

Flexible Pedagogies: part-time learners and learning in higher education

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Flexible Pedagogies: preparing for the future

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Project background

This report is one strand of a broader HEA project structured around the theme of flexible learning; the overarching research question guiding the project was: “Why and to what extent might flexible pedagogies be promoted, and in what ways?”

The strand of the project presented in this report is concerned with part-time learning and learners. The focus of this strand was to:

- identify key drivers for an increasing move towards part-time learning with a focus on national and international policy initiatives;
- critique literature to highlight some of the challenges and opportunities created by part-time education;
- survey, collate and evaluate current activity relating to pedagogical theory and practice with a particular focus on part-time learners;
- identify and analyse relevant pedagogies and approaches within the context of flexible learning and delivery for part-time learners;
- present a selection of case studies which illustrate the nature and form of these pedagogies and approaches;
- provide recommendations and information about why and how institutions might work towards the implementation of these pedagogies and approaches within the context of flexible delivery.

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Report structure

The report is divided into the following sections:

- Section 1 provides an introduction to the project identifying key terminology and presenting a model which outlines core dimensions of flexible learning that are expanded upon in later sections.
- Section 2 provides an overview of the current HE landscape in relation to part-time learning and learners. This includes a discussion about numbers, terminology and demographics.
- Section 3 considers the decisions and actions taken by practitioners in order to develop and promote more flexible pedagogies for part-time learners. This includes an analysis of current activity relating to pedagogical theory and practice.
- Section 4 examines key stages in a learning journey for students embarking on a part-time course of study through the introduction of a student learning pathway.
- Section 5 concludes the report and presents a summary of key issues together with an outline of recommendations for future practice.

The report is supplemented with an [audit tool](#) structured around key stages in the student learning pathway.

Case studies

Reference is made in the report to a selection of case studies which illustrate how flexible pedagogies have been developed to support the needs of part-time learners. Colleagues working in a range of HE providers within the UK with experience of developing and teaching courses for part-time learners were invited to submit a case study in relation to one or more of the following themes:

- distance education - description and evaluation of a particular pedagogical approach that has been introduced into a course to accommodate the needs of part-time learners studying through distance education;
- learner engagement - particular approaches used to enable part-time learners to access course content/collaborate with each other etc;
- flexible assessment approaches - the design, delivery and/or evaluation of flexible assessment approaches for part-time learners;
- HE partnerships - work undertaken with HE partner institutions in designing and developing flexible pedagogies to meet the needs of part-time learners;
- technology enhanced learning (TEL) - particular pedagogical approaches that draw on digital technologies;
- employer engagement/partnerships - particular pedagogical approaches developed through employer engagement partnerships;
- new innovations – pilot work being undertaken to develop a new or pilot learning activity/course that includes part-time learners.

Respondents completed a case study pro forma outlining the background to the course/learning activity, a short description of the pedagogical approach and brief evaluative comments. A summary of each case study is presented in the report with links made to the more detailed online case studies (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of case studies

Number	Name	Institution	Title of case study	Key theme(s)	Link to online case study
1	Martin Toms	Professional Golfers Association/ University of Birmingham	Foundation degree in Professional Golf (FdSc)	Employer engagement/ partnership Distance education	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Birmingham_FdSc_golf
2	John W Davies	Coventry University	Using part-time students as mentors in civil engineering	Learner engagement	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/Coventry_mentors_CE
3	Jane Thomas	Swansea University	Bespoke public health – fit for purpose	Employer engagement/ partnership Flexible assessment	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/Swansea_public_health
4	Lorna Dodd	Newman University	The design and delivery of a blended MSc programme in Clinical Applications of Psychology	TEL Distance education	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/Newman_psychology
5	Angela Gardiner	University of Hull	Online, distance-based education within endoscopy and gastroenterology care	TEL Distance education	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_hull_endoscopy
6	Jeff Lewis	Cardiff Metropolitan University	Developing a flexible pathway for dental technicians learning through distance education	TEL Distance education	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/Cardiff_met_dental
7	Steve McCall	University of Birmingham	Online braille course	TEL Distance education	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Birmingham_braille
8	Andy Cramp	University of Wolverhampton	Learning as social practice online	TEL Learner engagement	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Wlv_social
9	Graham Gibbs	University of Huddersfield	MSc Social Research and Evaluation (distance learning)	TEL New innovations	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Hudd_social_research
10	Danielle Hinton	University of Birmingham	Online educational placement visits for specialist teachers	TEL Distance education	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Bham_placements
11	Stella Jones-Devitt,	Sheffield Hallam University	Thinking critically about assessment practices and processes for part-time students	Innovative assessment	http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/SHU_Assessment_marketed

I. Introduction

The report has been written in a rapidly changing landscape for higher education providers (HE providers) in the United Kingdom (UK). As an example, recent government reforms in England have seen a shift from block teaching grants to repayable tuition loans, with students starting university now expected to meet some or all of the cost of their education themselves. Within these reforms, the student experience is increasingly viewed as being at the heart of HE with institutions expected to deliver a more effective student experience, improving teaching, assessment, feedback as well as preparation for employment (e.g. BIS 2011).

While it is too early to speculate on the precise impact of these reforms on students and HE providers, there is some evidence that they may have influenced the number of part-time learners at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. As an example, recent evidence from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) shows “a dramatic decline” in the numbers of entrants to part-time courses over the past two years in England (HEFCE 2013). In speculating about the reasons for this decline, a HEFCE report notes that this “may be as a result of a reduction in the funding of, and demand for, vocational training programmes, as fewer employers support staff development and many people find it difficult to afford or take breaks for studies. A more challenging economic climate is also likely to have an impact on graduates’ decisions whether to progress to postgraduate study” (p11). This finding is supported in a recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) in noting that while the data are not yet available to examine this trend in depth, reduced demand is “the most significant issue regarding part-time education, and it appears that the sharply increased cost is an important factor in this: demand is down even among those eligible for loans, and although there has been a trend of diminishing demand for some years, it has accelerated considerably this year” (Maguire 2013, p1).

Alongside such policy changes, the traditional division between full-time and part-time learning is increasingly becoming less distinct as learners are looking for more flexible ways that allow individuals to choose ways of structuring their study around their work and family commitments. Thus, as noted by Pollard et al. (2012), in recent years there has been a move in the HE sector towards adopting the term “flexible provision” (p13), to reflect the fact that “the distinctions between full-time and part-time study are becoming even more blurred as full-time students work part-time (although usually in non-career jobs), students (full-time and part-time) engage in accelerated and decelerated forms of study, and there is greater emphasis on work-related learning at higher levels. The more such flexibility is encouraged, generally the less valid the emphasis on part-time study, as such, becomes” (p268).

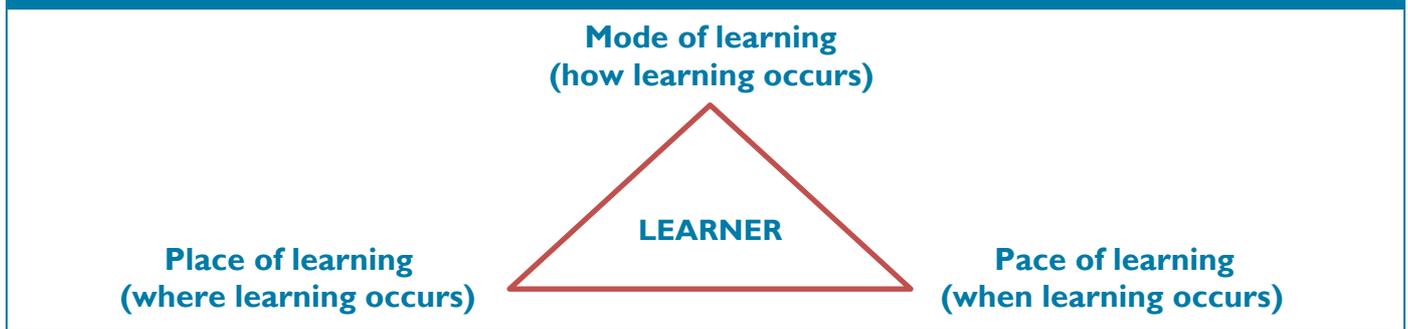
Similarly, technology is also changing at a rapid pace and developments in Internet access and mobile technologies means that for many learners the notion of “any time/any place” learning is increasingly becoming a reality both on and off the traditional campus. Digital technologies are allowing HE providers to change the way they undertake their core teaching activities – both with students and between students – with learning increasingly viewed as being more than content delivered in lecture-based format (or equivalent) (e.g. Sharples et al. 2012). In addition, developments in teaching within compulsory education have witnessed an increasing focus on use of TEL for delivery and assessment resulting in heightened student expectations about what a course of study in HE might include.

HE providers, therefore, have to explore new ways of meeting the needs of increasingly diverse learners as they seek to position themselves in a changing educational landscape that is increasingly student driven and market led. Placing the student experience at the centre of the system suggests students having a greater say, and potentially choice, in where, when and how they study, with institutions needing to take into account their particular learning needs. 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. As emphasised in the 2011 White Paper, this spectrum is very broad and, depending on their circumstances, some students will choose to “undertake a foundation degree, Higher National Diploma (HND), Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Apprenticeship, while others enter higher education later in life after a period in the workforce, or move onto a higher education qualification having already undertaken some vocational learning. Some want to work or take care of their family alongside studying part-time while others want to study more intensively, compressing a three-year degree into one or two years” (BIS 2011, p46).

Such diversity poses some challenging issues for institutions to address in relation to their mission statements and related learning and teaching strategies. At the core of this discussion will be a consideration of just how flexible a given credit-bearing activity should, or indeed can, be at various stages in a student learning pathway, taking into account a given pedagogical model of learning, or particular institutional processes and systems within which the learning takes place.

In reporting on the findings of the *HEA Flexible Learning Pathfinders Project*, Outram (2011) reports that although “definitions of flexible learning vary and are often too general or nebulous for systematic analysis, most commentators agree that flexible learning is about how, where, when, and at what pace learning occurs” (p7), essentially extending choice for learners in relation to when they learn, how they learn, where they learn and at what pace. As shown in Figure 1, this view of flexible learning can be illustrated through the dimensions of pace of learning, place of learning and the mode of learning.

Figure 1: Model to illustrate flexible learning through the dimensions of pace, place and the mode



Promoting greater flexibility in learning can serve to attract and meet the needs of a diverse range of students, increasingly drawing on new technologies including institutional virtual learning environments (iVLEs) to provide opportunities for asynchronous, off-campus learning, possibly accompanied by face-to-face interaction. In recent years mobile technologies have provided even greater opportunities for flexible learning, serving to “enhance not only the flexibility of learning but also the immediacy and the interactivity associated with active rather than passive learning and teaching methods” (Outram 2009, p3). Indeed, Elliot (2011) notes that within HE “probably our greatest opportunity to create more flexible and personalised teaching comes through the use of digital teaching tools” suggesting that they are “vehicles for communication - student-to-student and staff-to-student discussions and interactions, knowledge creation and knowledge storage. Importantly, they can operate together with strategies, such as one-to-one phone/Skype conversations, emails and student workshops and visits, to deliver whole units (subjects) and whole courses” (p938).

While the potential impact of new digital technologies is difficult to predict with certainty there can be no doubt that students and staff inhabit a different landscape in HE from one they would have even two years ago. New technologies demand a review of established pedagogical approaches as well as institutional structures for part-time learners, and institutions such as the Open University and JISC have been at the forefront of developing these and disseminating practice within the sector (e.g. Sharples et al. 2012, JISC 2010). Importantly, however, as noted in the HEA Pathfinders project, while digital technologies are clearly enabling greater potential flexibility in learning, as examined later in the report, flexibility can also be introduced in other ways, including for example the development of accelerated programmes, which do not necessarily extensively incorporate technological delivery methods (Outram 2011).

The various issues that need to be considered when seeking to promote greater flexibility in learning for part-time learners are captured succinctly by Elliot (2011) in highlighting the need to “boost on-line delivery of learning, to re-think pedagogy and to recast course structures, scheduling and professional experience (clinical) components to better accommodate students who need more flexible study options” (p935). Elliot proposes drawing on demonstrated success stories of what works in making higher education more attractive to students who are isolated by distance or family and work requirements, calling for “institutional commitment and faculty support for more flexible, choice-driven, technologically-rich pathways for all students, not just *equity groups*” (p935). Further, she argues that off-campus online learning, and other personalised, multi-modal and “just-in-time” learning experiences are legitimate and as such should be considered as being “normal and integral to the traditional approaches with which they are so often contrasted” (p935). A similar sentiment is expressed in the literature by a number of authors (e.g. Maguire 2013) and as such serves as a challenge to the HE sector in seeking to change institutional systems and established pedagogies to ensure they are more inclusive of the needs of part-time learners.

Student learning pathway

A key focus of this report is to identify and analyse suitable pedagogies and approaches within the context of flexible learning and delivery for part-time learners. For the purpose of the report pedagogy is considered as referring to the “actions and decisions taken by tutors to promote, or guide, student learning at a course or curriculum level”. This is in keeping with Laurillard (2013) who argues that pedagogy is about “guiding learning rather than leaving you to find your own way”, putting the onus on the teacher “to guide the learner’s journey to a particular and productive end” (p xvii). An important message to emerge from the literature is that developing greater flexibility in the use of such approaches for part-time learners needs to be contextualised within a broader consideration of the overall pedagogical environment in which learning takes place (be this campus, virtual or a blend of both). The vehicle used to illustrate a broader learning journey for students embarking on a part-time course of study therefore is the student learning pathway which identifies significant stages from application through to exit and/or progression. While the broad stages within such a pathway for part-time students will be similar to those studying through full-time education, the selected activities within each may differ in a number of important respects (e.g. online induction activities as an alternative to campus attendance; lectures presented through digital technologies; alternative assessment and feedback arrangements etc). An **audit tool** structured around the student learning pathway accompanies this report and is intended to serve as a reference point for tutors when seeking to review their own practice, with a view to developing and promoting greater flexibility in the learning opportunities provided for part-time learners in the future HE landscape.

2. Overview of the educational landscape for part-time learners

Introduction

The need to develop new ways of learning for part-time learners within the context of higher education (HE) has become an important issue in recent years, linked with demands for increased flexibility to reflect changes in the way people will study in higher education. As an example, the 2011 English higher education White Paper *Students at the heart of the system* makes reference to the lifelong nature of education stating that the “opportunities and enjoyment it offers should be available to people throughout their lives in different forms: full-time and part-time; academic and vocational, whatever will help them achieve their goals at that stage of their life. Our education and skills systems must make this possible.” (BIS 2011, p4).

In a recent study examining part-time education, Maguire (2013) emphasises that “part-time education – whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level – is an extremely important element in higher education in this country”, helping to “widen participation, offering opportunities to people who may not have achieved highly at school or who may have made wrong choices at an earlier stage, and it is an essential element in developing the nation’s skill base” (p2). A number of drivers, including a change in the fee structure, mean that more students may choose to work while studying in HE, with the result that the sector will need to identify appropriate pedagogies that will empower student learning, offering them increased choice, and facilitate high quality provision. A recent report by HEFCE outlines the shift in the way universities and colleges are now funded with students starting university expected to meet much of the cost of their education themselves, through access to publicly-funded loans. As considered later, a key finding in investigating the impact of these reforms on students and HE providers, however, has been the significant drop in part-time learners (HEFCE 2013), with the report noting that as data are made available, it will be important to understand the reasons for this decline, and to support action where necessary.

Definition of part-time learners

As might be expected, there is no single definition of part-time learners or part-time learning. Indeed, as Maguire (2013) notes defining part-time learning/study usually relies on a threshold based on credit or study hours. A commonly used definition in the UK is that provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) which makes a distinction between full-time and part-time students based on a full-time threshold of either 21 hours per week or 24 weeks per year (HESA 2013). The HESA definition of full-time includes those students who are:

- recorded as studying full-time and are normally required to attend an institution for periods amounting to at least 24 weeks within the year of study;
- enrolled on a sandwich course (thick or thin) regardless of whether or not they are in attendance at the institution or engaged in industrial training;
- on a study-related year out of their institution.

During this time, students will normally be expected to undertake periods of study, tuition or work experience which amount to an average of at least 21 hours per week for a minimum of 24 weeks study/placement. In certain types of analysis undertaken by HESA, full-time and sandwich modes of study are shown separately.

The HESA definition of part-time includes students who are recorded as studying part-time, or are studying full-time on courses lasting less than 24 weeks, on block release, or studying during the evenings only. Where the HESA analysis includes further education (FE) level students, part-time includes those recorded as studying part-time, or studying full-time on courses lasting less than 24 weeks, on block release, or studying during the evenings only, plus those students on FE continuous delivery.

As indicated in the Introduction however, a view of learning that is conceptualised as being either full-time or part-time increasingly will not capture the nuances of the different study modes available across the sector (as illustrated for example, through the sandwich mode of study described above), nor indeed the various study choices an individual might make over the course of his or her learning journey within HE. Three examples are provided in Box 1 to illustrate different combinations of study pathways in relation to the dimensions of pace, place and mode of learning (Figure 1).

Box 1 Illustration of different combinations of study pathways

Student A. Attends three different institutions over a three-year study pathway. She uses accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) to transfer credit between institution one and two.

Nature of study	Year	Pace	Place	Mode
Credit-bearing undergraduate modules 1-3	1	Three 20 credit modules in one academic year	Higher education institution one	Part-time – one year study with campus-based sessions
Credit-bearing module 4	2	APEL modules 1-3. Studies one module in one term.	Higher education institution two	Part-time – distance education supported with regional tutorials
Credit-bearing modules 5-6	3	One year.	Further education college	Part-time – evening study. Campus-based sessions

Student B. Attends three different institutions over an eight-year study pathway. He completes his study pathway by completing an employment related diploma.

Nature of study	Year	Pace	Place	Mode
Credit-bearing modules towards undergraduate degree.	1-3	Three-year undergraduate study	Higher education institution one	Full-time – campus-based study
Credit-bearing modules towards MA.	4-5	One-year masters	Higher education institution two	Part-time – distance education supported with regional tutorials
Credit-bearing modules towards a diploma.	7-8	Two-year diploma	Higher education institution three	Part-time – distance education supported with residential study components

Student C. Attends three different institutions over an eight-year study pathway. She completes her study pathway through an employment-sponsored module undertaken at a local FE college.

Nature of study	Year	Pace	Place	Mode
Credit-bearing modules towards foundation degree	1-2	Two year	Further education college one	Full-time – college-based study
Credit-bearing modules towards undergraduate degree	4-6	Three-year UG study	Higher education institution one	Part-time – distance education supported with regional tutorials
Single module	7-8	One semester	Further education college two	Part-time – distance education supported with residential study component

A recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) exploring the needs of part-time students within HE notes that the traditional divide between full-time and part-time modes of study is increasingly outdated, and that “the sector would be better served by a system focused on the concept of flexible study that views all learners as the same irrespective of the intensity with which they study” (Maguire 2013, p2).

Numbers and demographics of part-time learners

Part-time students form a significant proportion of the total student HE population. As an example, the HEPI report on part-time learners indicates that taking undergraduate and postgraduate students together in 2010-11 there were 823,895 students studying part-time and 1,677,305 studying full-time with part-time students representing 33% of the total student population by headcount (Maguire 2013). The most recent HEFCE report (HEFCE 2013) reveals interesting information about the make-up of the part-time student population in England:

- part-time students are more likely to be non-traditional learners and are more likely to be mature. As an example, in 2010, 79% of students enrolling on part-time undergraduate courses were over 25, compared with 13% for full-timers;
- one in four of these students studying at undergraduate level had no qualifications above GCSE or equivalent, or no qualifications at all;
- the data from HESA and the Individualised learner record show that, in 2011, young students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were twice as likely as the most advantaged young students to choose to study part-time rather than full-time;
- a higher proportion of part-time students are likely to have caring responsibilities – two-thirds of part-time students have family commitments;
- a reduction in part-time numbers will have a disproportionate effect on certain groups of students, with non-traditional learners likely to be most affected.

As noted in the Introduction, however, more recently there has been a marked decrease in the number of students taking part-time courses, with the most recent HEFCE report highlighting the decline in the number of entrants to both undergraduate and postgraduate part-time courses in England (HEFCE 2013). Indeed, it is reported by HEFCE that the numbers of part-time undergraduate entrants have fallen by 40% since 2010 (equivalent to 105,000 fewer students) with a 27% fall reported for part-time postgraduate entrants (equivalent to 25,000 fewer students) between 2010-11 and 2012-13. Of interest is that the already smaller number of entrants to part-time postgraduate research courses also fell during the same period by 7%, to around 4,000. The HEFCE report notes that a large proportion of part-time courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level is provided by a small number of institutions, which offer distinctive forms of part-time provision (e.g. The Open University, Edge Hill University, Birkbeck University of London). However, it emphasises that while a fall in recruitment at these institutions accounts for a significant proportion of the reported decline, it does not explain the scale of reductions across the sector.

In elaborating on the potential influences for the decline in student numbers the HEFCE report outlines a number of possibilities:

- impact of fee changes. Following the fee changes in 2012, part-time undergraduate students in England have access to tuition fee loans. However, feedback from universities and colleges suggests that many students and employers may not fully understand the new system, or are concerned about whether they will obtain sufficient value from the higher investment;
- withdrawal of courses. Some institutions have withdrawn courses which in the past attracted mainly part-time students;
- economic factors. The general state of the economy and fluctuations of the labour market are considered to be likely factors affecting the take-up of part-time study.

As approximately 80% of undergraduate part-time learners are in employment, funding by employers is noted as being important for this group, particularly for taught postgraduate qualifications and for other provision offered at further education colleges, such as foundation degrees. Further, it has been argued that not only is it likely that large numbers of part-time students have been put off study by the increased cost, but also that the measure that the Government put in place in the hope of offsetting the potentially off-putting impact of the cost increase has not been effective (Maguire 2013).

Of particular significance to this project strand is the suggestion in the HEFCE report that in response to falling numbers HE institutions will have to respond by developing innovative models of flexible as well as more affordable learning:

“More traditional part-time provision will have to continue to respond to new, innovative forms of higher education, such as the continuing development of online learning, which is already a key element in the delivery of many part-time courses. Lower-cost models of higher education and increasing flexibility in where and when learning happens may be attractive to both students and employers. They may also be attractive to students for whom more traditional part-time study is not an option. Any response to part-time decline will need to take account of the need to support a diverse range of students, including providing more responsive financial support, and to encourage beneficial innovation in course delivery.” (HEFCE 2013, p15)

Providers of part-time education

As the 2011 Higher Education White Paper reports there is a wide range of different providers and courses with over 1,600 public and private bodies offering some form of UK higher education provision. The part-time scene is dominated by the OU which in 2010-11 was, by headcount, more than ten times the size of the second biggest provider (Edge Hill University) and had 25% of all registered part-time students. There is acknowledgment in the 2011 Higher Education White Paper that for many people, entry to higher education will not necessarily follow the established route of A-levels through to a traditional full-time three-year degree. Approximately 250 of the HE providers are further education (FE) colleges which are described as having a distinctive mission particularly in delivering locally-relevant, vocational higher-level skills such as HNCs, HNDs, foundation degrees and apprenticeships, and which it is reported have displayed strengths in reaching out to non-traditional higher education learners which include mature and part-time students (BIS 2011). There is explicit acknowledgment in the White Paper of the importance of such non-prescribed higher education provision offered by these colleges, with the courses mainly studied on a part-time basis by students over 25 in employment. This kind of learning is described as being increasingly offered on a very flexible basis and includes distance and online learning which allows students to build their study around their working and family responsibilities (BIS 2011).

A report for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) on expanding and improving part-time higher education provides an overview of the numbers of students studying in FECs (Parry et al. 2012). Of particular note in the report is the proportion of part-time students taught in the FE sector. As an example, the report notes in 2009-10, approximately one in 12 higher education students (8% of the HE population) were taught in FECs consisting of 177,000 students studying for undergraduate, postgraduate and other higher level qualifications in the further education sector. The majority of this group (61%) were studying courses of undergraduate education with over a third (36%) studying for other higher-level qualifications. The remaining group (3%) were classified as postgraduate students. As noted by the Association of Colleges (AoC), when non-prescribed professional programmes are included, the majority of what is called “higher education in further education” or “college-based higher education” is delivered on a part-time basis, often to people who wish to improve their career prospects (AoC 2011).

In reporting on the experience of part-time students in a number of case study FE colleges, the BIS report concludes however that the experiences of the part-time college students were not as good as those of their full-time peers, or those of part-time university students, especially in relation to personal support and feedback (BIS 2012). Of particular note was that the colleges’ support structures appeared to be geared more successfully towards the needs of younger full-time students with a suggestion that colleges are not able to offer substantially more flexible provision than higher education institutions (HEIs). It is noted for example, that although “their management cultures and organisational structures promote greater adaptability, colleges are subject to significant external constraints imposed not just by validating HEIs but also professional bodies and employers accrediting agencies” and, as such, HE in FE “is more flexible in some respects, but more rigid in others” (BIS 2012, p182).

Delivery models of part-time learning

As indicated in the introduction, a range of delivery models are drawn upon for part-time learners in HE. Callender et al. (2010) have outlined a helpful typology of models, which includes:

- provision that is fully integrated with full-time provision or in-filled to full-time courses;
- mixed provision where some part-time provision is integrated,
- Credit-bearing modules towards UG degree but other courses are provided separately;
- separate part-time provision which is the responsibility of a school/university department;
- programmes that have an equivalent full-time course and others that do not (free-standing part-time provision).

The particular ways of delivering a course of study within these models includes:

- full online delivery with no campus-based requirements;
- blended learning – i.e. various combinations of remote and face-to-face options;
- day or block release – i.e. required attendance for specified days;
- flying faculty – i.e. faculty travel to a given institution to teach a particular unit of study;
- residential study components – i.e. on campus, short teaching blocks that may include weekend delivery.

As Pollard et al. (2012) note, it is rare for any model to be offered in isolation, and while “one particular model may dominate part-time delivery in an institution, particularly undergraduate studies, within some departments and for some types of provision, other delivery models exist” (p79). They report that “a mixed model is frequently observed” considered to be “an artefact of historical developments in institutions – and their departments – rather than deriving from centralised strategy” (p79). It is noted for example, that part-time courses can be offered in collaboration with a partner institution, including for example the student’s employer (e.g. vocationally focused and/or employer sponsored courses). Such “employer-led part-time provision” is considered to be different from other part-time provision, and although it is almost “exclusively part-time, it tends to entail closed courses developed for specific employers or sectors, which are low-intensity module-based courses

resulting in a university certificate (at sub-degree level) and university credits” (Pollard et al. 2012, p14). An example of a part-time course developed in partnership with the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) is presented in Case study 1 (overleaf).

Case study 1: Foundation degree in Professional Golf (FdSc) part-time distance learning programme in partnership with the University of Birmingham

Martin Toms: University of Birmingham

The FdSc programme is a 240 credit foundation degree which is delivered part-time through distance learning and an annual one-week residential block. It is delivered by the Professional Golf Association (PGA) and taught at The Belfry. A requirement for undertaking the programme is that the student must be employed by a PGA Professional for at least 30 hours per week at a golf facility, which will allow them the opportunity to apply the theory they learn. As well as academic entry requirements, an additional requirement is that they must have become an assistant professional (through a process linked to golfing ability and a required handicap of 4.4 or better) meaning they lose their amateur status. The programme itself is a reflection of the development of the golf industry and is directly aligned to membership of the PGA and therefore provides an industry standard licence to be employed. The programme has evolved over the past five years from a study guide paper-based system to an online integrated virtual learning environment (VLE) system. The students receive all their materials electronically and are able to access online lectures and web-related tasks. As the programme is available globally, the PGA can deliver to an international audience through an integrated VLE.

A more detailed case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Birmingham_FdSc_golf

The student experience of part-time learning

The most up-to-date national data relating to the part-time student experience derives from the National Student Survey (NSS) which is conducted annually in the UK with students who are about to graduate. The NSS scale scores serve only as broad indications of the student experience however and as such are of limited value for institutions in seeking to enhance their provision. Recent studies examining the student experience of part-time learning in greater depth range from small-scale projects at a course level (e.g. Freeman 2010), to wider-scale comparative surveys undertaken across institutions (e.g. Yorke and Longden 2008). The Yorke and Longden (2008) study was based on a survey of 11 post-1992 universities in the UK. Each HEI participated in a web-based survey of their part-time students on taught programmes which ranged from Masters degrees to short courses. The findings indicate that, in general, the respondents (n=2871) had a strongly positive view of their part-time studies. However, it is reported that part-time study is particularly demanding for many students who have to juggle more commitments than do students on full-time programmes. Key findings from the study of particular relevance to this report included:

- the predominant reason given for opting for part-time study over full-time study was that it allowed study to be undertaken alongside other commitments. The flexibility that part-time study allowed, and its relative affordability, were the second and third most acknowledged reasons;
- the most frequently-stated reason given for studying was the students' desire to improve their capability in their current job. The possibility of gaining promotion and preparation for a career switch were significant for smaller proportions of respondents;
- around two-thirds of respondents overall reported that they had made the choice of programme. Relatively infrequently was the decision solely the choice of an employer; when employers were involved, the decision was more likely to involve both employer and potential student;
- where employment-related study was the focus, tuition fees were met by more than two-thirds of students' employers; however, the level of employer support for ancillary expenses was considerably lower.

Responses to survey items relating to the student experience were generally positive. The highest scale scores were found in the areas of programme quality, the engagement with others on the programme, and institutional services (especially library and computing provision). Of particular interest was the finding that some aspects of provision elicited responses that were at variance with the general run of responses. It was found for example, that whereas students tended to be positive about coping with academic demands, they were less so where balancing the calls on their time was concerned. In addition, whereas programme quality was generally given a positive rating by respondents, programme organisation was not with the free-response comments indicating two main aspects of concern about programme organisation:

- part-time students infilling on full-time programmes - the main complaint reported by respondents was that insufficient attention was given to their part-time status in the way in which the programme was implemented;
- administrative and other institutional services - it was reported that these were not available at the times when the part-time students attended the institution.

The authors concluded that the most important issue raised by the study is “whether institutions make provision appropriate to the needs of part-time students, and avoid making the uncritical assumption that part-time students can simply be accommodated on programmes designed for their full-time counterparts”, providing what are termed as “pointers towards institutional self-analysis and action” (Yorke and Longden 2008.,p3). These pointers include:

- part-time learners’ needs - acknowledgement by institutions that their part-time students are, by definition, less free than their full-time counterparts to engage with their institution on the institution’s terms;
- inclusion of part-time students on full-time programmes - it is reported that the issues raised in the study invite institutions to consider whether their provision for part-time students is in need of enhancement to ensure it does not reflect a bias towards full-time study, and that the needs of part-time students are adequately taken into account (e.g. induction into the institution and its facilities, provision of support regarding study skills);
- administrative services - concerns were expressed about the opening hours of administrative offices; library provision, and rules relating to borrowing and fines; information technology; and catering.
- academic support - concerns were noted about the deadlines for the submission of assignments; the provision of feedback; and the viability of some pedagogic approaches (e.g. group work) for part-time learners;
- social issues - a number of social issues were identified as being significant for some respondents with a few older respondents reporting they felt that their life experience was insufficiently respected by academic staff and/or the way that they were treated was inappropriate. Others pointed to the desirability of having greater interaction with peers (for learning and mutual support), and to wanting more of an opportunity to engage in the social aspects of higher education.

Conclusion

This section has presented an overview of the educational landscape for part-time learners in the UK. It serves to highlight the significance of these learners to the HE landscape, their relevance to widening participation (WP) agenda, links with employability agenda, the role of the FE sector, issues relating to the student experience of part-time education and, of particular note, the recent decline in part-time student numbers linked possibly to increased student fees. Of significance is that despite the large number of students already engaged in part-time education, as Maguire notes “only a minority of those capable of doing so actually study at university so there remains considerable potential for expansion of part-time (and full-time) numbers and therefore even greater future benefits are possible” (p2).

Recent studies highlight the complex pattern of provision for part-time students in HE with evidence that the way in which HEIs organise their part-time study options vary, not just between institutions but also within institutions, along a spectrum with integrated provision at one end and bespoke provision at the other (Pollard et al. 2012). The advent of new technologies has somewhat blurred the traditional dichotomies that focus on part-time and full-time modes of study or “campus v non-campus” attendance. Indeed there is a move away from hard and fast definitions that could “have the potentially unintended effect of restricting the flexibility of provision – one of the advantages that students identify with the part-time model” (Pollard et al. 2012, p17), towards the broader notion of flexible learning.

3. Flexible learning approaches for part-time students

Introduction

As indicated in the introduction, HE providers are having to address fresh challenges to meet the needs of increasingly diverse learners as they seek to position themselves in a changing educational landscape that is increasingly student driven and market led. Placing the student experience at the centre of the system suggests students having a greater say in where, when and how they study with institutions needing to take into account their particular learning needs. Pollard et al. (2012) assert that “one of the key attractions of part-time study is the flexibility it provides for learners to combine study with the rest of their lives. The greater the flexibility that students have in the way they can study, the more likely they are to do so” (p268). In this section these issues are considered further in the broad context of flexible learning and, in particular, how the dimensions of pace, place and mode (Figure 1) can be helpful when reviewing how to provide part-time learners with choices regarding where, when, and how their learning occurs.

Pedagogy and part-time learners

As highlighted in previous sections part-time learners constitute a heterogeneous group with evidence to suggest they will be taught through a wide range of delivery models over a given time period. The particular pedagogical approaches adopted within a given model of delivery will therefore depend on a number of factors including:

- the nature of the learner (e.g. age, previous work and study experiences, etc);
- the level of study (e.g. foundation degree, HND, UG, PG, etc.);
- the theoretical and/or practical orientation of the course;
- the institutional support structures;
- links with partner institutions and/or employer engagement.

As an example, in relation to undergraduate students studying through part-time means, the findings of Pollard et al. (2012) provide “indications of a distinctive part-time pedagogy” where these students “formed the majority of a teaching group, or a free-standing teaching group (generally in large-scale providers)” (p84). It is noted that since part-time students tend to be older than full-time peers, and bring with them both work and life experiences, the selected pedagogy “can draw on their experiences to enrich the curriculum. Specialist part-time providers are able to elaborate and expand on the differences of managing part-time student groups. Generally, part-time pedagogy can take an applied approach relating theory to practice” (p84). This finding is illustrated through case study 2 which shows how the expertise of part-time students is drawn upon as a resource to support the learning needs of full-time students studying for a Civil Engineering degree.

Case study 2: Using part-time students as mentors

John Davies: Coventry University

The case study is based on the MEng/BEng in Civil Engineering. Full-time and part-time students are mostly taught together with part-timers making up about 30% of the cohort. Part-time students study on day-release, with most working as technicians in the civil engineering industry. A distinct advantage of part-time study is that they can place theoretical concepts in a practical engineering context, and can apply their workplace skills and their professional motivation to their studies. In contrast, the full-time students tend to find it difficult to get professional experience before graduation. Part-time students at the University are exempt from a programme of employability modules (10 credits a year). Instead the students on the Civil Engineering course gain these credits by participating in a scheme designed to allow them to use their industry knowledge and contacts to benefit full-time students. The aim is to give full-time students the opportunity to have structured contact with practising professionals, so that the knowledge and experience of the part-time students can be harnessed to increase the full-time students’ awareness of the civil engineering profession and of the skills required for success. Similar practice is also being adopted at three other universities supported by practice adopters funding from the National HE STEM Programme.

A more detailed case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/Coventry_mentors_CE

The study by Pollard et al. (2012) identified a number of features of good practice in supporting part-time students. Although it is noted that such practice varies by type of part-time study, the evidence from the case studies reported in the Pollard et al. study suggest some or all of the following:

- strategic commitment by the HEI to ensure that part-time study is seen as a legitimate study pathway by the HEI and not considered as a residual or deficit form of learning;
- flexible forms of delivery, including:
- length of course – so students can build up their own programme;
- speed of progression through the course – so they can accelerate or decelerate;
- flexible forms of assessment;
- entry points – so part-time students do not have to start at a particular point in the year that is designed to fit in with school leaving dates;
- exit points – so a part-timer can leave before fully completing a course but with some credits when they feel they have achieved their learning aims or their circumstances change;
- onward progression opportunities – so they know they can move on if they want to.

These findings pose some challenging issues for institutions to address in relation to their learning and teaching activities at a strategic level. At the core of this discussion is consideration of just how flexible a given credit-bearing course activity should, or indeed can be, within a given pedagogical model of learning, or in relation to particular institutional processes. As an example, building in flexibility to allow individually negotiated start and/or end dates for learners may be appropriate for some students when undertaking particular types of courses, but could then create challenges if aspects of the course were structured around the basis of collaborative learning opportunities with students in online tutorial groups (i.e. working together on joint activities at the same time).

Flexible learning for part-time students

The HEA Flexible Learning Pathfinders project notes that while there are many definitions of what constitutes flexible learning, “at its heart is a concern to give the learner as much choice as possible in relation to when, where and how learning occurs” (Outram 2009, p3). Examples cited in the Pathfinders project of how courses can be made more flexible include:

- accelerated or fast-track degrees - the duration of a programme might be concentrated, such as a three-year honours degree being undertaken in two years;
- decelerated degrees - the duration may be lengthened to increase flexibility – for example, a three-year programme being undertaken over an extended period of time (e.g. four years);
- personalisation of learning - this includes allowing the learner greater choice over content, by permitting roll-on/roll-off enrolment and through offering systems for the APEL as well as prior accredited learning (APL).

As such flexible learning can serve to attract and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse range of students, drawing where appropriate on new technologies to provide opportunities for asynchronous, off-campus learning, possibly accompanied by face-to-face interaction. Further, in recent years mobile technologies have provided greater opportunities for flexible learning, serving to “enhance not only the flexibility of learning but also the immediacy and the interactivity associated with active rather than passive learning and teaching methods” (Outram 2009, p3).

The broad dimensions of flexible learning outlined in Figure 1 (i.e. pace, place and mode of learning) provide a useful framework to consider:

- when learning takes place (e.g. the timing of classes and assessments including evenings and weekends);
- where learning takes place (e.g. off-campus learning at home and/or at work, or while travelling or commuting);
- how a student learns (i.e. the learning and teaching methods, assessment formats etc), (Outram 2011).

The significance of these dimensions to part-time learners is presented in Box 2.

Box 2 Flexible learning dimensions and part-time learners

Flexibility in the pace of learning for part-time learners (when learning takes place)

Building in flexibility to the pace of learning has relevance to part-time learners as it provides opportunities either to accelerate or decelerate the duration of the course, be this a three-year undergraduate degree or a masters qualification. This dimension encompasses duration (e.g. accelerated and decelerated courses), different blends of part-time learning, recognition of prior learning and the associated use of credit frameworks. This aspect can also include flexibility of pace within a set deadline for completion of a course (e.g. allowing students to choose when to submit an assessment component within a defined timeframe).

Flexibility in the place of learning for part-time learners (where learning takes place)

Flexibility in the place of learning provides opportunities for part-time learners to undertake their studies from a variety of locations. This dimension encompasses work-based learning projects, credit-bearing activities that are delivered in partnership with employers as well as distance education courses. The advent of mobile technologies allows for a greater variety of flexibility in the place of learning.

Flexibility in the mode of learning for part-time learners (how learning takes place)

Flexibility in the mode of learning provides opportunities for part-time learners to undertake their learning and assessment through different methods and formats. As recognised by (Outram 2011) this dimension includes flexibility in what is termed the *learning scaffolding* or *architecture* (i.e. the way in which the curriculum is structured and the choices that are available; the pathways a learner could take through the curriculum and progress; and the ways in which the quality management of learning might afford choice for the learner).

Outram (2011) reports that these different elements of student learning “comprise the student’s learning environment and as such one might examine the nature and scope of flexible learning environments” (p7-8). Table 2 illustrates a number of elements of learning provision within the broader learning environment, with examples provided of ways in which greater flexibility might be considered for part-time learners.

**Table 2: Areas of flexibility and flexible learning provision
(adapted from Collis and Moonen 2004, and Outram 2011)**

Time		Examples of flexibility/flexible learning provision for part-time learners
1	Starting and finishing a course	Flexibility in start/end dates through incorporating AP(E)L into course
2	Submitting assignments and interacting within the course	Particular assessment and feedback arrangements made for part-time students studying on conventional programmes (e.g. online submission and feedback, flexible submission dates)
3	Tempo/pace of studying	Flexibility in the length of time taken to gain a qualification or in the pace of learning (e.g. accelerated degrees)
4	Moments of assessment	Flexibility in assessment points, or assessment timings (i.e. so that students do not get assessments at the same time)
Content		
5	Topics of the course	Flexibility in the order in which topics are covered on the course to reflect background of learners
6	Sequence of different parts of the course	Flexibility in how the different parts of the course are sequenced allowing some parts to be taken in advance of others
7	Orientation of the course (theoretical, practical)	Articulation of the course orientation in relation to needs of part-time students (e.g. whether it emulates a conventional full-time course; has been designed according to employer needs/student experience, etc.)
8	Key learning materials of the course	Development of flexible learning resources to accommodate the needs of students not able to attend campus
9	Assessment standards and completion requirements	Flexibility in assessment (e.g. employment-led assessments), or completion requirements that reflect prior experiences (e.g. through submission of portfolio of evidence)
Entry requirements		
10	Conditions for participation. Instructional approach and resources	Flexibility through the use of AP(E)L.
11	Social organisation of learning (face to face; group; individual)	Flexibility introduced in the organisation of the programme to support student learning in different contexts (e.g. combination of face-to-face and one-to-one learning as well as distance learning)
12	Language to be used during the course.	Examples include statements of expectations provided about a course, what support is provided for part-time learners, etc.
13	Learning resources: modality, origin (instructor, learners, library)	The range of additional learning resources developed to support flexibility (e.g. access to e-books and/or online resources through institution library, etc.)
14	Instructional organisation of learning (assignments, monitoring)	Organisation of course to acknowledge particular needs of part-time learners and ensure they are not overloaded

Case study 3 illustrates how a public health module was designed to ensure the particular needs of part-time learners were drawn upon to provide effective, timely education to enable them to meet professional competences that were flexible, inter-sectoral and would meet specific employer requirements.

Case study 3: Bespoke public health – fit for purpose

Jane Thomas: Swansea University

Health protection is a core element of public health practice but challenging to teach beyond standard theoretical delivery and assessment. The 15 Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) M-level module was commissioned by Public Health Wales to raise the recognised theoretical and practice-based competence of public health practitioners from across Wales. The issues faced in meeting the commission included:

- a senior group of students unable to be released in the usual study day format of an extended period;
- diverse teaching content, requiring an all Wales approach;
- how to combine different types of competence in both the taught programme and the assessment;
- a requirement for rapid outcome through responsive, concurrent assessment.

The module design addressed these challenges in terms of mode and methods of delivery, inter-sectoral collaboration, innovative assessment and prompt feedback. The module was designed to be delivered intensively within a single working week with students working long days. All sessions were mapped to the learning outcomes, the National Occupational Standards and the UK Public Health Register (UKPHR) competencies. An important aspect about the pedagogical approach was the way individuals and the group were assessed in terms of contribution and performance. The examiner evaluation of the assessment process recognised the complexity of the process, the levels of analysis involved and the need for experienced assessors.

A more detailed case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/Swansea_public_health

Role of digital technologies in enhancing flexibility

Innovations in the use of technologies supported with consideration of appropriate pedagogical principles can serve to significantly enhance flexibility in relation to pace, place as well as mode of learning for part-time learners. Digital teaching technologies including VLEs are now commonly used as a means of HEIs engaging with students as well as for students to engage with each other without necessarily a need to attend campus. Indeed, as Elliot (2011) notes, the value of harnessing digital resources to strengthen pedagogy and learning is now well accepted, suggesting that in relation to part-time learners, they have the potential to “enrich learning environments, engage students and enhance learning outcomes.... facilitate pedagogical best practice, engage students and improve educational outcomes” (p937).

Three case studies are presented below to illustrate how digital technologies have been drawn upon to engage part-time learners who are geographically widespread.

Case study 4: Psychology

Lorna Dodd: Newman University

The MSc programme in Clinical Applications of Psychology comprises six taught modules, taught sequentially over two years and includes a research methods module and dissertation. It is delivered and assessed online using the institution's VLE – Moodle. Students are required to attend a one-day face-to-face campus-based programme induction prior to the commencement of the first module. The programme operates over the academic year and students can choose to study during the day, in the evening or at the weekend. Studying online enables students to be geographically widespread and gives them the flexibility to study at the most convenient time and place for them. The programme is underpinned by both synchronous and asynchronous learning and teaching methods (e.g. discussion forum and live chat rooms). It has been designed around notions of experiential learning with students expected to play an active part in each module of the programme. Each module is embedded with practical aspects to enable students to apply theory into a practical context.

A more detailed case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/Newman_psychology

Case study 5: Endoscopy and gastroenterology care

Angela Gardiner: University of Hull

Endoscopy and gastroenterology care are areas of specialist practice within healthcare which has seen a significant rise in the number of specialist, non-medical professionals requiring post-registration education. Given the nature of their role, students are substantively employed and are often mature. The programme is delivered online over three terms and is supported by optional workshops/study days at the start of each term. Owing to the geographical variations of the student group attendance is not compulsory although it is recommended. As a result of the non-compulsory aspect of the workshop, students who are not able to attend are not put at a disadvantage since all theoretical aspects of the modules are delivered online and relevant materials from the workshop are made available to those who are unable to attend. Theoretical elements are delivered via the University VLE with tasks being released on a weekly/fortnightly basis dependent upon activity and related work. A model of social and discovery learning has been adopted to enable students to gain skills in independent learning and contextualisation of key aspects into their own practice.

A more detailed case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_hull_endoscopy

Case study 6: Dental technology

Jeff Lewis: Cardiff Metropolitan University

This case study describes how use was made of video conferencing to provide a flexible pathway for dental technicians across the UK. Links between the University and the students workplace were set up using Adobe Connect Pro® web-based video-conferencing. This software allowed traditional types of information along with highly detailed images to be captured and broadcast and then used as re-usable learning objects for various purposes. The students were situated at geographic sites independent not only from the University but also one another and met in the virtual classroom on a weekly basis - there was no attendance to campus in the traditional sense. Much of the work required for the programme was carried out in the students' workplace. The institution's VLE was used extensively for access to learning resources. Work-based mentors were also identified and offered guidance to support the learner(s) at each laboratory. Accessibility, retention and student performance have all improved.

A more detailed case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/Cardiff_met_dental

Given the range of ways in which online learning and teaching can be implemented within higher education, it is useful to conceptualise models within which to cluster the different possibilities afforded by technology and so explore the various means by which technology can be blended within more established practice. An example is provided in relation to the design and delivery of a well-established approach to learning within HE called problem-based learning (PBL). By clustering the various features of this approach (traditionally delivered in a campus-based format) it is possible to identify broad models that differ in relation to the dimensions of place, pace and/or mode of learning. An example is presented in Box 3.

Box 3 Examples of models to illustrate how technology can be embedded within PBL activities for part-time learners

Model 1 – Campus-based delivery

Model 1 is a campus-based course that incorporates PBL activities. Part-time students attend the university campus for day release from their work place. Key features of this model include:

Place

- The course is delivered on campus one day a week and incorporates a number of small group PBL activities.
- The PBL activities take place in tutorial rooms on campus.
- Small group learning is facilitated through an academic tutor.
- The PBL activities are supported through use of an institutional virtual learning environment (iVLE). This includes a course Bulletin Board onto which tutors can post up information in advance of the activity, summary reports, additional resources, etc.

Pace

- Students attend the timetabled lectures and small group campus-based PBL activities.

Mode

- PBL activities are structured around face-to-face interactions (i.e. based on a traditional PBL tutorial setting).
- The problem brief is presented in hard copy format and supplemented with additional e-learning resources as appropriate.
- Students can access key resources during the activity through use of the Internet.

Model 2 – Distance education with campus-based components

Model 2 makes greater use of e-learning to complement established practice. The design is particularly applicable to distance education students who attend the campus for some study components. Key features of this model include:

Place

- The course is delivered through blended learning, combining hard copy and online resources (delivered through the iVLE).
- Students attend residential campus-based study components that include small group PBL activities.
- The PBL activities takes place in tutorial rooms on campus.
- Small group learning is facilitated through an academic tutor.
- The PBL activities are supported through use of an institutional virtual learning environment (iVLE). This includes a course bulletin board onto which tutors can post information in advance of the activity, summary reports, additional resources, etc.

Pace

- Students have flexibility in the pace at which they work through the online modules.
- They are required to attend the campus-based components on designated dates. This includes participation in the small group PBL activities.

Mode

- The problem brief is presented as an online case scenario – a summary is presented to students through the iVLE in advance of the session with further information provided on attending campus.
- The students meet in PBL groups to discuss the scenario, identify the learning issues and allocate tasks.
- Communication then takes place predominantly within the small group with a summary posted up on the iVLE.

Model 3 - Distance education with online components

Model 3 is delivered and supported through electronic means with no formal opportunities provided for face-to-face interaction. Learners are students studying through distance education with PBL activities undertaken through online means. Key features of this model include:

Place

- The course is delivered and managed entirely through electronic means (e.g. through WebCT).
- Communication is supported through synchronous (eg online chat rooms) and asynchronous means (eg online bulletin boards).
- Support is provided by online tutors.

Pace

- Students have flexibility in the pace at which they work through the online modules.
- They are required to engage in the online-based components on designated dates. This includes participation in the online PBL activities.

Mode

- Online PBL activities are used to develop learning and encourage communication and collaboration between the students.
- The problem brief is presented in the form of an online case scenario.
- E-learning resources include links to dedicated online resources.
- All communication takes place through the synchronous and asynchronous discussion boards.
- Each PBL group is required to note down their main findings and post up a group summary onto the course website for feedback/assessment.

The variations within each dimension serve to illustrate the means by which technology can be blended within established teaching practice and highlights the diversity in relation to when, where and how learning occurs in different blended models. It also highlights that while technology rich approaches will have a very different feel according to the particular course design and learner needs, as illustrated below they will be influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the learning perspective informing the particular design (Mayes and de Freitas 2004, 2013).

Learning perspectives

In considering the pedagogical principles that inform course design when using technology, Mayes and de Freitas (2004, 2013) argue that design decisions will need to be grounded in theoretical assumptions about learning and teaching more generally, with the role to be played by e-learning defined within this overall educational design process. Three perspectives that make different assumptions about what is crucial for understanding learning are outlined as being:

- learning as activity/behaviour (associative learning; building ideas step by step, training drills, etc);
- learning as social practice (situated learning; constructing ideas through dialogue; participating in communities of practice);
- learning as achieving understanding (constructivist learning through active discovery with learners actively constructing new ideas by building and testing hypotheses, etc).

Each of these perspectives makes different assumptions about how learning takes place, and while they inevitably tend to simplify the learning process, they serve as a useful basis for practitioners to draw upon when reviewing pedagogical practice for part-time learners. Indeed, Mayes and de Freitas (2004, 2013) argue that most implementations of e-learning in HE include blended elements that emphasise all three perspectives, and, as illustrated in case studies that feature in this report, there is an increasingly wide range of ways in which digital technologies will be drawn upon to increase the flexibility of part-time learners to enrich teaching and make programmes more accessible to a diverse student body. As illustrated below, these perspectives can be explicitly drawn upon to think about how to embed technologies into teaching practice in “pedagogically sound and accessible ways” (JISC 2004) to support learner engagement.

Engaging learners through an associative perspective - an assumption underpinning the associative perspective is that learning is viewed as acquiring competence (JISC 2004). As such, learners acquire knowledge through building associations between different concepts and will develop skills by building progressively complex actions from component skills. This perspective is associated with training activities that focus on developing competences and which have clear goals and feedback (not necessarily through human interaction). Such a perspective is of relevance when designing competency-based learning activities for part-time learners that incorporate for example, activities which progressively increase in difficulty. Technology increasingly enables individual student pathways to be constructed and matched to the learner’s prior performance thereby reducing the need for human feedback, or indeed any type of tutor interaction. Examples of when such a perspective could be drawn upon include an introductory language course, a basic anatomy course or pre-course study skills. Case study 7 provides an illustration of a course for educational practitioners learning braille that has been structured around an associative perspective.

Case study 7: Online braille course for part-time educational practitioners

Dr Steve McCall, School of Education, University of Birmingham

The braille course is intended for part-time educational practitioners who wish to teach themselves to read and write contracted (grade 2) braille as part of a credit-bearing award. It has been developed as an online course for use by part-time students who can work through the exercises at their own pace alongside their studies. The online material enables a learner to transcribe from print to braille or read the braille, which can be checked against the print. The online Rulebook lists all the braille symbols and explains the rules governing their use. It therefore provides a reference tool for the learner wanting to check the accuracy of their understanding of the complexities and nuances of the code without the need for a tutor.

A more detailed case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Birmingham_braille

Further information about the online braille course can be found at: <http://www.education2.bham.ac.uk/research/victar/braille/intro/>

Engaging learners through a situative perspective - a key assumption underpinning the situative perspective is that learning is viewed in the context of social practice with learners developing their identity through participation in specific communities and practices (JISC 2004). Within such a perspective, learners engage in social practices of enquiry and learning with support provided for the development of their learning skills. Of particular note are the opportunities afforded by recent developments in technology for students to learn through this type of social practice without needing to attend campus or indeed even meet during their studies. Examples of learning activities that draw on a situative perspective are presented in Case studies 8 and 9.

Case study 8: MA Education programme

Dr Andy Cramp: University of Wolverhampton

This exploratory study explored how meaningful dialogue can be nurtured online in the spirit of *learning as social practice* in one module of an MA Education programme. The programme is a flexible part-time continued professional development (CPD) award aimed at practitioners in any sector of education. The majority of participants are teachers in schools and colleges, looking to extend their skills and understandings of education and learning. To increase the flexibility of the award two online modules were designed, one of which was "Learning as Social Practice Online". This module is underpinned by the principle of activity-led learning (ALL). The module pace falls into three phases: Phase 1: Formative development; Phase 2: Summative development; Phase 3: Independent study leading to summative assignment submission. The pace is controlled by three keynote video conferences (VCs) during a nine-week activity period followed by two weeks of independent study leading to final summative assignment submission. Participants engage in online tutor (OLT) led discussion and activity leading up to each VC. Participants work at a pace that suits them, supported by online discussion in a Facebook group (open only to participants) with the OLT and other participants. Wikispaces is used to develop a 600-word formative assignment, submitted in week five which is commented on by other participants and the OLT.

A more detailed overview of this case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Wlv_social

Case study 9: MSc Social Research and Evaluation (distance learning)

Graham Gibbs: University of Huddersfield

This Masters programme (eight taught modules and a dissertation) is currently under development with recruitment due to start in January 2014. Although there is a full-time version, it is envisaged that most students will be part-time and take select modules to give them a Postgraduate Certificate in Social Research. The modules will be taught entirely online, using the *flipped classroom* principle. A number of video resources are already available in the area of social research methods and more will be produced over the next 12 months. Students will watch videos and read chapters and papers to prepare for online sessions. The latter will use the various activities available in Adobe Connect webinars (group discussion, whiteboard, software sharing, etc.) to enable staff and students to discuss the issues from the videos and practice some of the key research skills. A key component is that most of the video and other resources will be open education resources published under the Creative Commons licence. This will give students the opportunity to try out the course materials before signing up for teaching. The webinars, individual support and assessment will only be available to registered students.

A more detailed overview of this case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Hudd_social_research

Engaging learners through a constructivist perspective - a key assumption underpinning a constructivist perspective is that learning is viewed as achieving understanding, with learners actively constructing new ideas by building and testing hypotheses (JISC2004). As such interactive environments are provided for knowledge to be developed (either individually or in groups) with activities offered that encourage experimentation and discovery of principles, with support offered for individual reflection and evaluation. An example of a learning activity that draws on this perspective is presented in Case study 10.

Case study 10: Online educational placement visits for specialist teachers

Danielle Hinton: University of Birmingham

This module forms one component of a government approved programme for specialist teachers of children with visual impairment studying through distance education. The module explores the role of the teacher in identifying and reducing barriers to learning and participation. The students work in a school or service for children with sensory needs and are assigned study time on weekly basis in order to complete the course. A multi-media resource version of the module has been developed and is delivered through the institutional integrated VLE. The students undertake a series of virtual educational placement visits presented in the form of a module case scenario, to different types of provision in order to observe aspects of curriculum access for children with visual impairment. In each setting students are provided with opportunities to observe staff supporting children in different curriculum areas. Following each visit the students analyse how potential barriers to learning and participation can be identified and reduced through appropriate input from professionals concerned with the education of a child. They submit their visit reports through an online professional journal following which feedback is provided by an online tutor.

A more detailed overview of this case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/U_of_Bham_placements

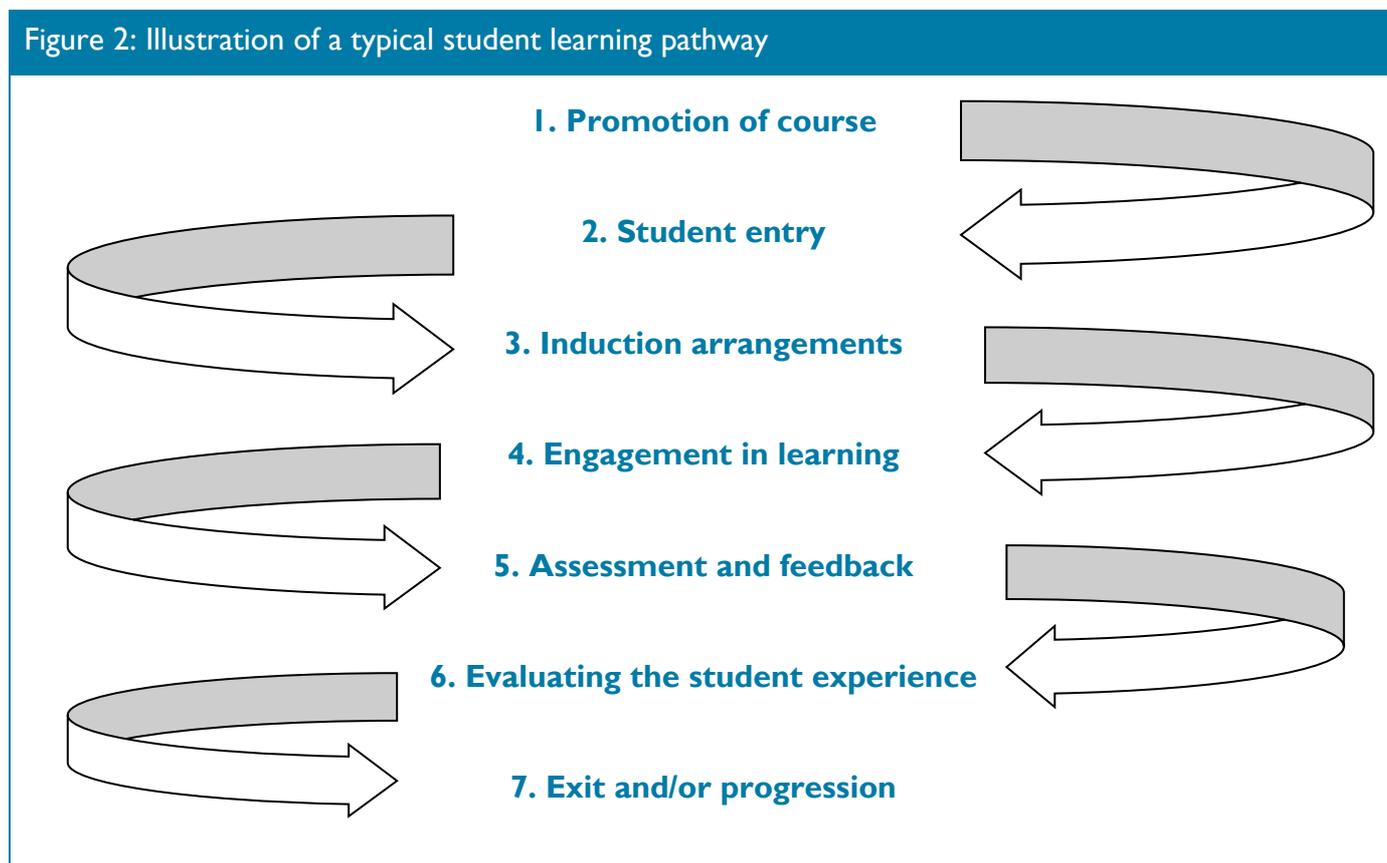
Conclusion

There is broad consensus in the literature that flexible learning is essentially about providing learner choice in different aspects of the learning experience. The case studies presented in this report provide helpful illustrations of practice in relation to pedagogical approaches that have been drawn upon to support part-time learners across a number of discipline areas. While the main focus of this section has been on flexible pedagogies in relation to the actions and decisions taken by tutors to promote, and guide, student learning at a course or curriculum level, it is apparent that developing greater flexibility needs to be contextualised within a broader consideration of the overall pedagogical environment in which learning takes place (be this campus, virtual or a blend of both) as well as related requirements of partner institutions. As considered in the next section, the vehicle used to explore the learning environment from the perspective of a part-time student is the student learning pathway that captures significant stages in the student experience.

4. Developing and promoting flexible pedagogies through a student learning pathway

Introduction

A helpful vehicle for exploring the broader pedagogical environment is to identify significant stages in a student learning pathway with a particular focus on the perspective of the part-time learner. Such a pathway includes the initial information presented to potential students, through to induction arrangements, engagement in learning activities, assessment and feedback, evaluation of their experience and exit/progression points (Figure 2). The student learning pathway proposed in this section is supported with an [audit tool](#) that provides opportunities for tutors to review their own practice and consider the extent to which each stage can be potentially developed to ensure greater flexibility in the approaches that are drawn upon.



Stage I: Promotion of course

The information provided in promotion of a course outlines a statement of intent to potential applicants and helps to cultivate expectations about the learning approaches offered. Supporting institutional information can also serve as a commitment by the HEI that part-time study is viewed as a legitimate study pathway. Three vignettes are drawn upon to illustrate how information is presented to potential part-time students at three HE providers.

Vignette 1 illustrates how the Open University (OU) as the largest provider of distance education courses in the UK provides information about its delivery approach for potential learners.

Vignette 1: Information provided by the OU about the delivery approach for distance education courses

The Open University provides a webpage about the style of delivering the distance learning courses it offers (Distance learning courses detailed). This page includes information about the resources, support provided, study skills and the overall study experience. A number of links (e.g. Study Skills) are available for potential applicants to view before starting a course.

<http://www.openuniversity.edu/studying-with-the-open-university/distance-learning>

Vignette 2 illustrates how the University of Derby offers opportunities for prospective applicants to find out further information about online learning.

Vignette 2: Virtual events for potential students

As advertised on the institutional website, the University of Derby offers a series of virtual events including open days. These are designed for prospective applicants to find out more about online learning and whether it is the right form of delivery for them. Visitors have the opportunity to ask questions and meet other potential students who might be interested in the same course. An online booking system is used to register interest in an event. <http://www.derby.ac.uk/online/virtual-events-and-open-days>

Vignette 3 illustrates how the University of Worcester provides dedicated webpages for applicants considering part-time provision.

Vignette 3: Online resources for part-time students

As part of the online resources listed in their *Prepare for Study* webpages, the University of Worcester includes a page on part-time students that outlines flexible study options. This includes a summary of the reasons to consider studying part-time with reference made to work commitments, family responsibilities, a preference for working at a slower pace or as a more affordable way to access higher education. <http://www.worcester.ac.uk/your-home/part-time-students.html>

Drawing on the issues raised in the literature about the experiences of part-time students and depending on the nature of the activity, promotional material at a course level may include reference to course orientation, pedagogical approaches, communication about learner choice, etc. The supporting [audit tool](#) outlines examples of how flexibility can be enhanced in relation to this stage.

Stage 2: Student entry

There are a number of ways in which flexibility can be built in to the entry (and subsequent exit points) of a course. This includes recognition of prior learning, prior experiences and/or the associated use of credit transfer. The terms APEL and APL are used to describe a similar process – essentially applying for accreditation against previous learning and/or experience. As such there will be a difference in the nature of the evidence that needs to be provided to support an application for recognition.

HE providers will have their own arrangements for accreditation at an institutional level as part of their internal quality assurance procedures. This type of accreditation allows applicants to be granted institutional recognition for skills and/or knowledge they bring with them. Such recognition can be used to gain entry to a course, be granted exemption from particular components of the course, or in some cases provide equivalence in order to qualify for a full award. Walsh (2010) suggests that while the recognition and assessment of prior experiential learning has been part of the practice of higher education for over 20 years, interest in this area has been given a new impetus relating to employer engagement, as “the ability to recognise learning that has taken place through experience is an important element in awarding credit for learning that takes place in the workplace” (p8).

Stage 3: Induction arrangements

Induction and transition to HE arrangements have traditionally been based around campus-based events demanding attendance for a given timeframe. A Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) institutional review guide on the first-year student experience reports that institutions support students’ transition to UK higher education in a range of different ways, with approaches often focusing on pre-entry support and academic and social induction, as well as including activities that relate to learning and teaching, skills development and student engagement (QAA 2011). The guide notes that the growing diversity of higher education presents new challenges and opportunities for transition support, citing research by Whittaker (2008) who proposes that more flexible and variable support systems are required to meet the needs of an increasingly heterogeneous student population. As a result, a range of approaches will be drawn upon to accommodate the diverse needs of part-time learners including, for example, running induction events on more than one occasion to provide flexibility in when students are able to attend. As illustrated by the examples presented in the supporting [audit tool](#), developments in technology have also provided new ways of increasing flexibility in relation to the induction and transition arrangements which can be used to complement or even replace the need for campus activities.

Stage 4: Engagement in learning

Placing the student experience at the centre of the higher education system suggests students having a greater say in where, when and how they study with institutions increasingly needing to take into account their particular circumstances and learning needs. Further, technology is allowing HE providers to change the way they undertake their core teaching activities – both

with students and between students – with learning increasingly viewed as being more than content delivered in lecture-based format (or equivalent). This implies that rather than continuing to view study as a simple full-time/part-time dichotomy, institutions can examine more flexible models of provision and support to ensure learner engagement.

The case studies presented in the report provide examples of how institutions are supporting part-time learners to engage in their studies through flexible learning opportunities. The supporting [audit tool](#) provides opportunities for tutors to review current engagement of learners they support and outlines examples of how flexibility can be further enhanced.

Stage 5: Assessment and feedback

Pollard et al. (2012) indicate that part-time students also require flexibility in assessment as well as flexibility in their studies more generally. This will be particularly relevant when the students may not be able to attend campus-based exams in a controlled environment. Flexible approaches to assessment can include:

- learner negotiated assessment (i.e. allowing learners opportunities to negotiate aspects of an assessment to reflect their own needs, skills and/or knowledge);
- building diagnostic feedback to support the learning process, e.g. embedding computer-based assessment into the teaching materials, with constructive feedback provided immediately to learners and teachers (Sharples et al. 2012);
- flexibility in assessment of the completion requirements to reflect prior experiences (e.g. through submission of a portfolio of evidence);
- building in a variety of technology-enabled assessment and feedback formats; online peer and self-assessment, which serve to increase learner participation in assessment processes (e.g. JISC 2010);
- programme-focused assessment strategies that are designed to have relevance to part-time students. As an example, Case study 11 illustrates how the assessment practices in an undergraduate programme for part-time students were redesigned to replace the traditional end-of-programme dissertation.

Case study 11: Thinking critically about assessment practices and processes for part-time students

Stella Jones-Devitt: Sheffield Hallam University

This case study relates to the part-time undergraduate programme BA (Hons) Health and Social Care Leadership and Management. The programme has been redesigned to reflect a more radical stance when using assessment for learning with part-time, in-work students. In developing this process to replace the traditional end-loaded undergraduate dissertation, the course team drew upon the conviction that within the field of health and social care education more attention to putting a complex theory into practice – or praxis – should be given, especially in relation to the ways in which the process of learner development is assessed. In considering more user-friendly and emancipatory approaches to assessment for the students, two Critical Thinking Leadership modules have been created as mechanisms for developing innovative assessment for learning processes. Each module draws upon assessment processes from all other programme modules by using patchwork text principles in which objects or concepts emergent from every assessed module are identified by students and stitched together in patches to form overarching, justificatory and individualised narratives that become personal and professional development tools for the learner and their organisation.

A more detailed case study can be viewed at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/flexible-learning/flexiblepedagogies/ptlearners/SHU_Assessment_marketised

The supporting [audit tool](#) provides opportunities for tutors to review current arrangements for assessment and feedback, and outlines further examples of how flexibility can be enhanced in relation to pace, place and mode of assessment.

Stage 6: Evaluating the student experience

The literature presented in this report suggests that while part-time students are generally positive about their experiences, an important issue is the extent to which institutions make provision appropriate to their needs, and thereby avoid making assumption that part-time students can be accommodated on programmes designed for their full-time peers (Yorke and Longden 2008). This finding suggests that any evaluation of the student experience should seek to determine whether the provision offered is indeed appropriate to their needs. An appropriate analysis of the part-time student experience of a provision should serve to ensure it does not reflect a bias towards full-time study, and that the needs of part-time students are adequately taken into account. The supporting [audit tool](#) provides opportunities for tutors to review current evaluation arrangements to ensure they are suitable for part-time learners.

Stage 7: Exit and progression

As noted in Section 2, students will engage with a variety of credit-bearing study pathways within HE over a given timespan. It will be important therefore to outline potential study progression routes that a student can follow on completion of a particular award whether this is at the award-bearing institution or another HE provider. This provides an example of institutional commitment to progression beyond the course of study and as such could feature in Stage one of this pathway. The supporting [audit tool](#) provides opportunities for tutors to review current arrangements for disseminating study progression routes to part-time learners.

Concluding thoughts

The overarching research question considered in this project has been: “Why and to what extent might flexible pedagogies be promoted, and in what ways?”

In relation to why more flexible pedagogies might be promoted for part-time learners, a number of themes emerge from the literature including:

- the changing nature of how part-time education is conceptualised within HE;
- different expectations of students undertaking studies in HE;
- developments in digital technologies affording new opportunities for developing more flexible learning approaches;
- the importance of institutional buy-in to more flexible learning approaches.

Underpinning these themes is a broad consensus that increased flexibility should not be the goal in itself when seeking to develop more flexible approaches to learning. Rather a key consideration is why greater flexibility might be incorporated into a learning pathway, and how such approaches potentially impact on student learning and the quality of the overall student experience. This suggests a delicate balance between selecting pedagogical approaches and considering how these relate to other changes made to a particular learning experience. As an example, providing students with opportunities to undertake learning at their own pace with their own negotiated assessment points, studying in their own place and through selecting their own mode of delivery will certainly serve to increase learner choice. It will however require a review of the academic and administrative support to mirror such flexible learning approaches, and crucially, consideration of the implications for the overall student experience (e.g. in terms of potential reduced opportunity for collaborative and social learning experiences).

Although the main focus of this report has been concerned primarily with flexible pedagogies in relation to what have been described as “the actions and decisions taken by tutors to promote, and guide, student learning at a course or curriculum level”, it is apparent that developing greater flexibility in the use of pedagogical approaches needs to be contextualised within a broader consideration of the overall environment in which learning takes place (be this campus, virtual or a blend of both). Indeed, Elliot (2011) reports that at a practical level there are at least four main strategies (considered to be intersecting) for opening higher education to students otherwise prevented from studying by barriers such as isolation, family care or employment:

- using digital technologies to deliver teaching online;
- revisioning pedagogy including assessment practices;
- providing flexibility in course scheduling/structures and professional experience (or clinical placements);
- ensuring more accepting and open attitudes to diversity.

The nexus between these strategies is of particular relevance to the focus of this project as institutions respond to the challenges posed by increasingly diverse learning needs. The evidence presented in this report indicates that the HE sector as a whole in the UK is becoming more responsive in recognising and understanding the broader pedagogical needs relating to part-time study. Further, while the case studies presented in the report illustrate that the overall student learning experience increasingly features in curriculum design and planning, adopting a more holistic view of these learning experiences (e.g. through the notion of a broader student learning pathway) could help to ensure part-time students are mainstreamed within institutional structures to ensure parity and equity with all learners.

A summary of key issues arising from this report together with recommendations is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Key issues and recommendations

Key issue 1: Promoting part-time study pathways

A strengthening policy emphasis on part-time study serves to highlight the significance of these learners in the future HE landscape within the UK. Most recent data suggests, however, a marked decline in the numbers of part-time students. At present there is only speculation as to the possible reasons for this decline, but these may include: a link to increased student fees, reduced funding available from employers, a levelling off following a period of growth, etc. Furthermore, the way an institution embraces part-time learners could determine how welcome they feel. Placing the student experience at the centre of the system implies students having a greater say in where, when and how they study with institutions needing to take into account their particular learning needs. This suggests that rather than continuing to view study as a simple full-time/part-time dichotomy, institutions will need to examine more flexible models to capture the full spectrum of learning needs.

Recommendations

- HEIs should continue to develop and promote flexibility drawing on the dimensions of pace, place and mode of learning for different learner groups to help part-time study become a more attractive option for students and their sponsors.
- They should review the information presented to potential applicants to ensure that part-time study is viewed as being a legitimate study pathway which is valued at institutional level.

Key issue 2: Learning environment

While greater flexibility may be viewed as being a broadly desirable goal for learners it does present particular challenges for institutions when considering the needs of part-time learners. There is evidence to suggest that institutions will need to review procedures to ensure provision is appropriate to the particular needs of part-time students. Although the main focus of this report has been primarily concerned with flexible pedagogies at a course or curriculum level, developing greater flexibility in the use of pedagogical approaches should be contextualised within a broader consideration of the overall environment in which learning takes place (be this campus, virtual or a blend of both).

Recommendations

- Rather than viewing flexibility as a goal in itself institutions should seek to determine how increased flexibility will potentially impact on student learning and the quality of their learning experiences. Drawing on a student learning pathway could be helpful in reviewing procedures for this purpose.
- By drawing on the dimensions of pace, place and mode of learning, institutions can support students' understanding of how their learning experience fits into broader institutional structures and delivery options, and help them appreciate not just what they study, but where, when and how the learning will take place.

Key issue 3: Technology enhanced learning pathways

The continuing development of online learning is a key element in developing and promoting delivery of part-time provision. New technologies demand a review of established pedagogical approaches as well as institutional structures to ensure they are appropriate for the needs of part-time learners. The case studies included in this report provide an illustration of a vibrant community within the sector that is seeking not only to innovate but also to evaluate and disseminate practice in order to develop and promote pedagogical approaches that are appropriate for part-time learners.

Recommendations

- When introducing new technologies HEIs should seek to review planned pedagogical approaches to ensure they are appropriate for the needs of part-time learners.
- As part of such a review, reference should be made to demonstrated case studies including the more detailed overviews presented in this report.

Key issue 4: Student experience

There is evidence that in general part-time students have a positive view of their part-time studies. However, it has been found that part-time study is particularly demanding for many students who have to juggle more commitments than students on full-time programmes. This suggests that appropriate methods are required for examining the part-time student experience to explore and take account of any differences in their learning experiences.

Recommendation

- Appropriate methods should be drawn upon for examining the part-time student experience. Examples of methods that could be drawn upon are included in the supporting [audit tool](#).

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