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Financial risk and inflexibility: part-time HE in decline

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Theme – finance and inflexibility; key challenges for part-time students; adult learners from a WP background disproportionately disadvantaged in part-time decline

Abstract

The last special edition of this journal featured a range of articles exploring important issues around the impact of financial support on access to higher education, and subsequent persistence and achievement. The authors focussed on the unstated assumption that all HE students are full-time, and their findings implied that all students in need of financial support are 18 – 21 years old. In a UK context, this ignores the 28% of HE students who can only study part-time, a group disproportionately represented by mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This article draws on a UK-wide study of part-time learners in HE (Butcher, 2015) to argue that the financial challenges faced by part-time HE students, together with the inflexibilities in many university systems, contribute to the diminishing attraction of part-time study, and may play a significant role in the dramatic decline in part-time HE numbers in England, and to a lesser extent across the UK, since 2010.

Introduction

'The majority of people are not really on board with the nuances between part-time and full-time study' (interviewee 15)

The last special edition of this journal featured a range of articles exploring important issues around the impact of financial support on disadvantaged students' access to higher education, and their subsequent persistence and achievement. While advocating an admirable research stance on the complete student lifecycle, the authors focussed entirely on the unstated assumption that all HE students are full-time, and their articles implied that all students in need of financial support are 18 – 21 years old. This narrow focus on what might be perceived as a traditional cohort of school leavers progressing straight on to university study compounds the error voiced by many politicians and policy-makers in England: that widening participation and social mobility can be addressed solely by increasing the proportion of disadvantaged 18 year-olds attending selective universities, and implementing interventions to prevent them withdrawing. The fact that most of the academic literature referenced in the articles in the special edition also drew on research into the impact of financial support on young students places the absence of any discussion of mature students, particularly part-time students, into even starker relief.

By focussing on financial support for full-time HE students, the research as reported inadvertently neglected a critical issue facing widening participation and lifelong learning policy and practice across the UK – the dramatic decline in part-time students. **In the UK, part-time is virtually a proxy for mature students (McLinden, 2013)**, and the impact of financial pressure on those students who do enrol part-time and manage to persist. This exclusion of any acknowledgement of the financial barriers faced by adult learners in the special edition was unfortunate, and masked what might be termed the critical zeitgeist issue facing widening participation in England – plummeting registrations by part-time learners.

It is noteworthy that there has been significant media attention in the UK in the last year to the dramatic decline (over 40% in England) in the number of part-time learners in higher education (Hillman, 2015). A steep decline in the numbers of adults registering for part-time HE began in 2010/11, the year before fees were raised significantly, with 152K fewer part-time students between 2010 and 2015 (Hutton, 2015) threatening critical mass in an already disadvantaged and vulnerable HE student group. Any reduction in part-time HE numbers should be an important issue to politicians and policy-makers, because of the positive impact part-time learners make to the economy: the majority are in full-time employment and remain so during their studies, and thus make a contribution to the Exchequer. Part-time adult learners are also likely to be the engine of modernisation and change to meet the challenges of the 21st century globalised economy, by re-skilling the workforce (UUK, 2013). Yet the critical issue for universities seeking to address fair access is that part-time higher education makes a major contribution to widening participation and to social mobility, because part-time learners are more likely to be over 25, to be from the lowest socio-economic groups, to be the first in their families to attend HE and to come from neighbourhoods with the lowest rate of progression to HE (ARC, 2013).

The context surrounding the reducing part-time numbers, and the consequent diminution of transformative HE opportunities for disadvantaged adults, is important. With the introduction of higher fees in England, student expectations about value for money have changed, with universities seeking to engage students more effectively (Hillman, 2014) – but this is not easy for part-timers who are likely to be time-poor (Butcher, 2015), juggling other major responsibilities alongside their studies. Part-timers have been caught up in a push by policy-makers for more intensive modes of study in a competitive HE environment, and many doubt the extent to which there is meaningful dialogue between HE institutions and those learners who study in them part-time.

Yet the experience of part-time students remains under-researched: the financial challenge faced by individual students is inadequately recognised, and institutional strategies aimed at supporting the persistence and achievements of part-timers are poorly evaluated.

As higher education policy in the UK becomes increasingly divergent across the four nations, the substantial financial challenges faced by part-time students need to be understood. These are likely to be adults, balancing working and learning with caring responsibilities, and some will be studying with disabilities or long term health impairments. Yet little student voice investigation into the implications for supporting part-time learners in HE has been conducted – part-time learners are difficult to reach and their stories rarely feature in research reports. This article, drawing on extensive new student voice material from a substantive study of part-time learners across the UK (<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/shoe-horned-and-side-lined-challenges-part-time-learners-new-he-landscape>), seeks to contribute to sector understanding of that significant proportion of HE students struggling at the sharp end of widening participation and lifelong learning policy. In so doing, the findings are intended to raise the profile of issues faced by part-time learners in the UK, especially in England.

Literature

The recent history of part-time HE in the UK provides an important context: 15 years ago part-time HE in the UK was growing; 10 years ago, as demonstrated in the Universities UK (the advocacy organisation for universities in the UK) study (UUK, 2006), that growth began to reverse, and 5 years ago (Callender & Wilkinson, 2012) a steep decline began. The part-time share of the UK HE market has dropped year-on-year from 36% (2007/8) to 28% (2012/13). Despite this drop, the part-time higher education sector in the UK is large – nearly

250,000 people in the UK commenced studying part-time in 2011-12 (HESA, 2015). The part-time 'problem' is also one of definition – despite a decade which has seen full-time HE endeavouring to offer greater flexibility to better meet the needs of learners (Barnett, 2014), the debate continues about the extent to which moves towards more flexible provision blur the traditional distinction between full-time and part-time (McLinden, 2013).

The severity of the part-time decline is particularly marked in England, where 80% of UK part-time students are based. Since 2010, numbers studying part-time undergraduate courses have dropped by 40%. Factors contributing to this drop include: the removal of financial support for students taking equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs); austerity measures reducing the financial support provided by employers for part-time study (especially in the public sector); the tripling of tuition fees for part-time students (McLinden, 2013). Provision of student loans (providing study meets a baseline intensity and leads to a qualification) has failed to arrest the decline in part-time numbers – unlike the now stabilised situation for full-time students. The steepest decline (55%) is in sub-degree provision – those awards of institutional credit, Certificates or Diplomas which reduce the risks perceived by disadvantaged students with low prior qualifications for upskilling. Ironically, the provision of Foundation degrees, vocational courses developed with employers to provide a second, flexible chance into a wide range of professional pathways, have seen part-time student numbers drop from 40K in 2011 to 24K in 2013. This may indicate a strategic withdrawal by a number of universities in response to reduced funding – with the unintended impact on the most disadvantaged students (often working adults) who engage with higher education via part-time modes of study (ARC, 2013). It is notable that in England, unlike Scotland for example, there is no maintenance grant or loan for part-time students (although while this article was being prepared for publication, the government announced (HM Treasury, 2015), after vigorous lobbying from the sector, a consultation on the extension of maintenance loans support to learners in England studying part-time from 2018/19).

This contraction has had a disproportionate impact on non-traditional and mature students, since part-time students, are less likely to have entry qualifications above GCSEs (Level 2 qualifications taken in school at age 16), and are more likely to have caring commitments (McLinden, 2013). Crucially, part-time students, most of whom are also mature, are not a homogeneous group (Smith, 2008), and are linked only by their selected mode of study (Jamieson et al., 2009).

Part-time adult learners are not prominent in those groups that universities (in England) were meant to target with resources from the significantly increased fees they were allowed to charge (BIS, 2011) after funding changes in 2012/13. The Higher Education Funding Council for England explicitly includes mature learners as a core widening participation group, and so universities are required to include actions and evaluations in their Access agreements (in which universities charging above a given fee set out intended measures to widen access) to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) – the independent regulator for fair access to HE in England. However, part-time provision is often not prominent in those surveyed (Bowl & Hughes 2014). This points to a failure of government policy, given that the unintended consequences of placing the burden of HE cost on individual part-time students in England appears to have been a dramatic decline in part-time participation (HEFCE, 2014).

Numbers studying part-time in Wales have also declined, less than in England with a drop of 24% in five years, but from a much smaller base. The decline might be considered as dramatic, since the Assembly (Welsh Government, 2013) have committed to part-time higher education as making a vital contribution to widening access and employability for those with 'protected characteristics' (HEFCW, 2014). Strategic intentions include: 'The aim

of widening access is to secure inclusion, progression and success in higher education to enable learners across all age ranges and backgrounds who face the highest social and economic barriers, to fulfil their potential as students, lifelong learners, citizens and employees. (HEFCW, 2013 p4). Yet aspirations of even a few years ago appear overly optimistic: an aim to deliver economic and social justice benefits (Welsh Government, 2009) via greater opportunities for individuals to learn on a part-time basis seems to have foundered, partly because the part-time market is less lucrative and the HE market generally is more volatile (UUK, 2010).

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. In Northern Ireland, **the Department for Employment and Learning – the devolved government department in the Northern Ireland Executive, published a key policy ‘Access to Success: An Integrated Regional Strategy for WP in HE’ asserting:**

‘... the challenge to develop a highly skilled workforce is not just about providing new, young graduates with the skills needed. Since around 80% of the 2020 workforce has already completed formal education, a major focus has to be on the upskilling of the existing workforce...the future providers of higher education need to become more flexible in delivery to accommodate the diverse learning needs of the mature student’ (DEL, 2012 p.5)

Scotland, which enjoys positive government discourse around the benefits of part-time higher education, experienced a decrease of 7% between 2012/13 and 2013/14, concentrated mainly in the College sector (HE in FE). The focus for Scotland tends to be more on school leavers and progression to HE, and mature learners per se are not mentioned as a priority.

International comparisons are difficult, since definitions of part-time study vary, and in some countries part-time higher education is virtually non-existent. **Historically, the UK has offered a wealth of part-time HE opportunities to address both the demand for employability upskilling, and ‘second-chance to learn’ agendas. Indeed,** across Europe, numbers studying part-time are dominated by those studying in England and Wales, with numbers in mainland Europe described as virtually non-existent (Higher Education Information System, 2008) – partly as a result of the absence of a distinctive part-time HE system in France and Germany. In the USA, part-time HE remains a marginal presence at most universities, with the full-time residential tradition remaining dominant (Jacoby, 2015). Indeed, googling part-time HE in the US generated a plethora of studies of part-time faculty rather than learners. South African HE is still based on a residential full-time daytime paradigm, with more limited after-hours part-time HE aimed at working adults (Jones & Walters, 2015)

There have been some studies which adopted a UK-wide approach (for example, UUK 2006), but relatively little research on part-time HE had been conducted prior to that (especially data on student attitudes to part-time study) compared to the wealth of data on full-time, recognising a conundrum, shared in this study, that students surveyed were currently studying and so had overcome initial barriers to access and participation. However, the authors argued such students were prevented from full-course participation due to the time constraints they studied within. Feinstein et al. (2007) noted evidence to suggest strong employment-related reasons for studying part-time, but argued for more detailed evidence. UK-wide data on the part-time student experience from a 2010 survey (Callender & Wilkinson, 2012), itself a follow-up to a 2008 original study, explored the impact on career development. While noting that one third of all undergraduates study part-time, twin drivers

were asserted – on the one hand, part-time HE was recognised as a response to the need to update employability skills, while on the other, part-time HE was offering the kind of choice in educational opportunity throughout people's lives which supports social mobility. Bennion et al (2011) researched the impact of part-time study, noting the fact that the vast majority of part-time learners are already economically active, and therefore benefits can be demonstrated during study rather than as an outcome of graduation.

Traditionally, policy and academic literature tends to define part-time in opposition to full-time (so there is a 'line' above which course duration or study intensity counts as full-time, and everything below that is part-time). This 'either/or' thinking can muddy the realities of part-time study. Definitions remain problematic – the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA's) maximum 21 hour/24 weeks per year rule does not quite match the blurring of full/part time study modes increasingly available under the mantle of 'flexibility'. And for students, there is a perception that institutions can pay too little attention to part-timers, especially if infilling alongside full-time students for whom their support services will be geared. As such, there will fewer opportunities for part-timers to engage with the institution on its terms.

Another problem in the UK is that the part-time HE sector remains confused and complex: universities vary considerably in the proportion of part-time study they offer, with some new (post 1992) universities in Wales offering more part-time than full-time HE. Universities which have sustained a part-time offer vary from mixed models of part-time integrated with full-time, or part-time separate from full-time, or a mix. The Open University, with its model of supported distance learning provides a UK-wide offer of part-time HE for those who do not require (or cannot access) traditional face-to-face learning. Many FE Colleges provide locally relevant higher level skills and a group of (usually but not quite exclusively post-92) universities retain a mission around part-time HE for local/regional students. Nonetheless, there are HE 'cold-spots' in some rural and coastal areas –in the absence of local authority community learning (as in North Wales), opportunity for part-time HE study is very limited.

Exploring the reality of part-time HE is fraught with difficulty since there are so many proxies and bifurcations involved. Part-time study can be a significant option for mature learners, but competing policy and institutional definitions of 'mature' (over 21, over 25, over 30?) remain, and, although the proportions are dropping, a minority of mature learners continue to study full-time. Part-time students may be adults with low, or non-traditional prior qualifications. While most mature part-time learners are undergraduates (including those studying on sub-degree courses which carry credit towards a degree), some are postgraduates who already occupy professional roles: the latter group are likely to use part-time study for professional upskilling while working and are less likely to be from Widening Participation backgrounds. Their motivations and even their position within the HE sector may be very different.

In a recent intervention, the Universities UK-led review of part-time higher education (UUK, 2013) highlighted a number of key issues which are directly related to the student experience in higher education, including the need for greater understanding of:

- the value part-time learners place on their experience;
- information, advice and guidance for part-time students;
- the impact of fees and financial support for part-time study.

The study on which this article is based sought to address those questions.

Methodology

Engaging a widely distributed cohort of part-time students across the UK presented a methodological challenge, since part-time learners represent the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach learners in the sector. In order to explore the authentic experiences of such students, in their own voices, the research was organised into two distinct but related stages, based on a methodological approach used in a successful pilot study conducted into the experience of part-time students in Wales in 2013-2014 by the Open University Wales and NUS Wales which has provided some insight into the motivations and experiences of part-time HE learners (Rees & Rose Adams, 2014; Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015).

In order to explore the part-time student experience across the rest of the UK (England, Scotland and Northern Ireland), the first stage consisted of a 25 question online survey, based on the original survey used in Wales. This was issued to a sample of part-time students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland between July and October 2014. The survey was sent to two groups of students – those identified by the Open University (which has a remit to operate across the UK) as an appropriate sample of part-time distance learners, and those identified as studying at ten face-to-face universities and Colleges with the highest numbers of part-time learners. **To reach the latter group, a link to the survey was posted on participating University/College student-facing websites.**

433 completed responses were received from Open University students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland **(22% response rate)**, and 1134 responses from non-OU part-time students at a sample of universities and Colleges in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (a total of 1567). This data was analysed to provide a demographic breakdown of who studies part-time, reasons why they study part-time, and the kind of barriers they face in their part-time studies. Themes from the quantitative data informed the schedule of questions asked via telephone interviews in the second stage of the research. This consisted of 22 semi-structured one-to-one interviews (digitally recorded) with a purposive sample **drawn from volunteer participants who had identified themselves when completing the survey. In order to ensure adequate responses from part-time learners in College settings, an additional focus group interview with three part-time HE in FE students was conducted.**

Our interviews were with a proportionate balance of female/male learners, mostly working while studying part-time, and representing face-to-face infill, evening, blended and distance modes, across different qualification levels and ranging in age from 21 to 60+. This qualitative data resulted in 285 pages of interview transcripts from a representative sample of non-OU and OU students. **Analysis of the interview data was developed jointly by the core project team and consultant researchers, following a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2009) of developing open and axial codifications. A rigorous approach to analysis, based on suggestions by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed, including six phases of analysis (data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme naming and defining, reporting).**

Findings

1. Fearing the cost of part-time study

'It's a lot of money – is it worth it?' (Interviewee 1)

A significant difficulty in understanding the financial challenges faced by part-time HE students across the UK is that, as the respondents to the survey made very clear, part-time learners are a highly heterogeneous group. While likely to be regarded as mature/adult students, their ages varied from 21 to 60+, their personal circumstances (working full-time,

employed part-time, carrying substantial caring responsibilities, studying with a disability or long-term health impairment) meant that motivations for studying were very different. These varied from extrinsic, employability-related aspirations around changing to a better job or enhancing job prospects, to intrinsic, love of subject, seizing the opportunity to 'catch-up' after missing out on HE previously – or simply (for older, 50+ students) the intellectual stimulation. Added to this the impact of the ongoing divergence between policies aimed at supporting part-time learners across the four UK nations, and the issue of fees and costs of study can be difficult to decipher – but crucial as evidence to inform sector and institution decision-making, and individual learners' study decisions.

Analysis of interview data suggested part-time students are very price-sensitive, and acutely aware of affordability issues in relation to other calls on their incomes:

'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'. (Interviewee 14)

This is a critical issue for policy makers, especially as funding policies affecting part-time HE increasingly diverge across the four UK nations. Interestingly, respondents from Scotland, which has suffered a far less dramatic decline in part-time numbers, were very aware of the relatively positive financial support environment in which they found themselves, and were altruistic in relation to the challenges faced by part-time students in other nations:

'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' (Interviewee 10)

The less propitious situation around financial support in England centres both on the difficulty of finding information about what financial support is available for part-time study, and, crucially, the absence of any maintenance grant (which is available to part-timers in Scotland):

'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' (Interviewee 17)

For some interviewees, part-time HE was not perceived as offering value for money and was considered barely affordable. This 21 year-old was unwilling to take on student tuition loan debt:

'I am finding it a financial struggle and my Dad offered to lend me the money' (Interviewee 9)

2. Hobson's choice and the affordability of HE

'Choice' is a familiar motif in HE 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 much rather study full-time if they could – but they could not afford to give up their paid work:

'If I could turn the clock back, I would go full-time...if I won the lottery tomorrow...if I inherited money or something, I would just start to study full-time'. (Interviewee 14)

The tension between part-time as an affordable study option, and insufficient time to devote oneself to effective studying was a constant refrain:

'I would very much enjoy a full-time course where I could just be a student and dedicate all my time to do that' (Interviewee 20)

So the disincentive for mature students of risking loan debt to study full-time (their preferred option) given the loss of salary forces them to take on a part-time option, which adds to the duration of studying to reach the qualification goal, and carries with it a personal time commitment which can only impact on family life:

'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'. (Interviewee 16)

Part-time students reported having to take difficult personal decisions about whether they could afford to continue studying:

'To study one module is expensive. You just don't have that kind of money...you've got a mortgage possibly...you have to take a lot more into account than just time...we don't really have the money' (Interviewee 1)

This is an important dimension, hidden in previous studies – this was a student who had passed two modules in two years, but felt no option but to withdraw because of the lack of disposal income when raising a family. Other part-time students had choices curtailed by the withdrawal of financial support for studying lower or equivalent qualifications (ELQs):

'It was an option to study full-time but financially it would have been a non-starter for me, unaffordable, because obviously I'm self-funding' (Interviewee 10)

It also became apparent that financial pressures had a knock-on effect on study commitment:

'It's not a reasonable expectation for part-timers that studying is their first priority – unlike full-time students – we have mortgages to pay, careers to deal with' (Interviewee 6)

This had an impact even if a student was in the (increasingly rare) situation of having financial support from an employer:

'Although my company sponsor me they're very, very reluctant to give me any time off in the day...so I can only do evening modules' (Interviewee 19)

Or even more so if self-employed:

'I've got a business to run...it's time...I've got to earn some money. I haven't got the wherewithal to spend all week at college' (Focus Group interview)

So key factors in understanding the pressure part-time students are under in registering for, and persisting in, HE seem to be cost and affordability. The cost of part-time study, and the limitations of financial support appear to have a negative impact on disadvantaged adult learners. As a consequence, social mobility and access to HE seem under threat, and the term 'crisis' to describe the decline in part-time numbers does not seem over-dramatic.

3. The impact of institutional inflexibilities on part-time students

In addition to the costs associated with HE study, part-time students interviewed felt ill-served and under-valued by institutions. Some universities were perceived as shoe-horning students into systems designed for full-timers, and hence preventing them from accessing institutional support communities. Despite policy discourses advocating (and indeed claiming) flexibility in HE, the experience of part-time learners appears to be 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' (Interviewee 12)

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', '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...God knows how people with kids fit it in'. (Interviewee 11)

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 not working, late notice of rooms, term dates'. (Interviewee 13)

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' (Interviewee 18)

'I didn't anticipate the amount of pressure trying to fit part-time study with kids...I was naïve' (Interviewee 19)

Both library facilities and assessment systems were criticised by part-time students, who viewed rules such as 'one week maximum loan' (Interviewee 7) and three weeks from task set to submission date as failing to take account of the pressure on time-poor learners.

Even distance learners, who relished the independence, felt challenged by a dauntingly impersonal and alienating study experience. One postgraduate commented:

'You do feel like you're on the end of a very, very long piece of thread, away from where it's all happening' (Interviewee 8).

Another felt, in relation to the challenge of 'coping' with studying in a more isolated way than any previous experience:

'Some people would have been overwhelmed' (Interview 12).

Many part-time students are the first in their families to engage with HE (60% of non-OU survey respondents) and come from social and economic backgrounds which necessitate having to make difficult personal decisions, and indeed sacrifices, to study at all. For example, interviewee 1 voiced the impossible choice facing their decision to study, and sustaining that over years – the tension between missing aspects of their child growing up, and committing to a part-time degree which carried the risk of attempting a career change in their 40s with no experience.

So there appears to be a real, pressing opportunity for universities to develop a more attractive part-time offer, one which starts with the kind of flexibilities which would put part-time students' need at the heart of curriculum and pedagogic decisions, and prevent the sort of comments which do not cast the sector in a positive or student-centred light

'My institution had excluded part-time students from a lot of things...if you are a mature student they never consider that you're not living on campus, and you might have other responsibilities' (Interviewee 17).

In this context, much of the current part-time offer in the sector appears to pay too little attention to meeting the flexible needs of time-poor, and often economically-stretched adult learners. If there are strategic approaches to supporting part-timers, the impact is difficult for students in this research to identify. In contrast to full-timers, the support they receive from institutions is not commensurate with the fees paid, and is poorly-targeted. Successful achievement in part-time study seems to be in spite of, rather than because of, what institutions do for them:

'It's a bit dislocating being lumped in with full-timers...you just don't have time to read around...part-time students are a demographic in their own right' (Interviewee 18)

Conclusion

The voices of part-time learners, as elicited in this research study, suggest an appetite for HE study despite the challenges of financial constraints, the virtually impossible personal choices and sacrifices to be faced, and the need to juggle complex time commitments. These learners are stretching themselves to study while working or caring, aspiring to transform their lives and those of their families. Yet to policy-makers, they are largely invisible signifiers of Widening Participation, of social mobility, of C21st upskilling. In England specifically, inadequate financial support combined with impoverished institutional support packages combine to make the experience of part-time study unattractive. The consequences, should part-time numbers continue to decline, would be catastrophic for those individuals denied an opportunity of higher education.

'It's the first time in my adult life where I've done anything for me so that's why I'm doing it' (Interviewee 17)

In the context of much increased fees in England, student expectations about value for money and study intensity have changed. Institutions are seeking to engage full-time students and listen to them more. This is far more difficult for part-time learners, and as a consequence their voices seem to be lost in sector discussion around quality enhancement and financial support. **Institutions need to find innovative ways to engage part-time students, and to devise metrics to represent what 'added-value' might look like for part-time learners.** The crucial role of part-time HE in widening participation is misunderstood and undervalued.

The relatively positive picture of the impact of financial support on full-time students reported in the last edition of this journal does not apply to part-timers. There need to be incentives, for institutions and individuals, to stimulate an attractive part-time HE sector, and to ensure all students who wish to, can benefit:

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