

UCU response to UUK review on part-time HE

1. What do you think are the main factors contributing to the fall in recruitment?

Outside of the Open University, part-time student numbers have been on a downward trend for a number of years. Some of the reasons for this include the:

- closure and transformation of specialist university lifelong learning and continuing education departments (and therefore a reduction in the part-time 'curriculum offer');
- rise in some part-time tuition fees after the 2006-7 reforms;
- introduction of the 'ELQ' rule in 2007.

Since the introduction of the new higher education reforms in 2012-13, there has been a much more significant decline in part-time enrolments (i.e. the current estimate is a 30% drop since 2011). Probably the main reason for the decline is the massive increase in part-time student fees in 2012-13.

It was thought that the introduction of part-time tuition loans would help increase participation but it is clear that this did not happen in 2012-13. This may be partly the result of poor information about the new loan scheme, but may be more to with debt aversion and/or a feeling that the increased costs of higher education now outweigh the potential benefits. It is also the case that 70% of part-time students remain ineligible for the new student tuition fee loans and therefore the majority of part-time students are now faced with much higher upfront fees than before.

Finally, there is some evidence that in the current recession (as in previous economic downturns) employers are less able or less willing to pay for the full cost of their employees' education and training (Callender and Wilkinson, 2012, *Futuretrack: part-time higher education students three years on – their experiences of studying and the benefits of learning*).

All of these factors have come together to create a 'perfect storm' for mature, part-time student participation in higher education.

2. What more might be done to communicate with potential learners about the value of part-time higher education, with a view to encouraging more people to take part?

While there is emerging research evidence highlighting the private [and public] benefits of part-time higher education (for example, Callender and Wilkinson, 2012), national marketing and media campaigns tend to focus on the traditional 18-19 year old route from school into full-time residential study. Government and university marketing and communications, therefore, need to feature adults and not simply young people in their literature and campaigns. Having said that, it can be difficult to persuade the media that mature, part-time higher education is a core feature of the system, rather than a niche market.

Providing face-to-face information, advice and guidance to potential students can be one of the best ways to encourage adults to undertake part-time study in higher education. Getting part-time alumni to speak to potential students can be particularly important.

However, these changes may only go so far in helping to encourage adults to opt for part-time study in higher education. We are in uncharted waters in higher education (for example, where even the Open University has experienced a fall in part-time numbers) and so we cannot automatically assume that the part-time student 'market' will recover to previous levels. More research is needed on the demand for postgraduate study, including at the disciplinary/subject level.

3. What is your understanding of the value employers place on part-time higher education provision? What role does employer funding/support play?

Research suggests that employers value part-time study in two main ways: firstly, as a means to develop employment-related skills in graduates and secondly, in upgrading the skills and knowledge of current employees (Pollard et al, 2012, BIS Research Paper 68, *Expanding and improving part-time higher education*). However, not all employers are willing to pay for it, or to ensure that it is accessible to all employees.

4. Has there been a change in employer funding/support in recent years and if so, why?

The Futuretrack survey found that employers have been contributing less towards their employees' part-time tuition fees than in previous years. Although it is too early to

determine the specific impact of the 2012-13 funding changes on the levels of employer funding and support, one can assume that the funding 'shortfall' has grown wider.

Probably the main reason for the reluctance to pay for the full cost of their employees' education is the massive increase in HE tuition fees. An added complication may be the relationship between employer support and new tuition fee loans (for example, to what extent it may be classified as a taxable benefit). Finally, in terms of the future, the changing nature of higher level qualifications (e.g. the introduction of higher level apprenticeships) may result in employers shifting to different types of support for employee learning.

5. How could higher education providers and employers work better together to help raise skills through part-time higher education provision?

6. What else should be done to improve the experiences of part-time and mature students? For example, through improvements to information and administration as learners come into the system or innovative practices in flexible learning?

Research shows that part-time students are largely satisfied with their HE experience, and appear to be more satisfied than full-time students. At the same time, part-time students are less likely to complete their course and achieve the highest degree classifications (Pollard et al, 2012). Overall, universities and colleges have improved their support for part-time students (for example, greater use of online support, increased entry and exit points throughout the academic year, developing peer support systems etc), though more could be done to ensure that these measures are applied consistently across the institution.

7. What policy changes at a national level might make a difference?

There are lots of potential changes that would help to improve the attractiveness of part-time study. For example, at the applications stage UCAS could do more to highlight the part-time option and could explore the possibility of part-time students applying in the same way as full-time students.

BIS and the SLC should also invest in a national publicity campaign to promote the value of mature and part-time higher education, including the welcome – albeit limited – improvements in access to tuition fee loans. However, the current student support package for part-time students remains inadequate and we call on BIS to ensure that tuition fee loans are available to all part-time students, rather than a minority as at present.

Finally, there needs to be a change in the fundamental approach to higher education finance and funding. If higher education continues to be conceived solely as a private benefit (with permanently high fees – either upfront or deferred), then it may be difficult to encourage young and mature students to enter part-time higher education. That is one of the reasons why we must continue to make the case for higher education as an essential public good, which is beneficial to individuals, but also the wider society and the economy. One of the specific changes in this direction is to restore the HEFCE teaching grant to institutions. However, this should be part of a wider campaign to raise the level of public investment in tertiary education. For example, the UCU-led 'Knowledge economy' campaign aims to persuade the UK governments to take a lead in raising funding for tertiary education to the OECD average of 1.6% of GDP:

<http://www.knowledgeeconomy.org.uk>

8. What else do you think the review should know or consider?

The review might consider the relationship between part-time provision and the widening participation agenda. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that young part-time students are more likely come from a low participation neighbourhood, compared with full-time adults (Pollard et al, 2012).

However, the main issue relates to the decline in the number of part-time adult learners in higher education. We suggest that OFFA and HEFCE explore how adult learners from 'non-traditional' backgrounds can be incorporated into their approaches to widening participation.

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