

Part-Time Now: What can we learn from part-time HE students in Wales about embracing plurality?

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The part-time higher education sector in the UK is large – nearly 250,000 people in the UK were studying part-time in 2011-12, but has contracted by more than 40% in the last two years. This contraction is being felt differently across the four UK nations (HEFCE, 2014; Oxford Economics, 2014; Universities UK, 2013). Recent attention in the media has highlighted the critical importance of part-time study to the economy – part-time students are net-contributors to the exchequer, are usually in full-time employment, and make a major contribution to widening participation, social mobility, and re-skilling the workforce to meet the challenges of the 21st century globalised economy (Universities UK, 2013), yet little student voice investigation into the implications for learning and teaching for part-time learners in HE has been conducted.

As higher education policy in the UK becomes increasingly divergent, there is critical need to analyse and compare experiences of part-time study across the four UK nations, with particular concern for characteristics and circumstances related to substantial barriers faced by part-time students, including caring responsibilities, disabilities, and working and learning.

In Wales, there are around 180,000 part-time students; the majority of 330,000 post-16 students study part-time. Funding for part-time provision, both to institutions and to the student, is different to other modes. The overall number of part-time students in Wales has been dropping consistently, year-on-year and whilst the decline in Wales has not been as steep as that in England, it nonetheless is a matter of concern.

This paper reports on data drawn from a study of the part-time student experience across Wales. The research formed a pilot (undertaken with NUS Wales) for a HEA-funded UK-wide investigation of part-time HE which will report in 2015. Welsh policy maintains a rhetoric of parity of esteem and equity for part-time HE. However, the study was undertaken in the context of a noisy HE discourse dominated by fees for full-time 18 year-olds entering HE – hiding a major decline in part-time numbers (most pronounced in England) and a consequent challenge for those most disadvantaged groups in society seeking a flexible first step into HE, and those in employment seeking to up-skill.

The research questions sought to establish **who** studied part-time, **why** students chose part-time, and **what** their learning experience had been. Survey data was collected from self-completed responses to an online survey promoted to part-time students in Wales. Following analysis, 25 follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with a volunteer, purposive sample to explore individual experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were used, which guided participants through discussions about their lives and how they positioned learning within their lives. This idiographic approach was pursued to enable an analysis capable of emphasising detailed descriptions of complex and particular circumstances (Yates, 2003) to attest to the extent of heterogeneity of experience in the part-time higher education student body. A narrative approach to the interviews and

analysis was used, to ‘provide a framework and context for making meaning of life situations’ (Pepper & Wildy, 2009).

Findings from the survey suggested 66% p/t students were female, 39% of p/t students cared for children and 11% cared for older relatives or long term disabled students, 22% had a long-term health impairment or a disability, and 72% were in employment. Most studied to enhance future employability. Five broad issues emerged:

Financial pressures (p/t students rely on savings, or their paid work, or enter into personal debt to pay for p/t study).

Time pressures (p/t students have a constant challenge to balance competing personal and professional demands with their studies).

Inflexibility (p/t students need greater flexibility to adjust the intensity of their studies)

Confusing information (p/t students need better, more efficiently delivered public information about the structure of qualifications, modes of delivery and financial support)

Institutional disincentives (HEIs lack financial incentives to prioritise/promote p/t HE)

In recognition of the significant proportions of disabled individuals, those with caring responsibilities and those combining learning and working, 25 individuals with these particular circumstances were chosen for interview.

Key aspects of the analysis explored in this paper include the range of ways in which students choose to invoke (or not invoke) reference to specific background characteristics or circumstances (for example a disability) when describing their lives and their studies. This speaks to the plurality of lived experiences of students and serves as a useful reminder of the need for individualised responses to students’ own exposition of their circumstances, rather than ascription of need based on identifiable circumstances or characteristics. The research provides evidence which emphasises the importance of institutional flexibility to support the needs of diverse students, supporting recent calls for the Academy to respond to the decline in part-time student numbers in the UK (Barnett, 2014; Universities UK, 2013). The research also provides a much needed counter-narrative to the prevailing dominant discourse around full-time higher education, and throws light on a largely invisible, but still sizeable, cross-section of the higher education student body.

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