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Higher Education Policy Institute

***Flexible Learning: Wrapping Higher Education Around  
the Needs Of Part-Time Students***

*(summary report)*

**Professor David Maguire**

## **Flexible Learning: Wrapping Higher Education Around the Needs Of Part-Time Students**

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### **Introduction**

1. The Government's HE policy makes a number of far reaching changes to the structure and operation of the HE sector. As indicated in a recent HEPI Report, and confirmed by the latest UCAS statistics of applications for September 2013, it is too early to say yet whether there has been a long-term reduction in demand for full-time places – so far the evidence suggests not. However there is evidence that part-time demand has reduced significantly despite the fact that some part-time students now qualify for access to loans on a similar basis to full-time students. Up to around 175,000 part-time students were estimated in the White Paper to be eligible for these loans, out of a total part-time undergraduate population of about 459,000 in 2011-12. Despite this, the impact of the increased fees on part-time students and the universities that provide for them appears to have been significant, with a reduction of one third in just one year.

2. Clearly, reducing demand is the most significant issue regarding part-time education, and it appears that the sharply increased cost is an important factor in this: demand is down even among those eligible for loans, and although there has been a trend of diminishing demand for some years, it has accelerated considerably this year. However, the data are not yet available to examine this in depth. So this summary report<sup>1</sup> puts the question of demand and the impact of the reforms largely on one side, and instead examines the status and significance of part-time students in UK higher education.

3. A key observation of the discussion is that the traditional divide between full-time and part-time modes of study is increasingly outdated, if not already redundant, and that the sector would be better served by a system focused on the concept of flexible study that views all learners equally irrespective of the intensity with which they study. A third of UK students currently study 'part-time' and a majority of 'full-time' students are in part-time employment. The aim should be in due course, if not immediately, to apply all policies (access to loans and grants, provision of a central admission system, availability of information, etc.) equally to all students irrespective of their intensity of study.

4. Part-time education – whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level – is an extremely important element in higher education in this country, as attested by the numbers discussed below. It helps to widen participation, offering opportunities to people who may not have achieved highly at school or who may have made wrong choices at an earlier stage, and it is an essential element in developing the nation's skill base. It is also something that is a feature of higher education in the United Kingdom that sets it apart from much of the rest of the world. The Eurostudent surveys, for example, show that in much of the rest of Europe part-time higher education is virtually non-existent, and, with one exception, England and Wales have twice the

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<sup>1</sup> For complete references and footnotes please see the full report, available at [www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk).

proportion of part-time students as the nearest comparator of the other 20 countries surveyed.

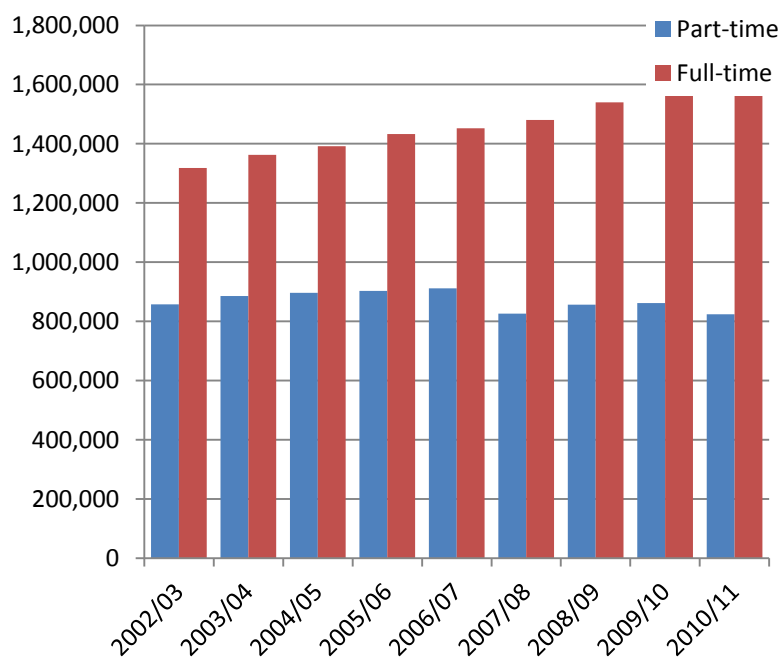
5. Nevertheless, despite their relatively large numbers, today only a minority of those capable of doing so actually study at university so there remains considerable potential for expansion of part-time (and full-time) numbers and therefore even greater future benefits are possible.

### Characteristics of Part-time Students

6. Defining part-time study is problematic and usually relies on a credit or hours threshold. In this report we adopt the widely used HESA definition of part-time students - that they are not full-time because they study for less than the full-time thresholds of either 21 hours per week or 24 weeks per year. This definition includes students on employment block release and evening study.

7. Taking undergraduate and postgraduate students together in 2010-11 there were 823,895 students studying part-time and 1,677,305 studying full-time (Figure 1), with part-time students representing 33% of the total student population by headcount (Figure 2). The average student load for part-time students in 2010-11 according to HESA was 0.30 which means that there were approximately 250,000 full-time equivalent part-time students (13 per cent of the total on a full-time equivalent (FTE) basis).

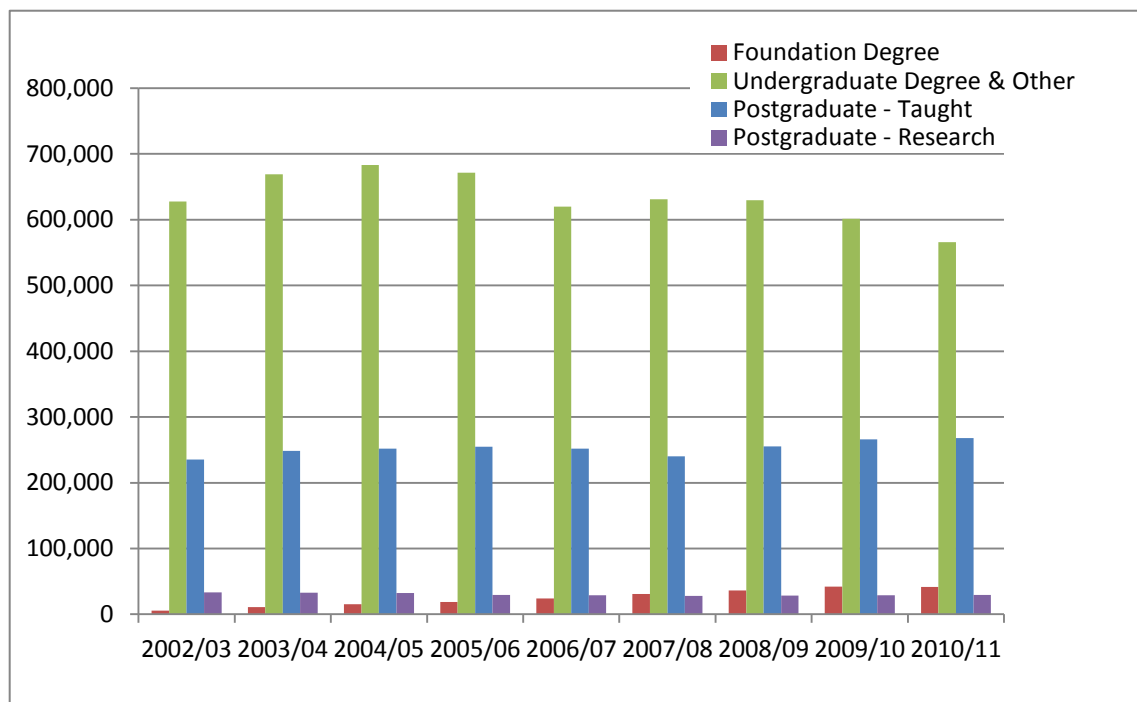
Figure 1: Number of full-time and part-time students



8. In terms of award type significantly more than 50 per cent of part-time students are studying for undergraduate degrees and other awards, with a significant minority enrolled on postgraduate taught awards (Figure 2). Between 2005-06 and 2010-11 there was a general decline in the number of part-time students studying for undergraduate qualifications, from 671,501 to 565,607, in marked contrast to full-time which has increased by 15.5 per cent over the same period. By contrast also, growth in postgraduate part-time

students continued in that period.

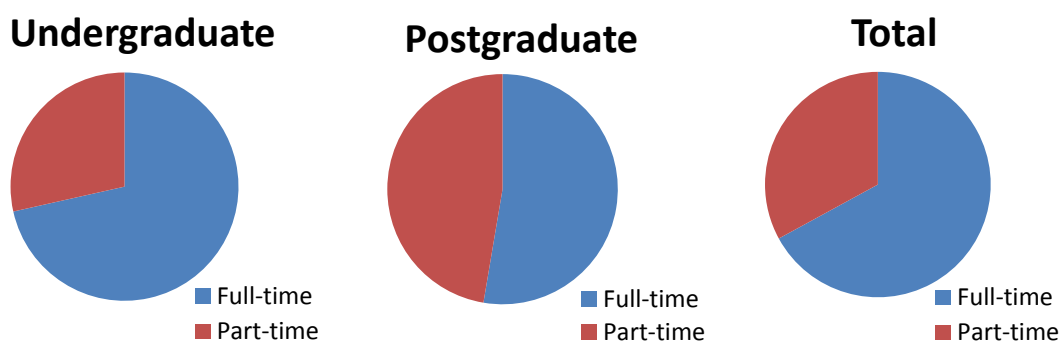
Figure 2: Number of part-time Students at UK institutions, by level of study



9. The diverging trends of full-time and part-time undergraduate numbers is explainable by factors that include the increase in opportunities to study full-time through the expansion of HE, the reduction in government funding in 2008-09 for programmes that led to equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQ), and the general lack of encouragement and incentives for universities and students for part-time study. The headline figure masks a larger fall in part-time students in most of the sector as the Open University (much the biggest provider of part-time education in the UK) has increased its student numbers over the same period<sup>2</sup>.

10. At 47 per cent the proportion of postgraduate part-timers is much higher than the 29 per cent of undergraduates that part-timers represent see (Figure 3)

Figure 3: UK Part-time and Full-time students by Level of Study 2010-11

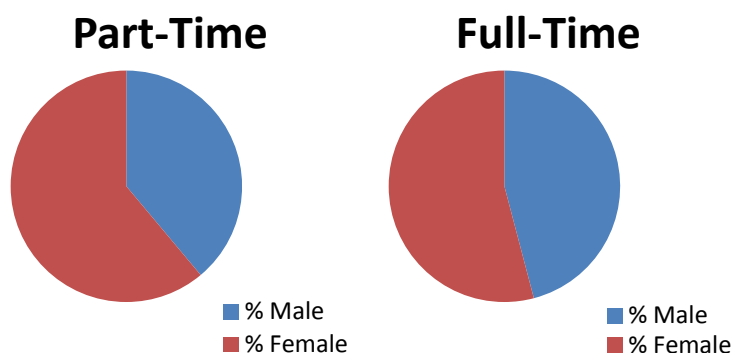


<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that these figures relate to the period before the introduction of the new fee regime in 2012 – 13 and the increased reduction in that year. The early evidence from HEFCE is that part-time numbers reduced substantially more in that year than the previous trend.

11. This balance reflects amongst other things, the number of students that use the part-time study route to up-skill and cross-skill while working.

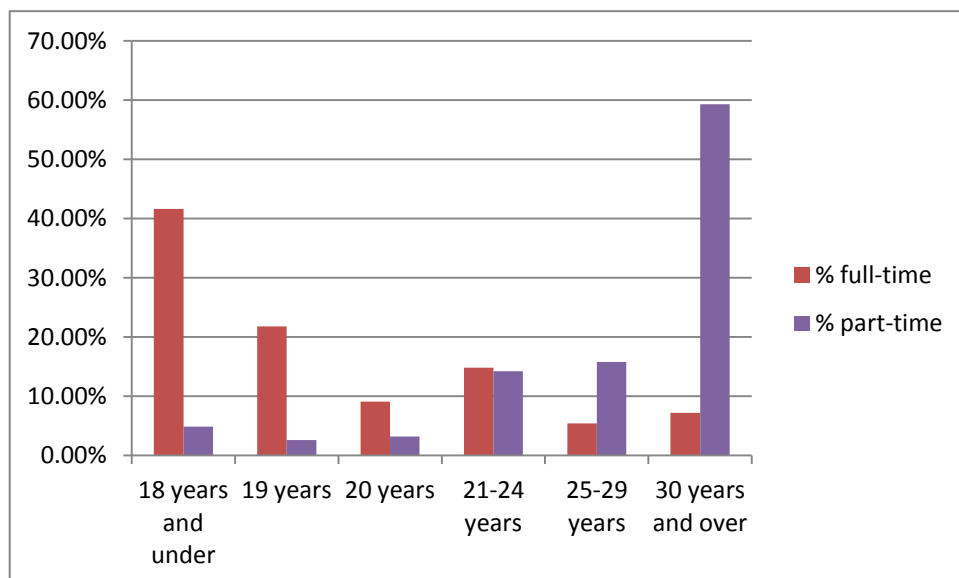
12. In terms of gender, in 2010-11 the part-time student population was made up of 38.9 per cent males and 61.1 per cent females, compared to full-time figures of 45.9 per cent and 54.1 per cent (Figure 4). Many women are second chance learners and act as carers while they are studying.

Figure 4: New entrant students by Gender in 2010-11



13. A high percentage of part-time undergraduate students are older than 21 when they start to study (Figure 5) with the largest group over 29 (61 per cent). This is quite different from full-timers where the largest group is school leavers with the distribution skewed towards younger people. These patterns are a natural outcome of the stage of student development: it is much more common to study full-time before embarking on a working career, but once working it is more likely that study will be part-time. Nevertheless, it is notable that over 10 per cent of part-time undergraduates are under 21 when they begin.

Figure 5: New undergraduate entrant students by Age in 2010-11



14. The most popular subjects for part-time undergraduate students are Subjects Allied to Medicine – nursing, midwifery, pharmacy, etc. – with

78,190 new entrants representing 55.4 per cent of the total studying this subject area and 18.2 per cent of the total part-time population; Education (76,430, 59.6 per cent, 17.8 per cent); and Combined – a wide area that includes multi-subject, general and unspecified programmes, with the majority being the Open University’s (OU’s) Open degrees – (65,515, 96.6 per cent, 15.3 per cent). The top three subject areas are studied by just over 50 per cent of part-time students and if the next most popular subject area, Business and Administrative Studies, is included then almost two-thirds of all part-time students study these four subject areas.

15. In terms of institutions the part-time scene is dominated by the OU which in 2010-11 was, by headcount, more than 10 times the size of the second biggest provider, Edge Hill University, and had 25 per cent of all registered part-time students. 20 HEIs account for 50 per cent of the total UK part-time student population. Nine have 50 per cent or more of their students studying part-time, with the list dominated by OU (99.9 per cent) and Birkbeck College (91.9 per cent). In addition to these, five others have more than 7,000 part-time students and more than 40 per cent of their students by headcount studying part-time: Edge Hill, Teesside, London South Bank, Staffordshire and Canterbury Christ Church. In Further Education Colleges 45 per cent of college-taught undergraduates are part-time (compared to 29 per cent across the sector as a whole), with most studying for non-degree awards.

16. Table 1 shows that in 2006-07 around half of all part-time undergraduate students were studying at less than 30 per cent of the full-time equivalent and only a small percentage were studying at more than 60 per cent intensity.

Table 1: Part-time undergraduate students in English higher education institutions, by intensity of study, 2006-07

Intensity	%	Number
<30%	50.2	255,495
30-49%	6.6	33,591
50-59%	29.7	151,159
60-74%	6.2	31,555
75+%	7.2	36,644

17. The entry qualifications of part-time undergraduate students are polarised. A high proportion have prior HE experience, already hold a Bachelor’s degree, and are re-skilling, often with financial support from their employer. At the opposite end, a substantial minority have no or low level qualifications, and are up-skilling and taking advantage of ‘second chance’ learning opportunities, which they pay for themselves or sometimes with help from the limited public financial support currently available. Part-time students are both more likely to have higher levels or lower levels of prior qualification than full time students.

18. In terms of employment outcomes of part-time undergraduates post-study, the same proportions of graduates from both part-time and full-time study (88 per cent) are in paid employment three and a half years after graduating from higher education, although twice as many part-time as full-

time graduates work part-time (14 per cent compared with 6 per cent), and are significantly older. The majority of graduates, irrespective of their mode of study, are employed as Managers and Senior Officials, in Professional and in Associate Professional and Technical occupations. A higher proportion of graduates from part-time than full-time study are employed in the public rather than the private sector, in Public Administration, Education, and Health and Social Work (59 per cent compared with 44 per cent). A higher proportion have permanent jobs three and a half years after leaving higher education (87 per cent compared with 79 per cent); and three and a half years after leaving HE part-time graduates in full-time employment earned more on average than similar graduates from full-time study - though it needs to be borne in mind that part-time students are significantly older on average. In addition, employers appear to appreciate the skills and knowledge possessed by employees who engage in part-time study as compared to persons with the same qualifications that they might have recruited from outside their firms or organisations.

19. Two-thirds of part-time students have family commitments and over two in five have children - the majority of full-time students are single and childless. There appear to be marked regional variations in the likelihood of part-time study, but further in-depth analysis is required to establish the facts about this. Different programmes and awards appear to be more or less attractive to part-time students: for example, certificates in arts and humanities tend to attract well educated, older adults, whereas higher nationals appear to be favoured part-time by younger students.

20. A HEFCE study that tracked undergraduate students who enrolled in 1996-97 has shown part-time completion rate figures ranging from 10-48 per cent. The current approximate equivalent for full-time students is 78.4 per cent. It appears that both level of intensity and type of institution are major determinants of the rate of completion. The key threshold for intensity appears to be 30 per cent: 22 per cent of non-OU students with a study intensity of less than 30 per cent had completed after 11 years, compared to 48 per cent of those with intensity greater than 30 per cent. The study advises caution because 'the diversity of, and flexibility found in, part-time provision make the data notoriously difficult to capture accurately and interpret'. That is undoubtedly correct, and is borne out by this present report.

21. A different perspective on the success of part-time students can be gained by examining expected time to completion for those that complete their studies. Analysis of HESA data for the length of time taken to complete compared to the expected time reveals that those part-time students who do complete their programmes do so in roughly the same time (pro rata) as full-time students.

### **Motivations and benefits for studying part-time**

22. The motivations for and benefits of part-time study - both undergraduate and postgraduate - may be characterised into three groups: economic, social and personal. Economic motivations include perceptions that personal income will increase, career outcomes will be enhanced through career changes,

promotion and enhanced satisfaction, and that employers tend to view employees who gain qualifications and skills by part-time study positively. Social motivations pertain to individuals (for example greater self-confidence and self-belief) and groups (for example, benefits to a family of helping children with homework). Personal motivations include studying for interest and enjoyment. There appears also to be a strong link between motivation and subject area: for arts programmes, eight out of the nine motivations given in a recent study were intrinsic (personal and social); and for business, professional and management programmes four out of the five reasons given were extrinsic (economic).

23. Some students study part-time by choice, while others do so because that is the only option available to them. The main reasons students elect to study part-time are greater flexibility and convenience, finances, fitting studies around existing work, domestic/carer commitments and that part-time study is a less risky option than full-time. On the other hand, for many part-time students, the choice is not between part-time or full-time study: it is part-time study or nothing at all.

### **Barriers to further expansion of part-time provision**

24. The new student financing arrangements increase the cost to part-time students, but give a minority access to student loans. The net effect is that, for most, and purely from a cost perspective, part-time study is likely to be much more unattractive than it was previously. And so it has proved, with part-time numbers sharply down in 2012–13. Recent data from HEFCE shows only 154,000 new part-time students in the HESSES count of students in 2012–13, 33 per cent fewer than in 2011–12.

25. Besides finance, one of the main barriers to expanding part-time provision is the lack of support from employers. This is surprising because part-time students offer them major advantages. These include employees investing their own time to develop work-related skills, acquisition of skills whilst minimising individual absence from the work place, and the fact that opportunities for personal development aid retention and employee morale. Lack of employer support also runs counter to the Government policy initiative designed to stimulate greater employer engagement as signalled by the Leitch Report.

26. From an institutional perspective part-time students are generally more resource intensive than full-time. They are more expensive to recruit because there is no central admissions system such as UCAS. Funding, at least historically, has been more complicated because of its piecemeal nature and the decision of the government in 2009 no longer to provide grant in respect of students with "equivalent or lower qualifications". Also, part-time students often require greater levels of academic and pastoral support, especially if they are mature and enter HE with non-traditional or lower qualifications, and many part-time students have not studied since leaving school. There is evidence, reported above, that part-time students tend to be far more 'risky' to teach than full-time students due to higher withdrawal rates. Finally, in some cases specialist part-time infrastructure costs can at least initially be



prohibitively expensive (for example, distance learning and evening/weekend teaching) when they add to, rather than dilute, physical infrastructure costs.

27. Some universities do not see part-time students as enhancing their status and esteem. From the Russell Group only Warwick University appears in the top 50 of institutions with the highest percentage of part-time students, although in terms of headcount Warwick, Cardiff, Kings, Queen's Belfast, Glasgow, Birmingham and Oxford are in the top 50.

28. In similar vein, part-time students are sometimes seen as less important to policy makers because in most institutions they are fewer in number; many of their courses are at sub-degree level and are therefore seen as less prestigious. Also, they are sometimes 'invisible' in that they study at home or at work, attend evening or weekend classes, or undertake distance learning.

29. Staff unwillingness to teach during evenings and weekends and outside 'normal' hours remains a barrier to part-time expansion: in part this might be due to concern about erosion of research time, and in part with interference with social and family time. However, this has not generally proved an issue in specialist distance learning institutions like Birkbeck and the Open University.

30. From a management perspective, the uncertainty of the business model around part-time finances presents a challenge for some. Establishing and expanding major programme initiatives requires multi-year, multi-person commitments, often with significant start-up investment, which some might see as unduly risky. Without assurance of funding it is difficult to justify these. This is especially the case for some types of part-time provision where start-up infrastructure costs may be quite high (for example, on-line, distance learning).

31. The individual constraints on study include young children, high pressure jobs, lack of supportive partners, health problems, and difficulties with language. These, of course, are not the exclusive preserve of part-time students, but the incidence is typically greater.

32. Finally, one of the barriers to expansion is inertia. In an academic and business environment where the current model is delivering success, there are not significant incentives to change, unless there is a compelling case that the alternative is much better or the existing model cannot be sustained.

### **Recent developments in Part-Time Funding**

33. Since 2012-13 UK universities have been able to charge annual tuition fees of up to £9000, in many institutions resulting in increases for both part-time and full-time students of around 2.5 times the 2011-12 level. On the other hand, from 1 September 2012 new students beginning a part-time high intensity (25 per cent or more) course do not have to pay tuition fees up front and can instead apply for a Tuition Fee Loan to a value of £6750 per annum. Loan repayments will begin in the April four years after the start of the course, or the April after leaving the course, providing that the student earns more than £21,000 per year. Other repayment terms are the same as for full-time graduates.

34. Both full-time and part-time students may be eligible for non-repayable bursaries and scholarships from universities and colleges, including the National Scholarship Programme. Unlike full-time students, part-timers, whatever their means, are not eligible for a maintenance loan or grant to cover living costs.

35. Unlike full-time students where there are complex student number controls imposed on HEIs by the Government (with various inclusion thresholds, such as for 2012-13 students with AAB or higher grades at A-level not being included in the controls), part-time student numbers are not subject to control at present.

36. In its White Paper the Government estimated that about 175,000 part-time students would be eligible for loans out of a total part-time undergraduate population of 490,500 in 2011-12. However, it appears that only about 32,000 eligible part-time students have applied for loans. The calculation is complicated by the relatively high non-completion rates among part-timers and the different intensity with which they study; but this roughly equates to about 120,000 all years students, and it is reasonable to conclude that significant numbers – up to one third – of those who might previously have enrolled to study part-time in high-intensity mode may not have done so this year. So not only is it likely that large numbers of part-time students have been put off study by the cost, but also that the measure that the Government put in place in the hope of offsetting the potentially off-putting impact of the cost increase has not been effective.

### **Discussion and policy implications**

37. If we are to provide the level of support that the part-time community needs, or even encourage its further development, then a number of issues with significant policy implications need to be addressed:

38. Understanding part-time students. On average, part-time students are:

- Older, with around 80 per cent over 25 on entry to HE (with the bulk aged 30-39) compared to around 20 per cent over 25 for full-time
- Female (61 per cent of part-time, 54 per cent of full-time students female)
- White (10 per cent of part-time, 16 per cent full-time from ethnic groups)
- Living in the same region as they are studying (80 per cent of part-time students study in the same region as they are domiciled)
- Studying a more limited range of typically vocational subjects with 23 per cent studying Subjects Allied to Medicine, compared to 8 per cent full-time
- Working immediately prior to starting a course (over 80 per cent part-time, compared to about 50 per cent full-time)
- Entering with a greater variety of qualifications than full-time students.

39. The impact of cost on different types of student needs to be better understood. It could be that because of their characteristics – age and family responsibilities, for example – the impact of fees will affect part-time students differently from full-time. If so, then, unless we are content to see the

number of part-time students substantially reduce - and we argue that this would be extremely damaging – then some mechanism will need to be found to reduce the cost to part-time students, notwithstanding what we say below about the need to treat full-time and part-time study as a continuum, not separately.

40. Binary distinction. Defining part-time students as simply those that do not study full-time conceals the heterogeneous nature of this very important group of students. Using a binary classification of students as either full-time or part-time also oversimplifies the reality of studying for a higher education award where the mode distinction is often not clear or appropriate in the minds of students or university staff alike. Students elect to study part-time primarily because of work, carer/family commitments, lifestyle choice, and the need to retake courses. Many have no choice.

41. The importance of work to students was confirmed by a study undertaken by the National Union of Students in 2008 which showed that 78 per cent of all students undertook an average of 14 hours work per week with 35 per cent doing so during term time.

42. In the case of working while studying we can characterise students into the following types:

- Work is the primary activity, with study secondary
- Work and study have similar priorities
- Study is the primary activity, with work secondary
- Full-time study with no work; today this is thought to be a small minority of students.

43. By extension of this typology it is easy to see how there are differential study priorities for students with carer/family commitments and for those that elect to study as a lifestyle choice (for enjoyment, to meet new people, etc.).

44. The simple full-time/part-time classification does not recognise that many students either do or would like to move between modes of study throughout their HE experience. This may be to undertake work for economic reasons or as part of a course, to fulfil carer or family commitments, or to retake one or more programme modules. The HEFCE-funded 'Back on Course' project found that students who failed to complete their qualifications most commonly gave health, and family and carer responsibilities as reasons for this.

45. Flexible learning. Replacing rigid, continuous programme structures with more flexible approaches that provide the best combinations of pace, place and mode would encourage part-time study. Flexibility could be improved if students were allowed to choose the length of course; the speed of progression; the form of assessment; the entry point (alternatives to October starts); or the exit points (allowing multiple exit and entry points for a programme).

46. Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) frameworks are more widely and flexibly used in the US than here. CAT frameworks enable students to accumulate credit towards a final award at their own pace, to interrupt their studies and/or transfer more easily between and within institutions, while maintaining a verified record of achievements. Most if not all UK universities

have implemented credit accumulation frameworks at the programme level, but there is not a great deal of experience of students assembling their own degrees through credit accumulation across subject areas, breaking their studies or transferring to other institutions. This may be because of lack of demand on the part of students for such flexibility or it may be because the university processes and structures are not working as they should.

47. More widespread use of CATs could contribute significantly to diminishing the full/part-time binary divide and in so-doing reduce the disincentive associated with part-time study in the minds of some, opening up study options to a wider group of people. An additional support mechanism would be the development of a dynamic 'personal learning cloud' that would allow the storage and retrieval of details of accumulated credits, certificates and experiences.

48. Central admission system. While the Universities Central Admission Service (UCAS) has recently added the ability to search for part-time courses at universities and colleges that also recruit for their full-time courses through UCAS, at present it handles admissions only for full-time students. Part-time students must apply directly to the place where they wish to study. As a result it is more effort for part-time students to apply to study and some may be discouraged from applying. They will certainly have less choice, and consequently are more likely to undertake programmes of study to which they are not suited. Similarly, compared to full-time students universities must perform more work and incur greater expense to recruit such students. Furthermore, in the case of the more selective universities, it is more difficult to recruit part-time students of the quality they desire.

49. A further step in improving the central service to part-time applicants would be the implementation of a portal that offers high quality, up to date information, advice and guidance about part-time programmes. Better reporting tools and improved statistical analysis would also be a welcome addition.

50. Parity of funding. The imbalance in tuition fee funding has been partially addressed with the extension of tuition fee loans to some part-time students. However, the majority of part-time students cannot obtain loans, and only full-time students can obtain maintenance support. The argument for this restriction, that maintenance support is required for full-time but not part-time students because of the ability of part-time students to work, is contradicted by statistics on the large number of full-time students that also work.

51. The problem, of course, is that it will be expensive to extend loans while these are substantially subsidised. If fee loans are to be made available to all part-time students regardless of the intensity of their study (and that is what will be required in order to go some way towards offsetting the disincentive effect of the very much higher fees), then the additional cost would be up to approximately £0.7 billion per year (depending on take-up by those already eligible as well as by the newly eligible). To go further and provide maintenance loans to all part-time students would cost around a further £0.6 billion per year.

52. The only realistic way of extending funding in this way would be – as many have argued – to remove the loan subsidy. That would be a difficult and politically contentious thing to do, but it is something that will need to be considered if the encouragement of part-time education is to become something more than empty rhetoric, confounded by the reality of the new funding arrangements. However, even this may not be sufficient. If, as it appears, the increase in fees has deterred large numbers of part-time students in a way that has not been the case with full-time, then, as HEFCE has said in a recent report, “there may be a need to develop innovative models of flexible and more affordable learning”.

53. Better information. A key theme that runs through much of the discussion in this report is that part-time study is poorly understood and that significant study opportunities are not taken up because of lack of information about what is on offer. A good example is the comparatively small government-funded advertising and information dissemination campaign devoted to part-time as opposed to full-time student loans. In spite of the very substantial number of part-time students, information from almost all parts of the sector is very full-time focused resulting in significant missed opportunities for greater participation and contribution by part-time students.

### **Conclusions**

54. If we are serious about the HE White Paper ambition of ‘putting students as the heart of the system’, then HE provision should be designed with the circumstances and requirements of all students in mind. In the context of this report this is provision that fully accommodates the differing and changing needs and requirements of both full-time and part-time students. The present reality appears to be that current policies are having a serious and negative impact on part-time demand.

55. What this means in practice is that there needs to be an erosion of the binary divide between full-time and part-time. This should be replaced with a more nuanced understanding of the requirements of students as individuals and flexible frameworks based around credit accumulation and transfer that can accommodate all modes of learning and teaching. It might help also if there were a common funding model that does not distinguish between part-time and full-time study, although recent evidence about the impact of fees and loans on part-time students may complicate such an approach. It is important too that services, such as UCAS, do not discriminate between modes of study.

56. Only through a unified approach to study can we avoid unfair discrimination and maximise the utility of the country’s human resources. If we remove the arbitrary barriers that exist in the minds of system designers, but are absent from those of system users, we can begin to unlock the true learning potential of our society.