

# OPTIMISING THE PART-TIME EXPERIENCE

Strategies for transition, induction  
and retention of part-time students.



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# Foreword

I am delighted to introduce to you this suite of transition and retention guides which have been produced under the National HE STEM Programme.

While increasing the supply of students to STEM Higher Education is important, ensuring that they experience a smooth transition to university and that as many as possible complete their studies successfully is of equal importance. There is a wealth of initiatives in this area that have reported on effective practice to help achieve this. The purpose of the guides is to collect and present effective practice models specifically from STEM departments. An important feature of this suite is the student perspective, which the authors have emphasised.

The issues related to induction, transition and retention are multi-faceted and therefore may have been addressed in slightly different ways in the different guides to take account of the specific context.

The suite consists of eight guides:

- Using data: an evidence-based approach to improving transition, induction and retention

- Happy landings – an introductory guide for students considering studying a STEM subject in Higher education
- STEMming the doubts – enhanced transition and induction to HE programmes
- Critical moments in the first year at university – towards a framework for effective transition
- Promoting social engagement: Improving STEM student transition, retention and success in higher education
- Improving retention: the curriculum development perspective
- Setting up a Maths Support Centre
- Optimising the part-time experience

My thanks go to the authors of the guides for distilling their knowledge and expertise and to the Steering Group for their valuable guidance. The group consisted of Professor Liz Thomas, Director for Widening Participation Research Centre (Edge Hill University), Hal Igarashi, Project Director Employer Engagement (Royal

Academy of Engineering), Henriette Harnisch, Director of Academies and Trusts (University of Wolverhampton), Fiona Lamb, Associate Director (Engineering Education Centre), Ed Stevens, Regional Officer for Widening Participation and Outreach (South West) and Sadaf Alvi, Regional Officer for Higher Level Skills (Midlands and East HE STEM Anglia regional spoke).

Our collective hope is that the wealth of case studies and the student perspective presented will stimulate colleagues to consider improvements to the transition processes where they find it appropriate for their institution.

**Professor Kamel Hawwash**  
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# Introduction

This guide recommends approaches to the transition, induction and retention of part-time students in higher education. In some key respects the transition and retention needs of part-time students are substantially different from those of their full-time counterparts. Indeed, the general situation of most part-time students differs profoundly from that of full-timers.

For many of the latter, the most important issues of transition may relate to the significant changes in their lives: moving away from home; and being given greatly increased independence in the way they live and how they approach their studies.

Part-time students are different. They experience fewer changes in their lives: the home environment continues as before, even providing continuity, although it may now include additional competition for personal time in the form of studying.

Far from having to re-invent their motivation to study (in the way that full-time students, separated from their parents and school teachers might have to), the existing 'workplace motivation' of working, part-time students can be applied, with great effect, to study. Whereas full-time students may lose motivation because of a poor understanding of where their studies may lead in terms of a career, part-timers have that understanding at the heart of their motivation.

However, part-time students face other sorts of challenges: shifting priorities between work, life and study; additional time and academic pressures; the stresses of incomplete background preparation and so on – all of which we shall be discussing.

The central aim of this guide, though, is to present practical, research-based examples of appropriate approaches to transition, induction and retention that take account of the particular characteristics, circumstances and needs of part-time students. So, particular attention is given to those aspects in order to justify proposed strategies for induction and support.



# Project background

Much of the research underpinning this guide is derived from a National HE STEM Programme project 'Part-time students in the workforce – enhancing practice in course provision and increasing participation', a collaborative initiative led by Coventry University and including Aston University, University of Derby, Nottingham Trent University and University of Wolverhampton.

The project involved investigating effective practice in part-time course delivery within the collaborating universities, identifying good practice at other selected HEIs in the Midlands and East Anglia region, and interacting with employers and professional bodies. It covered all aspects of course delivery including – but not restricted to – transition, induction and retention. The outcomes of the project, and consequently the contents of this guide, have an emphasis on delivery to part-time students on-campus!

Apart from this project, the other sources of data on student perspectives are studies of part-time students and graduates from Coventry University

over the period 2007–2012, including semi-structured group interviews (Davies 2008; Austin et al., 2011).

Direct input by students to the HE STEM project described above was in the form of responses to an on-line questionnaire created as part of the project itself. Some of their views are quoted anonymously throughout this guide. Students' views were also fed into the project indirectly via academic staff. The experience of part-time students more generally, as captured in the semi-structured interviews, is also used to illustrate points in this guide.



# Part-time students: a varied population

There is no such thing as a 'typical' part-time student. Most larger studies of this student population make that important point.

Like other studies, our research reveals the enormous diversity of part-time higher education students, and of their backgrounds, circumstances and aspirations. There is no 'typical' part-time higher education student.'

*(Schuller et al., 1999)*

Of course, this diversity is partly a result of the range of part-time modes available. These include part-time attendance on campus, where students are taught along with full-time students or separately. Provision that is tailored for particular employers may be delivered on campus or in the workplace. More flexible forms of delivery include distance learning, blended learning, work-based learning, and bite-sized provision. Each of these may attract different types of student and provoke differing needs for induction and a variety of priorities for enhancing retention.

The circumstances and needs of part-time students are related to some key characteristics: employment experience; previous education; and age.

## Employment

Part-time students employed in a professional discipline related to their studies have the potential to benefit from the juxtaposition of academic learning and its practical applications. This provides an excellent, meaningful context for their education.

*'I could see that the work I was doing at university was directly related to what I was then doing the next day in the workplace for real'*

They also apply professional skills acquired at work along with a distinctive 'workplace attitude' to their studies which generally enhance their academic achievements.

*'Going to work gives you responsibility and a useful attitude, how to manage your time.'*

Part-time students employed in a different area from their study discipline may experience the second benefit but not the first. In any case, studying must compete for time with work and family/leisure commitments.

Part-time students who are not in employment may not enjoy any of these advantages but, if studying part-time because of family commitments, they will still experience the competition for study time.

## Previous education

Some part-time students leave secondary education with comparable qualifications to those who take a more 'conventional' full-time route (for example, good A-levels). Others have left school or college with incomplete qualifications and pursued a complex route to part-time higher education.

*'... just progression in my career really. I started off on the tools, progressed from there, went to an office role, a management role. The next step was the HNC... and the next step was to go on the degree, and that's what I've done.'*

*'When I first left school I didn't particularly want to do A-levels, it made more sense to me to do a job with training. So that took me to ONC, HNC then a couple of years' gap then started a degree a few years after that. It just made sense to do it all part-time while I was working as well.'*

## Age

Typically, part-time students take longer to complete their HE studies and have often taken longer to reach the stage of starting them. They are, therefore, older than full-time students at the same level.

*'Part-time students are generally a bit older, a bit more mature, and you're thinking you want to put that bit more effort in.'*

This can be a significant factor in the attitude of part-time students to their studies, but differences in age should not be oversimplified. A study of students of Civil Engineering at Coventry University (Davies, 2008) found that the average age of part-timers in years 2 and 3 was 26.4 compared with 23.4 for full-time students. Most of the full-time students were, as expected, in the age range 20 to 22, but many were significantly older. The distribution of those aged 30+ was fairly similar for both groups.

# Support needs of the part-timer

Feedback from part-time students consistently indicates that their study demands hard work, eats into social life, and (for many) feels as if it takes over completely.

*'It's quite hard, very demanding actually, it takes up your social life, and the thing I find is that it's always on your mind. You feel (that's the worst thing I think), you feel when you're not doing it, that you should be doing it.'*

Family commitments can make this even harder.

*'I've got a child as well so that makes it even more difficult. Trying to look after a baby, well he's 2 now, but when he was born in April, just before exam time a couple of years ago, so that was very difficult, trying to find time to revise for examinations, up all night feeding the baby as well as working full-time, so that was very difficult.'*

*'I think it's likely to be detrimental to your life. Certainly recently – my wife had our first child eight weeks ago. And, with the workload we've currently got at the moment, I'm not seeing a great deal of him because I'm basically getting home and having to study, or stay at work do some study because I can't get to do it when I'm at home. There is a down side certainly. That's my own personal [experience].'*

Particular requirements at work can also add to the pressures.

*'A job I used to have involved winter maintenance on out-of-hours call, and it made it especially difficult to plan when you could actually do the work you were expected to.'*

*'Academically the work is tough – fitting in workload with full-time work and specially when I was working on the railways... every weekend I'd be out doing bridge surveys overnight... then trying to get up on Sunday and do coursework as well is tough work.'*

The challenge is to achieve a balance between work, study and life.

*'... you're generally talking long hours. Certainly, in my old job you were talking about being in the office for 7.30 in the morning, finishing 4.30 to 5 in the afternoon. By the time you've got home it's 5.30, 6, you've obviously got to eat something, then it's sit down till bedtime trying to do some university work, then bed, then up the following day. And of course you're not starting with a fresh mind either, you've already done a day's work, and you're thinking... Oh my God, I've got to start this now!'*

This aspect of the part-time study experience appears to have attracted most attention of researchers. For example Kember and Leung (2004) and Yum et al. (2005), who studied part-time students in a range of subject areas in Hong Kong, consider the employment of 'coping mechanisms' by part-timers and identify the sacrifices that must be

made. Nicholl and Timmins (2005), studying nursing students in the UK, concentrate on the high levels of stress experienced by part-time students.

Competition for time is the prevailing challenge for part-time students and moulds their needs for support during their studies. However, many, especially those who work in their area of their studies, benefit from some advantages that we discussed in the preceding section, including juxtaposition of work and study, and the opportunity to use their workplace skills and motivation to enhance their performance.

## Academic study

Pressures of time and competing priorities affect part-time students' experience of academic study. Also, some feel that they are simply the type of person who thrives more in work than in a study environment.

*'I have to say I'm not an academic. I prefer, well, just being at work.'*

*'I couldn't do it full-time. I couldn't sit and learn full-time. I like going to work and earning some money. You do courses with work and that's OK, and learning on the job, but I don't like sitting in a classroom and having to learn. A lot of people say university is a break from work, but work for me is a break from university.'*

For others, the gap since their last period of studying, or the incompleteness or discontinuity in their previous education, makes adjusting to academic study in higher education a significant challenge.

## Maths: a particular problem

In STEM subjects, the disjointed or incomplete preparation for HE that part-time students may have experienced can cause particular problems in the area of mathematics. For example, in a survey of 80 students of Civil Engineering at Coventry University (involving roughly equal numbers of part- and full-timers), the proportion with A-level maths was 69% of full-time students, but only 17% of part-time students (the remainder of whom had, instead, HNC or similar qualifications).

*'The only maths I did before this was GCSE and I was pretty poor really even solving equations... it took a lot of time to do simple things like that.'*

*'[As a result of] missing out A-level Maths, I always feel like there's a gap in my maths education between finishing school and then degree where I either didn't take it in when it was at ONC level and I didn't understand it, or it just hadn't been taught to me.'*

# Transition support

For some part-time students, support during the transition to higher education is critical because of the marked discontinuity with previous study, usually the result of a gap in time or a significant difference in level (or both).

Part of the function of the Lifelong Learning Networks established by HEFCE (Lifelong Learning Networks, 2012) has been to support the transition to higher education, including the provision of support materials. Many (but not all) of the students supported in this way have studied part-time.

As an example, the Higher Education Toolkit produced by the Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network 'aims to help you to feel confident about moving on to Higher Education while making you feel more familiar with what to expect and what will be expected of you. The package contains information to help you to prepare for Higher Education, and to be a confident and successful student. For each

section, there are samples of student work, interviews with learners, tutors and other members of staff from learning providers in Coventry and Warwickshire, as well as opportunities for you to practise your skills.' (Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network, 2011)

The structure of a part of this guidance is presented in Box 1 as an example, and also because it constitutes a useful checklist of relevant issues. The online guidance is divided into three main parts: Preparation for Higher level Learning, Work-based Learning, and Personal and Professional Development. Box 1 summarises the material on Preparation for Higher level Learning.

## 1. Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network

### Preparation for Higher level Learning

- What are semesters and terms?
- Study time
- Deadlines
- Time management
- Getting ready to go!

### Preparation for study – what you can do now to get ready

- Read actively
- Getting to grips with academic books
- Writing practice
- Brush up on your IT skills
- Creating a study environment

### The learning experience and teaching methods in higher education

- Lectures
- Getting the most out of lectures
- Seminars
- Tutorials
- Private study
- Appointments with tutors
- Note taking from lectures and seminars
- Note taking from books

### Other resources in higher education and how to use them

- Library
- Academic journals
- Internet
- People
- A glossary of library terms

### Working with others

- Working with other students
- Challenges
- Group assignments
- Samples of student work

### Online research

- What can you research on the internet?
- What limits my search?
- How do I search the internet?

### Academic writing

- The essay
- The structure and organisation of the essay
- Writing practice
- The final stage
- Writing reports
- Exams
- Plagiarism
- Assessment
- The marker's point of view

### Links

At the level of specific courses, transition support can be provided in the form of bridging studies. For example, some students who are qualified to enter the part-time BSc Engineering degree at Coventry University by virtue of their professional experience rather than purely on the basis of academic qualifications need bridging studies to prepare them for the start of the course. So, a bridging module is provided to take students to a level where they will be ready to succeed.

The bridging module is taught at first-year university level over 12 weeks on a part-time, evening basis, but in an accelerated and integrated manner that cements theoretical concepts together with academic skills and abilities prior to starting the BSc Engineering degree. Further information is in Box 2.

## 2. Coventry University – Part-time degree in Engineering

### Bridging module

#### What is the bridging module?

The aim of the module is to enable a student to document and bridge their experiential learning into academic practice with the intention that, upon achieving a good pass in this module, they can progress on to the BSc Engineering degree at stage 1 with improved confidence and academic abilities. Enrolment on this module is at the discretion of the university as the student must demonstrate the ability to bridge within this module (1 semester delivery) any missing academic competencies, knowledge and skills, and analytical ability that underpin the first year of the BSc Engineering degree. Students will engage in a taught experience that will guide them from their mixed learning background to form the foundation of a successful university experience.

In practice, this involves students participating in laboratory work and developing their understanding of the relevant underpinning theories and an ability to apply them. They then progress to a team project they have an opportunity to use these new engineering skills to develop an engineering and business analysis of a simple product. This intensive module is taught over 12 weeks.

#### What benefit will I gain from studying this module?

On the BSc Engineering degree we can assess your experiential learning as part of your admission for those who have followed a more vocational pathway.

We are aware that those of you that do not have direct entry level qualifications, but have learnt through prior level 3 qualifications and from doing your job, will be missing some important skills to succeed on the BSc Engineering degree:

- Appropriate academic skills
- Structured report writing
- Communication skills (presentations)
- Analytical skills and methods
- Research skills
- Functioning as an independent learner

Underpinning knowledge as expressed more theoretically in the following areas:

- Mathematics
- Engineering Science
- Engineering Design
- Materials
- Manufacturing Technologies
- Engineering Business Management

#### Benefits to you

An intense, but effective way to gain underpinning engineering knowledge to tackle the second year of your degree more effectively; Accelerated progression as compared to the more traditional HNC route; The combination with the portfolio documenting your experiential learning will gain you entry into the second year of the BSc Engineering degree; An ability to settle into university life; 40 credits at first-year university level (with a certificate).

#### Benefits to your sponsor

Cost effective way to develop you and support you in gaining admission to BSc Engineering degree, delivered over one term, unlike an HNC over 2 years. Delivered on two evenings, so allowing you to study and work at the same time.

# Facilitating induction

Clearly induction may have a different role for part-time as opposed to full-time students, but it is still important.

Any induction for part-timers would aim, as a minimum, to avoid a comment like this (an authentic quote, but describing a mistake that was never allowed to recur):

'Because we're coming in to the equivalent of year 2 the University automatically thinks we're 2nd year students – don't need an induction. We didn't know where the library was, didn't know where the computer rooms were, didn't know the process for getting on to the computers, where you get your NUS cards from, your student ID cards, things like that were missed out.'

As an example of a basic induction, at Coventry University, part-time students of Civil Engineering (mostly entering at year 2 of the full-time course, but some at year 1) have a one-day event. Some introductory sessions are with full-time students, but most of the induction event is presented to part-time students separately. It covers:

- welcome to University, Faculty and Department
- course outline
- introduction to student services
- online introduction to VLE

- maths diagnostic test
- library induction
- opportunity to order safety wear
- collection of ID card
- surgery for individual questions

Results of the maths diagnostic test are returned to students a week later, with advice about strengthening areas of weakness by using online material provided by the Maths Support Centre.

Full details of course procedures, course structure and module content are provided online. As a way of encouraging and enlivening their engagement with this material, part-time students are expected to complete an induction quiz, available online. A quiz score and appropriate feedback are provided when the answers are submitted. The quiz covers aspects of the University, Faculty and Department, course structure, finding module information, the academic year, and assessment (including coursework extensions and plagiarism). An extract is given in Box 3.

## 3. Coventry University – Civil Engineering

### Online Induction quiz

Q. How many credits does a module have on your course?  
(tick all valid answers)

5 10 20 30 40 60 120 360  
[10, 20, 40 and 60 are valid]

Q. Consider the following four scenarios and advise each student what the result of their application for a coursework extension is likely to be:

Abdullah has been doing his coursework on his laptop. Unfortunately it develops a faulty hard-disk in the week before submission and he loses his work. He takes his laptop to a repair shop and gets a receipt showing the fault. He asks for a 3 week extension.

Bob catches flu and spends 3 days at home recovering. Two weeks later he applies for a week's extension for his project that is due in that week.

Chen's mother falls seriously ill and he decides to go home for 2 weeks to visit and help look after her. Although he didn't think to at the time (who would?), after a few days he contacts his personal tutor and lets them know what's happened. He falls behind on his work and asks for an extension of 2 weeks on a piece of coursework that is due a week after he returns to his studies. He gets a letter from the family doctor confirming his mother's illness.

Dipesh has not left himself enough time to do his 2 pieces of coursework. He applies for an extension of 1 week for one of them.

[Select the response to the request from the drop-down list boxes]

- Abdullah's application will be **granted/denied**
- Bob's application will be **granted/denied**
- Chen's application will be **granted/denied**
- Dipesh's application will be **granted/denied**

The part-time only BSc Engineering (general Engineering) at Coventry University has four evening induction sessions that students are required to attend before they start their studies (see Box 4). These sessions cover an introduction to the University, IT systems, the Library, academic reading, writing for assessment, and giving presentations. All this is

backed up by comprehensive online information about the course design, the mode of delivery, application procedures, 1st year bridging module, induction, module choice, enrolment, what to expect as a student, timetable, detailed course documentation and information about the programme manager. Printed guidance materials are also provided.

## 4. Coventry University – BSc Engineering (part-time)

### Induction sessions

#### Induction session 1: 'Introduction to the University'

- What is Higher Education?
- Coventry University: programme and module structure; intended learning outcomes
- Assessment methods: review and expectations of these methods
- Difference between formative and summative feedback
- Difference between education, training and learning
- Reflection and Kolb's learning cycle

#### Induction session 2: 'Using the University IT systems and academic reading and writing'

- Introduction to university IT systems
- Module webs and course webs:
  - How to stay in touch with each other and with course information
- Check that you can be contacted via your university email account
- Academic reading and writing

#### Induction session 3: 'Library skills and academic reading and writing 2'

- Introduction to library session
  - Finding information to support your studies
- Academic reading and writing 2
- Paraphrasing article and CU Harvard Referencing
- Plagiarism

#### Induction session 4: 'Writing and presentations'

- Can exams be made any easier?
- Discussion of your final piece of directed preparation
- Prepare outline of group presentation based on topic that we have been researching

For part-time students whose course is delivered in a way that means they will be on campus only for limited periods, or not at all, online and printed materials are of particular importance and value in supporting induction. A good example is the high quality booklet 'Welcome to The

Open University' (Open University, 2009). OU students are, of course, also supported by extensive material online. The particular requirements for induction to distance learning courses are explored by Forrester et al. (2005).



# Sustaining retention

Course providers should try to support retention by creating structures and arrangements that match the particular needs of part-time students. Clearly, the challenge is to ease as much as possible the time pressures from competing demands for study, work and family.

However, there are limits to what course providers alone can achieve. Some factors affecting retention of part-time students are largely outside their control, for example those relating to security of employment.

The pressure on time experienced by part-timers can be worsened if attendance arrangements are not well planned. Here, course providers should remember that there are many alternative formats for part-time delivery, including day-release, tuition in blocks (typically one-week or two-week), evenings only, and delivery patterns based on low attendance including work-based and distance learning.

When part-time courses are offered on campus as standard university courses, the value of part-time students to the cohort as a whole is only realised when there is some level of integration of part-time and full-time delivery. Also potential efficiencies can be realised when the two cohorts are taught together.

Timetabling must be compatible with the availability of part-time students, and, where part-time students are taught together with full-time students, must fit with timetable requirements for full-time students. Some courses are taught entirely to mixed groups, and some are taught entirely to a part-time cohort only. Both arrangements have significant timetabling constraints, but the nature of the constraints is different. Some examples are given in Box 5.

## 5. Timetable formats and their implications – examples

The format for part-time courses in Civil Engineering at Coventry University (up to BEng level) is day-release. Classes are taught almost entirely to mixed groups. The only exceptions are laboratory classes and some tutorial classes. Different cohorts of part-time students attend on different days of the week. All classes (except labs and tutorials) are timetabled so that part-time and full-time students can attend together. Part-time students have a full programme on their attendance day – typically 8 hours of classes. This means that full-time students have a similarly full programme on this day. This does lead to complaints from full-time students, for example that they are tired in the last class as 6pm approaches. (In extreme cases the constraints of the timetable and room availability mean that the last class might not end until 8 pm.) There is justification for the complaints but there is also a balance of advantages and disadvantages. The needs of the part-time students (and the advantages of having them in the class) are explained to the full-time students. There are also advantages to full-time students of this 'blocking' of the timetable in terms of time management and availability for part-time employment.

Some small group tutorials and practical classes are timetabled for part-time students on their attendance day but can be timetabled for full-time students on another day. Lab classes, run on a rota of small groups, are timetabled on a completely different day for full-time students. For part-time students, if it is not possible for lab classes to be arranged during a gap in their attendance day, they take place during the vacation (usually on the normal attendance day).

Year 4 of the MEng in Civil Engineering at Coventry is taught in one-week blocks. Some of the modules are common to the MSc

programme, and employers have indicated that at graduate level they prefer week blocks to day-release. Part-time and full-time students attend together in this format, and although it may seem that the format is best suited to part-time students, full-time students rarely indicate that they are unhappy with it. The experience is highly structured: a heavily loaded week of attendance (formal delivery of one 15 credit module), followed by two (or three) weeks for study, coursework and project work. Part-time students take every second module (with twice the gap) and pick up the other modules the following year, with a complementary pattern.

The Foundation Degrees in Power Engineering at Aston University are taught to part-time students only in two-week blocks. This format is the one favoured by employers. It permits the formal delivery of one 20 credit module. Students (all part-time) take six of these blocks in one year.

Another degree at Coventry, the BSc in Engineering (general engineering) is delivered to part-time students only, on evenings and Friday afternoons. As the course is not taught to full-time students, the timetable can be arranged entirely to suit part-time students, and it is felt that these employers would not support day-release.

The part-time students do not have any common teaching with full-time students. Some modules are shared with full-time programmes, but even these are taught separately to the part-time group. This is seen as allowing a particular style of teaching which is highly contextual, is suited to students who do not see themselves as traditional academic learners (out of the habit of taking exams, for example), and allows use of work-based assessments.

With a tightly packed timetable when part-time students are on campus, access to staff outside classes may be difficult. Some students may prefer to have more flexible access to staff and subject support via email or online, though some do feel that they miss out on direct contact.

*'I've sent a few emails to whoever the relevant lecturer is and the response has been OK. But it's not been the same as if I was talking to them face to face and it's over email, it's over the phone, but it's not the same as if you're there. And then you always get that little question in the back of your mind that just creeps up, that if you were there together you'd just mention it there and then, but it's always that other email and you don't want to be [constantly emailing]... it's not as fluent with them.'*

Clearly, it is important that staff are responsive to the communication needs of their students. Part-timers often mention the resource they have at work in terms of access to subject-specific expertise.

*'You've also got an invaluable resource at work. I've got structural engineers, geotechnology, hydraulics, loads of people, materials, got loads of people I can ask and I often do, to help out, explain things, so that side of being a part-time student is great.'*

But, ideally, this work place resource should be in addition to the support students receive from academic staff rather than in place of it. Academic staff should be prepared to give special treatment to part-time students to help compensate for their problems of time and access. In timing of coursework submissions, for example, it may be part-time students whose constraints should be given most consideration.

*'I find a problem with the timing of assignments at the moment, because being part-time all the assignments seem to come at the same time. I have to fit my assignments in with work and, if I've got 3 on the go at once in a few-week period, I only have my evenings and the weekends to do that.'*

However, submission dates must be fair to full-time students too. There should not be greater flexibility in compliance requirements for part-time students than for full-timers.

At Nottingham Trent University (Civil Engineering) issues arising from part-time students' study experiences can be raised and resolved via regular meetings with tutors. Each part-time cohort has a year tutor. The group meets together with the tutor typically three times in term 1, twice in term 2 and once in term 3. They discuss any issues arising from the course, the development of academic skills, revision and exam skills. These meetings are a two-way exchange, with the tutor giving information and advice, and students raising issues, asking questions, and providing an industry viewpoint.



Access to facilities is another important area in retention. When part-time students are on campus on day-release, their precious time may be so full of classes that it is difficult to find space in their schedule to use support facilities such as the library or maths support centre. When attendance is in the evening, some facilities may simply be closed.

*'I think access to the [Maths Centre] helps and it's difficult for part-timers to [access this support]... if the Maths Centre has early closing on the day you're in University it's difficult to seek the assistance you require, whereas the full-timers can fit it in where they want.'*

As an example, it is only possible for the Maths Support Centre at Coventry University to remain open until 7.00pm on two evenings a week. For the rest of the week it closes at 5.00pm. However, to compensate, Coventry offers extensive support materials online. The Library at Coventry is open until midnight, five days a week, and until 7.00pm at the weekend, but after a long day of studying, part-time students tend not to exploit the late opening.

An approach to resolving these issues is used to provide maths support to students on the Aston University Foundation Degrees in Power Engineering by means of a web-based resource – Box 6.

## 6. Aston University Foundation Degrees in Power Engineering

### Web-based maths support

Students on the Aston University Foundation Degrees in Power Engineering have limited access to on-campus support structures, particularly for mathematics. To compensate for this, support is provided using Elluminate, a web based video conferencing system ([www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Collaborate/Products/Blackboard-Collaborate/Web-Conferencing.aspx](http://www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Collaborate/Products/Blackboard-Collaborate/Web-Conferencing.aspx)). Unlike a series of lectures, the topics to be covered are decided by the learners themselves. This enables a focused approach which directly addresses their needs. It also means that the content is not restricted and topics that need refreshing can be covered.

A major challenge with web-based resources is the need to display mathematics correctly. Fortunately, Elluminate enables a tutor to attach a graphics tablet so that the tutor can write directly on to the whiteboard. Learners are then able to follow the workings as if they were in a classroom on-campus. There are several features of Elluminate which enable the students to enjoy an interactive learning experience, including chat and the ability to control the whiteboard. The chat feature is particularly useful since it enables the tutor to monitor any questions or concerns the learners have during the

session and to answer them at a convenient point. With small groups, the audio and video capabilities of Elluminate enable a real time dialogue to occur, reminiscent of a classroom environment.

It was difficult to arrange a mutually convenient time for the sessions in order to maximise attendance. In the end a compromise was reached whereby the sessions were run after 5.00pm. The students who could not attend the live session had to rely upon the recordings.

The sponsoring companies had very strict regulations concerning access to their intranets. Some of the company firewalls blocked Elluminate since it needed to download a .exe file in order to run. This meant that in many cases the learners were not able to access the session while at work. The feedback given by the learners who participated in the sessions is positive. They also liked the fact that they could access the recorded sessions.

Elluminate has proved a useful learning technology for the Foundation Degree programmes. It has enabled mathematics support to be provided to learners irrespective of their geographical location. The intention is to develop its use and to further discuss with the employers some of the security concerns.

A more general impression of the types of support that part-time students view positively, and that may be assumed to have a positive impact on retention, is given by responses to the questionnaire referred to in the section 'Project Background' above.

Relevant responses to 'Name three aspects of your course that were well suited to the needs of part-time students' are given below (selected from 50 responses to the questionnaire). The purpose is not to present an analysis of the results of the survey but simply to give a flavour of those aspects of courses that part-time students particularly appreciate (at particular institutions). The quotes have been selected to be representative and to give the student view on some of the issues covered in the guide.

#### Contact/support

- Off site communication with lecturers ie, lecturers always available to speak on the phone and quickly respond to emails [very common]
- [VLE] and remote access. These are very useful! [very common]
- Availability of lecturers to suit with work schedule and limited time on campus
- Some lecturers are very receptive of the requirements of part-time students (others not so much)
- Individual tutors specific to part time problems

#### Programme

- Module number per year (4 modules) is an acceptable amount for part-time students to complete
- Length of course can be lengthened or shortened to suit students
- Flexibility of certain academic pre-requisites. ie, students being out of full-time education for longer than 10 years and offering the necessary support

#### Timetable

- Course based on one day a week attendance [the most common comment]
- Laboratory work is usually organised in a manner which fits the time required into the day of attendance for part-timers

#### Students

- Network with other part time and full time students forming support groups
- The university encouraging working on projects with full-time students, a benefit to both parties

#### Coursework

- Some assignments are able to be submitted online, this is very useful for part time students [common]
- Hand-in dates set to be study days to allow part time students the same opportunity as full time
- You are given assignments early so you have ample time to prepare and write them while you carry on with your day job

#### Relevance

- Relevant to work, gives better understanding
- You get an opportunity to conduct an investigation relevant to your work which employers find really useful
- Some modules are practically/industrially based and reflect real-life projects

#### Opportunity

- Part-time education has created for me an opportunity to get a degree whilst being funded by my employer. I am gaining vital experience within the civil engineering industry at the same time as getting my academic base.



# The potential contribution of part-time students

This section differs from the rest of the guide. It is not about how to enhance the experience of part-time students but the contributions that they can make to the transition, induction, and particularly retention of full-time students.

Part-time students who work in professions relating to their course tend to have significant practical experience. They can see where their studies are taking them in career terms and are able to apply workplace skills and motivation to their studies. There should be benefits if some of these experiences and attitudes were shared with full-time students, especially by allowing the latter to acquire more knowledge of the profession, more understanding of how what they learn at university might be applied in the real world, and greater appreciation of the types of skills and attitudes that could make them more successful students.

With appropriate arrangements, especially if they are made early in the course (starting in induction week), this type of contact with part-time students should enhance the experience of full-time students, with a positive impact on retention.

Here is one such initiative. Part-time Civil Engineering students at Coventry University gain 20 CATS credits by engaging with a scheme entitled 'Contact with Practice' (Davis and Davies, 2008). They are required to organise events to pass on their industry knowledge and contacts to full-time students and, in doing so, earn 'CP credits' (Box 7).

In 2010–11 the CP credits scheme was extended to enable part-time students to act as mentors for full-time first year students. By giving first year students the opportunity to have structured contact with practising professionals close in age and outlook to themselves, the aim was to harness the knowledge and experience of the part-timers in order to enhance the full-time students' awareness of the civil engineering profession and of the skills required for success (Davies, 2011).

It aimed also to help first year students to see where their studies are leading, to allay fears that they know little about the civil engineering profession, to ease the transition to engineering studies, and to give them contact with fellow students whose skills, attitudes and motivation have increased their chances of success on the course.

One further objective was to provide professional skills development to part-time students (Box 8) who were free to choose mentoring from the range of options for achieving CP credits. First year full-time students volunteered to be mentored.

When part-time students make these contributions they also gain significant benefit themselves, in terms of professional development, increased self confidence and personal satisfaction.



## 7. Coventry University Civil Engineering (part-time)

### CP credits

#### Aims

Full-time students at Coventry take 10 credits each year in the form of University-wide employability (Add+Vantage) modules. Part-time students are exempt. In place of these modules, part-time civil engineering students gain the extra credits they need in the form of CP credits.

To earn CP credits, students arrange an event or experience that will allow them to review and reflect on their own work experience and benefit others by giving them a flavour of the civil engineering profession – a contact with practice.

#### There are three objectives:

1. To provide a basis for awarding credit to part-time students in place of Add+Vantage modules.
2. To engage part-time students in reflective practice and personal development, and allow them to achieve Institution of Civil Engineers Development Objectives.
3. To create a mechanism to enable full-time students to benefit from the industry knowledge and contacts possessed by part-time students.

#### Summary

CP credits are awarded in recognition of two achievements:

1. The contact with practice that the part-time student has through hands-on experience (ie, work).
2. The proof of this, demonstrated by making the contact with practice for full-time students.

#### The most likely forms of event or experience are as follows:

- A. A workplace visit – most probably a construction site or design office – for about 10 students. A site visit would be led by the part-time student, and a design office visit would include some form of introductory presentation by the host part-time student.
- B. Acting as a mentor for a group of full-time first year students (typically 2 part-time students working with 4 or 5 full-timers), meeting periodically to share ideas about the profession and the course, and provide an insight into life in the industry.

- C. Contributing to a taught module or project. For example, a part-time student who works in drainage design could present aspects of their current job in a module on Hydraulics.
- D. A poster or on-line presentation on a relevant project that the part-time student has had significant involvement with. The poster would be displayed in the John Laing Building; the presentation would be hosted on the Programme web on CUOnline. The poster/presentation needs to be rich in technical detail that demonstrates to full-time students application of knowledge in a practical context. It must be designed to engage a full-time student and be self-explanatory.

Part-time students plan and implement their proposals (lead the visit, give the introduction etc). They make all necessary on-site arrangements, including health and safety induction, employer's authorisation etc.

#### In outline there are 3 stages:

1. Proposing one of the options above, and have that proposal approved.
2. Planning and implementing the proposal.
3. Recording the achievement in the format of the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) Development Objectives.

#### The relevant ICE Development Objectives are given below:

- C3 Support other individuals' training and development
- D1 Communicate with others at all levels (presentations, exchange of information)
- D2 Demonstrate personal and social skills (Awareness of the needs and concerns of others, set an example for others to follow)
- E1 Promotion of the construction industry

#### Why it's effective (or not)

Part-time students gain personal and professional development and achieve some ICE Development Objectives. Full-time students benefit from the experience and contacts of the part-time students.

#### Evaluation

Feedback from part-time and full-time students has been generally positive (more detail under Mentoring)

## 8. Coventry University Civil Engineering (part-time)

### Mentoring

#### Aims

As an option within the CP credits scheme, part-time students of civil engineering at Coventry University act as mentors for full-time first year students.

#### Summary

Part-time students interested in becoming mentors are given training and support materials. Full-time first year students who are interested in becoming mentees are identified. Groups are formed containing 2 mentors and 4 to 5 mentees. They meet about 6 times during the year (4 times in term 1 and twice in term 2). Typically they discuss work in the industry and also the course.

This is a credit-bearing activity for the part-time students. Assessment takes two forms. One is based on level of participation in the scheme, evidenced by submission of records of the meetings and attendance notes. The other is a brief reflective record in the format of the ICE Development Objectives (see CP credits).

#### Why it's effective (or not)

Peer mentoring schemes are quite common on university courses. Industry mentors are also a feature on some vocational courses. The scheme described here has the potential to combine the best of both these approaches by giving first year students contact with a practising professional who is also a student on their course.

#### Evaluation

Towards the end of the spring term 2011, separate evaluation meetings were held with the mentors (12) and mentees (5). In both cases, the students completed individual questionnaires and then took part in a facilitated discussion of the scheme.

The questionnaire responses from mentees about whether the scheme was a good idea, and whether it had lived up to expectations, were unanimously positive.

- Was very interesting and informative; explained types of roles in the industry well.
- They were really enthusiastic about answering our questions.

Responses to the question 'What do you think you got out of having a mentor?' included:

- It broadened my understanding, whilst allowing me to see what actual professionals thought of a career in engineering. It helped me to confirm my choice of a future in engineering.
- Gaining a better understanding of what life is like in employment and an idea of how I can prepare myself for future employment, qualities, etc.
- A dose of reality. A bridge to the outside and the ability to talk to someone with experience.

It had been felt that mentors could provide an insight into both the industry and also the course. To determine the relative time spent on these topics, mentors were asked in the questionnaire to indicate the breakdown of time for topics at the meetings. All mentors discussed both their work and the course either 'some of the time' or 'most of the time'. For 10 (83%) of the mentors, work was the dominant topic, for 2 (17%) it was the course.

When mentors were asked in the questionnaire what they got out of the scheme themselves, there was some agreement that the experience improved professional skills, but this was not strongly felt. The same impression was given in the discussion.

Most mentors derived personal satisfaction from the experience. Responses to 'What do you think you got out of being a mentor' in the questionnaire are generally positive.

- Improved person skills with increased ability to share knowledge.
- Improved my own understanding of my personal development.
- Self satisfaction.

## The strategic fit

The core aims for teaching and learning within Coventry University's Corporate Plan for 2010–15, start with *'To improve students' satisfaction by empowering them as participants in a community of learning where staff and students work together to learn, create, solve problems and research. That community also includes external practising professionals, employers and alumni.'*

Departments with significant part-time cohorts are well aware of the potential value and influence of these students. They bring great benefits to staff and other students through their industry knowledge and contacts, and their motivation and approach. They also inevitably influence the way things must be done, in many aspects of course delivery, emphasis and support.

Part-time courses tend to be strong in institutions that provide opportunities for lead-in to honours degree study, like HNC courses and foundation degrees, or who work closely with providers who do. Such institutions also consider a wide range of possible entry qualifications, and encourage appropriate entry beyond year 1. Part-time courses tend to be less common among universities whose entry is mostly young people with A-levels entering year 1.



# Mini action plan

Action	Guidance in this booklet
Consider the range of needs and circumstances of part-time students on your course	Analysis of the support needs of part-time students, illustrated with comments by students themselves (page 6–7)
Consider the transition needs of potential part-time students in their preparation of HE	As above, plus material on Transition Support (page 8–9)
Create appropriately presented material to support transition	Transition Support, with example support material in Box 1
Where needed, provide bridging module(s)	Discussion of bridging studies (page 9), example in Box 2
Design an appropriate induction experience	Approaches to induction events and programmes (page 10–11), with example supporting material in Box 3
Be aware of the issues that concern part-time students during their studies, and promote course features that best support retention	Presentation of the main issues, illustrated with student comments, pages 14–15
Ensure that maths support is in place and easily accessed	The importance of maths support; problems with access (page 14), and an example of an approach to overcome this in Box 6.
Recognise the value and the potential contribution of part-time students	A range of ideas on pages 16–18, with examples in Box 7 and Box 8



# Challenges and reflections

The main challenge in assembling this guide has been the sheer variety of part-time students and part-time study modes.

There can certainly be no one-size-fits-all prescription for transition, induction and retention. The guidance presented here tends to fit best with part-time delivery on-campus, rather than through distance learning or work-based learning, simply because the team involved in the project through which much of the guidance was developed (see Project Background) have most experience of this mode.

The main potential challenges for part-time students, and therefore the challenges of achieving effective transition, induction and retention, are

- competition for time with work, family etc
- difficulties in adjusting to higher education caused by a gap since previous study, or the level of previous study
- particular study problems in maths

However, many part-time students, especially those employed in the professional discipline relating to their studies, have distinct advantages, including the opportunity to relate taught material directly to practical experience at work, and the possession of professional skills and workplace attitudes that they can apply to their studies and, thereby, enhance their academic performance.

The challenge ultimately is to be responsive to the needs of part-time students and to recognise their value.



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## Titles in this series

- *Happy landings: a transition advice guide for students*
- *Critical moments in the first year*
- *Setting up a Maths Support Centre*
- *Improving retention: the curriculum development perspective*
- *STEMming the flow: a toolkit for improving transition*
- *Optimising the part-time experience*
- *Social engagement to promote success in retention*
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