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‘Shoe-horned and side-lined’? Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape

John Butcher, The Open University

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Foreword

The decline in the numbers of part-time students has been well documented in recent years. According to HESA statistics published in January, there were nearly 55,000 fewer part-time students studying in the UK in 2013-14 than in 2012-13, with overall numbers dipping to 603,325 last year. The reasons for this may be complex – and it is not the purpose of this research to uncover them – but whatever they are, the situation is one that should concern us all.

What this important research did set out to uncover was the experiences of part-time students across the UK. In so doing it found that the range of people studying in this way is enormously broad and that these students may have many different needs which have to be addressed if they are to get the most out of their time in higher education. For example, responses suggest that part-time HE attracts a higher proportion of female students, many of whom carried caring responsibilities for children or older relatives. In addition, a significant proportion of respondents reported being the first in their families to study HE, and most had been out of education for five to ten years. This analysis may help the sector to identify the needs of different groups: we need to adopt an approach to part-time provision that fully encompasses the heterogeneity of the students, enabling access and success for all.

The point has been made elsewhere (Pollardet.al. (2012) *Expanding and Improving Part-time Education,* BIS) that the distinctions between full-time and part-time students are in any case becoming blurred because many students, including full-time learners, spend a significant proportion of their time in employment. As Ron Barnett says in his 2013 research for the HEA, *Conditions of flexibility*, this implies that rather than continuing to view study as a simple full-time/part-time dichotomy, institutions need to examine more flexible models to capture the full spectrum of learning needs. Individuals in this research reported an imperative to balance the time for study with competing personal or work demands, which impacted on the learner experience (over a third had missed a formal element of their course as a result of work or caring responsibilities.)

We must be open to exploring new pedagogical models and to the training needs of those teaching in higher education if we want our diverse student population to continue to flourish. One of the recommendations from *Flexible Pedagogies: part-time learners and learning in higher education* by Michael McLinden (HEA, 2013) was that "appropriate methods should be drawn upon for examining the part-time student experience." This research, drawing directly and extensively on the student voice, is a significant step along the way.

Professor Stephanie Marshall
Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy
July 2015

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I would particularly like to thank the survey team in the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University for the administration of the online questionnaire to OU students and their contribution to the quantitative data analysis, and to the strategy office at the Open University for providing historic trend comparisons using Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data. Sincere thanks are also due to the various gatekeepers in the participating (non-OU) HEIs who agreed to put links to the survey instrument on institutional forums/VLEs.

This study would not have been possible without the excellent project management, logistic and administrative support provided by Wendy Fowle, John Rose-Adams, Lesley Goss, Kate Hawkins and Caroline Sturman in the Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships at the Open University.

Thanks are also due to Kate Thomas, our consultant on this project, who conducted 21 of the one-to-one interviews and did an initial analysis of the transcripts of the extensive interview recordings made, and to Open University colleague Laura Hills who conducted the group interview with part-time HE in FE students and carried out a one-to-one interview.

The Steering Group offered valuable guidance and advice and included: Wendy Fowle (OU), Alison Le Cornu (HEA), John Rose-Adams (OU), Geoff Stoakes (HEA), Rob Walton (HEA), Vida Douglas (HEA): Charlie Leyland (HEFCE) acted as an observer.

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Executive summary

This research set out to investigate the part-time student experience of higher education across the United Kingdom, in the context of a well-publicised contraction in the sector, and increasing divergence between policies affecting part-time study in the four nations. The topic is an important one, given the positive impact part-time learners make to the economy (UUK, 2013), and the extent to which the experience of part-time higher education contributes to social mobility and widening participation. It is also a pressing topic, because policy discourse around higher education has for far too long been dominated by assertions about full-time opportunities for 18 year-olds paying higher fees, and the need for selecting universities to do more to widen participation. Such policies disregard skills shortages, the transformative potential of enhancing social capital through lifelong learning, and the difficulties adults face in taking their education to higher levels. Research which elicits the authentic voice of part-time students can help policy-makers and institutions better understand, and thus re-prioritise, the needs of an invisible, difficult to reach, but still significant HE cohort.

It is usually the most disadvantaged students (often working adults) who engage with higher education via part-time modes of study (ARC, 2013). The dramatic decline in part-time participation (HEFCE, 2014) offers a serious challenge to the sector, not only a blunt message to policy-makers and funding bodies, but a diminution of opportunity to non-traditional students seeking tentative first steps into higher education. In this context, it appears vital to ask part-time students themselves, about the barriers they face in studying part-time, and to explore with them, in their own words, their motivations for choosing to study part-time.

The research is timely and significant because any decline in part-time numbers disproportionately impacts on students from the lowest socio-economic groups, precisely the groups that universities in England were meant to target with resources from the significantly increased fees they were allowed to charge (BIS, 2011) after funding changes in 2012/13. The numbers affected are highly significant: in England, the severe decline in part-time registration has been reported as a critical 40% since 2010. The decrease from 2010 – 2013 equated to the equivalent of 105,000 fewer students (HEFCE 2013).

This report explores the experiences of part-time students across the UK who are studying, rather than focusing on the complex reasons for the decline in part-time numbers. But the problem behind the dramatic drop in numbers – whether caused by supply diminishing as institutions withdraw from part-time provision, or demand reducing as potential learners choose not to study part-time – helps shape the experiences of those students resilient enough to continue. In England in particular, it has been argued (Universities UK, 2013) that the drop was driven initially by the reduction in financial support for students taking equivalent level qualifications, and the impact of austerity measures on employer support for part-time higher education (especially in the public sector). This problem was then exacerbated by the introduction of higher fees and student loans in England.

Importantly, the decline has been steepest (55%) in the part-time sub-degree market, the less-intensive provision that offers those mature students, who are unable to commit to full-time higher education, the award of institutional credit, or certificates or diplomas of higher education. Furthermore, the numbers on foundation degrees – one of the innovations designed to offer vocational and applied routes into HE for students with non-traditional entry qualifications – have also declined (by 18%), with a consequent negative impact on planned HE in FE expansion. So, even from a decreasing base, part-time numbers in England declined a further 8% from 2012/13 to 2013/14.

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, 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.

So, in this context of sector decline, a cross-nation study researching the experience of part-time learners was intended to inform debate among policy-makers, and stimulate enhanced understanding in institutions. The challenge was to engage part-time students, many of whom are the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach learners in the sector. In order to explore the learning experiences of such students, in their own voices, the research was organised into two distinct but related stages, based on a methodological approach used in a successful pilot study conducted into the experience of part-time students in Wales in 2013-2014 by the Open University Wales and NUS Wales. Conclusions from this Welsh study provided a useful framing device for the research in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland:

> *Part-time opportunities are at the forefront of widening access and employability in Wales*
> (Rees & Rose-Adams, 2014, p.26)

In order to explore the part-time student experience in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the first stage of this research consisted of a 25 question online survey, based on the original survey used in Wales. This was issued to a sample of part-time students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland between July and October 2014. The survey was sent to two groups of students – those identified by the Open University (which has a remit to operate across the UK) as an appropriate sample of part-time distance learners, and those identified by the researchers and their HEA project steering group, as studying at those face-to-face universities and Colleges with the highest numbers of part-time learners.

A total of 433 completed responses were received from Open University students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and 1,134 responses from non-OU part-time students at a sample of universities and colleges in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (a total of 1,567). This data was analysed to provide a demographic breakdown of who studies part-time, reasons why they study part-time, and the kind of barriers they face in their part-time studies. Themes from the quantitative data informed the schedule of questions asked via telephone interviews in the second stage of the research. This consisted of 22 semi-structured one-to-one interviews (digitally recorded) with a purposive sample of volunteer participants from those who completed the survey, and a focus group interview with three part-time students in a college setting.

This qualitative data resulted in 285 pages of interview transcripts from a representative sample of non-OU and OU students. Our interviews were with a proportionate balance of female/male learners, mostly studying part-time while working, and representing face-to-face infill, evening, blended and distance modes, across different qualification levels and ranging in age from 21 to 60+. They were mostly the first in their families to enter HE.

Key findings

One of the most important findings was the clear demonstration that part-time higher education students are marked by their heterogeneity – they cannot be considered as a single homogeneous group. This heterogeneity presents a conundrum for policy-makers, but one which has to be addressed given the wide range of personal circumstances and competing responsibilities, reported in this study, which can impact on successful participation and achievement in part-time higher education.

Nonetheless, there are demographic 'highlights' to be elicited from our survey, which might help focus attention on particular needs, all of which fall under the umbrella of widening participation characteristics: responses suggest part-time higher education attracts a higher proportion of female students, and that many carried caring responsibilities for children (38%), or older relatives (12%). A significant proportion of respondents reported being the first in their families to study HE (30%+ of OU students, 60% of non-OU students) – and most had been out of education for 5-10 years.

A key finding from the Welsh pilot, mirrored to some extent in Scotland but not really represented in the English data, was the significance of geographical isolation for part-time learners – this under-researched aspect of rural disadvantage points not only to 'cold spots' in HE coverage, but also a disconnect between learner aspirations to improve their lives and very limited local employment opportunities.

Issues around the impact of disability and long-term health impairments also figured strongly in the survey responses (22% reported learning choices being affected by persistent health issues – they do not think of themselves as victim, but were simply describing the realities of learning in such circumstances). Coping with mental health problems, being on medication, managing hospital appointments, being housebound or facing deteriorating mobility issues were all reported. This went some way to confirming a conclusion drawn from qualitative responses to the Welsh pilot study (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015) that for students in such circumstances, part-time higher education is a lifeline and should be even more accessible, rather than its availability being under threat. Ironically, the part-time students reporting a disability or long-term health issue (both OU and non-OU) were twice as likely as students not declaring a disability to have the entry requirements for traditional, full-time university study.

In exploring why learners studied part-time, a clear message emerged that notions of 'choice' were relatively meaningless: choosing part-time was effectively an illusion because students were faced with 'Hobson's choice' – it was either part-time or nothing. Most respondents admitted to preferring the idea of full-time study, but believed the cost was too great; they could not afford to give up a job when they had extensive family outgoings, and in many cases they were debt-averse.

Barriers to part-time study were cited as financial by many respondents, with the cost of courses presenting a challenge to individuals who reported utilising their own savings, borrowing from family, or even credit card debt to fund their studies. Issues of poverty in relation to the affordability of HE were also reported in the Welsh study, and this was echoed in some responses from Scotland. This is a particularly pressing issue given the retreat of employers from supporting the cost to individuals of part-time higher education (only 15% of respondents reported employer support for their studies). Critically, a key barrier to choice seemed to be a lack of disposable income – in other words, by the time adults had paid a mortgage or rent, transportation costs and childcare, there was very little left to pay for even part-time higher education. These were students anxious about going into debt for their higher education and concerned whether any investment they made would translate to some personal transformation (whether in aspirations for a better job or a more desired lifestyle). In England, the challenge of the lack of a maintenance grant for part-time study was often mentioned.

Just as important was the concern that full-time study was too inflexible, and would not fit with individual personal circumstances. Despite this, there were two clear messages clarifying why part-time students were studying at all. First, but not by a huge margin, was the motivation of improving employment prospects. Second, were those students who felt they had missed out at 18, and were pursuing the opportunity of a second chance.

These substantive drivers were explored in the interviews, from which five key themes emerged:

Flexibility remains a problematic concept in the context of part-time higher education. Despite flexible learning being in vogue in HE, it is alleged 'the term itself is largely empty of content' (Barnett, 2014, p.7). The different components of flexibility (whether in, for example, moves to online modes of learning, in revised timing of assessments, in place or in course scheduling and pace) inevitably intersect and it is crucial that institutional systems and structures are responsive enough to interact with flexible pedagogies to meet the personal flexibilities required by part-time students: institutions need to do more to take account of part-time learners' circumstances. Individuals reported an imperative to balance the time for study with competing personal or work demands, with an impact on the learner experience (over one- third had missed a formal element of their course as a result of work or caring responsibilities). Institutions were reported as being inflexible in relation to part-timers. Interviewees spoke of feeling like an "inconvenience", of being "shoe-horned" into existing full-time structures, of being "side-lined" and experiencing a lack of differentiation which felt like "one-size-fits-all". Older students were irked that their prior skills went unrecognised.

Motivation to learn is aligned with employability for many part-timers, whether in relation to developing skills and confidence to get a job, or to improve career prospects. But this work focus was definitely not the only motivation (and had nothing to do with policy announcements aimed at 21 year olds seeking graduate careers), since enjoyment and intellectual challenge (especially for those aged 50+) were also reported as significant drivers. The interview responses also suggested a potentially new conceptualisation of the part-time learner, a small group who seem to be embarking on part-time HE when their own children have left home to study full-time at university.

A lot of interviewees reflected on their perception of not having a student identity, amplified by not feeling part of a **student community.** Part-time learners feel isolated and disengaged from the institutional support structures provided for full-timers.

Information, advice and guidance for part-time students appear to be inadequate: the complexity of qualification pathways, delivery modes, workload and financial support remain a barrier. We note that some work is already underway in this area. For example, the UK higher education funding bodies are reviewing the provision of information about HE, looking at the information that is available and how it can be improved to meet the needs of students, institutions and other stakeholders. The current Quality Assessment Review being conducted by the funding bodies may also give insight into the provision of information, advice and guidance.

Disciplinary differences need acknowledging in part-time HE, since subject choices can be proxies for work-related upskilling, or study driven by personal interest, and there appear to be very different experiences across disciplines which might affect retention (Woodfield, 2014).

Across the UK, there is a knowledge gap around the experiences of, and barriers faced, by part-time mature students in higher education. Policy-makers need to listen to these experiences and carve out a space in which the needs and aspirations of disadvantaged learners in this heterogeneous sector can be properly considered. Shibboleths like "flexibility", "choice", "employability" need to take account of the particular circumstances in which adult part-timers have to learn. Part-time higher education must not be perceived as a disposable 'add-on', and be allowed to wither, whether as a result of the unintended consequences of policy decisions at national or institutional levels or, more broadly, as an invisible consequence of the economic downturn. Parts of the sector are starting to respond, but it is ironic that one (successful) solution to the decline in part-time has been Birkbeck's introduction of a "full-time" evening degree.

Recommendations

Policy-makers need to incentivise universities and colleges to prioritise part-time higher education as an attractive choice, offered in a diversity of modes, with a broad subject spread to provide an equitable offer for what are likely to be the most disadvantaged students.

Institutions need to be far more aware of the flexibilities that part-time students require, and to adopt a customer focus to ensure engagement with learners who currently feel isolated and disengaged from a student community. Institutions also need to avoid falling into the trap of addressing part-timers the same way: As one student put it: "Whether you're distance learning or in college, you get a message stating 'come into campus and register your ID immediately'" (8). Institutions need to be more open to the diversity that part-time students bring to HE – both celebrating their value to the culture of an HEI, and acknowledging their needs. If the responsibility for developing a part-time culture sat in a Pro-Vice-Chancellor's (PVC) brief, and progress against targets was reported annually this could help part-time students acknowledge the importance of their learner identity – which might in turn remind policy-makers of their significance in the sector.

The **sector** needs to see the benefits of educating local part-time adult students who could provide a platform for a range of radical community education partnerships (which might be good business, given the impending drop in 18 year olds in the UK), and who bring with them professional and personal skills and characteristics which could benefit the academy and re-orientate traditional pedagogies. But for this to work, the sector requires an understanding that students taking a part-time route to a HE qualification cannot be assumed to have the same learning priorities as a full-time student – and they may bring more to the learning experience in terms of 'professional capital' than is currently recognised. Implementing flexible pedagogies that challenge HE assumptions based on paradigms of a full-time young HE student could disrupt the sector and better meet the needs of the significant proportion of students who study HE part-time.

Introduction

Context

This research sets out to investigate the part-time student experience of higher education across the United Kingdom, in the context of a well-publicised contraction in the sector and of increasing divergence between policies affecting part-time HE study in the four nations. The recent history of part-time HE in the UK offers an important context for the current crisis: 15 years ago part-time HE in the UK was growing; 10 years ago, as demonstrated in the UUK (2006) study, that growth began to reverse, and five years ago (Callender & Wilkinson, 2012) a steep decline began. The part-time share of the UK HE market has dropped year-on-year from 36% (2007/8) to 28% (2012/13). The vast majority of the reduction in part-time undergraduate students is in English institutions, and it is England which has the highest proportion of part-time HE students across the four nations. This contraction disadvantages students for whom full-time study is not an option, and accentuates the difficulties if students need to switch modes due to changes in personal circumstances.

The part-time higher education sector in the UK is large – nearly 250,000 people commenced studying part-time in 2011-12 (HESA). This runs counter to the situation in much of Europe, where full-time HE is considered the default mode. In several European countries part-time does not really exist. Nonetheless, any reduction in part-time HE numbers is an important issue for UK policy-makers, given the positive and critical impact part-time learners make to the economy – the majority are usually in full-time employment and remain so during their studies. In addition, the experience of part-time higher education makes a major contribution to widening participation, to social mobility, and to re-skilling the workforce to meet the challenges of the 21st century globalised economy (UUK, 2013). Critically, the UK part-time undergraduate market has been declining at twice the rate of postgraduate.

Although the reduction in part-time learners is being felt differently across the four UK nations (UUK, 2013), the numbers affected by the contraction in the part-time sector are highly significant. In England, the severe decline in total part-time registration has been reported as a critical 40% since 2009/10. The decrease from 2010–2013 equated to the equivalent of 105,000 fewer students. This drop was driven initially by the reduction in funding and financial support for students taking equivalent or lower level qualifications (2008/9), alongside the impact of austerity measures on employer support for part-time vocational training in higher education (especially as fewer employers fund it in the public sector). From 2012/13, this reduction was exacerbated to a dramatic decline as a result of the increased cost of study, by the introduction of far higher tuition fees for part-time students (McLinden, 2013). The eventual provision of student loans has not arrested the decline and previous reports note lack of coherent information, advice and guidance on the availability of financial support for part-time study (Universities UK, 2006). The scale of these figures suggests it would be hard to understate the extent to which the part-time sector in England is under very serious threat.

This drop has variously been ascribed to the impact of fees (despite the availability of tuition fee loans) coinciding with an economic climate in which potential students are concerned about the value of their personal investment in part-time HE given the state of the labour market, as well as the withdrawal of part-time courses.

Importantly, the decline has been steepest (55%) in the part-time sub-degree market, the less-intensive provision offering those (usually) mature students, unable to commit to full-time higher education, the award of institutional credit, or certificates or diplomas of higher education. This sub-degree provision has been previously recognised as a route through which participation has been widened, and upskilling has been enabled. As if that steep drop was not worrying enough, the numbers on foundation degrees – one of the innovations designed to offer vocational and applied routes into HE for students with non-traditional entry qualifications – have also declined (by 19%), with a consequent negative impact on planned HE in FE expansion. So, even from a decreasing base, part-time numbers in England continue to decline, a further 9% from 2012/13 to 2013/14 (HESA SFR 210 Table 1a).

This contraction has had a disproportionate impact on non-traditional and mature students, since part-time students are more likely to be over 25, are less likely to have entry qualifications above GCSEs and are more likely to have caring commitments (McLinden, 2013). It is understood to be the most disadvantaged students (often working adults) who engage with higher education via part-time modes of study (ARC, 2013). As such, any dramatic decline represents a major diminution of opportunity to non-traditional students, especially those seeking tentative first steps into higher education. Research leading to a better understanding of those part-time students who do register and persist in the current climate is timely, because if a reduction in part-time numbers disproportionately impacts on students from the lowest socio-economic groups, it is precisely those groups that universities (in England) were meant to target with resources from the significantly increased fees they were allowed to charge (BIS, 2011) after funding changes in 2012/13.

This points to a potential failure of government policy, given that the unintended consequences of placing the burden of HE cost on individual part-time students in England appears to have been a dramatic decline in part-time participation (HEFCE, 2014). In addition, institutional policies to withdraw part-time provision may have contributed to the decline in numbers, fuelled by the economic downturn. The scale and speed of the decline offers a serious challenge to the sector and a blunt message to policy-makers and funding bodies. It is a pressing topic, because policy discourse around higher education has for far too long been dominated by twin impulses: on the one hand, a fixation about full-time opportunities for 18 year-olds paying higher fees, and on the other the need for selecting universities to do more to widen participation. While both may have their place, such policies disregard skills shortages, the transformative potential of enhancing social capital through lifelong learning, and the difficulties adults face in taking their education to higher levels – all of which could be addressed by a vibrant part-time sector.

To what extent is this crisis an English one? Taking a snap shot of part-time higher education across the four nations is opportune, because the divergence in policies is to some extent reflected in different narratives and different aspirations for learners.

In Wales, where the Assembly (Welsh Government, 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 reduction of 24%) than in England. It is acknowledged that little research had been conducted into part-time HE in Wales (NUS Wales, nd.), despite the assertion that part-time study is more significant in Wales than the rest of the UK (a quarter of Welsh undergraduates and half of Welsh postgraduates studied part-time in 2011). The Welsh context represents a HE space in which course franchising remains an important vehicle for bringing HE nearer to students, and in which the provision of HE in the Welsh language remains an access issue. Yet aspirations of a few years ago appear overly optimistic: an aim to deliver economic and social justice benefits (WAG, 2009) via greater opportunities for individuals to learn on a part-time basis seems to have foundered, partly because the part-time market is less lucrative and the HE market generally is more volatile (UUK, 2010).

In Scotland, which also has 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.

It is difficult to deny that part-time HE in the UK has become a divergent market, with fee variations between institutions, financial support variations between UK nations and variations in availability (whether through subject choice or mode of delivery). Judging by our survey, it appears doubtful that the diversity of educational aspiration represented by our respondents across the UK is being met, or whether skills shortages in the UK economy are being adequately addressed.

The sector remains confused and complex: universities vary considerably in the proportion of part-time study they offer, with some Post-1992s in Wales offering more part-time than full-time HE. Universities which have sustained a part-time offer vary from mixed models of part-time integrated with full-time, or part-time

separate from full-time, or a mix. The Open University, with its model of supported distance learning, provides a UK-wide offer of part-time HE for those who do not require (or cannot access) traditional face-to-face learning. As a key player, the Open University sustains HE provision for over 25% of UK registered part-time students, a proportion growing as other providers de-commit. Other providers at scale include those FE colleges providing locally relevant higher level skills (8% if taken as a total proportion) and a group of (usually but not quite exclusively Post-1992) universities which retain a mission around part-time HE for local/regional students.

But there remain particular access issues in some rural and coastal areas – HE 'cold-spots' where, in the absence of local authority community learning (such as in North Wales), opportunity for part-time HE study is very limited.

As higher education policy in the UK becomes increasingly divergent, there is a critical need to analyse and compare experience of part-time study across the four UK nations, with particular concern for characteristics and circumstances related to the substantial challenges faced by part-time students, including caring responsibilities, disabilities, and balancing working and learning. Yet little student voice investigation into the implications for learning and teaching for part-time learners in HE has been conducted. Why the paucity of research into the part-time student experience?

This is partly a problem of definition – despite a decade which has seen full-time HE endeavouring to offer greater flexibility to better meet the needs of learners (Barnett, 2014), the debate continues about the extent to which moves towards more flexible provision blur the traditional distinction between full-time and part-time (McLinden, 2013). In relation to calls for flexibility, new pedagogic approaches are intended to be inclusive of the needs of part-time students, helping people achieve their study goals at various stages in their lives. This flexibility is important for part-time learners who crave the opportunity to not only fit study alongside their other commitments, but also an affordable route to improving their employment prospects.

Providers of part-time HE now need to include a focus on 'any-time/anywhere' learning via ubiquitous mobile technologies. The latter re-positions the debate around pace, place and mode of learning, but in relation to the part-time crisis, raises a question – are moves to flexibility driven by the needs of part-time students or the inevitable positioning of a market? It may be that both the widening participation agenda – underpinning HE missions to sustain part-time study – and the employability agenda – to upskill in order to address global economic levers – are compromised by the new fee regime, and that drop in demand harms both.

Traditionally, policy and academic literature tends to define part-time in opposition to full-time (so there is a 'line' above which course duration or study intensity counts as full-time, and everything below that is part-time). This "either/or" thinking can muddy the realities of part-time study. Definitions remain problematic – HESA's maximum 21 hour/24 weeks per year rule does not quite match the blurring of full-time/part-time study modes increasingly available. And for students, there is a perception that institutions can pay too little attention to part-timers, especially if infilling alongside full-time students for whom their support services will be geared, and there will fewer opportunities to engage with the institution on its terms. Part-time learners in our study report too little interaction with their peers, and that life/work experiences of mature students can be ignored.

Exploring part-time HE is also fraught with difficulty since there are so many proxies and bifurcations involved. Part-time study can be a significant option for mature learners, but there remain competing policy and institutional definitions of 'mature' (over 21, over 25, over 30?) and, although the proportions are dropping, a minority of mature learners continue to study full-time. Part-time learners can be undergraduates (including studying on sub-degree courses which carry credit towards a degree) or postgraduates who already occupy professional roles. Their motivations and even their position within the HE sector may be very different.

So, crucially, part-time students, most of whom are also mature, are not a homogeneous group (Smith, 2008), and are linked only by their selected mode of study (Jamieson et al., 2009). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) explicitly includes mature learners as a core widening participation group, and so

universities are required to include actions and evaluations in their Access agreements to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), but part-time provision is often not prominent in those surveyed (Bowl & Hughes 2014). HEFCW (2013) and DELNI (2012) both make reference to mature students – DELNI specifically and HEFCW in relation to 'all age-groups' – for example, in Wales widening access strategic intentions include: "The aim of widening access is to secure inclusion, progression and success in higher education to enable learners across all age ranges and backgrounds" who face the highest social and economic barriers, to fulfil their potential as students, lifelong learners, citizens and employees. (p4)

This is manifest in actions including:

- prioritise all-age recruitment from Communities First cluster areas and areas in the bottom quintile of the lower super output areas of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD);
- improve participation and success in HE by all-age groups under-represented in higher education, including those from UK low participation areas;
- increase flexible learning opportunities, including part-time study, work-related learning and technology-enhanced learning.

In Northern Ireland, DELNI has a key policy Access to Success: An Integrated Regional Strategy for WP in HE, which asserts:

> "… the challenge to develop a highly skilled workforce is not just about providing new, young graduates with the skills needed. Since around 80% of the 2020 workforce has already completed formal education, a major focus has to be on the upskilling of the existing workforce. Employers need to better understand the benefits of upskilling their current employees and in turn the future providers of higher education need to become more flexible in delivery to accommodate the diverse learning needs of the mature student." (p5)

The focus for Scotland tends to be more on school leavers and progression to HE and mature learners per se are not mentioned as a priority.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest strong employment-related reasons for studying but according to Feinstein et al. (2007), more detailed evidence is required. An early, relevant study (UUK 2006) adopted a UK-wide approach, but it reported relatively little research on part-time HE had been conducted prior to that (especially data on student attitudes to part-time study), compared to the wealth of data on full-time. It noted: "Our knowledge about the part-time student population is partial and confined to an atypical minority", arguing prior research tended to adopt a narrow definition of part-time (minimum 50% of full-time equivalence, without prior L4 study) and as a consequence excluded the majority of part-time learners. The authors also recognised a conundrum, shared in this study, that students surveyed were currently studying and so had overcome initial barriers to access and participation. They argued such students were prevented from full-course participation due to the time constraints they studied within. In addition, this study reported the majority of HEI staff "recognise the pressure of combining part-time study with employment, families and other activities" (p.61) – a finding not matched by our data, which raised concerns around (in)flexibility within institutional systems and staff.

This research confirmed the key realities faced by part-time students, which, despite being driven by subject choice, are:

- affordability (impossibility of being able to afford to give up their job);
- constraint (the need to fit study around work and caring commitments: time poverty);
- convenience (mode and proximity).

The split between instrumentalism (gain a qualification/improve skills to boost career prospects) and intellectual motivation (love of subject/intellectual challenge) is suggested, but the two appear closer in the primary data reported than the conclusions actually drawn. Notably, at this time, over a third of part-time undergraduates were already graduates – presumably studying for personal development or to re-train. Younger part-timers were more interested in skills development and qualifications and males in particular were happy to study via day release in order to change jobs and earn more, while older students (50+) were

driven by interest in their subject. The policy discourse at the time was around flexibility to meet the national skills gap.

The historic baseline around funding is also interesting, as this data (UUK 2006) comes from a period when fees were first being introduced: 77% of part-time students were ineligible for government support, and while 35% of part-time students were likely to be supported by an employer, part-time workers (who were mainly female) were less likely to be supported or given time to study. These findings informed the approach taken to a number of question prompts in our data collection.

There was also some informative UK-wide data on the part-time student experience from a 2010 survey (Callender & Wilkinson, 2012), itself a follow-up to a 2008 original study, around the impact on career development. While noting (again) that one-third of all undergraduates study part-time, twin drivers were (again) asserted – on the one hand, part-time HE was recognised as a response to the need to update employability skills, while on the other, part-time HE was offering the kind of choice in educational opportunity throughout people's lives which supports social mobility. The authors claimed the introduction of student loans for new part-time students in 2012-13 was a belated recognition of both.

Their original report had emphasised the heterogeneity of part-time learners and their varied motivations to study. They sought to acknowledge both the importance of an instrumental (extrinsic) trigger for learners, and also the significance of intrinsic rewards, including interest in subject, embarking on new study, even being a role model for children. While extrinsic impact was described (in a recognisable discourse elicited by respondents in this study) in relation to job moves, higher salaries and promotions, the majority of part-time students followed up after two years had remained in stable employment, and perceived a comfortable "fit" between their qualification and career plans. The authors noted less attention has been given to the somewhat intangible effects of part-time study in relation to employability: greater confidence about their work; enhanced ability to do their work; deeper understanding of their work; taking on more responsibilities. For some part-time students the HE experience had been transformational, in offering clarity about careers planning.

But respondents also reported on the "softer" social impacts of learning in terms of developing as a person, enjoying learning more, improving self-confidence, being happier, with the impact of part-time HE extended to participants' families who became more interested in learning. This supports the view in Bennion et al (2011) that research into the impact of part-time study, and any benefits that accrue, is not only still rare, but can fail to take account of the fact that the vast majority of part-time learners are already economically active and therefore benefits can be demonstrated during study rather than as an outcome of graduation.

In this study, as in many others, part-time learners are described as pressed for time, with work and domestic commitments impinging on studying, yet for participants in this survey, HE is perceived as largely a positive experience. The fact that work/life balance changes dramatically as a result of studying part-time, and that those part-time students can experience loneliness and isolation is, in many ways, obvious. Our findings suggest this could be mitigated if HEIs offered clearer advice and guidance around studying (especially if on an infill course alongside full-time students, or as distance learner) and if efforts were made to engage part-time learners more pro-actively in the support offered.

Previous research, in policy reports and academic literature, seems hampered by attempts to discuss part-time study through two differing (competing?) policy conceptualisations – on the one hand a discourse of widening participation (linked in Wales, for example, to the regeneration of post-industrial communities), driven by aspirations to provide opportunities to access HE in a sufficiently flexible way for learners with low prior qualifications, stuck at home with no job or with caring responsibilities. On the other hand, a series of funding stimuli have sought to drive economic growth by enhancing skills for those in low-paid work. These are not mutually exclusive, but they do offer a challenge in relation to ideas of lifelong learning policies in which the instrumental ('training' to get on, change career) clashes with the personal/intellectual (personal development /challenge, seize opportunities missed).

However, in a welcome recent intervention, the Universities UK-led review of part-time higher education (UUK, 2013) highlighted a number of key issues which are more directly related to the student experience and teaching and learning in higher education, including the need for greater understanding of:

- the value part-time learners place on their experience;
- the information, advice and guidance for part-time students;
- the role and relevance of employment and employers for part-time study;
- the impact of fees and financial support for part-time study;
- a lack of clear identity for mature and part-time students.

So, in this context of sector decline, a cross-nation study researching the experience of part-time learners was intended to inform debate amongst policy-makers, and stimulate enhanced understanding in institutions. Given the volatility around part-time numbers, it appears vital to ask part-time students themselves about the barriers they face in studying part-time, and to explore with them, in their own words, their motivations for choosing to study part-time.

The challenge for the researchers was to engage part-time students, many of whom are the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach learners in the sector. In order to explore the authentic experiences of such students, in their own voices, the research was organised into two distinct but related stages, based on a methodological approach used in a successful pilot study conducted into the experience of part-time students in Wales in 2013-2014 by the Open University Wales and NUS Wales which has provided some insight into the motivations and experiences of part-time HE learners. Conclusions from this Welsh study provided a useful framing device for the research in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland:

> *Part-time opportunities are at the forefront of widening access and employability in Wales*
> (Rees & Rose-Adams, 2014, p.26)

The project extends and expands the research across the other three UK nations, attempting to deliver the most comprehensive research of part-time study in recent years. National surveys were conducted and enriched by interview and focus group data covering each of the UK nations.

We were interested in exploring the authentic individual voices of part-time learners – those affected by and having to make choices in relation to study options. We sought to understand what was more significant in the balance of factors for individual students – affordability (those learners in work who cannot afford to give up a job to study full-time) or flexibility (learners needing to juggle time to study with family commitments)? We explored the extent to which increased course fees reduce demand for part-time HE. In order to do this, issues from previous reports framed our study:

- What if part-time learner expectations were unrealistic?
- How much of a dilemma is "living at home" while studying part-time?
- Does travel time to a HEI intrude on part-time study?
- Is combining work and study attractive if employers offer support and learners enjoy aligning work and study?
- What if institutional support is insufficient for the isolated part-time learner?

The subtext from previous studies appears to be that the benefits of HE study have to outweigh the costs for part-time learners. This translates in practice as a personal decision about the value of HE if studied part-time – which is rather more pressing, and real, than that facing many full-time students who have just left school.

Research methodology

Aims

The Part-Time Now project project sought to identify and explore in detail the student experience of the range of barriers to part-time learning in HE across the four UK nations, and to expand the evidence base of what it feels like to be a part-time student in the new HE landscape.

Objectives

This project project was designed to address six key objectives:

- To make a substantial contribution to live and ongoing debates about part-time HE study across the UK.
- To better understand the role part-time provision plays in addressing access to higher education and participation issues for different groups of non-traditional learners (who may or may not otherwise participate in HE).
- To deliver a more detailed understanding of the diversity of the part-time student body, of the challenges facing part time students, and a deeper understanding of the range of experiences, needs and identities of part-time students.
- To deliver and analyse a UK-wide survey of part-time students.
- To deliver a range of interviews (complemented by focus groups as appropriate) with part-time students from a wide range of backgrounds in order to more fully explore the personal motivations and experiences of individual part-time learners, the barriers they face to study, and how barriers are overcome.
- To deliver a research report which articulates with specific national policies: for higher education; for part-time study, and for widening participation.

Research questions

1. Who are part-time students? To what extent do part-time students differ across the four UK nations? What can be learned about the impact of different HE funding regimes?
2. Why do individuals choose to study part-time rather than full-time? How do part-time students describe their study experiences?

Intended impact

The Part-Time Now project was intended to provide detailed and deeper understanding of what it looks and feels like to be a part-time student. Outputs are planned to be suitably disseminated via a series of conference presentations, seminars and academic articles. It is hoped that the findings will enable the HEA and policy-makers to develop more informed responses to the needs of part-time students than current policies allow, which position part-time students as a marginal and homogeneous group.

Research design

The pilot study: part-time HE learners in Wales

This research builds on a successful approach and methodology piloted and developed in Wales through a collaborative project between The Open University and NUS Wales in 2013-14. An online survey, gathering mainly quantitative data, was designed with the aim of eliciting information on the make-up of part-time HE students across Wales. A total of 1,344 respondents from learners in FE and HE provided insights into the motivation and needs of part-time learners in Wales. Eligible students were invited to complete the survey online, with a level of anonymity emphasised (in recognition of the potential examination of financial issues) to encourage participation. Quality control was provided in two ways: by ineligible self-reported modes of study being filtered out at an early stage and a compulsory detailed consent form (including aim of study, use of data and content) – any individuals who did not consent were not allowed to submit a survey. Mixed recruitment methods were utilised in an effort to access a large sample. The study made use of NUS Wales data assets, Open University data, liaison with stakeholders in colleges and universities, and HTML email with a survey link.

In seeking to elicit "hard-to-reach" student voices, follow-up in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 25 part-time higher education students in Wales, (20 of whom were studying Open University courses at a distance) in Autumn 2013. The interviewees had identified themselves in the national survey as willing to be contacted for follow-up questioning, and the sample was based on students who reported one or more of the following experiences: studying while caring; studying with a disability or long-term health impairment; studying in, or for, employment. The interviews were framed as offering the opportunity for in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perceptions of part-time study, and the schedule included engagement with learning around: life circumstances; HE environments; institutional support; future plans. Personal circumstances emerged from narratives offered, rather than being prompted directly. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis was conducted using grounded theory methods (Glaser and Strauss, 2009) in order to enable key themes and individual voices to emerge. The majority of respondents (65%) were female, with a broad age range (mid 20s to 70) represented. Some 22% declared a disability or long-term health impairment, while 4% of respondents declared a BME background. Voices ranged from those embarking on their first taste of HE on an access course (L3/4), across those part-way through an OU degree, to one returning to study at Masters level (L7).

Scope

The present research articulates with the Wales research to build an evidence base across the four UK nations. The original project proposal to the HEA was structured around an intention to build on what had effectively been a pilot study, a successful collaborative research partnership between the Open University (with access to thousands of distance learners in Wales) and NUS Wales (with access to thousands of part-time HE learners in HEIs and FE colleges across Wales). The collaborative model was evaluated as a successful one, with this study planning to utilise both the Open University's UK-wide access to large numbers of distance learners across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the National Union of Students' (NUS) access to large numbers of part-time HE learners in HEIs and FE colleges across the three nations.

Unfortunately, changes of personnel in key positions at the NUS and the move from relationships built up with colleagues based in NUS Wales meant it was not possible to extend the research partnership as originally proposed. Following consultation with the HEA Steering Group, it was agreed the Open University would take on the responsibility for administering the survey and conducting the follow-up interviews with non-OU part-time HE students, as well as with their own distance learners. Some adjustments in timing of the survey to non-OU students resulted.

Methodology

National survey

A detailed survey was promoted through the Open University's extensive network of direct contact with students studying higher level courses in a range of settings, including their own part-time distance learners, and those studying part-time HE in validated partner further education colleges. The survey instrument was adapted from the Welsh pilot and covered demographics and personal circumstances; academic programme, course and institution; financial support; employment; study motivations, expectations and experience; and support, advice and guidance. While early contact and agreement with NUS to jointly promote the survey was successful (following on from the Welsh study), with a key NUS officer providing input to the draft survey instrument and designing a process for engaging with NUS member institution, the NUS then effectively discontinued their involvement when that officer left the organisation. In response to the termination of the NUS's involvement with the project, and following consultation with members of the HEA Steering Group, a revised approach was implemented, through direct approaches to PVC (Teaching and Learning, or equivalent posts) in the top ten part-time recruiting HEIs in England, and all HEIs in Scotland and Northern Ireland. This was complemented by follow-up direct approaches to large further education colleges delivering part-time higher education qualifications, through the network of validated partnerships looked after by the Open University.

The following institutions were the first to agree to champion the survey to their part-time HE students:

- University of West of Scotland
- Sheffield Hallam University
- Coventry University
- Staffordshire University
- University of Central Lancashire
- Newham College

Subsequently, following discussions with HEA Steering Group members and further contact, a number of other institutions were approached but did not agree to administer the survey.

In order to maximize the response rate to the online survey, the challenges explored through the pilot research in Wales were addressed so that the reach and reputation of the Open University to engage part-time students was exploited. The original survey instrument was designed with input from both the NUS's Research Team and the Open University's professional survey design team. Professional advice from the Open University's Student Research Projects Panel ensured a high quality survey instrument which encouraged a high response rate. The timing of the survey was carefully programmed to maximise potential response rates.

The first stage of the research consisted of a 25-question online survey, which was issued to a sample of part-time students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland between July and October 2014. The survey was sent to two groups of students – initially, those identified by the Open University (which has a remit to operate across the UK) as part-time distance learners, and subsequently those identified by the researchers and their HEA project steering group, as studying at those face-to-face universities and colleges with the highest numbers of part-time learners.

The survey was initially completed with Open University students across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A representative sample of 2,000 Open University students was contacted about the survey and 433 completed responses were received, a response rate of 22%. Early analysis of the data indicated that the profile of respondents was representative of the Open University population.

Despite extended early discussions with the NUS about a suitable approach to HEIs (based on the Welsh pilot model), commitment was not forthcoming which meant that the summer break intervened before the non-

OU survey could be sent out. The researchers therefore re-worked the project plan so that the survey was conducted in the autumn term of 2014 with HEIs and FE Colleges who had agreed to take part. A total of 1,134 completed responses were received from non-OU part-time students at a sample of universities and Colleges in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland (a total of 1,567 responses in all). These data were analysed to provide a demographic breakdown of who studies part-time, the reasons why they study part-time, and the kind of barriers they face in their part-time studies.

Interviews

Analysis of survey responses were used iteratively to inform issues and topics for 22 one-to-one telephone interviews and a focus group with HE in FE part-time students, where concepts of "barriers", "identity", "value" and study experience were to be explored in detail. Initially, students who had expressed an interest in participating in the interviews through the online survey were contacted via email requesting their agreement to be contacted by our researcher. This purposive sampling differed slightly from the Welsh pilot study, when prospective interviewees were initially filtered from self-identified categories including disability/health impairment, caring responsibilities and learning in/for work.

The part-time students interviewed in 2014 represented each of the three nations (England, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and the demographic characteristics of the online survey respondents. Due to the geographical spread of those responding to the email, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face focus groups as intended. The project team then identified OU partner institutions to approach, in order to host focus groups for their part-time HE in FE students. Plymouth College of Art and Hull College of Further Education kindly agreed to participate, but in the end the latter were represented only by a one-to-one interview.

Telephone or Skype interviews were offered to individuals rather than face-to-face interviews or focus groups, in recognition of the likelihood that part-time learners may be unable to travel (or have the time/flexibility) to attend focus groups or to meet in a neutral place for appropriate one-to-one interviews. Experience from the Wales pilot project informed us telephone interviews were the most suitable and most effective to most participants. We engaged the services of an experienced researcher to work with the project team to conduct the interviews, all of which were completed by the end of 2014.

One focus group with HE in FE students was conducted by conference call following consultation with the college concerned, about the times most convenient to part-time students. The focus group was conducted by a researcher highly experienced in Focus group facilitation, and testing and reporting procedures for conducting focus groups, as outlined by Krueger and Casey (2001) were followed.

The Welsh pilot and subsequent analysis of the OU-specific survey data (Appendix B) was used to develop an interview and focus group instrument (see Appendix A)
Themes from the quantitative data informed the schedule of questions asked via telephone interviews in the second stage of the research. This consisted of 22 semi-structured one-to-one interviews (digitally recorded) with a purposive sample of volunteer participants from those who completed the survey, and a focus group interview with three part-time students in a college setting (an under-represented cohort in the interview sample).

This qualitative data resulted in 285 pages of transcripts from a representative sample of non-OU and OU students. Our interviews were with a proportionate balance of male/female learners, mostly studying part-time while working and representing face-to-face infill, evening, blended and distance modes, across different levels and ranging in age from 21 to 60+. They were mostly the first in their families to enter HE.

Analysis

Analysis of the survey, interview and focus group data was developed jointly by the core project team and consultant researchers and approved by the project Steering Group. Qualitative data was analysed

thematically and inductively following a Grounded Theory approach of developing open and axial codifications, and prepared for the research report. A rigorous approach to analysis was followed, based on suggestions by Braun and Clarke (2006) including six phases of analysis (data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme naming and defining, reporting).

Findings from the Wales study

The pilot study in Wales highlighted significant proportions of part-time students having a disability or long-term health condition (22%), having children under 18 (39%) or having caring responsibilities for an adult (12%), or working and learning. This appeared to confirm that part-time study was a route to widen participation in HE for non-traditional adults, and that reductions in numbers studying part-time suggested that access to new adult learners in HE was stalling. Three key findings (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015) emerged, each of which offered a counter-narrative to prevailing debates around HE in general and part-time study in particular. First, and most significant, was the issue of students having no choice in mode of study: this emerged from a reiteration and amplification of the impact of the wide range of personal circumstances which necessitated part-time learning as the sole HE study option. The second theme was a reminder that flexibility is a crucial element of part-time learning: this emerged from a range of student voices emphasising that flexibility requires "open" institutions to operationalise a highly responsive and personalised approach to meet the needs of learners. The third theme challenged those sector mission statements which blandly assert employability as a key purpose of university study: students interviewed expressed a more nuanced understanding of the alignment between part-time learning and employability, suggesting a fully inclusive discourse needs to be adopted to encompass a wider range of individual employability aspirations, dependant on personal circumstances.

Conceptions of **choice** for part-time students are less to do with selecting from a wide range of possible study choices in terms of where, when and how, as faced by full-time 18 year old university applicants, but more to do with fitting in to the only "choice" available to them. Quotations which follow are anonymised via pseudonyms. Examples of the heterogeneity of factors limiting 'choice' of part-time study included:

> "I have six children, five living at home…my eleven year-old has chronic fatigue syndrome and he's borderline Asperger's syndrome…my husband is virtually disabled…I'm diabetic and I have macular degeneration in one eye…I dropped out of A levels because I was in care and at eighteen they could no longer look after me…" (Amanda).

Or:

> "I was made redundant and given early retirement…and I've still got youngish children and one of them has become severely mentally ill and I spend a lot of time caring for him.'" (Christopher).

Welsh interviewees expressed formidable and varied time pressures to overcome around studying – whether in the demands of caring for disabled partners and children while studying: "My husband is disabled and has hospital appointments, I have hospital appointments, one of my daughters has hospital appointments," (Amanda), or in balancing intensive work pressures (whether part-time or full-time), voluntary work and family commitments (caring for elderly relatives) while studying (Bella) or "being disabled, I have to balance my voluntary work and care for my children and have to use all my spare time for studying" (Sarah). Others had to fit study around three or four part-time jobs, with working "odd hours" (Rachel) presenting a particular challenge for anything but the most flexible study patterns. For others, the juggling of study with full-time work and a new baby was worth it now that previous ill-health has been overcome: "I have the brains, it's just a slow process doing it part-time…getting to any face-to-face study would be hard…missing out at 18, I never thought I could afford to go to university, but I can't afford not to work." (Sharon).

Such examples of highly personal autobiographical perceptions encapsulate the urgent need for choice, both when and where to study, and are important as challenging any notion that policy-makers can continue to adhere to a homogenous composite of the part-time learner, to the extent that "the part-time market risks operating in neither the interests of students, employers nor the economy." (Universities UK, 2013, p1). Policy assertions around **flexibility** in HE are in vogue, and in relation to part-time learners sound helpful. However, definitions of flexibility can be very wide and "the term itself is largely empty of content" (Barnett, 2014, p.7). The different components of flexibility (whether in, for example, moves to online modes of learning, in revised timing of assessments, in place or in course scheduling and pace) inevitably intersect, and it is crucial that institutional systems and structures are responsive enough to interact with flexible pedagogies to meet the personal flexibilities required by part-time students.

While it is laudable that proponents of flexibility seek institutional change in relation to more flexible systems and pedagogies, whether those institutions' values are market-driven or mission-driven, it is far from clear the extent to which such flexible approaches are sufficiently personalised and responsive to the range of part-time students' individual circumstances that impact on their study and support needs. Data from interviews in Wales suggested that a clearer understanding of flexibility is required in the sector, one which addresses the wide range of barriers to study faced by individual students: "I had to give up work about two years ago, I have MS and I'm a full-time wheelchair-user…it's pretty full-time, with hospital appointments and doing physio every day." (Michaela).

Inflexible barriers resulting from time pressures (especially at assessment points) can increase the stress of juggling competing priorities (ie. the balancing act itself is precarious – "there are a lot of pressures with work, with family commitments, trying to fit everything in…" (Julia). Aligned to this is the suggestion that tutors themselves need to be flexible, and not assume studying has to be done in a certain way: "Because I am not in a 9-5 job, it is more difficult to fit study around it…there is a conflict if I have a commission to finish, and if I am working away, I am in my camper van so internet access is difficult." (Sally).

Health barriers again came through strongly in participant comments, suggesting HE providers need to accept the study implications of (say) mental illness, and offer patience as much as flexibility. Key points include recognising the disruption caused by "juggling study and doctor's appointments" (Teresa) or the obvious but crucial point: "I find it much easier to study when I feel well enough to do so, rather than missing set times when I am not well…" (Sharon). A key conclusion appears to be a perception that, because students' time was so limited "study suffered" (Sandy). Students with a range of personal responsibilities requiring flexible approaches to study often emphasised the difficult decision to commit to HE study in the first place, given circumstances meant it was "never a good time." (Julia).

Perhaps notions of flexible part-time learning need revisiting in the context of access and inclusive approaches to HE. For many part-time students, barriers exist in near-toxic combinations, and as a consequence flexible universities need to be dexterous enough to adjust the intensity of study to meet individual needs.

There also emerged, from the Welsh interview data, a need to revisit claims about **employability** for part-time learners. It was particularly striking that, grounded in this data, was a commitment from part-time students to enhance their employability through HE – but that the notion of employability they discussed was one informed by personal circumstances and personal values rather than the language of government diktats: "I'm not aiming for a career as an 18 year-old…it's a different process being part-time…there's an attitude that I'm dabbling but I'm not." (Bella). Many comments were around the skills for/in employment agenda, but some were noticeably "values-driven" (Gerwyn), rather than in relation to pure careers goals. So students talked of not being a burden, of "doing something worthwhile…I don't want to be sat at home doing nothing'" (Amanda), of "possibly improving my career when I graduate…I didn't want to do the same job I was doing for the next 40 years…have more options open" (Sharon), of "I want to have a career in the future, so taking steps to get there" (Teresa).

A significantly different perspective was voiced by those students who sought to develop self-organising skills valuable for potential self-employment: "Employment would be brilliant, but because of my health and the stigma…I don't like to set myself unrealistic goals…so in the medium term I am looking at self-employment…in the current job market I won't have to justify myself to anyone" (Luke), or those acknowledging a personal drive to move on: "being bored with being in an entry-level job, so a stepping stone into getting a better career and improving prospects" (Sharon).

Some students talked of positioning themselves for a "late career change…in a few years' time, when I want to change jobs I think it's going to be a useful tool" (Julia), or of "not wanting to stay in the same job forever…People say what have you done this degree for? I've done it for me, not looking to change jobs or anything…see where it takes me, see if it opens up doors" (Michelle). Others were very consciously preparing themselves to take up employment at an opportune time, as circumstances allowed: "I want to use

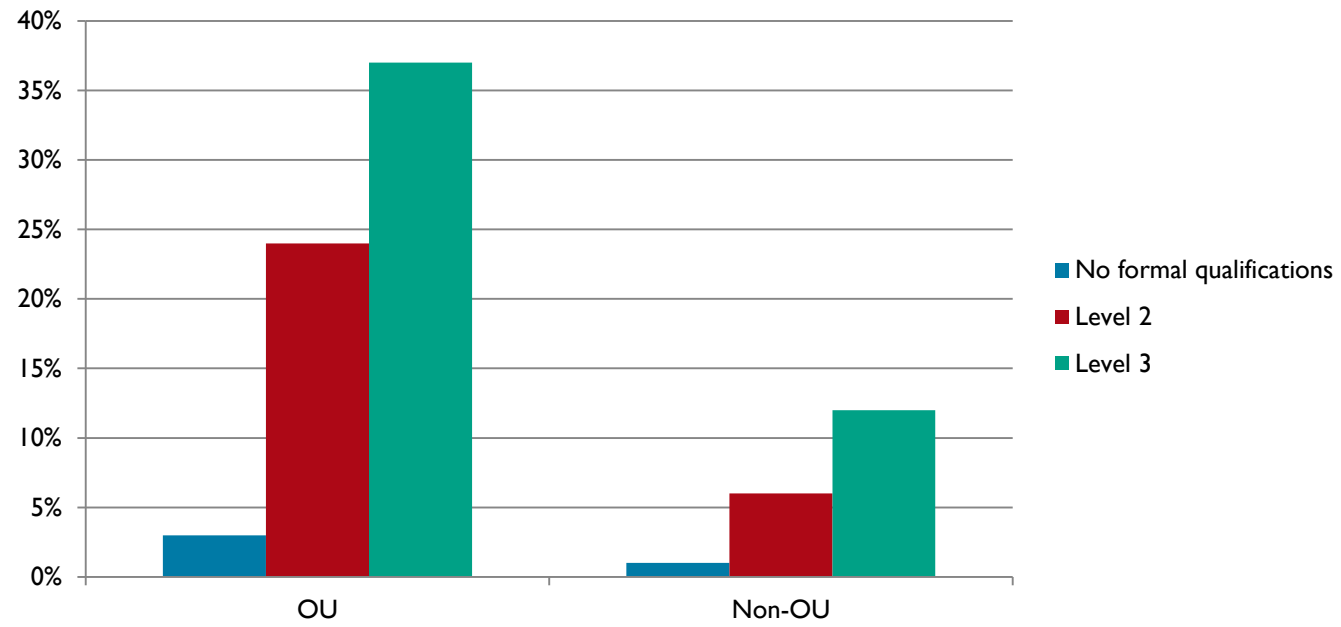
my degree, once I've got it…in the future, once my son's at secondary school" (Margaret). Sharon was determined to study as "due to a period of unemployment and temporary ill-health I didn't like to do nothing…I am motivated to better myself, studying things I want to study I am more inclined to stick with it". The boost to perceptions of an individual's own value are significant: "I'm impressed with myself if I'm honest…I'm not a confident person, I think I don't deserve to do well…it is convincing myself that I can do it…the marks help!" (Gemma).

Pegg et al (2012) suggest that part-time learners often "positioned themselves very specifically in terms of their engagement with the fields of learning, working and personal life" (p88), and found that "learners already both problematised the idea of graduate employability and adopted a critical and reflexive approach to their own learning" (p89). These part-time learners in Wales, with significantly different, and highly personal, conceptions of employability than 21-year-old graduates, appear to recognise the role of part-time HE in the development of self-managing skills.

Findings in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland

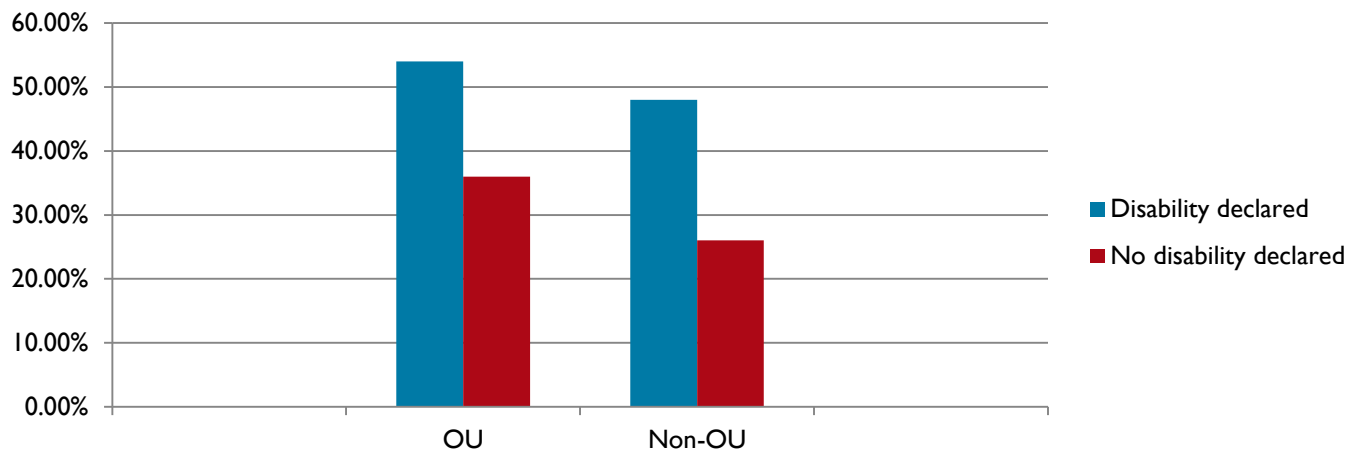
This project produced a number of similar findings to the Welsh pilot. Overall it is the heterogeneity of part-time HE students across the UK that is the most striking feature of the sector. This is undoubtedly a challenge for policy-makers, who tend to view the needs of part-time students through a more homogeneous lens – regarding them as either adult workers seeking upskilling to meet the needs of a modern global economy, or as widening participation students who did not have the prior entry qualifications to enter HE at 18. The latter are prominent in the part-time undergraduate demographic, identified as those possessing low prior qualifications (Figure 1), in sharp distinction to the entry qualifications demanded for full-time students:

Figure 1: Prior qualifications held by students



So the distinct demographic of students entering part-time HE with lower entry qualifications needs to be added to other dimensions of the characteristics of the part-time student. What emerges strongly from this study is the wide range of personal circumstances and competing responsibilities which impinge on the student experience of part-time HE, and which in many instances equate to barriers to access and successful participation. The difficulty of juggling time for study with time to care for dependents, or time associated with work responsibilities has always been a conundrum for the part-time HE learner (talk to anyone who has done an OU course), but in recent years these issues have been amplified by the tripling of fees, which causes potential students to take a more critical view as to the balance between the cost of study (money and time) versus the benefit in terms of better employment prospects, or in the opportunity to transform a life. A further issue emerging was part-time student identity – very few part-time students indicated they perceived themselves as having a "student" identity, and the only group of part-timers who admitted to having a student identity were those learners declaring a disability (Figure 2). This conundrum of a part-time student identity, and the absence of a part-time community or culture, came up often in the interviews:

Figure 2: Student Identity: % identifying themselves as a student by disability



Who studies part-time?

Appendix C presents findings of the analysis of descriptive data provided by the students who responded to the survey. Across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, a higher proportion of female students study part-time, that half are studying while caring (38% for children, 12% for an older relative), and that a significant proportion were the first in their families to study HE (60% of non-OU students, 30% of OU students). Most had been out of education for 5-10 years. Learners were embarking on part-time study for two clear reasons – the motivation of improving employment prospects remained important (as in previous studies) but this was closely followed by students who felt they had missed out at 18 and were pursuing the opportunity of a second chance (Figure 3). There was an age dimension to this: students over 35 often "always wanted to do it", there was a personal rationale. Students under 35 were seeking a second chance having missed out on the opportunity to study full-time at 18, and often sought alignment with employment aspirations.

Figure 3: Main reason for study for OU students

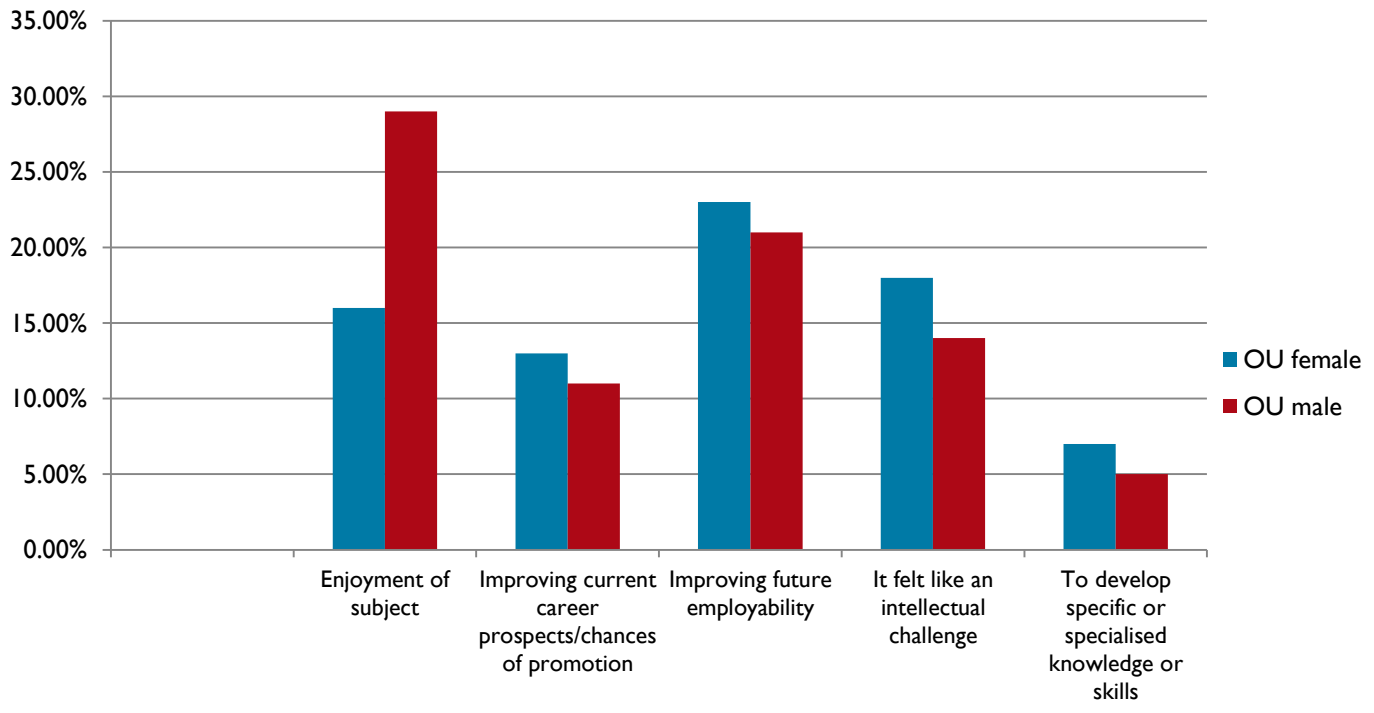
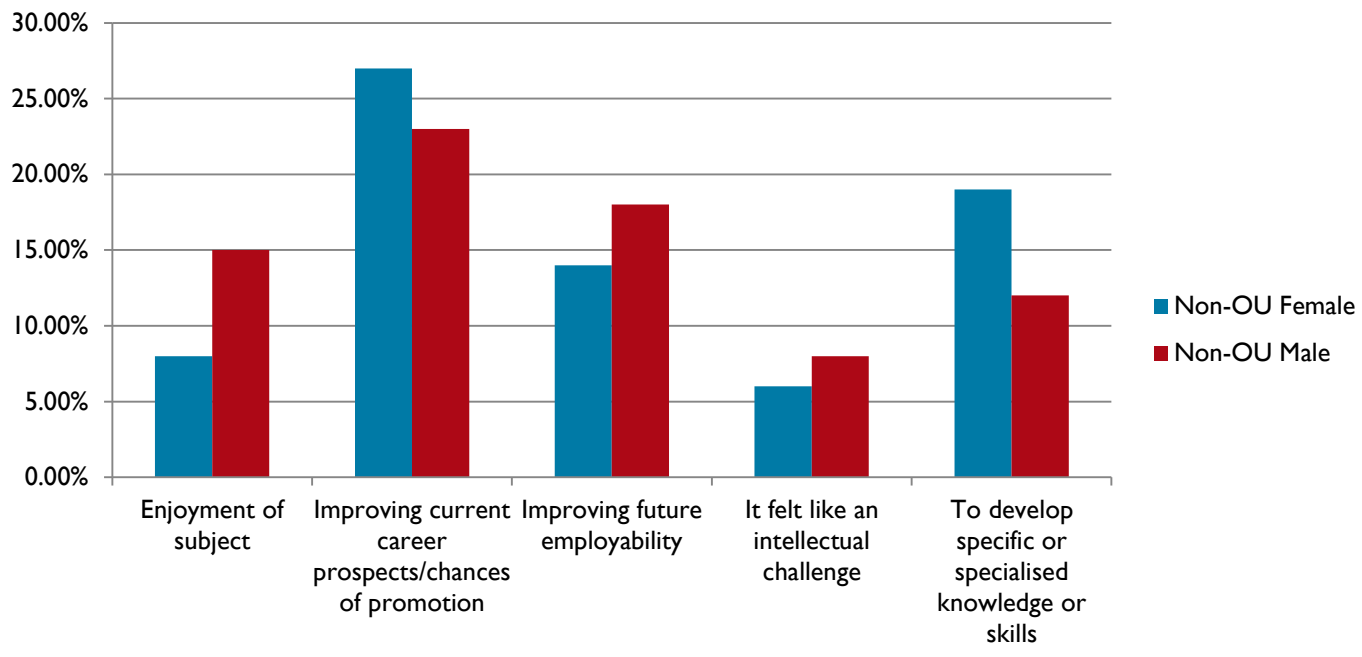


Figure 4: Main reason for study for non-OU students



Why study part-time?

For many part-time students interviewed, there was no choice when full-time study had become so expensive. Illustrative quotations which follow are anonymised, and the number used for each person reflects the order in which the intervuews were conducted. For example one (younger) student commented: "The less debt I'm in the better…the problem with full-time is, you get mountains of support but you're paying thousands of pounds extra." (9). This view was aligned with views of other students, who recognised that the affordability of part-time study had to compete with other demands on their resources. Despite this, there was much longing for full-time as a preferred mode: "I would much rather study full-time – if I won the lottery tomorrow I would." (14). Or: "I would prefer full-time study, to shorten my degree and do more with the family." (16). Others reflected with comments such as: "If I could turn the clock back I would go full-time…regret in back of mind I did not go at 18…[now] it would be a financial struggle with mortgage and bills." (5).

There were also those part-time students who acknowledged they were "embarking on HE once my children have started their university studies…always wanted to do it…missed out before" (2). This is a noteworthy example. The sector might be reminded that HE opportunities currently available to the mass of school leavers were not as accessible even a generation ago, and thus part-time study can fill a gap for mature students who would otherwise be excluded.

There were part-time students surveyed in Scotland (as there had been in Wales in the pilot study) who were geographically isolated from HEIs offering full-time HE in any accessible way, and hence who perceived part-time (especially distance learning) as their only route to an advanced qualification.

Issues around the connection between disability or long-term health impairment and part-time study did not figure as strongly in interviews in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland as they had in Wales, but this is more likely to be due to the slightly different sampling approaches taken in the two studies to select interviewees.

What emerged time and again was that part-time students were acutely aware of the need for flexibility in their studies. Many felt full-time HE was unable (or unwilling) to offer this flexibility. Institutional recognition of individual learners' needs and personal/professional circumstances were paramount in learning decisions

made. One typical comment, by a 21 year old part-time student in a face-to-face institution, highlighted a rare example of best practice: "They understand part-time students have got commitments, whether children, work, actively seeking work, so they are more flexible." (9).

What are the challenges?

The cost of fees for part-time study presented many learners with difficult decisions about personal financial commitments, but even those students who had their fees paid by employers were highly conscious of the impact on people who wanted to learn but might not be as fortunate as them:

"People are stuck in a situation where they feel they want to learn more but financial constraints are the biggest part. My fees…are paid through my employer whereas other people might not have that opportunity. I'm really sensitive to the fact that…how are people who want to do it going to pay thousands of pounds in fees – it's a lot of money." (14).

There was a shared perspective from existing learners that "the challenge of meeting the cost of part-time study, the fees may prevent others from having the opportunity to study part-time" (3). In particular, the impact of high part-time fees was perceived as falling on those most in need of the opportunities afforded by part-time study, but least able to afford them: "It's a lot of money – is it worth it?…it's people like us who take the impact of the fees." (1).

The barrier of cost was understood differently depending on the nation in which the student lived, a divergence which affects different students, with different reasons for studying part-time. It is a divergence which does not look likely to change in the short term:

"As a part-timer, I can't claim a maintenance loan. People on their own would find it impossible to cope and would be denied that opportunity." (17). This student recognises the contribution partners and other family members make to supporting (perhaps subsidising) the cost of part-time study.

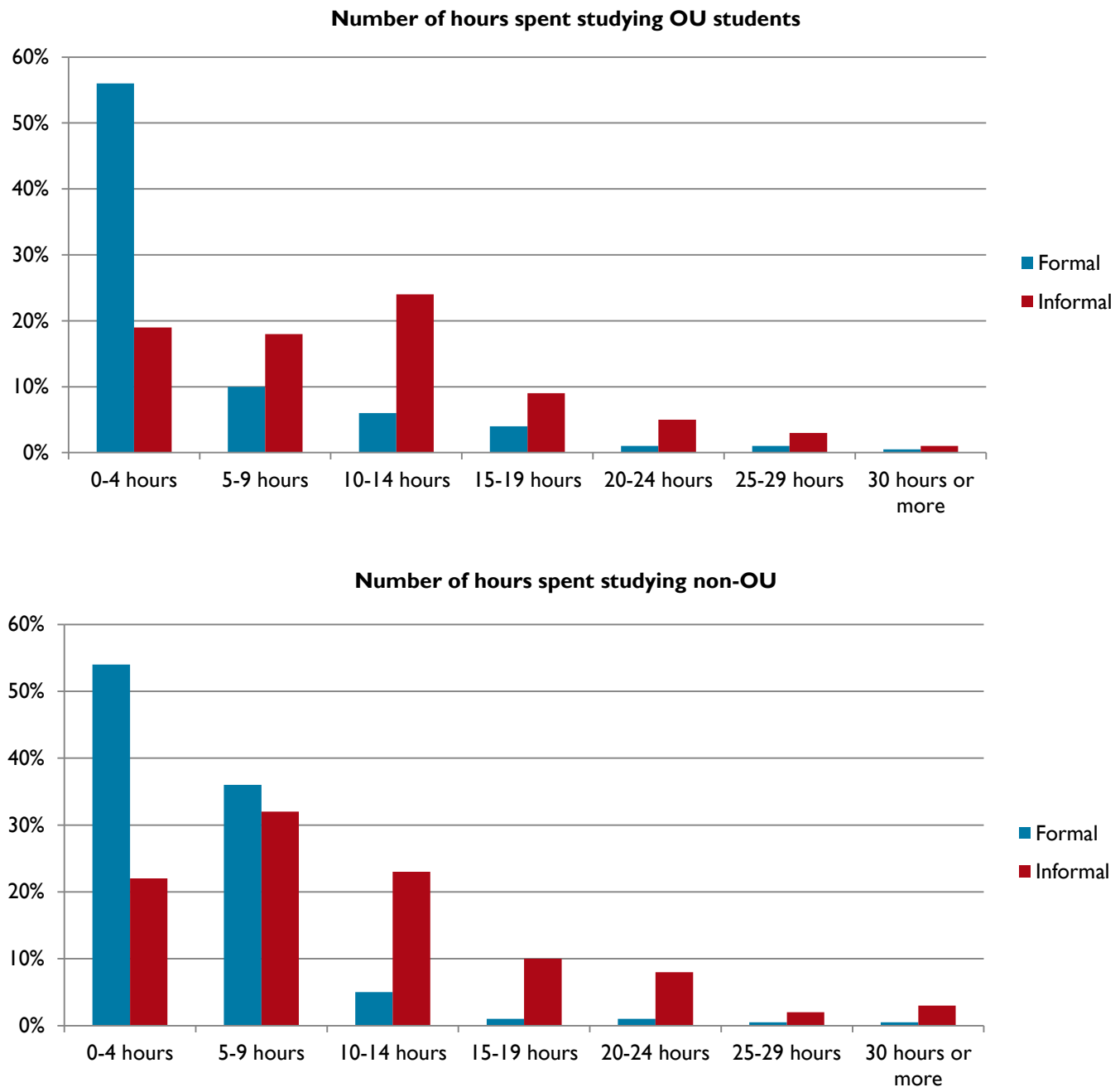
Others struggle to afford the upskilling beloved of policy-makers: "We're very fortunate in Scotland that we do get a lot of financial support…the additional fees are paid…But at postgraduate level they're not. It would be beneficial as a whole if money was found to help fund part-time Masters study." (10).

The tension between policies seeking to widen participation, policies seeking to enhance the skills of workers, and the cost to individuals of part-time study is a fraught one for many learners: **"**I think as a country, we need to look at making part-time more accessible financially." (10). It is a very real danger that the cost of part-time study is too expensive, and is as a consequence becoming inaccessible to precisely those non-traditional students it has served.

Juggling time/personal circumstances

Many students were vociferous about the tension between individual personal circumstances and the need to juggle competing time commitments to fit study in, which resulted in the deprioritising of personal responsibilities. For example, a student in his 40s discussed what he termed the virtually impossible conundrum of missing aspects of his child growing up against a commitment to his part-time degree – all in the context of risk awareness that the hoped-for career change at his age (with no experience) would be hard (1). The necessity to take these tough decisions in order to sustain and succeed in part-time HE study was echoed by a male student who emphasised: "Working full-time and studying part-time leaves no time for any kind of social life…it takes a hell of a lot of commitment." (16).

Figure 5: Number of hours spent studying: OU and non-OU students



It was particularly those students at the younger and older ends of the age continuum who admitted to having to miss formal elements of their part-time studies (Figure 6), whether due to work commitments, caring for children, transport difficulties or chronic health issues (Figure 7). For some students, the juggling of time, and the juggling of having different identities in and out of the HE world presenting difficult issues: "Very difficult to do work and study at same time. It's like having two different personalities…it's very challenging." (20).

For other students, it was the need to create "new" family relationships that could be a barrier to part-time study. On the one hand: "The trouble with being part-time is that people assume that they can come and steal your time…my mother came to stay for a week and I did not work on my course at all." (8). On the other hand: "It takes a lot of changing your lifestyle…plan not to be at everyone's beck and call." (11).

For those who work part-time while studying, there is admiration for those who work full-time and study: "I don't know how they do it." (2). For some, shift work provided time to study "it was quieter at work." (4).

Figure 6: Students who have missed a formal element of study (OU and non-OU)

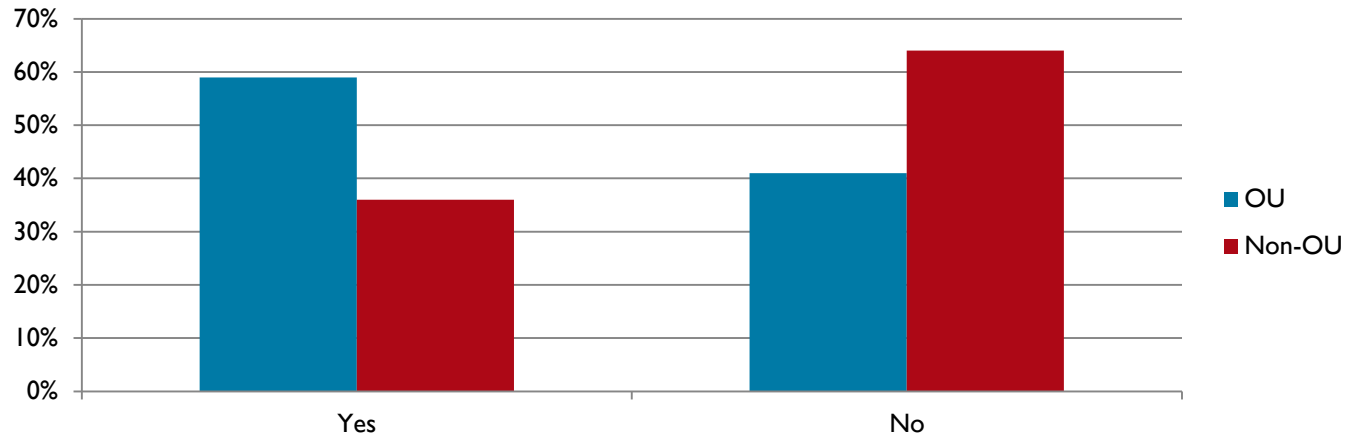
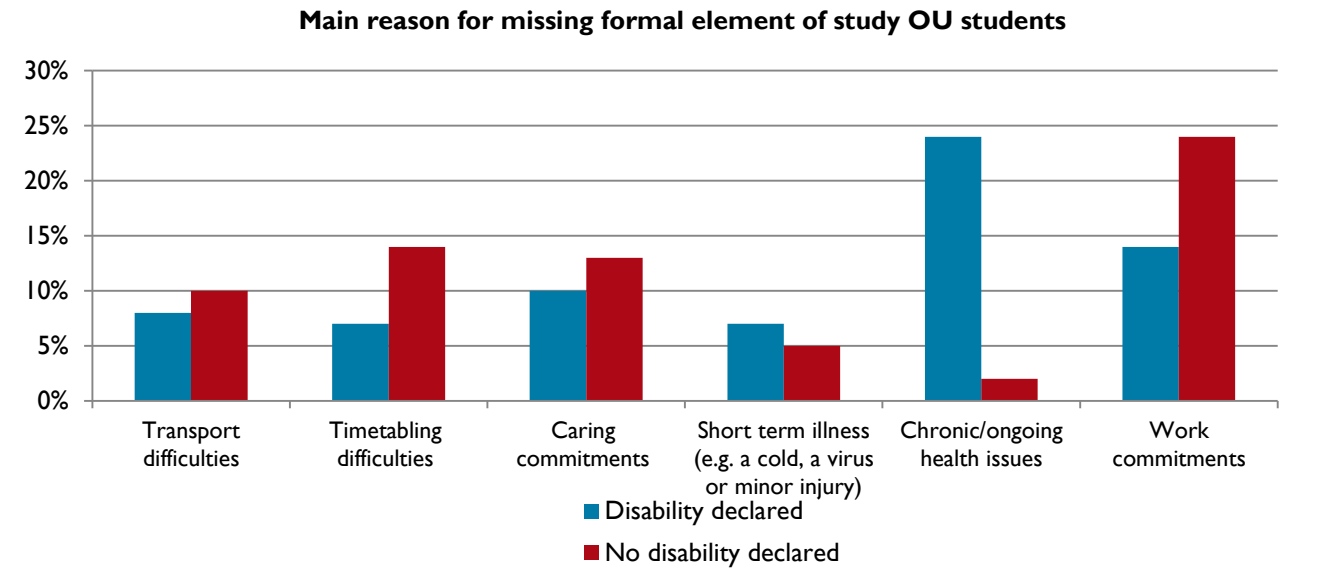
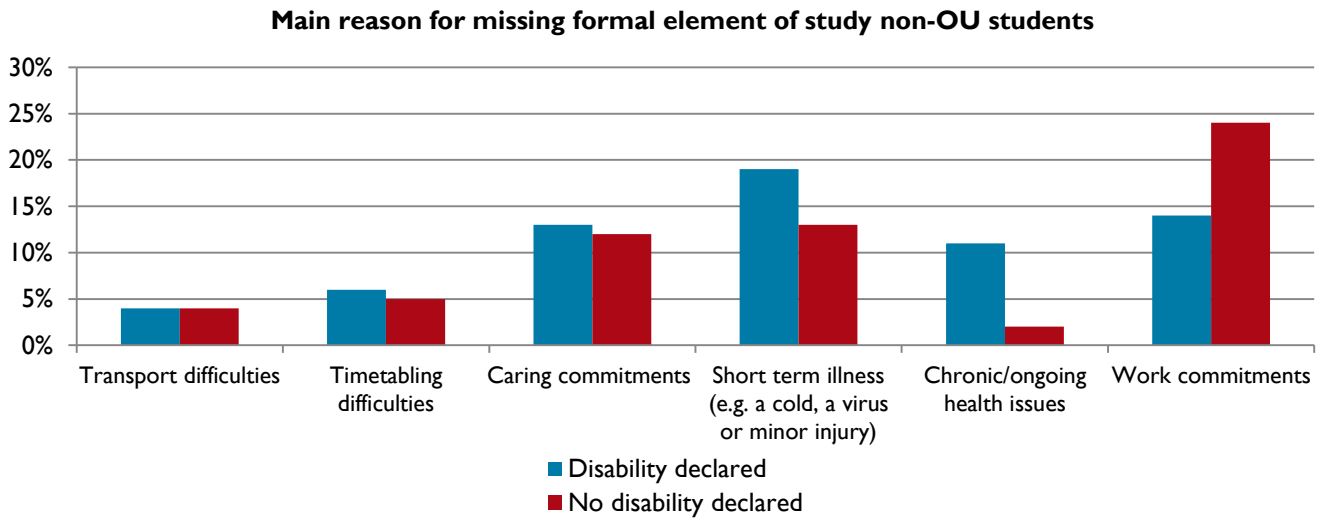


Figure 7: Main reason for missing a formal element of study (OU and non-OU)





Institutional inflexibility

Inflexibility appears a critical barrier to part-time study – interviewees expressed concerns in relation to specific institutions, but the issues appear to be sector-wide. One Scottish student expressed concern that his part-time Honours year was not available in any Scottish university in the evening – and that this inflexibility was a barrier to his progress. Others talked of the underwhelming experience of being a part-time student: "You don't feel as valued as the full-time students – the lecturer is assigned late, Moodle [the VLE] is not working, late notice of rooms, of term dates." (13). This situation, students suggested, would be less likely to happen with full-time students because systems are designed with the needs of full-timers in mind.

Additionally, inflexible assessment systems appeared to not serve the needs of some part-time students – one explained how institutions need to think about the impact of decisions taken, such as the switch from a single 3,000 word assignment, to two 1,500 word assignments which, he felt, doubled the research required (7). This part-time student also argued a three-week deadline for an assignment was too short for students working full-time, especially when followed by a five-month turnaround on assessment feedback. To add insult to injury, library services with a maximum one-week loan period (which may have been instituted in relation to texts used intensively) were inflexible, in his opinion, given the pressures on part-time learners working.

The dilemma of part-time students infilling on existing full-time provision was voiced by an early-retired student, who felt her "institution had excluded part-time students from a lot of things…if you are a mature student they never consider that you're not living on campus, and you might have other responsibilities." (17). For remote students, institutional VLEs can be time consuming to navigate, and unreliable, and thus perceived as a barrier by part-time learners. Tutors can of course vary in how they empathise with the needs of part-time learners: "If you're not in front of them, you're not their problem…even though I may have been paying fees." (4)

Participants in the focus group perceived a danger of institutions "over-selling" facilities if part-timers cannot access them because they are prioritised by full-timers, and if support services are predicated on the needs of 18-year-old school leavers. They also demanded that HEIs organise timetables earlier to allow part-time students to plan their attendance ahead. This raised the potential for mature part-time learners becoming more assertive "customers" – especially if inflexibility extends to a failure to acknowledge or draw upon the professional skills mature part-timers may bring with them. Other students contrasted flexible lecturers who "got it" that work commitments might prevent attendance at every face-to-face class, with others who seemed "inconvenienced" by part-time students (4). In the latter instance, the student noted that he would not, as a result, be brand loyal.

Flexibility

The inevitable necessity to balance time for study with competing personal/professional demands impacts on the part-time learner – over one-third of survey respondents had missed a formal element of their course due to work or caring (Figure 6). Nonetheless, flexibility remains a contested area. Distance learning does offer the kind of flexibility many busy part-time students require, but that can be at the cost of feeling isolated. One student talked of having to locate part-time HE related to his work, delivered in the evening in order to fit in with work, and as a result not being able to study at his first choice institution (5).

Claims made for flexibility by policy-makers need to be better understood by providers – some interviewees felt they were an "inconvenience", were "shoehorned" or "side-lined" and a lack of differentiation by study intensity felt like "one-size-fits-all". One student commented on the "leeway required by part-time students hit by personal circumstances like ill-health or bereavement, desperate to take an exam a couple of months late to enable them to enrol for their next course" (1). In such instances (which are not unlikely for some learners) an institution's one-size-fits-all policies fail to acknowledge differing demands faced by part-timers. For example: "Institutional changes to the timetable are for full-timers, without thinking of part-timers," (19) or: "My institution is not as adaptable as it might be to students who work full-time…there is disassociation," (11).

There is also the flexible approach necessary by those teachers with part-time students in their classes: "I recommend raising the teaching staff's awareness about issues faced by part-time students…enabled to know different cohorts right at the beginning" (22). But ultimately, if institutions can gear their approaches to part-time students to be sufficiently flexible, it is students who will benefit: "I enjoy the flexibility of it fitting round my life." (21).

Motivation

Employability

Survey data confirmed that employability is one of the key drivers for part-time study, whether in aspirations for a new job, to change job, or for women in particular, seeking to improve their current career. In the survey, students in the 25-29 age range were most likely to cite "improving career prospects" as their main motivation for embarking on part-time study. For some students, the link between study and work was important: "I didn't think for a minute that it would impact on my professional ability so quickly…it has, undeniably." (10). This was an especially important dimension in the extent to which some students valued their part-time study, those who articulated being motivated by a pay-off in job – those working full-time who wanted an experiential rather than a theoretical course – the measure of success was "today I can't do this, tomorrow I can" (6).

However, the link between work and study was not unproblematic: "Employers may only value HE study if it is relevant." (4). In contrast, some students recognised employer support, while important, can take many forms. Support need not be financial: employers who took an interest in a worker's part-time study or who actively participated in coursework were regarded positively.

Enjoyment

In the survey responses, enjoyment of the subject was almost as important a driver as employability. This was evidenced in statements like making up for lost time: "It's the first time in my adult life where I've done anything for me, so that's why I am doing it…it's the best thing I ever did…I would have thought being out of the educational system for 40 years I would be slow to catch up, but I'm amazed how easy it has been for me.'" (17).

For other part-time students, it was more about being able to seize some agency in their lives: "I worked as a consultant to children's services…with the change in government I anticipated there would be cuts…I want to be in control of what I'm doing…I actually went to the college to find an evening class to learn more skills." (22).

Individuals also welcomed those instances in which studying part-time were perceived as a positive decision by a supportive family when they cannot get work (2). Enjoyment of subject transcends employability for some students, and policy makers might need to acknowledge this possibility.

Intellectual challenge

The third significant survey response was around motivation to study part-time as a willing and pro-active engagement with intellectual challenge. This was a particularly significant driver for older (50+) learners: "I see an intrinsic value in education…I wanted to get back rather than always looking at education as a means to an end…I take my mind for a walk…this is more than a means to employment." (15).
The interview responses also suggested a potentially new conceptualisation of the part-time learner, a small group who seem to be embarking on part-time HE when their own children have left home to study full-time at university. For others, impact on family attitudes to learning at home is important, a motivation which speaks to a more holistic notion of social mobility: "My motivation is role modelling for my kids…showing you're never too old to learn…a bit of dedication and commitment can achieve." (13). "My children were really proud I won a prize for my year…I was a role model, a motivator for them." (14). "I want to lead by example with my own kids." (5).

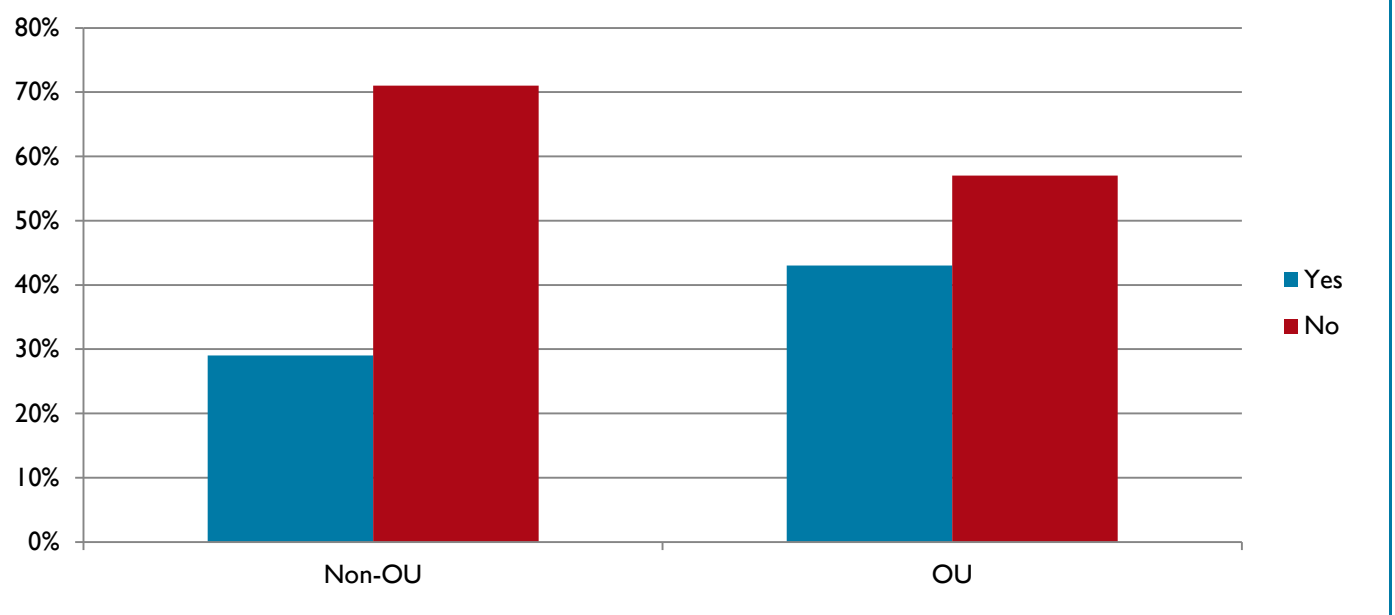
Related to this, but expressed with a subtly different nuance, is the statement from one student that: "I have empathy with my kids' educational challenges…but wish I'd done it when I was young." (19).

Part-time identity, culture and community

Survey results were split on whether part-timers would perceive themselves, or even call themselves "students" (figure 8). Interview data reflected this identity gap: "I actually ran away to get married a couple of weeks ago and they asked what I wanted on my marriage certificate…I'm not sure if I want to be down as a 33-year-old student." (8). "I'm in the middle of a Masters, rather than I'm a student…I regard students as full-time." (11).Although a 50-year-old part-time student in Northern Ireland asserted: "Being a student is part of my identity…I may be a late developer." (12).

There seems to be a vacuum when it comes to issues around identity and part-time study. Most part-time students feel isolated and disengaged from institutional and peer support structures, and as a possible consequence struggle to identify themselves as students: "You do feel like you're on the end of a very, very long piece of thread, away from where it's all happening." (8). Whichever mode of study was adopted, the majority of part-timers were not identifying themselves as students:

Figure 8: Student identity (OU and non-OU)



Part-time learner identities were complex and compromised. Students referred to themselves in the survey as a worker/student or were a worker/student/ parent/spouse/carer. Or they self-deprecatingly refer to themselves as an "old" student – or regarded themselves as too old to be a "real" student (even aged 21) – seeing former friends who went to university as having lots of friends, and therefore having "missed out" themselves (4). Many had to be pushed to admit some minor benefit of being a student, such as having an NUS card. Some interviewees represented the dual identity of part-time learners perfectly: "In the student world I am a professional, and in the professional world I'm a student…I kept in touch with three people I met on an earlier module, we have really interesting conversations that we can't really have with other people…on last year's course I had to go to the local university library a lot…it felt like being a proper student." (3).

Another reflected: "Up until very recently I've thought of myself very much as a part-time student but with the dropping off of work I see myself as more of a student…it's the bigger part of my identity because the

way things have turned out…my family probably think I'm having some sort of post mid-life crisis." [laughing] (22).

However, it appears that institutions could do things to open up to part-time students: "University in the evening is a ghost town. More should be done to mix/overlap part-time with full-time…as a mature part-timer I feel on the very fringes of university…I miss out on any beneficial relationships with other students and feel isolated." (19). Such students want some sense of relevant student culture which meets the needs of part-time learners, and which could in turn generate some meaningful sense of what it is to be a part-time student. Other part-time students craved more effective induction into HE which addressed the lack of study confidence: "The first few weeks of being part-time were daunting because you think it's for a degree, am I intelligent enough?" (13).

Enhancing part-time study is possible, as other students talked of enjoying the opportunity to mix with fellow students from other industries, and had set up peer study groups (5). And there are positive recognitions of part-time student identity: "It's nice to be able to say in my fifties "O, I'm studying", I think it's a great thing to be a student." (14).

But at the moment in the UK, the blurring of full-time and part-time study may do part-timers no favours: "The majority of people are not really on board with the nuances between part-time and full-time study." (15). If this assertion is true, the focus for policy-makers ought to be on part-time learners themselves, in all their heterogeneity: "It would be useful to categorise your part-timers…being a dad, married is a whole different thing…your personal circumstances are unavoidable and impact on study." (18).

Information and guidance

Pre-course

Unlike full-time HE with its extensive UCAS guidance and navigable institutional websites, pre-course information advice and guidance is regarded by part-time students as inadequate. Survey results revealed a high proportion of part-time students who did not know about loans/financial support before commencing their courses. Some 73% of the non-OU students surveyed said they did not know about student loans, and 63% did not know about sources of financial support. The proportions for OU students were 50% and 42% respectively. Over half of all students did not know about disability/dyslexia support, or the Student Union. Many also claimed to have not received reading lists, or information about course content or contact hours. This seems both unacceptable given the part-time tuition fees charged, and damaging to those more tentative part-time learners who may lack the resilience to persist in the face of such poor service.

The impact of this inadequate information can take many forms. One employed postgraduate student (6) talked of the disappointment and demotivation of registering for a part-time course which he believed would take an experiential approach and act as work-based learning to enhance his career opportunities, but which turned out to be theoretical. The time pressures from his full-time professional role caused him to withdraw prompted he felt by the institution expecting him to prioritise his studies over everything else in his busy life.

Another employed student lamented: "My part-time degree is my hobby…but you don't have time just to read around… the expectations of how many hours they expect us to put in are ridiculous, they cram in too much." (18). This really results in inadequate learner preparation, so institutions are failing to explain to students crucial elements of part-time study like workload and pedagogic expectations. Lack of transparency about studying part-time will form a further barrier to registering on the right course at the right level – and that will ultimately impact on successful achievement.

We note that the funding councils are undertaking work in this area. For example the UK higher education funding bodies are currently reviewing the provision of information about HE, looking at the information that is currently available and how it can be improved to meet the needs of students, institutions and other

stakeholders. The Quality Assessment Review, being conducted by the funding bodies, may also give insight into the provision of information, advice and guidance.

In-course

Once students are registered, the problems with inadequate advice do not necessarily cease: "The issue is communication…being part-time you get left out of the loop quite a bit…it's almost like we're an afterthought…I've been part of four different cohorts of students since I've started, and one issue is having to re-establish relationships with another group of people each time…for mature students it can be really daunting…I'm the only part-time student left…I think the College could do more to put part-time students in touch with each other…the issues we face would be quite similar…but we don't know who all the other part-time students are. Regardless of age, you know, if you're part-time you're part-time because you've got other stuff going on." (22).

This interviewee makes a strong case for institutions to think far more carefully about the impact of their practices on part-time students, and crucially not to assume a default of full-time, which can only exclude those students who are only able to "attend" part-time.

Survey results suggested half the respondents had asked for academic advice, generally from their tutor, occasionally from student services, and that younger students tended to ask for financial advice. Empathetic and well-informed tutors are thus vital for a positive part-time experience, but what really irked some interviewees was that the prior skills mature students brought were not recognised by some tutors. This again speaks of a "one-size-fits-all" approach, this time to HE teaching, and sadly prevents the positive learning resource that many part-timers bring being utilised with the pedagogic culture of the class.

There is also an issue reported around the fragmented experience of part-time learners, which can result in learning experiences being more atomised than full-timers: "Tutors tend to focus on their own module – there is a need to look at the whole part-time experience…failing to progress should not be a shock…"(11).

Discipline differences

Some interesting findings came out of the ways in which part-time students discussed their engagement with their chosen subjects. There was a range of subtle and nuanced differences from the ways in which disciplines are traditionally positioned in studies of full-time students. It is also worth acknowledging that subject choices can be proxies for work-related study, for study driven by personal interest, or for gendered decisions which may reinforce current inequalities.

For example, male interviewees were more likely to be studying Engineering or cognate disciplines like technology or IT, and describing their part-time studies as work-related upskilling: "[Engineering] gives me a good understanding of, a better insight into what I'm doing at work…given time issue, needs to be a 'pay-off' application to job." (5). So the juggling familiar to part-time learners is worth it if HE knowledge (in Engineering) can be applied to work situations experientially. Another IT student talked of studies that "tied together huge chunks of knowledge…I knew how, I didn't know why." (4).

Women interviewees were more likely to be studying Education or cognate areas like Health or Humanities, reporting "doing something for me" (3)…"falling in love with it…going back to something I enjoyed at GCSE." (2).

A Maths student reported an aspiration to "overcome disrupted schooling" and "activate mind" (1), conceptualising HE learning in this discipline as a distinctive subject, building on fundamentals, which he wanted to understand. He recognised the efforts part-time students make (he was up at 5am to study for two

hours before work, avoiding distractions) and the fact that his institution (OU) valued the skills he demonstrated like managing his own time.

In the arts, by contrast, part-time learning was not driven by the need or desire to gain qualifications, but rather the distinctive personal engagement around producing artefacts ("leaving a legacy") at a pace which fits in with other aspects of individuals' lives. Part-time students appreciated access to technical facilities (foundries, forges, screen printing, etching, presses) and expertise, so part-time study in the arts was claimed to not be about "painting at home" – it is rather about love of subject, but tempered by lifestyle alignment. It seems to embrace a conception of personal transformation, in which students "were desperate to do it but had been discouraged by parents when younger", or didn't think it was possible "to make a living doing this". So for both men and women, studying the arts was an immersive experience related to personal lifestyle (this group did not talk about "juggling" – they were insistent they were not "leisure learners"), their commitment went way beyond the odd evening class, rather, they had no time to commit to full-time study.

"I've always been interested in art and it was something I wanted to do when I left school, but because I was academically able I was encouraged to drop it and go down a more academic route. I guess I'm doing what I always wanted to do." (22).

The subject choices part-time learners make, and the availability of those opportunities to study a "loved" subject part-time are areas in which better understanding could impact on policy. It does seem that if some of those part-time HE opportunities continue to wither, such a decline will contribute to a far more impoverished HE system across the UK.

Conclusion

To what extent is the crisis in part-time HE an English one? The dramatic drop in student numbers, and the diminution of opportunities for adult learners, is certainly most pronounced in England, and the significance of the increase in fees and the introduction of student loans in England cannot be underestimated. English policies in the last five years have, whether intended or not, given the message to potential students in England, and to universities, that part-time provision was not a priority, and that part-time students would need to shoulder the burden and risk of investing in part-time study themselves. If the decline in England continues, the availability of a sufficient range of locally accessible part-time HE will soon come under threat. The Celtic nations have chosen to diverge in their approach to supporting part-time HE, but even when policy rhetoric is supportive, as in Wales, numbers have diminished. The crisis in terms of numbers is largely but not uniquely English – across the UK individual adult students who participated in this research have been affected. In order to persist in their part-time studies, they have had to overcome barriers of cost, inflexibility, isolation and inadequate IAG, demonstrating immense commitment and resilience which is not always appreciated in the sector or by policy-makers.

However, one of the most important findings was the clear demonstration, recognised in previous studies that part-time higher education students can best be marked by their heterogeneity – they cannot be considered as a single homogeneous group in any attempts to understand them. This heterogeneity presents a conundrum for policy-makers, particularly in relation to overlapping but often discreet personal drivers – whether around employability goals sought to be achieved through work-related HE or transformative social justice goals achieved through widening access. But this conundrum has to be addressed given the wide range of personal circumstances and competing responsibilities, reported in this study and others, which can impact on successful participation and achievement in part-time higher education.

Nonetheless, there are demographic "highlights" to be elicited from our survey, which might help focus attention on particular needs, all of which fall under the umbrella of widening participation characteristics: responses suggest part-time higher education attracts a higher proportion of female students, and that many carried caring for responsibilities for children (38%), or older relatives (12%). A significant proportion of respondents reported being the first in their families to study HE (30%+ of OU students, 60% of non-OU students) – and most had been out of education for 5-10 years. The majority were in employment, and for non-OU students, most lived locally to their HEI.

A key finding from the Welsh pilot, mirrored to some extent in Scotland but not really represented in the English data, was the significance of geographical isolation for some part-time learners – this under-researched aspect of rural disadvantage points not only to 'cold spots' in HE coverage, but also a disconnect between learner aspirations to improve their lives and very limited local employment opportunities. Travel times/difficulties may present a significant barrier, as may limit choice of subjects/levels.

Issues around the impact of disability and long term health impairments also figured strongly in the survey responses (22% reported learning choices being affected by persistent health issues – they do not think of themselves as victims, but were simply describing the realities of learning in such circumstances). Coping with mental health problems, being on medication, managing hospital appointments, being housebound or facing deteriorating mobility issues were all reported. This went some way to confirming a conclusion drawn from qualitative responses to the Welsh pilot study (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015, in press) that for students in such circumstances, part-time higher education is a lifeline and should be even more accessible, rather than its availability being under threat. Ironically, the part-time students reporting a disability or long-term health (both OU and non-OU) were twice as likely to have the entry requirements for traditional, full-time University study.

In exploring why learners studied part-time, a clear message emerged that notions of "choice" were relatively meaningless: choosing part-time was effectively an illusion, because students were faced with "Hobson's choice" – it was either part-time or nothing. Most respondents admitted to preferring the idea of full-time

study, but believed the cost was too great; they could not afford to give up a job when they had extensive family outgoings, and they were debt-averse.

Issues of poverty were also reported in the Welsh study, and this was echoed in some responses from Scotland. Barriers to part-time study were cited as financial by many respondents, with the cost of courses presenting a challenge to individuals who reported utilising their own savings, borrowing from family, or even credit card debt to fund their studies. This is a particularly pressing issue given the retreat of employers from supporting the cost to individuals of part-time higher education (only 15% of respondents reported employer support for their studies). Critically, a key barrier to choice seemed to be a lack of disposable income – in other words, by the time adults had paid a mortgage, transportation costs, childcare, there was very little left to pay for even part-time higher education, and these were students anxious about going into debt for their higher education, and concerned whether any investment they made would translate to some personal transformation (whether in aspirations for a better job or a more desired lifestyle). In England, the challenge of the lack of a maintenance grant for part-time study was often mentioned.

Just as important was the concern that full-time study was too inflexible, and would not fit with individual personal circumstances. Despite this, there were two clear messages clarifying why part-time students were studying at all. First, but not by a huge margin, was the motivation of improving employment prospects. Second, were those students who felt they had missed out at 18, and were pursuing the opportunity of a second chance.

These substantive drivers were explored in the interviews, from which five key themes emerged:

Flexibility remains a problematic concept in the context of part-time higher education: institutions need to do more to take account of part-time learners' circumstances. Individuals reported an imperative to balance the time for study with competing personal or work demands, with an impact on the learner experience (over one-third had missed a formal element of their course as a result of work or caring responsibilities). Institutions were reported as being inflexible in relation to part-timers. Interviewees spoke of feeling like an "inconvenience", of being "shoe-horned" into existing full-time structures, of being "side-lined" and experiencing a lack of differentiation which felt like "one-size-fits-all". Older students were irked that their prior skills went unrecognised. Parents needed affordable child care and timetables which acknowledged the pressures of school half-terms. This can reduce part-time students to an "outlier" status in many HEIs, a forgotten cohort.

Motivation to learn is aligned with employability for many part-timers, whether in relation to developing skills and confidence to get a job, or to improve career prospects. But this work focus was definitely not the only motivation (and had nothing to do with policy announcements aimed at 21-year-olds seeking graduate careers), since enjoyment and intellectual challenge (especially for those aged 50+) were also reported as significant drivers:

A lot of interviewees reflected on their perception of not having a student identity, amplified by not feeling part of a **student community.** Students experienced multiple identities, in response to competing work and domestic roles, but "being a student" tended not to be prioritised and this disassociation reflects perceptions in a number of institutions. Part-time learners feel isolated and disengaged from the institutional support structures provided for full-timers, and hence less supported when problems do occur. Already lacking in study confidence, barriers of social and cultural capital can result in "imposter syndrome".

Information, advice and guidance for part-time students appear to be inadequate: the complexity of qualification pathways, delivery modes, workload, progression routes from vocational qualifications, the recognition of prior learning and financial support remain a barrier for any part-time student or potential student seeking to access information to help inform decision making.

Disciplinary differences need acknowledging in part-time HE, since subject choices can be proxies for work-related upskilling, or study driven by personal interest, and there appear to be very different

experiences across disciplines which might affect retention (Woodfield, 2014). There are important inequities in discipline availability for part-time learners (for example, IT and Business courses seem more prevalent than Physical Sciences, Health and Social Care more prevalent than Art and Design or languages), but even popular subjects like Education have seen a dramatic decline.

Across the UK, there is a knowledge gap around the experiences of, and barriers faced, by part-time mature students in higher education. Policy-makers need to listen to these experiences, and carve out a space in which the needs and aspirations of disadvantaged learners in this heterogeneous sector can be properly considered. Shibboleths like "flexibility", "choice", "employability" need to take account of the particular circumstances in which adult part-timers have to learn. Part-time higher education must not be perceived as a disposable "add-on", allowed to wither as a result of the unintended consequences of policy decisions underpinned by mass HE for 18-year-old school leavers. The numbers involved, the skills to be acquired and the lives to be transformed are simply too important in a civilised society. Parts of the sector are starting to respond, but it is ironic that one (successful) solution to the decline in part-time has been Birkbeck's introduction of a "full-time" evening degree.

Recommendations

Policy-makers need to incentivise universities and colleges to prioritise part-time higher education as an attractive choice, offered in a diversity of modes, with a broad subject spread to provide an equitable offer for what are likely to be the most disadvantaged students, those with the poorest access to HE opportunity. Currently, the demand for full-time study is more robust, the fees are higher, and part-time provision is not perceived as enhancing HEIs' status or esteem. Part-time students can be seen as less important by senior managers and the business model around part-time student finance is volatile and complex. As one interviewee noted: "There is less opportunity to go and study part-time – what if they want to go and there is only full-time?"

Institutions need to be far more aware of the flexibilities that part-time students need, and to adopt a customer focus to ensure engagement with learners who currently feel isolated and disengaged from a "one-size-fits-all" student community. They also need to avoid falling into the trap of addressing part-timers the same way: "Whether you're distance learning or in college, you get a message stating "come into campus and register your ID immediately"." (8). Institutions need to be more open to the diversity that part-time students bring to HE – both celebrating their value to the culture of an HEI and acknowledging their needs. If the responsibility for developing a part-time culture sat in a PVC's brief, and progress against targets was reported annually this could help part-time students acknowledge the importance of their learner identity – which might in turn remind policy-makers of their significance in the sector.

The **sector** needs to see the benefits of educating local part-time adult students who could provide a platform for a range of radical community education partnerships (which might be good business given the impending drop in 18-year-olds in the UK), and who bring with them professional and personal skills and characteristics which could benefit the academy and re-orientate traditional pedagogies. But for this to work, the sector requires an understanding that students taking a part-time route to a HE qualification cannot be assumed to have the same learning priorities as a full-time student – and they may bring more to the learning experience in terms of "professional capital" than is currently recognised

Having completed this project, we are aware of three fertile areas for further research. First, we acknowledge this study left unexplored the particular experiences of part-time HE students from a black or minority ethnic (BME) background. This is an omission in our understanding of a crucial widening participation demographic, and the specific barriers faced in terms of access to part-time study, which needs to be addressed.

Second, we are aware, in any discussion of the barriers faced by part-time students, of the need to avoid lapsing unconsciously into a deficit model. To this end, research to explore the relative achievements of part-time learners (especially in the context of metrics around added value) is pressing, as is the need to clarify what a positive effect part-time/mature learners can have on the educational culture of groups of younger full-time learners (wisdom, resilience, life skills?). Crucially, institutions need to develop a meaningful partnership with their part-time learners, in which negotiation and dialogue (seemingly so much easier with full-time students) can be embedded in an effort to meet part-timers' needs.

Third, we are also aware of a knowledge gap around student perceptions of part-time informal study (in contrast to the formal, accredited HE which framed this project). This could contribute to the development of a more inclusive, and a more effective part-time student identity and group culture.

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Appendix A – Interview and focus group instrument

Preamble
Thank you for agreeing to take part in this important piece of research. We are trying to learn more about the experience of part-time students and how they experience learning within their busy lives, and this research will help universities and colleges, and national governments in the UK, to understand how to make part-time learning more effective.

Ice-breaker [for focus groups]
First off, can you tell me your name, where you study at and your course. I'll start…

Previous educational experience
What was your most recent experience of study before your current course?
How was that? Positive, negative?
Is going to university something that runs in the family?
[Interviewer prompt - If talk about being the first in family, ask about how family feel about this: what do those close to you think about you studying?]

Current studies
Why did you choose to study part-time?
[Follow-up question: to what extent do you see part-time as a compromise?]
To what extent was your decision to study part-time related to employment?
[Explore with individual the extent to which self-improvement was also a factor]
What do you want to achieve through your learning?
Where do you think your learning is taking you?
Is there anything that you think you are able to do now that previously you did not think possible?

Identities
Is being a part-time student important to how you think about yourself?
[Interviewer prompt - Be ready explore the value they place on being a part-time student]
What do others close to you think about you being a part-time student?
[Interviewer prompt - Probe! Ask for examples and explore response in detail]

Support structures
When you get stuck with your course, who do you speak with?
[lecturers, personal tutors, friends, family, course mates, internet chat, internet resources?]
Why?

Learning environments
If face-to-face learner:
Tell me about learning at your university: lectures, lecturers, tutorials and seminars.
What works for you, and why?
What do you find more challenging?

If distance learner:
Think back to the last time you had a study session at home: describe that for me.
What set up do you have at home: where do you study?
How long do you usually get?
What are the biggest challenges for making the most out of your study sessions?

You are a successful student, but what could your institution do to better support your learning?

Summing up

This research is all about learning more about studying part-time as part of your busy lives. So my final question relates to whether you think we might have missed something important. If this were the other way around, and you were the researcher and I was the student, is there anything you would have asked me?

Appendix B – Preliminary analysis of combined OU and NUS Wales survey responses

Selection for analysis
The purpose of this preliminary analysis was to guide the review and development of the survey instrument to be deployed in Phase 2.

The full merged dataset currently includes 1,775 survey responses, of which 1,481 are Open University student responses (Table 1). Responses for Wales-based OU students were mainly collected through the first survey administered by NUS Wales, and responses for all other OU students were collected through the second survey administered by the Open University.

Table 1: Survey responses by higher education institutions of student

HEI	Total
Aberystwyth University	1
Bangor University	6
Bridgend College	22
Cardiff and Vale College	4
Cardiff Metropolitan University	11
Cardiff University	11
Coleg Cambria	10
Coleg Sir Gar	28
Coleg y Cymoedd	1
Glyndwr University	24
Gower College	12
Grwp Llandrillo Menai	12
Grwp NPTC Group	1
King Henry VIII Abergavenny	1
Long Distance	1
Open University in Wales	1048
Other	11
Pembrokeshire College	13
Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama	1
Swansea University	42
The Open University	433
University of South Wales	32
University of Wales, Trinity Saint David (including the former Swansea Metropolitan University)	44
(blank)	6
Total	**1775**

Responses from OU students based in Wales are substantially overrepresented. However, OU in Wales students were also included in the second survey, so it is possible to just look at responses to the second survey to provide some preliminary insight. Table 2 summarises the national and English regional distribution of the responses to the second survey.

Table 2: responses to second survey by nation and England region	
Region	**Total**
East Anglian Region	46
East Midlands Region	27
Ireland	16
London Region	40
North Region	41
North Western Region	41
Scotland	40
South East Region	33
South Region	44
South West Region	22
Wales	15
West Midlands Region	34
Yorkshire Region	34
Total	**433**

Recommendations for survey instrument

1. Explore in more depth part-time students' identities through interviews and focus groups:
- When and why do they invoke a "student" identity?
- What value do students place on a student identity?
- What value do they perceive others (employers, work colleagues, friends, family) place on them being a student?

2. Explore in more depth students' construction of employability and career planning, and relationships between work and learning, including employers' interest and support:
- building on Wales analysis (see draft Open Learning paper);
- further analysis of the survey responses could provide further insight: what do those indicating employability as a reason also indicate other reasons?

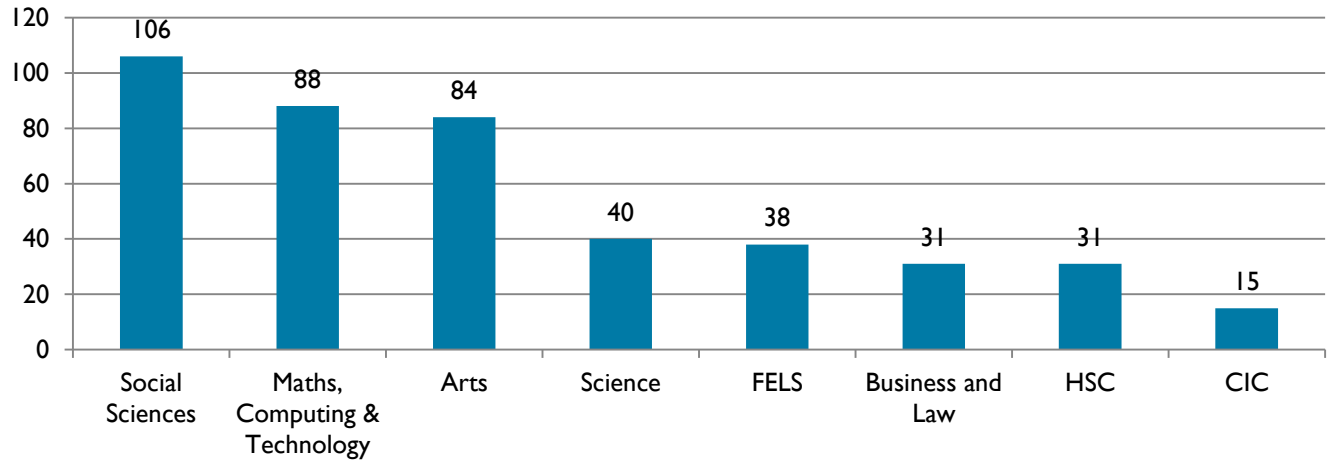
3. Explore specific aspects of expectations of study:
- meeting new people and the "social" in learning;
- value for money and cost of fees;
- expectations about the balance of time on activities (i.e. negotiating feelings of 'going it alone'…links to the social?):
  - less face-to-face time and interactive online teaching;
  - more independent study than expected.
- pressure, of course;
  - survey suggests overall only slight pressures of course – links to resilience and coping?
- missing formal elements of course and falling behind/keeping up:
  - work conflicting;
  - timetabling;
  - caring commitments.

4. support and assistance:
- extent of reliance on student services for financial, health-related and personal advice;

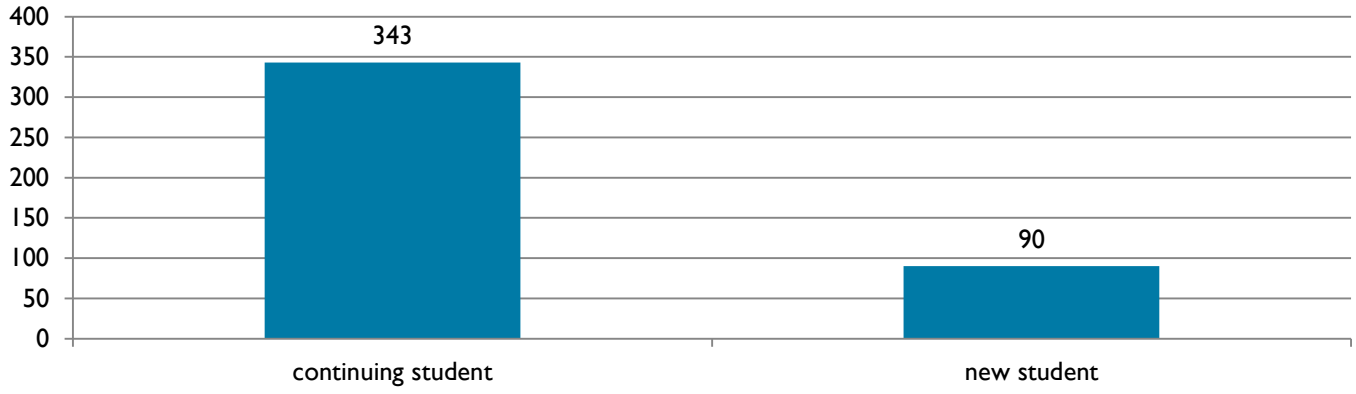
- strong reliance on tutor for academic advice but less so other areas;
- being aware of sources of additional information, advice and guidance:
  - induction and starting off studying;
  - disability support (if applicable);
  - contact hours and extent of independent study hours needed.

Appendix C – Descriptive statistics of OU data for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland

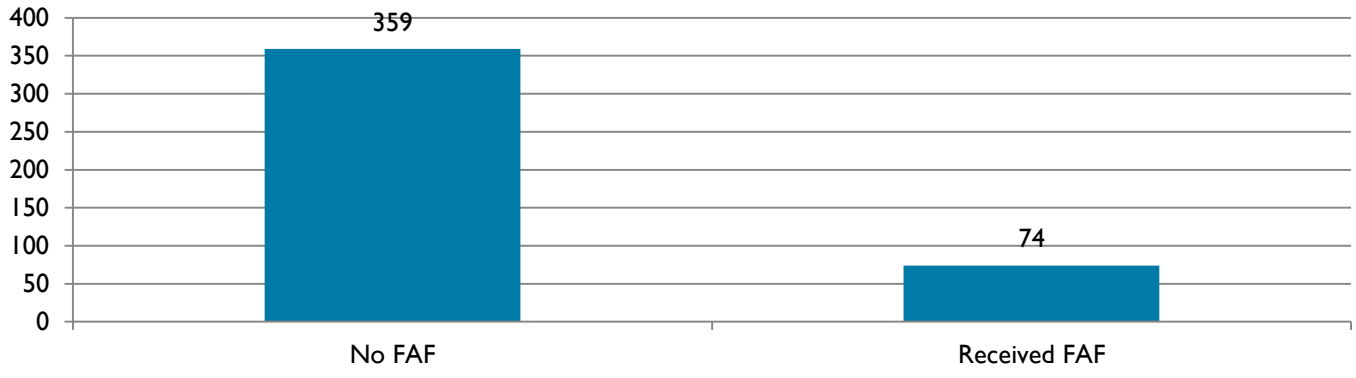
Subject area



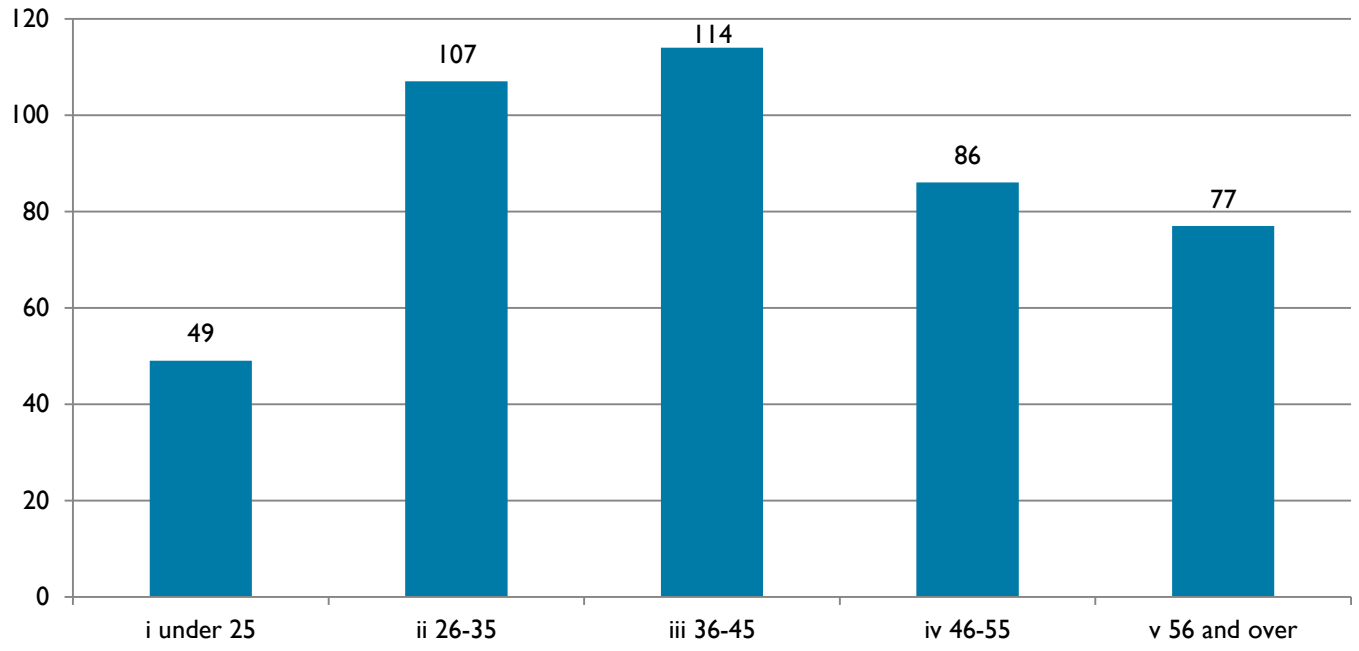
New or continuous



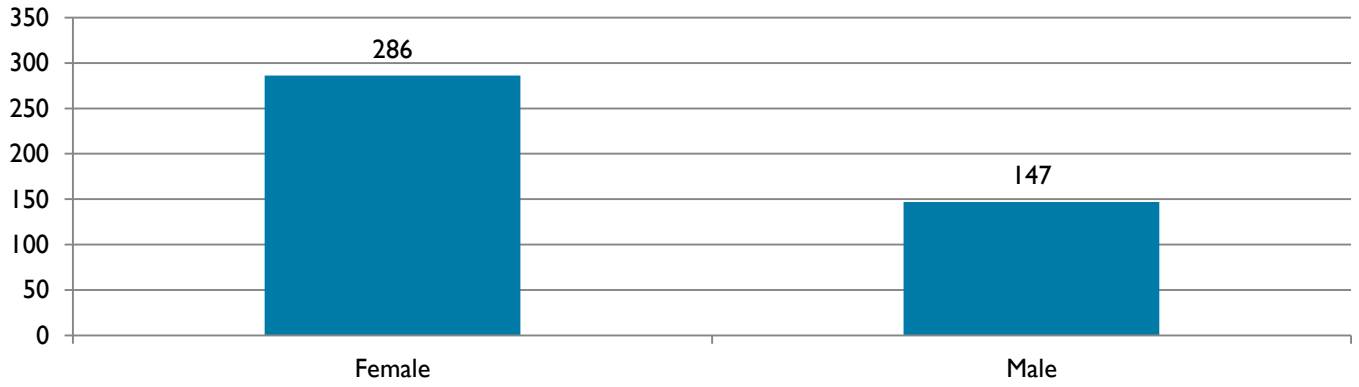
Receiving financial support through the Financial Assistance Fund (FAF)



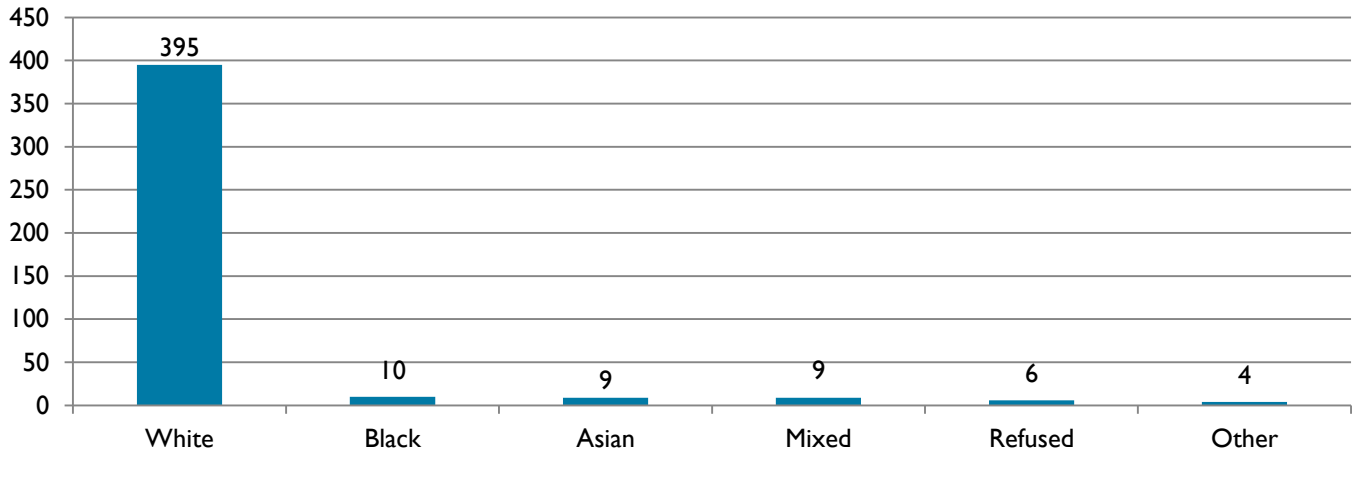
Grouped age



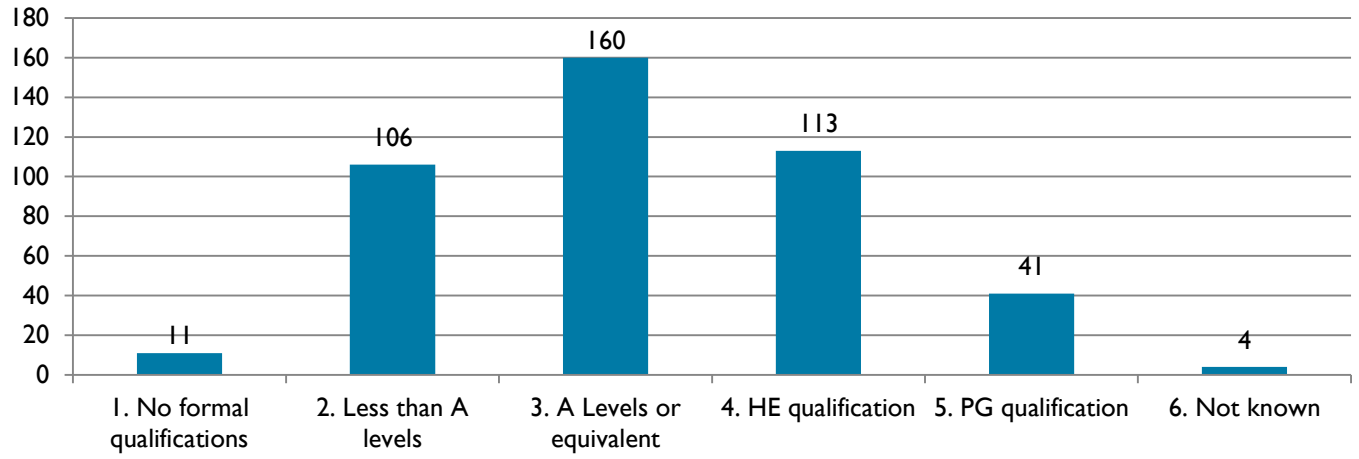
Gender



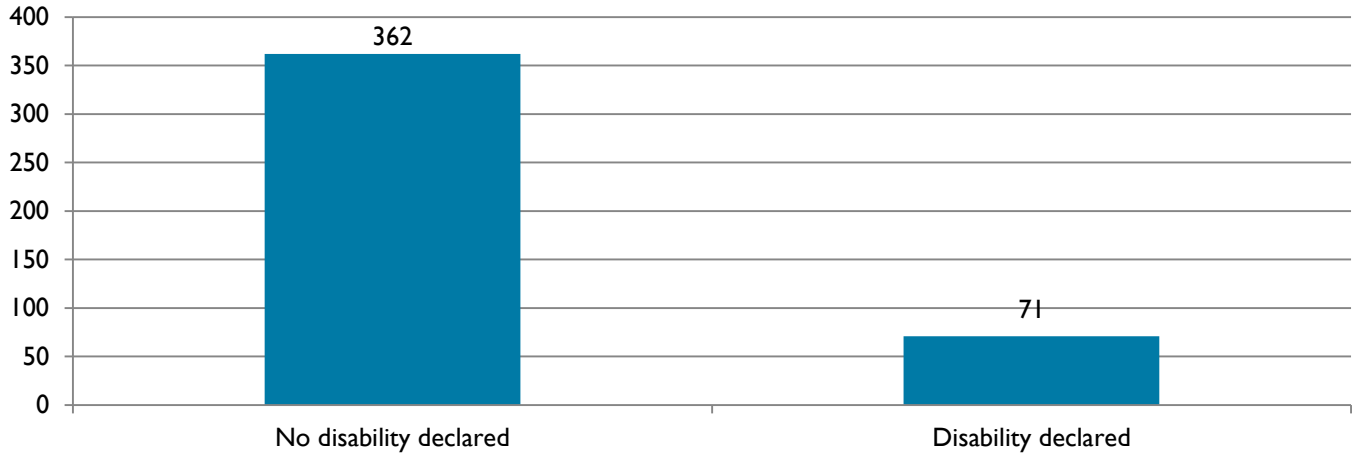
Grouped ethnicity



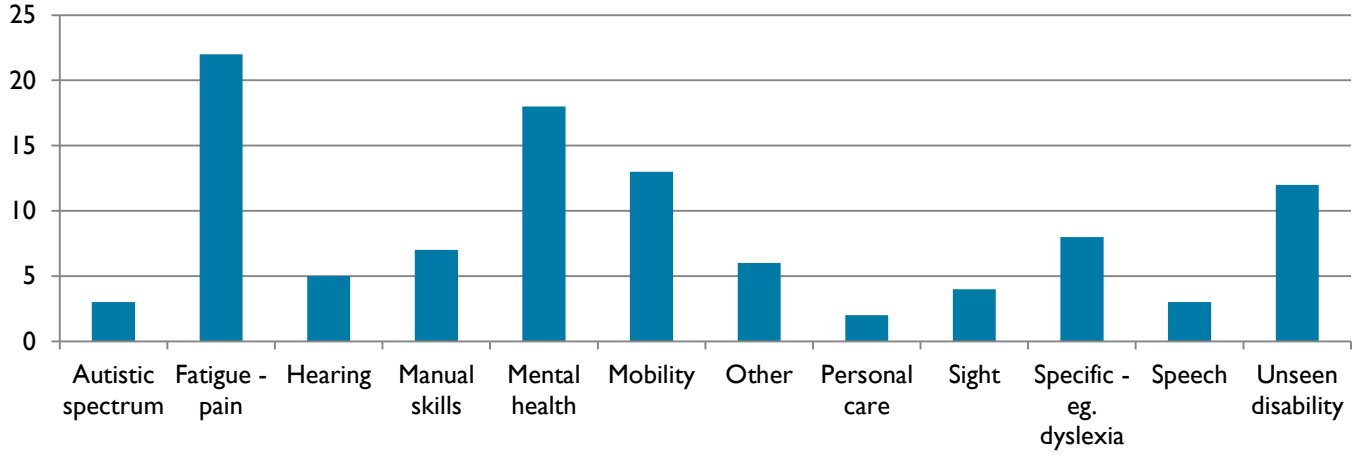
Grouped precious higher education



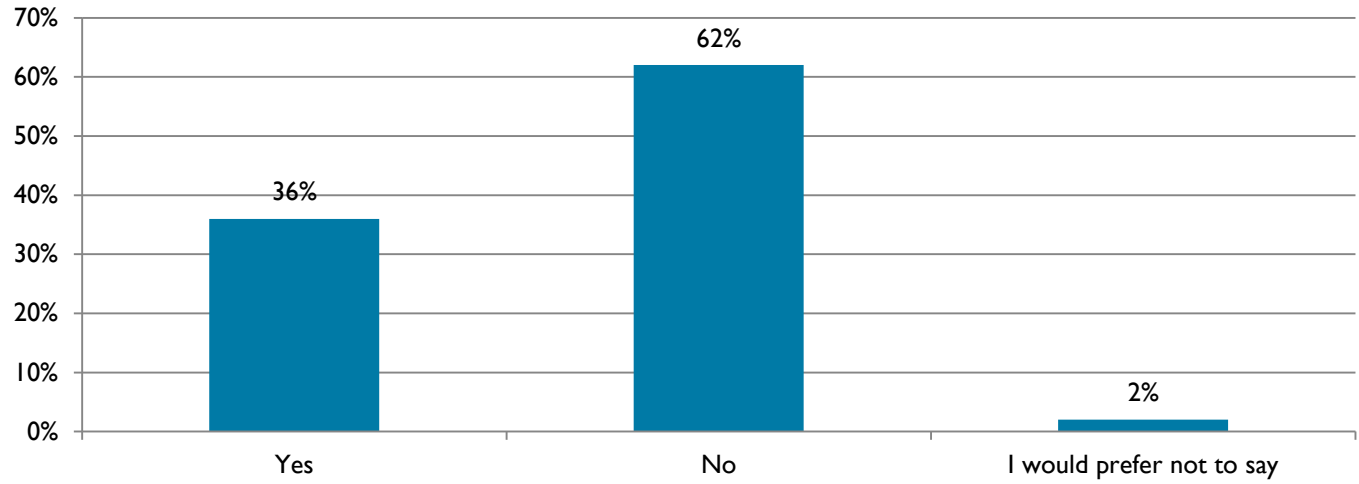
Disability declared



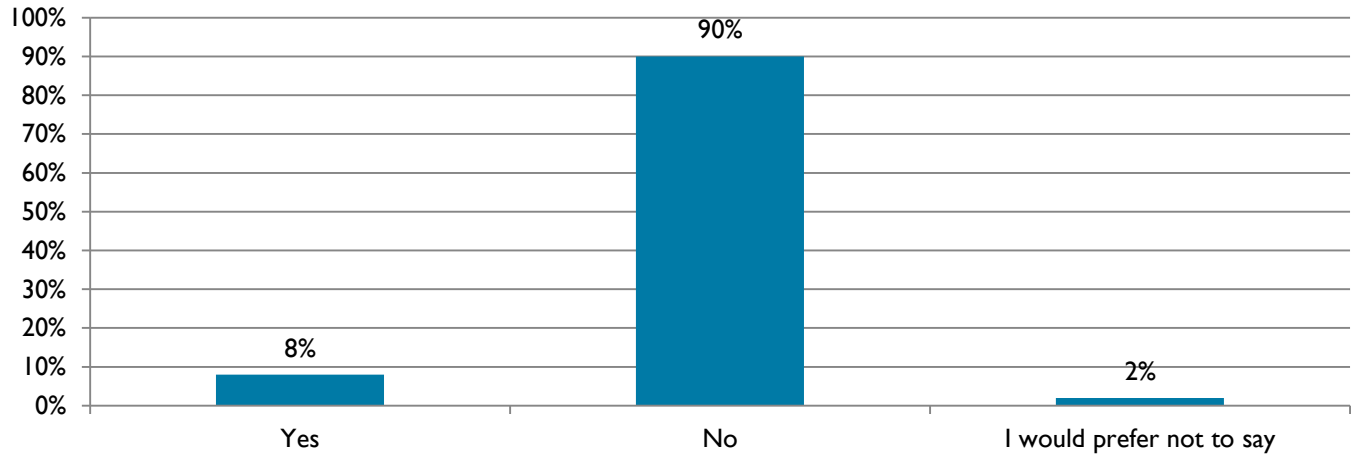
Disability impairment type



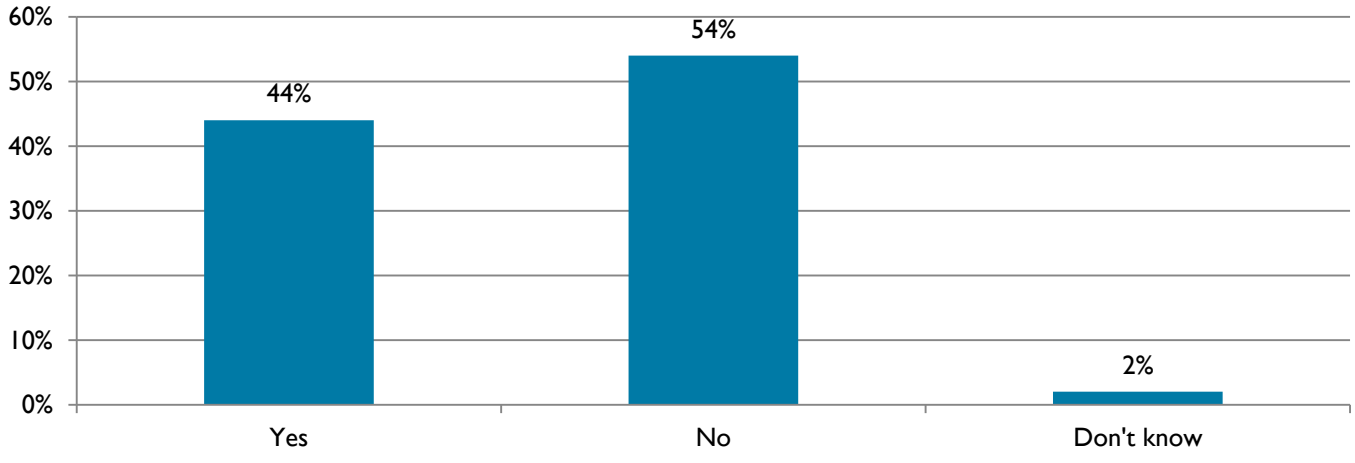
Caring responsibilities for under 18s



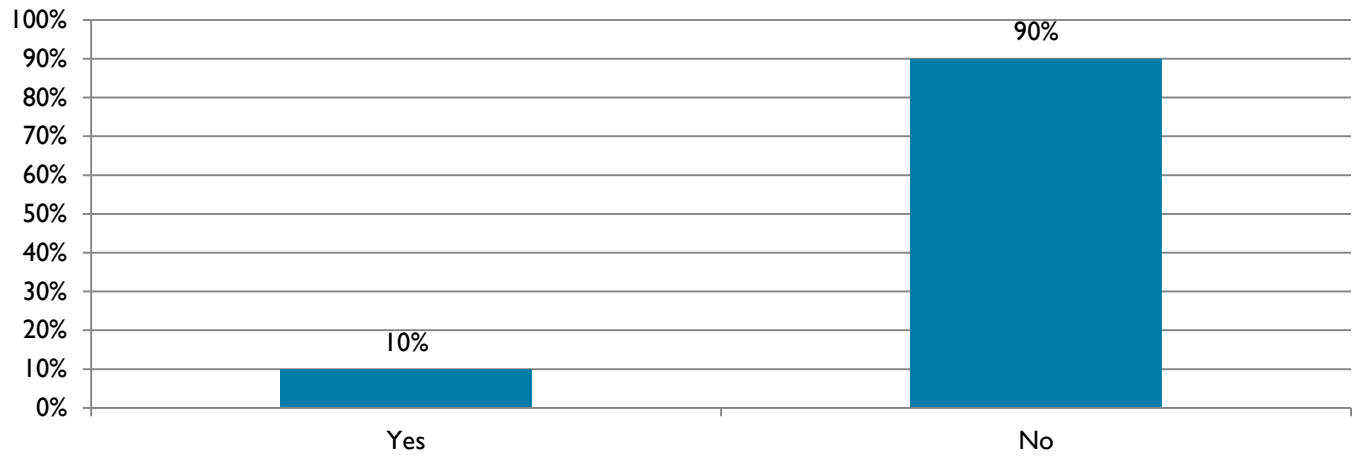
Caring responsibilities for elderly, disabled or person with long term illness



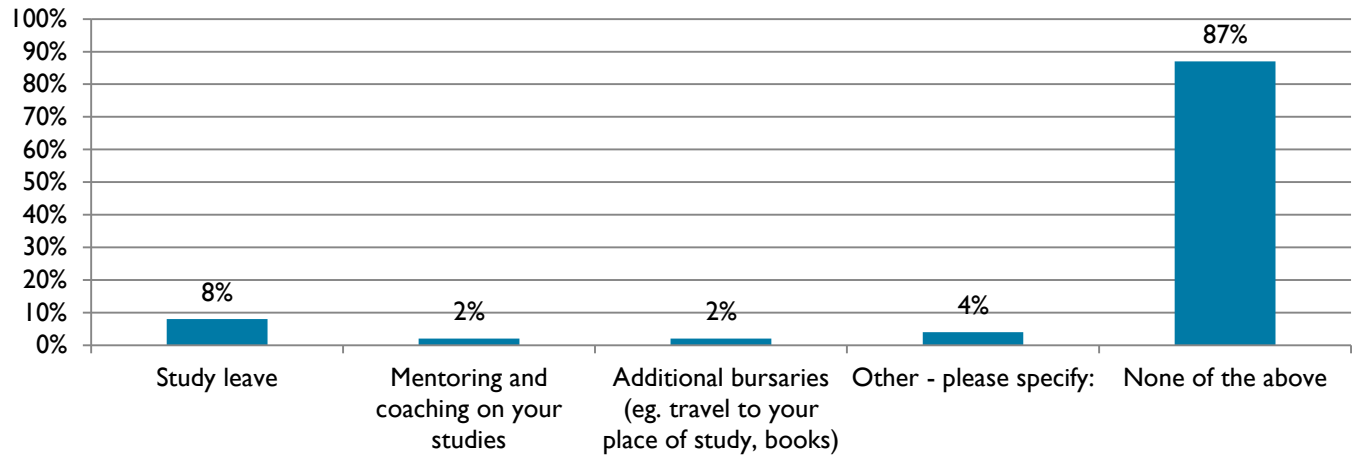
First in family HE



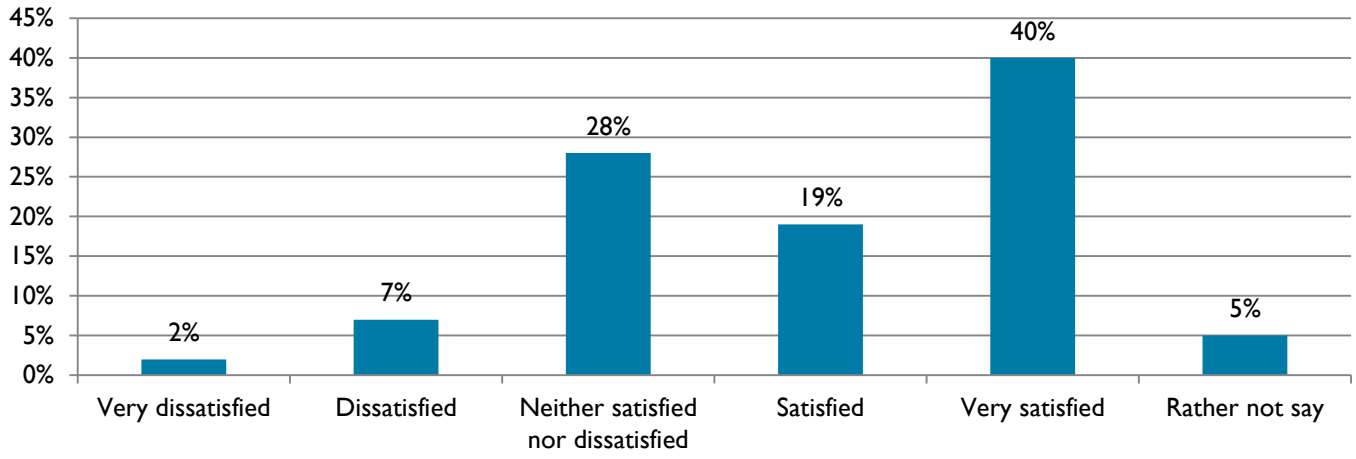
Employer funded



Employer support for studies



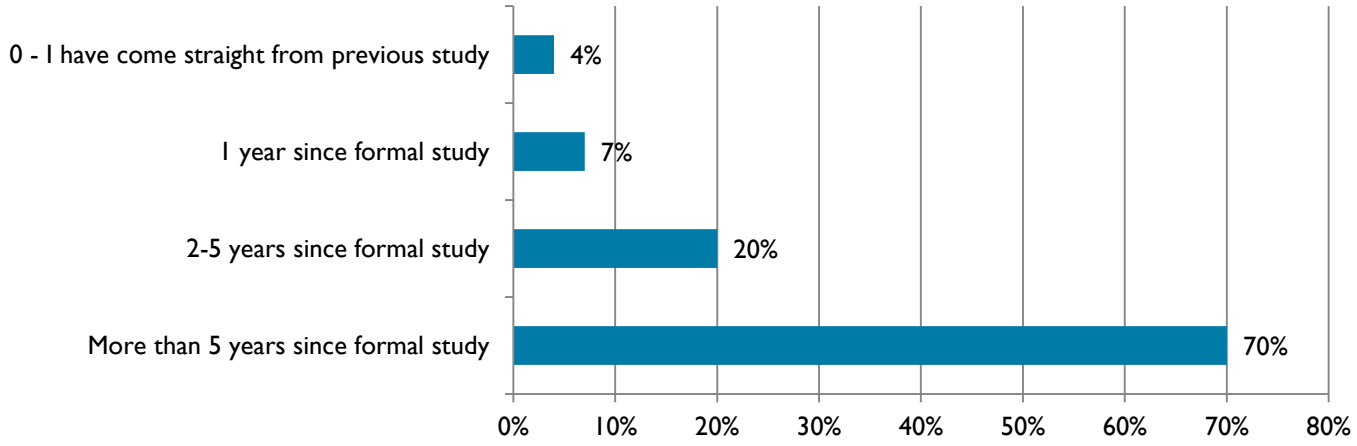
Satisfaction with employer support



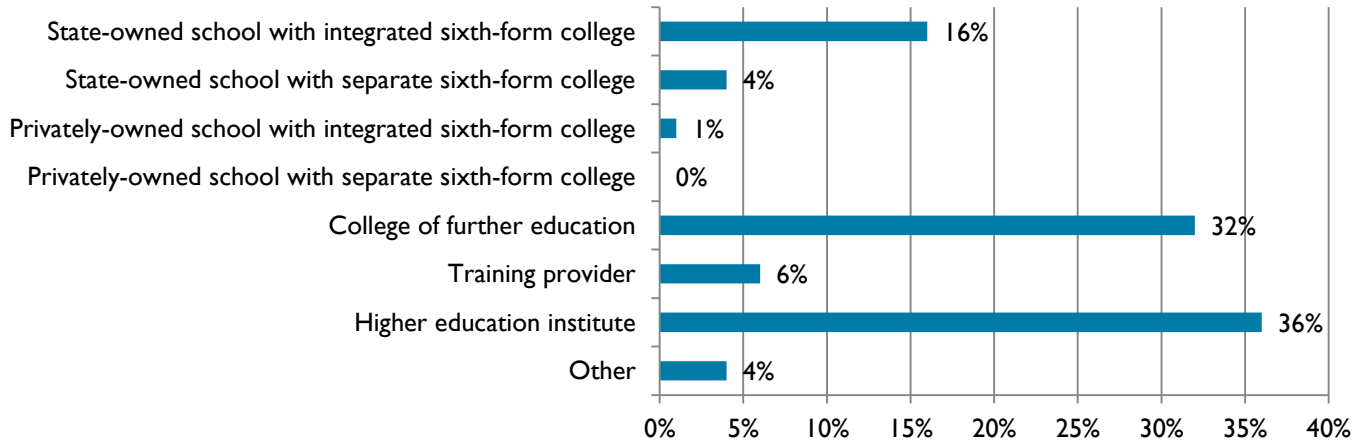
Basic insight

Previous study

Years passed since last period of formal study

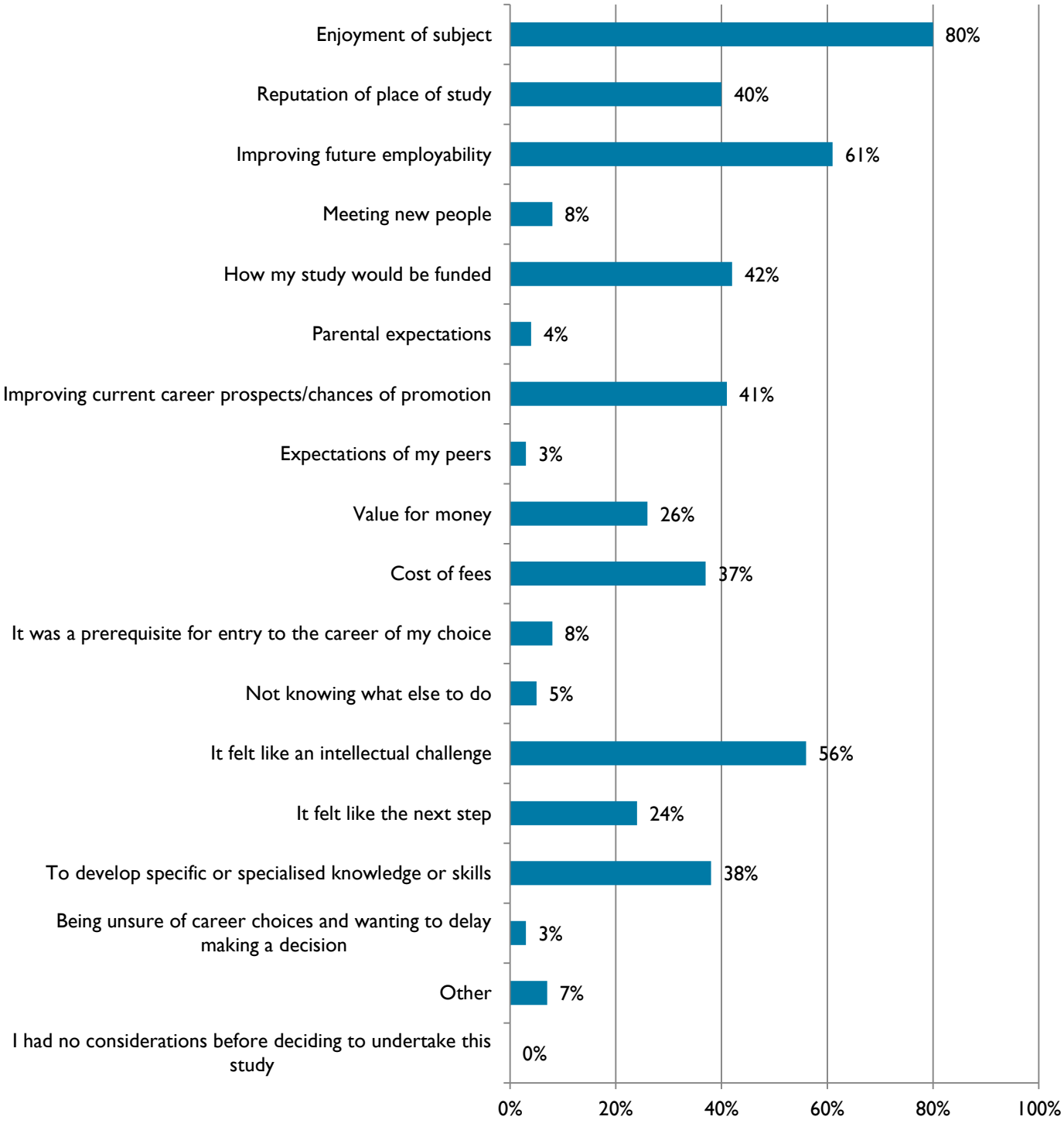


Place last studied

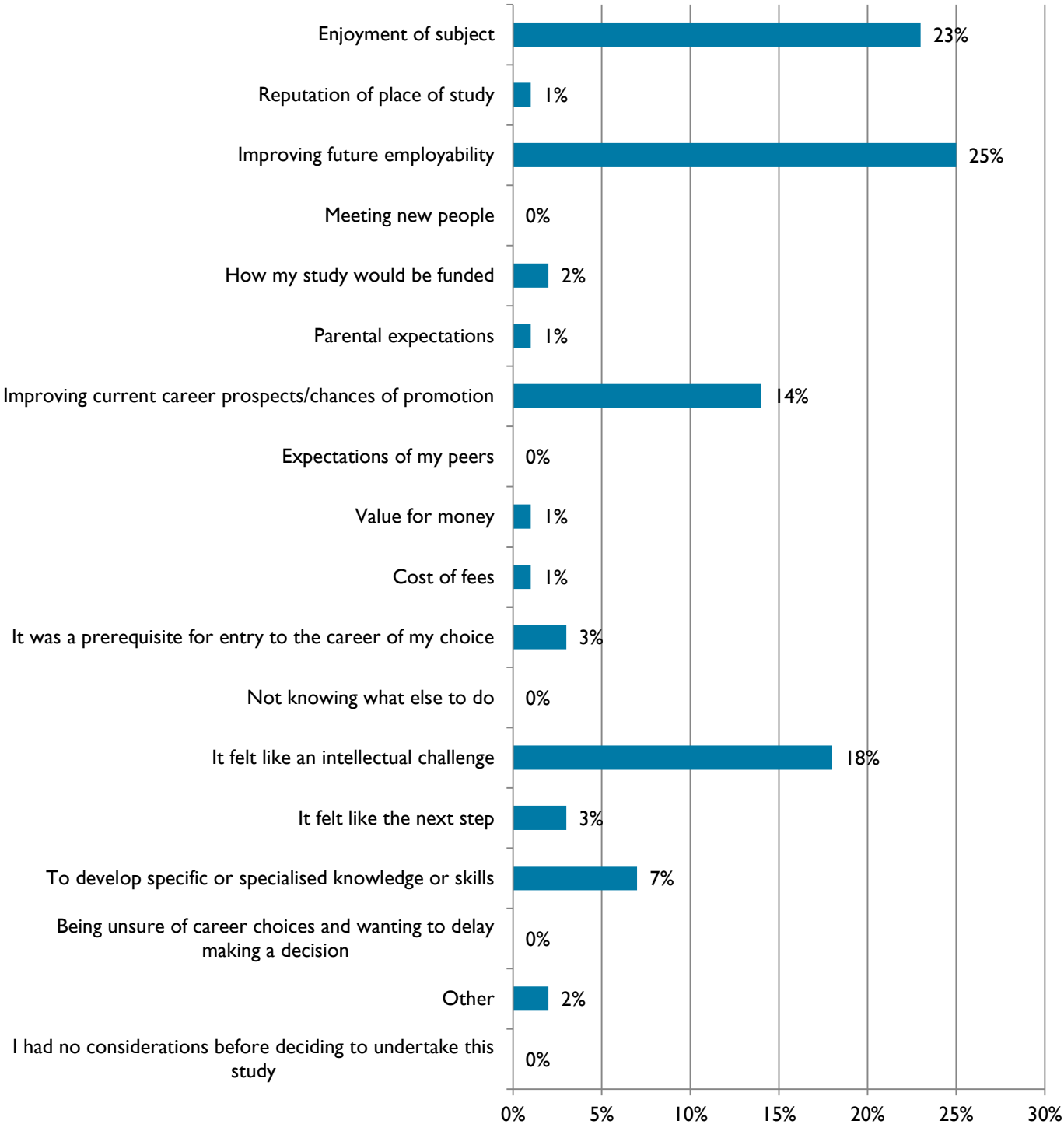


The decision to study

All decisions relevant to decision

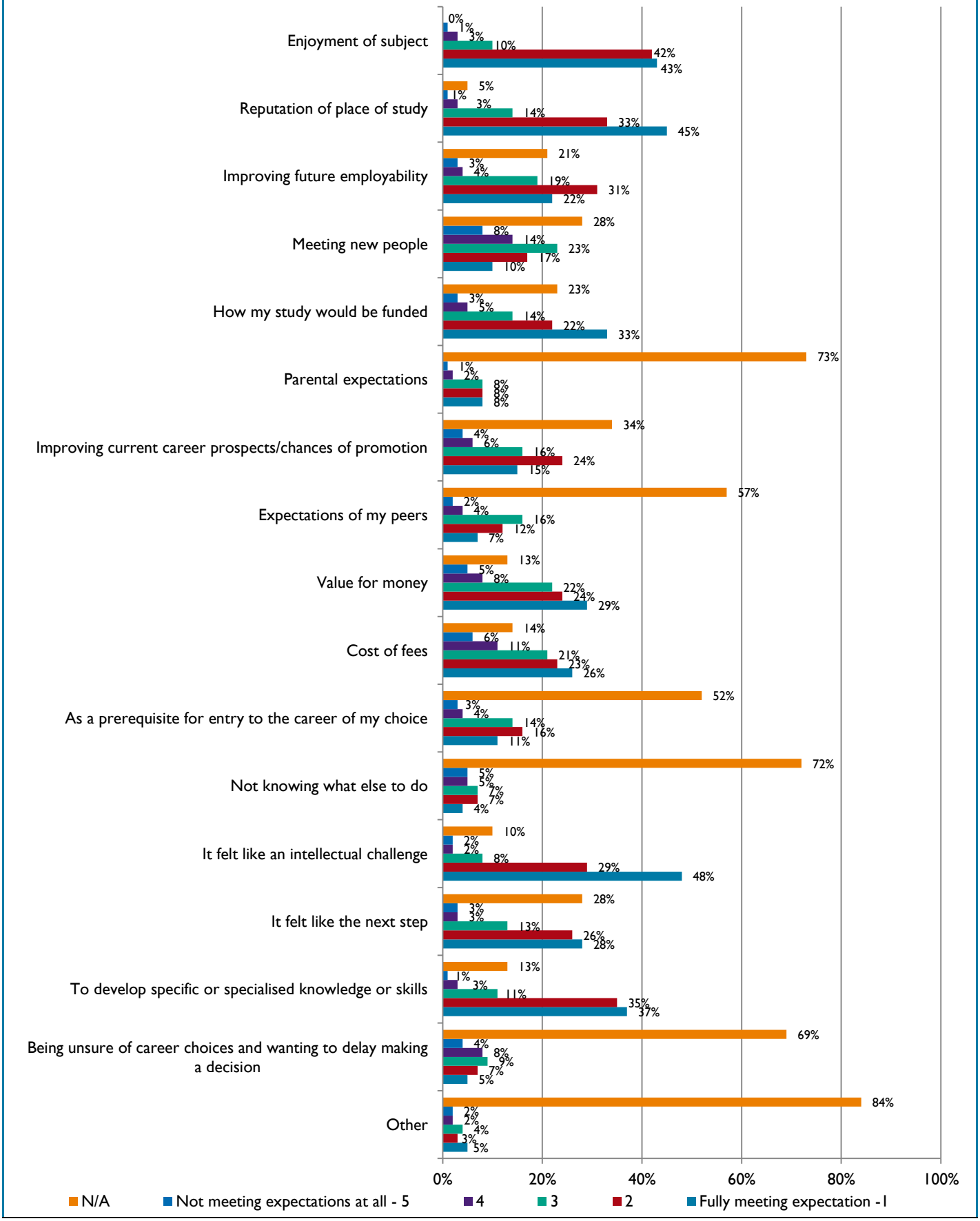


Most important reason relevant to decision

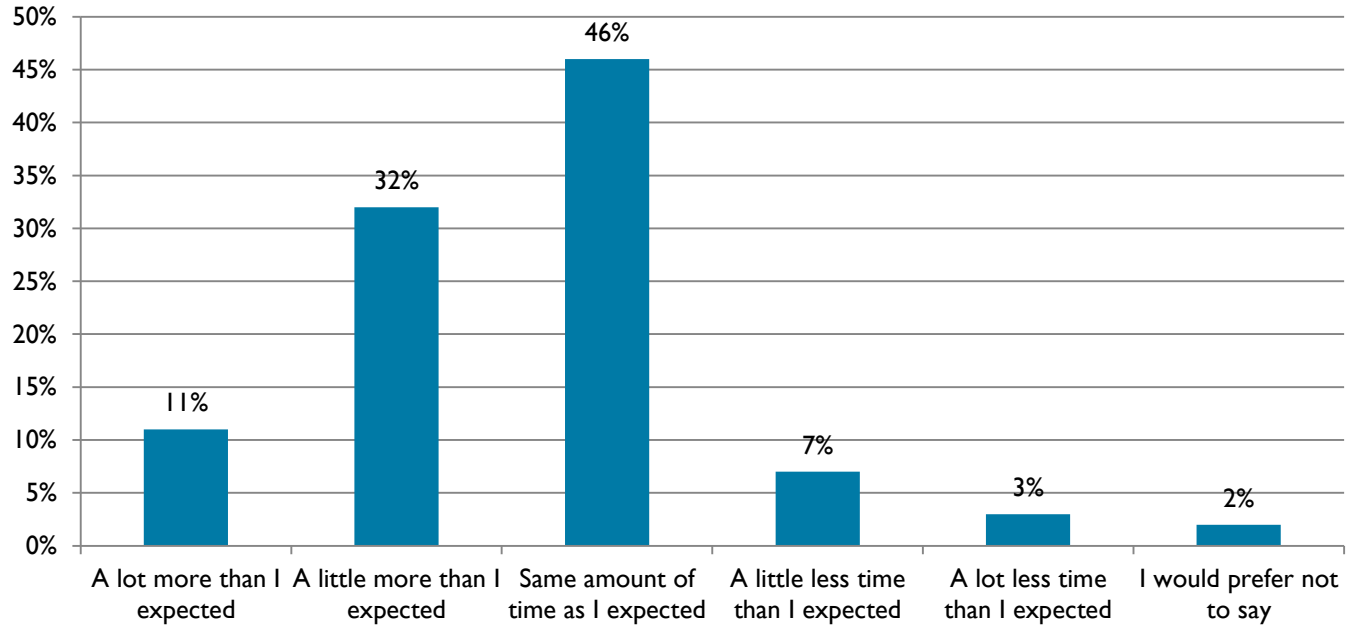


Experience of studying

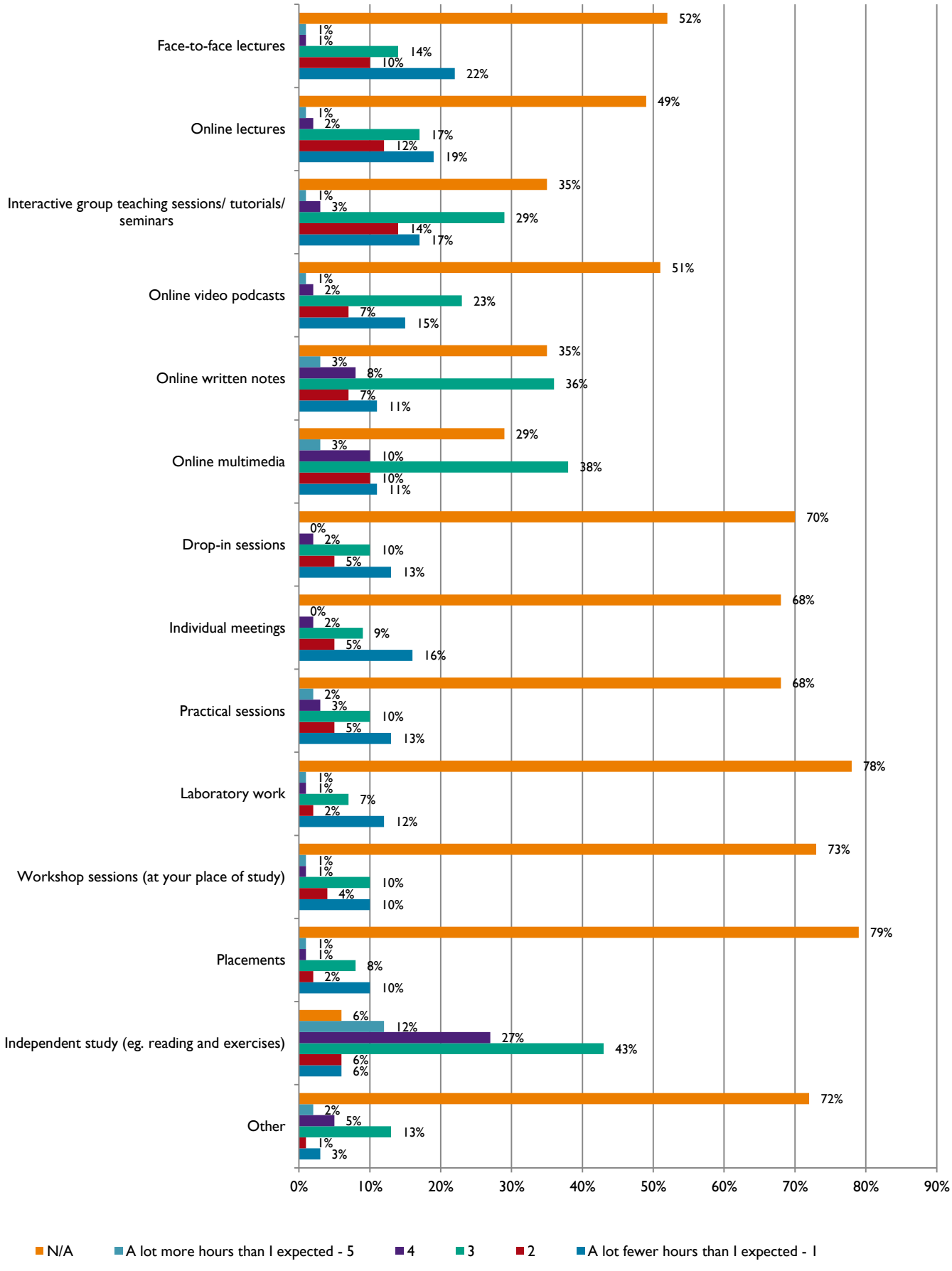
Meeting expectations



Actual commitment compared to expected

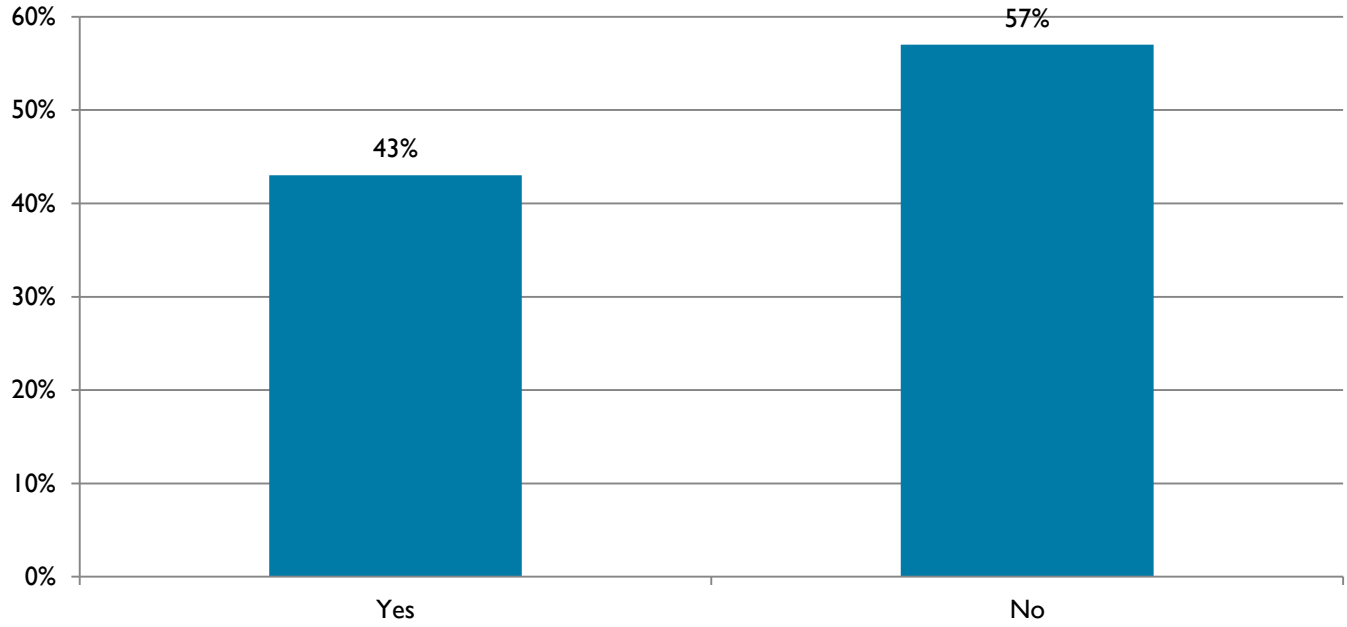


Activities on which spending more or less time on than expected

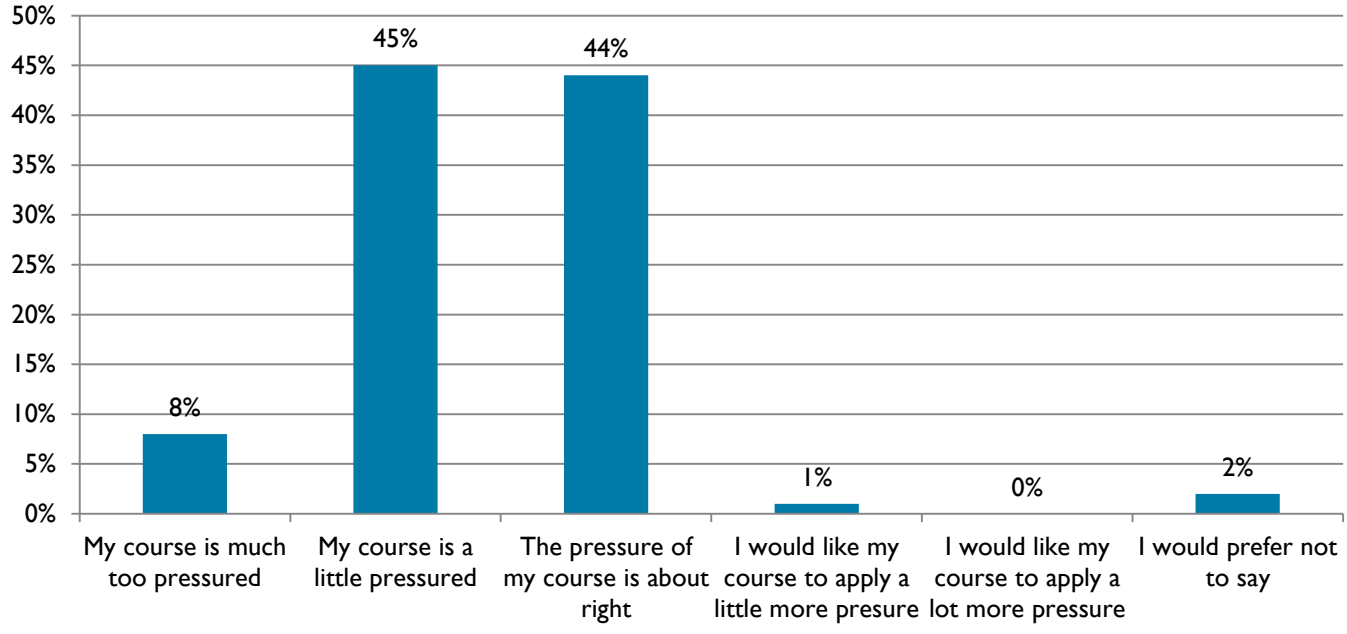


Identity

Describing yourself as a student

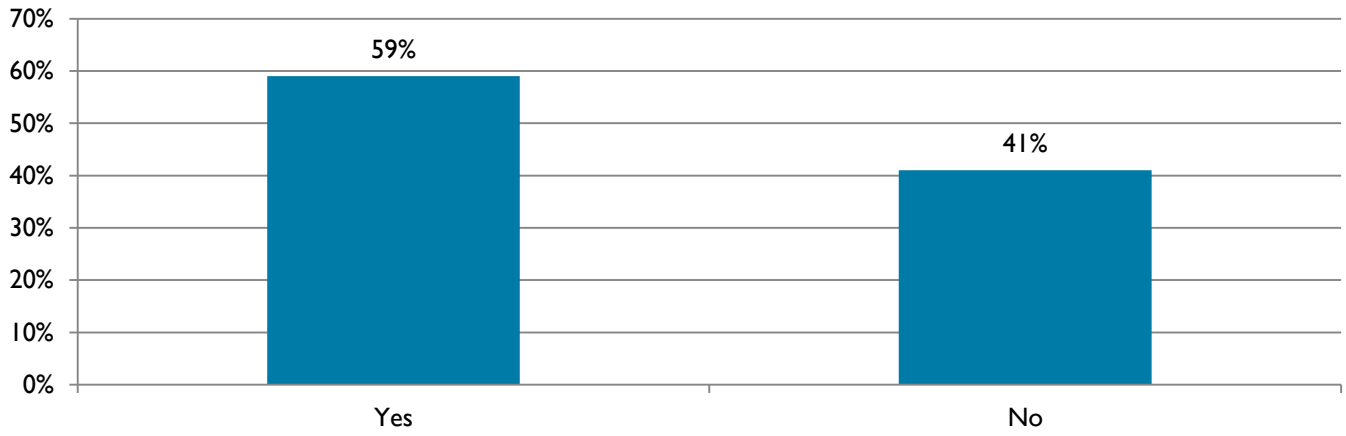


Course pressures

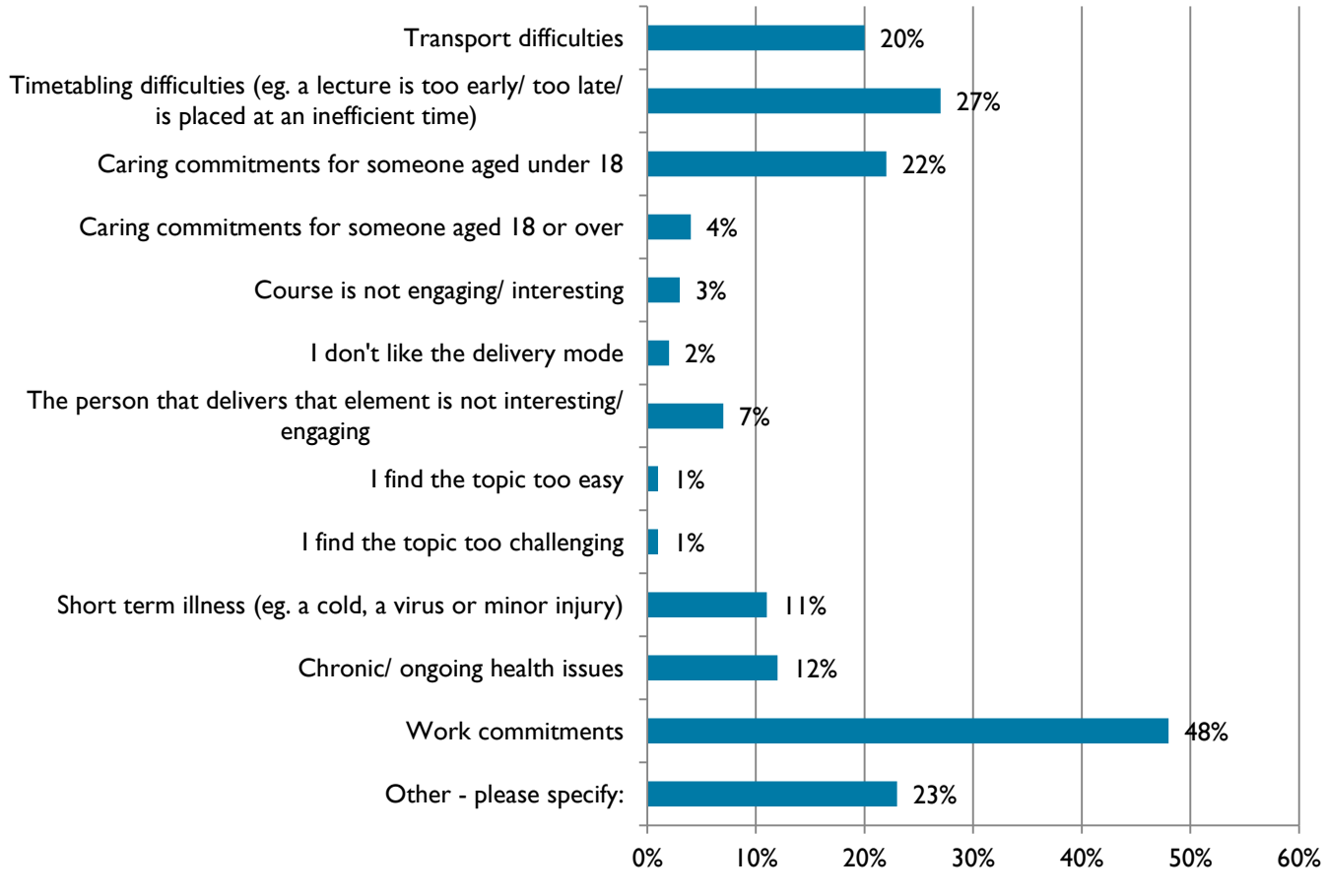


Being successful

Missing formal elements of course

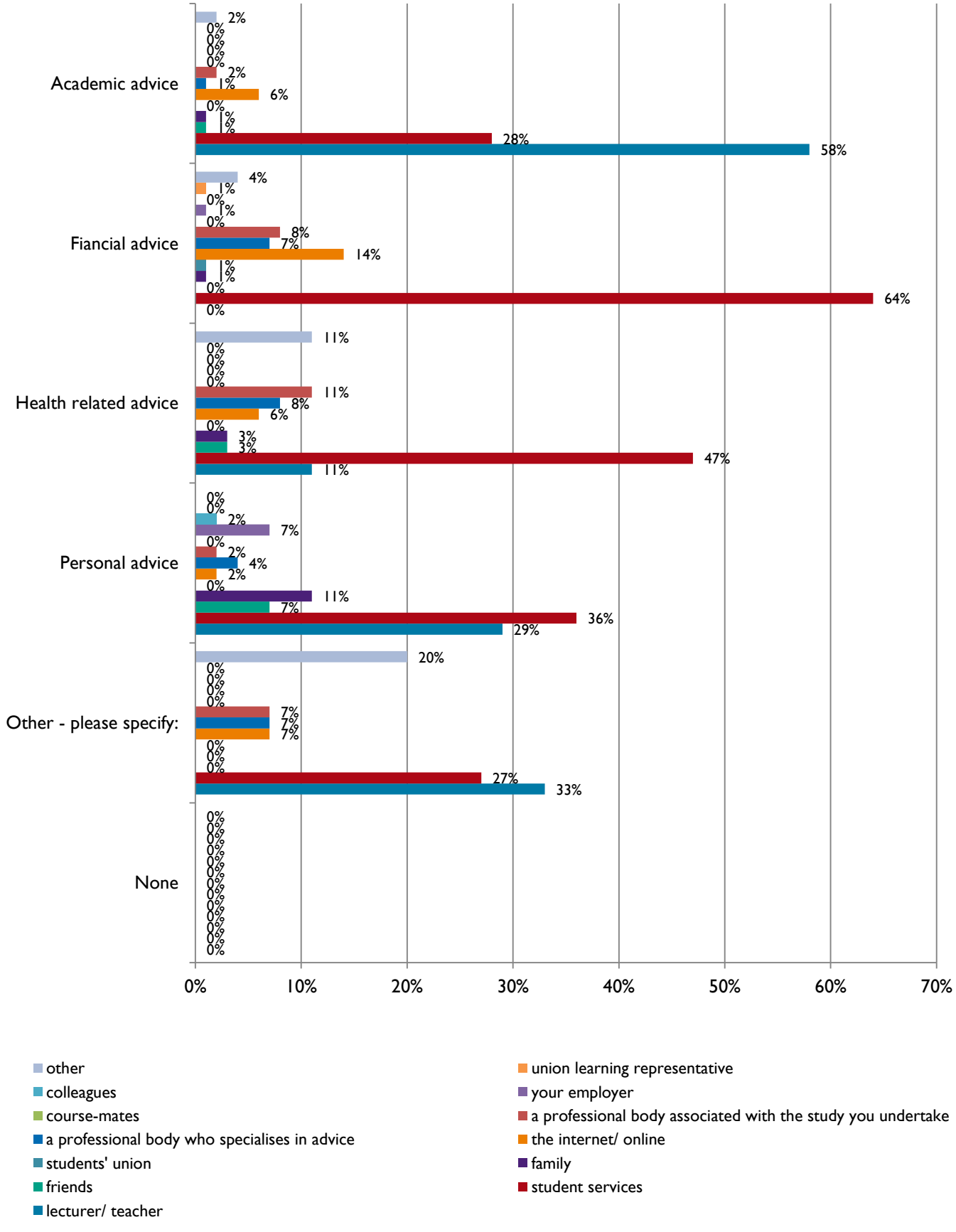


Reasons for missing formal elements of course



Advice and support

Awareness of sources of support when started studies



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