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Listen to part-time learners and smart policy will follow

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5. Listen to part-time learners and smart policy will follow

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People are stuck in a situation where they feel they want to learn more, but financial constraints are the biggest barrier... my fees are paid through an employer, but other people might not have that opportunity...I'm very sensitive to how people who want to study are going to pay thousands in fees. It's a lot of money.

The dramatic decline in part-time numbers in the UK over the last five years (most marked in the 40 per cent drop in England) has been reported in trenchant terms, and suggested reasons behind it have been analysed extensively. Unlike full-timers, part-time students in England cannot access financial support towards maintenance costs and, as mainly mature learners, are risk-averse in relation to taking on loan debt to fund their studies. This is clearly a critical issue for policymakers, especially as funding policies affecting part-time higher education increasingly diverge across the four nations of the UK:

We're very fortunate in Scotland that we do get a lot of financial support, but as a country we need to look at making part-time HE more accessible financially.

'Crisis' is not too strong a word, since the decline encompasses threats to social mobility, a narrowing of access to higher

education and a diminution of opportunities for the most disadvantaged adults in society. The consequences are catastrophic for those individuals denied a chance to transform their lives and those of their families through part-time study. The UK Government have been unaccountably quiet around this, which is disappointing as: degree apprenticeships will inevitably be part-time; and the RAB charge of part-time study is a positive for the Treasury, given that that part-time students are likely to be working while learning, contributing taxes, and have higher earnings on graduation, thus repaying their loans more efficiently.

However, the bare numbers behind the decline do not reveal the experiences of current part-time learners, who represent 28 per cent of current undergraduate numbers. In a recent UK-wide study for the Higher Education Academy, survey responses were elicited from 1,567 part-time students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, complemented by interviews with 25 participants. Added to the 1,344 survey respondents and 25 interviews from Welsh part-time students in a 2013 pilot study, the fraught experiences of part-time learners (many the first in their families to enter higher education) comes through loud and clear. The findings reveal the challenges faced by part-time learners, and suggest what policymakers might do to address such issues.

'Choice' is an increasingly familiar motif in higher education policy, yet the notion that part-time students choose part-time is misplaced. Because of personal circumstances,

respondents reported having no choice other than studying part-time – despite almost all admitting they would rather study full-time if they could – but they could not afford to give up paid work:

If I could turn the clock back, I would go full-time... if I won the lottery tomorrow I would.

I am employed full-time, so can only study part-time, but would prefer full-time in order to shorten the degree and do more with my family... it takes a hell of a lot of commitment.

Part-time higher education was not perceived as offering value for money and was considered barely affordable:

As a part-timer I can't claim a maintenance loan... my income is very low and yet I cannot claim anything apart from the tuition loan... people on their own would find it impossible to cope and therefore would be denied the opportunity.

I am finding it a financial struggle and my Dad offered to lend me the money.

Over one-in-five (22 per cent) of the respondents described themselves as studying with a disability or long-term health impairment – coping with mental health problems, being on medication, managing hospital appointments, being housebound or facing deteriorating mobility issues and were therefore unable to study full-time (despite many reporting attempting full-time study earlier in their lives).

Respondents confirmed that employability was a key driver: whether to gain promotion, an increased salary, change career direction or have an improved standard of living. While such aspirations figured strongly, especially for women, this was framed more in a personal sense of individual agency and career planning than policy discourses about graduate careers aimed at 21-year-olds. While the majority of respondents worked full-time while studying, only half studied a discipline related to their employment. Those who did saw benefits in being able to apply knowledge immediately to their professional environment, although they could be demotivated if learning did not align with skills needed at work.

But employability was not the only motivation. Significant proportions of respondents cited 'love of subject', the opportunity to engage with interests in the context of personal fulfilment and getting a chance to do something for oneself: making up for lost time, having 'missed out'. There were also comments around seeking to provide a good role model for their children. Additionally (particularly for older, 50+ students) intellectual stimulation was seen as driving higher education learning.

There were gendered subject choices: men tended to be upskilling in Engineering, Technology and Maths, while women were 'in love with' their studies in Humanities, Health and Education. Intriguingly, it was only in the visual arts that mature part-timers described higher education as transfor-

mative in lifestyle terms – something they had been steered away from by parents or employment prospects when young, but which now was, for them, closely tied to their sense of who they were. This belies the notion that so-called Mickey Mouse courses are unsatisfying or unpopular among second-chance students.

Despite policy discourses advocating (and indeed claiming) flexibility in higher education, the experience of part-time learners is that too often, institutions are intrinsically inflexible and fail to meet the needs of time-poor students juggling work commitments and caring responsibilities in busy complex lives. Students with disabilities or chronic health problems or with work or caring commitments were most likely to have missed a formal element of their course due to insufficient time:

It is demanding on top of a full-time job, especially when work commitments clash with deadlines.

The result is a diminished student experience. Generally, part-time learners felt they were unacknowledged as a student group by institutions, regarded as ‘an inconvenience’, as ‘shoehorned’ and ‘side-lined’ into one-size-fits-all systems aimed at full-time students:

The institution is not as adaptable as it might be to students who work full-time.

Too often, the communication from institutions to part-time learners was insufficiently differentiated or tailored, leaving them unaware of timetabling changes or prey to changes to programme structures which increased the length of time for which they had to study. Part-time students found it difficult to get to see tutors on dispersed campuses in the limited time they had available – they felt on the fringes when campuses were like ‘ghost towns’ in the evenings or at weekends.

As a part-time student you don't feel as valued as the full-time students – the lecturer is assigned late, VLE [virtual learning environment] not working, late notice of rooms, term dates.

Respondents felt it was unreasonable that tutors expected studying to be the first and only priority of part-timers:

being a Dad, married ... your personal circumstances are unavoidable and impact on study.

The benefits of peer learning, social support networks and pro-active institutional systems for pastoral care are well established in the literature on successful full-time study. However, part-time students tended not to interact with other learners, and were isolated from the student cultures and communities taken for granted by full-timers.

I wish I'd done it when I was younger ... I miss out on any beneficial relationships with other students, I feel isolated.

Many part-time learners did not identify themselves as ‘students’, often taking an ‘instrumental’ view solely in relation

to the benefits of having a NUS card, considering themselves 'too old' to be a real student – one of these was only 21, but perceived students as younger and full-time.

Some learners in full-time employment hid their student status fearing they would be 'found out' in their jobs. Others viewed their personal or professional identity as dominant, and were indifferent to their student identity, while a few expressed conflict around a deeper sense of being a 'lifelong or mature learner' rather than a student.

The problem with being part-time is that people assume they can come and steal your time...it takes a lot of changing your lifestyle, to plan not to be at everyone's beck and call.

Very difficult to do work and study at the same time. It's like having two different personalities...it's very challenging.

A minority took a more integrated view, in which a sense of achievement, commitment and excitement reflected a 'secret' student identity. Part-time learners with a disability were more likely to identify themselves as students.

While interviewees felt online and distance learning had advantages in terms of flexibility, they regarded it as requiring self-organisation, and carrying the risk of learner isolation or disassociation:

You do feel like you're at the end of a very, very long piece of thread away from where it's all happening.

Websites and traditional media are awash with information, advice and guidance aimed at 18-to-21 year old full-time students at traditional universities. Unfortunately, the complex needs of adult part-time students are ill-served: a particularly damning indictment is that 80 per cent of potential part-time learners were not aware that student loans were available for part-time study.

There is less opportunity for people to go and do things part-time – what if they want to go...and there is only full-time?

Respondents in this research relied on personal savings, and personal debt as well as their paid work. Part-timers needed financial, health-related and personal advice, as well as academic advice around qualification pathways, delivery mode and workload, but it was not always readily accessible.

Policymakers deserve to be held to account for the fact that young full-time students are unable to solve the skills shortage on their own as well as for the productivity crisis. The argument in the Leitch report that the workforce of 2020 have already been through education is truer than ever. The country needs to upskill and retrain adults, who often have no choice but to study part-time. The lack of attention given to nurturing a vibrant, accessible, viable and student-centred part-time sector has resulted in critical decline.

If policymakers listen to those part-time students resilient enough to persist, answers are available:

- Incentivise all universities to develop an attractive and flexible part-time offer through a refocused Student Opportunity Allocation, which could drive genuinely flexible part-time provision rather than *ad hoc* infill.
- Clarify the information advice and guidance aimed at part-time mature students in one place, so no potential learner is unclear about the funding available to support their studies.
- Support the aspirations of part-time learners across the UK equitably by fee subsidies and part-time maintenance loans (on which the likelihood of quicker payback is greater than full-time) to remove their fear of debt.

Widening-access policies that include the neglected part-time adult learner will result in increased upskilling and role models that more adults can aspire to, enabling them to transform their lives. Social mobility can be galvanised by an energetic part-time higher education sector. Such proposals would enable current barriers to part-time learning to be removed. Let us not forget: the majority of part-time learners are in employment and already contributing to the Exchequer.