Student Retention and Success report 2009

Introduction

Every October, the University retrospectively analyses student retention and success rates for the previous academic year. The final enrolment statuses of all students registered in the previous academic year are categorised into five groups:

- students who passed the year
- students who suspended their studies during the year
- students who completed the year but who failed to progress
- students whose studies were ended by the University
- students who withdrew from the University during the year.

A number of enrolment records are discounted from the analysis, like those created for students who did not ever enrol and those who transfer courses (only the student's new course record is included in this analysis).

What follows is a summary of student retention and success for 2008/9, in the context of the previous five years. The paper outlines the consistent disparities in student retention and success rates that are apparent from our analysis. It also utilises the research literature on these issues to formulate a series of discussion prompts that the University community may wish to use as a guide for further debates. A range of graphs are appended to this paper as visual summaries of the data. One data issue needs to be pointed out before reading: a significant clear-out of 'dormant' student records took place in 2006/7. This particularly skews the results in graphs B2, C2, E4, and H1 for that year.

Summary of results for 2008/9

The proportion of students successfully progressing to the next level of their studies or to the end of their course increased to 86.7% last year [see graph A1]. Withdrawal rates fell substantially, by 2pp to 8.3%. When grouped together, the proportion of students suspending their studies, failing the year, or having their studies ended by the University is at its lowest since analysis began (5%). However, the 87.3% who passed the year includes 2.4% who were granted 'conditional progress' because they had not met the credit requirements for progression. This is a larger proportion than in previous years (the next highest was 1.3% in 2007/8). This increases the possibility of higher failure rates in 2009/10, though these students will have a chance to gain the required credits during this academic year.

Inequalities of progression and success

1. Undergraduate honours degree students are more likely to be retained and succeed (88.1%) than students on other undergraduate (84.4%) or postgraduate courses (84.8%) [see graphs B1-3]. Students on other undergraduate courses are nearly twice as likely to withdraw as those studying for an undergraduate honours degree. Postgraduate students tend to be more likely to suspend or fail their studies.
2. Part time students (12.8%) are more than twice as likely to withdraw from courses than full time students (5.6%) [see graphs C1-2].
3. Female students are more likely to be retained and succeed (87.6%) than male students (84.5%) [see graphs D1-2].
4. There is a negative correlation between the age of students and progression and success rates, i.e., progression rates go down as age goes up [see graphs E1-4].
5. Black and minority ethnic students tend to be less likely to progress (84.4%) than non-BME students (86.9%) [see graphs F1-2].
6. Retention and success rates for students with disabilities have been better than those for students with no disability in five of the last six years [see graphs G1-2].
7. First year students are by far the most likely to withdraw from courses [see graphs H1-4]. However, students in years 2 and 3 are the most likely to suspend or fail their studies.
8. Retention and success rates for international students significantly improved in 2008/9 [see graph J2].
9. It seems that a significant element of the variation in retention and success rates at subject level [see graphs K1-22] is caused by the composition of student cohorts. Theology, for instance, which always scores very highly on student satisfaction, has typically had a higher rate of withdrawals than the University average since 2003/4. This is undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the subject has significantly more students at FD and PG levels (see point 1 above), has a majority of part-time students (see point 2) and students over thirty years old (see point 4), and also has significantly more males (see point 3) and first years (see point 7) than the University average. However, graphs L1-2 provide retention and success rates for first year, full-time, undergraduate honours degree students as a way of minimising some if these factors.
10. Graph M1 shows the timing of withdrawals during the year. It would seem that success in retaining students before 1st December each year significantly influences the total number of withdrawals in that year.

Some topics for discussion

Recent analysis of the University's National Student Survey (NSS) 2009 results highlighted young, male, full-time students on HEFCE-funded courses as being less satisfied with their experience than other groups of students. These are the (UG degree) students who succeeded in making it to the end of their courses. This paper's analysis of student retention and success has shown that it is part-time, mature, male students on UG other/PG courses that are more likely to withdraw. Both analyses show, therefore, that male students are less likely to be retained, to succeed and to be satisfied with their experience.

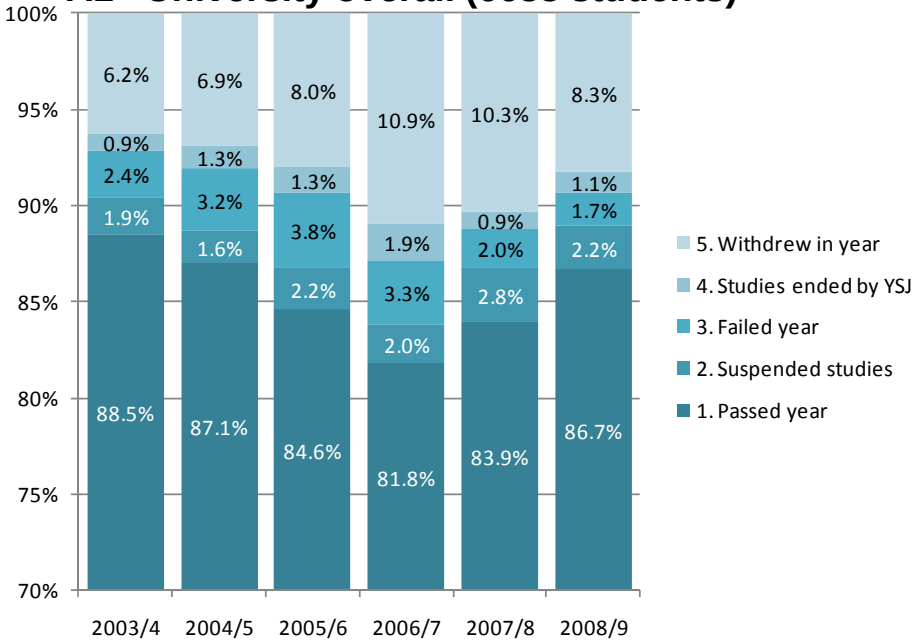
The following may be helpful in framing discussions on student retention and success issues:

- What can we do to enhance retention and success, particularly for first year, male, part-time, and mature students?
- Do we know enough about why our students withdraw or should we initiate research on this during 2009-10?
- Yorke and Longden (2008) identify five 'pointers' to enhancing the first-year experience, and thus retention and success:
    1. Improving the choice-making of intending students
    2. Quick engagement of students in academic work alongside formative assessment at an early stage
    3. Strengthening support networks for students (including academics' engagement with students)
    4. Improving resources, such as accommodation and food, and helping individuals to access electronic resources (if they do not possess the IT skills to do so already)
    5. Managing expectations – clarifying 'the deal' between the student and the institution

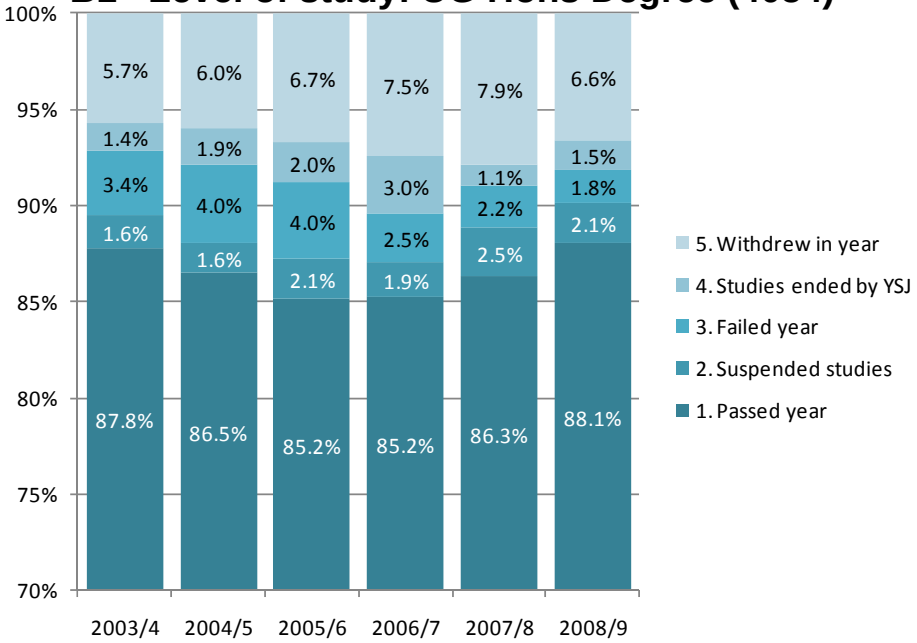
  Can anything further be done on any of these agendas to facilitate greater student retention and success? How would we find out? What would we do?

Andrew Fern and David Clarke
October 2009

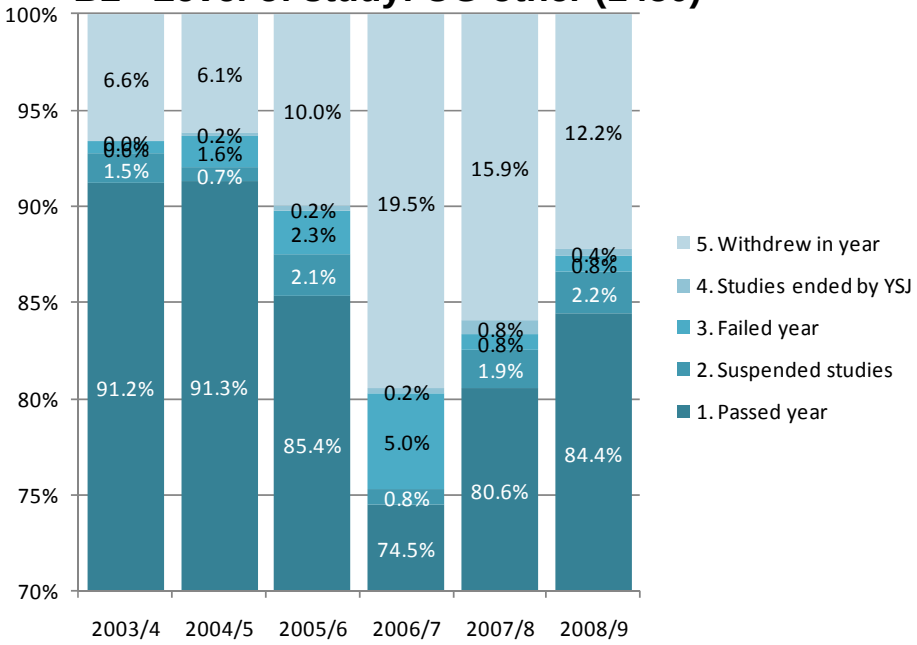
A1 University overall (6633 students)



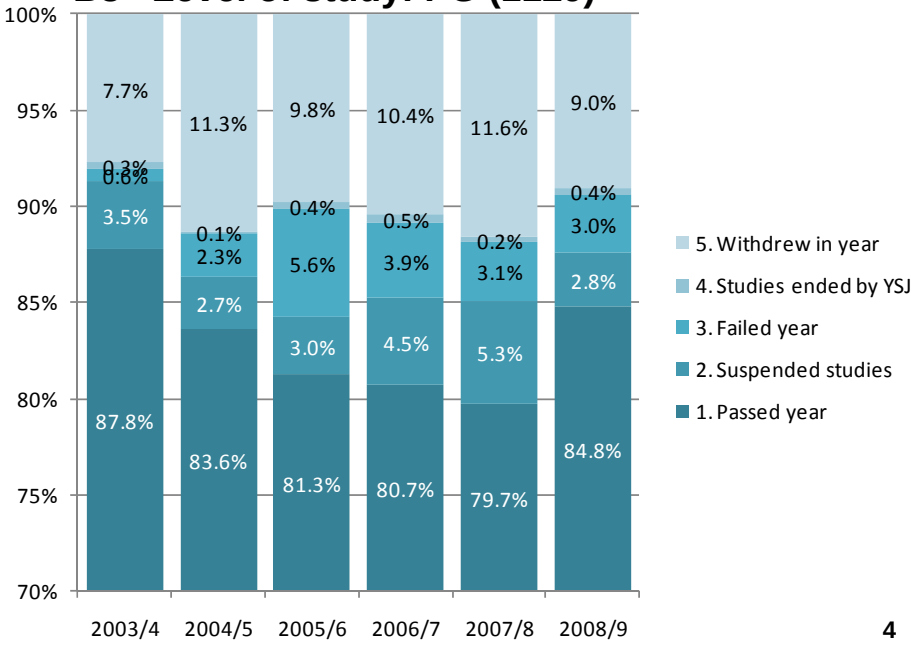
B1 Level of study: UG Hons Degree (4054)



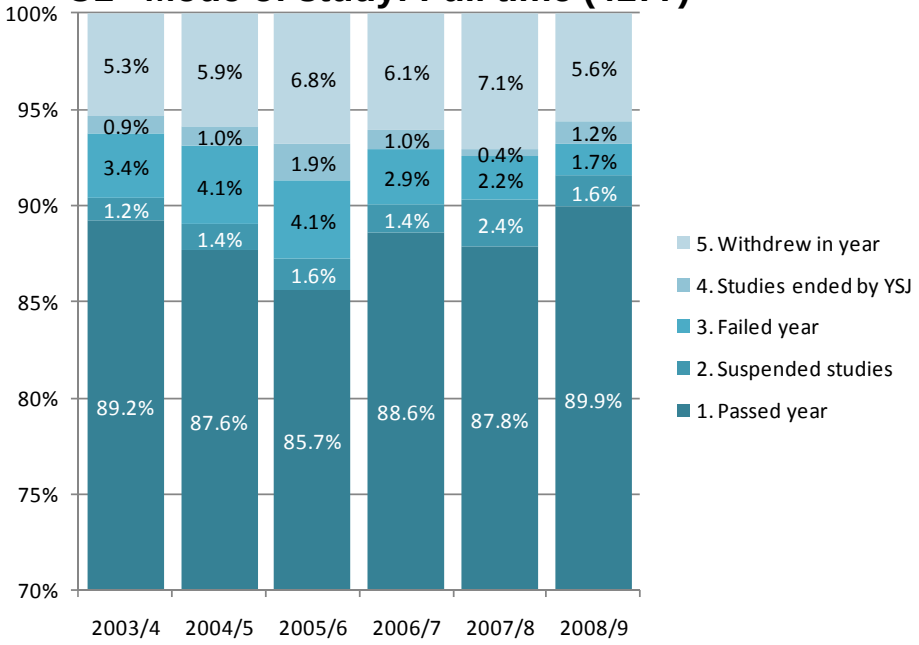
B2 Level of study: UG other (1450)



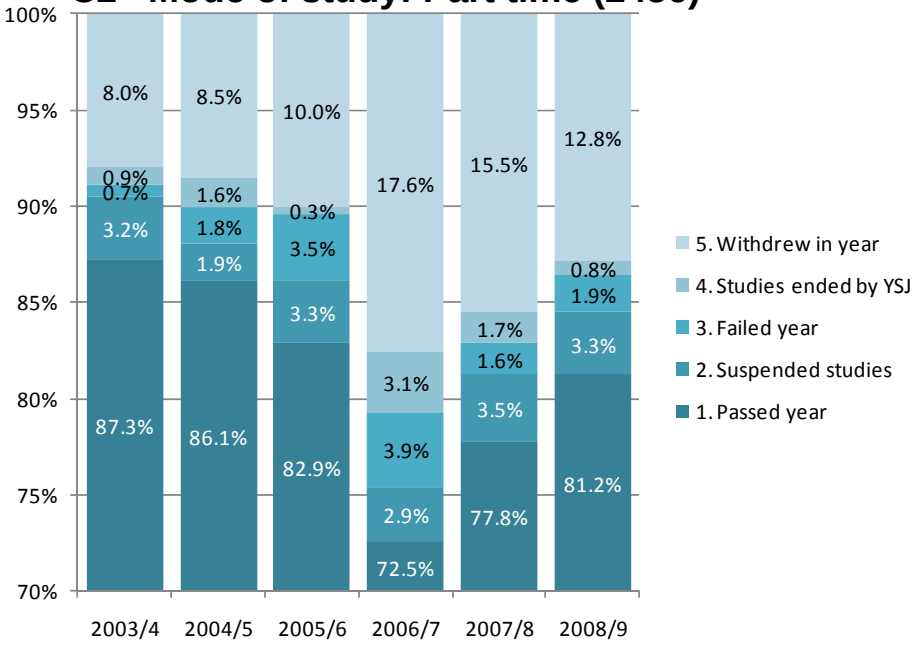
B3 Level of study: PG (1129)



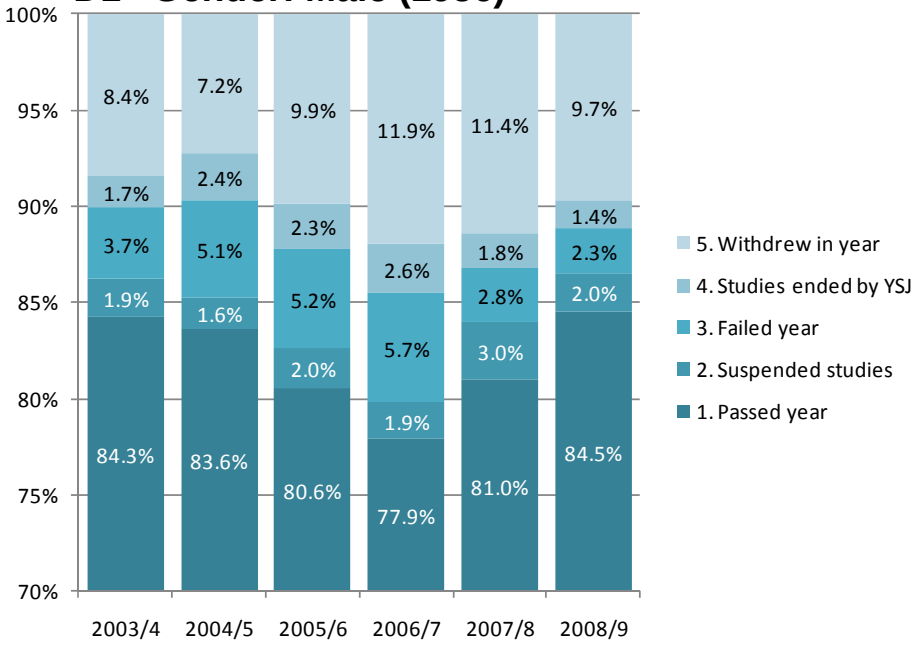
C1 Mode of study: Full time (4177)



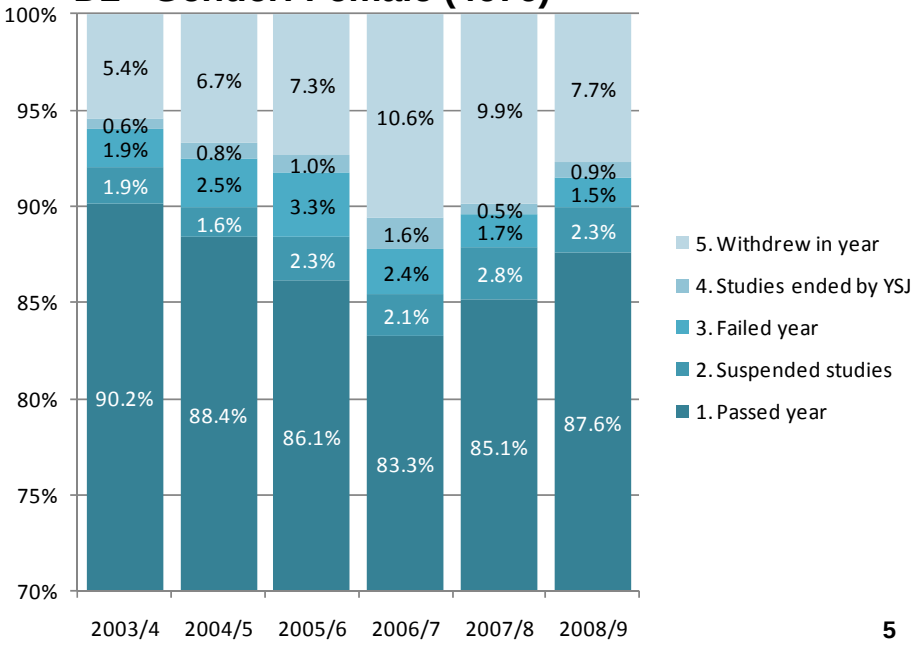
C2 Mode of study: Part time (2456)



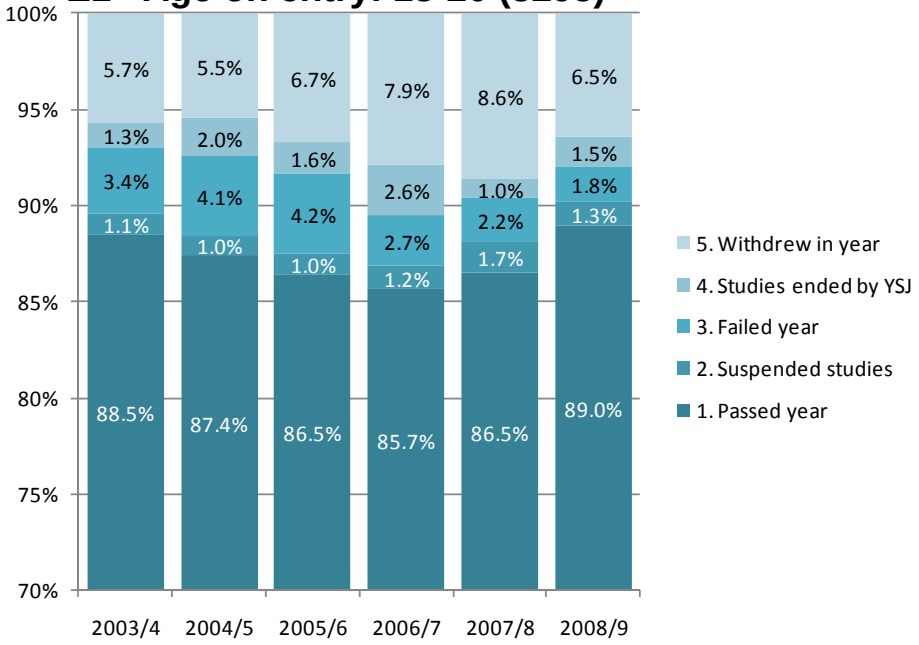
D1 Gender: Male (1956)



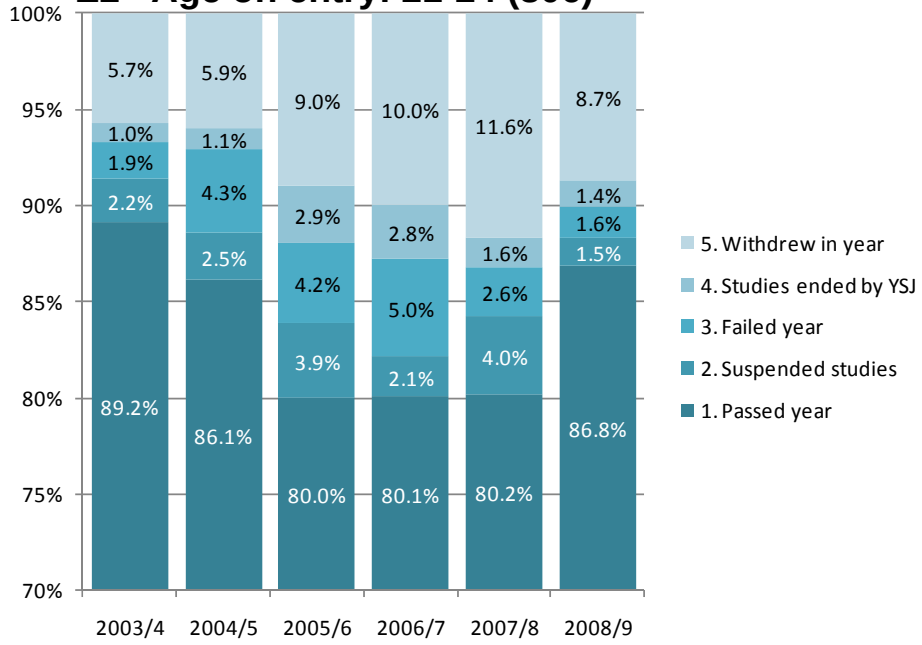
D2 Gender: Female (4676)



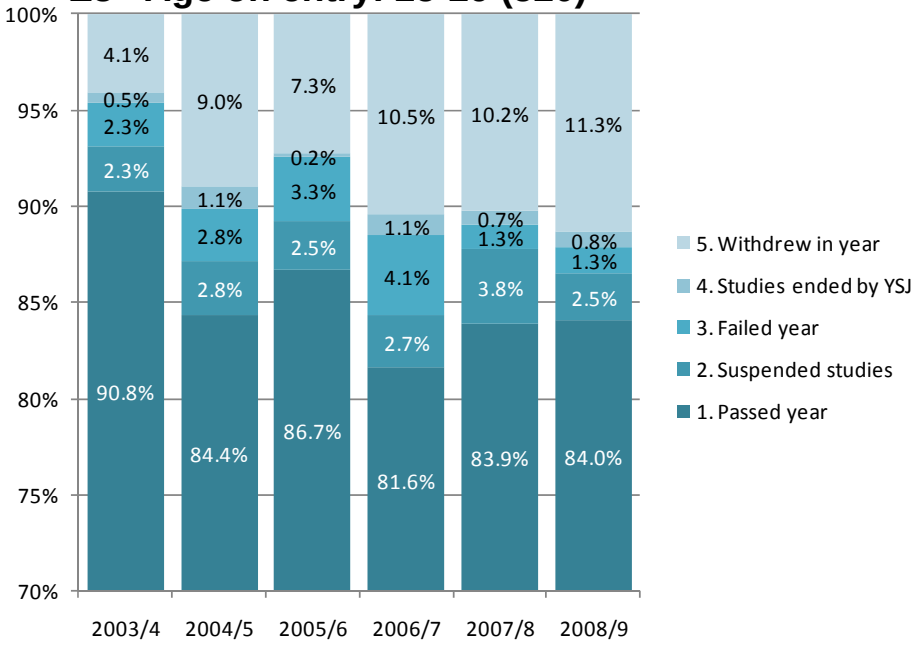
E1 Age on entry: 18-20 (3295)



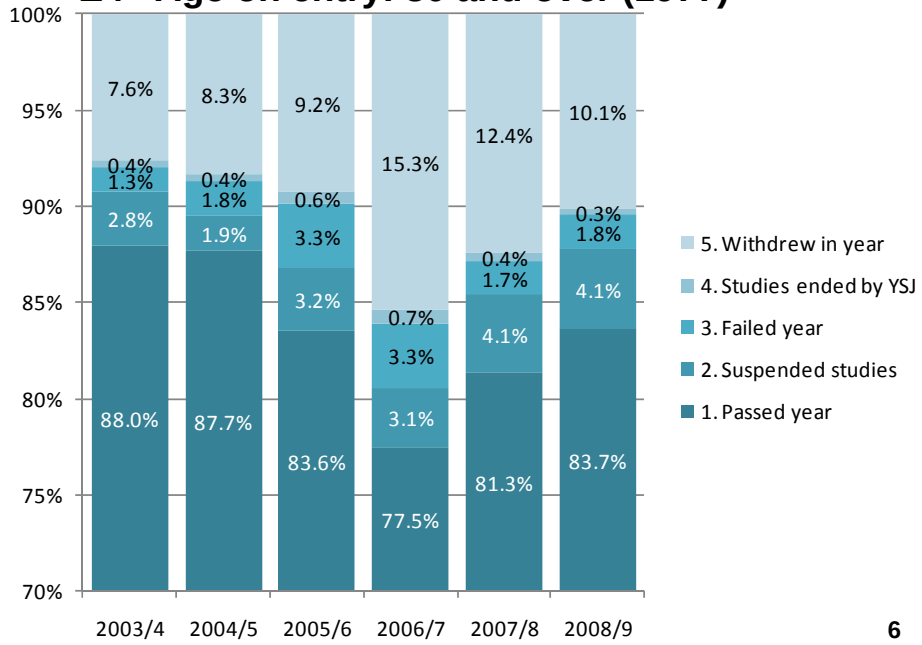
E2 Age on entry: 21-24 (806)



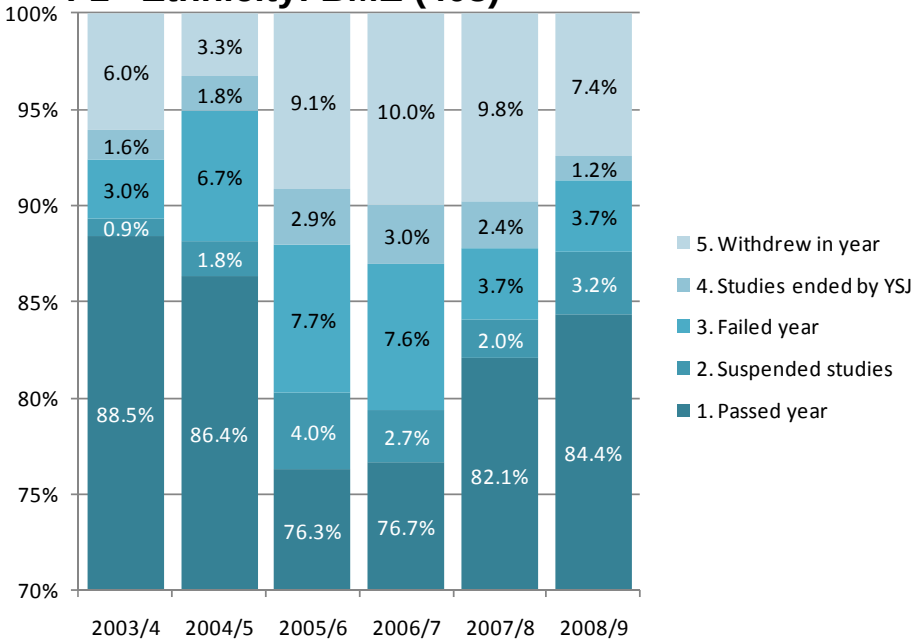
E3 Age on entry: 25-29 (520)



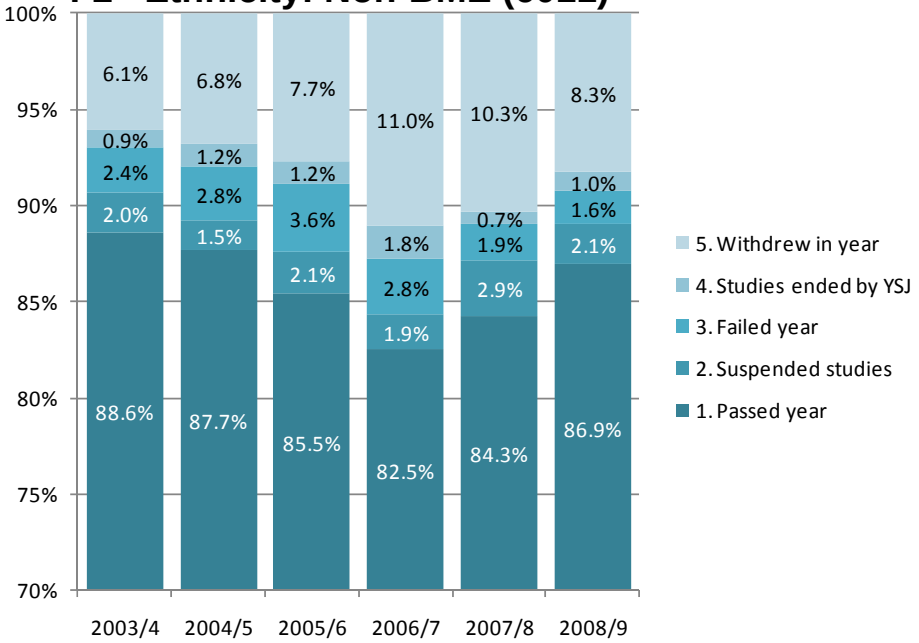
E4 Age on entry: 30 and over (1977)



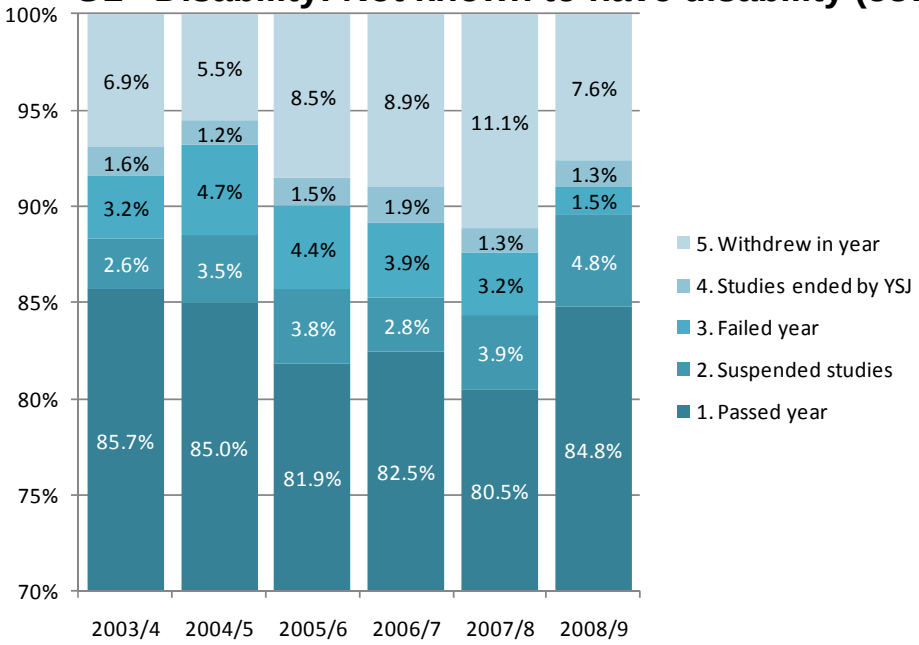
F1 Ethnicity: BME (403)



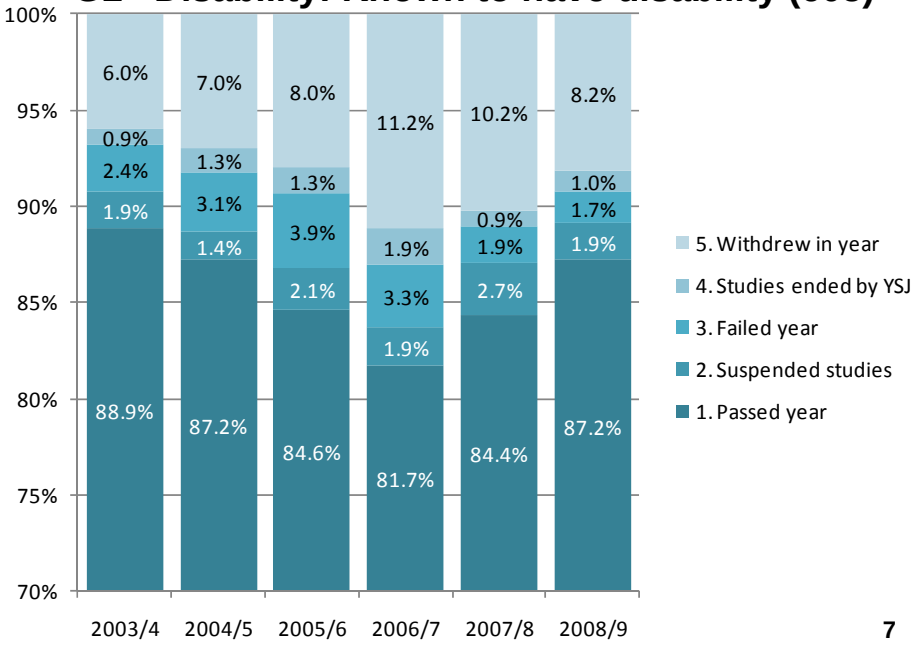
F2 Ethnicity: Non-BME (6011)



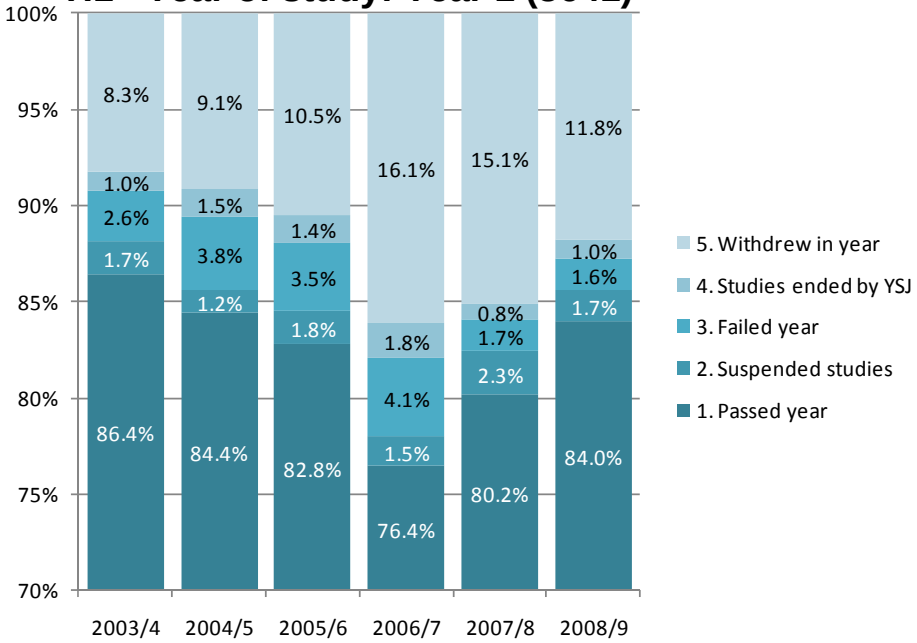
G1 Disability: Not known to have disability (5876)



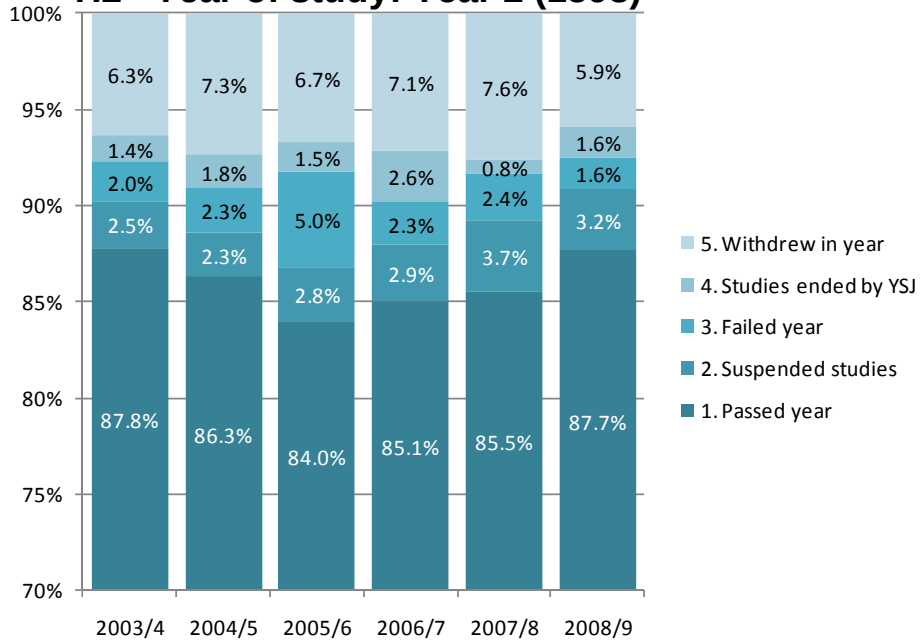
G2 Disability: Known to have disability (605)



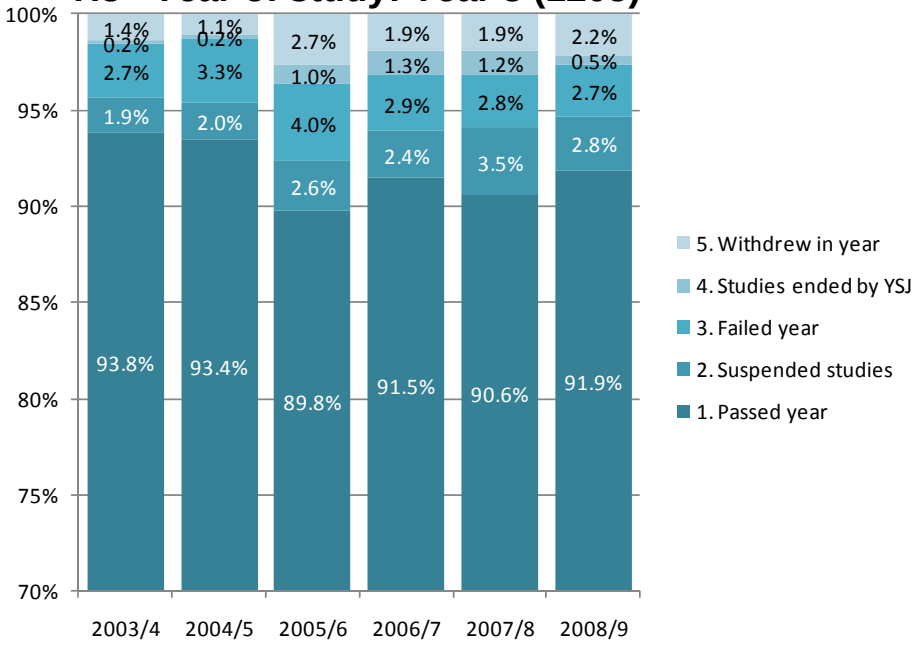
H1 Year of study: Year 1 (3641)



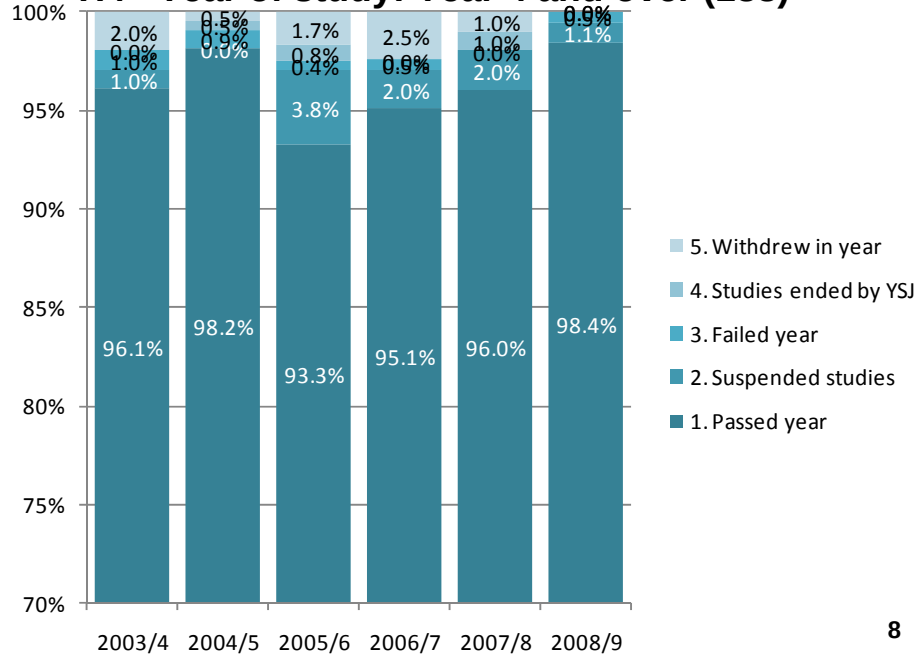
H2 Year of study: Year 2 (1598)



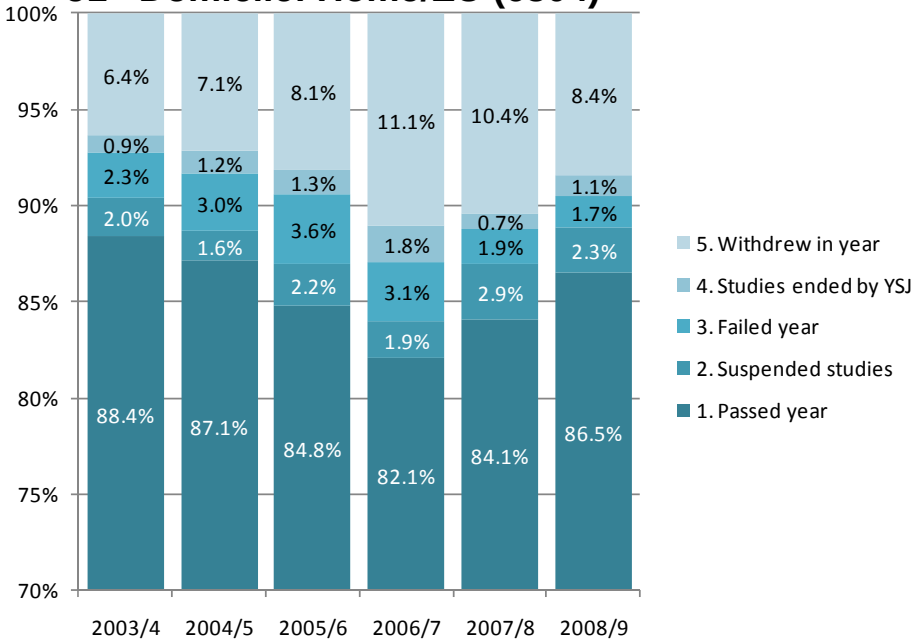
H3 Year of study: Year 3 (1205)



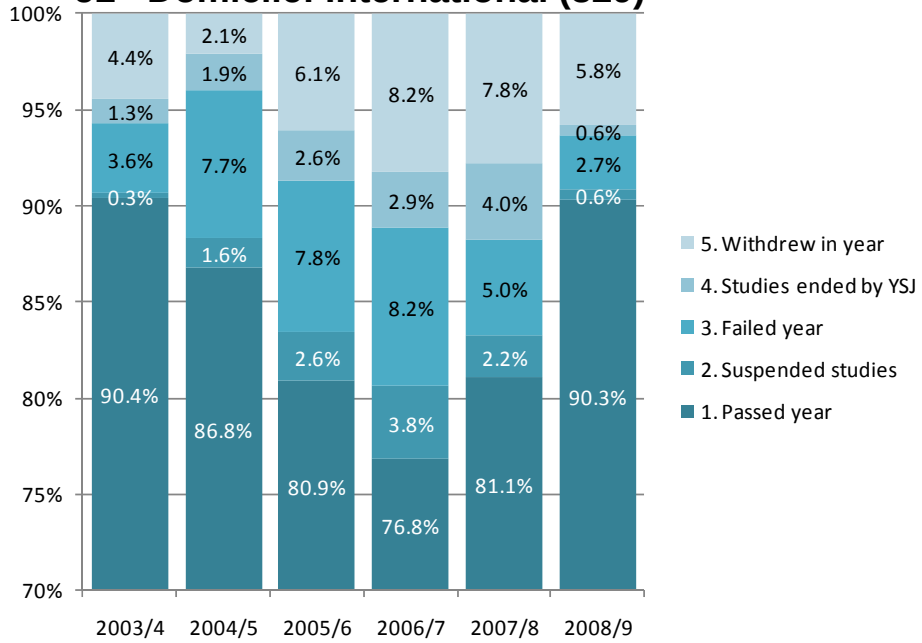
H4 Year of study: Year 4 and over (188)



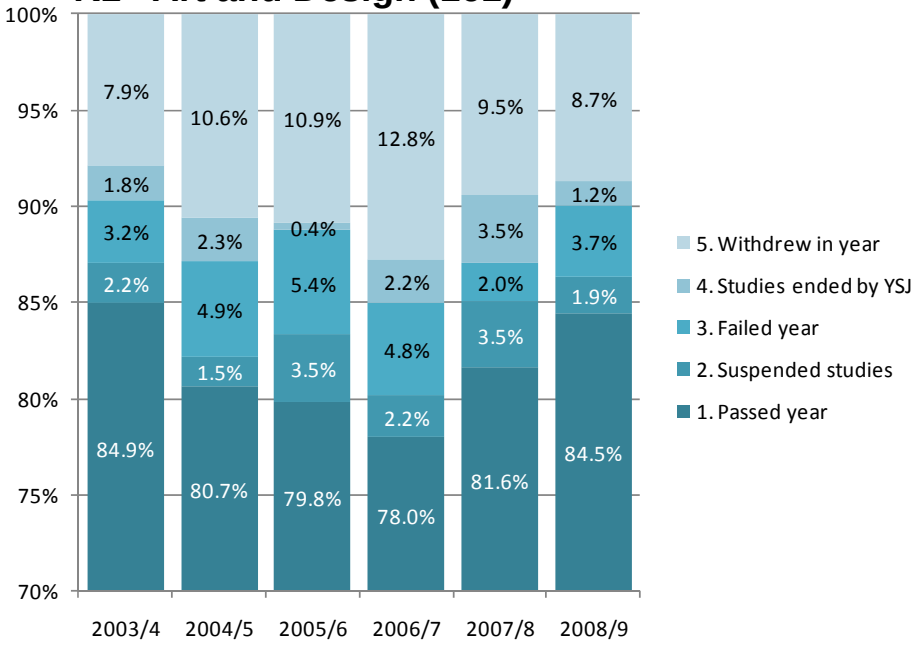
J1 Domicile: Home/EU (6304)



J2 Domicile: International (329)



K1 Art and Design (161)



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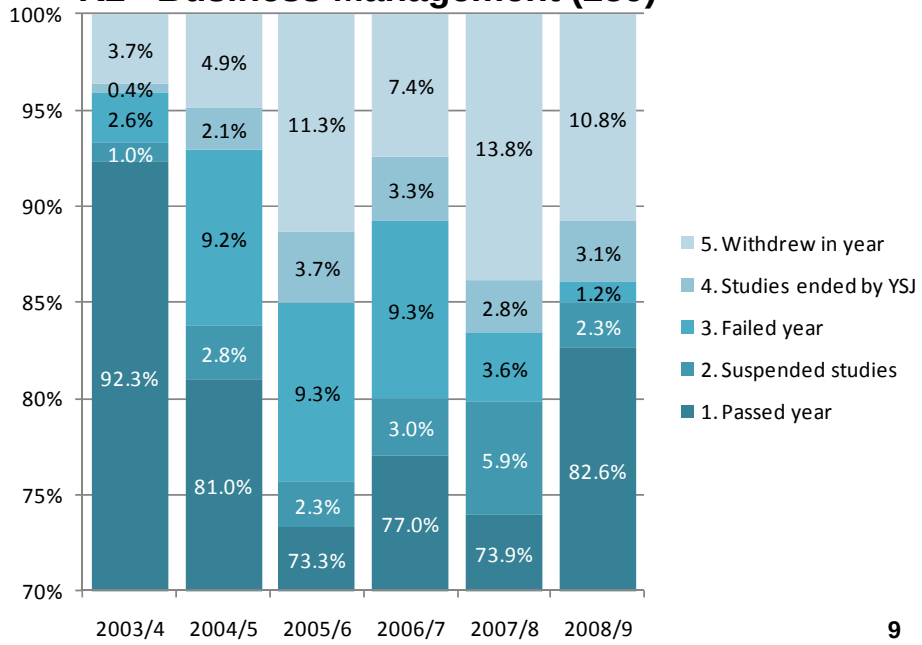
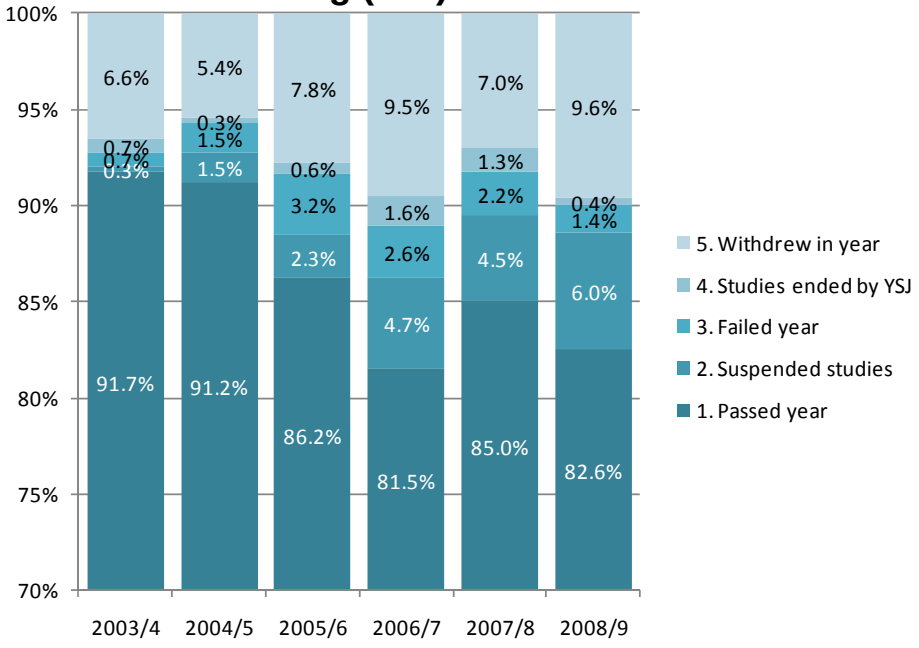
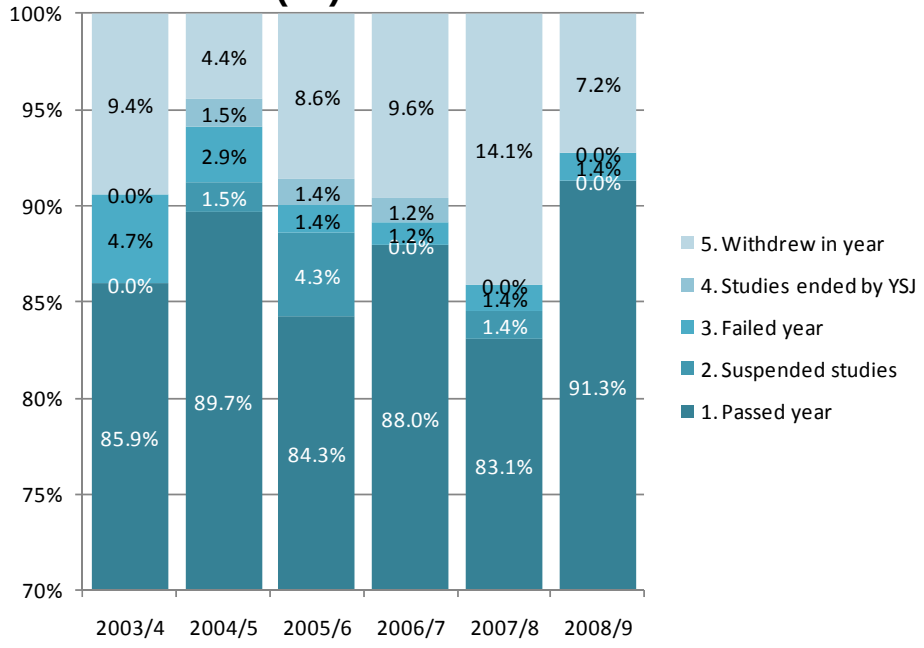


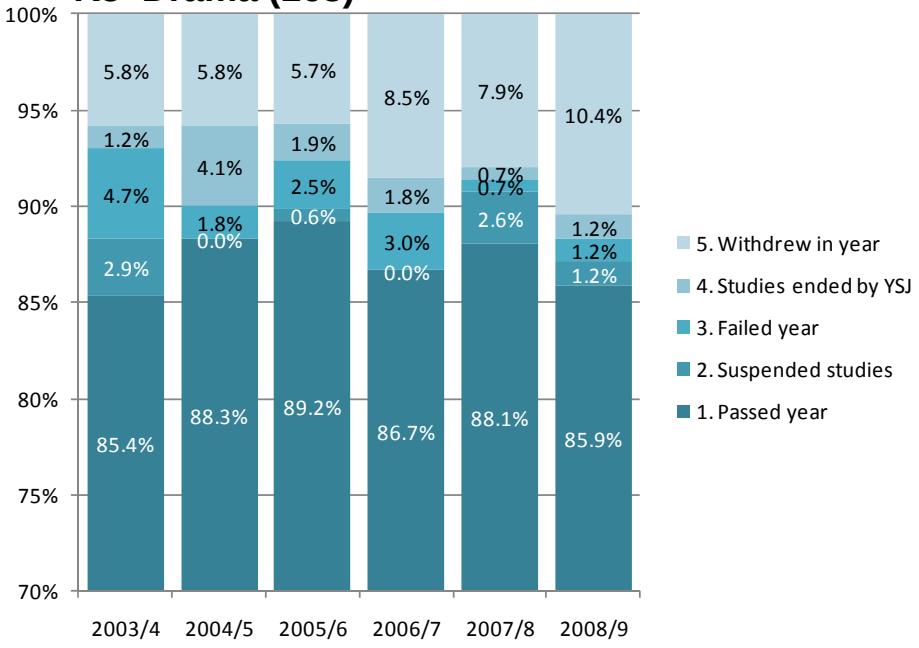
K3 Counselling (281)



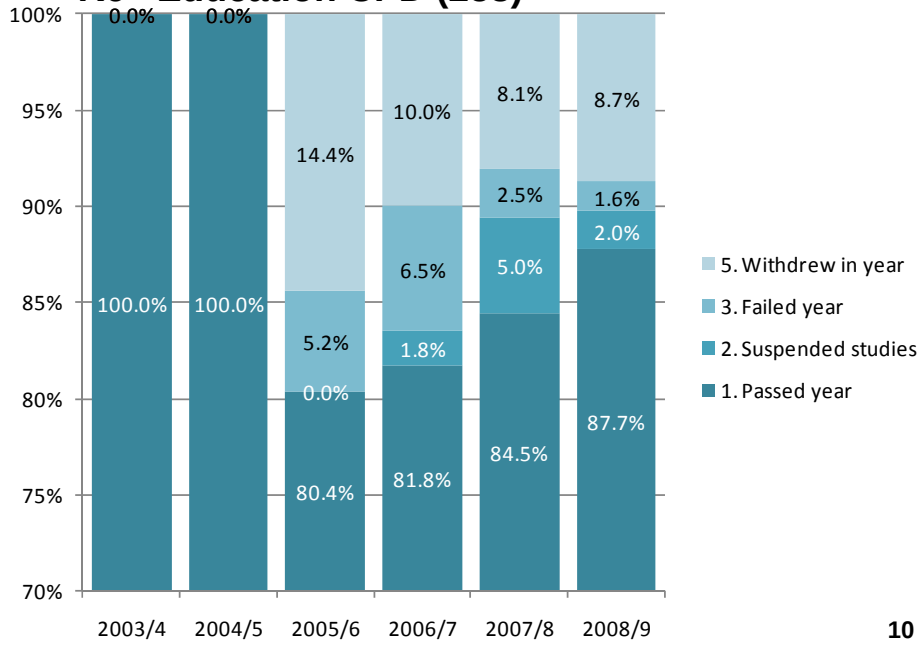
K4 Dance (69)



K5 Drama (163)



K6 Education CPD (253)



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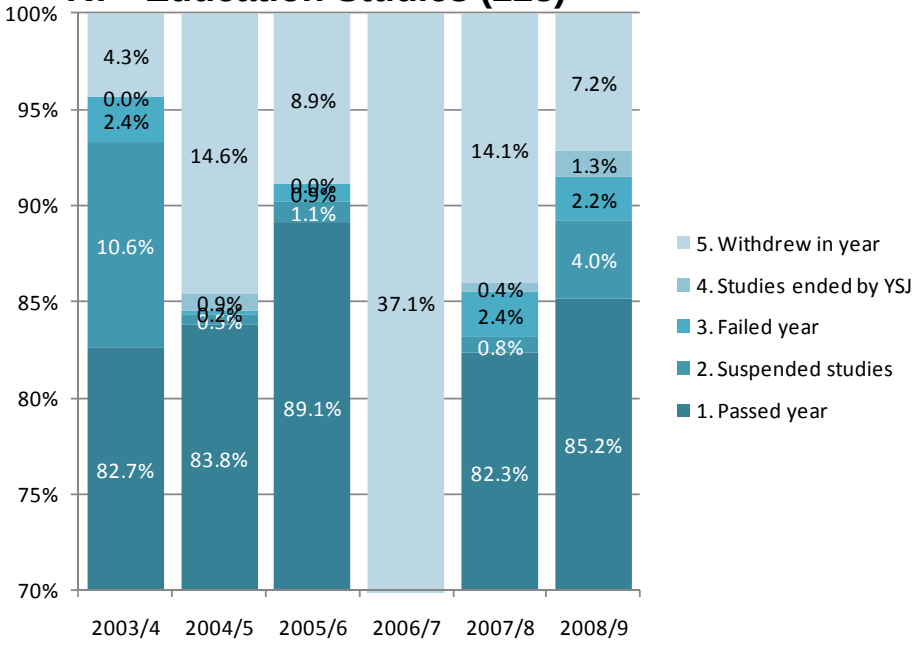
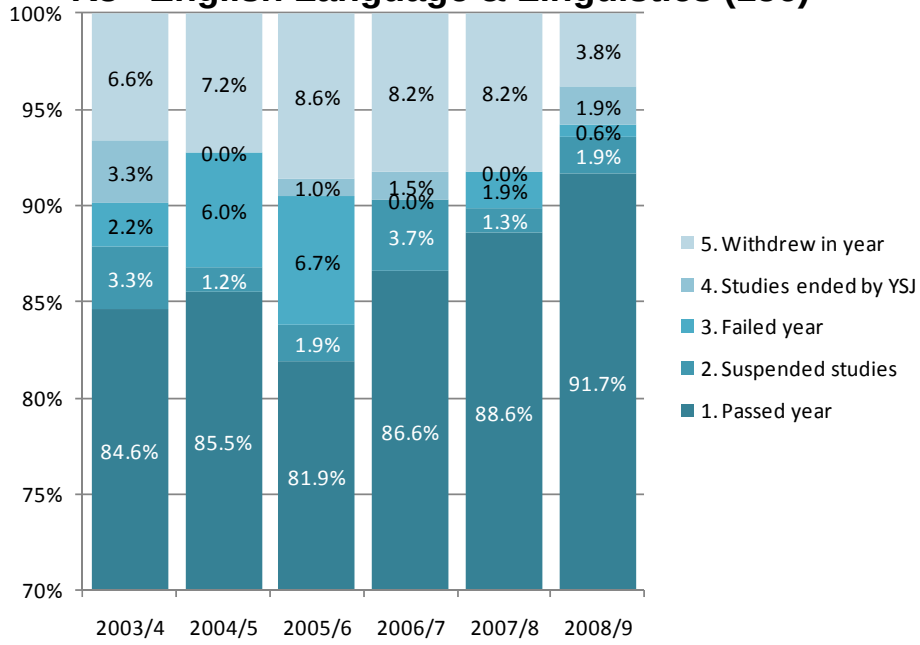


K8 English Language & Linguistics (156)



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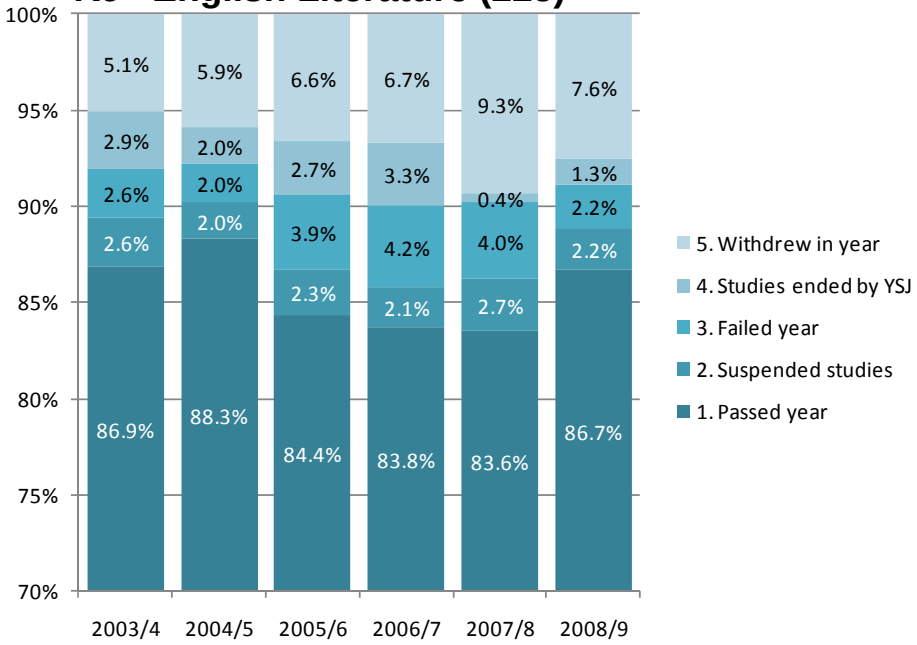

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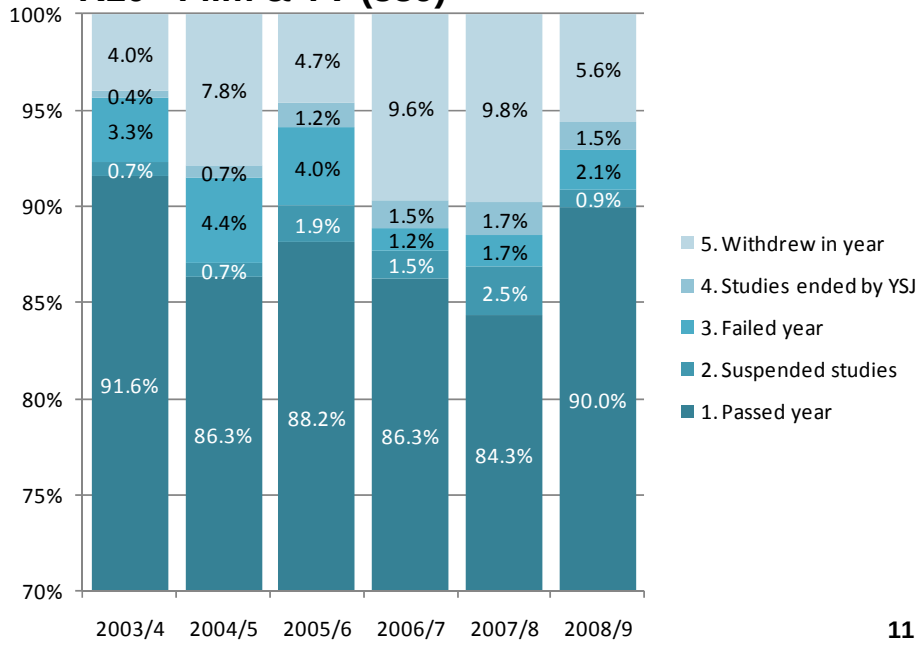
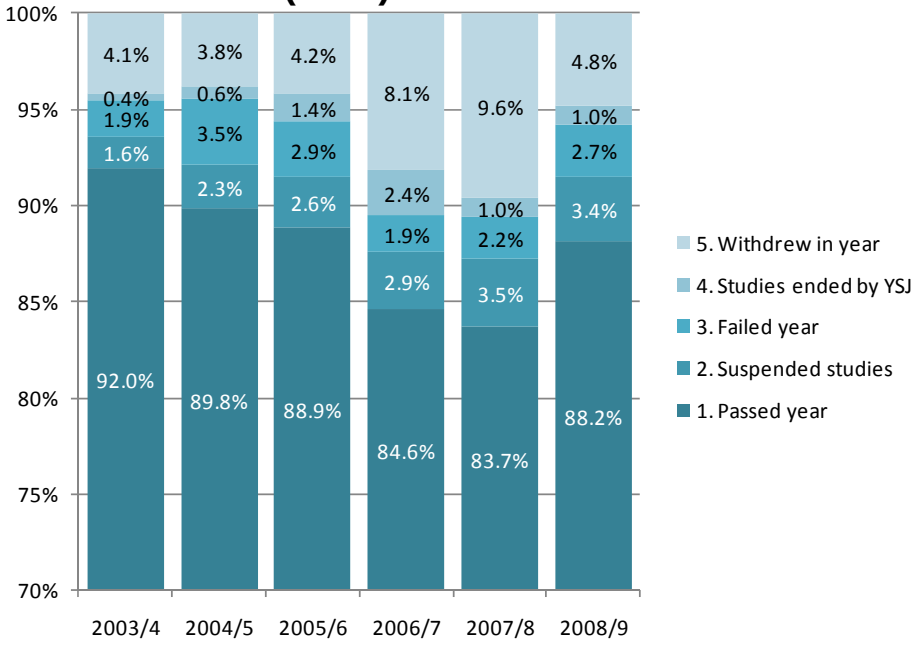


K11 Health (1041)



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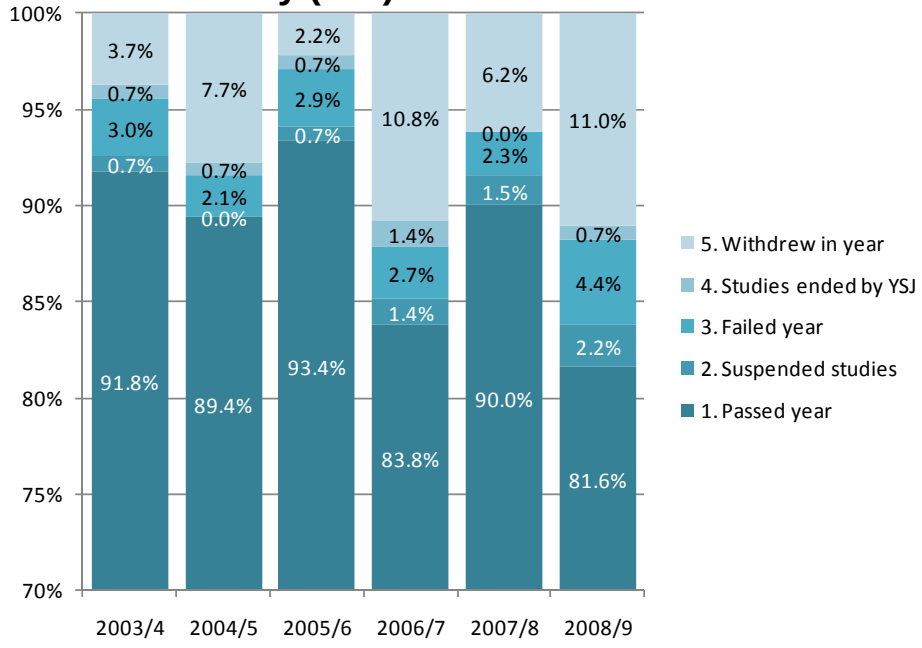

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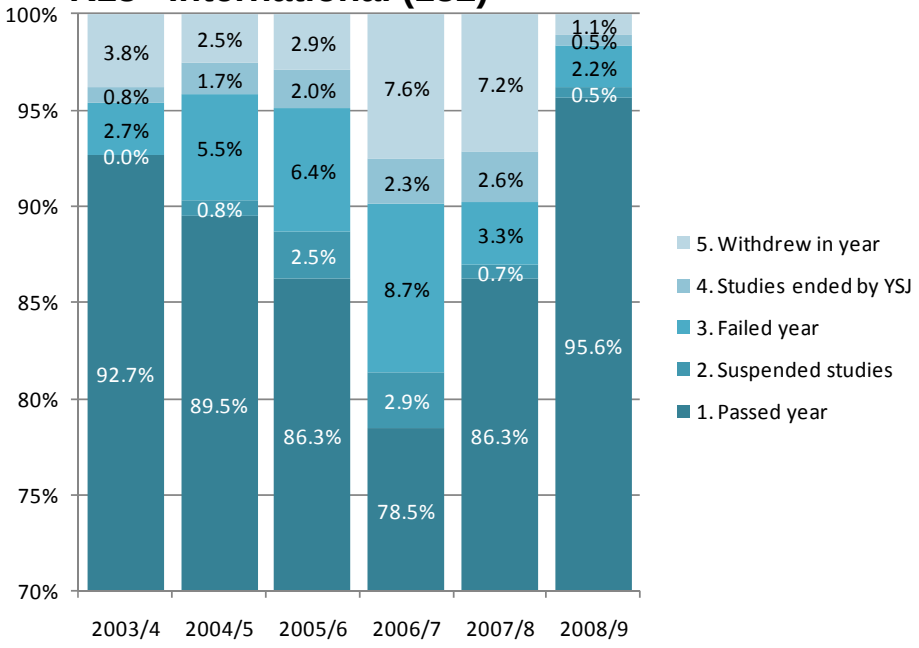
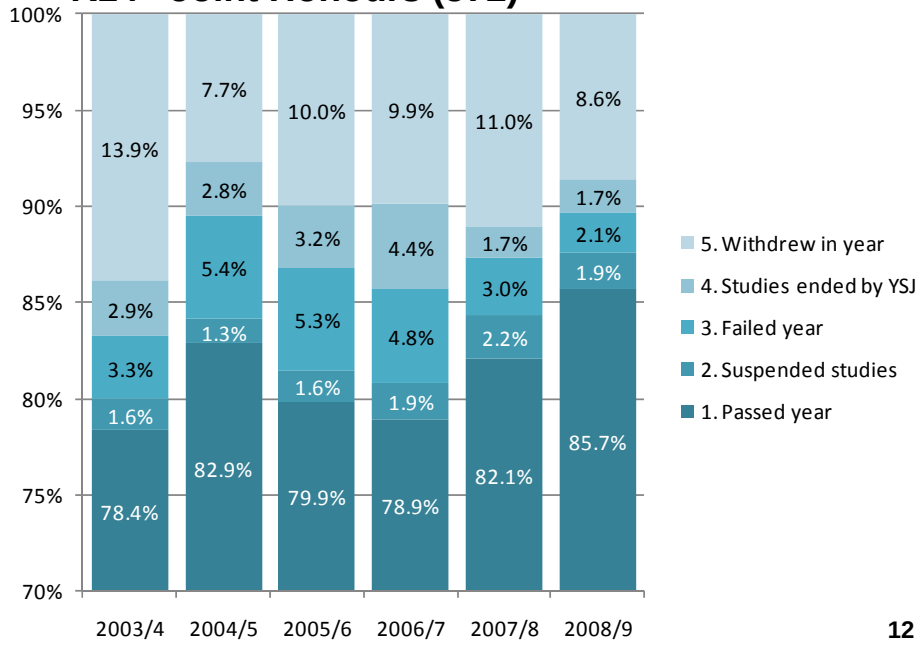
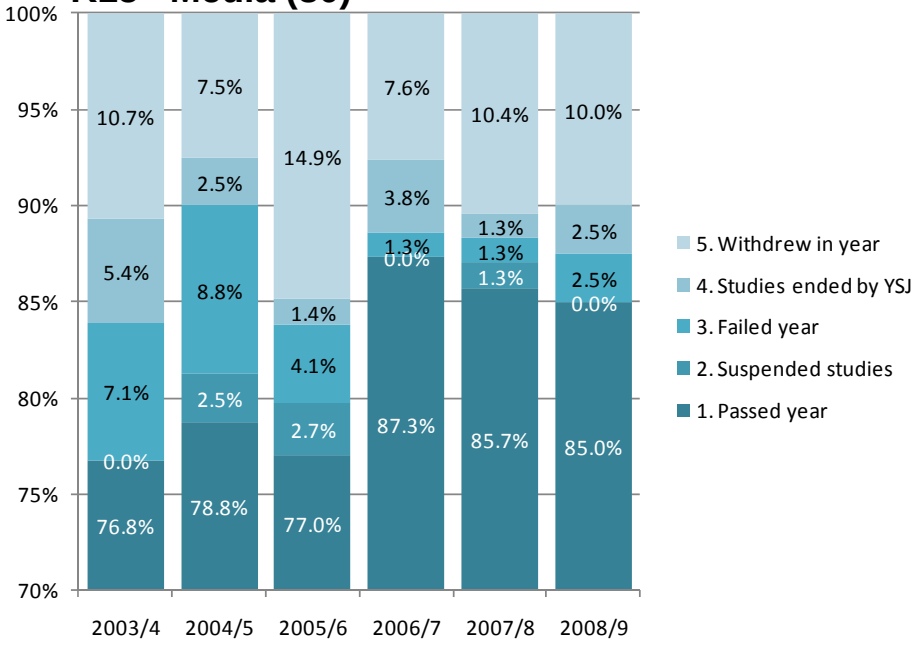


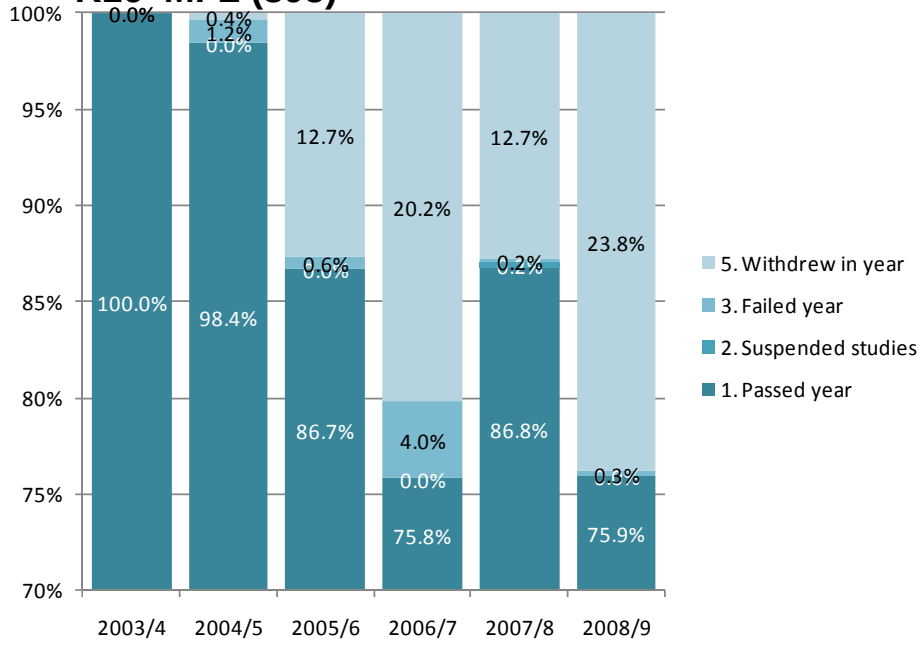
K14 Joint Honours (572)



K15 Media (80)



K16 MFL (395)



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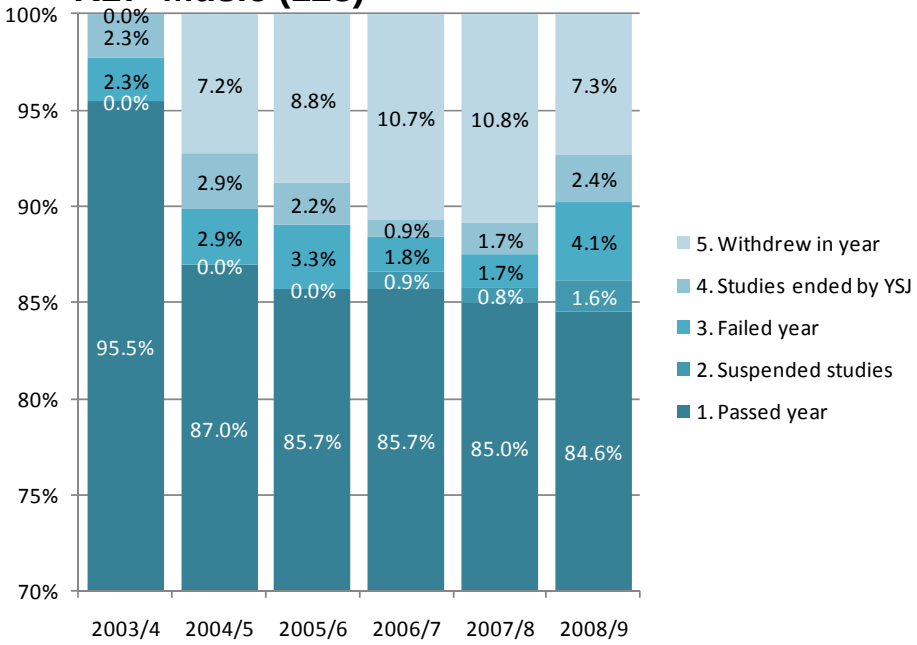

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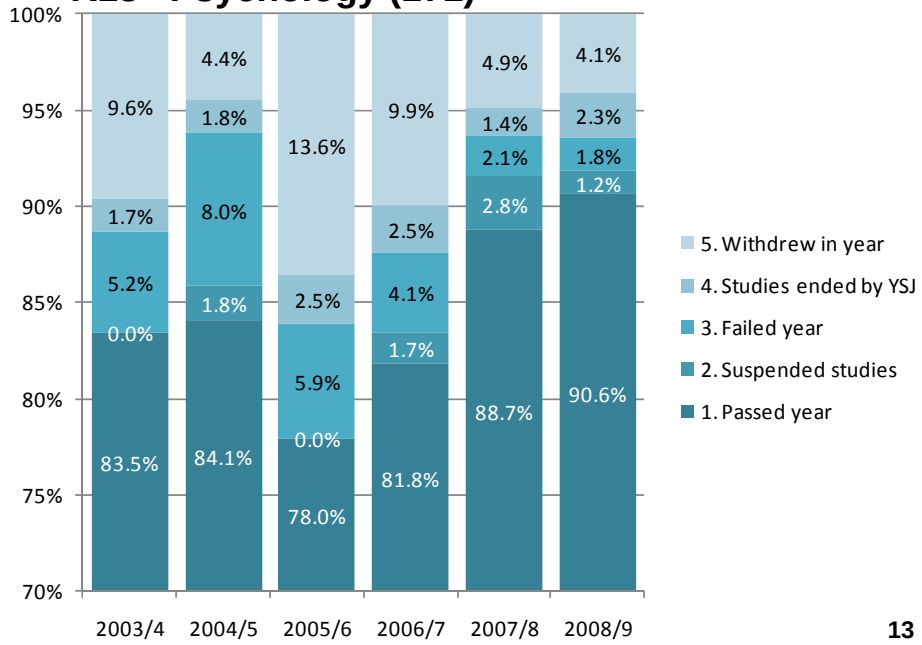
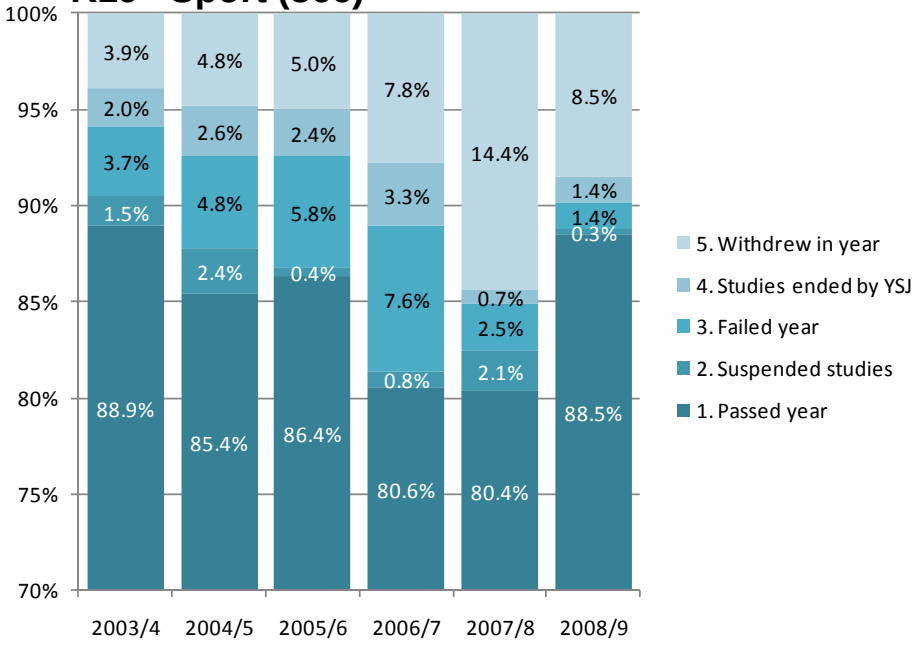
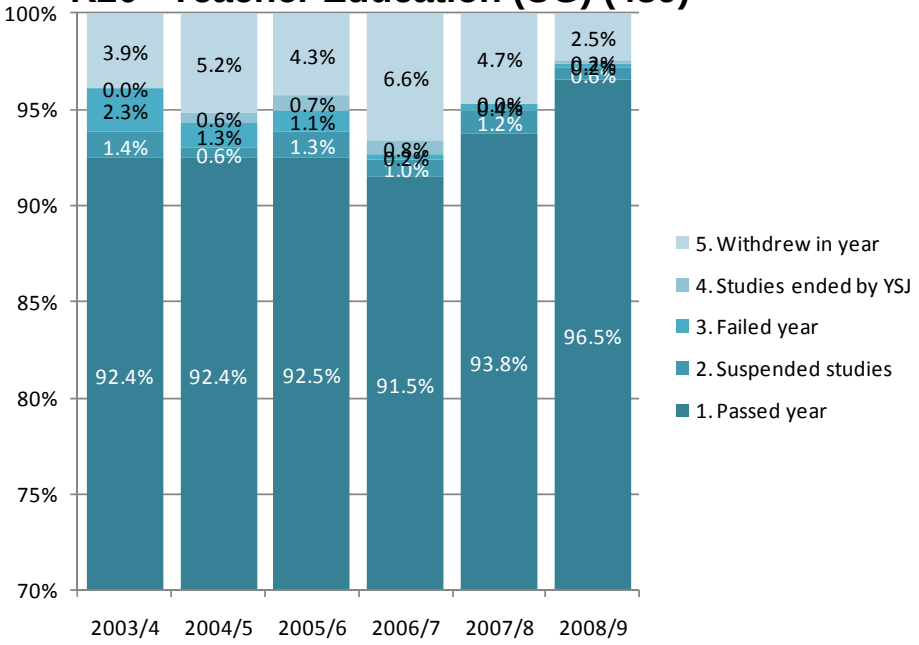


K19 Sport (366)



K20 Teacher Education (UG) (489)



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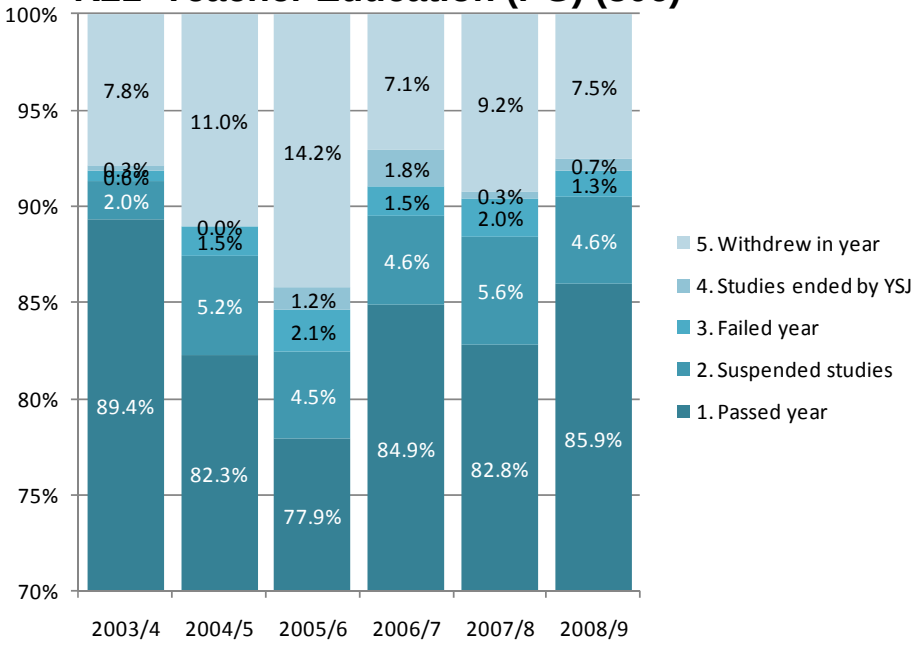
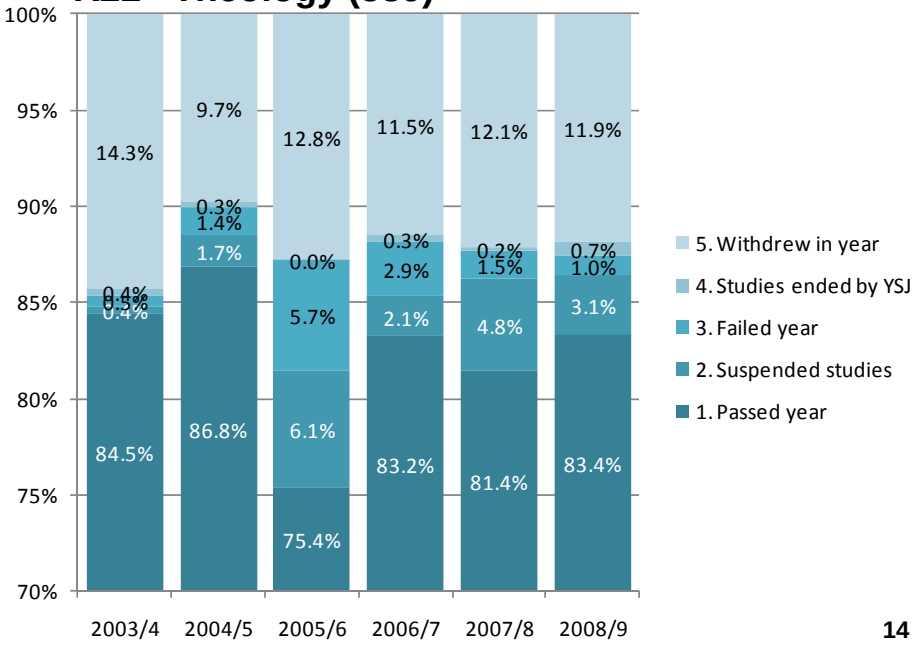
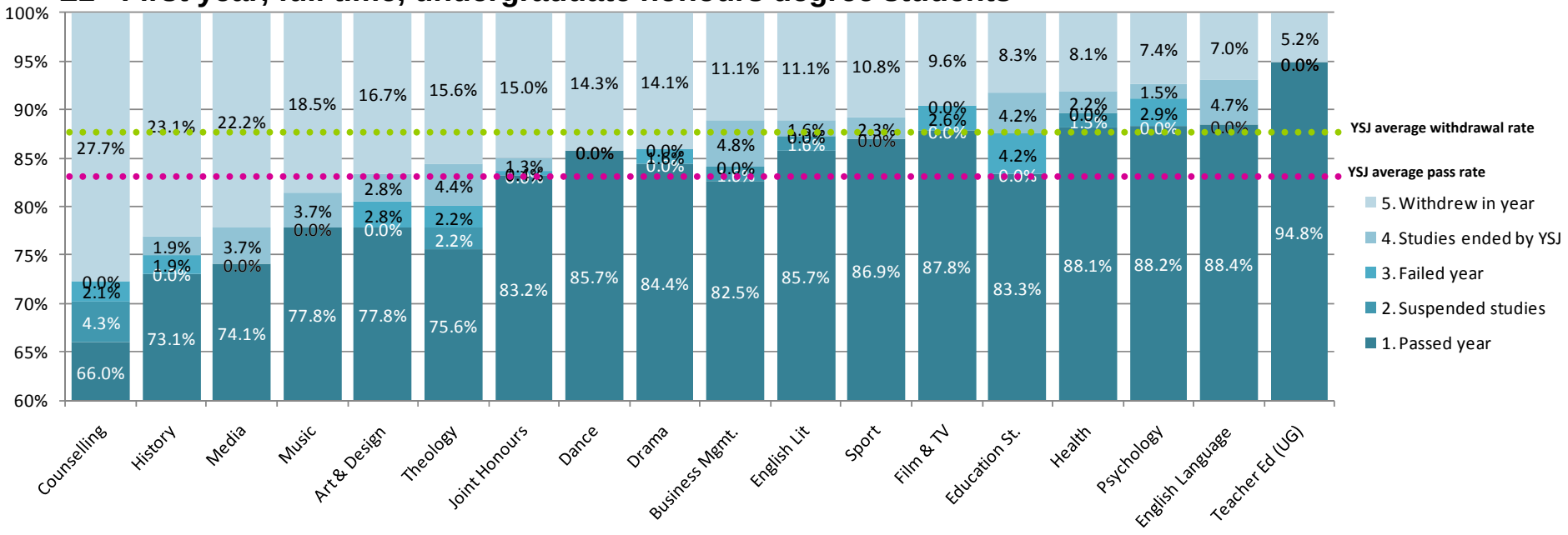


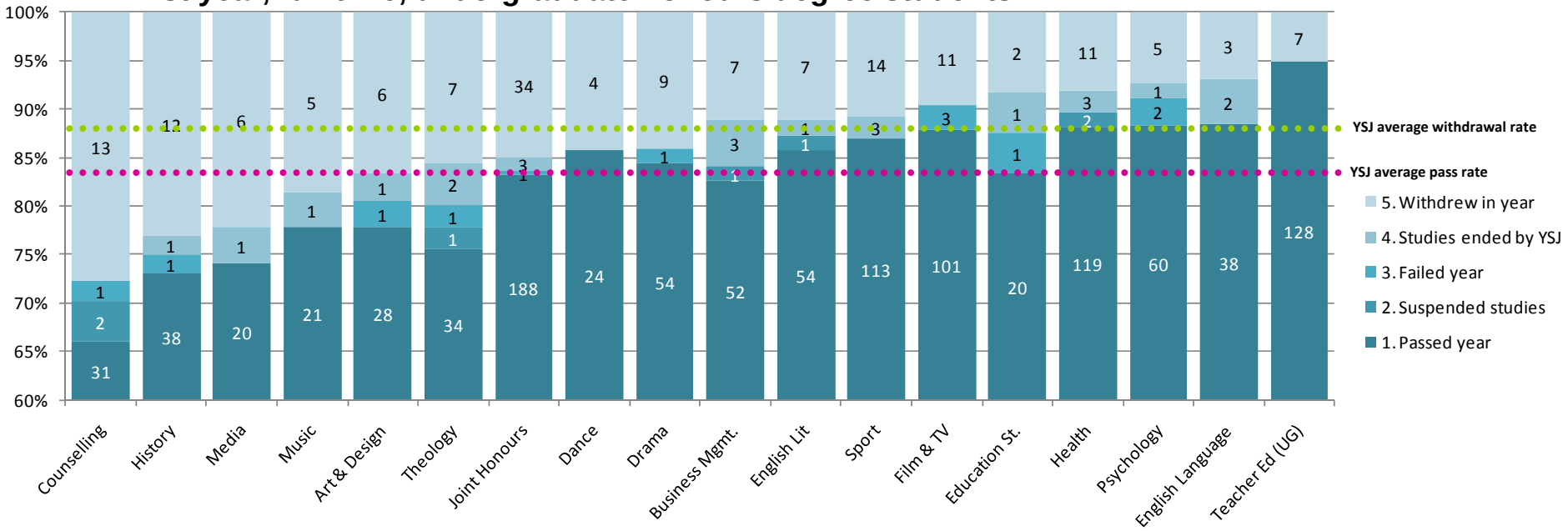
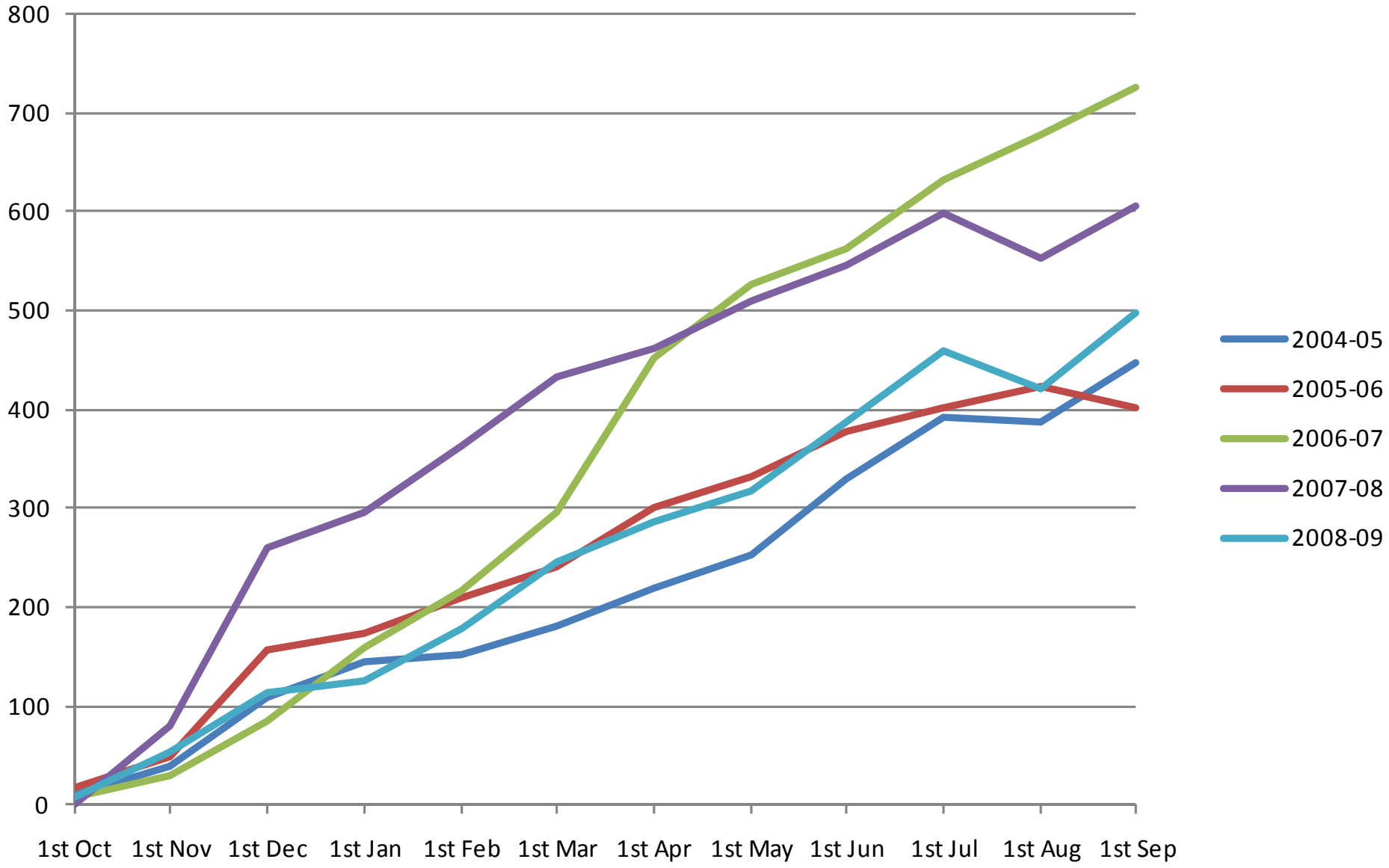
K22 Theology (589)



L1 First year, full time, undergraduate honours degree students



L2 First year, full time, undergraduate honours degree students



M1 Withdrawals by month, 2004-05 to 2008-09