Some features of a part-time degree programme in psychology: Further support for the provision of a foundation year

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A part-time degree programme has been run at the Liverpool John Moores University, formerly Liverpool Polytechnic, for some 20 years without any systematic attempt to evaluate its effects on students. An evaluation was begun by focusing on graduates of the programme who entered between 1992 and 1994 and continued with recent part-time students. During the academic year 2001–2002 there were 85 such students and information on the characteristics of the group was readily available from university records. A semi-structured interview with an opportunity sample of 12 part-time students was followed by the administration of a questionnaire that was answered by 57 of the students. The results are discussed in terms of group characteristics, pre-course concerns, the programme itself and future intentions of the students. In particular, the reasons given for withdrawal when combined with the high withdrawal rate in the first year leads to the recommendation that part-time study should commence with a foundation year.

IN A PREVIOUS issue of the *Psychology Teaching Review*, Hartley and Norton (2002), used a discussion of research on mature students in higher education in order to stimulate psychology lecturers to engage in research to inform their own practice. At that time, coincidentally, we were engaged in attempting to evaluate aspects of our own part-time degree programme in psychology. Since all the students taking our part-time programme are mature the article was of considerable interest to us.

We had already completed one part of our evaluation (Harrop *et al.*, 2005), which was concerned with part-time students who entered the programme between 1992 and 1994 for whom we could assume that sufficient time had passed for them to graduate. Overall, we found that of 91 students entering in year one, 35 had subsequently achieved BSc honours degrees, a further 10 becoming eligible for lesser awards (certificates, diplomas and ordinary degrees). Because 23 of the withdrawals had occurred in year one we argued that the first year should be a foundation year, so that on successful completion of the year, students could consult with staff and review their progress and experience of study in higher education prior to registering for a degree programme. That would replace the current system of admission in which the members of staff try to decide which applicants will be able to cope with part-time degree study while the potential students attempt to make the same assessment, on the basis of little knowledge of what they are undertaking. Among other findings, we also noted that although the range of entrance qualifications of the part-time students was extremely diverse the mean final degree marks, and the standard deviations, differed by less than 1 per cent from those of full-time students. Moreover, of 10 who entered without formal qualifications, 6 subsequently graduated – a success rate slightly higher than that

obtained overall. The part-time students took between four and seven years to complete the programme.

The earliest evaluation of a part-time psychology degree programme of which we are aware is that of Vinegrad (1980), who wrote about a part-time course at Goldsmiths running in the evenings, 'in parallel' with the full-time programme. The students had at least the minimum qualifications for entry to London University, five GCE passes with two at A-level, or four GCSE passes, with three at A-level. At that time we had begun running a part-time evening programme not unlike that described by Vinegrad. Now, however, the structure of our part-time programme is very different. Attendance is possible on an evening only basis, on a day only basis and on the basis of a mixture of evening and day. Part-time students take a maximum of 96 credits per year en route to achieving the 360 credits required for an honours degree, while full-time students can take a minimum of 96 credits per year, but typically complete the 120 credits required at each level within each academic year. Part-time students can switch to full-time while full-time students can switch to part-time. Full-time students are free to attend in the evening (and a large number do for the level 3 option modules) where they join with the part-time students. As a consequence, any notion of our part-time programme running 'in parallel' with the full-time programme would be completely misleading. It is more correct to say that one programme merges into the other. These changes have occurred over time and it seems evident that we are heading towards a complete convergence of the two modes of study, with both full-time and part-time students able to complete a degree within a relatively flexible timetable.

Moreover, unlike Vinegrad's students, so far as entrance qualifications are concerned, a considerable number of our part-time students have 'no formal qualification', some have completed access courses, others have professional qualifications, etc. That we are no different in this respect from other part-time programmes is evident from the writing of Blaxter and Tight (1993a, 1993b) a decade ago. It should be added here that two important characteristics of part-time students – a range of entrance qualifications and the fact of supporting themselves by work while studying – are now progressively being shared by full-time students, as Brennan *et al.* (2000) have emphasised.

While there have quite clearly been radical changes in part-time provision for higher education in recent times, most notably stemming from the Open University, there has also been an ever-increasing provision for part-time students, so much so that Mills and Shah (1999) estimated that over 30 per cent of all students are part-time. Much of that expansion may be due to what Tight (1989) called 'a removal of barriers'. In other words, programmes have become flexible and accessible.

Having looked at some of the results of our part-time degree programme on an intake some ten years ago we decided that it would be fruitful to consider certain features of our programme as it affected current students. In a previous investigation, Callender (1997), had asked graduates from part-time courses in general to rate the extent to which 12 skills had improved or deteriorated over the course of their studies. The largest rated improvements were for analytical skills, absorbing information, writing and communication. Numeracy occupied the last position of the 12 with 28 per cent claiming an improvement and 2 per cent claiming a deterioration. For psychology, Linley (2000), based on a paper by Hayes (1997), has argued that graduates are literate, numerate and possess computer skills. We suspect that few psychologists would argue with that.

A number of other investigations have considered aspects of part-time provision for undergraduates in general. Schuller *et al.* (1999), for example, surveyed part-time undergraduates in four Scottish institutions and the Open University. The students reported that their main source of

support came from their spouse/partner (45 per cent), academic sources (19 per cent), other students (14 per cent) and work sources (7 per cent). Bourner *et al.* (1991) surveyed some 4,000 undergraduates on CNAA programmes in the mid to late 1980s and, among other findings, noted that coping with job commitments, family demands, developing appropriate study skills and examination stress were all rated as more difficult than expected by a large proportion of the students. Students reported high levels of satisfaction with the relationship between staff and students, course content and helpfulness of staff and least satisfaction with feedback to students on their performance and progress and opportunities to vary the pace of their studies. Benn (1995) noted the difficulty in obtaining data about reasons for withdrawal, pointing, in particular, to low response rates and to a tendency to rationalise and also noted that a low entry qualification was not a forecaster of withdrawal. Other investigations have examined various aspects of part-time studies. For example, Kember (1999) in Australasia investigated the integration of part-time study with work, family and social commitments, finding such integration to be important for successful course completion; Kember *et al.* (2001, p.326) found that 'promoting a sense of belongingness contributed to better quality learning outcomes and increased the chance of students completing programmes'. Growth in part-time education is accelerating, as Davies (1999) has noted, and, not surprisingly, the number of investigations into its effects appears to be keeping pace with the growth. Unfortunately, space does not permit a thorough survey of such work.

It was against a background of the kind of information just discussed that we designed an investigation into some features of our current part-time undergraduate programme in psychology.

Method

The part-time programme

The programme leads to the award of a BSc Honours applied psychology degree and there is also provision for joint honours by day attendance. The programme is modularised, 120 credits needing to be accumulated at each of three levels. Some modules are compulsory for the award, others are optional. The optional element increases progressively from level 1 to level 3. The academic year comprises two semesters. For part-time students attending only in the evening the programme can be completed in five years, although not all the optional modules are available in the evening. Consultation with students normally determines which optional modules run each year. The evening programme is timetabled between 5pm and 9pm on two evenings per week, although it is possible at level 3 for students to attend on a third evening to gain more choice of optional modules. For part-time students who are able to attend in the day to take additional modules, it is possible to complete the programme in four years.

The participants/design

There were 85 students on the part-time programme during the academic year 2001– 2. Of these, an opportunity sample of 12 at level 3 took part in a group discussion with two of the investigators and subsequently 57 responded to a questionnaire given to all the part-time students.

Procedure

Twelve part-time students who were attending an evening session responded to a verbal request from their module tutor (educational psychology) and attended a semi-structured group discussion about their experiences as part-time students.

As a direct result of some of the points raised by the discussion group and using information from two of the sources noted in the introductory section (Bourner *et al.*, 1991; Callender, 1997), a questionnaire was devised. The questionnaire, which was to be

completed anonymously to encourage freedom of expression, comprised a covering letter explaining the nature and purpose of the study with instructions for completion. The questions covered the following areas: previous part-time study, entry qualifications, aims on enrolment, preferred times of attendance (evenings), employment status, support, course satisfaction/difficulties, student skills, interest and value of different types of learning activities and future goals. There were various kinds of question, fixed-choice, rating scales and open-ended.

Initially, the investigation was brought to the attention of part-time students via requests for volunteers on the part-time student notice board and by visits to lectures by one of the investigators. Following these measures a copy of the questionnaire, plus a pre-paid return envelope was sent to each part-time student enrolled.

Results

Characteristics of the group

During the year 2001–2 there were 85 part-time students, mean age 34.3, standard deviation 10.4, minimum age 21, maximum age 68. There were 21 males and 64 females. At entrance, those without formal qualifications are interviewed and those without mathematics GCSE grade C or above are given a maths test. Applicants are only offered places as undergraduate students if members of staff feel they can cope with the modules. Those accepted are advised how to prepare for the programme, those who cannot be accepted are advised how to equip themselves for acceptance in the future. As a consequence, there is a very broad spectrum of educational backgrounds, ranging from 1 student with a higher degree, through 3 with first degrees, a number with professional qualifications (HNDs, HNCs, A-levels, access courses, GCSEs) to 17 with no formal qualifications.

Of the 17 with no formal qualifications 13 have already completed level 1 with a mean level 1 mark of 61 per cent.

Previous part-time study, psychology and mathematics qualifications. Of the 57 respondents, 29 had studied part-time before beginning the part-time degree programme. Of these, 8 had studied in the year prior to entry and a total of 17 had studied within two years of entry. Psychology had previously been studied by 19 of the respondents and 35 possessed GCSE maths at grade C and above. That so few had experienced recent part-time study prior to enrolment and that considerably more than half had not studied psychology previously suggests that enrolling to study psychology as a part-time student was for many 'a step into the unknown'.

Attendance, nights and hours. The mode of attendance of the respondents was 25 by part-time evening only, 7 part-time day only and 24 part-time day and evening. These figures illustrate the flexibility of the mode of attendance.

When the evening-only students were asked the optimum number of nights for attendance on the degree programme, the vast majority opted for two. When asked which hours would be most convenient, bearing in mind the amount of work to be covered, the time 5pm to 9pm was by far the most frequent response. That these responses are in accord with our current practice is obviously not a coincidence, but for the teaching staff it can be taken as a vote of confidence in the existing arrangements.

Employment status. At enrolment two-thirds (37) were employed full-time or self-employed, 9 were employed part-time. The students were asked whether their employment status had altered since they began their studies and little change was reported. It seems that the part-time study demands have been assimilated into the 'normal' working pattern of these students.

Employer support. Of the 57, 22 reported that they had flexible working hours. That apart, there was not a great deal of support from employers indicated, the highest being that 9 students were allowed time off for exams, 8 had time off for class attendance, and 8 had

Table 1: Mean levels of importance for various aims on enrolment

Aim	Mean level	Standard dev
To learn more about a subject that interests me	2.84	0.37
To develop my mind	2.73	0.49
To widen my horizons	2.65	0.52
To increase the opportunities for changing my job	2.57	0.65
To prove to myself that I could complete a degree course	2.45	0.70
To gain an educational qualification for a higher level course	2.40	0.72
To acquire more self-confidence	2.19	0.74
To make up for a lack of educational opportunities in the past	2.12	0.76
To enable me to re-enter the job market	1.97	0.78
To help me do my present job better	1.95	0.85
To improve chances of promotion/increase salary in present type of work	1.64	0.78
To make friends with similar interests	1.64	0.72
To get away from my usual surroundings/responsibilities at home	1.48	0.72
To develop a shared interest with my partner, friend, etc.	1.23	0.50

some financial support for their tuition fees. It appears that employers are not particularly helpful to these part-time students.

Pre-course concerns

Usefulness of pre-course information. The pre-course information furnished by both the university and the School of Psychology, when rated on a scale of 1 to 5, from 'not at all useful' (1) to 'very useful' (5) received moderate mean marks of 2.9 and 3.1 respectively. Suggestions of information that would be useful were very varied but included information on the IT skills which would be required during the programme, pre-course reading material, precise details of timetabling through the years, more information on module content, module availability (as the programme progressed), more information on library resources, further details on methods of assessment, examination procedures and examination dates in advance.

Some of that information is included in current student handbooks given out during the first year and could be easily extracted for pre-course documentation. Other information would be relatively easy to provide, e.g. a written indication of useful pre-course reading, rather than the current verbal advice, details of library resources. On the other hand, precise timetabling and module availability for more than a year in advance would be difficult to produce and precise examination dates would be impossible to produce in advance.

Pre-course aims. From the list of 14 given (see Table 1), for which students were asked to indicate whether each was very important (3), fairly important (2) or not important (1), the most important, in order, were 'learn more about a subject that interests me', 'develop my mind', 'widen my horizons' and 'increase the opportunities for changing my job'. The least important, starting with the lowest, were 'to develop a shared interest with my partner, friend, etc.', 'to get away from my usual surroundings and responsibilities at home', 'to make friends with similar interests' and 'to improve my chance of promotion/increase salary in my present type of work'.

There are a number of implications to these answers:

1. Psychology is obviously a very interesting subject even to those who have not studied it in any academic way (bearing in mind that only 19 of the 57 respondents had previously studied psychology).

Table 2: Mean levels of support from various sources

Source of support	Mean level	Standard deviation
Spouse/Partner	4.13	1.23
Student Peers	4.09	0.89
Course Tutors	3.93	0.88
Family/Friends	3.73	1.24
Work Colleagues	2.84	1.28
Employer	2.47	1.35

2. There is a strong element of personal development expressed together with a desire to change career. Put negatively, the second, third and fourth aims could together be expressing a certain lack of satisfaction with aspects of the students' current state.
3. It is worth noting also that 'do my present job better' is rated considerably lower than 'increase opportunities for changing my job'.

The programme

Support. From a list of six potential sources of support, students were asked to indicate levels of support on a scale from 'very supportive (5) to 'not at all supportive' (1). Table 2 shows the mean scores each potential source received.

These findings are similar to those of Schuller *et al.* (1999), support from 'spouse/partner' heading the list, although support from student peers and course tutors is higher than they found. It seems we have a programme in which the students give each other a strong degree of support. Any attempt to modify the programme in the light of an overall evaluation must seek to preserve that level of support.

Expectations, satisfaction. Students were asked to what extent the programme lived up to their expectations and to elaborate upon their responses. Answers were very varied, most students making a number of points.

Positive answers included the following: 'learned a great deal', 'being able to apply the learning', 'being able to appreciate that psychology differs from my original view of the subject'. Neutral answers were: 'style of teaching unexpected (information gathering left to student)', 'not like school (pastoral support)', 'workload heavier than expected'. Negative answers were: 'library resources limited', 'not easy access to tutors in evening outside teaching sessions', 'high ratio of written work to group/individual discussion'.

When asked to rate satisfaction of 14 aspects of the course on a scale of very unsatisfactory (1) to very satisfactory (5) (see Table 3), all aspects except two reached the mid scale point of 3, the lowest being 'feedback on performance/progress', 'amount of contact with teaching staff' and 'course administration/school office'.

Those aspects rated most highly are similar to those found by Bourner *et al.* (1991). In general the students were not dissatisfied and although one of the aspects scoring below the mid point 'feedback on performance and progress' is a teaching issue, some comfort can be derived from the fact that this aspect was one of those rated as least satisfactory in the survey by Bourner *et al.* Nevertheless, the moderate rating score makes it a cause for concern. 'Amount of contact with staff' is a also a cause for concern which needs resolving, particularly since students seem to find staff very helpful when they 'catch' them. 'Course administration/school office' is a financial resource problem.

Value/interest. When asked about value and interest for eight aspects of the programme on a scale of not at all valuable/interesting (1) to very valuable/interesting (5), the mean ratings shown in Table 4 were obtained.

Table 3: Mean scores for satisfaction for various aspects of the course

Aspect	Mean score	Standard deviation
Content of the course	3.98	0.71
Helpfulness of staff	3.84	0.89
Standard of teaching/supervision	3.80	0.85
Relationship between staff and students	3.79	0.83
Teaching methods	3.71	0.83
Appreciation by staff of problems involved in part-time study	3.41	1.23
Library services	3.39	1.14
Opportunity to vary the pace of study	3.25	1.08
Provision and use of equipment	3.21	0.91
Choice of modules	3.20	1.18
Availability of staff	3.11	0.93
Course administration/school office	3.02	1.10
Amount of contact with teaching staff	2.96	0.91
Feedback on performance/progress	2.96	1.04

All the aspects were rated reasonably highly, except for interest in quantitative work/statistics that received a moderate score for interest. The top two for value, which also are rated as having high levels of interest, surprised us. A possible explanation is that the students' learning is examination driven, with course work and written exams at the forefront of their minds. We are aware that such an explanation runs contrary to a commonly perceived view in psychology 'that mature students utilise a deeper approach to their studies than do traditional students', as other studies have demonstrated (e.g. Richardson, 1994, 1995; Sadler-Smith, 1996). It is worth noting, however, that such a view has been drawn from student answers to questionnaires that are one step removed from the reality of learning and that seek to delineate 'approaches to learning'. It is always possible that answers to such questionnaires do not reflect accurately the ways in which students approach their studies in practice. Or it may be that part-time students feel their own time for study is limited and that as a consequence they have to be narrowly focused on those aspects of the programme that contribute to their assessment. Alternatively, they may just appreciate the value of these activities and find them interesting to undertake. Whatever the explanation, 'private study' and

Table 4: Mean ratings of various aspects of the course for value and interest

Aspect	Mean value	Standard deviation	Mean interest	Standard deviation
Private study	4.45	0.72	4.09	0.81
Preparation of written work/assignments	4.35	0.78	4.07	0.84
Use of computers	4.29	0.79	3.78	1.01
Independent project work	4.22	0.84	4.24	0.73
Lectures	4.22	0.94	4.00	0.91
Practical work	4.15	0.80	4.25	0.80
Quantitative work/statistics	3.78	1.08	3.09	1.19
Small group work	3.75	1.09	3.73	1.06

Table 5: Number of students rating potential difficulties as more, less or expected

Potential Difficulty	More difficult	As Expected	Less Difficult
Coping with family commitments	27	18	5
Finding the time to study	27	21	8
Coping with job demands	25	19	5
Developing appropriate study skills	25	15	15
Organising time in an efficient way	24	24	8
Grasp meaning of specialised terms & concepts	20	26	10
Coping with the stress of examinations	20	23	12
Coping with travel to and from university	15	36	4
Developing confidence in my academic ability	13	25	18
Keeping up with academic level of the course	12	27	16
Getting used to different approach to learning	12	25	19
Getting used to subjects not previously studied	11	24	20
Making friends with fellow students	9	31	15
Getting used to college environment	9	28	19

'preparation of written work/assignments' were rated as top of the list for value.

That practical work and independent project work were rated as the most interesting aspects of the programme suggests to us that the programme is giving the students a good 'feel' for the way psychology operates as a discipline. Overall, we can express satisfaction with these ratings while noting that within the programme we could endeavour to invest quantitative work/statistics with more interest.

Difficulties. When given a list of 14 potential difficulties and asked how difficult these were found to be compared with expectations at enrolment, the responses in Table 5 were obtained.

This shows that family commitments, finding the time to study, job demands and developing study skills were rated as generally more difficult than expected, while respondents were more equally divided on time organisation. Fewest students found 'making friends with other students' and 'getting used to the college environment' more difficult than expected.

Of those potential difficulties which the majority of students found more difficult than expected, there are two, 'developing study skills' and 'being able to grasp meaning of specialised terms and concepts', over which the teaching staff can have any direct influence, although students can be referred, through the personal tutor system, to various support services within the university, i.e. welfare, library (with study skills courses), and the students' union.

Missing lectures. When asked whether they had missed lectures because of work, domestic or other commitments, the majority of responses (41) were 'yes'.

When those 41 who answered 'yes' to the above question were asked if they had enough module information to allow them to study privately at home, 18 answered 'no'.

That answer suggests more guidance is needed to facilitate home study for occasions when students cannot attend lectures. Such increased guidance may well be facilitated by the increased use of information technology and in particular by the use of Blackboard (an aptly named on-line package that facilitates communication from staff to students). There is, however, a need to treat the response with caution, since lectures/teaching sessions are not meant to be redundant –

Table 6: Student ratings of whether skills have improved, deteriorated or stayed the same

Skills	Improved	Stayed Same	Deteriorated
Analytic skills	47	7	0
Computing/IT	44	11	0
Absorbing information	41	10	3
Writing skills	40	11	3
Working independently	38	14	3
Planning work/organising time	33	16	6
Self-confidence	32	19	4
Self-motivation/drive	32	15	8
Using initiative	29	25	1
Communication skills	27	25	3
Numeracy	22	32	1
Working with others	22	28	5

in other words there are some aspects of learning better done face-to-face in the programme.

Withdrawal. When asked whether they had seriously considered withdrawal from the course, the majority (36 of 56 responses) answered 'yes'.

When those who answered 'yes' were asked for reasons, the responses were somewhat varied, but 6 mentioned 'lack of time', 5 'work commitments', 3 'family/child care problems', 3 'perceived lack of ability/low marks', 2 'course content not as enjoyable/as expected'.

The answers show that for these part-timers, admittedly survivors, factors which provoked thoughts of withdrawal were generally concerns outside of the programme (only five concerned with ability, marks, content). It is also worth noting that these answers are strongly related to those aspects of the programme that the students found more difficult than expected.

Helped/hindered. When asked what three things, over which we have some control, most helped and hindered during the course, responses were varied, but may be summarised as:

- helped: 'staff helpfulness', Blackboard, 'other uses to which computers can be put (off-campus link, lion library system, PsycInfo, e mail)';
- hindered: 'lack of choice of modules if attending evening only', 'library facilities inadequate', 'difficulty in contacting tutors in evenings'.

Skills. Students were asked to what extent a number of skills had improved, deteriorated or stayed the same since starting the course. The results are presented in Table 6.

Analytic skills were clearly rated most highly, followed by computing/IT, absorbing information, writing skills. Communication skills and numeracy came further down the list although very few students thought they had deteriorated.

Future intentions. When asked what they hoped/intended to do when they finished the course, of those who declared intentions, 19 mentioned 'new job', and a further 19 mentioned 'further study'. Of those who answered 'stay in current job' the majority included a modification like 'change role', 'be open to opportunities', 'use skills to advantage'. One answered 'remain in current job, retire'.

It can be seen from these responses that a considerable number of the students feel that they are benefiting from the programme for more than just personal development and that it appears they feel that

their studies are opening up new avenues in their working lives.

Suggestions for improvement of the programme for part-time students. When asked how could we make the programme more beneficial to future part-time students the answers tended to be a reaffirmation of earlier comments. In particular, the following suggestions appeared 'more tutor contact in evenings outside lecture times', 'more modules running in the evening to allow greater choice', 'more information on lectures-particularly important when have to miss a lecture'.

Further comments, A space was left for further comments on aspects not covered. There were 23 responses, and many included points already made earlier. Seven of the responses used the opportunity to make very positive comments about the programme.

Discussion

Up to this point we have addressed the student responses to the questionnaire and highlighted some of the concerns raised. Before discussing what we have learned from the investigation, however, we need to set the part-time programme within a realistic context. Day attendance for part-time students, with students slotting in to the timetable of full-time programmes, presents little inconvenience to academic staff and no problem of cost-effectiveness. The evening route, which is followed either wholly or partly by the majority of the students, however, does require academic staff to teach outside normal hours and cannot be described as cost-effective. At levels 2 and 3 the teaching groups are relatively small by comparison with the teaching of full-time students. There is no preferential funding for part-time students and the fees paid by the part-time students are marginally less than those paid by full-time students. Inevitably, that means that the full-time programme subsidises the evening attendance of the part-time programme. As a consequence, there is a limit to the extent to which we can meet the concerns of part-time students.

On the positive side, we know from our previous investigation (Harrop *et al.*, 2005), that a good proportion of the intake is successful over four to seven years. Members of staff enjoy teaching the part-time students who bring experience, curiosity and a willingness to question to the teaching sessions. Also, the spectrum of academic backgrounds, ranging from degrees to the possession of no formal qualifications means that we are fulfilling the university mission with the working population within the immediate area of the university. These are the reasons why we do not abandon the evening part of the programme.

The responses to the questionnaire have already been discussed briefly in the results section so that in this section it seems appropriate just to highlight important features.

The first result we presented, that 13 of the 17 currently enrolled with no formal qualifications have already completed level 1 with a mean mark of 61, is a strong illustration of what can be achieved without the possession of what used to be regarded as standard entrance qualifications. If we add to that our previous finding (Harrop *et al.*, 2005), that for the 1992–1995 entry the success rate for those without formal qualifications was slightly higher than the rate for the whole intake, then we can reasonably state that withdrawal does not seem to be a mere function of a lack of academic background.

Although we did not directly examine reasons for withdrawal we did approach the subject indirectly. Those students who said they had considered withdrawal at some point in the programme generally pointed to aspects of their lives outside the influence of the programme team, i.e. 'lack of time', 'work commitments', and 'family/child care problems'. The same concerns are seen in the answers received when we asked for responses to 'potential difficulties' (Table 5). As a consequence, it is fair to say that the evidence suggests that the factors most likely to cause withdrawal are external to the programme. These are factors that are not easy

for either the potential student or for a member of staff to identify prior to registration for a programme of part-time study. It seems evident that the only way in which such factors can begin to be identified is by the student undertaking part-time study under the same conditions as operate during the degree programme. If we add to that our previous finding (Harrop *et al.*, 2005), that the vast majority of students withdraw in the first year, then the overall evidence strengthens our view that the first year should be undertaken as a foundation year. During, and at the end of that year, the student would need careful discussion with a personal tutor before final registration and continuing with the degree programme. The results of such discussions would serve to augment the feedback received by the students from their module tutors.

It could be argued that designating the first year as a 'foundation year', is a change of name only since the part-time students would be taking the same courses as before and there would be no financial cost involved for the student. Nevertheless, we feel that designating the year as a 'foundation', would give us an opportunity of highlighting to the entrants the potential difficulties of undertaking part-time study and of the typically high level of withdrawal in the first year. It could be emphasised that it is necessary to undertake preliminary study before the full implications of its effects on lifestyle can be appreciated. If we add to that the fact that the foundation year would be accompanied by an appraisal of progress by the student together with a personal tutor both during the year and prior to progression to further study, then we would be helping the student develop a realistic approach to the programme of studies. The designation of the first year as a foundation year would also help to remind the tutors of the crucial nature of that year for the part-time entrants and it would serve to underline the important nature of the role of the personal tutor.

On a more mundane note, that most of the part-time students attend in the evening and prefer the hours 5pm to 9pm on two nights a week tells us that the students are content with the present timing arrangements. We have often suspected that the 5pm start precludes many others from applying, but a later start would probably mean a requirement of more than two nights a week attendance, which we suspect would be unpopular. Since the current intake number is about as many as we can comfortably teach, there is little point in moving from the present timings.

If we look at the responses in terms of how we can improve our provision, certain features are evident. In the foundation year there would need to be an emphasis on the development of study skills, and that should include a consideration of 'time management'. Second, the pre-course documentation needs strengthening as indicated by the students' responses. Third, two major concerns expressed by students are 'contacting tutors in the evenings' and 'lack of feedback on performance/progress'. These concerns could be jointly addressed by a limited system of evening appointments and by students being encouraged to make an increased use of e-mail. Fourth, some curriculum development work for the academic staff is indicated to seek to make quantitative work/statistics more interesting. Finally, we need to consider, yet again, how scarce resources can best be allocated to maximise the library services and the availability of the school office to the part-time students.

If we switch our attention to more positive features of the programme we see that students say they receive a high level of staff support and, an even higher level of peer support. Both these findings are important but as regards the latter we have to admit that we did not construct the programme in order to facilitate such a level of peer support. Nevertheless, any future changes we make in the programme will have to seek to preserve that support. Overall, students seem to be satisfied with the programme, particularly the content, staff helpfulness, standard of teaching/supervision, relationships with the staff, and the teaching meth-

ods. They generally value a number of features of the programme and find them interesting. They feel that all the skills we asked them about have improved, the most improved being analytic skills, computing/IT, absorbing information and writing skills.

For the future, a substantial proportion mentioned a new job and of those who answered that they would stay in their current job, the majority included some modification to their role. In a way this student response explains the relative lack of employer support seen in the students' questionnaire responses. From an employer's viewpoint the study of psychology may not seem particularly important in terms of a specific role, e.g. for nursing, working in a bank, selling insurance and so on. As psychologists we can see the general applicability of psychology, but then we do have an in-built bias.

An equally large proportion of students mentioned further study. That intention, together with the responses about jobs indicates that the students feel that the study of psychology is having a considerable impact on their lives.

That last comment brings us back to what we said in the opening paragraph about the lack of cost-effectiveness of the part-time evening route. If we look at the part-time programme purely from an economic viewpoint we can be said to be running it simply for altruistic reasons. Beyond that narrow view, however, we can see that we are providing a vehicle to enable numerous individuals to move towards fulfilling their potential. Moreover, at a time when widening participation in higher education is national policy, we are providing a route for those who have missed the opportunity for full-time education.

Concluding comments

We have presented here a discussion of an investigation into some features of a part-time degree programme in psychology at the Liverpool John Moores University. There are undoubtedly other part-time degree programmes in psychology running in other universities and these will possess varying degrees of resemblance to the one described here. We do not know the extent to which our programme is representative of other programmes but there are some findings which we think are of general interest to teachers of psychology. In particular, the level of achievement of entrants with no formal qualifications is worth noting, as are the strong element of personal development shown in the aims on enrolment and the high level of value and interest reported for 'private study' and for 'preparation of written work/assignments'. It will also be of interest to note that the skills considered to have improved the most by the students are analytic, computing/IT, absorbing information and writing and that many of the students envisage new jobs and/or further study on completion of the programme.

Of more general interest is the finding that difficulties reported by the students tend to be features outside the teaching programme, a finding which has strengthened the view we expressed in our previous article that the first year should be a foundation year so that intending students can appreciate better the demands of part-time study. And since the difficulties tend to come from outside the teaching programme it is likely that part-time students on other courses experience similar difficulties and would benefit from a foundation year.

To make that year more effective, there are some features of the questionnaire responses that suggest further ways in which part-time students can be helped to adapt. Pre-course literature should be as detailed as possible and on-line communication between staff and students should be as full as possible. Availability of staff, particularly for evening students, is important, as is peer support. A way of facilitating these latter two features is to have relatively small group teaching in that year and to include time for student discussion. Moreover, teaching staff should be aware that two particularly important potential difficulties for part-time students are 'developing study skills' and 'being able to grasp the meaning of specialised terms', and should try to alleviate these diffi-

culties. Attention to these features is not a panacea for all the difficulties that part-time students meet but, from the evidence we have gleaned, such attention should reduce the severity of some of the obstacles encountered.

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