



Universities UK

# Policy Briefing

Part-time students in  
higher education –  
supporting higher-level skills  
and lifelong learning

## **Policy Briefings**

This new series of Policy Briefings published by Universities UK will provide authoritative and accessible analyses of current and emerging higher education policy issues. We aim to publish at least six booklets a year on major topics of the day, with an analysis of an issue, identification of policy options and, where relevant, a Universities UK or sector position. The booklets will draw on existing Universities UK policy work as well as new research that it has undertaken or commissioned.

# Part-time students in higher education – supporting higher-level skills and lifelong learning

## Executive summary

- Over 40 per cent of all higher education students in the United Kingdom study in part-time mode. Part-time higher education is a significant element in the continuing growth of the sector and plays a central role in meeting Government objectives such as the extension of higher-level skills, widening participation, and lifelong learning. It will continue to do so, if properly supported.
- Universities UK is publishing research findings in order to increase understanding of part-time higher education and to generate an evidence base that can form the basis for future policy-making in this area. The research draws on quantitative data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, a survey of institutions and a survey of part-time student attitudes.
- Part-time students benefit from a wide range of flexible academic provision that has been developed by higher education institutions in response to their needs. Students can study at their own pace, which means that some study at very low intensity over a long period of time whilst others study at nearly full-time levels.
- Part-time higher education is part of lifelong learning: it is the first experience of higher education for many mature students, and it also forms part of a continuous updating in skills and knowledge for those who already have a degree.
- Nearly three-quarters of all the students in the research believed their course represented good value for money.
- Affordability was the key reason why the surveyed students choose to study part-time as they could not afford to give up their job, or arrange economically viable childcare to enter full-time higher education.
- There is no such thing as a typical part-time student, and policy makers should avoid any tendency to assume that there is a single model of part-time higher education.
- Part-time undergraduate study cannot be seen as an adjunct to full-time study or as an alternative. For many part-time students the alternative would not be full-time study but not studying at all.
- There is potential fragility in the part-time market and some evidence of price sensitivity.
- Government should re-examine public support for part-time students. Relatively few part-time students currently benefit from the public support that is available, and many report that costs are higher than the support available. We suggest that detailed work takes place to ascertain the costs incurred by part-time students. Also, should students studying less than 50 per cent continue to be excluded? And would the higher-level skills agenda be better served if some students who already have a higher education qualification were no longer excluded from support?
- The review of the impact of variable tuition fees should consider the implications for ALL students, not just full-time undergraduates.

# 1 Introduction

1.1 Over 40 per cent of all higher education students in the United Kingdom study in part-time mode. Part-time higher education is a significant element in the continuing growth of the sector and plays a central role in extending higher-level skills, widening participation, and lifelong learning.

1.2 In March 2005 Universities UK and SCOP (now Guild HE) commissioned a significant piece of research into part-time students with the aim of informing policy on student support and funding, and also to raise the profile of this substantial dimension of higher education provision. In assessing the need for research it became clear that relatively little was known about part-time student provision. In particular there was no single documentary source that analysed data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), sought out other quantitative material (such as patterns of study) and drew on qualitative information relating to, for instance, the reasons why part-time students study.

1.3 It was also clear from the information that was available that there was no such thing as a typical part-time student in terms of who they were, why they studied, when, where and how they studied, and how they paid for their studies. It was therefore debatable as to whether it was appropriate to talk about “part-time students” as if they were a homogenous group. This theme recurs throughout the research and underpins many of our policy recommendations.

## Part-time funding and student support issues

1.4 During debates on the Higher Education Bill during the parliamentary session 2003/04 strong representations were made on behalf of part-time students. In relation to student support it was argued that there should be equality of treatment between full-time students and part-time students. In relation to institutional funding it was argued that following the introduction of variable fees, part-time courses would be under-funded relative to full-time, which would lead institutions to reduce provision in this area.

1.5 Cutting across both these areas was the argument that part-time students should be given the same right as full-time students to defer payment of their fees through publicly subsidised loans with income contingent repayments. Extension of this facility to part-time students would, in theory, enable institutions to charge higher fees in line with the increase in full-time fees. However, the public cost of extending these loans and the lack of evidence to show whether there was any real demand for them meant that the Government could resist these demands.

1.6 However, there was a danger that if institutions simply increased their part-time fees in line with the rise in variable full-time fees it would act as a disincentive to low-income students who preferred to study in part-time mode. The Government wanted institutions to be able to increase their part-time fees without undermining the widening participation agenda and in October 2005 it announced a modest package of enhanced support for part-time students in England with effect from 2006/07. The package included:

- an increase in the maximum annual fee grant for low-income part-time undergraduate students;
- a shift in the balance of the Access to Learning Fund<sup>1</sup> from supporting full-time to part-time students;
- increases in the widening participation premium for part-time students paid to institutions by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

## The Universities UK/Guild HE research project

1.7 The overall aim of the research was to collect and analyse information on all aspects of part-time study in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. The research will provide a valuable resource for UK higher education. In particular it will inform the development of appropriate policy, particularly in relation to funding. It was decided that the primary focus of the research should be on undergraduate students. This reflected the focus of the major public policy agendas such as widening participation, higher level skills and lifelong learning on undergraduate provision.

1.8 There are three strands to the research<sup>2</sup>:

- a quantitative data analysis of 2003/04 HESA data;
- a survey of institutional policy, costing and pricing issues;
- a survey of student attitudes concentrating on reasons for study, impediments to study, and value-for-money perceptions.

1.9 This research has been informed by, and closely related to, other research projects, which have either taken place before or alongside this project<sup>3</sup>.

## 2 Who are part-time students?<sup>4</sup>

### Definition of part-time

2.1 The definition of part-time students adopted for the research was the same as that used by HESA. In effect this defines it as anything that falls outside the definition of full-time study, where full-time means a requirement to attend the institution for an average of at least 21 hours a week for at least 24 weeks a year. This definition is also used by funding councils and in student support evaluation. They could also be defined as any student whose pattern of attendance makes them ineligible for full-time public support and who cannot be charged a full-time fee.

### Total numbers

2.2 There were nearly 840,000 part-time higher education students studying in the UK in 2003/04, representing approximately 40 per cent of all higher education students. The proportion was nearly 35 per cent for undergraduate students. Part-time students represent an increasing proportion of the sector, with growth between 1997/98 to 2003/04 being more than three times greater than in full-time.

2.3 The total numbers of part-time students by level of study in 2003/04 is shown in Table 1.

### Distribution of part-time students

2.4 Over 20 per cent of all part-time students study at the Open University, making it by far the largest single deliverer of part-time HE in the UK. However, many institutions have significant numbers of part-time students, as Table 2 indicates.

2.5 It can be seen that 60 institutions have more than 5,000 part-time students, and between them they provide for 77 per cent of the part-time population. The majority of institutions with more than 10,000 part-time students are post-1992 universities, usually in metropolitan areas. However there are significant numbers of part-time students in some pre-1992 universities.

### Gender

2.6 Over 60 per cent of part-time students are female. Table 3 gives a breakdown by level.

### Age

2.7 Table 4 shows the age distribution of undergraduate part-time students. Whilst around half of the students are between 30 and 50, there are significant numbers of students in other age brackets. Most noteworthy is the fact that 10 per cent of all part-time students on first degrees are under 21 – in other words they are not “mature” and are studying in part-time mode at the age normally associated with full-time undergraduates. The proportion of young students is even higher in the Open University, and there is some evidence that these numbers may be increasing.

**Table 1: Part-time HE students by level and full-time equivalent (FTE), 2003/04**

Level of study	Student numbers	Sum of FTE	Average % of FTE
Post graduate research (PGR)	42,680	15,402	36%
Post graduate taught (PGT)	227,570	82,214	36%
First degree	190,775	90,455	47%
Other undergraduate (Other UG)	375,985	117,922	31%
<b>Total</b>	<b>837,010</b>	<b>305,994</b>	<b>37%</b>

**Table 2: Distribution of part-time study across UK higher education institutions, 2003/04**

Headcounts of part-time students	Number of institutions	Proportion of UK total part-time
20,000+	1	20%
10,000+	11	16%
5,000-10,000	48	41%
1,000-5,000	63	22%
<1,000	46	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 3: Part-time students by gender and level of study, 2003/04**

Level of study	Female	Male	Total	% female
PGR	19,695	22,985	42,680	46%
PGT	133,495	94,135	227,635	59%
Other UG	251,155	124,765	375,920	67%
First degree	114,985	75,790	190,775	60%
<b>Total</b>	<b>519,335</b>	<b>317,675</b>	<b>837,010</b>	<b>62%</b>

**Table 4: Age distribution of undergraduate part-time students, 2003/04**

Age	First degree	Other UG	All UG
Under 18	0%	1%	1%
18-21 years	10%	7%	8%
22-25 years	16%	11%	13%
26-29 years	13%	10%	11%
30-39 years	33%	26%	28%
40-49 years	20%	21%	21%
50-59 years	6%	11%	9%
60 years and over	1%	8%	6%
Age Unknown	0%	3%	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Ethnicity

2.8 Table 5 shows the proportions of students from different ethnic groups, by level of study. The proportion of students from ethnic minorities is lower in part-time than in full-time: in full-time mode, 17 per cent of students come from non-white groups, compared with 11 per cent in part-time.

## Social class

2.9 There is less information about the social class origins of part-time students than there is for full-time, mainly because data collection is more difficult for such students who do not apply through Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). However, it might be worth noting that in the Universities UK survey sample around 13 per cent of students self-declared as being “routine and manual or unemployed”, with a further

16 per cent self-declaring as “intermediate”. The same sample was also asked about personal income: 46 per cent had an income of less than £20,000 per annum. It would appear that, as with full-time students, there is some degree of mismatch between income statistics and occupational categories.

## Entry qualifications

2.10 The pattern of entry qualifications for part-time study is far more diverse than for full-time. So, for instance, only 21 per cent of entrants to part-time first degrees have an A-level as their highest qualification. What is most striking about the part-time population is the large proportion who already possess some form of higher education (HE) qualification. This does not just apply to postgraduates: Table 6 shows that 46 per cent of all part-time students on undergraduate courses have some form of prior HE qualification. This indicates that lifelong learning and continuous skills development are already well embedded in the graduate population.

**Table 5: Part-time students by ethnicity and level, 2003/04**

Ethnicity	PGR	PGT	First degree	Other UG	Total
White	89%	87%	88%	91%	89%
Black or black British - Caribbean	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%
Black or black British - African	1%	3%	3%	2%	2%
Other black background	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2%	3%	2%	1%	2%
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Asian or Asian British - Bangladesh	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Chinese	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%
Other Asian background	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%
Other (including mixed)	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%

## Intensity of study

2.11 It has already been shown that the average part-time student studies at 37 per cent of a full-time load, with first degree students studying at 47 per cent. This masks a very wide divergence of study intensities, which vary greatly between different qualification aims. Significant numbers of students study at very low intensities, although a relatively large number study at almost full-time intensity<sup>5</sup>.

## The diversity of undergraduate study

2.12 The research evidence indicates that part-time undergraduate provision is a complex mixture of different types of programmes offering a variety of opportunities for students. To take just three examples:

- part-time programmes which are identical to cognate full-time provision but are offered at different times and may be in a different location;
- programmes for which there is no equivalent full-time provision such as professional programmes and adult and continuing education; and
- part-time students who are repeat individual modules by accessing relevant segments of full-time courses.

2.13 One way to show the diversity of undergraduate study in part-time is to segment it by qualification aim and qualification type, as shown in Table 7.

**Table 6: Highest qualification on entry by undergraduate classification, 2003/04**

Highest qualification on entry	All UG courses	First degree	Prof qual	Foundation degree	Cert HE	UG Dip/Cert	HNC	UG credit	Post reg health
First degree or higher	18%	11%	29%	4%	27%	25%	4%	24%	14%
Sub-degree	28%	32%	38%	22%	24%	19%	11%	22%	67%
All HE qualifications	46%	43%	67%	26%	51%	44%	15%	46%	81%



2.14 Part-time undergraduate study cannot be seen as an adjunct to full-time study or as an alternative. For many part-time students the alternative would not be full-time study but not studying at all. The pattern of part-time provision is normally flexible to fit in with student availability, usually outside of normal working hours in locally accessible centres, often through outreach or franchise arrangements with partner further education colleges. The intensity of part-time study varies widely between different programmes, between institutions for programmes with the same qualification aim and even for different students on the same programme. It can also be varied to fit in with students' changing work or domestic responsibilities. In part-time mode universities have been able to create part-time provision with a high degree of flexibility and personalisation – characteristics that are becoming increasingly desirable in full-time as well.

2.15 Some part-time undergraduate provision available at low intensity of study offers an alternative form of access to higher education for individuals who are not ready for the rigours of full-time study. This approach to widening participation is particularly evident in Wales, where for those living in more remote communities there are also physical barriers to full-time participation. Moreover, this low intensity provision is supported by grants to institutions from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

2.16 There are several different markets for part-time programmes, including students pursuing career development and career change objectives, through those who find it difficult to access full-time higher education, to those in retirement seeking to maintain their intellectual vigour. Institutional motivations to provide part-time opportunities are similarly varied, from simply increasing the income from the resources provided to deliver full-time programmes, through to long-term, historic commitment to part-time study or widening participation.

2.17 A significant proportion of part-time undergraduate students are studying nursing, other subjects allied to medicine or social work. In the case of nursing these students are a mix of full-time students retaking individual modules and those serving nurses without a higher education qualification undertaking continuing professional development (CPD), or seeking to upgrade their existing qualifications. In social work, unlike nursing, some local authorities have preferred a part-time route for initial training.

2.18 The inherent complexity of part-time study and the motives for providing it mean that a single national policy for this area makes little sense. Different types of part-time student are associated with different kinds of provision and the impact of current and prospective financial support arrangements will vary accordingly.

**Table 7: Segmentation of undergraduate qualifications, 2003/04**

UG Qualification Type	Headcount	%
First degrees	178,000	34%
Professional qualifications at undergraduate level	16,000	3%
Foundation degrees	11,000	2%
Post registration health and social care courses	32,000	6%
Certificates of higher education	24,000	5%
Other undergraduate diplomas and certificates	105,000	20%
Higher National Certificate (HNC)	15,000	3%
Institutional undergraduate credits	136,000	26%

## 3 How institutions provide for part-time study<sup>6</sup>

### Methodology and main questions

3.1 This element of the Universities UK research was based on a series of in-depth interviews with a representative sample of 26 HEIs across the UK. The pattern of part-time enrolments for the sample showed good correspondence to the sector as a whole.

3.2 The main focus of the research was a series of face-to-face interviews with staff of each sample institution, aimed at obtaining a full understanding of the following aspects of part-time provision:

- the market segments that it was engaged with and how those related to its full-time provision;
- demand;
- progression and completion;
- institutions' policies and how these might change with the introduction of variable fees for full-time undergraduates;
- employer support;
- fee waivers, fee remission, fee collection and student debt;
- the relative costs of part-time and full-time provision; and
- the use of the institution's central student services.

### Demand

3.3 The latest available data from HESA<sup>7</sup> suggest that demand for part-time undergraduate study has levelled off, or even declined very recently. The decline has been particularly noticeable in the demand for first degree programmes at the two specialist part-time providers (the Open University and Birkbeck College). This change in demand almost certainly reflects the substantial increase in the proportion of 18-year olds entering higher education from the late 1980s onwards. There are now fewer adults seeking a second chance to get a degree. Some institutions are concerned that part-time demand will be further seriously dented if they increase part-time undergraduate fees pro rata to the increase in full-time undergraduate fees.

3.4 Demand for part-time postgraduate courses is unpredictable from year to year, but several institutions are seeking to expand their part-time postgraduate provision, often in partnership with employers. This includes continuing professional development, which has been identified by several institutions as a major development opportunity. This is another example of institutions responding to student and employer demand to take forward key regional and national agendas relating to skills and knowledge transfer.

3.5 The inherent variability of demand has made it difficult for institutions to plan their part-time provision. Some are now seeking to research their part-time markets more thoroughly and to plan accordingly.

### Progression and completion

3.6 The different types of part-time provision and their inherent flexibility in terms of the length of study required make it difficult to produce performance indicators of progression and completion that can be readily compared with those for full-time study. Nevertheless, the on-going monitoring undertaken by institutions for quality assurance purposes, using the same measure for full-time and for part-time students, shows that on the whole retention and progression rates for part-time students are lower than those for full-time students.

### Fees

3.7 Part-time undergraduate fees have until now been set largely by reference to the regulated full-time undergraduate fee, but with a significant degree of variation reflecting local conditions. In England at least this has led to a modest premium for certain subjects. The main exception to this has been the Open University, which has always charged fees based on extensive market research rather than full-timer rates. The fee waiver system (which continues in Wales and Scotland) and its replacement fee support system in England for part-time students on low incomes is seen by institutions as valuable in helping to underpin the market but is limited in scope.

3.8 All the institutions in the sample were reconsidering their part-time fee policies in response to the changes in full-time fees in England. Some institutions were proposing to increase part-time undergraduate fees pro rata to the increase in full-time fees, but the majority, and especially the two specialist part-time providers, were concerned at the likely impact of such a change on student demand. Market research evidence suggested that part-time undergraduates were price sensitive and this conclusion is supported by the responses from the Universities UK student survey.

3.9 The most common planned change in part-time fees was for a more modest increase than that implied by the new maximum full-time fee and with the rise spread over a period to allow the market time to adjust. For 2006/07 some institutions had chosen to be guided by the planned increase in the maximum support available from the DfES, as mentioned in paragraph 1.6<sup>8</sup>. In Wales, where the introduction of variable full-time undergraduate fees has been deferred until 2007, the whole issue of financing part-time study has been reviewed by the Graham Committee for the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) in 2006<sup>9</sup>. Graham produced a range of options, with the preferred option being a combined support model where HEIs set variable fees, with an additional funding stream intended to compensate for the lower tuition fees paid by part-time students. It remains to be seen how the WAG will respond in terms of support for part-time study for HEIs and individuals. In Scotland, whatever the final decision on full-time fees, the Scottish Assembly has made clear that it expects no corresponding increase in part-time fees because it wishes to see an increase in part-time undergraduate participation.



3.10 The current methods for the public funding of teaching across the UK all require an assumption to be made about the student fees for different types of provision to determine the actual grant paid to institutions. At present the assumed FTE part-time undergraduate fee has been set at the same level as the average full-time undergraduate fee but HEFCE is committed to reviewing these fee assumptions in future years. This could have significant (negative) implications for those part-time providers in England who have decided not to increase part-time fees in line with the increase in full-time undergraduate fees. The Scottish Funding Council has seen its own decision to keep the part-time undergraduate fee assumption unchanged for 2006/07 as reinforcing the message from the Scottish Assembly.

### Employer support

3.11 For those institutions that were able to furnish us with detailed data, the proportion of students having their fees paid directly by employers ranged from under five per cent to over 35 per cent. There appears to be a marked discrepancy between these figures and the 35 per cent of part-time students in the student survey<sup>10</sup>, who reported having some or all of their tuition fees paid by their employer. This in turn was below the figure of 41 per cent of part-time students having their fees paid by their employer found by a DfES-commissioned report<sup>11</sup>. This discrepancy also parallels the figures in institutions' returns to HESA of the proportion of students having their fees paid by employers. It is also in contrast with the much higher proportion of part-time students surveyed as part of the HESA first destination statistics who reported having their fees paid by their employer<sup>12</sup>. There are two main reasons for these observed discrepancies. Firstly, a significant proportion of students supported by their employer will pay the fee themselves and then claim it back. Institutions will record these students as self-payers. Secondly, there will be differences in the samples against which the proportion of part-time students having their fee paid by employers is measured.

3.12 All the evidence indicates that the majority of part-time students pay their own fees up-front or through a series of instalments. Fee levels (together with the availability of financial support for fees for poorer students) are therefore the major factor in determining the future demand for part-time higher education provision in the UK. There is a real risk of a substantial fall-off in demand if fees are set too high: this could in turn lead to the loss of some part-time provision. The net result could be a reduction in opportunities for higher education for individuals for whom the only choice is local part-time study.

### Costs of provision

3.13 Although few of the sample HEIs were able to distinguish between the differential costs of full-time and part-time study it is possible to draw some general conclusions about the relative costs of part-time and full-time provision:

- Where part-time students are re-taking modules alongside full-time students, the main additional costs will be those central administrative costs identified by JM Consulting<sup>13</sup>. Similar principles will also apply to others undertaking part-time study who study alongside full-time students on modules primarily offered as part of a full-time course.
- For students on part-time programmes where there is equivalent full-time provision but the part-time provision is offered at a different time or location, the additional costs will depend on whether the same staff are used to teach the full-time and part-time programme within their contractual hours. Most of the permanent academic staff who teach outside core hours do so without additional payment within their existing contracts. There will also be the additional costs of keeping open buildings in the evening or at weekends and providing services over extended hours.
- Where part-time provision is wholly separate from full-time provision it will have its own unique cost structures. They bear no automatic relationship to the costs of full-time provision and offer little guide in assessing the cost relativities of part-time and full-time provision.
- There are indications, at least in some areas of part-time provision that direct teaching costs may be higher than for similar full-time provision. This could either be because of the high intensity of teacher contract required to complete the curriculum on the basis of one day a week, as in the HNC, or simply because part-time students expect relatively more face-to-face contact with their tutors outside formal teaching sessions than full-time students do. In part this reflects the lower importance of the peer group as a resource for part-time students as compared with full-time students. In some cases institutions have to employ part-time teachers to deliver the part-time provision, which can mean substantially higher unit teaching costs.

### The use of central student services

3.14 HEIs in the sample were only able to provide limited evidence of the differential use of services by part-time students compared with full-time students. However, the findings of the Universities UK student survey<sup>14</sup> showed that the use of services by part-time students was largely restricted to the library and on-line services. Ready access to student support services is an important indicator of the quality of student experience and it is important to ensure that potential barriers to access to such services are removed.

## 4 The student view<sup>15</sup>

### Recommendations for further research

3.15 The researchers who produced the institutional survey recommend that further work should be undertaken on the following:

- Performance indicators for different types of part-time study should be developed based on the data from the new HESA student record.
- Employer support for part-time students to try and reconcile the variations in levels of employer support for tuition fees found in different studies.
- Whether the study, pastoral and other support needs of all types of part-time students differ from those of full-time students.

4.1 This section summarises the results of an online survey of 2,654 students from 25 HEIs in the UK, which was conducted between November 2005 and January 2006. The students surveyed were not representative of all part-time undergraduates in the UK, and over-represented the students undertaking a first degree.

### Students' choices and motives for studying

4.2 Affordability was the key reason why students choose to study part-time as they could not afford to give up their job to enter full-time higher education. Other, pragmatic factors also shaped students' decisions and choices. The vast majority were working and a sizeable minority also had family ties, and their choices were both constrained and influenced by these commitments. Part-time study had to be fitted around the demands of their daily lives. Students were drawn to part-time study because it was more convenient, particularly for those with children, and those choosing to study by distance learning courses. Convenience also affected where they studied. They selected an HEI because the timing of the courses suited their existing commitments and because of its proximity to work or home. However, the subjects on offer were the most common reason for choosing a particular HEI.

4.3 Students' motives for studying were primarily instrumental. Most important were their desire to gain a qualification and improve their skills, labour market and career prospects. However, they were also motivated by their interest in the subject and a desire to be stretched intellectually or to continue their learning.

### The costs of study

4.4 The total costs of study per part-time student – tuition fees and other course costs – amounted to an average £1,385 over the 2005/06 academic year. Some 59 per cent of this was spent on tuition fees and the remaining 41 per cent on other course costs such as books, computers, travel etc.

4.5 The costs of tuition varied considerably. The mean amount of tuition fees charged by the HEIs attended was £821 and the median was £800 over the academic year, which equated to £1,480 and £1,200 respectively for a full-time equivalent course.

4.6 Three in five students paid for some of their tuition/course fees out of their own pocket, with the remainder getting financial support from their employer (35 per cent) or a Government grant (13 per cent). Students employed full-time (mostly men) were:

- more than two and half times more likely than those employed part-time (mostly women) to have had some of their fees paid by their employer (45 per cent compared with 17 per cent);
- three times more likely to have had their fees paid in full by their employer (35 per cent compared with 12 per cent); and

- two and a half times more likely to have been given paid time off work to study (40 per cent compared to 16 per cent).

4.7 The key beneficiaries of employer support were full-time workers, along with those taking a vocational qualification, and those from the wealthiest households.

4.8 On top of tuition/course fees, students incurred other course costs (books, travel, childcare, computers, etc) of £625 on average over the 2005/06 academic year, most of which they paid for themselves.

### Attitudes to the cost of study

4.9 The optimum tuition fee price estimated to maximise student participation for a course each academic year was about £600, and for those taking a first degree it was slightly higher at around £700. This price remained unchanged even when taking into account the potential availability of income contingent student loans, means-tested grants, or a mixture of loans and grants. This is because for most students the price at which the course would become too expensive was above the optimum price.

4.10 As indicated above, £800 was the median tuition fee actually paid by the students surveyed while the average was £821, which suggests that either current fees levels have been set just above the optimum level in order to maximise participation, or that the optimum level of fees is partly determined by the amount of fees paid. The optimum price is roughly equivalent to the fees for 0.5 FTE for a first degree at current prices. If part-time fees were to be linked pro-rata to future full-time fees of £3,000, they would have to rise well above the optimum price found in this study, which may affect participation levels.

4.11 According to the survey findings, the average price at which a course would become too expensive to consider taking was £1,666. This price rose only slightly with the potential availability of varying types of student support. It increased by £100 with the availability of an income contingent loan for tuition fees or a £1,000 means-tested grant, and by £169 for a mixture of a grant and loan.

### Student support

4.12 An estimated 77 per cent of the students in this study were ineligible for a course or fee grant – the main sources of student support to which part-time students are entitled. There were three reasons for this:

- students were studying for less than 50 per cent of a full-time course;
- students already had a higher education qualification (or equivalent);
- household incomes were above the eligibility threshold.

4.13 Of those eligible, 14 per cent would have received full grants and nine per cent partial grants. Neither of these grants covered the majority of eligible students' full

costs. Some 58 per cent of eligible students incurred course costs exceeding the maximum course grant of £250 while 53 per cent were charged tuition fees that exceeded the maximum value of the 2005/06 fee grants. Even with enhanced grants for 2006/07, 28 per cent of students still would have had fees in excess of the grant. Just over one in five students thought that financial support for part-time students adequate, but they were unsupportive of income contingent loans with only 38 per cent willing to take one out, if available.

### Barriers to full participation

4.14 All the students surveyed were currently studying and therefore had overcome the initial barriers to participating in HE. However, the majority still faced further obstacles that prevented them participating fully in their course, particularly a lack of time and competing demands, both at work (83 per cent) and at home (77 per cent).

4.15 Most students surveyed were doing courses over 0.5 FTE, and most anticipated that their courses would last between three to five years. Nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) were taking courses delivered through face-to-face contact. Students spent an average of 15 hours a week studying, mostly at home. However, the majority frequently used their HEI's online resources and library facilities.

4.16 Based on this level of commitment, most students struggled in juggling part-time study with their other commitments (78 per cent) and could not devote enough time to studying (62 per cent), despite having sympathetic staff who recognised these pressures (62 per cent). These issues were exacerbated by unrealistic expectations about the amount of time needed to devote to their course (71 per cent) and inadequate time management and study skills (65 per cent), suggesting both an information and a skills gap. However, unaffordable costs were also a barrier to full participation for nearly half the students; especially low incomes students (64 per cent), lone parents (62 per cent), and women (58 per cent).

### The future

4.17 Nearly three-quarters of all students believed their course represented good value for money. They also were convinced of the social and economic returns of HE and thought they would benefit financially (66 per cent) and socially (56 per cent) from their course in the longer term. With this worthwhile investment behind them, the most popular destination on course completion was further study although a sizable minority wanted changes in their working lives.

## 5 Conclusions

- **Flexible provision has been developed to meet the needs of a diverse set of students**

Part-time students form a substantial proportion of the overall student population. They are far more diverse than full-time students in their socio-economic mix, in their reasons for studying and their patterns of study. Higher education institutions have responded effectively to student and employer demand in this area by developing a wide variety of academic provision and flexible delivery methods. The high level of flexibility and personalisation in part-time study mode provides a template for the future of the learning experience in higher education.

- **Part-time provision plays a significant role in meeting Government objectives**

The diversity and flexibility of part-time provision has enabled it to meet the demands and aspirations of students and employers. It will continue to do so, if properly supported. It will therefore play a significant part in meeting Government objectives, particularly the need for continuous updating of skills in a globally competitive economy and stimulate regional economies.

- **There is no such thing as a typical part-time student**

The highly segmented nature of the part-time market, together with the great diversity of students and study types means that policy should be developed with caution and sensitivity in this area. In particular policy-makers should avoid any tendency to assume that there is a single model of part-time higher education, or that there is a typical part-time student.

- **There is potential fragility in the market and some evidence of price sensitivity**

Whilst growth in part-time has been strong over the last decade, our researchers have identified some potential fragility in the market. Numbers have stabilised. Our student survey found evidence of price sensitivity amongst part-time students. The optimum price that students in the sample might be willing to pay for part-time study was around £600, which equates to around £1,200 per full-time equivalent. This is a long way short of the new maximum full-time variable fee of £3,000. This reinforces scepticism in the sector as to whether part-time fees can be raised to this level without a significant drop in numbers. There are similar concerns about charging employers higher fees than at present. Consequently, whilst we note the Government's exhortation to institutions to raise fees, overall part-time student numbers will need to be monitored closely over the next three years.

- **There is no real demand for deferred tuition fees for part-time students**

Our study shows that there is no demand from part-time students for the provision of deferred fees as offered to full-time students. The students in the survey would not have been willing to pay higher fees if they had been able to take out an interest-free loan to pay them. Most students would have been unwilling to take out any form of income-contingent loan. Consequently, whilst we support the principle of seeking equity of treatment between part-time and full-time students, we do not consider that provision of deferred fee loans would be worthwhile, particularly given the cost of the public subsidy.

- **Government should re-examine public support for part-time students, including eligibility criteria**

A high proportion of part-time students do not gain any benefit from the public support packages potentially available to them, and these packages often do not meet the overall costs of being a part-time student. The reason why a student is ineligible for public support often has nothing to do with their economic circumstance but relates to one (or both) of two factors: either the student is studying for less than 50 per cent of a full-time course or the student already has some form of higher education qualification. We would therefore ask the Government to re-examine the scope of public support for part-time students both in terms of its value and eligibility criteria. The overall public benefit in terms of the higher level skills agenda would warrant some change in this area.

- **The real costs of part-time provision**

We urgently need to know whether the real costs of teaching different part-time students are significantly higher than those for full-time. There is evidence, identified by HEFCE in 2003, of the additional costs of part-time provision but new costing information will be available in 2009. This should inform future public funding allocations particularly as the scope for raising part-time fees may be limited.

- **The impact of variable tuition fees**

Finally we would urge that part-time study should be a significant element in the Government's review of the impact of variable tuition fees in 2009. Our own monitoring of the impact of variable fees will include part-time enrolments and part-time fee levels. We think that this evidence should be considered by the official study. The recommendations of the study for the future funding of teaching and student support should encompass all students, not just full-time undergraduates.



# Notes

- 1 The Access for Learning Fund is a non-repayable fund for higher education students in financial difficulty. Higher education institutions can use it to help students in financial hardship, provide emergency payments for unexpected financial crises, or to help students who may be considering giving up their course because of financial problems.
- 2 Full versions of all three strands can be downloaded from the Universities UK publications website at <http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk>.
- 3 The projects referred to are:
  - In 2003 HEFCE commissioned a number of studies to support a possible change to its teaching funding method. This included a survey of part-time fees and a study by JM Consulting of the costs of alternative modes of delivery – both of these are available on the HEFCE website as supporting reports for HEFCE Circular 2003/42.
  - In 2004 the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned a report from Alan Woodley: *Earning, Learning and Paying: The Results from a National Survey of the Costs and Financing of Part-Time Students in Higher Education*. The sample used was primarily Open University students.
  - London Higher undertook research into part-time students in all institutions in London in parallel with Universities UK. London Higher is the representative umbrella organisation for universities and higher education colleges in London. Strands 1 and 2 of the London Higher research use the same methodology and researchers as the Universities UK research. London Higher also commissioned research on the attitudes to part-time study of employers in London. All the reports are available from the London Higher website, <http://www.londonhigher.ac.uk/publications.htm>.
  - The Welsh Assembly Group announced that Dr Heather Graham would lead an independent review of part-time study in Wales, the Graham review, as a follow up to the *Final Report of an Independent Study into the Devolution of the Student Support System and Tuition Fee Regime in Wales in 2005*. The report is also known as the Rees Review. The Graham Review used the same researchers, structure and methodology as the Universities UK research, applying this to an enhanced sample of all Welsh institutions. The Graham Review was published in June 2006.
- 4 Brian Ramsden (Nigel Brown Associates), Universities UK *Part-time Research Strand 1*. Universities UK (2006).
- 5 This issue is considered in more detail in the Strand 1 and Strand 2 reports.
- 6 Susan Boorman, Nigel Brown, Philip Payne and Brian Ramsden, Universities UK *Part-time Research Strand 2: A Survey of the Issues facing Institutions*. Universities UK (2006).
- 7 HESA (2006) *Students in Higher Education Institutions 2004/05*.
- 8 Details available from the DfES student support website <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/studentssupport/>.
- 9 Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 2006, Op cit.
- 10 Professor Claire Callender (London South Bank University), David Wilkinson and Karen Mackinon (Policy Studies Institute), Universities UK *Part-time Research Strand 3: A Survey of Students' attitudes and Experiences of Part-Time Study and its Costs*. Universities UK (2006).
- 11 Woodley, DfES 2004, Op cit.
- 12 Brian Ramsden (Nigel Brown Associates), Universities UK *Part-time Research Strand 1*. Universities UK (2006).
- 13 HEFCE (2003), Op cit.
- 14 Susan Boorman, Nigel Brown, Philip Payne and Brian Ramsden, Op cit.
- 15 Callender et al, as above.







## About Universities UK

This publication has been produced by Universities UK, which is the representative body for the executive heads of UK universities and is recognised as the umbrella group for the university sector. It works to advance the interests of universities and to spread good practice throughout the higher education sector.



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