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Title: The motivations and outcomes of studying for part-time mature students completing higher education programmes at further education colleges

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Abstract:

Part-time students account for 31% of higher education students in the UK and 56% of part-time undergraduate students are over the age of 30 on entry (UniversityUK 2013). Whilst the motivations and successes of part-time mature students have been previously considered (Swain and Hammond 2011, Jamieson et al 2009, Feinstein et al. 2007) these studies have focussed on students who are either studying at university or by distance learning, and did not consider students on higher education courses at further education colleges. Parry et al (2012) identify that 7% of UK undergraduates study at a further education college and that 283 colleges offer courses at this level. However the literature relating to higher education students at further education colleges is very limited (Wood 2012), and there are no studies on the experiences and successes of part-time mature students in higher education at further education colleges. This research addresses the gap in the literature by considering the motivations and successes of part-time mature students at a sample of further education colleges in the West Midlands. It adapts approaches from Jackson and Jamieson (2009) relating data on age, gender and qualifications on entry to student achievement and retention, and uses interviews to explore the reasons for studying, barriers to study and the experience of part-time studying. Thus the research seeks to develop understanding of the experience of part-time study for mature students in a format that allows some comparison with existing studies of part-time mature students at university and by distance learning.

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## Introduction

This research paper was inspired by an extensive study for the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills in 2012 by Parry, Callender, Scott and Temple and uses similar approaches to consider Higher Education provision in a group of Further Education colleges in the West Midlands. However whilst Parry et al (2012) considered all students, this paper focuses on part-time mature students as a distinct category of students and, through data analysis and interviews, identifies a number of key variables that influence the decisions and experiences of mature students studying Higher Education courses part-time at Further Education colleges.

It is interesting to note that much of the UK research into Higher Education (HE) ignores or excludes provision of Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE). This may be for reasons of complexity or simply that it is overlooked within the larger body of research. However this seems iniquitous as Parry et al (2012) identify that around 177,000 students (7% of all UK undergraduates) study at a further education college and that 283 colleges offer courses at this level. Similarly the limited research into part-time studies and mature students in HE seems insufficient, given that HESA 2012/13 data shows that part-time students account for 31% of higher education students in the UK; mature students account for 21% (excluding Scotland), and that 56% of all part-time undergraduate students are over the age of 30 on entry (data cited in University UK 2013).

This paper draws together research on part-time students and on mature students to consider the types of people who choose to study part-time on HE in FE; their motivations and their experiences. Whilst the motivations and successes of part-time mature students have been previously considered (Swain and Hammond 2011, Jamieson et al 2009, Feinstein et al. 2007) most of these studies have focussed on students who are either studying at university or by distance learning, and did not consider those studying HE in FE. Indeed the very success of the long-term research collaboration between Birkbeck, University of London and the Open University has meant that many of the most influential papers on part-time mature students are based on data from these 2 organizations and effectively exclude HE in FE from the discussion. (Feinstein et al 2007, Callender et al 2006, Callender & Feldman 2009, Callender and little 2014, Jackson and Jamieson 2009, Jamieson et al 2009)

The research is based on a sample of FE colleges in the West Midlands and seeks to develop understanding of the experience of part-time study for mature students in a format that allows some comparison with existing studies of part-time mature students at university and by distance learning. Wood (2012) suggests that there are few studies on the experiences and successes of part-time mature students in higher education at further education colleges. Consequently this paper adapts approaches from Jackson and Jamieson (2009) relating data on age, gender and qualifications on entry to student achievement and retention, and uses in-depth interviews to explore the reasons for studying, barriers to study and the experience of part-time studying for part-time mature students in HE in FE.

## **Background to Higher education in Further Education colleges**

Parry & Thompson (2002) considered the history of the development of higher education in further education, including analysis of the Dearing report (1997), the Learning and Skills Act 2000 and the issues of funding through HEFCE and LSC. They identified a territory of considerable complexity, where uneven distribution of provision is influenced by historical and local factors and by definitions and distinctions which worked against rational and coherent approaches to higher education provision. They saw that the development of foundation degrees as vocationally oriented higher education and the introduction of ambitious targets for the proportion of 18-30 year olds who have participated in higher education, provides a policy context for an increased role for further education colleges. They suggest that this reverses a history where higher education in further education colleges was overshadowed by polytechnics in the 1980s and then limited by highly restrictive quality procedures in the 1990s.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2008, 2013) reviewed the role and future of higher education. They consider the 'vital role' of FE colleges in delivering HE, especially in vocational and technical subjects, and its importance for widening participation in higher education. Both reports conclude that decisions around HE in FE should be driven by learner and employer choices, rather than governmental targets. Bathmaker et al (2008) substantially agree with the complicated structure of FE described by Parry & Thompson (2002). However they identify HE in FE as a 'dual-sector' with complex interrelationships between providers and significant issues of boundaries and progression. They suggest that there has been a lack of coherent policy around HE in FE, and that much of the lead for policy development has come from higher education institutions. However they conclude that the barriers between HE and FE are 'permeable and workable' and that this permits a broad range of relationships.

Parry et al (2012) identify more recent changes. Significant changes in funding have meant that HE in FE is predominantly indirectly funded providing an economic incentive to establish collaborative arrangements with universities. Parry et al (2012) identify the clarification of funding and quality issues as allowing more equitable partnerships with HEIs. For the HEIs such partnerships are influenced by 4 strategic drivers: retaining the legacy and managing the overlap of provision; establishing a regional footprint, widening participation and improving employer engagement. This mutuality has meant that many colleges have relationships with more than one HEI, and are able to identify an area of provision that is broadly complementary to HEI provision. Parry et al (2012) state,

The pattern of HE provision in FECs reflects many of these strategic drivers. Most is sub-Bachelor, originally HNC/D but now predominantly FDs. Although there is a significant number of top-up programmes from FDs and even Bachelors' provision, most HEIs – 'pre-1992' and 'post-1992' universities alike – see HE-in-FE as predominantly a sub-Bachelor business catering for local students, many of whom are part-time and are also unlikely to be qualified for direct entry into 'mainstream' higher education. Even in the case of courses offered in both FECs and HEIs, for example FDs, there is usually a distinction in terms of the type and level of entry qualification. In this respect the views of HEI managers correspond to those of most FEC managers, that HE provision in HEIs and FECs is broadly complementary rather than competitive (p.95)

Much of the literature on FE colleges' role in higher education relates to the provision and collaborative provision of vocational programmes. This premise is rarely critiqued; indeed it appears as a tenet of policy (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2009:104), and tends to fit with specialisation in FE level provision. This is somewhat at odds with literature which identifies the importance of FE colleges in widening participation in HE (Stanton et al 2008). As well as the fundamental tension caused by seeking to meet these contradictory policy agendas it seems probable that a large proportion of the complexity and lack of coherence in provision identified by Bathmaker et al (2008) reflects differing strategic responses by FE colleges in response to the pressures and opportunities that come from specialist skills and facilities, local market conditions and collaboration with HEIs.

Despite the uncertain history of HE in FE provision, uncertain and contradictory policy agendas, multiple funding models, regional and historical variations, institutional specialisation and changes in the nature of its relationships with HEIs, it is clear that HE in FE has now developed a clear rationale that centres around local provision of vocationally oriented HE programmes in areas of FE specialisation.

### **Part-time Higher Education provision in Further Education Colleges**

In a major study of part-time undergraduate study, University UK (2013) makes a very strong case for the long-term importance of part-time learners in higher education. They note:

“Part-time learners are a hugely important part of the UK higher education system. In 2011-12 there were nearly half a million (490,590) UK domiciled people studying part-time (including distance learning) at undergraduate level. This includes Bachelors degrees as well as higher certificates and diploma. This represents more than a quarter (29%) of the UK domiciled undergraduate population.” (p.10)

Within this total they note that the Open University (OU) is the largest provider by far, accounting for 38.5% of all part-time undergraduates in 2011-2012, followed by several big universities. The proportion of part-time undergraduate provision in further education colleges in the UK differs significantly by regions, directly funded courses at further education colleges play a large role in Scotland, account for 39% of undergraduate part-time provision, compared to around 16% in England. The types of courses studied are also unevenly distributed, with a strong bias towards vocational subjects with subjects relating to medicine and combined studies accounting for nearly half of all students.

University UK (2013) identify a decline in UK domiciled part-time undergraduates, with an 11% drop between 2002-03 and 2011-12, with a disproportionate fall in female entrants, entrants in their thirties and those over sixty. Due to changes in the funding regime in England in 2012-13, there was a large drop in part-time undergraduate entrants with a 40% drop between 2010-11 and 2012-13. University UK (2013) suggests that this decline may continue in future as the routes into higher education for mature students are becoming more difficult with the ending of funding for short courses that often act as a route into HE, closure of lifelong learning and continuing education departments in universities; withdrawal of funding for access courses, and the ending of funding for Aim Higher and lifelong learning networks. Within this general decline, University UK identify that the part-time recruitment to

undergraduate courses at FE colleges that are funded directly through HEFCE (2013) shows a 19% fall between 2010 and 2012.

Parry et al (2012) provides a comprehensive review of higher education provision in 4 types of further education colleges: general further education colleges; specialist colleges in areas such as agriculture and horticulture, art and design, and drama and dance; specialist designated institutions, and some sixth form colleges. Their research for the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills identifies that around 7% of UK undergraduates study at a further education college on either a directly funded course or a franchised course. FE in HE accounts for around 177,000 students across 283 colleges in 2009-2010. However this is not evenly distributed and 52 FE colleges account for over half of this provision. Parry et al (2012) identify that of the 177,000 students on HE in FE programmes around 60% study on a part-time basis. However within this total around 108,000 students are undertaking undergraduate qualifications, of which foundation degree account for just under half of these undergraduates, and around 40% are part-time students. Of the remaining students, 64,000 are mostly part-time students taking some higher level credits leading to vocational, technical and professional qualifications, and 5000 are mostly part-time students undertaking taught postgraduate programmes (Parry et al 2012).

Thus whilst HE in FE accounts for a fairly small proportion (7%) of all HE in the UK, it represents a significant proportion of part-time undergraduate students in HE.

### **Characterising Part-time Mature students in Higher education**

Drawing on interviews with 110 students in England and Scotland, Osborne et al (2004) suggested that there are six categories of 'non-standard students' in HE. Such non-standard students represent those applicants with entry qualifications other than A Level and Highers, those with qualifications including Access or Foundation course certificates (a majority of whom are likely to be mature), and mature applicants with either standard or non-standard entry qualifications. Osborne et al (2004) classify these as:

- 'delayed traditional students' - these have chosen to take time out from their education but re-enter through a traditional route;
- 'late starters' - who have undergone a life-transforming event and require a new start;
- 'single parents';
- 'careerists' – people currently in employment;
- 'escapees' - who are employed but want a different career pathway
- 'personal growers' – those wanting to pursue education for its own sake.

In addition they found that there was a highly motivated cohort of student wishing to enter HE, but that they faced the prospect with considerable trepidation and uncertainty, particularly those with multiple responsibilities, and thus their decisions were often highly constrained. Osborne et al (2004) suggest that the consideration of mature students within these classifications allow greater targeting of advice and support and allows opportunities for inter-agency working.

In a detailed analysis of student data from Birkbeck and the Open University (OU), Feinstein et al (2007) also consider the reasons for part-time mature students to study higher

education. In this influential study, Feinstein et al (2007) considered in detail the social and economic benefits of part-time mature study. They found that students at different stages of life had different motivations for enrolling and different experiences of learning. However they also found that there were similar patterns of characteristics of part-time mature students in both institutions. Specifically they noted that: there were more female than male graduates at both institutions; the great majority of graduates were aged between 31 and 60 (although a higher proportion of Birkbeck students were aged 30 or under on entry), the ethnic backgrounds of Birkbeck and OU London graduates were very similar, and there were high proportions of students in full-time employment at both institutions. They also noted some differences: OU graduates were more likely to have parents with low educational qualifications; more OU graduates than Birkbeck graduates had partners and dependent children, and 23% of the Birkbeck undergraduate first degree respondents already had an HE qualification compared to 18% for the OU. However the personal incomes of Birkbeck graduates were similar to those of OU London graduates, but their household incomes tended to be higher.

Using factor analysis, Feinstein et al (2007) suggested that motivations could be classified under five headings:

- Finding a new job.
- Improvement of the current job.
- Employment requirements.
- Progression and personal development.
- Enjoyment.

Perhaps more pragmatically, University UK (2013) suggest classifying part-time students as: *career enhancers*; *career changers*; *non-career learners*, and *career entrants*. Without significant detail it is hard to see how these categories vary significantly from Feinstein et al (2007), other than moving the agenda from employment to career development.

All three categorisations reflect the varied reasons for mature students' study. However studies by both Feinstein et al (2007) and University UK (2013) seem wholly based on the link between study and future employability. As such they seem to suggest that the decision to study is fundamentally aspirational with education seen as a means to an end, rather than related to personal growth. By contrast the categories suggested by Osborne et al (2004) seem based in the applicants' situation with an implicit assumption that higher education is the solution to psychological needs such as frustration and a desire to escape. This approach suggests a more humanistic view of education, where the act of studying is itself of value as a period of growth. Whilst this might appear to be two sides of the same coin, it highlights the persistent emphasis in the literature of the link between mature students and employability, and the growing dominance of capital based approaches to understanding education.

### **Part-time mature study – building capital or personal growth?**

Swain and Hammond (2011) consider the motivations and outcomes of studying for part-time mature students in higher education, although they note that there are no universally

accepted definitions for either term. Their research considers the classes of motivation developed by Feinstein et al (2007) in the earlier paper, but expands the approach by considering both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for studying. They find that student motivations vary with the type of course - arts programmes being largely intrinsic whilst management courses are more extrinsically motivated - as well as with gender, reporting that twice as many women as men reported predominantly extrinsic reasons for studying. In addition they confirmed earlier studies that linked motivation to socio-economic status. However they conclude that:

There has been little previous research that has focused on students who are both mature and part-time, particularly in the UK. However, what emerged from this study, illustrated by the participants' own words, are the often passionate views of the significance of the study to these 18 individuals. They did not seem to be able to articulate very clearly why they decided to study at that particular time of their lives. It just 'seemed the right time', often because a number of factors came together to create the incentive, and sometimes sheer serendipity. (p.610)

In a review of policies and practices in the UK, again largely based on data from Birkbeck and the OU, Jackson and Jamieson (2009) challenge the evidential, theoretical and practical feasibility of a government agenda that assumes that mature students are primarily motivated by employment-related motivations and the need for up-skilling, and that the principle route to this is through part-time study on vocationally relevant foundation degrees. By contrast the authors find that it is often very difficult, if not impossible to determine in advance what mode of study yields employment benefits, and that a considerable proportion of mature students derived employment benefits, despite the fact that their initial study aims had been vague and diffuse. It was also clear that for most mature students their current employers were not actively engaged in promoting or supporting their study, and that many studied in order to change their job rather than to meet the needs of their employers. Thus they find that there are complex reasons for part-time mature students to study and that policies that focus on tightly defined notions of what is 'economically useful' may be damaging to mature students, particularly those studying part-time.

Jamieson et al (2009) consider the development of three forms of capital through higher education study for part-time mature students. They suggest that alongside the human capital benefits of gaining higher education qualifications that there are significant gains in identity capital, and social capital. Their conceptual model draws on earlier work by Putnam (1999) and Coleman (1988) and whilst they acknowledge the difficulties in clearly defining or calculating such benefits, it provides a means of incorporating measurable outcomes such as the financial benefits of gaining a degree with less tangible benefits such as changes in self-concept and increased civic participation. Their study (Jamieson et al 2009) considered two cohorts of students: part-time mature graduates of Birkbeck, University of London, and part-time mature graduates of the Open University. In both cohorts the study categorised the benefits identified by respondents into four types of benefit: Identity capital, social capital, generic skills and employment benefits. Whilst the descriptive statistics for these two cohorts shows considerable differences the measured outcomes are remarkably similar with very few differences in the pattern of responses from Birkbeck and Open University graduates. Around 60-59% of benefits reported by graduates in both cohorts relate to identity capital, 22-23% relate to employment benefits, 14-16% relate to generic skills, and 13-15% relate to social capital.



This study provides an interesting insight into part-time mature students experiences, suggesting that the most valued aspects of learning relate to changes in personal identity rather than skills development or career enhancement. Whilst this finding runs counter to some earlier texts, it suggests that part-time mature students may gain similar types of benefits regardless of whether they study at distance or in a university.

However there are two significant problems with the approach taken by Jamieson et al (2011). Firstly the work appears based on an assumption that part-time mature students are largely the same across all modes of study and across regions. Whilst the study provides evidence of similarities between these two cohorts, it does not follow that mature students studying in other modes such as HE in FE or work-based learning should be similar. Indeed it seems likely that mature students would make choices on the part-time mode of study to suit their lifestyles and expectations, and thus that particular modes of study would attract students with different demographic, academic and social backgrounds.

Secondly, the work uses a retrospective survey of outcomes. This seems based on the traditional assumption that studying is a discrete part of the student's life and that the benefits of study accrue after graduation. This position perhaps relates to Tinto (1993) who sees the university experience in terms of a rite of passage from one environment to another. However in another paper from Birkbeck, Callender and Little (2014) suggest that this is not the case with students on part-time courses. They find that most part-time students (59%) had considerable labour market experience prior to enrolment and continued to work at the same place of work from the beginning of their studies to a point two and a half years after the completion of their studies. They also found that 60% had received a pay rise during their studies that was linked to their studies, and concluded that most graduates were "reaping a range of employment benefits even where they had not moved employer or position" (p.11). Callender and Little (2014) argue that their findings show clear evidence of gains in human capital, social capital and identity capital, but that these are likely to be overlooked in the current measures. Thus it seems likely that part-time students may gain social and employment benefits and may have already applied many of the generic skills within the workplace during the course of their studies rather than afterwards. Consequently, the transition at the end of a course of studies is unlikely to be as marked by sudden changes in personal, social and professional circumstances as it is for full-time students and surveys of students after completion may not fully recognise benefits that may have accrued many years before.

Similar findings are shown in Woodley and Wilson (2002) where mature graduates were surveyed 3 years after graduation from part-time studies. The authors study shows that 'young mature' (25–29 years) students at both types of institution and 'middle mature' (30–39 years) students at 'other' institutions felt that their studies had satisfied most of their career objectives. Open University 'middle mature' students, despite having jobs, high incomes and average job satisfaction, nevertheless felt frustrated at not being able to use the knowledge from their degrees in their careers

Thus three of the four areas of capital benefit suggested by Jamieson et al (2011) seem likely to be underreported for part-time mature students – particularly those over 30 and in employment - as any benefits may have accrued before completion of the award, and thus may be less recognised than those associated with completion. If the changes in identity capital are removed from the data presented by Jamieson et al (2011), then the appearance

of similarity between the Open University and Birkbeck is markedly reduced and the case for considering employment related categories of part-time mature students is called into question.

**Conclusion:**

Overall, the literature shows a complex area of provision, a highly varied student body, and an academic focus that tends to apply economic analysis rather than consider study for mature learners to be related to personal growth or motivations related to identity. In addition many of the studies of part-time mature students are based on a non-representative sample that excludes swathes of provision and consequently generalises findings about part-time mature students without clear justification. Despite these short-comings however the literature shows the gradual establishment of agreed definition and categories of provision, or modes of study, and of mature students.

## **The study:**

The study uses student-level data on part-time mature students at 14 further education colleges involved in collaborative agreements with a university in the West Midlands and interviews with a sample of mature students studying part-time courses in HE in FE.

The data covers students on indirectly funded undergraduate courses with a range of providers of HE in FE including 10 general further education colleges; 1 specialist college; 1 specialist designated institution, and 2 sixth form colleges. Where colleges have changed names or entered into associations with other colleges since 2008/09, these have been considered in relation to their status in 2008/09. Students on directly funded courses or courses validated with other Universities were not included. For the study, part-time students were included if they were registered onto courses at level 4 – 6 in any of the academic years 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11, and only if their age on entry was greater than 21. Incomplete records were removed from the sample (n:11)

Interviews were conducted with a representative sample of 12 students to explore their motivations and experiences of studying as part-time mature students. Responses were coded and are analysed with reference to literature.

### **Analysis of student records for part-time mature students studying HE in a sample of West Midlands FE colleges 2008 to 2010**

Data is considered on 763 students at 14 further education colleges in the West Midlands. 1033 students were registered as part-time students on HE courses of which 874 were mature students (over 21). 11 incomplete records were removed. Therefore data was considered for 763 students over 21 years on entry who were studying higher education programmes part-time at FE colleges in any of the academic years 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11. The data shows considerable differences between the three years, with 243 in 2008/9, 303 2009/10, and 217 in 2010/11. These numbers represent new registrations in each year rather than the total at any time.

#### The region

The West Midlands region includes some areas of industrialisation however much of the region is rural with population density ranging from 82/km<sup>2</sup> in Herefordshire to 2,884/km<sup>2</sup> in Birmingham. This study includes colleges within Shropshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, West Midlands and Staffordshire.

#### The colleges

14 colleges are represented in the data; these include 10 *general further education colleges*, 1 *specialist college*, 1 *specialist designated college* and 2 *sixth form colleges*. All 10 general further education colleges deliver a broad range of further education courses and vocational courses, although each has areas of speciality. All of these colleges have collaborative arrangements with other universities; the data for which is not included in the study. A specialist college and a designated specialist college are included in the sample. Both of

these have higher education and further education provision within their specialist areas and some courses in other areas. These colleges also have other collaborative arrangements with other universities and with other FE colleges. The 2 sixth form colleges have a range of FE provision, including some vocational courses. A third sixth form college co-delivers an HE programme with a general FE college, but has been excluded to avoid double counting. All the colleges in the study are primarily focussed on FE provision, with some provision of HE in FE.

### The courses

36 pathways with course titles and course codes are included – some of these have shared delivery with the HEI and some are wholly delivered by the FE college. In addition some courses include collaborative provision between FE colleges. The principle subject areas include Education, Horticulture, Health, Animal Care, Sport and Art.

16% of students are registered on to level 4 awards – mostly HNCs. The majority of students (49%) are registered onto Level 5 awards with most of these being Foundation Degrees, which account for 45% of all students. A further 35% of students are registered on level 6 awards, mostly in education. Indeed the sample is heavily weighted towards education with 16 out of 36 courses being education related. These include Diplomas and Foundations Degrees in Early years, learning support and teaching in the lifelong sector. Overall, these account for 79% of the students within the sample and are delivered in 9 of the FE colleges.

### Students

The sample of 763 students includes 617 (81%) women and 146 (19%) men. This ratio of 4:1 ratio varies little with age of entry until 45-50 when the number of female students starts to decline more rapidly than male students such that the ratio of students over 50 years is around 5:2.

The average age of students on entry is 35.1 years with a standard deviation of 11.1. The most common age category is 21-25 accounting for 18%, and 62% of all students are under 40. However the distribution pattern for male and female students is rather different with 46% of Male students being older than 40 on entry, whilst only 35% of female students are over 40 on entry.

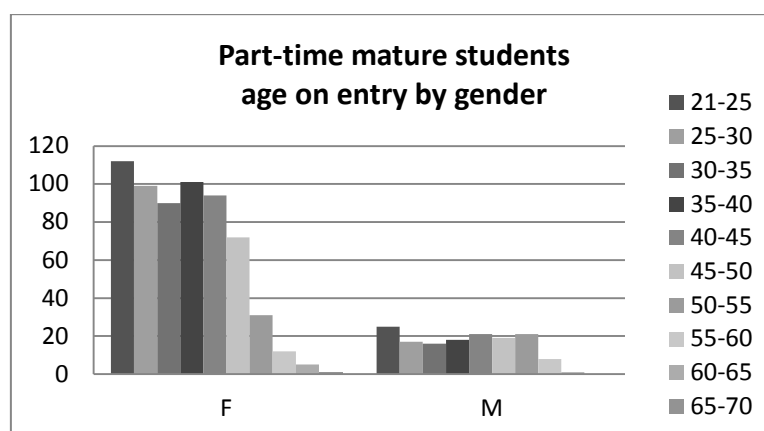


Figure1. Part-time mature student: age on entry by gender

The sample of part-time mature students is very ethnically homogenous. 755 students provided information on their ethnicity, of these 674 (89%) were listed as White (HESA codes 10, 13 and 19). The sample also included 41 (5%) students of Asian or Asian British ethnicity (HESA codes 31, 32, 33 and 39) and 29 (4%) students of Black or Black British ethnicity (HESA code, 21, 22 and 29).

Students reported their socio-economic category based on NS-SEC classifications. The sample shows that 59% are within NS-SEC 1 (Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations) and NS-SEC 2 (Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations), with 33% of students identified as 'lower management'. Only 18% of students are within NS-SEC 6, 7 and 8, and only 4 students are listed as long-term unemployed. It should be noted that UCAS adjusted the wording of the question for 2008/09 meaning that these results are not directly comparable with later years

Of the 763 students in the sample only 19 did not have UK nationality, however 11 of these students had previous educational experience in the UK, suggesting that they had been resident in the UK for a period of time.

The highest qualifications on entry for male and female students have broadly similar patterns with a predominance of level 3 (47%) and level 6 (24%) qualifications for both male and female students (figure 2). However over half (51%) of all female part-time mature students held a level 3 qualification, compared to just over a quarter (27%) of male part-time mature students. Conversely, 34% of male part-time mature students held a level 6 award, whilst the proportion of female part-time mature students was only 21%.

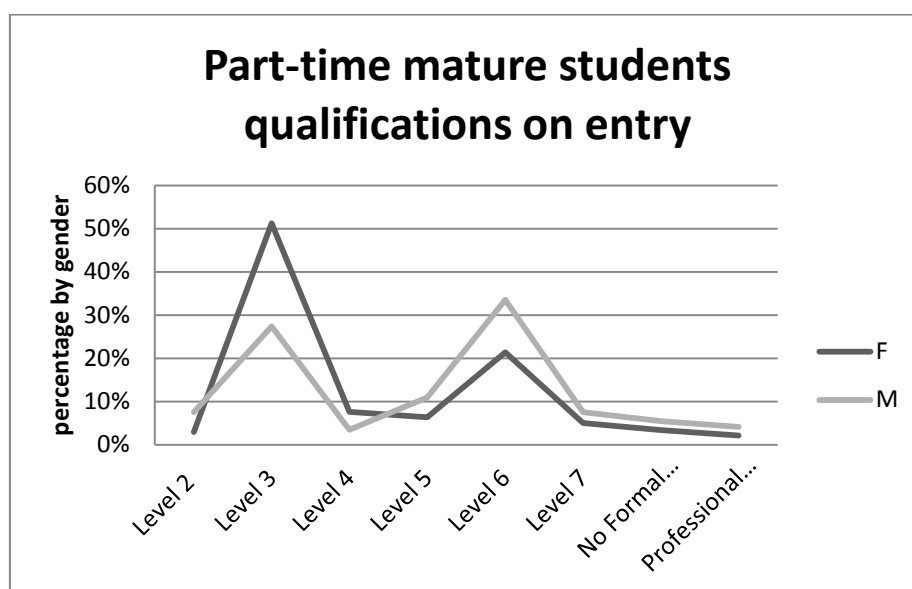


Figure 2. Part time mature students: highest qualifications on entry

Over 99% of students appear to be studying from home, providing identical term time and home postcodes. Whilst this is not a reliable measure, a sample of 50 home postcodes were mapped to the postcodes of the colleges and over 95% of students were resident within 10 miles of the college that they are studying at.

## Retention

A detailed analysis of retention is not possible from the data. However 211 out of 763 part-time students on HE in FE programmes withdrew without completing an award. This equates to around 28% of the total. This does not seem to be influenced by gender as 28% of women and 27% of men withdrew from their studies. However there is a marked difference in the pattern of withdrawal between men and women. Female students' withdrawal is highest between the ages of 21-25 years (32%) but then remains between 23% and 28% between 25-30 and 55-60. By contrast male students' withdrawal varies considerably with marked peaks at 35-40 (39%) and 55-60 (38%) and a low point 40-45 (14%). However it should be noted that the smaller numbers of male students in the sample may contribute to the increased variability.

## **Discussion**

The sampling method, the small number of courses and the small number of students means that it is not possible to draw detailed conclusions from this data. However it is possible to make some observations with relation to the literature and specifically with regard to the research based on the dataset relating to Birkbeck and the Open University.

## HE in FE

The findings tend to support the concept of a 'dual sector' and 'complex interrelationships between providers' (Bathmaker et al 2008). All the colleges had multiple relationships with universities; several were involved with co-delivery either with the HEI or with other colleges.

The colleges in the sample fit well within the categorisation of FE colleges (Parry et al 2012), with a predominance of general FE colleges, and considerable unevenness of provision reflecting differing strategic responses. Parry et al (2012) notes the rise of the Foundation degree and the decline of HNC and HND awards since the introduction of Foundation degrees in 2001/02, identifying that today HNC and HND represent less than 25% of the undergraduate population (p45). The findings support this, with only 17% registered onto HNC and HND awards, and 47% on foundation degrees. Parry et al (2012) also suggests a vocational focus to HE in FE which fits with specialisation in the Further Education offer. Within the sample only 1 course out of 36 is not directly vocational. However the degree of specialisation seems to differ with the nature and location of the college and it seems likely that the relationship between FE teaching and HE provision is influenced by other factors. This is consistent with the complex landscape described by Bathmaker et al (2008) and influenced by strategic responses to the pressures and opportunities that come from specialist skills and facilities, local market conditions and collaboration with HEIs.

Stanton et al (2008) suggested that HE in FE has a significant role in widening participation. This is not evident in the findings which suggest that nearly 60% came from the top two Socio-economic categories, and less than one in five students came from NS-SEC 6, 7, 8 and 9.

## Part-time HE in FE

University UK (2013) identified a steady decline in the numbers of part-time mature students studying HE in FE between 2002/03 and a significant drop off after 2011/12 (p.21). Whilst

the findings do show a decline across the three years, it should be noted that the numbers actually increased between 2008/09 and 2009/10, and that the yearly totals of such a small sample could equally be affected by changes to the number of courses, mergers, staff changes etc.

Based on Birkbeck and Open University data, Feinstein et al (2007) found a 3:2 ratio of female to male mature students registered as part-time students (p.20). The findings from HE in FE in the West Midlands show a significantly higher female to male ratio of 4:1. This may be explained by the broad range of subjects covered by Birkbeck and Open University and the relatively importance of education in the West Midlands data set. Feinstein et al (2007:22) also suggest that the average age of graduates was 43, whilst the West Midlands data shows an average age of 35 on entry. Whilst the comparison of age on entry to age at graduation is improper, it would appear that the average age on entry for the West Midlands is probably around 5 years lower than either Birkbeck or the Open University. There is also a marked difference between the patterns of qualifications on entry to study. The Birkbeck and OU study considers highest qualifications on entry – discounting all postgraduate provision they found that in both institutions around 20% of part-time mature students taking a first degree already held an HE qualification. However for HNC and HND there was a marked difference 20% of OU graduates held a previous HE qualification, but in Birkbeck 51% of graduates already held a previous HE qualification. In the West Midlands data, 44% of all part-time mature students already held an HE qualification. Within this only 25% of students undertaking HND or Foundation degrees already had an HE qualification. By contrast 74% of part-time mature students enrolling on honours degrees had a previous HE qualification.

### Conclusion

Thus the data from a sample of FE colleges seems to be a fair representation of FE colleges although it is rather too small to draw definite conclusions from, and it may well be strongly influenced by regional and local factors. However despite these limitations, it seems clear that the cohort of part-time mature students shares characteristics with part-time mature students as defined through the Birkbeck and the Open University studies. However there are some marked differences with regard to gender ratios, ages, and qualifications on entry. Possibly these differences simply relate to the difference in time between the studies, or to variability of a small sample size. However it seems equally possible that the West Midlands data illuminates a different form of part-time mature student, one that is not represented within the existing studies. If so then this perhaps confirms the reservations expressed by Feinstein et al (2007:8):

It is important to emphasise that the characteristics of the students who study at Birkbeck and the OU may not be representative of the broader body of mature, part-time students in the UK.

### **Interviews with part-time mature students studying HE in a sample of West Midlands FE colleges 2008 to 2010**

Semi-structured Interviews were conducted with 10 part-time mature students identified through course leaders at FE colleges. Those sampled were asked questions about age,

gender and the type of course, in order to ensure that respondents were a representative sample based on the West Midlands FE colleges' data. As such interviews with 8 female and 2 male part-time mature students were conducted. Interviews were conducted with students within 1 standard deviation of the average age for male and female part-time mature students. Students' responses were then considered in relation to the classification of mature students (Osborne et al 2004). All categories were evident within this small sample, with 'escapees' being the most common category. Whilst some responses were fairly evident, a number of interviewees met multiple criteria. Thus, responses such as,

"I'm 48. I'm female; and currently a self-employed xxxx in the xxxx field ... I basically worked around my children and now four years ago they were reaching an age that I could be more independent myself away from them so I undertook further education to hopefully change my career".

Meet the criteria for 'escapees' as the interviewee is employed but wants a different career pathway. However it was more difficult to categorise interviewees where the interviewee did not articulate a career objective, and yet was undertaking a vocational study.

"I'm 30; and I'm studying for a xxxx Degree... I haven't got a profession; I am a student and a housewife"

In this case the interviewee seems to fit the category for 'personal growers' and yet also meets the criteria for a 'late starter'. Thus it is likely that these are not mutually exclusive categories.

The sample also contained a considerable number of people who were self-employed or who worked for a member of their own family. There are a number of possible reasons for this: possibly this is a pragmatic investment in human capital, or possibly it reflects independence of decision making in these types of organisations, and this does not seem to be reflected in the findings on socio-economic groups in the data set.

The interviews considered motivations to study, experiences of studying and barriers to studying through a series of questions. Within all categories there were recurrent themes relating to childcare, time management and travel. Thus when interviewees were asked about their decision to study part-time, 60% of respondents explained how this mode of study made it was easier to arrange childcare than full-time study related to childcare; 40% mentioned travel and 30% discussed the relative cost of study (including loss of income) for part-time and full-time study. In addition two students compared FE in HE with the Open University in particular the opportunity for regular contact with other students and tutors.

"I studied two modules at Open University. I did the full year and a half through Open University studying xxxx and what I really found that I wanted was more personal tuition and contact with fellow students. I felt that I could do better if I was, you know; studying something".

Several students also discussed the benefits of studying one day a week:

"I like the fact that you have a definite commitment of one day a week and that has not changed throughout the four years. So I have been able to work around that; and that has been really good for me".



When asked what determined the choice of an FE college, the answers again reflected considerable pragmatism, with a majority of respondents again identifying that distance from home was a major factor, although one response related to FE provision where the student had selected the college because they had previously studied there. Distance from home was linked by students to a number of other factors – cost of travel, loss of income, duration of child care.

“I’m a single parent... So I needed somewhere that was near to where I live. So that I could couple parenting along with studying.”

Despite suggestions by Osborne et al (2004) that mature students ‘face the prospect with considerable trepidation and uncertainty, particularly those with multiple responsibilities, and thus that their decisions were often highly constrained’ this did not appear confirmed by the interviews. Where students reported barriers to entry related to multiple responsibilities, they could also articulate simple means by which they had overcome these barriers, particularly with relation to the recurrent themes of childcare and time management.

“I’ve got to try and make sure I organise my time very effectively because as I say; I’m a single parent; I work twenty hours a week; and I’m also heavily involved in my church... So I have quite a busy life really. So to overcome those barriers I’ve had to just make sure I organise my time very, very effectively.”

These findings are similar to those in Burton, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths (2011), which found that there has been a significant shift away from the traditional barriers to study for mature students. This study considered barriers to learning for mature adult learners studying HE in FE at Neath Port Talbot college, and used the work of Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002) to develop broad grouping of dispositional, family and personal, socio-economic, financial and institutional and organisational factors. Although the study only considered full-time students, nonetheless the findings indicated that further education colleges were able to successfully implement systems that addressed all of the traditional barriers, particularly with regard to financial and accessibility issues.

Respondents were asked about the development of transferable skills. With regard to transferable skills the most commonly reported were research skills and time management, however responses also included preparation for further study, development of confidence, involvement in social events, networks of friends and intellectual stimulation.

“I think it brings your confidence back; knowing that you can actually go back to study because I left any kind of study at 18 and it does give you that boost that you are able to do it.”

However when asked whether there courses had a focus on employment related outcomes, most students were unsure of any direct impact on their employability:

“Not really; I mean the course has had quite a lot of sessions that are supposed to prepare us for employment - CV writing and that type of thing - but it hasn’t sort of prepared me for a work environment.”

However, as 80% of those interviewed were in employment it is possible that this area of provision was not valued by students. By contrast one student who had just completed their award stated,

“But I’m just starting to look at alternative employment and I think having this degree is a definite advantage to not having one at all; because I am able to apply for jobs now that I probably couldn’t have considered before because they just ask for a graduate requirement. So yes I do think it has benefitted me. Definitely.”

Finally part-time mature students were asked for their advice to potential mature learners. All responses indicated that the interviewees would encourage other potential learners to study part-time if they had the motivation to study, but cautioned about time management and childcare.

Overall the interviews point to well organised people who have made pro-active choices to study part-time at an FE college because of work and family commitments and who value a structured learning experience. They appear to have expectations of career development, value the skills and knowledge acquired on the course, and acknowledge the impact of studying on their self-image and confidence. As such they provide some support for the development of all 4 kinds of capital, but particularly for identity capital noted by Jamieson et al (2009). Indeed it is possible to interpret the way that the recurrent themes of childcare, time management and distance from home are presented by students as manageable issues for part-time mature students, as evidence of the development of a specific identity that combines pragmatism, ambition and competence, and is significantly different to full-time and distance learning students in higher education.

## **Conclusions and limitations**

The study provides a snapshot of HE in FE provision and provides some evidence of the experience of being a part-time mature student in this environment. Overall the study finds a rather patchwork range of courses with considerably less choice than is available through the OU or through university-based courses. However the study finds that part-time HE in FE attracts and recruits large numbers of mature students as it offers a convenient way of studying that overcomes many of the barriers to studying addressed in the earlier papers. Significantly the study also finds that there may be considerable differences between the types of students in the sample and those in papers based on data from Birkbeck and the Open University, and suggests that the working definition of a part-time mature student should be broadened to incorporate those choosing to study higher education courses in further education colleges, particularly where such definitions are used to inform policy such as Bennion et al (2011).

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