

The power of part-time

Review of part-time and mature higher education



This briefing summarises the main findings of the Universities UK report, *The power of part-time: Review of part-time and mature higher education*. The full report is available on the UUK website at: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/UUKreviewofparttimeeducation.aspx

Part-time higher education: a powerhouse for skills

The UK relies heavily on part-time higher education to up-skill the population, in order to meet fast changing skills needs in a fast changing world. The powerhouse for the new skills base is amongst people already in employment; part-time study cannot be ignored if we want economic growth. There is also strong evidence of the social and personal benefits of lifelong learning.

- There were nearly half a million people in the UK studying part-time at undergraduate level in 2011–12, making up more than a quarter (29%) of the UK undergraduate population.
- The vast majority – nine out of ten – are aged between 21 and 65.
- Most are studying vocational courses and in continuous full-time employment.
- The contribution of graduates from part-time study to economic prosperity in the UK exceeds that of graduates from full-time study in the three and a half years after graduation.
- Sixty-two per cent are female and thirty-eight per cent are male.
- Forty-five per cent are parents with dependant children (in England).
- Fewer than one third received financial support from their employer (in England).

This report focuses on part-time undergraduate students, particularly those who are mature (aged over 21).

How is part-time undergraduate recruitment changing?

While full-time undergraduate enrolments have gone up over the last ten years in the UK, part-time undergraduate enrolments have gone down. This trend has been more significant for women and mature learners. **Following a decade of slow decline, the numbers of students recruited to undergraduate part-time courses in England suddenly fell by 40% in two years (2010–11 to 2012–13): equivalent to 105,000 fewer students.** Indications for 2013–14 are that the level of decline will not be stemmed.

There is currently little evidence that people are now studying in a different way. The figures above include entrants to part-time higher education courses in further education colleges. It is hard to quantify the numbers studying with private providers but the numbers, although growing, are likely to be small in comparison with the overall decline. The views of the organisations and individuals who responded to our call for evidence are that the decline is primarily due to people deciding not to undertake further higher level study. This would need to be investigated further but, even if it is only partly true, leads to real concerns for individuals' future employment prospects and the interests of the UK economy and society.

Part-time student numbers are also in decline in Scotland and Wales, though indicative suggestions are that the changes in the last year (2012–13) seem to be less marked. We keenly anticipate data released early in 2014 which will allow us to see in much more detail what has happened across the UK.

An urgent initial assessment of the situation

Universities UK (UUK) was invited by Vince Cable, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science to conduct a review of part-time undergraduate higher education.

We issued an open invitation to provide evidence and received more than 140 responses, from universities, colleges, students, employers and other bodies. We were particularly interested in the view of employers, so held further oral evidence sessions with representatives from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), the Federation of Small Businesses and the Association of Graduate Recruiters (among others), as well as with organisations which had carried out research in this area (such as the Institute for Employment Studies and the Higher Education Careers Service Unit [HECSU]). We also gathered together existing surveys, such as those carried out for the National Union of Students (NUS), Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and HECSU, and identified areas for further research.

We found a significant amount of concern about part-time higher education, as well as a relatively high degree of consensus about the likely reasons for the changes that we are seeing. There seems to be a 'perfect storm' of factors interacting: the current economic climate restricting employer support for further study, putting pressure on household budgets and changing the shape of the industrial sectors from which part-time students are traditionally drawn (particularly the public sector); changing pathways into higher education; changing demographics; and the 2012–13 changes to the funding system in England and associated increase in fees. Factors such as the rise of apprenticeships, increases in private providers (whether for profit or not-for-profit), and a shift to online learning will also be having an impact, however difficult to quantify. The situation is complex, made up of changes in both supply and demand, and plays out differently for different types of learners.

What should be done?

This report acts as an urgent initial assessment, identifying areas for immediate action, as well as the areas where more information is needed so that the right policy decisions are made. We see this review as the beginning, not the end, of UUK's involvement in a programme of work to protect and support this vital area of provision.

Part-time undergraduate higher education is not the concern purely of a particular part of the sector, nor can the challenges identified in this report be addressed by individual institutions acting in isolation. Our recommendations aim to:

- ensure that part-time and mature students are central to the higher education sector
- improve the visibility and understanding of part-time provision
- enhance the part-time student experience
- boost employer-focused provision
- understand better what is going on in part-time undergraduate higher education
- keep up the momentum of this review

We found...

- Many employers and potential students are not sufficiently aware of the value of part-time higher education and do not always fully understand the options, including financial, open to them.
- Information is patchy for potential students trying to find out about available courses and student finance information.
- There is a lack of visibility of the part-time offer.
- Opportunities exist for higher education providers to do more to attract and support part-time students, including through the development of more flexible learning approaches.

- Part-time study is highly vocational, yet there are opportunities for more employer-focused provision.
- There are opportunities for part-time study to be supported through Local Enterprise Partnerships in England.
- Finance is reported as a major obstacle to participation.
- We were told that this has been exacerbated by the new funding regime and increases in institutional fees in England in 2012–13, particularly as the majority of part-time students are ineligible for a fee loan.
- Universities, colleges, students and employers believe that the restriction on loans and funding council support to those doing qualifications higher than already possessed (equivalent or lower qualifications policy) is hampering re-skilling.
- There are a number of areas where the evidence is not yet as good as it needs to be to make sound national policy decisions, particularly around the issue of potential market failure. In particular, important data about the academic year in which the research was taking place (2012–13) will not be published until 2014.

‘Flexible higher education is vital in meeting our skills needs, including new skills requirements in a fast-changing global economy.’

Professor Sir Eric Thomas
Chair, UUK review of part-time and mature higher education; Vice-Chancellor, University of Bristol

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: All stakeholders across the UK, including higher education providers, government, funding councils and others, should consider the needs of part-time and mature students as an intrinsic part of their thinking, not as an add-on.

Recommendation 2: There needs to be an urgent push at all levels – national, regional and local – to help potential students and employers understand the value of and opportunities for part-time higher education.

2a. In England, UUK, GuildHE, the Association of Colleges, BIS, UCAS, the Student Loans Company, CBI, unionlearn and other interested groups should design and implement a clearly targeted national communications strategy, aimed at both potential students and employers, to encourage mature and part-time students into higher education. This should be done immediately in order to have an effect on 2014–15 entry.

2b. UCAS should develop its existing website coverage of part-time students, in order to provide a first port of call for those looking to study part-time at undergraduate level. This should be done as a matter of urgency and offer a similar level of information, advice and guidance on part-time courses as is available for full-time provision. We also support UCAS’ work in updating Search to allow institutions to display their part-time courses.

2c. The funding councils should continue all efforts to improve the visibility of part-time courses on the Unistats website.

2d. Universities and colleges should continue and expand their valuable work to promote part-time study options and the

value of part-time study in their region and local area. We urge them, in particular, to ensure that available part-time options are highly visible on websites and other marketing material, and that information on student finance is up to date.

Recommendation 3: Universities and colleges should take bold steps to meet the needs of potential part-time students and improve the part-time student experience.

3a. Universities and colleges, of whatever size, sector or mission, are urged to consider the evidence presented in the main report, particularly the evidence relating to the student life cycle, and to methods of flexible learning, including online delivery.

3b. Universities and colleges should consider how partnerships between higher education institutions and further education colleges can sustain and promote opportunities to study part-time.

3c. Universities and colleges will wish to consider the evidence in the main report when considering their own course pricing.

Recommendation 4: Employer-focused part-time higher education which meets the needs of the local economy should be boosted.

4a. Universities and colleges should work in partnership with employers to develop more flexible and innovative approaches to meeting the needs of part-time students. Universities and colleges need to step up longer-term partnership arrangements with employers, while at the same time employers need to get better at articulating skills needs.

4b. UUK will work with UKCES to highlight innovative ways in which higher education

institutions are working with employers to meet skills requirements and strengthen the high-level skills base of the UK economy. This project, which will pay special attention to flexible provision, will also explore how the sector's contribution to employment and skills can be further enhanced.

4c. In England, UUK will urge its members to work with Local Enterprise Partnerships to raise awareness of and access to part-time higher education study, and to ensure part-time study plays its critical role in supporting the local growth and skills agenda.

Recommendation 5: Further evidence and modelling is needed in order to support national policy decisions in England.

5a. The findings of this review should feed into planned HEFCE work to research part-time higher education at a local and regional level. We also support planned CBI work on financing options to support more firms to up-skill and re-skill their workforces.

5b. We recommend that the extension of fee loans to part-time students of engineering, technology and computer science who already have a degree in a different discipline should be monitored carefully.

5c. We recommend that BIS and the Treasury should conduct further research around the ways in which the tax system could better incentivise support for part-time higher education study, whether for employers or individuals.

5d. We recommend that the impact of changes to the HEFCE funding system is kept under review, including the removal of the part-time premium.