

The marginalization of higher-level technical courses and the decline of English University Continuing Education: addressing the unintended outcomes of policy

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1. Enormous growth in participation on higher education (HE) in England over the past 25 years, especially on full-time, three-year bachelor's degree courses.
2. A very steep fall in the number of mature students in English HE over the past 10 years.
3. That fall is the unintended result of government policy that overlooked HE students not on full-time bachelor courses, especially those on other undergraduate courses.

The rise of English HE

England has transitioned from a relatively small elite HE system to a mass system, with some of the features of a universal system (Trow, 2007).

English HE Institutions are highly stratified and hierarchical.

The governance of English HE is marked by “a strong underlying competitive, market-oriented vision”.

(Andreadakis & Maassen 2019: 90)

The rise of English HE

- In 1980 15 % of people under 30 had accessed HE in England; by 2018 that proportion was over 51.9% overall and for women it was 59.1%.
(DfE 2020)
- Today HE is paid for by loans, repaid by graduates. The level of graduate debt among borrowers who finished their courses in 2019 was £40,000. (Bolton 2020: 3)

The decline of some English HE

As the number of students on three-year degree courses has grown quickly, the numbers on higher-level technical courses (level 4 and 5) have dropped significantly.

- In 2016/17 these technical courses accounted for 3% of all HE students in England.
- A fall of 54% between 2008 and 2018 (Hubble & Bolton 2021)
- In the early 1960s, this provision accounted for over 50 % of all HE in England (Zaidi et al 2019: 39)

Students on other higher-level technical courses

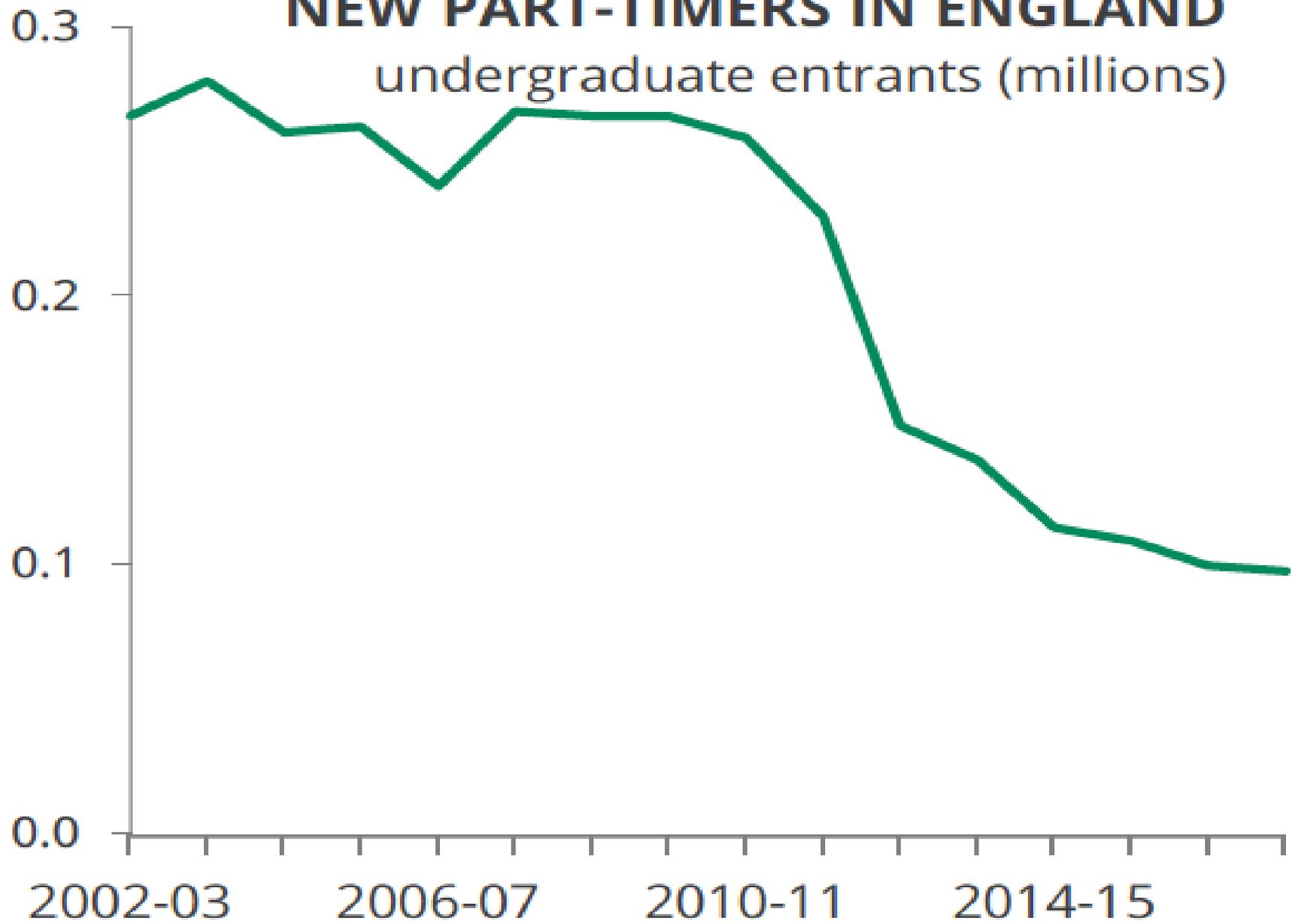
Students on higher-level technical courses tend to be part time.
Part-time students tend to be:

- In work
- Mature (starting their courses after the age of 21)
- Female
- Carers (for children or elderly relatives)
- Less mobile than younger full-time students.

*Higher level technical education is university
continuing education*

NEW PART-TIMERS IN ENGLAND

undergraduate entrants (millions)



A threat to social mobility

The decline in part-time students:

“...encompasses threats to social mobility, a narrowing of access to higher education and a diminution of opportunities for the most disadvantaged adults in society. The consequences are catastrophic for those individuals denied a chance to transform their lives and those of their families through part-time study.”

Butcher (2015: 47-48)

A threat to economic development

“The face of the English education and training system is marked by a curious absence, a ‘missing middle’ of mid-level, occupationally-relevant skills and qualifications”. (Field 2018: 12)

“there is an acute shortage of technician-level STEM skills which can be attributed to an undersupply of people with level 3-5 vocational qualifications over the last 20 years.” (Zaidi et al 2019: 9)

How has this happened?

1. Failure of the market system of HE and specifically the introduction of high fees. Mature students are resistant to debt.

“the decline in [part-time] numbers shows that for many the alternative to loans is not paying up-front, it’s deciding study is not for them.”

Callender and Thompson (2018: 4)

How has this happened?

2. Failure of the market system and in particular how competition between universities has led to a highly stratified system.

In a highly stratified system, “relative advantage is crucial” (Marginson 2016: 415)

In England’s stratified HE system, disadvantage in being associated with low-level HE courses.

How has this happened?

3. Associated with 2, the favouring of three-year full-time bachelor course by government and universities

Politicians have little personal experience of part-time courses; universities like the financial stability of three-year full-time courses.

The reasons for the decline are built into how HE in England is organised on a market-oriented competitive basis which requires universities to jostle for position and which marginalises continuing education as fulltime bachelor's degrees are valorised.

What can be done?

1. Incentivise universities to attract part-time mature students, especially on level 4 and 5 courses.
2. Incentivise employers to sponsor employees on these technical courses.
3. Reduce or remove fees from level 4 and 5 courses; loans have not worked.

Finally...

Continuing education in universities, including higher-level technical courses can open up routes to knowledge and understanding that can transform lives. For too many potential mature students in England, those routes remain closed.

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