Supporting Part-Time Students to Strengthen Social Mobility through Higher Education

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Widening Access and Improving Social Mobility in HE

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Outline

• Analysing the decline in part-time numbers
• Why part-time matters (and why a little learning is a dangerous thing)
• The Part-time ↔ Full-time continuum (spectrums and mosaics)
• Structural barriers to social mobility through PT (square pegs and round holes)
• Mixed mode study and flexible learning
Part-time trends

Source: HEFCE 2014/08d *Pressure from all sides: Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education*
UK and other EU part-time UG entrants 2005-06 to 2014-15 (registered at HEIs) for first degree and other undergraduate

Source: HESA Student Record. Note: UK and EU domiciled entrants to HEFCE funded HEIs. (Thacker, Oct 2016)
UK and other EU part-time UG entrants 2007-08 to 2014-15 (registered at HEIs) for first degree, foundation degree, HND/HNC, Diploma and Certificate, and other

Source: HESA Student Record. Note: UK and EU domiciled entrants to HEFCE funded HEIs. (Thacker, Oct 2016)
Part-time trends

“There are a number of contributory reasons for the recent decline in part-time student numbers, as a range of pressures have come together to disincentivise some individuals from engaging in the sector”  (DfE, Nov 2016. Consultation on part-time maintenance loans, p.9)

“The issues around take-up and financing of lifelong learning are complex and multi-dimensional and tackling them is no easy task”  

(University Alliance, Nov 2016. Lifelong learning manifesto. p.1)
Why part-time matters to the social mobility agenda – key influencers

• 92 per cent of part-time students are mature students (aged 21 and over)

• 44 per cent of part-time students are the first in their family to attend higher education

• One third of part-time students report that their study has increased the interest in studying from their children or other members of their family

• 29 per cent of part-time students are from low income groups
Why part-time matters – demographics

- Part-time students more likely to be …
  - Women from low income groups
  - BME
  - Disabled
“Between 2014 & 2024, it has been estimated that 72% of all newly created jobs, and 51% of all jobs, will require graduate level skills and they cannot all be filled by young graduates.”

“… part-time undergraduates are more likely to have no or low entrance qualifications, meaning that part-time provision opens up access to those who have been left out of higher education by prior attainment at school. Part-time students are also more likely to be mature (although mature students are only more likely to be part-time over the age of 30)”

(Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016 : 12 & 101)
Why part-time matters – a little learning is a dangerous thing …

- 36.4% of PT first degree students left HE 2yrs after entry in 13/14 (cf. 7.2% FT entrants)

- But this need not mean there’s no added value … quite the reverse, in fact

- Nor need it mean that learning – forever lifelong and lifewide – ends at the point of ‘leaving’ …

“… part-time higher education students are marked by their heterogeneity – they cannot be considered as a single homogeneous group. This heterogeneity presents a conundrum for policy-makers, but one which has to be addressed given the wide range of personal circumstances and competing responsibilities … which can impact on successful participation and achievement in part-time higher education.”
Spectrums, continua and mosaics
Spectrums, continua and mosaics

Skills
Study
Work
Life
Structural barriers to part-time study …

“There is a link between the retention of part-time students and the level of intensity of their study: those studying at 30% of full-time or higher are more likely to remain in higher education.”

(Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016: 106)
Structural barriers to part-time study …

- Finance (from student and institutional perspectives)
- Creating and maintaining communities of learning
- Timetabling for diversity (carers, working patterns, disabled students)
- Assessment & curriculum structures (quick, slow, quick-quick, slow)
- Celebrating difference, recognising constraints … individuals, institutions and administrative convenience
And what can we do to address current structural imbalances between PT & FT?

“… there is a knowledge gap around the experiences of, and barriers faced, by part-time mature students in higher education. Policy-makers need to listen to these experiences and carve out a space in which the needs and aspirations of disadvantaged learners in this heterogeneous sector can be properly considered.

Shibboleths like “flexibility”, “choice”, “employability” need to take account of the particular circumstances in which adult part-timers have to learn. Part-time higher education must not be perceived as a disposable ‘add-on’, and be allowed to wither, whether as a result of the unintended consequences of policy decisions at national or institutional levels or, more broadly, as an invisible consequence of the economic downturn. Parts of the sector are starting to respond, but it is ironic that one (successful) solution to the decline in part-time has been Birkbeck’s introduction of a “full-time” evening degree.”

(Butcher, 2015: 8)
The Power of Part-time (UUK, Oct 2013) – recommendations:

1. All stakeholders … (incl. HEIs, govt & funding councils) … should consider the needs of part-time and mature students as an intrinsic part of their thinking, not as an add-on.

2. There needs to be an urgent push at all levels – national, regional and local – to help potential students and employers understand the value of and opportunities for part-time HE.
The Power of Part-time (UUK, Oct 2013) – recommendations:

3. HEIs & FECs should take bold steps to meet the needs of potential part-time students and improve the part-time experience.

4. Employer-focused part-time HE which meets the needs of the local economy should be boosted.

5. Further evidence and modelling is needed in order to support national policy decisions in England.
Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016: Recommendation 10(ii)

• “There should be a particular focus on encouraging up-skilling or reskilling of mature students and the promotion of lifelong learning, along with the value of part-time study.”