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# Demand for flexible and innovative types of higher education

**Report to HEFCE by SQW Ltd and  
Taylor Nelson Sofres**

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# Executive Summary

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## Introduction

1. SQW Ltd, in partnership with Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS), was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to carry out a study investigating the demand for flexible and innovative types of higher education. The study was concerned with flexibility in the timing and pace of learning. Most of the fieldwork was undertaken between November 2004 and January 2005 but, following submission of a report based on this fieldwork, HEFCE commissioned additional fieldwork which was undertaken during July and August 2005.
2. SQW visited 10 institutions to consult on non-traditional delivery of teaching and learning. This sample was selected to ensure coverage of different institutional missions, and of different non-traditional delivery methods. It included pre- and post-1992 universities and one college of higher education. The models that were developed as a result of the consultations were presented at a workshop.
3. Focus groups were used to market test the two models that had emerged from the first phase of work. Twelve focus groups met in total, in six different locations (Birmingham, Bristol, London, Manchester, Reading and Norwich), and with discrete groups of participants to whom these models were thought to have potential relevance. The profiles of the groups were:
  - people aged 21 or under – qualified to study at higher education (HE) level but not studying
  - current mature students
  - people aged 25-35 in full-time employment, qualified for HE but without a first degree
  - people aged 25-35 in full-time employment, qualified for HE with a first degree
  - undergraduates – in vocational subjects, 2nd year or above
  - undergraduates – in ‘traditional’ subjects, 2nd year or above
  - students who had completed Year 12 of their education at school or college and were considering entry to HE<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Two focus groups were held with Year 12 students attending the University of East Anglia AimHigher Higher Education Summer School.

## Key findings

### *Visits to institutions*

4. The institutions visited mainly offered choice with respect to the number of modules that could be studied per semester. The higher education institutions we consulted have introduced this type of flexibility in response to student demand, and because in many cases it forms a necessary component of institutional strategies aimed at meeting the widening participation aspect of their missions. The principal way in which students exploit the inherent flexibility of a modularised system is through extending the period of study.
5. The second form of flexibly paced learning is an accelerated degree. We believe that only one institution, the University of Buckingham<sup>2</sup>, operates this approach in its 'pure' form in the sense of offering honours degrees which can be completed in two years. However, a number of other institutions do offer accelerated forms of learning in certain subject areas.
6. There are, typically, a number of other issues associated with flexible delivery. These include:
  - e-learning programmes which offer more scope to vary pace but were not designed to enable variations in pace
  - summer schools
  - support at a senior level is seen to be key to successful delivery of flexible learning both at those institutions where flexibility is a core part of fulfilling their mission, and at those which currently offer only small elements of flexibility
  - some institutions have had to make significant changes to their central administrative functions and practices in order to accommodate flexible forms of study. They have, for example, invested in IT systems and more powerful databases to track students
  - adequate student support mechanisms are important for all students, but the nature of flexible learning means that one-to-one advice, assistance with employment, and effective IT systems may be especially important
  - an important element within general initiatives to widen participation - credit-bearing assessment of prior learning - can enable students to take fewer modules and therefore complete a degree quicker than would otherwise be possible
  - increasing the provision of flexible delivery methods has required associated staff training and development.
7. The main barriers to flexibility identified by those we consulted were:

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<sup>2</sup> The University of Buckingham is a private institution. It does not receive funds from HEFCE and is not subject to some of the same restrictions as higher education institutions in the public sector, notably on the level of fees it can charge.

- higher institutional costs associated with student support and IT systems and a perception that the current HEFCE teaching funding method does not adequately compensate for the higher costs incurred
- securing staff engagement in some institutions
- student demand, with the limited financial support for part-time students being frequently cited<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Focus groups***

#### *Attitudes towards HE*

8. There was, predictably, a clear difference between current students and other groups. Many current students had entered HE with little or no consideration of the options; university was the norm for their peer group. A three-year degree was also considered the norm; indeed many were surprised to know there were alternatives. This was also true of Year 12 students considering HE, all of whom preferred the traditional three-year degree.
9. Other groups tended to see HE much more as a means of enhancing career paths and incomes. This was especially true of the 25-35 year-olds who would only consider HE, of any type, if it would directly promote their careers. The under-21s were mostly in employment and felt they had made the right decision not to enter HE.
10. All groups perceived advantages in study modes which involved some element of work-based learning through: work experience; placements with employers; or accreditation of employer training.

#### *Awareness of opportunities*

11. Many in the groups had a reasonable grasp of what student life could be like, but there was a poor awareness of more general issues including:
  - the flexibility in pace which was already available from some institutions
  - the existence of blended modes (including the belief that distance learning was completely remote)
  - the financial support systems for part-time students – some appeared to think that loans were available in the same way as for full-time students.
12. Many non-students felt the quality of advice and guidance on HE opportunities available to them was inadequate. This came through strongly in the groups of under-21s not in HE.

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<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork was undertaken before changes to part-time student support were announced.

### *Financial considerations*

13. For most groups, financial considerations were a key influence on behaviour:
- many in the under-21 and 25-35 groups considered HE almost exclusively in terms of the financial returns and were sceptical as to whether it was a sensible investment
  - for all groups (apart from the current 'traditional' groups) there was a high level of aversion to incurring debt
  - mature students (both actual and potential) often have significant financial commitments and this restricts the options which they are able to exploit.

### *The two-year degree*

14. There was very limited interest in this mode of study. This was, in part, because it was a novel idea to almost all, and their view of HE was very much in terms of the conventional three-year degree. Many felt it might be attractive to those entering HE direct from school or college; the rationale is that the opportunity to enter work sooner and thereby incur lower debt would be attractive to students and their parents. However, the focus groups with Year 12 students considering HE indicated a strong preference for three-year over two-year degrees.

### *Varying pace by choice of number of modules to study*

15. The opportunity for students to decide on their own pace of learning would not have had a significant impact on the decisions of the vast majority of those participating in the discussions. However, although greater flexibility would not have influenced their behaviour, there was a fairly widespread view that such flexibility would be attractive if they decided to enter HE. The main factors are:
- opportunity to combine work and study
  - opportunity to change mode (full-time to part-time and vice versa) in response to personal circumstances.
16. Many in the groups were also alive to potential difficulties with such flexibility and the main issues raised were:
- the potential for students to lose focus and fail to complete or take longer than is required. Many felt that support and guidance from the institution would therefore be important
  - whether a degree that was completed over a longer period of time (without good personal reasons) would be less valued by employers.

## **Conclusions**

### ***Part-time and varying pace***

17. The aggregate Higher Education Statistics Agency data available gives, at best, a very partial insight into recent trends in the demand for flexibly paced learning but there is nothing to indicate that demand will increase significantly in the near future. Data which distinguishes between 'high and low intensity'<sup>4</sup> part-timers suggests, if anything, the opposite.
18. This general picture is consistent with the information we gathered during consultations with the institutions. We were asked to comment on whether flexible provision should be a priority for additional student numbers, but we do not believe there is sufficient evidence, at present, to make such recommendations. There are a number of (related) reasons why expansion of flexible provision might in practice be problematic:
  - the focus groups indicated that while flexible provision would be attractive it would not be sufficient to encourage participants into HE. Individual financial considerations, both in terms of career prospects and the costs of HE, are far more important. Part-time and flexible provision can partly address some of these considerations but it would not alter the perceived net returns to the individual, especially given the high levels of aversion to acquiring debt
  - most of the institutions we visited took a cautious view of the potential for any significant expansion of part-time provision
  - the current financial environment is felt to inhibit both supply and demand.

### ***Accelerated degrees***

19. We were unable to identify much evidence on the demand for accelerated degrees. There was a widespread view amongst focus group participants that these would be attractive to students entering HE straight from school, but focus groups with students about to apply to HE indicated this was not the case. In principle, there could be cost advantages to the institution providing accelerated programmes, but they would need to establish a supporting infrastructure, and change working practices, which could be costly<sup>5</sup>. None of the institutions we visited had plans to do this.

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<sup>4</sup> High intensity students are those studying more than 0.25 full-time equivalent.

<sup>5</sup> There would also need to be changes to the regulations governing fees which universities can charge full-time undergraduates. These place a restriction on annual fees rather than fees for a degree and assume a minimum of three years to complete an honours degree by full-time study.



# 1 Introduction

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- 1.1 SQW Ltd, in partnership with Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS), was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to carry out a study investigating the demand for flexible and innovative types of higher education. The aim of the consultancy was to complement the various recent studies that had tended to concentrate on demand for existing types of higher education (HE) provision, by attempting to discover whether more people might access HE if it were delivered or designed differently. HEFCE's main interest, and the focus of this study, was flexibility in the sense of timing and pace of study. HEFCE wanted the work to assess the potential demand for more flexible and innovative types of HE in terms of both the delivery of existing programmes/provision and the delivery and design of new programmes. The methodology specified initially in the study brief, and largely followed by SQW and TNS, was: to explore current flexible and innovative types of HE; and to market test these models.
- 1.2 The initial focus of the study was to develop a number of models that captured current (and potential future) flexible and innovative HE provision. In order to do this, SQW visited nine institutions to consult on non-traditional delivery of teaching and learning. This sample was selected to ensure coverage of different institutional missions, and of different non-traditional delivery methods. The models that were developed as a result of the consultations were presented to the steering group and other invited individuals at a workshop in November 2005.
- 1.3 Focus groups were used to market test the two models that had emerged from the first phase of work. Ten focus groups were carried out in total, in five different locations (Birmingham, Bristol, London, Manchester and Reading), and with discrete groups of participants to whom these models were thought to have potential relevance (the profiles of these groups is set out in detail in chapter three). The focus groups identified which elements of the models did or did not appeal to individuals within these groups, the drivers that did or might motivate these individuals to enter HE, and some of the barriers that currently exist. The findings that emerged from each group were contextualised according to the prior experience they had had of higher education.
- 1.4 A report based on this fieldwork was submitted in March 2005. HEFCE then commissioned additional work to encompass:
- a visit to a college of higher education
  - focus groups with students at school or college considering entry to HE. This report encompasses findings from these additional tasks.

- 1.5 The project also attempted to identify data concerning the supply and demand of flexible provision in other countries, for comparison with the UK. However, sources that would enable both useful and credible comparisons with the UK were not located in the time available for this task.
- 1.6 The next two chapters review the consultations within HEIs and the focus group discussions. Our conclusions are presented in chapter four.

## 2 Consultation with HEIs: Summary of Findings

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### Introduction

- 2.1 The purpose of the case studies was to develop an understanding of current approaches to non-traditional provision of learning, in terms of feasibility, advantages and disadvantages (from both institutional and student perspectives), and potential to meet current and future demand. The evidence gathered through these case studies was then used to formulate the models presented to the focus groups (see chapter four). A total of 10 HEIs were consulted (see table 2.1), having been selected following consultation with the steering group. The sample does not represent a comprehensive list of institutions active in the provision of flexible higher education<sup>6</sup>, rather the aim was to include a range of institution types (with respect to mission), and different approaches to flexible modes of teaching and learning, both in terms of delivery and the student groups targeted.

**Table 2.1: HEIs visited**

Birkbeck College
University of Bristol
University of Derby
University of Essex
Kent Institute of Art and Design
University of Liverpool
London Metropolitan University
Middlesex University
University of Plymouth
University of Wolverhampton

- 2.2 Consultations were held in the main with senior staff because we wanted to ensure that policy and strategy issues were explored in the limited time available. However, in most institutions we also held some discussions with staff responsible for teaching flexible programmes. The main areas covered were:
- flexible and innovative activities undertaken in relation to the pace of learning
  - expected benefits/reasons underlying introduction of these activities
  - barriers to introduction

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<sup>6</sup> The Open University is the largest provider of part-time HE in the UK. It was not included in the sample because of the special nature of its provision and students.

- issues relating to students
- future demand.

2.3 As mentioned above, when exploring the types of flexibility offered by institutions, the main area of interest for this study was in flexibility with respect to pace of study. Flexibility in other aspects of delivery was also recorded and explored where relevant, for example the use of flexible modes of delivery such as e-learning and work-based learning. As far as pace of learning is concerned, the institutions visited mainly offered choice with respect to numbers of modules per semester.

### **Flexibility with respect to numbers of modules per semester**

2.4 This was the most commonly adopted approach concerning flexibility in terms of pace. It requires a modularised system and credit accumulation scheme, with students typically having considerable flexibility to personally determine pace of learning, including the possibility of starting full-time, switching to part-time, and then completing as a full-time student. Regulations define a maximum period of study within which the degree must be completed, typically seven or eight years. Students can complete a degree over a longer period, but the need to ensure currency of content means the degrees may not be awarded in a specific subject.

### ***Case study findings***

2.5 Most, but not all, of the consulted higher education institutions (HEIs) have well-established modularised degree programmes. Students have a wide range of choice over: module combinations (subject to timetabling restrictions and academic and professional requirements in certain subject areas); number of modules studied each year; and the ability to switch between part-time and full-time modes. There are often two intakes, September, and January or February; and several institutions are also considering or implementing a June intake.

2.6 The HEIs consulted have introduced this type of flexibility in response to student demand, and because in many cases it forms a necessary component of institutional strategies towards meeting the widening participation aspect of their missions. The opportunity to study at different speeds typically arises because the HEI is seeking to encourage new and non-traditional entrants into higher education. Flexibility in pace is almost a by-product of more general widening participation initiatives rather than a specific initiative in itself. There are a number of implications arising from this:

- since an important element of flexibility is the opportunity to switch between full-time and part-time modes, it is impossible to distinguish students who will complete programmes via full-time study from those who will complete via part-time study, at the point when they enter HE. Some degree courses are deliberately set up so students are able to change their degree and mode of study after the first year. They are allowed to gain exposure to different disciplines in year one to allow this flexibility
- the extra costs which HEIs incur through flexible delivery cannot be attributed solely to flexibility in the pace of learning
- flexibility in the pace of learning is only one aspect of widening participation and factors which influence the attractiveness of entering higher education, such as student financial support, more accessible modes of study, and more accessible teaching locations, will also have an important bearing on the demand for learning at different speeds.

2.7 The principal way in which students exploit the inherent flexibility of a modularised system is through extending the period of study. Some students make an explicit decision to study part-time when they enter HE, but for many it appears to be a decision they take after entering, initially on a full-time basis. Most are entering HE because they believe a degree will enhance their career prospects and, all things being equal, they have an interest in completing the degree as quickly as possible. At the risk of overgeneralisation, most of the HEIs we visited have substantial numbers of non-traditional entrants and, more specifically, they tend to be non-school leavers (and therefore older), local, and with family commitments. The reasons for switching to part-time study are likely to include:

- difficulties in coping with full-time study after a period out of full-time education and with no prior experience of HE
- the need to generate income during the study period – many will have anticipated working during full-time study but later find that the two are incompatible
- difficulties with child-care arrangements.

2.8 We would note that one of the HEIs visited, Birkbeck is unusual in its flexible teaching offering as all students who undertake a BA or BSc degree must enrol for four years of part-time study.

## Accelerated degrees

2.9 The second form of flexibly paced learning is an **accelerated degree**. We believe that only one HEI, the University of Buckingham<sup>7</sup>, operates this approach in its ‘pure’ form in the sense of offering courses which can be completed in two years. However, a number of other institutions do offer accelerated forms of learning in certain subject areas. Examples from the institutions consulted include:

- a law degree provided in collaboration with a European partner whereby students spend two years at each of the UK institution and the European partner – normally a student would be required to spend three years at either institution to obtain the relevant LLB qualification for that country
- a music degree which is compressed into two years of study with 49 weeks of teaching each year
- module provision over the summer vacation. In these cases it is theoretically possible to complete the degree in a shorter period than three years eg, complete three semesters each year over two years. In practice, as is discussed later in this chapter, few, if any, home students use the summer period to complete in less than three years.

2.10 As mentioned above, only Buckingham has embraced accelerated degrees as the norm, although the scope does exist within other HEIs. Unfortunately we have not been able to consult with the University as part of this study but, based on the other consultations and by searching Buckingham’s website, we believe the following points are likely to be important:

- the two-year degree requires changes in management and campus organisation, most obviously year-round teaching. This has obvious implications for facilities management but also staff terms and conditions. We understand, for example, that staff are given one term in three off to enable them to undertake research. Buckingham introduced the two-year degree when it was established and it may be difficult to operate two- and three-year degrees in parallel
- a high proportion of Buckingham programmes are subjects where there is an evident career path and reasonable job prospects, eg, law and business studies. Students may be willing to pay the higher (short-term) costs of accelerated study in subjects where there is a good prospect of recouping their investment, but demands for other subjects may be lower. More generally, it is unclear to what extent the demands of an accelerated degree are consistent with widening participation.

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<sup>7</sup> The University of Buckingham is a private institution. It does not receive funds from HEFCE and is not subject to some of the same restrictions as HEIs in the public sector, notably on the level of fees it can charge.

- 2.11 Buckingham estimates<sup>8</sup> that it will cost £32,590 to study a two-year accelerated degree – this figure includes £24,000 for tuition fees and £14,000 for maintenance. This compares to an average cost of £24,600 (tuition fees of £3,600 and maintenance of £21,000) to study for three years at other UK universities. Buckingham argues that if an assumed disposable income of £7,000 which a graduate will earn during year three (i.e. after completing their studies at Buckingham) is taken into account, then studying at Buckingham will cost about the same as other UK universities. But, a Buckingham student will have entered the labour market a year earlier.<sup>9</sup>

### **Associated components of flexible delivery**

#### ***E-learning***

- 2.12 E-learning programmes provided by the HEIs consulted were not designed to enable variations in pace. The scale of e-learning operations varies considerably. Several have well-developed virtual learning environments (VLEs), which are now an integral part of their teaching and learning strategies, and which are designed to reach diverse student groups and widen participation. One institution currently delivers 17 fully on-line study programmes, from foundation degrees to masters level, to around 500 UK students; there is no requirement for attendance on campus. From a strategic perspective the schools at this institution have taken ownership for the development of e-learning modules and courses, and the institution is moving towards fully embedding e-learning across all subject areas.
- 2.13 Examples of how e-learning supports variations in the pace of study include:
- one university offers professional masters degrees entirely through e-learning. Students can determine how quickly they complete the modules required for a degree
  - in another, (blended) e-learning is used as a means of reaching dispersed populations within the UK. It is seen as a way of attracting individuals who would not otherwise be interested into HE

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<sup>8</sup> The information has been taken from the University of Buckingham's website ( [www.buckingham.ac.uk](http://www.buckingham.ac.uk)) and is based on tuition fees for 2005. It estimates £7,000 as the UK average cost of student accommodation and maintenance for one year outside London and £18,800 as the first year UK salary for graduates (based on data from Prospects Today magazine).

<sup>9</sup> Buckingham is a private sector institution and is free to set its fees. Other English HEIs are restricted in the annual amount that they can charge in fees. This limit assumes the minimum period to complete an honours degree by full-time study is three years.

- the availability of modules on-line is convenient for those studying part-time (as well as full-time) since they can access modules without physically visiting the HEI. It may also provide a convenient method of revision/retake thereby providing some flexibility in pace. However, some of those consulted made the point that the backgrounds and experience of their non-traditional entrants mean e-learning alone is insufficient. Attention was also drawn to differences between subjects and in particular that some science, engineering and technology subjects could not be wholly delivered via e-learning.

2.14 E-learning is also being used to provide taster modules, either at the start of a course, or simply as a single non-exam based module, where a student can test themselves to determine whether this type of study is suitable for them. The aim of the latter is to allow students to take a single module initially without any commitment in order to build their confidence. Most, but not all, institutions emphasised the importance of blended learning, combining e-learning and on-campus delivery.

### ***Summer schools***

2.15 One HEI consulted has a thriving summer school programme, offering modules which are also available during normal semester periods. The summer school was designed originally for international (distance learning) students. It subsequently proved popular with home students, both those wishing to complete modules over a shorter period, those doing retakes, and those wanting to change study direction without losing too much time. Another university recognised the potential benefits of a summer semester but has decided there would not be sufficient demand for modules to make provision cost-effective.

2.16 Although not one of the ‘case study’ institutions, we did discuss briefly introduction of the summer semester with the University of Luton. Luton was one of the HEIs awarded a grant by HEFCE in 1995 to pilot the extension of the academic year into the summer vacation<sup>10</sup> and it is still teaching during the summer period. The fact that Luton has continued for such a relatively long period with summer teaching indicates that it is meeting a need but the point was emphasised that it is only appropriate for specific groups of students. In particular, there is apparently virtually no interest from school leavers in using the period simply to accelerate degree completion. It has, however, proved attractive to:

- certain groups, including some part-time foundation degree students, for whom the summer period is a convenient time to study

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<sup>10</sup> See ‘Changing times The extended academic year experiment’, Report to HEFCE by SQW Limited HEFCE 99/70 at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs)



- other students wishing to retake or catch up on modules. Luton admits students at non-traditional times of the year and the option to study during the summer may be especially useful to February entrants
  - overseas students.
- 2.17 Luton has also decided that summer teaching should be delivered by its core academic staff, rather than temporary staff engaged for the summer period. This has required changes in working practices with academic staff being available on campus throughout the year.
- 2.18 A summer semester would appear to offer some interesting possibilities for accelerating the pace of study, but:
- demand seems to be the key consideration. One HEI with a successful summer programme appears to have sufficient international and home demand to make provision cost-effective. One HEI pointed out that many of its students used the summer period to generate income to support themselves during term time
  - in principle there might be scope for HEIs to collaborate in providing modules during the summer period, but in practice there would be real difficulties arising from location and curriculum differences
  - it obviously requires changes in management and working practices.

***Enabling support structures***

- 2.19 Support at a senior level is seen to be key to successful delivery of flexible learning at both those institutions where flexibility is a core part of fulfilling their mission, and at those which currently offer only small elements of flexibility. Strategies are in place to promote flexible learning and teaching, and these state that students have the right to vary the pace and direction of their study. Staff are encouraged to be innovative and bring forward new ideas for learning and teaching. This includes, at one institution, an academic foresight group that meets regularly to come up with new ideas. Membership of this group comprises senior staff who provide an example for others to follow; the culture at the top level of this institution is to look increasingly towards non-traditional forms of learning and teaching.
- 2.20 It was reported that staff at many of the institutions visited had accepted, both explicitly and implicitly, that a commitment to flexible learning meant they would be working in a different manner eg, teaching in the evenings or delivering modules on-line. University regulations have also been updated to accommodate on-line assessment and to permit extended study periods. However, it was clear that the HEIs visited are doing much more than simply changing regulations; some examples are discussed below.

### **Central administrative structures**

- 2.21 In some instances HEIs have had to make significant changes to their central administrative functions and practices in order to accommodate flexible forms of study. They have invested in improved IT systems and more powerful databases to track student attainment in their own institution and in further education (FE) partner colleges. For example, one institution now has an award template to track individual student attainment, which outlines the modules that need to be taken to meet the requirements of the course, and the grades that need to be achieved. At the end of each semester students are provided with an electronic statement summarising personal achievement mapped against the requirements of the award. HEIs are also undertaking more analysis to better understand the needs of students taking flexible courses, both at the admissions stage, and throughout their time of study.
- 2.22 As well as their own internal investment, institutions have collaborated with regional or national frameworks/partnerships. This includes, for example, the Learndirect platform which offers negotiated awards through delivering bespoke programmes to meet work-based educational needs. Individuals or groups of learners from a particular workplace undertake an agreed number of modules. Learndirect meets the costs of the platform, each institution contributes 10% of the core funding, and there are fees per student (usually paid for by their employer). Learndirect runs national support centres for learners, both via telephone and on-line, and learners can access a range of resources and tutorial support from the institution itself.

### **Student support**

- 2.23 Adequate student support mechanisms are important for all students, but the nature of flexible learning means that the following initiatives may be especially important:
- *one-to-one advice* – part-time students will, by definition, spend less time in the HEI and will have less contact with staff and their peers. There is a need to ensure that they are aware of formal requirements, eg, what they need to study and when, and also to be able to meet individual requirements for learning support. HEIs run modules in study and analytical skills, often through on-line tutorials, and some have dedicated on-line or telephone-based services providing support and guidance in study management. Flexible delivery has also led some institutions to offer courses in time management, which also has beneficial implications for these students long-term

- *investment in IT systems* – e-learning is an issue in its own right and has necessitated significant investment by institutions. However, as mentioned above, some HEIs have developed IT systems specifically to enable students to identify feasible timetable options and, in some cases, assist staff to monitor progress. Such systems also allow students to access study resources, equipment, buildings and staff, in circumstances that are convenient to them. In general the on-line network provision of course material, administrative procedures, student records, timetables and lecture notes permits institutions to deliver courses in a more flexible manner, which requires significant investment in IT systems
- *assistance with employment* – HEIs recognise how important part-time jobs can be for some students. One institution has a policy of offering students employment within the university, with the advantage being that students are on campus and may therefore find it easier to access learning. A number of institutions also highlighted the increased integration of work placements into courses where students benefit from both the skills training and income provided; these placements also indirectly assist with seeking employment at a later date.

### **Assessment of prior learning**

2.24 An important element within general initiatives to widen participation, credit-bearing assessment of prior learning (APL) can enable students to take fewer modules and therefore complete a degree in less time than would otherwise be possible. Most of those we consulted made a clear distinction between:

- *APL*— systems were well developed and, in general, few problems were encountered
- *assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL)* — all the institutions consulted had APEL systems but several felt that the time taken to complete the necessary paperwork and supporting documentation to enable accurate assessment, along with other demands on the students, were such that taking the equivalent module would be the preferred option in most cases. The time costs to the HEI are also significant and this is reflected in the charge to students.

### **Staff training**

2.25 Increasing the provision of flexible delivery methods has required associated staff training and development. A number of institutions consulted stated that staff generally accepted that they were expected to undertake flexible delivery for at least some of their teaching and this was an accepted part of the culture in those institutions. As a result, certain teaching qualifications/certificates are mandatory for staff at some of these institutions. Induction programmes are also offered to acquaint staff with flexible learning and teaching, in particular

with respect to e-learning; one institution delivers an e-learning module to staff so they gain insights into e-learning from the student perspective.

- 2.26 Those institutions who had most fully embedded flexible teaching and learning provision into their mission and offering were, unsurprisingly, those who provided most staff training and support in this area. Whilst the introduction of flexible models of provision *per se* cannot be said to have promoted increased staff training and support given the small number of consultations, it would appear that those institutions who have most fully embraced flexible models see staff training as a priority for success in this area.

### ***Payment of fees***

- 2.27 A few institutions provide what both they and, reportedly their students, see as attractive financial models for flexible study – the aim being to use different payment methods in order to increase participation and retention. The flexibility relating to fees included paying per module, paying in instalments with no monthly interest being charged, and fee remission.

### **Benefits of flexibility**

#### ***Institutions***

- 2.28 The HEIs consulted highlighted a number of benefits that accrue to those institutions through offering flexible learning:
- new demand can be captured through the targeting of non-traditional student markets. The majority of institutions felt that students on flexible courses did not represent displacement from more traditional study, but rather would not otherwise be in HE
  - the provision of e-learning can act as a pull factor to both traditional and flexible students. Institutions feel that it makes them seem forward looking and progressive
  - the fee income from some flexible courses is actually critical to survival – sometimes flexible courses have been introduced to capture the overseas market, with institutions then tapping into home demand
  - greater interaction with the local business community due to increased work-based learning (WBL) provision has enhanced the reputation of some institutions, as well as generated income through consultancy work
  - overall, well-trained and more enthusiastic staff.

## **Students**

2.29 Benefits that accrue to students were identified by the HEIs consulted as follows:

- students willingly embrace these new methods of learning and teaching. Of the institutions that have undertaken student surveys, levels of satisfaction concerning flexible courses were high. WBL courses have also received positive feedback from employers:
  - students who would not be able or willing to complete a degree through the traditional three-year full-time route can now find an option that is more suitable for them
  - retention levels are said to be higher for some forms of flexibility (this has not been the experience of all institutions consulted); there are also examples of students coming back to the HEI for further study
- one institution stated increased completion rates on some e-learning courses. There were also examples of students gaining better marks due to attendance at summer schools
- students can study to suit their own personal circumstances eg, in full-time work, caring/family responsibilities, and disability.

## **Barriers to flexibility**

2.30 The discussion above has identified a number of areas which imply higher costs for the HEI. These include:

- student support
- IT systems
- APL/APEL systems
- the development of e-learning.

2.31 Further identified barriers are discussed below.

### **Staff engagement**

2.32 In considering staff engagement there are three related issues:

- conventional three-year degree delivery and the associated implications for how staff time is allocated between teaching and research activities is highly embedded in many institutions. Although one pre-1992 HEI consulted stated that evening teaching (for accelerated degrees) had proved problematic, at another institution staff viewed teaching between 6pm and 9pm as beneficial because it freed up their daytime hours to carry out research
- several HEIs stated that a willingness to embrace new approaches was an important criteria for staff appointment and a statement to this effect is now included in job adverts
- to reiterate a point made earlier, staff development programmes are necessary for successful administration of more flexible systems, especially in relation to e-learning, and importantly to secure buy-in and ownership of flexible courses. There is a need to reassure staff and get them on board, which takes time and is costly. Even the most advanced institutions, in terms of strategy, culture and courses, admitted that there is still resistance in particular subjects to flexibility. For one institution the problems with staff time and pressures from elsewhere has led to it providing funding to buy out small amounts of staff time for flexible delivery development.

### **Teaching Funding Method**

2.33 The current<sup>11</sup> HEFCE teaching funding method provides additional funding for certain activities which are closely related to flexible provision. In particular there is a 10% funding premium for part-time students, but also additional funding to encourage HEIs to widen participation which, for many HEIs, is closely related to flexible provision. These aspects of the funding method were welcomed by most we consulted but are not seen as providing a real incentive for flexible provision<sup>12</sup>:

- institutions do not consider the part-time (PT) premium of 10% recognises the fixed costs of dealing with individual students such as student registration, tracking and support. It is perceived as being based on the notion of a full-time equivalent (FTE) comprising two PT students when, in reality, the headcount may be much higher

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<sup>11</sup> The teaching funding method is currently being reviewed by HEFCE. A consultation document (HEFCE 205/41) has been published and is available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/funding/review](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/funding/review)

<sup>12</sup> These issues are discussed in detail in our 'Evaluation of the HEFCE Teaching Funding Method' available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2005/rd06\\_05](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2005/rd06_05)

- similarly, the widening participation (WP) funding substantially underestimates the additional costs of recruiting and retaining students<sup>13</sup>.

### **Performance indicators**

- 2.34 There is a view amongst some of those we consulted that the current HEFCE performance indicators (PIs) are biased towards conventional three-year degrees and cannot cope with students switching courses, switching to part-time modes or taking a longer study period than originally planned. While these do not impact directly on funding they do feed into league tables, prepared by others such as the national press, and influence student choice. In reality, the PIs as a whole do allow for switching between full- and part-time modes but individual tables may not give the full information and can therefore be misused by others.<sup>14</sup>

### **Quality assurance**

- 2.35 Some institutions stated that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) viewed flexible courses with a certain degree of suspicion. There was a perception in some institutions that the QAA definition of HE is still centred on traditional delivery to 18-21 year-olds on a full-time basis. This relates to earlier concerns that current PIs are not appropriate for judging institutions' effectiveness in teaching 'flexible' students.
- 2.36 Institutional concerns in relation to the QAA may reflect experiences under the subject review process<sup>15</sup>. We have briefly discussed this issue with the QAA and were informed that there is no prejudice against programmes which students may take several years to complete. Instead, internal quality assurance procedures are judged on their merits making use of the Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education.
- 2.37 The introduction of flexible models of delivery has coincided with changes to internal quality assurance systems. These have become more robust and closely managed, from initial course design through to monitoring. In many of the institutions consulted, the process of change has been driven by collaboration with further education colleges (FECs), where clear progression pathways have had to be agreed, and common curriculum frameworks have had to be developed.
- 2.38 The assessment of study was raised as a particular issue relating to dispersed populations of off-campus students. There is need for some flexible courses to check on real student

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<sup>13</sup> A recent study commissioned by HEFCE and others came to similar conclusions – 'The costs of widening participation in higher education' ( is available at [L www.hefce.ac.uk/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/) under Publications/R&D reports.

<sup>14</sup> For example, table T.3 "...shows how good an institution is at retaining the students it recruits. They are based on tracking students from the year they enter an institution to the following year, and provide information about where the students are in that second year. The table covers *full-time* first degree students who entered an institution in 2001/02" The table is available at <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/pi/0304/continuation.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Last completed in 2000, and now replaced by the process of institutional audit.

progress, which requires robust assessment of these students. Institutions have had to hire assessment centres to bring the students together, which is costly for both parties. It can be difficult ensuring that the right student takes the right assessment, at the right time and place.

### ***Managing student expectations***

- 2.39 A number of institutions stated that the expectations of students undertaking flexibly delivered courses could be difficult to manage. Given that many of these students were mature, often had prior work experience, and saw their period of study as a (personal) financial investment, they could be quite demanding in what and how they expected the course to deliver. Institutions do have to manage students' own perceptions about flexibility, as most would find it impossible to tailor courses to completely fit with every individual's study preferences, due to timetabling inflexibilities, costs etc.

### **Future demand**

#### ***Likely demand***

- 2.40 Most institutions were unable to provide figures on future levels of demand for the range of flexible courses that they were providing, and were unsure about the size of this demand. For some institutions increasing the provision of flexible delivery is not a priority as they are already experiencing difficulties in meeting current recruitment targets and/or in retaining students; as a result they see little scope for increasing provision in this area. The areas of flexibility where institutions did foresee growth included work-based learning, foundation degrees and summer schools, for example:
- one institution was reasonably 'bullish' about future demand for flexible delivery and forecast that demand would double over the next five years. This institution is interested in increasing the scale of its flexible delivery and expects demand primarily in the areas of work-based learning and foundation degrees. However, the institution felt that current staff and other resource constraints would severely limit the speed at which this provision could be extended
  - a representative from another institution, who attended the November workshop, stated that all their part-time students are mature, wholly vocational and paid for (in the majority of cases) by their employers. This institution has used the Sector Skills Council to broker arrangements with employers and foresees continued growth in modular-based learning where students undertake a chunk of learning/training not necessarily linked to a degree but strongly linked to their job. This form of learning already represented a sizeable income stream for the institution.



- 2.41 The majority of institutions consulted had not undertaken formal demand studies before introducing flexible models of provision. Rather, this type of provision had been and was being ramped up on a gradual basis (subject by subject), in response to student feedback, and other indicators, for example increasing numbers of home students enrolling on subject-specific summer schools initially set up to attract overseas students. One institution had commissioned external consultants to carry out a demand study based on prospective learner types and subject demands when it was entering into a partnership with a local FEC. However, the figures generated did not reflect the later reality.
- 2.42 A number of institutions commented that a major factor influencing future demand will be the extent of external support and finance available to students. Against this background and for the reasons explained above, the current teaching funding method was widely seen to discriminate against flexible provision.

### 3 Flexibility in HE: market testing

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3.1 In order to market test the attractiveness of various elements of flexibility within HE, a programme of focus groups was held; 12 groups in total, with between six and nine participants in each. Participants varied in their experience of, and contact with, HE; however, all participants within a single focus group fitted a broadly similar profile. The following topics were explored within the focus groups:

- existing attitudes towards current programmes of higher education
- perceptions of, and ideas for, flexibility within higher education at a general level
- feelings towards each model in turn, including how these could be further developed
- strengths and weaknesses of each of the models
- which group of people each model is likely to appeal to, and why.

3.2 The location and profile of each of the focus groups is shown in table 3.1. It is worth emphasising that the groups were not designed to include students already undertaking flexible modes of study, although some of the mature students were studying part-time. Focus groups lasted an hour and a half, and were facilitated by an experienced moderator.

Table 3.1		
Location	Group A	Group B
London	21 or under – qualified to study at HE level but not studying	Current mature students
Reading	25-35 in FT employment, qualified for HE but no first degree	Undergraduates – vocational subjects 2nd year or above
Bristol	Undergraduates – ‘traditional’ subjects 2nd year or above	25-35 in FT employment, qualified for HE & no first degree
Birmingham	Current mature students	21 or under – qualified to study at HE level but not studying
Manchester	21 or under – qualified to study at HE level but not studying	25-35 in FT employment, qualified for HE with first degree
Norwich	17 year-olds – Year 12 students who have just completed their AS Levels	17 year-olds – Year 12 students who have just completed their AS Levels

3.3 The findings from specific profiles of participants are given below, followed by a summary of the key findings across all the focus groups.

## **Profile 1: current 18-21 year-old students**

### ***Choosing HE over work aged 18***

- 3.4 The majority of participants in this profile progressed from school or college to university without considering any alternative option. Whilst in secondary education there was expectation that they would enter university, both personally, and from family and schools and colleges in most cases. In fact, schools and colleges were key sources of information and provided active support for the decision-making process; for example, students felt that schools and colleges had provided them with realistic expectations of the costs they would incur at university.
- 3.5 A key reason underlying the expectation that they would enter university was that a degree would lead to a better paid job. A degree was also perceived as opening doors to a wide range of careers; this was important given that many participants taking non-vocational degrees were undecided on potential career pathways prior to university. The overall life experience gained whilst at university was also an attraction; students can experience increased independence, develop social skills, and learn about financial management etc, whilst in a 'safe' environment. The social life on offer at university was also a positive factor.

### ***Perceptions of flexibility***

- 3.6 Whilst it was recognised that increasing flexibility in higher education could make it a more attractive or viable option for some people (here considered to be primarily mature students juggling study with earning to fulfil financial commitments), these participants all preferred their current study mode to any of the flexible options proposed to them. The one option that was considered directly attractive to these participants was work-based learning; this could serve to relate courses to the real world, could provide an additional source of income, and was thought to be something that employers would value.
- 3.7 There was concern that flexibility may devalue qualifications in the eyes of employers, with part-time study perhaps demonstrating a lack of commitment. Whilst teaching during the summer vacation was viewed as increasing the options available, participants would realistically only use this to retake a course they had failed, given that most needed to work during the vacation to fund the following academic year. Programmes of evening study would also limit the time available for part-time jobs, and interfere with social lives. The majority of these participants combined full-time study with one or more part-time jobs during term time, in addition to working during the summer vacation.

- 3.8 Accelerated study had certain attractions for this group, primarily less accumulated debt, the demonstration of commitment to a potential employer, and the opportunity to stay in the university environment more or less full-time during the year. However, there was concern that two years at university may not give sufficient time to fully explore career options, especially given that less ‘free’ time would be available for this during the two years; it was therefore perceived to be a viable option only for those with a strong idea of their future career path at the age of 18. Some participants expressed concern that accelerated study would also provide little time for consolidation of learning.
- 3.9 Overall, the majority of these participants felt that three years was the appropriate length of time to spend studying for an undergraduate degree, both in terms of academic learning, and personal development. There was a concern that if the majority of students were doing three-year courses, it would be very difficult and isolating to be on either an accelerated course, or on a part-time course over more than three years.

## **Profile 2: current mature students**

### ***Choosing work over HE aged 18***

- 3.10 Mature students choose to enter work rather than higher education aged 18 for a variety of reasons, including negative experiences at school, doubts in their ability to cope with further study, having children, lack of parental financial support, or a need to gain independence from ‘home’. Some chose a career path at 18 which does not require a HE-level qualification, so there was no perceived benefit in going to university at that time; others made an active decision to work or travel for a number of years before entering HE.

### ***Choosing HE over work now***

- 3.11 Improving job prospects and earnings potential is a significant underlying reason for entering higher education as a mature student. Additional qualifications may be needed to meet specific career goals and requirements, or in order to change career direction. Returning to study may also provide an opportunity for personal development and self-fulfilment. With changing circumstances, for some people the ‘right time’ to enter higher education is as a mature student, and not as an 18 year-old.
- 3.12 Entering higher education has had immediate as well as longer term benefits for these participants, for example meeting new people, facing and meeting new challenges, learning new skills, and gaining new perspectives. The time commitments required, even for full-time courses, are felt to be less than those demanded by a full-time job. However, entering higher education as a mature student also brings challenges. Mature students find it difficult to adapt to patterns of study and research, and to maintain motivation over a three-year period. The financial aspect is also challenging, particularly in terms of trying to study part-time and work

part-time to cover the costs. Studying full-time (supported either by a partner or workplace, or because sufficient financial resources have been accrued previously, or borrowed) appears less of a struggle financially; it may also be more attractive than part-time because of additional benefits such as free childcare on offer to full-time but not part-time students in some universities.

### ***Perceptions of flexibility***

- 3.13 Many mature students currently experience flexibility on their courses, for example, negotiating with tutors to fit study around individual needs and circumstances. There was an openness to increasing the options for flexibility further; the ability to move between full- and part-time study would provide a safety net, and would provide the option of starting a course on a part-time basis with the option of moving to full-time if circumstances change, or as students gain confidence in their abilities (eg, their ability to cope with assignments and deadlines). Work-based learning, especially where paid, would be very attractive. Whilst participants were aware of such options already being offered, these are at present individually negotiated, rather than a firm commitment across the board by the university.
- 3.14 Some aspects of increased flexibility would not be attractive to mature students. Distance learning, particularly on a part-time basis, was perceived as only suitable for those learning for general interest, and not for people with particular career ambitions in mind. There was also the fear that part-time courses could lead difficulties in maintaining motivation.
- 3.15 Whilst condensing a degree programme into two years would enable students to (re-)enter the workplace more rapidly, as an option for mature students this realistically depends on individual financial situations. Those who have opted to study part-time have already made this decision because they cannot commit to full-time study over three years; they are therefore unlikely to opt for studying over two years. For those students with children, studying during the summer break is not an attractive option, although it is acceptable for those without children.

### **Profile 3: under-21s in employment, qualified for HE-level study**

#### ***Choosing work over HE aged 18***

- 3.16 The majority of participants in this profile chose not to enter higher education aged 18 for a variety of reasons. Many had had a negative experience of school or college; they had found the work either difficult or boring, and they had the perception that higher education would be more of the same. Several lacked confidence in their ability to dedicate themselves to studying a single subject for three years. Where parents were unable to provide financial support, participants felt they would have been unable to support themselves through a degree. There was also a strong aversion to incurring debt. In terms of qualifications,

approximately half of this profile had between two and four A-levels, whilst the other half had more vocational qualifications (such as AVCE, BTEC, HNC and NVQ). This was true both within each focus group, and across all the groups fitting this profile as a whole.

- 3.17 Entering work at 18 has provided financial independence for these participants, which is of particular importance to those from low income or one parent families. There is a belief that entering the workforce at this age will lead to faster progression, both in terms of career, and financially. Gaining experience through work was highly valued by these participants; they also were of the opinion that employers valued hands-on experience more highly than formal qualifications in many cases.
- 3.18 These participants displayed a reluctance to move outside of their local area, because of strong links to the community, culture, or other social links; family pressure also played a part in some cases. Although attending the local university would be an option for those in this situation, there was general apathy concerning the quality of their local institutions. Some had felt time pressures on making decisions about higher education, and had had little support in making these decisions; there was a strong fear around making the wrong decision and consequently losing both time and money. If a degree proved necessary later in life, participants felt they would be able to enter higher education then.
- 3.19 In many cases, participants were in a job which did not require a degree, and were fulfilled and happy with their choices. Based on the experiences of friends and relatives, participants felt that having a degree is now not a guarantee of getting a good job, and that degrees have become devalued in recent years.

#### ***Choosing work over HE now***

- 3.20 The main barriers to entering higher education now are financial and emotional. Participants would be reluctant to give up their financial independence; many felt that if they did undertake a degree, they would want to work at least part-time, and there was the acknowledgement that this would make study difficult. Given that many of the peers of this group who did enter higher education have already finished their studies, there was the psychological barrier that they would be taking a step back if they themselves made the decision to enter higher education now.
- 3.21 However, participants did recognise that higher education opened up opportunities and career pathways that were unavailable without a degree. There was also the acknowledgement that having a degree often, but not always, led to a better-paid job. A number of participants had inspirational role models who they perceive to be very successful and happy in their careers, and these people have degrees. Only those participants who were contemplating going on to further study cite drivers such as having a genuine passion in a particular subject and wanting

to learn for the sake of learning, feeling a sense of achievement and self worth, and opportunities for an enhanced social life (though this was of minor importance).

### ***Perceptions of flexibility***

- 3.22 Whilst participants recognised that increased flexibility might enable more people to enter higher education, flexibility in itself would not cause any of these participants to consider higher education. In particular, there were concerns whether options increasing the length of a degree would decrease motivation. Even though part-time study increases the potential for income generation alongside studying, many thought a balance would be very difficult to reach, and there was the danger of not completing the course and ending up in more debt. Increasing modularisation did have attractions, but there was concern around the difficulty of managing modules and making the right decisions; strong guidance would need to be provided. Some participants queried whether part-time courses may have less credibility than full-time as they are perceived to be offered by less popular institutions. Extending the study period into the summer vacation was seen as an attractive fallback option to enable those students who failed modules during the year to catch up. Distance learning was dismissed as only being an option for learning for general interest.
- 3.23 Work-based learning was attractive for these participants; it would give students valuable experience of the workplace, which would be of benefit when applying for jobs. Where work-based qualifications were mentioned, participants had the perception that this would be unpaid, and was therefore unattractive.
- 3.24 The main perceived benefit of condensing a full-time degree into two years is financial; students would enter the workplace one year ahead of their peers. This option was thought to be of most appeal to 18 year-olds and their parents, and perhaps mature students, especially those who have been able to save a lump sum through work first. Participants also felt that a shorter programme of study could foster more enthusiasm, and encourage greater focus; it could also be an attractive option for a student who has fallen behind a year at school or college and who wishes to catch up with other students of the same age.
- 3.25 Whilst increasing flexibility is regarded positively by these participants, the options suggested would not have led any of them to enter higher education. Other activities that may make this profile group more likely to enter higher education included having more time to make decisions regarding higher education (and further education) options (perhaps indicative of limited support and information at school), the introduction of 'taster' courses to enable students to make the right choices, the ability to 'cash in' a completed year or module of study for certification, having a guaranteed place at a local institution, and the availability of more courses that are sponsored by employers (to provide reassurance that study will have been 'worth it' in terms of leading to a job).

## **Profile 4: 25-35 year-olds in employment, qualified for HE-level study**

### ***Choosing work over HE aged 18***

- 3.26 The barriers to higher education study for these participants were similar to those cited by participants aged 21 and under and currently in work. Participants had had negative experiences of studying at school or college, there was a reluctance to move away from strong social networks locally, a degree was not perceived as important to them, and there was a fear of getting into debt, both for themselves and their parents. The lack of positive steer or pressure from parents and schools or colleges to consider higher education had meant that many had not; schools and colleges had only provided support if it was requested. Gaining financial independence was an important driver into work, as was the fact that a chosen job or career path did not require a further qualification. Approximately half of these participants had A-levels, whilst the other half held vocationally-based qualifications of an equivalent nature.
- 3.27 Several participants now expressed regret that they hadn't entered higher education aged 18. Many had seen graduates enter their own workplaces, and commented on how these had more confidence and entered at a higher level than non-graduates, even though they were not necessarily more able to do the job. Graduates were seen to be given more respect by managers, even though they lacked practical experience. Several participants felt they would have enjoyed the social life available to students, but this was countered by many who thought they'd been able to have a more active social life because they had had more money at 18 through having jobs.
- 3.28 The majority of participants felt that having a degree would not have furthered their careers, especially the careers that they had chosen and desired to continue in. Many had friends with degree qualifications, and whilst these often had better jobs, they also had much greater levels of debt and were less likely to own their own homes.

### ***Choosing work over HE now***

- 3.29 In order for participants to enter higher education as mature students, the study programme would have to have tangible value; no-one in this group would consider entering higher education just to get a degree at this stage in their lives. However, if a particular job, promotion or pay increase was guaranteed as a result, it would become an attractive option. Redundancy might also cause participants to consider higher education. Many did feel that there was a course out there that would appeal to them, but it was something they were more likely to turn to purely out of interest later in life.
- 3.30 Barriers to entering higher education now included a lack of information about what is available, that it's not feasible financially due to other commitments (such as mortgages and



children), that it's not feasible practically (it would have to fit around jobs; this would increase tiredness and leave little time for other social activities), there would be difficulty in adjusting to going back into study, that high quality training was already available through work when and where needed, and that in many cases, people were happy with where they are at the moment, and see no need to step outside this comfort zone.

### ***Perceptions of flexibility***

- 3.31 Flexibility with respect to pace is perceived as positive, enabling people to make things realistic and manageable around their own circumstances, and making higher education accessible to a wider range of people. Work-based learning would be considered particularly valuable, especially if it could be sponsored by the employers and integrated into a current job; it would also enable participants to continue earning, which is a high priority. The ability to switch between institutions was also seen as positive, but given that most of this group would only consider studying within an institution less than one hour from their home or place of work, this would not be of major importance. Other attractive components of flexibility for these participants included varying start dates, evening and weekend courses in local venues, provision of advice and guidance on higher education and careers for adults, being able to vary the pace at which the degree was completed, and having support from employers during the period of study (both in terms of time and money). Flexibility would make it easier to fit study around a job or a family, although the person would still have to be focused and good at time management.
- 3.32 Summer schools and intensive periods of study were not attractive as people would need to take time off work. Condensing study into two years was likened to being in full-time employment. Whilst two years was seen as being a more feasible period of commitment than three, the inability to earn money and work whilst studying during this period meant that it was discounted as an option by all but one of this group.
- 3.33 These participants felt that offering more flexible options for higher education would be most likely to appeal to those in their twenties and thirties with enough motivation, available time and an interest in a particular subject.

## **Profile 5: graduates in employment, 25-35**

### ***Choosing HE over work***

- 3.34 These participants entered higher education at 18 primarily because it was expected of them, personally, by their parents, and by their peer group. They also wished to delay or avoid entering the world of work for a further three years. Degree subjects related to areas of strength at school or college. In retrospect, a number regret the courses they chose to do, and now feel that others courses would have been more applicable and/or useful for them. Also, many had found it hard to adjust financially to being a student.
- 3.35 Having been in work for a number of years, participants felt that the pace of full-time study was much less intensive than that of full-time work; full-time study could probably be managed part-time around a job, or could be made more intensive to take up less time and cost less money.

### ***Perceptions around flexibility***

- 3.36 The ability to vary the pace of study would appeal to these participants if they were opting to enter higher education now, but the majority feel that it would not have been an attractive option aged 18. There were concerns around the responsibility needed to control this variation, and around maintaining motivation if studying part-time. Participants also felt that employers would not look favourably on degrees completed over a longer time period. There were concerns that part-time study would be difficult to manage even as an adult learner, but participants recognised that it would make higher education more accessible for some adult learners.
- 3.37 Other aspects of flexibility had some attraction for these participants. Work-based learning was the most appealing option; this would give people the edge over students on courses that did not offer this, and it was perceived to be something that employers would value. Many participants were aware of people with degrees who cannot currently get degree-level jobs because of a lack of practical experience; in many of their workplaces, work experience is almost as important as having a qualification.
- 3.38 Accelerated study was perceived to be most attractive to 18 year-olds; it would ensure motivation and interest in the subject, and students could then use the third year to, for example, undertake masters-level study and therefore gain a higher degree over the same time period as other students do a bachelors degree. There are recognised financial benefits as well, for both students and their parents. However, accelerated study was not a popular option for these participants currently as it would be extremely difficult to combine with financial commitments; this would only be possible if the two years of study could be combined with paid work-based learning.

## **Profile 6: Year 12 students, aged 17**

### ***Choosing HE over work aged 17***

- 3.39 All of the students were intending to study between three and four A-levels on return to school or college in September 2005. Whilst there was not necessarily the expectation from their family that the participants would continue onto higher education there was the expectation from their schools and colleges that they would and also from the participants personally. Only a few of the participants had family members who had progressed on to higher education. The majority of participants were planning to go to university straight from school or college. They were planning to study a social science or vocational subject at university, which was either related to their choice of A-level subjects or to the area of work they were interested in.
- 3.40 A key reason for the majority of participants entering HE was that a degree would lead to a better paid job and better career prospects. A degree was seen as giving better employment opportunities and the prospect of progressing faster within a given career than without a degree. Concern was expressed by participants, however, over the 'value' of certain degrees and that there was no guarantee of obtaining a job in the degree subject.
- 3.41 The other main reason for entering university was for the life experience that the opportunity of living away from home in a new location gives. Participants were attracted by the prospect of meeting new people, developing new social skills and having to take on new responsibilities such as managing their own finances.
- 3.42 Making the decision to go to higher education was seen by all participants as daunting. The majority felt that their schools and colleges had not provided them and their families with enough information, guidance and support, and would welcome more active careers advice. In particular, students had received little information on the alternatives to university such as apprenticeships. Their school or college presented either work or university as the only two options open to them. The students wanted more information on degree subjects in terms of what careers and jobs they could lead onto. The majority of participants would welcome earlier provision of information on higher education in order to allow them to plan for attending open days and to give more thought to the decision. Most were of the view that the end of Year 12 was too late to start this process, particularly as issues surrounding student debt and tuition fees were seen by the majority of participants as a key reason why they might not consider going to university.

### ***Perceptions of flexibility***

- 3.43 The majority of participants had little awareness of the alternative modes of study available to them other than the traditional three- or four-year full-time degree. Some were aware of the possibility of part-time study but this was not of interest to them and perceived as being for mature students with other commitments such as work and family. Part-time study was unattractive to them as it was perceived as taking too long to complete a degree, work commitments might get in the way of completion, and once completed they would be three years behind those who had studied the same degree full-time. The main advantage of a part-time degree to the participants was the ability to earn money at the same time as studying.
- 3.44 All of the participants preferred the traditional mode of studying at university over any of the flexible options proposed to them. Of the models proposed, in general, the participants preferred the flexible modular structure compared to intensive study, although a small number were attracted by the possibility of completing their studies in two years.
- 3.45 The intensive model was seen as unattractive as it did not provide the opportunity of having a break from studies, and studying was felt to take up too much of the student's time with the potential to cause stress. The vacation time was seen as an important period to consolidate learning, catch up with studies and earn money for the following academic year. There was also the perception that those studying intensively might not achieve so much as those studying for three years as there was less time to do background reading and research and the worry that students might fall behind having taken on too much. The model was seen as appropriate for those who wanted to get their degree over and done with quickly – for example mature students with the necessary financial resources or those who pick up subjects easily and want to move on rapidly to work.
- 3.46 Students were particularly attracted to the credit/modular system as it is something they are familiar with from current studies. There was some interest in the possibility of students deciding upon the number of modules they complete each term or semester as this was seen as a good method of easing into university life. Some students did express concern over the monitoring of such a procedure to ensure that students were not taking on too much or too little. The majority of participants felt that work-based learning was a good idea. There was a perception that university is not linked to the world of work and that a degree is not enough alone to ensure a job. Linking learning with work experience was felt to be important to provide additional experience.

## **Key findings**

### ***Attitudes towards HE***

- 3.47 There was, predictably, a clear difference between current students and other groups, with almost all of the latter having decided not to enter HE. Many current students had entered HE with little or no consideration of the options; university was the norm for their peer group. A three-year degree was also considered the norm, indeed many were surprised to know there were alternatives, and the opportunity to combine an active social life with study was perceived as a real advantage of the three-year degree. Students about to apply to HE had similar attitudes.
- 3.48 The other groups tended to see HE much more as a means of enhancing career paths and incomes. This was especially true of the 25-35 year-olds who would only consider HE, of any type, if it would directly promote their careers. The under-21s were mostly in employment and felt they had made the right decision not to enter HE. Frequent mentions were made of:
- large numbers of graduates working in non-graduate occupations
  - the importance to employers of work experience
  - employers distinguishing between what they perceive to be good and weak universities, and that there was little point studying at a perceived weak university.
- 3.49 A WBL component to degrees was widely welcomed because this was seen as enhancing the relevance of the degree and, more important, the attractiveness of the student to future employers. WBL, in this context, included:
- work place learning that should count towards a degree ie, APEL
  - work experience that is valued by employers – placements and projects
  - accreditation of company training schemes.
- 3.50 Many also felt that the student should be paid for any WBL activities. The under-21s not in HE saw WBL as one way of not losing out to/falling behind their friends who had chosen to go directly into work after college. They attached great value to working, learning in their work environment and making progress in their careers compared to spending three years at university with no work experience.

### ***Awareness of opportunities***

3.51 Many in the groups had a reasonable grasp of what student life could be like, but there was a poor awareness of more general issues including:

- the flexibility in pace which was already available from some HEIs
- the existence of blended modes (including the belief that distance learning was completely remote)
- the financial support systems for part-time students – some appeared to think that loans were available in the same way as for FT students.

3.52 Many non-students felt the quality of advice and guidance on HE opportunities available to them was inadequate. This came through strongly in the groups of under-21 not in HE.

### ***Financial considerations***

3.53 It appeared that many current traditional students were receiving significant financial support from their families, although some were also working PT/summer vacation. They had, typically, realised they would leave university with debt and accepted this as a necessary cost of university life and enhanced career prospects.

3.54 For the other groups, financial considerations were a key influence on behaviour:

- as mentioned above, many in the under-21 and the 25-35 groups considered HE almost exclusively in terms of the financial returns and were sceptical as to whether it was a sensible investment
- for all groups (apart from the current traditional groups) there was a high level of aversion to incurring debt
- mature students (both actual and potential) often have significant financial commitments and this restricts the options which they are able to exploit.

### ***The two-year degree***

3.55 There was very limited interest in this mode of study. In part, because it was a novel idea to almost all and their view of HE was very much in terms of the conventional three-year degree. In addition, many were discouraged by:

- intensive study
- a requirement to be very focused
- limited if any opportunities to generate income while studying

- the loss of the long summer vacation.

3.56 As such, virtually none of those in the groups would consider this mode. However, many felt it might be attractive to the following groups:

- most important, those entering HE direct from school or college. The rationale is that the opportunity to enter work sooner and thereby incur lower debt would be attractive to students and their parents. Two-year intensive study would not appear so daunting to those emerging from A-level programmes and the thought that they would only be studying for a further two years might also be attractive. However, those about to apply to enter HE unanimously rejected the two-year option and their responses were very similar to those currently studying for a three-year degree
- some mature students are funded by their partners and might have the financial resources to complete in two years without generating income from other sources
- perhaps most speculative, those in receipt of windfall income coinciding with a need to change career eg, redundancy

***Varying pace by choice of number of modules to study***

3.57 Two main points emerged from the discussions. First, the opportunity for students to decide on their own pace of learning would not have had a significant impact on the decisions of the vast majority of those participating in the discussions:

- for the reasons mentioned above, current traditional students, and those about to apply, see real benefits to a three-year degree and consider this to be the norm
- the under-21s were mainly motivated by a wish to generate income and, if they had entered HE, would probably have wanted to complete within three years
- some of the mature students are already pursuing flexible degrees and the ability to combine study and work is vital
- the 25-35s are primarily motivated by career considerations and few say there are any persuasive arguments for HE qualifications, at least at present.

3.58 Although greater flexibility would not have influenced their behaviour, there was a fairly widespread view that such flexibility would be attractive if they decided to enter HE. The main factors are:

- opportunity to combine work and study
- opportunity to change mode (FT to PT and vice versa) in response to personal circumstances.

3.59 Many in the groups were also alive to potential difficulties with such flexibility and the main issues raised were

- the potential for students to lose focus and fail to complete or take longer than is required. Many felt that support and guidance from the HEI would therefore be important
- whether a degree that was completed over a longer period of time (without good personal reasons) be less valued by employers.

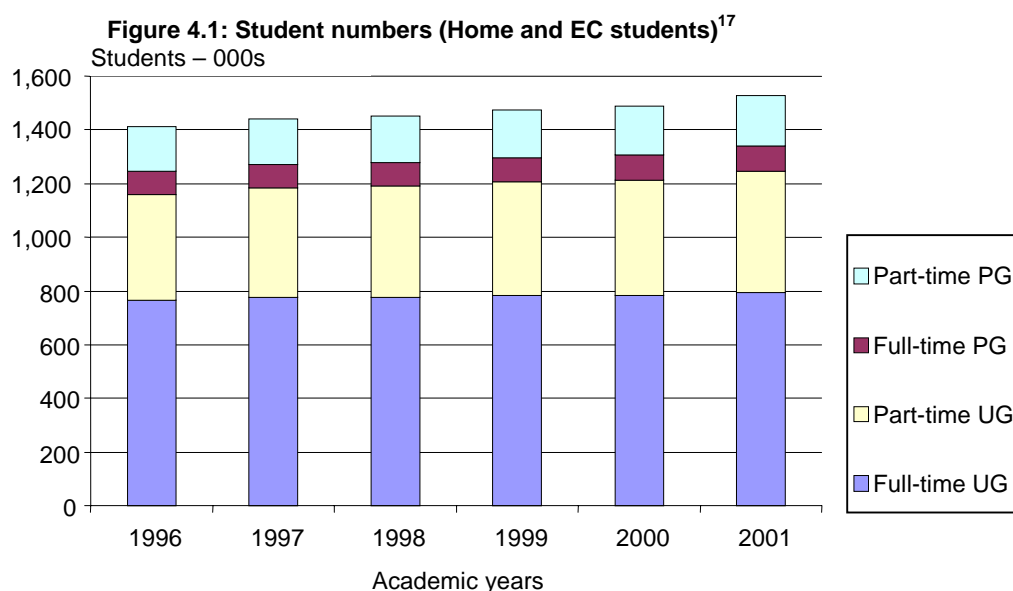


## 4 Conclusions

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### Recent trends in the demand for HE

4.1 There are no sources of aggregate data on flexibly paced learning corresponding to the different methods of provision explored during the current study. However, a 2003 study<sup>16</sup> by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), which drew on Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey Data, provides some relevant information which is reproduced here. Figure 4.1 shows recent changes in total student numbers and illustrates the dominance of full-time undergraduates.



4.2 Figure 4.2 shows trends by age and study modes and illustrates:

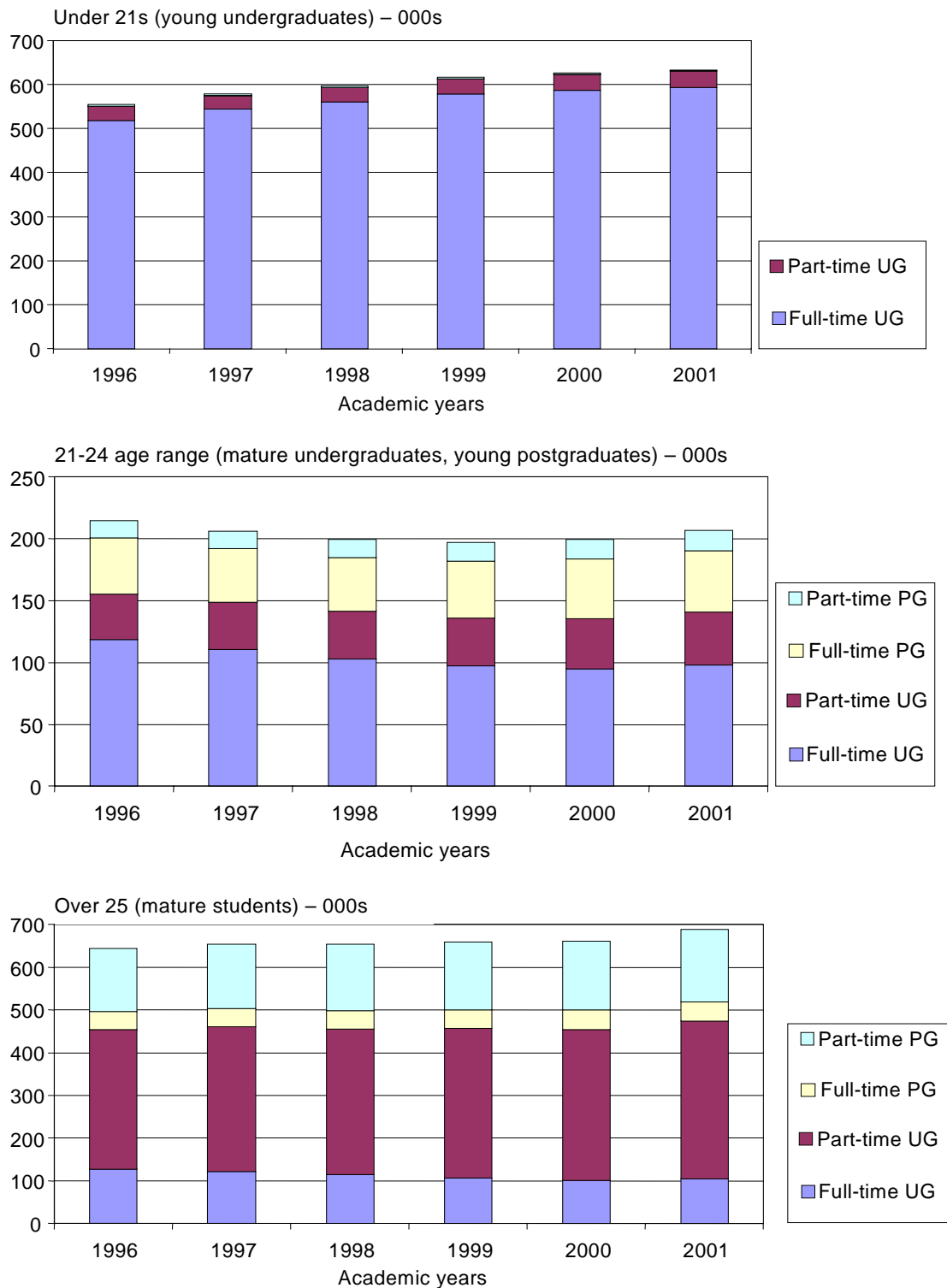
- relatively strong growth by FT undergraduates aged under-21
- that majority of PT students are mature, and most aged over-25
- comparatively little change in the demand for PT study as a whole.

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<sup>16</sup> Higher Education Supply and Demand to 2010, HEPI. Available at [www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk) under Publications

<sup>17</sup> The source for this and subsequent graphs is the HEPI report.

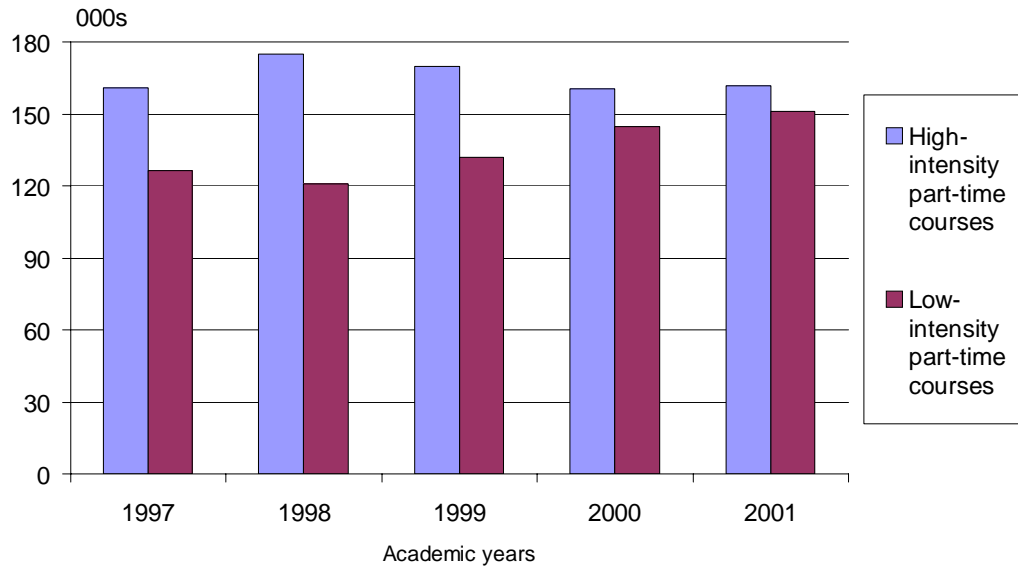
**Figure 4.2: Trends by age group and study mode**



4.3 The HEPI study makes an interesting distinction between ‘high and low intensity’ part-time students. The high intensity students study more than 0.25FTE and the low intensity ones less. According to HEPI, low intensity part-timers tend to study for recreational reasons and already have an HE qualification. High intensity students are much more likely to be studying for a full HE qualification. Figure 4.3 shows recent trends for the two groups. It excludes

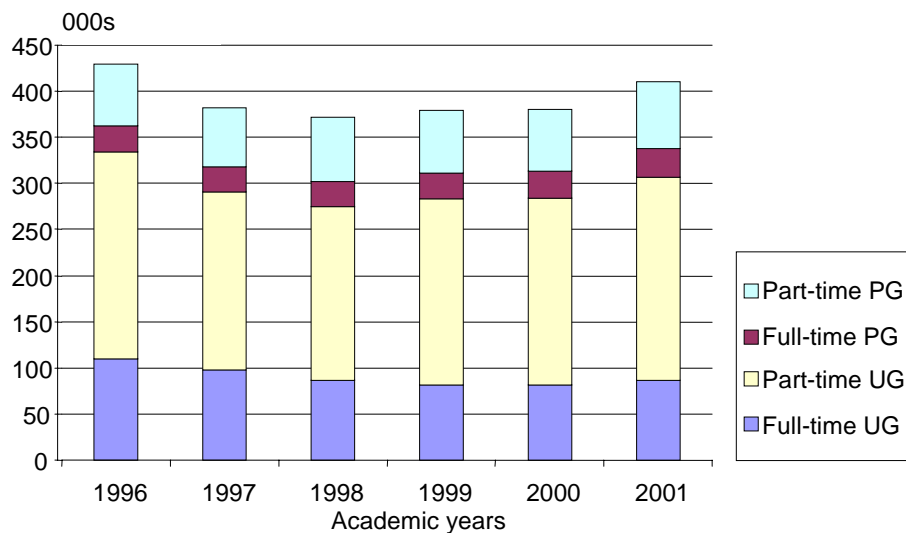
Open University students where numbers increased substantially between 1996 and 2001. Figure 4.3 shows that all the growth in PT numbers has been for low intensity study, with the number of high intensity part-timers declining very slightly over the period.

**Figure 4.3: Part time numbers by intensity of study**



4.4 Finally, Figure 4.4 shows trends for mature first year students. There has been a small decrease over the entire period although numbers increased in the last year reported. The number of part-time undergraduates increased slightly faster than other groups in the last year.

**Figure 4.4: Mature first year students**



## Part-time and varying pace

- 4.5 The aggregate data available gives, at best, a very partial insight into recent trends in the demand for flexibly paced learning but there is nothing to indicate that demand will increase significantly in the near future. The trend in high intensity part-time study suggests, if anything, the opposite.
- 4.6 This general picture is consistent with the information we gathered during consultations with HEIs although, for some, PT provision was relatively more important to first degree provision than the aggregate figures suggest. Part-time, and the potential to switch between PT and FT study, is also an important component of WP strategies and activities and some universities would have little prospect of meeting their objectives unless they offered such flexibility.
- 4.7 We were asked to comment on whether flexible provision should be a priority for ASNs, but we do not believe there is sufficient evidence, at present, to make such recommendations. There are a number of (related) reasons as to why expansion of flexible provision might in practice be problematic.
- 4.8 First, the focus groups indicated that while flexible provision would be attractive it would not be sufficient to encourage participants into HE. Individual financial considerations, both in terms of career prospects and the costs of HE, are far more important. Part-time and flexible provision can partly address some of these considerations but it would not alter the perceived net returns to the individual, especially given the high levels of aversion to acquiring debt.
- 4.9 Second, most of the institutions we visited were cautious as to the potential for any significant expansion of PT provision<sup>18</sup>. In part this is related to cost considerations, which are discussed further below, but there are also concerns that there is limited unmet demand at present and some institutions are already experiencing difficulties in meeting current target student numbers.
- 4.10 Third, the current financial environment is felt to inhibit both supply and demand:
- the current teaching funding method is considered by HEIs we consulted to make expansion of PT provision unattractive. In part, this relates to an identification of PT provision with WP and a perception that the WP related funding does not cover the costs of expansion in this area. But, there are also specific concerns relating to the size of the PT premium and the measurement and treatment of non-completion

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<sup>18</sup> Some did perceive opportunities to expand provision funded by employers

- financial support for students is seen to discriminate against PT students and their relative position will deteriorate with the requirement to pay fees up front. Several institutions also felt concerned that the introduction of variable fees would increase the relative financial attraction of FT students over PT students unless PT fees were increased. However, the increased cost could lead to a significant reduction in demand for PT provision.

### ***Accelerated degrees***

- 4.11 We were unable to identify much evidence on the demand for accelerated degrees. There was a widespread view amongst the focus group participants that these would be attractive to students entering HE straight from school but this view was not supported by subsequent focus group sessions with such potential entrants. In principle, there could be cost advantages to the institution providing accelerated programmes, but they would need to establish a supporting infrastructure, and change working practices, which could be costly. None of the institutions we visited had plans to do this. We would note that two-year degrees could only be financially feasible for an HEI if annual fees were raised significantly above their current level and this would require legislative changes.

## **List of abbreviations**

FT full-time

HE higher education

HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI higher education institution

PT part-time