

Regulatory case report for Leeds Beckett University: Ongoing condition B3 investigation outcome

Summary

This report confirms that the Office for Students (OfS) has found Leeds Beckett University's ('the university's) performance to be justified but at increased risk of breach of ongoing condition B3 for the following indicator:

- completion, full-time, first degree, computing.

In relation to the outcomes for the following indicators, the OfS found that the contextual factors submitted by the university justified its performance:

- continuation, part-time, other postgraduate, health and social care
- continuation, part-time, other undergraduate
- completion, part-time, other undergraduate
- completion, full-time, postgraduate taught masters', business and management
- completion, part-time, postgraduate taught masters', business and management

No finding was made in relation to the following indicators:

- completion, full-time, postgraduate research, business and management
- completion, part-time postgraduate research business and management.

This report sets out our findings and our decision to impose a specific condition of registration (an 'improvement notice') requiring the university to take action to mitigate the increased risk of breaching condition B3 in the future in relation to its completion outcomes for full-time, first degree computing students.

Background

Leeds Beckett University is a higher education corporation with taught and research degree awarding powers, offering a range of full-time and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and doctoral studies.

The university was selected for assessment of its compliance with ongoing condition of registration B3 (student outcomes) as part of the OfS's 2022-23 annual prioritisation cycle. As set out in Regulatory advice 20: Regulating student outcomes, each year the OfS decides:

- which student outcome measures, modes and levels of study we wish to prioritise
- whether we should focus on any particular split indicators, such as subject of study or student characteristics, or on any other themes, such as partnership arrangements
- how many cases we will assess in that year.

We published the final prioritised categories for 2022-23 in a statement on the OfS website in November 2022.¹

The university was one of 12 higher education providers where the OfS opened an investigation in 2022-23. In selecting the university, we placed particular weight on the number of students potentially affected by performance below our numerical thresholds, the statistical certainty we had about that underperformance, and the number of indicators or split indicators that were below a numerical threshold.

The indicators in scope of our investigation are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Student outcomes dashboard data as of September 2022

Indicator or split indicator	Numerical threshold (%)	Indicator value (%)	Distance of indicator value from relevant numerical threshold (percentage points)	Statistical uncertainty distribution below numerical threshold (%)
Continuation				
Part-time, other undergraduate	55	50.2	-4.8	100
Part-time, other postgraduate, health and social care	65	49.8	-15.2	100
Completion				
Full-time, first degree, computing	75	68.8	-6.2	100
Full-time, postgraduate taught masters', business and management	80	72.7	-7.3	100

¹ See OfS, November 2022, [Condition B3: Prioritised categories for the 2023-24 assessment cycle](#).

Indicator or split indicator	Numerical threshold (%)	Indicator value (%)	Distance of indicator value from relevant numerical threshold (percentage points)	Statistical uncertainty distribution below numerical threshold (%)
Full-time, postgraduate research, business and management	75	51.9	-23.1	100
Part-time, other undergraduate	55	50.6	-4.4	100
Part-time, postgraduate taught masters', business and management	65	57.1	-7.9	100
Part-time, postgraduate research, business and management	60	41.5	-18.5	99.7

Outcome of investigation

In its written submissions to us, the university set out an indicator-by-indicator analysis of its performance, broken down to course level. It also identified a number of themes:

- educational strategy and associated quality processes
- closed courses and course withdrawal processes
- courses identified for 'enhanced monitoring'
- performance of business and management provision.

The OfS considered the extent to which this information satisfied us that the university's performance was justified, despite being below the relevant numerical threshold, and responded to the university's concerns. We have included some examples here to illustrate our approach to reaching our decision.

Educational strategy and associated quality processes

The university's 'Education plan' is an integrated element of its strategic plan. This is in its second iteration (2021 to 2026) and has been in place since 2016. The university states this is focused on outcomes aligned with B3 and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The plan focuses on supporting students, for instance:

- by mapping out a learning pathway
- with increased support in the early stages
- with a student support framework that aims to mitigate problems before they occur
- with an employability implementation framework to embed career readiness.

The plan embeds performance indicators that inform the strategies for each of the schools. The university also has an 'Annual good standing of courses' process, which provides governance and oversight of courses, with clear accountability to the Board of Trustees via the Academic Board. This process has been further enhanced since the introduction of revised condition B3 and now considers performance across whole subject areas, with oversight at school level. Development of new courses is restricted in subject areas subject to enhanced monitoring.

The university has key performance indicators for continuation and progression, and a key performance indicator for completion was introduced in 2023 and cascaded at course level within the Annual monitoring and Good standing process.

Closed courses and course withdrawal processes

The university has formal course closure arrangements in place, which are designed to ensure courses are closed appropriately and quality is maintained for students who will remain on those courses to complete their studies. It identified a number of courses that were now closed, stating that course closures tended to be market-driven or due to courses ceasing to be financially viable. We noted that while some of these courses had performed below the relevant numerical threshold before being closed, there was a lack of evidence that reasons for underperformance had previously been considered. However, we accepted that recent refinements to the 'Annual good standing of courses' process will bring an element of quality evaluation into the course closure process.

We accepted that the performance of closed courses affected performance for some indicators. To understand this, OfS analysts remodelled the university's data to exclude closed courses. For the indicator found to be at increased risk of breach (Completion, full-time, first degree, computing) a small positive impact was seen in this modelling, although this did not fully justify the below threshold performance of this indicator.

For the Continuation and Completion, part-time, other postgraduate indicators where performance was found to be justified, the impact of modelling the data to exclude courses that had been closed was a significant factor in our finding that performance was justified for these indicators.

Courses identified for 'enhanced monitoring'

The university stated that some of the courses with outcomes below our numerical thresholds had been identified as of concern through its 'Annual good standing of courses' process, and placed into 'enhanced monitoring'. Enhanced monitoring was introduced in 2017 with the process refined over time, including in response to the establishment of the OfS. This process encompasses a review of a range of course outcomes and data. It is described as being enhancement-led. Consideration of the relevant OfS numerical thresholds for continuation, completion and progression has been included since the introduction of revised condition B3.

The university placed some courses into enhanced monitoring in January 2023, and described the actions it was taking for these courses. We considered the credibility of these actions in improving performance of the relevant indicators. The enhanced monitoring plans did not always identify improvement of the relevant indicator as an aim, demonstrate an understanding of the reasons for below threshold performance, or identify specific actions to address this. However, we considered some of the actions could deliver some improvement to the relevant indicators over time.

It was not clear whether the courses placed in enhanced monitoring in 2023, or other courses performing below threshold during the time series under review, had been placed into previous periods of enhanced monitoring. Although one further course was identified as requiring improvement, enhanced monitoring had not been instigated because of low cohort numbers and action plans already in place.

The university did not initially explain how it was addressing performance below threshold for courses other than those placed in enhanced monitoring. In some instances, these other courses made a significant contribution to the performance of the relevant indicator. We also considered that while the annual review of courses appeared to be effective in identifying individual courses requiring improvement, it had not historically identified systemic or thematic issues. This means that any actions taken in the past to address course performance may not have addressed any underlying causes of underperformance across subject areas or departments. This aspect of the annual review has been enhanced since the introduction of revised condition B3. We accepted that reviews now being undertaken at subject or whole school level may lead to improvements in the relevant indicator.

As refinements to the enhanced monitoring process have only been made recently, we considered that there was a lack of evidence as to whether current plans for improvement would deliver sufficient or sustained improvement in an appropriate timescale. Further years of outcomes data are needed before the extent of any impact will be evident.

Performance of business and management provision

The university stated that it did not consider there to be a subject-wide issue with business and management provision. Details of some generic activities designed to support students to complete, which were informed by consideration of the reasons for non-completion, were provided. These activities included changes to timetabling, availability of academic advisers and enhancing students' sense of belonging.

The university set out the performance of each individual course contributing to the postgraduate taught masters' business and management indicators in the scope of our investigation, which showed that performance of some courses was above the relevant numerical threshold, but below threshold for others. This was not analysed further in the submission for courses identified as having low cohort numbers or fluctuating year-on-year performance, despite these courses making a significant contribution to the indicator in some cases. The university has confirmed that it now considers all courses across a subject area, to explore whether there could be any underlying factors which may signal that subject-wide actions to sustain performance may be necessary.

The university highlighted that its TEF metrics for business and management, in areas other than completion, were above benchmark. As TEF relates to undergraduate provision, we did not consider this to be relevant context for postgraduate business and management indicators.

The university also stated that its part-time, postgraduate business and management provision, both taught and research, is often delivered to students who are employed in senior positions, and who may have had 'less-than-optimal working conditions during the past three years'. We accepted that this may have been related to the Covid pandemic, and if so, could have affected performance in the last year of the time series (2014-15 entrants).

In addition to these general findings, we made some specific findings for each indicator.

Indicator where performance was justified with a finding of increased risk

Completion, full-time, first degree, computing

Although improvements could be seen over the four-year time series, the indicator remained below threshold in every year of data in the initial time series. During this assessment, the university identified that a number of students recorded as inactive had in fact achieved exit or full awards that had not been reported in the relevant Higher Education Statistics Agency submission. Our modelling of the data showed that if these students were recorded in the data with positive rather than negative outcomes, the indicator would improve, but not by enough to take performance at aggregate indicator level above threshold.

The most recent indicative OfS data shows performance in the latest year of data is above threshold. Although two courses had been placed into enhanced monitoring, the timing of this means that these actions will not yet have resulted in the improvements seen. We have therefore concluded that performance is justified, but that as there is only one year of above threshold data, and the statistical certainty that this represents the university's underlying performance is less than probable, there is an increased risk of breach for this indicator.

Indicators with a finding of justified performance

Continuation and Completion, part-time, other undergraduate

The university provided information about courses that had been closed and were no longer recruiting. This included a large number of language-related courses that were offered as enrichment activities for current students on full-time courses in other subjects, or were a resource for the local community to support language development, rather than as full degrees. It had also ceased delivery of a number of courses accredited by professional bodies. OfS modelling of the data to remove these courses and to show the indicator for only the courses currently in active delivery confirmed that performance would be above the relevant numerical threshold for all years and in aggregate. We therefore we concluded that performance for these indicators was justified.

Continuation, part-time, other postgraduate, health and social care

The university explained that this indicator was affected by the historical impact of a data amendment relating to validated provision. We remodelled the data for all years to accurately reflect this impact, and were satisfied that performance would be above the relevant numerical threshold. We therefore concluded that performance for this indicator was justified.

Completion, full-time, postgraduate taught masters', business and management

For this indicator, as performance was above threshold in the latest year of data (July 2023), and with indicative OfS data for the following year showing above threshold performance, with very strong or compelling statistical confidence, we concluded that performance for this indicator was justified.

Completion, part-time, postgraduate taught masters', business and management

As for the Completion, full-time, first degree computing indicator, the university identified that a number of students recorded as inactive for this indicator had in fact achieved exit or full awards that had not been reported in the relevant Higher Education Statistics Agency submission. Our modelling of the data showed that if these students were recorded in the data with positive rather than negative outcomes, the indicator would be materially above the numerical threshold in the most recent two years.

The university stated it had introduced robust data quality checks to ensure this issue could not recur. It provided evidence that it was conducting a thorough review across all students recorded as 'inactive', to identify any other historical outcomes that have not been accurately reported.

We placed weight on our modelling and the steps the university is taking to conclude that performance for this indicator was justified.

Indicators where we have not made a finding

Completion, full-time, postgraduate research, business and management and Completion, part-time, postgraduate research, business and management

Although these indicators were included in the scope of our assessment, the number of postgraduate research business and management entrants in more recent years has reduced. Where the OfS holds data for an indicator or split indicator for fewer than the minimum number of 23 students, our policy is that we will not assess the provider's performance against that indicator or split indicator, and this will not prevent the provider from satisfying the condition.² Therefore, based on the reduction in numbers to below this minimum number in the most recent years, and the provider's submission that it is scaling down this provision, we have not made a finding for these indicators.

Outcome of investigation

Having considered the contextual information, the OfS concluded that Leeds Beckett University's performance was justified but at increased risk of breach of ongoing condition B3 in relation to its completion outcomes for full-time, first degree computing students.

The OfS has therefore imposed a specific ongoing condition of registration, which requires the university to mitigate the increased risk we have found. The university is required to take targeted action to sustain its performance in relation to this indicator at or above the relevant OfS numerical thresholds, ahead of the OfS assessing the university's compliance with these requirements in spring 2028.

² See paragraph 334H of OfS, [Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England](#), November 2022.