The Part-Time Degree and the Support That Assumes Full Time

A Decline Produced by an Instrument

Claire Callender

Claire Callender, Institute of Education, University College London, London, United Kingdom

The number of students studying part-time has fallen in most European systems in the same period in which the policy of lifelong learning was adopted, and the two facts are connected by the design of student support. This article examines the instrument: the four costs that a part-time student bears and the one that the support does not meet, the fee charged per credit without a grant to pay it, the loan whose repayment period is shorter than the study, the employer who used to pay and no longer does, and the institutional arrangements that make a part-time route expensive to run. It argues that the decline was produced by a series of decisions each of which was reasonable, and that the instrument which would reverse it is a support calculated on intensity of study rather than on the status of the student.

Contents **Page**

1. The Decline and the Policy **54**
2. Four Costs of a Part-Time Student **54**
3. The Fee Per Credit **54**
4. The Loan That Fits Badly **55**
5. The Employer Who Stopped Paying **55**
6. The Intensity of Study **56**
7. The Institution's Cost **56**
8. The Data **57**
9. The Student Who Is Also a Carer **57**
10. The Assessment and the Second Sitting **58**
11. The Employer's Support and the Tax **58**
12. The Comparison Across Systems **58**
13. The Sequence of a Reform **59**
14. The Evidence of a Policy **59**
15. Conclusions **60**

1. The Decline and the Policy

The participation of part-time students in European higher education has fallen for two decades, and the fall has coincided with the period in which every system adopted a policy of lifelong learning.

The coincidence is not a paradox and it is a consequence. The support of a student was rebuilt in the same period around a full-time student: a fee charged for a year, a grant assessed on a household, a loan repaid over a period that begins at graduation. Each of the three was designed for a young person who studies for three years and then works, and each of them fits a part-time student badly.

The consequence is a system that announces a policy and prices it out of reach. The instrument is a support calculated on the intensity of study: a fee per credit, a grant per credit, and a repayment period that runs from the end of the study rather than from the age of the graduate.

2. Four Costs of a Part-Time Student

A part-time student bears four costs and the support of most systems meets one of them.

The first is the fee, which is charged pro rata in some systems and at the full rate in others, and the difference is a decision that nobody defends in public. The second is the foregone income, which is smaller for a part-time student and which is nevertheless the calculation that determines whether she can study at all.

The third is the cost of the arrangements that make study possible: the childcare, the transport, the time taken from a job that pays by the hour. The fourth is the cost of the duration: a programme of six years costs more in fees than the same programme in three, and the total is what the student compares with the salary she does not earn.

3. The Fee Per Credit

The fee is the instrument through which a system decides whether a part-time route exists, and the decision is frequently accidental.

A system that charges a full annual fee to a student who takes a third of the credits has charged three times the price of the same teaching,

and the anomaly is not a policy but a consequence of a fee regulation written for a cohort. A system that charges per credit has priced the route correctly and has produced a fee that the support does not cover.

The instrument is a fee per credit with a maximum annual charge, and a grant per credit assessed on the income of the student rather than on that of her household. The two together convert the fee from an obstacle into a price, and a price can be met.

4. The Loan That Fits Badly

A loan designed for a three-year degree fits a six-year part-time programme badly in three respects, and each of them is a disincentive.

The first is the amount: the loan is calculated for a year of full-time study and the part-time student needs a fraction of it, which in some systems she cannot obtain. The second is the accumulation: the interest accrues over a longer period and the balance at graduation is larger for the same teaching.

The third is the repayment: the period begins at the end of the study, and a student who completes at forty-five has a working life in which to repay that is shorter than the schedule assumes. The instrument is a modular loan, per credit, with the interest subsidised during the study and the write-off counted from the first payment.

5. The Employer Who Stopped Paying

The part-time student of the previous generation was frequently financed by an employer, and the employer has withdrawn from the arrangement in most sectors.

The withdrawal is a consequence of the labour market rather than of a policy: a shorter tenure in a post makes an employer less willing to fund a qualification that the employee may take to a competitor. The consequence is a cost that has moved from the firm to the individual, and the individual has responded by not studying.

The instrument is not to persuade the employer and it is to make the investment portable: a voucher attached to the person rather than to the post, funded by a levy on the sectors that employ the graduates, and usable at any accredited institution. A portable voucher matches the instrument to the labour market that exists.

6. The Intensity of Study

The statistical category of a part-time student conceals a range of intensities from a single module a year to almost a full load, and the instrument must respond to the range.

A student who takes thirty credits a year for six years is not in the same position as one who takes ten for twelve years, and a support designed for the first excludes the second. The consequence is a policy that serves the students who are nearest to full time, which is to say the ones who need it least.

The instrument is a support that is proportional to the credits taken, with a supplement for the students below a threshold of intensity, and a maximum duration that is stated in credits rather than in years. A design of that kind reaches the population that the category was meant to describe.

7. The Institution's Cost

A part-time route is expensive for an institution and the expense is the reason that the provision has been withdrawn.

A programme delivered in the evening requires the rooms in the evening, the staff at hours outside their contracts, the administration across a longer year and the assessment in a second sitting. The consequence is a cost per student that is higher than the full-time equivalent and an income that is lower when the fee is charged pro rata.

The instrument is a funding that recognises the cost: a premium for the programmes delivered in a mode accessible to the employed, and a funding per credit that does not distinguish the mode. A premium of that kind is small and it is the difference between an offer and a claim.



Figure 1 Four costs of a part-time student and who meets them

8. The Data

A system that wishes to know whether its part-time provision exists can publish four figures, and the four are held by the agency and the institutions.

The first is the number of the students by intensity of study, in bands of credits. The second is the fee charged per credit, compared with the full-time equivalent. The third is the completion rate of the part-time entrants within twice the normal duration. The fourth is the share of the part-time students who receive a grant or a loan of any kind.

The four are administrative facts and the second is the one that reveals the anomaly that most systems conceal.

Cost	Borne by	Instrument
Fee	The student per year	A fee and a grant per credit
Foregone income	The household	A support assessed on the student
Arrangements	The student	A childcare place and a concession
Duration	The student	A loan with a longer schedule

Table 1 Four costs and the instrument each requires

9. The Student Who Is Also a Carer

The part-time student is frequently a carer as well as a worker, and the combination produces a pattern of study that no calendar accommodates.

A student who cares for a parent and works and studies takes a module at a time, interrupts for a semester, returns to a different regulation. The consequence is a trajectory that the institution records as a series of enrolments and that the student experiences as a single effort.

The instrument is a personal record of the trajectory: the credits accumulated, the regolations that apply, and a named adviser who maintains the continuity across the interruptions. A record and an adviser are the two instruments that make a fragmented study possible, and neither of them is expensive.

10. The Assessment and the Second Sitting

An assessment calendar designed for a full-time cohort produces a collision for a part-time student in almost every semester.

The examination falls in the month of the annual audit at her work, or in the week in which the child has no school, and the alternative that the institution offers is the sitting of the following year. The consequence is a year lost for a coincidence rather than for a failure.

The instrument is a second sitting in the same session and a right to choose it at the registration, which costs a room and an invigilator and which is the single cheapest instrument of completion that an institution has. A student who can choose her week is a student who can plan her year.

11. The Employer's Support and the Tax

The support that an employer gives to a part-time student is frequently a taxable benefit, and the treatment is a disincentive with no policy behind it.

A firm that pays the fee of an employee on a programme related to her work is making an investment in its own capacity, and the tax system of several systems treats it as a salary. The consequence is a form of support that is more expensive than it needs to be and that a small firm cannot administer.

The instrument is an exemption for the fees of a programme that leads to a recognised qualification, with a ceiling and a condition that the study is related to the post. An exemption of that kind is a line in a finance law and it is worth more than a campaign.

12. The Comparison Across Systems

The comparison of part-time participation across Europe is made on a share of the student body and the share is not comparable.

A system in which the part-time students are counted in the same register as the full-time ones produces a low share because many are counted as full-time while studying slowly. A system that counts them in a separate category produces a high share and a lower level of sup-

port per student. The consequence is a comparison that measures the accounting rather than the provision.

The instrument is a common definition: a student is part-time if she takes less than a stated share of the credits of the year, and the figure is reported by intensity. A definition of that kind is the condition of any comparison and it costs a line in a statistical regulation.

13. The Sequence of a Reform

A system that decides to restore the part-time route can do so in a sequence, and the sequence begins with the fee.

The first step is the fee per credit with a maximum annual charge and a grant per credit. The second is the modular loan with the interest subsidised during the study. The third is the second sitting and the personal record with an adviser. The fourth is the premium for the programmes delivered in an accessible mode and the portable voucher with the employers.

A sequence of that kind takes five years and the first step is a regulation. A reform that begins with a campaign for lifelong learning produces a website and a decline that continues.

14. The Evidence of a Policy

The evidence that a policy of lifelong learning exists is not the strategy and it is the number of the students who study slowly and complete.

Four figures describe the state of a system: the number of the students by intensity, the fee per credit, the completion within twice the duration, and the share of the part-time students who receive a support. The four are the instrument through which a parliament can see whether the policy that it has funded has reached the population it named.

The instrument is the annual publication of the four, with the trend over five years, by institution and by field. A publication of that kind is the instrument of accountability that a policy of this kind requires, because the population it serves has no other voice.

15. Conclusions

The decline of part-time study was produced by a series of decisions each of which was reasonable, and the instrument that would reverse it is a support calculated on the intensity of study rather than on the status of the student.

Three conclusions follow. The price must be per credit: a fee with a maximum annual charge, a grant assessed on the income of the student, and a modular loan with the interest subsidised during the study and the write-off counted from the first payment. The calendar must be flexible: a second sitting in the same session, a personal record of the trajectory across the interruptions, and a named adviser. And the institution must be funded for the mode: a premium for the programmes accessible to the employed, a portable voucher attached to the person rather than to the post, and a tax exemption for the fees that an employer pays.

A system that has done the three has a part-time route. A system that has done none of them has a strategy of lifelong learning and a declining number of the students it describes.

References

[1] Callender, C. (2021). The decline of part-time undergraduate higher education in England. London: UCL Institute of Education.

[2] Callender, C., & Mason, G. (2017). Does student loan debt deter higher education participation? British Educational Research Journal, 43(6).

[3] Eurydice (2021). Adult education and training in Europe. Brussels.

[4] OECD (2023). Who studies part-time and why. Paris.

[5] European Commission (2022). Micro-credentials and flexible learning pathways. Brussels.

Biography:

Claire Callender is a professor at the UCL Institute of Education working on student finance, part-time study and the participation of non-traditional students.