

# Unheard: the voices of part-time adult learners

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**HEPI's previous published work on the decline in part-time students includes a collection of essays from people across the higher education sector: *It's the finance, stupid! The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it* by Nick Hillman (ed.) (2015).**

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## Introduction

This paper aims to promote a re-think about the decline in part-time higher education in England. Most part-time learners are mature students, and the oft-reported drop in part-time student numbers can be viewed as a proxy for the retreat of older learners from higher education. A succession of reports has been published identifying the dramatic loss of part-time numbers. Despite the persuasiveness of the quantitative data cited, policymakers have yet to reverse the decline.

The issue of disappearing part-time adult learners in higher education is important for individuals and institutions. Individuals miss out on developing their full potential, and their talents are wasted. Universities miss out by a loss of diversity in the student body, and through the contribution adult learners make to widening participation. Adults who study part-time are disproportionately likely to have characteristics associated with non-traditional and disadvantaged learners. If part-time learners are included, government claims about closing gaps in participation are untrue. The loss in part-time numbers equates to 17 per cent fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing higher education.

This paper uses little seen qualitative information from part-time adult learners interviewed for four research projects. The authentic voices identify policy solutions to the seemingly intractable problem of part-time decline.

The report by the Independent Panel to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, known as the Augar review, argues for flexible learning, bridging courses and greater financial

support for lifelong learning.<sup>1</sup> Politicians of all major parties recognise the importance of the need to support access to part-time learning. At the 2019 General Election, the Labour Party pledged to offer every adult the right to six years of free study, the Liberal Democrats proposed a 'Skills Wallet' of £10,000 to spend on education and training over a period of 30 years and the Conservatives pledged a 'new National Skills Fund' of £600 million annually, with an ambition to establish a 'Right to Retrain'. So all the major political parties recognised a need to stimulate more flexible approaches to lifelong learning, and through that to inspire new developments in part-time higher education.

In this spirit, this paper responds with a series of recommendations for universities and policymakers to arrest the part-time decline.

# 1. The voices of part-time adult learners

Since 2014, quantitative analysis of the dramatic decline in part-time student numbers (particularly affecting England) has been widely disseminated around the higher education sector. There has been a 61 per cent drop in part-time learners since 2010.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of them are over 21, and so the decline might be regarded as a proxy for the retreat from adults in higher education: 'The fall in mature student participation in higher education is primarily among part-time students.'<sup>3</sup>

Over this period, the proportion of part-time students in the higher education system plummeted from 40 to 20 per cent, with the Sutton Trust claiming 40,000 potential part-time learners had been lost from higher education.<sup>4</sup>

To provide some context, in 2017/18:

- there were a total of 193,000 part-time undergraduate students in England studying at a UK university;
- 84,000 students in England started a part-time undergraduate course at a UK university;
- more than one-in-six (18 per cent) undergraduate first-year students in England were studying part-time;
- over half (56 per cent) of first-year undergraduate students in England aged 24 and over were studying part-time;
- almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of part-time undergraduate first-year students in England were women; and
- almost half – 46 per cent – of people who started part-time undergraduate courses were aged 29 and under.

However, when comparing the 2017/18 data to that for 2011/12, we see:

- 60 per cent fewer people in England started a part-time undergraduate course every year;
- a 21 per cent fall in the total number of people going to university at undergraduate level;
- a 16 per cent fall in the number of undergraduate students from low participation areas; and
- falls across the entire age range – for example, there were 25 per cent fewer people in their twenties starting undergraduate courses every year because the number of part-time undergraduate entrants, who previously made up 45 per cent of university entrants aged 20-29, fell by half.

A number of reports highlight the problem, including research from the Higher Education Academy (now absorbed into Advance HE), Universities UK, the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, HEPI and the Sutton Trust.<sup>5</sup> These may have influenced guidance issued by the Office for Students, proclaiming an optimistic expectation of ‘a significant reduction in the gaps in mature student access, success and progression over the next five years.’<sup>6</sup>

The Augar report called for flexible learning approaches, bridging courses and greater financial support for lifelong learning to address skills shortages. What was missing from the Augar report was a student perspective on the issue, which would flag the need for more diversity in the sector to enable students to engage with different modes of learning to



suit their needs. The key concern of part-time students is that their chosen course is available in an accessible and affordable mode with authentic progression possibilities. They are less concerned than young full-time students with which type of institution they study in.

Analysts regularly point to the disproportionate impact of the decline in part-time numbers on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The issue is identified as one in which policies aimed at widening participation have produced unintended consequences, and manifestly failed students who happen to require flexible study opportunities rather than a full-time higher education experience.

There is widespread agreement that two factors contributed to this decade-long fall. First, the regulatory change tightening access to funding for Equivalent and Lower Qualifications (2008/09) prevented public funding for any course at the same level or below an award that a student already held. Secondly, the steep rise in tuition fees in England (2012) disproportionately affected older and part-time students. For adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, the higher education sector has appeared increasingly exclusive and less flexible. In contrast to regular headlines, participation overall has narrowed.

The unbalanced impact of policies aimed at widening participation can be illustrated in data trumpeted as positive news: the rise in 18-year old students entering higher education from POLAR 1 (the lowest quintile for young people's participation in higher education by local area).<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, this masks the fact that the gap from the most advantaged to

the most disadvantaged remains stubbornly persistent. Worse still is that if all learners (the 'invisible' adult part-timers) are included in the data, there are 17 per cent fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing higher education.<sup>8</sup> This is entirely due to the decline of part-time numbers.

Everyone in the sector should be aware of the scale of the part-time problem. However, looking at Access Agreements up until 2017 and more recent Access and Participation Plans, it appears most universities, other than specialist providers, have not been persuaded the issue is one of their major strategic priorities.<sup>9</sup> The part-time adult higher education market appears not to be fit for purpose and is certainly not contributing as it could to efforts to widen participation.

The reasons may be complex and interpretations disputed, but the result remains that the number of part-time learners continues to drop year-on-year – albeit with a small recovery for first-year undergraduates in 2017/18 due to increased uptake of apprenticeships – and policymakers appear unable to stop the haemorrhaging.<sup>10</sup> This is serious, not only for diversity across the sector but for the life chances of individual adult learners, who face a 'Hobson's choice' between part-time study and no study at all.

Should the rate of decline continue, part-time learners will be increasingly rare in England. The introduction of degree apprenticeships may mitigate the downward trajectory to some extent, but only for those learners seeking vocational higher education. Degree apprenticeships offer the flexibility of engaging with higher education via distance education, blended learning or block-release, but the (still new)

qualification is primarily targeted at 18 or 19-year old school leavers and is currently offered only by around 60 universities. Adult learners, especially those in locations remote from participating universities, may not feel a degree apprenticeship meets their needs.

The crisis engulfing part-time adult learners in England points to an impoverished future in which higher education morphs into a purely full-time experience for 18-year olds fortunate enough to be born in the right place, attend the right school and gain the right A-Level grades. No more 'second-chance' transformations, no more learn-while-you-earn, no more enriching learning with contributions from adults who can bring different life experiences. Flexible opportunities for those disadvantaged individuals who cannot study full-time may all but vanish.

How best to solve this? Successive reports of the decline in part-time numbers have thus far failed to prompt a sufficient response. Perhaps the numbers themselves have become problematic: faceless, abstract, depressing and disconnected and have failed to tell a convincing story or to offer a creative 'space' for alternative policy direction?

My fear is that political infatuation with the employability discourse around advanced skills for adults, as well as a series of muddled protestations about social mobility, have concealed the part-time issue. The key stakeholders who could amend policies and drive strategies to energise part-time learning in higher education are instead busily engaged in addressing other challenges, such as:

- the Teaching Excellence Framework, which has only recently recognised the need for discrete continuation metrics for part-time learners;
- the National Student Survey, which is insufficiently nuanced for part-time learners;
- the evaluation of widening participation initiatives in schools – millions of pounds flow into the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) but this ignores part-time adults; and
- anxiety about meeting student numbers, which translates in many universities to 18-year old ‘bums on seats’.

The sector needs to galvanise around part-time study opportunities. The very existence of the Open University, which celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> year as a part-time distance education university with a social justice mission in 2019 to be ‘open to all’, must not be perceived by the rest of the sector as a ‘safety-valve’, in Martin Trow’s words, permitting conventional universities to ignore or de-prioritise part-time study.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than reiterating yet more disheartening data, greater attention needs to be given to the voices of adults struggling to overcome barriers to studying part-time, especially the voices of those adults for whom full-time study is impossible. The Nobel Laureate economist Robert Shiller argues people’s actions are more often based on human interest stories than hard data.<sup>12</sup> Stories shape policy. Perhaps it is in these rarely-heard and forgotten voices that the government might find the ‘call to arms’ necessary to address the contemporary catastrophe facing part-time higher education study.

I have been conducting research with part-time adult learners for over five years and feel strongly that an evidence-led argument can be constructed from learner voices. This would help policymakers and university leaders, whatever their institution's mission, to understand the issues and address declining part-time numbers through a series of actions. The seldom-heard voices of adult learners who are, despite the odds, managing to study part-time, suggest arguments about social equity and flexibility of the student experience might offer a way forward.

Policymakers should recognise part-time higher education is an optional world in which complex individual student needs trump the homogeneity of institutional systems. Part-time students can feel peripheral, like tourists visiting higher education but who know they do not really belong. Adult learners are already juggling busy lives, they just need a university to acknowledge this. While much of the widening participation literature asserts students need to belong, part-time learners have told me the key issue is simply a need to not feel excluded or taken for granted in their university.

To offer some solutions to the part-time problem, I will draw principally on a series of research projects, structured as case studies, to exemplify issues using the authentic voices of part-time students.

- 1. What gets in the way? Life, money, inflexibility** draws on data from a sector-wide investigation across non-Russell group contexts with part-time adult learners interviewed for a report originally published by the Higher Education Academy.

- 2. What do we want? Clarity, inclusivity and signposts** utilises data about part-time adult engagement in (mainly) selective universities, from learners interviewed for a report originally published by the Office for Fair Access. This included students on the Foundation Year at the University of Bristol, the Social Sciences introduction at Birkbeck University London, community learning pathways into the University of Leeds and free informal online provision hosted by the Open University.
- 3. What can we do? Integrate skills and feedback to enhance confidence** is drawn from part-time adult learners interviewed for an ongoing scholarship project, *Access to the Arts in higher education for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds*, and interviews conducted with students from the Open University's Science, Technology and Maths Access module.

My argument is complemented with evidence gathered by doctoral students I have supervised and examined, and in scholarly evaluations of the Open University Access Programme I lead, on which there have been 30,000 student registrations since 2013.

The conclusions contextualise the personal dimensions of the part-time issue, reflecting the lost transformative opportunities. Recommendations are made to the sector that are linked to the institutional benefits of taking such civic responsibility seriously as well as to the potential impact for individual learners.

## 2. What gets in the way? Life, money, inflexibility

From interviews originally collected for a study funded by the Higher Education Academy, four key themes can be identified. They emerge from 23 interviews with part-time learners in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and a pilot study which interviewed 20 part-time learners in Wales. Most of the quotations have not been published before, but a minority (as indicated) included in the original report are re-used to shape the recommendations.

### i. Adults have missed out on higher education at 18 because they experienced 'life disruptions' and have no choice but to engage part-time as older learners

*I'm 38, I started a degree at 18 but that was horrendous – my mathematics wasn't up to scratch – they shouldn't have accepted me ... I suffered quite a bit mentally because of that ... now I'm in one day per week but I have to do many hours of independent study – I feel like I'm playing catch-up, fearing I'm going to underachieve.*

*It's bloody hard ... I wish I had done it when I was young ... I was naïve when I took it on. (Quoted in Butcher, 2015)*

*I'm in my 50s, with a family ... I left high school and just went to work ... but there was this thing in the back of my mind I could have done more ... if I could turn the clock back I would consider going full-time.*

*I was taken out of school when I was 15 and missed my GCSEs. Since then I have needed to work full-time and tried to study part-time, but stressful things happen when you get older. I got so far behind I became demoralised.*

These highly personal perspectives are absent from quantitative studies. They reveal the rawness of individual challenges which policymakers rarely confront. One achievable response would be that universities commit to work with their teaching and support staff to ensure that individuals' part-time starting points are recognised (an adult learner does not arrive as a 'blank slate'). Another would be that flexibilities are embedded in student workloads and assessments to prevent learners falling so far behind they become demotivated.

The research also reveals (as does Open University survey data) that part-time students have a range of reasons for studying, with many individuals balancing a mix of personal and professional motivations. For part-time adult learners thinking predominantly in vocational terms, it is less about getting a job (although that is true for some) and more about gaining a promotion or earning more money or enhancing job security. For those driven by more personal impetuses, notions of self-improvement and 'to prove I can' are prominent, although 'regret' also figures powerfully for those learners who missed out earlier in their lives.

## **ii. Costs associated with higher education in England are a significant disincentive**

*It's not feasible for me to give up work, I can't afford to go to university full-time. (Quoted in Butcher, 2015)*



*Paying rent or a mortgage impacts on people's ability and their decision to invest in part-time education ... in my late 30s, is it something that is going to have been worth the time, and the financial investment ... it's people like us who have taken the impact of the fees. (Quoted in Butcher, 2015)*

There is a desperate need for policymakers to consider the impact of the costs associated with higher education in England on learners who can only study part-time. The issues are very different to those around tuition fee loans aimed at supporting full-time 18 to 21-year olds. Part-time fees and the student loan repayment rules need to appear affordable to someone in their thirties who is worried about paying a mortgage or rent, worried about the cost of childcare and worried about the cost of personal transport. Part-time fees need to look like a safe investment for an adult learner from a disadvantaged background who is likely to be more debt-averse than an 18-year old from a wealthier background. There needs to be recognition from policymakers that any perceived or actual lost earnings will make part-time higher education look like a significant financial risk for an adult student, especially given fewer employers than in previous years offer financial support for part-time higher education study.

The issue of appropriate maintenance support is a significant issue for part-time adult learners. Part-time adult learners have reported to me the difficulty of accessing clear up-to-date information on maintenance support, which is unhelpful given their fears around the affordability of part-time higher education. Part of the problem is the complexity of what is available, varying greatly across the four UK nations.

For example:

- a potential part-time student in Wales receives (pro-rata) parity of support with full-time learners, meaning at 50 per cent study intensity a part-time learner can access a means tested Welsh Government Learning Grant of up to £3,000 (depending on household income) and a maintenance loan of between £325 and £2,825;
- in Northern Ireland, a part-time learner at a similar study intensity can access a means-tested fee grant of up to £820 and a course grant up to £265;
- in Scotland, part-time fee grant levels depend on intensity and tuition fee levels – at 50 per cent intensity, the maximum a student could receive (depending on the fee) would be £910; and
- in England, a part-time maintenance loan was introduced in 2018/19 (with the amount dependant on household income and study intensity) but distance learners are excluded, other than a small number who study at a distance as a direct consequence of a disability.

So the costs of higher education and the complex navigation required to access financial support affect decision-making by part-time adult learners and potential part-time adult learners.

### **iii. Institutions are reported as being thoughtlessly inflexible with their part-time students**

*A part-time student is not considered as a demographic in their own right ... you are just shoe-horned in, lumped*

*with the full-timers ... I'm basically too old ... it would be useful to categorise part-time students a little bit further.*

*The university in the evening is a ghost town ... you don't experience university as it should be ... more should be done to integrate part-time students ... you're at university, but on the very fringes. (Quoted in Butcher, 2015)*

*As a part-timer you don't feel as valued as the full-time students.*

*They had one lecturer where you being a part-time student was the biggest inconvenience to him ... he couldn't care less about you if you weren't based at his campus.*

*Currently we arrive at 5.30 just as the full-timers are leaving.*

These voices, of adults seeking to educate themselves, should prompt universities to act. Provision for some of the most vulnerable student groups in the sector needs to be much improved, if only to offer an equitable experience compared to full-time students. What is reported looks like second-class higher education, compounded by a sense that the availability of flexible opportunities is being reduced for adults who can only study part-time:

*I see less and less opportunity for people to study part-time – for some subjects you would only be able to do it full-time. Some part-time students are told they need to do a certain module but it is only available between 2pm and 5pm.*

**iv. However, the personal pride in engaging in part-time higher education should not be underestimated:**

*One of the things I missed when not studying part-time was the element of feeling like I was actually doing something to move forward.*

*It keeps my mind active, my kids look and say 'well if he can do it, we can do it'.*

*I sit with my kids to do my homework and help them with theirs ... I hope it rubs off on them, just showing that you're never too old to learn.*

The learners interviewed demonstrated an impressive appetite for higher education, recognising the extent to which they could be positive role models for their own children. They did not lack aspirational drive. However, the drop in part-time numbers suggests inadequate financial support and institutional inflexibilities contribute to deterring older adults from higher education.

### **3. What do we want? Clarity, inclusivity and signposts**

Guidance from the Office for Fair Access about Access Agreements recognised the fall in part-time numbers and encouraged universities to target resources at widening the participation of adult learners:

*All institutions have a responsibility to consider how they might work to support part-time and adult learners ... you should consider the different barriers mature learners may face in accessing, succeeding in and progressing from higher education.*<sup>13</sup>

In working with the Office for Fair Access to produce a report highlighting examples of effective practice, we noted adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are a key but all too invisible example of an under-represented group in higher education. There was also an awareness of intersectional disadvantage, in that adults seeking to study part-time are more likely to be white working-class or to be from certain Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds or to be disabled – and that as a result any sustained drop in numbers harms social justice, reduces diversity, and is, in the Office for Fair Access's words, 'deeply worrying'. This challenges official claims that participation has widened; it has, but only if young full-timers alone are counted.

A key challenge, in contrast to widening participation initiatives aimed at improving the attainment and aspirations of school pupils, is how to target and reach adults who are likely to be in work, or at home in caring roles or outside wider

societal structures. Adult learners have told me they do not lack aspiration – rather, they need inspirational role models to enable them to imagine that higher education is possible for them.

The kind of issues that regularly came up include:

- the paucity of clear information, advice and guidance relevant to the needs of adult learners (especially around fees and study pathways);
- the need for inclusive support which acknowledges the impact of time out of education, including confidence and understanding of academic language; and
- the need for signposted routes from informal free learning, to formal fee-paying credit-bearing learning to university-based provision.

For example, the University of Bristol's community-based outreach was introduced as an attempt to address the invisibility and inaccessibility of the University to local adults lacking conventional qualifications. A crucial approach was to co-design taster sessions with organisations already engaged with groups chronically under-represented at the University. These led to a Foundation Year with progression to undergraduate study. However, although interviewees appreciated an entry curriculum which relates to their prior experiences, they noted that after progressing to undergraduate study the feeling of not being a legitimate student returned:

*I'd been at home since I had children ... just to come outside was a big thing, but then to come into a university and then to be with academics, listening to lectures and seminars ... caused me quite a lot of internal anxiety.*<sup>14</sup>

Recommendations aimed at the sector included:

- offering a reduced fee and bursary as part-time adult students are often poor;
- recognising some students will feel they do not belong, will feel they are transitioning 'across separate worlds with no guidebook', and will progress as a small and isolated cohort – so support students with tutors who will continue the higher education journey with them; and
- using interdisciplinary approaches early on to match adult students' life experiences.

Birkbeck, University of London also reported part-time students with many overlapping widening participation characteristics. A possible 'London effect' was noted – many learners on their introductory programme had fled from conflict zones, and were seeking alternative pathways following educational achievement in their former country:

*I'd not finished [study] because of civil war in [country of origin] so I had to leave ... And I remember when I was here in the UK I felt this kind of piece of me missing, the fact that I never had the chance to finish my studies. So, I was fantasising about going back to university until I did it, and to me it was a big achievement. (Quoted in Butcher, 2017)*

Others reflected the classic position from adult education research of disadvantaged adults fearing higher education was 'not for the likes of them':

*I always used to say I'd love to go to university to my friends and they were like 'Hold on, you ain't even got GCSEs' and I was like 'I know' and that's what kind of stunted my operation, like looking towards university... And one night ... I got on a bus and I see it on a banner ... 'Night time university' I was shocked, I was thinking 'What is this?' so I had to find out what it was and, you know, best thing I ever did. I swear. (Quoted in Butcher, 2017)*

The diversity in classes was described as inspiring – with a plea for the benefits of diversity in higher education to be fully researched, so that curriculum development and assessment can be better aligned.

The University of Leeds is one of the relatively few universities to have retained their Lifelong Learning Centre, and as a consequence have a long-standing institutional commitment to support local students from low-participation neighbourhoods through a network of community-based volunteers. Part-time students are supported alongside full-time mature undergraduates in a specialist resource and social area, and part-time student numbers have risen to 2,000, bucking the national trend since fees rose. Their three-stage pre-entry framework includes links with non-formal community learning groups (with 50 learning champions drawn from those communities to challenge self-perceived barriers), part-time GCSE groups for adults and Foundation



preparation for undergraduate study:

*The teacher that actually taught us (community course) is the only person that ever suggested that any of us could even think about a university. And we didn't believe her for ages either, I don't think. I mean, she just mentioned it and then we went to the study day and it just made it seem possible cos it never had before. (Quoted in Butcher, 2017)*

*They basically put into perspective that people like me that went through the situations that I've gone through; they were really specific with their life stories and you could just relate to them and they just made you feel comfortable. (Quoted in Butcher, 2017)*

*Well they're just normal people like myself, like with children, and they're not, you know, I don't know who I think should go to university, but they were just more like me.*

Staff at the University of Leeds were aware that, often, part-time learners take a non-linear trajectory, dependent on random / chance encounters, and in the absence of institutions organising learning as tiny steps, 'life gets in the way' and learners disengage. Such students are perceived as being dependent on effective information, advice and guidance, but often they have received none since school, and it is not always available for adults. One student admitted they needed learning advice being confirmed 'again and again and again' as a result of carrying low expectations.

Some part-time learners at Leeds had experienced work-related training, but this was often regarded negatively. The message for institutions seeking part-time learners from disadvantaged backgrounds is that engagement with higher education needs to take account of complex personal needs and responsibilities, and go beyond the marketing spiel aimed at school pupils.

Since 2015, the Open University has offered, with its Social Partnerships Network, six free online badged courses, aimed at adults with no or low incomes. Branded as 'Part-time education for adults returning to learn' (PEARL), the website offered a 'go-to' one-stop-shop providing information, advice and guidance through an 'Advise me' interactive tool, and a suite of 15-hour courses: 'Supporting children's development'; 'Caring for adults'; 'Introducing practical healthcare'; 'Taking part in the voluntary sector'; 'Starting your small business'; and 'Planning a better future'.<sup>15</sup> Each course is designed to address known situational barriers of time and cost for part-time learners, and to circumvent institutional structures and processes. Signposting to higher education opportunities is embedded but not central. Evaluation suggest learners enjoyed refreshing career-related skills and deepening existing knowledge. They appreciate the availability of resources 'where universities are not'. However, for such adults the journey to undergraduate study is a long one – learner trajectories are disjointed, slow and haphazard. So, if and when policymakers implement changes affecting adults from disadvantaged backgrounds, patience is required before evaluating any impact on part-time higher education learning.

## 4. What can we do? Integrate skills and feedback to enhance confidence

Many of the 20+ part-time students interviewed for our scholarship project with adult learners on the Arts and Languages Access module at the Open University specified the personal significance of their time out of education (between ten and 40+ years), and the terrifying challenge of re-engaging with education at university-level. These quotations have not previously been published:

*Not sure I was able to study ... I left school 40 years ago ... a long time since I did any formal studying ... I wasn't even sure how study worked.*

*I've been a stay-at-home mother for 22 years ... it's so long since I've studied I wanted to make sure I still could ... I found it hard to even focus for more than about half an hour ... wanted to test myself out.*

*I left school in 1983 and I've never studied since, and I was really worried about my first piece of written work.*

Such acute concerns are easy to ignore if an institution's core demographic is an 18-year old with good A-Level grades. But approaches to engage adults in part-time higher education are vital for the individuals concerned:

*I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to study, to put in the hours ... understand the question ... I was struggling a bit at the start ... but when you get into it, it falls into place really, and then you realise you're prepared for the next level.*

*I've got two small children, so I thought I'd never have the time to study. Now, when they go to bed, I am excited to get my study books out.*

On the one hand, these stories may be considered a familiar trope from adult education research, with individuals committing to overcoming personal barriers that had prevented earlier learning. However, it is a powerful message to policymakers and university administrators to acknowledge that any study gap experienced by adults can amplify negative feelings of 'I will not be able to cope ... I am not good enough ... young students are brighter than me ... I will be like a fish out of water, an imposter'. Universities need to be encouraged to redesign their first steps into higher education:

*When you start off it was like being in a darkened room where you can't see anything and you're kind of groping around and bumping into this and trying to find your way because you can't see.*

Students on access courses reported great and palpable benefits in being helped to learn how to learn. Key was the support provided by the embedding of study skills, which enabled adults to explore the extent to which they can cope, and can succeed in higher education study:

*Realising what you have already done shows what you can do ... Knowing the support is there is like a comfort blanket.*

However, some students had to learn how to engage with their tutor after previous negative experiences in education:

*I was frightened of my tutor's first call ... I remember my old school days which didn't bring back very good memories.*

*I had never had a tutor ... I was afraid I was going to get into trouble for not doing stuff.*

In the context of a programme designed to offer a taster of higher education which facilitates entry into undergraduate study, it was noteworthy that students appreciated what might be termed an access pedagogy – materials designed to take students by the hand: to develop academic writing and essay-writing skills; to understand what a question is asking; to take notes efficiently; to plan effective time management; and to hone organisational skills.

*I've got a three year-old – it gets you in the habit of setting aside some time to study ... I did fall a bit behind when my son was ill and I had family commitments ... I did catch up – it just became personal determination to see it through to the end ... I've done so much in the past where I've started things and just couldn't finish them ... this time I really wanted to see it through.*

The adult learners reported these were not skills that had been explicitly taught in their previous education:

*If I hadn't had the access course, I don't think I would ever have gone on to an undergraduate course because I would have thought it's a lot of time and money to do something not very well ... I just would have thought maybe I'm not good enough.*

*I did access to see if I have the capability of writing essays, and would I really enjoy learning, bearing in mind that I'm working as well – was it all too much?*

*I'd no idea how to attack an essay ... sorry, how to approach an essay.*

Adults studying part-time needed to develop confidence in their own abilities to succeed and progress. For some, this comes transparently through supportive tutor feedback and facilitating personal resilience:

*It's given me a real boost of confidence that my brain's still working ... that I'm not on the downward slope. I am not as frightened about taking a course in the future.*

*I hit my teens and my academic life collapsed really, so my confidence dipped massively, and my brain had been stagnating. I signed up and it reinvigorated the love of learning that I hadn't had for about ten years. It built on things I may have missed at school ... I really want to get back on track with my life really.*

There is something to consider here for academic leaders reflecting on their university's civic mission:

*I'm 50 years of age now, a recovering addict – ten years sober. I work full-time and study in the library on my days off. I'm pretty kind of raw and new to learning ... it's hard but my confidence and my outlook has changed in life as well.*

These rarely heard voices complement key findings from interviews with 18 adult students taking the Science,

Technology and Maths Access module at the Open University. The quotations have not previously been published unless specified. These interviews led to three conclusions.

- i. The necessity for timely one-to-one tutor support, certainly at the start of the higher education journey** – this helps individual learners address the inevitable challenges posed by juggling competing calls on their time from work and home, and to address gaps in knowledge.

*I had a very good tutor who encouraged me right from the beginning, which was important to me as I have not undertaken any study for many years. (Quoted in Butcher et al, 2018)*

- ii. The integration of regular little-and-often assessment feedback** – this aids persistence, reduces fear and helps part-time learners become more assessment literate and appreciative that assessment should be embedded for their learning (and not merely of their learning).

*The teaching materials were structured in such a way that allowed me to slowly build up my confidence and capitalise. The optional activities are a case in point. (Quoted in Butcher, 2017)*

- iii. Integrate the material / skills that disadvantaged adults most fear** – for example, Maths for Science students gradually removing cognitive barriers through digestible chunks.

*I have made a comment to my tutor that for the first time*

*in my life I was actually starting to enjoy the challenge of maths. (Quoted in Butcher, 2017)*

*I even feel confident in helping my son do his Maths homework now. Before this course I would have struggled and would not have been confident in assisting him as it would have ended up making him more confused. (Quoted in Butcher et al, 2018)*

*I managed to sit a Maths test for a job interview and passed. This is something I would have struggled with before completing the course. (Quoted in Butcher, 2017)*

It is entirely predictable that adults returning part-time to education can be knocked back by poor grades – personal identities will be threatened and trust may not yet have been developed to give learners the courage to ask for help. To prepare part-time learners to succeed, institutions need to try harder to ensure those returning to education know how to learn, and to foster the development of personal resilience to counter inevitable vulnerabilities.

## **How did we get here?**

The year 2019 was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the highly influential *Final Report of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction* (1919).<sup>16</sup> This key policy document argued that a population educated throughout life was vital for the future of the country, not least in terms of developing a more intelligent citizenry with democratic values. It is worth reflecting how, in one generation, opportunities for part-time adult learners have been so diminished.



Policymakers' infatuation with 18-year olds and assumptions that higher education equates to studying away from home seem to have eroded the kind of flexibilities previously available for tenacious adults to slip into university (albeit studying part-time). In the UK, far more than in other countries, students are likely to live away from home and the quarter who do not are more likely to live at home and commute to study – with poorer outcomes, less engagement and lower satisfaction.<sup>17</sup>

Policies like tightening access to funding for Equivalent and Lower Qualifications, the steep rise in tuition fees and strict limits to maintenance support have reduced many of the transforming and empowering possibilities of higher education. This is a grave mistake, in part because of the moral case that higher education is a right for all who could benefit. It is also a mistake because adults introduce new learning opportunities and challenge 'passive group think' among 18-year olds.

A democratic society, now more than ever with the challenges of a country split by Brexit, needs as many of its citizens as possible to be encouraged to engage in higher education. Policymakers need to be more creative, proactive and enthusiastic about the benefits of part-time study.

This may seem common sense, but unless universities re-frame their approach to part-time adult learners, the problem will remain one of additionality – something to be done on top of a crowded menu of widening participation activities. Rather, policies could help nudge more universities to re-imagine their civic role in their communities. Talking to adult

learners and listening to the obstacles they have overcome suggests to me it is not inevitable that part-time adult learner numbers decline. Plenty of adults aspire to re-engage with education, but they are faced with changing their lives so much to fit into immovable university systems. These barriers include timetabling, funding and assessment, and represent a major disincentive. One small step would be to shift from assumptions about approaches to funding higher education which assume all learners are full-time 18-year olds, and towards metrics designed to value the flexibilities inherent in non-full-time higher education. This could help revitalise the part-time market just in time to prevent critical decline. Such metrics could be developed to evaluate the value-added to an adult learner who is studying while working, who may have entered with low prior entry qualifications or not studied for many years, or who is not seeking a first graduate job at 22. This would provide a far more contextualised understanding of the distance a part-time learner has travelled.

The crisis in part-time study is predominantly an English problem. Numbers have not dropped, or have dropped far less precipitously, in the other parts of the UK. Uniquely, the Open University serves the whole of the UK and thus experiences first-hand the impact of different funding regimes on student behaviour. In Wales, for example, the OU has seen a growth in numbers on its Access Programme, and on numbers studying at full-time intensity, as a direct result of changes in funding.

There are undoubtedly different political drivers in Scotland and Wales, and both benefit from the Barnett formula which results in more money and allows more generous funding

regimes. I fear a re-balancing of higher education funding priorities in England is necessary before any progress can be made to address the decline in part-time numbers.



## Conclusion

The policy focus around part-time higher education needs to shift. Adult learners need to be considered within the context of their busy lives, acknowledging their previous experiences and perceptions of education. Institutions could do more to address uncertainties about 'being a student', about understanding learners' reasons and motivations for studying and about supporting students on a trajectory of engagement with higher education. The guidance issued to institutions by the Office for Students identifies 'mature' learners as a disadvantaged group but leaves it up to individual universities to decide the extent to which they are a target group and whether any access or attainment gaps need to be addressed. This is not enough.

Policymakers could consider more explicit carrots and sticks. A start would be to reward financially those institutions which commit to attracting more part-time learners and supporting them to successful outcomes. Any 'carrots' should acknowledge what the learners themselves want out of their higher education experience to offer a more personalised and nuanced metric in relation to the context in which part-time learners find themselves. For example, in England, Access and Participation plans could be scrutinised by the Office for Students far more closely in terms of stimulating more effective part-time provision. Best practice in engaging and supporting part-time and mature learners could be identified and modelled for the sector.

The voices of those adult learners who have managed to buck the declining trend in part-time study suggest three areas in

which a re-thought approach might arrest, or even reverse, the drop in numbers.

### **i. Becoming part-time student aware**

First is a critical recognition across the sector that many adult learners are juggling personal, domestic and professional responsibilities and that, as a consequence, higher education is neither their only priority nor even their first priority. Half of the part-time learner respondents to the research for the Higher Education Academy did not identify themselves as students. Many had to study while balancing caring responsibilities; others described themselves as disabled or managing chronic health problems. One-third of the interviewees were the first in their families to enter higher education. Students in rural areas were isolated from peers and could experience transport difficulties limiting their learning opportunities. Ignorance about specific financial and academic support aimed at part-time learners remains a key obstacle.

Starting part-time study in higher education as an adult is unlike starting full-time study at age 18/19. The learning experience is not a simple continuation from school or college; it is rather a transition involving unforeseen re-balancing in relation to home and work responsibilities.

While some part-time students I have spoken with are raising their skills to gain enhanced employment, others are deliberately seizing a second chance ('finally doing it for me') or pursuing a subject choice previously not open to them. The menu of higher education opportunities needs to recognise the heterogeneous aspirations of adult learners.

## *Institutions*

Universities should personalise support for those who can only study part-time (and who are likely to experience unpredictable student journeys). The aim should be to acknowledge and meet individual needs, and not (unthinkingly) default to bending the learner to inflexible university systems. Supporting a genuine sense of student identity will help, so peers from similar backgrounds ('looking and sounding like me') should be visible in mentoring roles. This is imperative to challenge any perceived elitism which can lead to fears that 'higher education is not for the likes of me' or of feeling like 'a fish out of water'.

## *National policy*

- Central university admissions systems need to be evaluated to ensure they are fit-for-purpose for applications from part-time learners. This could be included in the Department for Education's review of university admissions practices (announced in April 2019) and Universities UK separate 'Fair Admissions Review' (launched July 2019).
- Clear and accessible information, advice and guidance needs to be available from a credible central source (and to be suitably promoted) to adult learners seeking a pathway to part-time study opportunities in higher education.
- The introduction of a Lifelong Learning Loan Allowance, including distance learning, could lessen the kind of anxieties about loan funding described by adult learners. Based on the Augar recommendations and picking up on some of the ideas in both the Labour and Liberal Democrat

2019 general election manifestos, it could provide support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, whatever their chosen mode of study. It could give adults in work, including graduates, an incentive to engage with higher education, especially if inclusive of all ages and accessible for single module study. To deliver added value, all UK adults should be eligible, and all graduates should be eligible for one year of additional funded study.

- Aligning an agreed version of the maintenance grant offered in the Celtic nations for the most disadvantaged part-time learners could have a positive impact on adults currently deterred from flexible study (in line with the impact of the Welsh Government reforms).

## **ii. Institutional flexibility**

Universities need to re-consider whose needs they are meeting.<sup>18</sup> Part-time learners consistently express concerns about inflexibility: especially in relation to timetabling, which defaults to assumptions that all students are full-time. Assessment systems also need to be reconsidered as many part-time students I have interviewed report missing formal assessment tasks due to work commitments. The challenge for universities prioritising full-time study is that too often structures fail to engage part-time learners – essentially they are an afterthought, meaning adult part-time learners have to adapt to systems not designed for them.

### *Institutions*

Universities should encourage flexible, accessible and affordable tasters of higher education to attract potential



part-time learners. They need to be low-risk for the adults concerned, offer rapid student-centred diagnostic feedback and deliberately bridge the formal / informal divide (whether in the workplace, the community or virtually). They should be designed to demonstrate higher education is not out of reach, and embed information, advice and guidance around financial support and what might be, for some, complex pathways to progression.

### *National policy*

- Reporting to the Office for Students through Access and Participation plans needs to demonstrate the extent to which pastoral support systems are sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of part-time adult learners.
- Greater flexibility, in a step-on, step-off system would offer adult learners the possibility of portability. This should reduce the drop-out rate and enable adults to envisage lengthy study breaks to enable completion.
- Proposals for increasing the availability and status of milestone qualifications at Levels 4 and 5 would offer adults a more accessible route to a higher education qualification.
- Ending the Equivalent and Lower Qualification barrier would provide more personalised opportunities to complete higher education and to meet changing employability needs.
- Strengthening flexible study choices by making accelerated part-time study (the alternative programmes offered by a limited number of institutions which teach across the

summer to enable mature career changers to graduate in four years and enter the workplace) subject to identical fee caps as accelerated full-time study (for which higher fee funding is available in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland).<sup>19</sup>

### **iii. Sector drivers**

For at least a decade, higher education discourse has been shaped by a one-size-fits-all model of full-time campus-based study aimed at 18-year old school leavers. Funding to widen participation – for example, the National Collaborative Outreach Programmes (NCOP) – encourages this by prioritising activities with school pupils. The model is unbalanced: many institutions are aware of the commuter student phenomenon and some turn a blind eye to those students who have to work significant hours alongside full-time study. The range of metrics contributing to the Teaching Excellence Framework appear to be designed solely with full-time students in mind, suggesting notions of excellence in higher education are inimical to part-time study. This is a crucial disincentive to any vice-chancellor considering enhancing part-time study. It is also noteworthy that a significant amount of part-time higher education that is still available is provided in further education colleges, and resourcing needs to recognise this and encourage future development at Levels 4 and 5.

#### *Institutions*

Teaching approaches need to be designed to boost returner confidence – regular feedback on authentic assessment tasks which evidence ‘You can do it ... you are good enough’ are vital to challenge long-held fear of failure. Part-time learners

enjoy applying their learning, they appreciate teaching which responds to (rather than ignores) the prior learning skills adults bring with them.

### *National policy*

- The language in which higher education policy is expressed needs to be refreshed to avoid defaulting to assumptions that all higher education students are full-time, and learners commence their studies at age 18/19. Greater inclusivity in language will mitigate the way some of the funding policies are framed, for example the millions of pounds going into widening participation interventions, which exclude adult learners seeking part-time study.
- Any proposals to increase post-18 education opportunities for all, including the neglected older non-graduates and the 50 per cent of 18 to 30-year olds not currently going to university, are to be welcomed if teaching grants are attached to disadvantaged students at the individual level.

Sadly, none of this is new. Over 40 years ago, the higher education literature assumed undergraduates were single, unfamiliar with employment and aged 18 to 22. A rare voice lamented the assumption that the world of students is a young world:

*Handbooks of advice for new students may classify their contents under headings of 'Sex' or 'Managing money', but the sections are unlikely to refer to the difficulties of maintaining a marriage or paying a mortgage.<sup>20</sup>*

Part-time adult students continue to be 'othered' by policymakers, and as a result extinction beckons for them in many universities. Recent policy changes – for example accelerated degrees, slight relaxing of Equivalent and Lower Qualification rules, degree apprenticeships – have tinkered at the edges, but the fundamental problem remains unaddressed. Access to maintenance support has not been to the benefit of all modes of part-time study, as those who study via part-time distance learning are still excluded. Re-thinking part-time higher education in response to the needs of learners would challenge the prevailing policy mindset that higher education equates to 18 to 22-year olds. There is a real danger that part-time learners are increasingly perceived via a 'deficit' lens – needing to be bent to fit institutional structures not designed with them in mind. Instead, policy needs to drive institutions to change, to respond positively to diverse needs and to value part-time study opportunities.

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In this paper John Butcher challenges policymakers and the English higher education sector to act urgently to address the decline in part-time higher education. Although the drop in part-time student numbers has been well-reported in a series of quantitative studies, the problem persists. The dramatic reduction in part-time learners disproportionately affects those disadvantaged adults with characteristics associated with widening participation.

This paper takes a different approach to the issue, drawing on qualitative data from interviews conducted with part-time learners to construct the story of the barriers, voiced in their own words. Their perspectives demonstrate the loss of transformative learning possibilities for adults who missed out at 18, and a loss of diversity in the student body.

Recommendations include: a call for universities and national policies to become more part-time student aware; a push for institutions to adopt far more flexible systems to meet part-time learner needs; and a plea for greater inclusivity in policy assumptions around students.

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