

# **‘Shoe-horned and side-lined’?: Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape: Executive summary**

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## Executive summary

This research set out to investigate the part-time student experience of higher education across the United Kingdom, in the context of a well-publicised contraction in the sector, and increasing divergence between policies affecting part-time study in the four nations. The topic is an important one, given the positive impact part-time learners make to the economy (UUK, 2013), and the extent to which the experience of part-time higher education contributes to social mobility and widening participation. It is also a pressing topic, because policy discourse around higher education has for far too long been dominated by assertions about full-time opportunities for 18-year-olds paying higher fees, and the need for selecting universities to do more to widen participation. Such policies disregard skills shortages, the transformative potential of enhancing social capital through lifelong learning, and the difficulties adults face in taking their education to higher levels. Research which elicits the authentic voice of part-time students can help policy makers and institutions better understand, and thus re-prioritise, the needs of an invisible, difficult to reach, but still significant HE cohort.

It is usually the most disadvantaged students (often working adults) who engage with higher education via part-time modes of study (ARC, 2013). The dramatic decline in part-time participation (HEFCE, 2014) offers a serious challenge to the sector, not only a blunt message to policy-makers and funding bodies, but a diminution of opportunity to non-traditional students seeking tentative first steps into higher education. In this context, it appears vital to ask part-time students themselves about the barriers they face in studying part-time, and to explore with them, in their own words, their motivations for choosing to study part-time.

The research is timely and significant because any decline in part-time numbers disproportionately impacts on students from the lowest socio-economic groups, precisely the groups that universities in England were meant to target with resources from the significantly increased fees they were allowed to charge (BIS, 2011) after funding changes in 2012/13. The numbers affected are highly significant: in England, the severe decline in part-time registration has been reported as a critical 40% since 2010. The decrease from 2010 to 2013 equated to the equivalent of 105,000 fewer students (HEFCE 2013).

This report explores the experiences of part-time students across the UK who are studying, rather than focusing on the complex reasons for the decline in part-time numbers. But the problem behind the dramatic drop in numbers – whether caused by supply diminishing as institutions withdraw from part-time provision, or demand reducing as potential learners choose not to study part-time – helps shape the experiences of those students resilient enough to continue. In England in particular, it has been argued (Universities UK, 2013) that the drop was driven initially by the reduction in financial support for students taking equivalent level qualifications, and the impact of austerity measures on employer support for part-time higher education (especially in the public sector). This problem was then exacerbated by the introduction of higher fees and student loans in England.

Importantly, the decline has been steepest (55%) in the part-time sub-degree market, the less-intensive provision offering those mature students, unable to commit to full-time higher education the award of institutional credit, or Certificates or Diplomas of higher education. Furthermore, the numbers on Foundation degrees, one of the innovations designed to offer vocational and applied routes into HE for students with non-traditional entry qualifications, have also declined (by 18%), with a consequent negative impact on planned HE in FE expansion. So, even from a decreasing base, part-time numbers in England declined a further 8% from 2012/13 to 2013/14.

Taking a snap shot of part-time higher education across the four nations is also opportune, because the divergence in policies is to some extent reflected in different narratives. In Wales, where the Assembly (Welsh Government, 2013) have made a firm commitment to part-time higher education as making a vital contribution to widening access and employability for those with 'protected characteristics' (HEFCW, 2014), part-time numbers have also dropped over the five year period, but by less (a 24% drop) than in England. In Scotland, again with a more positive and explicit government discourse around the benefits of part-time higher education, the decrease was 7% between 2012/13 and 2013/14, but concentrated mainly in the college sector (HE in FE). In Northern Ireland, numbers involved in part-time higher education have always been small, but a 5% decrease has been recorded from 2012/13 to 2013/14.

So, in this context of sector decline, a cross-nation study researching the experience of part-time learners was intended to inform debate among policy makers, and stimulate enhanced understanding in institutions. The challenge was to engage part-time students, many of whom are the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach learners in the sector. In order to explore the learning experiences of such students, in their own voices, the research was organised into two distinct but related stages, based on a methodological approach used in a successful pilot study conducted into the experience of part-time students in Wales in 2013/14 by the Open University Wales and NUS Wales. Conclusions from this Welsh study provided a useful framing device for the research in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland:

*Part-time opportunities are at the forefront of widening access and employability in Wales.*

*(Rees & Rose-Adams, 2014, p.26)*

In order to explore the part-time student experience in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the first stage of this research consisted of a 25-question online survey, based on the original survey used in Wales. This was issued to a sample of part-time students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland between July and October 2014. The survey was sent to two groups of students – those identified by the Open University (which has a remit to operate across the UK) as an appropriate sample of part-time distance learners, and those identified by the researchers and their HEA project steering group, as studying at those face-to-face universities and colleges with the highest numbers of part-time learners.

433 completed responses were received from Open University students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and 1134 responses from non-OU part-time students at a sample of universities and colleges in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (a total of 1567). This data was analysed to provide a demographic breakdown of who studies part-time, reasons why they study part-time, and the kind of barriers they face in their part-time studies. Themes from the quantitative data informed the schedule of questions asked via telephone interviews in the second stage of the research. This consisted of 22 semi-structured one-to-one interviews (digitally recorded) with a purposive sample of volunteer participants from those who completed the survey, and a focus group interview with three part-time students in a college setting.

This qualitative data resulted in 285 pages of interview transcripts from a representative sample of non-OU and OU students. Our interviews were with a proportionate balance of female/male learners, mostly studying part-time while working, and representing face-to-face infill, evening, blended and distance modes, across different qualification levels and ranging in age from 21 to 60+. They were mostly the first in their families to enter HE.

## **Key findings**

One of the most important findings was the clear demonstration that part-time higher education students are marked by their heterogeneity – they cannot be considered as a single homogeneous

group. This heterogeneity presents a conundrum for policy makers, but one which has to be addressed given the wide range of personal circumstances and competing responsibilities, reported in this study, which can impact on successful participation and achievement in part-time higher education.

Nonetheless, there are demographic 'highlights' to be elicited from our survey, which might help focus attention on particular needs, all of which fall under the umbrella of Widening Participation characteristics: responses suggest part-time higher education attracts a higher proportion of female students, and that many carried caring responsibilities for children (38%), or older relatives (12%). A significant proportion of respondents reported being the first in their families to study HE (30%+ of OU students, 60% of non-OU students) – and most had been out of education for 5-10 years.

A key finding from the Welsh pilot, mirrored to some extent in Scotland but not really represented in the English data, was the significance of geographical isolation for part-time learners – this under-researched aspect of rural disadvantage points not only to 'cold spots' in HE coverage, but also a disconnect between learner aspirations to improve their lives and very limited local employment opportunities.

Issues around the impact of disability and long term health impairments also figured strongly in the survey responses (22% reported learning choices being affected by persistent health issues – not defensively in any 'victim' mode, but simply describing the realities of learning in such circumstances). Coping with mental health problems, being on medication, managing hospital appointments, being housebound or facing deteriorating mobility issues were all reported. This went some way to confirming a conclusion drawn from qualitative responses to the Welsh pilot study (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015) that for students in such circumstances, part-time higher education is a lifeline and should be even more accessible, rather than its availability being under threat. Ironically, the part-time students reporting a disability or long-term health issue (both OU and non-OU) were twice as likely as students not declaring a disability to have the entry requirements for traditional, full-time university study.

In exploring why learners studied part-time, a clear message emerged that notions of 'choice' were relatively meaningless: choosing part-time was effectively an illusion, because students were faced with 'Hobson's choice' – it was either part-time or nothing. Most respondents admitted to preferring the idea of full-time study, but believed the cost was too great; they could not afford to give up a job when they had extensive family outgoings, and in many cases they were debt-averse.

Barriers to part-time study were cited as financial by many respondents, with the cost of courses presenting a challenge to individuals who reported utilising their own savings, borrowing from family, or even credit card debt to fund their studies. Issues of poverty in relation to the affordability of HE were also reported in the Welsh study, and this was echoed in some responses from Scotland. This is a particularly pressing issue given the retreat of employers from supporting the cost to individuals of part-time higher education (only 15% of respondents reported employer support for their studies). Critically, a key barrier to choice seemed to be a lack of disposable income – in other words, by the time adults had paid a mortgage or rent, transportation costs and childcare, there was very little left to pay for even part-time higher education. These were students anxious about going into debt for their higher education, and concerned whether any investment they made would translate to some personal transformation (whether in aspirations for a better job or a more desired lifestyle). In England, the challenge of the lack of a maintenance grant for part-time study was often mentioned.

Just as important was the concern that full-time study was too inflexible, and would not fit with individual personal circumstances. Despite this, there were two clear messages clarifying why part-time students were studying at all. First, but not by a huge margin, was the motivation of improving employment prospects. Second, close behind, were those students who felt they had missed out at 18, and were pursuing the opportunity of a second chance.

These substantive drivers were explored in the interviews, from which five key themes emerged:

**Flexibility** remains a problematic concept in the context of part-time higher education. Despite flexible learning being in vogue in HE, it is alleged ‘the term itself is largely empty of content’ (Barnett, 2014, p.7). The different components of flexibility (whether in, for example, moves to online modes of learning, in revised timing of assessments, in place or in course scheduling and pace) inevitably intersect, and it is crucial that institutional systems and structures are responsive enough to interact with flexible pedagogies to meet the personal flexibilities required by part-time students: institutions need to do more to take account of part-time learners’ circumstances. Individuals reported an imperative to balance the time for study with competing personal or work demands, with an impact on the learner experience (over a third had missed a formal element of their course as a result of work or caring responsibilities). Institutions were reported as being inflexible in relation to part-timers. Interviewees spoke of feeling like an ‘inconvenience’, of being ‘shoe-horned’ into existing full-time structures, of being ‘side-lined’ and experiencing a lack of differentiation which felt like ‘one-size-fits all’. Older students were irked that their prior skills went unrecognised.

**Motivation** to learn is aligned with employability for many part-timers, whether in relation to developing skills and confidence to get a job, or to improve career prospects. But this work focus was definitely not the only motivation (and had nothing to do with policy announcements aimed at 21 year olds seeking graduate careers), since enjoyment and intellectual challenge (especially for those aged 50+) were also reported as significant drivers. The interview responses also suggested a potentially new conceptualisation of the part-time learner, a small group who seem to be embarking on part-time HE when their own children have left home to study full-time at university.

A lot of interviewees reflected on their perception of not having a student identity, amplified by not feeling part of a **student community**. Part-time learners feel isolated and disengaged from the institutional support structures provided for full-timers.

**Information, advice and guidance** for part-time students appear to be inadequate: the complexity of qualification pathways, delivery modes, workload and financial support remain a barrier. We note that some work is already underway in this area. For example the UK higher education funding bodies are currently reviewing the provision of information about HE, looking at the information that is currently available and how it can be improved to meet the needs of students, institutions and other stakeholders. The current Quality Assessment Review being conducted by the funding bodies may also give insight into the provision of information, advice and guidance.

**Disciplinary differences** need acknowledging in part-time HE, since subject choices can be proxies for work-related upskilling, or study driven by personal interest, and there appear to be very different experiences across disciplines which might affect retention (Woodfield, 2014).

Across the UK, there is a knowledge gap around the experiences of, and barriers faced by, part-time mature students in higher education. Policy makers need to listen to these experiences, and carve out a space in which the needs and aspirations of disadvantaged learners in this

heterogeneous sector can be properly considered. Shibboleths like 'flexibility', 'choice', 'employability' need to take account of the particular circumstances in which adult part-timers have to learn. Part-time higher education must not be perceived as a disposable 'add-on', allowed to wither, whether as a result of the unintended consequences of policy decisions at national or institutional levels, or more broadly as an invisible consequence of the economic downturn. Parts of the sector are starting to respond, but it is ironic that one (successful) solution to the decline in part-time has been Birkbeck's introduction of a 'full-time' evening degree.

## Recommendations

**Policy makers** need to incentivise universities and colleges to prioritise part-time higher education as an attractive choice, offered in a diversity of modes, with a broad subject spread to provide an equitable offer for what are likely to be the most disadvantaged students.

**Institutions** need to be far more aware of the flexibilities that part-time students need, and to adopt a customer focus to ensure engagement with learners who currently feel isolated and disengaged from a student community. Institutions also need to avoid falling into the trap of addressing part-timers the same way: 'whether you're distance learning or in college, you get a message stating 'come into campus and register your ID immediately' (8). Institutions need to be more open to the diversity that part-time students bring to HE – both celebrating their value to the culture of an HEI, and acknowledging their needs. If the responsibility for developing a part-time culture sat in a PVC's brief, and progress against targets was reported annually this could help part-time students acknowledge the importance of their learner identity – which might in turn remind policy makers of their significance in the sector.

The **sector** needs to see the benefits of educating local part-time adult students who could provide a platform for a range of radical community education partnerships (which might be good business given the impending drop in 18 year olds in the UK), and who bring with them professional and personal skills and characteristics which could benefit the academy and re-orientate traditional pedagogies. But for this to work, the sector requires an understanding that students taking a part-time route to a HE qualification cannot be assumed to have the same learning priorities as a full-time student – and they may bring more to the learning experience in terms of 'professional capital' than is currently recognised. Implementing flexible pedagogies that challenge HE assumptions based on paradigms of a full-time young HE student could disrupt the sector and better meet the needs of the significant proportion of students who study HE part-time.

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