Building on success

Increasing higher education retention in London

Kathryn Petrie
Nigel Keohane

SMF Social Market Foundation

FIRST PUBLISHED BY

THE SOCIAL MARKET FOUNDATION

The Foundation's main activity is to commission and publish original papers by   independent academic and other experts on key topics in the economic and social fields, with a view to stimulating public discussion on the performance of markets and the social framework within which they operate. The Foundation is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is independent of any political party or group and is funded predominantly through sponsorship of research and public policy debates. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author, and these do not necessarily reflect the views of the sponsors or the Social Market Foundation.

COMMISSIONED BY

GREATER
LONDON
AUTHORITY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kathryn Petrie

Kathryn is a senior economist at the SMF. She has worked on several policy areas since joining the SMF including education, social care and financial services.

Prior to joining the SMF Kathryn worked at the National Employment Savings Trust (NEST) where she worked as a Strategy Analyst. She has a BSc in Economics from Brunel University and an MSc in Economics from the University of East Anglia.

Nigel Keohane

Nigel oversees the SMF's research programme and leads the work on public service reform and commissioning, welfare reform and low pay, and pensions and savings. He is also Deputy Director of the SMF.

Prior to the SMF, Nigel was Head of Research at the New Local Government Network think tank, worked in local government and taught history at Queen Mary College, University of London. He has a BA and MA in history from Exeter University, and a PhD in Political History from Queen Mary.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report seeks to understand the factors affecting non-continuation and transfers at London universities. London's non-continuation rate is 7.7%, which is much higher than the English average of 6.3%, and students in London are the most likely to transfer to another university compared to students in the rest of the country. We seek to build on previous SMF work by focusing on why students leave university in London and the report looks in-depth at the differences in retention by ethnicity and socio-economic status. This report draws on qualitative and quantitative evidence. Interviews were conducted with 20 individuals from London who attended and withdrew from a London university and quantitative analysis of HESA data on young students in London between 2013/14 and 2015/16.

Reasons for leaving university in London

The key themes raised in the qualitative discussions on withdrawing from university were:
- Term time accommodation and commuting – *living at the family home impacts engagement with studies and the motivation and ability to make friends at university and engage in university social life.*
- Cost of living – *affordability constraints affect accommodation choices, with students more likely to commute from home; it also increases reliance on income from part-time work.*
- Course choice and value for money – *some students enter university having been poorly advised as to the course and institution they should attend. This can contribute to students perceiving their university degree to be poor value for money. Research suggests that students from London, who make up a large proportion of London university students, have comparatively poor access to careers support.*
- Preparation and support – *a lack of support at university, especially for students who studied non-academic courses before attending higher education, can lead to poor academic performance* and subsequent disengagement from studies.
- Mental health issues - *In a small number of our interviews, students reported having had mental health episodes during their time at university. These students reported that they received little support.*

Why does London have a high rate of non-continuation?

The demographics of the student population in London appear to contribute to its higher than average non-continuation rate. Our analysis shows that the living accommodation of students has a significant effect on the average likelihood of withdrawal. Living within the parental or guardian home increases the likelihood of withdrawing from university compared to those in university provided accommodation by 1.7% at a high tariff institution and by 3.4% at a low tariff institution. Due to the number of students living within the parental home whilst studying in London this is likely to be contributing to London's higher than average non-continuation rate. The data shows that 42% of students studying in London live within the parental or guardian home.

The socio-economic status of students is only significant in predicting the likelihood of withdrawal at medium and higher tariff institutions, with those whose parents work in routine occupations the most likely to withdraw, these students are defined as "working

class". HESA data from 2014/15 shows that London has the highest proportion of students from socio-economic groups 4 -7, this includes those who have parents working in jobs such as a taxi driver through to a cleaner.

What is contributing to the Black student non-continuation rate?

London has a large number of black students attending its universities (14%), and more than one in ten (13%) of Black students withdraw from their studies in London. However, our analysis suggests that the high non-continuation rate among London's black students is largely explained by factors other than ethnicity. A significant proportion of Black students (42%) enter university in London with a BTEC, and students following this route are much more likely on average to withdraw from their studies. As noted above, students who live at home are much more likely to withdraw, and more than half (55%) of Black students live in their family home during university compared to 25% of White students. Such factors go a considerable distance to explaining the high drop-out rate of London's Black students.

Our regression analysis shows that at high and medium tariff institutions, when controlling for other factors such as living accommodation and entry route, there is no significant difference between the non-continuation rates of Black students and White students in London. Only at low tariff institutions are Black students more likely than White students to dropout. Given that low tariff institutions have on average a higher proportion of Black students attending, this suggests that the impact of ethnicity could be more complex than historic concerns about non-inclusive universities or curriculums. During our qualitative work ethnicity was not highlighted as an issue in relation to retention.

What is the relationship between degree transfer and withdrawal in London?

Students with parents in lower-skilled occupations are more likely to transfer out of higher tariff universities but not lower tariff institutions. Compared to White students, Asian students are more likely to transfer. Perhaps most noteworthy is that students with vocational courses are most likely to transfer universities. This underscores the challenges described in the research about the choices such students make, their preparedness for study and the support they receive when at university.

Amongst students that had withdrawn from university in London there was a lack of awareness of transferring as an alternative to full withdrawal. Based on the very low level of awareness of transfer options, it is likely that some students in London who discontinue their studies altogether could be better supported by transferring to a different institution.

The characteristics associated with increased non-continuation are not the same as for transferring. This suggests that the factors that influence a student's decision to leave higher education may be different to the reasons for transfer. We can hypothesise that the role of advice and guidance could be playing a role in these differences, with those leaving university having received less thorough advice prior to and during their studies.

Policy

The report concludes by setting out some potential steps that could be considered by London universities and government. These include:

- Improving the experience of commuters including: Timetabling, flexible accommodation, more appropriate facilities on campus for universities, and making it easier for students to use the facilities of other London universities.
- Coordinating collective evidence gathering across London universities on student retention.
- Helping students manage the costs of transport and accommodation in London.
- Establishing better access to good quality advice and guidance to help potential candidates make the best choice of course, institution and career before entering higher education.
- Promoting better awareness of transferring university and rewarding universities that help students successfully transfer to other institutions.

GLOSSARY

Term	Definition
Managerial and professional occupations	This includes occupations such as lawyers, medical doctors, nurses and teachers.
Intermediate occupations	Examples include paramedics, bank staff, farmers and taxi drivers.
Routine occupations	This includes mechanics, plumbers, receptionists and cleaners.
Non–continuation or dropout	Withdrawal from higher education
Transfer	Moving from one institution to another
Retention	Holding onto students so they do not withdraw or move to another institution
Young	A student who is under 21 on the 30th of September the year they commence study.
First degree	Undergraduate bachelor's degree
First year of study	First year of study at the institution, not necessarily the first year of their degree.
Tariff	Based on the average UCAS points of the institutions population. Universities in England were divided into three equal tariff groups and the results were as follows for London: High = 355 and above Medium = 302 to 354 Low = 301 and lower

CHAPTER 1: NON-CONTINUATION IN LONDON

This chapter explains why non-continuation matters, particularly in the context of London's outstanding education system.

Why student retention matters

Attending and completing a university course is a fundamental enabler of social mobility in the UK, and graduate training is a major pillar of a high-skilled and high-productivity economy.

In past decades there has been a significant expansion of university places, with a much higher proportion of the population attending a higher education institution. The higher education participation rate has grown from 42% in 2006 to 49% in 2016.[1] As well as seeing a rise in the overall rate, governments have focused increasing attention on widening access – ensuring that those from more disadvantaged backgrounds attend university. For example, over the long-term there has been a significant increase in the proportion of students who come from state schools (rising from 85% at the turn of the century to 90% in 2016/17).[2]

Notwithstanding this expansion in university numbers, many students leave before they complete their studies. The Government has acknowledged this problem. In recent years, it has shifted the focus to a broader 'student life cycle' approach, which focuses not only on access but also student retention, progression, attainment and employability. The Higher Education and Research Act legislated for this broader focus and this has been written into guidance for the regulator the Office for Students.[3]

London's positive education story

London's education system has an outstanding record. In 2016/17, London had the best GCSE record in England.[4] Disadvantaged pupils in London outperform those in other regions, with 51 per cent of London children on free school meals achieving A* to C in English and maths GCSE, compared with an average of 36 per cent in all other English regions.[5] London also has the highest regional young participation rate in higher education.[6]

London's higher education institutions are highly regarded, with many of them achieving a high ranking nationally and globally. The Times Higher Education world university rankings show that two of the world's top 20 universities are in London.[7] However, London's record on degree completion is much less impressive. Previous research conducted by the Social Market Foundation found that London has consistently had one of the highest rates of degree non-continuation amongst the regions within England. In 2014/15, 7.7% of young UK-domiciled students left a London university by the end of their first year, in comparison to 4.6% in the South West.[8] The Mayor's skills strategy published in June 2018 notes that the 'drop out' rate across London universities is 10 per cent, higher than the UK average, and that the rate is higher among Black and male students.[9]

This research

Research focus

This research seeks to help fill the evidence gap and to learn what more could be done to help Londoners continue their higher education studies. Existing research has highlighted important themes that can determine retention rates. These include: student demographics (such as ethnicity and socio-economic background); institutional factors (such as teaching, facilities and the living environment) and regional influences (such as the cost of living, the other opportunities available to students). For instance, the SMF's report *On course for success?* found that there is a positive correlation between a university's non-continuation rate and the proportion of Black students, those from lower socio-economic groups and those with low prior attainment. Meanwhile, research has shown that 'a sense of belonging' and engagement with all aspects of university life are associated with successful degree completion.[10]

This research will address the following questions:

- Why does London have a high rate of non-continuation?
- What is contributing to the Black student non-continuation rate?
- What is the relationship between degree transfer and withdrawal within London?

Methodology

This research is based on a broad range of methods to gain insights from both students and universities.

- Literature review of academic, government and policy papers on student retention and higher education in London.
- Data analysis of data provided by HESA on first year young full time UK domiciled students by continuation status for 2013/14 to 2015/16.
- 20 depth interviews with young students who had been brought up in London and subsequently attended a London university before withdrawing. The interviewees were selected to reflect a range of characteristics that the data suggested were important to understand more about, including; household income, living arrangements, university type, ethnicity and gender.
- Three focus groups with the same students to discuss what universities and government could do to support them better. Interviewees were recruited by Indiefield. Participants were given a payment to thank them for their time.
- Interviews with 9 officials at a range of higher education institutions in London.

Report structure

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 looks at how London performs on retention
- Chapter 3 focuses on why students withdraw from university
- Chapter 4 looks at the demographics of those withdrawing from university
- Chapter 5 discusses the interactions between factors affecting non-continuation
- Chapter 6 highlights practice currently underway
- Chapter 7 focuses on policy interventions.

CHAPTER 2: HOW DOES LONDON PERFORM ON NON-CONTINUATION?

This chapter describes London's performance on non-continuation.

Figure 1 shows that 7.7% of students do not continue at university within London, this is much higher than the English average of 6.3% and way above the best achiever, the South West (4.9%). Past SMF analysis has shown that this is not just a one-off but an established pattern.[11]

Figure 1: Higher education non-continuation rates by region, 2016/17 entry (young, first-degree, UK-domiciled students),
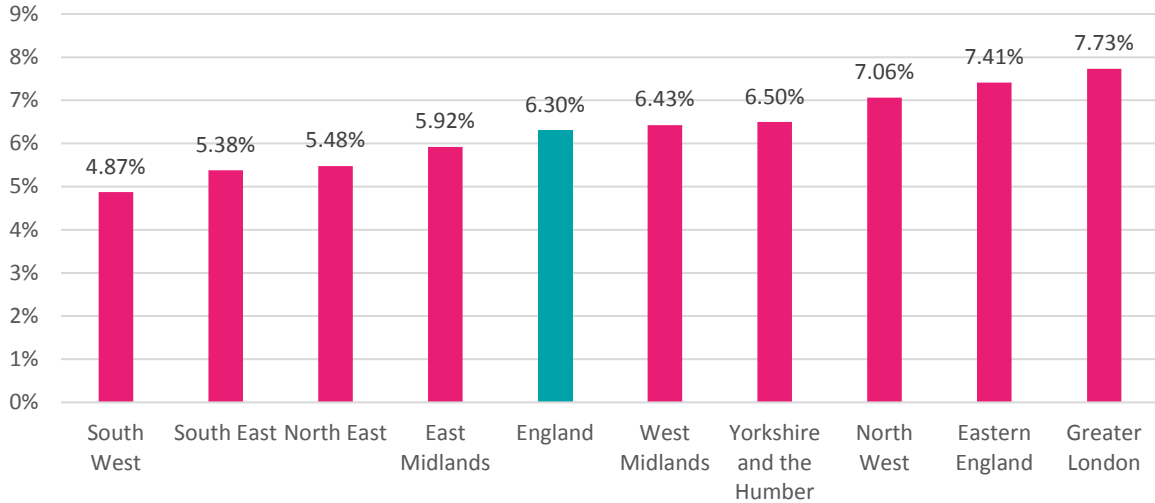
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data (2019)

This regional picture itself conceals substantial variation between institutions in the capital. As set out in the anonymised Figure 2, non-continuation rates vary by more than a factor of ten with the worst performing institution recording a drop-out rate of nearly one in five (20%) whilst the best performing achieved a rate of 1.5%.

Figure 2: Higher education non-continuation rates by institution in London, 2016/17 entry (young, first-degree, UK-domiciled students)

Source: SMF analysis of HESA data (2019)

Whilst London's higher than average non-continuation rate is affected by high non-continuation rates at a small number of institutions, many institutions under-perform against the average in England, as shown by the dashed line on figure 2. If London's two worst performing institutions reduced their non-continuation rate to be equal to that of the third worst performing institution, London's non-continuation rate would reduce from 7.73% to 7.5%. In this scenario, London would still be the worst performing region in England.

In 2016/17, 19 out of 33 universities in London have a non-continuation rate that is higher than their benchmark. The benchmark estimates the proportion of students that can be expected to leave their studies before the end of the course based on the demographics of the student population. The worst performing university has an observed non-continuation rate 82% higher than its benchmark. Across England, 53% of universities perform better than their benchmark, the figure in London is only 42%.[12]

CHAPTER 3: WHY DO STUDENTS DROPOUT OF UNIVERSITY IN LONDON?

This Chapter seeks to explain why students dropout of London universities. It draws on depth interviews with students who withdrew from London universities[1], interviews with higher education officials and analysis of student-level data.

Living at home

Data from HESA shows that in 2015/16, fewer than one in five (19%) full-time and sandwich students lived in their parental or guardian home during term time.[13] This figure is twice as high in London: 42% of students live in their parental or guardian home. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among London students who were brought up in London, with nearly two-thirds (63%) living at home during their studies.

Figure 3: Term time accommodation of students in London and UK[2], *2015/16*
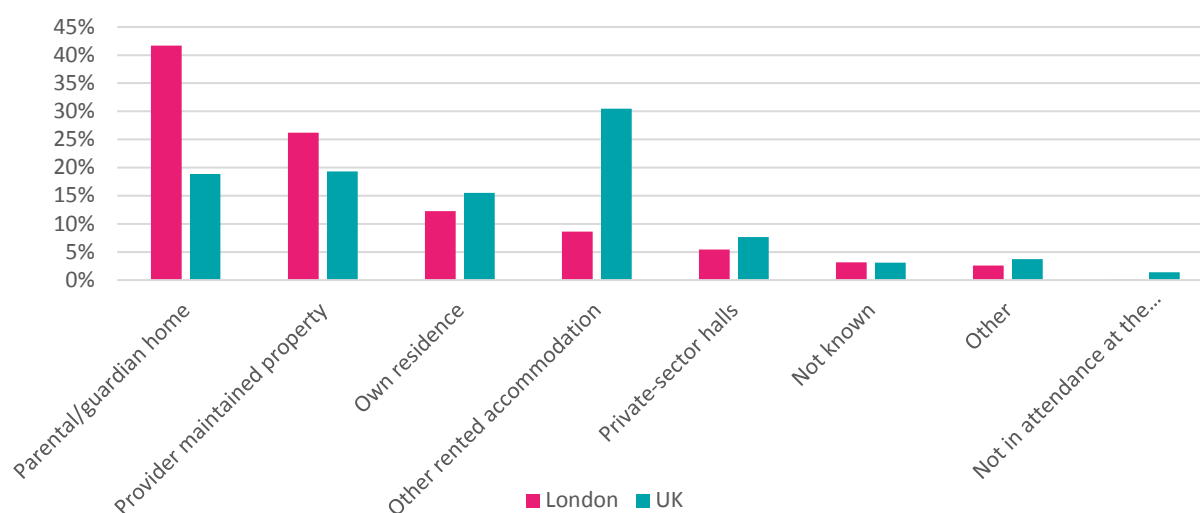
Source: HESA (2017)

There are several ways through which living at home during university can impact a student's experience. Living at home can have consequences on the student's sense of belonging and their connection to the university, whether this is through reduced time spent socially around the university, missed lecturers or a lack of strong relationships with other students.

Our qualitative research helped explain why accommodation patterns affect non-continuation rates. Ex-students we spoke to stressed that living at home was often a contributing factor to the reason they eventually dropped out of university. The experience of leaving home to attend classes and return home made many feel that the experience was similar to attending school or college. Students were unaware that living at home during university would lead to them feeling isolated or alter their experience.

---

[1] A full list of the criteria used to recruit students and their demographics is within the annex
[2] London covers young full-time first-degree entrants, UK covers full-time and sandwich students

> *"Everyone who didn't live on campus was singular, where those who lived on campus had formed cliques and groups" – Female, 21, Mixed race*

> *"It wasn't really university for me it was like college still...I should have gone away, you gain more independence when you go to university out of London"- Male, 24, Black British Caribbean*

> *"It was almost like school, I would go there... and then visit friends from my actual home...I would be with friends from home more than I was with people from uni...Being so close to home was definitely a disadvantage" – Male, 24, Black African*

Those who do not live in university halls or with other students reported struggling to make friends on campus and relying on existing social circles. This was driven by multiple forces – living off campus meant fewer opportunities to engage with other students; meanwhile, many already had established networks to draw on. Therefore, there was less impetus to establish new friendships than had they been forced to integrate fully.

> *"If I was to be away from my childhood friends... I feel like I would have had more motivation" – Male, 26, Black British Caribbean*

> *"I maybe made three or four good friends...living on campus creates different bonds, with the university, with the area and with the people... it was like going to work for me" – Female, 27, Black British*

Some students spoke anecdotally about not being eligible for university accommodation as their parental home was within London and therefore they felt they had no alternative than to live at home. Many students expressed a desire to live at home for cost reasons, and this is reflected by the difference in socio-economic status of those who live within their parental and guardian home during university. Figure 4 reveals a link between the socio-economic status of students and their likelihood of living at home during university. Research by the Sutton Trust has shown that students from lower socio-economic groups are much less likely to move out of their family home or move far away for university.[14]

> *"I couldn't afford to live near [university area] ... therefore I had to stay at home"- Male, 29, Black British*

Figure 4: Proportion of young full-time first-degree entrants in London living at home by occupational class of parents
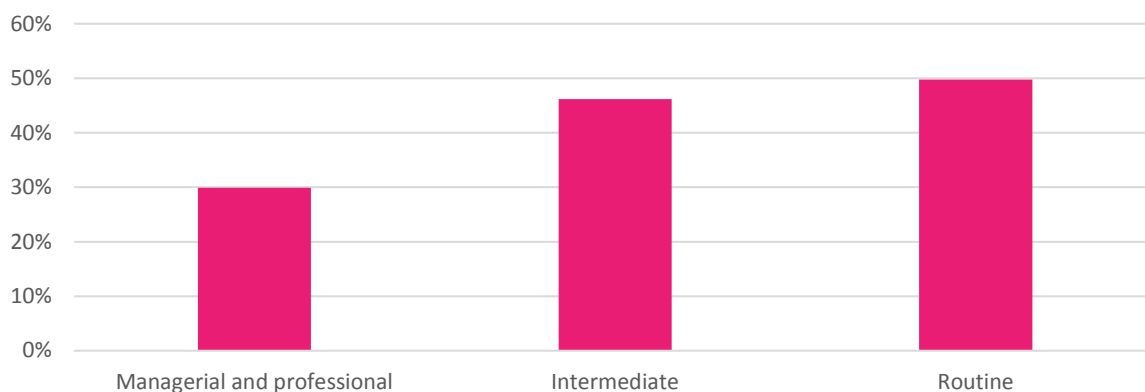
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

Ethnicity and culture also drive some of these differences: 60% of Asian students studying in London live in their parental or guardian home during term time, this increases to 72% of Asian students from London studying in London. In contrast, only a quarter of White students at London universities live at their family home during term-time, however this increases to 53% when focusing on White students originally from London.

Figure 5: Proportion of students at London HEIs living at their parental or guardian home, by domicile (all students and those from London)
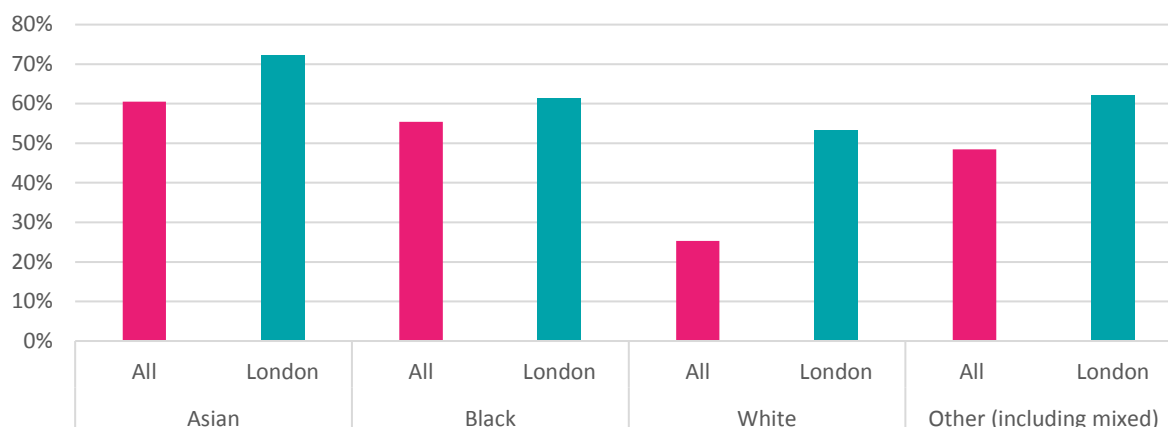
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

Commuting

London's geography means that it is common for students to commute many miles to attend their institution, irrespective of their accommodation status. Whilst a quarter (28%) of students commute fewer than two miles, another quarter (23%) commute more than 10 miles. The Academic Experience Survey of 2018 highlights that commuting more than 10 miles can have a significant negative impact on the perception of value for money.[15] The Government's review into post-18 education will look at how to encourage learning that is more flexible, including commuter degrees.[16]

Many of the students we interviewed were travelling for considerable amounts of time to attend lectures, with one commuting one hour and 45 minutes each way to university. Whilst it is important to consider the distance travelled, within London the reliance on public transport and connectivity issues within some areas, particularly south east London can mean that short distance journeys can take considerable amounts of time. Although London has one of the most impressive public transport networks in the world, congestion in the city can contribute to slow travel times.

> *"Just getting to university was an absolute hassle because of the train network"- Male, 29, Black British*

> *"Living at home ended up with me missing lectures…. It takes me an hour to get there" – Male, 24, Black African*

Students commuting long distances spoke of difficulties managing gaps in their timetables. They did not want to spend hours waiting for their next class and would occasionally miss classes that were at inconvenient times for them, such as first or last thing in the day. Those that did spend time waiting in between classes found that there

was a financial cost associated with this, particularly in central London where the universities are not campus based.

> *"I would spend money just being around London waiting for my next class…Those days where I would be there at 9 and have to stay to 6 is when I spent the money"* – Female, 22, Black British

Whilst living close to the university has many upsides for some students there were also negatives including it being easier to leave the university in between classes and not return for lectures or seminars later in the day. Those commuting between 25 and 34 miles are less likely to discontinue their studies than those commuting between 5 and 24 miles, the same pattern holds true for the likelihood of transferring to another provider. Those who commute longer distances may find it more difficult to come and go from university and their willingness to travel such distances may represent a strong commitment to study.

Figure 6: Proportion dropping out or transferring by term time accommodation distance (in miles)
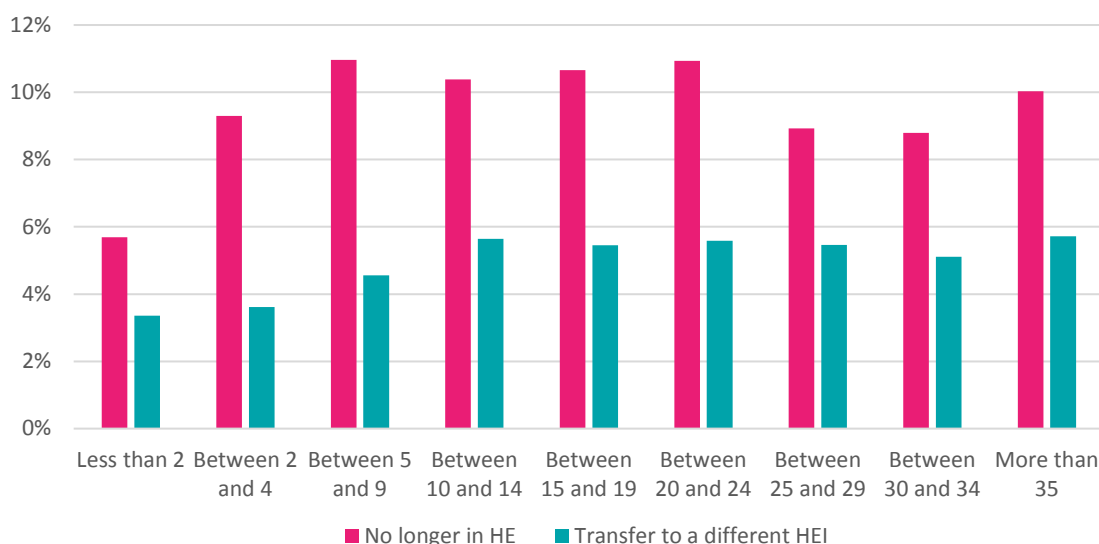
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

The cost of living

London is an expensive city, and this is partly reflected by the larger maintenance loan available to students who choose to study there. As we have shown, many students in London opt to live within their family home, but they still have costs associated with travel which was frequently raised within our qualitative research.

> *"I was not aware of how much it would cost to go across London…And that was just travel, living in London, it's so expensive….30% off as a student is ridiculous… we are one of the most expensive cities to travel in"* – Male, 29, Black British

Many students work part-time to allow themselves to be able to afford to live without relying solely upon their student loan. This can create clashes with academic life, particularly if the hours of work are not conducive to studying.

"In order to pay rent, I needed to work full time, I couldn't attend the course and work… it was a last resort" – Female, 21, Mixed race

"Because I lived by myself and I did not have any support by my parents…I couldn't not work…It was difficult to juggle" – Female, 27, Black

"I was trying to work and stuff…part time but maybe 30 hours a week or something… was still trying to go to university after doing a six to three shift and then going to lectures at 4" – Male, 26, Black African

We observed that not all subjects allow for the students to work during term-time due to the hours of contact time and / or requirements to undertake placements. This can have profound consequences on the financial situation of students affected.

"Distance was one thing and the second was not getting any income… I couldn't really have a job alongside that… Monday to Friday 8 hours a day is a lot to take on… After the first year I thought it might get a bit too much…I dropped out and started working again"- Male, 22, White British

One common theme was the cost of rent in the London and the impact on individual decisions to live at home during university. We have previously explored how the term-time accommodation of students can have a significant impact on their likelihood of continuing. This is a mechanism by which economic disadvantage can transmit into higher non-continuation rates.

"I didn't want to rent because it was expensive"- Male, 22, White British

"The rent in London is crazy" – Male, 26, Black Caribbean

"It was so expensive the second year I couldn't afford to live in campus…A lot of people ended up commuting from home because it is so expensive" – Male, 24, Black African

The choice of course

The chances of dropping out of university are also affected by decisions made before attending. Some students leave university because they have made the wrong decision about their course. This is very hard to assess quantitatively because data is not gathered on how students made the decision to attend university. However, it emerged as an issue in our interviews with students.

"I was split between studying law because it sounded interesting…I feel like I made the wrong choice and was a bit resentful"- Female, 27, Black British

"It made me feel like I picked the wrong course"- Male, 26, Black Caribbean

"Anything you do at university you have to find interesting or you will struggle drastically…I would have probably gone into something to do with the arts if I had my choice again"- Male, 29, Black British

Picking the wrong course is only part of the problem. Some students also reported that they felt pressurised to attend university and that they were pushed down this route.

> *"I felt rushed…Teachers, parents, aunties, uncles everyone was saying you have to go to university now…I was not ready at 19"- Male, 24, Black African*

Several of the students interviewed entered university through clearing and in some cases the students had not visited the university before deciding to study there. Entering through clearing or failing to attend an open day can influence an individual's expectations, students may not be aware of the course content, the university environment or their commute from their term time address.

Information and guidance is patchy throughout the country and within regions.[17] This is reflected in the different advice and guidance offered to those who participated within the qualitative section of this research. Research by the Careers and Enterprise Company suggests that students in London, who make up a large proportion of London university students, have comparatively poor access to careers support compared to other regions within England. The research shows that in London less than half of the Gatsby sub-benchmarks are achieved, this is the joint lowest regional score.[18] Alternatives to higher education were raised throughout our discussions, with many students, particularly men, believing that an alternative route may have been better for them.

> *"They geared everyone up for university…They did not push vocational courses, people did not even talk about it"- Male, 29, White British*

> *"No alternatives in terms of apprenticeships, it was pretty much you go to university, which was a shame"- Male, 24, Black African*

> *"An apprenticeship would have helped more, it is more hands on… I needed experience and theory at the same time"- Male, 23, Asian*

Perceptions of value for money

The concept of value for money is high up the agenda of the Department for Education and will be a key theme in the Government's review of post-18 education.[19] Students' perception of value for money declined from 2012 to 2017: in 2012, 53% of students reported that their course represented value for money, compared to 35% in 2017. This year has seen the first increase since 2012, with 38% reporting that their course offers good or very good value for money.[20]

Our interviews revealed that some students considered their university education to be poor value for money. At times, this reflected their individual experiences. It also reflected a negativity about the cost and value of university that students heard about from others.

> *"You don't ever hear it's worth it… I've never heard it's worth it…you always hear the bad stories"- Male, 24, Black British*

> *"You pay so much money for such little tutor time…they should have more on offer for students during their time off…classrooms available for study…you pay so much to self-study"- Male, 29, White British*

> *"Everything I learnt there I knew already… they were using old material because they couldn't afford new things…I was using stuff that I wouldn't use, its outdated" – Male, 24, Black British Caribbean*

Individuals spoke of knowing friends who had graduated and struggled to gain employment. If students perceive there to be little value associated with their degree regarding employment prospects this could be influencing their decision to leave.

> *"The people who stayed in uni, they are struggling to find jobs right now"-Male, 24, Black British Caribbean*

Research shows that there are significant differences in the earnings potential of students, often dependent upon the university attended and the level of prior attainment. Five years after graduation students who entered university with over 360 UCAS points, has annualised median earnings of £35,500, however those with 240-299 UCAS points earnt £10,000 less at £25,500 per annum.[21] For many students in London, the earnings potential associated with different universities and courses could cause them to perceive there to be little value associated with the continuation of their studies.

Preparation and support

Students enter university with various levels of expectations. For instance, those whose siblings or parents had attended university may be more aware of what to expect from university life compared to those who are the first in their family to go to university. The workload at university can be intense, the environment can be challenging and very often there is a large amount of independent study. Many of our interviewees were unaware of how much would be involved and how much of this would be self-study.

> *"When I did my A-levels I felt like I wasn't too stretched...I wasn't prepared for how much harder it would be...It is not an extension of you're A-levels" – Female, 27, Black British*

> *"It is a lot more laid back than I thought it would be... it is kind of up to you to make of it what you can... If I had grasped that earlier I may have been able to stay on and complete" – Male, 26, Black African*

Evidence suggests that those who enter university with vocational qualifications, such as BTECs or access courses are less likely to continue in higher education.[22] The SMF's report *Vocation, Vocation, Vocation* also found that such students may require additional support when they attend university because they have less experience in specific study disciplines than students who studied A-Levels or other academic subjects.

> *"A-levels are a lot more suited to uni, just because of how intense the work is... The BTEC does not really prepare you because in uni you have to teach yourself" – Male, 26, Black Caribbean*

Students who struggle to cope with the academic side of university may look for support from lecturers or tutors but can struggle to obtain this or in some cases will not search for the help they need and try to go it alone.

> *"I was hugely disappointed...I didn't feel I received the level or kind of support I needed"- Female, 28, Black African*

> *"In college they told us we would get a lot of support... but I found I didn't get any"- Male, 23, Asian*

"I did reach out for some support but I probably could have reached out for more...you feel a little lost in the crowd"- Female, 20, White British

Student mental health

In a small number of our interviews, students reported having had mental health episodes during their time at university. These students reported that they received little support. In some cases, students reported that they had sought to deal with the issue themselves and therefore had not sought to access support. Others tried to access services but were put on lengthy waiting lists or felt that there were too many hoops to jump through in order to be made eligible for support.

Most concerning were stories of students feeling that the university did not want the individuals to continue or even defer their studying because of their mental health situation. In these situations, the students did not feel in control of their decision to leave.

"[regarding discussing mental health] I do think that this did contribute to them asking me to leave...maybe I shouldn't have said anything... damned if you do, damned if you don't" – Female, 28, Black African

Transferring

Transferring allows students to move to another institution to complete their degree if they decide that their current institution is no longer suitable. Research has shown that students within London are the most likely to transfer as are students who study STEM based subjects.[23] Research suggests that between 1.5 to 2% of UK domiciled first degree students in England transfer between institutions, with two-thirds going back into the first year of study.[24] Approximately 5% of students who entered a London university in 2016/17 transferred to another HEI following the year of entry.[25]The proximity to other institutions in London is said to reduce the costs associated with degree transfer and this may contribute to the higher than average rate of degree transfer.

Lower tariff institutions have the highest rates of degree transfer, with one in twenty students transferring to a different institution.

Figure 7: Proportion of students transferring to another HEI by tariff of university
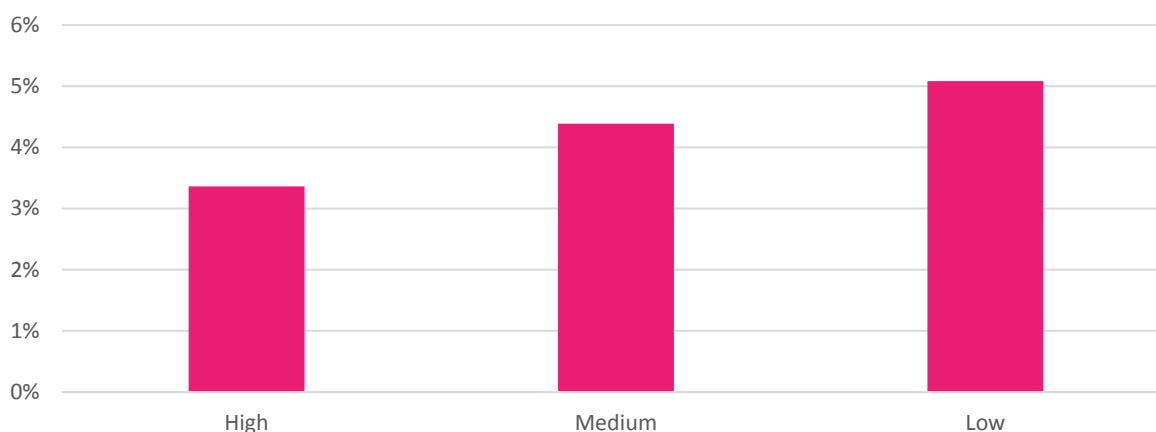
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

Transfer rates differ between ethnicities and by institutional tariffs. Black students are the most likely to transfer to another HEI regardless of tariff, however the gap is most pronounced at medium tariff institutions. White students have a transfer rate lower than the London average of 4% regardless of the tariff of their institution.

Throughout our research we asked students who had dropped out of London universities whether they had considered or heard of transferring. Very few students were aware of the option and those who were aware of transferring were not fully aware of credit transfer, a scheme by which students can take with them accumulated credits from their current university onto the next institution.

> *"I never thought about transferring... I don't know what it is" [once explained] ...*
> *"That's cool"- Female, 20, White British*

Based on the very low level of awareness of transfer options, it is likely that some students in London who discontinue their studies altogether could be better supported by transferring to a different institution.

> *"Even if they said change your subject or look at other universities... I think that would be good if someone said that to me" – Female, 27, Black British*

Conclusions

This chapter has described the main factors that emerged from our data analysis and fieldwork that help explain the non-continuation rate in the capital. Living at home has several implications such as low engagement with university social life and difficulties engaging with academic studies due to time spent commuting.

The advice and guidance students receive before attending university is vital in helping students make the right choice, and yet our research shows that several individuals feel they made the wrong choice or that alternative options would have been better for them and their career ambitions. The preparation and support on offer to students, particularly those entering through alternatives to the academic qualifications, appears to be lacking at some institutions.

## CHAPTER 4: CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH NON-CONTINUATION IN LONDON

The SMF's previous work on retention has shown that there are several characteristics associated with non-continuation at university, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status and entry routes. The aim of this chapter is to explore these characteristics with a London focus and understand the extent to which these characteristics overlap.

Ethnicity

Past research has shown that non-continuation rates vary markedly by ethnic background: institutions that have a higher intake of Black students are likely to have a higher non-completion rate.[26] Non-continuation rates are higher for Black students even when controlling for other factors,[27] and the Black drop-out rate is almost 1.5 times higher than the rate of White and Asian students.[28] According to TEF data from 2017, 10.3% of Black students drop out of university, compared to 6.9% for the whole student population.

There is a higher proportion of Black students in London compared to England, however there are significant variations between the institutions. Figure 8 shows that 14.5% of London students are Black whilst 26% are Asian and 12% are Other. Fewer than half (47%) are White – compared to 69% in England.

Figure 8: Student population by ethnicity
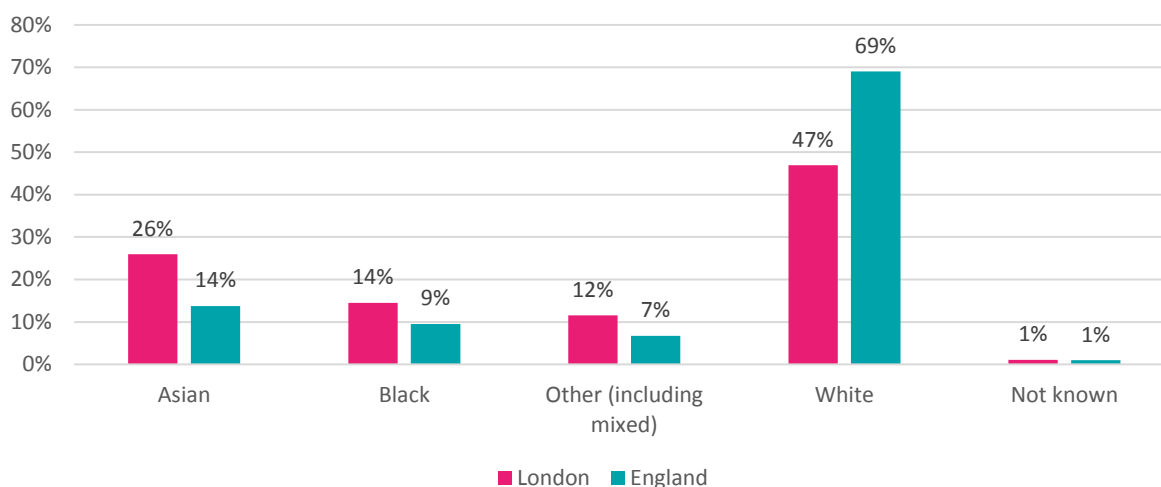
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16 and HESA 2016/17 for England

Non-continuation is much more prevalent among the Black student population in London (see Figure 9). Black students have the highest non-continuation rate within London, at 13%. This compares to only 8% for White students and for Asian students. The difference in drop-out rates between ethnicities is similar in magnitude to that across England (6.9% for White students and 11.4% for Black students). We note also that the transfer rate for Black students is higher than that of students of White, Asian and Other background.

Figure 9: Non-continuation rates by ethnicity of London students
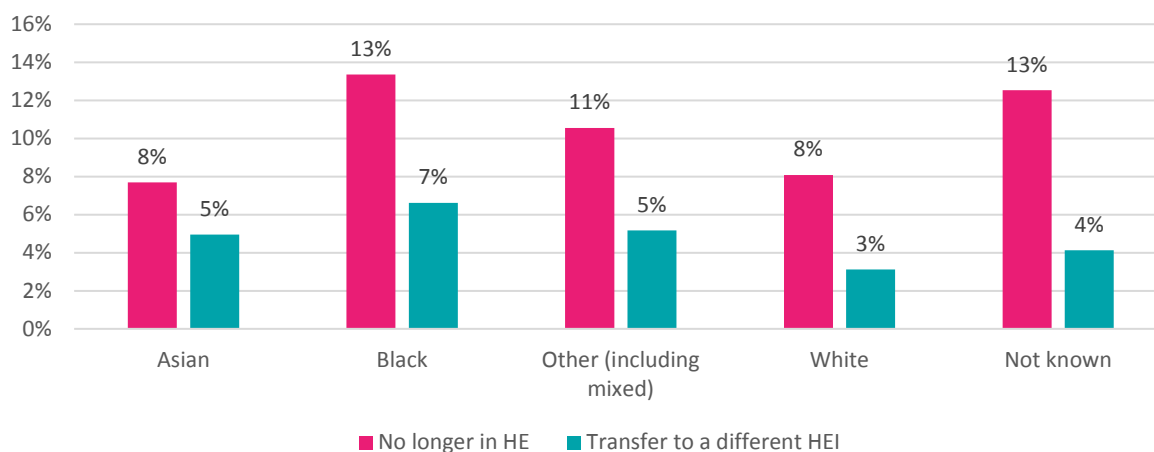
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

Due to ethnic categories available in the HESA data, this analysis uses a broad definition of ethnicity and it is important to consider the different groups within each ethnicity. Data on graduate outcomes shows that the earnings of different groups within the ethnicities vary significantly. Five years after graduation Black Caribbean students had annualised median earnings of £22,300, compared to £22,500 for Black African, although this gap reduces at the 10-year point.[29] For Asian students there is a large gap between the earnings of Asian Indian and Asian Pakistani's five years post graduate, with Asian Indian earning £26,300 compared to £19,700, this gap remains ten years post-graduation.

Entry qualifications

Over a third (35%) of students entering university in London enter with A levels and one in four (26%) enter with a BTEC qualification. However, as figure 10 shows this varies significantly by ethnicity. Two in ten (20%) White students enter university in London with a BTEC, compared to more than four in ten Black students (42%). Black students are more likely than any other ethnicity to enter with BTEC qualifications.

Figure 10: Top three qualifications held on entry to university by ethnicity
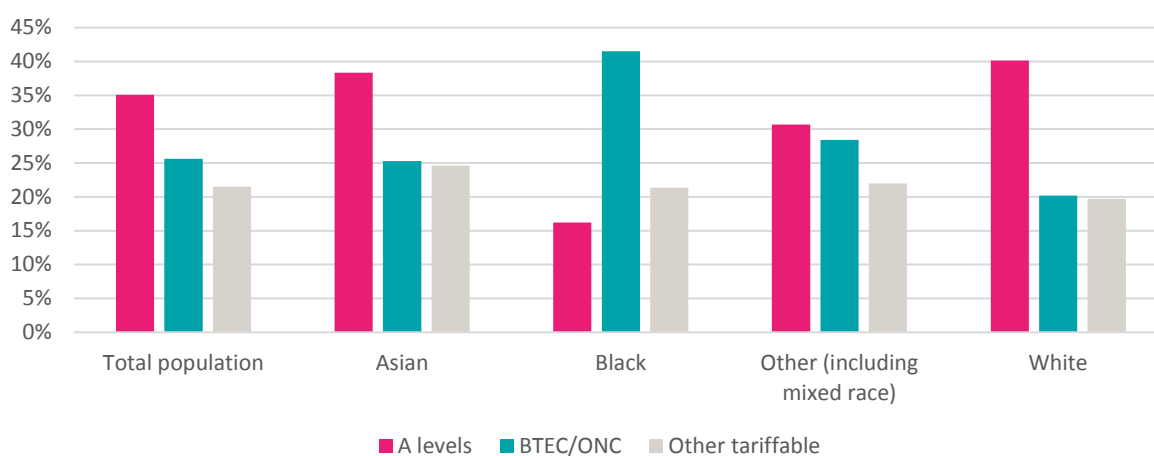
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

The large proportion of Black students entering university with a BTEC qualification could be at least partly responsible for the differences we see in the non-continuation rate by

ethnicity. Figure 11 shows the non-continuation and transfer rate by qualification type at London universities.

Figure 11: Non-continuation rates by entry qualification of London students
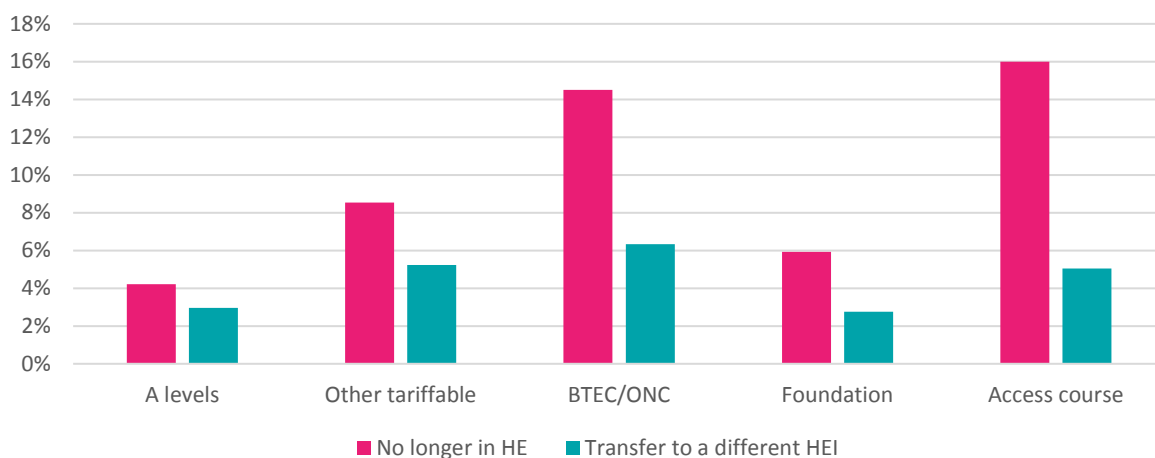
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

Less than 5% of students entering university with A levels withdraw from their students. Students entering university with a BTEC or Access course qualification have high rates of university withdrawal, 15% of those with BTECs and 16% of those with access qualification decide to not continue with higher education.

Our evidence suggests there is also a link between the socio-economic status of students and their entry qualifications. Almost half (49%) of students whose parents work in management or professional occupations enter university with A levels, compared to only 26% of those whose parents work in routine occupations. Students whose parents work in routine occupations are more than twice as likely to enter university with a BTEC or Access qualification compared to those from the upper occupational class.

Accommodation type

We have already discussed the numbers living in different accommodation at university in London, Figure 12 shows how the differences in term-time accommodation are associated with differing non-continuation and transfer rates at London universities.

Figure 12: Proportion of students dropping out or transferring by term time accommodation
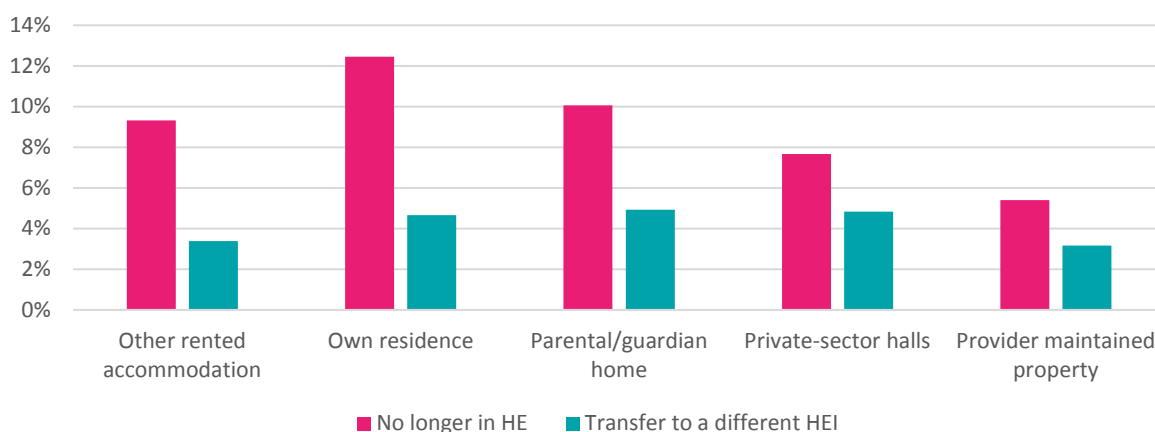
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

One in ten (10%) of those who live at their parental or guardian home withdraw from university and 5% transfer to another higher education provider. In contrast only 5% of students in provider-maintained property leave higher education and only 3% transfer.

Term time accommodation could explain some of the non-continuation differences seen between ethnicities. Black students are much more likely to live within their own accommodation compared to White students, 17% compared to 11%. More than half (55%) of Black students live in their family home during university compared to 25% of White students. A high proportion (60%) of Asian students live within their family home, however Asian students tend to have lower non-continuation rates, this highlights the complex nature of ethnicity and living accommodation. There can be several reasons why students choose to live within a specific accommodation type, including the cost of living, ease of commute or cultural reasons and these reasons could be concentrated within certain socio-economic groups or ethnicities.

Socio-economic status

Parental occupation is used as an indicator of economic status, those from lower socio-economic groups are one of the underrepresented groups in higher education and their outcomes are monitored within access agreements. Throughout this research occupation is used as a measure of disadvantaged rather than POLAR.

There is a clear relationship between the socio-economic classification of a student's parental occupation and their likelihood of leaving higher education. Over a third (34%) of students studying in London have parents who work in management and professional occupations, 17% have parents in intermediate occupations and 23% have parents in routine occupations.

Students whose parents occupy lower-skilled roles are much more likely to discontinue their studies. In part this is likely to be explained by the fact that parents in lower-level occupations are less likely to have attended university and therefore expectations of university may be different across the occupation groups.

Figure 13: Non-continuation rates by occupational status of student's parents
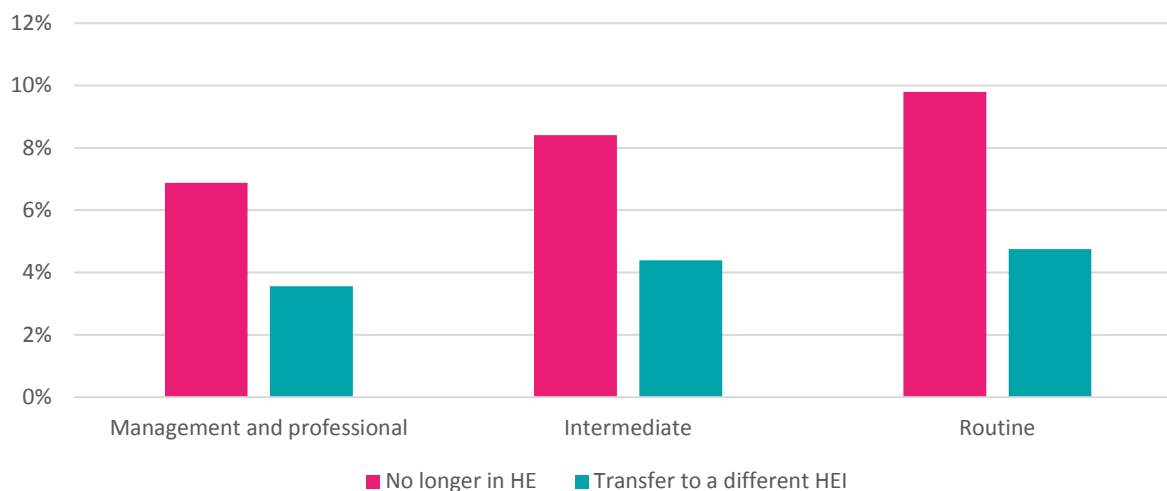
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

There is a marked difference in the socio-economic class of students from different ethnicities in London. More than four in ten (43%) of White students in London are from the upper occupational class, compared to 24% of Black students. Initial evidence shows that for Black students their socio-economic status makes little difference to their likelihood of withdrawal, 11% of Black students from the upper socio-economic class do not continue with higher education compared to 12% for those with parents working in routine occupations.

Region of home

A large share of London's student population was originally domiciled in the capital before attending university. More than half (56%) of those studying within London are from the capital, while 71% are from London and the South East. Among Local Enterprise Partnership areas with more than 5,000 domestic students, London has the highest proportion of students who grew up in the area in which they subsequently study.[30]

Figure 14: Proportion of students that attend London higher education institutions by domicile, (young, first-degree, UK-domiciled students)
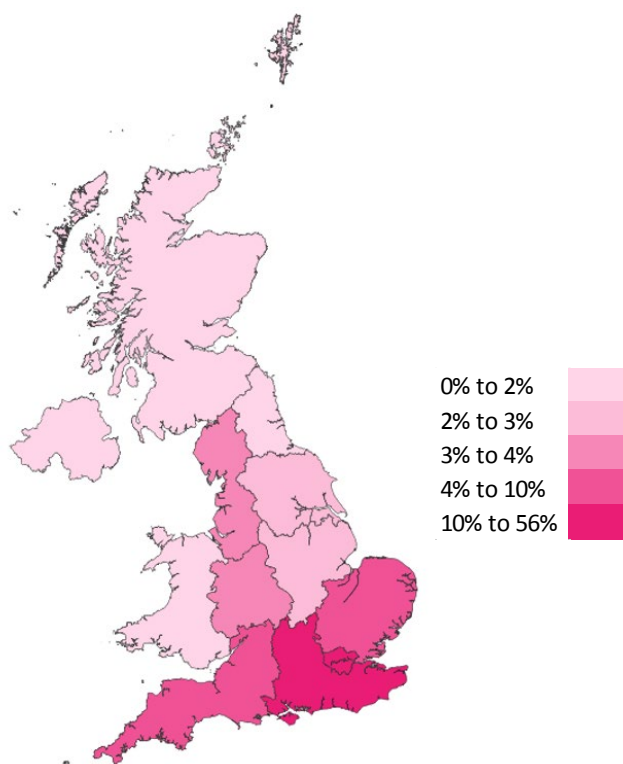
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

In this context, it is important to note that among students studying in London those from the capital are more likely than those from any other region to leave university, as is shown in figure 15. In contrast, the transfer rate does not vary significantly by region of domicile. This suggests that the factors that drive non-continuation may differ from those that drive transfers.

Figure 15: Non-continuation rate and transfer rate of London higher education students by region of domicile

Legend: No longer in HE (pink), Transfer to a different HEI (teal)
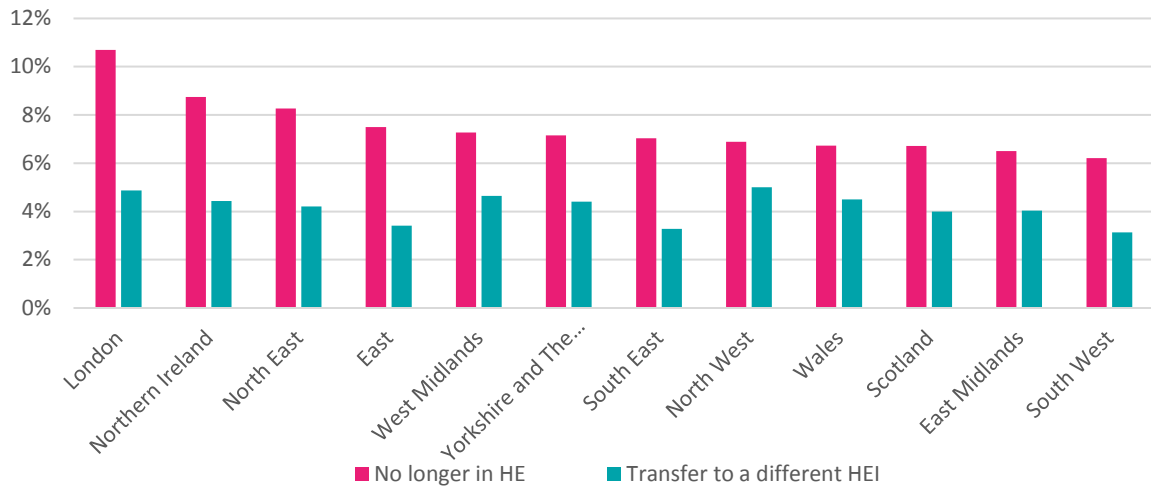
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

The non-continuation rate in London hides significant differences between boroughs. In terms of where students were brought up, the best performing borough has a non-continuation rate of 7.3% whilst the worst has a non-continuation rate of 13.8%. The map below shows the proportion of students from each borough that do not continue in higher education.

Figure 16: Proportion of students leaving higher education by borough of domicile

Legend:
<7.5%
7.5% to 9%
9% to 10.6%
10.6% to 12.2%
12.2% to 13.8%
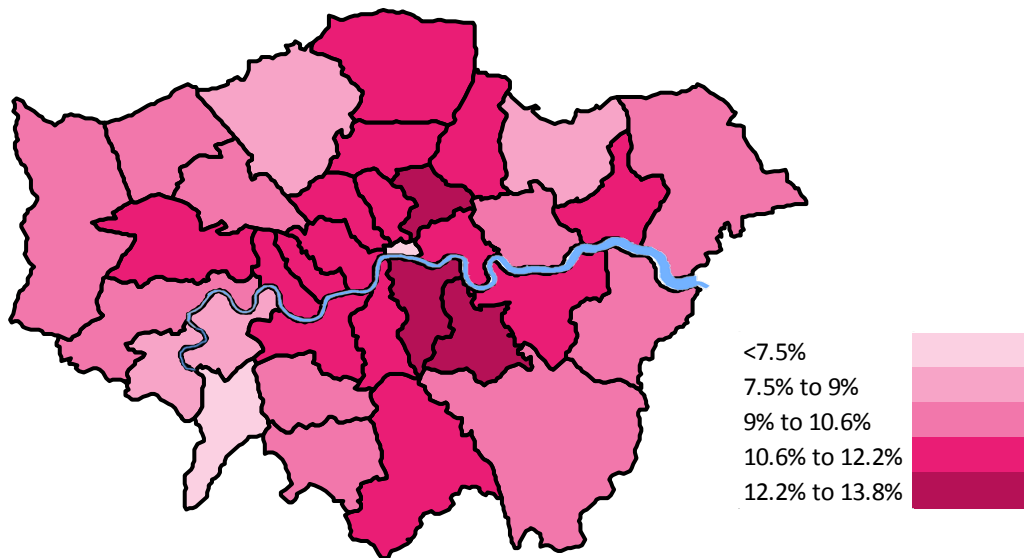
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

Gender

As in other regions, men are more likely to leave their studies than women, with 11% of men discontinuing compared to 8% of women. London has the highest proportion of young, full-time first degree female students at 58% of the student population, however there is only a marginal difference between regions with 56% of the young full-time student population being female.[31]

Figure 17: Non-continuation rates by gender of London students
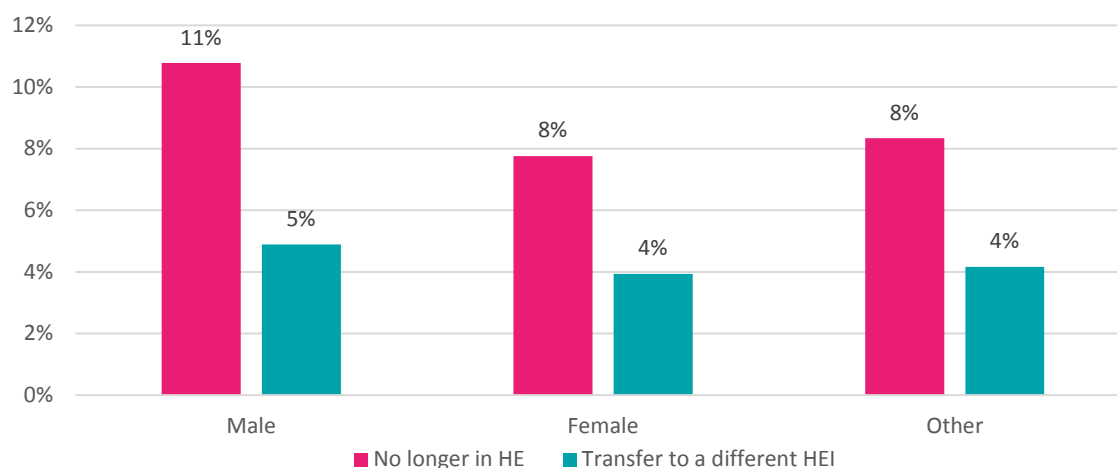
Source: SMF analysis of HESA data, 2013/14 to 2015/16

There are substantial differences between the genders within ethnic groups. Black males have a withdrawal rate 17%, whereas only 9% of White males withdraw. Female Asian students have a withdrawal rate of 6%, compared to 11% for Black females.

CHAPTER 5: HOW FACTORS INTERACT TO AFFECT NON-CONTINUATION AND DEGREE TRANSFER IN LONDON

Many factors affecting non-continuation interact in often complex ways. Living at home, may be associated with economic disadvantage and separately with ethnicity and culture.

The regression analysis is based on data of students studying in London between 2013/14 and 2015/16. The regression uses a probit model to understand the probability of non-continuation or degree transfer. The model controls for a range of characteristics including gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and entry route.[3]

Results from modelling on non-continuation

Table 1: Regression results from probit model on the probability of non-continuation by tariff

	High tariff	Medium tariff	Low tariff
In comparison to those with A-levels			
Other tariffable	3.67%***	2.18%***	2.77%***
BTEC	13.71%***	6.31%***	8.33%***
Foundation *(small sample)*	5.42%***	-0.01%	-3.61%***
Access	9.70%***	7.74%***	9.79%***
Other	2.70%***	3.21%***	6.12%***
In comparison to those in provider-maintained property			
Own residence	1.51%***	1.70%***	3.20%***
Parental/guardian home	1.65%***	0.70%**	3.39%***
Private sector halls	3.15%***	1.39%***	2.78%***
Not known	4.67%***	2.85%***	5.52%***
Other	4.99%***	1.5%	6.30%***
Other rented acomm.	0.93%***	0.84%*	4.76%***
In comparison to White students			
Asian	-0.54%***	-2.56%***	-2.29%***
Black	-0.09%	-0.09%	1.84%***
Other (including mixed)	-0.34%	-0.13%	1.43%***
In comparison to management and professional parental occupations			
Intermediate	0.22%	-0.02%	0.44%
Routine	0.65%***	0.66%**	0.28%
In comparison to those from London			
South and East	-0.82%***	-1.04%***	-2.38%***
North and Midlands	-0.61%**	-0.34%	-0.73%
Northern Ireland *(small sample)*	0.96%	-1.20%	5.29%
Scotland	-0.95%	-0.55%	1.36%
Wales	0.88%	-2.06%**	-2.23%
Not known	2.26%	0.10%	-3.74%
In comparison to men			
Women	-0.83%***	-2.78%***	-4.4%***

*Note: *** represents significance at 5%, ** is significant at 10% and * is significant at 15%.*

[3] Full description within appendix.

Qualification type

Our regression analysis shows that those who enter with a qualification other than A-levels are much more likely to dropout of their studies. At high tariff institutions those who enter with BTEC qualifications are 14% more likely to leave higher than those with A-levels. This falls to 8% at low tariff institutions.

These effects are large and much bigger than other factors such as ethnicity and living accommodation. Those who enter via the access course route are also much more likely to discontinue higher education than those who enter with A-levels. Those entering a high tariff institution having previously studied a foundation course are more likely to discontinue their studies compared to those with A levels. However, if they attend a low tariff institution they are more likely to continue compared to those who enter with A-levels.

Living accommodation

In this analysis, we compare accommodation choices to provider-maintained property (more usually called university halls). At high and low tariff institutions living in any other type of accommodation has a significant and positive impact on the likelihood of dropping out of university in comparison to those who live within provider-maintained property. The same is true at medium tariff universities, with the exception of 'other'.

For students who attend low tariff institutions, living within their parental or guardian home increases their likelihood of dropping out by 3%. Living within private sector halls increases the likelihood of dropping out of university by 3% at high and low tariff institutions. We were not able to explore this issue through our work and this issue deserves further analysis. Potential explanations include: it may be harder for those living in private sector halls to build connections with the university or with their flatmates, because some may be placed with flatmates from other institutions in inter-collegiate halls. Research shows that integration with flatmates is positively linked with retention.[32] NUS research has reported that privately provided accommodation providers are much less likely to offer welcome events for students.[33] The same report found that private sector suppliers have weekly rents 38% higher than the rents offered by the institutions within London.[34]

Whilst living at home was discussed frequently within our qualitative research the data suggests that living in private sector halls or within your own residence can have an equivalent impact on non-continuation.

Ethnicity

Our results show that the impact of ethnicity is more subtle and complicated than often argued. When other factors are accounted for, Asian students have lower non-continuation rates than White students, regardless of tariff-type. Only at low tariff institutions are Black students more likely than White students to dropout. Given that low tariff institutions have on average a higher proportion of Black students attending, this suggests that the impact of ethnicity could be more complex than non-inclusive universities or curriculums.[35] During our qualitative work we spoke to students about their experiences at university and interviewees did not cite race or ethnicity as a factor in its own right.

Socio-economic status
The analysis finds that there is no statistical difference between those whose parents work in management and professional occupations and those who work in intermediate occupations. Having parents who work in routine occupations compared to management and professional significantly increases the likelihood of withdrawal at high and medium tariff institutions by 0.7%. This increase is marginal in comparison to other characteristics in our analysis.

Region of home
When controlling for other factors, Londoners are more likely to withdraw from university compared to those from the South or East of England, this is most significant at low tariff institutions. Those from the North and Midlands are less likely to withdraw compared to Londoners at high tariff institutions but the results are not significant at medium or low tariff institutions.

Gender
In support of other research, we find that women are much less likely to withdraw compared to men, with the impact being most significant at low tariff institutions.

Results from modelling on degree transfer

Table 2: Regression results from probit model on the probability of degree transfer by tariff

	High tariff	Medium tariff	Low tariff
In comparison to those with A-levels			
Other tariffable	2.92%***	1.25%***	1.50%***
BTEC	8.66%***	2.64%***	2.14%***
Foundation *(small sample)*	5.13%***	-1.05%***	3.63%*
Access	0.83%	2.13%***	1.59%***
Other	-0.17%	-0.94%***	-0.51%
In comparison to those in provider-maintained property			
Own residence	0.6%*	0.94%***	0.17%
Parental/guardian home	1.76%***	0.59%**	0.80%***
Private sector halls	2.16%***	0.66%	3.59%***
Not known	3.68%***	3.18%***	2.46%***
Other	2.58%***	1.24%	1.36%***
Other rented acomm.	-0.58%***	0.29%	0.97%***
In comparison to White students			
Asian	0.43%**	1.04%***	2.42%***
Black	1.17%***	3.28%***	3.68%***
Other *(including mixed)*	0.50%*	1.19%***	3.26%***
In comparison to management and professional			
Intermediate	0.69%***	0.44%	-0.14%
Routine	0.61%***	0.44%*	-0.09%
In comparison to those from London			
South and East	0.27%	0.13%	-0.70%***
North and Midlands	1.58%***	2.11%***	1.77%***
Northern Ireland *(small sample)*	1.46%	3.81%**	3.13%*
Scotland	2.12%*	2.82%	1.89%

Wales	1.18%*	2.30%**	2.99%***
Not known	1.02%	.	-1.48%
In comparison to men			
Women	-0.67%***	-1.09%***	-1.11%***

Note: *** represents significance at 5%, ** is significant at 10% and * is significant at 15%.

Qualification type

At high and medium tariff institutions students who enter with a BTEC qualification are the most likely group to transfer compared to those with A-levels when holding other characteristics constant. The fact that those who have studied vocational courses are much more likely to transfer may be a reflection of concerns about advice, guidance and course selection that were raised in the interviews.

Living accommodation

In comparison to the non-continuation results, living in the parental or guardian home has less of an impact on the likelihood of transferring university. Those at low tariff institutions who live at home are 0.8% more likely to transfer than those in provider-maintained property. Living in private sector halls at a high or low tariff institution has a significant impact on the likelihood of transfer, these students may find themselves less connected to their institution or London and therefore opt to transfer to another institution within or outside of London.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity has a significant impact on the likelihood that a student will transfer at all tariff institutions. Most striking is the difference between Asian and White students. Whilst Asian students are less likely to withdraw from their studies compared to White students, they are more likely to transfer university compared to White students. Black and other (including mixed race) students are more likely than White students to transfer university, regardless of tariff.

Socio-economic status

At high tariff institutions having parents who work in intermediate or routine occupations is associated with higher levels of transfer compared to those whose parents work in management and professional occupations. At medium tariff institutions it is only students whose parents work in routine occupations that are more likely to transfer out of their institution compared to students with parents in management and professional occupations. As with non-continuation, at low tariff institutions there is no statistical difference between the socio-economic classes regarding degree transfer.

Region of home

There is a large difference between how a student's home region affects their likelihood of dropping out compared to transfer. Coming from the North and Midlands regions has a significant and positive impact on the likelihood of transferring out of university within London at all tariff levels. We can hypothesise that those who move from further afield may be less familiar with London and therefore their expectations may not match the reality of living and studying in London. Data on the destination of those who transfer would allow further exploration of this topic.

Gender
Female students are also less likely to transfer out of university than men, with those attending medium or low tariff institutions being 1% less likely to transfer.

Conclusions

The regression results show that there are many characteristics that are correlated with withdrawal and transferring, however the results show the issues are complex.

What is most striking within this section is the role of qualification type on entry, BTEC and access students are significantly more likely to dropout or transfer out of university compared to those with A levels.

Our results support the evidence that living at home during university can lead to an increased likelihood of dropping out and transferring compared to those living in provider-maintained property. Those living in private sector halls and within their own residence are even more likely to dropout.

Our regression analysis shows that at high and medium tariff institutions, when controlling for other factors such as living accommodation and entry route there is no significant difference between the non-continuation rates of Black students and White students in London. Only at low tariff institutions are Black students more likely than White students to dropout, although they are more likely to transfer compared to White students at all tariffs. Given that low tariff institutions have on average a higher proportion of Black students attending, this suggests that the impact of ethnicity could be more complex than non-inclusive universities or curriculums.

Whilst on the surface Londoners studying in London have a higher non-continuation rate than those from other regions, our results show when controlling for other factors they are no more likely to leave then those from the north or midlands. However, those from the midlands and the north are significantly more likely to transfer university compared to those from London.

The characteristics associated with increased non-continuation are not the same as for transferring. This suggests that the factors that influence a student's decision to leave higher education may be different to the reasons for transfer. We can hypothesise that the role of advice and guidance could be playing a role in these differences, with those leaving university having received less through advice prior to and during their studies.

Whilst, socio-economic status and ethnicity are two of the characteristics monitored, when controlling for other factors these factors do not appear to universally influence non-continuation across all tariffs. It is only at low tariff institutions that ethnicity appears to be influential regarding progression and only at high tariff institutions where socio-economic status is significant.

CHAPTER 6: HIGHLIGHTING GOOD PRACTICE

Many universities within London are aware that their retention rates are a cause of concern and are actively looking at ways to reduce this. Below are case studies of various initiatives and programmes put in place by London universities geared at addressing issues with retention. This information was gathered from discussion with universities in London and through access agreements.

Utilising peer support

For many, the transition to higher education is challenging. Some students find it so difficult that they choose to dropout. This can be for myriad reasons, from entry routes to expectations. Many London universities have implemented schemes that help students adjust to university life.

GoldStart – Goldsmiths College[36]
Goldsmiths launched the GoldStart programme to help non-traditional students transition to university life. The programme contains: study skills inductions, inductions to College systems, a demystifying academia session, sample lectures or seminars from academic departments, the opportunity to meet faculty staff and an introduction to student life.
Students on the programme are supported by Student Ambassadors and Peer Mentors who act as 'buddies' for students and provide e-mentoring throughout the first term of university. The combination of informal, social and quasi-formal structured engagement has driven a highly positive initial student experience. The programme gained an overall satisfaction score of 96% in the 2015/16 academic year.

Students can often be unaware or lack the confidence to use the range of student support services available to them. Universities are seeking to engage senior or former students to act as a stepping-stone between students, schools and services.

Student Engagement Interns – London Southbank University[37]
LSBU established a team of Student Engagement Interns to work in six departments to improve student retention and progression. Each intern was a recent LSBU graduate.
Their role is to assist students with any issues or concerns that could affect their progression through the university. They do this by contacting students whose attendance is low or whose engagement is declining and offer peer advice, support and signposting. Students considering withdrawal are given an appointment with a Senior Student Advisor to explore their available options and to ensure they fully understood the impact of decisions relating to the continuance of their studies. The interns also shared information with student services and academic departments so they could better respond to the needs of those most at-risk.
In the 2016/17 pilot year, 124 students at high risk of withdrawal decided to continue or interrupt their studies rather than withdraw because of interventions made by the engagement interns. This was an 8.5% reduction in withdrawals compared to the year before. The university reports that re-enrolment over the summer also improved. By contacting all students who had not yet re-enrolled for the next year and finding ways to support them to return to study, 89% eligible to re-enrol did so in September 2017 compared to 85% the year before.

Improving support services

Universities run a range of support services to help students who are less engaged. The ability of an institution to recognise how students with difference needs should be supported is essential.

Mental health and complex needs provision – University College London[38]
UCL's Student Psychological Services (SPS) has seen an increase in students struggling to cope with student life and at risk of dropping out. 30% of SPS users are from underrepresented backgrounds. Access Agreement expenditure is being used to expand SPS provision to meet the rising demand from this group of students. The Being@UCL programme was developed in 2015/16. It offers a series of personal development workshops designed to help students get the most out of their time at UCL – particularly working on developing the confidence needed to meet the emotional challenges of university life. Targeted student groups include those with caring responsibilities and students who might need to balance their studies with paid work.

Other London universities are diverting more resources to their student support services to widen access and availability. Academic and pastoral issues often arise quickly and without much warning. Ensuring that students can receive the necessary support or guidance at similarly short notice can help prevent such issues leading to withdrawal.

Drop-in support sessions – University of West London[39]
Since 2012, drop-in support sessions have been provided daily to ensure students have access to immediate support of any academic or personal issue, with no pre-arranged appointments needed. Students are seen on a one-to-one basis and guided to additional services if needed. It also facilitates peer mentoring pairings to allow students to gain support and learn from the experiences of another student working at a senior level to them. In 2015/16, HESA data showed the withdrawal rate among users of the drop-in support service was 7.3% against the 9.3% UWL average. For first year students this went down from 12.6% to 7.1%.

Engaging commuter students

A recent survey by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) found that students who commute to university are less likely than their peers in halls to say they are learning a lot on their courses.[40] They also miss out on many extra-curricular opportunities. This is a problem felt particularly acutely in the capital, as the high cost of halls makes staying at home an attractive option for many. Several London universities are implementing schemes aimed at tackling this problem to treat commuter students equitably.

Accomodating commuter students – Kingston University[41]
Kingston University has one of the highest proportions of commuter students in the country. More than half of the undergraduate population commute daily to the university from outside the borough. In 2015, in response to student-led research carried out the year before, a team of 12 students were brought together under the title of 'Commuter Connectors' with the aim of helping commuter students feel more connected to life at

the university. It has established online 'Commuter Leaning Communities' by utilising social media. The accounts post regular updates on road and train travel in the local area, in addition to general student outreach about upcoming events and tips for staying on top of work and making the most of university life. It holds daily activities on campus designed to fill 'dead time' between lectures and introduce commuters to one another.

The university provides a free shuttle bus service from nearby train stations. It also recently launched a pilot 'Flex-stay' project to offer some rooms in their Halls of Residence as flexible accommodation that commuting students can book on a flexible basis. Students are able to book a room on an affordable basis for one or two nights when needed.

Learning analytics – University of East London[42]

Attendance is a key factor in retention and the University of East London use learning analytics to monitor the participation and attendance of students as part of their retention efforts. Students are required to swipe into lectures and seminars. Alongside attendance they monitor, library access, activity data from the online learning system, modular performance and student characteristics; such as age and gender.

Following the collection of this information they use weighted multivariate analysis to create a student engagement metric which can be used to identify those at risk of leaving. Initial results show a small increase in retention and a significant improvement in the numbers achieving a 'good degree'.

Developing an evidence base

Many universities are establishing data-gathering and analysis initiatives to develop a better evidence base on retention.

Academic staff network projects – Brunel University London[43][44]

In 2016, Brunel University began inviting faculty members to submit bids for funding to run short term projects within their departments aimed at identifying and understanding the causes of student withdrawal.

In 2017 the Department of Computer Science began work on a new software tool for students struggling with the demands of university life. The software was aimed particularly at helping students to identify conflicting demands between their academic commitments and personal life and plan a balanced schedule. Going forward it will explore whether 'at-risk' students can be identified for early intervention using the captured data.

The Arts & Humanities Department are conducting an overview of reading lists and curriculum content to analyse how diverse the content is with respect to gender, race and ethnicity. The Business School is using quantitative research methods to correlate as many aspects of students' backgrounds and life experiences with student performance and identify where best to focus resources to improve outcomes. The Department of Life Sciences is analysing the experiences of BME groups to inform action planning to improve BME academic achievement within their department and help contribute to retention more widely.

This year the university embarked on a piece of research investigating what factors and circumstances allowed final year students 'to stay the course' and complete their studies.

CHAPTER 7: WHAT CAN LONDON GOVERNMENT AND UNIVERSITIES DO TO ADDRESS THE RETENTION CHALLENGE

This chapter describes what steps individual institutions, the capital's universities collectively, London government and national government could take to address non-continuation in London. It draws on the analysis contained in the previous chapters, three focus groups with students in London, conversations with university officials, as well as evidence from what has taken place in other sectors and policy fields.

1. Improving the experience for commuters

Many London students live at home and many commute considerable distances to university. Successive HEPI student surveys have found that the reported experiences of those that live at home are poorer than those who live with others. They are less likely to feel integrated,[45] a much lower proportion report that they have learnt a lot,[46] and they are more likely to have wished they had chosen an alternative course.[47] The 2018 HEPI survey showed that commuter students are over-represented among Asian students, older students, those working more than 20 hours a week, and those who are first in their family to attend university.[48] The report concluded that there is a complex mix of cultural, social and economic factors associated with commuting and with experiences of low-value learning at university.

Specifically, institutions should ask themselves: what is the offer for those who live at home? Given they make up 42% of the London student body, this is becoming a core purpose of running a good modern university.

From our research, we suggest that interventions could take the following forms:

- **Timetabling**: irregular and episodic timetables do not suit those with external responsibilities nor those who commute. In subject areas where the teaching hours are low, block timetabling may be particularly important, thus allowing students to remain at home or at a more local library and thus save on commuting time.
- **Flexible accommodation:** we heard some innovative practice where accommodation is made available to non-resident students for single nights so that they can stay on campus. This may be helpful not only in academic connection, but also in terms of social interaction.
- **Student Voice:** Disengagement of commuter students may be a self-reinforcing circle, given that more engaged students are likely to be better represented on student councils. New York University has established a commuter student council whose mission statement is 'to give voice, community, and opportunities to commuter and off-campus students through advocacy, programs, and philanthropy.'[49]
- **Developing a national policy for commuters**: This is not the first study that has raised concerns about commuter students. The Office for Students should develop a specific workstream and evidence base that relates to commuter students.
- **Building networks:** Some students commented that social events often take part in the evening and are not suitable for those who need to commute home. One official noted that more could do to engage students in university life.
- **Sharing facilities across London universities:** Initiatives already exist to share facilities across university institutions. For instance, the Society of College, National and

University Libraries (SCONUL) represents all university libraries in the UK and Ireland and enables students to use the libraries and resources of participating universities. Awareness of such schemes was low. We believe that it would be helpful to carry out an audit of cross-university participation initiatives in London; it would also be necessary to test awareness and usage of these facilities among students.

2. Coordinating collective evidence-gathering

Universities can struggle to test and evaluate interventions. In part, this is because evaluation is inherently time-consuming and expensive. In part, this is because any single institution may have a small sample of students in any given sub-group (e.g. those from an ethnic or socio-economic background).

At a sector level, HEFCE money has been directed to the What Works programme, which has helped stimulate more evidence gathering and new initiatives in relation to retention. We accept that some factors are specific to the institution, however there may be opportunities to collaborate on pilots and testing across institutions within the capital.

Specific steps that could be led by the London Mayor or others include:

- **Better sharing of data on university retention across London**: the London story is rarely analysed. Better data would also help universities look at student demographics and understand how far their own institution is performing compared to others.
- **Pilots and trials coordinated across institutions by a London working party**. Building on HEFCE's London Retention Project,[50] the GLA should establish a working group of senior London HEI stakeholders who should help coordinate evidence gathering and sharing across London.

3. Helping students manage London's high costs

Transport
Our research encountered mixed views on the impact of living costs in the capital. Students in London already benefit from discounted transport, namely a third off the costs of TfL travelcards. Some students felt this support was insufficient, and universities spoke about the needs of those who commute from areas not covered by the zone system, and who do not benefit from this discount. The consequence of high costs can be students taking cheaper but less convenient and more time-consuming transport such as buses. TfL should look at ways to reduce these costs for students.

Accommodation
Students often opt to live at their parental home due to the cost of living in other accommodation. Student accommodation in London can be very expensive, with average weekly rents of £226 in 2015/16, private sector suppliers have weekly rents 38% higher than the rents offered by the institutions within London.[51] Our results showed that living in private sector halls can have a significant impact on a student's likelihood of withdrawal. The Mayor's Academic Forum has previously given attention to the issue of accommodation costs for students in London.[52] The New London Plan restates that 35% of newly built student accommodation should be reserved for affordable properties (55% of max loan amount).[53] However, the maximum loan amount is only available to those with net household incomes below £25,000, for many students they will not be able to access

the full loan amount and without financial parental support may find themselves priced out of the student accommodation market in London. The government assumes parents with a household income above £30,000 will top up the maintenance loans of their children to cover their living costs

On the issue of private sector halls, more research should be conducted into the lives of those who live within private sector accommodation, focusing on their engagement levels, wellbeing and cost of living.

4. Advice and guidance

Reports by parliamentary committees and the National Audit Office have noted deficiencies in the information and advice available to young people. In particular, studies have noted that prospective applicants are often not armed with the necessary information to make an informed choice of university or subject.[54] The NAO concluded that: 'The Department has improved information available to help prospective students choose their course and provider, but only one in five use it and additional support does not adequately reach those who need it most'.[55]

As the Mayors' Skill Plan acknowledges, effective advice and guidance is crucial to enabling young people to navigate training and career choices. This may be especially the case for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds or those doing non-academic subjects because the options open to them may be less clear, and they may have less access to other networks that can help guide them. The Mayor's skills strategy sets as its first objective to 'Reduce barriers to participation in lifelong learning and progression in work, through the creation of an all-age careers offer'.[56]

Research by the Social Mobility Commission has suggested that information and guidance is patchy throughout the country.[57] It reported analysis showing that along with the North East and the East Midlands, young Londoners have the worst access to careers advice.

These concerns were reflected in our interviews with students. Here, the challenge appeared to be most pronounced among those who had entered university with non-academic qualifications and those who were doing more applied and vocational subjects at university. In some cases, better information would have led students to different decisions about the training they undertook and how they would achieve their career goals.

The availability of **impartial advice and guidance should be strengthened**, the quality of advice and guidance should not be dependent upon the school someone attends. We are aware of the previous London Ambitions initiative, and the Mayor's forthcoming All Age Careers Offer action plan which seek to address many of these issues in London.

5. Helping students make the transition to university

Our research suggests that students can struggle to make the transition from college and A-level study to university. This is particularly the case for BTEC students. This emerged through our data analysis, our student interviews and our interviews with university officials.

The wider context is that a growing proportion of students are attending university with non-academic qualifications, most often applied generals (BTECs). As previous SMF research has argued, in many respects this is a very positive development, especially as this is a very important entry route for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.[58] However, teaching and learning policies at universities have not kept pace. More support is needed for those entering from non-academic routes, particularly at high tariff institutions.

▪ **More preparatory courses for students from non-academic backgrounds:** some universities in the capital and elsewhere have put in place specific programmes and partnerships to help prepare students with vocational backgrounds for higher education. Further work should be done to explore the case for universities collaborating to support students during the months leading up to starting university. The preparation does not need to be module or content specific but focusing on academic skills such as note taking, referencing, maths ability etc. Some provision could be online. Universities could club together to deliver preparatory courses to achieve the necessary scale.

6. Student mental health

The issue of mental health is becoming increasingly important for higher education institutions. Becoming a student can involve new and additional stresses relating to being away from home for the first time, losing access to support networks, coping with a new learning environment, dealing with financial responsibilities and debt, as well as anxieties relating to achievement at university and in the labour market.[59]

This summer, the Government announced additional measures to improve support for those with mental ill health. These include: a University Mental Health Charter, which will include new standards to promote student and staff mental health and wellbeing; a working group into the transition challenges that students face when going to university; and, consideration of an opt-in requirement for information sharing between student mental health services and parents or a trusted person.[60]

One specific issue that emerged in our research which would be worth further analysis in London is where students access mental health services. With a large share of students living in boroughs different to that in which they study, coordination and signposting is more complex in the capital than in many other universities. Previous reports have pointed out the difficulties such as registration with more than one GP practice. HEPI has recommended that the NHS allows students to be registered with a GP in two places, at home and at their higher education institution simultaneously.[61]

7. Better measurement of student disadvantage in London

The currently-preferred measure of disadvantage for university students is POLAR4. POLAR scores reflect the proportion of young people in an area that attend university, and it is a proxy for disadvantage. Local areas are split into quintiles depending on whether the proportion of young people that attend university is high or low. The measure is important because it informs the Office for Students' expectations of university performance, as well as informing funding.

In its study, *On Course for Success?* the SMF noted that the measure has imperfections especially in relation to London. London has a much lower proportion of students from low participation areas than other regions. In large part this is a consequence of the fact that London sends a higher proportion of its young people to university than other regions and many of these students attend an institution in the capital. A young person with a given level of disadvantage is more likely to attend university if they were brought up in the capital compared to if they were brought up outside London.[62]

Some of the limitations of POLAR have been noted by others, including University UK's Social Mobility Taskforce, which concluded that POLAR should be complemented with other measures of disadvantage.[63]

A 2014 study that looked at how far POLAR maps onto geographic disadvantage suggested that rural areas and London are particularly affected by variation of disadvantage within the observed geographic area (ward-level). Therefore, while the participation rate in the ward may be high, some parts of the ward may be very disadvantaged: 'In Greater London, highly affluent and highly deprived neighbourhoods are often located next to one another, sometimes within the same ward'.[64] The study also found that London had a high participation rate despite having a similar proportion of children from low-level occupation households as other regions and having a higher proportion of children on FSM.

Our analysis adds further support to evidence that POLAR scores are not a good reflection of the level of disadvantage of students from London. The measure might have had some merit when the principal policy interest was promoting access to universities. However, the agenda has matured to capture student retention, attainment and labour market outcomes. We suggest that the Office for Students should assess how an alternative measure can be developed that complements the participation score.

8. A student of London

Several university officials reflected that one of the factors driving higher drop-out rates is the absence of an emotional attachment to the city as a student: there is no common feeling that you are a student of London. This may be more likely to arise in London than other UK universities because many institutions are not single campus institutions and because the wide range of other leisure opportunities means that students are less likely to engage in traditional physical events organised by the university.

Developing a deeper sense of belonging within London for students is essential if the London non-continuation rate is to be addressed. There are no easy solutions for this problem although creating spaces for students to interact with those from other London universities or running "student of London" events could be places to start. Creating a common identity for students within London and helping them forge relationships with others around the city, either near their home or in other areas of the city could contribute to further engagement with the social aspects of university life. London has an unusually powerful and influential mayoral position, which could potentially be part of the answer.

9. Transfers

Transfer rates within London are twice the national average and yet in our discussion with students who had left higher education there was very little awareness of transferring as an alternative to leaving. This is support by research from the Department for Education which highlighted that student awareness is one of the key barriers to switching university or degree course.[65] Universities are not incentivised to make students aware of their transfer options and this could be attributing to the lack of awareness.

Whilst some students do transfer between institutions concerns have been raised over the numbers who do so without transferring their credits. Two-thirds of those who transfer into the same subject area start again in their first year.[66] Not only does this represent a loss of their time but also comes with significant financial costs.

Universities are dependent upon fee income and by encouraging transfers of any kind they are risking part of their revenue stream. As a result, the Office for Students should consider introducing rewards and incentives for universities that facilitate transfers, particularly in cases where credits are transferred. London should take advantage of the number of institutions within the capital are look at ways to ensure that transferring, particularly with credit, is made seamless and an attractive option to those who feel their current university does not suit their needs.

Conclusions

Key findings	Policy response
Those living within their parental or guardian home have significantly higher withdrawal rates than those in provider-maintained halls.	**Improve the experience of commuters:** • Flexible accommodation • Timetabling changes • Student voice
Universities can struggle to run and test evaluations due to cost and sample sizes.	**Coordinating collective evidence-gathering:** This should include better sharing of data and pilots / trails to be run across institutions. This should be overseen by a new working group of senior HEI stakeholders.
The cost of living can influence accommodation, transport mode and part-time work.	More should be done to investigate the costs students face in London. Particularly regarding private sector halls and transport.
Many students spoke of studying the wrong course or being surprised by the content of their course.	Greater availability of **impartial advice and guidance should be strengthened.** The quality of advice should not be dependent upon the school you attend.
Those entering with BTECs or access courses are much more likely to withdraw from their course, particularly at high tariff institutions.	**More preparatory courses for students from non-academic backgrounds**. More work needs to be done at high tariff institutions to supports from less academic backgrounds.
The use of POLAR as a measure of dis-advantage is flawed in London.	The Office for Students should **assess the merits of an alternative measure of disadvantage.**

Universities and students reflected that there was a lack of connection to the university and often the city itself.	**Create a common identity for London students.** This would include running "student of London" events and communal places for students from a variety of HEIs to interact.
Students were unaware of the option to transfer university.	The Office for Students should consider introducing **rewards and incentives for universities that facilitate transfers.**

APPENDIX:

Qualitative research

Full list of criteria used for recruiting students who had withdrawn from university:

- Attended and withdrew from a London university
- Was raised / educated in London prior to university
- Under the age of 30
- Had withdrawn from university in the last 5 years
- Students from a variety of universities, including tariff mixtures
- Representation across genders (Of the 20 participants,10 were male and 10 were female)
- Ethnicity mix (Of the 20 participants, 11 were Black, 4 were White, 3 were Asian and 2 were Mixed race)

The ethnicity of participants is self-selected.

Quantitative research

Full list of variables included within the regression analysis:

- Socio-economic status
- Ethnicity
- Term time accommodation
- Qualification upon entry
- Region of home before university
- Gender
- Whether the university is within inner or outer London
- Distance to the university

ENDNOTES

[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/648165/HEIPR_PUBLICATION_2015-16.pdf

[2] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/01-02-2018/widening-participation-summary

[3] DfE, Access and Participation Secretary of State for Education Guidance to the Office for Students (OfS) February 2018

[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/gcse-and-equivalent-results-2016-to-2017-provisional

[5] Social Mobility Commission, State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain

[6] ; HEFCE, POLAR 4 classification, A local geography classification for young participation in higher education (2017)

[7] https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2018/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats

[8] Social Market Foundation, On course for success? Student retention at university (2017)

[9] https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/sfl_strategy_final_june_20186.pdf

[10] Liz Thomas, What works? Student retention and success: Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change (2012)

[11] Social Market Foundation, On course for success? Student retention at university (2017)

[12] SMF analysis of HESA data

[13] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/chart-4

[14] Sutton Trust, *Home and away* (2018)

[15] Advance HE & HEPI, 2018 Student Academic Experience Survey (2018)

[16] Department for Education, Review of post-18 education and funding: terms of reference (2018)

[17] Social Mobility Commission, State of the nation 2017: Social mobility in Great Britain (2017)

[18] The Careers and Enterprise Company, *State of the nation 2017* (2017)

[19] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-launches-major-review-of-post-18-education

[20] Advance HE & HEPI, 2018 Student Academic Experience Survey (2018)

[21] Department for Education, *Employment and earnings outcomes of higher education graduates* (2016)

[22] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/non-continuation-rates-and-transfers/

[23] HEFCE, Undergraduate transfers in England (2017)

[24] HEFCE, Undergraduate transfers in England (2017)

[25] SMF analysis of HESA data (2019)

[26] Social Market Foundation, *On course for success? Student retention at university* (2017)

[27] Higher Education Funding Council England, *Noncontinuation rates at English HEIs: trends for entrants 2005-06 to 2010-11*, (2013)

[28] OFFA, *Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2015-16* (2017)

[29] Department for Education, *Graduate outcomes (LEO)* (2018)

[30] HESA, Student Geographical Mobility data (2017)

[31] HESA, *higher Education Student Statistics* (2018)

[32] Unite students, *Student resilience: unite students insight report* (2016)

[33] The National Union of Students & unipol, Accommodation costs survey (2015)

[34] The National Union of Students & unipol, *Accommodation costs survey* (2015)

[35] The higher Education Academy, *Improving the degree attainment of Black and minority ethnic students* (2011)

[36] Goldsmiths, University of London, *Access Agreement* (2018)

[37] London South Bank University, *THELMA Student Services Overview* (2018)

[38] University College London, *Access Agreement* (2018)

[39] University of West London, *Access Agreement* (2018)

[40] HEPI, *Student Academic Experience Survey* (2017)

[41] Range of sources; AMOSSHE, *The role of student services and support in attainment commuter students* & https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/30/commuter-students-debt-universities-live-home & Kingston University, *Access Agreement* (2018)

[42] Jisc, *Learning analytics: the current state of play in UK higher and further education* (2017)

[43] Brunel University, *Student Success Project: Year One Report* (2017)

[44] http://www.insidegovernment.co.uk/uploads/2016/11/garytindell.pdf

[45] HEPI, *Student Academic Experience Survey* (2016)

[46] HEPI, *Student Academic Experience Survey* (2017)

[47] HEPI, *Student Academic Experience Survey* (2017)

[48] HEPI, *Student Academic Experience Survey* (2018)

[49] https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/commuters-off-campus-students/commuter-student-council.html

[50] https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/london-retention-project

[51] The National Union of Students & unipol, *Accommodation costs survey* (2015)

[52] https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/affordable_student_accommodation_planning_guidance_discussion_paper_20_january_15_with_january_2016_addendum_.pdf

[53] https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/new_london_plan_december_2017.pdf

[54] Sub-Committee on Education*, Skills and the Economy, Careers advice, information and guidance inquiry* (2016);

[55] NAO, The Higher Education Market (2017)

[56] https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/sfl_strategy_final_june_20186.pdf

[57] Social Mobility Commission, *State of the nation 2017: Social mobility in Great Britain* (2017)

[58] Nicole Gicheva and Kathryn Petrie, *Vocation, Vocation, Vocation: The role of vocational routes into higher education* (SMF, 2018)

[59] Poppy Brown, *The invisible problem? Improving students' mental health* (HEPI, 2016)

[60] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-package-of-measures-announced-on-student-mental-health

[61] Poppy Brown, *The invisible problem? Improving students' mental health* (HEPI, 2016)

[62] Nigel Keohane and Kathryn Petrie*, On course for success? Student retention at university* (SMF and UPP, 2017)

[63] Working in partnership: *Enabling social mobility in higher education, The final report of the Social Mobility Advisory Group*, 2016

[64] HEFCE, *Further information on POLAR3: An analysis of geography, disadvantage and entrants to higher education* (2014)

[65] Department for Education, *Findings from the call for evidence on accelerated courses and switching university or degree* (2016)

[66] HEFCE, *Undergraduate transfers in London* (2017)