

Flexible Learning: Wrapping Higher Education Around the Needs of Part-Time Students

Introduction

1. The Westminster coalition Government's HE policy, as described in the White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (BIS 2011), makes a number of far reaching changes to the structure and operation of the HE sector, especially with the introduction of higher, variable fees up to nearly 3 times greater than previously, and the provision of loans to cover these.

2. As indicated in HEPI Report "The impact on demand of the Government's reforms of higher education", and confirmed by the latest UCAS statistics of applications for admission in September 2013, it is too early to say yet whether there has been a long-term reduction in demand for full-time places – so far the evidence suggests not. However, there is evidence that part-time demand has reduced significantly despite the fact that some part-time students may now qualify for access to loans on a basis comparable and prorated to full-time students. Up to around 175,000 part-time students were estimated in the White Paper to be eligible for these loans, out of a total part-time undergraduate population of about 459,000 in 2011-12. Despite this, the impact of the increased fees on part-time students and the universities that provide for them appears to have been significant, with a reduction of one third in just one year.

3. Clearly, reducing demand is the most significant issue regarding part-time education, and it is difficult to conclude other than that the sharply increased cost is an important factor in this: demand is down even among those eligible for loans, and although there has been a trend of diminishing demand for some years, it has accelerated considerably this year. However, the data are not yet available to examine this in depth. So this report puts the question of demand and the impact of the Government's reforms largely on one side, and instead examines the status and significance of part-time students in UK higher education.

4. Given the importance of this mode of study it is all the more surprising that, with a few important exceptions (e.g. Fazackerly et al 2009, Callender et al 2010ab, Bennion et al 2011, Callender and Wilkinson 2012; Pollard *et al* (2012), there has not been more analysis of part-time study. As a consequence, there remains a lack of understanding and in some cases undervaluation of the importance of part-time students. Our goal here is to present recent analysis of

the characteristics of UK part-time students, to examine students' motivations for studying on a part-time basis, to determine the barriers to expanding study opportunities, to review recent developments in funding, and to outline future policy issues relating to part-time provision. Three brief case studies are presented featuring Birkbeck College, University of London, the University of Greenwich and the Open University, to illustrate some of the general issues that are raised in the text. The discussion focuses mainly on part-time and comparative analysis with full-time study. It is acknowledged that many of the points raised also pertain to both modes of study.

5. A key observation of the discussion is that the traditional divide between full-time and part-time modes of study is increasingly becoming outdated, if it is not in fact already redundant, and that the sector would be better served by a system focused on the concept of flexible study that views all learners as the same irrespective of the intensity with which they study. A third of UK students currently study 'part-time' and a majority of 'full-time' students are in part-time employment. It is proposed that the policy aim should be in due course, if not immediately, that all policies (access to loans and grants, provision of a central admission system, availability of information, etc.) should apply equally to all students irrespective of their intensity of study.

6. Part-time education – whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level – is an extremely important element in higher education in this country, as attested by the numbers discussed below. It helps to widen participation, offering opportunities to people who may not have achieved highly at school or who may have made wrong choices at an earlier stage, and it is an essential element in developing the nation's skill base. It is also something that is a feature of higher education in the United Kingdom that sets it apart from much of the rest of the world. The Eurostudent surveys¹, for example, show that in much of the rest of Europe part-time higher education is virtually non-existent, and, with one exception, England and Wales have twice the proportion of part-time students as the nearest comparator of the other 20 countries surveyed.

7. Nevertheless, despite their relatively large numbers, today only a minority of those capable of doing so actually study at university so there remains considerable potential for expansion of part-time (and full-time) numbers and therefore even greater future benefits are possible.

8. According to Callender et al (2010b) there is a variety of models for organising the delivery of part-time HE provision including:

- Complete integration – part-time and full-time students learn together. This model is used for some courses at the University of Greenwich (see case study below)

¹ http://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/Synopsis_of_Indicators_EIII.pdf

- Partial integration – part-time and full-time students learn together for a portion of time, but some part-time courses are provided separately. This is the most common model for the majority of universities in the UK including some courses at the University of Greenwich
- No integration – part-time students learn separately often under the responsibility of a specific unit (e.g. academic department), although in the case of Birkbeck, University of London and the Open University part-time study is the norm for the whole institution (see case studies below).

9. Where and how part-time learning and teaching takes place also varies – it is not always exclusively at an institution’s main site or campus. For example sometimes it is undertaken:

- In partnership with, or at, other educational institutions, typically further education or overseas colleges under validation or franchise arrangements
- At employers’ premises – so-called work-based learning
- Electronically – via on-line distance learning
- There are also combinations of these including ‘blended’ mode which typically combines on-line and face-to-face learning and teaching.

10. Defining part-time study is problematic and usually relies on a credit or hours threshold. In this report we adopt the widely used HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) definition of part-time students. Typical of the secondary significance accorded to part-time students, the definition used is that they are not full-time because they study for less than the full-time thresholds of either 21 hours per week or 24 weeks per year². This definition includes students on employment block release and evening study.

Characteristics of Part-time Students

11. Taking undergraduate and postgraduate students together in the UK in 2010-11 there were 823,895³ students studying part-time and 1,677,305 studying full-time (Figure 1), with part-time students representing 33 per cent of the total student population by headcount (Figure 1). The average student load for part-time students in 2010-11 according to HESA was 0.30 which means that there were approximately 250,000 full-time equivalent part-time students (13 per cent of the total on a full-time equivalent (FTE) basis).

²<http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1902/#mode>

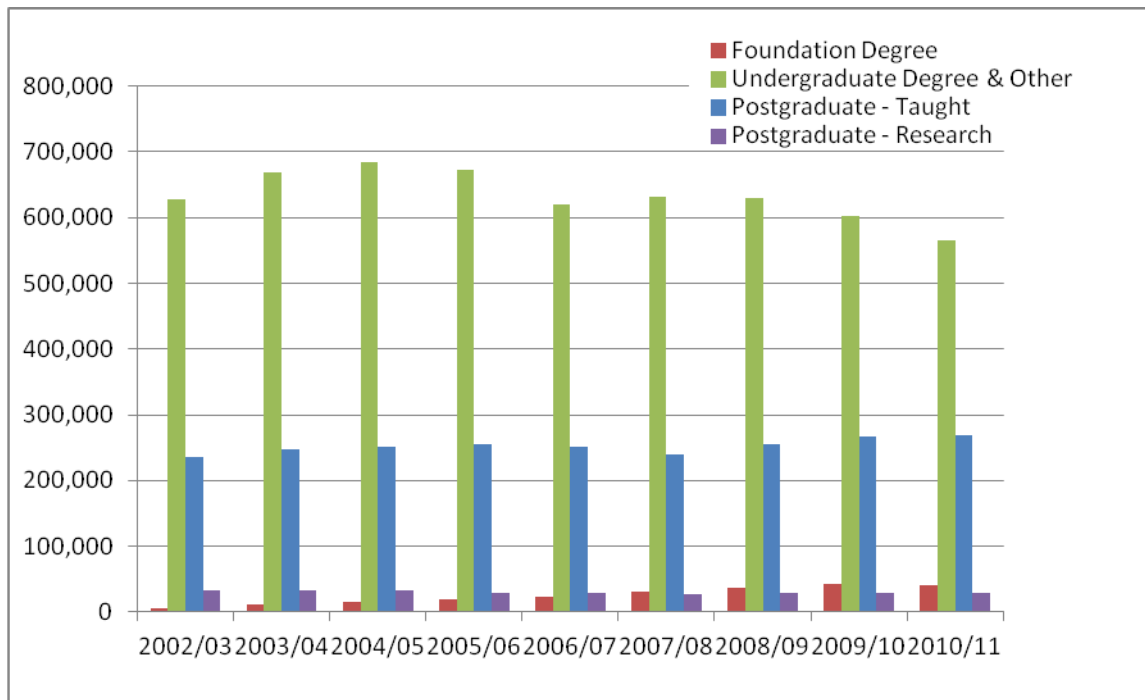
³ In the discussion in this section all statistics are derived from HESA data for ‘home’ students (that is international students from outside the EU are excluded).

Figure 1: Number of full-time and part-time students (Source: HESA).



12. In terms of award type significantly more than 50 per cent of part-time students are studying for undergraduate degrees and other awards, with a significant minority enrolled on postgraduate taught awards (Figure 2). Between 2005-06 and 2010-11 there was a general decline in the number of part-time students studying for undergraduate qualifications, from 671,501 to 565,607, in marked contrast to full-time which has increased by 15.5 per cent over the same period. By contrast also, growth in postgraduate part-time students continued in that period

Figure 2: Number of part-time Students at UK institutions, by level of study (Source: HESA)



13. The diverging trends of full-time and part-time undergraduate numbers is explainable by factors that include the increase in opportunities to study full-time through the expansion of HE, the reduction in government funding in 2008-09 for programmes that led to equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQ), and the general lack of encouragement and incentives for universities and students for part-time study. The headline figure masks a larger fall in part-time students in most of the sector as the Open University (much the biggest provider of part-time education in the UK) has increased its student numbers over the same period⁴.

14. At 47 per cent the proportion of postgraduate part-time students is much higher than the 29 per cent of undergraduate students that part-time represents (Figure 3 below) reflecting, amongst other things, the number of students that use the part-time study route to up-skill and cross-skill while working (see below for further discussion).

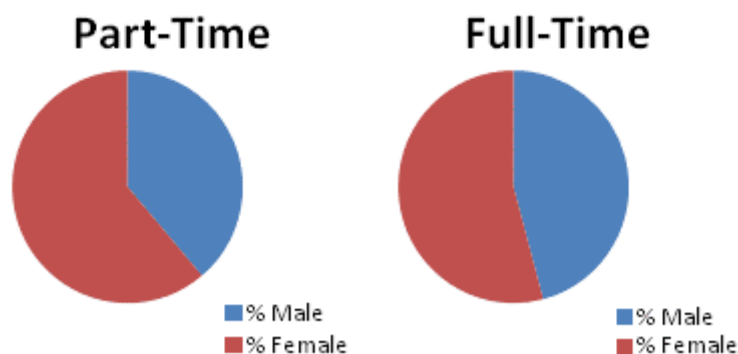
⁴ It should be noted that these figures relate to the period before the introduction of the new fee regime in 2012 – 13. The early evidence from HEFCE is that part-time numbers reduced substantially more in that year than the previous trend. This is not surprising given the almost trebling of fees in that year, for the great majority of part-time students without the availability of any compensating support finance (loans or grant). See “Higher Education in England: Impact of the 2012 Reforms”, accessible at www.hefce.ac.uk

Figure 3: UK Part-time and Full-time students by Level of Study 2010-11 (Source: HESA student and qualifier statistics).



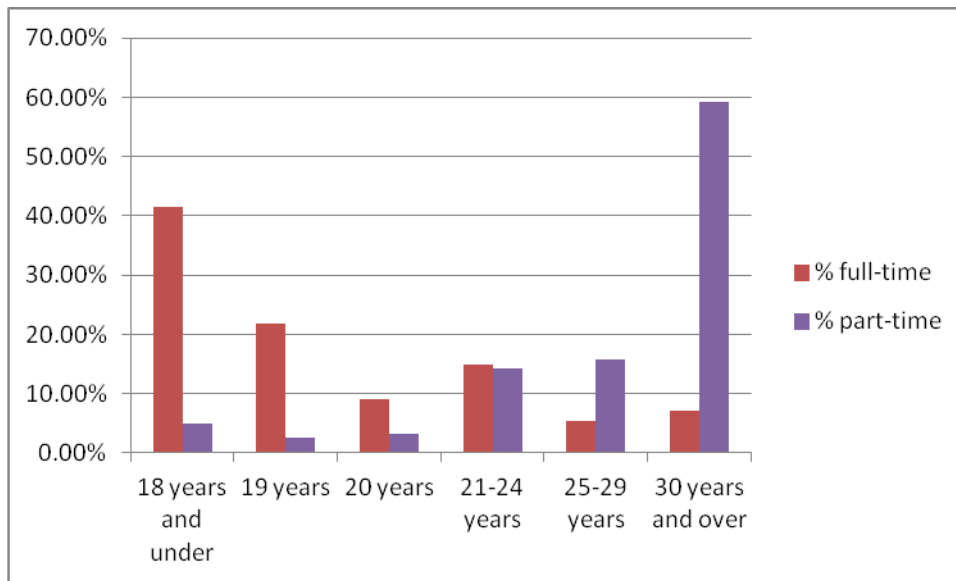
15. In terms of gender, in 2010-11 the part-time student population was made up of 38.9 per cent males and 61.1 per cent females, compared to full-time figures of 45.9 per cent and 54.1 per cent (Figure 4). Many women are second chance learners and act as carers while they are studying. For those that are not employed full-time there are also opportunities to study for interest.

Figure 4: New entrant students by Gender in 2010-11 (Source: HESA)



16. Looking only at undergraduate students, a high percentage of part-time students are older than 21 when they start to study (Figure 5) with the largest group over 29 (61 per cent). This is quite different from full-time students where the largest group is school leavers and the distribution is skewed towards younger people. These patterns are explainable as a natural outcome of the stage of student development. That is, it is much more common to study full-time before embarking on a working career, but once engaged in work then it is more likely that study will be part-time. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that over 10 per cent of part-time undergraduate students are under 21 when they begin their programmes.

Figure 5: New undergraduate entrant students by Age in 2010-11
(Source: HESA)



17. The most popular JACS (Joint Academic Coding System) subjects for part-time undergraduate students (Table 1) are: Subjects Allied to Medicine – nursing, midwifery, pharmacy, etc. – with 78,190 new entrant part-time students representing 55.4 per cent of the total studying this subject area and 18.2 per cent of the total part-time population; Education (76,430, 59.6 per cent, 17.8 per cent); and Combined – a wide area that includes multi-subject, general and unspecified programmes, with the majority being the Open University’s Open degrees – (65,515, 96.6 per cent, 15.3 per cent). The top three subject areas are studied by just over 50 per cent of part-time students and if the next most popular subject area, Business and Administrative Studies, is included then almost two-thirds of all part-time students study these four subject areas. Proportionately, Agriculture and Related Subjects, and Languages are important for part-time study, although these two subject areas are less significant in absolute terms. Subjects Allied to Medicine, Education, and Business & Administrative Studies are all vocational subjects which typically attract mature learners that want to up-skill or cross-skill and so it is no surprise that these are popular amongst part-time students.

Table 1: Subjects studied by UK part-time students in 2010-11 (Source: HESA).

New Entrants 2010-11			
JACS Code	Total Number P-T	% of Subject Studying P-T	% of Total Studying P-T
(2) Subjects allied to medicine	78,190	55.4	18.2
(I) Education	76,430	59.6	17.8
(J) Combined	65,515	96.9	15.3
(D) Business & administrative studies	52,260	29.8	12.2
(B) Social studies	31,575	32.1	7.4
(F) Languages	24,950	40.4	5.8
(3) Biological sciences	16,880	21.9	3.9
(9) Engineering & technology	14,425	21.1	3.4
(G) Historical & philosophical studies	13,695	35.2	3.2
(C) Law	8,720	21.4	2.0
(8) Computer science	8,115	18.9	1.9
(H) Creative arts & design	7,845	10.7	1.8
(A) Architecture, building & planning	7,460	30.3	1.7
(6) Physical sciences	6,830	19.0	1.6
(1) Medicine & dentistry	5,130	25.5	1.2
(5) Agriculture & related subjects	4,955	43.8	1.2
(7) Mathematical sciences	3,470	22.1	0.8
(E) Mass communications & documentation	2,585	11.1	0.6
(4) Veterinary science	190	13.5	0.0
Total	429,220		100.0

18. In terms of institutions the part-time scene is dominated by the Open University which in 2010-11 was, by headcount, more than 10 times the

size of the second biggest provider, Edge Hill University (Table 2), and had 25 per cent of all registered part-time students. The 20 HEIs listed in Table 2 account for 50 per cent of the total UK part-time student population. Nine HEIs have 50 per cent or more of their students studying part-time, with the list dominated by OU (99.9 per cent) and Birkbeck College, University of London (91.9 per cent). In addition to the OU and Birkbeck, five other universities have more than 7,000 part-time students and more than 40 per cent of their students by headcount studying in part-time mode; Edge Hill, Teesside, London South Bank, Staffordshire and Canterbury Christ Church.

19. Parry et al (2012) looked at part-time provision in Further Education Colleges and noted that 45 per cent of college-taught undergraduates were part-time (compared to 29 per cent across the sector as a whole), with most studying for non-degree awards. This pattern can also be seen in the University of Greenwich case study presented below.

Table 2: The top 20 UK universities for total part-time students in 2010-11 (source HESA).

Institution	Total Part-time Students	per cent Part-Time at Institution	Part-time as per cent Total
The Open University	208,400	99.85	25.29
Edge Hill University	18,460	66.06	2.24
Birkbeck College	16,375	91.87	1.99
Teesside University	16,155	59.26	1.96
The University of Central Lancashire	11,985	37.39	1.45
London South Bank University	11,945	47.26	1.45
Sheffield Hallam University	11,755	32.20	1.43
The University of Warwick	10,535	37.40	1.28
Staffordshire University	10,380	47.19	1.26
The University of Plymouth	10,250	31.54	1.24
Coventry University	10,175	36.58	1.23
University of the West of England	9,515	31.17	1.15
The University of Northumbria	8,660	29.43	1.05
The University of Greenwich	8,445	30.44	1.03
Anglia Ruskin University	8,330	38.28	1.01
University of Ulster	8,305	32.55	1.01
The University of Hull	8,170	35.03	0.99
Cardiff University	7,670	26.60	0.93
The University of Huddersfield	7,435	35.11	0.90
Canterbury Christ Church University	7,425	40.83	0.90

20. The remainder of this report concerns undergraduate students only, unless explicitly stated to the contrary.

21. Fazackerley et al (2009) reported the intensity of study of part-time undergraduates at English HEIs in 2006-07 based on the response to a parliamentary question (Table 3). Around half of all part-time students were studying at less than 30 per cent of the full-time equivalent and only a small percentage were studying at more than 60 per cent intensity.

Table 3): Part-time undergraduate students in English higher education institutions, by intensity of study, 2006-07 (from Fazackeley et al 2009).

Intensity	%	Number
<30 per cent	50.2	255,495
30-49 per cent	6.6	33,591
50-59 per cent	29.7	151,159
60-74 per cent	6.2	31,555
75+ per cent	7.2	36,644

22. In terms of entry qualifications part-time students are polarised (Callender et al 2010a). A high proportion have prior experience of higher education, already hold a Bachelor's degree, and are re-skilling, often with financial support from their employer. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a substantial minority have no or low level entry qualifications. They are up-skilling and taking advantage of 'second chance' learning opportunities, which they pay for themselves or sometimes with help from the limited government-funded financial support currently available (Callender et al 2010a). Part-time students are both more likely to have higher levels of prior qualification (Level 4 or above) or to have lower levels (Level 2) than full time students (Callender et al 2010b, Callender et al 2011).

23. In terms of employment outcomes post-study, Callender et al (2011) observed that the same proportions of graduates from both part-time and full-time study (88 per cent) were in paid employment three and a half years after graduating from higher education, although twice as many part-time as full-time graduates worked part-time (14 per cent compared with 6 per cent). The majority of graduates, irrespective of their mode of study while undergraduates, were employed in the top three occupation categories: Managers and Senior Officials, Professional occupations, and Associate Professional and Technical occupations. This study also showed that a higher proportion of graduates from part-time compared to full-time study were employed in the public rather than the private sector, in

Public Administration, Education, and Health and Social Work (59 per cent compared with 44 per cent). A higher proportion of graduates from part-time rather than full-time study had permanent jobs three and a half years after leaving higher education (87 per cent compared with 79 per cent). Furthermore, they found that three and a half years after leaving HE graduates from part-time study in full-time employment earned more on average than similar graduates from full-time study. Some 84 per cent of part-time graduates earned more than £20,000 compared with 73 per cent of full-time graduates, though it needs to be borne in mind that part-time students are significantly older on average and most are employed before beginning to study.

24. In a survey of graduate employers, Mason and Hopkin (2011) observed that there were clear signs that employers appreciated the skills and knowledge possessed by employees who engaged in part-time study as compared to persons with the same qualifications that they might have recruited from outside their firms or organisations. Johnson et al (2009) highlighted the fact that around 80 per cent of part-time students were employed, mostly in full-time jobs in the public sector.

25. Callender et al (2010a, 2011) pointed out that two-thirds of part-time students have family commitments and over two in five have children whereas the majority of full-time students are single and childless. Callender et al (2010b) identified marked regional variations in the ratio of part-time university based students per 1,000 persons in the working age population, but stress the need for further in-depth analysis. Different types and numbers of part-time students are attracted to HEIs depending on the type of programme and award available. Callender et al (2010b) showed, for example, that certificates in arts and humanities tended to attract well educated, older adults, whereas higher nationals were favoured part-time by younger students.

26. HEFCE (2009) shows part-time completion rate figures ranging from 10 per cent-48 per cent (Table 4) for 1996-97 starters beginning a first degree by following a part-time programme of study. For comparison the approximate equivalent for full-time students is the projected completion rate for first degrees which for 2009-10 starters is 78.4 per cent. From this study it appears that both level of intensity and type of institution are major determinants on the rate of completion. The key threshold for intensity appears to be 30 per cent. Data for the OU are reported separately because of the unique nature of the provision at this institution. The study advises caution when reviewing these figures because 'the diversity of, and flexibility found in, part-time provision make the data notoriously difficult to capture accurately and interpret'. One of the wider observations of the present report is that the diversity of part-time provision does make generalisations difficult across the piece. For example, the assumption that the study intention of all part-time

students is a degree is erroneous; for some students and some vocational subjects, a single module, a Certificate in Higher Education or Diploma in Higher Education may be the desired initial outcome even where a degree is stated as the intended goal.

Table 4: Part-time completion rates (after HEFCE 2009)

Type of Institution	% Intensity	% Completion	
		7 years	11 years
Non-OU	> 30	44	48
	< 30	18	22
OU	> 30	17	24
	< 30	10	15

27. A different perspective on the success of part-time students can be gained by examining expected time to completion for those that complete their studies. Table 5 shows analysis of HESA data for the length of time taken to complete compared to the expected time; for example, a part-time undergraduate studying for a degree at 50 per cent intensity would normally be expected to complete in 6 years. There is in fact very little difference in the expected time to completion rates for part-time and full-time students who complete their programmes.

Table 5: Part-time and Full-Time All Degrees per cent Expected Completion Rates (Source: HESA⁵)

	Part-Time	Full-Time
Before/On-time Expected Completion	76.76	82.70
Later Than Expected	21.88	17.30

Motivations and benefits for studying part-time

28. There are many reasons why students choose to study part-time – whether for undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications (Raffe et al 1997, Feinstein et al 2007, Jamieson et al 2009, Callender et al 2010a, Bennion et al 2011, Callendar et al 2011, Swain and Hammond 2011, Callender and Wilkinson 2012). The motivations and benefits for studying part-time may be characterised into three groups (Bennion et al 2011): economic, social and personal. Economic motivations include perceptions that personal income will increase, career outcomes will be enhanced

⁵). Note Part-Time column does not sum to 100% due to unknown 1.36%.

through career changes, promotion and enhanced satisfaction, and that employers tend to view employees who gain qualifications and skills by part-time study positively. Social motivations pertain to individuals (for example greater self-confidence and self-belief) and groups (for example, benefits to a family of helping children with homework). Personal motivations include studying for interest and enjoyment. Swain and Hammond (2011) showed in their study of part-time mature students that motives for studying are generally complex, multiple and overlapping and that they are inextricably linked to student circumstances and identities (who they think they are and who they want to become). Swain et al (2007) reported a strong link between motivation and subject area: for arts programmes, eight out of the nine motivations given were intrinsic (personal and social); and for business, professional and management programmes four out of the five reasons given were extrinsic (economic).

29. From a 2003 survey of graduates from Birkbeck College and the Open University Feinstein et al (2007) derive the classification of key benefits shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Economic and social benefits reported in a 2003 survey of students at all levels (Feinstein et al 2007).

Specific learning skills
○ Soft business skills e.g. leadership or teamwork skills
○ Research and communication skills
○ Technical skills
Employment benefits
○ Future professional opportunities
○ New job
○ Improvement of current job
○ General employment benefits
Identity capital
○ Self-development
○ Learning and progression
Social benefits
○ Wider social networks
○ Intergenerational benefit
○ Close relationships
○ Civic participation
○ Voting

30. In addition to quantifiable benefits such as job moves, higher salaries and promotions, Callender and Wilkinson (2012) suggested that there are also less tangible, qualitative changes to consider such as productivity, the approach and attitude to work, confidence and a deeper understanding of work.

31. Clearly, these motivations and benefits, which apply to both undergraduate and postgraduate students, do not pertain just to part-time students, but in some cases there may be more significant impacts on students studying by this mode (for example, employment benefits).

32. Some students study part-time by choice, while others do so because that is the only option available to them. Callender et al (2010a)

examined the reasons students elected to study part-time rather than full-time, with the top being: greater flexibility and convenience (mentioned by 80 per cent as very or fairly important), finances (83 per cent), fitting studies around existing work (79 per cent), domestic/carer commitments (54 per cent) and less risky option than full-time (50 per cent). On the other hand, in an earlier paper, Callender et al (2006) suggested that for many part-time students, the choice is not between part-time or full-time study: it is part-time study or nothing at all. Other research on the potential applicants to HE, found a real interest in part-time HE study amongst working adults (Pollard et al 2008, Million+/NUS 2012).

Barriers to further expansion of part-time provision

33. The new student financing arrangements increase the cost to students, but give a minority of part time students access to student loans. The net effect is that for most, and purely from a cost perspective, part-time study is likely to be much more unattractive than it was previously. And so it has proved, with part-time numbers – even among those eligible for loans – sharply down in 2012 – 13. Recent data from HEFCE shows only 154,000 new part-time students in the HESSES count of students in 2012–13, 33 per cent fewer than in 2011-12.

34. In addition to higher fee levels from 2012-13 onwards a number of other significant barriers have held back and continue to hold back expansion of part-time student numbers, and these have been reviewed by Callender et al (2010b) and Fazackerly et al (2009).

35. One of the main barriers to expanding part-time provision in the UK is the lack of support from employers. This is surprising because part-time students offer major advantages for employers (Mason and Hopkins 2011). These include employees investing their own time to develop skills relevant to their work, the acquisition of skills whilst minimising individual absence from the work place, and the fact that opportunities for personal development aid retention and employee morale. Lack of employer support also runs counter to the Government policy initiative designed to stimulate greater employer engagement as signalled by the Leitch Report (Leitch 2006, Jackson and Jamieson 2009).

36. From an institutional perspective part-time students are generally-speaking more resource intensive than their full-time counterparts for several reasons. They are more expensive to recruit because there is no central admissions system such as UCAS. Funding, at least historically, has been more complicated because of its piecemeal nature and the decision of the Government in 2009 no longer to provide grant in respect of students with "equivalent or lower qualifications". Also, part-time students often require greater levels of academic and pastoral support,

especially if they are mature and enter HE with non-traditional or lower qualifications. As Callender et al (2010b) pointed out, many part-time students have diverse educational backgrounds and some have not studied since leaving school. There is evidence reported above (Figure 10) that part-time students tend to be far more 'risky' to teach than full-time students due to higher withdrawal rates. Finally, in some cases specialist part-time infrastructure costs can at least initially be prohibitively expensive (for example, distance learning and evening/weekend teaching) when they add to, rather than dilute, physical infrastructure costs.

37. Some universities do not see part-time students as enhancing the status and esteem of the institution. Indeed some institutions do not appear to favour any expansion of student numbers at all, and for those that do, high quality, full-time postgraduates are usually the preferred option. From the Russell Group only Warwick University appears in the top 50 of institutions with the highest percentage of part-time students, although in terms of headcount Warwick, Cardiff, Kings, Queen's Belfast, Glasgow, Birmingham and Oxford are in the top 50.

38. In a similar vein, part-time students are sometimes seen as less important to policy makers because: they are fewer in number in most institutions; many of the courses they take are at sub-degree level and are therefore seen as less prestigious. Also they are sometimes 'invisible' in that they study at home or work, attend evening or weekend classes, or undertake distance learning (Feinstein et al 2007).

39. Staff unwillingness to teach during evenings and weekends and outside 'normal' business hours remains a barrier to the expansion of part-time student numbers in predominantly face-to-face institutions, although this has not generally proved an issue in specialist distance learning institutions such as Birkbeck and the Open University. In part this might be due to erosion of research time, and in part to interference with social and family time.

40. From a management perspective, the uncertainty of the business model around part-time finances presents a challenge for some university leaders. Establishing and expanding major programme initiatives at universities requires multi-year, multi-person commitments, often with significant start-up investment costs. Without medium/long term assurance of funding it is difficult to justify large scale investments which some might see as unduly risky. This is especially the case for some types of part-time provision where start-up infrastructure costs may be quite high (for example, on-line, distance learning).

41. From the perspective of the individual, Swain and Hammond (2011) listed five constraints on study in their review of mature, part-time

learners: young children, high pressure jobs, lack of supportive partners, health problems, and difficulties with language. These, of course, are not the exclusive preserve of part-time students, but the incidence is typically greater.

42. Finally, one of the barriers to expansion is inertia. In an academic and business environment where the current model is delivering success, there are not significant incentives to change, unless there is a compelling case that the alternative is much better or the existing model cannot be sustained.

Recent developments in Part-Time Funding

43. As signalled in the 2011 Government White Paper (BIS 2011), since 2012-13 it has been possible for UK universities to increase tuition fees to a maximum of £9000 per year. At many institutions, for both part-time and full-time students, this has resulted in very significant increases in many cases of around 2.5 times the 2011-12 level. Along with this, from 1 September 2012 new students beginning a part-time high intensity (25 per cent or more) course did not have to pay any tuition fees up front and instead were able to apply for a Tuition Fee Loan to a value of £6750 per annum (75 per cent of maximum full-time fee). The loan value is not contingent upon household income and does not have an upper age limit for application. To qualify students must study at an intensity of at least 25 per cent of the full-time equivalent (that is, they should expect to finish their course in no more than four times longer than a full-time student, with a maximum of 16 years) and must not hold an equivalent or higher level qualification.

44. Repayment of the Tuition Fee Loan will begin in the April four years after the start of the course, or the April after leaving the course, providing that the student earns more than £21,000 per year. Monthly repayments are based on income not how much was borrowed and are at the rate of 9 per cent of any income above £21,000. Interest on a loan is charged at inflation (based on the Retail Price Index, RPI) plus 3 per cent while studying, up until the April repayments start. After this, interest is charged on a sliding scale up to inflation (RPI) plus 3 per cent, depending on income.

45. Both full-time and part-time students may be eligible for non-repayable bursaries and scholarships from universities and colleges, including the National Scholarship Programme. Unlike full-time students, part-timers are not eligible to apply for a maintenance loan for living costs (such as rent) or a maintenance grant if household income is less than £42,600.

46. Unlike full-time students where there are complex student number controls imposed on HEIs by the Government (with various inclusion thresholds, such as for 2012-13 students with AAB or higher grades at A-level not being included in the controls), part-time student numbers are not subject to control at the present time.

47. In its White Paper the Government estimated that about 175,000 part-time students would be eligible for loans out of a total part-time undergraduate population of 490,500 in 2011-12. However, it appears that only about 32,000 eligible part-time students have applied for loans. The calculation is complicated by the relatively high non-completion rates among part-timers and the different intensity with which they study; but this roughly equates to about 120,000 all years students, and it is reasonable to conclude that significant numbers – up to one third – of those who might previously have enrolled to study part-time in high-intensity mode may not have done so this year. So not only is it likely that large numbers of part-time students have been put off study by the cost, but also that the measure that the Government put in place in the hope of offsetting the potentially off-putting impact of the cost increase has not been effective.

Case studies

48. To unpack some of the general points in the earlier discussion we present here three brief case studies. The Open University and Birkbeck, University of London are selected because they have the largest percentage of part-time students in the UK and the first and third highest numbers of part-timers (see Figure 8). They also have models of tuition and student support which are based on part-time and flexible study requirements. The University of Greenwich is selected as an example of a mainstream HE provider with a significant, but not dominant part-time population. Greenwich is a little above average by per cent part-time, and is in the top quartile by absolute numbers given its comparatively large size overall.

University of Greenwich

49. The University of Greenwich is a mainstream provider of higher education with three campuses in SE London and Kent. It offers a wide range of research-informed programmes at Level 4-8 across over 40 subject areas. In 2010-11 there were a little under 40,000 students studying for University of Greenwich awards in the UK and overseas. By headcount 35 per cent of students studied part-time, with 21 per cent part-time by FTE. The percentage of part-time students has not changing significantly in the previous 5 years, even though the university has increased in size by 75 per cent.

50. The majority of the university's programmes can be attended on a part-time basis, with part-time students typically studying alongside their full-time counterparts. The university has structured its programmes so that it is possible to switch from part-time study to full-time and vice versa. Some part-time programmes allow evening or weekend attendance, while others require students to come into the university for one day per week. Part-time courses range from non-credit-bearing short courses to postgraduate Master's and research degrees.

51. At Greenwich a much higher percentage of part-time students (33 per cent) study in partner institutions in the UK (mainly FE colleges) and overseas than on the university's campuses (14 per cent). These are concentrated in the schools of Business (20 per cent of university part-time total), Architecture, Design and Construction (18 per cent), Computing and Mathematical Sciences (18 per cent) and Education (16 per cent), with these four (out of 9 schools) accounting for 72 per cent of part-time students.

52. As a percentage of school FTEs the university schools fall into three broad categories: those with a markedly higher proportion than the university average, namely, Architecture, Design and Construction (39 per cent), Education (34 per cent) and Computing and Mathematical Sciences (28 per cent); those with a similar proportion to the university as a whole, namely, Health and Social Care (23 per cent) and Business (18 per cent); and those Schools with a proportion lower than the university average: Science (14 per cent), Engineering (12 per cent), and Humanities and Social Science (6 per cent).

53. An interesting aspect of the Greenwich part-time student body is that approximately one-third are not actually studying part-time entirely by choice, but are in fact 'full-time' students retaking failed or missed modules. These students are using the part-time route to 'catch up', before continuing to study as 'regular' part-time or full-time students.

54. Without question part-time students are a distinctive and significant constituent group of the overall student body. Their significance is not just in terms of the numerical dimension, but also extends to the experiences and attitudes which they bring to the university community.

Birkbeck, University of London

55. Birkbeck is a research and teaching institution ranked among the top 150 universities in the world, and London's only specialist provider of evening higher education. A wide range of programmes are offered to suit multiple entry levels, and applications are encouraged from students without traditional qualifications.

56. Birkbeck's programmes include certificates and short courses, undergraduate degrees, and postgraduate qualifications in subjects ranging across arts, business, economics, law, science and social sciences. Teaching takes place at the main campus in Bloomsbury, Central London, and in Stratford, where a new campus will open next autumn as part of a joint initiative with the University of East London.

57. In 2010-11 there were nearly 18,000 students studying at Birkbeck. The vast majority were studying part-time – 93 per cent by headcount, 91 per cent by FTE. The highest proportion of students were studying for 'other undergraduate qualifications' (8,064), including Certificates of Higher Education. There were 4,683 undergraduate degree students and 5,075 postgraduate students (including taught and research programmes).

58. The flexibility of Birkbeck's courses enables students to study at the intensity that suits them given their other commitments. Undergraduate degrees, for example, can be completed in three, four or six years. This year Birkbeck offered an unprecedented 20 three-year taught in the evening undergraduate programmes and this will increase to 40 courses for 2013-14 entry. Similarly, taught Master's degrees are available on a part-time or full-time basis.

59. As an evening university offering large numbers of part-time courses, Birkbeck has always had a student population that was on average older than those at 'traditional' universities. In 2010-11 10,054 students (59 per cent) were over 30 years of age. Around 70 per cent of Birkbeck's undergraduate students combine study and work, and the ability to gain prestigious qualifications at the same time as working is greatly valued by employers

The Open University

60. The Open University has students across all four nations and all geographical regions in the UK, as well as the Republic of Ireland and other countries around the world. Established in 1969, the OU's mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas, delivering distance learning to students who would not otherwise have access to higher education.

61. The OU has developed its own style of distance learning called 'supported open learning'. Open learning means students work wherever they choose – at home, workplace, library or study centre – and can plan their study around their other commitments.

62. Supported open learning means students have:

- support from a tutor or online forum to help with module material, activities and assignments
- student advisers and study facilities in their own region
- contact with other students at tutorials, day schools or through online conferencing, online social networks, informal study groups, and events.

63. The OU is the biggest university in the UK with more than 260,000 students, close to 7,000 home-based part-time tutors and more than 1,200 full-time academic staff. Students come from the widest possible range of backgrounds and age groups. The youngest students are in their teens, including some Year 12 and 13 school students who are studying OU courses alongside A-levels. The oldest students are in their 90s and long since retired from work. The average age of new undergraduate OU students is 32.

64. The OU is the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities; more than 12,000 people with disabilities study with the OU each year.

65. The OU's open admissions policy helps thousands of people who failed to achieve their potential earlier in life. Up to 44 per cent of the OU's UK student population starts undergraduate study without the entry qualifications they would need at a conventional university. Around 70 per cent of OU students remain in work while studying.

Discussion and policy implications

66. If we are to provide the level of support that the already well-developed national part-time community needs, or even encourage its further development, then a number of issues with significant policy implications need to be addressed:

- Better understanding of the needs and requirements of part-time students
- Incorporation into the mainstream by removing the binary distinction between full-time and part-time provision
- Greater development of flexible learning approaches
- Introduction of a complete central admission system comparable to that provided by UCAS for full-time provision
- Parity of funding (and it needs to be borne in mind that the present disparity relates not just to access to loans, but also to maintenance grants). However, the approach to funding needs to be subtle and to take into account the specific characteristics of part-time students

- Better information about part-time study opportunities, including student loans and other funding mechanisms

67. Understanding part-time students. In an attempt to understand part-time students more fully we can draw on the work of Fazackerley et al (2009) who described the average characteristics of part-time compared to full-time students suggesting that part-time students are:

- Older, with around 80 per cent over 25 on entry to HE (with the bulk aged 30-39) compared to around 20 per cent over 25 for full-time
- Female (61 per cent of part-time, 54 per cent of full-time students female)
- White (10 per cent of part-time, 16 per cent full-time from ethnic groups)
- Living in the same region as they are studying (80 per cent of part-time students study in the same region as they are domiciled)
- Studying a more limited range of typically vocational subjects with 23 per cent studying Subjects Allied to Medicine, compared to 8 per cent full-time
- Working immediately prior to starting a course (over 80 per cent part-time, compared to about 50 per cent full-time)
- Entering with a greater variety of qualifications than full-time students

68. Clearly these are aggregate statistics and we must be careful not to overlook the individual characteristics and needs of specific students, on specific programmes of study. To understand part-time education more fully we need to examine in detail the nature of prospective, current and former students, and how motivation and success is driven by previous education, socio-economic and other circumstances and the optimum mode(s) of learning.

69. The impact of cost on different types of student needs to be better understood. It could be that because of their characteristics – age and family responsibilities, for example – the impact of fees will affect part-time students differently from full-time. If so, then, unless we are content to see the number of part-time students substantially reduce - and we argue that this would be extremely damaging – then some mechanism will need to be found to reduce the cost to part-time students, notwithstanding what we say below about the need to treat full-time and part-time study as a continuum, not separately.

70. Binary distinction. Defining part-time students as simply those that do not study full-time conceals the heterogeneous nature of this numerically significant and very important group of students. Using a

binary classification of students as either full-time or part-time also significantly oversimplifies the reality of studying for a higher education award where the mode distinction is often not clear or appropriate in the minds of either students or university staff. From earlier discussion it is apparent that students elect to study part-time primarily because of work, carer/family commitments, lifestyle choice, and the need to retake courses.

71. The importance of work to students was confirmed by a study undertaken by the National Union of Students (NUS) in 2008 which showed that 78 per cent of students undertook an average of 14 hours work per week while registered as a student with 35 per cent doing so during term time (NUS/HSBC 2008), although this figure had fallen to 63 per cent in a similar survey in 2010 (NUS/HSBC 2011).

72. In the case of working while studying we can characterise students into the following types:

- Work is the primary activity, with study secondary (e.g. work-based learning (WBL), employer-funded study and continuing professional development (CPD))
- Work and study have similar priorities (e.g. part-time work and part-time study based around WBL, employer-funded study and CPD)
- Study is the primary activity, with work secondary (e.g. part-time job to supplement living costs, or gain work experience)
- Full-time study with no work; today this is thought to be a small minority of students.

73. By extension of this same typology it is easy to see how there are differential study priorities for students with carer/family commitments and for those that elect to study as a lifestyle choice (for enjoyment, to meet new people, etc.).

74. The simple full-time/part-time classification does not recognise the fact that many individual students either do or would like to move between modes of study throughout their HE experience. This may be to undertake work for economic reasons or as part of a course (e.g. paid or unpaid short term placements, or long term internships), to fulfil carer or family commitments, or to retake one or more programme modules (see Greenwich case study above). The HEFCE-funded 'Back on Course' project (Stephens and Peters 2011), which delivered information, advice and guidance to 'early leavers' from full-time undergraduate study, found that students who failed to complete their qualifications most commonly gave health, and family and carer responsibilities as reasons that prompted them to leave their education institution.

75. Flexible learning. One of the most significant ways to encourage part-time study is to replace rigid, continuous programme structures with more flexible approaches that provide the best combinations of pace, place and mode (Tallantyre 2012). Pollard *et al* (2012) suggest that flexibility could be improved by allowing students to choose: the length of course; the speed of progression through the course; the form of assessment; the entry point (alternatives to October starts); or the exit points (allow multiple exit and entry points for a programme). They also suggest that flexibility is required about facilities and services, and that there are onward progression opportunities.

76. Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) frameworks that are modular in nature, making them flexible to student needs, are more widely and flexibly used in the US than here, though their use is increasingly encouraged in Europe too (see European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), European Communities 2009). CAT frameworks enable students to accumulate credit towards a final award at their own pace, to interrupt their studies and/or transfer more easily between and within institutions, while maintaining a verified record of achievements (QAA 2008, King 2008, European Communities 2009). Most if not all UK universities have implemented credit accumulation frameworks at the programme level, but there is not a great deal of experience of students assembling their own degrees through credit accumulation across subject areas, breaking their studies or transferring to other institutions. This may be because of lack of demand on the part of students for such flexibility or it may be because the university processes and structures are not working as they should. Credit transfer frameworks are disliked by some university leaders because of the competitive implications of anything which might increase student mobility between institutions.

77. More widespread use of CATs could contribute significantly to diminishing the full-time/part-time binary divide discussed above and in so-doing reduce the disincentive associated with part-time study in the minds of some, opening up study options to a wider group of people. An additional support mechanism would be the development of a dynamic 'personal learning cloud' that would allow the storage and retrieval of details of accumulated credits, certificates and experiences.

78. Central admission system. At present the Universities Central Admission Service (UCAS) handles admissions to universities only for full-time students, and so part-time students must apply directly to the place(s) where they wish to study. Perhaps as a result, there is a sense that those applying to university via UCAS (typically students of school age) think that 'part-time is what older people do'. The lack of a centralised service means that it is more effort for part-time students to apply to study and it is possible that some will be discouraged from

applying because of this. They will certainly have less choice, and consequently are more likely to undertake programmes of study to which they are not suited. Similarly, compared to full-time students universities must perform more work and incur greater expense to recruit students. Furthermore, in the case of the more selective universities, it is more difficult to recruit part-time students of the quality they desire.

79. UCAS has recently added the ability to search for part-time courses at universities and colleges that also recruit for their full-time courses through UCAS. A further step in improving the central service to potential part-time students would be the implementation of a portal that offers high quality, up to date information, advice and guidance about part-time programmes. Better reporting tools and improved and statistical analysis would also be a welcome addition.

80. Parity of funding. As mentioned earlier, the imbalance in tuition fee funding was addressed to a limited extent for study beginning in the 2012-13 academic year with the extension of tuition fee loans to some part-time students. However, it remains the case that only full-time students have access to maintenance support, as was confirmed in the Government's response to the White Paper consultation (BIS 2012). The argument presented in support of this restriction, that maintenance support was required for full-time but not for part-time students because of the ability of part-time students to work, is contradicted by statistics on the large number of full-time students that also work (even the terms of international student visas allow such students to work up to 20 hours per week).

81. The call for parity of funding for part-time and full-time students is not a new one. In 2007 London Economics and the Million+ Think Tank (London Economics 2007) produced a report highlighting the variable treatment. The report pointed out both the differing student and institutional financial arrangements that negatively impact part-time study. It also concluded that the funding system deters participation for students who want to switch between intensity modes. The same point is reinforced in a recent study of mature and part-time learners (Million+/NUS (2012)).

82. The problem, of course, is that it will be expensive to extend loans while these are substantially subsidised. If fee loans are to be made available to all part-time students regardless of the intensity of their study (and that is what will be required in order to go some way towards offsetting the disincentive effect of the very much higher fees), then the additional cost would be up to approximately £0.7 billion per year (depending on take-up by those already eligible as well as by the newly eligible). To go further and provide maintenance loans to all part-time students would cost around a further £0.6 billion per year.

83. The only realistic way of extending funding in this way would be – as many have argued – to remove the loan subsidy. That would be a difficult and politically contentious thing to do, but it is something that will need to be considered if the encouragement of part-time education is to become something more than empty rhetoric, confounded by the reality of the new funding arrangements. However, even this may not be sufficient. If, as it appears, the increase in fees has deterred large numbers of part-time students in a way that has not been the case with full-time, then, as HEFCE has said in a recent report, “there may be a need to develop innovative models of flexible and more affordable learning”.

84. Better information. A key theme that runs through much of the discussion in this report is that part-time study is poorly understood and that significant study opportunities are not taken up because of lack of information about what is on offer. A good example is the comparatively small government-funded advertising and information dissemination campaign devoted to part-time as opposed to full-time student loans consequent upon the introduction of higher, variable fees in 2012-13. In spite of the very substantial number of part-time students, information from almost all parts of the sector is very full-time focused resulting in significant missed opportunities for greater participation and contribution from a key group. The earlier call for better information, advice and guidance on part-time study options on the UCAS web site is one good example of where more should be done.

Conclusions

85. If we are serious about the HE White Paper ambition of ‘putting students as the heart of the system’ (BIS 2011), then HE provision should be designed with the circumstances and requirements of all students in mind. In the context of this report this is provision that fully accommodates the differing and changing needs and requirements of both full-time and part-time students. The present reality appears to be that current policies are having a serious and negative impact on part-time demand.

86. What this means in practice is that there needs to be an abolition of the binary divide between full-time and part-time. This should be replaced with a more nuanced understanding of the requirements of students as individuals and flexible frameworks based around credit accumulation and transfer that can accommodate all modes of learning and teaching. It might help also if there were a common funding model that does not distinguish between part-time and full-time study, although recent evidence about the impact of fees and loans on part-time students may complicate such an approach.. Additionally, it is important that all national HE services, such as UCAS, do not discriminate between modes of study. Only through a unified approach to study can we avoid unfair

discrimination and maximise the utility of the country's human resources. If we remove the arbitrary barriers that exist in the minds of system designers, but are absent from the thoughts of system users, we can begin to unlock the true learning potential of our society.

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