“It’s like seeing a whole other world”

Why part-time higher education matters

Claire Callender, Rajay Naik, Tricia King, Pam Tatlow and others on the crisis in adult demand for HE
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Ian Nash, education journalist

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The crisis in adult demand for higher education

A worrying picture of declining adult demand for higher education in England is emerging which should trouble ministers and institutions alike. Part-time student recruitment had been falling for some years when the government agreed to extend eligibility to tuition fee loans to part-time students from 2012 (previously part-time students in England had paid their fees up-front). The expectation was of a boost to part-time student recruitment but, instead, part-time enrolments have gone into free fall. While national figures are, as yet, unavailable, institutions are reporting sharp reductions, with many in the sector estimating an overall drop of 30 per cent or more.

This is a serious and substantial loss, particularly when viewed against a context of already declining part-time participation and a steep drop in full-time mature student recruitment. UCAS’s end-of-cycle data on full-time higher education acceptances for 2012 show that while acceptances to English institutions for people aged 20 and under fell by 3.1 per cent between 2010 and 2012, the number of people aged between 21 and 24 accepted into an HEI fell by 12.1 per cent over the same period, with similarly significant falls of 12.3 per cent for people aged between 25 and 39 and 10.2 per cent for people aged 40 and above. Figures for the 2013 cycle suggest that while applications from younger students are recovering, mature student applications continue to fall (with drops of 3.9 per cent and seven per cent recorded for 30 to 39 year olds and for people aged 40 and over, respectively).

Despite this, the crisis in adult recruitment goes largely unreported; the media remains, as ever, in thrall to the outdated notion of universities as finishing schools for 18 and 19 year olds treading the (usually) well-worn path from school to full-time residential study. NIACE thinks this perception needs to change, and soon. We think it matters that mature and part-time student numbers are in decline and that the higher education system is becoming a less age-diverse and less adult-friendly place. We believe that the fall in part-time and mature student participation is damaging to the economy, to the health of our democracy and to our ambitions to improve social mobility. That is why we are publishing this special Adults Learning Extra, giving some leading commentators and key stakeholders an opportunity to publicly debate the issue, to set out the challenges the sector faces and to consider how we might move forwards towards a solution. Failure to do so will mean the further disintegration of a framework that took many decades to build up – and which will take many more to rebuild from scratch. Most of all, this issue poses a critical challenge to government and institutions: to better understand the barriers to mature and part-time access to higher education and to consider how they can better persuade, encourage and incentivise adults to participate.

Paul Stanistreet, Editor

A second chance for learning

Amanda Scales began learning as an adult some years ago, but childcare issues prevented her from finishing her course. For years Amanda thought about returning to learning, and when she heard about an evening class in belly dancing she decided to give it a go. In 2006, encouraged by a supportive university outreach worker, Amanda joined a course designed to help women access university and, overcoming a number of family difficulties, passed the course and started a degree in contemporary history. Amanda graduated with a 2:1 and decided that she wanted to help others by becoming a teacher. Having ‘faced her fears’ Amanda now works as a support assistant, and began a PGCE teaching course in 2012. ‘My journey so far has been long and hard but immensely pleasurable,’ Amanda says.
An academy of all the talents

A reduction in opportunities for adults to participate in flexible HE provision won’t help the economy grow and will hamper the government’s objectives for social mobility. Three actions, aimed at policy, practice and promotion, could make a big difference, argues DAVID HUGHES

she said, before explaining how her move into teaching was driven by her desire to ‘help children be motivated and challenged and reach out for a better future.’

Amanda’s story is not unique – many thousands of adults benefit from higher education as mature students across the country each year – but it does provide a great case study of the personal, social, economic and community outcomes which mature students achieve. This government’s ambition to support more people to participate in higher education has a straightforward economic rationale, made longer before they retire; it also makes no sense in terms of business efficiencies because people need to keep their skills up to date as the world of work changes, particularly with new technologies transforming working practices in many industries. For employers, it makes no sense because they will miss out on the talents of their staff at exactly the time they are facing skills shortages due to people leaving the labour market to retire.

A reduction in opportunities for people to participate in higher education flexibly throughout their careers is not right for
achieving the social mobility which the coalition government is aiming for. It is inconceivable that enough young people will be able to participate in higher education immediately after their compulsory education finishes to achieve true social mobility. It is also arguably undesirable and unfair to push young people into making a large investment decision at the age of 17 or 18 when they may be unsure about their future career direction. Many adults find the motivation and the confidence to want to participate in higher education only after working for some time. When they do this they become keen, positive and experienced students often with a thirst to learn; they bring a different dimension to their learning which can help them benefit fully as well as helping others who are learning around them.

**THREE ACTIONS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

1. The government to develop an action plan on how to increase the number of adults participating in higher education.

2. More research to be commissioned into what works for adults in higher education.

3. Improve the way higher education is promoted, particularly to adults who would prefer to learn flexibly.

As well as these reasons, there are many other arguments set out in the articles in this edition as to why we should strive to provide more flexible opportunities for adults to participate in higher education. Our ambitions though need some actions to be realised; for my contribution I set out three important actions based around policy, practice and promotion.

There is growing evidence that too many institutions will not be paying enough attention to this issue without a policy nudge, therefore my policy action would be for the government to develop an action plan on how to increase the number of adults participating in higher education. They might wish to ask the Office for Fair Access to get involved with individual institutions to agree their plans to help achieve this and they might task the Higher Education Funding Council for England with ensuring that a proportion of its Widening Participation fund is used for older learners. The commitment the government made through providing access to loans for part-time study requires support and, without a supply-side, it seems clear now that there will not be sufficient opportunities available to older learners.

My second action would be for more research to be commissioned into what works for adults in higher education. Too often, the debate centres on a simplistic notion of full-time and part-time learning when a more sophisticated and subtle debate needs to be opened up about the flexible ways in which adults can benefit from higher education. This needs to include the use of technology, distance learning, blended opportunities and block learning, as well as the very nature of credit accumulation over time, rather than a view that the traditional undergraduate experience of a first degree is the right and best offer. Flexible learning for adults at different stages of their careers might include short courses, modules and refreshers, as well as full first and postgraduate degrees. Understanding what works is the first step after which we need dissemination and support for institutions to be more creative about the offers they make.

My third action is about improving how higher education is promoted. The media, marketing materials and communications are all too often focused on young people, with very little material showing adults and information relevant to them. We need more case studies about adults learning flexibly, setting out how their finances worked and what the benefits to them were, and we need more media attention about it as well. There are many opportunities through working with Adult Learners’ Week to highlight role models and inspiring stories about people like Amanda Scales who have achieved so much. At a local level there are some great partnerships between institutions and other learning providers which promote flexible pathways into higher education but we need to understand from a learner perspective how we can improve on these as well.

These three actions and many others are needed to address this challenge and to achieve the social, economic and community benefits which we know are possible. I hope that this *Adult Learning Extra* stimulates thinking and supports actions which will give more adults more opportunities to learn throughout their lives. Ensuring older learners have access to part-time and flexible higher education is essential to the economic success of the country and to making the most of the talent within our population.

David Hughes
is Chief Executive of NIACE
According to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, ‘Skill acquisition which does not enhance employability, earnings, labour market progression or which does not bring other economic and social returns, is a waste of public and private resources’ (UKCES, 2010, p.109). A recent study tracking the career development of several thousand part-time UK undergraduate students in their first, third and final years at university, and two years after graduation, illustrates the considerable value of investing in part-time study and its private and public benefits (Callender and Wilkinson, 2012; 2013). Four in five of the students and graduates surveyed were employed, mostly full-time. The vast majority used the skills they learned on their course in their job, especially their subject knowledge, the ability to apply their knowledge, and the ability to analyse material and situations critically. Half of the graduates surveyed had changed jobs, either with their existing employer or a new employer, because of their studies, which for the majority resulted in a pay rise and improved promotion prospects. Both students still studying and graduates frequently accrued other non-financial work benefits as a direct result of their course. For instance, the majority had taken on more responsibilities at work, their ability to do their work had improved, and they gained greater job satisfaction. And they reaped these benefits irrespective of whether they had changed jobs or employer. In addition, students and graduates' non-working lives were enhanced. At least two-thirds felt that, because of their course, they had developed as a person, were more self-confident, and enjoyed learning more. Significantly, part-time students begin to reap the benefits of studying well before they graduate, as well as once they graduate.

Economic role
These research findings confirm that part-time study plays an important economic role in raising, updating and improving the skill levels of people already in employment, and ensuring they possess the skills and qualifications required by employers. It helps to fill skill gaps, and by combining work experience with study, it can increase the supply of highly-educated people needed by employers, and for economic recovery. And part-time study minimises absence from work, with individuals investing their own time in work-related study (Mason and Hopkin, 2011).

Overall, a third of all UK undergraduates study part-time and, unlike their full-time peers, are more likely to be older, female, and to have family commitments. Most do not study for a Bachelor's degree, but take vocationally orientated and professional qualifications. Unlike full-time undergraduates who typically enter HE with A-levels (Level 3 qualifications), part-timers' entry qualifications are polarised.

The private and public benefits of part-time HE

Despite the real advantages of part-time higher study, it is one of the casualties of the government’s HE funding reforms. To reverse this we need a better understanding of the challenges facing the sector and the political will to address them, says CLAIRE CALLENDER
A high proportion have prior experience of HE, already hold a Bachelor’s degree, and are re-skilling, often with financial support from their employer. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a substantial minority have no or low-level entry qualifications. They are up-skilling and taking advantage of ‘second chance’ learning opportunities, which they pay for themselves or sometimes with government-funded financial support. So, part-time study plays an important role in widening participation too. However, irrespective of whether part-time undergraduates are re-skilling or up-skilling, most want an HE qualification to get ahead and to meet their career ambitions (Callender et al., 2010).

Despite these very real advantages of part-time study, it is one of the casualties of the recent higher education funding reforms. There was a considerable drop in demand for part-time undergraduate study in 2012-13 in English higher education institutions. Currently, no published figures on part-time enrolments for 2012-13 are available, and HESA data will not be released until January 2014. However, the consensus in the sector is that there has been a fall in enrolments of about 30 per cent, and applications for 2013-14 do not appear to be picking up.

Opposite effect

Many believed that the introduction of tuition fee loans for part-time students would improve part-time participation, and stem the steady decline (outside of the Open University). In reality, the combination of a threefold increase in part-time tuition fees, alongside the introduction of student loans, seem to be having the opposite effect on part-time enrolments.

Several dynamics appear to be playing out. First, some would-be students who are eligible for the new loans appear to be unwilling to take them out. Without these loans they probably cannot afford to study because of the high part-time undergraduate fees of up to £6,750 a year, which equates to £9,000 a year for a full-time equivalent course. Part-time students can take out loans to cover all their fees, and so no longer have to pay their fees up-front. They begin to repay them four and half years after they start their course, or sooner if their course is shorter, but only if they are earning £21,000 a year. The interest on the loans also rises in line with students/graduates’ earnings and reaches a maximum of inflation plus three per cent when earnings exceed £41,000 per year. Part-time students and graduates continue to pay nine per cent of their income (above £21,000) until they have paid off their loan, or for no more than 30 years when their debt is forgiven.

We cannot be sure why students who are eligible for loans are unwilling to take them out. It may be because they are debt averse, or already have sizeable financial commitments with mortgages and children, or think that paying nine per cent of their income to repay their student loan is more than they can manage or are prepared to pay, especially given the economic uncertainties. They may not feel that the benefits of study outweigh the costs.

Up-front fees

Second, the majority of prospective part-time students are in fact not eligible for the new loans. Government figures suggest that only a third of part-time undergraduates qualify for the loans. Most are ineligible because they already hold a Bachelor’s degree or Level 4 qualification. These potential students would have to pay their fees up-front, just as they did before the reforms. Except now their tuition fees are much higher. And these individuals also may think the fees are too expensive an investment, or simply unaffordable, in an uncertain future.

Third, there is some evidence that employers are less able or willing to pay for employees’ education and training, especially in times of recession and economic decline. Historically, around a third of part-time undergraduates receive financial help with their tuition from their employers. Recent research, conducted before the large hike in fees, suggested that while employers were still willing to contribute to their employees’ fees, they were not contributing as much, and so employees have to pay more of their fees themselves (Callender and Wilkinson, 2012).

We cannot assume that part-time enrolments in England will bounce back in 2013-14, and that 2012-13 is just a blip, as is being argued for full-timers. The reality is that since the last changes in student funding in 2006-07, which led to a rise in some part-time tuition fees, part-time undergraduate enrolments, outside of the Open University (which absorbs a third of all part-time undergraduates), have been on a downward trajectory, and far more erratic than full-time enrolments. And in 2012-13, part-time numbers fell at the Open University too for the first time in many years. So, historic data on part-time participation are unreliable predictors of future enrolments.

The current funding reforms seem to be exerting a downward pressure on part-time enrolments and further reforms are required, if demand does not pick up this year. But we need a much better understanding of what is happening across the sector before recommending any reforms. As importantly, we need the political will both within the sector and government to tackle the challenges posed by part-time study.

Claire Callender is Professor of Higher Education, Birkbeck and Institute of Education, University of London

Callender, C. and Wilkinson, D. (2013) Futuretrack: part-time higher education students three years on – their experiences of working, the benefits of learning, and their future plans, Manchester: HECSU


Why falling adult demand for higher education matters

Adults need to be as central to the strategic planning of both policymakers and universities as young people, argues Andy Westwood

Recent Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) data show that university applications still remain a long way below 2010 and 2011 levels. The slight recovery this year – though welcome – is largely driven by increased interest from 18 and 19 year olds (arguably those that policy is most focused on), informed school or college leavers choosing a traditional three-year full-time degree, typically away from home. But this focus tends to neglect a great deal of provision across further and higher education at a time when people want real choices and the UK needs a much broader model that produces more human capital through a range of routes.

Already, over 40 per cent of the student population study close to home, a third study part-time and a third are mature learners – yet policy rarely seems to focus on these groups, or to line up incentives for either them or the institutions that they attend to offer more options. And yet this is where we are more likely to find employer-facing provision, skills closer to the labour market and a much broader range of participants, as is the case in other higher participation countries.

There seems to be a twin labour-market effect at work in current application data. First, for young people leaving school or college, choices are limited and so demand for further or higher education is reinforced. But for adults in work – however poor quality or low paid – the opportunity cost is rather different: dare they risk even low levels of income for the costs and risk of further study?

This creates several problems. There are obvious issues of access, affordability and fairness for adults but also real questions about how this might be damaging the acquisition of improved skills and their deployment in the workplace. Combined with reduced incentives for universities to develop co-funded provision with employers, it can be argued that higher education and the labour market might be drifting further apart. Many may celebrate that as a welcome shift away from utilitarianism but they would be misunderstanding much of the demand from adults for higher-level qualifications.

We need to find many more models and choices for employers and individuals of all ages to study for degrees and other higher-level qualifications. We need to dramatically extend choice and diversity in our HE system and include more mechanisms for employer financing or co-financing; higher-level apprenticeships offering degrees and other higher-level qualifications; and much more innovation in modes of attendance, whether part-time, distance learning (including MOOCs) or intensive study – or combinations of all three. Adults need to be as central to the strategic planning of both policymakers and universities as young people continue to be.

Andy Westwood is Chief Executive of Guild HE, the representative body for small and specialist institutions in UK higher education

We need to reassert the value of part-time higher education

If we cannot demonstrate the value of part-time higher study, the cost to the economy and society could be considerable, writes Mary Stuart

Part-time higher education has had many challenges over the last 30 years but the last few years have been particularly challenging. There are challenges in all nations of the UK for part-time education, and different policies and ideas for the focus for part-time learning, but the greatest reductions in part-time students this year have been in England.

The increase in fees for full-time undergraduates and the subsequent fall in numbers in 2012 have dominated the news but the reality is that the largest impact on recruitment has been felt in the part-time and mature arena.

Institutions are naturally careful about what they say but it is clear that many have seen drops in recruitment larger than the most dramatic falls in full-time student numbers.

The government agreed to offer loans to undergraduate part-time students for the first time in 2012 and clearly believed that this would provide a significant boost for part-time higher education. This has not proved to be the case. Falls in student numbers are as great as 40 per cent in some institutions and although part-time students seldom apply before Easter time, from talking to colleagues in different institutions, very early indications for 2013 do not suggest a major bounce back. Part-time mature students have always been very price sensitive and clearly this has had a major impact on recruitment, particularly at a time when wages are depressed and workers are concerned about their jobs.

We know, from the 2006 Leitch report, that ‘over 70 per cent of our 2020 workforce have already completed their compulsory education’. Part-time higher education for returners to education while in work is a vital part of supporting our economic recovery.
Hence, there is a real need to re-focus our efforts on part-time and mature higher education.

Intelligence from a wide variety of part-time higher education providers indicates that the new system for part-time students has not been communicated very well. At the very least, some sort of campaign to explain the loans system is needed.

Part-time students are, of course, much harder to reach than young people in schools, but a concerted effort to work between FE colleges and other HE institutions is necessary. Employer networks need to be exploited and support from government is also important to get the message across that learning as a part-timer is not only possible but that there is help to undertake your studies.

Perhaps more importantly we need to re-assert that higher education is vital for the future of our society and our economy. We need to demonstrate the value of such learning to employers and to society at large, not only for young full-time students but for part-timers as well. If 70 per cent of the 2020 workforce are already adults then part-time HE study is even more important. We need clear policies which encourage employers and adults to undertake study and incentives and plans for institutions to ensure we have the skills our society needs for the future.

Universities UK has realised the seriousness of this issue and is leading a review of part-time and mature higher education. As a member of the working party I will be making these points very clearly.

Mary Stuart is Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lincoln

Mature students don’t fit the government’s narrow, utilitarian vision

Only a change in political philosophy will reverse the downward trend in part-time and mature student recruitment, says Aaron Porter

If you have followed the debate surrounding the reforms to higher education, and, certainly, if you have tracked the press coverage, you could be forgiven for thinking that it was just about full-time, undergraduate students. Of course, those of us working and interested in higher education know that the changes have been more significant than that and the impacts more far-reaching. The rise in tuition fees for full-time undergraduate students has grabbed all the headlines, but I remain convinced that it was the initial withdrawal of teaching funding for the bulk of subject areas across the arts, humanities and social sciences which is the root cause for concern. And it is this unprecedented cut to the teaching grant which needs to be the start point for any analysis of what is happening to part-time and mature students specifically.

As January’s UCAS application statistics indicate, we may have seen the beginning of a recovery in the applications from 18-year-old school leavers. The government has been quick to use this small uplift in school leavers applying to higher education as an excuse to justify their reforms, although they conveniently forget to mention that total numbers are still considerably lower than in 2011 and 2012. More shameful was the Conservative Party press release which greeted the UCAS figures: this had the audacity to accuse the Labour Party of ‘scare-mongering’ students away from higher education. Perhaps if the Tories spent a bit more time looking at the figures and less time trying to blame others, they may realise that the figures for part-time and mature students are incredibly worrying, and not worthy of playground blame-game politics.

From a narrow, utilitarian perspective you could reasonably have expected that the increase in tuition fees should have seen an uplift in applications from mature and part-time students. Quite understandably, the extension of tuition fee loans for a significant number of part-time students arising from the 2010-11 reforms was seen as a major step forward. Given that repayments are not made until earnings reach £21,000 a year, and that after 30 years the ‘debt’ is written off, the data would suggest that the majority of part-time and mature students are unlikely to pay off their tuition fee in full. But this requires a focused and calculating assessment of whether going into higher education pays or not. Now whilst members of the coalition government may well see higher education as a simple equation of outlay versus potential earnings, many students do not. And for many good reasons – age, family circumstances, prior educational experience, to name a few – part-time students and mature students are some of the least likely to view education through this narrow calculation.

To reverse this downward trend in applications from part-time and mature students, no amount of tinkering with policy will really suffice. Ultimately, this is a question of political philosophy. If higher education policy continues to be built on a market philosophy then certain groups of students will always find themselves at odds with a utilitarian judgement about whether higher education is worth it or not. Instead, we need to begin by making the case for higher education as an inherently good thing – of benefit to the individual, society and the economy broadly – and that teaching is worthy of the restoration of large parts of the funding it has lost. Perhaps then we might see a reversal of the market forces which do not serve all students, and certainly run contrary to the motivations of many part-time and mature students.

Aaron Porter is a higher education consultant working across higher education. He was President of the National Union of Students during the high-profile tuition fee debate of 2010-11.
We can do more to boost demand for learning

The Open University’s annual degree ceremonies are an inspiring reminder of the value of part-time higher learning. But there is a real risk of the UK falling behind the competition if we fail to give lifelong learning the support and recognition it deserves, writes RAJAY NAiK

There’s nothing quite like the Open University, and there’s nothing quite like one of our degree ceremonies. Last year we held 24 of them in 13 towns and cities across the UK, plus Dublin and Versailles, playing host to around 40,000 graduates and guests.

But it’s not just the scale and variety of our ceremonies that makes them unique – it’s the people who attend. Last year I was honoured to present the honorary graduate award at the Manchester ceremony, and it was a very real, very special reminder of how the Open University’s part-time online learning continues to touch lives across the country and around the world.

I can’t begin to describe how inspiring it was to see so many people from so many backgrounds cross the stage to collect their awards. The oldest was 82 years old, the youngest just 21, but although each new graduate was different from the next they all shared the same, very visible, emotions: jubilation, relief, a certain level of nervousness, certainly, but coupled with an overwhelming sense of pride. Together they formed a phenomenal tapestry, more than 600 individuals united by a common love of learning.

A love of lifelong learning is something that has always been worth nurturing, and never more so than now. With Britain’s role in the world under pressure, there has never been a greater need for an educated workforce equipped with the skills and qualifications they need to compete. Yet, for all the work that the OU and others do, there is a very real risk of the UK falling behind the competition if we, as a nation, fail to give lifelong learning the support and recognition it warrants and requires.

Crucial areas

Our economic rivals have already woken up to this fact. In Germany, for example, the incredibly successful Mittelstand model has been nurtured and boosted by an acceleration of growth in adult learning in crucial areas such engineering and vocational studies.

Compare this with the situation in England, where the first year of the new funding regime saw a significant decline in adult and mature learning.

The government made a hugely positive move last year, finally putting part-time students in England on a level footing with their full-time counterparts by offering loans to help with the cost of tuition. However, it openly concedes to struggling to effectively communicate that fact to the people who should have been its target audience – mature learners.

The government correctly invested in publicising the new arrangements, but it focused its resources exclusively on school-leavers. By doing so it fell into the all-too-common trap of thinking that ‘students’ is a synonym for ‘18- to 21-year-olds living on a campus and studying full-time’. It’s a common problem – earlier this month a top high-street bank refused to let one of our students open a student account because the OU is not ‘a proper university’ … we didn’t need to show them the OU coming top of the National Student Survey before they realised their error! Now we have got the funding correct, it’s time to get our communications and messaging correct.

Our experience shows that when you
communicate the system, demand can perform better. Rather than simply telling people about our courses, we invested in explaining the funding situation and highlighting the benefits of part-time education for people already in full-time employment.

At the Open University we launched a major marketing and communications campaign telling prospective students about the new loans scheme for England, ensuring they were not deterred from applying for purely financial reasons. The result? For 2012-13 registrations, 'new regime' undergraduate recruitment at the OU will be about 70 per cent of last year. Although this is obviously lower than under the old system, we’re far from disappointed. It is in line with our expectations and well ahead of the nationwide trend of a significant decline. Numbers have also remained strong in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Overall, OU undergraduate numbers for England will be at more than 90 per cent of last year’s numbers, incredible given the upheaval the sector has experienced. Postgraduate recruitment is actually higher than it was in October of the previous year. Most impressively of all, we also saw an increase in the proportion of students coming to us from a disadvantaged background. The rise was modest – around two per cent – but at a time when many fear that people from underprivileged areas are being priced out of higher education it was an incredible achievement.

Seventy-eight per cent of our new students in England have chosen to take out loans via the Student Loans Company route; five per cent have taken out an OU tuition fee loan; the remainder have paid up-front.

So investing in properly targeted communication with the right people can make a huge difference. But adverts and outreach is not the only way to get the attention of adult learners – and formal, accredited study is not the only way to provide them with an education.

Just before Christmas, the OU and 11 partner universities unveiled Futurelearn, the UK’s first at-scale provider of massive online open courses, or MOOCs. Futurelearn will offer free, world-class courses of the highest quality, delivered online to anyone, anywhere in the world.

The first courses will be available in the second half of this year. Building on the OU’s unrivalled expertise in online learning, the courses will provide another opportunity for adults to experience the joys of further study. But Futurelearn will also make the most of the OU’s many years of experience in moving students from informal study to formal, accredited qualifications.

This isn’t something that’s new to us – since our first broadcasts back in the early seventies we have been guiding people inspired by our programmes towards our world-class part-time degrees, and as technology and the media have evolved, so has our offering.

Some of our most informal openings are offered directly, such as through our YouTube presence, which is the most popular of any university or college in Europe. Others come through our partnership with the BBC – more than a billion people worldwide see our broadcasts each year. They’re the kind of passive learning experiences that don’t demand much of the viewer – you just sit back, enjoy and, of course, learn something in the process.

A desire to learn
But we don’t allow the journey to end there. Because those informal beginnings are often enough to spark an interest in a subject, a desire to learn more. And when that happens, we’re right there with a range of non-formal learning options that takes things up a level. Our OpenLearn website has received 25 million visits since its launch, and we recently achieved our 60 millionth download from iTunes U – proof that our most informal, ‘entry-level’ offerings create a real appetite for further study.

But we don’t let the journey end there, either. There’s a lot to learn from our non-formal offerings. But for students who want to take things on to the next level, we provide a clearly signed pathway that leads them into formal study, earning academic credit and working towards a recognised qualification.

And this isn’t just a theory, it’s something we’re doing every day.

Frozen Planet was a huge success around the world, a co-production with the BBC that attracted around 11 million viewers per week in the UK alone. We shipped 220,000 Frozen Planet wallcharts to homes up and down the country.

More than 330,000 people visited our Frozen Planet course pages on OpenLearn, finding out a little more about the science behind the series.

More than 8,000 of them moved from looking at OpenLearn to looking at the Frozen Planet module prospectus. And so many of them signed up for the module that we completely sold out its first two presentations.

Thanks to our carefully constructed, well-signposted pathway, more than 600 people eventually made the journey from watching TV on a Sunday evening to embarking upon formal study that is earning them academic credit.

All of this was achieved not through direct marketing but through careful signposting, tailored support and, ultimately, the attraction of a top-quality educational experience. By creating and feeding an appetite for learning, we were able to bring higher education to literally hundreds of thousands of people who had not experienced it before. And when an individual chooses to undertake study as an adult, it’s not only them who benefits – their families, their employers and their whole community too.

With families across the country continuing to struggle, it’s absolutely vital that Britain does not fall behind its competitors and rivals in the global race. Part-time educators have a huge role to play in ensuring this does not happen, but they will only be able to meet that challenge if potential adult learners are aware of all the options open to them.

We have to communicate the availability of part-time loans, the benefits of adult learning and the routes into study that are available. And we have to be clear that the opportunities presented by higher education remain open to all, regardless of their background.

If we do that, it will mean a more positive future for the country, the economy, and – above all – those proud, joyful graduates at degree ceremonies up and down the country.

Rajay Naik is Director of Government and External Affairs at the Open University
Colleges report ‘depressing picture’ in part-time HE recruitment

John Widdowson reflects on the emerging picture for mixed-economy colleges and argues that the government must do more to ensure the new loans system is understood.

Much of the recent debate on the shape and future of higher education has centred on the prospects for young people entering full-time courses directly from school or college. Although concerns have been expressed at the long-term impact of student debt and the potential impact on widening participation, any adverse consequences of the new fees regime appear to be seen as temporary or at least not causing fundamental change. The picture for mature and part-time students seems significantly less positive.

The recent HEFCE grant letter recognises the key role played by higher-level qualifications in social mobility but comments: ‘We need to understand better the HE experience of part-time and mature students’. On current evidence from the larger FE colleges offering HE courses (many of whom belong to the Mixed Economy Group), that better understanding will reveal a depressing picture. Most colleges in the Group have reported a significant decline in recruitment to their part-time courses. Although the availability of student loans was hailed as a major improvement in the lot of part-time learners, the reality appears to be very different. For a large number of courses, the removal of financial support from HEFCE has resulted in a sudden increase in fee levels: a 300-fold increase is not unusual. Many students have seen the prospect of significant debt as a major disincentive, a view shared by employers. They seem increasingly reluctant to support higher-level education for their employees at a time when other business pressures take precedence.

In the grand scheme of things, does this matter? For the individuals concerned, for whom part-time study may be the only realistic option and for employers who, in the longer term, will need employees with higher-level skills, it most certainly does. The recent HEFCE report (HEFCE, 2013/01) on destinations of higher education leavers from FE colleges shows the importance of part-time study routes for a high proportion (41 per cent) of college leavers. An earlier report on college recruitment of full-time students from widening participation backgrounds (HEFCE, 2012/20) shows the important role played by colleges in serving the needs of students less well-served by other parts of the system. Given the local nature of most part-time study it is likely that the college impact on bringing wider opportunities to part-time students will be even more significant.

These students have often been seen as having a lesser priority than their full-time colleagues. In a more diverse higher education landscape, this cannot continue. In the short term, more proactive steps must be taken by government to ensure that potential part-time students understand how the loans system will affect them and how it can be used to enable them to study flexibly and at a time and place to suit them. We must all, policy makers, providers and employers, recognise the important role part-time study can play in widening participation. Institutions must ensure that course structures are attuned to the needs of part-time learners, introducing flexible and affordable approaches to delivery which will benefit all students. At a time when the distinctions between full-and part-time modes become more blurred, such a review of the way in which colleges deliver their courses is increasingly necessary.

Finally, all of us need to recognise the value of part-time study: for the individuals who benefit directly and also for the economy and society as a whole. This will bring respect for learning (and those who learn) directly into the heart of our communities.

John Widdowson is Principal of New Durham College and Chair of the Mixed Economy Group, a working group of 34 colleges that offer higher education courses in addition to their further education provision.

It’s about changing the culture of institutions

By examining their own practices and assumptions, universities can do more to support the application and success of mature and non-traditional students, argues Suzanne Hallam.

It is difficult to predict the extent of demand for full-time higher education by mature applicants in the current cycle from application data to date. However, figures relating to previous years show a considerable fall in UCAS applications, particularly from older age groups – for example, an 11.8 per cent drop in applications from the 24 to 29 year age group. This fall has led a number of commentators to suggest that the rise in tuition fees has had a detrimental effect on mature students in particular.

While most higher education institutions welcome applications from mature candidates, such candidates may be further disadvantaged by the newly introduced student number controls, which limit the number of places HE institutions are able to offer to candidates who do not have A-level grades at ABB or strictly prescribed equivalents. As research by Stephen Gorard...
Lifelong learning should be a central pillar of our society

If universities believe there is no market for part-time education they will stop offering part-time courses – significantly limiting the availability of higher education, writes Rachel Wenstone

When the government announced that student loan entitlements would be extended to part-time students in higher education from 2012 – albeit limited to those students studying at between 25 and 75 per cent intensity – nearly everyone, the National Union of Students included, welcomed the news as a ray of light in an otherwise bleak policy landscape. What nobody anticipated was that we would find ourselves in a looming crisis situation, with widespread concern across the higher education sector that part-time student numbers are in grave decline.

The impact of such a decline must not be understated. If universities believe there is no market for part-time education they will stop offering part-time courses and focus on the more lucrative full-time market. This will significantly limit the availability of higher education study for those already in employment, with caring responsibilities, seeking to retrain or enhance their skills, or who simply have a preference for a more flexible mode of delivery. The vast majority of these types of people are those who are classified as ‘mature’ – adults in their 20s, 30s, 40s or older.

If people’s ability to access the education they need to adapt themselves to a changing economic context is limited, the consequences will be grave indeed, both for the economic circumstances of individuals and for the health of the UK economy as a whole. But there is also a social justice challenge here: lifelong learning must surely be one of the central pillars of a healthy society. If we care about child poverty, about social mobility and about caring for an aging population then we must also, de facto, care about lifelong learning.

To what can we attribute this drop? One issue is, of course, fee levels, which are now set in many cases pro rata to £9,000. We know that mature student applications through UCAS saw a significant drop of over 10 per cent in 2012 and we know the majority of part-time students in higher education are mature learners. The government invested a great deal of money – and Martin Lewis – in explaining the new fees and finance system to young learners, while mature and part-time prospective students have been left out in the cold. It is unclear what proportion of part-time students already hold a degree level qualification, which would make them ineligible for further student loans. For these students, fee levels will have an immediate and obvious impact.

Another issue could be the wider economic climate. Across the UK, everything feels less secure – employers could be cutting professional development funds, jobs feel more tenuous and workers are doing more work due to redundancies in their workplaces. Under these circumstances, weighing up the question of whether to take on part-time study may result in greater appreciation of the personal costs rather than the benefits.

Government should act to support – and fund – improved information and guidance for mature and part-time learners, while universities will need to consider carefully their access strategies and activities. In the medium term, we need to see a reversal of this damaging market in higher education, which encourages competition for full-time young students while neglecting one of the cornerstones of our higher education system – the lifelong learners.

Rachel Wenstone is Vice-President (Higher Education), National Union of Students
Everyone agrees, part-time higher education matters. In a turbulent higher education sector, at a time of major change, the opportunity to undertake university study on a part-time basis remains essential. Historically, around a third of all undergraduates in the UK study part-time so this is important. Compelling recent evidence suggests that part-time study is a universal good. It allows working people to up-skill and reskill to support economic growth in a fragile economy, promotes social mobility and gives ‘second chance’ learners a first-class opportunity to transform their lives. It benefits society, employers and, most of all, the individual student who will see a significant return on investment right from the first term of study. The recent Higher Education Careers Service Unit reports provide evidence that part-time students gain in confidence, get promoted, earn more, have more secure jobs and exhibit high levels of happiness. So why, as the lessons of 2012 unfold, does it look like part-time study could be the biggest casualty of change. The government supported part-time students by offering them loans for the first time and this welcome innovation might have made 2012 a good news story for part-time but, despite no longer having to pay their fees upfront, part-timers are staying away in numbers. There is a real challenge now to secure part-time HE for future generations. The lessons learned at Birkbeck in the 2012 cycle begin to point at how that might be achieved.

So what went wrong? As the dust settles on 2012, it’s clear that accurate information for part-time students was extremely hard to come by in the early stages of the cycle. The 2012 recruitment cycle was highly charged and complex as fees trebled and a new loan package was introduced. With everything changing, the institutions involved in the pipeline that brings students to study focused their energies on communicating the new information on fees and loans to the mainstream cohort of traditional school leavers. Part-time learners are usually outside of all the support structures as they are mostly not at school or college when they apply to university. They were the most non-traditional and the least confident group of students grappling with the 2012 changes, and the new loan regime for part-timers was one of the biggest changes introduced. Opening up government loans to part-timers brought them into the mainstream but the mainstream institutions struggled to understand and quickly communicate the details of the new part-time loans. The Student Loans Company worked hard and fast to gear-up its new service to part-timers but it was a steep learning curve and it took time before they were able to provide both accurate information and a service that responded well to a new sort of student asking new types of questions about new loan provision. Government communications with part-timers launched late in the day and were nowhere near as well resourced as those targeted at school leavers. Martin Lewis and his Independent Taskforce on Student Finance spotted the gap and worked hard to communicate the part-time story but it was May before the information was circulated and, even then, Lewis, a high-impact, high-profile finance journalist, found the national media uninterested. Poor communication with such a non-traditional cohort in the 2012 cycle certainly played a role. However, the downturn in part-time recruitment in 2012 may well turn out to be about much more than poor information. Recognising the need for good information, institutions like Birkbeck worked extremely hard to communicate with their students. When a year-one survey was undertaken in autumn 2012, 80 per cent of Birkbeck’s part-time undergraduate students who were eligible stated that they understood the group of students just above the income levels that get financial support. Birkbeck has lost London’s hard-working squeezed middle.
With part-time enrolment down 30 per cent, there is a challenge in securing part-time HE for future generations. Good information, combined with personal engagement, could be key to improving recruitment, writes Tricia King

confidence in the value of a degree is low. At Birkbeck, it mostly takes part-time undergraduate students at least three years to move from first enquiry to enrolment and then over half of them apply after July when they are clear that everything aligns in terms of work, money and family, to make study possible. The 2012 downturn may well reflect a reluctance by part-time students to act quickly. Unlike school leavers, they are not part of a well-established process that drives them towards university application and enrolment within a limited timeframe. They may well stall for a year or two to see how the change beds down. They may yet make the decision to study in 2013 or 2014. When fees have gone up before, part-time demand has always taken between two and three years to recover. At a recent Birkbeck open evening almost everyone in the room had enquired about study in 2012 and had either not applied or had deferred their offer to 2013.

For an institution like Birkbeck, one interesting and pleasing aspect of 2012 recruitment was the high levels of enrolment from within the poorest student groups. The government loan and Birkbeck’s generous financial support package encouraged the least well-off to take the leap. The biggest downturn is with the group of students just above the income levels that get financial support. Birkbeck has lost London’s hard-working ‘squeezed middle’.

What now needs to happen? One urgent issue is to find ways to publicise the cross-sector 2012 downturn in part-time recruitment. Full-time trends are easy to monitor as all students apply through UCAS. National UCAS data have regularly made headline news throughout the 2012 cycle. Part-time students apply directly to the institutions they wish to study at so official national data are only available retrospectively. Part-time enrolment data for 2012 will only become available in autumn 2013. That’s far too long to wait. It’s well known across the sector that part-time enrolment is about 30 per cent down on 2011 but that figure is not official so a quiet crisis continues to go largely unreported.

The institutions that manage the pipeline that brings mainstream students into HE need to develop approaches that are flexible enough to accommodate the needs of part-time students. These institutions show every intention of trying to do just that and need the sector’s support to get it right. UCAS is looking at how it can create broad information and advice about all types of university-level study. They are working to signal the diversity of HE study available.

At Birkbeck, the power and value of face-to-face information, advice and guidance for this non-traditional student group is compelling. As part of the intensive communications campaign, Birkbeck ran drop-in events for students every week throughout the cycle as well as offering pre-entry career advice and one-to-one support sessions with Birkbeck alumni. The conversion rate from these face-to-face encounters to the classroom was extremely high. Birkbeck is clear that, in the end, it is personal engagement that convinces a non-traditional learner to find their courage and start the course. It seems that good information, available on well-signposted websites and fed to students over a period of time, combined with the right personal interventions might be the recipe for successful recruitment. The inclusion of real-life alumni who have survived the experience and can describe the highs, lows and benefits seems to be particularly important.

Government ministers are undoubtedly well informed about the downturn in part-time study and are demonstrating interest and concern. They hoped for better outcomes from the introduction of loans for part-timers. They are paying close attention to what policy change or communication initiative might make an impact and improve the situation. The good news is that they have commissioned Universities UK (UUK) to convene a group to report on the future of university study for part-time and mature learners. Led by UUK President and Vice-Chancellor of Bristol University, Professor Eric Thomas, the group will look at issues of supply and demand and develop practical recommendations about how to safeguard the future of part-time study. The sector is lucky to have a committed and senior champion in Thomas.

Part-time higher education does indeed matter. As the news of the 2012 downturn begins to emerge, the HE sector is starting to acknowledge what may well turn out to be the worst bad news story of the changes. It is worth fighting for. The evidence of its impact on economic growth, employer success, social mobility and the individual student is compelling. We need to pay close and urgent attention before a valuable part of our sector is quietly lost forever.

Tricia King is Pro-Vice-Master, Student Experience, Birkbeck, University of London
Careers advice and guidance should be a lifelong process

Realising the potential of part-time study as a driver of widening participation and social mobility depends on access to good information, advice and guidance, says Tessa Stone

Part-time higher education has the potential to be a serious driver of widening participation and social mobility, particularly in the context of rising tuition fees. It provides a way into HE for groups such as young entrants who want to combine earning and learning, employees who want to retrain while maintaining the security of their current job, those who ‘missed out’ at 18 and are looking for a risk-reduced second chance, and a whole host of others for whom the flexibility of part-time suits their circumstances.

However, that potential will not be realised if these prospective students are either unaware that it’s a realistic option, or don’t fully understand how to access it. With more, and more complex, education and employment pathways available now, advice and guidance has never been more necessary in helping people make informed choices about the different routes to a degree.

There is no national, centralised resource for finding out about part-time HE, let alone seeking tailored advice on it. The National Careers Service site – insufficiently well-known among the target audience as it is – focuses largely on access to the job market and has very little information about part-time study; certainly nothing of use if you’re coming at it from a standing start. UCAS only includes information on part-time courses between July and September, and then only for those universities which wish to include the information, and applications have to be made direct to the institution. Simply reaching the endlessly diverse potential audience for part-time HE currently relies almost totally on serendipity, and even if you’ve thought about what you want to do, having to trawl endlessly through individual university websites is not an ideal scenario.

Government cannot introduce higher education policy change on the scale it has in the last three years and not fund a serious information campaign backed up by access to personalised guidance – not if it wants that policy change to bear fruit. Even though tuition fee loans are now available to part-time students, we cannot expect people to take the sort of leap of faith that often accompanies part-time study without being armed with the facts, and having had the opportunity properly to understand, assess and weigh up the risks and the benefits.

Ideally, of course, we should not be talking about audiences segmented in this way. Careers IAG, like learning, should be a lifelong process, with people supported in making the most appropriate choices from all the available options, whatever their age. However, I’d be happy for now with good-quality information and guidance on part-time HE being made available through the National Careers Service or any other existing national mechanism, and a national awareness-raising campaign so that people from all walks of life know that the option is available, and within their grasp.

Tessa Stone is Chief Executive of Brightside, an education charity which creates, develops and manages online mentoring projects, and Chair of the Bridge Group, an independent policy association promoting social mobility through higher education

It’s for universities to step up to the mark

The issues are complex but we shouldn’t wait for national planning. Universities need to decide where they stand and how they will enable participation by part-time learners, argues Geoff Layer

Since the 1963 Robbins report UK universities have been challenged to make higher education available for all who have the ability to succeed within it. Successive governments have sought to change universities through encouraging expansion, greater social inclusion, enhanced engagement with business and excellence in research. And it seems to have worked. In the last 10 years alone there has been an increase of over 400,000 students in higher education in the UK.

However, things are not all rosy. Over the last few years, despite growth in other areas, we have seen a significant decline in the participation levels of two types of less ‘traditional’ students: part-time and mature. If we are to have the sort of society in which we want people to achieve at the highest level and to be able to contribute fully we need to seriously look again at how these groups are treated.

Neither part-time nor mature students are a homogeneous group in the same way that school leavers might be and therefore the factors we need to address are much broader. The overriding concern is that, for too long, the UK higher education system has based itself on full-time students going to university straight from school – the ‘traditional student’ – equating full-time methodologies with those of part-time.

If we look at categories of part-time learners we can see a pattern of social and economic change which we have been slow to respond to:

- The liberal adult education movement developed by extra-mural departments. There was some great work undertaken but primarily the courses were heavily subsidised and were not a vehicle for social and economic improvement.
The day release programmes that were the foundation of many urban polytechnics. Metallurgists, engineers, bankers and accountants attended once a week to develop their professional competence whilst working in a firm the rest of the week. This withered as access to many of these professions became through full-time degree courses.

The distance learning which started life through correspondence courses. Many universities sought to provide opportunities but it is an expensive mode of delivery and not always appropriate as an approach to learning.

The ELQ change. Funding support was removed for those who had already been publicly funded to study at that level. Therefore, such individuals had to pay the full cost. This may have been unfair on some but as a general principle in times of cutbacks does seem reasonable.

The professional who wants to upgrade their qualifications to improve their career or work performance. Often this was achieved by following a course in which the fee paid was a relatively small contribution to the cost.

The changing funding model for HE which moved the cost of study from the state to the individual, meaning a much higher personal contribution.

So, in the light of these issues what should happen? There will be many different views because of the complexity of the issues, which is why I believe that we should not wait for a national planning response. We should simply recognise the diversity and make sure that we do not tie our hands through encouraging part-time study to be controlled by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and UCAS as they will want part-time to fit into their approach. Instead, we need to have a well-led campaign calling on universities to respond to the current decline and a greater recognition that study does cost but that it is beneficial to the individual, the economy and society.

In Wolverhampton we have a long and rich history dating back over 170 years of delivering part-time education across the industrial heartland. Our response to the decline in part-time and mature learners will be to develop a strategy to seek to change how and where we deliver our provision, with greater emphasis on those in the workforce as well as clear access routes.

Whatever we think about how our HE framework impacts on part-time students we have to remember that it is a framework which seeks to reflect equity as best it can and there are always going to be imperfections. This is one of the reasons why I welcome private providers to English higher education as they will challenge the culture we have of not wanting a planned system while, at the same time, blaming national planners when it goes wrong. It is for universities to step up to the mark and to decide where they stand in respect of these groups of potential learners and how they will enable participation.

Geoff Layer is Vice-Chancellor, University of Wolverhampton

Access to education should be based on talent not wealth

The new funding system appears to be deterring older, part-time applicants – and it’s not difficult to see why, writes Sally Hunt

In the first year that English universities were allowed to charge students up to £9,000 a year for tuition fees, there was a dramatic fall in the number of older people who decided to embark on a degree.

According to UCAS, those aged 19 and older were between 15 and 20 per cent less likely to apply for full-time degree courses at English universities in 2012, than the previous year when tuition fees cost £3,375 per year. This amounted to 15,000 fewer English applicants aged 19, and a further 15,000 fewer aged 20 and over.

The January admissions data gave us the opportunity to find out if there had been any improvement in the number of people applying to university. The overall number of applicants to university increased by 3.5 per cent between 2012 and 2013. However, that headline figure was misleading. While numbers had gone up slightly from the dramatic dip of 2012, they had not recovered to the levels they were before the higher fees came in. And it was clear that older applicants had been badly affected. Their application rates were lower than in 2010 and 2011. The number of mature students applying in 2013 stood at similar levels to 2012.

Statistics on part-time study, a very popular route for older students as it allows them to combine study with existing commitments like jobs and families, tell the same story.

Access to education should be based on talent not wealth.

The new funding system, which has seen the burden of paying for higher education shifted from the state to the individual, appears to be a significant deterrent to older, often part-time students. A quick look at the finances probably explains why.

A part-time student who starts university in 2013 will pay a maximum tuition fee of £6,750. To do a course over five years would set them back £33,750. If they earned over £25,000 a year, it would take them 24 years and five months to repay their total loan of £96,193. And that’s without maintenance costs. The average tuition fee for a full-time degree will be £8,507 in 2013. A full-time student who did a three-year course would borrow £25,500 and pay back £52,773 over 16 years and 11 months.

While younger people may have the stomach for income-contingent loans, perhaps seeing them as something to face further in the future, for mature students, who are often already working, debt is perhaps seen as a more immediate and alarming prospect.

We risk having access to education based on people’s wealth or acceptance of huge levels of debt, rather than their talents, which is not good for students, universities or the country.

Sally Hunt is General Secretary of the University and College Union
Contrary to some public policy assumptions, UK higher education is distinguished by a long tradition of part-time study. Never limited to the Open University or Birkbeck, many modern universities have a rich history of providing flexible provision, enabling adults who are working, and those bringing up families, to study for higher education qualifications that would otherwise be denied to them.

In spite of the history, the part-time penny has never really dropped with politicians or the media. Part-time is seen as a ‘special feature’ rather than as an integral part of the HE fabric. In the tortuous debates about funding and student finance that have bedevilled UK higher education for a decade, full-time has been the default position. Even Scotland’s much-vaunted policy of tuition-free higher education only applies to full-time students.

This has all added unnecessary complexity to an already complex system. Student finance systems are not holistic. Government media campaigns focus on full-time. Students who wish to make perfectly sensible life-style and learning decisions to mix modes of study – more common than is often realised – face a cliff-edge in terms of student support, particularly if they wish to switch from full-time to part-time.

When Parliament voted to raise the cap on fees in England in December 2010, it was the full-time package that was debated. The 2011 Education Act provided the primary legislation on which the part-time fee regulations were subsequently based. These allowed part-time students in England to access fee loans for the first time if they were new entrants to university in 2012, provided they were studying at 25 per cent or less and had not studied for a degree previously. However, the maintenance grant and loans available to first-time full-time students were not extended to their part-time peers. At the same time, part-time course grants were removed.

Repayment mechanism
To cap it all, a different repayment mechanism was applied, with part-time students required to commence repayment, not when they had completed their course, but four years after they had commenced study. From an administrative perspective universities were equally hide-bound. Part-time fees do not have to be charged pro-rata but are capped at 75 per cent of the full-time fee cap of £9,000. Few part-time students study in excess of 75 per cent per academic year but, even if they wanted to, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and Student Loan Company computers will say ‘no’.

In the second of a series of joint ventures with London Economics, million+ has published a new report analysing the economic outcomes of the changes to higher education funding in England in 2012. This includes an analysis of the 2012 part-time funding system.

Given the government’s then commitment to eliminate the structural deficit by 2014-15, the switch from direct funding to indirect funding of
higher education via the student loan book makes sense. Student numbers are preserved. The BIS budget is reduced by 60 per cent to be replaced by income from student loans. On paper, this reduces the structural deficit but, ironically, the government will have to borrow more. In practice, what is effectively an accountancy measure will have long-term economic costs that are potentially six and a half times more than the short-term Treasury gains.

The inflationary impact of the new funding system is one of several outcomes that are reviewed – important because tuition fees are included in the basket of measures used to assess the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Any increase in fees increases CPI but fees also impact on the Retail Price Index (RPI). By removing index-linking from a number of benefits from April 2013, the government has in part insured itself against the inflationary shock of higher tuition fees.

Nonetheless, the cost of state and public sector pensions will increase by £162 million and £42 million respectively. During the three years that it will take for the higher fees regime to cover all student cohorts, there will be an associated impact on CPI and RPI. As a result, consumers will face price hikes in regulated rail fares, water bills and second-class postage stamps (all linked to either CPI or RPI).

However, by far the largest inflationary impact will arise from the additional interest that the Treasury will pay on the £294 billion in index-linked gilts that the government has issued. These RPI-linked payments will also increase as a result of higher tuition fees. In 2012-13 alone, the Treasury is likely to have to cough up an additional £655 million in interest payments.

London Economics has also reviewed the economic impact of higher fees and the new student support system on both full-time and part-time students and graduates. Unlike full-time loans, the part-time loans now in place are likely to generate revenue for the Treasury. This surprise finding reflects the smaller size of the loans, the positive real interest rate charged and the fact that part-time students often combine work and study and therefore achieve earnings in excess of the £21,000 repayment threshold.

Overall, part-time students will be studying and paying-off their student loans at the same time with the Treasury as a net beneficiary. Arguably, this is not very different to the previous system when part-time students had to pay fees upfront. However, for all the fanfare about part-time loans, it does not seem like much of a victory especially when viewed against gloomy assessments of part-time participation.

**Serious reverse**

HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council for England) has concluded that part-time numbers fell significantly in 2012. Anecdotal reports suggest that numbers have tumbled by over a third. The potential for a serious reversal in part-time participation is now very real.

The fact that the majority of the resource made available by government to promote the new funding regime in England focused on full-time has rightly been the subject of criticism. But perhaps the mistake is the policy process (rather than the media message). If so, this is even more profound and one repeated by successive governments. When the default position is full-time, inevitably part-time becomes a political and financial ‘add-on’.

The 2004 HE Act introduced full-time fees of £3,000 in England from 2006, a matching loan scheme for full-time students and restored their maintenance grant – but totally excluded part-time students. It was not until after the 2005 general election that the then government gave any serious attention to part-time, time participation declined in 2011 in advance of the introduction of the 2012 system. We now need to ask whether the current system is fit for purpose. If we are serious about students being able to study on a more flexible basis, we need a holistic student support system and a funding regime that is predicated and informed by the challenges, academic and financial, of ensuring that university is not just for young people studying full-time. After all these years there is still a long way to go.

*Pam Tatlow is Chief Executive of the university think-tank million+.* Are the changes to higher education funding in England cost-effective? was published on 18 February. The analysis was undertaken by Dr Gavan Conlon of London Economics.
The pedagogy of debt: what higher education teaches us

Fear of debt is having a devastating effect on part-time recruitment and is prompting the development of radical free forms of higher education, says Mike Neary

The continuing assault on higher education by successive British governments is based on a pernicious form of lifelong learning: the pedagogy of debt (to use a phrase borrowed from Jeffrey Williams). Fees for undergraduate education in England, set between £6,000 and £9,000, are among the highest in the world. Debt creates a negative response from people whose lives are already undermined by credit card and loan repayments. As a consequence, the fear of debt is having a devastating effect on the numbers of mature part-time students applying for university.

Debt is more than a financial constraint; it is a powerful learning environment. Debt teaches students that money is the supreme social power enforcing lifelong work as the unavoidable fate of humanity, with ‘employability’ its most sacred principle. Debt indoctrinates students with the dogma of mainstream economics and the consumerist discourse on which it is based. Debt instructs students that the state will enforce the separation between manual and intellectual labour, maintaining an employment market for precarious jobs alongside professional work. Debt teaches those on low incomes, who may not earn enough money to repay their student loans, that they are already sub-primed for failure – even debt recognises that some will never escape the poverty trap, whatever the promises of higher education. Debt-dependent funding drives higher education providers to deliver what Paulo Freire termed a ‘banking’ education: depositing information for students to withdraw and exchange for vocational qualifications, crowding out courses based on criticality and critique.

But academics and students are fighting back. In the UK, the National Campaign against Fees and Cuts is a network of students, academics and activists who organise against tuition fees and cuts in funding for education and other public services. In the US, the Campaign to Abolish Student Debt demands that education be regarded as a public good; and shows how repayment regulations criminalise students by not allowing them to discharge their debts through bankruptcy. Students in Quebec, Chile and Colombia have led successful campaigns against increases in student fees.

As well as the campaigns against student debt, academics and students are establishing debt-free forms of higher education. The Social Science Centre, Lincoln, is a free higher education co-operative run by academics and students. All those involved with the centre can make a membership subscription based on their ability to pay, while academics working at the centre are not paid. With no formal connection to any university or higher education accrediting body, the centre makes its own awards at the same level as a university degree. These awards are validated through a peer review system involving the centre’s academic and student members. The centre operates across the city of Lincoln, making use of public spaces and community centres. The curriculum is co-produced by academics and students based on the principle that higher education is the production and representation of critical practical knowledge. The centre is a protest against government defunding of courses in the social sciences, arts and humanities which are now financed by student debt.

The Social Science Centre, Lincoln, is only one project amidst a transnational movement to create no-fee radical alternative forms of higher education. Other projects include: the Ragged University, People’s Political Economy, the Free University of New York City, the Free University Network, the Free University of Liverpool and the Edu-factory Collective.

Mike Neary is a professor of teaching and learning and a founder member of the Social Science Centre, Lincoln

The general attrition of university lifelong learning

The cost of study is now such that learning for pleasure or personal development is out of reach for most, writes Bill Jones

The decline in part-time student numbers is a matter of major concern to the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL). This decline cannot be separated from the general attrition of university lifelong learning itself, where, over recent years, many departments and units for lifelong learning have experienced closure or transformation into income-generating continuing professional development units. These two worrying circumstances have a number of shared causes, the two main ones being, on the one hand, funding cuts and, on the other, steep escalation of fees. As ever, data on part-time provision are patchy, but university providers report a drop in recruitment of between 30 and 50 per cent.

Cuts in funding take three forms: first, the simple removal or reduction in funds; second, the removal of protection for part-time study, allowing universities to hire funding to the more financially efficient support for young full-time students. The third cause is policy change, the consequences (sometimes unintended) of which can render part-time students ineligible for funding – the most damaging example in recent years being the infamous ‘ELQ’ rule which denied funding to any student who
had at some time studied at HE level.

The escalation of fees has of course been a high-profile issue. Traditionally, part-time HE fees have not been regulated, leaving providers to set their own fee levels to match demand and market sustainability. The introduction of full-time fees, from the post-Dearing £1,000 per year to the later £5,000 and now, of course, £9,000, did not in formal terms affect part-time fees. But the lack of protection for part-time funding led inevitably to universities scrutinising their part-time provision and deciding whether to charge pro-rata fees, or to vire part-time funded numbers to full-time. The effect has been to price many part-time programmes out of existence – a typical 10-credit evening class will have experienced a fee increase from (say) £85 five years ago to £750 in the new £9,000 fee regime. Add to this the much inferior financial support for part-time students (fees to be paid up-front; little other support) and it is clear part-time lifelong learning is unaffordable for all except for very specific vocational outcomes, and where employers may provide support.

Thus, the severe decline, and UALL’s deep concern. At the start of the current academic year a UALL meeting discussed possible responses to these matters. Members reported on how their programmes were recruiting in this the first year of the £9,000 fee regime. The resulting snapshot was illuminating.

The effects of the increase in fees were not uniform and were, in some cases, unexpected. Many areas of the curriculum were in what members described as ‘free fall’; in others recruitment was barely viable. Among the unexpected effects was the failure of many vocational programmes in, for example, management – perhaps owing to employers withdrawing financial support. Creative subjects – writing, art – were by contrast recruiting healthily. Where programmes were sustainable it was the result of universities not insisting on full pro-rata fees, but allowing reductions or a staggered progress to full equivalent fee income. Incidentally, UALL members from Scotland and Wales, where, of course, the fee regime is entirely different, reported recruitment at previous-year levels.

Therefore, the situation for part-time study in universities is serious, and the outlook bleak. True, loans are now available for part-time students studying at above a threshold level, but the evidence is that this will only be available to 50 per cent of students. Information for students on financial support has been found to be inadequate. A government survey found university websites often silent or actually discouraging to part-time applicants; some universities market full-time provision as accessible to full-time workers in their non-work time.

But even by the government’s most instrumental criteria – economic renewal, high-level skills, employability – the future lies in the working-age population, for whom part-time study is the mode of choice or necessity. The increase in enrolment for Open University courses is testimony to the importance to students of part-time study, and affordable fees.

The cost of study is now such that learning for pleasure or personal development is out of reach for most, especially those wishing to study in retirement. And, of course, the reduced Workers’ Educational Association and narrowly skills-based local authority provision simply widen the desolated landscape of adult learning. Provision may have all but vanished, but demand remains, and in some universities there are signs of a revival – unfunded, non-accredited courses, the initiative of a few committed individuals. We must do all we can to help these hopeful flickerings to spread through the sector.

Bill Jones is Honorary Professor of Lifelong Learning at the University of Leicester and an executive member of UALL.

We need more – and more accurate – information

We need more evidence on who is missing and what more can be done to support them, argue Andrew Rawson and John Storan

Defining part-time in higher education is not straightforward. Indeed, there is a move in the HE sector towards using the term ‘flexible provision’. Mature students do form the vast majority of part-time students as well as a significant proportion of the full-time student population at most universities and colleges. Relative proportions vary greatly at different institutions.

Who makes up the part-time student cohort? Entry qualifications range from many having prior experience of higher education, already holding a Bachelor’s degree, often re-skilling, many with financial support from their employer, to a substantial minority have no or much lower-level entry qualifications and are up-skilling and taking advantage of ‘second chance’ learning opportunities.

This suggests that while a substantial proportion of people on more flexible study patterns may well be from lower-income groups, with little family experience of HE, and taking up second-chance opportunities, this is clearly not true of all. More, and more accurate, information is needed.

Institutions continue to develop different part-time or flexible learning so they can enable all students, including those from under-represented groups, to take advantage of HE where full-time study may not be an option. There are many definitions of what constitutes flexible learning but at its heart is a desire to give the learner as much choice as possible in relation to when, where and how learning occurs, to facilitate their access to and success in HE.

Institutions have developed provision beyond the limitations and rigidity of the traditional full-time mode: using alternative forms of delivery and flexible pathways through HE; developing alternative programmes of study, such as foundation degrees; and addressing organisational practice to provide the necessary supporting infrastructure (for example, by extending opening hours of core functions and services). Technological innovation
A watershed moment in employer support for part-time HE

The increased cost of tuition fees means that companies expanding their offer will see a big increase in training spend, says Tony Ellender

Balfour Betty, the UK’s largest construction and infrastructure company, has been sponsoring its employees through part-time degrees for over 20 years. This reflects a long-standing culture, particularly in construction, of new entrants being supported on part-time higher education (and further education) courses. The value of part-time study to the industry is partly explained by the importance attached to relevant work experience (for the same reason, many full-time degrees include a sandwich placement).

For Balfour Betty, part-time study has predominantly been about learners straight from school. In recent years, joining a company and studying for a degree on a day- or block-release basis, while undoubtedly hard work, has been increasingly attractive to young people because of the rise in tuition fees.

Companies also like this route because, as well as securing relevant experience, new entrants can be introduced to the company’s culture.

There are two main methodologies for the delivery of this type of programme. First, trainees study part-time at a university alongside trainees from other companies, often attending lectures with full-time students. While this has the advantage that they gain the same degree as everyone else, and is fairly straightforward in terms of organisation and support, there is a lack of integration between academic study and the workplace, and opportunities to incorporate what is learned in the workplace are missed. Second, trainees attend a closed course designed by the company and accredited by the university. This means that the trainees are learning exactly what the company wants, and classroom and work-based learning can be integrated. However, it can be difficult to explain how such arrangements operate to parents and teachers, and, during times of economic downturn, the viability of such courses can be threatened.

We have now come to a watershed in these types of programmes. A number of companies in other occupational areas (such as the accountancy and professional services firms) are introducing part-time and bespoke degree options as the
impact of increased tuition fees is felt and apprenticeship-type routes become more attractive to young people and gain a higher status within business and government. In addition, corporate social responsibility imperatives, social mobility and the NEET agenda play a part in encouraging companies to consider alternative routes to technician and professional roles.

However, there are a number of factors that mean the future of this type of employer-supported learning is coming under review and will not necessarily increase. First, the increase in tuition fees means that these types of routes are even more in demand, whilst companies’ abilities to recruit more trainees are restricted by the trebling of tuition fees. In effect, those companies that expand these types of routes will also see a huge expansion in their training spend.

Second, the impact of loan eligibility for part-time students is yet to be clarified but also needs to be considered in relation to tuition fees. For example, will companies encourage their trainees to take out a loan for their fees – in which case there may be issues around taxable benefits? Alternatively, will they continue to pay them upfront and in full but reduce salaries to maintain the overall cost of employment?

And third, where companies have payback agreements and trainees who have had their fees paid leave during or shortly after they complete their qualifications, the size of what might need to be paid back will dwarf any final salary and will be very difficult to recoup.

The introduction of higher and Level 6 apprenticeships will further change the landscape as young people and their parents realise that these routes offer a viable route to professional development alongside the traditional degree. For companies, the funding model and financial costs of these routes are not yet totally clear and there will be further debates around status and terminology.

In any event, all this is so new that there is not yet an evidence base upon which to make decisions so companies are taking on a lot of risk whichever way they decide to turn and for many it will be an act of faith and related to what the company culture will best support. The fact that degrees tend to be taught in HE and apprenticeships in FE further complicates the future and may lead to either more collaboration or more competition.

There are very interesting times ahead for industry, education and young people as all three adapt to the rapidly changing world of part-time study.

Tony Ellender is Emerging Talent Development Manager, Balfour Beatty Construction Services UK

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**A one-size higher education does not fit all**

A long-term vision for a diverse and flexible sector can help counter negative reporting and boost demand, writes Libby Hackett

Universities play a major role in tackling inequality and breaking down barriers in society. This is no better emphasised than in part-time higher education, through which individuals are given the opportunity not only to study at a university for the first time but also, importantly, to retrain. There is no question that part-time study is central to the UK’s skills and employability agenda as it provides flexible study aimed at those already in the labour market. But it is the huge importance of part-time study which makes the recent decline in applications from mature students, which make up 95 per cent of part-time students, so dishheartening.

So why have applications been hit so hard? The persistent negative, baseless stories about ‘graduate unemployment’ and ‘graduate debt’ have led many to question whether university is worth the investment. It is important that, as a sector, we tackle the negative rhetoric which has emerged by better communicating the transformational role that universities play not just for the individual, but to the economy and society as a whole.

One of the key concerns for University Alliance is the lack of a long-term vision for universities and for the role of part-time education in the future economy. Politics is very much rooted in today. It is important that we focus on getting the here and now right for our students but it is equally important that we form our vision for the sector. As part of a diverse sector, individual universities need to be challenging and shaping their own mission and offer, but as a whole sector we must also have a collective mission and vision for the health and welfare of our nation.

Tomorrow’s economy will look completely different to what we see now. Already in the UK’s global knowledge-based economy, 80 per cent of new jobs are in high-skill areas. Massive growth in creative and digital industries means we will increasingly see business and the professions taking a high-tech and innovative approach within an increasingly global and competitive market. This means big changes to the way we work and the kind of work we do as a nation. If we are serious about ensuring that economic growth returns to the UK, we need to seriously invest in the growth of an innovative and creative workforce. Part-time education will remain a crucial part of any knowledge-creation system. Part-time education is an important route through which many can update their skill sets and expertise or retrain completely. We know that a one-size higher education sector does not fit all.

There are many examples of diverse provision in the form of part-time courses, accelerated degrees and work-based courses, and many other forms of innovative provision across our sector. These need to be the norm not the exception. Universities and government need to ensure that the value of part-time education to individuals and businesses is better communicated so that individuals and employers continue to recognise the possibilities opened up by part-time education. Our future economic prosperity demands it.

Libby Hackett is Chief Executive of University Alliance, which represents the UK’s leading business-engaged universities
Advanced Learning Loans:  
A whole-organisation risk management approach

Tuesday 19 March 2013, Birmingham

Loans for adults aged over 24 for Level 3+ courses in further education are being introduced in 2013.

NIACE has been instrumental in the development of the package of support, including the £50 million bursary fund announced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on 12 July 2012. Our members have asked us to go beyond the briefing sessions that are provided to look in detail at practical planning implications. In order to support the sector to prepare for the introduction of loans, the Skills Funding Agency has allocated development funds to each provider. Providers may wish to use these development funds to support their attendance on this training.

At the training day participants will work with NIACE policy and research staff who have been working with providers across the learning and skills sector on their planning for local implementation of this far-reaching policy.

The approach presents a model to outline ways in which providers can undertake local analysis and assessment of risk, share risk-mitigation strategies and look at the longer-term impact of this policy, including embedding workforce change-management approaches.

This NIACE one-day training session is targeted particularly at current Level 3 and Level 4 providers.

One of the implications for providers is that it implies a different type of engagement with the learner, which becomes a more complex relationship, requiring different skills sets, with implications for the workforce and how they need to be equipped. (Provider)

It’s not only educating the person who is currently learning or will be going into learning and taking the loan out, it’s educating everybody else around them. (Learner)

Participants who attended the most recent 2013 training event said:

This training was informative and will benefit organisations.

[I] now see this [introduction of Advanced Learning Loans] as a positive opportunity as well as a challenge.

[It] raised many opportunities to take back [to my organisation].

For more information and to book places go to:  
http://www.niace.org.uk/campaigns-events/events/funding-adult-learning-through-loans-fall.  
Enquiries: events@niace.org.uk