

GMT interview

The power of part-time

GMT interviews Chief Executive of Universities UK, Nicola Dandridge

October saw the release of the Universities UK (UUK) report, *The power of part-time: review of part-time and mature higher education*¹, which was commissioned by the Government amidst concerns about the 40% drop in the number of students studying part-time in higher education (HE) over the last two years. In this article, GMT interviews Chief Executive of Universities UK, Nicola Dandridge² to find out more about some of the issues raised in the report and some of the recommendations made, including the distinction between full-time and part-time study and what the impact of higher apprenticeships might be on the need for part-time HE.

The fall in participation in part-time HE is clearly articulated in the report, what sort of impact is this having on course provision in universities and colleges?

It is having a serious impact, but the impact is very varied across different courses and institutions. The report found that the fall in part-time enrolments is the result of a drop in both student demand and course supply, interacting in complicated ways.

Clearly, there are big issues with universities and colleges closing courses where demand is no longer sufficient. A big concern is that if demand picks up again in the future, it will be hard to rebuild provision.

Some of our members are responding with vigorous marketing efforts and developing new courses to attract students. There is evidence from some institutions that these are already having a positive effect.

But some people were surprised to hear that some of our members are being forced to withdraw courses even where demand exists but the funding just isn't there (for example, in subjects allied to medicine). Or they might be taking a strategic decision to concentrate on full-time or postgraduate provision. So it is a very complicated picture.

Do you think the increasing costs for students of part-time study is the major reason why participation is falling?

It will certainly have had an effect, yes. Having said that, our research didn't find one single reason for the fall in participation. For example, a great deal of the take-up of part-time higher education has traditionally been from employees working in the public sector where their employers frequently paid for course fees. We know that that sector is undergoing great change with employers less able to pay for continuing education of this sort. Another reason is that more people are gaining a higher education qualification early on in life. For example, for those in their thirties, the percentage of those holding higher education qualifications nearly doubled between 1998 and 2012 (from 25% to 47%). So there are fewer people seeking to gain a first-time higher education qualification in their thirties. These things all have an effect.

Have we reached a 'saturation' point in the demand from employers for their employee skills development to be provided via part-time HE?

No, I don't think so at all. The review found a great deal of confidence from employers in the benefits of part-time higher education. For example, a recent report from the CBI found that part-time higher education is vital for growth in fast-developing sectors of the economy such as low carbon and advanced manufacturing. What is important is that there is even more work done between universities and employers to deliver what employers want and need, in a flexible way which means that the student can remain in employment while they learn.

Do you envisage that higher apprenticeships will eventually obviate the need for part-time HE?

No. People want different things and the choice should be there for them. We also need to keep a sense of scale. The numbers of higher apprenticeships are currently small; the Government is seeking 23,000 higher apprenticeship starts in England and Wales by May 2015. In 2011-12, there were nearly half a million

¹ You can access a copy of the full report at: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/UUKreviewofparttimeeducation.aspx>

² Nicola Dandridge became Chief Executive of Universities UK in 2009 and is responsible for the leadership and management of the organisation

people undertaking part-time higher education in the UK. The great majority were aiming for courses which would be less intensive than a higher apprenticeship, for example, professional qualifications and higher education credits. Those options should still be open to them, even as higher apprenticeship numbers grow.

If you could choose three ways to enhance students' experiences in part-time HE what would they be?

We benefited greatly from the views of students in our research, through the NUS and also direct from students. The most frequently cited concern that they raised about current part-time provision was one which is (on the face of it) quite simple: timetabling. This included early release of timetables, trying to keep the day of part-time lectures the same throughout the course year and having lectures, tutorials and contact hours on the same day for part-time students rather than spread throughout the week. Part-time students lead very complicated lives, and recognising that is key to meeting their needs.

The second issue was spreading the expertise in the sector about teaching flexibly. This is where the Higher Education Academy has just published some useful research in a report, *Flexible pedagogies: part-time learners and learning in higher education*³.

And the third issue has to be about new forms of part-time provision, particularly on-line provision. It is early days for Massive Online Open Courses, for example, but there are going to be some really interesting opportunities here.

Given the extent of part-time working amongst full-time students, is it time we ended the distinction between full- and part-time learning in higher education?

Good question. This one really exercised the steering group for our review of part-time students. In the end,

our concern was that there is something special and particular about part-time students. They are overwhelmingly mature, in full-time employment and studying vocational courses. This is quite different from full-time students.

It is around the edges where it gets complicated. We heard, for example, about very similar courses run over the same timeframe, designated as part-time in one institution and full-time in another. We also heard about students who would previously have studied on a part-time course, looking for a full-time course with the fewest hours in order to access maintenance grants and loans. So the distinction is not always helpful. I can see both sides of the argument. Ultimately all students will benefit from increased flexibility in learning opportunities.

Is there sufficient information, advice and guidance offered to prospective part-time students?

No, I don't think that there is. We found information was patchy for potential students trying to find out about available courses and student finance information. That is why we recommend that there should be an urgent push at all levels – national, regional and local – to help potential students and employers understand the value of and opportunities available for part-time higher education.

Is there anything you would like to add?

Firstly, I would like to thank everyone who was involved in the review. We spoke with or heard from more than 200 different individuals and organisations. And secondly, the situation with part-time recruitment is moving very quickly, and we see our review as the beginning of a process to understand what is going on and how to address it. There is a need for more research, modelling and partnership working to tackle what is going on. Universities UK is committed to this. We don't see this review as the last word.

**For more information about Universities UK and the report on part-time higher education visit:
www.universitiesuk.ac.uk**

³ The HEA's report is available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/main_report. Also see the summary of the report in this edition of GMT.