

PART-TIME STUDY AND E-LEARNING IN EUROPE: INSIGHTS FROM ERASMUS+ PT&SCHE PROJECT

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Abstract: Flexible delivery is often seen as an integral part of e-learning and lifelong learning. In some countries students learning at a distance or while working have equal status with on-campus students. Currently there is no agreed definition for 'part-time' studies across Europe. Part-time studies can refer to notional time spent learning, number of credits, time allowed for completing studies, or to funding arrangements.

In this paper we consider part-time and e-learning in Higher Education in Europe with a particular focus on Serbia. Results from surveys with private sector employers, students and university teaching staff in Serbia are presented. While all agreed on part-time studies being introduced, students' and staff's views differed in terms of how to implement this new route to higher education qualifications.

Keywords: E-Learning, Distance learning, online, Part-time studies

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on three surveys conducted for the Erasmus+ Part-time and Short Cycle Studies in Serbia (PT&SCHE) project [1]. The aim of this project is to test and report on part-time, online and short cycle higher education in Serbia with a view to its official endorsement and wider adoption.

Part-time study can be regarded as a large proportion of online or e-learning opportunities in higher education in Europe. Part-time study can be attractive to those who are working full or part-time and/or to those who have caring responsibilities and/or those who may not be able to study full-time for reasons related to their health/disability or geographical location.

Flexible delivery is seen as part of the approach to lifelong learning taken by a country but while full-time student status is clear and easy to understand in most EU countries, this is not the case for defining part-time students. The majority of EU countries recognise more than the sole status of full-time student (around 2/3 countries for which data are available) [2]. In the remaining countries there is no formal status of part-time student. Although students may in effect be studying part-time within the existing system, they are not officially recognised as a particular category of student. Other countries have laid down equal status for on-campus and distant learning students, or those who wish to study on a part-time basis.

It should also be noted that there is no agreed definition for 'part-time'. Sometimes the definition relates to the notion of time spent studying, while elsewhere it relates to funding arrangements, number of credits being studied or time

allowed to complete the study programme [2]. Sometimes these components are combined in the definition. In addition, some countries have no fees for full-time students, but expect part-time students to contribute to their studies, and part-time students might also receive less financial support [2].

Funding for part time studies depends upon how countries regard life-long learning. When this is seen as part of the national approach to economic and human capital development then there is likely to be more public funding. Otherwise funding is a mixture of public and private sources. Some of this private funding is from business, as is the case in Serbia, while elsewhere it comes from the students. However, it should be noted that public funding is not always clear due to the nature of the financing [2].

2. PART-TIME HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

The share of part-time students varies significantly from country to country. The largest share of part-time students in 2015 was in Finland (41.80%), while the smallest share was in Portugal (5.51%) with some countries, such as Austria and Italy, like Serbia, not recognising part-time students at all [2]. When comparing undergraduate and postgraduate studies in various countries the share of part-time students is significantly different. For example, in Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary Romania, Slovenia, Norway and Switzerland there were more part-time students at undergraduate or Bachelor level. In contrast, in Bulgaria, Spain, Cyprus, Luxemburg, Malta, Netherlands, Slovakia, Finland and the UK the proportion of part-time

students was significantly higher at Masters level [2]. The countries of the EU also differ in relation to short cycle higher education [3].

3. PART TIME AND SHORT CYCLE HIGHER EDUCATION IN SERBIA

In 2016 members of the Erasmus+ PT&SCHE project conducted a survey to find out the current state of affairs in the different partner countries, namely Estonia, the Netherlands, Scotland and Slovenia. One of the questions to gather information about the different national approaches to the issues covered by the project was: are part-time degrees available? In all the other countries involved in the project part-time studies are available, therefore it is necessary to investigate further the situation in Serbia in relation to part-time higher education studies.

To better understand the current situation in Serbia it is necessary to refer to the Education Strategy 2020 and its accompanying action plans [4]. Serbia is starting from a position of not having any “precise data on the number of employed persons, who are changing or acquiring other qualifications through some form of part-time education in vocational schools does not exist, nor do we have data on the number of people who have lost their regular student status or have dropped out and are continuing their education as part-time students. therefore, we cannot assess the percentual amount of this key feature” [4].

In the Serbian law "Sl. glasnik RS", br. 88/2017 it is stated that institutions in higher education may lay down detailed regulations if they consider it necessary to provide a part-time mode of studying. Before 2002 part-time studies were possible but were abolished by a law in 2002 because they were had not been deemed to be successful. Even when part-time studies were not explicitly provided for by the legislative regime a student could complete their degree programme in double the number of years compared to the normal duration of the study programme. Thus, the status of student ceased in the case of expiry of twice the number of academic years required for completion of the programme “except in the case of studies at work” as “a student studying with work [i.e. a part-time student], ... retains the status of a student until the expiration of the deadline determined in the triple number of school years required for the realisation of the study programme.” [4]

4. FINDINGS

Three online surveys were carried out in 2016 to gather data from employers, students and university teaching staff on their attitudes towards part-time higher education in Serbia. This would let us know if there was a demand for part-time studies from employers in the private sector and students and also some of the practical challenges that the introduction of part-time studies might produce.

Survey of enterprises

An online survey was conducted to understand the labour market and employers’ attitudes towards part-time studies. The survey was conducted during March 2016 and responses were received from 212 enterprises.

The first three figures below show the structure of the respondent sample in terms of industry sector, enterprise size and the management level of the person who responded to the survey.

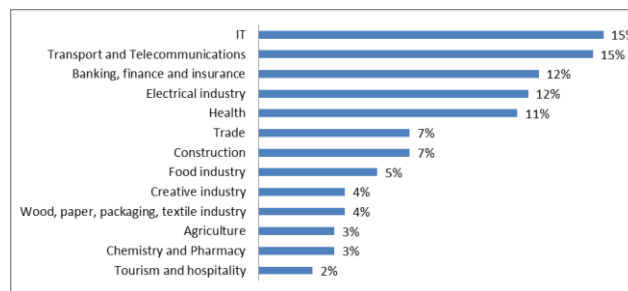


Figure 1: Respondent breakdown by industry sector

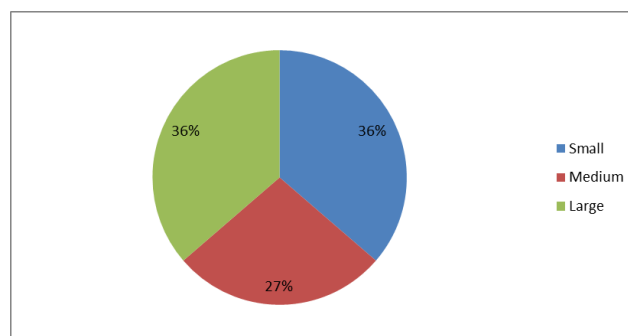


Figure 2: Size of enterprises that responded

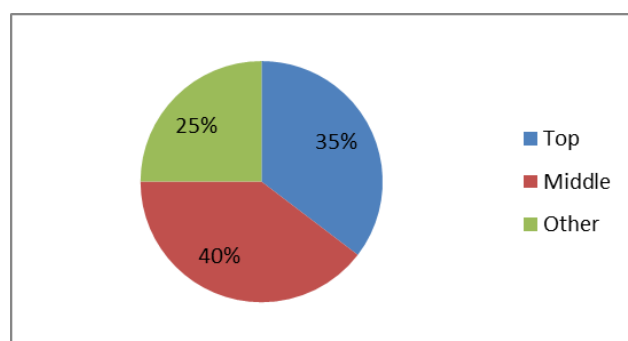


Figure 3: Management level of the responding person

The survey included questions on the status of the labour market in relation to vacancies that the enterprises needed to fill. It would appear there is space for additional education as 19% of enterprises have vacancies because they are not able to find the appropriate work force from the existing labour market. In addition, almost 40% of the enterprises have employees with secondary school education who are doing work for which tertiary education is needed.

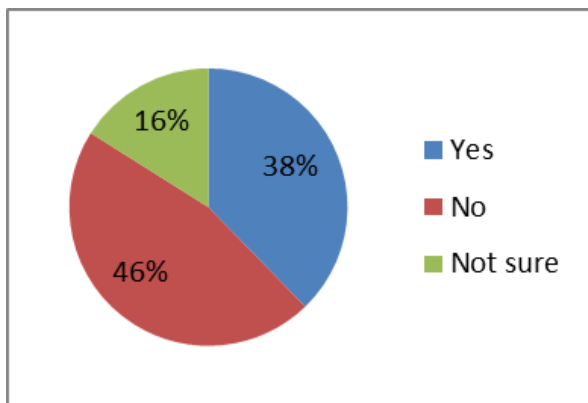


Figure 4: Do you have employees with secondary school education doing work for which tertiary education is needed?

The next figure shows that enterprises are willing to support further education for their employees. They are more inclined to support them through flexible working hours rather than days off (free days) or financial support. This would suggest that if flexible working hours are the most acceptable option to employers then it would be better if part-time studies were organised to fit around students' work commitments.

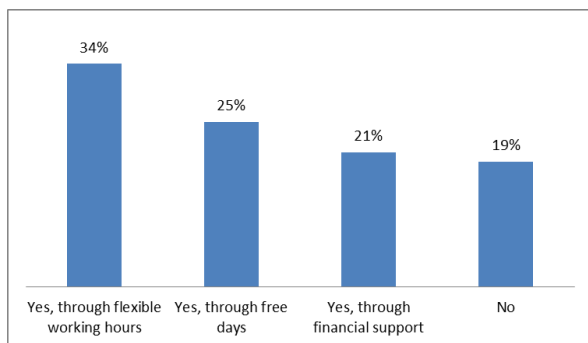


Figure 5: Will your enterprise support its employees to study and in which way?

Differences according to the size of the enterprise were analysed and it appears that the larger the enterprise the more willing it is to support their employees carrying out part-time studies. In addition, respondents from top management positions appear more open to additional studying by their workers.

Survey of students

During autumn 2016 researchers conducted an online survey of students to elicit their views on part-time studies. The goal was to understand students' needs and attitudes toward this kind of studying. The sample size was 821 respondents from higher education institutions across Serbia.

The figures that follow show the structure of the sample with 56% of respondents being female and 44% male. The sample's distribution by gender, field of study and level of study correspond to the distribution in the population. Age structure shows that a significant number of older students is included in the sample, and this is important because

part-time studies are likely to be of more interest to older students with families, jobs, and other responsibilities.

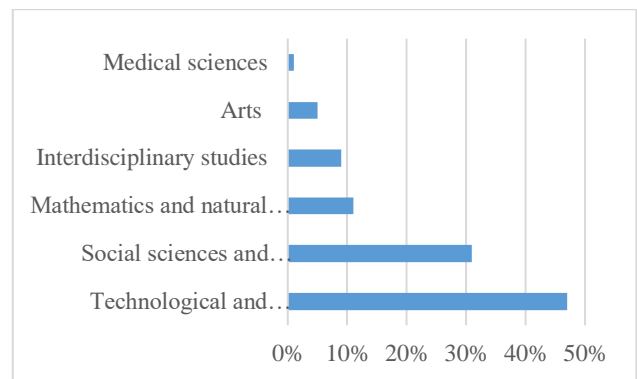


Figure 6: Distribution of students in the sample by academic field (n=784)

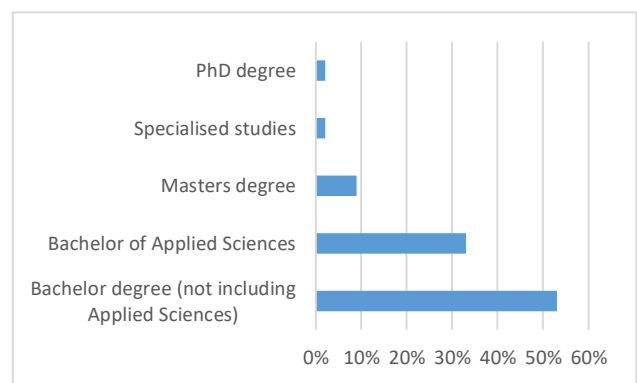


Figure 7: Distribution of students in sample by degree level (n=812)

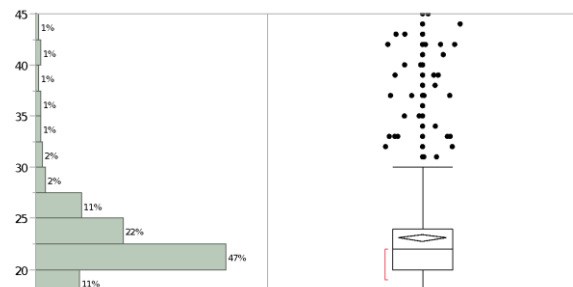


Figure 8: Distribution of students in sample by age (n=815)

Forty percent of students in the sample (n=817) had some sort of job (19% full-time and 21% part-time). This suggests that a significant number of students are interested in combining study with paid work.

The results of the survey suggest that a significant share of students in Serbia support the idea of introducing part-time studies into higher education in Serbia. Sixty-one percent agreed there was a need for part-time HE studies with 25% not sure and 14% against (n=818).

In the survey respondents were asked if part-time studying would be a good option for students who did not live where they were studying, for students who had children and for students with disabilities. The table below shows the responses.

Table 1: For which of the following categories of students, would part-time studying be a good option? (Multiple response question)

Options	Number	Percent
Students who do not live in a place where studying	331	40.32%
Employed students	576	70.16%
Students who have child(ren)	629	76.61%
Students with Disabilities	603	73.45%

From the results in Table 1, it would appear that students are aware of the social dimension in the HE system and its relationship with part-time studying. According to their answers, students with children will benefit most from part-time studying.

Data from the study suggests that a significant number of students would have enrolled as a part-time student if that possibility had existed when they were beginning their studies. In answer to the question "Would you have enrolled for part-time studies if such a possibility existed?" 42% said yes (n=816). The question "Would you have switched to part-time studies if such a possibility existed?" received a positive response from 39% (n=817).

Table 2: When should lectures and tutorials for part-time students be organised? (n=813)

Options	Number	Percent
During the working week at the same time as for the regular students	143	17.60%
During the working week in the afternoon	223	27.40%
During the weekend	327	40.02%
No classes	120	14.80%

The table above shows that the most popular option for when teaching should take place part-time students was during the weekends.

In relation to the financial aspects of studying part-time, the most popular response from students was that fees for part-time studies should be at the same level as for full-time students.

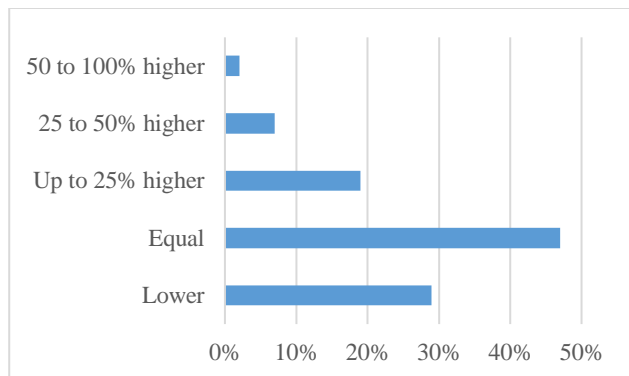


Figure 9: Should fees for part-time degrees be equal to, lower or higher than fees for regular studies?

When students were asked "How many ECTS credits should part-time study and short cycle studies undertake each year?", the average number of points was 45.64. Since

the total of ECTS credits for full-time students is 60, this can be understood as the workload for part-time students being 25% lower than regular studies.

Survey of teaching staff

During autumn 2016 the research team conducted a survey with university teaching staff about part-time studies. The goal was to understand the needs and attitudes toward this new kind of studying from the lecturers' perspective. The sample size was 532 respondents from higher education institutions across Serbia. Data collection was conducted via an online survey.

Figures 10 and 11 show the structure of the sample across scientific disciplines and academic titles.

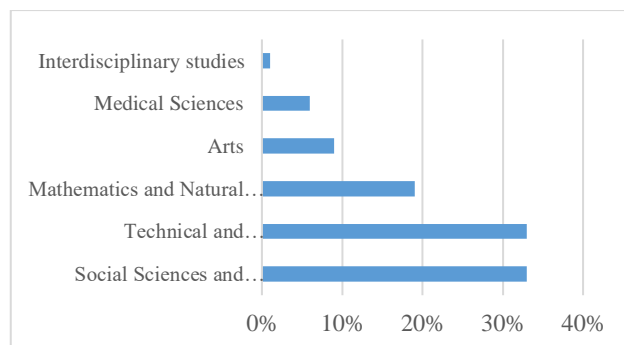


Figure 10: Distribution of sample by discipline (n=525)

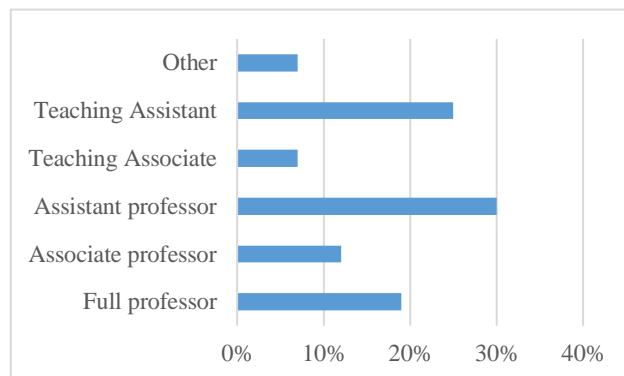


Figure 11: Distribution of respondents by academic title (n=521)

A majority of the surveyed teaching staff (59%) agreed there was a need for the introduction of part-time studies in higher education in Serbia with 23% not sure and 18% saying no (n=525).

Table 3: When should lectures and tutorials for part-time students be organised? (Multiple response question)

Options	Number	Percent
During the working week at the same time as for the regular students	196	36.84%
During the working week in the afternoon	460	86.47%
During the weekend	370	69.55%
No classes	211	39.66%

Table 3 shows that according to teaching staff the most appropriate time for part-time courses to be held would be during the working week. This is different compared to the responses of students. Students' response was that weekends would be the best time for tuition for part-time studies.

The majority of university teachers in the survey thought that fees for part-time studies should be higher than fees for full-time studies (22.6%+19.2%+12.5%=54.3%) which is in contrast to students' opinion about fees being the same.

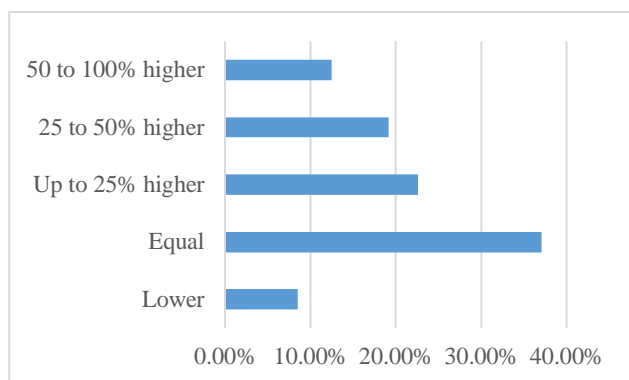


Figure 12: Should fees for part-time degrees be lower or higher than fees for regular studies?

The table below shows respondents opinions in relation to the introduction of part-time studies in specific scientific fields. More than half of the respondents think that in interdisciplinary studies and technical and technological sciences, part-time studies should be completely allowed. Around 40% of respondents agree with the partial introduction of part-time studies in all fields.

Table 4: Do you agree with the introduction of part-time studies in the following fields? (multiple response question)

Study field	Part-time studies allowed?		
	Completely	Partially	Not at all
Mathematics and natural sciences	42%	44%	14%
Technical and technological sciences	55%	34%	11%
Social Sciences and Humanities	44%	40%	15%
Medical Sciences	41%	32%	27%
Arts	42%	34%	19%
Interdisciplinary studies	52%	37%	11%

Table 5: For which of the following categories of students, do you think part-time studying would be a good option? (Multiple response question)

Options	Number	Percent
Students who do not live in a place where studying	195	13.8%
Employed students	459	32.5%

Students who have child(ren)	372	26.3%
Students with Disabilities	387	27.4%

More of the surveyed teachers were of the opinion that part-time studies would benefit employed students. This contrasts with the results of the student survey as the most popular reason with students who responded was that part-time studying would be a good option for students with children. Seventy percent of the surveyed teachers agreed that changing between status of full-time and part-time should be allowed.

5. CONCLUSION

With respect to part-time degrees it would appear that legislation should enable students of any age to study part-time. In particular, this should be as flexible as possible for older students, who might have family and work commitments, which constrain their options for study. Whether time measures, or credit measures are used to determine how fast, or slow, part-time studies take place may not be so important. The key factor appears to be that part-time study should be available to as many students as possible to enable them to enhance their current qualifications and gain the higher education qualifications they need for new, or preferred future roles and to help enterprises in the private sector to fill vacant posts. There are differences of opinion between students and university teaching staff about when part-time studies should be held and how these programmes should be financed. However, they are in general agreement that students should have the option to study part-time in Serbia as happens in most other European countries.

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