

Regulatory case report for the University of Cumbria: Ongoing condition B3 investigation outcomes

Summary

This report confirms that the Office for Students (OfS) has found the University of Cumbria compliant with ongoing condition of registration B3 (student outcomes) in relation to continuation for full-time, first degree business and management.

In relation to continuation for part-time, postgraduate taught masters', the OfS found the contextual factors submitted by the provider justified its performance, but we concluded that there is an increased risk of the provider breaching ongoing condition B3 in the future.

Background

The University of Cumbria was formed in 2007 following the merger of existing providers, and offers higher education predominantly through its campuses in the north-west of England, as well as a further campus in London.

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,¹ 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.

The university was one of 12 where the OfS opened an investigation in 2022-23. In selecting the provider, 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.

¹ See [Regulatory advice 20: Regulating student outcomes \(officeforstudents.org.uk\)](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/regulatory-advice-20-regulating-student-outcomes).

The indicators in scope of our investigation were as follows:

Indicator or split indicator	OfS numerical threshold	Indicator value	Distance of indicator value from relevant numerical threshold
Continuation			
Full-time, first degree business and management	80%	76.7%	-3.3 percentage points
Part-time, postgraduate taught masters'	65%	61.8%	-3.2 percentage points

Investigation outcome

In its written submission to us, the university made arguments relating to three key themes:

- It emphasised the socioeconomic profile of its student body at its London campus, noting that it consisted of high proportions of mature students, those from more deprived areas, and those from the lowest quintiles of associations between characteristics of students (ABCS).²
- It explained the action it had taken following the introduction of business top-up courses in the London campus, and its impact.
- It provided information about the reasons for the continuation rate of postgraduate taught masters' students and actions to improve this, focusing on student support and resources and increased flexibility of some of the courses.

The OfS considered the extent to which this information satisfied us that the university's performance in relation to the indicators in scope was justified, despite being below the relevant numerical threshold.

Socioeconomic profile of undergraduate students

On the socioeconomic profile of the university's student body at its London campus, the OfS did not consider this justified the university's performance and we did not place weight on this argument. This was because we did not consider this argument was supported by the performance shown in the split indicators included in the OfS data dashboards. For example, we noted that performance in continuation for full-time, first degree students was likely to be higher for students from ABCS quintile 1 (where students have characteristics that suggest they are least likely to continue in higher education) than it was for students from ABCS quintiles 4 and 5.

For the first degree business and management split indicator, we also took account of the university's performance compared with its individual benchmark values, which was below benchmark. Benchmarking data is not available for postgraduate levels of study. On considering our analysis, we concluded that there was no evidence of contextual factors resulting from the

² For information on this measure, see [Associations between characteristics of students - Office for Students](#).

socioeconomic background of the university's students that would justify the university's performance.

The impact of new business top-up course

The university explained that in the first year of delivering the London top-up courses in business, which comprised the Level 6 modules of the International Business Management programme – also taught at its Lancaster campus – student outcomes began to decline. This had a negative effect on student outcomes for the business subject area overall. The university commissioned a review of provision and student outcomes in all subjects on the London campus in June 2019. The review identified some of the issues that had led to weaker continuation rates, such as concerns relating to students' ability to access support staff, and noted that these issues had informed the type of action the university had put in place.

When high withdrawal rates were identified, the university undertook the June 2019 review which identified the causes and put actions in place. Within the university's submission, it noted that student numbers had put academic and learning support staff under pressure. There were not enough staff to act as personal tutors and deliver the support students needed and that this was the reason for the poor performance seen in the data. The OfS considered that this explained the poor performance; however, we were concerned that the university did not do enough to secure positive outcomes for students when establishing the new business provision and so did not consider that this justified the historical performance.

The university set out that it had removed the poor performing top-up course at the London campus and had replaced it with a new course that was tailored to the needs of the London cohort. It improved recruitment and admissions practices, enhanced personal tutoring and support for academic skills, and introduced student engagement coordinators to support students to engage with their learning. The most recent OfS data shows that continuation for full-time, first degree business and management students, entering in 2019-20 and 2020-21, has been above the numerical threshold. This suggests the actions that the university has taken have been effective in improving performance, and we gave weight to the improved performance in reaching our view.

The OfS was satisfied that the information in the university's submission provided evidence that it has taken steps to improve performance for this indicator, and that there is evidence that those steps have led to sufficient and sustained improvement in outcomes. We therefore considered the provider was not in breach of ongoing condition B3 for its full-time, first degree business and management indicator.

Context and improvement actions for postgraduate taught masters' courses

In its submission to us, the university explained that it offered flexibility to students, for example by permitting step-on, step-off study and extended breaks in study for its postgraduate taught masters' students. Many students went on study breaks and returned at a later date, ultimately affecting the continuation rates. We undertook further analysis looking at continuation rates, using a longer census date, which showed there was no improvement in continuation rates and therefore did not support the argument that students took breaks and came back to study later. However, we agreed that the university's performance in some health and social care courses was likely to have been affected by external circumstances, for example the COVID-19 pandemic, and part-time students who were employed in the health and social care sector not being released to continue their studies because of service pressures.

The university set out that it had implemented new procedures for registration, monitoring of attendance and the creation of support groups. The university's plans did not detail how these will be resourced and who would take ownership of each action. We also considered information put forward by the university about its actions in relation to students in other areas of its postgraduate taught masters' provision. We also noted the action the university had taken in relation to improving performance in the arts programmes. Specifically, the university took the decision, as of September 2021, to offer only full-time entry to one Arts programme, which is the Creative Practice award. We judged that this action may be seen as a proactive measure to improve student engagement and outcomes in a programme where part-time enrolment was challenging to manage.

The most recent OfS dashboards, published in April 2023, showed that performance had improved. While it remained below the numerical threshold, we considered the university was not in breach of ongoing condition B3 for its part-time, postgraduate taught masters' indicator, but that there was an increased risk of breach.

Conclusion

Having considered the contextual information, the OfS concluded that the University of Cumbria was not in breach of ongoing condition B3 in relation to its continuation, full-time, first degree business and management students. This is because we judged that the actions taken appear to have been effective in leading to sufficient and sustained improvement in student outcomes.

In relation to continuation, part-time, postgraduate taught masters', we considered the ongoing impact of external factors on student continuation for some courses. The university has suggested that internal data shows improved performance that is above the threshold, but until we have evidence that this improvement is sustained, we consider there remains a risk because of the length of time where performance was below threshold. We therefore concluded that the university was compliant with ongoing condition B3 in relation to this indicator, but that there was an increased risk of breach in the future.

The OfS has therefore imposed on the university a specific ongoing condition of registration which requires it to improve outcomes for continuation for part-time, postgraduate taught masters' students. The provider is required to take targeted action to bring its performance in relation to this indicator at or above the relevant OfS numerical thresholds by spring 2027.