

Paying the Price? An Investigation Into the Continued Decline of Part-time Higher Education in England

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Abstract

Part-time study represents a significant segment of the UK higher education sector accounting for almost half of all university enrolments at its peak in 2004, yet since then the different modes of study (full-time/part-time) have followed very different trajectories. A 'perfect storm' of economic conditions and government policy changes have combined to trigger a dramatic decline in part-time higher education enrolments even though full-time study enrolments continue to expand. The steep rise in tuition fees in 2012 is widely regarded as the sole catalyst behind the decline. However, this view almost certainly oversimplifies a complex array of economic pressures and policy changes that have coalesced to depress part-time recruitment. This article looks beyond the fee hike by synthesising the findings from a number of recent significant studies to separate the influence that recent governmental policy changes, supply-side factors and demand-side barriers have each exerted on part-time enrolments. The article continues by exploring some of the recent initiatives for enabling more accessible and flexible study that may help to slow the decline and also discusses abandoning the binary separation of the study modes as discrete entities as this may be particularly detrimental to the part-time mode.

Keywords: Part-time; higher education; decline; enrolments; government policy; supply; demand; student finance

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Introduction

This article contributes to the ongoing debate over the continued collapse of part-time higher education (HE) study in England by investigating the complex and interrelated factors affecting HE recruitment. Drawing upon a review of recent literature, this article looks beneath the veneer of rising tuition fees by synthesising and separating the findings from a range of recent studies, to explore the major factors shaping part-time enrolments. Part one seeks a clearer understanding of the reasons for the decline by separately exploring three of the key influences that drive part-time enrolments:

- government policy
- supply-side factors, and
- demand-side factors.

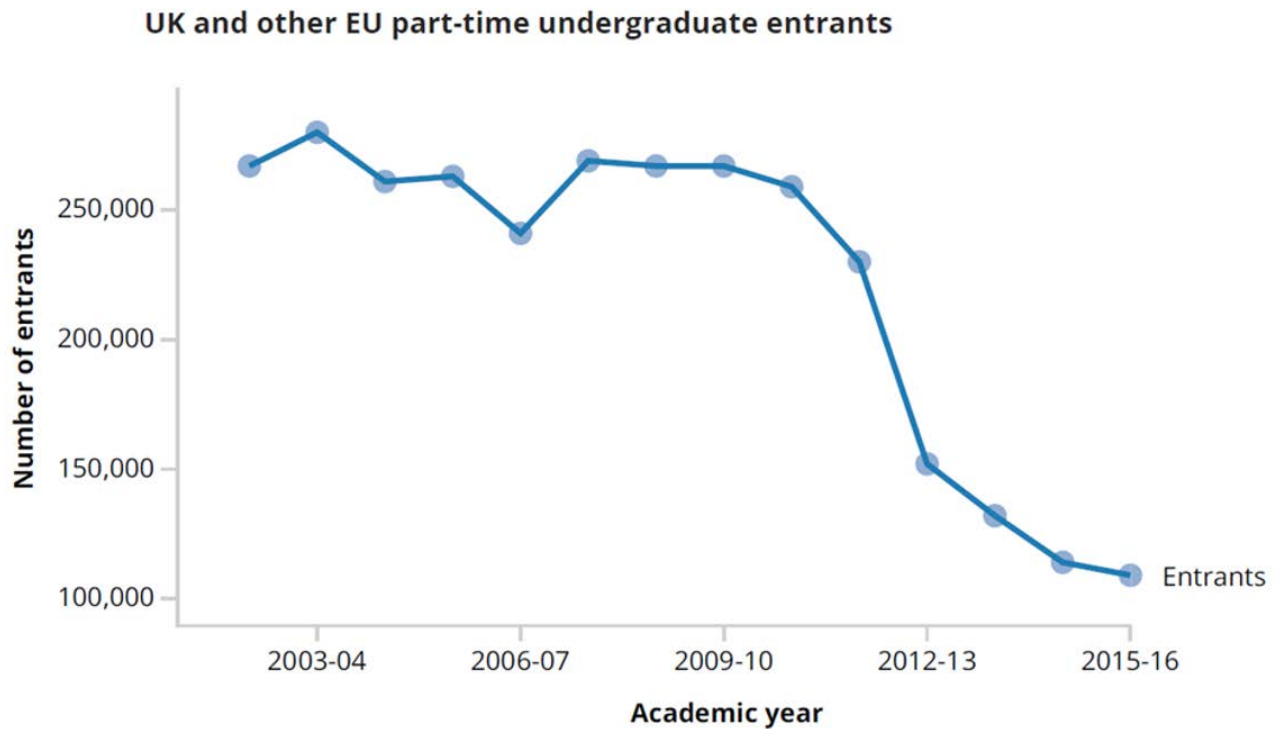
Part two continues by considering some of the current innovations in the delivery of higher education and how these might contribute towards arresting the decline in part-time enrolments and make study more accessible. Part two then closes with a brief discussion about the significance of part-time study, and how the binary divide between full-time and part-time modes may act as an obstacle preventing opportunities to interact with lifelong learning.

Article context

The past decade has seen a significant decrease in the numbers choosing part-time HE study in England with the latest Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) datasets showing that enrolments fell for the seventh successive year, and by 61 percent since 2010–11 (HEFCE, 2017). From a peak of almost 280,000 enrolments in 2003/2004, part-time recruitment remained broadly flat (averaging circa 260,000) until 2012/2013 when enrolments declined sharply. Since then the steep decline has

continued with part-time enrolments falling to just 100,000 in 2016/17 as illustrated in figure one below (HEFCE, 2017).

Figure 1



Source: Table 5, Column 2 in HESES and HEIFES data.

The precipitous decline coincided with a substantial increase in tuition fees in 2012 and there is a growing body of research suggesting that increased fees may be a significant causal factor (Maguire, 2013). Nevertheless, part-time students are a highly diverse group and to imply that fees alone are responsible would be to oversimplify a complex set of issues and ignore the fact that other causal factors may be responsible (Bennion, Scesa & Williams 2011; Pollard, Newton & Hillage, 2012; Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2012; Butcher, 2015a).

In the context of record levels of university enrolments (Jubb, 2016) the decline could easily be ignored as inconsequential. However, the decrease *is* hugely significant for a wide range of stakeholders and, if this is not addressed urgently, the damage to the part-time mode could be irrecoverable (Jamieson, Sabates, Woodley & Feinstein, 2009;

Callender, 2015a). The benefits of a university education are well documented and part-time study offers an array of important social and economic benefits that can help to transform lives and aid social mobility by supporting widening participation and lifelong learning. There are powerful macro-economic benefits to be gained through enabling the workforce to re-skill and up-skill throughout their careers because not everyone is able or willing to follow the traditional route of A-levels followed by an undergraduate degree. Furthermore, part-time study can help to ensure that those who did not achieve highly at school or who made wrong choices earlier in life still have opportunities to re-skill or up-skill as part of a lifelong learning agenda (Jamieson et al., 2009; Bennion et al., 2011; Pollard et al., 2012; Maguire, 2013; Butcher, 2015b).

The UK faces a potential skills crisis with a number of traditional manufacturers in decline and many established industries being replaced in an increasingly technological knowledge-based economy. Additionally, it is anticipated that demographic changes over the next decade will result in more jobs being created than the number of young people entering the workforce, creating an economic necessity for lifelong learning to re-skill the existing workforce. The traditional three-year full-time degree only represents one aspect of the contribution that HE makes and part-time study is essential to facilitate lifelong learning for continued innovation and skills development and to enable workers to retrain into new emerging industries (Callender, 2011; Universities UK, 2013; Callender & Little, 2015; Spellman, 2015).

Aims and method of the study

Until recently, little specific research into part-time as a discrete study mode existed, however, the 2012 tuition fee hike and subsequent decline in part-time enrolments prompted a significant increase in research activity. Over the past five years a number of significant government reports, academic studies and other grey literature have been

published investigating the decline in part-time higher education. Therefore, a thematic review of this body of primarily qualitative research was selected as the primary information-gathering approach. Time constraints prevented a full systematic literature review being conducted and a thematic review facilitated an effective and efficient synthesis of the key research aims.

Because of the novelty of the relevant literature, the document searches were implemented by conducting a detailed interrogation of web-based research reports and peer-reviewed journals and academic papers. Only peer-reviewed papers were included in the thematic review as one notable drawback of utilising predominantly on-line sources is that, whilst the Internet is a hugely significant resource, the vast number of web pages from experts and non-experts alike can make locating legitimate sources time-consuming (Dolowitz, Buckler & Sweeney, 2008). Furthermore, on-line materials are subject to few restrictions and must be subjected to even greater scrutiny than would normally apply to books and journals (Denscombe, 1998).

The initial literature searches identified 62 journal papers and research reports from which to conduct the detailed literature review. From this review it was evident that, although fees and finance were frequently recurring themes, three sub-topics of supply, demand and government policy emerged as key drivers behind the decline. Once the preliminary document review was completed, the search parameters were expanded to include further 'grey literature' on the websites of organisations concerned with higher education delivery and with advising the government on higher education policy, including:

- Higher Education Policy Institute
- Higher Education Academy
- Higher Education Careers Services Unit
- Universities UK

- HEFCE
- Department of Business Innovation and Skills
- The Open Universityⁱ.

The initial literature review indicated a number of common issues affecting part-time students including widening participation, lifelong learning and distance learning (Callender & Feldman, 2009) and therefore the search criteria were expanded to include these terms.

Part one

Findings

This section separates and explores the main factors that are influencing part-time higher education enrolments, and is divided into three parts:

- government policy
- supply-side factors
- demand-side factors

Government policy

Following the expansion of the university sector in the early 1990s, successive governments have faced a policy dichotomy, on the one hand keen to ensure an effective HE system that meets the nation's economic needs whilst, on the other hand, striving to safeguard the public finances. Traditionally, young full-time undergraduates have dominated the HE policy debate whilst the different needs of part-time students have remained largely overlooked possibly due to their lack of 'visibility' (Universities UK, 2013; Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015). One possible reason for this may be that many of the policymakers themselves followed the traditional route of school-leavers embarking on a

course of full-time HE before entering the labour market, and may therefore fail to recognise the disparate challenges faced by a significant yet peripheral group of students (Callender, 2015b).

Recognising the economic and social benefits of post-compulsory education, the 1997 Labour Government announced an expansion of their lifelong learning strategy by focussing predominantly on 'non-traditional' students and those studying part-time (Bennion et al., 2011). However, in a significant policy change, the 2007 Labour Government introduced the 'Equivalent or Lower Qualification' (ELQ) ruling that discontinued funding for students already holding a qualification at or above the level to be studied. Although promoted as part of a widening participation agenda, based on the premise that the government's funding priority was to students new to HE or progressing toward higher-level qualifications, the ELQ ruling proved highly damaging for many part-time students and enrolments were immediately hit (Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, 2008; Callender, 2011). The government had anticipated that employers would step in by supporting employees' part-time studies, however, the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession resulted in highly uneven levels of financial support (Callender, 2011; Callender & Wilkinson, 2012). In 2013 the ELQ rules were partially relaxed to exempt those studying Engineering, Technology and Computer Science (STEM) subjects from the restriction (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Then, from August 2017, a further relaxation exempted more STEM subjects including those 'allied to medicine; biological sciences; veterinary sciences, agriculture and related subjects; physical sciences and mathematical sciences' (UK Parliament, 2017, p. 1), however, it is too early to judge whether these changes have arrested the decline.

The 2010 election of a coalition government and subsequent publication of the Browne Report into university funding signalled a major HE policy shift. In a bid to reduce the budget deficit, the burden of HE funding was transferred from central government to the students themselves in 2012 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011; Callender & Wilkinson, 2012), and was justified by the government as putting 'HE on a sustainable footing' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011, p. 4). For the first time, part-time students had access to tuition-fee loans on the same basis as their full-time counterparts, however, because of the retention of the ELQ restriction large numbers of prospective students remained ineligible (Callender & Little, 2015; Horrocks, 2015). Although part-time fees were regulated and capped at £6,750 per annum, for many part-time students this represented a significant increase (Callender & Wilkinson, 2012) and a policy intended to achieve greater parity between the modes inadvertently resulted in part-time study becoming less attractive or affordable (Bennion et al., 2011). The significant increase in tuition fees being paid by young full-time undergraduate students dominated the HE policy debate and, as a result, the decline in part-time enrolments remained peripheral (Butcher, 2015b). The retention of the ELQ ruling and significantly higher fees that were not sufficiently mitigated by access to tuition-fee loans, acted as major disincentives to part-time study, and are widely regarded as key drivers behind the decline in enrolments (Butcher, 2015b). Furthermore, there is some evidence that the take-up of part-time study loans has been lower than anticipated and may reflect the complexity of a system primarily designed for full-time undergraduate students who will enter employment for the first time *after* graduating (Callender, 2015b).

Part-time students whose funding is not excluded by the ELQ ruling, may remain ineligible for tuition-fee loans if they are not studying 'at an intensity of greater than 25 per cent of a full-time equivalent' (HEFCE, 2014, p. 7). Furthermore, determining eligibility

based on a threshold calculated from full-time degree equivalents illustrates the government's fixation with qualification outcomes rather than learning outcomes (Butcher, 2015b). Governmental myopia toward the differing needs of part-time students marginalises those who wish to study individual modules by rendering such study unaffordable and limits opportunities for re-skilling and up-skilling the labour force (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015). Changes to the funding system have also reduced the attractiveness of low-intensity study programmes and short courses that have traditionally contributed to raising the skill levels of the workforce, which is necessary in order to maintain the nation's competitiveness (Mason, 2014). Moreover, by focussing excessively on qualification attainment, policy-makers fail to recognise the transformative effects and social capital that can be realised through engaging with even low levels of HE study (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015).

Supply-side factors

The withdrawal of the part-time teaching premium in 2012 resulted in increased tuition fees and a reduction in the provision of some part-time courses. Without the central part-time funding to underwrite costs, many courses were no longer considered economically viable due to their higher overheads, as cohorts are typically smaller and courses are often delivered outside core teaching hours (Pollard et al., 2012). The 2012 funding changes prompted some institutions that have traditionally focussed on teaching activities to chase alternative finance sources, such as Research Excellence Framework (REF) funding, often to the detriment of their part-time provision. Without the cross-subsidies of alternative funding sources, institutions are increasingly consolidating or abandoning their costlier part-time programmes because demand levels are insufficient to sustain such provision (Universities UK, 2013; Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015).

Full-time recruitment has remained buoyant despite the 2012 tuition fee hike and this has reduced the incentive for many institutions to offer part-time courses. Indeed, part-time students are often perceived as 'riskier' due to their greater diversity of educational backgrounds and entry qualifications compared to their full-time counterparts and, as a result, many institutions prefer to focus on the more lucrative full-time market (Pollard et al., 2012; Maguire, 2013). Furthermore, following the lifting of the recruitment cap in 2015, many universities no longer needed to promote part-time study to bolster enrolments and could instead focus their activities on more profitable full-time courses (Universities UK, 2013; Callender, 2015b).

The make-up of each institution's study provision is largely influenced by their tradition and their mission, with most established research-intensive institutions predominantly focussing their activities on full-time students whereas most of the part-time provision exists in the 'newer' post-1992 universities (Pollard et al., 2012). Other than those studying with the Open University, most part-time students prefer to study locally to fit in with their work and domestic commitments. However, recent research has found that some cities have no part-time students, which could indicate gaps in the supply of part-time provision in these areas (Pollard et al., 2012). As institutions expand their full-time programmes, often at the expense of part-time provision, locally accessible part-time study can be at risk in those cities dominated by a Russell Group institution (Callender, 2011; Butcher, 2015b) and as Callender observes, 'when local part-time courses close, the door to higher education closes too' (Callender, 2015b, p. 22).

Universities face huge uncertainty over the future levels of demand for part-time provision. A combination of the government's public sector austerity cuts and reduced employer support for HE study have depressed demand for part-time courses and created uncertainty over their sustained viability (Pollard et al., 2012). Concerns over

future demand have caused some institutions to turn their back on their part-time programmes and, in the absence of medium/longer term funding assurances, universities are reluctant to develop new programmes because of the significant set-up costs and multi-year commitment that is required (Maguire, 2013).

The absence of part-time students from the central applications system can make them costlier for institutions to recruit (Maguire, 2013). Full-time students apply to UCAS well in advance of their enrolment date if they wish to secure a place at their chosen university, whereas part-time students apply directly to their institution and typically much closer to the course start date (Pollard et al., 2012). The lack of early recruitment data makes resource allocation more problematic, which may increase costs and deter providers from offering part-time courses (Callender, 2011). Furthermore, the absence of centralised part-time applications, together with the highly heterogeneous backgrounds of students, can increase marketing costs and further discourage institutions from offering part-time provision (Butcher, 2015b; Universities UK, 2013). The largest decline in part-time enrolments has been for those students who are registered at HE Institutions but are taught at Further Education (FE) Colleges under a franchise agreement (Callender, 2011). Although the numbers involved are relatively small (five per cent of the total part-time entrants in 2012), there was a 59 per cent decrease between 2010–11 and 2012–13 (HEFCE, 2013), which may be a further indication that universities are reining back their part-time provision.

The publication of the 2016 White Paper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy' continues the government's plans to expand the HE market by reforming the 'Degree Awarding Powers'. Granting small-scale private education providers and FE Colleges the power to accredit and award their own degrees advances the government's aim to broaden the HE market, and increases competition based on the premise that different providers can

cater more effectively for different sectors of the market (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). Many FE colleges already have an established record of offering vocational qualifications that are delivered more flexibly than the full degrees offered at HE Institutions, and this initiative puts these providers in direct competition for students (Pollard et al., 2012).

Demand-side factors

One of the challenges when seeking a better understanding of the decline in part-time enrolments is establishing an effective dialogue with this difficult to reach heterogeneous group (Butcher, 2015b). Those who have taken the decision not to engage with HE study remain largely invisible to institutions and policymakers and therefore their reasons and circumstances cannot be reliably investigated. The decline in enrolments took hold following the 2008 recession and historical data suggests that part-time enrolments tend to be counter-cyclical whereas full-time enrolments are typically pro-cyclical when measured against unemployment rates (Oxford Economics, 2014). Put simply, when unemployment rises more people traditionally choose to study full-time, whereas falling unemployment is usually reflected by increasing part-time enrolments. However, this is not inevitable and, indeed, around half of OECD nations experienced a growth in enrolments in recent years (HEFCE, 2014).

When the UK edged out of recession in 2011 traditional models would normally have indicated a recovery in part-time enrolments but, contrary to expectations, the decline not only continued but actually worsened (HEFCE, 2014). Recent research suggests that the anticipated rebound in demand for part-time study was nullified by the large increase in tuition fees (Oxford Economics, 2014) and, although both study modes were affected, part-time students tend to be more price 'sensitive' and debt-averse (Mason, 2014;

Butcher, 2015b; Hughes, 2015). Many of those considering part-time HE study may already have a number of significant financial commitments such as mortgages and families, and may be wary of taking on further debt when the economic gains from study remain uncertain (Callender, 2015b). Despite the wider availability of loans, part-time students appear to be reluctant to accept the increased financial risk of investing heavily in HE study (Harrison, 2013).

Even prior to the raising of the fee cap in 2012, concern was growing over the affordability of part-time study with fees rising well above inflation. During the period between 2007/2008 and 2010/2011, average part-time fees rose by 27 per cent whereas the Retail Price Index rose by around 4.4 per cent for the same period (Callender & Wilkinson, 2012). These large fee increases occurred during a period of both economic turbulence and reduced levels of employer support, which combined to depress demand for part-time study (Maguire, 2013). Attempts to mitigate higher fees with access to student loans have not been effective thus far and feedback from Higher Education Institutes suggests that students and employers may not sufficiently understand the new loan system (HEFCE, 2013). The poor loan take-up may reflect a broader 'fear of debt' that exists in many families in Britain, especially in lower income households, and this debt aversion may have been underestimated by the government (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2012, p. 7; Mason, 2013).

The poor take-up of loans may also reflect wider awareness issues regarding part-time study as a viable option for engaging with HE. Many institutions' websites and prospectuses focus primarily on traditional undergraduate degrees and graduate outcomes, with part-time course material quite generic and seemingly of secondary importance. The quality and availability of specific part-time course information is 'patchy', and the paucity of detailed fees and finance guidance can deter prospective

part-time students from engaging fully with the materials and act as significant barriers to pursuing HE (Burton, Lloyd & Griffiths, 2011; Universities UK, 2013; Butcher, 2015a).

Where specific information does exist it is mostly aimed at mature applicants, and largely ignores young school leavers who may wish to diverge from the traditional route of full-time study and instead embark on a part-time course that will enable them to enter the labour market earlier (Pollard et al., 2012). The dearth of specific part-time finance information may give potential students the sense that loans are only for full-time students and the inconsistent provision of in-depth course materials and assessment information is not conducive to helping prospective part-time students determine whether the course fits with their existing commitments (Universities UK, 2013; Butcher 2015b).

Over recent years, a number of institutions have consolidated or restructured their course delivery with part-time and full-time students taught simultaneously (Callender & Wilkinson, 2012). Whilst merging study modes may offer cost savings to the institution, it fails to recognise the differing needs of part-time students many of whom are juggling study with an array of differing responsibilities (Butcher, 2015b). As part-time provision declines, 'out of hours' teaching is often scaled back making study less accessible for those in full-time employment (Burton et al, 2011; Callender & Wilkinson, 2012). With the exception of the Open University, most part-time students still need to attend their institutions to be able to follow their course and, although some courses offer a distance-learning alternative, this may leave students feeling isolated from their peers and can act as a deterrent to engaging with study (Butcher, 2015b).

Part two

This section begins by briefly investigating some of the current innovations aimed at boosting participation and making higher education study more accessible. Traditional campus-based three-year degrees may not adequately meet the needs of those looking to upskill and retrain throughout their lifetime and universities are adapting teaching and learning strategies to better serve the needs of businesses and learners through the provision of shorter and more flexible courses (CBI, 2018). The article concludes with a discussion about the challenges facing those wishing to access part-time higher education study and proposes a reconceptualisation of the HE paradigm as a means of removing the binary divide between the full-time and part-time modes and enable learning to be a flexible and lifelong experience.

Future developments to boost participation in higher education study

There is evidence to suggest that, despite falling part-time enrolments, significant demand for flexible access to higher education still exists both from learners and from employers (CBI, 2018). Many universities are developing more flexible ways to access higher education study as providers increasingly recognise the importance of innovative pedagogical approaches and teaching delivery to better meet the needs of part-time learners (McLinden, 2013; Universities UK, 2018). The decline of the part-time sector, combined with a range of other pressures including Brexit and the lifting of the cap on undergraduate student numbers, has created a financial imperative for institutions to look outside traditional teaching approaches (Balfour Beatty, 2018).

New digital technologies are blurring the traditional delineation between full-time and part-time study, as well as the separation between campus and non-campus delivery (McLinden, 2013), however, the on-line delivery of education should not be regarded as

the sole panacea to reverse the decline. Despite the pervasiveness of the Internet, a 'digital divide' still exists in the UK, and may prevent access to on-line study especially for those in the lower socio-economic groups who often have most to gain from access to flexible learning (Chelliah & Clarke, 2011). Utilising technology has enabled teaching to move away from the primary campus with delivery possible at franchised institutions, an employer's workplace, electronically or a combination of these using a 'blended learning' approach (Maguire, 2013). Furthermore digital technologies enable part-time courses to be delivered in increasingly diverse ways, for example face-to-face, through mixed media and online (Callender, Wilkinson, Gibson & Perkins, 2011), and institutions are increasingly exploiting emerging technologies to innovate by means of flexible lower-cost course provision models (Universities UK, 2013).

One recent innovation for expanding access to study is the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Originating around ten years ago, MOOCs offer flexible provision through large-scale independent learning modules that employ recorded on-line content, some with automated assessment, and largely dispense with academic and pastoral support (Universities UK, 2013). Despite the fact that MOOCs make study more accessible, concern exists over their high dropout rate, although Porter (2015) cautions against comparing retention rates with traditional university courses, as they are distinctly different forms of study. Indeed, students normally pay enrolment fees for traditional courses, which can act as a powerful motivator to complete, whereas many MOOCs are freely available to anyone with on-line access and therefore there is no financial loss for non-completion (Billsberry, 2013).

MOOCs are not currently widespread in the UK because many institutions remain wary of their lack of recognised qualifications, preferring instead to wait until the business model is established rather than jeopardise their institutional reputation (Fazackerley, 2012;

Haggard, 2013). A number of UK institutions are trialling Short Online Closed Courses (SOCCs), which like MOOCs offer flexible study access, however, SOCCs are taught to small groups with direct tutor contact resulting in higher satisfaction and improved completion rates (Lingwood, 2015). Although on-line courses provide students with a 'taste' of HE, many are not credit bearing and do not provide the qualification outcome that may often be the study goal.

In addition to flexible teaching provision, HE access can be improved by enabling greater programme flexibility. Institutions need to break the traditional shackles of terms and semesters to allow students greater flexibility over their entry point, course content (i.e. individualised programmes), pace of study and even (where appropriate) the scheduling and methods of assessment (Pollard et al., 2012; Maguire, 2013; Widdowson, 2015). Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) frameworks offer a partial solution by enabling students to accrue credits at their own pace, break their studies and transfer credits to other institutions. CAT frameworks are widespread in the US and are growing in Europe via the European Credit Transfer Scheme. However, whilst most UK universities have incorporated CAT frameworks into their programme structures, many institutions have little real experience of students assembling their own degrees and they remain infrequently used in the UK (Universities UK, 2013). Moreover, university leaders may be reluctant to embrace the concept as increased student mobility could damage tuition-fee income (Maguire, 2013).

Another recent initiative has been the creation of 'Degree Apprenticeships' offered by some universities and designed in partnership with employers and professional bodies. Launched in September 2015, students remain employed throughout the programme and combine work with part-time study toward either a bachelor's or master's degree. The

scheme is, however, in its infancy and provision is not currently widespread, therefore no completion data to exists indicate its success (UCAS, nd).

Discussion and conclusions

The continued fall in part-time enrolments is one of the most significant issues currently facing the HE sector in the UK. Arguably, had full-time enrolments suffered a similar downturn, immediate government action would have been demanded, and yet the decline of part-time study has been met by almost total inertia (Callender, 2015b). Successive governments have extolled the positive contribution that HE makes in providing the high-level skills required for economic recovery yet, almost exclusively, policy focuses around 18-year-olds studying full-time and part-time study is largely overlooked (Callender, 2011; Horrocks, 2015). It is imperative that part-time study is not regarded as a peripheral form of provision, nor one that is only chosen when no alternative exists, and it must not be left to dwindle as the result of the unintended consequences of policies that focus disproportionately on the mass HE market of young school-leavers (Pollard et al., 2012; Butcher, 2015b). By focussing excessively on young full-time undergraduates 'the part-time market risks operating in neither the interests of students, employers nor the economy' (Universities UK, 2013, p. 1).

The absence of a clear and absolute metric to define the mode is problematic and contributes to the challenges involved in addressing the decline. Part-time study is defined by what it is not, rather than what it is, and anything that is not full-time implies a deficit, which means it is not fully recognised as a distinct and legitimate form of study (Pollard et al., 2012). HE needs to reconceptualise the binary full-time/part-time dichotomy to eradicate the outdated notion that full-time study is for young school-leavers and that part-time study is only for mature learners because this portrays too narrow a

concept of what it is to be a university student (Maguire, 2013). Institutions and governments need to recognise the flexibility that part-time students require to help them deal with the challenges of combining study with their other commitments whilst, at the same time, understanding that this does not simply mean serving up a cut-down version of the full-time experience or compelling them to engage with distance or on-line learning (Butcher, 2015b).

Part-time students who overcome the various personal and financial challenges to enrol on a course of study may then face difficulties with integration. Many institutions' activities focus predominantly around full-time undergraduates, which can be detrimental to part-time students' early experiences. Enrolment and freshers' activities usually take place during working hours and institutions need to adapt their procedures to meet the different needs of part-time students. For example they could find alternative ways for students to be issued with their ID cards other than visiting the campus in person (Butcher, 2015b). Part-time students tend not to have the same opportunities to interact with other students and this may lead to feelings of isolation (Butcher, 2015c). The benefits of peer learning and social support are well established and support networks can be easily created using social media. Peer-initiated Facebook groups were reported to be highly beneficial in supporting the continuation of students' study, and peer-support networks should be actively encouraged by institutions (Pollard et al., 2012; Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015).

Although reinstating withdrawn provision will be challenging, if the government is committed to addressing the nation's skills shortage and supporting lifelong learning then urgent and fundamental action will be required before the decline becomes irreversible (Callender, 2015a; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). The factors affecting the supply of, and demand for, part-time study are complex and deeply

intermeshed, however there is a case for recognising that any recovery strategy would need to be preceded by an increased supply of places. There is some evidence of prospective students being unaware of the existence of part-time provision at some institutions (Pollard et al., 2012) and, indeed, if demand were to recover only to be met by a paucity of supply the recovery could be very short-lived.

Full-time study is still widely regarded as the best way to engage with HE, and part-time study is often perceived as being of a lower quality and of a lesser value (Pollard et al., 2012). Indeed, one of the challenges facing the HE sector is creating an environment that provides a flexible yet effective system of study provision that works for a wide-range of stakeholders (HEFCE, 2014). Reduced employer support is regarded as a significant contributory factor in the decline, although research suggests that the role that HE can play in increasing productivity (usually via part-time study) is inadequately understood by many employers and not sufficiently well promoted by institutions (Bennion et al., 2011). Institutions need to actively engage business partners not only to encourage higher levels of financial support but also to collaborate in creating programmes that better serve the needs of industry (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011).

The evidence seems compelling that the introduction of the ELQ rule and pro-rating of part-time fees based on the significantly higher full-time cost, has blighted demand for part-time study (Butcher, 2015b; Lingwood, 2015). To counteract these damaging policy decisions, changes to the funding system should be explored to lower the cost barriers to part-time study and curtail the incentives for institutions to focus excessive attention on recruiting full-time students (Spellman, 2015). Although a wholesale reinstatement of the part-time premium appears unlikely in the current climate, the government should at least mitigate any lost income resulting from studying part-time possibly through the taxation system or an expansion of the student loan system (Vieru, 2015).

HE needs to be made accessible and affordable to enable learners to engage with study whenever they feel intellectually equipped, and decisions made at the age of eighteen should not define the rest of one's life. Without urgent and decisive action, part-time study could become an irrelevance leaving the university sector to service predominantly school leavers and stifle the nation's ability to compete in the global economy.

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ⁱ The Open University has been included in the literature search as part-time students represent around 99.8 percent of their enrolments and as an institution they account for over 23 per cent of the entire provision of part-time higher education study in England (HESA, 2016).