

‘Shoehorned and side-lined?’ Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape (0378)

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Introduction: This research set out to investigate the part-time student experience of higher education across the United Kingdom, in the context of a well-publicised contraction in the sector, and increasing divergence between policies affecting part-time study in the four nations. The topic is important, given the positive impact part-time learners make to the economy (UUK, 2013), and the extent to which the experience of part-time higher education contributes to social mobility and widening participation. Current policies and practices side-line part-time HE, and in doing so disregard skills shortages, the transformative potential of enhancing social capital through lifelong learning, and the difficulties adults face in taking their education to higher levels.

The dramatic decline in part-time participation (HEFCE, 2014) offers a serious challenge to the sector, and a diminution of opportunity to disadvantaged students seeking tentative first steps into higher education. Any decline in part-time numbers disproportionately impacts on students from the lowest socio-economic groups (ARC, 2013), precisely the groups that universities in England were meant to target with resources from the increased fees they were allowed to charge (BIS, 2011) after funding changes in 2012. The numbers affected are highly significant: in England, the decline in part-time registration has been reported as a critical 40% since 2010 (HEFCE, 2013). The decrease from 2010 – 2013 equated to the equivalent of 105,000 fewer students (HEFCE 2013).

The divergence in policies is to some extent reflected in different narratives. In Wales, the Assembly (Welsh Government, 2013) have made a firm commitment to part-time higher education as making a vital contribution to widening access and employability for those with ‘protected characteristics’ (HEFCW, 2014), but part-time numbers have dropped over the five year period, (a 24% drop, so less than in England). In Scotland, with a more positive government discourse around the benefits of part-time higher education, the decrease was 7% between 2012/13 and 2013/14, but concentrated mainly in the College sector (HE in FE). In Northern Ireland, numbers involved in part-time higher education have always been small, but a 5% decrease has been recorded from 2012/13 to 2013/14.

Methodology: in order to explore the part-time student experience in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, a 25 question online survey was issued to a sample of part-time students between July and October 2014, based on a pilot study conducted in Wales in 2013 (Rees & Rose Adams (2014). The survey was sent to students identified by the Open University (which operates across the UK) as an appropriate sample of part-time distance learners, and those identified by the project steering group as studying at those face-to-face universities and colleges with the highest numbers of part-time learners. 433 completed responses were received from Open University students and 1134 responses from non-OU part-time students at a sample of universities and colleges.

Themes from the quantitative data informed the questions asked via telephone interviews in the second stage of the research. This consisted of 22 semi-structured one-to-one interviews with a purposive sample of volunteer participants from those who completed the survey, and a focus group

interview with three part-time students in a college setting. This qualitative data resulted in 285 pages of interview transcripts.

Findings: Flexibility emerges as a core issue. Institutions were reported as being inflexible in relation to part-timers - interviewees spoke of feeling like an 'inconvenience', of being 'shoe-horned' into existing full-time structures, of being 'side-lined' and experiencing a lack of differentiation ('one-size-fits all'). The sector must be conscious of the heterogeneity of part-time students and address individual needs accordingly – whether that is in the mode, place or pace of study and to embed these in strategies for learning and teaching.

Some respondents reported that “it was either part-time or nothing” in terms of choosing a mode of study. Most respondents admitted to preferring the idea of full-time study, but believed the cost was too great; they could not afford to give up a job when they had extensive family outgoings, and in many cases they were debt-averse. They are thus confronted with 'Hobson's choice'.

Coping with mental health problems, being on medication, managing hospital appointments, being housebound or facing deteriorating mobility issues were all reported. This went some way to confirming a conclusion drawn from qualitative responses to a Welsh pilot study (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015) that for students in such circumstances, part-time higher education is a 'lifeline'.

Barriers to part-time study were cited as financial by many respondents, with the cost of courses presenting a challenge to individuals who reported using their own savings, borrowing from family, or credit card debt to fund their studies (only 15% of respondents reported employer support for their studies). In England, the challenge of the lack of a maintenance grant for part-time study was often mentioned.

When asked why they were studying at all, the commonest response from part-time students was to improve employment prospects. The second most cited reason was that students who felt they had missed out at 18 were pursuing the opportunity of a second chance.

A lot of interviewees reflected on their perception of not having a student identity, amplified by not feeling part of a student community. Part-time learners feel isolated and disengaged from the institutional support structures provided for full-timers.

Information, advice and guidance for part-time students appear to be inadequate: the complexity of qualification pathways, delivery modes, workload and financial support remain a barrier. Even disciplinary differences need acknowledging in part-time HE, since subject choices can be proxies for work-related upskilling, or study driven by personal interest, and different experiences across disciplines which might affect retention (Woodfield, 2014).

Conclusion: Across the UK, there is a knowledge gap around the experiences of, and challenges facing part-time students in higher education. Policy makers need to listen to these experiences, and recognise the needs and aspirations of disadvantaged learners in this heterogeneous sector. Shibboleths like 'flexibility', 'choice' and 'employability' need to take account of the particular circumstances in which part-timers have to learn.

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