing an understanding of what is happening on the ground in HEIs and the systems that HEIs have in place to deal effectively with non-completions. • Are there situations where HEIs only have one or two individuals who understand how to do the HESES return? This is a risk for HEIs if they are relying on 1-2 key staff with relevant expertise. • Is the HEFCE definition of student non-completion having a detrimental impact on some HEIs, as some HEIs believe that the definition penalises those with more innovative course patterns and/or more WP students. • There is concern that staff involved in the HESES return may be at a relatively low level in the HEI which may potentially be a risk in terms of understanding the significance of the non-completions data and the ability to raise any concerns that may arise. • Where HESES and HESA returns are carried out separately there is often little or no liaison between the two processes. • Where does the structure for dealing with student non-completions sit within the overall organisational structure of an HEI? How does the process impact internally on the culture and organisation of an institution? |

Source: SQW (2008) Student non-completions study

HEI fieldwork

C.5 In determining the sample selection of institutions, the Steering Group sought to choose institutions that:

- separately would be able to bring experience of, and practice relating to, student non-completions; and
 - together would be broadly representative of the sector as a whole.
- C.6 Institutions in the sample were selected from the following Steering Group-defined descriptors:
- a large, inner-city based institution with a widening participation mission and a significant part-time student population
 - a large selecting institution
 - a small, new institution
 - a medium-sized, mixed-economy pre-92 institution, and
 - a medium-sized, mixed-economy, post-92 institution.
- C.7 Up to three institutions were initially identified in each category and part of the inception meeting involved determining the primary institution to contact in each category and a reserve institution (in case the first institution did not wish to participate in the study). The Steering Group chose not to focus on any institutions that had had student non-completions problems in the recent past. The sample did not include any specialist HEIs as they were seen to be atypical of the sector as a whole; student non-completion tends not to be an issue for these institutions. The Open University was also excluded as atypical.
- C.8 The institutions visited have been kept anonymous to limit any potential sensitivities in sharing practice.
- C.9 In undertaking the fieldwork, the project team conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with some of the key staff involved in the non-completion process i.e. a mix of staff with strategic and hands-on operational responsibilities. In practice this involved interviews with the following types of individuals:
- the senior management representative with overall responsibility for data/data quality
 - staff involved in compiling the HESES return and in the HESES/HESA reconciliation process
 - Planning Officer or equivalent (if not covered above)
 - key Registry and Finance staff
 - one or two Faculty or Departmental officers who may have responsibility for collecting and inputting of information relevant to student non-completions, and
 - some academic staff.
- C.10 The case study institutions also provided any relevant internal documentation setting out their institutional processes and systems in relation to student non-completions, as well as a copy

of their academic regulations and any other pertinent documents. The topic guide setting out the questions and issues explored with the HEIs is attached as Annex D.

Consultative seminar

- C.11 A national consultative seminar was held in London in mid December 2007. In recognising the problems inherent in carrying out fieldwork with a small sample of five HEIs, the purpose of the seminar was to present the emerging research findings to AHUA members and other relevant stakeholders, and to test and evaluate how the findings compared with the wider experience of the seminar participants. Around 50 participants from a wide range of HEIs took part in the seminar.
- C.12 A presentation by the project team on emerging findings was made at the seminar and attendees were then asked to reflect on the following questions/issues:
- validation of the findings, and whether attendees recognised the picture being put forward
 - identification of any significant gaps or inconsistencies when compared to their own experiences
 - identification of areas of risk in the non-completion process
 - examples of good practice
 - recommendations for future improvement, and
 - areas where further work might be needed.
- C.13 The views of seminar participants are summarised where relevant in the report's key findings and conclusions as set out in Chapters 2 and 3.

Annex D: HEI briefing note and questions

Background to and purpose of the project

The robustness of student non-completions data from institutions is a perennial issue that arises through HEFCE's data audit and HESES/HESA reconciliation, and can occasionally contribute to significant funding adjustment for some institutions. In August 2007 SQW Consulting was commissioned by AHUA, with support from HEFCE, to review the ways in which individual institutions define, recognise, record and report on student non-completions. The aim of the study is to contribute to the evidence base on good practice in recording and dealing with student non-completions data, and to demonstrate sector-level commitment to continuing to improve performance in this area. The project will consider current policies, processes and systems on student non-completion via fieldwork with five HEIs and a consultation seminar with a broader range of sector representatives. It will also look at how HEIs handle different types of student non-completions such as withdrawal and failure to complete the required number of modules.

In undertaking the fieldwork with the HEIs we will want to interview some key staff (a mix of those with strategic responsibility and hands-on operational responsibilities) about your systems, policies and practices on student non-completions and also to do some walk-through testing. We are aiming to do the necessary interviews and testing in a one day visit but there may be a small amount of follow-up work by e-mail or telephone.

HEIs will need to select the most relevant people for us to speak to, depending on how the institution handles student non-completions. Ideally, though, we would like to see:

1. the senior management representative with overall responsibility for data/data quality
2. staff involved in compiling the HESES return and in the HESES/HESA reconciliation process
3. Planning Officer or equivalent (if not covered under the second bullet point above)
4. key Registry staff, and
5. 1-2 Faculty or departmental officers who may have responsibility for collecting and inputting of information relevant to SNC (where appropriate).

We are anticipating that in most cases the meetings will be on an individual or paired basis rather than seeing everyone together in a single group meeting. The findings from the visits to the HEIs will be anonymised and written up thematically within the final report.

It would also be helpful to receive any internal documentation setting out your institutional processes and systems in relation to student non-completions, plus copies of academic regulations and any other relevant documents.

| Questions to be covered in HEI discussions. | | |
|---|--|--|
| Theme | Questions for senior managers | Questions for staff with operational responsibilities |
| A. Governance, management and organisational culture | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Please summarise your institution's overall approach to student non-completions (including the respective responsibilities of key staff in the senior management team, Registry, Planning office, other central services and individual Faculties/Departments). Please also highlight any issues that have arisen via the HEFCE data audit and how you have addressed these? 2. Is there a good fit between HEFCE's definition of student non-completion and your own internal policies (academic regulations, student retention, flexible learning patterns)? Where are the key challenges/problems/gaps? 3. Is data quality seen as a key corporate priority for your institution? How is this handled within your governance structure? How does the process impact on your institution's own culture and organisation? 4. Where does student non-completion fit within your institution's overall approach to risk management? How do you mitigate any perceived risks (financial or other) associated with the recording and reporting of student non-completions data? 5. What would you identify as helpful and/or unhelpful in the current HEFCE requirements relating to the recording and reporting of student non-completions? What do you see as the key challenges for your institution in the student non-completion process? 6. Are student non-completions data useful for your internal context and to what extent are these data used by your institution? 7. Are there any particular aspects of good practice within your own and/or other institutions in relation to good governance and management arrangements for student non-completions? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Please identify the key individuals within your institution with strategic and operational responsibility for student non-completions data, policies and processes. Explain their respective roles and how they inter-relate with one another. 9. Is there a good fit between HEFCE's definition of student non-completion and your own internal policies (academic regulations, student retention, flexible learning patterns)? Where are the key challenges/problems/gaps? 10. How would you explain the significance of student non-completions data and its context within your own institution? Is it seen as an important issue by your senior management team? 11. What would you identify as helpful and/or unhelpful in the current HEFCE requirements relating to the recording and reporting of student non-completions? What do you see as the key challenges for your institution in the student non-completion process? 12. Are student non-completions data useful for your internal context and to what extent are these data used by your institution? 13. Is the use of SNC information changing due to influences such as the introduction of variable tuition fees and student bursaries? If so, what impact has this had on the system requirements? 14. Are there any particular aspects of good practice within your own and/or other institutions in relation to good governance and management arrangements for student non-completions? |
| B. Definitional issues | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the current HEFCE student non-completion definition fit for purpose? 2. How might the definition be changed to reflect future developments within the HE sector (taking account of possible future changes to the HEFCE T-funding methodology and variable fees policy)? 3. What is the appropriate balance between timeliness and accuracy in relation to the reporting and recording of a student non-completion? 4. Are there any particular aspects of good practice within your own and/or other institutions in dealing with the definitional issues related to student non-completions? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Is the current HEFCE student non-completion definition fit for purpose? 6. How might the definition be changed to reflect future developments within the HE sector (taking account of possible future changes to the HEFCE T-funding methodology and variable fees policy)? 7. What is the appropriate balance between timeliness and accuracy in relation to the reporting and recording of a student non-completion? 8. Are there any particular aspects of good practice within your own and/or other institutions in dealing with the definitional issues related to student non-completions? |
| C. Operational issues | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is the Student Records System operated within your institution? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. How is the Student Records System operated within your institution? |

| Theme | Questions for senior managers | Questions for staff with operational responsibilities |
|--|---|---|
| | <p>Specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it managed through a central system, devolved to departments or incorporating elements of both approaches? • What are the reasons/benefits behind this? • How frequently is your system updated? • Which software system does the institution use? • What was the basis for this decision and who was involved? • Please describe the degree of configuration that was required to tailor the system to your needs • How has your institution ensured effective implementation of your student record system? <p>2. How does your institution monitor, at various levels, its SNC systems and processes to ensure they are operating effectively?</p> <p>3. What checks and balances are in place to identify when systems are inadequate or processes are not being followed?</p> <p>4. What level of training and guidance has been provided for key staff and others involved in reporting and recording student non-completions?</p> <p>5. In moving from one student record system to another how have you been able to minimise any drop in data quality?</p> <p>6. Can you identify any particular good practice in the collection, handling and reporting of student non-completions data within your own or any other institution?</p> | <p>Specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it managed through a central system, devolved to departments or incorporating elements of both approaches? • What are the reasons/benefits behind this? • How frequently is your system updated? • Which software system does the institution use? • What was the basis for this decision and who was involved? • Please describe the degree of configuration that was required to tailor the system to your needs • How has your institution ensured effective implementation of your student record system? <p>8. What checks and balances are in place to identify when systems are inadequate or processes are not being followed?</p> <p>9. What level of training and guidance has been provided for key staff and others involved in reporting and recording student non-completions?</p> <p>10. In moving from one student record system to another how have you been able to minimise any drop in data quality?</p> <p>11. Are your data on student non-completions captured as close to the point of activity as possible and how frequently do you collect these?</p> <p>12. How quickly and regularly does your institution notify other key external bodies such as the Student Loans Company (SLC) and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) when a student non-completion occurs?</p> <p>13. What would help you to provide more timely SNC data to external bodies?</p> <p>14. Can you identify any particular good practice in the collection, handling and reporting of student non-completions data within your own or any other institution?</p> |
| D. Walk-through testing with person(s) responsible for HESES return | | <p>1. Please talk us through your institution's overall approach to student records throughout the student life cycle including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registration • Module completion • Examinations and assessment • Progression between years, and • Graduation <p>2. Now, highlight the way in which your institution specifically handles the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recording of student non- |

| Theme | Questions for senior managers | Questions for staff with operational responsibilities |
|-------|-------------------------------|--|
| | | <p>completions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reporting of student non-completions (to HEFCE, LEAs, SLC, any others?). <p>3. Talk us through your processes using the following indicative examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A student who leaves your institution part way through a course/year• A student who fails one or more of the modules she/he set out to complete in a given year (please explain how you would deal in this instance with a student who has passed the year according to your own academic regulations but should be recorded as an SNC for HESES purposes). |

Source: SQW (2008) Student non-completions study