

Understanding student withdrawals from studies at UEA

Executive Summary

Introduction

The student experience at UEA often focuses on students who have successfully completed a course of study, but not all students will get that far. One of the KPIs that is used as a measure in some league tables is student completion rates, and UEA figures in recent years suggest there is room for improvement. To understand our completion rates we need to give attention to our students who withdraw.

UEA: continuation, transfer to another HEI, drop-out of HE

HESA information is available which allows us to examine our rates of student continuation, transfer to another HEI, and drop-out after the first year of entry to HE compared to our adjusted sector (“expected”) rates. The main points are:

- the rates for transfer to another HEI are generally lower than expected, with the notable exception of 2006/7, and look fine against our comparator and aspiration groups;
- the rates for students dropping out of HE are concerning, especially for mature students and look particularly high against our aspiration group;
- our drop-out rate affects our continuation rate and we look particularly weak against our aspiration group in this area.

UEA Withdrawal Survey

- The UEA withdrawal survey questionnaires paint a picture of a typical withdrawn student as being female, mature, a first year undergraduate student leaving for undisclosed / personal reasons or for course failure.
- The six most influential factors leading to withdrawal concerned course content, academic support, unfulfilled expectations of the course, personal support, the quality of teaching and illness.
- Students considering withdrawal tended to approach Advisers, friends and family for help and advice.
- Withdrawn students are now predominantly in employment or studying at another Higher Education Institution.

Understanding student withdrawals from UEA

- It is evident that a good understanding of the reasons why students withdraw from study at UEA requires a balance between quantitative and qualitative data.
- Producing high quality reports from HESA and internal data would be relatively easy, but agreement on the most useful format of reports would be needed as some internal development time would be required.
- We would like LTC to consider the following questions:
 - a) What process should be developed that will support students contemplating withdrawal?
 - b) What process should be developed to allow high quality data to be collected should a student proceed to withdrawal?
 - c) Where should responsibility lie for these processes?

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**Project Officers: Eva Roberts and Anne Vallins
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A. Non-continuation following year of entry: full-time first degree entrants

1. Introduction

Data available from HESA in the derived statistics section includes “**non-continuation following year of entry: full-time first degree entrants**”, available as Table T3a. The following is taken from the HESA website (www.hesa.ac.uk) and describes the derivation of these data:

The continuation rates have been produced using a census cohort approach. The method involves identifying a group of entrants known as a cohort, consisting of all students of interest who started at the institution on a course of study in a particular year. Their continuation outcomes – whether they continue, transfer to another institution, or are absent from Higher Education (HE) registered at a higher education institution (HEI) – are then determined.

This page provides details of the method used, including variations to the method for different groups of students.

General information

A student who begins an engagement with an HEI in a particular year may achieve one of a number of possible outcomes after a given period of time. These can be summarised as:

- qualify, whether or not that qualification exactly matched their original study intention;
- continue at the same HEI, either on the same course or elsewhere in the institution;
- transfer to another HEI, either to a similar course or to an entirely different study experience;
- absent from HE registered at an HEI.

In our analysis of continuation, students who qualify with a first degree or another undergraduate qualification are included with those who continue.

(Source: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1707&Itemid=141)

(applicable to tables T1 to T3, T7 and E1)

This page contains the technical details and assumptions made in producing the adjusted sector benchmarks for tables T1 to T3, T7 and E1. Details of the subject and entry qualifications breakdown used to obtain the benchmarks, and tables showing the numbers of students in each category and the proportion of students in each category with different characteristics, are given at the end of this document.

Most of the indicators included in these tables have benchmarks attached. The benchmarks are not targets. They are average values which will change from one year to the next if the overall value of the characteristic changes. They are provided to give information about the sort of values that might be expected for an institution's indicator if no factors other than those allowed for were important. The corollary of this is that where differences do exist, this may be due to the institution's performance, or it may be due to some other factor which is not included in the benchmark.

What should be included in the benchmark?

The factors to be included in the benchmarks need to have a number of characteristics. In particular they should:

- be associated with what is being measured;
- vary significantly from one institution to another;
- not be in the institutions' control, and so not be part of their performance.

The first two characteristics were easy to identify. It was obvious from analysis already done that non-continuation rates, for example, varied between subjects, so subject as a factor had the first characteristic. It also had the second characteristic, as the proportion of students in each subject area varied between institutions.

It was not so easy to identify factors with the third characteristic. For example, the subjects offered at an institution could be considered to form part of that institution's performance, in that they could theoretically be changed, but in practice changing an institution's subject mix substantially is very rare. After much discussion it was agreed that both subject of study and entry qualifications should be counted as outside an institution's control.

The benchmarks were therefore set up to take account of the entry qualifications of an institution's students, the subjects they studied, and their age. It needs to be stressed that because a difference between institutions may be accounted for by differences in the subject or entry qualification profiles of the institutions this does not imply a justification of that difference. The purpose of the benchmarks is to allow any discussion of the reasons for the differences to be carried out on an informed basis.

Using the benchmarks

The tables of indicators, by including all institutions in one table, allow direct comparisons to be made both between institutions, and between an institution and the sector. However, if the benchmarks were ignored such comparisons would not take account of the effects of different subject profiles or the different entry qualifications of the students. In general, indicators from two institutions should only be compared if the institutions are similar. If the benchmarks are not similar, then this suggests that the subject / entry qualification profiles of the institutions are not the same, and so differences between the indicators could

be due to these different profiles rather than to different performances by the two institutions.

To compare an institution's indicators to the sector, the benchmark should be used in preference to the overall sector average, again because it takes account of the subject and entry qualifications profile.

(source:

http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1690&Itemid=141)

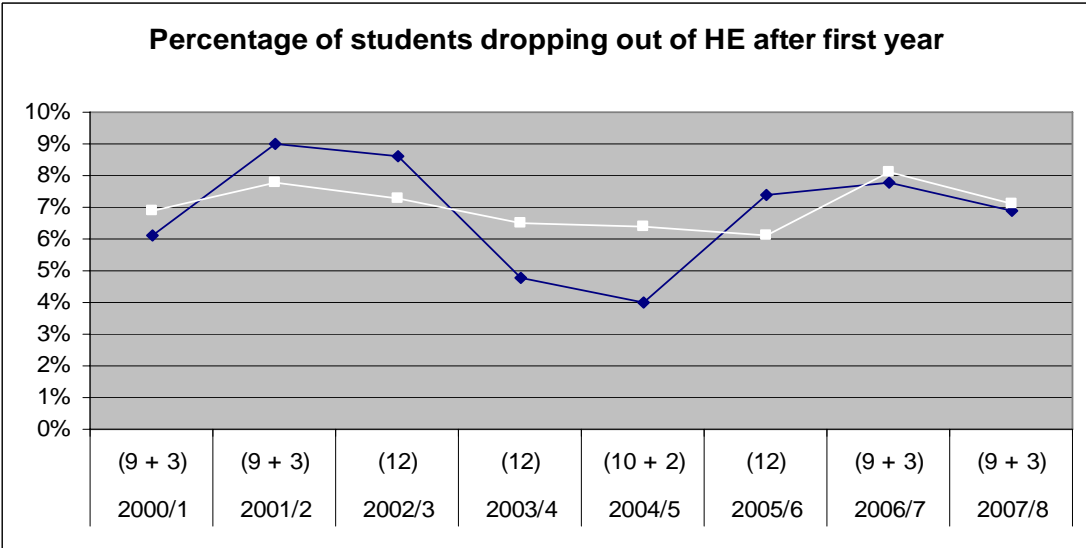
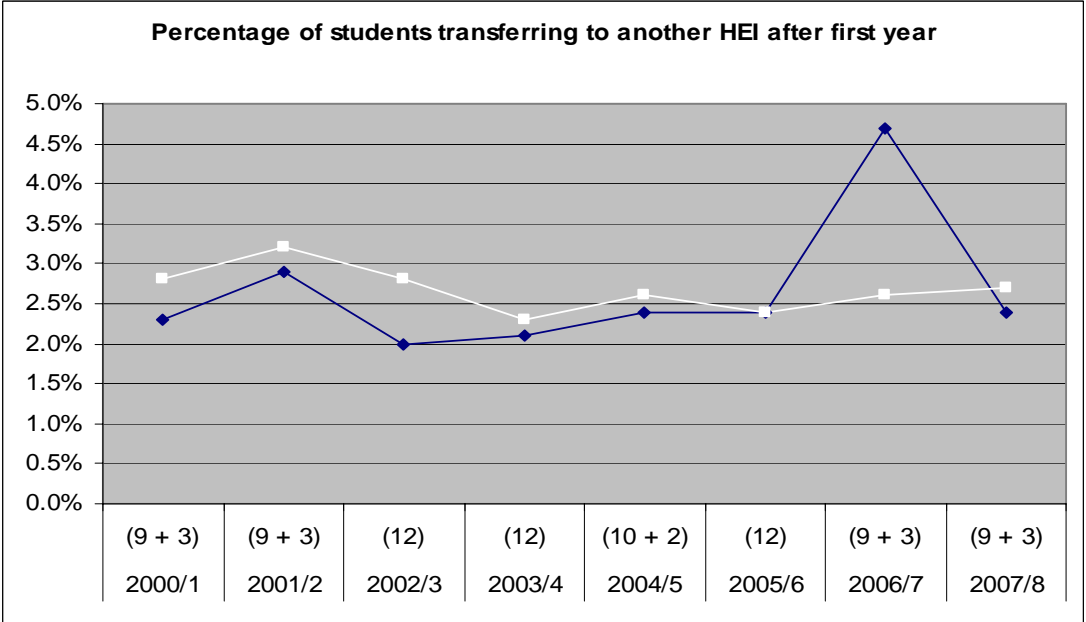
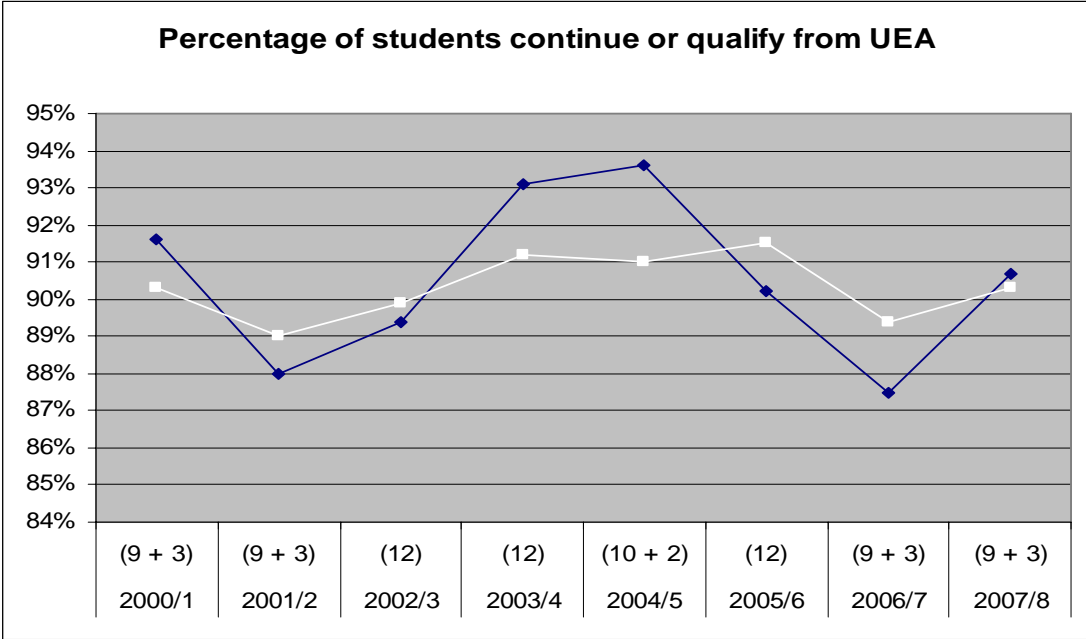
Following the HESA release of derived statistics on 15 April 2010 it was possible to view figures for the 2007/8 cohort. HESA, through HEIDI, now holds figures since the 2000/1 academic year which has allowed a time series over eight academic years to be constructed.

2. UEA: continuation, transfer to another HEI, drop-out of HE

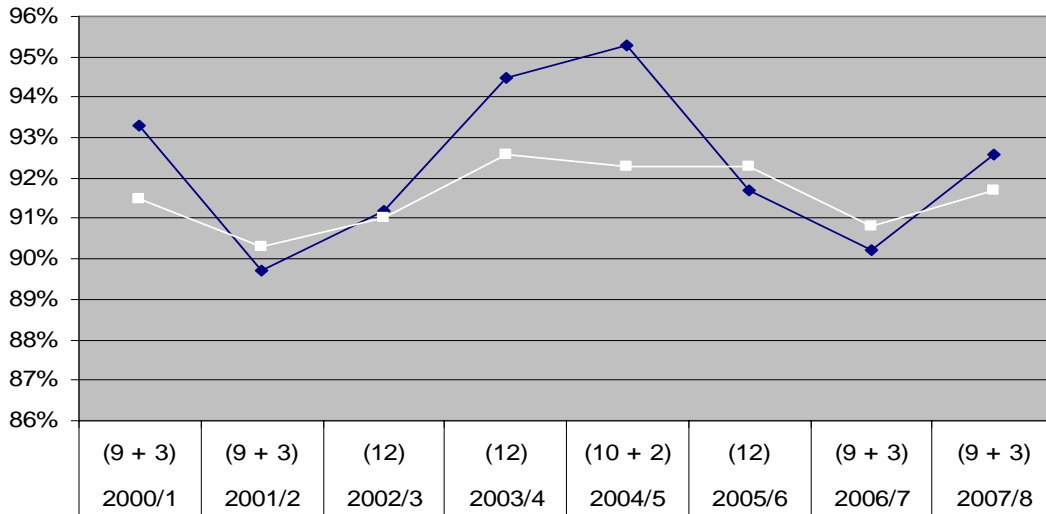
The graphs on the next page show the total figures for UEA. (The graphs showing the split by Young and Mature students are also included). The academic year of study includes information about the "normal" Spring Semester teaching dates. The blue line is the observed percentage figure for the institution and the white line in the adjusted sector figure (i.e. the expected value for the UEA). Comparing the actual and expected values allows us to look at how the UEA is performing. It is worth noting that the University's figures for first degree entrants in 2007/8 are not flagged by HESA as being significantly better or worse than expected.

The University has seen many changes during the eight-year time span of the study. The list below serves as a reminder of some main changes.

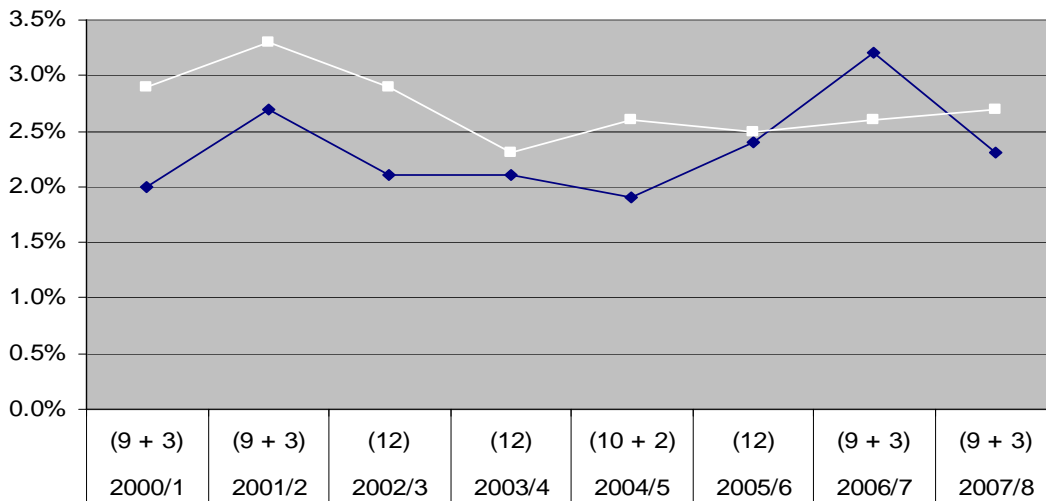
2000/1	UEA changed to the 12/12/6 academic year structure.
2001/2	SENDA legislation introduced.
2002/3	BlackBoard introduced.
2005/6	New CCS regulations. Faculty structure implemented. Admissions use SITS.
2006/7	Top-up fees. First SITS registration (problems with SPOT)



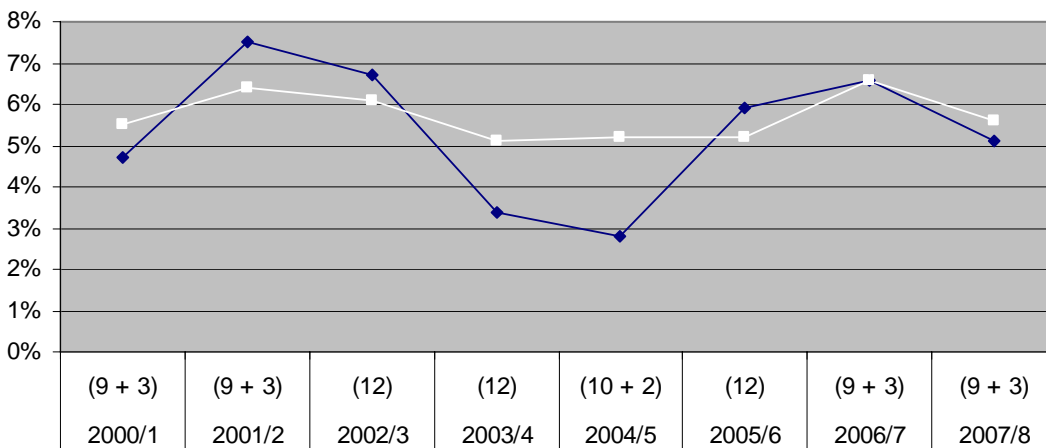
Percentage of students continue or qualify from UEA



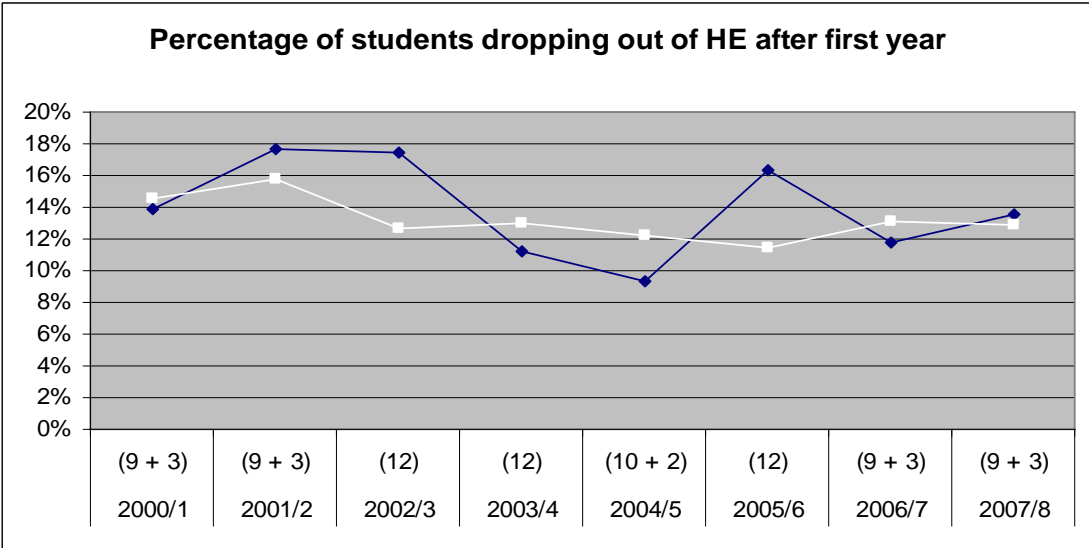
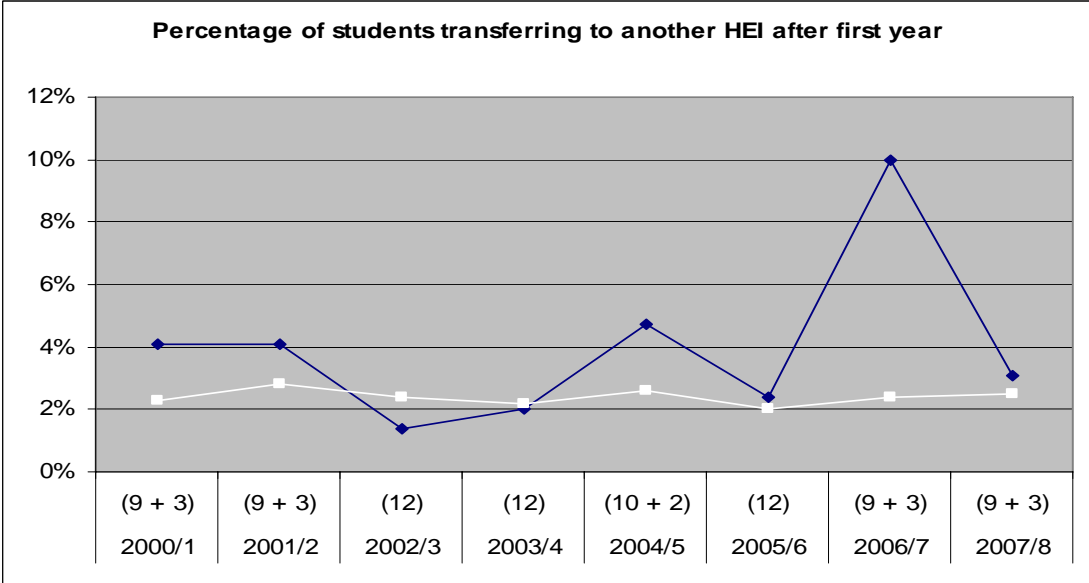
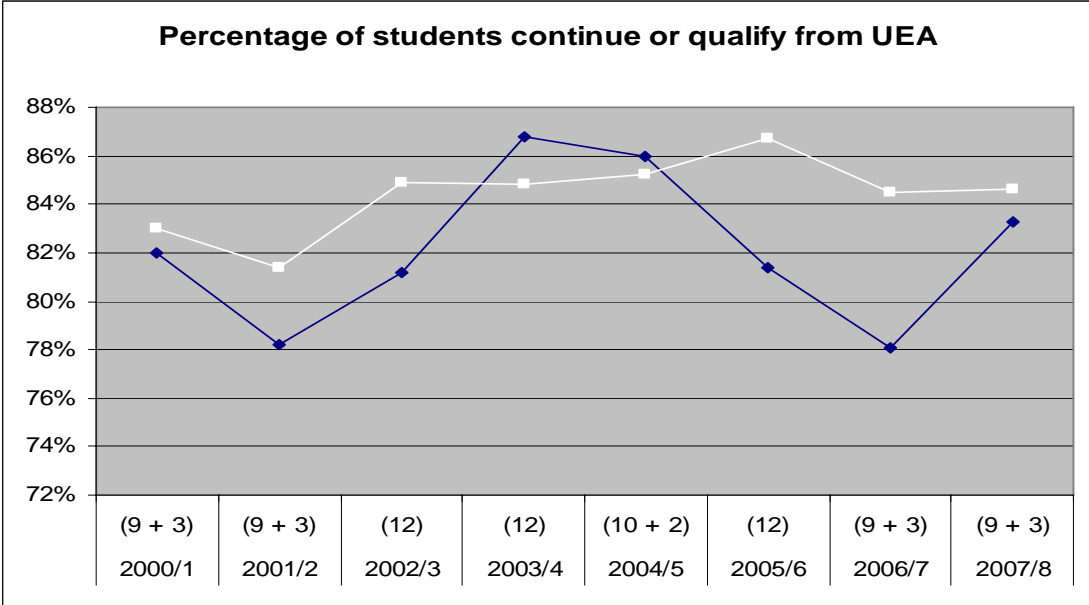
Percentage of students transferring to another HEI after first year



Percentage of students dropping out of HE after first year



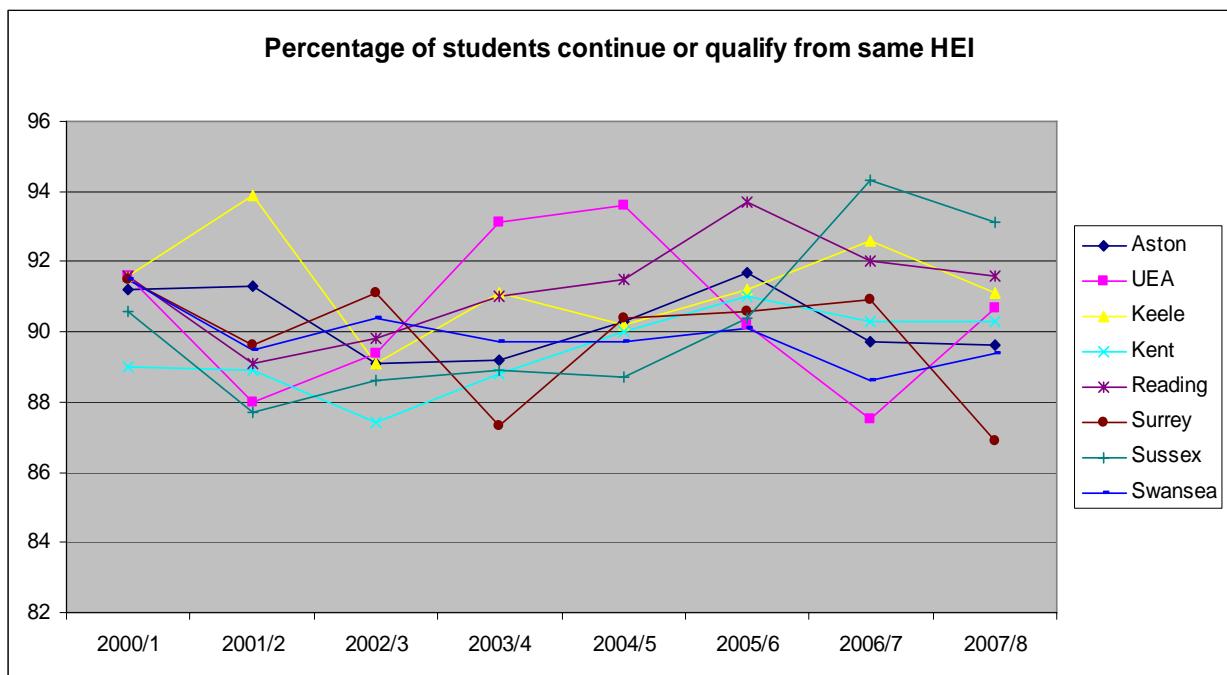
Mature students at UEA

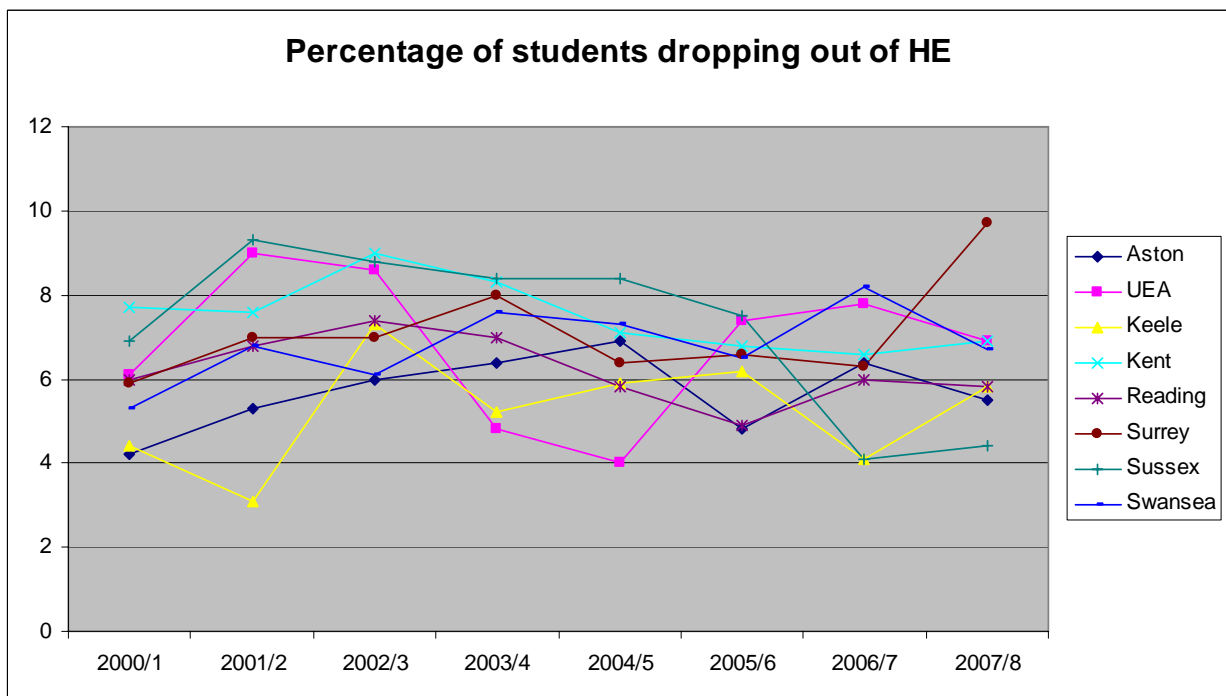
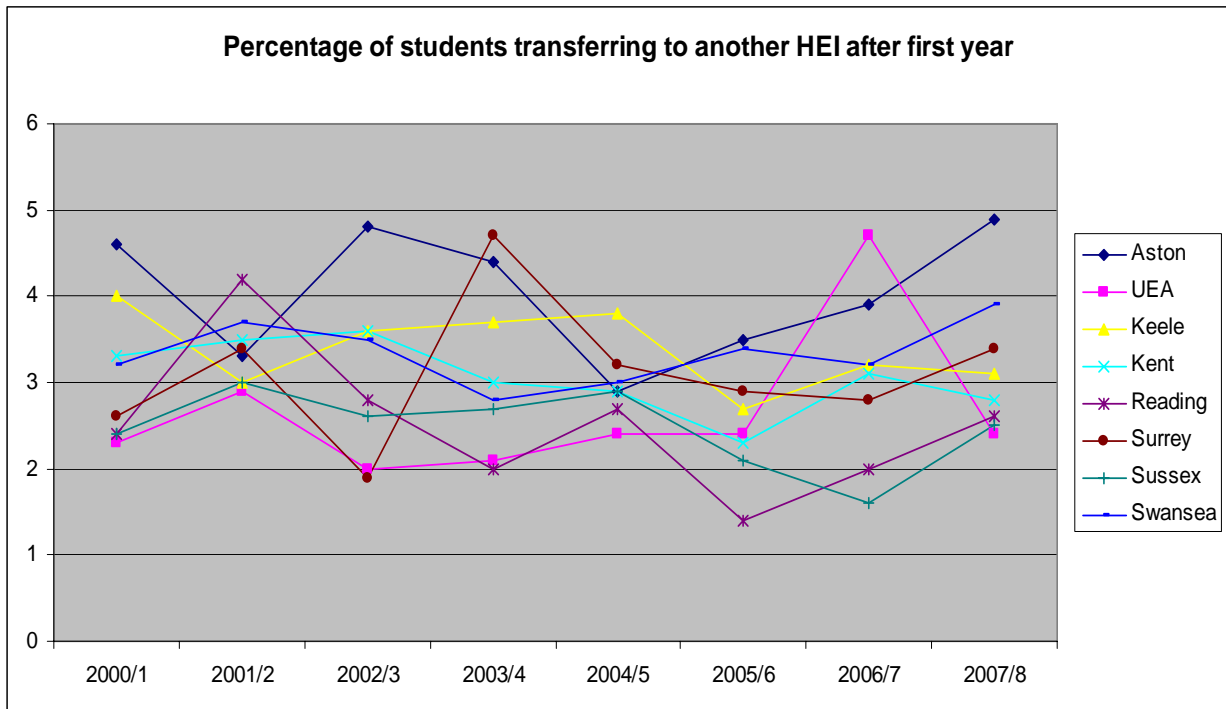


3. UEA and comparator group

The second set of graphs (below) compares the figures for UEA with a benchmarking group that has been identified using the benchmarking information provided by HESA. The benchmark calculations for the following universities are close to that for the UEA so are institution with which we can compare ourselves:

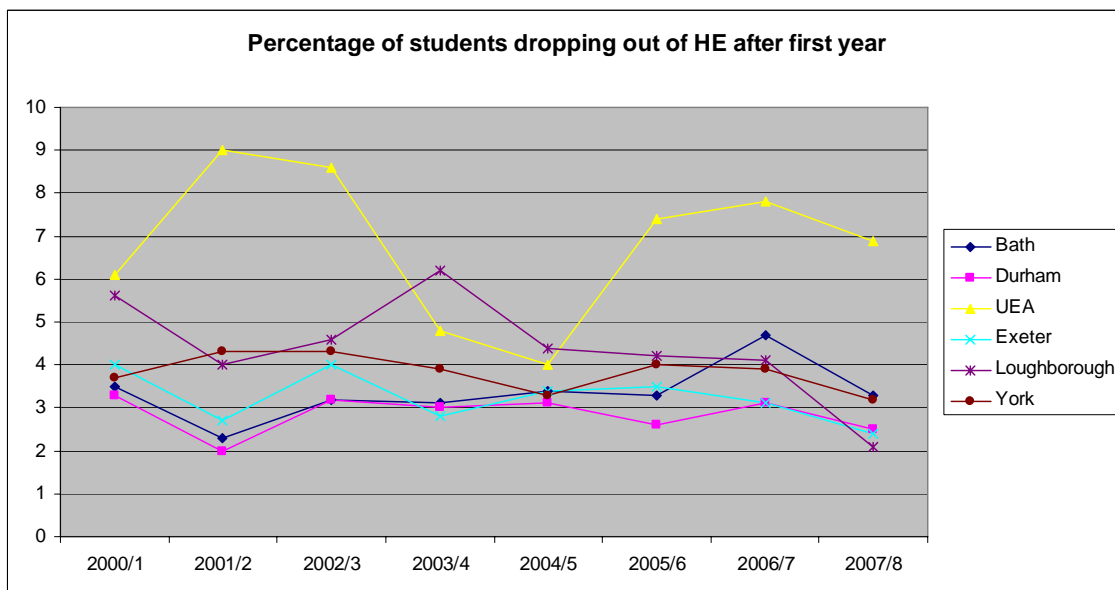
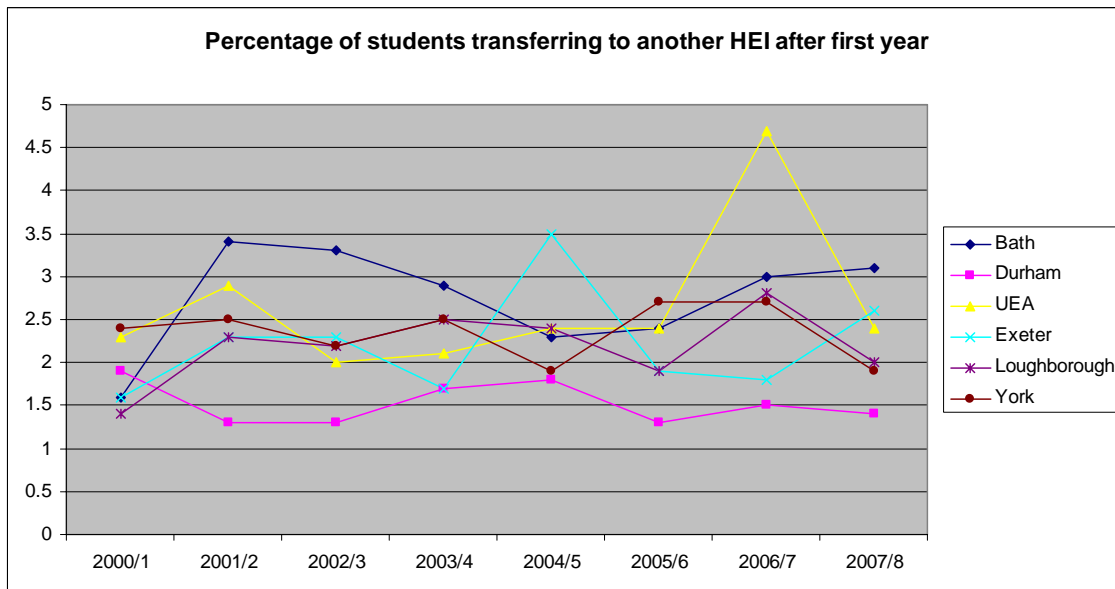
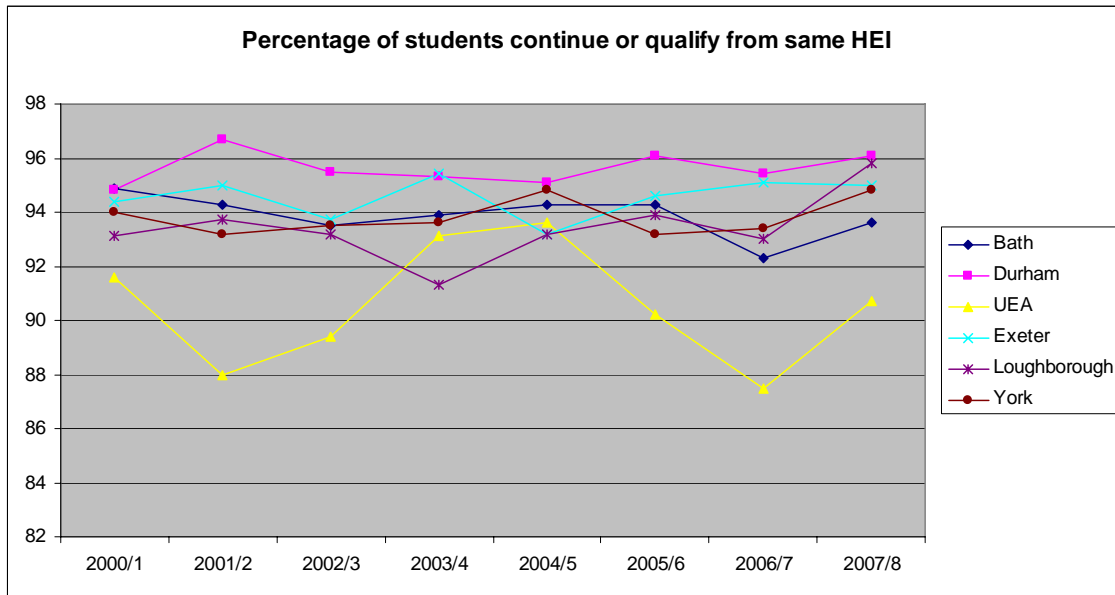
<u>UEA</u>	7.1%
Aston University	6.7%
University of Keele	7.1%
University of Kent	7.8%
University of Reading	6.4%
University of Surrey	7.3%
University of Sussex	6.7%
Swansea University	7.7%





It is pleasing to see that on the whole the percentage of students transferring to another HEI is lower at UEA than the group of universities in the comparator group. In 2005/6 the percentage of transfers went up in relation to some other universities and then we “peaked” in 2006/7, but for students starting in 2007/8 we seemed to have recovered our position as the institution losing the lowest proportion of students to other HEIs.

4. UEA and aspiration group



B. Student Withdrawals at UEA: a summary of key issues

1. Introduction

The most common reason for students leaving the UEA is recorded as “other / other personal” according to the data field that is completed on the student record for HESA reporting purposes. Work on student withdrawals within the Dean of Students’ Office has so far revealed that in many cases the reasons for student withdrawal are complex. The information for this work has been gathered several months after former students have withdrawn. The work has been time consuming, and it would be sensible to explore the benefits of having a process which includes the gathering of better quality information at the point of withdrawal for why students withdraw.

The following issues have been highlighted by the process of gathering UEA student withdrawal data over the past three years.

2. Data capture

Gathering student withdrawal data should be an important part of UEA’s continual administrative processes to:

- capture data on withdrawing students from a high percentage of leavers;
- enable a meaningful analysis of the data to be undertaken annually;
- better understand who withdraws and why they withdraw;
- better understand how we might support and advise students considering withdrawal;
- aid our understanding of the data ‘non-continuation following year of entry: full-time first degree entrants’ available from HESA.

3. A withdrawal process

The decision to withdraw is not one that has been taken easily by any student as reported by those who have responded to the withdrawal survey questionnaires in 2008 and 2010. The process by which to seek advice and support, find out about all options available and finally make a decision is not transparent. Students considering withdrawal are typically in difficulty or under stress often making it hard to approach the University for support, advice and guidance if they know where to seek it from in the first place. Friends and family are therefore their first and often only source of support and advice.

A withdrawal process needs:

- clear communication channels to be present between the student and their School / Faculty;
- to be personal;
- to be part of an organised set of administrative procedures e.g. ‘attendance, engagement and progress’;
- to be linked to the Survey Office for annual analysis of the data.

4. A typical withdrawn student

The withdrawal survey questionnaires paint a picture of a typical withdrawn student as being female, mature, a first year undergraduate student leaving for undisclosed / personal reasons or for course failure, now currently either in employment or studying at another Higher Education Institution. They report to have chosen the wrong course or found that their expectations of the course were not met. Academic and personal support from their School was not always appropriate to help them with their circumstances and they tended to approach Advisers, friends and family for help and advice.

C. Student Withdrawals at UEA: the survey results (2007-08 & 2008-09)

1. The Withdrawal Surveys

As part of the Transitions Project UEA has now surveyed students who withdrew from the University during either 2006-07, 2007-08 or 2008-09. The surveys were not restricted to just new entrants to HE, but were sent to all those who were recorded on SITS as withdrawn. A questionnaire was first sent to all those who withdrew in 2006-07. A second questionnaire was more recently sent to those who withdrew in either 2007-08 or 2008-09.

	2007-08 & 2008-09	2006-07
No. of responses	86	70
% response rate	9	9

Each survey received a 9% response rate. This is disappointing and makes the data sets too small to allow an in depth analysis to be carried out.

The quantitative survey results can only be indicative of factors that may lead to students' withdrawal. However the consistency of results between the two surveys indicates there may be patterns present in:

- the type of student who responds to withdrawal information requests via questionnaires;
- their reasons for withdrawal; and
- their advice seeking behaviour.

2. The respondents

Respondents to the recent second questionnaire had been enrolled on a range of courses, but the majority had been undergraduates (table 1). Respondents came from all UEA Schools of Study with the exception of ART, FTV, MTH and MUS. The largest group (10.5% of respondents) had been EDU students.

Course type	N	%	% (06-07)
Undergraduate	58	67	57
PGT	16	19	19
PGR	6	7	7
Other/non response	6	7	17
TOTAL	86		

Table 1: respondents by course type

The majority (68%) of the respondents are female (table 2). A smaller proportion of respondents (39%) were 26 or over when they withdrew (table 3) compared to the 2006-2007 withdrawal survey (52%).

Gender	N	%	% (06-07)
Male	26	30	31
Female	58	68	66
Non-response	2	2	3
TOTAL	86		

Table 2: respondents by gender

Age	N	%	% (06-07)
18 - 21	27	32	20
22 - 25	19	22	24
26 – 30	2	2	16
Over 30	32	37	36
Non- response	6	7	4
TOTAL	86		

Table 3: respondents by age group

The majority of respondents (87%) indicated their ethnicity as white and 92 percent are British. 94 percent are home students. 13 percent (11 respondents) considered themselves to have a disability.

Year of course	N	%	% (06-07)
0	4	5	
1	49	57	59
2	13	15	30
3	2	2	9
4	0	0	2
5	2	2	
Non-response	16	19	
TOTAL	86		

Table 4: year of course

Most respondents had withdrawn during their first year of study. 87 percent said that UEA had been their first UCAS choice and only 6 percent entered through clearing.

When asked about their primary occupation after withdrawing the majority were either in employment (44%) or had transferred and were studying at another Higher Education Institution (30%).

3. Reasons for leaving

The first part of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate their main reason for leaving UEA. Table 6 summarises the reasons those who responded to the survey gave, using the HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) categories.

Reason for leaving	Survey respondents			All leavers 2007-9		
	N	%	% (06-07)	N	%	% (06-07)
Transfer to another institution	18	21	11	64	6	10
Course failure	18	21	19	192	19	*
To seek employment	3	3	4	21	2	1
Financial	3	3	13	26	3	4
Other personal	19	22	26	442	44	74
Health	4	4	21	41	4	7
Other	21	24	32	105	11	3
Non-response	2	2		105	11	
TOTAL	86			996		

Table 6: reasons for leaving (HESA categories) * The survey was not sent to those whose reason for leaving was recorded as course failure in 2006-07.

A quarter of the survey respondents (24%) indicated that they had withdrawn for 'other reasons'. A further fifth (22%) said they had withdrawn for 'other personal reasons' and two more fifths left to transfer to another institution (21%) or withdrew due to course failure (21%).

Influencing factors	N	Major influence N	Quite important N	Some influence N	Not relevant N	% major influence or quite important	% (06-07)
Expectations of course content were not met	82	15	18	12	37	40	44
Not given helpful academic support by School	81	15	13	10	43	35	32
Chose the wrong course	82	16	12	14	40	34	28
Not given appropriate personal support by School	81	10	15	11	45	31	31
Disappointed by the teaching standards	82	19	6	13	44	30	38
Unwell and not able to continue my studies	79	15	9	7	48	30	23
Disappointed by amount of teaching and contact time	81	10	11	8	52	26	*
Feedback was not timely and detailed to improve grades	80	14	5	9	52	24	*
I found it difficult to balance academic work with personal pressures	81	11	8	7	55	23	26
Disappointed in the marks I was getting	80	10	7	14	49	21	12
Didn't know where to go for academic help and advice	80	5	12	9	54	21	19
Difficult transition from A-Level to Higher Education	81	7	8	12	54	19	*
I was lonely/not able to make close friends	80	7	7	12	54	18	9
Not given appropriate support by central student services	80	7	7	10	56	18	13
Assessment tasks were harder than expected	80	6	8	18	48	18	*
Financial situation causing great concern	80	6	8	9	57	18	20
Didn't know where to go for personal help and advice	81	7	7	10	57	17	19
I wanted to be closer to family and friends	80	5	6	6	63	14	14
Didn't feel adequately prepared for study	81	4	6	15	56	12	18
Not given helpful academic advice from Learning Enhancement Tutors	79	6	2	5	66	10	*
Pre-entry information did	81	5	3	15	58	10	17

not give a realistic indication of University life and study								
Preferred to be working than studying	79	2	6	4	67	10	15	
Too difficult to balance PT work with study	79	5	2	5	67	9	17	
Fellow students were difficult to live with	81	4	3	1	73	9	13	
Didn't work hard enough to pass coursework/exams	79	2	5	12	60	9	*	
Expectations for accommodation were not met	79	3	3	5	68	8	5	
Expectations of social life were not met	81	4	1	12	64	6	6	
My family/friends put pressure on me to leave	79	0	1	6	72	1	6	

*Table 8: factors influencing respondents' decision to withdraw * not provided as an option as part of the 2006-07 survey questionnaire.*

Respondents were asked to indicate which, if any, of a list of possible factors had influenced their decision to leave. The factors listed and students' responses are summarised in table 8 and are listed in order of their significance.

No single factor of those given was a major or quite important influence for the majority of the respondents. Those that were the most influential for the largest number of respondents (the first six listed in table 8 above) concerned:

- course content;
- academic support provided;
- unfulfilled expectations of the course;
- personal support provided;
- the quality of teaching; and
- illness.

When given the opportunity to describe any other factors that influenced withdrawal the most comments were made about balancing study with work and / or family commitments.

I was working full time and expected to attend 1x1/2 day per week. I was unable to take this time off due to immense caseload at work. Work pressure affected my ability to study;

I found the practical difficulties more taxing than academic content. For instance I have a job and family so my time is limited...I spend more time dealing with such practicalities than studying;

As a more mature student who has an elderly parent (80s) who I was the main carer for. I found it difficult to complete course work;

The part-time study timetables were not published early enough for me to reorganise my working hours every term. Some timetabling was impossible to work around childcare...I have continued my studies with the open university. However, I would have much preferred, in an ideal world, to have remained at UEA as I learn much better in a face to face setting.

A number wrote about poor academic and personal support.

During my time at UEA I never met my academic tutor, he was just a name. I never had the chance to meet him and it's difficult to go and try to explain your problems to someone you don't know and who doesn't know you;

Personal tutor was mostly absent during his office hours. When present, he wasn't very helpful in regards to the course;

I started the course as a mature student in the second year. Whilst there was an introductory day for mature students, I found that there was not enough support nor consideration given for the needs of mature students, and none at all for people starting in the second year;

My period as an undergraduate was a big success, top of my year almost a (star) First. So I knew I was of academic capability. I simply did not receive the support and teaching I expected as a research student. My supervisor was away for 6 months.

A further proportion of respondents felt they had either chosen the wrong course or their expectations of their course were not met.

I felt that after lectures, we were left to our devices. We didn't get enough lecture material to enable us to go away and carry out private and further reading. Some kind of specification would have been good to know what you were expected to know;

I undertook a 2nd undergrad degree which in hindsight was too much. I was doing a vocational course which would lead to a specific career. I was unsure I still wanted to go into that profession - I intercalated before withdrawing.

Health reasons for withdrawal were also explained, with depression and other mental health issues being the most prevalent.

4. Help and advice

The second part of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate on a list of potential sources of guidance which they had consulted prior to making their decision to leave or in deciding future action. They were also asked to rate the usefulness of the advice they were given, to indicate when they had sought advice, and whether or not the advice had helped them to consider alternatives to withdrawal. Their responses are summarised in table 5.

	% Used	% (06-07)	Usefulness of advice				When consulted N (%)		Helped consider options Yes (%)
			Helpful N	OK N	Not helpful N	% Helpful or OK	Before decision making	During decision making	
School and Faculty									
Adviser	52	50	11	20	14	69	24 (53)	4 (9)	53
Senior adviser	12	27	4	3	3	58	3 (25)	2 (17)	42
Other academic staff	21	41	6	5	6	61	7 (39)	3 (17)	44
School administrator	12	20	6	2	1	80	3 (30)	2 (20)	30
Faculty administrator	7	14	1	2	3	50	5 (83)	0 (0)	33
Central services		10							
Careers Centre	9	*	4	2	1	75	3 (38)	1 (13)	63
Learning Enhancement Tutor	10	*	5	3	1	89	7 (78)	0 (0)	44
Other DOS staff	15	*	6	3	3	69	5 (38)	1 (8)	62
Counselling Service	15	7	2	5	6	54	8 (62)	3 (23)	31
Chaplaincy	1	-	0	1	0	100	0 (0)	0 (0)	0
UMS	9	16	3	3	2	67	5 (63)	0 (0)	63
Students' Union	12	7	4	3	3	70	6 (60)	2 (20)	70
Friends and family									
Friends	45	57	20	14	1	76	12 (31)	3 (8)	77
Family	53	60	24	14	5	83	14 (30)	3 (7)	87

Table 5: sources of advice consulted *The responses were grouped together as DOS in 2006-07.

Advice was most commonly sought from family, Advisers and friends (53%, 52% and 45% respectively). Other academic staff had been consulted less frequently (21%). A relatively small proportion had consulted one or more of the central student services, including the University Medical Service (UMS).

New questions were asked about course failure and appeals. 18 students responded saying they left due to course failure, of which 11 reported that they were alerted to the fact that they were at risk of course failure. Only four respondents appealed against their grades.

Just under a quarter of survey respondents were helped to consider alternatives to withdrawal. They were helped on the whole by either their Academic Adviser or by Student Services. The most common alternative they were given to withdrawal was intercalation.

19% were given guidance on the withdrawal process, mainly by administrative staff based in their School.

Those that did not seek advice before they withdrew reported not knowing where to obtain advice from or who to approach. For some the ordeal made it difficult to approach staff for advice.

I felt too overwhelmed to do much more than to sit outside the offices that could potentially help me.

Survey respondents were invited to make further comments about their UEA experience and their reasons for leaving. Many reiterated their concerns about choosing the wrong course and being accepted onto a course that they were not suitable for or had expectations about the course that were incorrect.

Only take students suitable for the course;

Towards the end of the year, convinced that I had chosen the wrong course, I tried to switch change and start fresh this year but no other schools would accept me because my A level grades were not good enough, which begs the question of why I was accepted in the first place. I am now in thousands of pounds worth of dept and nothing to show for it. A situation which could have been avoided had UEA been clearer about the course I chose and just what is expected of a student not meeting the entry requirements but being accepted. Perhaps had I been interviewed upon selection then an understanding between me and the UEA would have been clearer;

Having already completed my undergraduate degree at UEA I knew what to expect however the MA course I started was the wrong choice for me/not what I expected;

I don't feel the UEA portrayed the content on the level of difficulty. If I had known what the course entailed, I would not have ever come to the UEA in the first place.

Poor, or a lack of, academic and personal support was a common comment.

I feel the attitude to mature students with a family and a long journey was not very supportive....When I asked for help I was told 'we don't tutor here';

Personal tutors need to be more active in the learning of tutees, find out more about them to get a clear picture. If a student doesn't approach any of the academic staff for help, then it is not really the fault of these teachers but I did and more help could have been given to prevent my failure.

A small number of respondents did make positive comments about their UEA experiences however.

I have good memories of my time at the UEA and will keep in touch with my Academic Adviser;

My learning experience at UEA was extremely positive and I enjoyed my programme of study very much;

I love the UEA – it's like a 2nd home and my case was extremely individual;

I am very grateful to many members of the support staff who were very supportive / helpful;

I would like to highlight how helpful and supportive the staff at the careers centre were during what was a difficult time for me.

D. Understanding student withdrawals from UEA

It is evident that a good understanding of the reasons why students withdraw from study at UEA requires a balance between quantitative and qualitative data. Producing high quality reports from HESA and internal data would be relatively easy, but agreement on the most useful format of reports would be needed as some internal development time would be required.

Collecting high-quality qualitative data is the important developmental step that would be essential for allowing summary reports to be interpreted with confidence. Having these two elements would create valuable management information that should assist with the recruitment and retention of dedicated students.

To meet this reporting objective, the sorts of questions that need addressing are:

- a) What process should be developed that will support students contemplating withdrawal?
- b) What process should be developed to allow high quality data to be collected should a student proceed to withdrawal?
- c) Where should responsibility lie for these processes?

The Committee is asked to give thought to these questions, and come to a decision on how development should be managed.