

THE MARGINALISATION OF SHORT-CYCLE COURSES IN ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION: ADDRESSING THE UNINTENDED OUTCOMES OF POLICY

Kevin ORR

University of Huddersfield, UK

E-Mail: K.Orr@hud.ac.uk

Keywords: *mature students, short-cycle courses, funding, access and participation*

ABSTRACT

Over the past thirty years Higher Education (HE) in England has transitioned from being a relatively small elite system to being a mass system, with some of the features of a universal system (Trow, 2007). Yet, the number of mature part-time undergraduate entrants to English Higher Education (commencing their courses aged 21 or over) has declined significantly in the past ten years (Hubble & Bolton, 2021). This article discusses one aspect of this decline, the marginalisation of short-cycle courses leading to technical qualifications below bachelor's degree level. These courses have traditionally attracted part-time mature students and they lead to long-established qualifications that are well-recognised by employers. The government's emphasis on full-time bachelor's degree courses for students starting under the age of 21 has, however, had the unintended outcome of making these short-cycle courses much less attractive for universities and for students. This article explains that student funding is the most significant barrier to participation, but universities also need to make adjustments if more part-time mature students are to access these short-cycle courses.

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses one aspect of the serious decline in part-time mature students in English higher education (HE) over the past decade, the marginalisation of short-cycle courses that lead to well-established HE qualifications such as Higher National Certificates (HNCs), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and foundation degrees. HE policy in the United Kingdom (UK) is devolved to each of the four nations, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. England has by far the largest HE system, which has diverged from the other UK nations in how it is organised (Callender & Mason, 2017). The great majority of HE students in England are full-time and studying on three-year bachelor's degrees that they started before they were 21. Often overlooked by researchers and by policymakers are those students taking short-cycle technical courses equivalent to ISCED level 5, below bachelor's degree. These students are most likely to be mature (starting courses after the age of 21) and part-time¹⁸. This article seeks to explain the decline in the numbers of students on short-

¹⁸ The intensity of what constitutes part-time study differs between courses and individuals. This article adopts the definition used by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA): those recorded officially as part-time; studying full-time on courses lasting less than 24 weeks; on block release; or studying during the evenings only.

cycle courses in relation to the unintended impact of government policy, and it suggests finally how that decline might be reversed.

The English HE system: competition and high fees

The English HE system is hierarchical and its governance is marked by “a strong underlying competitive, market-oriented vision” (Andreadakis & Maassen, 2019, p. 90). Governments have consistently promoted the expansion of full-time three-year undergraduate courses in universities, and attending university has become the desired outcome for school-leavers. As a result, English HE has transitioned from being an elite system designed for a small proportion of young people to a mass system with some of the features of a universal system (Trow, 2007). In 1980 15 per cent of people under 30 had accessed HE in England; by 2018 that proportion was over 51.9 per cent overall (DfE, 2020).

The current tuition fee for home students on a full-time undergraduate degree is up to a maximum of £9250 per year (more for certain courses and for international students), pro-rata for part-time students. That maximum fee is charged by the great majority of HEIs. Graduates repay these fees with government-funded loans, which also cover some living costs. Consequently, the level of graduate debt among borrowers who finished their courses in 2019 was £40,000 (Bolton, 2020, p. 3).

The decline of students on short-cycle HE courses

While the number of students on three-year degree programmes has until recently expanded, the number on short-cycle courses in HEIs has been shrinking significantly. Between 2015/16 and 2019/20 the number of students on short-cycle courses fell from 155,830 to 106,425 (HESA, 2021). There has been an overall decline in the number of part-time undergraduate students in England, but that decline has been even steeper on short-cycle courses. Between 2010 and 2015 there was a drop in part-time students of 37 per cent on Bachelor's courses but a drop of 57 per cent on short-cycle courses (Callender & Thompson, 2018, p. 21). Other nations of the UK have not experienced such a drop in students on these same short-cycle courses (Field, 2018, p. 21), suggesting that drop is associated with English policy.

Figures for English HE in 2019-20 indicate that short-cycle students are disproportionately from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Applying the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) measure, 51 per cent of students on short-cycle courses live in areas within the two most deprived IMD quintiles, compared with 38 per cent on undergraduate degrees. As noted above, they are also disproportionately likely to be part-time: 53 per cent of short-cycle students were part-time while 10 per cent of bachelor's degree students were part-time (figures from HESA, 2021). The decline in part-time students is of concern because their demographic is very different to that of full-time students. They tend to be older; in 2019-20 59 per cent of new part-time students were over 30. Part-timers are also more likely to be female and to have caring responsibilities, especially for children. The great majority are in work and they are less geographically mobile than full-time students (Hubble & Bolton, 2021, p. 7). Falling numbers of part-time students reflects diminishing opportunities for many mature people to access HE.

Why have the number of students on short-cycle HE courses in England declined so much?

By far the most important factor in determining the steep fall in the number of part-time students, including those on short-cycle courses, is how HE courses in England are financed. HE had been free throughout the UK prior to 1998, when tuition fees were introduced, to be repaid by loans as noted above. After education policy had been devolved to the four nations

of the UK, in England these fees rose to a maximum of £3000 in 2006 and then in 2012 tripled to £9,000 for full-time students, pro rata for part time students.

This tripling of fees “marked a cliff edge” for part-time students (Open University, 2017, p. 8), who were unwilling to take on the loans associated with the fees. Mason’s (2020) analysis of the 2017 Adult Participation in Learning Survey which surveyed 5169 persons aged 17-plus in Great Britain (see Mason, 2019) reinforces this conclusion: “very few current adult learners appear willing to go into debt in order to pay for course fees” (p. 38). Many of those lost adult learners are likely to have taken short-cycle vocational courses such as Higher National Certificates, Higher National Diplomas and Foundation Degrees where enrolments have fallen most sharply (Parry *et al.*, 2017; Augar, 2019; Callender & Thompson, 2018).

The overall decline in the number of part-time HE students in England and the associated marginalisation of short-cycle courses represent a major failure of the market in education upon which English education policy has been constructed (see Open University, 2017). England has what Cantwell, Marginson, Smolentseva and colleagues (2018) describe as a high participation system of HE with around 50 per cent of young people accessing HE. Within this competitive system the stratification of HEIs leads to a vertical stretch of the sector as strong universities accumulate advantage and improve their position so attracting those students who seek to maintain or advance their own social position (Marginson, 2016, p. 413; 425). In this hierarchy, in which some courses carry more value than others, “relative advantage is crucial” (Marginson, 2016, p. 415) and students with the wherewithal will seek out the most prestigious course they can access. There is no competitive advantage for a university in offering short-cycle courses in positioning itself within England’s HE hierarchy and arguably there is disadvantage in being associated with low-level HE such as short-cycle HE.

Consequences and solutions

The unintended decline of short-cycle courses is, therefore, the consequence of broader structural changes in HE in England and not just the policies of a few universities or a single funding measure. The reasons for the decline are built into how HE in England is organised on a market-oriented basis which requires universities to compete and which valorises fulltime bachelor’s degrees courses and marginalises other undergraduate provision. The government commissioned Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, referred to as the Augar Review (2019), explicitly attributes the narrowing of higher-level technical education through short-cycle courses to market failure. Unfortunately, that recognition of failure has not produced new ideas on how students might be attracted back to these courses. The Augar Review still advocates a “lifelong learning loan allowance for tuition loans... available for adults aged 18 or over, without a publicly funded degree” (2019, p. 40). The poor take-up of similar existing loans suggests strongly that this will not encourage mature students onto these short-cycle courses, part-time or otherwise (see Mason, 2020) because of the deep-seated aversion to debt discussed above.

If the government wishes to see this area of technical education expand, they need to drastically reduce the costs of these courses or, as Mason (2020) recommended, make them free to students. Similarly, the government could actively incentivise universities to develop short-cycle courses through regulation and funding.

For their part, universities need to learn once again how to attract mature part-time students to short-cycle courses as they have done in the past. That will entail more targeted guidance for mature applicants about HE courses, and it will mean greater collaboration with employers to encourage and enable release for part-time courses. Universities can also improve access to these courses by organising them to allow people in work to attend part-time, whether in person or online. Similarly, mature students have different priorities and different obligations to younger students and communication needs to reflect those

differences. All of that would constitute a shift from English universities' current and overwhelming focus on recruiting students aged below 21 onto bachelor's degrees. It would also constitute a challenge to the market orientation of English HE. Short-cycle courses in technical subjects can open routes to knowledge, understanding and employment that might transform lives. For too many potential students in England those routes remain closed because of a competitive HE system that excludes them.

REFERENCES

- Andreadakis, M. & Maassen, Z. (2019) United Kingdom/England. Chapter in P. Maassen, Z. Andreadakis, M. Gulbrandsen & B. Stensaker (eds.) *The Place of Universities in Society*. University of Oslo: Oslo, pp. 90–103.
- Augar, P. (2019) *Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding (Augar Review)*. London: HMSO.
- Bolton, P. (2020) *Student Loan Statistics*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper No 1079, 9 December 2020.
- Callender, C. & Mason, G. (2017) Does student loan debt deter higher education participation? New evidence from England. *Annals of American Political and Social Science*, 671(1), 20–48.
- Callender, C. & Thompson, J. (2018) *The Lost Part-Timers: The decline of part-time undergraduate higher education in England*. London: The Sutton Trust.
- Cantwell, B., Marginson, S. & Smolentseva, A. (eds.) (2018) *High Participation Systems of Higher Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Department for Education (DfE) (2020) *Academic Year 2018/19: Participation measures in higher education*. Link: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-measures-in-higher-education/2018-19> (accessed July 2021)
- Field, S. (2018) *The Missing Middle: Higher Technical Education in England*. London: Gatsby Charitable Foundation.
- Foster, D. (2019) *Level 4 and 5 education*, House of Commons Briefing Paper Number 8732. Link: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8732/> (Accessed July 2021).
- HESA (2021) *Who's studying in HE?* Link: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#widening_participation (accessed July 2021).
- Hubble, S. & Bolton, P. (2021) *Part-time undergraduate students in England*. House of Commons Library Briefing Paper No7966, 3 March 2021.
- Marginson, S. (2016) The worldwide trend to high participation higher education: Dynamics of social stratification in inclusive systems. *Higher Education*, 72(4), 413–435.
- Mason, G. (2019) *Adult Education and Training in Great Britain* (Age 25-Plus Research Paper No. 66). London: Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances (LLAKES).
- Mason, G. (2020) Higher education, initial vocational education and training and continuing education and training: where should the balance lie? *Journal of Education and Work* 33(7-8), 468–490.
- Open University (2017) *Fixing the broken market in part-time study*. Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Parry, G., Saraswat, A. & Thompson, A. (2017) *Sub-Bachelor Higher Education in the United Kingdom*. Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
- Trow, M. (2007) Reflections on the Transition from Elite to Mass to Universal Access: Forms and Phases of Higher Education in Modern Societies since WWII, in J.J.F. Forest & P.G. Altback (eds.), *International Handbook of Higher Education*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 243–280.