

# Staying the Course

September 2016

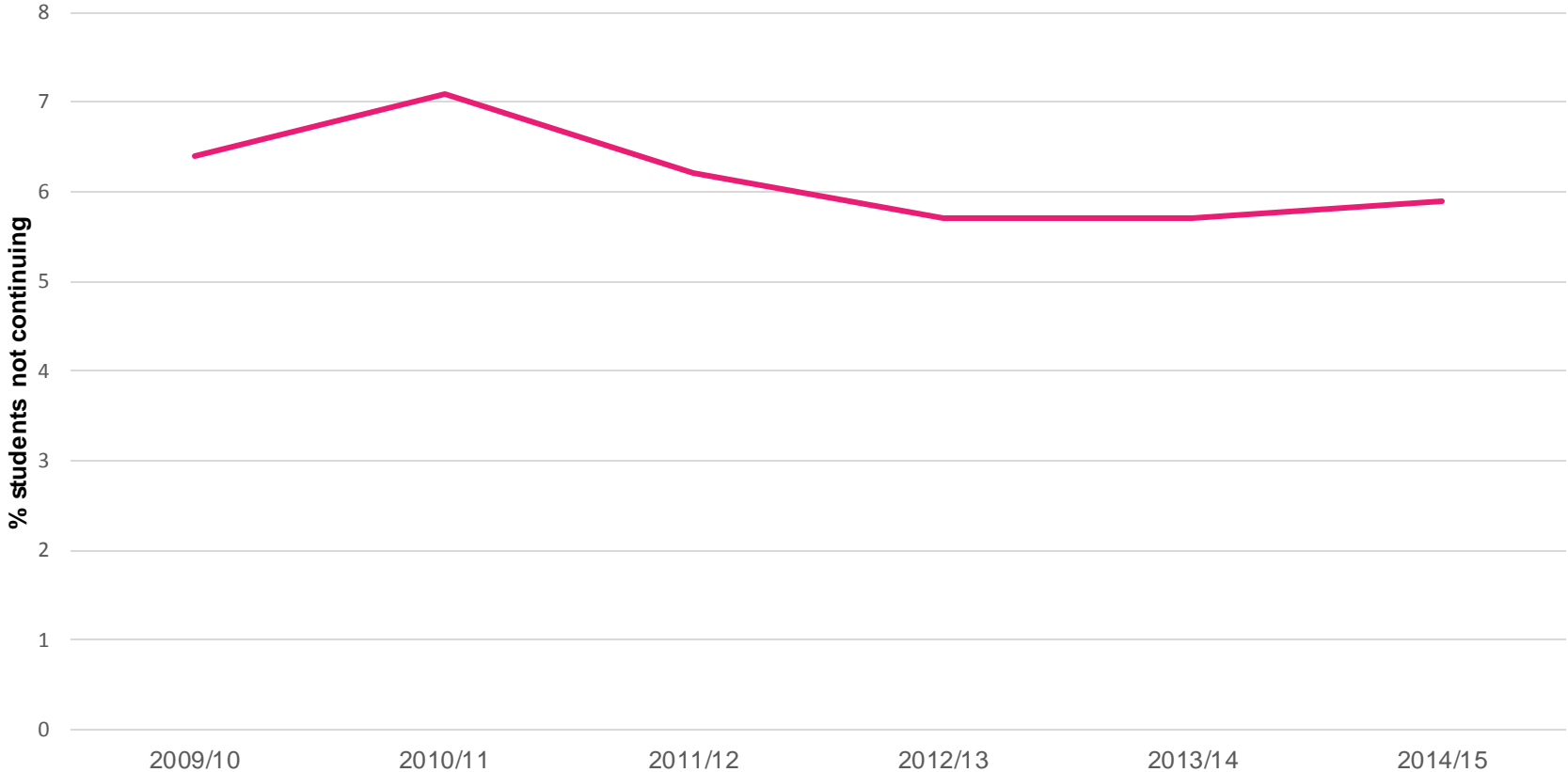
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**HOBSONS** 

- There is a rising focus on student success in higher education. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) will include measures of it; HEFCE has a programme of work on it; Government is consulting on how to make it easier for students to switch institutions mid-degree; and students themselves are more focused on it in the context of paying higher tuition fees.
- Student success should be thought about broadly, including the experience of higher education as well as the outcome. It should not be reduced to one metric or the other; though for the purposes of this paper we examine student success mainly through the frame of continuation rates. We do this because it is one leading measure of success and will be part of the TEF. In the case studies presented at the end of the paper we capture some of the broader issues and hope to return to them in a future paper.
- In terms of continuation rates, we report overall results and demonstrate the variation across the sector. Unless otherwise stated, the results come from our own analysis of HESA data, focusing on undergraduate students at English institutions. We also go on to look briefly at student satisfaction, using headline results from the National Student Survey.
- Beyond the analysis, we report on interviews conducted with a range of institutions about the strategies they have adopted to improve student success.
- This work has been supported by Hobsons though the SMF is responsible for the analysis and any conclusions drawn from it.

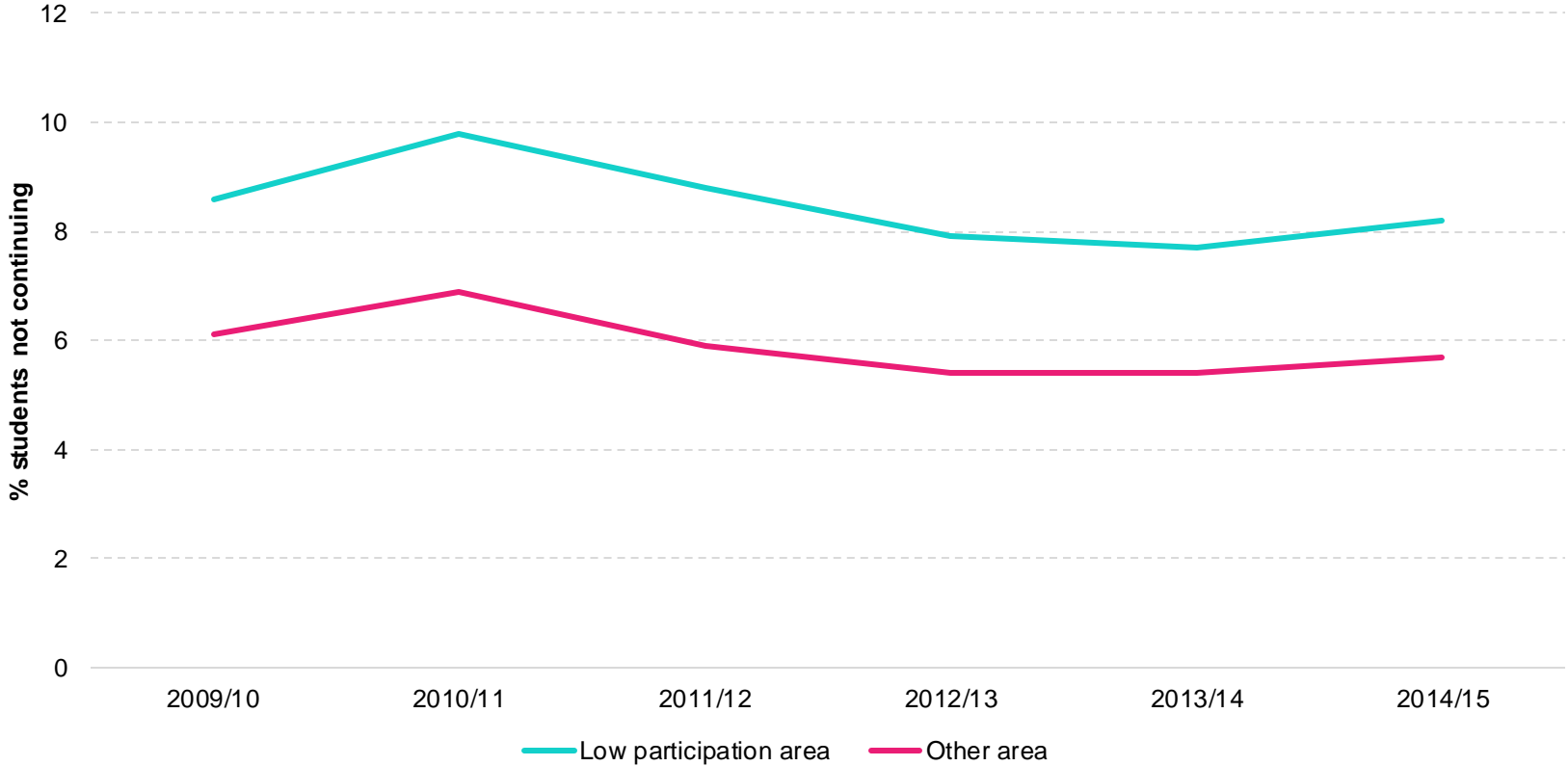
# Starting with non-continuation rates . . . These are low though no significant progress in improving them

**Proportion of students at English universities not continuing in the following year by year of non-continuation, young full-time first degree entrants**



# Non-continuation rates for students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are higher than others

Proportion of students at English universities not continuing in the following year by POLAR3 area and year of non-continuation, young full-time first degree entrants

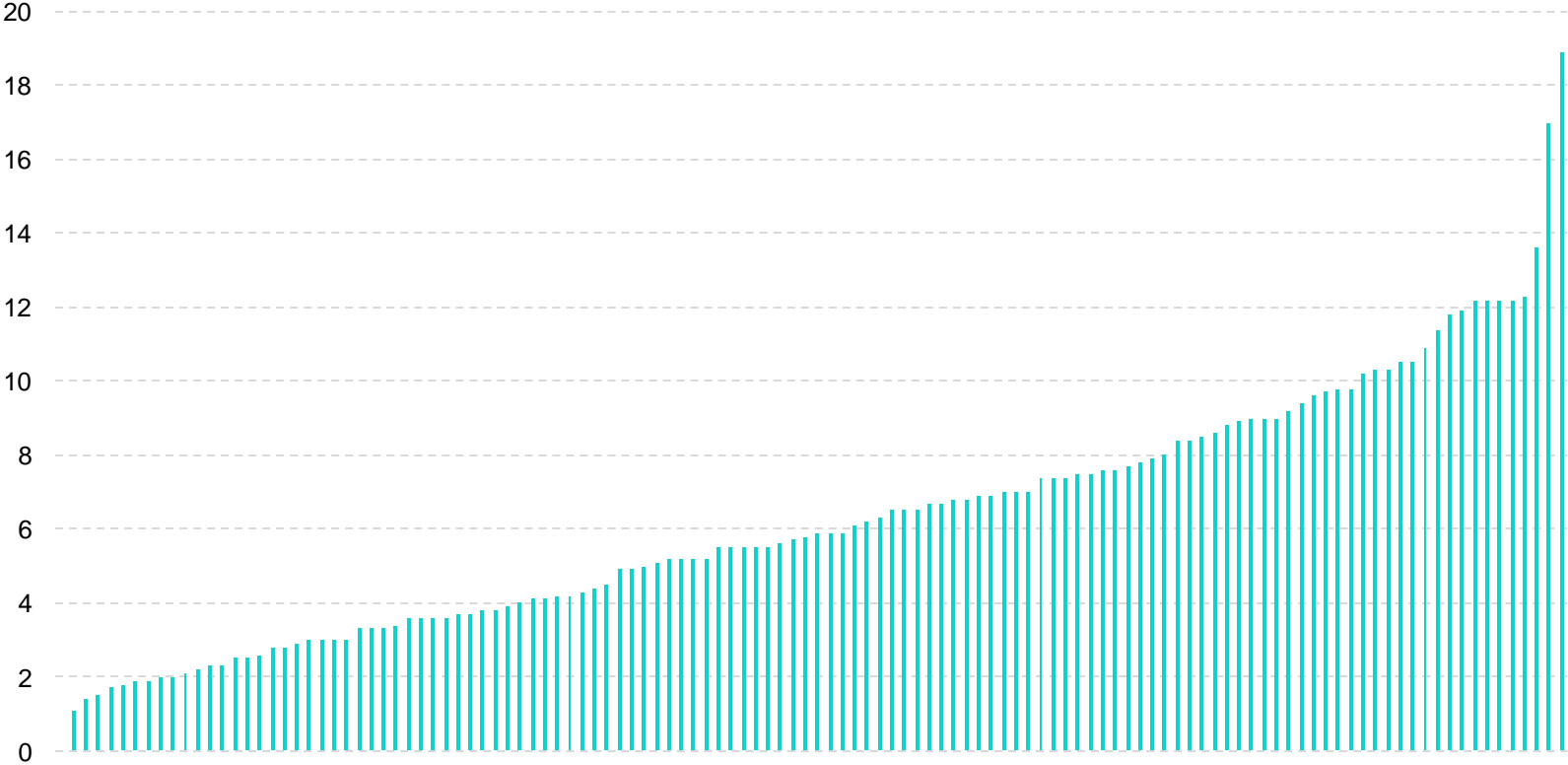


## Non-continuation rates in perspective

- While we can observe challenges, England nevertheless has low drop out compared to peer countries. A report published by HEFCE in 2015 (*Causes of differences in student outcomes*) notes, for example, that in the US only 65% of students graduate within 6 years; and that proportion drops to 33% for Associate Degrees in community colleges.
- Even within England though, non-continuation rates vary widely depending on region. HEFCE analysis going up to 2012/13 shows a variation of 4 percentage points between the best and worst performing regions for this measure of student success: London institutions had a non-continuation rate at the end of year one of 9.6% whereas the best-performing region – the North-East – had a non-continuation rate of just 5.5%.
- In any case, while non-continuation rates may be low by international standards, every drop out nevertheless represents a loss of potential, a poor and probably confidence-sapping experience for a student and an investment in tuition costs which is likely to have a low return. Or, as the Government's White Paper puts it, even the present position on non-continuation “represents thousands of life opportunities wasted, of young dreams unfulfilled”.
- In what follows we look more closely at the variation in non-continuation rates.

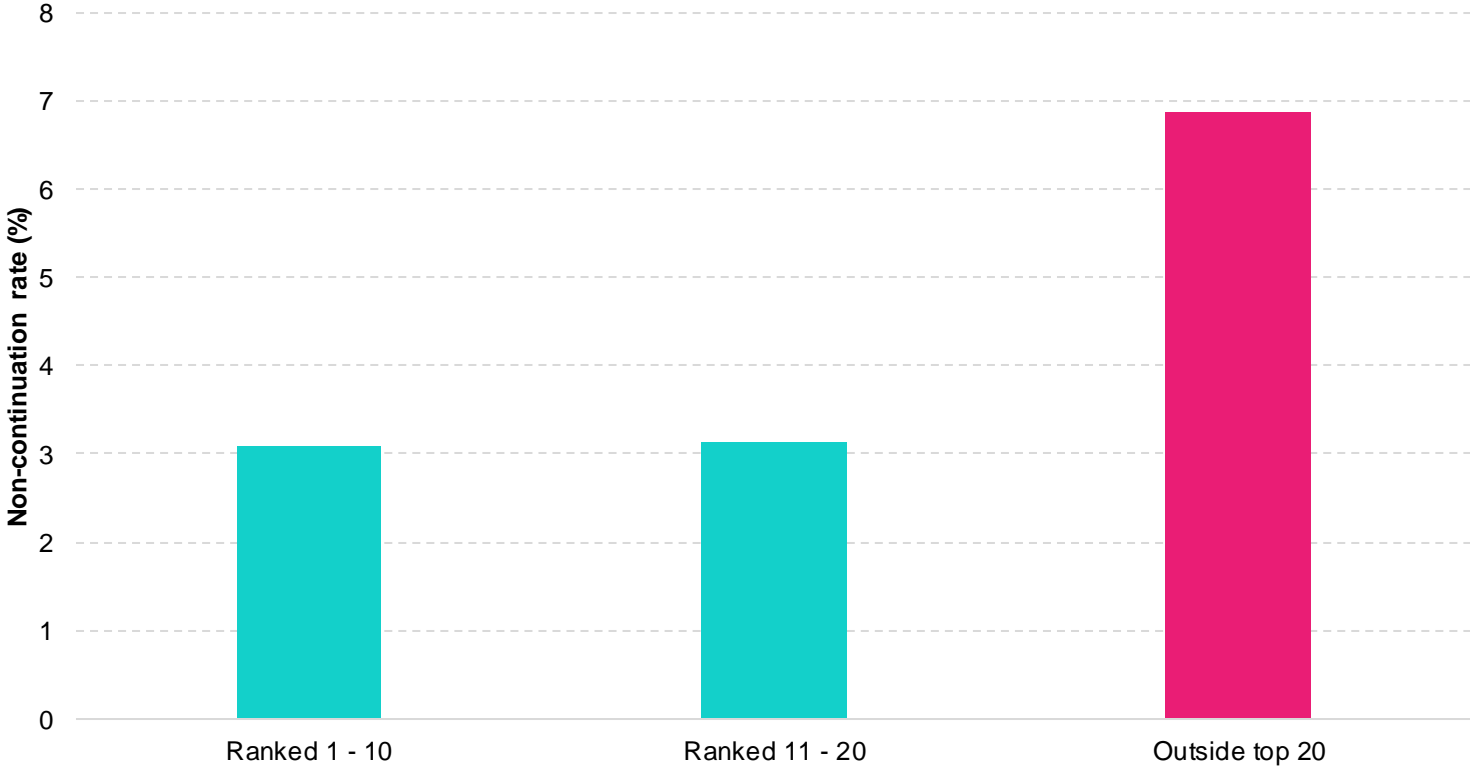
# Non-continuation rates after first year vary hugely across institutions

**Variation in non-continuation rates 2014/15**  
Royal College of Music has lowest rate - **0%**  
First institution represented in the chart is University of Cambridge – **1.1%**  
London Metropolitan University has highest rate - **18.9%**



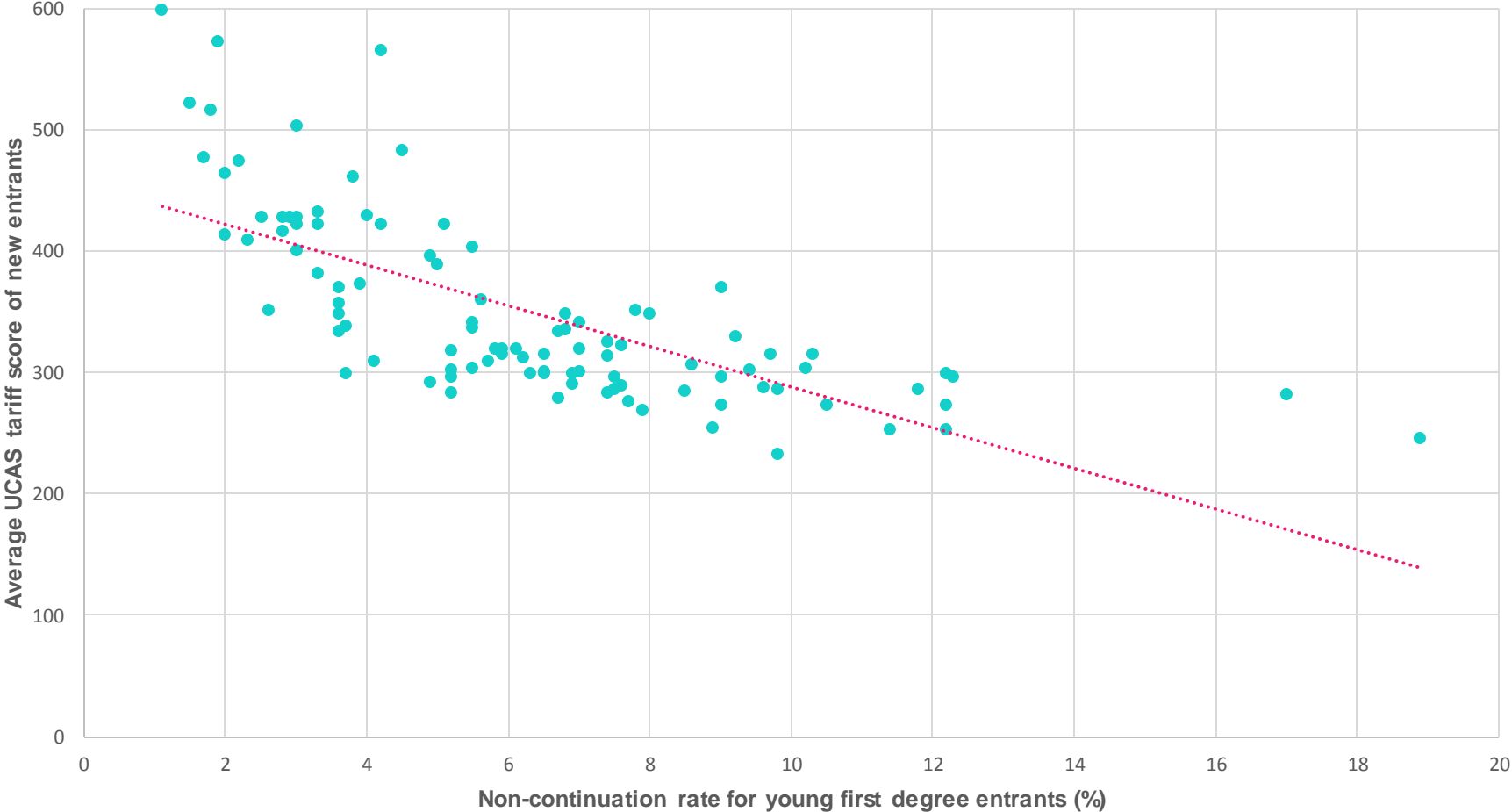
# One broad trend is variation by league table position

Average non-continuation rates by THE university league table ranking (2014/15)



# Equally there is a clear trend in non-continuation rates based on average UCAS tariff scores

Average UCAS tariff scores and non-continuation rates (2014/15)

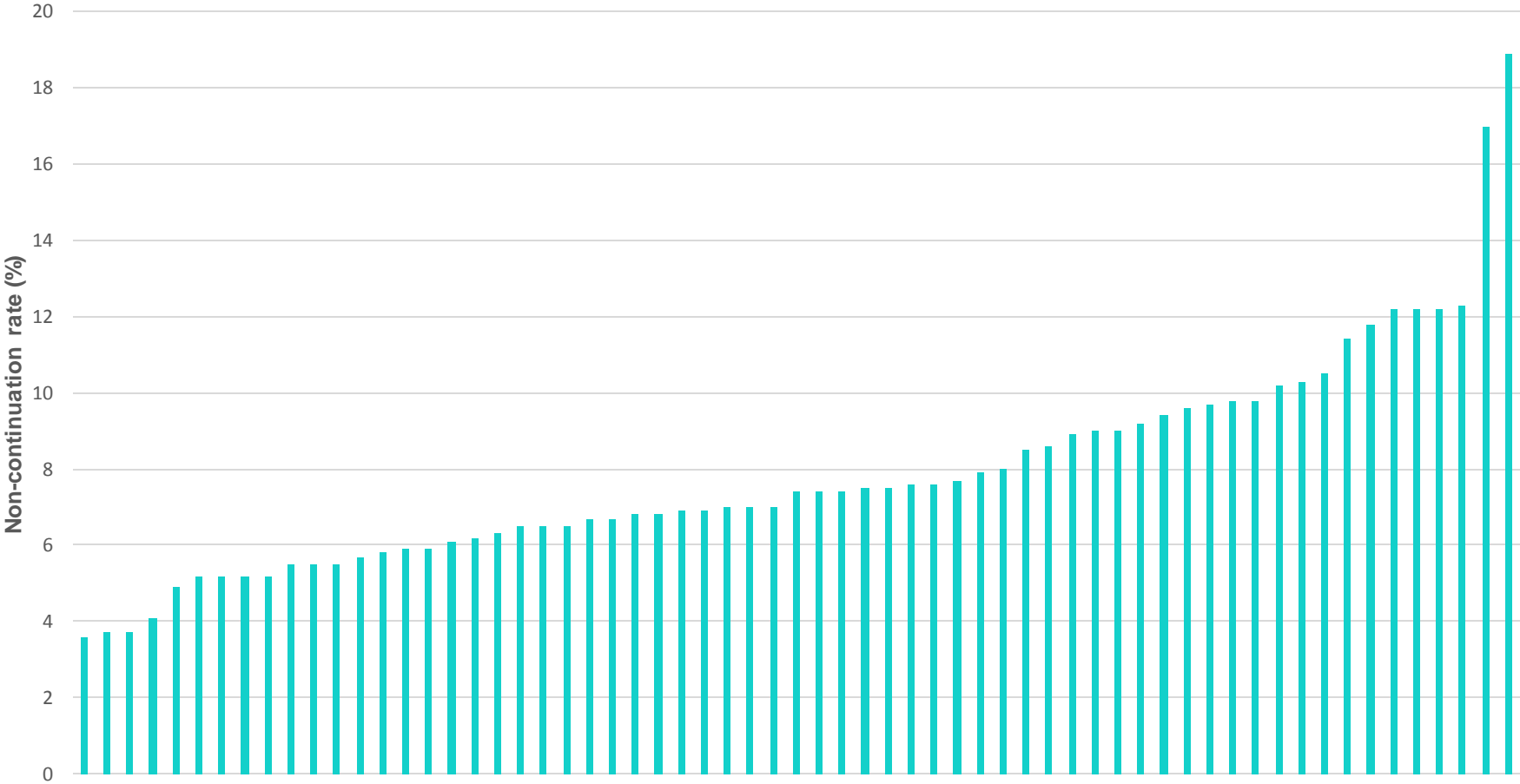




# But there is substantial variation here as well: not all unis with below average tariff scores do poorly

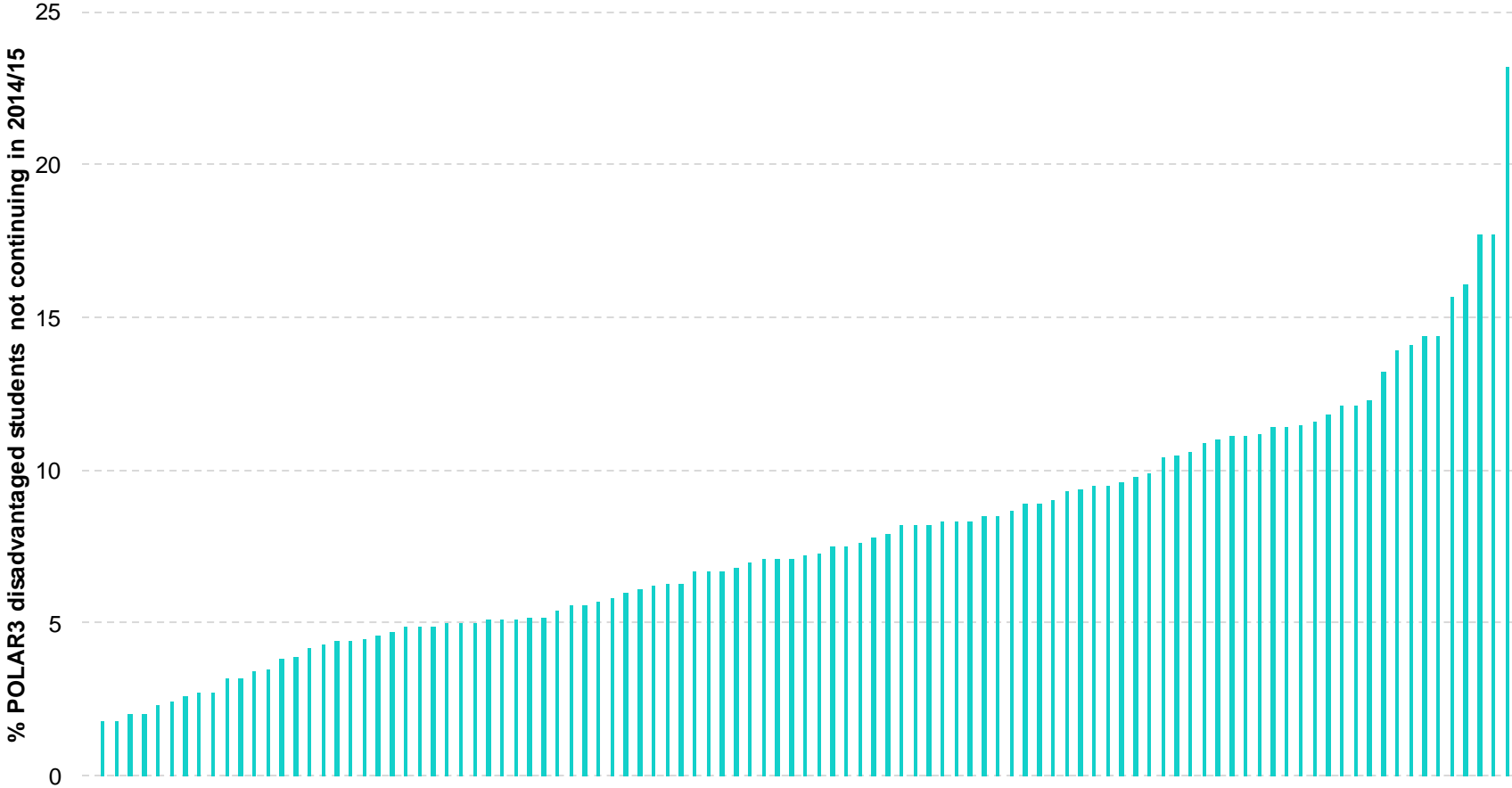
## Variation in non-continuation for universities with average entry tariff below 350 points

Oxford Brookes, Lincoln, & Royal Agricultural University all below 4% non-continuation



# Non-continuation rates for most disadvantaged students are higher though large variation among institutions

Variation in non-continuation rates among the most disadvantaged students 2014/15



- Non-continuation rates in many institutions are exceptionally low. But there is a group of twenty institutions where around one in ten students are not continuing in higher education after one year.
- While non-continuation rates are higher among the most disadvantaged students, some institutions are successful in keeping these low as well. Many of these institutions are selective, so they may have the most qualified and motivated students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Certainly this fits with the trend observed on slide 8 that the most qualified entrants are the least likely to drop out.
- Yet there are institutions with different profiles that are making a success of the student experience too. Institutions including City University London, St Mary's Twickenham, Aston, Bishop Grosseteste, Lincoln and Kingston have among the lowest non-continuation rates of all institutions for the most disadvantaged students.
- At the other end of the scale, the University of Bolton sees more than one in five students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds drop out.

So far we have looked at non-continuation rates per se. It is also possible to look at the improvement in these. In the following chart, we map that improvement against improvement in widening participation. Our aim is to find out if institutions are seeking to make progress on one front at a time – i.e. they focus on widening participation to begin with; and then improving the student experience may be tackled later.

# Largest group of institutions making progress on both fronts – widening participation as well as improving continuation rates

Progress in widening participation (% increase, horizontal axis) and progress in continuation rates (% increase, vertical axis) by institution 2009/10 to 2014/15 (positive numbers indicate progress)



- The largest group of institutions are making progress on both widening participation and improving continuation rates.
- Similarly, there is no correlation between improving widening participation and worsening continuation rates. If institutions claim that making progress on widening participation has impaired their performance on continuation then this has little basis when examined across the sector.
- Policymakers, students and other observers of the sector can and should expect institutions to make progress on both fronts.
- The number of institutions going backwards on widening participation is relatively small, certainly in comparison to the number of institutions who are making no progress or going backwards on continuation rates.
- There are close to 50 institutions that are either making no progress or going backwards on continuation rates.
- Most of the institutions who are making progress on continuation rates demonstrate modest progress. There are very few institutions who have made radical improvements.
- Taken together these features give context to the flat trend on continuation rates overall across the sector that we observed earlier.

The institutions in the bottom left hand quadrant – slipping back on widening participation as well as continuation rates – are:

- Guildhall School of Music and Drama
- Norwich University of the Arts
- London Metropolitan University
- Harper Adams University
- Courtauld University of Art
- University of Lancaster

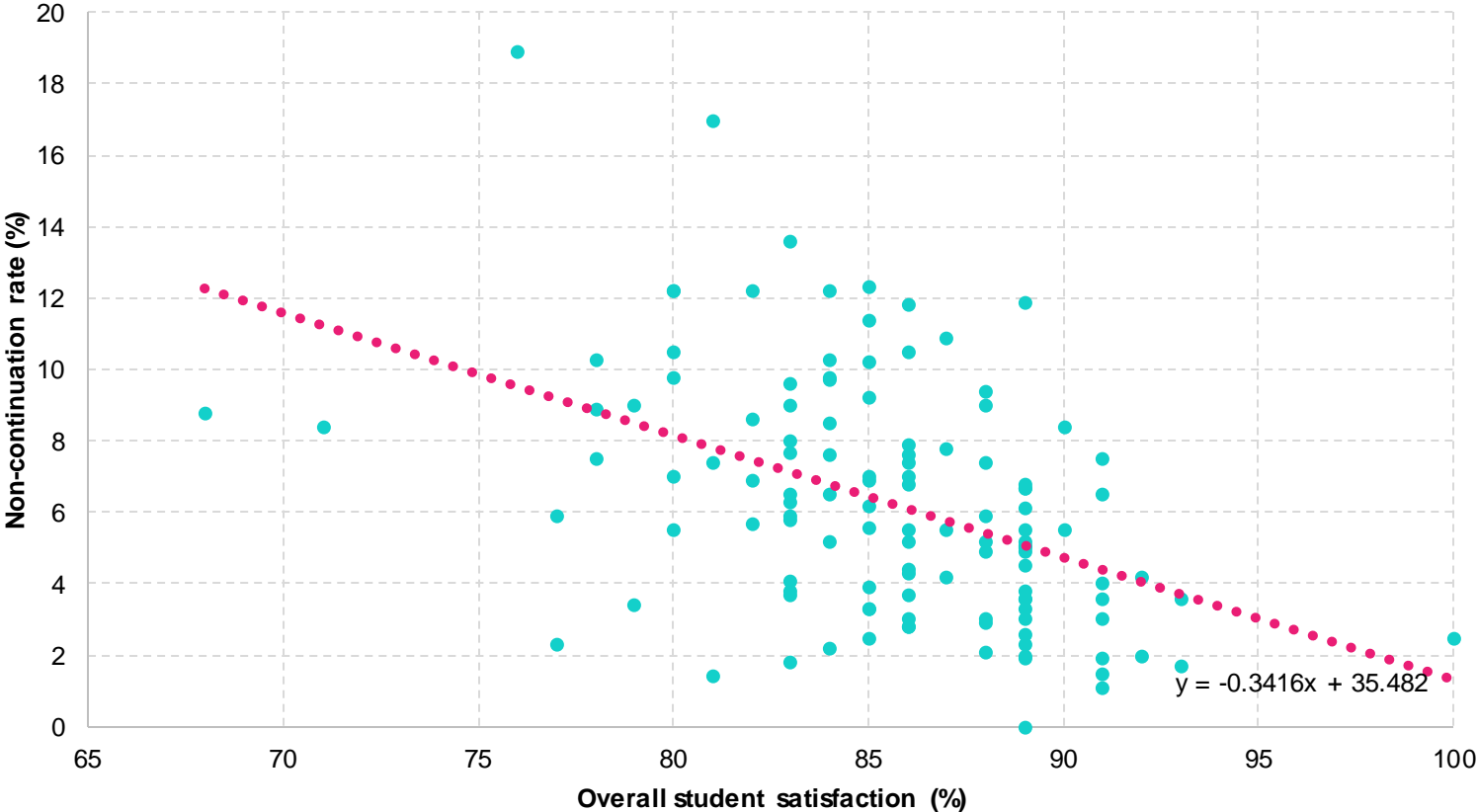
The institutions in the top right hand corner – making the strongest progress on widening participation while also improving continuation rates – are:

- University of Worcester
- University of Hull
- Goldsmiths, University of London
- Royal Holloway, University of London
- Birmingham City University
- University of Plymouth
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- University of Chichester
- Aston University
- Trinity Laban
- Arts University Bournemouth

- Continuation rates provide one perspective on student success. If non-continuation rates are falling at some institutions compared to others then this provides a point of entry to study what measures those institutions are taking and whether they can be replicated elsewhere. We will turn to a couple of institutional case studies shortly.
- Before that it is worth looking in headline terms at student satisfaction. Looking at student satisfaction for those who stay in higher education is likely to provide us with more information about the quality of the student experience – and the variation across institutions.
- Student satisfaction is measured in the National Student Survey. On the following slide, we map student satisfaction scores against non-continuation rates.
- We are looking to identify whether non-continuation rates are in fact correlated to student satisfaction. If they are then this would suggest that in headline terms improving the student experience may reduce non-continuation rates too.

Looking at student satisfaction and non-continuation rates we observe a strong relationship . . . Higher student satisfaction is correlated to lower non-continuation rates

Overall student satisfaction (2014) and non-continuation rates (2014/15) by institution





## What does a strategy for improving student success look like?

- Our analysis suggests that higher student satisfaction in general is correlated to lower non-continuation rates. But this finding provides little contextual information on what a strategy to improve non-continuation rates looks like.
- To understand the substance of successful strategies we interviewed senior managers in institutions. We asked them:
  - How do you identify students who may be struggling in their courses or at risk of not continuing in higher education?
  - Do you find that students from more disadvantaged backgrounds require more or different forms of support to do well in higher education?
  - How have you succeeded in improving the continuation rate at your institution?
  - What is the outlook for continuation, in your view, given the context of policy change, e.g. the switch from maintenance grants to loans?
- We reached out to a broad range of institutions but very few were willing to speak to us on the record about their strategies for improving student success. We expect this may be because of the imminent introduction of the TEF. Nevertheless we did obtain two case studies from very different institutions.

- Trinity Laban was created in 2005 following the merger of the Trinity College of Music and the Laban centre for contemporary dance. It is “the UK’s only conservatoire of music and contemporary dance”. It has a little over 1,000 students across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.
- The strategy for student success is adapted to the size of the institution; and the intensive mode of teaching and training distinctive to a conservatoire. The number of contact hours is high and teaching groups are typically small.
- This means the institution is able to draw on the close working relationships between staff and students to ensure student success; for example, given small teaching groups, staff know when a student has missed a class. Equally mental health issues or other welfare issues are more likely to be noticed quickly or discussed informally between staff and a student; and further support can then be provided if needed.
- In terms of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the institution auditions before selecting students and then spends time on acclimatising entrants to the experience of learning at a conservatoire. This means that students are typically highly motivated and committed.
- The educational experiences of teachers sometimes differ to those of contemporary students, including their expectations of a conservatoire education. The institution is working on developing teacher understanding of how prior educational experiences and non-traditional backgrounds can shape student success.
- Another priority for the institution is leaning in against the pressure that some students feel due to rising debt levels and recent findings about low earnings returns from some arts and music courses.

- Salford became a university in 1967. It consists of 7 schools and provides a broad range of courses. In contrast to Trinity Laban, it is a large institution with student numbers approaching 20,000. As such its approach to improving student success is increasingly built around the use of big data.
- The institution uses the digital footprint that students create through library borrowing, email logins, use of electronic resources and booking of extracurricular activities to identify students whose level of engagement is problematic. This data is used by personal tutors, School and teaching teams to signpost support and help. The data is also heavily used by 7 student progression assistants who were first appointed in August 2015 to provide a join between pastoral services, students in need of support and academic colleagues. The early evidence on their impact is positive.
- In addition to this targeted support, the institution also tailors support to the prior experience of students recognising that students from differing backgrounds will arrive with differing sets of values, assumptions and expectations. This support, threaded into the welcome and induction activities provided from A Level results day onwards point students to a wide variety of additional resources and support structures.
- In terms of the broader environment, the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework is expected to raise the profile and priority of the ongoing work towards student success.

- Across all English higher education institutions taken as a group, there is little evidence of recent progress in reducing non-continuation rates. However, there is substantial variation in non-continuation across institutions, with some institutions having much higher non-continuation rates than others.
- This variation is not random: students from more disadvantaged areas are more likely to drop out; and institutions with higher average UCAS tariff entry scores, or with a higher league table ranking, have better non-continuation rates.
- However, these characteristics do not make high non-continuation rates inevitable. Many institutions are doing well on non-continuation despite having a high intake of disadvantaged students, or a lower than average UCAS entry tariff.
- There is no evidence of a trade off between progress in non-continuation and progress in widening participation, with most institutions making limited progress in both. A focus on widening higher education participation to disadvantaged groups does not appear to come at the price of higher non-continuation rates.
- Yet there is evidence that student satisfaction matters: institutions with the highest satisfaction have much lower non-continuation rates.
- Our findings suggest several paths for improving student success in higher education. Some institutions are already doing well, and we can learn from them. Student satisfaction matters, and may be particularly important for overcoming the disadvantages faced by students from low participation areas, and by students going to some (but by no means all) lower tariff institutions.