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Leaving university early: exploring the differences between continuing and non-continuing students

Hazel Christie *, Moira Munro ✉ & Tania Fisher

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Abstract

This article explores some of the issues surrounding student retention at two contrasting universities in Scotland. It is based on a relatively small-scale quantitative survey of students who withdrew or continued, in order that direct comparisons may be made between the two groups. This comparison allows analysis of the constraints and opportunities that face all young people during their time in higher education, and the circumstances under which students decide to withdraw. This shows widespread and similar financial difficulties amongst students who continue and those who withdraw, suggesting that it is more useful to look at the points at which similar pressures seem bearable for one student but not for another. The research indicates that important factors in the decision to withdraw include: poor choice of course; limited social support networks; and lack of 'fit' between student and institution. While there is macro-level

evidence of a class gradient in withdrawal rates, the evidence unpacks more fully the reasons why students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds decide to leave university early.

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Corresponding author. School of the Built Environment, Heriot-Watt University, Chadwick Building, Edinburgh EH14 4AS, UK. Email: h.christie@hw.ac.uk

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