From lifelong learning to youth employment

From lifelong learning to youth employment: back to the future for higher education in Scotland's colleges

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Journal of Further and Higher Education, 2014
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2014.971104

This article explores aspects of the experience of higher education students in a Scottish college within the context of widespread contemporary concern about youth unemployment. Analysis of published data reveals a marked shift in the demographic profile of higher education students in colleges in favour of young people. An unseen consequence of this change has been a decline in opportunities for older students, particularly women wishing to study part time at an advanced level. Survey data from one college follows up an earlier case study and explores new dimensions of the work/life/study balance. In this study the respective experiences of school leavers, young adults and adults are compared. Over half of the students were in paid work, an increase compared with the previous survey. The relationship between work or family life and study was significant in influencing the quality of the students' experience. Young part-time students, many of whom were following modern apprenticeships, achieved a more successful work/life/study balance compared with full-time students who were in paid work. It is recommended that colleges should devote attention to enabling students to maximise the benefits of combining work with study, to prepare them for transition into a difficult labour market. It is also argued that the different priorities of older lifelong learners should continue to be recognised as their numbers decline.

Keywords: work/life/study balance, youth employment, Scottish colleges, higher education, apprenticeships, work experience

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Introduction

Sustained growth in provision since the mid-1980s has resulted in colleges being major providers of higher education in Scotland (Gallacher 2003, 2006; Garrick 1997). By 2003 the college sector's share of all higher education students in Scotland had stabilised at around 28% and it has remained at this level.[1] During this period of expansion, colleges opened up vocational higher education opportunities for students who would not have traditionally attended university. College-based higher education students are more likely to be older and to come from less-advantaged backgrounds, and their aspirations and experience are therefore congruent with the contemporaneous policy goals of lifelong learning and social inclusion (Lowe 2005).

Higher education in Scotland is defined as courses leading to qualifications at or above level 7 in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).[2] Colleges typically offer courses leading to the Higher National Certificate (level 7), Higher National Diploma (level 8) and, in partnership with universities, to degrees (level 9). Colleges also offer Scottish Vocational Qualifications, some of which are at level 7 and above.

In 2007 we published a case study of the experience of higher education students in a Scottish further education college and explored the dimensions of the work/life/study balance and its relevance to wider participation in higher education in Scotland (Lowe and Gayle 2007). In 2011 we conducted a follow-up survey in a comparable college at a time of growing concern about youth unemployment in Scotland and internationally (Scottish Government 2012a) and specifically in the light of a directive from the Scottish Government that colleges should accord priority to young applicants (ibid). Our follow-up study had three aims: to review the demographic profile of higher education students in colleges in recent years; to explore the relevance of the experience and expectations of younger higher education students for the social and economic aims of reducing youth unemployment; and to consider the consequences of the changed policy context for older lifelong learners in colleges.

Young people today

In recent years Scotland, in common with the rest of the UK, has been characterised by increased attainment at school, higher rates of participation in post-compulsory attendance at school, a growing further education sector and high levels of participation in undergraduate and postgraduate education.[3] This positive overall picture masks an underlying increase in youth unemployment that is causing widespread contemporary concern. Analysis of labour market data demonstrates that young people are disproportionately disadvantaged by the current economic downturn, as was the case in previous recessions. In 2010–11, although 89% of school leavers had progressed to a positive destination, the percentage entering employment had fallen to 19.3% from a high of 28.3% in 2006–07 (Scottish Government 2012b). By September 2013, the youth unemployment rate for Scotland stood at 21.1% and the claimant count for 18–24 year olds was 6%, nearly double that for the general population (Skills Development Scotland 2013).

Youth unemployment is a matter of concern beyond Scotland, although there are substantial regional variations across the world (ILO 2010). In Europe the problem is most severe in countries hit hardest by the sovereign debt crisis, with youth unemployment rates of over 30% in Portugal, Italy and Ireland and around 50% in Greece and Spain in 2012. The northern European economies have proven more resilient, and Austria, the Netherlands and Germany have the lowest rates of youth unemployment, at less than 9%. The UK youth unemployment rate is near the European Union average of 22% (Lanning and Rudiger 2012).

Bell and Blanchflower (2010, 2011) report the negative consequences of unemployment for young people, which include loss of wellbeing, loss of current and future earnings and increased probability of future unemployment. For society the consequences include rising levels of crime and greater social and health costs (Godfrey et al. 2002). The literature considers a number of potential underlying causes of youth unemployment. There is little evidence to suggest that inward migration has had any significant effect (Blanchflower and Shadforth 2009) and similarly it does not appear to be the case that young people are pricing themselves out of the market as a result, for example, of increased employer costs associated with the national minimum wage (Dickens and Draca 2005). An alternative hypothesis is that negative characteristics of young people themselves contribute to difficulties in finding work, such as low qualifications, a lack of technical skills or of the 'soft skills' that employers, particularly in the service sector, assert that they value, or inadequate exposure to the working environment.[4] Compared with adults, young people are less likely to

have well-developed job-seeking skills and may suffer from negative stereotyping in the media. It is certainly the case that the group generally most vulnerable to unemployment is low-skilled youths with few academic qualifications (ILO 2012; ONS 2012). Bell and Blanchflower (2010) contend that the primary underlying cause of unemployment in the current recession is lack of demand for labour, which is not generally susceptible to government policy levers. Nevertheless, they argue that the seriousness of youth unemployment creates a strong rationale for governments to divert public expenditure towards measures that may have indirect beneficial effects, including expansion of post-16 education and vocational training, including apprenticeships, to which we return later.

Post-16 education policy in Scotland: a brief summary of recent developments

The majority of Scotland's colleges were founded in the mid-twentieth century by local authorities to provide post-school vocational education and training, primarily for young people. Most students attended college on a day release basis as part of an apprenticeship in the traditional employment sectors of engineering, mining, shipbuilding and construction (Gallacher 2003). In the late 1990s policy in Scotland, in common with the rest of the UK, was characterised by a shift towards lifelong learning as the principal driver of post-16 education policy. In 1998 the then Secretary of State for Scotland set the ambitious goal that, by 2002, all Scottish citizens would have the means to access lifelong learning at any stage of their lives (Scottish Office 1998). From 1999 the new Scottish Parliament assumed full devolved responsibility for education in Scotland and the Scottish Executive continued to pursue policies aimed at driving up adult participation in learning. In 2000 the Comprehensive Spending Review in Scotland delivered additional funding for colleges over the life of the first Scottish Parliament (Scottish Executive 2001), with the expectation of a correspondingly significant increase in student places. By 2007–08, total investment in the college sector had increased by almost £200 million (45% in cash terms) since 2003–04 (Scottish Executive 2007). In return, colleges were expected to expand to tackle social inclusion, adult literacy and skills for a modern economy, as well as maintaining their traditional role in preparing young people for employment and accommodating a new constituency of school pupils (Scottish Executive 2003). Colleges duly complied and by 2008 there were nearly 360,000 students in colleges, including nearly 50,000 higher education students. In 2004 the proportion of students aged over 25 peaked at 59%.[5]

In 2007 the Scottish National Party (SNP) was elected to government in Scotland and, in pursuit of its declared political objective of independence for Scotland, set a 'single purpose' of creating a more successful country with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish through sustainable economic growth (Scottish Government 2007a). Post-16 education policy shifted again, towards stimulating employer demand for a more highly-skilled workforce and to improving the effective 'utilisation' of skills in the workplace in order to generate greater productivity (Scottish Government 2007b). Increased funding was directed towards boosting the number of employed modern apprenticeships from 10,000 per annum in 2007 to 25,000 per annum by 2011 (Scottish Government 2011). Modern apprenticeships in Scotland are administered by Skills Development Scotland.[6] It is important to note that a modern apprentice in Scotland has employed status as well as a guaranteed opportunity to study for a qualification at SVQ2 or SVQ3. Priority is given to apprenticeships for young people at SVQ3.[7] Apprentices who undertake their off-the-job training with colleges will usually also enrol for an HNC. Keep and James (2011), in a critical appraisal of

apprenticeships in England, commend the Scottish approach as it retains the prestige and status of apprenticeship provision and the quality of the training.

In Scotland, in common with the rest of the UK, the economic downturn in 2008 caused the next shift in policy. In 'Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth' (Scottish Government 2010), the SNP government reverted to presenting an increased supply of learning provision as a solution to the growing problems of redundancy and unemployment. This was followed by the creation of a new Minister for Youth Employment and the publication of a Youth Employment Strategy (Scottish Government 2012a) and establishment of a Commission on Youth Employment (Scottish Government 2013). One of the cornerstones of current policy is a directive to colleges to give priority to young people and the announcement of a 'guarantee' of a place in education or training for every young person not already in education, employment or training.

Higher education in Scotland's colleges: demographic change

Youth unemployment was rising before the recession (Bell and Blanchflower 2010) and a corresponding shift in the demographic profile of higher education students in colleges in Scotland can similarly be detected before 2008. The proportion of older students began to decline, relative to those aged under 25, in 2001–02[8] and the trend accelerated from 2005–6 (Table 1). Other changes in this student population also began to occur. There was a shift towards more full-time students and more male students (Table 2).

Table 1. Higher education students in Scottish colleges: 2006–2011: age.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	% change
All	50960	49458	47770	48355	49801	51354	+1
School leavers (16–18)	10844	11033	10644	11162	11999	11984	+11
Young adults (19–24)	15889	16126	15868	16374	17369	19185	+21
Adults (Over 25)	24227	22299	21258	20819	20433	20185	–17

Source: Scottish Funding Council Infact Database (www.sfc.ac.uk)

Table 2. Higher education students in Scottish colleges: 2006–2011: gender and mode of attendance.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	% change
All	50960	49458	47770	48355	49801	51354	+1
Full-time male	12300	12240	11855	12375	13765	15290	+24
Full-time female	13680	13640	13330	13580	14880	15842	+16
Part-time male	10985	11100	11020	11550	10965	10359	–6
Part-time female	13995	12475	11565	10855	10195	9863	–30

Source: Scottish Funding Council Infact Database (www.sfc.ac.uk)

The biggest increase (35%) was in full-time male students aged 19–24. Although the overall number of part-time male students declined, part-time male students aged 19–24 went up by 22%, with a corresponding decline in the other age groups. The decline in part-time female students (–30%) was spread across all age groups. These stark shifts result from consistent year-on-year movements that pre-date the Scottish Government's new policy emphasis on combatting youth unemployment and may have been caused by several contributory factors. On the demand side, lack of employment prospects may have increased applications for college courses from younger people. At the same time, reductions in public expenditure, leading to cuts in funding, have caused colleges to rationalise their course portfolios in favour of more cost-effective full-time courses.

Work, family life and study

As youth unemployment has risen, paradoxically, student employment has become more widespread. It is worth noting that, of the 100,000 young people registered unemployed in Scotland in 2010, 35% were students in full-time study seeking work (Scottish Government 2012a). During the post-Robbins expansion of higher education, when most students enjoyed state funding, participation in paid employment was generally restricted to the long vacation. With the erosion of state funding in more recent decades, working during term-time has become more commonplace. Various empirical studies have documented the scale, nature and growing extent of this part-time work amongst university students, finding that, in some cases, nearly half of students participate in some form of employment during term-time (see, for example, Carney et al. 2005; Cremieux and Johnes 1993; Leonard 1994; Metcalf 2001; Roberts and Higgins 1992; Sorensen and Winn 1993; Taylor 1998). Research interest has grown in recent years in the UK and internationally (Callender 2008; Hall 2010; Humphrey 2006; Broadbridge and Swanson 2007). The experience of college higher education students remains, however, largely undocumented.

Our earlier work looked beyond the relatively narrow perspective of student employment to explore the diverse experiences of students who were juggling busy lives as partners, parents, carers and job seekers as well as employees and students. Within the social sciences, there is an extensive literature on work/life balance, much of which considers how women combine part-time employment with bringing up a family and what this means for gender equality in the labour market (for example, Warren 2004). Gatrell and Cooper (2008) contend that men and women face different pressures because work/life balance policies are closely bound up with underlying assumptions about the social and family roles that men and women are expected to play. Callan (2007) finds some evidence that the introduction of family-friendly employment policies and flexible working practices has contributed to reducing pressure on working parents of both genders.

Research methodology

We began by reviewing recent published demographic data on higher education students in colleges in Scotland, in aggregate and for individual colleges. We then collected new primary data through a questionnaire survey. Our earlier case study of the experience of higher education students in a Scottish college was based on data collected during 2000–03 (Lowe 2005, Lowe and Gayle2007). In 2011 we conducted a follow-up survey in a different but comparable college. This second college was one of the larger colleges in Scotland in 2011,[9]

situated in the central belt, with a mixed urban and rural catchment and a broad-based portfolio of vocational courses. The college's higher education courses lead to the Higher National Certificate (HNC), Higher National Diploma (HND) and to undergraduate degrees, offered in partnership with a nearby university. Ethical approval for the survey was given by the University of Stirling.

For the follow-up survey we used the same questionnaire as in the earlier work. We collected demographic data, factual data and the respondents' descriptions of, reflections on and evaluations of their experiences. We included single-choice questions, multiple-choice questions and free-text questions. Sections of the questionnaire sought data on reasons for studying, work, family life, work/life/study balance, sources of support and likelihood of dropping out. We explore these themes in the following sections of this article.

The questionnaire was distributed to all higher education students on one campus of the college. We received 878 completed questionnaires, representing a response rate of 69% for the surveyed campus, and 41% for all higher education students enrolled in the college. The demographic profile of the questionnaire respondents is broadly comparable with the profile for all higher education students in the college and for all higher education students in Scotland's colleges, in the year of the survey.

Tables 3 and 4 show that the college experienced a change in the demography of its higher education students between 2005–06 and 2010-11 that is comparable with the changes for Scotland noted in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 3. Higher education students in the case study college: 2006–2011: age.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	% change
All	2464	2323	2177	2127	1990	2127	–14
School leavers (16–18)	533	449	445	496	494	531	0
Young adults (19–24)	712	768	737	702	764	803	+13
Adults (over 25)	1219	1106	995	929	732	801	–34

Source: Scottish Funding Council Infact Database (www.sfc.ac.uk)

Table 4. Higher education students in the case study college: 2006–2011: gender and mode of attendance.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	% change
All	2464	2323	2177	2127	1990	2127	–14
Full-time male	505	538	487	501	589	644	+28
Full-time female	619	612	603	547	569	600	–3
Part-time male	711	633	665	717	549	577	–19
Part-time female	626	534	416	368	281	306	–51

Source: Scottish Funding Council Infact Database (www.sfc.ac.uk)

The biggest increase is in full-time male students aged 19–24 (35%). Although the overall number of part-time male students has gone down, part-time male students aged 19–24 increased by 20%, with a corresponding steep decline in the older age groups. The decline in part-time female students (–51%) is spread across all age groups over 19. Not surprisingly, this shift in the age profile of the students is matched by changes in their personal circumstances. In our earlier case study, in 2003, 45% of the cohort was single (Lowe 2005, 140), compared with 77% in the 2011 cohort. Similarly, in 2003 54% of the students were living with a spouse/partner and/or children (Lowe 2005, 167), compared with only 33% in 2011.

In the light of the demographic changes noted above, we chose to analyse our data on the students' experience of higher education with a particular focus on differences across age groups, with a view to considering the findings in relation to the Scottish Government's policy objective of reducing youth unemployment through expansion of education and training opportunities, and to exploring the consequences for older learners. To do so, we created a useful typology of three student groups:

- School leavers (aged 16–18 years)
- Young adults (aged 19–24 years)
- Adults (aged 25 years and over)

Within these categories we compare the experiences of those in paid work and those not in paid work. Where relevant, we also consider the respective experience of full-time and part-time students.

Combining work, study and family life: the student experience

This follow-up survey suggests that the incidence of students combining study and work has increased since 2003. Our earlier work revealed that almost all part-time students and around 40% of full-time students were employed. In 2011 this had risen to 100% of part-time students and 59% of full-time students, the majority of whom were spending a proportion of Monday to Friday at work. In addition, 9% of those not in work indicated that they would like a job or were actively looking for a job. School leavers and young adults were more likely to work than their older counterparts, with two out of three young adults who were full-time students having a job. This increase in employment amongst full-time students is significant in that a clear majority now work. This challenges the college to expect student employment as the norm rather than the exception.

The analysis of time use is a useful technique in sociological research (Gershuny 2000). In our surveys, each student was asked to estimate the number of hours spent during a typical week on: studying, working, travelling to/from work/college, domestic tasks, family or personal time or social activities. Table 5 shows that students were putting in an average 'working week' of 39–67 hours.

Table 5. Mean hours spent per week on categories of activity split by mode of study, job status and age.

	All *n* = 790	School leavers *n* = 158			Young adults *n* = 415			Adults *n* = 200		
		FT no job *n* = 60	FT with job *n* = 86	PT n = 12	FT no job *n* = 92	FT with job *n* = 200	PT n = 123	FT no job *n* = 90	FT with job *n* = 66	PT *n* = 44
Study	23	25	22	9	26	27	10	31	27	11
Work	21	3	18	34	4	19	37	9	23	39
Travel	5	5	4	6	4	5	5	4	5	6
Domestic	8	6	4	4	7	7	5	22	9	11
Family/social	33	47	28	52	39	29	39	32	22	27
Total	90	86	76	105	80	87	97	97	86	94
Total excluding family/social	57	39	48	53	41	58	57	65	64	67

Note: 17 respondents did not give their age; some full-time students with no job record hours spent at work. This is likely to include work placements and voluntary work.

We observe in Table 5 the expected difference in the balance between work and study for full-time and part-time students. Our earlier surveys indicated that female students had a generally more pressurised working week, with more time spent on domestic tasks and less on family/social time. In this survey we consider age differences and note from Table 5 that the experience of juggling a busy life of study, work and family time is clearly evidenced amongst adults, who record an average 'working' week of 64 hours if full time and employed, 65 hours if not employed and 67 hours if studying part time. By comparison, school leavers and young adults report a lower average total amount of activity (excluding leisure time). School leavers and young adults record a 'working' week of only 39–41 hours if they do not have a job. We observe that school leavers with a job appear to compensate for working by studying less than those who do not have a job. Over the three years of our earlier case study, full-time students reported spending around 30–35 hours a week studying either in college or in their own time. In this more recent cohort this figure is considerably less, with school leavers recording only 22–25 hours per week on average. We suggest that these patterns of activity may be more comparable with their school experience.

It is also enlightening to consider why students choose to work whilst studying. Responses to multiple-choice questions in our survey revealed that, for many students, this was a lifestyle choice and working was a passport to a better social life and not just a means of paying for rent and food. This choice was more likely to be one that school leavers and young adults made, not surprisingly, given that they were more likely to be living at home. Seventy-seven per cent of full-time school leavers and 72% of full-time young adults were working, in part, to pay for extras such as social activities, whilst the majority of adults (73%) were working to pay for living expenses.

Managing the work/life/study balance

Next, we examined more detailed aspects of the student experience of work/life/study balance. We found that students assigned unexpected priorities to their activities. Of the full-time students with a job, 5% rated the job as more important, 49% rated the college course as more important and 46% rated them equal. Thirty-six per cent of part-time students rated their job as more important, 3% rated the college course as more important and 62% rated them equal. Students were asked to evaluate the impact of work and home life on study. Table 6 **shows** differences between the responses of full-time and part-time students, with respect to the impact of work, with the latter reporting a more mutually beneficial relationship between work and study.

Table 6. Work impact on study (%).

	Full-time with job *n* = 394	Part-time *n* = 201
No impact	30	21
Positive impact	9	33
Negative impact	22	9
Both positive and negative impact	39	38

Row percentages. Chi square = 63.60, df = 3, Cramer's V = 0.327, *p* = < 0.001

The results for full-time students are comparable with our earlier study. For part-time students there is a difference, with more students recording a positive relationship between work and study in 2011. We conjecture that this may be due, in part, to a change in the demography of the part-time students, with adults being displaced by young apprentices studying at college. We return to this issue in the later discussion section.

Table 7 shows that home life is not a significant factor for most young students. For adults, the picture is different, with nearly 60% recording some negative impact of home life on study. This chimes with Edwards's (1993) finding that the quality of the relationship between family life and education is fundamental for mature women. Edwards explored the ways in which adult students manage the boundaries between their spheres of activity and found both positive and negative models of integration and separation. Hill and McGregor (1998) similarly drew attention to the complexity of women's relationships with their families during a period of study. In our survey, 44% of adult respondents reported both positive and negative impacts of home life on study, echoing Hill and McGregor's conclusion that families can be both supportive and destructive for adult learners, as relationships are destabilised and reformed.

Table 7. Home impact on study (%).

	All *n* = 844	School leavers *n* = 172	Young adults *n* = 450	Adults *n* = 222
No impact	35	41	39	22
Positive impact	28	37	28	20
Negative impact	9	3	8	15
Both positive and negative impact	29	19	26	44

Row percentages. Chi square = 66.22, df = 6, Cramer's V = 0 .198, *p* = < 0.001.

Table 8 shows how students categorised their work/life/study balance, based on a typology developed during our earlier work,[10] and the significance of this balance in relation to their risk of dropping out. These results, which are comparable with those of our earlier study, reveal that work and family life continue to have both positive and negative consequences for students. Despite the many demands on their time, two-thirds of the students in 2011 reported that they had achieved a good or manageable work/life/study balance, compared with 57–66% in 2001–03. Their success in doing so was strongly related to whether or not they had considered dropping out.[11] For a significant minority, though, the experience of balancing work, home and study creates difficulty and increases the risk of dropping out.

Table 8. Relationship between categories of work/life/study balance and likelihood of dropping out (%).

	All *n* = 843	Have seriously considered dropping out	
		Yes *n* = 244	No *n* = 599
Good balance	29	16	35
Manage to balance	39	25	44
Find it difficult to balance	19	31	14
Conflicting priorities create stress	13	28	8

Row percentages. Chi square = 117.94, df = 3, Cramer's V = 0 .374, p = < 0.001.

In our earlier work, we found no evidence of an association between the personal or employment characteristics of the students or their mode of study and the quality of work/life/study balance. This stood in marked contrast with simplistic assumptions that students who work and/or have family responsibilities are under more pressure than those who can devote themselves wholly to their studies. Given the shift in the demographic profile and mode of attendance of students between 2003 and 2011 and the increase in the proportion of students in employment, we were interested to see if different findings emerged from our more recent data. We found some evidence that, in 2011, students who were younger or male or those studying part-time were more likely to report experiencing a good balance and adults or those with family responsibilities were less likely to do so. Similar patterns emerged in relation to serious consideration of dropping out. However, in looking specifically at full-time students, we again found that having a job made no significant negative difference and that the number of hours worked was also not significant. In 2001–03 we discovered that the students' need for support and the source of that support were much more important factors in influencing the quality of their work/life/study balance. In 2011 these findings were replicated only to a limited extent. Childcare support for those with family responsibilities was important in achieving a good balance. For employed students, receiving leave of absence from work appeared to reduce the likelihood of dropout.

In 2011 a different aspect of the underlying dynamics of the work/life/study balance emerged. We found that the relationship between the different aspects of students' lives was significant. Tables 9 and 10 show how the four categories of balance are related to the quality of the impact that students perceive work and home life to have on their studies.

Table 9. Relationship between categories of balance and home impact (%).

	All *n* = 859	No impact *n* = 298	Positive impact *n* = 233	Negative impact *n* = 74	Both positive and negative impact *n* = 254
Good balance	29	33	39	14	19
Manage to balance	39	48	44	24	30
Find it difficult to balance	19	12	12	35	27
Conflicting priorities create stress	13	7	6	27	24

Row percentages. Chi square = 127.60, df = 9, Cramer's V = 0.223, p = < 0.001.

Table 10. Relationship between categories of balance and work impact (%).

	All *n* = 588	No impact *n* = 158	Positive impact *n* = 103	Negative impact *n* = 100	Both positive and negative impact *n* = 227
Good balance	30	39	44	15	25
Manage to balance	38	48	44	22	36
Find it difficult to balance	17	9	7	31	21
Conflicting priorities create stress	15	3	5	32	18

Row percentages. Chi square = 101.96, df = 9, Cramer's V = 0.240, p = < 0.001.

Those who experienced most difficulty in balancing their priorities also reported a negative impact of home or work on study. On the other hand, it is clear that work and home life can and do have a positive impact on study. Where this is the case, students are more likely to report a good balance. We argue that these findings suggest that the college has a growing responsibility to acknowledge the reality of students' experience of work and family life and to consider how to enable students to develop positive relationships between work, home life and study. One example of how this might be explored is illustrated by comments in one of the free-text sections of the questionnaire, where 8% of working students wrote that what they would most like to make their lives easier would be to have their college days or college week structured differently. For example, they suggested that college classes could be compressed into three days or spread evenly over five half days, to reduce travelling time and to facilitate employment in the remaining time or to make childcare more practicable. In response to a multiple-choice question, 34% and 20% chose online learning and distance learning, respectively, as an option that would improve the quality of their experience.

Discussion

An uncertain future in a difficult labour market

The demographic profile of higher education students in colleges has shifted markedly over a period of several years in favour of younger full-time students. Researchers suggest that prioritising measures to improve the labour market position of young people is justifiable in a

recession but this also raises some important questions. Sustaining young people in full-time education when the labour market is highly competitive is only a temporary expedient. Field (2006) has suggested that mass higher education results in warehousing young people who experience higher education as a lengthy extension of school, rather than as a positive post-school choice. In our survey, some school leavers exhibit a pattern of study, work and home life that appears comparable with that of a school pupil. This has negative implications for likelihood of success in higher education. It indicates low levels of motivation and hangs a question mark over the likelihood of successful transition into suitable employment.

In our study, 77% of respondents overall and 80% of school leavers gave securing a job as one of their reasons for studying.[12] By contrast, adults cited a broader range of reasons for studying, including improving their skills in their current job (23%), or learning skills for personal reasons (45%), or supporting the family (32%).[13] Until the economy improves, there is a risk of unmet expectations as students exit from college into a difficult labour market. Although there is a strong overall link between educational attainment and employment, higher levels of qualifications do not necessarily translate automatically into improved job prospects. There may also be a mismatch between what students choose to study and the labour market. This places an increased responsibility on colleges, which should be helping students to achieve their vocational ambitions (ILO 2012). Employers commonly assert that they value work experience when recruiting and it could therefore be argued that those young people who have sustained jobs whilst studying may find transition into employment easier. Crawford et al. (2011) found that combining full-time education with work had beneficial long-term effects later in life (compared with education only). A key finding of our survey was that the majority of full-time students had a job and that work formed a big part of their lives. For some students work was valued and positive, providing financial security and a better social life as well as experience of relevance to their studies, whilst for others work was resented as a necessary imposition that created difficulty. For full-time students, whether their jobs had a positive or negative impact on their studies was important. This suggests that colleges should take greater steps to enable full-time students to combine work and study effectively, and to gain as much benefit as possible from their work experience.

The apprenticeship alternative

The OECD reports on the use of apprenticeships to reduce youth employment and notes that Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the countries that are proving most resilient to the current economic downturn, have strong traditions of apprenticeships (Keese 2013). Our case study campus population included 150 modern apprentices and we estimate that they represent at least 50% of our part-time survey respondents. We are therefore able to consider the implications of the respective experiences of young full-time and young part-time students, many of whom are modern apprentices. We found that young part-time students (under 25), whose fees were paid by their employers, were more likely to have well balanced lives, more likely to report a positive relationship between work and study and less likely to consider dropping out than young full-time students. These findings accord with a survey of apprentices conducted by Skills Development Scotland in 2012, which found high levels of satisfaction with apprenticeships. By contrast, young full-time HNC and HND students represent a different constituency, as their connection to the labour market is more tenuous and their future employment prospects more uncertain. Unlike apprentices, the majority of the young so-called full-time students in our study combined study with work in an unplanned and largely unacknowledged manner. They were less well-off financially than

their apprentice counterparts, and more likely to find it difficult to manage their work/study balance. Apprenticeships appear to represent a positive option in terms of combining work and study. Growth in apprenticeships may therefore represent sound policy in response to youth unemployment, as an apprenticeship offers an attractive mode of access into post-school education at an advanced level as well as a viable route into the adult labour market.

Articulation to degree-level study

Progression to a degree was also one of the stated aims of a high proportion of the students. Sixty-five per cent chose progression to a degree as a reason for studying, rising to 76% for school leavers. The Scottish Funding Council, which has had a policy on articulation since 2004, estimates that only around 2500 students per year articulate to a degree course with full credit (SFC 2011). Field (2004) and Ingram and Gallacher (2011) suggest that many do not receive full credit for their qualification level and that their prospects are restricted to certain universities. One advantage of studying for an HNC or HND full-time is that there is a clearer route to more advanced level study. Although securing articulation from an HNC or HND course to degree level study is not always straightforward, there are in theory as many as 2000 recognised full-time pathways (SFC 2005). For the apprentice with an HNC or SVQ, progression to the next level of study, on a part-time basis, is more likely to be problematic as part-time progression routes are far less widely available in universities (Ingram and Gallacher 2011). Continuing growth in the number of apprentices in the labour market may increase demand from employers for work-based models of higher education. If universities were to respond by creating more part-time articulation routes, then apprenticeships may offer an attractive alternative to full-time higher education.[14] There are currently no systematic data available in Scotland on the destinations of either full-time or part-time students after they have completed their HNC or HND. Improving articulation, possibly through legislation, continues to be a stated aim of the Scottish Government (2012c) but further research is needed to understand the scale and nature of the demand from both students and employers.

Adults in college-based higher education

For colleges, the return of significant numbers of day-release apprentices to their campuses represents a reprise of their traditional role as technical training institutes, which dates back to the 1950s. Since the 1980s colleges have also embraced a new and important role in lifelong learning and their distinctive higher education curriculum has offered adults the benefits of labour market participation, career development, community engagement and personal fulfilment. The hidden story behind the recent shift in balance in favour of young people is a reduction in this type of second chance higher education for adults, particularly women who wish to study whilst working or raising a family. In our 2011 study, the proportion of adults whose fees are paid by their employer has reduced dramatically compared with our earlier study. This is possibly because employers have switched their training priority to apprenticeships. We note a similar decline in the number of lone parents now participating in college-based higher education. Nevertheless, adults over 25 years of age continue to represent 39% of higher education students in Scottish colleges and understanding their experience is therefore of continuing importance. For these students, achieving a positive work/life/study balance may be one of the most important factors in enabling them to succeed.

Osborne et al. (2001) found a complex relationship between mature students' aspirations, the personal pressures they faced in embarking on study and the institutional factors that affected initial enrolment and continued participation. The data in Tables 6 to 10 suggest that, in our study, mature students are likely to be at greatest risk of experiencing difficulties with work/life/study balance. It is equally important to note that many students succeed in juggling their various priorities and report positive outcomes. One key issue, therefore, is whether students accept responsibility for balancing home, work and study. This does not mean, however, that institutions have no part to play. Kember (1999) lists a range of institutional practices that may contribute to success, including counselling, flexibility in study requirements and assignments, administrative arrangements, group work and childcare. We argue, therefore, that colleges have a continuing responsibility to find ways to enable adult students to capitalise on the positive aspects of work and home life and manage the complexity of these relationships.

Conclusion

During the 1990s, the rhetoric of lifelong learning policy claimed a wealth of social and economic benefits from adult education (see, for example, Coffield 2000a, 2000b). More recently, lifelong learning has declined in importance as a policy priority in Scotland, resulting in a reduction in learning opportunities for adults, as resources have been diverted towards post-16 education and training for young people. Growth in the provision of apprenticeships, in particular, may represent a well-founded policy response to increased youth unemployment. It is, however, important that research should continue to investigate the benefits, for individuals and society, of investment in college-based higher education for all age groups and that the experiences of older female students in particular should continue to be documented.

The changes in student populations that we have documented present two contrasting challenges for colleges. For the school leavers and young adults who now form the majority of their higher education students, colleges must work to manage the risk of simply sheltering them temporarily from the recession. Colleges must devote attention to enabling as many students as possible to prepare appropriately for their eventual transition into the labour market. Our evidence suggests that this should include maximising the benefits that students gain from combining work with study, by recognising this as the norm rather than the exception.

The second challenge is to continue to recognise the different priorities of adult students. We speculate that a college community dominated by young people may be a less congenial learning environment for older learners and that there is a danger that they feel marginalised. For these older students, their home circumstances may be more significant in influencing whether they achieve a good work/life/study balance, together with the support they receive from a range of sources including family, fellow students and financial assistance with childcare. Enabling adult students to mobilise sources of support and to manage the many demands on their time will remain essential for maximising their chances of educational success.

Notes

1. In 2012 the share was 17%, the reduction being attributable to the creation of the University of the Highlands and Islands and the University of the West of Scotland, both of which incorporate former colleges.
2. A detailed explanation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework may be found at www.scqf.org.uk. The awarding body for HNCs and HNDs is the Scottish Qualifications Authority (www.sqa.org.uk).
3. Detailed statistical evidence can be found at http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Lifelong-learning/Publications and http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/Publications.
4. For an overview of the barriers to employment for young people, see Allen et al. (2012).
5. Source: Scottish Funding Council Infact Database (www.sfc.ac.uk)
6. Details of the frameworks can be found at www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk.
7. SVQ3 is broadly equivalent to level 7 in the SCQF.
8. Source: Scottish Funding Council Infact database (www.sfc.ac.uk).
9. Beginning in 2012, most colleges in Scotland have merged with others within their region.
10. See (Lowe 2005) for details, especially Chapter 8.
11. Chi-square = 117.94, df = 3, p = < 0.001.
12. This was a multiple-choice question.
13. This was a multiple-choice question.
14. The Scottish Funding Council has supported two pathfinder projects on articulation from modern apprenticeships to degrees as part of its programme of funded skills utilisation projects. Details can be found at http://www.sfc.ac.uk/funding/FundingOutcomes/Skills/SkillsUtilisation/SkillsUtilisationProjects.aspx

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