



Higher viewpoints: studying Higher Education in a Further Education College.

An analysis of student experiences

Paper 2: The experiences of Part Time students studying HE in English FE Colleges

1. Introduction

This paper explores the views and experiences of students following Part Time (PT) courses of HE in English FE colleges. It reports the responses gained from a survey of PT HE students undertaken in April 2013 as part of a suite of enquiries into the student experience of college-based Higher Education. 352 students from 15 colleges took part in the survey. Whilst it is accepted that there are currently no precise definitions about what constitutes Full or Part Time study, the large majority of students who responded are in employment, with 50% being supported in their studies by an employer. Consequently, it may be assumed that for many their prime identity is not that of “student”.

2. Background

The method of funding (and paying for) HE changed radically for those embarking on a course of Higher Education in the academic year 2012-2013. Although the assessment of the impact and implications of those changes is still at an early stage, a number of concerns are emerging. Principal amongst these is the apparently accelerating decline in PT study. For the reasons set out below, reliable data is hard to come by and may not be available for several years. However, there is sufficient concern for a number of enquiries to have been set in train to investigate the causes, effects and potential remedies for this obvious decline. These include a number of research papers written by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)¹ the Thomas Review,

¹ Expanding and Improving part-time higher education. 2012 BIS and Understanding higher education in further education colleges. 2012 BIS.

overseen by UUK and a longer, 2-year project jointly funded by the Association of Colleges (AoC) and BIS which will investigate the reasons for a decline in college-based part-time HE. This level of activity illustrates the interest amongst policy makers in identifying the underlying causes for the clear decline in part-time admissions.

Approximately 60,000 students studied prescribed HE on a PT basis in FE colleges in 2009-2010.² Total numbers, i.e. for prescribed and non-prescribed HE, are difficult to establish due to the differences in data collection systems between HEFCE and the Skills Funding Agency. In addition, students who are self-funded and do not take out a student loan will not appear in either the SFA or HEFCE data collections. Within colleges PT HE students make up a significant proportion of the HE student body, in some cases more than 50%. Any major decline in PT enrolment is thus of both immediate and long term concern to those institutions. Local decisions about the viability of Part Time HE provision will be made against a background of overall financial pressure on colleges, employers and individual students. The shift from funding based on block grants from HEFCE to a system based on student loans has yet to be fully tested for PT provision. Colleges and other providers believe that the consequent increase in fees to students or their employers had a significant effect on recruitment. This is coupled with the impact on demand of an economic downturn affecting most if not all business sectors, resulting in the sharp decline in year 1 recruitment in 2013. Whilst there are no national targets for PT enrolments, initial assessments from both HEFCE and OFFA³ indicate that overall recruitment to Prescribed HE in both universities and colleges has dropped by 40% since 2010. HEFCE suggests⁴ that *“Part-time recruitment to undergraduate courses at further education colleges that are funded directly through HEFCE shows a 19 per cent fall between 2010 and 2012 when new providers are included. When they are excluded to allow for comparison with previous years, there has been a 27 per cent drop (around 3,000 fewer students). These figures do not include changes in franchised part-time places. The falls continue and intensify a longer-term trend.”*

A short, unpublished survey of MEG member colleges in May 2013 suggested that with one or two exceptions, PT enrolments had fallen significantly against 2011-2012 numbers. Of the twenty nine colleges that responded to the survey, 86% (25) indicated that they had experienced a decline in Part Time enrolments. 10% (3) said that numbers had remained the same whilst only around 4% (1 college) experienced an

² Ibid.

³ OFFA Annual Report 2012-2013.

⁴ Higher Education in England: Impact of the 2012 reforms. HEFCE 2013.

increase in enrolments. In the main, the reductions were perceived to be due to an increase in fees (often threefold over the previous year) coupled with employer reluctance to fund in difficult economic circumstances. Anecdotal evidence suggested that employees were less likely to commit to self-funding in uncertain times. Most importantly, almost two thirds of respondents (63%, 17 colleges) indicated that they expected PT recruitment to remain at current levels: that is, they did not see any prospect of recovering the “lost” numbers from the current first year intake.

This current survey into the student experience did not explicitly enquire as to the socio-economic background of students studying part-time. However, the characteristics of college based HE students indicate that a significant proportion are drawn from widening participation backgrounds. Given the “second chance” nature of much HE in FE, the older age of entry of most students and the fact that for most this is their first experience of HE, it is likely that a disproportionate number of those deterred from PT study will be from widening participation groups. It is worth noting that many colleges serve economically-deprived localities, where participation in Higher Education is low. Colleges may also operate in areas where local universities do not prioritise part time provision as part of their HE offer. Raising skill levels is of benefit to both the individual and their local economy. Any decline in PT student numbers in these geographical areas is therefore of particular concern.

3. Key findings

The main points emerging from this survey of Part Time students include:

- The vast majority of students (91%) believe they benefit from their higher level studies at college
- A large majority of students (79%) believe that their overall experience is either satisfactory or very good and 77% believe they receive value for money
- There is concern about the level of fee charged from a significant minority of students
(This may reflect a higher fee charged to first year students than to those in later years of the same course.)
- College HE students are more likely to study vocational courses, usually below Honours degree, and do so with a view to improving their career prospects or supporting their success at work

- The decision to study in a college is largely determined by location, employer choice of course/college and the availability of that course at the college
- Part time students take their studies seriously. They express a desire to have more time away from employment to allow them to concentrate on academic work and more contact with tutors when in college
- PT students are less concerned about other aspects of “student” life such as sports, social and advice services
- Students strive to balance the demands of study, work and their private lives and would prefer course structures which take this into account
- Funding from employers is an important source of support, as is time away from work to study or flexible working arrangements
- PT HE students have indicated their preference for a separate library, as well as other academic and social spaces.
- PT students are satisfied with the knowledge and supportiveness of the tutors.

4. Overview of the results

A total of 352 students from 15 FE colleges took part in the survey. In the following sections, the data is presented both in terms of frequency count and as the percentage of the total students that took part in the survey. Most respondents (57%) were male and aged 25 or over. This balance (which may not reflect previous surveys showing a majority of female students) may reflect the make-up of the survey sample - see later sections of this report.

It should also be noted that students from two colleges make up 60% of the responses. This over-representation from certain colleges may have an impact on the findings: however, as stated earlier, it is challenging to capture the views of PT students. As a group they have less time to spend on activities which are not directly related to their main study. It is hoped that despite these methodological limitations the report provides useful insights into the experiences of PT students.

Type of Course

Type of course	Frequency	%
Higher National	150	42.6
Foundation degree	95	27.0
Honours degree	52	14.8
Professional Qualification	55	15.6
Total	352	100.0

A majority of respondents (42.6%) were pursuing Higher National qualifications. This was followed by those studying for Foundation degrees (27%). A relatively small proportion of students indicated that they were studying for an Honours degree (14.8%).

1. Subject Area

Subject area	Frequency	%
Art and Design	10	2.8
Business and Management	35	9.9
Computing and IT	6	1.7
Construction	20	5.7
Creative Arts	1	.3
Education	65	18.5
Engineering	148	42.0
Health and Social Care	48	13.6
Total	352	100.0

As highlighted in the table above, a notable proportion of students (148 students or 42% of the sample) was studying Engineering or related qualifications. The number of students pursuing Education or related courses was 65 (or 18.5% of the sample). A small proportion of students studied Construction (Civil Engineering courses have been grouped under Engineering), Art and Design, and Computing and IT courses.

As enrolment trends for the academic year 2012/13 are not available it is not possible to determine whether the sample reflects the current distribution of HE students across subject areas. The relatively low numbers pursuing Business-related subjects are unusual, but further research later in the academic year is needed before any firm conclusions can be reached as to the perceived value of this subject in the current economic climate.

2. Year of Study

Year of Study	Frequency	%
First Year	150	42.6
Second Year	99	28.1
Final Year	103	29.3
Total	352	100.0

Most students were in their First year of study (42.6%; this is regardless of the type and length of their programme). This was followed by those in the Final year (29.3%), closely followed by those in the Second year of their study.

4. Funding the course

How did you fund your studies?	Frequency	%
Entirely Self-Funded	57	16.2
Family	7	2
Bank Loan	2	0.6
Sponsorship	16	4.5
Employer Funded	179	50.9
Part employer and part self	20	5.7
Personal Loan/ Borrowings	2	0.6
Loan from SLC	80	22.7
Total	363	100.0

Multiple options were chosen by 10 students, hence there are 363 total responses rather than 352. Most students seem to have used only one means of funding their studies. Employers were part of a funding package in only three cases, suggesting that just under 50% of students were wholly funded by their employer.

5. Your decision to study HE at your particular College

350 students ranked a listed choice as option 1. Two indicated Other reasons as their first option.

Choice to study HE at your college	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank3
Location	131(37.2)	59 (16.8)	44(12.5)
My friends/siblings study(ied) here	4 (1.1)	14(4)	20(5.7)
Reputation of the College	25(7.1)	46(13.1)	36(10.2)
Offered my preferred course of study	68 (19.3)	64(18.2)	51(14.5)
Lower fee than other colleges	19 (5.4)	25(7.1)	26(7.4)
My employer insisted on this course at this college	103 (29.3)	14(4.0)	14(4.0)
Other reason rated as the most important reason	2		
Total	352	222	191

All of the 352 respondents offered a Rank 1 to explain their choice, while Rank 2 was completed by 222 students and 191 students highlighted a 3rd most important factor for their choice. As some students only ranked one option as Rank 1, and they were asked to assign each rank on the basis of its strength, Rank 1 is used as the key factor for assessing the significance of each student's choice. This is used in combination with the total number of ranks allocated by the students, although it must be noted that Ranks 2 and 3 were not mentioned by all the respondents.

Location of the college was ranked as number 1 by 37.2% respondents, closely followed by 29.3% students attributing their choice to *the insistence of their employer*. The fact that the college offered their *preferred course* was ranked third. As a sum of the total ranks offered to these three choices,

Location was ranked as one of the three key reasons by 234 respondents, Employer insistence by 131 respondents, and preferred course by 183 respondents. Other reasons included familiarity with the college as the result of a previous course, the reputation of the staff and the mode of study. Furthermore, it may be noted that 'lower fee than other colleges' and 'friends/family' were weak factors. This latter is interesting because it seems that contrary to commonly-held perception, student choice is not affected by family/friends.

6. Employer support in terms of time

Employer support for time to study	Frequency	%
My employer gives me time off work to attend college	193	54.8
I have to take leave to study	38	10.8
My employer allows me to work flexibly to accommodate attendance	100	28.4
I'm not employed so I can study whenever I like	21	6.0
Total	352	100.0

Employers are generally supportive towards employees who pursue PT studies. A notable proportion of students (54.8%) indicated that their employers offer them time off work to attend college; another 28.4% students said that their employers allow them flexibility in their work to accommodate attending courses.

7. Hours of College attendance

Hours of College Attendance	Frequency	%
Up to three hours per week	42	11.9
Between three and six hours	71	20.2
Over six hours	239	67.9
Total	352	100.0

Over two thirds of the survey respondents (239 students, 67.9%) attend college for more than 6 hours per week. A relatively small proportion (42 students, 11.9% of the sample) attends the college for up to 3 hours per week.

8. Hours of study required outside college

Hours of study required outside college	Frequency	%
Up to three hours per week	93	26.4
Between three and six hours	124	35.2
Over six hours per week	135	38.4
Total	352	100.0

A majority of respondents (38.4%) indicated that they spent over six hours a week in study in addition to their college hours. It may be noted that while 239 students (67.9% of the sample) previously confirmed that they attend the college for over six hours per week, a smaller proportion of students confirmed such commitment outside college. Likewise, while only 11.9% students indicated that they attend the college for up to three hours per week, a relatively larger proportion of students (26.4%) felt that they studied for up to three hours per week outside of their college hours.

Taken together the two tables show that PT students (however this is defined) generally spend more time than may have been assumed in the study of their subject. Whilst the concepts of Full and Part time are now more fluid, a sizeable proportion of work-based HE students who are attached to a college appear to receive hours of tuition which in some cases are the same as the contact time experienced by Full time students in a traditional university setting.

9. Relevance of the course to your work

Relevance of the course to work	Frequency	%
Very relevant to the work I do	135	38.4
Not related to what I do	43	12.2
Provides useful background to my job	73	20.7
Essential if I am to progress in my career	101	28.7
Total	352	100.0

This table suggests that 67% of the respondents either found the course very relevant to their work (38%) or felt that it was essential for their career progression (28.7%). Another 20.7% of respondents felt that their course was useful in providing a background to their work. Not all PT respondents appear as convinced: however, this may be explained in part by students pursuing generic qualifications in a particular profession or discipline some components of which are necessary for qualification but not immediately relevant to the student's current post. Some students may not be in employment.

10. Would you have preferred to study FT?

Preference to study Full time	Frequency	%
Yes	88	25.0
No	264	75.0
Total	352	100.0

The majority of respondents (75%) would not have preferred to study on a FT basis, and consider that that the PT route is right for them. However, a notable proportion of students (25%) said that they would have preferred to study Full Time had it been possible to do so.

11. Perceptions of course fee

Perceptions of course fee	Frequency	%
Too High	120	34.1
Too Low	3	.9
About Right	229	65.1
Total	352	100.0

Whilst a majority of students (65.1% of the sample) thought that their course fee was reasonable, just over a third (34.1%) felt that it was too high. It could be expected students who are self-funded or who have taken out loans are more likely to be sensitive to the level of the fee charged.

12. What would help you to learn better?

Learn Better	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3
More class contact hours	76 (21.6)	32 (9.1)	44 (12.5)
More private study time at college	58 (16.5)	71 (20.2)	33 (9.4)
More time away from work	122 (34.7)	49 (13.9)	38 (10.8)
More on line or distance learning	27 (7.7)	31 (8.8)	31 (8.8)
More individual study support from my tutors	57 (16.2)	56 (15.9)	44 (12.5)
Summer schools or other more intensive periods of study	12 (3.4)	17 (4.8)	28 (8.0)
Total	352	256	218

All of the 352 respondents offered a Rank 1 to explain their choice, while Rank 2 was completed by 256 students and 218 students highlighted a 3rd most important factor for their choice. As some students only ranked one option as Rank 1, and they were asked to assign each rank on the basis of its strength, Rank 1 is used as the key factor for assessing the student choice.

'More time away from work' was ranked as number 1 by 34.7% respondents, followed by 21.6% students who felt *'More class contact hours'* could help them learn better. *'More private study time at the college'* and *'More individual support from tutors'* gathered comparable numbers of responses as the most important factor that could help the PT students learn better.

However, *"More time away from work"* was offered a Rank (1 or 2 or 3) by 59.4% respondents and is therefore the most crucial factor that can help the student to learn.

"More class contact hours" gathered a total of 152 responses, while *"More private study time at the college"* gathered a higher sum of 162 responses. However, it must be noted that *"more class contact hours"* attracted a higher volume of Rank 1 responses. Therefore, more time away from work, more class contact hours and more private study time at the college appear to be the three factors that can positively affect student learning.

Colleges may wish to reflect on the implications of this for the way in which courses are structured and learning is organised and delivered across the college day. College staff should take note of the significant lack of interest in On-line or Distance

learning recorded here. Often seen as a more economical way of delivering provision, it is clearly of less interest to this group of respondents.

13. Your course and your work

Your course and your work	Frequency	%
My employer arranges my work commitments to allow me to attend	167	47.4
My course tutors do not always take into account the demands of my job	67	19.0
The course arrangements are flexible, so that I can organise my work and studies	118	33.5
Total	352	100.0

These responses show that more than half of those completing the survey work for employers who are supportive of their need to attend college on a regular basis. A further third were content with the structure of their course, in that it allowed for some flexibility between work and study priorities. However, just under 20% of respondents suggested that their teachers were less considerate of their circumstances than might have been expected.

14. The Part Time student experience

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
a) Information about the pastoral support provided by the college was clearly explained.	50 (14.2)	168 (47.7)	90 (25.6)	30 (8.5)	14 (4.0)
b) The college provided clear information on fee payment and administration	68 (19.3)	179 (50.9)	75 (21.3)	20 (5.7)	10 (2.8)
c)The college library is well resourced with books and learning material.	79 (22.4)	174 (49.4)	43 (12.2)	38 (10.8)	15 (4.3)
d) I would prefer to have a separate library for higher education students	82 (23.3)	95 (27.0)	123 (34.9)	38 (10.8)	11 (3.1)
e) The college should have separate academic and social spaces for HE students	71 (20.2)	116 (33.0)	125 (35.5)	31 (8.8)	8 (2.3)
f) I make use of the college's sporting facilities	6 (1.7)	18 (5.1)	55 (15.6)	111 (31.5)	157 (44.6)
g) The college forms an important part of my social life	12 (3.4)	56 (15.9)	92 (26.1)	94 (26.7)	97 (27.6)
h) I can get good and impartial careers advice and guidance at the college	22 (6.3)	91 (25.9)	169 (48.0)	30 (8.5)	36 (10.2)
i) My teachers are supportive	138 (39.2)	160 (45.5)	26 (7.4)	18 (5.1)	9 (2.6)
j) My tutors are up to date with their subject	135 (38.4)	156 (44.3)	37 (10.5)	14 (4.0)	8 (2.3)
k) My tutors are good teachers	137 (38.9)	156 (44.3)	36 (10.2)	17 (4.8)	5 (1.4)
l) My tutors are enthusiastic about their subject	148 (42.0)	158 (44.9)	31 (8.8)	8 (2.3)	6 (1.7)
m) What is taught relates directly to my job and my industry generally	98 (27.8)	148 (42.0)	67 (19.0)	19 (5.4)	20 (5.7)

a) Information about the pastoral support provided by the college was clearly explained.

218 (61.9%) students either agreed or strongly agreed that information about the pastoral support was clearly explained to them. A significant number of students (25.6%) students did not express a view on this.

b) The college provided clear information on fee payment and administration

247 (70.2%) students either agreed or strongly agreed that information about the payment of fees was clearly provided to them. Only 30 (8.5%) students either disagreed or strongly disagreed. 21% students had no view on this subject.

c) The college library is well resourced with books and learning material.

253 (71.8%) students either agreed or strongly agreed that their library is well resourced. 12.2 % students neither agreed nor disagreed on this subject.

d) I would prefer to have a separate library for higher education students

177 (50.3%) students either agreed or strongly agreed that they would prefer to have a separate library for HE students. Over a third (34.9%) had no view on this subject.

e) The college should have separate academic and social spaces for HE students

187 (53.2%) students either agreed or strongly agreed that the college should have separate academic and social spaces for HE students. Again, over a third of the students (35.5%) had no strong views on this.

f) I make use of the college's sporting facilities

The majority of students do not make use of the college's sporting facilities. Only 24 students did so, while 268 students clearly did not.

g) The college forms an important part of my social life

Similarly, 191 students did not consider that the college forms an important part of their social life. Only 8 students either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This is not unexpected - PT students are older, in work and often have family or financial commitments.

h) I can get good and impartial careers information, advice and guidance at the college

Nearly a third (113) of the students who responded either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. 66 students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they have access to good and impartial CEIAG. Nearly half expressed no specific views. This may be attributable to the very high proportion of students in employment. In most cases it can be expected that they have already made firm decisions about their career paths and are thus studying for higher qualifications that will help them to achieve a known goal. In other instances it may be that students are unaware of the existence of the service if they have an instrumental view of their time at college.

i) My teachers are supportive

A large majority - 298 students - either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Only 27 students did not think that their teachers are supportive. This is a consistent response across each of the student experience surveys carried out as part of this wider study – the great majority of students consider their tutors to be helpful.

j) My tutors are up to date with their subject

Again, the majority (291 students) either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while a relatively small proportion (22 students or 6.3%) did not consider their tutors to be up to date with their subject. This is consistent with parallel surveys in the same study project.

k) My tutors are good teachers

An almost identical response to the previous question was given here. 293 students either agreed or strongly agreed that their tutors are good teachers, with only 22 students taking the opposite view.

l) My tutors are enthusiastic about their subject

In a strong statement of support, 306 students either agreed or strongly agreed, while 14 students did not think that their tutors are enthusiastic about their subject.

m) What is taught relates directly to my job and my industry generally

246 students either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. 39 students either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the taught content of their courses relates directly to their jobs and the industries. The remaining students had no strong views.

15. Benefit from studies

Are you Benefitting from your studies?	Frequency	%
Yes	321	91.2
No	31	8.8
Total	352	100.0

A clear majority of students (91.2%) confirmed that they were benefiting from their studies.

Typical comments included:

“I have been well-supported by my tutors and have really enjoyed the whole experience.”

“Good all round learning and social experience”

The small minority who were less happy about their course frequently cited a lack of prompt and detailed feedback about their work as their main cause for concern. Some referred to lengthy waits for coursework to be marked, during which time minor errors that could otherwise be corrected were allowed to persist and more fundamental areas that should be the focus for improvement went unnoticed.

“We were told at the start that we would receive feedback on assignments within 3 weeks of submission in order to use the constructive feedback to improve our grades - which is considered a vital part of the course. Without this the same small errors can be repeated in 5 subsequent assignments meaning that grades can effectively be capped. Currently feedback is averaging two months. Staff clearly do not have the resources to mark the work within the allotted time.”

The volume of course work, when set against a full time job, was cited by one respondent, but many more noted that there was a degree of self-direction that they had not expected to have to deal with. For many this felt as if they were teaching themselves rather than being guided by skilled practitioners. Coupled with finding the work more time-consuming than they had expected, this added to a sense that the course was not value for money.

16. Overall experience

Overall Experience	Frequency	%
Very Good	139	39.5
Satisfactory	140	39.8
Average	47	13.4
Unsatisfactory	14	4.0
Very Poor	12	3.4
Total	352	100.0

It follows from the above table that 279 out of 352 students (79.3% of the sample) felt that their overall experience of studying HE in their college was either very good or satisfactory. A relatively small proportion of students (7.4%) indicated their experience to be unsatisfactory or very poor.

17. Would you recommend the college to family/friends?

Recommend to Family/Friends?	Frequency	%
Yes	221	62.8
Maybe	93	26.4
No	38	10.8
Total	352	100.0

Whilst a notable majority of students (62.8%) confirmed that they would recommend the college to their family/friends, 10.8% students indicated that they would not do so.

18. Value for money

Is the course value for money?	Frequency	%
Yes	271	77.0
No	81	23.0
Total	352	100.0

A majority of students (77%) believed that their college offered them good value for money but nearly a quarter (23%) did not share this view.

5. Students' Comments

Of over three hundred students responding, eighty two offered further comments at the end of the survey. These inevitably reflect the views of those who feel strongly about a particular issue (either in favour of their course and/or their college or wishing to draw attention to perceived failings.) None the less, they are still also the views of a group of students who are balancing the requirements of a job and family commitments with the need to obtain a work-related qualification.

The Discussion section at the end of this report picks up many of the issues raised in the student comments, but given the overall fall in PT numbers across the HE sector, it is useful to explore some broad themes at this point. The comments fall into five areas:

(a) Course administration

Some students logged very positive comments, of which the following is typical:

“I believe my course is very beneficial to my job role. However, it is challenging to work full time and study - but with good organisational skills and a bit of dedication I am managing to do this”

Assignments generated a number of responses which can broadly be summarised by the two instances quoted below:

“I think the college workload is extremely unrealistic for students who work full time. As an example, at the present time we have over four modules, a total of almost 10,000 words to write in assignments (which we are also learning) and a power point to put together in a total of 11 weeks. I feel this is too much to ask of people who are working full time.”

“Assessments around Christmas are always inconvenient. It would be much more helpful if more assignments could happen in November and the rest left until January. As a working, studying, single parent, December assignments never allow me to perform at my best.”

Other comments suggested that communication between the college staff and Part Time students could be improved, drawing a contrast with the way in which they perceived that Full Time students are treated. Several students noted that word of mouth was often substituted for more formal communication, leaving them with a sense that their college was generally “chaotic”. Inter-departmental communication, for instance, also varied, adding to this overall impression.

Other students noted that as their course was delivered on a Monday they lost teaching time to Bank Holidays and were left feeling that they had to teach themselves despite paying what seemed a high course fee.

(b) Teaching quality

The perceived quality of teaching received a range of remarks. The great majority were complimentary:

"I really enjoy studying at a nearby well-resourced site. Most of my teachers have brilliant and dynamic teaching styles which keep the lessons fresh and enjoyable! I did not join this course to get the ""uni experience"" I don't feel it offers that as there are very young students around the college but this doesn't bother me. I'm glad I decided to study at xxx college"

Others reflected concerns about teaching standards and the ability to keep discipline in class:

"Standards are not maintained in classes and tutors seem oblivious to disruptiveness in class"

Others reflect college planning and organisational issues:

"I am at College one day a week. I understand this is not a lot of time for them to tutor our small class of 3; however every week we go in for 9am to be told to get on with what we were doing and then left alone for the rest of the day. No lectures, no tutorials, no nothing."

(c) Feedback from assessments

NSS scores for feedback to students pursuing part-time provision delivered in FECs are noticeably lower than those for PT students in a university.⁵ This area continued to draw comment as students reached the end of a lengthy survey, suggesting that it was a significant source of dissatisfaction.

"Assignments briefs are always very vague and have no marking scheme. First time they've run my course so it seems all over the place."

"We were given an assignments timetable at the start of the year and this has not been followed, so therefore we got 6 assignments at once."

Other students in other colleges didn't experience the same problem, as is reflected in the comment below:

"Although I sometimes struggle with college and work commitments, my tutor and the college have met every expectation I have."

(d) Resources

⁵ NSS 2012

The 2012 NSS results suggest that access to sufficient and high-quality resources continues to generate low scores amongst students pursuing a course of HE in FE.⁶ Some of our respondents reflected similar concerns:

“I feel it would be very useful if the library kept one copy (of books) for reference within the library as there are not enough books for the number of students. I appreciate that we have to buy some books but I feel that I have had to buy more than was necessary.”

“When you have free study time you are unable to get on a computer in library as “younger” students on Facebook and other irrelevant websites or messing about. Sorry if this makes me sound old, but when you are working full time and undertaking a foundation degree it is quite an ask. Library facilities and access to e-books very poor as library mainly geared up for other studies”.

Again, not all students in all colleges held the same view:

“My first experience of HE college and I really enjoy the subject. The tutor is excellent and has excellent resources that she uses effectively, so learning takes place.”

These points, and those in previous sections, suggest that colleges need to review their operational priorities and make the necessary adjustments to ensure that delivery meets demand and expectations.

(e) Fees

Comments that fell under this heading largely reflected the view that course fees were too high. Whilst some noted that their employer paid their fees, they also offered their opinion that the course did not deliver value for money. To be fair, this was largely based on a perceived lack of organisation rather than poor teaching skills. One student, meeting fees out of their own pocket, used the opportunity to request that payments be spread over a longer period. Many other comments were directed at costs other than course costs. In several colleges, the canteen and the shop were regarded as over-priced

However the most telling comment came from one student who said:

“It’s good value for our year, as we got in before the course fees went up, although they are still lower than most unis. - it’s seen around here as a lower

⁶ Ibid.

price uni that allows for easier and more flexible study. Raising the fees wipes out any advantage to them.”

6. Conclusions and Discussion

We offer some areas for discussion which have arisen from both the analysis of the questionnaire and the students' comments.

For Colleges

A suggested typology of Part Time students is included below to assist colleges in their planning processes.

With regards to your Part Time HE provision, whether prescribed or non-prescribed:

- How are classroom delivery and the quality of the student learning experience assessed? Are teachers delivering HE formally observed in the classroom?
- Is the course organised to suit the needs of Part Time learners e.g. does it take into account family responsibilities when timing assessments, particularly around holiday periods?
- Is student feedback timely and suited to the tighter time constraints under which Part Time students work?
- Is sufficient attention paid to course organisation? Are changes to course organisation affecting students explained to them?
- Are staff changes or absences adequately managed?
- Are learning resources including library stock accessible to PT students who may wish to access them at times convenient to them?
- Are there sufficient resources to deliver a high quality PT course?
- Are the different learning and social expectations of PT students taken into account?
- Is the level of fee set at a level which both attracts students and guarantees sufficient resource for quality course delivery and resourcing?
- Does your PT offer have a distinctive organisation and delivery that is suited to the needs of your students?
- Are PT courses seen as programmes in their own right rather than a subset of Full Time equivalents?

For BIS

- If fee levels are a significant disincentive for participation in Part Time study what can be done to counter this? Are there fiscal or other financial incentives which could encourage individuals or businesses to support part time study?
- Is the importance of PT study to economic development and business success recognised appropriately? Is there an appropriate balance between the number of full and part time students?
- Are there appropriate incentives to encourage innovative approaches to higher level skills in the workplace including Higher Apprenticeships?

For Employers

- Have you considered the benefits of higher level study for your employees and your business?
- Do you make appropriate arrangements to support employees engaging in part time study (paying costs, giving, study time etc.)?

For HEIs

- Do your validation systems and partnership arrangements recognise the role and importance of Part Time study in college delivered HE?
- If PT provision is given lesser priority by your institution, have you considered how, working in partnership with colleges, these opportunities can be preserved?
- Have you identified progression opportunities to post graduate study for Part Time students?

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Annex 1

Typology of Part Time HE students

A suggested typology of Part Time HE students

Students studying on a Part Time basis are a heterogeneous group. Their motivations for study are varied. Some are sent to study by their employers whilst others support their own studies to aid career development. A smaller proportion study purely out of personal interest.

Whatever the reason for their studies it is increasingly apparent that PT courses cannot be seen simply as a lesser dimension of an equivalent Full Time course. Part Time students have distinctive needs and expectations which this typology begins to define. Colleges will of course have their own analysis of the PT students who attend their institutions. The outline presented below is intended to act as a stimulus for thought and to assist colleges in putting the needs of these students at the centre of what they do.

Employment status	Employer support	Payment responsibility	Reason for study
Employed FT	Time to attend college	Employer	Required for job role/ licence to practice. Employer has direct interest in outcome.
Employed FT	Time to attend college	Student/employer	Career progression but not directly related to current role. Financial responsibility thus shared.
Employed FT	No time from employer. Not related to job role or career with that employer but seen as personal development	Student	Personal development or potential career change.
Employed PT	No time from employer. Study fits alongside work	Student	Career enhancement. Student may see a balance between non-graduate employment and study as a means to an end.
Not in work	None	Student/state	Career enhancement or return to the labour market.
Retired	None	Student	Social/personal. May also have an interest in supporting voluntary roles.