

THE COHORT STUDY OF THE CAREER EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS ON QUALIFYING LAW DEGREES IN ENGLAND AND WALES'

Melissa Hardee

THE COHORT STUDY: THE ESSENTIAL BACKGROUND

The first two years of this Cohort study were funded by the (Higher Education Academy (HEA) However, due to the HEA's own funding problems, it was not able to fund the third and final year of the study. I am therefore extremely grateful to LERN, which has made it possible for me to complete the study.

The Cohort study follows on from a limited research project I undertook for the UK Centre for Legal Education ("UKCLE study") in 2011, which provided a snap-shot of student career intentions at the start of their degree based on a random sample across a wide range of institutions and stages of study. The reason for the UKCLE project was that there was little objective data available on the career intentions of law students; rather, what tended to be relied upon was anecdotal. With the introduction of higher tuition fees for students, understanding students' career intentions and the usefulness of the information and support that students use to inform their decisions about their career choices was vital to universities, employers of law graduates, as well as students themselves, since more informed universities, employers and regulators would be able to provide better advice and careers information and opportunities.

Since then, with the Solicitors' Regulatory Authority's(SRA) proposed removal of prescription and validation of qualification pathways, and proposed Solicitors' Qualification Exam, understanding how informed students' career intentions are, and the resources they rely on in forming and changing their career intentions, as well as their perceptions of career opportunities and their likely success of achieving their career ambitions, may assist in anticipating the impact of the SRA's proposals.

The intended audience for the study therefore includes law schools, regulators of the legal profession, employers of law graduates, and those involved in providing careers support to law students at both school and university levels.

What I have not tried to do in the study – or been able to do because of sample sizes, which I will consider below - is to provide definitive answers to questions. Rather, I hope the value of the study will be in indicating trends and issues, and provide hypotheses which could merit further testing and research.

Context and sign-posts

Just to give some context and sign-posts to the research:

Date	Event
2010/2011	Undertook UKCLE study
2011	HEA published the report of the UKCLE study at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/disciplines/law/Hardee-Report-2012.pdf

2012/2013	Commenced the Cohort Study
From November 2012	First on-line questionnaire made available to students in cohort
Sept 2013	Produced an interim report comparing the results of the First year of the Cohort Study with the results of the UKCLE Study.
April 2014	Interim Report published on the HEA website at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/disciplines/law/Hardee-Report-2012.pdf
2013/2014	Second year of the Cohort Study
From November 2013	Second on-line questionnaire made available to students in cohort
August 2014	Produced Report of the First and Second Years of the Cohort Study for the HEA – not published
2014/2015	Third year of the Cohort Study
From March to June 2015	Third and final questionnaire made available to students in cohort
December 2015	Presentation at LERN Showcasing Event
2016	Production of report of 3rd year of study for LERN

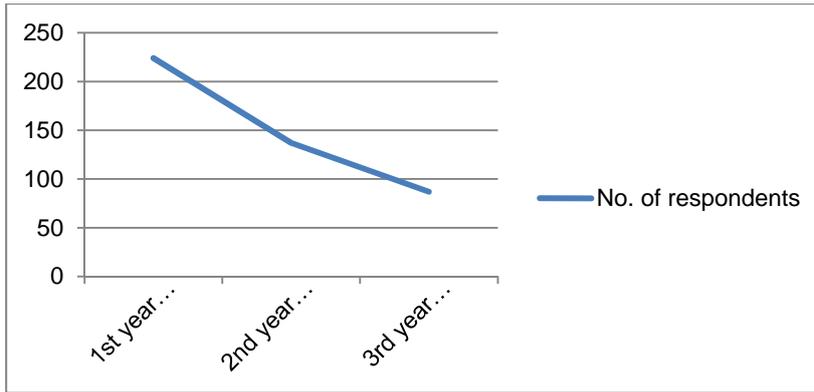
Sample sizes

Just before I launch into the results, let me talk about the sample profile and size.

I have used a sample of 16 universities, which cover Russell Group universities, non-Russell Group pre-92 universities and post-92 universities. The cohort in the study comprised QLD students at the sample universities, who had commenced the first year of their law degree in academic year 2012/2013.

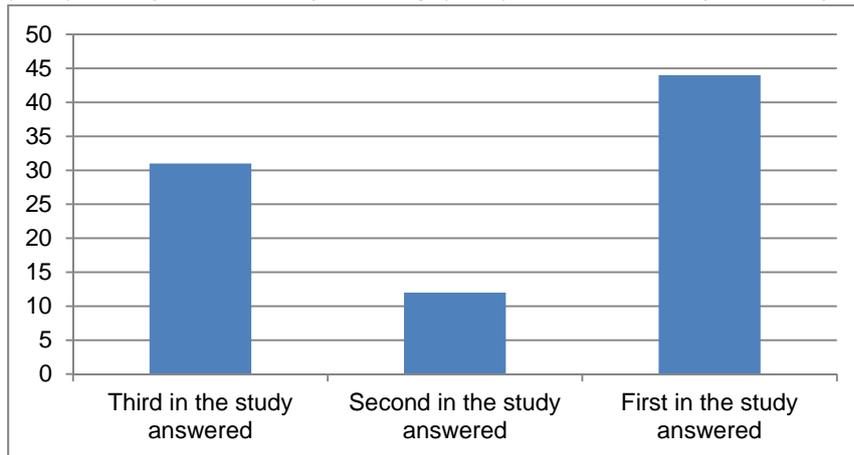
The number of respondents to each of the 1st year questionnaire, 2nd year questionnaire and 3rd year questionnaire are as follows:

1st year	2nd year	3 rd year
224 respondents	137 respondents	87 respondents



The sample size for the questionnaire in the first year of the Cohort study was potentially around 2,400 students – I say potentially because I was not given enrolment numbers for three of the universities. So, out of the 13 universities for which I did have enrolment numbers, the response rate was about 8%, with 224 responses from 15 of the 16 universities. The number of respondents to the second questionnaire was 137, which, on the same potential sample size, would represent 5.7%. For the third year, the number of respondents was only 87, which would give a response rate of only 3.6%.

Percentage of third year questionnaire respondents who had answered no questionnaires previously (51%), one questionnaire previously (14%) or both the two previous questionnaires (36%):



This is not entirely 'robust', as the enrolment numbers were not requested in the second year, and have not been provided from all universities for the third year. However, it doesn't take away from the fact that the response rate was low and declined over the three years.

I had thought that one explanation for the low response rate in the first year was that 18/19 year olds when they leave school and start university actually aren't focused on careers; they are really focused on being an undergraduate. I was therefore interested to see whether there was an increased level of response to the second and third questionnaires, which I thought might indicate that career becomes more relevant as students progress through their degree i.e. as they become more mature, become more informed about career options and career chances etc. However, the drop in response rates to the second and third questionnaires has put paid to that theory – or, my theory is correct but students have such a degree of survey fatigue through the degree that outweighs even interest in their future careers!

Tracking the same cohort of respondents

Although my original intention was to track the cohort of respondents through all three questionnaires, I decided to open the second and third questionnaires to all students in the cohort year at the 16 universities, irrespective of whether or not they have answered the first questionnaire, as I was concerned to have a sample size that would provide some reliable data, rather than fixating on following what might be a statistically insignificant sample of the same respondents through all three years. For this third year of the study, 36% of respondents had answered the previous two questionnaires, 14% had answered either the first or second questionnaire, and for 51% of respondents, the third questionnaire was the first questionnaire they had answered.

Profile of respondents

In terms of the profile of respondents to the third questionnaire, this was almost the same as the profile for respondents to the first and second questionnaires, and to the UKCLE Study, namely: the majority of respondents were:

- a home student
- studying at a post-92 university
- female,
- of white ethnic origin,
- studying full-time,
- with parents whose highest educational qualifications was a degree,
- who were in manager/director positions,
- and did not have family within the legal profession.

Profile	Majority of 3rd year questionnaire respondents	Majority of 2nd year questionnaire respondents	Majority of 1st year questionnaire respondents
University type	Post-92	Post-92	Post - 92
Student type	Home	Home	Home
Mode of study	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Ethnic origin	White	White	White
Parents' highest educational qualification	Degree, followed by GCSE/'O' level	Degree, followed by GCSE/'O' level	Degree, followed by GCSE/'O' level
Parents' occupation	Qualified Professional, followed by Manager/Director	Manager/Director, followed by Qualified Professional	Qualified Professional, followed by Manager/Director

Family connection with legal profession	No	No	No
---	----	----	----

The only difference is with the profile of the 2nd year respondents, for the majority of whom, their parents' occupation was as a manager/director, followed by qualified professional.

Research questions for the 3rd year of the study

The research questions I used for the third year questionnaire of the Cohort study, which built on the research questions used for the first and second years, were:

1. Have students' career intentions changed since enrolment?
2. What range of career destinations do students currently have?
3. What factors and influences have affected students' career plans since enrolment?
4. What perceptions do students have of their chances of securing a training contract or pupillage?
5. What flexibility exists in students' career plans
6. What perceptions do students currently have of the personal characteristics and experience which are valued within the jobs market?
7. What perceptions do students have of the law degree and the relative value of the elements of the law degree after their first year of study?

The research questions I will give some of the results for here are the following three questions which form the core of the study:

- Have students' career intentions changed since enrolment?
- What range of career destinations do students currently have?
- What perceptions do students have of their chances of securing a training contract or pupillage?

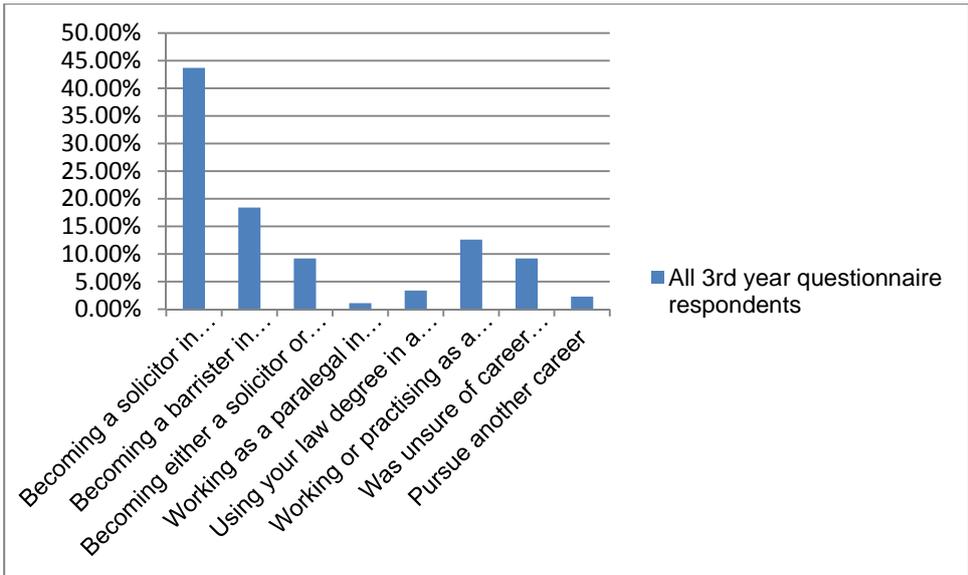
The results for all the research questions, however, and their various permutations, will be covered in the FINAL REPORT I am producing for LERN.

FINDINGS

Before looking at whether students' career intentions have changed since enrolment, it is helpful to look at what students' career intentions were *on* enrolment.

Career intentions on enrolment (3rd year questionnaire respondents)

Becoming a solicitor in England and Wales	43.7%
Becoming a barrister in England and Wales	18.4%
Becoming either a solicitor or barrister in England and Wales but undecided at this stage	9.2%
Working as a paralegal in England and Wales	1.1%
Using your law degree in a non-legal occupation in England and Wales	3.4%
Working or practising as a lawyer outside the UK	12.6%
Was unsure of career intentions	9.2%
Pursue another career	2.3%



Intention to enter legal profession

In terms of entering the legal profession, if you conflate those respondents who intended to become a solicitor, barrister, either but were undecided, or work as a lawyer outside the UK, then the percentages of respondents in the UKCLE, 1st year Cohort Study questionnaire and 3rd year Cohort Study questionnaire samples intending to enter the legal profession on enrolment compare as follows:

	UKCLE study respondents	1st year Cohort Study respondents	3rd year Cohort Study respondents
Intended, on enrolment, to enter legal profession (whether in UK/OS)	79%	71%	84%
Did not intend, on enrolment, to enter legal profession (whether in UK/OS)	21%	29%	16%

The reason for providing the 1st year Cohort Study questionnaire stats is because the 3rd year respondents included students who were only responding to their first questionnaire in the 3rd year of the study, or had not responded to the first year questionnaire.

The 3rd year results are very similar to the results of the UKCLE study.

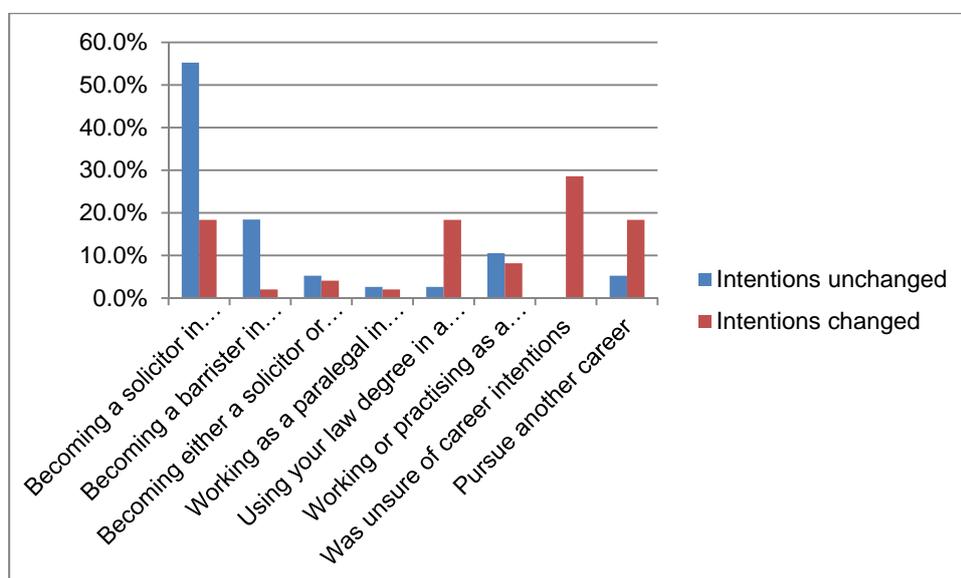
Have students' career intentions changed since enrolment?

When asked in the third year of the law degree, the majority of respondents to the third year questionnaire (56%) had changed their career intentions since they had enrolled on their law degree. (When asked in their second year, the percentage of respondents to the second year questionnaire who had changed their career intentions since enrolment was 55%. So, it would appear that the main change in career intention came during the second year of the degree.) The percentage was similar in the UKCLE study.

Changed career intentions	% 3rd year questionnaire respondents
Yes	56%
No	44%

What range of career destinations do students currently have? - changed and unchanged intentions

The following graph shows where career intentions stand at the end of the three years of the degree for respondents to the third year questionnaire, according to whether respondents had changed their career intentions since enrolment or not.

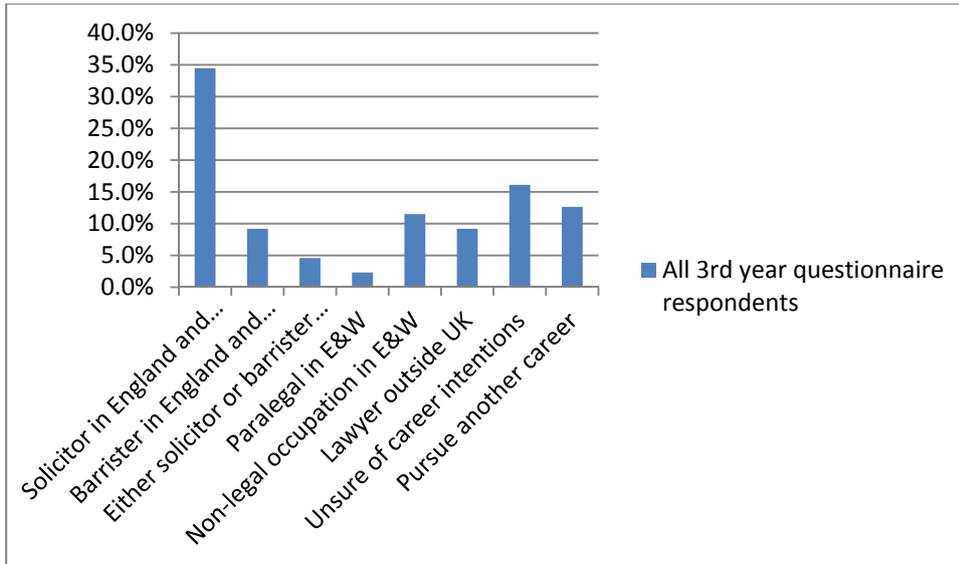


Interestingly, the percentage of respondents intending to become a solicitor was much higher for respondents whose career intentions remained unchanged.

For those respondents who had changed their mind since enrolment, there were far fewer intending to become a barrister, a far greater percentage of those considering a non-legal occupation, pursuing another career or who were now unsure of their career intentions.

What range of career destinations do students currently have? – all respondents

If all respondents to the third year questionnaire are considered, their career intentions at the end of the degree are illustrated in this graph:



- By far the greater majority intend to become a solicitor
- Followed by uncertainty as to intentions, pursuing another career, non-legal occupation, and practising outside the UK – all ahead of those now intending to become barristers.
- Consistently, a career as a paralegal is of least interest.

What range of career destinations do students currently have? – across all three years of study

Putting aside actual numbers, in terms of preferences, the career destinations across each year of the study are very similar, as this table shows.

	3rd year of study	2nd year of study	On enrolment
1 st	Becoming a solicitor or barrister in England and Wales	Becoming a solicitor or barrister in England and Wales	Becoming a solicitor or barrister in England and Wales
2 nd	Working or practising as a lawyer outside the UK	Now unsure of career intentions	Unsure of career intentions at that stage
3 rd	Pursue another career	Pursue another career	Working or practising as a lawyer outside the UK
4 th	Using your law degree in a non-legal occupation in England and Wales	Working or practising as a lawyer outside the UK	Using your law degree in a non-legal occupation in England and Wales

5 th	Working as a paralegal in England and Wales	Using your law degree in a non-legal occupation in England and Wales	Pursue another career
6 th	Now unsure of career intentions	Working as a paralegal in England and Wales	Working as a paralegal in England and Wales

Intention to enter legal profession - comparison

In terms of entering the legal profession, the statistics compare as follows:

- 57.9% of respondents to the third year questionnaire still intended to enter the legal profession at the end of the degree, compared to 83.9% of the same respondents at enrolment
- However, 57.9% is still more than the 50-odd percent figure which is cited as the percentage of law graduates who enter the profession. But if I take out those who intend to work as a lawyer outside the UK – i.e. who do not need a training contract or pupillage necessarily, which constitutes 9.6% - then the percentage of those who intend to enter the legal profession in England and Wales as a solicitor or barrister becomes 48.3% - much closer to the reality. The other way of looking at this is that 26% (i.e. 83.9% less 57.9%) of respondents to the third year questionnaire who were intending to practise in England and Wales on enrolment had spent £9,000 in tuition fees enrolling on the law degree with the intention to enter the legal profession, only to have decided against it by the end of their degree.

So, what has made them change their mind?

- **Importance of factors in changing career intentions**

The factor which had been **most important** to the third year respondents in changing their career intention was uncertainty about the job market, followed by their likelihood of obtaining sponsorship for the LPC or BPTC.

The factor that had been **least important** was any concern about changes to routes to qualification and/or other reforms to legal education and training by regulators, followed by concern about discrimination in the profession. If I discount the changes to qualification etc as a factor, as I introduced that option specifically in the third year questionnaire, the other least important factor was advice they had received from their careers service and 'other' reasons.

What perceptions do students have of their chances of securing a training contract or pupillage? - Have chances improved since enrolling?

Respondents were asked in both the second and third year questionnaires whether they thought their chances of securing a training contract or pupillage, according to their career intention, had improved since enrolling. The similarity in the results between the two questionnaires is shown in this table.

	% of 3rd year questionnaire respondents	% of 2nd year questionnaire respondents
--	---	---

Training Contract		
Better	76.5%	77.4%%
Worse	23.5%	22.6%%
Pupillage		
Better	100%	73%
Worse	0%	27%

The main difference is the somewhat inexplicable optimism of those third year questionnaire respondents who intend to become a barrister and who, at the end of the degree, all believe their chances of obtaining pupillage have improved. This may be optimism – but it is also such a small sample that it is not reliable. So, no conclusion as to the confidence of would-be barristers should be drawn from this!

It is interesting though that the third year questionnaire respondents who intended to become a solicitor felt that their chances of securing a training contract had improved since enrolling on their law degree. In the report, I will be considering this result in relation to the drop in those actually intending to become a solicitor by the end of the degree in the Final Report.

ISSUES RAISED BY THE RESEARCH

By far the greater majority of respondents to both the first year and third year questionnaires had enrolled on the law degree intended to enter the legal profession. This is consistent with the UKCLE study.

Even when career intentions had changed, it was still a majority of respondents to both questionnaires who intended to enter the profession – or, at least, who intended to become a solicitor.

However, by the end of the degree, more than half of respondents to the third year questionnaire had changed their career intentions, and the proportion intending to enter the legal profession – or at least intending to become a solicitor - is closer to the percentage of law graduates likely to enter the profession – in contrast to intentions on enrolment.

So, to my mind, there are a number of issues that immediately spring to mind:

- Are students being properly informed about career options and opportunities before they enrol on the law degree? If not, is there more that schools careers advice could and should be doing, and/or is there more that universities could and should do to improve careers advice to school leavers? This will become more important if the SRA removes prescription of pathways.
- Should universities be changing the emphasis in their careers support – and curriculum - from careers as solicitors and barristers, to placing emphasis on the many roles that a law graduate may do, particularly in a legal services market which is seeing increased growth in alternative business structures and accompanying new roles and career paths, and other careers where a law degree is valuable?
- Whatever the paralegal organisations say, in neither the Cohort Study nor the UKCLE Study, was any intention evidenced that respondents saw being a paralegal as a career alternative to being a solicitor or barrister. They may turn to paralegal work as an inevitable reality towards the end of the degree but it was certainly not a reason for enrolling on a law degree for the respondents to both studies.
- If the SRA were to remove prescription of pathways to qualification, would this help or hinder students in deciding whether to study law? If the careers advice is not sufficient at present – which bears investigation – how would they be able to navigate a pathway for themselves without any guidance, and how could they make the investment in time and money that will give them a fair chance of achieving their career ambitions? Given the fact that my data has not shown up any evidence of occupational inheritance, I think it is very important that students not from families with connections to the profession, or from non-traditional backgrounds or first generation to go to university, are able to pursue a route to qualification which will provide them with the same chances of achieving their career ambitions as any other student who may have e.g. family in the profession etc.

I have not covered the results relating to respondents' perceptions of the time and money invested in their education if they aren't able to obtain the training contract or pupillage that they desire but, instead, have to work as a paralegal or even do non-legal work – after spending three years on a law degree and a year on the LPC/BPTC, and spending £9,000 of tuition fees and £15,000 plus on the LPC/BPTC. However, as a headline, respondents thought the investment in the law degree was both time and money well-spent – but not the LPC/BPTC.

I think this should give comfort to law schools that respondents valued the law degree, and may be relevant when considering the SRA's argument for no prescription of pathways – certainly for the law degree.

REFLECTIONS

What have I learnt from doing this project? Many things!

- Basing questionnaires on the original UKCLE questionnaire: good idea but it meant that flaws in the first questionnaire have been carried through the other three questionnaires, or, where I have been able to correct the flaws in subsequent questionnaires, it has meant that it has not been easy/possible to make direct comparisons on every question. I was asked to do the UKCLE project in a very short time-frame (before UKCLE lost its funding) and, although the questionnaire was largely put together by UKCLE, there was insufficient time to test it as thoroughly as it should have been. So, on reflection, I would say do nothing in haste but take the time to check – and check again.
- Lack of mentor for the first two years of the study – very important for independent researchers in particular. Having a mentor for the third year courtesy of LERN has been wonderful.

- Over-ambitious in scope of research. As you can see from the research questions, the scope has been very broad – from career intentions, to perceptions of what employers are looking for, to perceptions of the law degree, and also respondents' choice of law school. So, I have a wealth of data and now need to grapple – with my mentor's help – as to how to best use it and make it available.
- Questionnaires are becoming an almost ineffective research tool because students are being over-surveyed. I think this has a lot to do with what I would actually call paranoia by universities – as opposed to students - about the NSS. The third year questionnaire had to be delayed longer than I had hoped simply because some universities were concerned that if their students had to answer the cohort study questionnaire, it might affect how they answered the LSS because they were tired of questionnaires. That may be. However, from what I have seen of surveys of students generally, they are being over-surveyed even without the NSS. I think this had an impact on the number of students who responded to the third year questionnaire in the cohort study in particular, which I wanted to do toward the end of the academic year. So, my original intention of tracking the one cohort of students through each of the three questionnaires has not been feasible.
To make up for this, I had hoped to be able to use focus groups to supplement the lower level of responses to the questionnaire. However, because of having to move the questionnaire to later in the year, that was not viable either.
- Having 16 universities involved in the study means having to be very well-organised. I have to say that the universities remained co-operative and helpful over all three years, and I am extremely grateful to them for this. It is all very well having your own ideas of what you want to do and being organised, but if you don't have the co-operation of those whom you need to provide the data, you are not going to get very far. I was very fortunate in this.
- I couldn't have done it without LERN – any of it: the LERN workshops, guidance, support, mentoring – not to mention funding for the third year.

NEXT

This paper to be published on the LERN website while I finish writing up the report of the third year of the cohort study, also to be published by LERN.

The UKCLE report, and the interim report I produced comparing the results of the first year questionnaire of the cohort study with the UKCLE study are also being published on the LERN website.