

Educating Rita?

A model to address inadequate state support for part-time students

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Executive summary

One of the greatest and most glossed-over injustices in the English higher education system is the fact that part-time undergraduate students, who are older and from less traditional academic backgrounds, have a much worse deal than their full-time counterparts. Despite making up nearly a third of undergraduates, part-time students get a fraction of the financial support received by full-time students. They have to pay their fees up front, they can't take out a Government-supported loan, and their chances of securing any financial support are slim. A staggering 90% of part-time students do not receive any financial help from the Government. In 2007-08 the Government provided just £40.2 million in tuition fee and course grants for part-time students. This is less than 5% of the £936.9 million spent on maintenance and tuition fee grants for full-time students, leaving aside the billions spent on student loans. Furthermore, many choose to study part-time to change direction in their career, and only a third receive any financial assistance from their employer. If the Government is serious about encouraging people to continue to learn throughout their lives it must make it as easy as possible for people to go to university part-time.

Higher education is heading towards a crisis this month. With a boom in university applications and half as many full-time undergraduate students expected to receive places through clearing as last year, tens of thousands of eligible students will be left without university places. This surge is driven partly by older learners, who now make up nearly a quarter of all enrolments. The application figures show a rise of 14.9% for students aged between 21 to 24 on last year's applications, and an increase of 18.8% from applicants over the age of 25. This prompts the question – if the funding arrangements for part-time students were more equal, would many of these applicants prefer to attend part-time and continue to earn while they study?

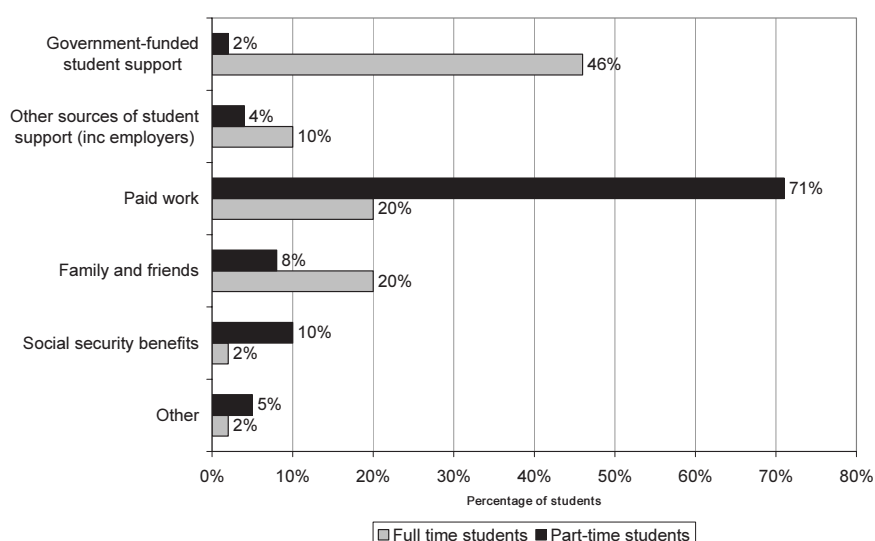
State support for part-time undergraduates is based upon arbitrary judgements such as the number of hours they will study. Part-time students often have complicated lives, juggling jobs and childcare alongside their course, and this inflexible and unfair funding system provides yet another barrier to university entry. We propose a new, fairer and affordable model which will lessen the divide between full- and part-time students. Firstly, under our model students whose household income is up to £50,000 will now be eligible for a partial tuition fee grant. Secondly, those who study at least 30% of an equivalent full-time degree (rather than at least 50%) will now also be eligible. We estimate this will cost an additional £33 million. Around 60,000 more part-time undergraduate students would receive some financial support from the Government. At present only 44,000 receive any assistance, and this would rise to 104,000.

This £33 million should be diverted from the ill-thought through £150 million University Challenge scheme, which aims to create 20 new higher education centres in under-served towns in England over the next six years. This scheme is not plugging genuine gaps in the market and is a poor use of public money. It should be reviewed by the Government as a matter of urgency. The fact that a town is desperate to have a university to its name does not automatically signal a serious gap. To take one example, Swindon is eager to have a university, but the area is actually already well served in terms of higher education, with a variety of different sorts of local university provision. These include the Swindon campus of the University of the West of England (which also has a larger campus in nearby Bristol), the Swindon branch of Oxford Brookes University and the Swindon campus of the University of Bath.

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The graph below highlights the very low level of Government and employer funding for part-time students and how they have to rely on their earnings to pay for their studies. It also illustrates the insignificance of Government-funded student support relative to full-time students.

English-domiciled part- and full-time undergraduates' sources of income, 2007-08



Source: Authors' calculations from Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2007/08

Part-time provision is a key part of the agenda to widen access. The report shows for the first time that 13% of part-time students are only educated to GCSE-level, compared to 2% of full-time students (see table below).

Part- and full-time undergraduates – highest qualification on entry, 2005-06

	Part-time	Full-time
First degree or above	23%	2%
Other HE and professional qualification	28%	6%
A-level or equivalent	21%	79%
GCSE or equivalent	13%	2%
Other or no qualification	13%	4%

Source: Authors' calculations from HESA 2005-06 data

Key recommendations:

- We propose a fairer model of financial support for part-time undergraduates. Firstly, to bring eligibility in line with full-time student financial support, students whose household income is up to £50,000 will now be eligible for a partial tuition fee grant. Secondly, those who study at least 30% of an equivalent full-time degree (rather than at least 50%) will now also be eligible. We estimate this will cost an additional £33 million. Around 60,000 more part-time undergraduate students would receive some financial support from the Government, up from 44,000 to 104,000.
- The Government should reconsider the £150 million University Challenge scheme which aims to create 20 new higher education centres in under-served towns in England over the next six years. While widening access to higher education is an important aim, we remain unconvinced that this ill-thought through scheme is plugging genuine gaps in the market. We feel strongly that it is a poor use of public money and may in fact harm existing regional and local partnerships between universities and further education colleges. £33 million should be diverted from this scheme as a priority to broaden support for part-time students and widen access.

Introduction

Why part-time students matter

Improving access to part-time study could help to drive two of the most important policy agendas in education: helping adults to develop their skills throughout their lives, and bringing more people from non-traditional backgrounds into higher education. Lifelong learning has been a core theme of Labour rhetoric since 1997, and although they have introduced a small amount of state support, their failure to address fully the unfair treatment of part-time students makes such rhetoric seem hollow. One of the greatest and most glossed-over injustices in the higher education system is the fact that part-time undergraduate students, who are often older and from less traditional academic backgrounds, have a much worse deal than their full-time counterparts. We are concerned about all part-time students in the UK, but in this paper and as an immediate policy priority, we propose a model to amend the chronic underfunding of part-time undergraduate students in England.

For too long part-time students have been the forgotten cohort of the student population, severely underfunded and firmly off the political agenda because reversing this inequity would be seen as costly. Yet they are far from being a small minority. There are now just under half a million part-time undergraduates in English universities, representing a third of all undergraduate students (it is worth noting that part-time students now make up nearly half of all postgraduates as well).¹ After a long period of steady growth enrolments have dropped off recently, including a fall of 15,000 part-time undergraduates between 2006-07 and 2007-08.²

The vast majority of part-time students are over the age of 25 (82%), female (62%) and work in full-time jobs – estimates place the proportion in paid work as high as 80-90%.³ Well over a quarter of those aiming for an undergraduate qualification have only a GCSE or equivalent qualification, or lower.⁴ Whether they are mothers trying to return to work after a career break, or individuals who left school with no formal academic qualifications, part-time study often provides a ‘second chance’ that would otherwise not be available. Younger students also study part-time, and those under 21 now make up 10% of part-time first degree students in the UK.⁵

Unlike their full-time counterparts, part-time students in England have to pay fees up front, they can’t take out a Government-supported loan, and their chances of securing any financial support from the Government or their university are slim. Therefore, many part-time students are penalised for taking a course alongside their job. If the Government wants people to re-skill and up-skill during their lives this surely has to change. We need to focus on making it as easy as possible for those who would benefit most from it to go to university.

The crisis that higher education is heading towards with a massive shortage of university places this summer throws a spotlight on the level and type of provision in the sector, and provides a timely opportunity to re-examine the critical role part-time study can play in the years ahead.

The student places crisis

Universities are anticipating an unprecedented scramble for university places when the A-level results are released on August 20th. For the first time in history, over 600,000 people have applied to start full-time undergraduate courses in the UK this autumn, up around 60,000 on last year.⁶ Yet a funding cap on student places means most of these extra applicants will miss out on going to university. The Government initially told universities that it would fund 15,000 more student places than last year, but due to budget constraints this

was later retracted to just 10,000.⁷ Earlier this year the Government revealed to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) that the actual figure would be as low as 3,000 extra full-time places.⁸

The media predicted that up to 50,000 students would fail to find a place through clearing, and the Government attempted to divert this PR catastrophe in July with a complete policy about-turn.⁹ Reversing their previous stern warnings to universities that there was absolutely no room for expansion (and that universities would be fined for over-recruiting,) the Government agreed to provide an extra 10,000 unfunded student places in STEM¹⁰ subjects, bringing the total number of extra places up to 13,000.¹¹

This will go some way towards dampening the crisis, but will still leave tens of thousands of students who achieved the required grades unable to go to university. 43,000 students found places through clearing last year and UCAS has recently revealed that only “about half” that number will find places this year.¹² Meanwhile the universities who choose to accept these additional student numbers (and exactly how they will be distributed remains worryingly unclear) may later regret establishing the precedent of unfunded expansion.

One striking aspect of this boom in full-time student applications is that it is driven partly by older learners. The application figures show a rise of 14.9% for students aged between 21 to 24 on last year’s applications, and an increase of 18.8% from applicants over the age of 25.¹³ This prompts the question – if the funding arrangements for part-time students were more equal would many of these applicants prefer to study part-time and continue to earn while they study? Vice Chancellors we interviewed said that many universities would be unwilling to divert older full-time applicants towards part-time courses in the current environment because the financial support students would receive would be much less and it would therefore be extremely unfair.¹⁴ This research note will present a model for making part-time undergraduate study in England a more viable alternative for these older learners in particular.

Economic challenges and the Government’s rhetoric

The economic benefits of investing in higher education are well known, and universities will undoubtedly play a central role in providing the flexible skills needed for tomorrow’s workforce.¹⁵ Much has been made in recent years about the importance of the UK’s knowledge economy and numerous projections highlight the need for more high-level skills in the years ahead.¹⁶ With the baby-boom generation heading towards retirement and fewer young people coming through to take their place, there will also be a short to medium-term demographic shift which will place even more strain on the workforce.¹⁷ With six million adults of working age currently possessing only A-Levels or equivalent qualifications, there exists a large pool of untapped talent in the workforce, many of whom could benefit from higher education.¹⁸ Furthermore, recent research indicates that around four million adults would actively consider going to university if it was more accessible and they could be provided with financial support.¹⁹

Lifelong learning has been a big theme for Labour since the early Blair years, but while the Government has been strong on narrative, it has been disappointingly weak on delivering any real outcomes. Back in 1997 the Party’s manifesto said “we must learn throughout life, to retain employment through new and improved skills”.²⁰ A year on the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, continued in a similar vein, arguing 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.”²¹ In the 2003 white paper *The Future of Higher Education* the case for lifelong learning was made even clearer and was explicitly linked to universities.²² As recently as July this year Peter Mandelson made the case for part-time students in his first public address on universities as the new Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, arguing that the

sector needs to be “serious about adult skills and life-long higher and further education”. He also voiced regret that “we need to ask whether the higher education system adequately supports mature students and part-timers” and concluded that “we need to do more in these directions”.²³

Yet despite appearing to understand the importance of encouraging adults to return to learning, the Government has made no serious attempt to address the part-time funding situation. Although the Labour Government was the first to introduce state support for part-time undergraduate students, the level of provision put in place has been entirely inadequate. Crucially, the level of funding remains far too low in comparison to the support received by full-time undergraduates.

In part, this can be attributed to an ongoing insistence that employers must bear a greater responsibility in funding part-time study. This is right in principle. However in practice we know that only a minority of students get help from their employers, and those that do tend to come from higher paid jobs and wealthier households.²⁴ Universities UK’s survey found that students with annual household incomes of between £35,000-£49,000 were three and a half times more likely to be financed by their employer than students with household incomes of £15,499 or less.²⁵ Employer support should of course be a part of the overall funding picture, but the Government should not continue to use it to dodge the role it can play in providing support to part-time students.

Cuts to funding for people who have studied before

Part-time student funding took a massive hit at the start of the 2007-08 academic year when the Government decided to withdraw institutional funding for those students returning to university who were taking an equal or lower level qualification (ELQ).²⁶ The Government stumbled upon a £100 million funding gap in the full-time student support budget and decided that withdrawing funding for ELQ students was the most painless sacrifice. Predictably this decision affected part-time students disproportionately. In total over half of all part-time students on undergraduate courses have some form of prior HE qualification.²⁷ In simple terms the ELQ cut meant that many people who wanted to retrain would no longer be supported by the Government. For example, a university would no longer receive funding for a woman returning to work who previously studied English and now wanted to improve her job prospects by studying management. If the Government genuinely believes in lifelong learning then this was a truly retrograde decision.

Much debate has since raged over the detrimental effect this decision would have not only on the two specialist part-time providers – the Open University and Birkbeck, University of London – but on the sector as a whole. Several lifelong learning departments across the country have come under significant financial pressure in recent years, with a string of cuts and closures to adult education, and this move will undoubtedly make matters worse.²⁸ Earlier this year a report commissioned by English Heritage argued that adult education was “on the verge of extinction” after the ELQ decision had put lifelong learning departments under “severe financial pressure”.²⁹ The Innovation, Universities and Science select committee’s inquiry into the withdrawal of ELQ funding received 478 submissions – an unusually large number – of which 470 were critical of the Government’s decision.³⁰

HEFCE’s review of the ELQ policy due this autumn will examine the full impact across a large number of institutions. Yet there is no doubt that this funding cut has greatly harmed adult education and part-time students in particular. The impact will be keenly felt during the recession, when thousands of adults who find themselves unemployed seek to re-skill. The Government’s message for those who have already been to university seems to be: if you chose wrongly the first time or you’ve decided on a career change, there will be no second chances.

The part-time student population

Whilst most universities have some part-time provision, the undergraduate part-time student population is concentrated more heavily in modern universities and the two specialist part-time providers, Birkbeck and the OU, with the latter being by far the single largest deliverer of part-time higher education in the UK.³¹ The Open University alone has over 40% of the share of first-degree part-time students in the UK.³² Despite steady

growth in the early part of the decade, enrolments have begun to dip, and fell by 15,000 places between 2006-07 and 2007-08.³³ Looking to the future, fewer 18 year olds will be coming into higher education, and many universities will look to part-time students to plug this gap, so getting the level of student support right is crucial.³⁴

Part-time students across the sector are very diverse and quite sharply differentiated from full-time students. On average part-time students are more likely to be:³⁵

- Older – 82% of part-time students are aged over 25 on entry compared to just 12% of full-time students. Note that the bulk of these students are aged between 30-39 years;
- Female – 62% of students are women compared to 55% of full-time students;
- White – 10% of students are from minority ethnic groups compared to 16% for full-time students.

Part-time students are more likely to be living in the same region that they are studying in, with 80% of part-time first-degree students studying in their region of domicile.³⁶ They tend to take a more limited range of subjects than full-time students: 23% study subjects allied to medicine compared to 8% of full-time students.³⁷ They are also much more likely to be in work during or immediately before starting their course than their full-time counterparts (over four-fifths compared to just over a half).³⁸

Student case study³⁹

Liza Bennett, University of Warwick, Part-time BA (Hons) Health and Social Policy, Part-time MA Social Work
“My journey of study at the University of Warwick began with the Part-time BA in Health and Social Policy. At the point of entry I was a lone parent working three jobs as a waitress, care assistant and barmaid, yet still barely making ends meet. The part-time degree provided the flexibility to juggle simultaneously university study, childcare and work commitments.

I graduated in 2006 with a BA (Hons) and subsequently continued my studies at Warwick on the MA Social Work course, graduating in 2008. Now I am a qualified social worker, working for Warwickshire County Council. Studying at the university has enabled me to change the shape of my life in so many ways. On a personal level my confidence and motivation have grown beyond my wildest dreams: I have a career I love (where I have the opportunity to make a real difference to peoples' lives), paid holidays and a salary which affords sufficient disposable income to live my own dreams.”

In spite of the unfair funding arrangements for part-time students a significant proportion come from poorer backgrounds. This suggests that focusing more financial support on part-time students would do much to widen access to university. Universities UK's survey of undergraduate part-time students in UK universities found that 13% of students declared themselves as being “routine and manual [workers] or unemployed”, with a further 16% self-declaring as “intermediate”, which includes clerical, sales and service positions.⁴⁰ The latest *Student Income and Expenditure Survey* found that part-time undergraduate students in England had an average total income of £13,511 in 2007-08.⁴¹

Entry qualifications for part-time undergraduate students are far more diverse than for their full-time counterparts. The part-time undergraduate student population in particular is very polarized among the well qualified and the not well qualified.

The table on the following page highlights some key aspects of the part-time higher education sector:

- Over half of all part-time undergraduates already have experience of higher education compared with just 8% of full-time students. (It is important to note that clearly not all part-time students are disadvantaged as suggested in much of the literature in this area).

- Nearly a quarter of part-time undergraduate students have a first degree. (This poses a very real challenge in light of the most recent cuts to funding for people who have studied before).
- The table also highlights issues about widening participation. Well over a quarter of all part-time students aiming for an undergraduate qualification have only a GCSE or equivalent qualification, or lower.

Part- and full-time undergraduates – highest qualification on entry, 2005-06

	Part-time	Full-time
First degree or above	23%	2%
Other HE and professional qualification	28%	6%
A-level or equivalent	21%	79%
GCSE or equivalent	13%	2%
Other or no qualification	13%	4%

Source: Authors' calculations from HESA 2005-06 data

It is no surprise that employment commitments and financial constraints are still the major factors behind students' choice to study part-time.⁴² A majority of undergraduate students also see the greater convenience of part-time rather than full-time study as an important factor, as well as being able to fulfil domestic responsibilities.⁴³

While gaining a qualification and having an interest in their subject of choice are high on the list of priorities, part-time undergraduate students largely study for professional reasons. Interestingly, almost as many students see changing their job as important as getting on in their current career as a motivation for studying.⁴⁴ When making assumptions about funding it is important to remember that many part-time students will retrain precisely in order to change their jobs, and will therefore find it harder to obtain employer support for their course.

Student case study⁴⁵

Jeff Porter, Birkbeck, University of London, Part-time MA History and Politics

Jeff has been a tube driver on the London underground for the best part of 20 years and was a late-starter to higher education, having recently completed an MA in History and Politics at Birkbeck at the age of 48. Jeff was part of history himself when he successfully led over 1,000 of his passengers to safety after a bomb exploded on a neighbouring train during the July 7 terrorist attacks. After the events of 2005, Jeff returned to Birkbeck to continue his studies, which he fit around his tube driving and his work as a local councillor for Barking and Dagenham.

At school he played truant and left with nothing other than "a bicycle proficiency pass and a couple of swimming certificates". Through his involvement with his trade union he spent some time going to work health and safety courses, which got him back into learning. "I don't think that I'm brighter now than when I was at school, but back then there seemed to be no attempt to engage my interest," he says. Learning part-time at university was a completely different experience. He took his A-levels at his local adult education college and later pursued his love of history with a part-time BA (Hons) in History from the OU.

Part-time undergraduate student financial support

On average it costs part-time undergraduate students in England just under £2,000 a year to study (including tuition, course and other learning costs).⁴⁶ But 90% of part-time undergraduates in England receive no financial

support at all from the Government with these costs, while all of their full-time peers receive at least some help with their study costs.⁴⁷ Part-time undergraduates don't have access to Government-supported student loans, have limited access to institutional bursaries, and receive minimal fee and course grants. One of the major reasons why many part-time students don't receive support is because they are not deemed to study enough by the Government. At present Government support is only available for part-time students who study at least half of the equivalent full-time course each year and complete the whole course in no more than twice the time it would take a full-time student. In other words if you are studying for an undergraduate degree which would typically take 3 years full-time you must take at least 50% of the modules that would be taken in the full-time course each year, and take no longer than 6 years to complete the course. This threshold is described as studying at "50% intensity".

This jargon is immediately hard to understand and potentially off-putting for those considering taking a part-time course. But more importantly this is an entirely arbitrary cut-off point. There is no logical reason why a student studying 40% of the full-time course each year is less in need of support than a student studying 50%. As we have seen, part-time students are often juggling complicated schedules, including jobs and childcare, and removing flexibility in this way simply erects yet another barrier to going to university. Henceforth we will refer to the intensity of study as 'studying x% of the full-time course each year'.

Current funding arrangements

In 2009-10 part-time undergraduate students in England will only be eligible for a fee grant towards the costs of their fees if they study at least 50% of the full-time course each year, they do not already have a level 4 qualification (which is equivalent to the first year of a bachelors degree), and their household income is below £16,509 for receipt of a full grant or between £16,509 and £26,505 for a partial grant.⁴⁸ The amount of fee grant varies according to the percentage of the full-time course you study each year, with the maximum currently set at £1,210.⁴⁹ Note that this is far below the maximum maintenance grant of £2,906 available to full-time undergraduates.⁵⁰ Part-time students may also receive a means-tested course grant of up to £260 a year on top of the fee grant if they study at least 50% of the full-time course each year and do not already have a level 4 qualification.⁵¹ Consequently, access to support is not driven by financial need, but is determined initially by a student's existing qualifications and how many hours they study.

Government guidance for student support, 2009-10

How intensive your course is	Maximum Fee Grant you can receive
50% or more but less than 60% of the equivalent full-time course	£805 or the cost of the fees charged by your university or college, whichever is lower
60% or more but less than 75% of the equivalent full-time course	£970 or the cost of the fees charged by your university or college, whichever is lower
75% or more of the equivalent full-time course	£1,210 or the cost of the fees charged by your university or college, whichever is lower

Source: *Guide to student finance 2009/10, Student Finance Direct*

The average fee grant received in 2007-08 for the three levels outlined in the table above was £550, £750 and £930 respectively.⁵² At present only 10% of part-time students receive support.⁵³ Therefore the vast majority of part-time undergraduates, unlike their full-time colleagues, rely on their earnings to pay for their studies – they bear the costs of study personally. In fact Universities UK's survey found that of those English part-time undergraduate students eligible for course grants in 2005-06, 58% spent more on their course costs than the

amount of their grant. Of those eligible for a fee grant, around a quarter ended up paying more for their fees than the amount of their grant.⁵⁴

Evidence from the 2007-08 *Student Income and Expenditure Survey* of English-domiciled undergraduate students (which only includes those part-time students who study 50% of the full-time course each year) suggests that the main beneficiaries from tuition fee and course grant support in England are lone parents, ethnic minority students and those with clerical level and routine/manual jobs.⁵⁵ Just over a quarter of students surveyed received tuition fee support and around a fifth received a course grant.⁵⁶ Just 2% received income from the Access to Learning Funds, which are available from the Government through individual institutions and aim to provide help for students in hardship or who require extra financial support to stay in higher education.⁵⁷ Birkbeck, University of London and the Open University received just £450,000 and £5.9 million respectively from this fund in 2007-08.⁵⁸

Student case study⁵⁹

Tony Denton, Sheffield Hallam University, Part-time BSc Physiotherapy

Tony left school at 15 with no formal qualifications. Although he worked part-time as a health technician at Sheffield Hallam University in his early 40s he had never thought higher education was open to him. When he heard about SHU's plans to start a new part-time course in physiotherapy he realised he had stumbled upon his "second chance". Now Head of Physiotherapy for the Sheffield United Football Club Academy, he feels part-time higher education turned his career around.

The university granted him a place on the physiotherapy course on the provision that he could prove that he was able to juggle studying and working at the same time. The experience wasn't without its challenges. "I was the oldest student on the course [then 45]. I was granted two days off work per week to study, but this time had to be made up in over-time and additional hours."

This juggling act was his only option, because he had a mortgage and other financial responsibilities to meet. But he was fortunate to receive a grant for his fees from the NHS, and saw the lack of financial support available for other students as a major barrier both to entry and to completion of the course. "I would say the one biggest hurdle is ensuring employer support," he says. "There were very few students who failed their exams, but rather most dropped out because support was eventually withdrawn from their employer. If the Government were able to provide additional income to part-time students it would make a huge difference. Students could afford to cut down their working hours."

Tony found the learning experience a very positive one and saw a number of benefits to picking up study later in life. "I've seen the full-time physio programme at the university and the kids that come straight out of school tend to be a lot more competitive. When they break up for group work they compete with each other a lot more. It's completely different on the part-time course. Mature students tend to support each other and part-time study is definitely more geared towards life experience. Everyone is there because they want to be a physiotherapist. A lot of youngsters maybe haven't thought it through as much." Tony plans to start a part-time MSc (also at SHU) in Advancing Physiotherapy in March 2010.

With the introduction of top-up fees for full-time undergraduate students in England in 2006, fees for part-time students, which are not capped, have also been rising. Historically, part-time fees have been based on a pro-rata basis of full-time fees. Consequently, there was a danger that if universities increased their part-time fees in line with the rise in variable full-time fees it would act as a disincentive to low-income students and others who are price sensitive. On the other hand, if universities did not increase their fees, part-time courses would be under-funded relative to full-time courses, which would lead to a reduction of provision.

This relative difference will widen considerably if the cap on full-time fees is raised. Since 2006, part-time fees have increased but not in line with full-time fees (the average annual tuition fee charge for part-time students was £1,006 in 2007-08 compared to just over £3,000 for a standard undergraduate degree).⁶⁰ Over the same period, part-time undergraduate enrolments have fallen by 3% while full-time enrolments increased by 2%.⁶¹

With rising part-time tuition fees and without more part-time financial support, there is a real danger that enrolments will fall even further.

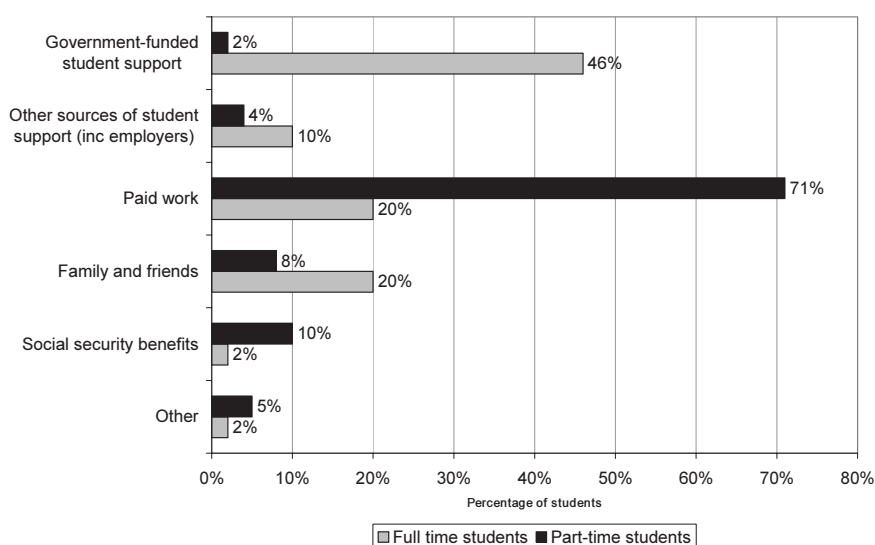
The maximum maintenance grant in 2009-10 for full-time students is set at £2,906 a year for a student with a household income of less than £25,000, with a partial grant tapering off up to £50,020.⁶² On top of this, all full-time students can take out Government-subsidised loans to pay for their tuition fees of up to £3,225 a year, and loans of up to £4,950 for their living costs. The level of support for English part-time students in 2007-08 was a mere fraction of that received by their full-time counterparts. On top of the billions spent maintaining the student loan pot, the Government spent £936.9 million in maintenance and tuition fee grants and allowances to low-income students.⁶³ Over the same period part-time students were awarded tuition fee and course grants of only £40.2 million.⁶⁴

Employer contributions

Although estimates vary between institutions and courses of study, it is believed that broadly across the sector around a third of all part-time undergraduate students in the UK receive at least some support from their employers.⁶⁵ That leaves two-thirds of students who have to fund their studies themselves. In reality the actual level of support amounts to very little of the average income of part-time students, as outlined in the graph below. Crucially, employers are more likely to sponsor male employees, those taking vocational qualifications and those from wealthier households.⁶⁶ Universities UK's survey found that students with annual household incomes of between £35,000-£49,000 were three and a half times more likely to be financed by their employer than students with household incomes of £15,499 or less.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the *2007-08 Income and Expenditure Survey* found that the amount of support was on average higher for those under the age of 25 and those from managerial/professional backgrounds.⁶⁸ In many respects employer support tends to go most to those who least need it. A banker doing a part-time professional certificate in management is likely to get cash from his employer while a single mother trying to climb up the career ladder is left to struggle on her own.

The following graph highlights the very low level of Government and employer support for part-time students and how they have to rely on their earnings to pay for their studies. It also illustrates the insignificance of Government-funded student support relative to full-time students.

English-domiciled part- and full-time undergraduates' sources of income, 2007-08



Source: Authors' calculations from Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2007/08

It is worth noting that the two specialist part-time providers (Birkbeck and the OU) report very low levels of employer sponsorship of tuition fees.⁶⁹ And such employer funding is especially at risk during an economic downturn, at the very time when employees need to re-skill and up-skill.

A model for increasing government support for part-time students

Parity of support for all students who need it and regardless of intensity of study should be a long term aim, but is clearly not a political reality right now. Nonetheless, the current situation is so unfair that the Government could make a significant difference to support for part-time undergraduate students in England by making some relatively minor changes to the current levels of funding.⁷⁰

As a starting point, it should be made a priority to increase the household income thresholds for part-time support to reflect the thresholds for grants received by full-time students. In 2009-10, full-time undergraduates will receive a full grant of £2,906 if their household income is £25,000 or less, and a partial grant if their household income is between £25,000 and £50,020. Mirroring these limits for part-time students would radically change the proportion of students who receive support.

In addition, the Government should extend support to part-time students who study less than 50% of a full-time course each year. New evidence obtained through Parliamentary questions shows that over half of all part-time undergraduate students study less than 50% of the full-time course each year (see table below) and so are automatically excluded from receiving any student support. Although it may not be feasible (or even desirable) to fund students at all intensities of study, the minimum threshold should be lowered to those who study at least 30% of the full-time course each year, as is currently the case in Wales.

Percentage of part-time undergraduate students in English higher education institutions, by intensity of study, 2006-07⁷¹

Intensity	Data from new PQ %	Students
<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
All	100.0	
Base	508,955	

Source: Hansard PQ 476 c85W, 19.05.2008

We have modelled changes to the tuition fee grant only. Fees are students' largest item of course expenditure and any additional help with these is likely to have a greater impact on widening participation than changes to the course grant. Modelling the impact of changes to the current eligibility criteria for fee grants for part-time students and its cost is difficult because of a lack of information. Therefore we have had to make some assumptions based on the available information.⁷² We used data from Parliamentary questions and a survey of part-time students⁷³ to calculate the likely implications for the number of students getting a fee grant and the costs of providing this support for two different policy changes outlined below. The calculations project from the existing number of students currently receiving this grant, as well as existing costs. Note that increasing the generosity of the support may attract more students to study part-time and so increase our estimated costs.

From Parliamentary questions we know that in 2006-07 around 44,000 English-domiciled part-time students received fee grants and 46,000 received course grants. Each total represents around 10% of part-time undergraduate students. Together these grants cost the Government a total of £37.7 million.⁷⁴ More recent figures for 2007-08 show that these costs have risen slightly to £28.5 million on fee grants and £11.7 million on course grants, a total of £40.2 million.⁷⁵

Changing the income thresholds for the receipt of fee grants to match those of grants for full-time students would roughly double the proportion of part-time students receiving fee grants and roughly double the costs.⁷⁶ Extending support to students who study between 30-49% of the full-time course each year has a smaller impact. This would increase the proportion of students receiving fee grants by about 15%.

If we combine the extension of fee grants to students who study between 30-49% of the full-time course each year and raise the income thresholds to mirror those of full-time students, then the proportion of students benefiting from this support would more than double. This would cost £33 million more than under current arrangements. Around 60,000 more part-time undergraduate students would receive some financial support from the Government.

Summary of changes to the fee grant for part-time undergraduate students

	Old system	New model
Income thresholds	Full grant <£16,090 Partial grant £16,090 -£24,280	Full grant < £25,000 Partial grant £25,000-£50,020 (in line with full-time support)
Intensity of study	No support for less than 50% intensity of study	Support for between 30-49% intensity of study
Cost	£26.5 million 2006-07 £28.5 million in 2007-08	£61.5 million
Students receiving support	44,000 total (2006-07)	104,000 total

Recommendation: The criteria for state support for part-time students should be changed to reflect the income thresholds for grants received by full-time students. The Government should also extend support to those who study less than 50% of the full-time course each year, which accounts for over half of all part-time undergraduate students.

Where should the money come from?

The agenda to widen access to higher education is an incredibly important one. At face value at least, University Challenge, an ambitious project to build up to 20 new university centres in towns with limited access to higher education by 2014, could seem to be a broadly good thing. However, one needs only to scratch the surface to find that this £150 million scheme is alarmingly poorly planned and unlikely to deliver any real benefit or value for money. We therefore recommend that roughly £33 million of this money is diverted as a priority to pay for the new part-time funding system announced above to help widen access to existing universities.

Sources close to the Government say that University Challenge was a back-of-an-envelope strategy, patched together as a sign that the Government cared about regeneration following the collapse of the much-vaunted

super casinos scheme in early 2008. Big universities are often the largest or second largest employer in a city, and thus provide a considerable boost in terms of jobs, revenue, skills and aspirations. If you ignore the fact that a university cannot really be developed for £5 million or £10 million, investing in new higher education institutions seemed an obvious political answer.

In March 2008 John Denham, then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, announced the creation of up to 20 new “university centres” across England. Planned over six years, the new universities or extensions to existing further education colleges would provide up to 10,000 new student places. £150 million of public money was earmarked from HEFCE’s strategic development fund, with the expectation that significant funding from Regional Development Agencies and the private sector would follow.⁷⁷ Denham argued that local higher education had the potential to unlock “problems of public health and civic engagement” as well as drive up the skills of the workforce.⁷⁸

By March 2009 HEFCE had received 27 expressions of interest from towns interested in joining the scheme.⁷⁹ Yet with ministers looking hard at every budget the initiative seems to have stalled, and we could not find any information on the next stages of the scheme. The fact that the scheme is broadly agreed to be over-subscribed shows that the political calculation about demand from towns was right. However, this demand is not supported by clear evidence of a real need for new universities.

Although HEFCE received largely positive responses to its consultation, privately many Vice Chancellors argue that the scheme is unlikely to plug genuine gaps in the market. One summed up a common feeling in the sector: “Regarding University Challenge we certainly need a lot more convincing. There are very few areas which are actually ‘cold’, and there are all kinds of good reasons why this might be the case.”⁸⁰ The Head of one modern university asked: “Do we need more and more new institutions?”⁸¹ Professor Chris Higgins, Vice Chancellor of Durham University, said: “This is a matter of catering to local parochialism. What is most critical in the sector is to ensure the unit of resource is maintained.”⁸²

The fact that a town is desperate to have a university to its name does not automatically signal a serious gap. To take one example, Swindon is eager to have a university, but the area is actually already well served in terms of higher education, with a variety of different sorts of local university provision. These include the Swindon campus of the University of the West of England (which also has a larger campus in nearby Bristol), the Swindon branch of Oxford Brookes University and the Swindon campus of the University of Bath (at the research intensive end of the spectrum).

Furthermore, there is a danger that University Challenge will duplicate or even threaten existing partnerships between universities and further education colleges that are already proving successful in providing local courses for people who might otherwise not consider going to university. For instance, the town of Thurrock in Essex is currently bidding for a new university centre. However, the University of Essex already has a campus in Southend, as well as accrediting just under 1,000 higher education students a year at the South East Essex College next door. In addition, in August 2007 the University of East Anglia and the University of Essex formed a partnership with five further education colleges to create University Campus Suffolk, with centres in Bury St Edmunds, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft, Otley and Ipswich. Neither Essex nor UEA benefit financially from the scheme, but both see it as part of their core mission to spread knowledge and opportunity throughout the region. This is an innovative and exciting model, similar to the new Combined Universities in Cornwall partnership. So given that these regional partnerships already exist, do we really need another higher education institution in the area? If we continue to add new universities there is a very serious risk of replicating good work that is already happening, and spreading resources too thinly.

Affordability is an obvious and very real concern. One Vice Chancellor we spoke to from a research-intensive university noted that this sort of scheme “might have been viable five years ago but certainly not in the current climate” and that the sums involved could well be insufficient to support a new higher education centre at a further education college, let alone fund an entirely new institution.⁸³ Given the current pressure on places, there are serious doubts that the Government will be able to find the additional 10,000 student places promised in this scheme. We would argue that at a time when many higher education institutions are nervous about their future survival it seems unwise to inject large amounts of Government money into creating new universities.

Worryingly a number of Vice Chancellors we spoke to were convinced that many further education and higher education providers were putting in bids for the scheme for political reasons rather than because they felt a new centre was necessarily a good thing for the area or the best use of public money. One head of a leading research-intensive university said that it revealed the “nasty side of politics,” while another said he was involved in the scheme “basically for political reasons”.⁸⁴

Two of the big aims of University Challenge are to widen access to non-traditional students and to drive skills in local communities. These are both key elements of part-time provision. We feel strongly that it would be a better use of public money to encourage future part-time study in already established institutions rather than promoting new student places at small, new higher education centres in an already stretched market.

Recommendation: The Government should reconsider the £150 million University Challenge scheme which aims to create 20 new higher education centres in under-served towns in England in the next six years. While widening access to higher education is an important aim, we remain unconvinced that this ill-thought through scheme is plugging genuine gaps in the market. We feel strongly that it is a poor use of public money and may in fact harm existing regional and local partnerships between universities and further education colleges. Around £33 million should be diverted from this scheme as a priority to broaden support for part-time students as we have outlined.

The student experience

Funding alone will not be enough. Part-time study throws up a series of unique challenges and any debate about encouraging provision must include a discussion about the student experience. Retention is particularly critical. Part-time students are three times more likely to drop out than their full-time counterparts. From an analysis of 50,000 part-time first-degree students starting in 2004-05, the National Audit Office found that 23% failed to continue on to their second year of study.⁸⁵ This compares to recent data from the Higher Education Statistics Authority which showed that only 7.4% of all full-time first degree entrants in 2006-07 were no longer in higher education the following year.⁸⁶ Best practice should be shared throughout the sector, especially from Birkbeck and the OU, who have the most extensive experience in the area.

To date institutions have tended to be bad at sharing best practice on retention, although many share the same problems. To address this, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation has established a grants programme which funds institutions to monitor what works in discouraging students from dropping out and to share it throughout the sector. This scheme focuses largely on full-time students. We recommend that HEFCE funds additional research focusing on best practice for retention of part-time students.⁸⁷

If students drop out it tends to be early on. The Open University has identified the first formal assessment as a crucial milestone that is likely to cause a setback for students who are already struggling. Helping students to

deal with any issues they may have early on in their course can make a big difference in their ability to continue further. Tutors have a contractual obligation to look out for those students not completing their first assessment and can access an electronic referral system where support staff in regional centres will try to make contact with the students. The reasoning is that while tutors may have contact with students and a rough awareness of the help available, dedicated student support staff will be better equipped to help those students that need it most.

The OU has focused on identifying students who might need extra help by developing a ‘vulnerability index’. This fairly crude collection of indicators includes variables for postcode (socio-economic background), previous educational experience and English as a second language. Someone from the University’s regional support centre will contact those students who score highly on the index before the course begins to explain clearly what support services are available. While this system is particularly useful for the OU’s distant learning model it could also be adapted to suit more traditional provision.

Another successful scheme run by the university is the ‘interrupted study’ program, aimed at accommodating students who for whatever reason are forced to take a significant break from their studies. A student is eligible to take part if they have completed at least one assignment on their course. The scheme allows students to stop their course and take it up again at the next presentation stage, usually 9 to 12 months later.

Practical projects such as the work underway at Birkbeck, University of London to build a new support centre can also make a real impact to the part-time student experience. The student support centre is being moved so that it is the very first thing students see when they enter the campus and aims to provide a one-stop shop for both current and prospective students’ enquiries. The idea is to put student support at the heart of university life and tackle financial and student experience issues head on.

One Vice Chancellor that we spoke to from a leading research-intensive university noted that with fewer resources to cater to the needs of part-time students he found that attending to “small practical measures” can often make a big difference. He argued that improving the student experience of part-time students can be as simple of asking “whether there is enough car parking or how easy it is to buy a coffee on campus in the evening”.

Recommendation: As well as the Government addressing the package of financial support for part-time students, universities must focus more on the part-time student experience. Best practice about how to support and retain part-time students should be shared throughout the sector, and in particular universities should learn from the two specialist part-time providers (Birkbeck and the Open University). HEFCE should take a lead by co-funding additional research on the retention of part-time students, using the Paul Hamlyn Foundation grants programme as a model.

Conclusion

The old stereotype of the part-time student was of someone studying wine-tasting or flower-arranging to keep themselves busy in their spare time. Happily now politicians realise that such an image is utterly outdated. Part-time students, who are often older and from less traditional academic backgrounds, take on a very challenging personal workload when they enrol at university, juggling at least one job at the same time, and perhaps also childcare. This is no small commitment, and they take it on primarily because they want to improve their career chances or change direction completely. Nor are part-time students a trivial part of the student population. They now make up one third of all undergraduate students in England.

Part-time study is crucial for boosting the skills of our country (and enabling people to adapt to the changing needs of our economy) and also for bringing people in to higher education who could benefit but would not otherwise consider it. However, flexibility is the key. By failing to provide adequate levels of financial support for these students the Government is putting yet another obstacle in the way of higher education. Students who are not deterred by the lack of state support may find the pressure of covering their course costs themselves becomes a barrier to completing the course.

The crisis that higher education is heading towards this month, with a massive shortage of student places and a surge in applications, throws a spotlight on the level and type of provision in the sector. The boom in student applications has been driven in part by major growth in interest from older students, many of whom may have preferred to study part-time alongside a job if only there was proper help available from the Government.

There is no logical reason for supporting full-time students and neglecting to support those who can only commit to studying part-time, other than the knowledge that shifting these arrangements could prove costly. It must be a long term goal to provide parity of support for all who need it, regardless of their hours of study. However, this problem cannot wait. In fact, the situation is so unfair at the moment that the Government could make a real difference with a relatively small investment. We have suggested a model for changing the boundaries for awarding fee grants to part-time undergraduates in England, which would mean that over 60,000 extra students would receive support, at an additional cost of around £33 million. This is a realistic and achievable plan. It is not enough for the Government to talk about the importance of learning throughout life, it must act on part-time student support to make this aspiration a reality.

Recommendations

- **Financial support** – We propose a fairer model of support for part-time undergraduates. To bring eligibility in line with full-time student support, students whose household income is up to £50,000 will now be eligible for a tuition fee grant. Those who study at least 30% of an equivalent full-time degree will now also be eligible. We estimate this will cost an additional £33 million. Around 60,000 more part-time undergraduate students would receive some financial support from the Government, up from 44,000 to 104,000.
- **University Challenge** – The Government should reconsider the £150 million University Challenge scheme which aims to create 20 new higher education centres in under-served towns in England in the next six years. While widening access to higher education is an important aim, we remain unconvinced that this ill-thought through scheme is plugging genuine gaps in the market. We feel strongly that it is a poor use of public money and may in fact harm existing regional and local partnerships between universities and further education colleges. Around £33 million should be diverted from this scheme as a priority to broaden support for part-time students.
- **Student experience** – As well as the Government addressing the package of financial support for part-time students, universities must focus more on the part-time student experience. Best practice about how to support and retain part-time students should be shared throughout the sector, and in particular universities should learn from the two specialist part-time providers (Birkbeck and the Open University). HEFCE should take a lead by co-funding additional research on the retention of part-time students, using the Paul Hamlyn Foundation grants programme as a model.

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⁷¹ These official figures include students with and without a level 4 qualification. So not all the students studying more than 50% will be eligible for part-time student support.

⁷² National data on the distribution of part-time students' household income are not available and so we have drawn upon available survey data (from Universities UK (2006), Part-time students: Strand 3). In addition, no data is available on students' intensity of study by whether or not they hold a level 4 qualification or by their household income.

⁷³ Universities UK (2006), Part-time students: Strand 3.

⁷⁴ Hansard, HC 16 Jun 2008 : Column 652W, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080616/text/80616w0005.htm>.

⁷⁵ Hansard, HC Deb, 6 July 2009, c600W, <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2009-07-06a.282967.h>.

⁷⁶ The modelling has not taken into account additional monies associated with support given to married couples and to students with children.

⁷⁷ HEFCE (2008), A new 'University Challenge': consultation on proposals for new higher education centres, p.4, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_27/08_27.pdf.

⁷⁸ DIUS (2008), A new 'University Challenge' Unlocking Britain's Talent, p.4, http://www.dius.gov.uk/higher_education/shape_and_structure/~/_media/publications/U/university-challenge.

⁷⁹ DIUS (2009), Next steps to New University Challenge, http://www.dius.gov.uk/news_and_speeches/press_releases/new_university_challenge.

⁸⁰ Private information.

⁸¹ Private information.

⁸² Phone interview conducted in July 2009.

⁸³ Private information.

⁸⁴ Private information.

⁸⁵ National Audit Office (2007), Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education, p.5, <http://www.nao.org.uk/idoc.ashx?docId=f2e92c15-d7cb-4d88-b5e4-03fb8419a0d2&version=-1>.

⁸⁶ HESA Performance Indicators 2007-08, Non-continuation rates, http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1438&Itemid=141.

⁸⁷ A total of £1 million has been made available by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and HEFCE starting in 2008-09 to support projects that identify, evaluate and disseminate institutional good practice relating to student retention. From Action on Access, What works? Student retention and success, http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=1_2_9.

Work on Education at Policy Exchange

Education is one of Policy Exchange's key areas of research. **'Educating Rita?'** is the third report in a major new programme of work at Policy Exchange on universities. Over the course of this year we will be looking at a range of issues in higher education including how we should fund universities in the future, how we maintain fairness and promote wider access to universities, and whether the Government's current interventions on innovation within universities are working.

Our second report on universities, **'Sink or swim? Facing up to failing universities'**, examines the 'no-fail' culture in higher education and considers the case for failure in the overcrowded London market. The report outlines some of the major financial threats for universities on the horizon and takes a closer look at the accountability framework keeping universities in check. It also considers the role private providers could play in taking over part or all of a failing institution.

We have also published a number of reports on schools and recently launched a major new project on skills.

'A Guide to School Choice Reforms' looks at the lessons learned from existing school reforms in England (the academies programme), Sweden (free schools) and the United States (charter schools). We assess the success of reforms in all these countries against seven criteria which we believe a schools market should meet in order to find the right balance between promoting innovation and choice while maintaining accountability and quality control.

For further information about our education work please contact Anna Fazackerley, Head of the Education Unit, at anna.fazackerley@policyexchange.org.uk.

About Policy Exchange

Policy Exchange, an independent educational charity, is Britain's largest centre-right think tank. Our mission is to develop and promote new policy ideas which will foster a free society based on strong communities, limited government, national self confidence and an enterprise culture. In contrast to many other think tanks Policy Exchange is committed to an evidence-based approach to policy development. Our impact speaks for itself: from housing to policing reform, education to the NHS, our proposals have been taken on board by the main political parties. Registered charity number 1096300.

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