

Does distance education do more harm than good?

The first term in the Doctor's Hippocratic Oath (which medics in the UK are still required to take on graduating) is 'Do no harm'. In distance education it's axiomatic that we do good. This paper suggests that we may be too complacent about this and that we need to know rather more than we do about what in many cases is our final product – the dropped out student. For there is evidence that dropping out of full time UK higher education has deleterious effects on the students who drop out and on society as a whole. We don't know the effects of dropping out of distance education.

1. Effects on students who drop out of full-time higher education

Data collected by Professor John Bynner at the Institute of Education suggest that, compared with both graduates and university entrance qualified students who didn't go to university, dropout students have

- higher chances of suffering depression,
- (for women) higher chances of experiencing violence from their partners.
- (for men) higher chances of an increased bmi (body mass index) and therefore higher chances of physical ill-health, an effect that appears to be long-lasting
- (for women) lower chances of good health
- (for men) higher chances of not working (and thus indebtedness, due in part to lower chances of paying back their student loans)

- see the figures below (adapted from Bynner 2003).

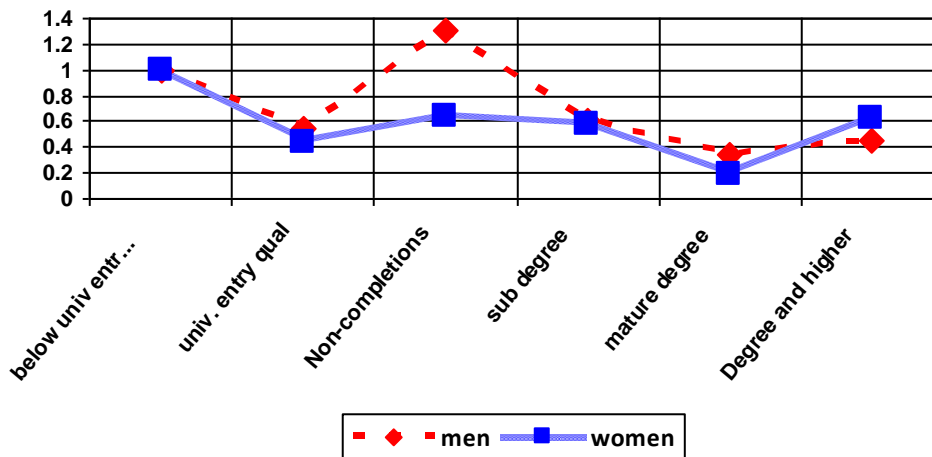


Figure 1 Likelihood of depression by qualification

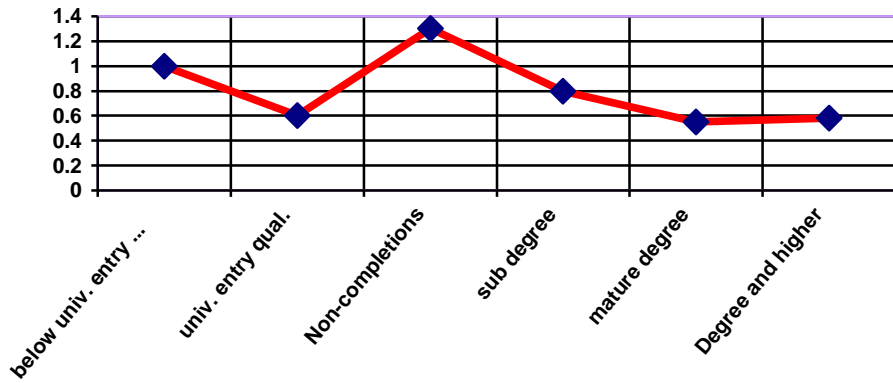


Figure 2 Likelihood of reporting violence from partner by qualification - women

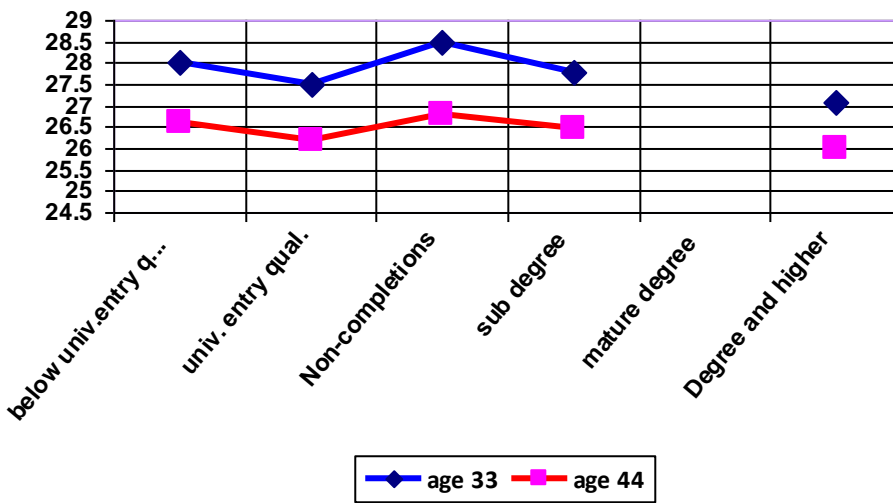


Figure 3 Body mass index (bmi) for two older male cohorts by qualification

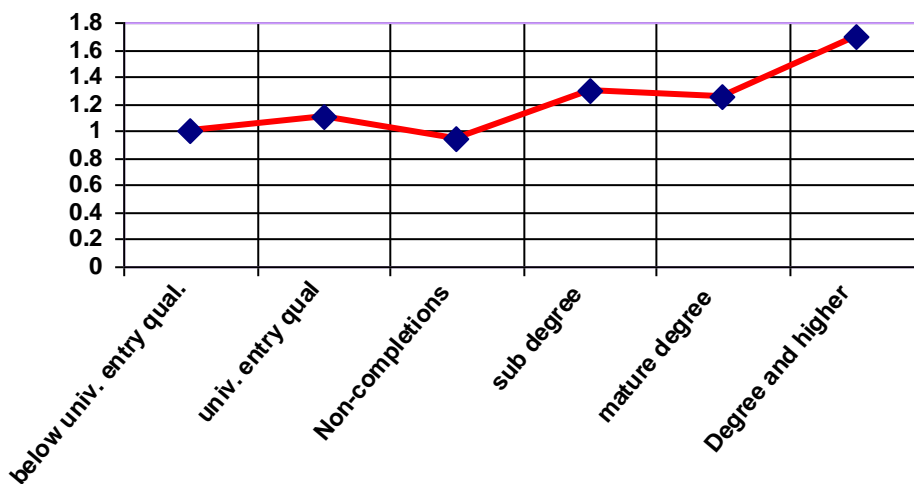


Figure 4 Likelihood of excellent health by qualification – women

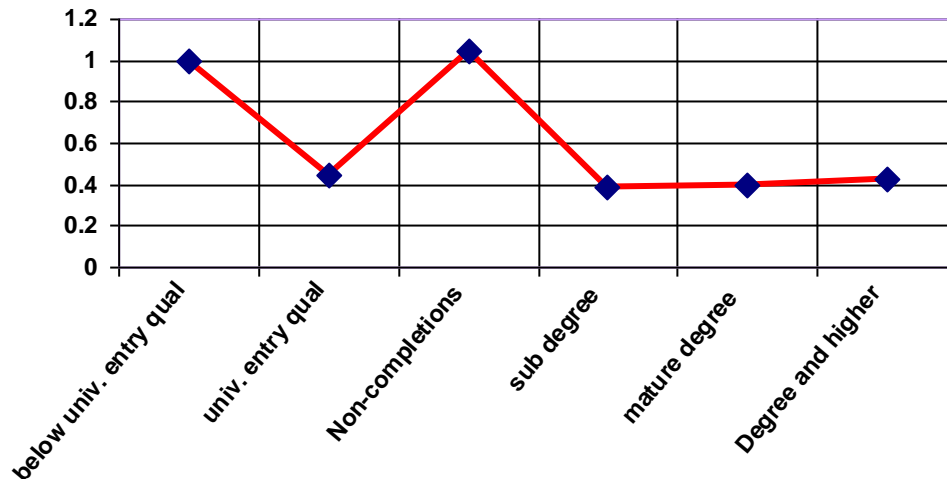


Figure 5 Likelihood of not working by qualification – men

These graphs suggest that dropout students not only experience these effects more than successful graduates (which might be expected), but also more than students qualified to go to university who didn't in fact go. Of course, it could be argued that this does not necessarily imply cause and effect; such students may have dropped out because they became depressed whilst at university. Yet such students were not too depressed to enter university in the first place. And it seems more likely that dropout students experience effects as a result of dropping out, rather than spontaneously experiencing depression and then dropping out. Finally, Figure 3 suggests that these effects may be long-term, lasting well into middle age.

The reason to take these finding seriously is because full-time student dropout in the UK currently runs at about 20% a year. With a participation rate nearing 50% this means that nearly 10% of each UK 18 year-old age cohort will suffer increased chances of mental and physical ill-health, unemployment and indebtedness. 10% of a cohort is a substantial proportion: for example it is roughly the same as the proportion of the age group who were casualties in the British army in the First World War - the so-called 'Lost Generation', the loss of which was thought to have had profound social and economic effects in the 1920's and 1930's.

But the effect may be most important when it comes to the apparent increased chances of depression. Professor Sir Richard Layard has recently suggested that depression is the single most serious social and health problem in the UK – costing the Government more than unemployment - and has recommended a substantial programme of cognitive-behavioural therapy to deal with the crisis. As Professor Watson says "The more successful [we] are in growing participation and achievement, the greater the gap between those who stay on the ladder of educational achievement and those who drop off. [There is a] negative effect – particularly on young working-class males - of enrolling in, but then dropping out, from higher education" (Watson, 2004)

2. Effects of student dropout on society as whole

UK society loses out considerably from student dropout. Not only are there the costs of increased depression and unemployment but there are losses due to the lower levels of graduates in society. Not only do graduates contribute more to GDP than lower qualified people through increased productivity and increased tax, but also by having better levels of health and participation in society such as voluntary work. One very rough estimate (Simpson, 2008) suggests that the cost of dropout to the UK is of the order of £3-5 billion a year.

Distance education and student dropout

Why is this concern with student dropout in full time higher education important in distance education? *Because it has much higher levels of dropout than conventional education.* For example in the UK Open University dropout is around 45% on new students' first module and nearly 80% to graduation. Of course some of this dropout is students having gained the intermediate qualifications they wanted and some transferring to other institutions. We don't know the proportion, but at the best interpretation UKOU dropout is up to three times that from full-time education.

If that is the case then is the OU doing at least three times the damage of full time education? The answer is that again we don't know. Readers will search UKOU literature in vain for studies that look at what happens to students who dropout. Yet the UKOU's main output is dropout students rather than graduates. Shouldn't it be taking more interest in them?

We may certainly hope that dropping out of a part-time course has less traumatic effects than dropping out of a full time one. The level of commitment to a part-time course may well be different to that of a full-time course and the damage to self-esteem consequently less. But we simply don't know. Nor does there seem any current research dedicated to finding out. Indeed there seems to be little current UKOU research aimed at student retention. Much UKOU research (especially into e-learning) appears to be focused on providing a 'better learning experience' for students. But the best learning experience you can give a student is to ensure that they pass their course, so such research feels rather like going to a battlefield site and offering the survivors manicures. Or to use an educational metaphor it's like doing a course on cake icing and forgetting that you need to know how to bake a cake. By focusing on the learning experience, it's easy to forget that up to half your students have already gone.

Yes, the UKOU did indeed have a retention project a few years ago. But as the doyen of retention studies, Professor Vincent Tinto noted in a recent presentation (Bogotá, 2009), many institutions start retention projects which after a few years have been deemed to be 'mainstreamed' - which in effect means invisible. That's certainly the fate of the UKOU's retention project.

All this is most alarming because the UKOU is still the UK's single most important route into higher education for the educationally underprivileged. But this is precisely the group who dropout most frequently.

This article has taken the UKOU as an example of a typical distance education provider. If anything it does a little better than many other such providers where retention can be worse. So is it time for these distance education institutions to stop putting their limited resources into increasingly fancy and expensive learning platforms and to remember that 'the main thing is to make sure that the main thing stays the main thing' (Covey) – getting students through their courses. And doing the least harm on the way.

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