

# **Attitudes to Higher Education and Part-Time Degrees among 16–18 Year Olds**

**Final Qualitative Report (6 May 2005)**

**Research Study Conducted for  
The Sutton Trust and Birkbeck College**

**January–February 2005**



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# Introduction

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This report presents the findings from qualitative research conducted by MORI on behalf of the Sutton Trust and Birkbeck College. The research was commissioned to explore the factors which influence young people in making decisions about Higher Education, and in particular awareness and perceptions of, and potential demand for, part-time undergraduate degrees among 16-18 year olds.

## Research background and objectives

The qualitative project was commissioned as a precursor to mooted large-scale quantitative research to measure the nature and extent of the market, *if any*, for part-time undergraduate degrees amongst – broadly speaking – 18-21 year olds, given that:

- Currently, the majority of Birkbeck’s students are aged between 25 and 45; and
- There is a widely-held (and erroneous) perception that the College does not offer undergraduate courses to “conventional” higher education applicants<sup>1</sup>

However, because quantitative research with this research audience would be reasonably expensive, with no guarantee that any viable market for part-time undergraduate degrees would be revealed, it was decided that a small-scale qualitative study would provide a useful and cost-effective opportunity to begin to explore some of the issues surrounding the potential for take-up (or not) of part-time degrees among the target age group. The research would also have a wider applicability by giving more insight into the factors which influence young people *in general* when making decisions about higher education.

In light of this, the specific objectives of the qualitative research were to:

- Assess the availability and accuracy of information and advice about the range of Higher Education options and progression routes open to young people
- Understand the factors that influence young people’s decisions on their ‘next steps’ when they finish school (at age 16 or age 18). More specifically, who is involved in the decision-making process, and what is the influence of their peer group, family, teachers and the media
- Ascertain the perceptions among young people of the cost of Higher Education and how to finance it, and about debt, and the extent to

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<sup>1</sup> For example, UCAS does not appear to list Birkbeck College in its List of Institutions. See <http://www.ucas.com/instit/index.html>

which the debate about top-up fees is influencing their decisions

- Explore the awareness of ‘part-time’ study among young people and their perceptions of part-time undergraduate degree courses, in particular what would make them consider this option and what would make them rule it out
- Gauge awareness and perceptions of Birkbeck College and explore measures to raise awareness of part-time undergraduate degrees among young people

## **Methodology**

In total, seven focus groups were conducted by MORI executives with young people in five locations across London: Greenwich, Surbiton and Northwood in outer London, and Islington and Southwark in inner London. The groups were conducted between 24 January and 2 February 2005. Overall, 61 young people took part in the research, with participants (who were recruited face-to-face) differentiated by the following key demographics:

- Sex
- Age (only young people aged 16-21 were recruited)
- Ethnicity
- Occupation (in FE, in work or NEET)
- HE plans (planning to go into higher education; not planning to go into higher education)

A more detailed profile of group participants is provided in the appendices.

A topic guide was developed by MORI in consultation with staff at the Sutton Trust and Birkbeck College. A copy of the topic guide is appended.

## **Interpretation of the data**

It should be noted that qualitative research is an interactive process between the researcher and participants that allows insights into attitudes and reasons for these attitudes. Participants in this research were a small sample of a cross-section of young people, so the findings which emerged are illustrative and not statistically representative of the ‘universe’ of young people.

It is also worth bearing in mind that the research deals with participants’ *perceptions* and *beliefs* and these may not accurately reflect the *facts* of higher education, part-time study and/or Birkbeck College.

## **Publication of the data**

As with all of MORI's studies, these findings are subject to our Standard Terms & Conditions of Contract. Any press release, publication or web-siting of the findings from this survey requires the advance approval of MORI. Such approval will only be refused on the grounds of inaccuracy, misinterpretation or misrepresentation of the findings.

## **Acknowledgements**

MORI would like to thank James Turner and Tessa Stone at the Sutton Trust, and Philip Dewe and Tricia King at Birkbeck College, for their help in developing this project.

Thanks are due, too, to the young people who took part in the group discussions.

# Higher Education, or Not? The Post-School Decision-Making Process

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## Why Higher Education?

In order to assess the potential popularity of the part-time undergraduate degree option among 16 to 18 year olds, it is important to look at what drives young people's decisions to go – or to not go – into Higher Education. From this research it is clear that young people are motivated by a wide variety of factors although some common themes do emerge.

### More career opportunities and money

Decisions by young people about Higher Education are not always about interest in a subject and a desire to further their academic development. Instead, many of the young people have practical long-term goals in mind and see having a degree as a way of maximising the career opportunities which will be available to them. It is also believed that a degree will provide a considerable advantage when applying for jobs.

*I don't want to leave school and apply for a job to find out that they need a degree, so I can turn around and say I have got that degree*

Female, aged 16-18, going into Higher Education

*If you go for the same job but you have got that little bit more than someone with that degree, then you have more chance of getting what you want*

Female, aged 16-18, going into Higher Education

Closely allied to the perception that a degree will bring more job opportunities, many young people also believe that a degree will heighten their earning potential by making a well-paid career more likely.

*One of my teachers in school, he was an investment banker in the city ... and he said after two years you are on a six-figure salary and that sort of motivates me into going into that*

Male, aged 16-18, going into Higher Education

For some young people, a degree confers 'status' and having a degree is a means of climbing the social ladder and 'getting ahead' in life.



*I had a friend and he done some social science course and he's not interested in science but he just wanted it for the degree*

Male, aged 19-21, going into Higher Education

*... degrees mean a lot. Come on now – if people have got a degree then they've made it, like*

Male, aged 19-21, going into Higher Education

## **The 'experience' of university**

Even so, for many young people who want to go into Higher Education, university is not just about gaining a degree or viewed simply as a means to a better job and a bigger salary, but also valued as an 'experience'. The prospect of meeting new people and a social life are significant 'pull factors' which should not be underestimated. It is important to take this into consideration when thinking about how to 'market' the part-time degree option to young people.

*I suppose when I go to university I will be experiencing more and understanding more about what I want to be when I leave. It would just make me more prepared for the outside world*

Female, aged 16-18, going into Higher Education

*Some people go to university to have more fun than study*

Female, aged 16-18, going into Higher Education

*... that's the age you're supposed to be enjoying your life, because obviously when you grow up you've got to be able to care for yourself and pay bills and taxes that you don't even worry about now*

Male, aged 19-21, going into Higher Education

## **Why Not Higher Education?**

For young people who say that they do not want to go into Higher Education, it is clear that their reasons are equally diverse, although again they tend to cluster around some key themes.

### **A degree will not bring better career opportunities**

Few young people who do not want to go in Higher Education think that having a degree will bring any long-term benefits in terms of career prospects or earning potential. They perceive studying for three or four years as a waste of time when they could be in work, earning money and progressing in a career. The financial difficulties which would have to be endured make studying for a degree even less desirable.

*A lot of people leave school and start trades and they're wealthier than a person who has spent years doing a degree*

*or whatever in university and then they're spending the rest of their life paying off a debt they got from their education*

Female, aged 19-21, working, not going into HE

*Now you have got more options, you used to have to go to university to get a good job, now you can get money from anywhere really, you don't need to go through that ... you waste four years ... look at all the money you could have made in four years*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

*I just thought there was no need because I could actually get into the job that I wanted to do with the education that I had and start earning some money, instead of spending three years at university and learning the same sort of stuff*

Male, aged 19-21, been in FE, did not go into HE

In support of this belief, some give examples of people who have not got a degree but have still “made it” financially. Boys, in particular, seem to look up to role models who “prove” that a degree is not needed to achieve success.

*It is all about money at the end of the day. You used to have to have to go to university for a good job. People make money without going through the hassle. It is almost the easy route*

Male, 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

*One of the richest men in the world, in Australia, he didn't go to university*

Male, 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

*What about Bill Gates? He didn't go to university*

Male, 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

*I mean look at Bill Gates he dropped out of school and look where he is now*

Male, 16-18, in FE, going into HE

Taking a ‘glass half full’ perspective on this finding, it is perhaps to be seen as encouraging that these young people regard the world as their financial oyster and believe they are capable of attracting considerably above-average salaries. However, the financial benchmarks for several of the young people interviewed tended to be footballers, popstars and highly successful (or plain lucky) business entrepreneurs and none showed a real grasp of the true salary levels of the more conventional members of the workforce they are most likely to themselves become.

## A degree will not give you the practical skills needed for the 'real world'

A common view among the young people we spoke to is that university does not provide the practical skills which are needed in the workplace and desired by employers. For them, the argument runs that time would be better spent in employment, gaining skills through on-the-job learning, rather than continuing with 'academic' studies. Others say a degree is simply not required for the job they want to do.

*Actually what you have got on your CV with regards to education seems to be irrelevant in some ways. A lot of offices, unless you've got the experience or the basic skills, people are uninterested*

Female, aged 19-21, been in FE, did not go to HE

*When it comes down to it a lot of places want experience and just because you can do something on paper doesn't mean you can do it in real life*

Female, aged 19-21, working, did not go into FE

*I want to open up a shop and to open a shop you need good business sense, good business plan and experience ... I don't need to go to university for five years that would mean I'll have no money and have to repay money at the end of the day*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

*For what I want to do I don't really need to go to university. If it is not necessary I am not going to waste my life*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

Young people who leave school with few qualifications, if any, would not even consider doing a degree and not just because they have not got the entry requirements, but also because they do not perceive university 'to be for them'. Attempting to attract such young people to Birkbeck College to do a part-time degree would therefore be a considerable challenge.

*I'd think that everyone else [at university] was looking down on me. I've got no qualifications, I'm 20 and I've got two kids. I think they'd be looking down on me as if they are something better than me*

Male, aged 19-21, not working, did not go to FE

*I'd go in [to school] at about 10am and then I would mess around and it was time to go home then. It was really just a good laugh, that's the way I saw it*

Male, aged 19-21, not working, did not go to FE

## No desire to continue studying

Many young people lack direction and motivation when at school and do not enjoy studying, so would rather get a job than continue what they regard as purely academic study at university. Others admit they would not have the commitment necessary to spend three years at university for no discernable benefits during that time. This is not just the case for young people who leave school at 16, but also for some of those who go into Further Education, but do not want to continue their education further.

*I am not the kind of person to think I am going to go to university for three years when I do not like homework and studying, I want something at the end of it, when actually at the end of it anything can happen*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

*There's quite a few people who seemed to know what they wanted to do, but I was one of the people that didn't have a clue*

Female, aged 19-21, working, been in FE, did not go into HE

*If you think about it what is the point in going through the hassle of learning all that information which you probably won't ever use*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

## Can go into Higher Education at a later date

A less common, but equally important, view expressed by some young people is that they can go into Higher Education at a later date, when they have a better idea of what they would like to do and are perhaps more settled.

*I think the best time to go to college is when you are ready to, not because you have been told to. Because when you are ready that it when you really know what you want to do*

Female, aged 19-21, working, been in FE

*Maybe I will at some point [go to university] but now no, I want to have a gap year or years. I can always come back to university*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

## Information on 'Next Steps'

For many young people, the decision about whether to go to university or not is not simply a personal one. The information they receive at school, the views of family and friends and perceptions of the cost of Higher Education are also key factors.

## Advice at school

Findings from this research indicate that the quantity and the quality of ‘next steps’ advice varies enormously from school to school. Careers advice, whether through one-on-one contact with a dedicated ‘careers advisor’ or in the form of a ‘careers lesson’, is common in many schools and an acknowledged source of information for young people.

*[We had] careers advice. You go to them and tell them what you are good at and they tell you the careers that would suit your way of thinking*

Male, 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*I remember getting advice [at school] with regard to what sort of career you wanted and then thinking of the qualifications that would be relevant to that sort of career*

Female, 16-18, been in FE, not going into HE

For some young people, careers advisors are an invaluable source of information about jobs, Further Education or university. Students find one-to-one sessions particularly useful as they provide an opportunity for personal advice as well as more practical help such as assisting with application forms for college or university.

*She [the careers teacher] told us that she wasn't going to advise us on what we should do because nobody knows us better than we know ourselves. So all she could do was help support us ... I miss her because I haven't spoken to her in ages*

Female, aged 19-21, in FE, going into HE

*They [careers advisor] told me information about the courses. They told me when I had to apply and the length of time it would take, and gave me an application form and everything*

Female, aged 19-21, in FE, not going into HE

However, not all young people who participated in this research feel that the advice they received at school was relevant to them. This is particularly the case for the less academically-able who tend to feel that careers advice is only targeted at ‘high achievers’. Similarly, young people who are interested in less ‘mainstream’ careers said they found it difficult to get specific and appropriate advice because careers advisors did not have connexions with the full range of potential employers.

*We had a careers advisor that came [to school] and she wrote out a list of different things we could try, but every single one you had to get good grades*

Male, aged 19-21, working, did not go to HE

*... they were basically saying that if you didn't want to go to university you were dead, you were on the streets, you had no option, everything was university and that was it. It was really hard to find some other way*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

*Don't just tell us about the courses that you need A, B or C to get on but tell us about the courses that are available if you don't do that well*

Male, aged 19-21, working, did not go into HE

*I think they should make connections with companies from within all industries*

Female, 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

It also seems that much of the information that young people receive about Higher Education at school focuses on 'traditional' progression (i.e. Key Stage 4, immediately followed by post-16/further education, immediately followed by full-time higher education) and does not mention the part-time degree option.

*It seems that everything is set in stone completely. You go to school, college and then university and that's the way it goes. Young people should accept that you can take other roads and do other things and it's all right to do that*

Female, 19-21, been in FE, did not go into HE

*It was very sort of streamlined [careers advice]: education, A-levels, degree. There was never any part-time angle to it at all*

Female, 19-21, been in FE, not gone to into HE

It is also apparent that the advice young people receive on 'next steps' when they leave school for a college of Further Education varies from institution to institution. Some students who are currently at college say they have not received any formal 'careers advice'; for others, the advice is of poor quality and given by staff who tend not to know their students particularly well (unlike teachers at school who have known students for many more years). Some students also feel that 'next steps' advice at college is rushed and unstructured.

*They [the careers advisor] told me what I should do and I told them that I didn't want to do that, so that was it really*

Female, 19-21, in FE, going into HE

*You get to Sixth Form and they throw the careers stuff at you*

Male, 16-18, in FE, going into HE

## The role of family and friends

Careers advice is not the only source of advice young people have when deciding on their 'next steps' after school or college: family and friends also play a key role in their decisions. Some young people who have parents or siblings with degrees refer to an expectation that they too will follow the same route when they finish school. Some speak of a "being brought up to go to university", while for others it is a "family habit". Knowing friends who have been, or are going to go to university, may also encourage young people to go into Higher Education. Family and friends appear to have as much influence on the decisions of boys as they do on girls.

*My family haven't been [to university] but a couple of my mates, their fathers and brothers went so they have always had it that they would go to university. When I say that I might not go to university, I might just get a job, they are shocked. It is the way they are brought up to think*

Male, aged 16-18, going into Higher Education

*I wanted to do the course [at university] because I have an interest in medicine for a start. A friend of mine is studying medicine and he said it was really interesting*

Male, aged 19-21, going into Higher Education

For students who feel that the advice they receive in school is not relevant to them, family and friends seem to have an even bigger role to play. Such young people mention doing what their parents tell them to do and others speak of following the same route as their friends.

*I kind of wanted to go to college but my mum was, like, you have to go*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

*There's lots of stuff you can do but nobody really hears about it. A lot of people hear things from hearsay, what their friends tell them*

Female, aged 19-21, not gone into HE

*I think we all did pretty much the same thing ... You know what you are like when you're that age, you don't really care what you Mum and Dad say. Mates were the main part*

Male, aged 19-21, been in FE, but did not go into HE

The variety and usefulness of information regarding Higher Education is perhaps something that could be measured quantitatively, or explored in more detail qualitatively, in order to gauge which medium would be most effective to communicate the part-time degree option to young people.

## **Which university?**

It is also important to understand what motivates young people to choose a particular university once they have decided that they want to go into Higher Education. Findings from this research indicate that advice from teachers or careers advisors is less important than young people's own 'research' such as visiting the UCAS website, looking at university prospectuses, and attending university open days. It also seems the 'reputation' of an institution is important.

*I found the best way is to narrow it down is with the brochures and then to go and look at the universities where I may be going*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*On the UCAS website you put down which subject you want and then it will show you every university that has that subject so it was much easier*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

It is clear that decisions about Higher Education are also based on more 'informal' sources of information, such as chatting to students at university open days and hearsay from family and friends.

*I talk to friends who go there or have been [to that university]. They can probably tell you if it is good or not*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*When I went [to a university open day] I was able to speak to the tutors about the course ... It is your friends you ask about the nightlife and the town*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

For some young people these less formal sources of advice are viewed as more reliable than university prospectuses and websites, which are perceived as trying to 'sell' a particular image of a university so cannot be trusted.

*The trouble with these university websites is that they are trying to sell themselves, they are going to make themselves sound that they have got the perfect university there*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*As a student you are warned that with every prospectus they do try and sell themselves*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

Whilst the entry requirements or the quality of teaching at a particular university influence the choice of university for many young people, less tangible factors, such as the 'atmosphere' of the university or how they 'feel' when they attend an open day often play an equally important role. Young people do not just weigh up which university would offer them the best academic environment to achieve



their degree, but also whether they feel that they would enjoy the experience of studying at a particular institution.

*I have found out from friends who have gone to one place and they have said it is not actually for them; you can usually get a feel for it. It is like buying a house, they know as soon as they walk in whether it feels homely or not. It is an eerie type of thing, you know if you are going to fit in there*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*The thing I liked [at the open day] was having students taking you round. The girl that took us was such a bubbly student, they way things came across it was like a little village within the city and she made out that you have real fun*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

## **The Money Factor**

Perhaps unsurprisingly an important factor in young people's decisions on what to do when they finish school is the issue of money.

### **Perceptions of debt**

The prevailing view among young people who took part in this research and have decided to go to university is a sense of resignation to the inevitability of debt. While some consider paying for university to be unfair, the prospect of debt has not ultimately affected their decision to go into Higher Education.

*You know it is going to happen [getting into debt] whether you like it or not really*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*I don't really care, I know it is going to happen anyway*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

Some are concerned about the level of debt they will have accumulated by the time they graduate, but for others the short-term prospect of experiencing and enjoying university outweighs the prospect of long-term debt.

*You might as well have a good time ... As you get more mature or whatever that's when you will start thinking about money*

Female, aged 16-18, going into HE

Other young people say they will attempt to control their spending at university in order to minimise the length of time they will be paying off their debt.

*I know people who are paying off their university debts at 28 and 29, so that's what scares me into thinking I don't want to spend that much*

Male, aged 16-18, going into HE

A part-time job while studying also seems to be a popular way of minimising their reliance on a student loan and their parents.

*You can't keep on running into debt like going out all the time or having a car, you're going to have to have a job*

Male, aged 16-18, going into HE

*I have been working every Saturday and Sunday for the last year. If you want to keep going to your Mum and Dad when you are at university then you are not being that independent*

Female, aged 16-18, going into HE

However for some young people who do not want to go into Higher Education, the prospect of years of debt after graduating is the key factor in their decision not to do a degree.

*The thing is if it wasn't down to debt and all the money ... I would even go there just for the experience to be away from home and meet new people*

Female, aged 19-21, not been in FE or HE

Others are unwilling to get into debt when they do not see any guaranteed benefits of having done so once they have graduated, especially a graduate-level job (several referred to unemployment rates amongst graduates or graduates working in below graduate-level jobs). Many view the time that would be spent at university as an opportunity to develop a career and earn money instead of getting into debt.

*I was watching this programme and they were talking about taking people on and they were saying that when people come out of university they think they are all big and everything because they've got this degree and they don't necessarily want to employ them because of it*

Female, 19-21, been in FE, did not go into HE

*I think it depends what course you are doing. I know people who've decided to do law, so when they come out they can get a job. Then I've met people who are doing media studies and they did two lessons a week for four hours and during the rest of it they've just gone out and wasted all their money ... and they've just got a media studies degree which might not necessarily get them out of that debt*

Male, 19-21, Done FE, not HE

## The cost of university

For most young people – both those who do want to go to university and those who do not – university is seen as expensive. Young people have largely realistic expectations of what they will need to spend money on while they are studying, mentioning rent, utility bills, tuition fees, books, equipment, travel and food, plus the costs of socialising. However, where there is less understanding is in the *actual cost* of these things (among both boys and girls), even among young people who have decided to do a degree. Estimates of post-degree debt vary from “possibly £10,000” to “I’d say £20,000” to “far more than that”. Given that the young people interviewed were either living at home and still largely supported by their parents, or living ‘independently’ but on benefits, it is hardly surprising that none could accurately assess the true level of debt they are likely accumulate. Moreover, as noted above, given that young people who have already decided to go into Higher Education largely view debt as inevitable, it may be that the precise level of that debt is unimportant<sup>2</sup>.

Some young people we interviewed were very conscious that the cost of university and the prospect of debt would mean having to compromise on their ‘lifestyle’, a compromise they didn’t want to make, preferring instead to earn money, giving them a larger disposable income for consumer goods such as good cars and clothes. (This finding is particularly pertinent in light of research findings which show that young people are more aware of the cost of an iPod than they are about common household items such as milk and bread<sup>3</sup>.)

*At the end of the day when you get older everyone doesn't want to be struggling ... You want to be well off and have a nice car like everyone else. Personally I just want to have money*

Male, 16-18 in FE, not going into HE

*Some people just want to buy clothes every day, so that puts them in debt, some people just want to buy a car and then you have insurance*

Male, 16-18 in FE, not going into HE

## Low awareness of top-up fees and funding options

Awareness of top-up fees and sources of funding is also low and does not appear to be an important factor in the decision-making of young people. Although some of those we interviewed are aware that there will be a variation in cost between different courses, they (like most people) are vague on the details.

*I don't know anything specific, it depends on what course you are doing*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Scott has found that what students regard as a manageable amount of debt is growing, and that “they could be more worried about not having five pounds in spending money - rather than the £5,000 they owed in debts”. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4408967.stm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/story/0,3604,1415138,00.html>

*Say in English, you don't really have to go in that many times but if you are doing science you are in every other week, so on that I would assume it would cost more to do science. But I am not sure about the prices for anything*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

There is some evidence in this research that the public debate on top-up fees and the cost of university does influence the decision of some young people on whether to go into Higher Education, although this was only mentioned by a few participants.

*From what I've heard about on the news and stuff I've just thought "I can't be bothered with all that"*

Female, 19-21, not in FE or HE

# The Part-Time Degree Option and Birkbeck College

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## “Earn While You Learn”: Perceptions of Part-Time Degrees

A key issue for The Sutton Trust and Birkbeck College is whether young people can be encouraged to take the part-time route to obtaining a degree when this would maximise their chances of going into Higher Education. An important question is therefore whether young people who would like to go into Higher Education would be attracted to the part-time degree option. Also, would young people who are not considering full-time Higher Education consider part-time study instead?

As has already been touched upon, advice on Higher Education in schools tends to be limited to the “traditional” progression route and consequently awareness of the part-time undergraduate degree option is low among the young people that participated in this research. One or two were aware of what one girl described as “Night University”; otherwise, the availability of this option came as news to group participants

However, although most of the young people we spoke to are not aware of part-time degrees, many do have an idea as to what studying part-time would entail. Many mention that it would involve study in the evenings and would take longer than a ‘full-time’ degree. There is some belief that it would be more relevant to ‘adult learners’ who have other commitments, for example, a family or a job, rather than young people. Other young people perceive a ‘part-time degree’ to be a programme of working and studying alternate terms (i.e. ‘sandwich’ study).

*Is it that you spend that one term working and then another term on a university course?*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, going to HE

*My mate’s doing a carpentry course at college at the moment. He has to do college for like a term and then he has to go to work for half a term and then back to college*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, going to HE

When asked what the benefits of studying part-time may be, young people mention gaining experience of, and skills for, the workplace at the same time as getting a degree. Work is seen as even more relevant if the job is closely related to the degree course.

*You are gaining the experience of work ... as well as getting a degree*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*You could get the chance to apply your knowledge and relate it to the job so it could actually help you a lot more*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*It looks good on your CV as well that you were working and gaining experience at the same time*

Female, aged 19-21 been in FE, not going into HE

Part-time study alongside full-time work would also enable students to fund their study without getting into debt.

*Not as much debt, less to pay back. With what you are earning you can probably fund the part-time course*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*The good thing about that is that you can work and you wouldn't end up in so much debt*

Female, aged 19-21, working, not going into HE

However there are some common areas of concern which point to potential difficulties in persuading young people to take the part-time degree route. Many young people believe that a part-time degree will take longer to complete than a full-time degree (longer than is actually the case), and so working as well as studying would be a big commitment.

*If you were serious about it then maybe you could cut back on the more social side*

Male, aged 19-21, been in FE, not going into HE

*If you've chosen to do it and it's quite a big thing to choose to do then you're not just doing it for the fun of it you're doing it to get something out of it*

Female, aged 19-21, been in FE, not going into HE

*You would have to be in the right frame of mind to get on with it*

Female, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*It would take a long time and you may get bored studying for eight years part-time. I think it's better to study full-time*

Male, aged 19-21, in FE, going into HE

*I think it would be too much studying all the time and then having to go to work*

Male, aged 19-21, in FE, going into HE

The loss of the social 'experience' of going to university, which is so attractive, is viewed as a pitfall of entering Higher Education 'part-time'. Many young people

believe that by taking the part-time option there would be fewer opportunities for socialising and university would just be about academic study.

*You need some sort of interaction with your own age for support. You need to be able to talk to people of your own age really*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

*Maybe some people could go to university strictly just for learning, but if I didn't go to university for three days, or didn't go out to a party and have fun, then I would regret it, because university is not just about getting your degree but it's about enjoying life as well*

Female, aged 19-21, in FE, going into HE

Many also view part-time degrees as being most relevant to 'adult learners' rather than to young people, and feel they would miss the social interaction with their peer group. Some of the young people who took part in the research said they knew of people who are doing part-time studies and they tended to be older, often with families.

*A lady I work with was at university part-time, because she's married and she's got a little girl. She said she wants to work so she can help support her child and the house and everything, but she also wants to improve her chances of getting a better job and broaden her knowledge*

Female, aged 19-21, in FE, going into HE

*When it comes to evening courses or part-time courses, I think that would be a chance for a lot of older people and people with kids to go and take advantage of that*

Female, aged 19-21, working, not going into HE

Indeed, when thinking about whether they would consider part-time study, a common perception is that it could be an option for the future if they fail their degree at university or decide later in life that they want to go into Higher Education.

*I think fun outweighs the study part of it [going to university] because at the end of the day if after three years you've enjoyed yourself but haven't quite come out with a degree you have still got part-time study*

Female, 16-18, in FE, going into HE

A lot of young people question whether they would have the motivation – or energy – to work full-time and do a part-time degree and so see it as 'not for them'. These views are often based on personal experience of having combined work with study whilst at school or college. This suggests that even if the part-time degree option were marketed to young people as 'evening learning' or

‘flexible learning’, it may be difficult to persuade young people to give up their evenings.

*I was worried about working and going to college because I got a temporary job working in Toys ‘R’ Us and the hours I was working. I tried to tell my workplace that I was doing my studies and stuff and that I’d do more late hours than early hours so I could go to my classes and stuff but it just didn’t work out ... Working and studying just doesn’t balance out, because at the end of the day you are tired*

Female, 19-21, working, not in HE

*When I left school my mum was cool she was like, “you go to college and I’ll pay for everything”, but when I started to work it was hard and I couldn’t handle both*

Female, 19-21, working, not in HE

There is a degree of confusion over whether part-time degrees would be more expensive or cheaper than studying for a degree on a full-time basis. Some young people believe that because a part-time degree will inevitably take longer, the costs will therefore be higher; others see part-time study as the cheaper option.

*If you do a full-time course then you’ve got to live for four years, but if you do it part-time then you’ll have to do it in eight years and you’ve got to pay £3,000 per year anyway so the money will just keep going up*

Female, 19-21, in FE, going to HE

*If you’re studying part-time then surely you wouldn’t pay the same fees as a full-time student*

Male, 19-21, in FE, going to HE

## **Perceptions of Birkbeck College**

Overall, very few young people who took part in the research had heard of Birkbeck College. Some recall seeing “a little advertisement on the tube” and others have seen it in the Higher Education magazine ‘Springboard’. Even among those who are aware of the College, most did not know that the College offers part-time *undergraduate* degrees.

However, after being given information on Birkbeck College the prevailing perception is that studying at Birkbeck would be ‘different’ from studying at other Higher Education institutions. This is particularly the case for young people who have decided to go to university and who tend to see Birkbeck College as more relevant to older people who want to do a second degree or return to education. It is thought that Birkbeck would therefore have a ‘serious’, more impersonal learning environment and fewer opportunities for socialising.



*If you have chosen to do it ... then you're not doing it just for the fun of it, you're doing it to get something out of it*

Female, aged 19-21, been in FE, did not go into HE

*They've probably got their own separate lives and they're just going to get an extra qualification. So it's not like a normal university*

Female, aged 19-21, been to FE, not gone into HE

*Not very intimate [Birkbeck College], not very close to the students. Everyone's just there to learn*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, going into HE

Young people perceive that the 'social' side of Higher Education would be less important to the type of students that would be attracted to study part-time at Birkbeck, which for some would be beneficial as they would be encouraged to work harder, but for others would be a disadvantage.

*In a way I suppose it could be boring if you're studying with older people, but you would get more work done*

Female, 19-21, in FE, going to HE

*Because it's not a full-time course so you're not spending day in and day out with these people. It's just a couple of hours a week or a couple of evenings*

Female, 19-21, went to FE but not HE

It may be that in order to attract young students, Birkbeck will want to consider teaching younger people separately from the older students, enabling the College to compete with other universities with a much younger student profile – this was certainly suggested in one group.

*Have different lectures. I suppose you are going to learn in a different way anyway when you are mature. People who are younger probably have a lot more questions to ask whereas the people who are older are a lot more knowledgeable generally*

Female, 19-21 in FE, going to HE

The location of the College is also seen as a problem by some students who say they would not be willing to travel into central London after work. This is especially the case for young people who work in outer London (for example, Surbiton in Zone 6) where the cost and the time it would take to travel are both perceived as significant hindrances. Even so, young people in Greenwich (Zone 3) also saw the journey into Zone 1 as an expensive "schlep", although travel into central London was less of an issue for participants in Islington and Southwark (Zone 1). It may be that the College needs to consider teaching in 'satellite' locations in order to address this issue.

*To get there [to Birkbeck College], if you're leaving work at about 6pm, I presume they don't start until 8pm, then it's the trouble getting there and you'd be rushed. You'd get home and go straight to bed and then in the morning you'd have to go straight off to work again. I just don't travel that would really put me off*

Male, aged 19-21, been in FE, not going into HE

*I've got not transport at the moment so I'm still relying on public transport and I couldn't catch the train down to Waterloo everyday and change and get another train down to Tottenham Court Road*

Male, aged 19-21, working, did not go into FE

There do not seem to be any differences between boys and girls in their attitudes to Birkbeck College.

## **Increasing Awareness of Birkbeck College**

The type of information which young people say they would need if they were considering an application to Birkbeck includes: outlines of the courses available, the length of courses, the facilities at the college, entry requirements, location and funding.

Suggested ways of raising the profile of part-time degrees and Birkbeck College included radio, television and billboard advertising and visits from Birkbeck representatives to schools. The main message which young people feel should be communicated is that Birkbeck College is a viable destination for 18 year olds who want to get a degree.

*Leaflets are so boring, they just sit there and no one points you to them ... There's big posters advertising cigarettes and I think if that is how they get us to buy things then why don't they do that to get us into education?*

Female, aged 19-21, working, not FE, not HE

Raising awareness of the financial benefits of a part-time degree at Birkbeck College may also have an impact, especially given the rising cost of Higher Education following the introduction of top-up fees. Young people feel that the College should “play on the money aspect of it” and stress that people would be receiving full-time earnings as well as a degree and “no debt”.

*That is the main difference between full and part-time [no debt]*

Male, aged 16-18, in FE, not going into HE

## Key Findings and Implications

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Several **key findings** emerge from this research:

There is clear evidence that information about part-time undergraduate degree courses is not reaching young people, particularly those for whom the prospect of accumulating a large student debt is a pronounced barrier to HE entry. The scope for improving young people's awareness of the various progression routes open to them is considerable, as is raising the awareness of *those who advise young people about HE*.

However, at least some of the appeal of full-time undergraduate courses is the 'experience' of being a student. There is some evidence, therefore, that, in order to immerse themselves fully in the 'experience', many young people are prepared to accept a certain level of debt as a necessary trade-off.

Perhaps surprisingly, though, debt is not the only – or sometimes even the main – reason why young people do not go into HE. *Not enjoying study, not having the right qualifications, not needing a degree to pursue a particular career, wanting to get on with earning good money, not wanting to compromise a lifestyle and degrees not guaranteeing any benefits (definite employment, higher salaries etc.) in the long-run* are all given as reasons for not taking it up.

Unsurprisingly – given that they are currently not self-supporting – young people demonstrate scant awareness of the cost of living and hence the likely levels of debt they would accumulate as students. At the same time, perceptions of their earning potential without a degree are largely based on hearsay and wishful thinking. If young people are to make **informed** decisions about whether to enter Higher Education and – if so – what type of higher education to pursue (full-time versus part-time), it will be vital to improve their 'financial literacy'. This would include developing their awareness of (1) how much they should expect to pay to support themselves (rent, bills, food, travel etc.) and cover the cost of study (fees, loans etc.) whilst studying, together with means of mitigating these costs, and (2) the long-term, 'real world' earning potential of someone with a degree versus someone without one.

Knowledge about what part-time study involves is low ... and what is known (or, at least, *believed*) – for example, the length of courses, what other students would be like, managing their learning on top of full-time work, limited opportunities for socialising (either with other students or with existing friends) – is not always appealing to young people.

However, young people are clear on the plus points of part-time study, predominantly *getting a degree without getting a debt and developing vocational skills whilst studying*.

To this extent, we believe the **implications** of the research are as follows:

There is unlikely to be a marked take-up of part-time undergraduate degrees by those from more ‘traditional’ student backgrounds, that is, those who attend schools with an academic tradition; who are their family’s “second plus” generation entrant to HE; whose socio-economic situation is such that they do not anticipate a high level of debt and/or a particular difficulty in paying it off. Similarly, those for whom the ‘experience’ is a key lure are likely to regard full-time study as more appealing than part-time study.

However, demand *is* likely to be higher amongst those young people who (1) are sufficiently worried about getting into debt to currently rule out HE or (2) believe that the ‘short-term pain’ of student debt does not bring any ‘long-term gain’ or (3) want (or need) to be earning money *now*. Even so, generating this demand will be contingent on:

- Marketing the opportunities for part-time undergraduate study more effectively than is the case now.
- Demonstrating the career opportunities, earning potential and lifestyle opportunities actually garnered by having a degree (versus not having one)
- Providing academic courses with an explicit vocational relevance
- Emphasising the “Earn while you learn” message
- Building-in something of the ‘experience’ for younger undergraduates

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# Appendices

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# Participant Profile

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Group	Location	Total attending	Sex	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation	Highest Educational Qualification	HE plans
1	Islington	6	1 male/5 female	19-21	All BME	Working	None GCSE (or equiv.)	n/a
2	Surbiton	9	6 male/3 female	19-21	No BME	Working	A-level (or equiv.)	n/a
3	Greenwich	7	4 male/3 female	16-21	1 BME	Not working/ not in FE/ not in HE	None GCSE (or equiv.) A-level (or equiv.)	Not going into HE
4	Northwood	11	5 male/6 female	16-18	1 BME	In FE	n/a	Going into HE
5	Surbiton	10	5 male/5 female	16-18	7 BME	In FE	n/a	Not going into HE
6	Southwark	9	5 male/4 female	19-21	8 BME	In FE	n/a	Going into HE
7	Surbiton	5	All male	16-18	No BME	Working	None GCSE (or equiv.)	n/a





# Topic Guide

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