

From lifelong learning to youth employment: the future for higher education in Scotland's colleges

Lowe Janet¹, Gayle Vernon⁰, ¹*University of Stirling, UK*, ²*University of Edinburgh, UK*

Higher education provided by further education colleges in Scotland contributes to higher levels of participation in higher education compared with other parts of the UK (Gallacher 2003, 2006)¹. In 2007 we published a case study of higher education students in a Scottish college and explored the dimensions of the work/life/study balance. In 2011 we conducted a follow-up survey in a comparable college, with three aims: to review the demographic profile of higher education students in colleges; to explore the relevance of the experience of younger higher education students for a new policy objective of reducing youth unemployment; and to consider the consequences of the changed policy context for older lifelong learners in colleges.

Young people, particularly those with few academic qualifications, are disproportionately disadvantaged by the current economic downturn (ILO 2012; ONS 2012). Bell and Blanchflower (2010, 2011) report the negative consequences of unemployment for young people, which include loss of wellbeing, loss of current and future earnings and increased probability of future unemployment.

In Scotland the recent economic downturn caused a shift in post-16 education policy. The Scottish government increased the supply of learning provision as one solution to problems of unemployment and published a Youth Employment Strategy (Scottish Government 2012a). This included a directive to colleges to accord priority to young applicants.

Various empirical studies have documented the scale, nature and growing extent of part-time work amongst university students (recent examples include Humphrey 2006; Broadbridge and Swanson 2007; Callender 2008; Hall 2010). The experience of work/life/study balance for higher education students in colleges remains, however, largely undocumented.

¹ Higher education in Scotland is defined as courses leading to qualifications at or above level 7 in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Colleges typically offer courses leading to the Higher National Certificate (level 7), Higher National Diploma (level 8) and, in partnership with universities, to degrees (level 9). Colleges also offer Scottish Vocational Qualifications, some of which are at level 7 and above.

Research methodology

Our earlier case study was based on data collected during 2000-2003. In 2011 we conducted a follow-up questionnaire survey in a comparable college. Published demographic data indicated that the proportion of younger higher education students in colleges began to increase in 2001-02² and that the trend accelerated from 2005-6. The biggest increase (35%) was in full-time male students aged 19-24. Part-time male students aged 19-24 went up by 22%. A decline in part-time female students (-30%) was spread across all age groups. Changes in the demography of the college's higher education students were comparable with the changes for Scotland.

We therefore analysed our data with a particular focus on differences across age groups, using a typology of three student groups:

School leavers (aged 16-18 years)

Young adults (aged 19-24 years)

Adults (aged 25 years and over)

Findings

The incidence of students combining study and work has increased since 2003. In 2011, 100% of part-time students and 59% of full-time students were in work. School leavers and young adults were more likely to work than their older counterparts, with two out of three young adults who were full-time students having a job.

The analysis of time use is a useful technique in sociological research (Gershuny 2000). Each student estimated the number of hours spent during a typical week on: studying, working, travelling, domestic tasks, personal/social activities. Students were putting in an average 'working week' of 39 - 67 hours. The experience of juggling a busy life was clearly evidenced amongst adults. School leavers and young adults reported a lower average total amount of activity (excluding leisure time). In our earlier case study, full-time students reported spending around 30-35 hours a week studying. In this more

² Source: Scottish Funding Council Infact database (www.sfc.ac.uk)

recent cohort this figure is considerably less with school leavers recording only 22-25 hours per week on average. These patterns of activity may be more comparable with their school experience.

Two thirds of the students achieved a good or manageable work/life/study balance. Their success in doing so was strongly related to whether they had considered dropping out³. For a significant minority, though, the experience of balancing work, home and study created difficulty and increased the risk of dropping out.

In both phases of this investigation, we found very little evidence of an association between the personal or employment characteristics of the students or their mode of study and the quality of work/life/study balance. In 2011, the relationship between the different aspects of students' lives emerged as significant. Those who experienced most difficulty in balancing their priorities also reported a negative impact of home and/or work on study. Work and home life can and do have a positive impact on study. Where this was the case, students were more likely to report a good balance.

The campus population included 150 Modern Apprentices⁴ and we estimate that they represented at least 50% of our part-time survey respondents. Young part-time students (under 25), whose fees are paid by their employers, were more likely to have well balanced lives, more likely to report a positive relationship between work and study and less likely to consider dropping out than young full-time students.

Osborne et al (2001) found a complex relationship between mature students' aspirations, the personal pressures they faced and the institutional factors that affected participation. In our study, mature students were likely to be at greatest risk of experiencing difficulties with work/life/study balance. Their home circumstances were significant in influencing whether they achieved a good work/life/study balance, together with the support they received from a range of sources.

Discussion

3 chi-square = 117.94, df = 3, p = <0.001

4 Studying at SCQF level 7 or 8

Sustaining young people in full-time education is justifiable in a recession but this also raises important questions. Field (2006) suggests that mass higher education results in warehousing young people who experience higher education as a lengthy extension of school, rather than as a positive post-school choice. In our survey, some school leavers exhibited a pattern of study, work and home life that appears comparable with that of a school pupil. This has negative implications for likelihood of success in higher education and for transition into suitable employment.

Although there is a strong overall link between educational attainment and employment, qualifications do not translate automatically into improved job prospects. Crawford et al (2011) found that combining full-time education with work had beneficial long term effects (compared with education only). Our findings suggest that colleges should take greater steps to enable full-time students to combine work and study effectively, and to gain as much benefit as possible from their work experience.

Apprenticeships appear to provide a positive option in terms of combining work and study. Growth in apprenticeships may therefore represent sound policy in response to youth unemployment, as an apprenticeship offers an attractive mode of access into higher education as well as a viable route into the adult labour market (Keese 2013).

The hidden story behind the shift in balance in favour of young people is a reduction in “second chance” higher education for adults. Enabling adult students to mobilise sources of support and to manage the many demands on their time will remain essential for maximising their chances of educational success.

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