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UK University part-time higher education: a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of higher education prospectuses

In the UK, HE Policy discourse over the past 60 years has advocated flexible part-time higher education (HE) for social mobility, personal development, economic advantage and as a leisure pursuit. However, part-time HE in the UK is in steep decline. Against this backdrop, we were interested in how universities promote, or fail to promote, part-time study options. We built a corpus of 90 UK undergraduate prospectuses for 2018 entry (5,673,799 words). Using a corpus-assisted discourse analysis approach we found significant mismatch between policy discourse and marketing discourse regarding part-time study. In particular, we found that UK university marketing discourse positions full-time study as the dominant mode of study and writes of part-time study as 'second-best'. This discourse mismatch is particularly marked when it comes to the elite Russell Group of universities. Viewing the absence of strong promotional discourse relating to part-time study alongside other factors such as increased tuition fees and the rise of global online education platforms adds a new perspective to the decline of flexible part-time undergraduate higher education at campus based universities in the UK.

1. Introduction

Since the 1960's, academics and policy makers interested in equity in HE have represented flexible, part-time and lifelong university education as possible solutions to issues to do with, on the one hand, changes in career patterns and, on the other, low levels of social mobility. By making it possible to complete a university degree (a) later in life and (b) alongside other commitments, early pioneers of lifelong learning aimed to break the monopolisation of university education by the well-off and widen access to HE.

Over the last seven decades, UK HE policy discourse has consistently promoted the benefits of part-time HE. However, the realities of UK policy implementation has led to a dramatic decline in part-time, flexible HE in the UK (Callender & Thompson, 2018). In order to assess the status and place of part-time undergraduate education in the UK university today, we studied how universities present themselves as sites for full-time and part-time study in undergraduate prospectuses. The university prospectus portrays the university through marketized promotional discourse (Askehave, 2007). Our examination of university prospectuses found that higher status universities tend to present themselves as places for full-time study, while it is predominantly lower status universities that promote part-time options.

We do not claim that prospectus discourse is the primary cause of the decline of part-time study in the UK. Instead, our discourse analysis adds a further

perspective to the decline by showing how UK universities construct the purpose of part-time study in relation to the ‘norm’ of a full-time undergraduate degree.

The article opens with a brief policy discourse overview of part-time education discourse in the UK and beyond. Next, we chart the recent fortunes of part-time study at UK universities. We then gauge how universities position themselves in terms of full-time and part-time study through a corpus-assisted discourse analysis. We close by discussing our findings.

2. Part-time and flexible higher education policy: discourse and reality

2.1 Part-time HE study in the UK (1963 -)

The Robbins Report (1963) evaluated the state of UK HE and proposed a plan for the future. One of the main conclusions of the report was that HE should be available to all that are qualified with an ambition to study. In 1963, (soon to be Prime Minister) Harold Wilson delivered his ‘White Heat of Technology’ speech at the Labour Party conference which set out plans to take advantage of new technologies to promote wider access to HE; this vision culminated in the foundation of The Open University (1969). Wilson’s vision pictured mature students studying while working, breaking the stranglehold of the middle and upper classes on HE providing more opportunity for all (Wilson, 1963). This period saw a steady rise in the numbers of part-time study at UK universities, from 16,146 in 1954 to 40,752 part-time students and 76,295 (separately counted) Open University students in 1984 (Tight, 1991).¹

1992 saw the expansion of the UK HE sector and part-time higher education was back

¹ These figures include all levels of tertiary education (from undergraduate to postgraduate).

on the agenda. The 1998 Labour Government paper: *The Learning Age* (Department for Education and Employment (DFEE), 1998) outlined the approach the UK would take to lifelong learning in response to challenges requiring workers to return to education periodically to 're-skill' and 'up-skill' to keep pace with the changing labour market. The paper presented flexible learning, aided by technology, as the key to a well-educated, adaptable workforce and successful economy. Part-time student numbers continued to grow to a high point in 2008 of 344,775 first year undergraduate students ('HESA', 2019). Policy throughout this period advocated part-time study for educational opportunities across the life-course, increasing social mobility and giving students greater choice. The 2012 Research Report 'Expanding and Improving Part-Time Higher Education' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2012) even called for a 'blurring of the line' between full-time and part-time, making flexible study available to all. Outside of the UK, the OECD, World Bank, UNESCO and the European Union have all advocated lifelong learning as a solution to many educational and economic problems (Schuetze, 2006).

Despite the fact that UK governments since the 1960's have emphasised the importance of part-time study, since 2008 part-time undergraduate student numbers have declined dramatically. First year UK undergraduate part-time students have dropped from the 2008/09 high point of 344,775 to 128,730 in 2017/18 ('HESA', 2019). A number of factors contributed to this decline. In 2006/7, tuition fees in England were increased to £3,000 and in 2012/13 fees rose to a maximum of £9,000. Although part-time students started to qualify for the same student loans as full-time students in 2012/13, loan and repayment terms for part-time students were less favourable for part-time compared to full-time students (Callender & Thompson, 2018). Moreover, potential part-time students reacted differently to the new fee and loan regime than full-time students. The

higher fee seemed to be offset in the minds of *full-time* students by the availability of fee and maintenance loans, *part-time* students were put off by the higher fees and the availability of loans did not alleviate this (Shaw, 2014).

Alongside fees, a number of other factors are important in understanding the decline of part-time students. One factor was the Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQ) policy. In 2007, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) withdrew subsidies for students studying for qualifications equivalent to or lower than a qualification they already held, meaning that students studying for an 'ELQ' were liable to pay fees at a higher rate (Lingwood, 2015). Because many part-time students undertake part-time study later in life to re-skill and already hold an ELQ, part-time study became a bad financial proposition for these learners. Furthermore, Mason (2014) documents that employer support for part-time study also declined in the period, making it increasingly hard for UK students to study part-time. Next to these factors (fee levels, the ELQ policy and employer support) other factors that may have led to the decline in part-time study in the UK are: poor economic returns, the economic downturn and a decline in leisure learning (Hubble & Bolton, 2017).

2.2 International Comparisons

Across OECD countries, 16% of those studying for a bachelors degree are studying part-time (OECD, 2019). The highest percentage of part-time undergraduate students can be found in New Zealand (39%), Norway (35%) and Sweden (53%) (OECD, 2019:159). The Nordic model of lifelong learning is a frequently cited example of a culture of learning throughout the lifespan underpinned by national corporatism and strong employer engagement through trade unions (Rubenson, 2006). In the USA, total part-time fall enrolment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions between 1959 and 2014 increased year on year with projected increases expected until 2025 (NCES, 2015)

and in Canada part-time enrolments have remained fairly consistent between 1992-93 and 2015-16 (Usher, 2018). In Australia the numbers of students on part-time higher education courses (at undergraduate and postgraduate levels) have consistently increased in line with full-time students; there were 8,701 part-time students enrolling in 1949, this steadily rose to 102,762 in 2000 and 206,307 in 2008. (Department of Education, & Training and Youth Affairs, 2001; Australian Government, 2008). In 2008, 31.2% of all Australian students attended on a part-time basis. In English-speaking countries, like the US, Australia and Canada, we have clearly not seen the decline in part-time provision that we have seen in the UK. One example of an OECD country with particularly low levels of part-time higher education is Germany. In Germany only 7% of all HE students are officially registered as part-time and only 13% of programmes can be studied part-time. Like in the UK, there have been calls to improve part-time study options in Germany (Gehlke, Hachmeister, & Hüning, 2017).

2.3 The rise of global online providers

The innovative use of technology in the 1960s, such as that adopted by the UK's Open University, led to the use of technologies such as television and radio to widen access to HE. The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) has become the symbol of online digital learning opportunities provided by universities and others on a worldwide scale. In 2018 there were 101 million students and 11.4k courses offered globally by the top 5 MOOC providers: Coursera, edX, XuetangX, Udacity and FutureLearn (Class central, 2019). The variety, flexibility and range of study opportunities offered by MOOCs is increasingly popular with potential students and, as a flexible offering, threatens the position of the (traditional) 6 year part-time undergraduate degree on university

campuses. The possibility of online education has redefined time and space for the learner (Sheail, 2018) and it is very possible that the rise of online study has contributed in some way to the decline of part-time campus provision in UK HE. However, doubts continue to be raised over whether MOOCs can or will replace campus-based study. Firstly, MOOC completion rates are poor - less than 10% of students signing up for a MOOC are likely to complete (Jordan, 2014). The MOOC has been praised for potential expansion of educational opportunities under the backdrop of internationalization and digital connectivity as well as contrasting reports of low-quality alternatives to traditional education (Lierat, 2015). It is true that online education which is open to all provides the potential for social justice and opportunity for all, however it can also be argued that this results in an equality of access rather than equitable outcomes (Selwyn, 2016). There are also concerns that global online platforms are not designed by educators but by programmers and technologists, funded by technology venture capitalists, focused on large scale data capture and private sector profit (Williamson, 2017). MOOCs, rather than offering education to all, have potentially had the opposite impact on social mobility and widening access in that they exclude unprivileged groups and privilege those with a degree (van de Oudeweetering & Agirdag, 2018). A possible migration to online study is one of a set of complex reasons that must be borne in mind when understanding the fortunes of part-time study in the UK.

3 Methods: a corpus-based discourse analysis of university prospectuses

Given the decline of part-time study in the UK today, we were interested in how much attention part-time study receives in terms of discourse. One of the clearest ways to illustrate the status that universities themselves give to part-time and full-time study, and how they position the two against one another, is by reading university prospectuses. To map discourses of part-time higher education in the UK we collected

undergraduate prospectuses from 90 universities, 22 from the Russell Group and 68 from other universities. Together, these prospectuses form a corpus of 5,6734,799 words. To evidence how universities in the UK represent mode of study, we used a hybrid method of corpus linguistics (CL) and discourse analysis (DA) to compare and contrast how the universities of the Russell Group and those outside the Russell Group write about part-time study. We also compared this discourse against two contrast cases: (1) discourse around part-time study at the two best known specialist part-time universities in the UK – the Open University and Birkbeck, University of London and (2) discourse around part-time study as found on the websites of some leading MOOC providers.

The social sciences have increasingly turned to corpus linguistics methods to analyse the real world use of text (Baker, et al, 2008), but the method is still seldom used in education studies.² In our study, we used standard CL methods of word frequency, collocation and concordance analysis to build a descriptive picture of part-time study in university prospectuses. Large corpus approaches can provide systematic evidence regarding the pattern of use of words (Stubbs, 2001), it can lack the nuanced contextual interpretation provided by a more qualitative approach. To focus more closely on what university prospectus writers *mean* by using language in a certain way, we therefore paired our corpus approach with a follow-up discourse analysis (DA). We modelled our approach of pairing CL and DA on the approach of Baker et al (2008) and (Efe & Ozer, 2015). Following initial analysis we followed up by using Van Leeuwen's (2008) discursive construction of purpose, as a theoretical framework to analyse use of 'part-

² A search on 'corpus' in the pages of *Higher Education Research & Development* yielded one result.

time study’. This allowed us to measure how frequently universities talk about part-time study and also how they present the possibilities for part-time study.

4 Results: Corpus analysis

First, we explored the very simple matter of how frequently universities in the UK write about part-time study in their prospectuses. Table 1-3 shows the number of occurrences of ‘part-time’/‘part time’ and ‘full-time’/‘full time’ across our corpora.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Table 1: 90 undergraduate prospectuses (academic year 2018/19) <p>(HE corpus)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5,673,799 words 		
Word	Occurrences	Relative frequency per 10k
‘Part-time’/‘part time’	2353	4.15
‘Full-time’/‘full time’	6024	10.62

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Table 2: 22 undergraduate Russell Group prospectuses (academic year 2018/19) (RG corpus) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1,546,065 words 		
Word	Occurrences	Relative frequency per 10k
‘Part-time’/‘part time’	224	1.55
‘Full-time’/‘full time’	888	6.13

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Table 3: 68 Non-Russell Group undergraduate prospectuses (academic year 2018/19) <p>(NRG corpus)</p>		
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4,142,962 words 		
Word	Occurrences	Relative frequency per 10k
‘Part-time’ and ‘part time’	2,155	5.21
‘Full-time’ and ‘full time’	5, 324	12.85

A high level comparison shows that the word ‘full-time’ is used over twice as frequently as the word ‘part-time’ across the HE corpus. In the RG (table 3) corpus, we can see that the word ‘full-time’ is used almost 4 times as often as the word ‘part-time’.

Table 4: Comparing corpora	Observed frequencies			Loglikelihood
	HE Corpus	RG Corpus	NRG Corpus	
‘part-time’	2353	224	2155	384.60
‘full-time’	6024	888	5324	514.45

Table 4 compares the occurrences of ‘part-time’ and ‘full-time’ in the HE corpus and both sub-corpora (RG Corpus and NRG Corpus). It illustrates that Russell Group universities use the word ‘part-time’ far less frequently in their prospectuses than non-Russell Group universities and the university sector as a whole. We used log likelihood to test for statistical significance in comparing the frequency of words use across two or more corpora. While the chi-square test is a more familiar test for social scientists, (Rayson, Berridge, & Francis, 2004) hold that log-likelihood provides a more accurate test of significance than chi-square for corpus linguistics (A loglikelihood of >15.13 is equivalent to a p-value of < 0.0001).

Counting word frequency, ‘part-time’ in prospectuses gives us an indication of how frequently universities write about part-time compared to full-time. However, what do universities say *about* part-time study? Using collocation analysis allowed us to show which words most frequently appear in close proximity to the node word. As Firth said:

You shall know a word by the company it keeps (Firth, 1957: 11)

Tables 5-7 present collocation data for ‘part-time’ and ‘full-time’ across the assembled corpora, that is, the frequency of a collocate appearing within 5 words either side of the node word. MI (mutual information) is used to measure the strength of the collocate - the higher the number the stronger the collocation (Baker, 2006) a minimum threshold of 5.0 was set to ensure the strongest and most relevant collocates. The 10 most frequent collocates are listed. Frequency of the collocation is reported.

Table 5: Collocation in HE corpus. Mutual Information => 5.0			
Part-time		Full-time	
Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
years	1275	years	3812
full-time	762	3	1300
study	365	ucas	1075
3	285	code	971
available	276	4	965
code	240	course	912
options	233	duration	909
costs	225	part-time	762
ucas	199	campus	700
location	194	placement	652

Table 6: Collocation in NRG corpus. Mutual Information => 5.0			
Part-time		Full-time	
Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
years	1260	years	3438
full-time	742	3	1111
study	314	ucas	1069
3	285	code	971
available	267	duration	909
code	240	course	897
options	230	4	824
costs	225	part-time	742
ucas	196	campus	680
location	194	hons	644

Table 7: Collocation in RG corpus. Mutual Information => 5.0			
Part-time		Full-time	
Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
years	58	years	664
full-time	54	3	347
work	47	4	240
students	43	full-time	182
study	41	including	156
please	37	honours	140
fees	31	campus	139
start	30	duration	133
september	28	start	108
date	28	park	103

Table 5 gives us a view of the entire UK HE sector and words collocate with ‘part-time’ and ‘full-time’. The second most frequent collocate of ‘part-time’ in the HE corpus is ‘full-time’. This shows how relational the word ‘part-time’ is – it is frequently found alongside the word ‘full-time’. In contrast, the word ‘full-time’ is often used without ‘part-time’ and part-time is only the 8th most frequent collocate of ‘full-time’. Table 6 summarises this analysis for the NRG corpus. Again, we can see that ‘part-time’ is paired with ‘full-time’ much more often than vice versa. Frequent collocates of ‘part-time’ that do not also collocate with ‘full-time’ include: ‘study’, ‘available’, ‘options’, ‘costs’ and ‘location’. This gives us a hint as to what the writers of NRG prospectuses are mainly concerned with when they write about ‘part-time’: they are writing about ‘part-time study’, what is ‘available’, the ‘options’ are for part-time students, the associated ‘costs’ of part-time study and the ‘locations’ in which students can study. Table 7 summarises this same analysis for the RG corpus. Again, we can see that ‘part-time’ collocates more frequently with ‘full-time-time’ than vice versa. However, frequent collocates of ‘part-time’ that do not collocate with ‘full-time’ include: ‘work’, ‘students’, ‘study’, ‘please’, ‘fees’, ‘September’ and ‘date’. These collocates are not necessarily what one would expect. ‘Please’ appears to collocate due to the texts often referring potential part-time students to other sources that they should ‘please’ consult – a telephone number or website. ‘September’ and ‘date’ appear to emphasise when part-time study is available; despite the potential flexibility, we see that the start of the traditional academic year (September) emphasised. Notably table 6 shows that ‘study’ frequently collocates with ‘part-time’ in the NRG corpus. In contrast, ‘work’ collocates much more frequently with ‘part-time’ in the RG corpus. This hints that the authors of RG prospectuses may have something different in mind when they write about ‘part-time’ than the writers of NRG prospectuses: when they say ‘part-time’, RG

prospectuses are often concerned with *part-time work performed by students alongside full-time study* rather than with part-time study. We were interested in how universities write about part-time study. We therefore eliminated references to part-time work by taking the all uses of ‘part-time’/ ‘part time’ in the HE corpus, and excluded all cases where the word ‘study’ does not appear within 10 words of the node word, ‘part-time’. We also manually removed instances of ‘part-time’ used as a heading; while the use of headings is informative, headings alone do not show how part-time study is *presented* to students by the university. Following this process, we were left with 256 uses of the word ‘part-time’ of which we could be sure that they referred to part-time study.

Next, we analysed these using Van Leeuwen’s three dimensional framework (2008) of the discourse of purpose. Van Leeuwen distinguishes three different constructions of purpose. A **goal orientated use** is where the producer of the text is talking about potential, opportunities and the possibility of achievement. In the context of our study, we classified use of the word ‘part-time’ in a university prospectus as ‘goal-oriented’ if it were used to signal how a student might use part-time study to achieve some goal. A **means orientated use** is instrumental, giving instructions, or sign posting how to do something. Use of the word ‘part-time’ was classified as instrumental if it gave information about how to apply for a course or what to do in order to study part-time. An **Effective action use** describes the result of something or to report the outcome or possible outcome of an action. We classified uses of the word ‘part-time’ as ‘effective action’ if it made mention of the consequences of studying part-time; achieving a part-time degree resulting in career progression, for example.

Table 8 – Coded discourse analysis

HE Corpus

Goal Orientated	141
Means Orientated	102
Effective Action	13

In analysing the use of each of the 256 uses of ‘part time’ and coding them as described (table 8) we found that the most frequent use of the word ‘part-time’ was goal orientated. These were uses which give agency to prospective students by offering them options and by talking about the possibility of studying part-time. Means orientated coded concordance lines included mostly discourse on fees and how a prospective student should go about applying. Tables 9 and 10 show ‘goal’ and ‘means’ oriented examples.

Table 9: Examples of Means Orientated

If you would like to study	part-time,	please apply to GCU directly.
Fees are reviewed annually and increases should be expected. Annual	part-time	fees are based on the number of modules you study

Table 10: Examples of Goal Orientated

we cannot guarantee that your application will be accepted.	Part-time	study All our full-time courses are modular and many can
Most of our degrees are also offered on a	part-time	basis. Typically, part-time students study one or two modules each

Goal-oriented and means-oriented discourse around part-time study is essentially neutral; for instance: if individuals would like to study part-time, the following is available (goals-oriented discourse) or, if they would like to study part-time, this is how

to go about it (means-oriented discourse). Goals-oriented and means-oriented discourse do not *promote* part-time study.

By contrast to the neutral discourse regarding part-time study, just 13 instances were found which showed effective action discourse (table 11). In these cases, the prospectus presents positive effects of part-time study. Looking at these 13 instances, it is clear that effective action of part-time study mostly concerns gaining a job, in one case ‘a dream job’. A small number of uses of the word were in the context of how studying part-time can help students overcome other challenges (like studying while having working and caring responsibilities).

Table 11: Effective Action discourse in HE corpus.

Studying a degree	part-time	is a popular way of addressing the challenges students may
Much later in life I returned to education, studying	part time	in the evenings or at weekends whilst still working.
also go on to postgraduate study, on a full or	part-time	basis. The following is a list of the major career ³
to meet each student’s personal and professional needs.	Part-time	students are normally permitted to study a maximum of three
can be completed in a minimum of two years	part-time	study. Successful completion of this programme leads to the award
They provide you with the opportunity to learn by studying	part time,	and gain on-the-job training by working full time and earning

³ Although this references postgraduate study, the concordance line is in an undergraduate prospectus. We concluded that this is still promoting part-time study.

The first step in this journey was to move to	part-time	working in her role as office/IT manager and study towards
AND FLEXIBLE STUDY MODES Many of our students are studying	part-time,	either taking degrees, on short courses or working to gain
Many of our	part-time	students study the HND while working, and move to more
the job or career you have always dreamed of.	PART- TIME	STUDY We offer part-time degree programmes in a number of
PART-TIME STUDY We offer	part-time	degree programmes in a number of subject areas, allowing students
aged 19+ at entry for all of our full- and	part-time	programmes. Whether you return to study for career enhancement, or
Study abroad opportunities available	Part-time	study options available

We repeated this analysis for the RG corpus and again found mostly goals orientated and means orientated discourse regarding part-time study. We could find only three instances where a Russell Group prospectus speaks of the effect of pursuing a part-time study.

Table 12: Coded discourse analysis

Russell Group corpus	
Goals Orientated	21
Means Orientated	21
Effective Action	3

Table 13: Effective Action discourse in RG corpus.		
Much later in life I returned to education, studying	part time	in the evenings or at weekends whilst still working.
also go on to postgraduate study, on a full or	part-time	basis. The following is a list of the major career ³
of study to meet each student's personal and professional needs.	Part-time	students are normally permitted to study a maximum of three

Word frequency, collocation and concordance analyses indicate that non-Russell Group universities write more often of matters of part-time study. Moreover, across the UK HE sector, prospectuses seem to mention part-time study mostly in terms of goals and means, rather than effects. The scarcity of discourse of effective action across the UK HE sector illustrates the absence of promotional discourse around part-time study in UK university prospectuses in 2018. This is despite government policy discourse advocating part-time study.

5 Results: Corpus-assisted discourse analysis

5.1 UK campus-based prospectuses

In the second part of our analysis, we used our descriptive findings as entry points to reading the prospectuses in more critical depth. Moving from a Corpus Linguistics approach to a Discourse Analysis approach, we widened our view beyond the patterns

of words and the reading of targeted lines of text in more depth using the quantitative patterns above as a guide. We found that broadly there are three quite different approaches to writing about part-time study in university prospectuses in the UK. (1) Prospectuses sketch part-time study as being essentially the same as full-time study, but as offering greater flexibility. (2) A second group of prospectuses sketch part-time as markedly different from full-time study and position part-time students differently due to their unique circumstances. (3) A selection of elite universities actively discourage both part-time study and part-time work.

It was mostly non-Russell Group universities that presented part-time and full-time study as essentially the same. For instance we found two ‘less prestigious universities’ who offer the majority of their programmes on a full-time and part-time basis. They do not describe part-time study as essentially different – they present the two options side-by-side as equals. For instance:

“A lot of our courses can be studied on a part-time basis.”

“When studied part-time, the duration of the course depends on the speed at which you wish to progress through it. This is called the ‘intensity of study’.”

Another non-Russell Group institution, use the word ‘part-time’ 135 times, but next to the frequent mention of part-time, they not only list part-time study as an option but also include more detail about how students can combine part-time study with work and that evening study is available. The options on the course pages state whether the part-time option is ‘day’ or ‘evening’ and there is a section dedicated to part-time students called ‘Part-time, flexible learning’.

‘Studying part-time doesn’t mean you receive part-time support; in fact quite the opposite. We understand that part-time students often have multiple commitments to juggle, such as work and family, so strong support systems are absolutely crucial.’

A similar ranking institution also uses the word ‘part-time’ frequently in their prospectus, and have part-time options listed on the majority of course descriptions. Major themes in this prospectus are: (1) what a big step part-time study is and (2) the services and support on hand to support part-time students from a range of perspectives. For instance, we read:

‘While part-time students and those returning to study or with other commitments do face certain challenges, we believe you can take these in your stride with the right support.’

By contrast, Russell Group universities are far less enthusiastic about part-time study and work. For instance, in one Russell Group prospectus, we read:

‘Our degrees are principally designed to be taken on a full-time basis; all teaching takes place during the daytime. However, some departments do permit part-time study. Please enquire with the relevant programme contact.’

‘You can work part-time, as many students do, to supplement your income during your studies. That said, we’d like to emphasise that your academic work should take priority.’

We could only find one example of a Russell Group institution in our sample promoting and part-time options actively, writing:

‘We know that many mature and part-time students face unique challenges, including balancing academic study with family and employment commitments. For that reason, our Lifelong Learning Centre provides specialised guidance, advice and support to mature and part-time students, from pre-application right through to graduation and beyond.’

Still, regarding this prospectus, we found it telling that the option to study part-time at this university is not university-wide, but confined to the Lifelong Learning Centre.

5.2 Contrast Cases

In sections 4 and 5 we analysed part-time study discourse at mainstream UK universities. We found that mainstream universities tend to present full-time study as the default option and that part-time study is not actively promoted; we also found an important status difference in that the elite universities of the Russell Group tend not to promote part-time study and that it is only lower status universities that do promote part-time study. In order to set this discourse in context, we compared this part-time study discourse with two contrast cases: the discourse of two specialist part-time and distance universities in the UK (arguably *outside* the mainstream) and flexible online offerings of four prominent MOOC providers.

In the UK there are two established universities with long histories of part-time and flexible approaches to undergraduate study, the Open University and Birkbeck, University of London. The Open University has traditionally provided distance learning through a variety of media: from posted materials and television to online digital media today. Birkbeck is a campus-based institution, but teaches mainly in the evening (6-9pm), to accommodate part-time and full-time students. In order to provide a contrast

case to our sample of ‘traditional’ UK university prospectuses, we constructed a mini corpus (60,077 words) (OUBBK) of these two institutions’ most recently available prospectuses 2019 (OU) and 2020 (Birkbeck). Table 14 reports the top 10 most frequent collocates of ‘part-time’ and ‘full-time’ in this small corpus.

Table 14: Collocation in OUBBK corpus. Mutual Information => 5.0			
Part-time		Full-time	
Collocate	Frequency	Collocate	Frequency
years	151	years	177
or	108	4	100
this	99	or	94
course	95	this	74
4	76	3	72
full-time	71	part-time	71
enrolment	34	ba	71
higher	30	bsc	50
will	27	foundation	32
modular	25	course	30

Across this small corpus we can see that when talking about part-time and full-time study, the length of the programme is important with the top collocate for both words being the word ‘years’. Interestingly, in the OUBBK corpus, the word ‘part-time’ collocates with ‘full-time’ equally frequently, showing that the two words tend to be used alongside one another. This is in contrast with our finding regarding traditional campus based institutions above (tables 5-7). In addition to the evidence provided by this collocation analysis, specific examples of how the word ‘part-time’ is used

positively (and indeed in an ‘effective action’ mode) abound in the OUBBK corpus. For instance:

We’re pioneers in distance learning and, since we were founded, have helped more than two million people realise their potential. Our unique approach to learning means you don’t have to put your life on hold to get the qualification you want.

You’ll have the flexibility to fit study around the other things going on in your life, whatever they may be.

Our unique evening teaching means that you can study alongside London’s working professionals and pursue internship or part-time work opportunities during the day. This will not only help you finance your studies, but also means you can explore job opportunities and enhance your career prospects.

As we held above, the rise of MOOCs and platforms which offer opportunities to study short non-credit bearing courses through to fully online degrees may also have played a part in the decline of part-time HE in the UK. For this reason, we were interested to compare mainstream, campus-based UK universities’ part-time learning discourse with the promotional material offered by online providers. To make this comparison, we compared our findings from the analysis of UK undergraduate prospectuses with the ‘about us’ pages of the large online providers Coursera, EdX, FutureLearn and Udacity. Just as we found in the considerably more formal discourse found in the OU and Birkbeck prospectuses, these online pages revealed strongly promotional discourse designed to highlight the effective action of studying flexibly.

“ Our Mission

Our mission is to democratize education through the offering of world-class higher education opportunities that are accessible, flexible, and economical. Virtually anyone on the planet with an internet connection and a commitment to self-empowerment through learning can come to Udacity, master a suite of job-ready skills, and pursue rewarding employment.” (Udacity, 2019)

“The Mission

- Increase access to high-quality education for everyone, everywhere
- Enhance teaching and learning on campus and online
- Advance teaching and learning through research” (edX, 2019)

“We offer a diverse selection of courses from leading universities and cultural institutions from around the world. These are delivered one step at a time, and are accessible on mobile, tablet and desktop, so you can fit learning around your life.” (FutureLearn, 2019)

“We envision a world where anyone, anywhere can transform their life by accessing the world’s best learning experience.” (Coursera, 2019)

Here, we see a striking difference in the discourse of the MOOC providers who promote educational opportunities for all, available online and globally. Taking this small sample we can see that using the Van Leeuwen construction of purpose framework (Goals Orientated, Means Orientated and Effective Action) the discourse of MOOC providers reflects both goals orientated discourse, explaining study options that are available if one has certain goals, and effective action discourse, reflecting goals that student should

strive for, such as self-improvement or career progression resulting in widening educational opportunity, worldwide, for all.

6 Discussion

Scholars studying the decline of part-time HE in the UK have charted this decline mainly in terms of the changing funding regime. Here, we add another perspective, by looking at how universities themselves construct and promote discourse around part-time HE. Using corpus techniques to analyse the part-time discourse in university prospectuses, we found that, in 2018, UK universities simply write less frequently about part-time study options than full-time study. This is especially the case for elite Russell Group institutions, who, in the main, are silent or muted about part-time undergraduate study. Next, we looked at how the word ‘part-time’ is actually used in prospectuses when it is used. Looking at the words that are typically collocated with ‘part-time’ in university prospectuses, we saw that part-time study is positioned very differently from full-time study. While institutions outside the Russell Group broadly inform students about the part-time options that are available, Russell Group institutions seem to downplay the possibility of part-time study and position ‘part-time’ options mostly in terms of *working* part-time while studying full-time. Moreover, reading UK universities’ prospectuses in depth, we found that UK universities mainly use the word ‘part-time’ in a goal and means orientated way and that few uses of the word ‘part-time’ are effective action oriented and therefore *truly promotional* regarding the benefits of part-time study. This contrasts strongly with the way in which the two specialist distance and evening study universities in the UK and a cohort of rising online education providers, write of part-time study.

Three broad explanations are possible as to why UK universities' promotional discourse is so muted about part-time study: (1) universities do not find it worthwhile offering part-time options and have therefore taken the step to promote part-time study less actively; (2) the market for part-time study in the UK has shrunk because those wishing to study part-time are looking at alternative options such as global online platforms instead of traditional undergraduate degrees or (3) the decline of part-time students may be due at least in part to the meagre promotional efforts that UK universities themselves make to promote part-time study. Our research cannot itself answer these three questions and all three deserve further study. However, our research adds detail to the picture, showing that on the whole, UK universities make comparatively meagre efforts truly to promote part-time undergraduate study.

With increased digital global connectivity, potential part-time learners may well be looking at alternative short courses provided by global online learning platforms. The unbundled university or the unbundled degree (McCowan, 2017) may mean that small modules can be studied over shorter periods of time, potentially by different 'providers'. Students may choose then to link these together to form a larger qualification (or not). While currently there are a variety of platforms available to students globally, ambitions to create a 'Netflix style' platform for education are predicted:

“Pearson is building a Silicon Valley-inspired platform with potential reach to millions of students, who it addresses explicitly as social media consumers, at the same time as treating universities as long-term partners in its online learning services infrastructure and as labour market preparation centres.” (Williamson, 2019: 11)

On the one hand platforms such as these have the potential to 'disrupt' not only part-time education but all forms of education, going as far to challenge the future of the

undergraduate degree. However, on the other hand our study shows that full-time, campus-based study is implicitly shown as the standard route for UK undergraduate higher education. Part-time and online study is generally presented as a form of study that is special, different, less valued or of lower quality. Moreover, MOOCs have not delivered the equitable access to education that was hyped during the early 2010s. Despite consistent policy discourse encouraging part-time options, the standard full-time, three year degree is still presented as the norm at UK campus-based universities.

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