

Engagement of Hard-to-Reach Part-time HE/Adult Students

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Objective

In the forward to the report 'Power to the Part-Time', Sir Eric Thomas ascribes the loss of 40% of part-time students from 2010 to 2013 to a variety of factors including the economic crisis and a drop in employers' support, financial pressure on households, 'changing pathways into HE', changes in demographics and fee increases. The report also suggested that the advent of apprenticeships and growth in private providers would continue to put pressure on part-time HE student numbers (Universities UK, 2013). A great deal of work has been undertaken by, for example, HEFCE and The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP).

This report is in response to a requirement to better understand a key segment within the college HE student population, hitherto under-researched and becoming more significant with the advent of degree apprenticeships.

Approach

The approach to its completion is to review key documents relating to the engagement of hard-to-reach part-time students followed up by three focus group meetings with student groups to obtain views responding to the following questions:

1. How do part-time students' actual experience of learning compare with their expectations and their potential for fulfilment?
2. What are some of the challenges faced by these part-time students engaged in higher education?
3. What strategies could be implemented to improve engagement of part-time students?

The approach is constrained to what is actionable within the timeframe, involving as it does discussion with groups of students right at the start of the academic year, as the research project is due to complete. The other difficulty is to engage with hard-to-find students in classes of students who have, by their attendance, selected themselves as 'not hard to find'.

As set out in the brief (Appendix 1) this report is an opportunity to apply rather than engage fully with academic literature. It is a review of the

issues raised by students in relation to specific literature relating to part-time student engagement with proposals for addressing these based on the views of a number of students undertaking three different courses in two English FE/HE colleges.

Although out of scope, there is likely to be some relevance to full-time college HE students. Despite their designation as full time, their pattern of attendance, say of one or two days per week, or evenings/weekends, would allow them to be in regular employment at the same time. These students might also see themselves and act as if they are part time.

In order to address issues such as these, there is an additional section name 'Questions raised for follow-up'. Where views are provided that are not evidenced from within the strict boundaries of the research, these are placed in square brackets.

Since 2011 there has been an unbroken decline in the number of students in England studying at higher education levels in England.

Definitions

In their 'What we do' web page (Tsep.org.uk, 2017) Tsep say that "Student engagement is about empowering students to shape their own educational experience and creating excellent teaching and learning within a connected and cohesive higher education community." TSEP talk about three categories of engagement: academic, social (relating to wider community) and enhancement – relating to the provider's processes such as quality and governance).

Osam et al (2015) talk about three groups of factors that influence engagement – situational (the student's circumstances), institutional (provision, policies) and dispositional (student's confidence, readiness to study).

In discussion with students the essence of engagement was seen as what makes students excited, motivated and ultimately successful in their studies.

Issues reviewed

The questions to explore:

1. To what extent are part-time students likely to be less engaged than full time students?
2. To what extent is reduced engagement inevitable given the limited time available to part-time students?
3. To what extent do lower levels of engagement impact on the expectations of and outcomes of part-time, hard-to-find students.
4. Who are the hard-to-find students?
5. In what ways could engagement levels be improved in order to improve the achievement and perceptions of part-time and hard-to-find students?

Focus group findings

Group A

This group of 12 students (1 male, 11 female) recently enrolled on a Level 3 Leadership and Management course (selected due to 'fit' rather than level). Most students already had a first degree and were included because of their experience of full-time and part-time education. The group was evenly split between students paying for themselves and students who were sponsored by their employers. In all cases where sponsored by the employer, the student was responsible for choosing the course.

Most students searched for courses using Google.

One student knew that their local college ran adult learning courses and went straight to that site where they found the course they required.

Several students agreed that they were looking for a class-based course reporting that they felt that the Leadership and Management course should enable face-to-face discussion and sharing experiences with others. One student said a class-based course "would humanise the process". Online courses are good but this student wanted to "bounce ideas" with a group. Another felt a clas- based group would be "less

isolated”. There was a consensus that class-based courses were hard to find and that online provision dominated.

Once on the website, students felt that the physical location of the course was not clear. Other details were also unclear including whether there would be exams and which days the course would run. In one case a student was under the impression that the course ran in the evening when it actually ran during the day. All employer-sponsored students felt that the information provided should target employers as well as students.

Previous discussions in this group uncovered a concern that students had commitments that would prevent them from attending some classes. They sought reassurance that if they needed to miss a lesson that there would be provision to allow them to catch up. They agreed that the opportunity to change some of the class session dates and assignment submission dates would be welcome. One student said there was a “need to build in flexibility”.

All students felt that their workplace colleagues and managers would be supportive of their studies and would be prepared to assist and provide opportunities to apply learning from the course. [However, separate conversations with other students and potential students also revealed how some employers were sceptical of the value to their staff of attending part-time courses and that they would be less supportive. In one case, a student asked specifically whether a ‘mentor’ could be found for them as they would not be supported by their employer].

Asked whether students would welcome opportunities for their significant others to obtain an understanding of the commitment that students would be making on the course and what support they might appreciate (uninterrupted study time, understanding that additional study time close to assignment submission might be required) students responded that for some it would be helpful.

Group B

This group comprised 16 Second Year adult, part-time HNC students at an HE/FE college. All were male and all were sponsored by their employers. In terms of comparing themselves with full-time students, most students had

previously undertaken BTEC Level 3 qualifications and the contrast between part-time and full-time studies was less relevant to this group of students – apart from one who held a first degree.

When asked why colleges were interested in student engagement the first answer was that it was a “management” metric, the second was that higher engagement levels helped the reputation of the institutions. Students did not volunteer the existence of a link between engagement and outcomes. This was covered as an introduction to the meeting.

On a scale of 1 – 5 where 5 is very engaged and 1 is not engaged a majority put their hands up for 3 and 5 raised their hands for 1. Asked for the reasons for the low engagement responses focused on the nature of the units studied and the apparent lack of relevance with their work. Further discussion resulted in a show of hands indicating that the main objective for 12 students from their studies for them was to improve their pay grade.

Reasons given for low engagement included:

1. The course content did not appear to relate to the work that students were involved with in their workplace.
2. Teaching styles were less practical and workshop based and more theoretical lecture style which did not match the preferred style of students.
3. Timing and quality of assignment marking and feedback from tutors was seen as another issue with delays in marking and feedback which did not provide sufficient clarity as to how students could improve work. The VLE was seen as an effective vehicle for feedback but some students felt that the system was not updated by tutors in a timely manner.

Student expectations of their studies were often at odds with their subsequent experience:

1. One student said that their expectation had been that it would be a harder version of BTEC Level 3 and that they would “learn more [than they were actually learning]”.
2. Some students experienced the need to put in more work than they had expected.

3. Around half said the amount of work had to be “worked around our shifts” and some said that it adversely affected time with family and friends. This has to be contrasted with the view of some students that this was to be expected.

Need for study at home:

4. One student said he was surprised that following class he was expected to study additional content at home in order to complete assignments. Others agreed but a discussion ensued with several other students saying that Level 4/5 students should expect to take more responsible for their own learning outside the classroom. This view was shared by several students and seemed to prevail.

With respect to the relevance of the course to the work students were actually engaged in, students did not volunteer to take more control over their course or contribute to the improvement of their course. However, when asked, 10 students agreed that they would be prepared to make a contribution to the design of the course including proposing future changes from which they would not benefit but where their successor students would. One student added “if it’s productive” by which he meant, if student suggestions are actually considered and are influential.

When discussing the role of students in the design and management of the course there was a strongly held view that employers and college course managers collaborated closely on the selection of units. One view was that college course management views prevailed and that employers deferred to college management without understanding the content of the units proposed by course managers. At the end of this part of the discussion students broadly agreed that there would be willingness on the part of students to be part of the process of selecting units but there was also a view that the college did not offer a wide variety of the units available and that a student role might be less influential.

About half the class agreed that an HNC is better than a degree because there is less debt and you are building job experience at the same time as earning money.

Flexibility was a key requirement of students. One view was that the flexibility to extend the course over a longer period of time (OU courses were cited here) was less helpful than a clearly time-boxed two-year course that required students to complete in that period. If students had the option to extend assignments into the year(s) following the taught course, some students would never complete. One view that was explored was to allow students to agree assignment deadlines early on in the course. Such an assignment plan could apply to the whole class but might also include consideration of individual commitments of students. Another, possibly more prevalent view was that students could obtain assignment extensions easily and that this less formal approach was a more pragmatic solution than a formal plan. However, a group of six students preferred a more formal assignment submission plan so that their employers would not get the impression from college that their submissions were late when students had agreed an extension, 'locally' with their tutors.

There was broad agreement that either way, flexibility was a requirement for this group of students given their – often unpredictable – work patterns and that the college was able to provide this flexibility.

The opportunity to discuss improvements to the provision of systems and technology was offered but this was not seen as necessary.

Group C

This was a class of five First Year HND students studying at an HE/FE college (four male; one female). All were employed and sponsored by their employer. All attended college one day per week. One student had studied on a full-time degree course previously and another had studied on an online course.

This group identified themselves as primarily employed. For four out of the six, their secondary priority was social and the third their studies. One student felt strongly that her secondary priority was her studies. Following discussion, all the remaining students agreed that their priorities shifted as they prepared to submit assignments.

There was agreement that full-time students had “more time for study work”. One student preferred to focus on studying at the weekend whilst the other four tried to study in the evening after work.

A second difference between full- and part-time studies volunteered by the group was the level of access to support available for part-time students. Unlike full-time students who can access tutors during the working week, part-time students were unable to contact tutors during the day which limited their access to the time they were in college. On the other hand, four out of five students agreed that they obtained support from colleagues at work, many of whom had completed similar studies. One student reported that they were less able to rely on their colleagues because they did not have enough knowledge and experience in the subjects being studied.

Another difference was in the way students could rely on each other for support. Full-time students would have ready access to a number of other classmates with whom they could collaborate closely. This group also worked together but with greater reliance on phones, text and social media. One student had used a Facebook group at university whereas this group had used a WhatsApp group and planned to do the same this year.

The support enjoyed by these students was also in contrast to the experience of the student who had completed an online course whose only contact was through email to tutors which was not regularly used. There was no contact with other students.

As far as access to resources was concerned this group of students seemed comfortable with their access to reading material by visiting their college’s Learning Resource Centre (LRC) during their on-site days.

Asked what barriers they faced to being fully engaged on their course:

- Some units are irrelevant; one student had done extra units last year but this year the course that was expected was withdrawn.
- The course had been expected to enable students to complete an HNC/D in three years but now it was going to be four years. This was very demotivating. One student said that “we don’t really have any control”; and “we just get told” and “nothing is going to change”.

- Another problem with the choice of units by the college was the academic nature of some units. Last year more practical, skills-based units were taken whereas this year none of the units involved practical workshop or site-based practical work. One CAD course was started last year but then withdrawn – this was disappointing as it was a useful course.
- All students wanted to change the choice of units.

Access to literature online is not reported as a problem with students accessing resources using Google, Google Scholar and professional websites.

Personal life getting in the way of studies was reported by one student.

In relation to assignments, whereas last year assignments were issued with little time to complete, assignments seemed to be being issued earlier.

Students were happy with the flexibility offered with respect to assignment submission date extensions although assignment submission dates could be inconsistent, with the date on the assignment different from those in assignment information on Moodle.

There was a debate about the benefits of more rigid assignment submission dates. Some felt there were benefits in having a more university-style discipline associated with submission dates “where you know where you are”. On the other hand, with the pressure of work, which could often be unpredictable, students “like to be able to breathe”, meaning that the flexibility in place was appropriate.

Conclusions

The best of both worlds

When introducing themselves and when asked, students on the three part-time courses involved in the discussions identified themselves as employed, working people first and students second or third. Certainly, this might give rise to disengagement: when pressure in work or family circle

increases, studying often suffers. But for these part-time working students, their community is wider than for many of their full-time, first degree peers with affiliation to 'communities of practice' at work, and fellow students and their tutors at college and strong social networks of friends and families. The power of informal learning within a student's social and work communities is well documented, such as by Lave (1996). These students are more likely to be learning informally at work as well as formally at college. If managed in a way where the pressures of either circle are compensated for in the others, the part-time student in work could be expected to do better not worse than their full-time counterparts. More pressure, certainly but with the support of HE/FE colleges which are often more able to offer flexibility than universities these students have, in many ways, the best of all worlds.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

3 Students engage individually in and with their learning

4 Students engage in a variety of learning spaces and opportunities

Student peer collaboration

Of the three groups, Group C had a record of collaboration with each other that began the previous year and would continue this year using a variety of methods including text, phone and WhatsApp. Group A had just begun their course so had little opportunity, nevertheless several had joined a Twitter group and some had posted. None of the groups used the VLE to collaborate.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

1 Students are active members of a learning cohort

3 Students engage individually in and with their learning

4 Students engage in a variety of learning spaces and opportunities

Confusing course information

In two groups there had been confusion about the nature of the course before it started which affected students:

- In Group A the location and timing of the course was incorrect on the college website [resulting in at least one student deciding not to join the course]

- In Group C elements that had been offered were withdrawn without notice after the beginning of the course and the duration of the course changed.
- Group B underlined the importance of providing accurate information but also information that is aimed not only at potential students but also employers

Failure to provide all the appropriate information could lose students or build expectations that are subsequently not met.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

6 Students make independent judgements about the quality of learning and teaching

Management of assignments

Students in Groups B and C who had already experienced at least one year of studies at higher levels reported that their tutors were flexible about assignment submissions deadlines and that the tension between the need for structure and boundaries on the one hand and the need to provide breathing room for students with sometimes unpredictable work patterns was well handled. The need for flexibility and transparency requires continuous effort on the part of colleges so that the employer can be assured of sufficient progress of their students; that students complete on time; and that students feel that they are being treated fairly in the opportunities afforded to them to achieve the highest grades of which they are capable. Consistent information about deadlines, fair submission processes, timely marking and meaningful feedback were all reported as important requirements that were not always met.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

1 Students are active members of a learning cohort

3 Students engage individually in and with their learning

5 Students engage in curricular content and design

6 Students make independent judgements about the quality of learning and teaching

Irrelevant course content, inappropriate teaching methods

Perhaps related to most students as identifying themselves as employed and working first, studies that do not appear relevant to their workplace are seen as irrelevant and of little value to them or their employers and not worth working hard for (in particular, professional development and employability skills units were singled out by students). At least for some (Group B notably) this justified lowering their aims to lower pass grades. More value is placed on practical and relevant units. Students in Group B were aware that the inclusion of 'less relevant' and 'academic' units might be forced by exam boards designating units a core or compulsory. If so, then the reasons for inclusion were either not understood or not accepted by these students.

Student involvement in course management

“Three quarters (76%) of students felt it important that they are able to influence the way that their course is run; however, only 46% believed that they actually had the opportunity to do this.” (Tsep.org.uk, 2017)

The greatest levels of frustration for students resulted from decisions about course content which were taken without consultation with students. In all three groups there was strong agreement that students should be involved in decisions relating to course content. There were clear indications from students in two of the groups that this had adversely affected student engagement.

This has implications for validated courses that are difficult to change because of university processes. In fact, there are cases where course changes have been successfully made by a university over a summer break but making changes in the early weeks of a course may be more difficult and made harder because universities may be less inclined to flex their own courses. An alternative for colleges may be to consider Higher Apprenticeships as offering more flexibility. There may also be opportunities to run core units first, giving time for students to select options and for faculties to prepare to run units that they may not have run before.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

5 Students engage in curricular content and design

6 Students make independent judgements about the quality of learning and teaching

The role of the employer

In all three groups the employer played a significant role for many students and in some cases their support is crucial to students' continuation.

- As sponsors paying for the course (all in groups B and C and some in group A) employers expected their employees to achieve at least a Pass and at least some would actively monitor their employees' progress with their studies
- For many, the reason the student is attending the course is because their employer has required them to attend or is offering higher pay levels on completion
- The employer plays an important part in choosing the units that students will study. Some students felt their decisions were wrong because they did not understand the content of the units
- There are also opportunities for employers to play a role in increasing engagement in other ways, providing practical learning opportunities in the workplace, assigning mentors – who may have been part-time students themselves at one time – and access to equipment and opportunities to use specialist equipment that a college may not be able to offer 'Principle 4 Students engage in a variety of learning spaces and opportunities'
- [There is also evidence from outside this research that withdrawal of support by employers, whether financial or not, leads to reduction in attendance and withdrawal from the course, even where fees for the year have been paid]

So for many, the role of the employer is key. For sponsored students, the employer provides financial support, reviews progress and provides mentoring support. In the case of the Leadership and Management course running for Group A, in the past students who retain the support of their employer are more likely to achieve.

In Group B the impression given by students is that there is a stronger relationship between college and employer than between student and college. It is hard to say whether the effect is positive or negative as the

relationship between student and employer may be key to keeping the student sufficiently engaged to promote achievement. On the other hand, discussion with students indicated that strong employer support on its own might not guarantee achievement of higher grades.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

- 1 Students are active members of a learning cohort
- 3 Students engage individually in and with their learning
- 4 Students engage in a variety of learning spaces and opportunities
- 5 Students engage in curricular content and design

Study time requirements.

There is a mismatch in expectations of students as to the amount of effort that is required of students. Expectations are more realistic in the HND Group C, presumably because they have already experienced years of study at Level 4. But in Group B some students reported that they did not know how much time they were expected to spend on studies (learning hours) until after they had enrolled and were attending induction. Some students (but not all) seemed surprised that they would be expected to learn outside the classroom (i.e. acquiring new knowledge rather than working on assignments and revising). Some students reported less inclination to aim for higher grades as a result of these (and other) mismatches in expectations.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

- 1 Students are active members of a learning cohort
- 3 Students engage individually in and with their learning

Recommendations

Qualifications that are fit for purpose

Qualifications such as HNC and HND need to be reviewed with employers, students and awarding bodies to ensure that they are authentic for part-time working people. Core units need to have relevance to the widest number of students. The nature of units such as Professional Development, Employability Skills and Study Skills need to be reviewed for their relevance

to students in employment. These units will have been devised primarily for university and full-time study and as such may be less useful for part-time students who would benefit more from closer engagement with acquiring management skills and professional CPD affiliations and qualifications in their immediate future.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):
3 Students engage individually in and with their learning

Choosing between courses

Colleges need to question the relevance of HNCs and HNDs for part-time students when compared with Higher Apprenticeships which may be a more natural fit for these students. HNCs, HNDs and Foundation Degrees may continue to have relevance where there is a need for an emphasis on theory, its development and application in practice. Apprenticeships do not necessarily have to focus as much on the development and application of theory as opposed to the development of skills and the application of methods. In any event, apprentices should be seen in the context of part-time students which they may not be at present (as they are often managed in different ways within colleges).

It seems important that colleges have clear strategies for matching students to the appropriate course and that course information makes it easy for students and employers to make appropriate selections. See also the next section below.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):
3 Students engage individually in and with their learning
5 Students engage in curricular content and design

Course information

More care needs to be taken in the details of courses to be published online as this is clearly the starting point of part-time students in their search for appropriate courses. The website needs to speak to students, employers and the student's family members and friends. Providers could consider provision of a chat room for enquiries, a calendar of key events including taught sessions and assignment submissions and/or access to the course handbooks. Information for which students need more clarity include:

- Clear explanation of terms, or use of words that do not require a detailed understanding of academic words such as credits, guided learning hours
- Time expected from students in studying in class and outside
- Assessment (how many, how often, whether coursework, exams or presentations and role plays)
- The units to be taken, their content and an explanation of their aims and importance.

Even the terms ‘full time’ and ‘part time’ may be misunderstood. Whereas academically a three-day course may be categorised as a full-time course, adult students in employment may treat these as part time and may see themselves as very different from other students whose commitments outside the course are less onerous.

Understanding of student commitment prior to course start

Checklists for staff interviewing potential students should ensure that applicants to courses are clear about the content of the course, the learning methods, assessment methods, effort required in and out of the classroom and the level of autonomy and control they will have over their learning and the development of the course.

Access to resources

Reading resources required by students should be available in physical form and online. Part-time students are unlikely to be able to access physical resources in college outside classroom time so it is important to ensure that Learning Resource Centres are open either at the beginning or at the end of class-based sessions and that there is sufficient investment in relevant e-books/ journals, which is difficult for cash-strapped colleges).

Some adult learners are often not familiar with Virtual Learning Systems (VLE) or Learning Management Systems (LMS). On the other hand they may be more familiar with cloud-based storage systems and social media platforms. Some students find it easier and more natural to engage with certain resources using these systems.

Students did not report significant issues with technologies in place to support learning (e.g. Moodle). Indeed, their own social media is often used to support collaboration between students. Colleges need to consider the use of new learning technologies that allow students to engage with new content during short periods of time and on accessible devices including mobile phones and virtual reality plus Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and apps such as Skill-pill.com, (2017). At the same time students need to be made more aware of the value of academic and industry publications available electronically through their LRCs; staff and students need to be using resources that will improve their effectiveness and efficiency of managing assessments e.g. e-portfolios, synchronous chat rooms and voice links and asynchronous forums and Turnitin. Once again, colleges have more flexibility to introduce this for summative as well as formative assessment

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

1 Students are active members of a learning cohort

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Opportunities for part-time students to influence their course

Even though part-time students have less time to engage in the management of courses and institutions, their need to adapt their learning around work and family commitments is significant. Specific interests in influencing may include:

- Units /modules covered: the units proposed by the provider may not reflect particular needs and students may want to negotiate changes with their peers and tutors
- Teaching and learning methods
- Timing of taught sessions and assessments to fit around work, home and holiday plans
- Students may welcome the opportunity to influence the nature of assessments (role plays, presentations, written assignments). It might be expected that commitment to class attendance and assessment deadlines may be strengthened if these have been agreed in advance.

Colleges must adapt for part-time students the processes whereby all students are able to give feedback about their studies and are able to influence the full scope of the student experience short to long term. There is no shortage of possible ways of effecting this (TSEP, 2017, Insights). As a minimum, there could be a time during every college attendance day (probably once per week and at the beginning of the day) when students have their say, when their views will be discussed and, when agreed, actions are committed to either by the college or by students themselves. There should also be means of interacting online through forums and chatrooms, for example.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

5 Students engage in curricular content and design

6 Students make independent judgements about the quality of learning and teaching

7 Students effect change in a continual process of enhancement

Start of year course conference

Rather than an 'induction' where students are informed of what is going to be done to them, course managers could consider an initial week when students and staff could be afforded the opportunity to contribute and adapt the course to the student group and its individuals. [Students from previous Group A classes have organised visiting speakers]. This conference could consider:

- Units and knowledge and skills covered, options available
- Calendar for the course and assessment submissions and any changes possible
- Enrichment opportunities (including visits, speakers, college open days, competitions)
- Arrangements for support including tutorials, peer learning cells, support and employer
- Familiarisation with college facilities and resources and access

A further meeting or meetings should be planned during the course to agree any updates that might be necessary. A possible schedule for such a conference is included as a draft as Appendix 3.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

1 Students are active members of a learning cohort

- 5 Students engage in curricular content and design
- 6 Students make independent judgements about the quality of learning and teaching
- 7 Students effect change in a continual process of enhancement
- 8 Students engagement is given strategic leadership

Improving learning productivity

Few students claimed to study or collaborate efficiently although further discussion is needed in this area. However, given the importance nationally of improving productivity and given the work pressures under which students operate, it would seem sensible to introduce Study Skills in a way that focuses on improving efficiency of learning and producing assignments affording students with the opportunity to get work done quicker or provide time to achieve higher grades. Colleges should focus on building these skills at the very start of a course including the use of learning cells, developing research skills, using online collaboration tools and tools for storing and safeguarding documents and data, submitting and accessing feedback and marks and referencing. These skills are important for part-time students.

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

- 1 Students are active members of a learning cohort
- 3 Students engage individually in and with their learning
- 4 Students engage in a variety of learning spaces and opportunities
- 5 Students engage in curricular content and design
- 6 Students make independent judgements about the quality of learning and teaching

Flexibility of FE/HE colleges

The flexibility of FE/HE colleges is driven by the diversity of students and vocational and academic coverage. These afford real opportunities to students that should be used:

- Take advantage of the fact that colleges have specialist staff with industry backgrounds who could take a mentor role where students do not have sufficient access at work

- Colleges have specialist ALS staff whose support could be offered to part-time students. Given that many courses are delivered at full cost, the cost of such services could be part of their learning contract

This point relates to Principles of Student Engagement (PSE):

3 students engage individually in and with their learning

4 students engage in a variety of learning spaces and opportunities

Questions raised for follow-up

To what extent have the issues and challenges raised in discussion contributed to the withdrawal of students from their courses?

How has lack of availability of tutor support for students outside college days affected their studies?

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Appendix 1 – The Project Brief

Expression of Interest

In general, English HE student engagement measures are aimed at young full-time students, and it is often difficult to encourage part-time HE students to consistently engage. Historically, and to a lesser extent currently, colleges have tended to attract part-time HE students, often in employment.

This is also a particularly timely project as enrolments in higher and degree apprenticeships continue to rise and colleges seek to identify market advantage. The project is seeking an organisation or consultant, with experience and knowledge of college HE part-time students, to produce a short report and draft guidance note (an exemplar) to be used in induction sessions aimed at these students for inclusion in the scholarship project final framework.

- Name of organisation or consultant;
- Names of person (s) who will undertake the work;

Outputs

This is an applied piece of work – and we do not expect the organisation/consultant to engage with the academic literature in this field. We would though expect engagement with the policy/HEFCE literature on ‘hard-to-find students’ within the context of student engagement. It is likely the appointed team would want to engage with work by the Catalyst-funded project REACT

<http://www.studentengagement.ac.uk/index.php/about/about-react> and outputs from HEFCE/TSEP <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/forstudents/sp/se/>

Outputs

- Short report (indicative word count:1,500 words) summarising the key engagement issues facing part-time college HE students (‘hard-to-find students’ in the policy literature);
- Induction guidance note (an exemplar) for inclusion in the final scholarship project framework, subject to evaluation by an expert panel.

Methods

This is not a data collection research commission. As indicated, we would expect the appointed team/consultant to engage with the quoted policy literature and use their own experience working with this group of students. This could involve one focus group session with these types of students. We would expect a short iterative discussion on this issue.

Timescales

- Start date: 4 September
- Completion date and submission of report: Friday 24 September

Appendix 2 – The Principles of Student Engagement

Adapted from TSEP (2017). *Making Student Engagement a Reality: Turning Theory into Practice*.

1 Students are active members of a learning cohort

Integral to a culture of partnership is the space for students and educators to learn from and support one another. These reciprocal relationships build learning communities, with mutual benefit. The HEA's model of 'partnership learning communities' describes this in detail.

2 Students engage in scholarly activity

This principle concerns the ways in which a provider can empower students to enrich their knowledge and undertake research. Scholarly activity might be related to students' own studies, but could also involve students and staff undertaking research to diagnose and solve shared problems related to teaching and learning.

3 Students engage individually in and with their learning

There are many ways a provider can motivate and support students with their responsibility to engage in their learning in order to create engaged, critical, reflective learners. This includes the development of high-impact, flexible pedagogies and embedding standards of high-quality feedback mechanisms and course organisation and management.

4 Students engage in a variety of learning spaces and opportunities

Students have the opportunity to access activities relating to their course in order, for example, to expand their knowledge; to practise the application of their subject in real-life situations; or to build their networks. Students also have the opportunity to access and help shape a variety of formal and informal learning spaces. These could include peer-led schemes, virtual learning environments and student-led spaces, such as academic societies.

5 Students engage in curricular content and design

With leadership and guidance provided by staff, there is a growing diversity of approaches to student involvement in these activities, which can lead to educational enhancements and represent a transformative pedagogical approach.

6 Students make independent judgements about the quality of learning and teaching

An important dimension of student engagement is allowing students to organise around issues they care about and develop independent judgements as a basis for prioritising and tackling issues. Activities and processes designed to acknowledge and encourage student judgements could include the development of an effective student representative scheme, embedded within the provider's processes for annual monitoring of academic governance; training for students and staff involved in local quality processes; student-led teaching awards; and student surveys and focus groups. This could also involve the students' union or student representative body gathering and analysing student insights on a regular basis and making recommendations for change to their provider.

7 Students effect change in a continual process of enhancement

Quality enhancement is not just about checking that [quality] standards are met but also about creating an environment where everyone is working towards the goal of making the best of the students' experience.

8 Students engagement is given strategic leadership

Where student engagement has become embedded in the culture of a provider, strong leadership of this agenda is usually a key feature. This often involves a clear sense of value, desired outcomes and accountability for student engagement which is shared by the students' union or student representative body and approaches that are agreed and delivered in partnership.

9 Students engage through effective student leaders and governors

Student leaders (such as student representatives and sabbatical officers) and student governors are integral to a community in which students' independent judgements are valued and used as a basis for enhancement. Appropriate mechanisms to train and support these individuals are crucial to their success and the communities they serve.

10 Students engage in activities that support their wellbeing and encourage their sense of belonging

Whether the intended outcomes of student engagement in a local context are related to personal learning, enhancement of the learning environment, students' engagement in work and communities or capabilities for future change agency

and citizenship, it is likely that co- and extra- curricular activities that encourage students' wellbeing and sense of belonging will support their readiness to engage and help to create an environment in which these ends can be achieved.

Appendix 3 – Induction Guidance Note (Exemplar) – Draft Start of Year Course Conference Schedule

Start time	Session
0900	Welcome
0915	Feedback from previous year's strengths and weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students • Tutors • Course Manager
	Summary of points and actions already taken or agreed
1030	Break
1045	Presentation of units to take this year, explaining value of each, explaining options and enrichment activities that accompany these. Proposed assignment issue and submission dates.
	Groups of 4 (random selection) discuss how these units will support them in their work / careers; formulate questions issues and proposals for variations or alternatives and student involvement in the solutions, document own support needs; prepare flip charts: issue/question proposed solution actions and responsibilities. Photograph flip chart and upload to forum to address after lunch or separately.
1315	Lunch
1415	One person from each group then presents their issue and resolutions flip chart to other students who visit each group and leave comments, agree or improve upon solutions in a 'market place' type activity. Each group then presents finalised proposals to the rest of the cohort. Class rep is elected to take these forward with course management.
	OR
	Learning Resource workshop: say 3x30 minute sessions on various such as VLE forums, research skills, time/assignment management, on line voice meetings, article search, access to e-books, VR tools... Groups go from demo to demo
1445	Student Support arrangements presented by staff including assignment extensions, extenuating circumstances etc. Students match own needs against the support available.
1545	Break
1615	Plenary session to summarise. Opportunity to invite representatives of employers / mentors and family members