Part-time university education

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Introduction

As economic restraint in the post-secondary education sector becomes a persistent reality, an appreciation of the contribution of part-time students to universities, as well as an awareness of their needs, has grown. Smith and Saunders (1988, p. 7) noted that “new conceptions of higher education and the nature of its student clients have led to part-time higher education being placed more centrally on national political agendas and on the agendas of educational institutions themselves”. Devlin (1989) considered part-time study in higher education to be consistent with the two major directions of “openness and access” recommended for Canadian universities. However, in the last few years universities in Canada have seen a noticeable decline in part-time enrolments (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1996). This decline has given rise to concern in university quarters. Unfortunately, this concern exists against a backdrop of relatively little research on part-time university students, programmes and, attendance which is useful for decisions on policy and practice. The absence “of comprehensive data on the central issues arising from part-time study” was recognised by Devlin (1989, p. 30). Also, Bourner et al. (1991, p. 1) suggested that “compared to full-time higher education, the information available on part-time higher education is very limited”.

Some comparison of participation, enrolment rates, and trends in post-secondary education at the international level may shed light on important questions emerging from the study of part-time university education. For example, Tight (1991) examined higher education systems and part-time student participation in 12 western developed countries. In the UK, part-time enrolments at all levels in the 1987-88 academic year totalled approximately 37 per cent. Around 64 per cent of these enrolments were serviced by polytechnics and colleges. The Open University absorbed the majority of the remainder at 23 per cent, with 13 per cent of enrolments serviced by other universities. Research on part-time participation in the UK also suggests that a large proportion of students study at subdegree and postgraduate levels. Broomfield (1993) noted that for the years 1980-81 and 1989-90, the vast majority of part-time university education outside of the Open University occurred at the postgraduate level. Tight’s (1991) findings for the UK are roughly consistent here, showing that 68 per cent of all students at subdegree levels were enrolled part-time and that only 19 per cent of students at the first-degree level were enrolled part-time. Overall, the subject areas most studied included education, engineering and technology, and business, administration, and social studies (Broomfield, 1993; Tight, 1991). In contrast, the total part-time enrolment rate in the USA rose above the 40 per cent mark (approximately 43 per cent) in the 1987-88 year, with part-time enrolments comprising 24 per cent of all enrolments in four-year degree programmes (Tight, 1991). US participation in higher education for classes starting after 4:00 p.m. in 1988 was estimated to be as high as 53 per cent. In both the UK and the USA, the rate of growth in participation was greatest for women.

A number of general trends were found to be common in many of the countries studied and, indeed, parallel much of what has occurred on the Canadian scene. Tight (1991) proposed these generalizations: part-time students comprise from one-third to one-half of total enrolments in western developed countries; correspondence and distance education are not included in most statistics; part-time provision tends to be common at subdegree and postgraduate levels (the USA and Canada may be exceptions to this); students are older and disproportionately female; enrolments seem to be mostly concentrated in certain discipline areas including arts, social sciences, business, education, health, and law; and evidence suggests that part-time studies are increasing in importance.

The lack of comprehensive data on part-time university education reinforces the need for additional study of existing and potential part-time students and programmes. Towards this end, the following discussion summarizes results from a study of part-time programming at Canadian universities and the needs and characteristics of undergraduate study.
part-time degree completion. The findings suggest changes which may be necessary in university functioning in order to better serve these student populations in the future.

Method

A cross-sectional survey design with an emphasis on descriptive analysis was used for this study. Four related populations served as a basis for surveying procedures, which, in turn, were initiated in four stages: Canadian universities (1995-96 member institutions of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada – AUCC); part-time undergraduate students at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada; university transfer students at Grant MacEwan Community College, Edmonton, Alberta; and former University of Alberta Faculty of Arts students eligible for readmission from 1985 to 1995.

The University of Alberta is a comprehensive research institution which in 1995-96 enrolled 29,120 students in a wide range of undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Grant MacEwan Community College is a public, multi-campus institution offering mainly two-year certificate programs along with university transfer and non-credit courses. In 1995-96, Grant MacEwan served approximately 13,000 students in credit programs within the Edmonton metropolitan region which has a population of about 800,000 people.

The characteristics of each population warranted the design of four separate survey instruments. The development and refinement of survey instruments were based on a review of relevant literature and previous research, and on feedback from a statistics consultant, a survey designer, and informed colleagues. Questionnaires were then reassessed and refined by a research team in the Special Sessions Office at the University of Alberta. The questionnaire to AUCC member institutions was pilot-tested using academic and administrative staff at the University of Alberta. The other survey instruments were pilot-tested using small groups of respondents from the respective populations being studied. For institutions in Quebec, and for other French-language institutions, a copy of the survey instrument was prepared in French by an experienced translator. All surveying procedures were conducted between January and April 1996.

Eighty-eight AUCC member institutions were surveyed and 59 questionnaires were returned for a final response rate of approximately 76 per cent. Final response rates for part-time undergraduates and former Faculty of Arts students at the University of Alberta were 63 per cent and 49 per cent respectively. For students at Grant MacEwan College, data were collected through the administration of in-class surveys based on a stratified sample (by year and programme area) of the university transfer population. Data management and data analysis procedures were conducted or directly supervised by a co-researcher and the principal researcher. Findings within each data set and across data sets were compared with previous research for common themes which would have implications for policy and practice.

Summary of results

Canadian universities

Data on AUCC member institutions were examined in four major categories of variables: background information; part-time degree programmes including data on the type of programmes offered and programme administration; evening and weekend course offerings including the administration of courses; and services for part-time students.

The most commonly used system for defining full-session (September to April) courses appeared to be six units of credit (53 per cent of responding AUCC institutions), and the most frequently indicated maximum course load for part-time undergraduate students was three courses per term (approximately 54 per cent of responses). When part-time to total undergraduate enrolment proportions were examined, about 80 per cent of respondent institutions were above the 10 per cent ratio, and about 50 per cent of institutions were at or above the 20 per cent ratio. The mean for part-time to total undergraduate enrolments in degree credit programmes was 23 per cent. The most frequent starting time for an evening credit course was 7:00 p.m. (26 per cent of responding institutions). This was closely followed by 4:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. (20 per cent).

Fifteen institutions (25 per cent of respondents) indicated that they offered specific part-time undergraduate degree programmes distinct from regular programming. However, the range of programmes reported was diverse. For those with evening course offerings the most frequently specified part-time programmes were in the arts and business/commerce discipline areas, followed by applied arts, social work, nursing, and science respectively. For weekend course offerings, applied arts and business management were the most frequently specified areas, but the range of programmes and institutions in
which weekend courses were offered was considerably smaller than for evening offerings. Nearly all of the part-time programmes (14 out of 15) were administered by regular academic departments.

The overall extent of evening and weekend degree credit course offerings differed considerably. The mean number of evening courses offered by all responding institutions was 204, while the mean number of weekend courses was only 7.5. Institutions were asked to rank faculties offering the greatest number of evening degree credit courses. The most frequently mentioned faculties were arts, education, and commerce respectively. When responses were examined for weekend programming, this ranking shifted to education, arts, and commerce respectively. For the majority of institutions (67 per cent of respondents), evening and weekend course offerings were administered by regular academic departments.

Approximately 44 per cent of respondent institutions published materials specifically for part-time students and almost one-half (48 per cent) provided some form of financial support for this group. For the majority of respondents, full-time and part-time application deadlines at four points in the academic year (first term, second term, spring session, and summer session) were the same. Only ten institutions (17 per cent) indicated the existence of formal policy on extended office hours for teaching faculty. Other university services with extended hours indicated by institutions – although, in some cases, not exclusively for part-time students – included libraries, bookstores, registrars’ offices, continuing education units, health services, counselling offices, recreation facilities, food services, a part-time studies office and career and placement services.

Student groups

Data on the needs and characteristics of the three undergraduate student populations were examined in six major categories of variables: demographic profiles; academic backgrounds; finances and employment; educational expectations and student services; technology and the alternative delivery of courses; and advantages and disadvantages of part-time attendance.

In all three student response groups, females outnumbered males almost two to one. The majority of part-time undergraduate and former Faculty of Arts students at the University of Alberta were 25 years of age and over (76 per cent and 75 per cent respectively) with significant percentages aged 30 and over (57 per cent and 53 per cent respectively). The majority were married (60 per cent and 61 per cent respectively), but with no or few dependent children. Their primary daytime activity was employment, and large percentages (78 per cent and 51 per cent respectively) indicated some previous post-secondary education prior to enrolment at the University of Alberta. In contrast, the mean age of 21 years for university transfer students at Grant MacEwan Community College was at least ten years below that of other groups. The vast majority were single and were full-time students. Their highest level of education prior to Grant MacEwan enrolment was predominantly high school.

Close to 60 per cent of part-time undergraduates at the University of Alberta expected to complete degrees, and 68 per cent of these respondents indicated that they would seek part-time status at their next registration. Eighty per cent of Grant MacEwan College students intended to complete degrees at the University of Alberta, but planned to attend full-time. Much smaller numbers of former Faculty of Arts students (24 per cent) had plans for degree completion. For part-time undergraduates at the University of Alberta, the main reasons for attending part-time were, in order: the desire to work while attending classes; personal/family responsibilities; and the need to work to cover expenses. For former Faculty of Arts students, the main reasons for non-completion of degrees included: attendance at another institution; lack of interest; employment responsibilities; and personal/family responsibilities.

The primary source of funding for education for part-time undergraduates at the University of Alberta was current employment (47 per cent of responses). For Grant MacEwan College students, the primary source of funding was parents. Large numbers of part-time undergraduates and former Faculty of Arts students at the University of Alberta were employed either full-time or part-time (78 per cent and 84 per cent respectively). In contrast, roughly half of Grant MacEwan students held part-time jobs. The majority of part-time undergraduates and former arts students had annual family incomes of at least Cdn$30,000 (64 per cent and 65 per cent respectively). In each of these groups, almost 30 per cent had annual incomes of at least Cdn$60,000 per year.

Despite differences in attendance plans and expectations for degree completion, large numbers of students from all three response groups indicated “somewhat likely, very likely, or yes, would attend” on the likelihood of attendance in evening and weekend degree completion programming. The largest distribution in these three response categories was for part-time University of Alberta
undergraduates (74 per cent), and the smallest was for Grant MacEwan university transfer students (41 per cent). Part-time undergraduates and former arts students showed a course scheduling preference for three-hour blocks once a week, and were divided on start times between 5.00 p.m. to 7.00 p.m. weekdays (42 per cent and 48 per cent respectively), and 8.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. weekdays (43 per cent and 43 per cent respectively). In contrast, Grant MacEwan students showed a preference for one- and one-and-a-half-hour blocks twice a week, and start times of 8.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. weekdays. Overall, responses on the need for after-hours access to student services for all three groups included the registrar’s office, faculty offices, department offices, counselling services, and parking services. By far the most frequently indicated preferred time for access to such services was 4.30 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. on weekdays.

High proportions of respondents in all three groups (83 per cent, 85 per cent, and 85 per cent for part-time University of Alberta undergraduates, Grant MacEwan students, and former arts students respectively) had access to basic computer technology such as word processing. When questions related to technology which was more recent or sophisticated, these numbers dropped by almost half. The majority of respondents had never taken courses using technology or alternative delivery mediums. Of those who had, print-based correspondence was by far the most frequently used method. When questioned on interest in taking courses using alternative delivery methods, responses were generally low to moderate across data sets. The highest level of interest was expressed in computer-assisted instructional methods such as CD-ROM, followed by computer conferencing.

For part-time undergraduates at the University of Alberta, the most frequently listed advantage of part-time studies was that it allowed time for work commitments (56 per cent of respondents). Perhaps surprisingly, this finding was followed by personal fulfilment and fit with personal lifestyle (39 per cent), and family commitments (16 per cent). For this same group of respondents, the most frequently listed disadvantage of part-time studies was limited course selection including evening course selection (60 per cent of respondents), followed by the extended time needed for degree completion (27 per cent), and poor access to services (20 per cent).

Figure 1 provides an overview of major components of the study with a focus on discipline areas accessible for part-time degrees at Canadian universities, a profile of part-time students, personal factors influencing the decision to study part-time, and the institutional variables most likely to influence part-time enrolments.

Implications for institutional policy and practice

A need exists in higher education and in educational research in general for the translation of research results into meaningful implications for policy and concrete recommendations for improvement in institutional practice. Based on the results of this study, and with reference to previous research, ten implications for institutional policy and practice are suggested as guidelines for improving performance when addressing the access needs of part-time learners:

1. Findings in this study indicated that part-time total undergraduate enrolment proportions for the majority of responding institutions were above the 10 per cent mark, and roughly half were at or above the 20 per cent mark. For 1 December 1995, the mean part-time to total enrolment proportion was 23 per cent. Twenty per cent of respondent institutions fell below the 10 per cent mark in part-time to total undergraduate enrolments. At present, it is unclear as to what this means. These enrolment differences may be suggestive of how institutions perceive their diverse student constituencies, and how they have used flexible policy and practice to address the learning needs of these groups. Some institutions may require a re-examination of the educational, social, and economic costs and benefits of part-time students.

2. Findings on specific part-time degree programs offered by Canadian universities were “sketchy” and ambiguous at best. Analysis of data was hindered by a number of factors ranging from different reporting practices and definitions for part-time programmes to different conceptions of university degrees. More accurate knowledge and information is needed on the nature and extent of part-time degree programming offered by institutions.

3. Although the dominant organizational model for the administration of part-time programming appears to be regular academic departments, previous research suggests that this approach may not be the most effective, and that free-standing part-time degree programmes may be more supportive and comprehensive (see Rickwood, 1995; Smith and Saunders, 1988; Thompson and Devlin, 1992).

4. Many more institutions offer a greater number of evening courses than weekend
courses, yet findings in this study suggest that both types of offerings hold potential for soliciting the more mature part-time student.

5 In the present study, some evidence suggests that scheduling and timetabling development should focus on senior-year course levels (fourth-year and after-degree students) (see also Devlin, 1989.)

6 Previous research has postulated a relationship between part-time enrolments and the availability of evening and weekend course offerings (Thompson and Devlin, 1992). A analysis of data from Canadian universities showed a positive correlation between the extent of evening course offerings and part-time undergraduate enrolments independent of the influence of full-time enrolments. What may be needed is research which establishes the “causal direction” of this relationship.

Most likely, increases in the extent of evening programming will lead to part-time enrolment growth.

7 Previous research and findings in the present study reinforce the notion that some types of service provision are inconsistent with the demographic profile and characteristics of mature part-time students.

8 A reassessment of service provision for part-timers may translate into cost savings to both the student and the institution. Recent research suggests that the cost savings of educating a part-time student compared to a full-time student may be as high as 50 per cent (Rickwood, 1995).

9 Overall, interest in technology and the alternative delivery of courses was “lukewarm.” This finding is supported in previous research, which also suggests that distance learning may not be an attractive alternative for many part-timers (Broomfield, 1993; Thompson and Devlin, 1992).

10 Findings on technology and alternative delivery were highly consistent across all three response groups. These findings may be a more widespread phenomenon. If so, this would need to be weighed against government and institutional policies advocating increased technology integration, alternative delivery, and distance learning in educational settings.

Conclusion

In the last few decades, educational institutions have invested considerable resources in strategic planning efforts intended to define, establish, or reaffirm educational missions and values. Typically, however, these initiatives are “top-down” activities, where decision making proceeds from government policy on education, through major institutional stakeholders, and then to various student clienteles. Thus, students remain situated at the receiving end of the implementation of what policy makers decide “ought” to be done. In contrast, the research described here serves as a good example of an alternative
“bottom-up” approach, where, potentially, the process moves from relevant knowledge and information on students and programmes to institutional change; that is, from student needs to institutional responses.

In Canada, researchers, scholars, and administrators in higher education often appeal to demographic, political, or socio-economic factors as explanations for the variety of unanticipated pressures with which organizations are now faced. (Falling part-time enrolments may be a case in point.) Although these external variables do serve as perfectly valid explanations of internal organizational stresses, institutions have little control, and more often no control, over such variables. Alternatively, an institutional policy decision model based on student needs allows educational organizations to begin to identify strategies through which they can exercise proactive influence in countering the unpredictable effects of shifting social trends. For example, the results of this study suggest, among other things, that well-planned, intelligent course scheduling and carefully designed student services can influence part-time enrolments. Overall, this depicts a quite different institutional policy decision model. The essential difference lies in the “directional flow” of the process itself, and therefore in the type and quality of knowledge on which decisions are based.

Most importantly, how institutions choose to use relevant knowledge on students and programmes can affect policy change and improve educational practice.

References