

PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

Part-Time and Continuing Education

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HOUSE OF LORDS DEBATE, PART-TIME AND CONTINUING EDUCATION, AND THE FUTURE OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY - BARONESS BAKEWELL, THURSDAY 5 JULY 2018

1. MillionPlus is the Association for Modern Universities in the UK, and the voice of 21st century higher education. We champion, promote and raise awareness of the essential role played by modern universities in a world-leading university system. Modern universities make up 52% of all UK undergraduates, and 37% of all postgraduates, with over one million students studying at modern institutions across the UK.

PART-TIME AND MATURE STUDY IN THE UK

- 37% of students studying a full-time undergraduate degree entered university when over the age of 21
 - Between 2010/11 and 2015/16, there has been a 58% decrease in the number of part-time undergraduate entrants at UK universities and FE colleges in England
 - The total number of mature students in the UK has declined by 20% since 2011/12
 - Modern Universities educate 78% of part-time students across the UK
2. For some courses, part-time and mature study have been highly important, if not integral, to their success. Nursing, in particular, draws a significant proportion of its students from mature and part-time learners. Many of these students seek to change their careers or enter the profession after having had young families to care for. Between 2009/10 and 2016/17 the number of part-time nursing students over the age of 21 fell by 49%, causing potentially serious workforce problems in the years to come. As modern universities educate 72% of all nursing students, this is of critical importance to NHS workforce planning.
3. The new fees and funding regime introduced in 2012 enabled sustained investment into the higher education sector for full-time undergraduates. However, the impact on part-time and mature study has been a particularly severe unintended consequence of these reform. The problem that was created has yet to be addressed by government.
4. The current funding system is set up best for school leavers who are entering university full-time at age 18/19, who are more likely to be more mobile, have far fewer commitments, and are less debt averse than students who may already have a number of financial commitments that make them less comfortable taking out a loan for academic study. Research undertaken in a recent MillionPlus study of mature learners provides evidence for this. This report¹ carefully lays out the challenges inherent in the current funding system with regard to part-time and mature study.

¹ <http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/policy/reports/forgotten-learners-building-a-system-that-works-for-mature-students>

WHY ARE THESE STUDENTS IMPORTANT?

5. The idea of having one or two jobs in the same industry for a working life simply does not reflect the reality for the vast majority of people today: the way we access education needs to adapt to this new reality. Particularly as people are living longer, our working lives are extended, but traditional forms of education (school, college/university) remain static in the minds of many and take up a smaller amount of our lives today than at any point in the recent past.
6. A modern 21st century workforce will need to constantly update its skills, to remain abreast of technological change. It is therefore vital that our higher education sector is able to provide the very best, and highest quality, part-time and flexible education, to meet the demands of the future. According to the most recent census data, around 20 million people in the UK working population did not have Level 4 qualifications or above (equivalent to an HNC or the first year of university). This is significant untapped potential.
7. It is also vitally important for social mobility and enabling access to higher education to everybody. Modern universities educate 69% of all students in England from the areas of the country with the lowest levels of higher education participation, as well as over half all BAME students – traditionally under-represented in the sector. These universities understand the value and potential of these students, and the ability to transform their lives, but also how hard it can be for them to access education due to adverse circumstances. That is why flexibility in provision is so important, and is only going to become more important, as lower skilled jobs lose out to automation.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

8. It is vital that the government appreciates the scale of this problem and moves to rectify it. Former government Ministers have admitted with candour that the changes in 2012 were a major cause of the current problems in part-time and mature study, urging the current government to find solutions.
9. With the current review into post-18 education ongoing, there is a great deal of hope that these issues will be addressed, and progress can be made. MillionPlus, however, believes that there are concrete steps that should be taken to start to seriously address this decline and make higher education more flexible and truly accessible to all.
 - Restore maintenance grants for students in England, so that potential students are not discouraged from part-time and mature study due to high living costs
 - Maximize the flexibility of the options in higher education, by moving away from only accessing by academic year, and enabling more credit-based learning, so that students can tailor study to their needs and around any existing commitments
 - Establish tuition-fee write-off for key sector workers, such as nursing and midwifery students, after five-years' service – to boost recruitment and retention

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