

Momentum grows for campaign championing benefits of part-time higher education

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*Businesses are backing learn-while-you-earn schemes and higher education experts are recommending immediate action to boost the skills and economic growth associated with part-time study. As the spotlight focuses more and more on part-time students, **Guy Collender** argues that today's review by Universities UK marks a milestone in efforts to promote, and improve, opportunities to study part-time.*



Part-time higher education is grabbing the headlines and rising up the political agenda. From the CBI's recent report about skills to an announcement at the Conservative Party Conference about extending student loans for some part-timers returning to university to retrain, the benefits of part-time study for employers, the economy and individuals are increasingly being recognised. Today's publication of the first-ever comprehensive review of part-time and mature higher education is a high point against this backdrop of increased awareness and activity surrounding part-time study. It's time now for the report's research and recommendations to gather support and lead to action to safeguard access to higher education for students of all ages and backgrounds for whom the traditional full-time route is not an option. Part-time students are among the most non-traditional students and are outside the systems that normally provide guidance about higher education, so a positive student experience is vital to help them gain the full benefit of a higher education, realise their potential, and play a fuller part in society, industry and the economy.

Describing itself as an "urgent initial assessment", the report by Universities UK emphasises how part-time study is a "powerhouse for skills" and calls for a shift in attitude towards this often neglected, but highly valuable, aspect of university education. The review calls on higher education providers, government, agencies involved in higher education and others to consider the needs of part-time and mature students as an "intrinsic part of their thinking, not as an add-on." Universities and colleges are advised to take "bold steps" to improve the part-time student experience and further modelling is also recommended, including research into how the tax system could better incentivise support for part-time study.

The review, called *The power of part-time*, was commissioned by the Government's Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in response to falling part-time student enrolments, particularly among women and mature learners. After a decade of slow decline, the numbers of students recruited to undergraduate part-time courses in England fell dramatically by 40 per cent between 2010-11 and 2012-13. Its publication this week is at a very opportune moment. It coincides with a national campaign called *Make your future happen: discover higher education*, which includes a particular focus on part-time opportunities and the benefits that they offer students.

Figures and research highlighting the importance and value of part-time study are highlighted in the report:

- Nearly 500,000 undergraduate students were studying part-time in the UK in 2011-12
- Most are studying vocational courses and are in continuous full-time employment
- The three top subject areas studied by these students are related to medicine, business and administrative studies, and education
- The contribution of graduates from part-time study to economic prosperity in the UK exceeds that of graduates from full-time study in the 3.5 years after graduation
- 62 per cent are female and 38 per cent are male

The “wonderful transformative powers of learning” are highlighted in the report by Professor Sir Eric Thomas, Chair of the review group and former president of Universities UK. He also acknowledges that this report is the “beginning of a process to understand what is going on and how to address it.”

The launch of the report and discussion about its findings at UUK’s headquarters in central London is a time for celebration and reflection. The campaign to improve the understanding of part-time study has advanced hugely since I first wrote about [part-time study for the LSE Politics Blog in June](#). Then the #PartTimeMatters campaign, which was launched by an alliance of universities, businesses and unions, had just begun. My employer Birkbeck, University of London, was one of the key supporters of the initiative as Birkbeck is London’s evening university and specialises in catering for part-time and mature students juggling work, family and other commitments with their university studies.

In other developments, the Early Day Motion recognising the “vital role of adult learning” and its “transformative effect”, including on social mobility, has now been signed by 66 MPs. In July, the CBI backed more “learn-while-you-earn” schemes and stronger relationships between universities and businesses in its blueprint for higher skills, called Tomorrow’s growth: new routes to higher skills, published in July. The Office for Fair Access has made part-time higher education a focus for future work, and UCAS’ updated website includes signposts to part-time provision. In addition, David Willetts, the universities and science minister, announced at the Conservative Party Conference on 30 September that the government will relax the Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQ) rule for part-time students studying engineering, technology and computer science, thereby enabling students to return to university to retrain in a different discipline.

The UUK report concludes: “It will be essential to maintain the momentum of this review, through harnessing the energy and actions of all of the different stakeholders with the ability to make a difference.” Having made such progress in the last few months, it is imperative that the part-time higher education lobby continues to scrutinise policy, research the impact of part-time study, and campaign for the best part-time provision. Employers, the economy, and individuals all stand to benefit if part-time higher education improves. Now is the time to ensure that the momentum that helped created the report is translated into action.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Guy Collender is Communications Manager at Birkbeck, University of London
[@guycollender](#)