

Understanding part-time College Higher Education

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Introduction

The decline in part-time Higher Education (HE) has been of concern to the stakeholders of part-time HE including policy makers and providers of part-time HE. A number of recent research projects have contributed to developing an understanding of trends in part-time HE and the possible reasons for decline in part-time HE in England, however the specific area of part-time HE in FECs remains relatively under-researched.

This paper draws on findings from a study that is currently being undertaken on College Higher Education (CHE) in England. FE Colleges deliver HE to about 8 percent of the total population of HE students and a majority of College HE students study on a part-time basis. College HE plays a significant role in providing access to sub-degree education as well as other professional courses to local and regional communities. A decline in part-time CHE implies that fewer people can access these opportunities for studying HE that is largely vocational and important for those wanting to up-skill or re-skill to meet their aspirations.

The College Higher Education project has been funded by the Association of Colleges and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The project has three key strands- motivations and experiences of part-time students to study HE in FE colleges; institutional perspectives on the reasons for decline in part-time students; and employer perspectives on part-time CHE. The study aims to help develop an understanding of undergraduate level part-time CHE and offer some insights into the reasons for decline in part-time student numbers experienced by the colleges. This timely and topical study will also contribute to the wider knowledge and understanding of part time HE delivered in FECs.

Methodology

As part of the research, 30 FE colleges are being studied. These sample colleges include those that have experienced an increase, decrease or have remained stable in terms of their part-time HE student numbers. The sample has been chosen to include colleges from different regions of England, and to include providers of both prescribed and non-prescribed HE. These providers include those that deliver directly funded as well as indirectly funded HE provision.

As part of the sample selection process, trends data on part-time student numbers was requested from two separate sources. Whilst HEFCE provided time series data for HEFCE recognised HE, the ILR data for non-prescribed HE was provided by the Data Service. Whilst drawing the sample, simultaneous references have been made to both the datasets.

The study uses a mixed method approach which includes conducting focus groups with part time students at selected colleges as well as a survey that is currently being conducted through completion of paper-based questionnaires by students at the participating colleges. The study also involves in-depth interviews with the college HE leaders to gather insights into the nature of part-time provision delivered at the colleges as well as the recent patterns in the recruitment of part-time students.

A majority of the data has been gathered and the data collection phase will shortly be followed by the data analysis phase of the project. The study also involves secondary data analysis which will identify the key trends in part-time college higher education at an undergraduate level.

Discussion

The HEFCE time series data has suggested that out of 261 colleges that provided part-time HE, 97 colleges had experienced a decline (-50 to -249) and another 21 had experienced a notable decline (-250 or more) in their part-time numbers from 2008/09 to 2012/13. It is also notable that only 22 colleges have experienced an increase (+50 to +249), whereas only 1 college has experienced a notable increase in part-time student numbers. Whilst the patterns of decline have not been consistent over the five year period (and there may have been changes in approaches to recording the data although these are unlikely to be able to explain the notable decline in part time student numbers), a number of colleges have experienced a steep decline in their part-time recruitment.

Whilst a systematic data analysis has not yet been conducted, an initial analysis of the qualitative data gathered through the interviews with Heads of HE suggests that there are differences in how the decline in part-time students has affected the colleges. These include some regional differences as well as differences in the impact of the economic downturn and recovery in different parts of the country. However, a majority of respondents have attributed the decline to the rise in tuition fee, economic recession, and a reduction in the employer support for funding their employees to study HE. Mixed responses have been received in relation to the impact of the introduction of part-time tuition fee loans. On the one hand, arguments have been made to suggest that part-time tuition fee loans may deter mature students from pursuing HE as they are likely to be debt averse. On the other hand, it has also been argued that with the increased tuition fee and withdrawal of maintenance grants, tuition fee loans are enabling part-time students to pursue HE who would otherwise not be able to fund their studies.

Likewise, a very initial analysis of the student focus group data suggests that there are a number of reasons underpinning student choices to study HE in FE including the college offering their preferred course, location of their college, employer funding and support to study a specific course at the college, lower fee at the college and most importantly the opportunity to study their course on a part-time basis.

The paper will present findings from the two strands of the study, namely the institutional perspectives as well as the student perspectives (identified through student surveys and the student focus groups). This substantial piece of work on part-time College Higher Education will potentially help inform the policy developments relating to HE in FECs. Additionally, the project will highlight some areas for development that could be considered by the colleges to help facilitate a better learning experience for their part-time HE students.