

Widening Access throughout the Student Lifecycle

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Edited by

Graeme Atherton, Steve Kendall,
Michael Naughton and Martin Webster

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0384-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0384-7

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INTRODUCTION

The National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) was formed in early 2012 to provide a professional organisation to support staff working on widening access to higher education (HE) and social mobility. Adopting a cross-sector approach, it brings together HE institutions (HEIs), schools, colleges, the voluntary sector, professional bodies and employers.

NEON has four main objectives: to increase the professionalisation of widening access work through the development and accreditation of practice; to be a research and advocacy resource for those working on access at the local, regional and national levels; to develop and enhance practice and quality in widening access work; and to offer input and support to policy-makers and government from the widening access community.

During NEON's operation, the widening access agenda has itself expanded from a primary focus on entry to higher education for disadvantaged students to ensuring their success through the whole student lifecycle. For example, in the English HE context, there is now a strong emphasis on sustained engagement and a clear recognition of the need for a better understanding of the full range of factors which determine access and student access. The Office for Fair Access states that "fair access is only meaningful if disadvantaged students are supported not only to get into university or college but also to achieve to their full potential and to prepare for the next chapter after graduation"¹ and the Higher Education Funding Council for England agrees that "addressing widening participation relates to the whole 'life-cycle' of a student in HE. This covers pre-entry, through admission, study support and successful completion at undergraduate level, to progression on to further study or employment".²

¹ Office For Fair Access. "Aims and Objectives." Accessed August 1, 2016. <https://www.offa.org.uk/about/objectives/>.

² Higher Education Funding Council For England. "Student opportunity and success: Policy and practice 2015-2020." Accessed August 1, 2016. <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/pp1520/background/>.

This volume is a contribution to that broadening agenda, as a reflection of the concerns and the professional practice of NEON members and as a way of grounding current debates in what can be learned from that practice. The chapters are organised chronologically across the student lifecycle from pre-university study in school or college through employment and, when possible, they are also grouped thematically so that, for example, chapters about engaging stakeholders or dealing with issues of data and evidence are presented together.

Neil Raven³ opens the discussion with an examination of students' experience at the threshold of entry to HE, taking their AS and A levels. Based on case studies of three institutions, within a single English local authority, he focuses on the issues raised by student withdrawal at this critical stage. He identifies a rising trend in student drop-out and a common pattern across the institutions studied, in terms of the stages in the academic year when they withdraw and the destinations to which they then progress. Crucially, he provides an analysis of those students most at risk of withdrawal and this will be of relevance to those who are seeking to enhance progression, particularly for those less likely to progress to HE. Recommendations for addressing these patterns of withdrawal emphasise the need for work across the student lifecycle, beginning with students before they enter the sixth form up to the transition to HE, providing enhanced information, advice and guidance, targeting those at risk of drop-out and providing mentors from within their peer group. Beyond these recommendations, he invites us to re-evaluate withdrawal and to consider the possibility that it is not always a "lost opportunity".

Kirsty Younger⁴ and **Päivi Eerola**⁵ offer insight into the opportunities and challenges afforded by joint work with school teachers. They reflect on a residential programme for teachers, designed to raise awareness of opportunities for students from a widening participation background at highly-selective universities and to establish a partnership approach to enhance progression. The opportunity afforded by such programmes to bring teachers together, network and share information is valuable. However, widening participation interventions which rely on teachers' capacity to lead change will be crucially influenced by the operation of hierarchies within schools and the position of individual teachers within such hierarchies. It is also a paradox that schools most able to engage with widening participation interventions may be those with the students already most able to engage with HE opportunities.

³ Independent Consultant and Researcher in Higher Education.

⁴ Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, Durham University.

⁵ Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, Durham University.

Partnership with Further Education Colleges (FECs) offers a significant opportunity for widening access, as **Joni Chase**⁶ argues, but there are many challenges associated with attempts to establish and operate such partnerships. Widening access can appear so congruent with the purposes of FECs that it can be difficult to establish the need for further efforts, especially when there are such intense financial pressures on FECs, which do not typically have progression to HE as a key institutional objective. Success in overcoming these challenges, it is argued, lies in the structures which are adopted and the dual role of FECs as providers of HE and as a route into HE, more broadly. The development of cross-college widening participation is crucial to the establishment of effective partnerships and successful widening access initiatives.

John Bateson,⁷ **Mary Somerville**,⁸ and **Richard Griffin**⁹ consider the case of potential students seeking entry to HE who already have an established career path. The authors explore the case where existing nursing staff are seeking entry to nursing degrees. HEIs' focus on attracting high achievers from disadvantaged backgrounds does not, the authors argue, fit well in such a case. Matters are complicated further by the lack of close coordination between HE and employers and a lack of understanding of which activities are most effective in engaging students from such a background. Their research points to the potential benefits of widening access for existing staff in the health sector and they point to the need for a much stronger evidence base in this area of widening access work.

Joanna Cooke¹⁰ and **Susannah McKee**¹¹ consider what can be learned at the threshold to HE in their study of a "foundation course". Their discussion includes the notion of students as partners in course development and this raises the prospect of using student views when designing a course. They outline key elements of the literature on the social, affective and cognitive aspects of course development and delivery and report on key issues experienced by the students. These include high

⁶ Previously based at Canterbury Christ Church University, now at KaMCOP, University of Kent.

⁷ Institute of Vocational Learning and Workforce Research based at Bucks New University.

⁸ Institute of Vocational Learning and Workforce Research based at Bucks New University.

⁹ Institute of Vocational Learning and Workforce Research based at Bucks New University.

¹⁰ London Metropolitan University.

¹¹ London Metropolitan University.

levels of anxiety at the start of the course, the need for a supportive and constructive approach to course delivery, the importance of the social aspects of learning and recognition of its transformative possibilities. By understanding these concerns, one can make adjustments to course design, focus on “assets” rather than “deficits”, reforms to assessment and feedback and approaches to teaching and learning which encourage collaboration and a “sense of belonging”.

Anke Twigg-Flesner¹² focuses on the experience of mature students in HE. This case study which is set in a “niche” institution offering HE in a further educational setting examines the support needed throughout the students’ academic career. The case for this support is informed by an analysis of how students rank the challenges they face. The author recommends a greater acknowledgement of the distinct needs of mature students and of the scope for facilitating peer support. (The assessment regime is a significant source of stress for these students.) In achieving this, a delicate balance must be struck between recognising their needs and differentiating them unhelpfully from the student body overall.

The concern with assessment is further examined by **Tina Byrom**¹³ who explores the relationship between feedback and students’ sense of belonging. Taking the ideas of Bourdieu as a starting point, she argues that feedback can cement students’ sense of meaningful participation in HE or their sense of alienation from it. There can be a disjuncture between the expectations of non-traditional students and the feedback they receive. This disjuncture should be addressed by increasing the use of formative feedback and curriculum re-design to embed ongoing feedback within module delivery. Also, feedback which emphasises weakness can be discouraging and alienating, underlining “otherness” and eroding belonging.

Rachel Roberts,¹⁴ **Laura Brammar**¹⁵ and **Fiona Cobb**¹⁶ outline a scheme in which employers offered a range of mini-consultancy projects to HE students from less advantaged backgrounds. The scheme was designed to enable students to enhance their social capital by means of participation in professional networks and thereby to enhance their employability and undergird their studies. Surveys of targeted participants revealed that the scheme had increased employability self-efficacy in all categories measured. Participation in the scheme led to wider engagement

¹² University Centre, Hartpury.

¹³ The University of Nottingham.

¹⁴ The Careers Group, University of London.

¹⁵ The Careers Group, University of London.

¹⁶ The Careers Group, University of London.

with career advisors, enhanced professional networks, improved employability and positive business development outcomes. The scheme also served to enhance recognition of participating HEIs by employers. Such schemes, the authors argue, can have a significant impact on the social mobility of disadvantaged students.

Neil Williams¹⁷ and **Lucy Jones**¹⁸ also focus on graduate outcomes by investigating the impact that research studentships can have, especially in the case of black and ethnic minority (BME) students, where there is a recognised attainment gap, at and beyond graduation. Their paper reviews the operation of a research internship scheme at Kingston University which has had a positive impact on graduate outcomes, with significant percentages achieving good, including first class, degrees and without the attainment gap previously identified for BME students. This effect is also clearly discernible beyond graduation, with participants in the research internship scheme achieving enhanced employment outcomes, across the participating student population.

Helen Wareham¹⁹ and **Laura Da Costa**²⁰ examine the data which could underpin our evaluation of widening access practice, in a study of the outcomes for participants in two schemes designed to engage young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with the opportunity to study in research-intensive institutions and highly competitive subject areas. They show how the Sutton Trust Summer Schools and Pathway to Law programmes were evaluated using Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data to establish longitudinal tracking of participants into HE and into employment. They show that progression to university for participants in these schemes was higher than for the population overall and have established the basis for tracking these students into employment.

Jon Rainford²¹ analyses the discourse of Access Agreements, reached by HEIs with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to determine the extent to which these agreements appear to embody commitment to widening access as distinct from mere compliance with the procedures established by OFFA. He analyses ten such agreements, 5 from the post-1992 new university sector and 5 from the longer-established institutions. He points

¹⁷ Kingston University London.

¹⁸ Kingston University London.

¹⁹ Previously based at Durham University, now at Study Higher, Oxford Brookes University.

²⁰ Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, Durham University.

²¹ Previously based at Staffordshire University, now at Conservatoire of Dance and Drama.

to the variation between institutions in how they frame their commitments so that they are transparent (or not) and the extent to which they can be accountable for what they achieve (or not). The efficacy of such agreements, he argues, is likely to be greater where they are founded on commitments to robustly evaluate their achievements in widening access. He points to the potential for the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) system to be developed by users to assist this process.

Julian Crockford²² questions the possibility of establishing a clear causal relationship between widening access interventions and their outcomes and notes that the expectation that this is so is conditioned as much by the concern to determine the return on investment as to identify the most effective interventions. In practice, if we are to establish a more robust evidence basis for widening access, it will be necessary, he argues, to refocus on a local level, which is better contextualised. To achieve this, we would need to be able to break down access interventions into smaller steps, more susceptible to measurement, perhaps, but also offering a more nuanced evaluation and analysis. This would require closer attention to local contexts than is possible with the present emphasis on understanding the impact of widening access initiatives at the “macro” level.

Several key themes emerge from these studies. The importance of sustained engagement across the student lifecycle is clearly paramount but many of the contributors describe working partnerships (between HEIs or among stakeholders) as a critical strategy for widening access. This involves recognition of the inter-relationship between sectors (schools, colleges, universities and employers, to cite a number of key examples) and of the relationship between local action and regional or national policies. The fundamental importance of effective evaluation and monitoring of reliable data and evidence about widening access at all stages of the student lifecycle also emerges as a key theme. All the contributions gathered here were formed in the course of widening access *practice* and this underlines the importance of practice-based research and reflection. NEON benefits significantly, in this context, from being a member-led and practitioner-focused organisation.

²² The University of Sheffield.

SECTION ONE:
ENTRY INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

CHAPTER ONE

DROP-OUT AMONGST AS-AND A-LEVEL LEARNERS: INTERPRETATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

NEIL RAVEN¹

Preface

Addressing the NEON 2016 conference theme of improving attainment in schools and colleges, this chapter focuses on the subject of AS- and A-level drop-out. This represents an area of some concern in the school and college sector. Besides the financial costs of non-completion for post-16 providers, drop-out can have a damaging impact on the aspirations of the learners involved. It may also represent a loss of potential higher education applicants. Moreover, it has been suggested that amongst those at greatest risk of non-completion are learners from widening participation backgrounds.

Drawing upon evidence from an English local authority and, specifically, three case study institutions, this chapter explores this phenomenon. It does so by, first, identifying patterns in the timing and scale of drop-out, before exploring explanations and profiling those most at risk of non-completion. Informed by these findings, consideration is then given to potential strategies and tactics for enhancing retention and reducing drop-out, and their continued relevance as the new linear A-levels are introduced. The chapter concludes by suggesting the need to qualify the concept of drop-out, advocating that, in some instances at least, it should not be viewed as a lost opportunity.²

¹ Independent Consultant and Researcher in Higher Education.

² An earlier version of this paper was prepared for an unpublished report submitted to the REACH NNCO partnership by the author in November 2016.

Introduction

The issue of AS- and A-level drop-out is a concern for a variety of reasons.³ Payne described drop-out as “wasteful of public funds”.⁴ In response to such concerns, the UK’s Government expressed the view in April 2016 that schools should be penalised if they “sign students up to inappropriate A-level courses they later abandon”.⁵ Indeed, reference has been made to possible financial sanctions.⁶ In addition, from the summer of 2016, sixth form school and college performance tables will include a “retention measure”, which “will show the proportion of (level 3) students who get to the end of the programme of study that they enrolled in at a provider”.^{7,8}

In addition to a concern for institutional finances and reputations, drop-out is also likely to have a detrimental impact at the individual learner level, potentially undermining the confidence of the young people involved.⁹ Moreover, from a widening participation (WP) perspective, there is some evidence to suggest that amongst those most likely to drop-out of their

³ AS [Advanced Subsidiary] and A [Advanced] levels are typically studied by 16-19 year olds in school years 12 and 13. AS levels are taken during year 12 and, whilst they can represent “stand-alone qualifications”, usually form the first part of a two-year A-level programme, which will be completed in year 13. They are the “traditional” qualification used for university entry. BBC. “AS and A level,” BBC Schools (2015), accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/parents/alevels/>.

⁴ Joan Payne, *Student Success Rates in Post-16 Qualifications Data from the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study* (London: Department for Education, 2001), accessed August 15, 2016, <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4655/1/ACF2FAA.pdf>.

⁵ Billy Camden, “Punish Schools For A-Level Dropouts, Says Skills Minister,” *Schools Week*, April 27, 2016, n.p., accessed August 15, 2016, <http://schoolsweek.co.uk/punish-schools-for-a-level-dropouts-says-skills-minister/>.

⁶ Billy Camden, “Schools Could Face Financial Penalties for A-Level Dropouts,” *FE Week*, April 29, 2016, n.p., accessed August 15, 2016, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ul51-uKRK9QJ:feweek.co.uk/2016/04/29/schools-could-face-financial-penalties-for-a-level-dropouts/+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk&client=safari>.

⁷ Department for Education, “16-19 Accountability Headline Measures: Technical Guide. For Changes in 2016,” London: Department for Education (2015), accessed August 15, 2016,

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482225/16_to_19_accountability_headline_measures_technical_guide.pdf, 22.

⁸ Camden, “Punish Schools”, n.p.

⁹ Payne, *Student Success Rates in Post-16*, 10.

studies will be learners from less advantaged backgrounds.¹⁰ In the context of the new National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP),¹¹ this outcome could be particularly relevant since it may afford some understanding of what is happening to areas where higher education (HE) progression is lower than expected after accounting for attainment at age 16 (based upon General Certificate of Secondary Education [GCSE] scores).^{12, 13}

It is against this backdrop that the research reported in this chapter was commissioned. Funded by REACH, the Leicester and Leicestershire National Network for Collaborative Outreach Partnership (NNCO),¹⁴ the goals were to learn more about rates of local drop-out and, in particular, to identify any patterns in the timing of drop-out and which students are at greatest risk. Having gathered these insights, the study was charged with exploring tactics and strategies that might be enacted to enhance retention.

Approach and methods

Having sought to provide some quantitative context by identifying area-level figures on drop-out, a case study approach was chosen, which would

¹⁰ Steve Bradley and Pam Lenton, “Dropping Out of Post-Compulsory Education in the UK: An Analysis of Determinants and Outcomes” (2007), 14-15, accessed August 15, 2016,

<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/ecasb/papers/Bradley+lenton210806-full.pdf>.

¹¹ The new National Collaborative Outreach Programme, which will run from 2016/17 to 2019/20, is aimed at supporting “consortia of HE providers, schools, colleges and other organisations to deliver programmes of collaborative outreach in specific local areas where HE participation is low overall and lower than expected given GCSE attainment levels.” Higher Education Funding Council for England, “National Network of Collaborative Outreach Programme” (2016), n.p., accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/ncop/>.

¹² BBC, “What Happens After the Age of 16?” (2015), accessed August 15, 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/parents/education_after_16/.

¹³ GOV.UK, “Get the Facts: GCSE Reform” (2016), accessed August 15, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-the-facts-gcse-and-a-level-reform/get-the-facts-gcse-reform>.

¹⁴ Funded for the period 2014/15-2015/16, the NNCO scheme “brings together universities and further education colleges into local networks to provide co-ordinated outreach to schools and colleges, with the aim of encourage more young people into higher education”. Higher Education Funding Council for England, “National Networks for Collaborative Outreach. Policy Guide” (2016), accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/nnco>.

allow for a “detailed” exploration of the subject.^{15, 16, 17} Consequently, data collection and analysis were focused on three institutions. Selection of educational establishments was based on ensuring coverage of a range of different types of post-16 providers. Accordingly, a school with a sixth form was included alongside two sixth form colleges. Whilst one of the colleges specialised in A-levels, the other two institutions also offered level 3 BTECs.¹⁸

Moreover, in terms of geography each institution had a distinct catchment area. The sixth form specialising in A-levels drew on an area around the centre of the main county town along with its western suburbs, although it also attracted some learners from the wider county. The sixth form school drew mainly upon the institution’s own learners, as they progressed from year 11 (15 and 16 year-olds), and these principally derived from suburbs to the south of the same city. Finally, the catchment area of the other college—and the largest of the three in terms of its post-16 cohort—was centred upon the northern suburbs of the city, although it attracted learners from other areas as well.

Having gathered a sense of the numbers withdrawing from each institution and the timing of withdrawal, a qualitative investigation of the underlying causes of drop-out was conducted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key members of staff in each institution. This approach, which included asking supplementary questions to those prepared in advance, afforded an opportunity to gather in-depth insights.^{19, 20}

¹⁵ Phil Hodkinson and Heather Hodkinson, “The Strengths and Limitations of Case Study Research.” Paper presented at the Learning and Skills Development Agency Conference, Cambridge, UK, 5-7 December 2001, 3, accessed August 15 2016, http://education.exeter.ac.uk/tlc/docs/publications/LE_PH_PUB_05.12.01.rtf.

¹⁶ Robert E. Stake, “The Case Study Method in Social Enquiry,” *Educational Researcher* 23, no. 6 (1978): 5–8.

¹⁷ John Gerring, “What is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?” *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 2 (2004): 341–54.

¹⁸ BTECs are “specialist work-related qualifications available in a range of sectors”, including, “business, engineering and ICT”. Pearson, “About BTECs” (n.d.), accessed August 15 2016, <http://qualifications.pearson.com/en/support/support-topics/understanding-our-qualifications/our-qualifications-explained/about-btecs.html>.

¹⁹ UK Data Services, “Semi-Structured Interviews” (2016), accessed August 15, 2016, <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/teaching-resources/interview/s,emi-structured>.

²⁰ Barbara DiCicco-Bloom and Benjamin F. Crabtree, “The Qualitative Research Interview.” *Medical Education* 40 (2006): 314–21, accessed August 15, 2016, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x/full>.

The individuals interviewed comprised heads of sixth forms and faculty managers, as well as career guidance officers and data managers. In total, 10 teaching professionals were interviewed, with each interview lasting between 40 minutes and one hour. As a means of enriching the picture with a different and more detached perspective (in terms of institutional affiliations), the views of three information, advice and guidance (IAG) professionals employed by the local authority were also sought. Their views helped to determine the extent to which the findings from the case study institutions could be compared with experiences encountered in other local colleges and sixth forms.

From the outset of the study, there was a need to define the term *drop-out*. Whilst definitions vary, the focus was on learners who had left the institution and their AS/A-level programmes before completing their second year of study. There are certain advantages in adopting this more absolute measure, compared, for instance, with one based upon individual course withdrawals. It is comparatively easy to identify such learners. It is also consistent with other studies that have investigated drop-out, and is comparable to the definition used by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) when assessing rates of institutional retention at HE level.^{21, 22} Moreover, it is consistent with the new retention measure developed by the Department for Education (DfE) and that, from summer 2016, will be used to assess the performance of sixth forms and colleges.²³

Trends

Recent drop-out rates were identified for the local authority in which the three case study institutions were located. In total, 76.8% of the 2012/13 AS cohort progressed to the second year of their advanced level studies (referred to as A2) in 2013/14, with just over 23% withdrawing. A slightly higher drop-out figure was found for the next cohort, with 28.4% of AS students in 2013/2014 not continuing with their advanced level studies the

²¹ Higher Education Funding Council for England, “Non-Continuation Rates at English HEIs: Trends for Entrants 2005-06 to 2010-11” (2013), accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2013/201307/>.

²² Office for Fair Access and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, “National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education,” London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014), accessed August 15 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/299689/bis-14-516-national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success.pdf.

²³ Department for Education, “16-19 Accountability.”

following year. As a comparison, work conducted by Policy Exchange in the north west of England uncovered non-continuation rates of 31%.^{24, 25, 26} A further study based upon a consortium of schools and colleges in southern England found a comparable “proportion of young people leaving within or at the end of Year 12”²⁷.

Drop-out prior to completion of A2 was also recognised as a concern amongst the managers interviewed in the three case study institutions. Here, reference was made to this being an “on-going issue for us” and one that was judged to have “grown over the last five years”. In addition, managers discussed how drop-out had an “impact on planning” and that it was a concern since institutions had an “obligation” and “duty of care” to their students.

Timing

From the institutional data provided, and from figures discussed by managers, a clear pattern emerged in the timing of drop-out. Moreover, the same trends were apparent in each institution. All talked of a “churn” during the initial five to six weeks of the first term. However, this tended to involve learners changing courses rather than abandoning the institution, although in each case it was acknowledged that a few students

²⁴ Policy Exchange, “Academic Focus Driving Students to Quit A-Levels” (2013), accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/media-centre/in-the-news/category/item/academic-focus-driving-students-to-quit-a-levels>.

²⁵ Anon, “One in Three Drop Out from A-Levels. All About School Leavers” (2016), accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.allaboutschooleavers.co.uk/news/article/13/one-in-three-drop-out-from-a-levels>.

²⁶ See also Owen Corrigan, “Technical Matters: Building a High Quality Technical and Vocational Route Through the Education System,” in *Policy Exchange* (London: Policy Exchange, 2013), ed. L. Lee, accessed August 15 2016, <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/technical%20matters.pdf>, and Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, “Achievement and Retention in Post 16 Education. A Report for the Local Government Association” (2015), 14, accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/11431/Achievement+and+retention+in+post-16+education,%20February+2015/746a1fb2-2a89-49e9-a53b-f5339288d4b1>.

²⁷ Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours, “Middle Attainers and 14-19 Progression in England: Half-Served by New Labour and Now Overlooked by the Coalition?” *British Educational Research Journal* (2013), 4 and 9., accessed August 15, 2016, <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/11987/>.

did leave. Whilst practitioners were keen to address this, it was accepted that this opening phase was not of greatest concern, in part because of the modest numbers involved but also because it occurred prior to the submission of official learner numbers in October.

Two further peaks in drop-out were identified. The first occurred during January and February. This was described by one interviewee as the “winter blues”. It was typically during this period that learners received their first set of coursework marks and when mock exams were sat. The second notable period of drop-out occurred during the summer term. This followed receipt of AS results. After this peak, it was observed that “most students who are going to drop-out” will have done so, with retention judged less of an issue during the second year of A-level studies.

Destinations of those who drop-out

By interviewing IAG advisors, it was possible to gather insights into what happens to those who discontinue their advanced-level studies. Some enrolled in apprenticeships or opted for BTECs, whilst others re-started their A-levels. It was also observed that those who re-started often took the same advanced level subjects but at a different institution. In addition, the advisors acknowledged that a small number of those who dropped out became NEETs (individuals who were Not in Employment, Education or Training)^{28,29}—an outcome also identified by Hodgson and Spours.³⁰

The same trajectories were discussed by a career advisor in one of the case study institutions. Here reference was made to some learners finding AS study “tough” and of the “novelty” of pursuing this option “wearing off” as the first-year progresses. Under such circumstances, and often associated with the start of the second term, attention would turn to “an earlier idea of pursuing an apprenticeship”. In contrast, drop-out during the summer tended to be the consequence of receiving AS marks that were not in line with expectations, and in some instances, were below the grades required by their school or college for progression to the second year of study. This said, it was suggested that, prior to dropping out, learners often displayed behaviours that could signify the likelihood that

²⁸ Jeanne Delebarre, “NEET: Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training,” House of Commons Library, Research Briefing (2016), accessed August 15, 2016,

<http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06705>

²⁹ Corrigan, “Technical Matters,” 10.

³⁰ Hodgson and Spours, “Middle Attainers,” 3.

they would discontinue their studies. These included a fall in attendance and, before that, a decline in classroom engagement.

Most at risk

From further discussions with IAG advisors, as well as the managers and teaching professionals in the case study institutions, it was possible to profile learners most at risk of dropping out. Here, mention was made to those who had to travel the greatest distances to their place of study, with one manager drawing attention to learners who commuted from the surrounding county. This assessment is consistent with Martinez and Munday's findings that "students with the longest travel times were slightly more likely to be over-represented amongst those who drop-out" of college.^{31,32}

Those enrolling in their programme late in the application process were also judged by the practitioners interviewed to be more likely to discontinue their studies, although many of these were involved in the initial "churn". A comparable group were also identified as more likely to leave by Martinez and Munday who noted, conversely, that students who applied two or more months "before the start of their course were least likely to drop out".³³

Beyond this, interviewees identified health problems, especially those associated with mental wellbeing, as the cause for a number of drop-outs. This was also judged to be an area of growing concern, in accordance with many studies.³⁴ Although not distinguishing mental health problems as a primary cause of non-continuation, Martinez and Munday suggest that "A-level students who drop one or more courses are more likely to report health problems than those who do not".³⁵

³¹ Paul Martinez and Felicity Munday, *9,000 Voices: Student Persistence and Drop-Out in Further Education* (London: Further Education Development Agency, 1998), 31.

³² See also Peter Davies, "Student Retention in Further Education: A Problem of Quality or of Student Finance?" (paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Sussex at Brighton, September 2-5, 1999), accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001257.htm>.

³³ Martinez and Munday, *9,000 Voices*, 23.

³⁴ Jessica Shepherd, "Stressed A-Level Students Seek Medical Help in Record Numbers," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2011, accessed August 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/may/20/a-level-students-stress-help>.

³⁵ Martinez and Munday, *9,000 Voices*, 74.

Some reference amongst interviewees was also made to males having a greater propensity to drop-out, although this was acknowledged to be more an impression than an evidence-based assessment. However, one of the findings from Hodgson and Spours' study suggests that amongst those most likely to struggle with their A-levels were males who had chosen to "stay on in the school sixth form" and pursue what was offered there because it was the easiest, although not necessarily the best, educational option.³⁶ In addition, although interviewees did not consider social class to be a good indicator of who might drop-out, one manager, drawing upon evidence from the previous academic year, suggested more learners in receipt of pupil premium had left at the end of their AS year.³⁷ Whilst it was acknowledged that the numbers involved were small, this assessment chimes with the work of Bradley and Lenton who found some "limited evidence" that drop-out was less likely to occur where parents were in "managerial, professional or skilled non-manual occupation[s]".³⁸

However, there was a broader consensus amongst the interviewees that prior attainment was a good indicator of the likelihood that a learner would withdraw. Here, reference was made to the more "marginally qualified [who] could find it hard to manage the step-up in terms of academic demands". In some instances, the challenge for such individuals could be exacerbated by the need to re-take GCSEs, notably maths and English, and the additional workload this would entail. Similarly, Payne's study found that learners with "relatively poor results in Year 11 GCSEs were at much greater risk of being unsuccessful than students with good GCSE results".³⁹ In addition, Hodgson and Spours identified that those "struggling with A-Level courses" included learners with "relatively weak Key Stage 4 attainment profiles and the lack of GCSE English and Maths".⁴⁰

Interviewees also considered parental influence to be a further prominent factor. Whilst parental encouragement to pursue A-levels was referenced

³⁶ Hodgson and Spours, "Middle Attainers," 9.

³⁷ Pupil premium is "additional funding for publicly funded schools in England to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils" and is calculated on the number of pupils in eligible (because of levels of family income) for free school meal or have been in local-authority care. GOV.UK, "Guidance. Pupil Premium: Funding and Accountability for Schools" (2014), accessed August 15, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings>.

³⁸ Bradley and Lenton, "Dropping Out," 15.

³⁹ Payne, *Student Success Rates in Post-16*, 2.

⁴⁰ Hodgson and Spours, "Middle Attainers," 9.

by Hodgson and Spours, the practitioners were able to provide more detailed insights.⁴¹ Parental influence, it was suggested, took one of two forms. The first was pressure to do well and, in some instances, take particular subjects. Conversely, the second was associated with a lack of parental involvement in a child's education. What both forms appear to have in common are parents who may have had little experience of post-16 education themselves—a point acknowledged by the practitioners. It is also an assessment that appears to underpin Payne's finding that "A-level students were more at risk of being unsuccessful if neither of their parents had A-level qualifications than if their parents were well qualified".⁴²

The third widely considered cause of drop-out concerned the modest levels of IAG received by some learners prior to the commencement of their advanced level programmes. Here practitioners described learners being "pushed into the academic (A-level) route". Many also talked about learners receiving "a lack of information on alternative pathways" associated, for instance, with work-based and vocational learning. These pathways, it was observed, could still lead to the acquisition of a level 3 qualification and, ultimately, HE entry. Consistent with these findings, Hodgson and Spours discuss "concerns raised by [IAG] specialists" about the "lack of impartial advice" received by some young people in terms of the pursuit of A-levels rather than alternative post-16 "vocational programmes, even though they might have had more successful outcomes".⁴³

Recommendations

Having acknowledged drop-out as a concern, and investigated when learners are most likely to withdraw and who is most at risk, the study turned to the question of how the issue could be addressed. The recommendations to emerge from this process are derived from two main sources. First, interviewed practitioners discussed interventions that had proven effective in their own institutions, as well as ways in which current practices could be further developed. In addition, the study drew upon desk research to identify practices successfully adopted elsewhere, including those profiled by Ofsted.⁴⁴ The recommendations to emerge

⁴¹ Ibid., 17.

⁴² Payne, *Student Success Rates in Post-16*, 40.

⁴³ Hodgson and Spours, "Middle Attainers," 10.

⁴⁴ The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), is a "non-ministerial department" with responsibility for inspecting and regulating "services that care for children and young people, and services providing education

from this process can be grouped according to different phases in the learner lifecycle: from those addressing learners in school year 11 and earlier, to interventions that could be offered once learners had embarked upon their advanced level studies.

Pre-16 support

Here the focus was on raising learners' awareness of the different post-16 educational pathways available to them.⁴⁵ The findings from another REACH supported research project, which examined the progression of advanced apprentices, revealed that it was quite common for these individual to have started A-levels and, in some instances, completed them. The general view amongst such learners was that they had not been given enough information about alternatives prior to starting sixth form, and that they had largely discovered the work-based option through their own endeavours. Similarly, amongst Hodgson and Spours' more strategic-level recommendations, there was a need for greater "collaboration between" different educational providers, as well as employers and higher education institutions, "in order" to provide more "impartial" IAG and alert learners to different "progression routes".⁴⁶

An associated recommendation for this phase in the learner's journey was the imperative of tailoring advice to the individual. Here practitioners discussed the importance of taking account of prior attainment, as well as coursework or examination preferences, career aspirations and subject strengths and interests. It was also considered important to inform parents and guardians of the different pathways open to young people whilst they were still in school, and that each could provide a route to HE. Linked to this was the need to ensure that parents, as well as subject teachers who might also offer informal information and advice, recognised that the 2015 statutory rise in participation to 18 relates to staying in education and training, rather than remaining in full-time education at a learner's current educational establishment.^{47,48}

and skills for learners of all ages". GOV.UK, "Ofsted. What We Do," (2016), accessed August 15, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>.

⁴⁵ Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, "Progression Pathways" (2016), accessed August 15, 2016, https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/progression_pathways_report_final_v2_0.pdf.

⁴⁶ Hodgson and Spours, "Middle Attainers," 20.

⁴⁷ GOV.UK, "School Leaving Age" (2015), accessed 15 August, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/know-when-you-can-leave-school>.

Pre-level 3 entry

Besides the importance of continuing to inform and engage parents, a further recommendation for this stage in the learner's journey was to place the IAG received by 15 and 16 year-olds into a wider career context. In contrast to this objective, a number of the practitioners interviewed observed the tendency of some young people to "take the path of least resistance" into A-levels, with little awareness of what these offered and what might come next. A greater appreciation of the opportunities that A-levels afford could, it was argued, help motivate those who embark upon them.

The other recommendation at this juncture comprised the provision of level-3 taster sessions. These could include insights into the nature and demands of A-levels, and how these compare with BTECs and apprenticeships. They could also provide insights into the skills required for success at advanced level study. Similarly, one of the recommendations made by Hodgson and Spours was for the "building [of] progression skills into the curriculum at Key Stage 4, both within subjects and across the curriculum as a whole".⁴⁹

Transition to advanced level study

Moving a little further along the learner timeline, a number of recommendations were made for supporting retention and success once learners had begun their advanced-level studies. Three recommendations were prominent. The first concerned the provision of an orientation programme to inform new starters of the support and guidance available to them, and to help cultivate a sense of institutional belonging. Accompanying this was the idea of a generic skills training programme. A practitioner from one of the case study institutions offered examples of the subjects that could be covered. These included time management, dealing with feedback, listening and planning skills and exam and revision techniques, as well as essay writing and research skills. It was also suggested that "progress coaches" could oversee this provision. These were described as individuals employed to support learners in their academic work and who would also be able to offer pastoral support.

The final recommendation at this stage of the learner's journey concerned the introduction of early assessment and feedback on

⁴⁸ BBC, "What Happens After."

⁴⁹ Hodgson and Spours, "Middle Attainers," 20.

educational performance. Ideally, it was suggested, this should commence within the first four to five weeks of advanced level study and should be accompanied by guidance on how to interpret and make the most of the feedback received.

On-going support

The final group of tactics to be identified were designed to commence during the transition phase and continue throughout both years of advanced-level study. These comprised identifying and supporting learners considered to be most at risk of dropping out (for instance, those with modest prior attainment records, as well as late applicants and those travelling from farther away). In addition, reference was made to the importance of monitoring performance, including levels of classroom engagement and the quality of submitted work. Accompanying this was the need to provide early and timely interventions to tackle any arising concerns. Equally, the value of getting to know learners individually, and of establishing a regular and on-going dialogue with them, was recognised.

The final recommendation, mentioned by the IAG advisors and highlighted in an Ofsted report, was the use of peer mentoring. Here the desk research identified a good practice case study based in a Further Education (FE) college that involved experienced students mentoring those new to the institution. The scheme, it was reported, benefited learners in a number of ways, including their attainment and retention, as well as boosting levels of confidence and the “ability to ask for help when needed”.⁵⁰ A further reported example involved “year 13 mentors supporting students in year 12”. Here reference was also made to the benefits gained by those doing the mentoring, including “getting to know a topic thoroughly in order to help someone else”.^{51,52}

⁵⁰ Ofsted. “Choosing to Volunteer” (2011), 4, accessed August 15, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/choosing-to-volunteer>.

⁵¹ Ofsted, “Identifying Good Practice: A Survey of Post-16 Science in Colleges and Schools” (2008), 4 and 12, accessed August 15, 2016, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141124154759/http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/identifying-good-practice-survey-of-post-16-science-colleges-and-schools>.

⁵² See also Neil Raven, “The Impact of Mentoring Reconsidered: An Exploration of the Benefits for Student Mentors,” *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 20, no. 3 (2015): 280–95.