It’s About Time

A study of part-time students and their experiences in Wales
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**Steering Group**

The project benefitted from the direction of a steering group made up of all key project partners. The steering group was responsible for both the survey data collection, the qualitative research and the ultimate analysis and dissemination of the data. Included on the steering group were the following key representatives:

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Introduction

When we set out to develop this research it was against a backdrop of falling part-time numbers, and a state of flux in support for those studying part-time and in the funding of further and higher institutions that offer part-time provision. There was also – and perhaps this remains the case – a crowding out or lack of awareness and debate about the wider purposes and benefits of part-time learning, caused in large part by the dominance of discussions within policy-making and public circles around fees and funding systems for full-time students. Not much has changed, but one thing has – now we know that part-time provision stands at the forefront of enabling vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups to access education. We also know that part-time study plays a vital role in the economy, providing skills to those who are already in employment, those who are struggling to balance a huge array of work commitments with their study.

In total there are around 180,000 part-time students in Wales, indeed the majority of our 330,000 post-16 students study part-time. And yet the funding for part-time provision, both to institutions and to the student, is disparate when compared to other modes, and the overall number of part-time students in Wales has been dropping consistently, year-on-year. Whilst the decline in Wales has not been as steep as that in England, it is a matter of real concern.

And it’s not just funding that poses challenges, but how best to structure part-time provision, and how employers can best engage with this provision. Less than one in five part-time students who are in employment are supported to study by their employer. While those that are supported financially are hugely grateful, there is also a consensus that there needs to be a greater understanding of the other kinds of support part-time students need, including flexible work and study hours.

A large number of part-time students find themselves committing more time to their study than they had expected, with many having to miss formal elements of their course because of the pressures on their time.

And for many even getting on their course is a challenge, fees often have to be paid upfront and students are using savings and paid-work to fund their study. We do not know how many people have not pursued part-time study because of the financial barrier, but we do know that around one in ten have used debt to fund their studies. Now that tuition fee loans are being introduced for those studying on a part-time basis in higher education their effects on recruitment will need to be closely monitored.

Part-time study is about the enrichment and enhancement of knowledge and skills. But it is also simply about time itself. It is about being able to balance the many competing demands on students’ time to enable them to study. It is about students’ using their time to further develop their knowledge, skills and career prospects, and by extension the knowledge and skills base and the economy of Wales.

We see this research as a beginning, showing us who part-time students are and the value of part-time study in Wales. We must then start exploring what actual flexibility ought to look like in delivery; putting in place structures and funding to enable models of best practice to be widely promoted. We know that a key focus of the Welsh Government’s Review into Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales is the strengthening of part-time in Wales1. We must make sure that this opportunity capitalised on in concrete terms for students and providers so that provision on the ground matches policy-commitments and, on occasion, the rhetoric about part-time study that accompanies such commitments.

We must also be clear that strengthening part-time provision is more than just topping up the funding or changing the fees policy. Strengthening part-time provision is also about flexible delivery and creating productive links with employers and into communities whose

support is essential in opening up opportunities to those in employment or those seeking to enter the workforce and ensuring success for part-time students.

Now we lay our challenge to policy-makers, the Government, and the education sector in Wales: be bolder and live up to the promises made often about equity and parity of esteem for part-time leaners and part-time provision. In Wales, in further and higher education, there is no incentive for providers to promote or support part-time provision despite the very clear and vital role it plays in skills, employment and widening access. For too many learners in Wales, the choice has never been part-time or full-time, but part-time as an active, positive and liberating choice. And it’s because of the fundamental importance of part-time provision that Wales can and must do better.

Because what we know now is that part-time study is about time, and it’s about time we made it a priority.

Stephanie Lloyd, NUS Wales

Rob Humphreys, The Open University in Wales
Recommendations

Structures

- Our research shows that, for many, part-time study is about time, the time they are able to commit to study and the other pressures in part-time students’ lives. As such, the choice is not full-time or part-time, but rather part-time or nothing at all. And yet part-time numbers across further and higher education have been consistently falling in Wales, year on year.

- Currently in higher education, despite the part-time teaching grant being protected, part-time provision provides less financial return to institutions than full-time provision. Welsh institutions are expected to shore-up part-time provision with full-time fee income. This does not incentivise the delivery of, or recruitment to, part-time provision.

- We must also ensure we learn lessons from the rest of the UK, including the impact of £9,000 tuition fees in England that saw part-time numbers decline by 42% between 2008 and 2012.

- Yet the decline in part-time numbers has not been consistent across the UK, we must look at models of best practice. For example, a focus on reskilling workers in Northern Ireland saw intake in HE part-time grow by 16%.

- In the short term, we recommend that the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) protects the totality of investment in part-time provision in real terms including the teaching grant, per capita payment and premia and compensates for the loss of strategy funding for part-time.

- In the long term, we recommend that the Welsh Government develop a funding structure that fully incentivises providers to promote part-time provision, and funds them appropriately to deliver that provision.

- Such a system should not operate in parallel to the full-time system, but rather as part of a single holistic funding approach. Such an approach would also enable students to more easily adjust the intensity of their study to suit their needs throughout their course.

Student Support

- In terms of maintenance support, the investment in part-time student support is dwarfed by the investment in full-time student support.

- We know that nearly one in ten part-time students use debt to fund their studies.

- The most common means of funding study are savings and paid work, these are not options for many students.

- We recommend that the part-time student support offer be improved and that the Welsh Government introduce a system of support for students in Wales that is fair, meets the specific needs of part-time students and scales according to intensity.

- We recommend, regardless of any other alterations to the part-time support package, that the Welsh Government streamline public information regarding part-time student support that is often seen as disjointed and confusing.

- Given the difficulties associated with the funding of study, we must ensure that there is flexibility with existing funding to enable prospective students to access courses most appropriate to their needs.

- Currently Welsh Government funding for higher-level apprenticeships cannot support higher education qualifications but can only support specific high-level professional

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http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/england-sees-biggest-fall-in-part-time-study-entrants/2013000.article

Ibid.

NUS Wales, Pound in Your Pocket Wales, 2014
qualifications that are awarded by non-HEI providers

- **Enabling this funding to support foundation degrees, HNDs and HNCs would enable greater flexibility for providers and students**
- **In the near-term, we recommend that the Welsh Government enable higher level apprenticeship funding to be used for the study of foundation degrees**

### Employer Links

- The demands on part-time students’ time are many. The commitment to informal study averages at approximately 10 hours per week, and where formal course elements are missed it is often the result of work commitments.
- Many students who receive employer support for fees also expressed a desire for their employers to have a greater understanding of the other requirements of their course.
- **We recommend that the Welsh Government and appropriate stakeholders carry out further research of what employer-institution links already exist in part-time provision**
- **We recommend that the Welsh Government use this research to work with institutions to pilot approaches across Wales. The purpose of which would be to create a shared understanding between employers and providers. Such a pilot should also focus on provision of information to employers regarding course timings, costs and structures.**

### Flexibility

- Part-time is valuable both for widening access and developing skills and employability
- Part-time students are a diverse group that spans the adult age-range and has a high proportion of disabled students, parents, carers and those in employment
- These students have a range of pressures on their time, such that almost half have missed a formal element of their course
- This research was mainly focused on the nature of the part-time student cohort and their experiences of part-time provision. Models of flexible delivery were, as such, outside the remit of this research
- **We recommend a detailed study of flexible study programmes in Wales, including distance learning (including MOOCs), community learning and the UHOVI model, to evaluate their effectiveness in offering flexible study opportunities. This work should be informed by the recent report on Open Educational Resources (‘Open & Online) produced for the Welsh Government. Successful models then should be promoted and funded throughout Wales.**

### Advice and Guidance

- One of the challenges with part-time provision is the breadth of provision, funding and support available
- We found that a third of part-time students did not seek advice and guidance prior to starting their course. Those that did tend to seek advice from their prospective institutions and/or tutors
- We recommend that the Welsh Government explore ways to improve the advice and guidance available to potential part-time students in Wales – including the structure of qualifications, the delivery of provision and the types of financial support available
Key Findings

1. Part-time students are a diverse group who are spread across the adult age range, with 62% of our respondents being over 30. Our research suggests that part-time students include a high proportion of students who are in employment (72%), have a long-term health condition or disability (22%), or have caring responsibilities (39%).

2. Part-time study is firmly associated with employability and the economy, 72% of part-time students are in employment and the most commonly cited reason for pursuing part-time study was to improve future employability.

3. Part-time students tend to be satisfied with their courses, on average stating that their course is close to fully meeting expectations.

4. The informal commitment to part-time study is greater than the formal commitment, with over half of part-time students studying over 10 hours a week informally through reading, writing or independent study. 40 per cent of respondents felt that the time commitment had been more than they had expected prior to beginning their course.

5. The majority of part-time students find the pressure of their course ‘about right’ (75%). However, carers, parents and disabled students were more likely to say they felt their course was a little too pressured.

6. Over half of part-time students have missed a formal part of their course, the most common reasons cited for this being caring commitments, work commitments or transport difficulties. Being a disabled student, carer or parent increases the likelihood of a student missing a formal element of their course.

7. The most common sources of funding used by part-time students to fund their studies are savings or paid work. Around one in ten students have used personal debt to fund their study.

8. Fifteen percent of those in employment receive support or funding from their employer. Those who do receive support were very grateful of financial support but emphasised the importance of other kinds of support including study leave and flexibility to attend formal elements of the course.

9. A third of part-time students did not seek advice or guidance prior to starting their course, those that do generally seek academic and financial advice. Part-time students tend to seek advice from their institutions, their lecturers/tutors and online
Overview and Aims

Part-time study is currently a high priority in Welsh education and has formed a part of the Welsh Government's 'Policy Statement on Higher Education' (2013) and 'Policy Statement on Skills' (2014), and HEFCW's Corporate Strategy. The strengthening of part-time study has also been highlighted as a focus of the Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales chaired by Sir Ian Diamond.

Yet part-time numbers across further and higher education in Wales have continued to fall in recent years, with HE part-time numbers falling by 24% between 06/07 and 10/11 (HEFCW, 2012) and FE part-time numbers falling by 30% between 2004 and 2010 (StatsWales, 2012). Whilst the decline in part-time numbers in higher education in Wales has not been as steep as that in England, it is a matter of real concern. In addition to this, despite reports on HE from both the Graham Review and OldBell, a thorough literature review on this policy area conducted by NUS Wales identified a paucity of recent research around part-time study in Wales, particularly around those part-time students studying in further education.

Furthermore, the higher education part-time support and funding system in Wales has been in flux, with only relatively recent confirmation of the tuition fees and support regime for part-time students for 14/15. The impact of the forthcoming introduction of part-time loans in 2014/15 is still unknown. Similarly, in further education, the review of the National Planning and Funding System (NPFS) for colleges has yet to report on measures for part-time courses, explicitly not including them in the introduction of Learning Area Programmes (LAPs).

This ‘knowledge’ gap, coupled with the lack of long term strategic vision for part-time higher education and falling numbers, suggests that now is the optimum time to identify who studies part-time, why they study, how they navigate the system and what their experiences of part-time study are. As such NUS Wales and the Open University in Wales developed this project to gather quantitative and qualitative data that will enrich the sectors’ understanding of part-time study and provide a powerful tool to inform the development and improvement of the provision and support of part-time students in Wales.

The aims of this research were:

- To engage with a representative sample of part-time students in Wales across further and higher education to explore and understand:
  - Why students in Wales choose to study part-time
  - How part-time students in Wales study

- To gather data related to students’ experiences of part-time study in Wales, including issues related to retention and on-course support.

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8 http://wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/2014/hefinance/?lang=en
10 http://wales.gov.uk/docs/caecd/research/110602parttimehighereducationresearchen.pdf
11 http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/p16planningandfunding/planningandfundingplanningandfundingreview/?lang=en
• To identify any barriers part-time students in Wales encounter in attempting to access part-time provision

• To identify any notable gaps in part-time provision and support in Wales
Methodology

Phase 1 - Survey

The first phase of the research employed a wide-reaching online survey to gather, for the most part, quantitative data to gain an authoritative understanding of the make-up, mode and experiences of part-time students across Wales. The emergent themes from this survey then informed the second phase of the research which developed qualitative interviews with 25 part-time students.

The survey was designed by NUS Group’s research unit and NUS Wales with input from the project steering group. The survey was open between 24 October 2013 and 4 November 2013, 1,442 responses were received of which 1,344 were valid.

Quality Control

Quality controls were built in to the survey design at a number of stages:

- Respondents who reported themselves as ineligible to take part in the survey, for example because of mode of study, were filtered out at an early stage
- Routing was built into the survey to minimise errors. For example, only students who indicated that they had missed a formal element of their course were asked what the reason for this had been

Self-completion

Eligible students were invited to complete the questionnaire online. It has been suggested that online surveys provide a good opportunity to ask questions that might require the respondent to check documents. Whilst the questions were designed so that respondents did not have to recall items, the survey format allowed respondents to check any relevant information if necessary. The online method also provided a level of perceived anonymity that we hoped would encourage participation in the survey, which examined sensitive financial issues.

Informed consent

A detailed consent form, providing information about the aims of the study, the use of the data and the content of the questionnaire, was a compulsory element of the survey. Individuals who did not consent were not allowed to submit the survey.

Sampling

Mixed recruitment methods were used to pursue a large sample. NUS Services and NUS Wales sought to maximise response through the following methods:

1. The use of existing NUS Wales and NUS Services data assets
2. The use of Open University data assets
3. Liaison with sector stakeholders, colleges and universities
4. An HTML email with survey link

Profile of survey respondents

We received 1,344 valid responses from part-time students across further and higher education.

Gender

460 respondents identified themselves as a man (34.7%), 856 respondents identified themselves as a woman (64.7%), 3 respondents identified as neither a man nor woman and 5 preferred not to say.

Caring Responsibilities

515 (39%) respondents had caring responsibilities for children under the age of 18 and 149 (11%) had caring responsibilities for someone over 18.

Part-time students who identified as women were more likely to have caring responsibilities for children under-18 than those who identified as men. 43% of women identified as having caring responsibilities for an under 18 compared to 30% of men. There was no significant difference in likelihood between men
and women having caring responsibilities for an adult.

Ethnicity

1,168 (87.9%) identified themselves as ‘White – British’, 92 (6.9%) identified themselves as ‘White – Irish’ or ‘White – Other’.

3.4% identified themselves as black or minority ethnicity.

Disability

291 (22.2%) of respondents identified themselves as having a long-term health condition, impairment or disability.

When asked to describe their disability, impairment or long-term health condition, the most commonly cited were ‘Mental health difficulties, such as depression or schizophrenia’ with 182 (16.6%) respondents and ‘An unseen disability or health condition eg. Diabetes, epilepsy, asthma, HIV’ with 145 (13.2%) respondents.

73 (6.7%) respondents described themselves as having a ‘Physical impairment’.

Age

82% of respondents were over 26 and a total of 62% of respondents were over 30. The most populous age group for responses was the 26-30 bracket, although there remained a sizeable and significant proportion of part-time students older than 30.
Phase 2 – Interviews with part-time students

The second phase of the research used telephone interviews with individuals who study higher education part-time to explore in greater detail their experiences and perceptions of part-time study. Preliminary analysis of the survey responses indicated three areas of potential interest, and these related to individuals who reported one or more of the following circumstances:

- Individuals with caring responsibilities
- Individuals with disabilities or long term health problems
- Individuals learning in or for employment

A purposive sample was drawn of survey respondents who consented to being contacted for further research and who had indicated in their survey responses one of the above three circumstances, and were contacted about taking part in either interviews or focus groups. Inevitably, due to the potential long distances required to travel to focus group locations, and the relevance of the individuals’ particular circumstances to their time and ability to travel, there was very little interest in focus groups, and so telephone interviews were pursued.

The interview schedule

Researchers deployed a semi-structured approach to interviews, and invited individuals to talk about a range of aspects relevant to opportunities to engage and be successful in learning:

- Life and circumstances
- Learning and life
- Learning environments
- Support structures
- Future plans

Individuals were deliberately not asked about caring responsibilities, disabilities or learning for or in employment. This strategy was used in order that individuals could be free to describe their own circumstances and draw on and make reference to anything they felt was relevant.

One important observation can be made about the resultant interview data: individuals did not necessarily invoke reference to disability or caring responsibilities in their narratives. This important observation draws attention to the distinction between the presence of a specific circumstance or condition in an individual and the ways in which that individual wishes to make reference to that in talking about their live and their learning.
Findings

Survey findings are presented below under the headings of Employment, Main reasons for studying, Meeting expectations, Experiences of study, Funding for part-time study, and Advice and guidance.

Analysis of interview data is used to illustrate and develop the survey findings, before a more detailed exploration of the specific circumstances of disability, caring responsibilities, and learning in or for employment is presented.

Employment

We asked respondents about their employment status. We found that majority of part-time students are in employment with nearly half (46%) in full-time employment year-round and 49% in full-time employment for a part of the year. In total 72% of part-time students are in some form of employment with less than a third describing themselves as not in employment.

Carers and parents were less likely to be in full-time employment – with 35% of carers and 43% of parents in full-time employment compared to 49% of all respondents. Carers were also the most likely of those three groups to be in part-time employment and more likely to also be not in employment (36% of carers compared to 29% of all respondents). This suggests that time and flexibility are as such particularly important to Carers, which concurs with recent NUS research\(^\text{12}\) which found that only 36 per cent of student carers felt able to balance their commitments, as compared to 53 per cent of students without caring responsibilities.

One individual interviewed – Christopher – had been made redundant several years ago and his role within the family has become one of primary carer for one of his children and looking after the family home. He sees his studies as a core part of his identity, but recognises that caring responsibilities and supporting the rest of his family take precedence. As such on occasions he needs his university to be flexible to accommodate challenges associated with his caring role, particularly around assignment deadlines.

Interviews with individuals outlined a complex picture of work and employment, which often included voluntary work within their busy and varied lives. For example, Michael described working full-time as well as volunteering in the evenings with the Ambulance service. He fitted in studying around these work commitments and family commitments, which include a strongly-held promise to never study when his 6 year old daughter was awake. This relegates Michael’s study to late nights during the week, and

regimented study hours and breaks to ensure he stays on track.

Simon, a former clergyman, juggles ad hoc teaching contracts, volunteering with the Salvation Army and substantial caring responsibilities for two members of his immediate family (“Eventually the time is going to come that we are going to have to move in with them. At the moment we’re there during the day and come home at night.”), alongside his degree studies. Despite these informal working commitments, Simon described himself as retired and as such not in paid employment.

**Main Reasons for Studying**

We asked part-time students what their main reasons for undertaking part-time study were. From a list of nineteen reasons, the reason provided most often by students as their main reason for studying part-time was to ‘improve future employability’. Over one in three part-time students provided this as their main reason for studying. Other prominent reasons included ‘enjoyment of subject’, ‘it felt like an intellectual challenge’ and to ‘improve current career prospects’. The five most cited reasons for all respondents were largely consistent across all groups of students including disabled students, carers and parents.

Among the five most common motivations for studying, there were some variations between different groups of students. Parents were more likely to study for future employability than non-parents. Similarly, parents were less likely to cite ‘enjoyment of subject’ as the main reason for studying than other respondents.

Carers exhibited a greater spread of reasons for studying part-time when compared with other respondents. The only notable difference is a slightly increased likelihood of choosing to study to develop specific or specialised knowledge.
The motivations for part-time students in further education differed slightly from those in higher education. Higher education part-time students (18%) were more likely to be studying for the enjoyment of the subject compared to further education students (14%). Further education part-time students were more likely to be studying either to improve current career prospects (18%) or to develop specific or specialised knowledge or skills (18%) compared to higher education students (12% and 11% respectively).

Interviews with part-time students provided detailed insights into the intersection of motivations and reasons for studying. There appeared to be a strong leading emphasis on a strong interest in the subject matter, but some intersectionality with work and career thoughts, whether fully formed and planned, or otherwise.

Ruth, for example, chose her Mathematics degree to pursue a lifelong interest and aptitude in the subject which started at school. Although she had chosen to study medicine for her first degree, she had always wondered what would have happened had chosen to study mathematics. Ruth is looking for something to keep her mind occupied and although she is not thinking about the degree as a means to a specific job, Ruth is keen to explore opportunities to adapt her career.

Simon, who had studied theology and worked as a minister and chaplain, was interested in sociology. He described people – “knowing people and having knowledge” as one of the most important things in his life, once he had retired from paid work with the Church, and notwithstanding substantial caring responsibilities for two close family members and volunteering commitments, he felt he had sufficient time to devote to studying sociology part-time.

Michelle, who had been teaching for many years, described her motivation to studying as simply “wanting to use my brain”, or “getting my brain back in gear”. Studying was something for herself, and clearly distinguished from work and career: “My career hadn’t quite gone in the way I thought it was going to go and I didn’t want to be stuck teaching for the rest of my life, I wanted other opportunities I suppose, or other interests if not, not to take them up as a work thing, but a diversion I suppose!“

Sandy, who when we spoke to her had just completed her Masters course. She described the combined reasons of supporting her professional development as a self-employed consultant with a desire to “prove to myself whether I could”. She had commenced her studies without the specific intention of completing a full Masters degree: “I didn’t set out deliberately to do that. It just sort of, one thing led to another.”
Why part-time?

The interviews represented an opportunity to explore with individuals why they chose to study part-time. For all individuals part-time was seen as the option relevant to them. Participants’ narratives about part-time study were characterised by reference to finances, both by the cost of study, but also the income forgone by having to interrupt careers to study full-time.

For example Sandy, working as a freelance consultant, juggled work and family commitments and described her family being highly reliant on the joint income generated by herself and her husband.

Michelle perceived no other option: she wanted to learn but could only support herself through continuing levels of paid work, and this financial imperative meant she only considered part-time study options.

However, no accounts solely made reference to finances. For example, Gerwyn, who in addition to the importance of his family characterised ‘things most important to him’ by reference to “Contributing back to people’s lives in a helpful way”. He had changed careers due to deep-rooted concerns about private sector practices and taken up career in mental health support:

“Because of the reduced pressure, though now’s the time if I want to actually learn a bit more about computers and how these things work at a deeper level, and who knows, maybe work some time in that sector, maybe not. But my decision was ‘let’s do one course at a time’. If I enjoy it, do another one. If I don’t, re-evaluate. In on my fourth course now.”

For Gerwyn, his study was part of range of possible future scenarios, which could potentially relate to new career directions, rather than a concrete plan. He made reference first to cost, but then referred to preference for working and studying side by side: “I like doing something in the real world. I don’t think being a student full-time would fit with my personality very well.” For Gerwyn, studying part-time was an absolute necessity. Indeed, adding part-time study has filled any spare time he had – “there wasn’t the amazing amount of free time I perceived to be there” – to his busy life has left him with “no time whatsoever to do anything at all”.

For some, the opportunity to study was influenced primarily by full-time work commitments. For example Julia, living in rural Wales and seeking to change career later in her working life, “just couldn’t have fitted it in around work. It just wouldn’t have been practicable at all. And there’s no real courses around here that aren’t distance learning so it had to be a distance learning course really to fit in around work and any other activities”.

Where cost or working was not mentioned, interviewed part-time students referred to part-time being the ‘best fit’ for their lives and circumstances.

Simon for example felt he could only contemplate part-time study alongside his substantial caring and volunteering responsibilities – “I thought, if I’m going to be caring, I cannot do full-time, although it seems like full-time. It takes a lot of time, reading.”

Similarly, Christopher who was the primary carer for his teenage son, saw that full-time study “just wouldn’t have been an option and I wanted something I could do in sort of bite size chunks.”

Sarah who had complex long-term health conditions believed only a part-time degree to be possible because of the ‘over-riding reasons’ of her health and mobility. For Sarah, the flexibility afforded by part-time gave her space to deal effectively with her often unpredictable and debilitating health conditions.
Meeting Expectations

We asked part-time students whether part-time study was meeting their expectations, with 1 being fully meeting and 5 not meeting the expectation at all. It became clear that part-time study was close to fully meeting students’ expectations in all areas. When looking at the top five reasons for study, all reasons averaged approximately 2.

Looking across all the reasons provided, those who had chosen to study because they were unsure of career choices, who did not know what else to do, or wanted to meet new people were the most likely to feel that their study was close to fully meeting their expectations.

There were only very minor differences between different groups when it comes to their satisfaction with their study, suggesting that regardless of background, students tend feel that their study is very close to fully meeting their expectations.
Experiences of Study

Hours of Study

We wanted to develop an understanding of the time commitment made by part-time students to their study. The concept of intensity varies and is dependent on level and mode of study, as such we instead asked students how many hours of formal and informal study they undertook. We defined formal study as including lectures, laboratory work and tutorials. We defined informal study as including independent learning and reading. Over half of part-time students (57%) study formally for 0-4 hours a week. 18% of part-time students have 5-9 hours of formal study a week. Only a very small proportion of part-time students (3.6%) indicated that they had over 20 hours of formal study a week.

The picture was significantly more varied when it came to informal study. The majority of part-time students study informally 5-14 hours a week, with one in four (27%) part-time students studying 10-14 hours and one in four (25%) part-time students studying 5-9 hours informally a week.

17% of students said they study informally 15-19 hours a week, and 8% said they studied 20-24 hours a week.

There were no significant differences between different groups of students and the amount of hours they studied formally, with the graph below breaking down each response category by group.

We asked respondents how this time commitment compared to the time they had expected to commit when they first started their study, responses to this question were mixed. Around half (49%) said that it was the same amount of time as they were expecting. However, 40% said that their commitment had been more than they’d expected, 27% said it was a little more time than they expected and 13% said it was a lot more time than they’d expected.

When we asked how many hours per week students spent on different kinds of activity, it was clear that the most significant weekly commitment for part-time students was independent study with part-time students averaging nearly 10 hours per a week. The average amount of time part-time students spend in lectures was an hour a week. Online written notes were also commonly used with part-time students spending, on average, 2 hours a week using online written notes.
Interviews with students emphasised just how time-poor part-time students can be, and the range of creative strategies part-time students develop to overcome lack of time for study. Bella, for example, was pursuing a multi-disciplinary arts degree part-time. Part-way through her second year, she described the need to be highly selective in her choices of modules to ensure that she was not required to attend college several days in a week, inevitably constraining her choices. She described her success in study as “a continuing juggling act”.

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Average hours per week

- Independent study
- Online written notes
- Online multimedia
- Other
- Online tutorials
- Placements
- Lectures
- Practical sessions
- Online video podcasts
- Workshops
- Laboratory work
- Individual meetings
- Drop-in sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Average Hours per Week</th>
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<tr>
<td>Independent study</td>
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<td>Online multimedia</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online tutorials</td>
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<td>Placements</td>
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<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-in sessions</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Attendance

Of all respondents, over half (52%) had missed a formal element of their course. This was broadly consistent across all groups of students with parents slightly more likely to have missed a formal element of their course and students who are not disabled, carers or parents the least likely to miss a formal element of their course.

Where formal elements of a course were missed, there were a range of responses. The most common reasons for missing formal elements of a course were work commitments (38%), caring commitments for someone under 18 (22%), transport difficulties (21%) and timetabling difficulties (20%), clearly demonstrating the importance of flexibility and that, for a large number of students, courses are not yet offering flexibility sufficient to ensure participation in all formal elements of the course.

Individuals in interviews described experiencing a range of views of staff about missing parts of courses, with some staff perceived as less flexible. Bella for example made reference to negative staff attitudes towards part-time students “if you miss classes you will fail courses – that kind of attitude. I’m working hard thank you, but I have to fit it around other parts of my life.” Sarah, characterising her studies as a challenge against the backdrop of fatigue and fibro-myalgia, attends her college one day a week, fitting in three modules in one day on a course specifically designed for part-time students. Because of her disabilities, she conducted almost all her independent study from home, enabled by what she described as excellent access to electronic course materials: “if my health dictates when to study, it’s useful that I can access everything 24/7”.

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### Graphs

#### Attendance Graph

- **Others**
- **Carers**
- **Parents**
- **Disabled**
- **All**

- **Yes**
- **No**

#### Reasons for Missing Formal Elements

- **Other**
- **Work commitments**
- **Chronic / ongoing health issues**
- **Short term illness, e.g. a cold, a virus, or minor injury**
- **I find the topic too challenging**
- **I find the topic too easy**
- **The person that delivers that element is not...**
- **I don’t like the delivery mode**
- **Course is not engaging / interesting**
- **Caring commitments for someone aged 18 or over**
- **Caring commitments for someone aged under 18**
- **Timetabling difficulties (e.g. a lecture is too early /...**
- **Transport Difficulties**

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Pressure

Part-time students indicated that although the time commitment was more than they had expected, the pressure of the course was generally about right, with 75% of respondents indicating this. However, parents, carers and disabled students were more likely to respond that their course was a little too pressured compared to other respondents.

Individuals in interviews were encouraged to talk about aspects of the studies and life in general that they felt had to juggle. These discussions were characterised by reference to pressures changing over time, sometimes able to be planned for, for example deadlines and busy periods in their paid employment, and others that could not, for example complex health conditions such as those experienced by Sarah, who contended with the unpredictability of fybro-myalgia, in addition to the constant challenge of mobility issues.

Individuals talked about overcoming such pressures, and emphasised the importance of them foreseeing or expecting these challenges, and then planning for them, for example through bringing forward writing essays which would otherwise have conflicted with work priorities.
Funding for part-time study

We asked students how they fund their study. There was a large spread of sources identified. Nearly one in four part-time students (24%) said they use savings to fund their study while over one in four students (22%) said they funded their study through paid work during term-time. Worryingly, debt accounted for 17% of responses to this question, consisting of overdrafts (8%), credit cards (8%) and pay-day lenders (1%). Many of those who use overdrafts to fund their study also use credit cards, and as such the total number of respondents who used debt to fund their study was approximately 9%.

A large proportion of part-time students claimed to receive the Assembly Learning Grant. For part-time students, this is only available in further education. As such, it is likely there was some confusion among respondents between the Assembly Learning Grant and other Welsh Government sources of support such as the Course Grant.

Nearly one in four students who identified themselves as having a long-term health condition or disability said they receive Disabled Students’ Allowance (23%). Otherwise the sources of funding cited by this group were broadly similar to the overall picture.
Of the total responses, 11% said they received business/employer support or funding. Looking only at those who are in employment, 15% received support or funding from their employer. Of those who received employer support, 86% said that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the support.

We asked part-time students to explain their response to that question. Most part-time students who responded to this expressed gratitude that their employer was contributing to the cost of their course. What became clear in the qualitative responses was that part-time students who were in employment wanted employers to have a better understanding of their study commitments, not just the financial support that they receive. This was expressed in terms of study leave as well as feedback, guidance and/or encouragement. This response aligns with our other finding that the informal study commitment far outweighs the formal element of part-time study.
Advice and Guidance

Nearly half of respondents sought academic advice prior to starting their course (47%) and nearly half sought financial advice prior (46%). Nearly a third of respondents did not seek any advice prior to starting their course (30%).

When we asked part-time students where they had sought advice and guidance, nearly a third had sought advice from the lecturer/teacher (30%) and just over a third from student services at the institutions (34%). Another common source of advice and guidance was the internet with 16% of students seeking advice and guidance online.

Interviewed students emphasised the primary role of their personal tutor for raising and resolving queries of an academic nature. However, students who made reference in their narratives to circumstances, for example caring responsibilities or disabilities, which occasionally presented challenges around assignment deadlines, additionally described approaching their tutors with requests for extensions. Although this flexibility was generally supported by institutions, there was also reference to variation between individual staff members.
Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of who studies part-time, why they choose to study part-time and what their experiences of part-time study are. What has become clear is that part-time opportunities are at the forefront of widening access and employability in Wales. Survey and interview data confirms that part-time students are a diverse group that spans the adult age-range with a high proportion from difficult to reach groups including disabled students, carers and parents.

Approximately two thirds of our sample were women, and respondents who identified as women were more likely to be parents than those who identify as men. Part-time students are also very likely in some form of employment, 72 per cent were in some form of employment with nearly half in full-time employment year round.

It is these competing demands on the part-time cohort that makes this mode of provision a far more attractive offer and opportunity than full-time provision.

We found that there were two significant groups of motivations for part-time study – reasons associated with employability and skills, and those associated with intellectual challenge and enjoyment. ‘Improving future employability’ was the single most cited reason for study provided by part-time students. And those that study part-time also expressed a great deal with satisfaction, indicating that their study was close to fully meeting their expectations and that, for 72 per cent of respondents, the pressure of their course was ‘about right’.

We found that the informal commitment in hours to part-time study is greater than the formal commitment. We also found that a large number of students (40%) said that the time commitment of their course was more than they expected. It’s important that we as a sector take steps to recognise the unique demands placed upon the part-time student and how they are supported to manage the competing pressures on their time.

The most common sources of funding for part-time students were savings and paid work. Unfortunately, this suggests that those without access to such sources of funding would have difficulty accessing part-time study. This is further supported by the fact that nearly one in ten part-time students have used debt to fund their study. Although the 2014/15 introduction of a part-time loan scheme will go some way to remedy this accessibility issue, it’s uncertain what impact the scheme will have on student numbers, whether there are other costs of study that this will not effect, or whether the loan regulations will meet the needs of part-time students given it is restricted to those without a first degree.

Of those in employment who receive employer support, the vast majority were very grateful of financial support. Yet there was a consensus that as well as financial support, many wanted a greater understanding from their employers on the expectations placed on them in the course of their part-time study.

Flexibility is fundamental to part-time provision, with many students having to balance work, caring responsibilities and other demands while studying. A large proportion of part-time students found the time commitment more than they had expected and half of part-time students have had to miss a formal element of their course, with work commitments, caring responsibilities and transport difficulties among the most common reasons cited. Similarly, carers, disabled students and parents were more likely to say that they found their course a little too pressured.

We now have a grasp of the value of part-time, in terms of skills, employability and widening access, as well as the challenges. The next step is to develop a greater understanding of what successful delivery looks like and how flexible provision is best configured. But there is another, clearer challenge.

Part-time provision is underfunded and the part-time student offer lacks parity with full-time. There must be a clear commitment to
treat part-time students on an equal basis in investment terms, while at the same time recognising that their needs and expectations are different from the full-time cohort, and therefore may require different solutions. There must be a move away from overly fragmented funding systems operating in parallel (full-time vs. part-time, higher vs. further) to streamlined and sustainable systems that are able to meet needs fairly, equitably and flexibly and that do not privilege one mode of study over another.

Greater links need to be forged between providers and employers. With less than one in five employed students being supported by their employer, the value of part-time education needs to be more clearly conveyed to employers. Similarly, the competing pressures of work and study would be alleviated through better employer/providers links as it would enable a more informed timetabling process and a greater appreciation by employers of high intensity points in the academic year.