

## **PART-TIME STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

A report commissioned on 28 May 2008 by John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, as a contribution to his review of the future of the HE sector.

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### **Acknowledgments**

In thinking about the potential of part-time study to the future of the Higher Education sector I have spoken with many individuals and received comments from a wide range of organisations including Birkbeck College, Guild HE, HEFCE, Million+, National Union of Students, NIACE, Open University, Oxford Brookes University, QAA, UniversitiesUK, UCAS, Standing Conference of Heads of School of Architecture and SURF (Staffordshire University Regional Federation).

I would like to thank everyone who has shared their experiences and thinking with me. I have tried to do justice to our conversations. Huge thanks are also due to my colleague at Staffordshire University, Lesley Rollason, who has worked alongside me on this study from day one.

### **Introduction**

All the evidence shows that education brings significant benefit to individuals, to communities and to society at large. There are good pragmatic, social and economic reasons why people who wish to should be able to study part-time at any level, in retirement, at times when they are without paid work and simply for leisure. My colleagues at NIACE continue to make this point persuasively as do both government and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (1). I support this position wholeheartedly.

My concern in this report is, however, as the letter of commission sets out, with skills for employment. The government has a declared ambition to become a world leader in higher level skills and this is where the study begins. I argue that if the UK is serious about wanting to claim its place in the world economy through the higher level skills of its people, then we have to recognise that the majority of these skills, developed throughout a working life time, will be acquired on a part-time basis.

If this is indeed the case, then there are some important consequences. Changes are needed in the way in which government and HEFCE think and talk about part-time students. There will need to be changes in how student success is measured and how resources are allocated. The HE sector will need to adapt its calendars and working practices to accommodate the flexibility that part-time students need without compromising other areas of their work. Employers will need to understand and be persuaded of the value such study will add to their businesses and then be prepared to support it in a variety of ways.

When these parts of the picture are in place, it will be easier to make lifelong learning a reality for everyone working at or close to graduate level.

Before we look in more detail at the implications of these messages, it is important to set the wider context.

### The age of information

1. The world is changing. 'We are in a new age – the age of information and of global competition. Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing. The types of jobs we do have changed as have the industries in which we work and the skills they need.' (2)

We are witnessing not only technological and social change on perhaps a more rapid scale than ever before, but we also face in the UK short to medium term demographic changes will mean that a significant part of the workforce to deliver to this new agenda is even more likely to be older and already in employment.

### The skills revolution

2. A number of recent government commissioned reviews (3) have put forward strategic responses to this era of industrial change, highlighting the importance of science, innovation and skills to continued competitive advantage. It is now widely accepted that economic and social success for this country depends on the UK taking a lead role in this 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge-based revolution, developing a world class service led economy and high value added industry.
3. It is also true that 'To be regarded as excellent - world-class - is becoming much tougher. Plenty of other countries, emerging and developed, will challenge our position'. (4) A recent OECD report also shows that among the Anglo-speaking countries Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States all spend larger percentages of GDP on tertiary education than the United Kingdom. (5)
4. To be world class, the UK needs a skills base which is measured not simply by the proportion of participating adults but by a demonstrable increase in those graduate skills such as innovation, creativity, synthesis, problem solving and enterprise, which are so critical to becoming a high-skill economy.

### The role of universities

5. Universities, with their expertise in knowledge creation and transfer and their research, scholarship and practice-based activities are best placed to do this. Linked with their applied research activities, universities also play a very important role in anticipating and promoting qualifications for tomorrow's world i.e. 'sunrise subjects' such as digital games technology and forensic computing.
6. Universities recognise and embrace their own role as important players in this globally competitive environment. They are large, service-led organisations contributing more to the UK economy than either the UK

aircraft or pharmaceutical industries. They are global in reach, earning £3.6bn from international students and more than £10bn from the export of and education and knowledge-based services. The expansion of higher education means that increasing numbers of highly skilled graduates are entering the UK labour force. Many universities are already shaping themselves for an increasingly diverse student market by working flexibly and in new ways.

7. Given the university sector's key role in developing a world-class, high value-added economy and society, it is recognised that as many people as possible should be able to access higher education. Currently, however, just over one quarter of adults hold a degree. This is less than many of our OECD comparators. Leitch (3) has set a target of more than 40% of the working age population qualified to level 4 and above by 2020.

#### Steps that government has taken so far

8. Government recognises the crucial role of universities in meeting the needs of a globally competitive, highly skilled, knowledge-based economy. To help universities realise this goal, it has, in recent years, both increased the number of graduates and given significant support to the area of research, recognising the relevance of a world class research base, especially in the sciences, to the new agenda. (6)
9. It is now time to take the next step and to underpin, in the same way that the research and science base has been underpinned, the expansion of higher level skills for the workplace.

#### Why part time study needs to be grow

10. It is time to recognise that because of the need for constant updating of skills and the development of new knowledge, the power house for this new skills base is amongst people already in employment.
11. DIUS (7) has identified latent demand for higher level education among those in full-time work and their interest in easily accessible locations of study, face-to-face delivery of higher education and the importance of part-time study.
12. The nature of employment is also changing. People no longer have a job for life: they may work in different jobs, even in different sectors as new industries emerge and others decline. Advancing technology and communications both facilitate and demand innovative ways of working across geographical boundaries and in new virtual spaces.
13. The development of a highly skilled workforce in this dynamic environment will require the ability for individuals to learn in what is currently called a 'part-time' mode in order to combine study with changing work, lifestyle and family commitments. In fact, according to HEPI (8) Leitch's 40% target can only be reached if participation by part-time and mature students in employment increases significantly.

## Part-time study - the current scene

14. Part-time study in higher education is not a new phenomenon. It already plays an important part in meeting the higher level skills and lifelong learning agendas with some 40% of HE students in the UK currently studying on an accredited part-time basis. There are also increasing numbers of students engaging in short, non-accredited courses. Whilst all universities have some part-time provision, 77% of the part-time population is concentrated into just 60 institutions including the Open University, which is the largest single deliverer of part-time HE in the UK.
15. Part-time students within the sector are not an homogenous group. Just as there is no single typical 'university experience', there is no such thing as a typical part-time student.

People studying part-time include students studying for undergraduate first degree, foundation degree, postgraduate taught, postgraduate research, professional development courses at a variety of levels and of varying lengths undergraduate, postgraduate and post experience, short course, non-credit bearing courses, programmes undertaken in the workplace, at an FE/HE centre and online. Some, of course, combine a number of these elements and modes.

Historically this list has led to a quiet resignation in university planning meetings. These thousand flowers might be allowed to bloom (provided they are somehow funded) but the real business remains full-time students - where the numbers and income are more secure. Undoubtedly there have been many university administrators who have counselled, usually successfully, against a twelve hour timetable that would accommodate both full- and part-time students since that would be 'the tail wagging the dog'. This would not only challenge the laws of nature but, perhaps more importantly, make no financial sense!

## The current full-time part-time divide is being eroded

16. Despite the growing importance of part-time higher education, it could be argued that part-time students are consistently disadvantaged by the current system and that the very phrase 'part-time' implies a norm of full-time and a hierarchy of importance between the two.
17. Certainly traditional university systems, timetables and calendars are constructed with little reference to the world of employment. Timetables, for example, are still constrained by the concept of semesters or terms and long summer breaks, which are irrelevant to part-time students in employment.
18. Weekend and evening study can be a desolate experience with little or no access to catering or other student support facilities.
19. Part-time students are not eligible for the same student financial support packages as full-time students. This inequity of treatment compounds the perception that part-time students are somehow less important or less deserving than full-time students.

20. However, the financial costs of higher education are beginning to erode and blur the current distinction between full-time and part-time study.
21. Full-time students increasingly work part-time to fund their studies. They choose work which fits in with their studies and make pragmatic choices about modules of study and attendance at classes to combine both work and study. Such students are eligible for full student support.
22. Part-time students, on the other hand, choose study which fits in with their working and family life and make pragmatic choices about courses which can be accessed locally and conveniently to them. Such students are only eligible for part-time student support.  
  
Claire Callender's research (9) has shown that whilst 83% of part-time students are in employment it is also the case that 66% of full-time students are in employment during term time and 82% in vacations.
23. Increasingly younger students are choosing to study part-time so that they can learn and earn. Almost 10% of part-time students are under 21 and there has been an increasing number of young applicants at the Open University since variable fees were introduced.
24. There is growing demand for different types of provision ranging from part-time, work-based foundation degrees to accelerated, fast-track degrees and masters programmes.
25. There is a demand for more innovative and exciting ways of using new learning spaces created by the internet, digital TV and mobile phones – none of which are campus or time-dependent.
26. Increasing numbers of learners are acquiring higher level skills at local Further Education colleges to meet their need for easily accessible locations of study.
27. It is increasingly evident, therefore, that in the absence of any fundamental institutional change, students themselves are actually challenging the structures and presumptions of higher education. It is no longer acceptable just to fit in and adapt to an institution, its structures and regimes. They are pushing at our artificial boundaries and demanding an experience which is flexible enough to accommodate and address their diverse, particular needs in a modern society. What is needed, to fit the needs of students in the future, whether full-time or part-time are new ways of studying flexibly.

#### **What universities need to do**

28. If we accept that part-time higher education study is central to UK's ambition to be leader in world class skills and central to unlocking the talent of younger and older people alike, then those committed to the realisation of this vision will want to accelerate this demand-led transition from traditional rigid constructions to greater flexibility in organisational structure as well as curriculum delivery.

29. UniversitiesUK has acknowledged that 'The high level of flexibility and personalisation in part-time study mode provides a template for the future of the learning experience in higher education.' (10)
30. The government has also been explicit on this need for flexibility particularly with regards to adult learners in employment. (11)
- 'We need to develop radical approaches that can lead to much higher levels of access to higher education by older people already in the workplace. This means models of HE that make available relevant, flexible and responsive provision that meets the high skill needs of employers and their staff'.*
31. Flexible timetables and services are beneficial for both current and future full- and 'part-time' students and would encourage growth in participation and greater employer engagement.
32. Flexible delivery on campus, in the workplace, at a University Centre, in an FE college in cyberspace or in a combination of these is beneficial for both current and future full- and 'part-time' students and would encourage growth in participation and greater employer engagement.
33. Flexible systems and financial support which recognise the importance of 'part-time' or rather 'flexible' study of world class higher level skills are beneficial for students and encourage growth in participation and greater employer engagement.
34. Flexible systems remove the increasingly artificial full-time/part-time divide and demonstrate HEIs' own ability to be innovative, creative and entrepreneurial – the very attributes that make us world class. This process is already underway.

**What is needed to support and extend the transition to a more flexible HE system?**

35. Accepting that 'flexible' higher education study is critical to the ambition to become a world leader in skills by 2020 is simply not enough. All partners, government, employers and HE will need to commit to the realisation of the ambition and create the conditions in which part-time/flexible study can grow and flourish.
36. From policy briefings, discussion papers, keynote speeches, submissions to the 'After Leitch' IUSS committee inquiry (12), responses to the DIUS HE at Work consultation and other contributions to this report it is clear that there is an emerging consensus on the changes needed to enable HEIs to meet the higher level skills challenge through increased flexible participation.
37. Liz Marr and Janet Beer (13) explore a number of these propositions for fundamental change. These and others have been advocated by various contributors to this study. They include:

- Ø The elimination of the increasingly indefensible division between part-time study and full-time study in terms of regulatory, funding and student support frameworks.
- Ø An alternative model to the traditional academic calendar to allow year round enrolment and access to facilities so that learners are not confined to artificially imposed times of the year or even times of the day.
- Ø A system of transferable credit based learning and credit based funding which recognises achievement irrespective of mode, type and place of study.  
The ability for students to enter and re-enter HE and gain credit for the study they have undertaken will reward personal commitment and aid retention.
- Ø A research, practice-based curriculum with increasing flexibility in delivery using a variety of types of engagement - mobile communications, web-based, blended, face-to-face, on campus, in the workplace, in HE centres and FE colleges.
- Ø A flexible HE workforce that can support diverse patterns of student engagement and enhance staff scholarship, research and practice-based learning.
- Ø A uniform system of financial support for all students regardless of mode.

In those areas under university control, a number of universities have made significant progress, albeit at cost and with some high risks.

#### What might prevent this progress?

38. Whilst there is a growing consensus on the importance of these changes if there is to be a genuine step change in participation and higher level skills, there is also a recognition that those institutions wishing to excel in part-time, flexible delivery are currently taking a risk in terms of reputation. They are pursuing an affirmative social inclusion agenda by working with employers and individuals to increase part-time, or rather flexible, learning opportunities for those with no previous experience or with low aspiration. They are also taking on the extra costs associated with 'non-traditional' learners and the additional costs of flexible, increasingly bespoke, curriculum delivery.
39. Those working extensively with employers to increase the number of adult workers with higher level skills and knowledge are also taking the risk of financial instability. Experience suggests that company training budgets are often the first to be cut in a financial downturn and such volatility can in turn lead to financial instability for provider organisation. The sudden and unplanned reduction in MPET (Multi Professional Education and Training) budgets, for example, had a destabilising effect on those institutions who had invested heavily in health provision to meet employer demand.

#### The role of employers

40. The ambition to increase the number of HE qualifications that are co-funded by employers does not remove the risk of financial instability and the extent of demand remains uncertain. In fact, Professor John Brooks,

Vice-Chancellor of a business-facing university suggests that today's business world has an outdated 1970s attitude towards universities and 'that Government is being (overly optimistic) on co-funding and I think there are going to be very small numbers indeed.' (14)

41. Whether this is true or not, there is obviously still much work to be done to overcome misconceptions on all sides and to persuade employers of a need to co-fund a world class workforce. As HEFCE points out in its strategy for engaging with employers (15) 'there is a lack of a shared language between employers and HE that could help make clear the relationship between HE learning and skills and competence. The role of HE in improving productivity is also poorly understood.'
42. There is a need for more informed dialogue between HE, government and employers to achieve better articulation and understanding by all parties of what is meant by the highest level, world class skills and the means to their delivery.
43. Whilst the introduction of an entitlement for time of work to study is a welcome move in the drive for world class skills, without appropriate financial support and funding models, the impact may be minimal. The current financial inequity between full- and part-time learners in terms of funding and student support is insupportable if there is a genuine commitment to a radical step change in the level of graduate skills.

#### The role of student support

44. Given the increasingly indefensible distinction between full- and part-time learners and the critical importance of part-time/flexible study for working adults wishing to gain higher level skills and qualifications in later life, access to the means to pay must be available for all. Yet misconceptions about part-time study abound and fuel government's attitudes towards financial help for part-time students. In a briefing paper Birkbeck College (16) summarises this disadvantageous position.

*'The Government's unwillingness to support part-time students is based on erroneous assumptions that they can afford it, or that their employers are helping them. Yet we know that only a minority of students get help from their employers and those that do tend to come from higher paying jobs. Those that require it most are not getting the help they need.'*

45. A fundamental review of the student support system, looking at best practice from other countries, will need to be considered if part-time/flexible study is to grow and meet Leitch's ambitions. Whilst employer engagement is important, the significance of the individual learner route should not be overlooked. Some demand-led models might ignore the many part-time students in higher education who are 'hidden' to employers because they are looking to move on from a current employer, are part of the flexible workforce, are seeking to move back into paid employment or hoping to maintain an active contribution to society in retirement.
46. As John Denham says 'Opportunities to learn can broaden and enrich everyone's view of the world. We cannot afford to waste the talent of any

adult.' (17). All policy and systems should, therefore, recognise the complexities of part-time, flexible study and guard against any inequities or unintended consequences for any individual or groups of individuals. As NIACE has pointed out in evidence to an IUSS Inquiry. (18)

*'Full-and part-time study are a single ecology. Neglecting either (or considering one in isolation from the other) increases the risk of poorer policy making and inconsistent, anomalous and confusing practice.'*

Working towards an holistic model of student access and support, which is not only fit for purpose for the next decade and beyond but which also safeguards equality of opportunity is also key to future success.

### The role of advice and guidance

47. Potential talent may currently be wasted due to inadequate information, advice and guidance provision as well as a lack of easily accessible application systems for part-time students. The National Union of Students, in its submission to this review, (19) stressed the importance of accurate information on courses available supported by access to advice and guidance through the application process and beyond. It went so far as to recommend that

*'UCAS be expanded to include information about part-time courses, and where appropriate, provide an application route*

*Local providers of IAG need to have clearer information about part-time study and the options available to prospective students'.*

### How to deliver the skills-based 'competitive edge' for the UK

48. To become a world leader in skills by 2020, it is clear that all partners, government, employers and HE will need to recognise the critical importance of 'flexible' higher education study and create the conditions for its realisation.

49. This in turn requires a shared language and reinvigorated, national commitment to 'lifelong learning'. Some 10 years ago in the Learning Age green paper (2), David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment stated that:

*'To cope with rapid change and the challenge of the information and communication age, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives.'*

50. In 2006 Leitch (3. Page 22) stresses the need for a 'culture of learning to be fully developed across society, so that all groups are able to invest in the development of their skills, driving a step change in participation in skills improvements.' The message in relation to part-time is clear.

51. Although the language may be different, the message is still the same. As a society we still have not fully embraced a learning culture. If we really are to effect a step change in skills, and not just have more of the same, government, individuals and employers need a new and compelling

language which not only promotes the personal, cultural and economic relevance of learning but which also drives greater accessibility. 'Part-time' or flexible study are key words in this new vocabulary, which should excite interest in learning in order to stimulate demand.

52. HEFCE has already made tentative steps towards a new discourse. (20) HEFCE states that 'Employer engagement is part of our approach to delivering flexible lifelong learning'. It is perhaps helpful terminology on which to build.
53. We should also look to European discourse 'to give direction to the perspective of lifelong learning and to intensify the commitment of the stakeholders of higher education.' (21)
54. The European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning (22) commits to consolidating reforms to promote a flexible and creative learning environment for all students. Given that learning environments will increasingly extend into the workplace, the home and cyberspace, other stakeholders too also need to commit to essential reforms in their behaviours and practices. There may be positive benefits in working with European partners in the promotion of part-time, flexible and lifelong learning.

#### Recommendations for government

1. Step up the pace of change to deliver world class skills by working with the HE sector and employers to identify a) patterns of present and future need and b) ways in which these can be supported.
2. Start the dialogue with HE by recognising that one of the strengths of the sector is its diversity and that there are already institutions taking a lead on part-time provision and flexible, learning opportunities. In supporting the principle of 'equal but different' acknowledge the risk such universities take in terms of reputation and of funding. They are expanding the widening participation arena and taking on the recognised extra costs associated with 'non-traditional' learners and the additional costs of flexible curriculum delivery.
3. Take steps to acknowledge and reward diverse missions including those which are centred on the development of flexible study and world class skills. This is not a second-rate activity. It is just as crucial as research excellence. The work currently being undertaken by HEFCE on new key performance indicators should reflect the crucial importance of higher level skills and qualifications, flexibility, employer engagement and workforce development and feed into national league tables.
4. Recognise that the success of 'part-time' students will increasingly depend on flexible university structures and systems which suit their needs rather than those of the institution. KPIs for the retention of part-time students do not currently exist because they are too diverse a body with diverse motivations to make any measure meaningful. A removal of the demarcation between full- and part-time students and more flexible provision will require new ways of measuring and recording achievement

and progression and HEFCE should consult with the sector and others on how to achieve this.

5. Work with partners both nationally and internationally to develop a new language of flexible lifelong learning as a driving discourse to effect a step change in highest level skills by 2020.
6. Recognise the importance of flexible lifelong learning to world class skills ambitions and acknowledge the complexity and fragility of the current flexible 'part-time' market. Acknowledge that individual learner demand for flexible study at Level 4 and above is as important to most HEIs as growing employer demand. The development needs of an individual and an employer will not always be coincident. HEIs have historically taken on the social responsibility to attract and serve all those who can benefit including those who are out of the workforce – such as the unemployed and women returners.

Develop policy with caution and in consultation with the sector to guard against unintended consequences and social inequities for individuals or groups of individuals who wish or need to study part-time.

7. Ensure that current moves to improve adult information, advice and guidance also include a real understanding of flexible learning opportunities and their importance to the individual and to the country's skills base.
8. Lead a national consultation on the desirability and feasibility of a national application system to better service the access and information needs of all potential individual learners and not just full-time undergraduates.
9. Charge HEFCE with the development of appropriate funding mechanisms to facilitate growth of flexible learning – including the benefits and disadvantages of a move towards funding by credit.
10. Charge HEFCE with developing an appropriate CAT system which builds on current practices for the accreditation of prior and experiential learning and which takes a fresh look at these in light of the need for increasing flexibility.
11. Introduce an holistic system of student finance and support which is mode free and which incentivises progression - looking at international examples and their successes. In Norway, for example, means-tested provision for all students has led apparently to unprecedented growth in part-time students.
12. Recognise the financial risks of working with employers and be realistic about the extent to which economic uncertainty affects employers' decisions to invest in skills as well as the prospects of those employed in SMEs to engage in co-funded higher level learning. Continue, therefore, to provide funding for employer engagement pilot schemes to gauge more accurately the extent of employer demand and the cost of bespoke programme delivery. Co-funding should not replace mainstream funding as a model to deliver expanded access to higher level skills and qualifications nor should it be used to reduce the unit of resource.

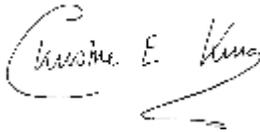
13. 'SMEs and sectors experiencing market instability may not be well placed to participate in co-funding. There is therefore a case for flexibility to ensure institutional funding which can underwrite involvement with businesses and employers which may not be involved or engaged in higher level education or opportunities.' (23)

### Some Conclusions

In the rapidly changing social and economic world the need to update and acquire new skills through a working lifetime will become ever more apparent. The demand from employers and learners, both full-time and part-time and for more flexible ways of working will grow. The funding of part-time study, measures of success and new delivery modes are the keys to making the HE sector fit for the future. If we continue to do what we have always done in relation to part-time study we will get what we always got- and we will not achieve our place in the knowledge economy.

I have not suggested detailed solutions although I have tried to indicate the direction some of these might take. My task has been to consider the role of part-time study in the future of the HE sector and point to some of the conditions that will need to be constructed to achieve that end. The gaps, errors and prejudices are mine. I offer an opinion and, I hope, the starting point for a debate which will lead to change.

This is all very real for me. My day job, working with all my colleagues at Staffordshire University, porters to professors, is to build a university fit and flexible not just for the present but for future.



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