

Research Briefing

By Sue Hubble and Paul Bolton

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Part-time undergraduate students in England

Summary

- 1 Background
- 2 Part-time students
- 3 Decline in part-time students
- 4 Provision of courses
- 5 Support for part-time students
- 6 Reasons for the decline in part-time study
- 7 Impact of the decline in part-time students
- 8 Part-time students across the UK regions
- 9 Reference table

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Contents

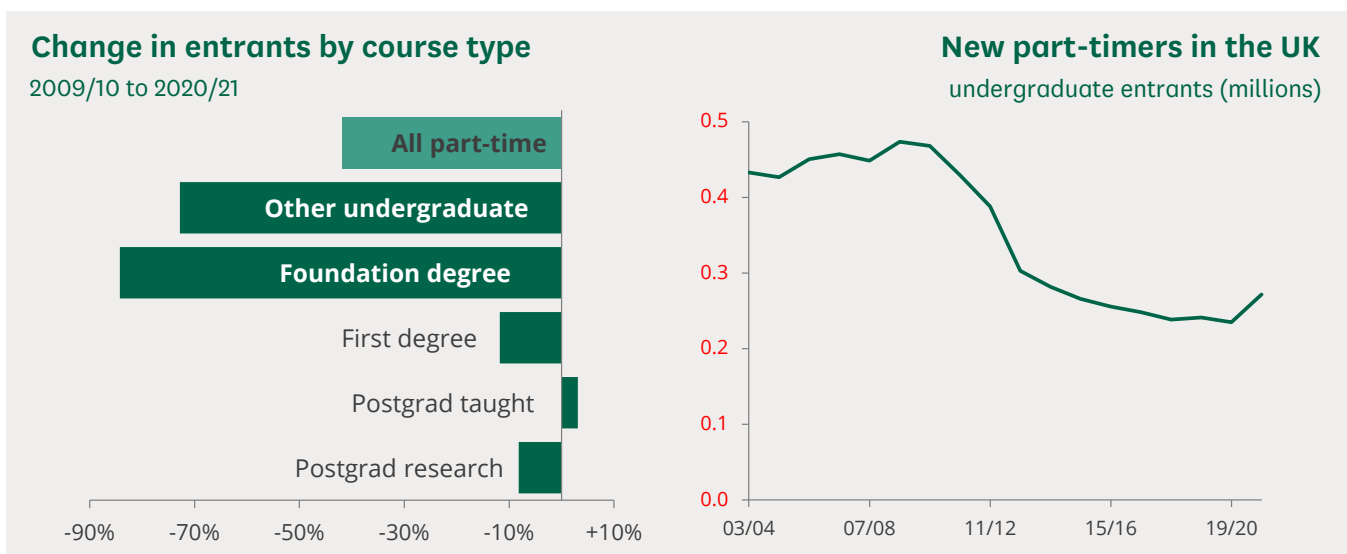
Summary	6
1 Background	8
2 Part-time students	10
2.1 Snapshot	10
2.2 Characteristics of part-time students	11
Mature students	11
2.3 Reasons for students studying part-time	12
3 Decline in part-time students	13
4 Provision of courses	15
4.1 Fees for part-time courses	16
4.2 Distance learning	16
5 Support for part-time students	18
5.1 Pre 2012	18
5.2 Post 2012	19
Fee loans from 2017-18 academic year	19
Take up of fee loans	20
5.3 Extension of ELQ exemptions	20
5.4 Maintenance loans for part-time students	21
6 Reasons for the decline in part-time study	23
6.1 Fee levels and support for part-time students	24
6.2 ELQ policy	25
6.3 Debt aversion among older students	25
6.4 Returns to part-time study	26

6.5	Economic downturn	27
6.6	Decline in leisure learning	27
7	Impact of the decline in part-time students	29
7.1	Reskilling and life-long learning	29
7.2	Widening participation	30
7.3	Impact on higher education institutions	31
	Effect on specialist part-time institutions	31
8	Part-time students across the UK regions	34
8.1	Support for part-time students	34
	Northern Ireland	35
8.2	Decline in part-time students across the regions	35
9	Reference table	37

Summary

Up until 2006/07 the number of part-time undergraduate students in England had been rising annually. This steady rise in numbers changed to a fall in 2008/09 and this decline became precipitous from 2011/12.

From a peak of almost 590,000 in 2008/09 part-time undergraduate student numbers fell to just under 270,000 in 2019/20; a fall of 50%. There was an increase in 2020/21, but numbers were still 43% below their peak.



The causes of the collapse in part-time student numbers are complex. The fall in numbers has been attributed to different factors: the policy of removing funding for equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs), the economic downturn and the 2012 higher education funding reforms which led to an increase in tuition fees.

Part-time students are a very different group demographically to full-time undergraduate students and are less homogenous. Part-time students tend to be older than full-time students and high numbers are female. They are more likely to be in work and have caring responsibilities. Understanding the motivations and behaviours of part-time students could be key to reversing the downward trend in numbers.

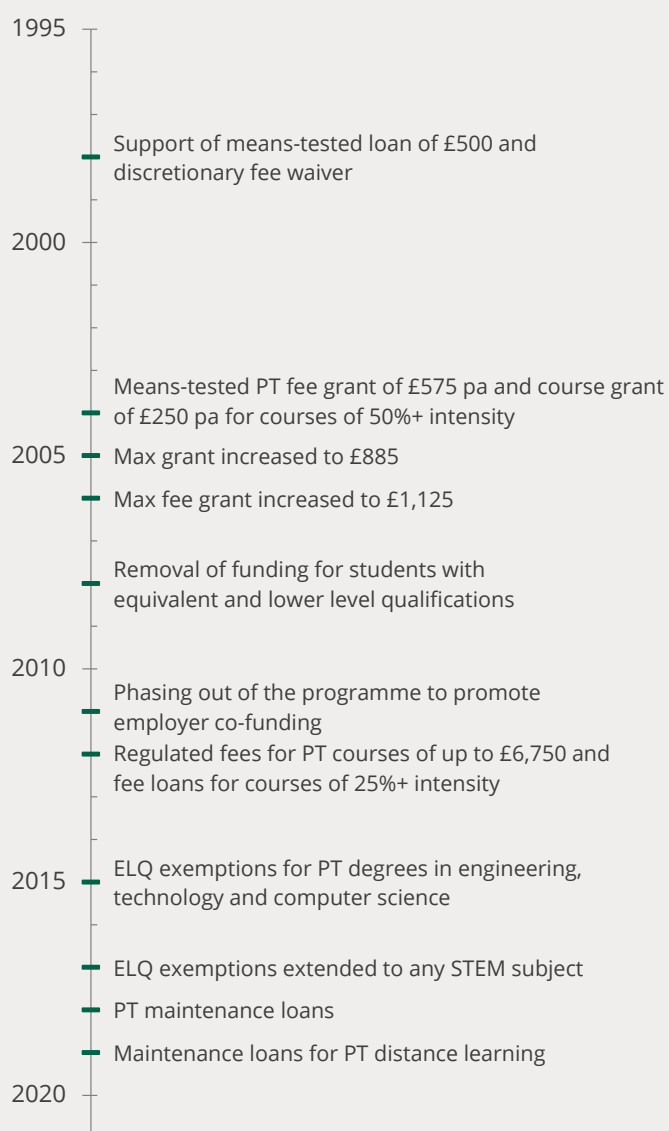
The decline in part-time students is more than a concern for individual students. Individuals tend to undertake part-time studies to improve their skills, or to reskill for employment purposes. Part-time higher education can therefore create a more highly skilled workforce which benefits the whole economy and is essential to increase national productivity.

There are also equality issues around part-time education as a high proportion of part-time students come from disadvantaged backgrounds or have disabilities. Part-time higher education is therefore an important part of the widening participation agenda and is a driver of social mobility.

The state of part-time higher education therefore has a far reaching impact and reversing the decline in part-time students could have potentially wide ranging benefits for individuals, society and the economy.

1 Background

Changes to part-time student funding



Most of the recent debate surrounding higher education has focused on the regulation of the higher education sector and arrangements for full-time undergraduate students. Very little attention has been paid to the pressing issue of part-time undergraduate students.

In 2019/20 15% of all undergraduate students studied part-time.¹

The number of students taking undergraduate part-time courses has been declining for a decade, but the fall in numbers was particularly sharp after the higher education funding reforms in 2012

Before 1 September 2012 part-time students were not subject to regulated fees and there was limited student support for part-time students. The 2012 higher education reforms brought in regulated fees for many part-time courses and extended tuition fee loans to cover these fees. As a result of these changes fees for part-time courses rose at many providers. Maintenance loans for part-time students were introduced for new entrants from 1 August 2018.

It has been suggested that the decline in part-time students has been caused by a combination of factors such as the equivalent or lower level qualification policy (ELQ) introduced in 2008 which abolished institutional funding for students taking second undergraduate qualifications and the 2012 funding reforms. However the decline could also be a consequence of a long standing lack of awareness of the needs and motivations of part-time students.

¹ HESA, [Higher Education Student Data \(Who is studying in HE?\)](#)

“The collapse in part-time study is arguably the single biggest problem facing higher education at the moment”.

Nick Hillman, Director
Higher Education Policy
Institute 2015

The *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* will arguably do little to improve the current situation. However opening up the market to a wider range of providers may lead to more innovative modes of course delivery which could potentially benefit part-time students.

Box 1: Policies affecting part-time undergraduate study

Equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs)

In 2008 the Labour Government introduced a policy which abolished institutional funding for most students taking degrees of an equivalent or lower level (ELQ) to one that they already held. Information on this policy is available on the [Higher Education Funding Council for England](#) website. There were exceptions to this policy, but most humanities and arts courses were affected by this change. The Coalition Government and the following Conservative Government extended ELQ course exemptions for specific STEM courses, but arts and humanities courses are still included.

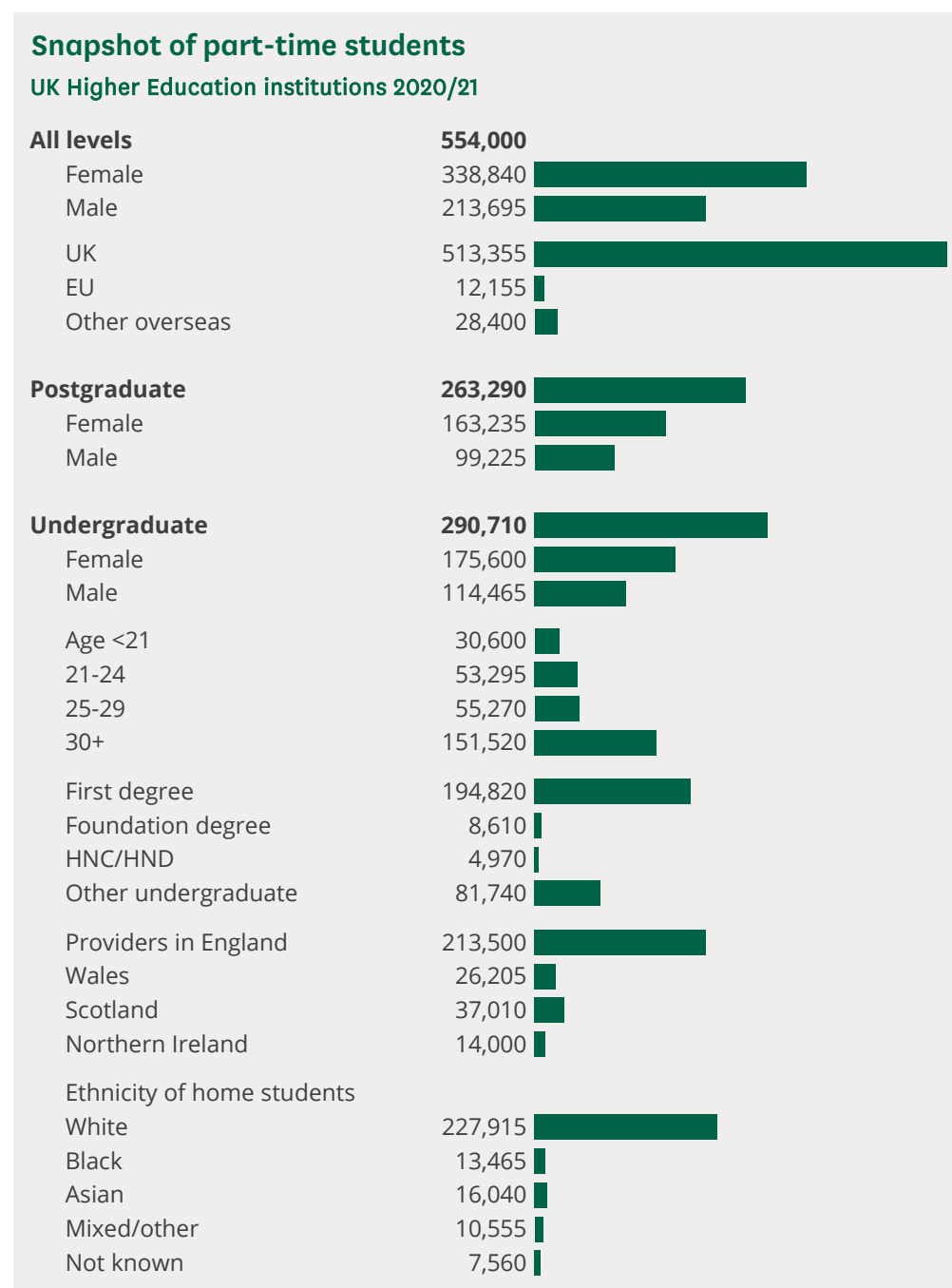
Regulated fees and fee loans for part-time courses

The 2012 higher education funding reforms brought in regulated fees for many part-time courses and extended income-contingent tuition fee loans to cover these fees. Fees for new entrants to part-time courses in the academic year 2012/13 at public higher education institutions (HEIs) were capped at £6,750 per year and £4,500 at private HEIs. The cap at public institutions has since increased in line with the cap for full-time students and is £6,935 in 2020/21 and will remain at this level in 2021/22. The cap at private institutions is £4,625.

This briefing paper focuses on issues affecting part-time undergraduates as the decline in part-time postgraduate numbers has been less pronounced.

2 Part-time students

2.1 Snapshot



Note: These figures used here and elsewhere in this paper do not include higher education students who study at further education colleges or students at alternative (private) providers.

Source: [Higher Education Student Data \(Who is studying in HE?\)](#), HESA

2.2

Characteristics of part-time students

Part-time students are a diverse group and the demographic of the part-time student population is very different to full-time students.

Part-time students tend to be older than full-time students and a larger proportion are female. In 2020/21 7% of new part-time students were aged 20 or under compared to 46% of full-time students. 58% of part-timers were aged 30 and over compared to 13% of full-timers. There is also a higher proportion of women among part-time students; 61% compared to 56% of the full-time population.²

Part-time students often have caring responsibilities and are often first time participants in higher education.³ A survey from 2011/12 found that 46% of part-timers had children compared to 7% of full-time students.⁴ These students often have more family and financial responsibilities than full-time students and this tends to make these students particularly sensitive to fee increases, higher levels of debt and the perceived risks of undertaking part-time study.

Research in 2013 suggested that 82 per cent of part-time students were employed.⁵

Part-time students also tend to be less geographically mobile than full-time students due to their work and family commitments; these students are therefore more likely to study locally than full-time students.⁶ This lack of mobility makes part-time students particularly vulnerable to changes in provision of part-time courses.

A report by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in 2012 contains a detailed profile of part-time students in Chapter 7.⁷

Mature students

The majority of part-time students are mature students ie aged over 21.⁸ Mature students are funded through the student finance system in the same

² HESA, [Higher Education Student Data \(Who is studying in HE?\)](#)

³ Higher Education Academy, '[Shoe-horned and side-lined? Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape](#)', 2015 p6

⁴ Department for Business Innovation and Skills, BIS Research Paper No 115, [Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2011/12](#), June 2013 p235

⁵ HEFCE 2014/08d, [Pressure from all sides Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education](#), April 2014 para 42

⁶ *Ibid* p22

⁷ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, BIS Research Paper 68, [Expanding and Improving Part-time Higher Education](#), June 2012 p115

⁸ The [Higher Education Statistics Agency](#) and the [Office for Fair Access](#) use over age 21 as a definition of a mature student– different bodies may use different ages

way as younger students – there is no extra funding for mature students. The briefing paper [Mature students in England](#) give more detail.

A report by Universities UK in 2013, [The power of part-time Review of part-time and mature education](#), stated that mature students are more likely to enter higher education through further education routes, short higher education courses, access and foundation degrees and employers.⁹

The Office for Students includes mature learners as a core widening participation group as mature learners are more likely than younger learners to have characteristics associated with disadvantage and to be under-representation in higher education. Higher education institutions are required as part of their access agreements to have strategies in place to attract and support mature students.

2.3 Reasons for students studying part-time

The 2013 Universities UK publication, [The power of part-time](#), stated that part-time students study for a variety of reasons but suggested that students could be put into four groups:

Career enhancers: people in work who want to enhance their existing career by acquiring additional skills and qualifications – probably the biggest group

Career changers: people generally in work who want to change their career by acquiring new qualifications in a different field

Non-career learners: leisure learners who may already be qualified at degree level but who are interested in continuing or developing their education

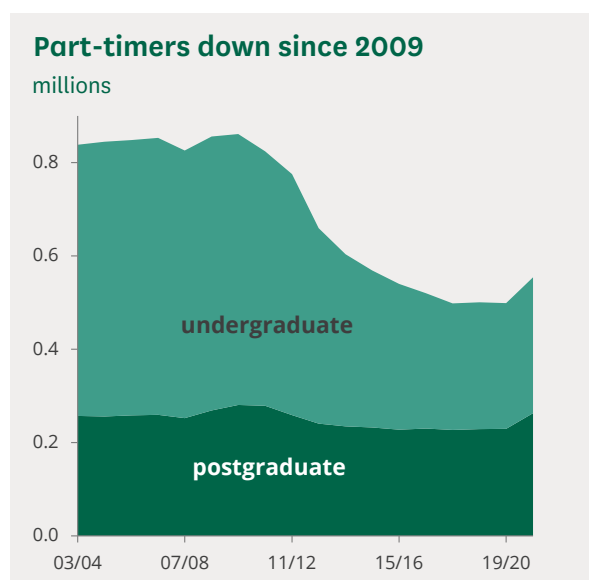
Career entrants: those interested in part-time education to assist their career entry, for example young people who are choosing to study part-time or those who want to start a career later in life – probably the smallest group.¹⁰

⁹ Universities UK, [The power of part-time Review of part-time and mature education](#), p25

¹⁰ Universities UK, [The power of part-time Review of part-time and mature education](#) p10

3

Decline in part-time students



In 2003/04 there were 840,000 part-time students at universities across the UK including postgraduates and overseas students. They made up 38% of the total student population. By 2019/20 their number had fallen to just under 500,000 or 21% of the student population. Numbers increased substantially in 2020/21 for the first time in over a decade. They reached 554,000 or 21% of all students.

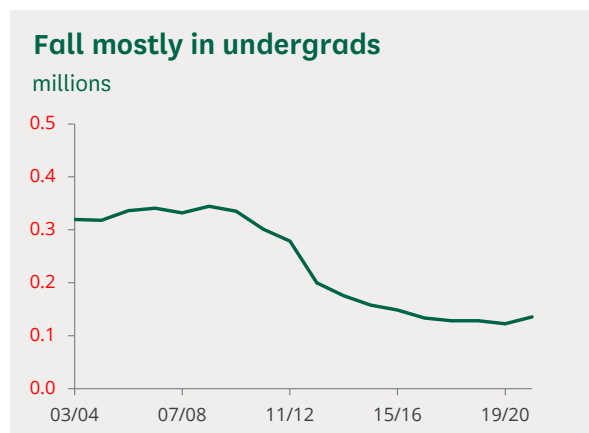
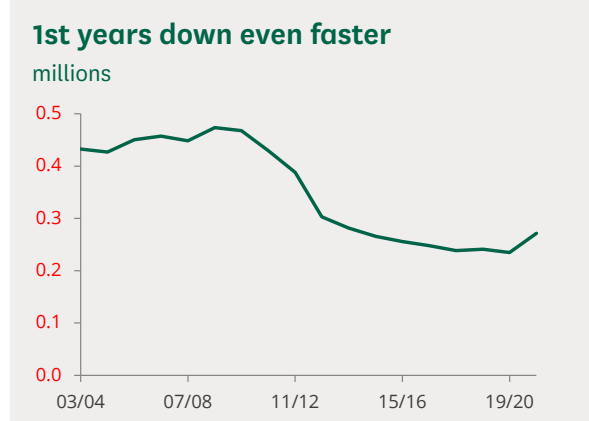
Part-time student numbers increased in the early part of the last decade, but started to decline towards the end, as shown opposite. Total numbers fell at their fastest rate in 2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14.

The chart opposite shows that the drop in part-time *undergraduates* was particularly large. **Their numbers fell from a peak of almost 590,000 in 2008/09 to 269,000 in 2019/20; a fall of 54%.** In contrast, full-time undergraduate numbers increased by almost 300,000 over the same period. The underlying data is given in the reference table at the end of this paper.

The data on the stock of part-time students across all years is less volatile than the data on flows (the number of first years), because it takes some time for changes to feed through to the stock.

Changes in part-time entrants across all levels are given opposite. The number fell from more than 470,000 in 2008/09 to just below 235,000 in 2019/20; a fall of 50%. Again, this was driven by the decline in **undergraduate study where the fall in entrants since 2008/09 was 64%** (chart below/ opposite).

The increase in part-time entrants to 271,000 in 2020/21 was the largest in this series. Numbers increased for undergraduate and post-graduate study. It is possible that this increase was, in part, due to the pandemic, with more people looking to retrain or unable to find full-time employment.



Source: Students in higher education institutions, various years, HESA

There was a drop in part-timers across all broad types of courses, but it was largest in courses other than first degrees. Section 4 looks at types of courses in more detail.

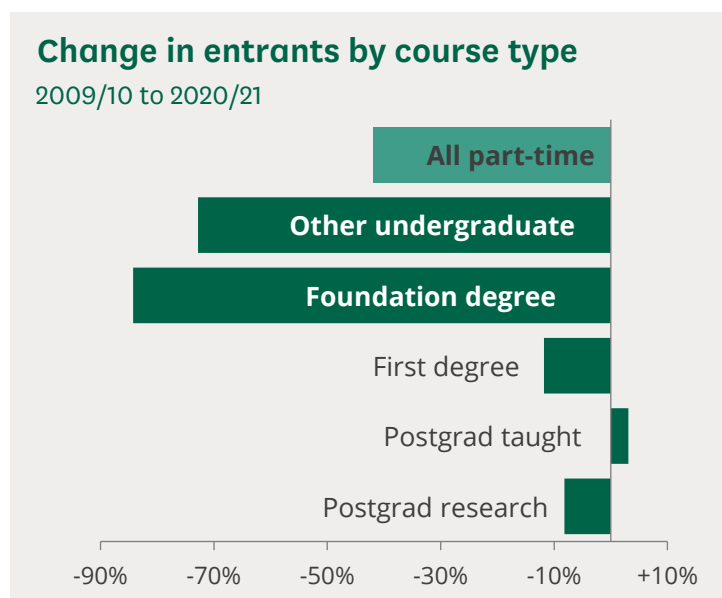
As most part-time students are from the UK the decline in home part-timers has been as large as the overall drop. **There were 324,000 home part-time undergraduate entrants in 2008/09 and around 125,000 in 2020/21; a fall of 61%.** This data is also given in the table at the end of this paper.

4 Provision of courses

The majority of part-time undergraduate entrants are studying on courses below first degree level, such as foundation degrees, HNDs and HNCs. Students on these courses made up 53% of part-time undergraduate entrants in 2020/21. The longer duration of first degree courses means that the majority of part-time undergraduates (across all years) are on first degree courses.

The number of entrants to part-time first degrees did not fall as fast as those to other undergraduate programmes after 2009 and has increased since 2016/17. However, the 2020/21 figure was still 12% lower than 2009/10.¹¹ The decline has been most severe among older students and those studying at lower levels of intensity.¹²

Changes in entrants by type of course (below) clearly show the decline over this period has been greater for undergraduate courses and, within this, larger still for courses other than first degrees. A report by the former funding council suggested that higher education institutions appeared to be exiting the market for study below degree level and focusing their undergraduate provision around degree courses.¹³



¹¹ HESA, [Higher Education Student Data \(Who is studying in HE?\)](#)

¹² HEFCE [Undergraduate education Part-time](#) March 2017

¹³ *ibid.*

Part-time entrants to taught postgraduate courses increased by around 7,000 in 2016/17 (7%). This came after earlier sharp drops between 2009 and 2012. The funding council for England commented: “The increases in entrants are likely to be attributable to the introduction of postgraduate loans.”¹⁴ There was a 22% increase in part-time entrants to taught postgraduate courses in 2020/21, taking their number above 2009/10 levels.

The most popular part-time subjects are – subjects allied to medicine, business and administration and education.¹⁵

Under the *Higher Education and Research Act 2017* the Office for Students has a duty to promote greater choice and opportunity for students in the provision of higher education and this duty will include the provision of part-time education.¹⁶

4.1 Fees for part-time courses

Fees for part-time courses have increased significantly since 2008.

The ELQ policy which was introduced in 2008 reduced the funding received by higher education providers and it has been suggested that this policy led to a fee rise of 27 % between 2007-08 and 2010-11.¹⁷

The tuition fees reforms in 2012 caused part-time fees to rise further and has increased variability in fees for part-time courses.¹⁸

All GuildHE institutions, all alternative providers and nearly all FE colleges which responded to a Universities UK survey in October 2013 reported fee increases.¹⁹ In 2012 fees for undergraduate degrees at the Open University more than tripled from £700 to £2,500.²⁰

4.2 Distance learning

A report by the Higher Education Academy and the Open University found that many part-time students chose to study part-time because they needed

¹⁴ HEFCE [Postgraduate education taught programmes](#) March 2017

¹⁵ Universities UK, [The power of part-time Review of part-time and mature education](#), October 2013 p13

¹⁶ Higher Education and Research Act 2017 s2 (1)(b) and 2(2)(c)

¹⁷ HEFCE blog, [Does the collapse in part-time study matter?](#) 21 March 2016

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Universities UK, [The power of part-time Review of part-time and mature education](#), p24

²⁰ [“Save part-time students, the Open University’s new leader urges MPs”](#), *The Guardian*, 25 June 2015

flexible study modes. Many students however stated in the report that they found traditional part-time study was not sufficiently flexible.²¹

Many part-time students study through distance learning and the Open University (which offers only distance learning courses) delivers provision for over 25% of UK registered part-time students.

From 2019/20 the new part-time maintenance loans (see Section 5.3 p13) will be extended to cover part-time distance learning courses.

‘Cold spots’ in higher education provision

In some areas of the UK students are unable to easily access higher education provision – these areas are known as ‘cold spots’.²² Part-time higher education and distance learning are well suited to addressing the issue of cold spots. Maintaining delivery of part-time education in these areas is therefore particularly important.

²¹ Higher Education Academy and the Open University, *‘Shoe-horned and side-lined’? Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape*, 2015 p7

²² *“Warning of university ‘cold spots’”*, *BBC News*, 1 October 2014

5 Support for part-time students

Eligibility for part-time student support is based on the intensity of study undertaken by the student. Students undertaking small units of study will not be eligible for funding. The intensity of study is calculated based on the proportion of full-time equivalent (FTE) study. The highest rates of support are available for students studying the highest FTE.

5.1 Pre 2012

Historically support for part-time students was limited. This was partly due to the assumption that many part-time students were either funded by employers, or were able to work while they studied.

In 1998-99 support for part-time students was introduced in form of a **means-tested loan of £500** and **discretionary fee waivers**.

In 2004-05 the *Higher Education Act 2004* abolished the system of fee waivers and loans and introduced a means-tested non-repayable **Fee Grant** of £575 per year to help with tuition fee costs and a **Course Grant** of £250 per year to help with study costs, such as books, materials and travel. The fee grant was linked to the intensity of study and students studying less than 50% FTE were ineligible for a fee grant. The maximum fee grant was increased over time.

In 2011/12 the fee grant and course grant were:

- Fee Grant up to £1,230 for 75% or more of the FTE course
- Course Grant up to £265 depending on household income.²³

However only a small proportion of part-time students received any kind of support. In 2010 a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills report stated that only 15% of part-time students received a grant and that the average fee grant was £700 per year.²⁴

²³ Student Finance England, [A guide to financial support for part-time students in higher education 2011/2012](#)

²⁴ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, [Interim Equality Impact Assessment: Urgent reforms to higher education funding and student finance](#), November 2010 p17-18

5.2

Post 2012

In 2012 higher education funding and student finance were reformed and part-time students became eligible for **tuition fee loans** to cover the cost of fees. Students could apply for a non-means tested loan of up to £6,750 where the course is provided by, or on behalf of, a publicly funded institution. The tuition charged for these courses could not exceed £6,750, so the student will be able to access a loan to cover the full tuition amount. The maximum value of the part-time tuition fee loan is £6,935 in 2020/21 and will remain at this level in 2021/22.

Students taking courses at private institutions could apply for a maximum tuition loan available of £4,500. Tuition charges for courses at private institutions are not capped and the student may therefore have to self-fund any tuition charge that exceeds the maximum loan available. The current maximum loan at these institutions is £4,625.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Interim Equality Impact Assessment report on the funding reforms, estimated that around 30% of part-time students would be eligible for a loan.²⁵

Eligibility for loans

Students must meet the following criteria to be eligible for a loan:

- intensity of study must be at least 25% of a full-time equivalent course in each year of the course and over the whole duration of the course. (but the amount of part-time tuition loan available is not linked to the intensity of study).²⁶
- students must also follow a full course for a specified qualification aim – students studying individual modules are ineligible for loans.
- students must not already have a higher education qualification

Payment of part-time tuition loans is made directly to the HEI.

Fee loans from 2017-18 academic year

Part-time students in 2017-18 were eligible for tuition fee loans of £6,935 in public HEIs and £4,625 at private providers. This has been frozen in subsequent years and this level will still apply in 2021/22.

²⁵ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, [Interim Equality Impact Assessment: Urgent reforms to higher education funding and student finance](#), November 2010, p18

²⁶ Student Finance England, [2015/16 HE Student Finance Support for Part-time Students](#), February 2015

Take up of fee loans

In 2020/21 92,500 part-time students from England took out fee loans for undergraduate courses. The number taking out loans has increased each year since they were introduced, with a particularly large increase in 2020/21. The average value of these loans was **£3,310** in 2020/21. Their total value was just over **£305 million** compared with £9.7 billion for full-time fee loans.²⁷

5.3

Extension of ELQ exemptions

In 2015/16 the Government extended ELQ exemptions to cover part-time students taking certain specified STEM subjects – the list of STEM subjects covered by the exemption was further extended in 2017/18. The policy change was set out in a PQ in January 2017:

Higher Education: Part-time Education: Written question - 60225

Asked by **Gordon Marsden:** 17 January 2017

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to address the continued decline in enrolments of all part-time students in higher education as indicated in higher education student enrolments and qualifications obtained at higher education providers in the UK in 2015-16.

Answered by **Joseph Johnson :** 20 January 2017

The Government believes that studying part-time can bring enormous benefits for individuals, the economy and employers, and is committed to helping part-time learners.

Up-front fee loans for eligible part-time students were introduced in 2012/13 and we are further enhancing the student finance package for part-time students by introducing full-time equivalent maintenance loans in 2018/19.

Since 2015/16, students who already hold an honours degree qualification and wish to study part-time on a second honours degree course in engineering, technology or computer science, have qualified for fee loans for their course. This is being extended for 2017/18 to graduates starting a second part-time honours degree course in any science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subject.

In our February 2016 guidance, we asked the Director of Fair Access to provide a renewed focus on part-time study.²⁸

²⁷ [Student Support for Higher Education in England 2021](#), SLC

²⁸ PQ 60225 [[Higher Education: Part-time Education](#)] 17 January 2017

5.4 Maintenance loans for part-time students

In the Spending Review Autumn 2015 the then Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne announced new maintenance loans for part-time students:

Following a sharp decline in part-time students since 2008, the government will introduce new part-time maintenance loans from 2018-19 to support the cost of living while studying. The government expects 150,000 part-time students could benefit each year by the end of the Parliament.²⁹

In November 2016 the Department for Education launched a [consultation on part-time maintenance loans](#).³⁰

The consultation document set out the rationale behind introducing loans for part-time students:

The Government's objectives of introducing part-time loans are to:

- Promote parity between full-time and part-time undergraduate courses by reducing the differences in financial support available to part-time and full-time students.
- Support increased take-up of part-time study by providing greater access to finance to meet living costs for those who opt for this form of Higher Education.
- Widen participation in Higher Education by supporting those from less well represented backgrounds to study part-time, including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) individuals and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Benefit employers and the economy by enabling more people to develop their skills and/ or change career paths and therefore increasing the supply of workers with the high level skills needed to stimulate an innovation-led economy (p5)

An [analysis](#) of consultation responses was published in March 2017³¹ alongside the [Government response](#).³²

The Government response stated that part-time maintenance loans would be introduced in academic year 2018/19 for students aged under 60 on degree level courses. Loan amounts would be based on course intensity and the study intensity would be categorised into five fractional bands. Maintenance loans would be extended to part-time distance learning courses from

²⁹ HM Treasury, SPENDING REVIEW AND AUTUMN STATEMENT 2015, November 2015, HC 9162 p47

³⁰ Department for Education, [Consultation on part-time maintenance loans](#) *Government consultation*, 4 November 2016

³¹ Department for Education, [Undergraduate part-time maintenance loans](#) *Consultation analysis – final report*, March 2017

³² Department for Education, [Part-time Maintenance Loans Government consultation response](#), March 2017

academic year 2019/20. Part-time loans will be means-tested in the same way as full-time loans.

Details of the system are given in Annex B of the Government response.

2018/19 and later years

Part-time maintenance loans were introduced for new students starting courses after 1 August 2018. Information on the eligibility requirements and loan amounts are set out in on the Student Finance England webpage: [Part-time Maintenance Loan](#).

The loan amounts are tiered depending on the intensity of study – the lowest loan amount is available to students studying at 25%-33% intensity, these students are eligible to apply for a loan of up to £1,831 if they live at home, £2,838 if they live away from home and in London and £2,175 if they live away from home and study outside London. Loan amounts increase in line with the intensity of part-time study. Only those on household incomes of £25,000 or below can claim the maximum. Loan amounts are reduced from this at higher incomes.

Rates have been increased in subsequent years and the maximum amounts in 2020/21 for those at 25-33% intensity will be £1,937 if they live at home, £3,003 if they live away from home and in London and £2,301 if they live away from home and study outside London.³³ Again, loan amounts increase in line with the intensity of part-time study

Take up of maintenance loans

4,100 part-time undergraduate students from England took out maintenance loans in 2018/19 when they first became available. Their average value was £4,750 and they totalled **£18.6 million**. In 2020/21 take-up increased to **7,900** with a total value **of £37.9 million**.³⁴

³³ [Student Finance Memorandum for the 2020/21 Academic Year](#), SLC

³⁴ [Student Support for Higher Education in England 2020](#), SLC

6 Reasons for the decline in part-time study

The decline in part-time student numbers cannot be attributed to a single factor. A range of policy changes and social and economic factors have created a ‘perfect storm’³⁵ which has led to the sharp downturn in student numbers.

The former funding council HEFCE suggested the following reasons for the fall in part-time study:³⁶

- Cuts in funding for equivalent and lower qualifications from 2008/09
- Phasing out of the programme to promote employer co-sponsored courses after 2011/12
- The 2012 funding reforms, specifically the loss of most direct funding for teaching, the impact on fees, possible confusion around the operation of loans, reluctance among mature students to take out loans and the fact that loans are not available for courses with an intensity of less than 25%
- The impact of the recession and continued ‘challenging’ economic conditions on individuals to fund their own part-time courses and employers to directly fund courses for their employees.
- Austerity measures within the public sector which have reduced public sector employment and led to cuts in training budgets.
- Reduction in support from (public sector) employers to fund part-time postgraduate study in the subject of education

HEFCE said in 2014 that the overall decline in part-time entrants may “...have a detrimental impact on widening access overall”. This is because part-time higher education tends to have a higher share of students with characteristics linked to lower levels of participation - more mature students and those from ‘non-traditional backgrounds’ including disadvantaged, students with low prior qualifications or caring responsibilities.

³⁵ [“Number of part-time students plummets after ‘perfect storm’](#), *The Guardian*, 16 October 2013

³⁶ [Higher education in England: Impact of the 2012 reforms](#) (March 2013); [Higher education in England 2014 Analysis of latest shifts and trends](#) (April 2014); [Pressure from all sides: Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education \(April 2014\)](#)

Research for the 2018 Universities UK publication [Lost Learners](#) concluded the following about reasons that adults did not enrol in part-time higher education:

- **2012 funding reforms:** 43% said they would have attended if one or more of the reforms had not happened
- **Costs of studying:** 44% said that fee levels and 42% living costs were important reasons why they did not enrol. 59% said that cheaper fees would encourage them to study in the future, 37% said more funding for living costs would help.
- **Flexibility:** 26% said that the course was not flexible enough to fit in with other commitments. 44% said that more flexible course options would encourage them to study in the future, 30% said that greater flexibility from their employer would help.

6.1 Fee levels and support for part-time students

The support system for part-time students and the levels of fees have been cited as reasons for low student numbers.

Loans for tuition fees for part-time courses were brought in in 2012 to address the decline in student numbers and in 2012-13 30,500 part-time entrants received a fee loan.³⁷ However it has been estimated that around two-thirds of would-be part-time students do not qualify for fee loans – mostly because they already have a higher qualification.³⁸

“Approximately 40% of this decline is attributable to the fee changes”

Sutton Trust report, *The Lost Part-Timers*, March 2018

Fees for part-time courses rose in 2012 and as stated many prospective students are liable for financing the upfront costs of these fees themselves.

A report by the [Independent Commission on Fees](#) in July 2015 stated that the new fee regime in 2012 had ‘taken a toll’ on enrolments and was a ‘major contributory factor’ in the decline of part-time students:

Of course it is not possible to assign full independent causality to the fees regime when it is part of a complex set of variables driving these changes in demand. There seem to be factors other than tuition fees affecting part-time demand, just as there are factors other than fees affecting the resilient appetite for full time degrees for school leavers.

But the comparative data between the home countries of the United Kingdom does not support any strong concern about the school leaver market, whereas it does point to an exacerbation of the issue for part time and mature students. The quite marked differences between the fee arrangements in the four

³⁷ HEFCE 2014/08d, [Pressure from all sides Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education](#), April 2014 para 23

³⁸ Higher Education Policy Institute, [It's the finance stupid. The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it](#), November 2015 p19

countries of the United Kingdom should provide good evidence for the probable impact of fee arrangements.³⁹

The introduction of maintenance loans for part-time students from 2018/19 may potentially have some impact on part-time numbers; however a Sutton Trust report which analysed the decline in part-time student numbers was sceptical about degree of impact of this measure:

No doubt, maintenance loans will enable some to take up part-time studies, but it seems unlikely that this measure alone will lead to a significant increase in numbers of entrants.⁴⁰

6.2 ELQ policy

The removal of funding for ELQs in 2008/9 made the provision of part-time courses more expensive for providers and students. This policy led to some institutions withdrawing part-time courses and raising fees on others. The high point in undergraduate part-time student numbers was in 2008 which suggests that the ELQ policy has had a long-term detrimental impact on part-time provision and take-up.

6.3 Debt aversion among older students

As previously stated the demographic of part-time students is different to full-time students. These students tend to be older and more come from disadvantaged and low-income backgrounds. These students tend to be more debt averse than other students and exhibit greater sensitivity to the price of courses.⁴¹

Professor Claire Callender has suggested that part-time students need a different funding approach:

To achieve these goals, policy instruments have to be tailored to the needs and realities of potential part-time students. A one-size-fits-all policy approach does not work. Currently, student loan policies are not devised for older, employed and experienced part-time students with ongoing financial commitments and limited disposable incomes.⁴²

The provision of additional funding in the form of loans will not necessarily therefore halt the decline in part-time student numbers among debt averse students.

³⁹ [Independent Commission on Fees 2015 Final Report](#), July 2015 p3

⁴⁰ Sutton Trust report, [The Lost Part-Timers](#), March 2018, p57

⁴¹ *Ibid* p35

⁴² HEPI [It's the finance stupid. The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it](#), November 2015 p22

In 2016/17 the Government removed non-repayable NHS bursaries for full-time healthcare students and replaced them with increased funding in the form of loans. This change resulted in a steep drop in nursing applicants.⁴³ Nursing students also tend to be older and this decline suggests that it is not just the availability of finance that matters to mature students, but the form of that finance and the associated financial benefits of the study undertaken.

6.4 Returns to part-time study

It has been suggested that the economic returns to part-time study are less than for full-time study.⁴⁴ Professor Callender has said that students are reluctant to take out loans for study when the returns are uncertain:

However, research shows that while the non-financial and public benefits of part-time undergraduate education are high, the financial returns tend to be lower than those experienced by younger graduates of full-time study in terms of earnings growth and employment opportunities.

Prospective students' concerns about loans, therefore, may be well founded. The unwillingness of would-be part-time students to pay high tuition fees or to take out a loan for an uncertain return is unsurprising.⁴⁵

However a report by the UK Commission for Employment Skills in September 2011 stated that students benefited financially from skills gained through part-time study:

There were significant employment advantages to those who improve their skills by upgrading their current qualifications from below a Level 3 through part-time study relative to full-time study. This was also true for those who obtain new skills but without a qualification upgrade.

Individuals benefit financially from the skills acquired through part-time and full-time higher education study. The skills they acquire also benefit employers and the wider economy.

The contribution of graduates from part-time study to economic prosperity, particularly in relation to earnings, exceeds that of graduates from full-time study in the relatively short period of time under consideration – up to three and a half years after students graduated.⁴⁶

⁴³ UCAS, [*Applicants for UK higher education down: 5% for UK students and 7% for EU students*](#), 1 February 2017

⁴⁴ HEPI [*It's the finance stupid. The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it*](#), November 2015 p23

⁴⁵ *Ibid* p20

⁴⁶ UK Commission for Employment Skills, [*The impact of higher education for part-time students*](#), Evidence Report 36, September 2011

6.5 Economic downturn

A report by HEFCE in 2014, *Pressure from all sides Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education*, outlined the influence of the economic recession on part-time students. The report discussed the connection between employment and part-time study:

Entry to part-time study appears to be pro-cyclical: increasing in good economic times and reducing during and after a recession. Figure 13 shows public sector employment and part-time higher education study tracking each other in recent years. A partial explanation may be that decreasing employment in the public sector leads to fewer people able to access employer funding for study, as well as reduction in employers' training budgets.⁴⁷

Fall in employer support

The numbers of UK and EU entrants with direct financial backing from their employers for undergraduate part-time study fell by almost half in 2012-13 compared with the previous year, from 40,000 to 23,000.⁴⁸

6.6 Decline in leisure learning

A HEFCE blog in 2016 suggested that a third of the decline in part-time students could be accounted for by the drop in students studying for self-improvement purposes or leisure.⁴⁹ The blog stated that these students tended to study single modules and were particularly sensitive to fee increases. This drop was seen in the steep decline in the number of students taking combined studies courses:

Notably, three subjects account for almost half the fall. By far the biggest contributor is 'combined studies', which has seen an 85 per cent reduction in entrants since 2008-09 and accounts for over a third of the total fall in part-time numbers. Students of combined studies have a distinctive profile: in 2008-09, 85 per cent were studying towards a certificate or diploma, 64 per cent were distance learners and 77 per cent were mature students.

[...]

Some enrichment learners may have switched to courses that do not lead to a qualification rather than withdrawing from study entirely: these courses tend to be cheaper than the credit-bearing courses. Between 2008-2012, there was a 33 per cent increase in English HEIs' income from non-credit-bearing

⁴⁷ HEFCE 2014/08d, *Pressure from all sides Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education*, April 2014 para 46

⁴⁸ HEFCE 2014/08d, *Pressure from all sides Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education*, April 2014 para 21

⁴⁹ HEFCE blog, *Does the collapse in part-time study matter?* 21 March 2016

courses, which may have been partly caused by enrichment learners switching across.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *ibid*

7

Impact of the decline in part-time students

7.1

Reskilling and life-long learning

“If the government is committed to up-skilling the workforce, it must take some radical action to arrest the decline of part-time study before it becomes terminal.”

Professor Claire Callender, “*The demise of part-time study – who cares?*” Birkbeck Comments

The [Leitch Report](#) in 2006 and the economic crisis in 2008 led to calls to improve the skills of the workforce to address skills gaps and to increase UK productivity.

The Leitch Review stated that ‘the powerhouse for the new skills base is among people already in employment’. Re-skilling people in employment requires access to work-based learning, part-time courses and flexible learning opportunities.

The HEFCE report [Pressure from all sides Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education](#) stated that the largest fall in part-time students had been in students studying at low intensity (less than 25 per cent).

Numbers of such entrants fell by 42 per cent between 2010-11 and 2012-13.⁵¹ These short courses, or modules are often the type of courses which are most useful to employees wishing to upgrade their skills for work.

A report by Universities UK, [The power of part-time: review of part-time and mature higher education](#), gave an overview of the important role of part-time education in skilling the workforce:

Part-time education plays a vital role in up-skilling and re-skilling people of working age, as well as providing a second chance to those who missed out on higher education when younger. It helps to provide the UK with the graduates it needs in order to support economic growth.⁵²

A HEFCE blog also highlighted the importance of part-time learning for re-skilling:

That is a particular concern when the hollowing out of the labour market may lead to some skills becoming rapidly obsolete. If adults are choosing not to retrain in the face of falling relative wages, that could lead to long-term, structural unemployment in vulnerable sectors

The decline in access to part-time learning deprives individual workers of the chance to improve their skills and increase their earnings capacity and it

⁵¹ HEFCE 2014/08d, [Pressure from all sides Economic and policy influences on part-time higher education](#), April 2014 para 24

⁵² Universities UK, [The power of part-time: review of part-time and mature higher education](#) p5

deprives employers of a highly skilled workforce. This point was made by Ruth Spellman of the Workers' Educational Association:

It is clear that to address the productivity gap the UK will be increasingly reliant on opportunities for retraining and reskilling as technological change further disrupts old industries and economic models. In addition, many economists predict a further decline in jobs for low-skilled or unskilled people as robotics and automated processes continue displacing traditional assembly and service roles. Furthermore, research from Deloitte highlights that the 'UK's continued success will rest on the ability of businesses and organisations, educators and government to anticipate correctly future skill requirements and provide the right education and training.'⁵³

7.2 Widening participation

Part-time students are more likely to come from under-represented groups and non-traditional backgrounds, so the decline in part-time students has serious implications for widening participation in higher education and social mobility.

“The decline in part-time numbers disproportionately impacts on students from the lowest socio-economic groups.”

Shoe horned and sidelined, Open University and Higher Education Academy report 2015

The importance of access to part-time study for disadvantaged students was highlighted in a speech by the Vice-Chancellor of the Open University in 2016:

For many people in Britain, part-time study is the *only* way to access higher education.

Whether it's because they are working, have children, come from a low income background, have physical disabilities or mental health issues: for many people full-time just isn't an option. So if they can't study part-time, they don't study at all.⁵⁴

The report by the [Independent Commission on Fees](#) in July 2015 also stated concern about the detrimental impact of increased fees on part-time students and the negative effect on social mobility:

But there is a far more severe issue in the part time and mature market, where a precipitous fall in demand has been seen, with further relapses this year. This must be a major concern, especially from the perspective of social mobility, since the part time market has traditionally been a 'second chance' route for those without the automatic assumption of university progression.⁵⁵

In January 2015 Professor Les Ebdon the Director of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) said that “addressing the decline in part-time study must be a priority”.⁵⁶ Subsequently in March 2017 he welcomed the introduction of

⁵³ HEPI [It's the finance stupid. The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it](#), November 2015 p26

⁵⁴ Speech by Vice-Chancellor of the Open University, [The Role of Part-Time Students in Widening](#)

⁵⁵ Sutton Trust, [Independent Commission on Fees](#), July 2015 p3

⁵⁶ OFFA, “Action on part-time decline must be a priority – OFFA”, 15 January 2015

maintenance loans for part-time students and said that they would help disadvantaged students by making study more accessible:

Commenting on the Budget statement by Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond, Professor Les Ebdon, Director of Fair Access to Higher Education, said

“I welcome the Government’s introduction of maintenance loans for part-time students in today’s Budget. With part-time students more likely to be from under-represented groups, this is an important step in making higher education more accessible, and I hope it will help reverse the troubling decline in part-time student numbers we have seen in recent years [note 1]. I also encourage universities and colleges to continue to think about how they can attract and support part-time learners, for example through flexible study options that meet the needs of students from a range of backgrounds.”⁵⁷

7.3 Impact on higher education institutions

There is less part-time provision in research-focused universities, most part-time provision tends to be concentrated in post-1992 institutions. A report by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills in 2012⁵⁸ gave information on the number of providers in England with high percentages of part-time students:

In addition to the OU and Birkbeck College with 100 per cent part-time provision, English institutions with a relatively large percentage of undergraduate part-time students within their student body are: Teesside University (65 per cent), University of Bolton (49 per cent), University of Sunderland (48 per cent), Thames Valley University (47 per cent), London South Bank University (45 per cent), Edge Hill University (43 per cent), University of Warwick (42 per cent), University of Cumbria (42 per cent), Anglia Ruskin University (42 per cent), Staffordshire University (42 per cent), University of Hull (40 per cent) and Buckinghamshire New University (40 per cent). P56

The decline in part-time students will have had the most impact on these providers.

Effect on specialist part-time institutions

There are only two majority part-time HEIs in the UK – the Open University (OU) and Birkbeck, University of London. These institutions are highly respected and they have unique missions in the higher education sector. They recruit students from diverse social and educational backgrounds and perform well on widening participation measures. Both of these institutions are now taking an increasing number of younger students.

⁵⁷ OFFA, “[OFFA comment on the introduction of part-time maintenance loans](#)”, 8 March 2017

⁵⁸ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, BIS Research Paper 68, [Expanding and Improving Part-time Higher Education](#), June 2012

In October 2015 the OU and Birkbeck made a [joint submission](#) to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills asking the government to make changes to higher education policy in England to help stimulate part-time study.

Open University

The OU is the largest single provider of part-time undergraduate studies and teaches over a third of UK and other EU part-time students in England. It offers flexible courses through distance learning. In 2015/16 almost one in five of all new OU undergraduate students came from the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods across the UK.⁵⁹ The OU is also the largest provider of higher education for disabled learners in the UK.⁶⁰

The number of learners at the OU fell by 30% between 2010-11 and 2015-16.⁶¹ The position of the OU was discussed in an article in the *Times Higher Education*, [Open University's numbers dive 28% as pool of part-timers dries up, 19 February 2015](#):

The total number of students at the OU fell from more than 260,000 in 2009-10 to just over 187,000 in 2013-14. In terms of full-time equivalent enrolment, the decline was 10,000 over the five years to about 73,500 last year.

The number of FTE students fell by more than 6,000 in the 12 months to July 2014 alone – a year in which the institution also posted a deficit of £16.9 million, equating to 4.2 per cent of its £404.2 million income.⁶²

A spokesperson for the OU also said in the article that the performance of the OU remained strong and “that 60 per cent of part-time undergraduates taking their first degree in England do so with the OU”.⁶³

Birkbeck University of London

Birkbeck University has a long history and is unique among higher education providers in offering courses which can be studied in the evening. Birkbeck attracts a high proportion of students from low income backgrounds, with 40% of its part-time students eligible for Birkbeck financial support in 2014/15.⁶⁴

Jonathan Woodhead Policy Advisor at Birkbeck gave the following figures on the impact of changes in part-time students on the university:

‘Birkbeck is one of only two majority part-time Higher Education providers in the UK and as such has been affected by the fall in part-time numbers for the seventh consecutive year. In 2016/17 there was an 8.3% fall in part time

⁵⁹ Information supplied by the OU

⁶⁰ Open University, [Access Agreement 2016/17](#), para 3

⁶¹ “[Part-time student numbers collapse by 56% in five years](#)”, *The Guardian*, 2 May 2017

⁶² *Times Higher Education*, [Open University's numbers dive 28% as pool of part-timers dries up](#), 19 February 2015

⁶³ *ibid*

⁶⁴ Birkbeck University of London, [Access Agreement 2016/17](#) p4 para 3.1.1

undergraduate entrants with the decline being most acute in older students and those studying at a lower intensity.

‘Birkbeck’s part-time numbers have fallen from a peak of almost 15,000 in 2008/09 (the final year before the ELQ changes) to 8,600 in 2015/16. The decline here has been felt mainly in the 30+ age group, which was over 9,000 in 2009/10 but now stands at 4,000.’

Birkbeck now has more full-time undergraduate students than part-time students.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Birkbeck University of London, [Access Agreement 2016/17](#), p4 para 3.1

8 Part-time students across the UK regions

Higher education is a devolved issue and the arrangements for student funding and courses varies across the UK. The various regions provide different amounts of funding for part-time students and the health of the part-time student sector is variable across the regions.

8.1 Support for part-time students

Scotland

Information on support for part-time students in Scotland is given in on the Student Awards Agency Scotland website at [Part-time student](#). Students may be eligible for a **fee grant** of variable amount depending on the course studied. In 2020/21 the maximum awards are:

- £1,805 for publicly funded degree level courses,
- £1,820 for eligible 120 credit university courses which are not campus based,
- £1,274 for publicly funded Higher National awards (HNC, HND),
- £1,195 for all courses at private providers

The amount received is dependent on the number of credits studied, the qualification a student is studying, meeting residence criteria and earning an average gross income (before tax and national insurance) of £25,000 or less.⁶⁶

Students' Award Agency Scotland's [Part time student funding](#) provides further information.

Wales

In 2020/21, part time students ordinarily living in Wales may be eligible for:

- A tuition fee loan of up to £6,935 if studying at an eligible university/college in Wales

⁶⁶ SAAS, [Part time: Funding and eligibility](#), accessed 18 September 2020.

- A maintenance loan of up to £4,433.75 (depending upon household income and study intensity)
- Welsh Government Learning Grant of between £250 and £4,500 (depending upon household income and study intensity).⁶⁷

Non-repayable grants such, but not limited to, the Adult Dependants' Grant, Childcare Grant and Parents' Learning Allowance may also be available, depending upon an applicant's household income and their study intensity. Student Finance Wales's [Part time students](#) provides further detail.

Northern Ireland

Students from Northern Ireland (a UK, Republic of Ireland or EU national who has lived in NI for at least three years before the start date of their course) may be eligible in 2020/21 for a:

- Tuition fee loan of up to £3,296.25.⁶⁸
- Tuition fee grant of up to £1,230 (based on household income and reduces the amount of tuition fee loan required).⁶⁹
- Course grant to help with everyday costs (based on household income) of up to £625. Those with household income above £28,068 are ineligible.⁷⁰
- Disabled Students' Allowances (following a study needs assessment), which take the form of four allowances: general allowance, specialist equipment, travel and non-medical helper allowance.⁷¹

More information can be found at Student Finance NI's [Part-time undergraduate, NI students](#).

8.2

Decline in part-time students across the regions

A report by the Higher Education Academy and the Open University in 2015 looked at regional differences in part-time student populations across the UK. The report showed that there was a decline in part-time student numbers across the UK but the decline was greatest in England:

Taking a snap shot of part-time higher education across the four nations is also opportune, because the divergence in policies is to some extent reflected in different narratives. In Wales, where the Assembly (Welsh Government,

⁶⁷ SFW, [Part-time student finance summary page 2020/21](#), accessed 17 September 2020

⁶⁸ SFNI, [Tuition fee loan: Part-time undergraduate](#), accessed 18 September 2020

⁶⁹ SFNI, [Tuition fee grant: Part-time undergraduate](#), accessed 18 September 2020

⁷⁰ SFNI, [Course grant: Part-time undergraduate](#), accessed 18 September 2020

⁷¹ SFNI, [Disabled students' allowances](#), accessed 18 September 2020

2013) has made a firm commitment to part-time higher education as making a vital contribution to widening access and employability for those with 'protected characteristics' (HEFCW, 2014), part-time numbers have also dropped over the five-year period, but by less (a 24% drop) than in England.

In Scotland, which has also had a more positive and explicit government discourse around the benefits of part-time higher education, the decrease was 7% between 2012/13 and 2013/14, but concentrated mainly in the college sector (HE in FE). In Northern Ireland, numbers involved in part-time higher education have always been small, but a 5% decrease has been recorded from 2012/13 to 2013/14.⁷²

⁷² Higher Education Academy and the Open University, '*Shoe-horned and side-lined?*' *Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape*, 2015 p5

9 Reference table

Summary of part-time student numbers. UK higher education institutions

All home and overseas students

	All enrolments			First years only					
	Under-graduate	Post-graduate	Total	Undergraduate			All under-graduate	Post-graduate	All first year
				First degree	Foundation degree	Other			
2003/04	580,835	257,100	837,935	..	..	..	..	..	..
2004/05	588,490	256,280	844,765	..	..	..	..	..	..
2005/06	589,780	258,415	848,200	..	..	..	..	..	..
2006/07	593,310	259,675	852,985	..	..	..	..	..	457,245
2007/08	572,965	252,755	825,720	..	..	..	..	..	448,275
2008/09	587,205	268,815	856,020	..	..	..	344,475	128,945	473,420
2009/10	580,810	280,450	861,260	72,190	18,595	244,270	335,055	132,745	467,795
2010/11	545,250	278,705	823,955	70,680	16,370	214,435	301,485	127,925	429,415
2011/12	516,120	259,080	775,195	77,905	15,595	185,030	278,530	109,540	388,065
2012/13	418,405	240,900	659,310	62,195	9,630	128,120	199,945	102,890	302,830
2013/14	368,335	234,995	603,325	54,130	8,835	112,415	175,380	106,260	281,635
2014/15	336,185	232,735	568,930	46,385	7,260	104,190	157,835	107,950	265,785
2015/16	312,435	227,850	540,285	47,310	6,490	94,770	148,570	107,120	255,690
2016/17	289,445	230,380	519,825	44,590	5,275	83,655	133,520	114,025	248,000
2017/18	271,475	227,075	498,545	48,590	4,095	75,710	128,395	109,810	238,545
2018/19	271,730	229,080	500,810	52,640	4,510	71,085	128,235	112,540	241,075
2019/20	269,270	229,840	499,110	55,750	3,275	63,505	122,800	112,125	234,925
2020/21	290,710	263,290	554,000	63,665	2,930	68,455	135,340	136,085	271,420

Source: Students in higher education institutions, various years, HESA

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