

million+ submission: UUK Review of part-time & mature higher education

Section 2: part-time and mature higher education

1. What do you think are the main factors contributing to the fall in recruitment to part-time undergraduate higher education provision, at a national level, in recent years?

million+ and the NUS recently undertook a major piece of research into the motivations, aspirations and experiences of mature undergraduates studying for first degrees for the first time. The research, which focussed on first-degree undergraduates, involved analysis of commissioned HESA data, an online survey of current mature students in HE and FE (which received 4,000+ responses), case studies of best practice amongst universities and students' unions and a series of workshops with mature students and academic and support staff. Findings and analysis from this research were published in *Never Too Late To Learn: Mature students in higher education* report, available via [this link](#). This submission draws on this research and therefore focusses on mature first degree undergraduates.

It is important to state at the outset that part-time and mature learners are **not** synonymous. Mature undergraduates are much more likely than their younger counterparts to study on a part-time basis but, whilst the overwhelming majority (85.5 per cent) of part-time students at UK universities in 2009–10 were mature, the majority of mature students (57.6 per cent) were actually studying on a full-time basis. There is a need for greater clarity about the focus of the UUK Review: part-time students and mature students or part-time students who are mature?

There is also a need to recognise that part-time study and full-time study are not binary opposites. In practice there is a good deal of flexibility in intensity of study and students can and do switch between modes. Universities report that mature students are more likely to switch from full-time to part-time or vice versa than younger students, according to work and family commitments and the number of modules that they have been able to study in previous years. This type of flexibility is not widely recognised by policymakers or the student support system.

Last but not least, it important to acknowledge that mature and part-time students are not homogenous. There is no universal mature or part-time student experience and age or mode of study are not necessarily the overriding influences on student life. Yet whilst mature students, their motivations for study and their experiences at university are diverse, there are some common tendencies which should be born in mind in the context of the UUK Review. Compared with young students mature undergraduates are more likely to study part-time and at modern universities and FE colleges, undertake online and distance courses, study education- and health-related subjects, to be juggling study and family responsibilities, to be from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, to have known disabilities and to obtain lower degree classifications than their younger peers. They are also less likely to complete their studies.

In relation to Question 1, there is no single reason for the substantial decline in mature and part-time enrolments but contributing factors include:

- **The increase in tuition fees:** Mature students are also known to be more debt averse than younger students so the headline increase in tuition fees will have acted as a major deterrent. Part-time enrolments fell in 2011-12 as well as 2012-13 so there are obviously other factors at work beyond the increase in tuition fees. However the degree of misinformation circulating in the press at the time is such that it is reasonable to assume there was some knock-on effect on part-time and mature enrolments in 2011-12 as well as in 2012-13.
- **Misinformation about tuition fee levels and funding options:** There is a great deal of misinformation circulating about the new higher education funding regime in England. Government communications following the increase in tuition fees in England were focussed on young students wishing to study full-time yet stories abound of students, parents and teachers who are under the impression that tuition fees need to be paid upfront. For part-time and mature students this effect has presumably been compounded by the paucity of investment in communications designed to explain the new fees and funding regime for mature students and those wishing to study on a part-time basis.
- **Wider economic malaise:** The wider environment is very challenging for prospective mature and part-time students. Unemployment remains above pre-recession levels and wages have not risen in line with inflation but the cost of many household goods has increased. Part-time students are now eligible for tuition fee loans but they are not eligible for maintenance loans or grants and this wider environment makes it more difficult to find the funds necessary to cover additional costs associated with studying such as childcare and travel. In addition, many businesses have reduced or eliminated training budgets as part of cost-cutting strategies. This, coupled with the headline increase in tuition fees, makes reduces the likelihood of direct employer funding for undergraduate level study.
- **Wider policy changes:** Many mature students we met during the course of the *Never Too Late To Learn* research told us that they had friends or family members who had been considering Access to HE courses but who had been put off by the withdrawal of direct state funding for people aged 24+ who wish to study for Level 3 qualifications. Some of this was linked to misunderstanding of the timing of the Level 3 loans policy (which is being introduced for 2013-14) but in a greater sense it linked to perceptions of risk. When Access to HE courses were co-funded, they were seen as low-risk pathway back into education which enabled adult learners to 'dip a toe in the water'; with the withdrawal of direct funding and implementation of a loan system Access to HE qualifications assumed much greater risk in the eyes of the students we spoke to and their friends and family, due to debt adversity and perceptions of risk.
- **A general negative narrative:** For any mature student, the decision to enter higher education involves a conscious weighing up of the potential benefits and risks, far more so than for the younger student who has always expected to go to university. Many students we met as part of the *Never Too Late To Learn* research said they had deep anxieties about being the oldest or the least

intelligent in the classroom before starting their course. They were also anxious about their ability to cope intellectually or emotionally with the challenges of higher education. The wider economic climate is very challenging and the broader narrative has reflected this. A focus on aspiration, opportunity and realising potential might help overcome some of the concerns that prospective students have about entering higher education.

2. What more might be done to communicate with potential learners about the value of part-time higher education, with a view to encouraging more people to take part?

There is a clear need for a cross-sector campaign to promote the value of higher education. This campaign would communicate the details of the new fees and funding regime to a broad array of audiences, thereby addressing some of the pervasive misinformation that is circulating. However it would also seek to inspire, highlighting the breadth of the opportunities that are available and the transformative potential of higher education.

Since the mature and part-time admissions cycle for mature bears little relation to UCAS deadlines this campaign should begin immediately as it may well influence the 2013-14 admissions cycle and our understanding is that BIS are keen to see this happen. [Parliamentary questions](#) tabled by Paul Blomfield MP reveal that there has been significant underspend on part-time tuition fee loans (£30 million against planned expenditure of £120 million) so it may be possible to via these funds towards a campaign.

Incidentally research by [million+ and London Economics](#) suggests that unlike the loans provided to full-time students, fee loans for part-time students are likely to generate revenue for the Treasury. This surprise finding reflects the smaller size of the loans, the positive real interest rate charged on them and the fact that part-time students often combine work and study and therefore achieve earnings in excess of the repayment threshold.

3. What is your understanding of the value employers place on part-time higher education provision? What role does employer funding/support play?

Employers are not a monolith and it is important to recognise that employer funding and support can be both **direct** and **indirect**.

Direct employer support may take the form of whole or part-payment of tuition fees. The *Never Too Late To Learn* research found low levels of direct employer-funding amongst mature students: just 5.2 per cent of respondents reported that they had employer funding, a notably lower level than found in the 2005-6 UniversitiesUK and GuildHE survey. It may be that our data was anomalous or that employer funding has plummeted since 2005 but the implication is that policymakers may be overestimating the levels of employer co-funding that is available.

Direct employer support can also take the form of support-in-kind for example through the provision of

study leave or options for working compressed hours or on a more flexible basis. This type of support is less well understood but can be just as important in supporting part-time and mature students. It is sometime offered with fewer conditions about subject studied and length of service prior to or following the completion of an award.

Many part-time and mature students who do not have direct employer funding or support, combine work and study and are therefore dependent on an indirect form of employer funding and support. Among the 2,482 survey respondents who were studying on a full-time basis and answered the question about paid employment 43.2 per cent were working part-time and a further 9.7 per cent were combining full-time work with full-time study. For full-time students the most commonly cited reasons for undertaking paid employment were to cover basic living costs (38.4 per cent), to cover indirect course costs such as travel and childcare (23.7 per cent) and to cover direct course costs such as books and equipment (23.7 per cent; N=2,475). The majority of part-time students were also working and studying: Three quarters (75.1 per cent) of the 1,423 part-time respondents who answered the survey question about work said they had a full-time or part-time job. For part-time students the most common reasons for paid employment were to cover basic living costs (47.5 per cent), a prior decision to combine full-time work and part-time study (45.0 per cent) and to avoid debt (21.6 per cent, N=1,410).

The importance of paid employment and indirect employer funding is clear from these statistics and the fact that survey respondents frequently reported experience of financial hardship, Without opportunities for paid employment, many part-time and mature students would not be able to enrol or complete their studies but some employers are more supportive and accommodating than others. Ideally, more employers would fund mature and part-time students directly, recognising the many benefits that higher education produces for individuals and organisations. In the absence of this ideal scenario, it is important that employers who employ self-funding part-time and mature students are as accommodating as possible.

4. Has there been a change in employer funding/ support in recent years and if so, why?

Very probably, linked to wider economic malaise, public spending cuts and organisational decisions about training and staff development budgets. Given the withdrawal of the Part-Time Premium and general (although not universal) increase in part-time tuition fees, it is worth noting that even organisations that have maintained training and development budgets at pre-recession levels would be able to support fewer people to study undergraduate degrees on a part-time basis.

5. How could higher education providers and employers work better together to help raise skills through part-time higher education provision?

Many universities have strong records and long traditions of working with employers to offer higher education programmes on a flexible basis. There is no clear evidence that the problem currently relates to supply of part-time provision but there are indications that employer demand has slumped in the wake

of the economic malaise discussed above and the new fee regime. The issues around employer demand would be best addressed by the Government.

6. What else should be done to improve the experiences of part-time and mature students? For example, through improvements to information and administration as learners come into the system or innovative practices in flexible learning?

The *Never Too Late To Learn* research highlighted the many benefits of mature participation in higher education for individuals and wider society. Mature students see higher education as a wonderful opportunity and the overwhelming majority (93.4 per cent) of surveyed mature students characterised their time in higher education positively. Nonetheless the research also highlighted some challenge around retention, attainment and finance.

Mature students are less likely to complete their courses: Mature student non-continuation rates are trending downwards but HESA performance indicators show that mature students are consistently twice as likely as young students to withdraw between the first and second year of study. There are many reasons why students of all ages suspend their studies or drop out of university but this is a serious problem

Mature students may also be less likely to obtain good degrees, Caution should be exercised in interpreting these statistics as they are based on a single cohort of young and mature students but whilst the mature students who graduated in 2009-10 were slightly more likely to gain first class degrees, they less likely to obtain 2:1s and more likely to graduate with third-class and unclassified degrees than young students. It seems reasonable to assume that variable attainment levels reflect the cumulative array of challenges that mature students can face but there may also be scope for improvement in the extent to which higher education supports the aspirations of mature students.

The *Never Too Late To Learn* research includes a number of examples of good practice amongst universities and student unions that aim to address retention and attainment and other common issues such as lack of confidence and feeling overwhelmed during the first few days of term. Many of these initiatives are not designed exclusively for mature undergraduates but are rather available to, and beneficial for, students of all ages. There is a strong case for best practice in these areas to be adopted more widely.

7. What policy changes at a national level might make a difference?

The *Never Too Late To Learn* research sets out 22 recommendations which we submit to the UUK Review. In addition, we propose the following:

A well-resourced and comprehensive campaign to promote the value of higher education: See

above. Since the mature and part-time admissions cycle for mature bears little relation to UCAS deadlines this campaign should begin immediately as it may well influence the 2013-14 admissions cycle.

Reviewing the withdrawal of direct funding for 24+ Level 3 qualifications: Mature and part-time enrolments have already dropped significantly but over the medium-term there is a risk that enrolments will fall further following the implementation of Advanced Learning Loans for individuals age 24 and above who wish to study for Level 3 qualifications. In the *24+ Advanced Learning Loans Impact Assessment* which was published in June 2012 BIS stated:

Our central estimate is that around 125,000 learners (starts) will go ahead with learning under this option in 2014-15. This represents 55% of the learners who would have been supported under option 1, and take-up of around 70% of available funding for loans. Our upper bound

In other words BIS expected the number of Level 3 learners to almost halve, compared to option 1 which was the continuation of the previous system. If the withdrawal of direct funding does deter adult learners to this extent then there will be a clear knock-on effect on adult learning in general and part-time and mature enrolments in higher education. This would be deeply damaging to the lifelong learning agenda and the UK economy and society and policy change would be absolutely essential.

Caution over ELQ: Caution should be exercised in relation to the relaxation of ELQ regulations that some in the sector having been pushing for. The new fee regime has exacerbated some of the challenges around ELQ participation but this is by no means the only factor contributing to the dramatic fall in part-time enrolments and given spending constraints there is a significant risk that funded numbers and student support would not be additional but rather diverted from first-time entrants to university. If the main issue relates to debt adversity and fee levels then the case for re-instating the Part-Time Premium is much stronger than the case for revisiting ELQ regulations.

A holistic funding and support system: Successive governments have focused on funding and student support systems for young, full-time students with part-time study a late add-on. When reviewing options for higher education funding, there is a strong case for a more holistic approach which takes into account the diversity of the student profile and participation by those who want to study for a degree later in life or on a more flexible basis. A holistic approach to student support would mean that students were entitled to pro-rata support according to the intensity with which they were studying,

8. What else do you think the review should know or consider?

The review must consider pathways into higher education amongst higher education of mature and part-time learners and the wider policy environment.

For any mature student, the decision to enter education or higher education involves a conscious weighing up of the potential benefits and risks. One of the major themes that emerged from the *Never Too Late To Learn* research was the need first for low-risk pathways back into education for mature learners who may well have had variable experiences at school, and second for these pathways to have clear progression routes. This covers Access to HE courses but also AS and A-Levels and vocational

qualifications such as BTECs as these are not just sat by 17 and 18 year olds.

More than half of the surveyed mature students who applied to university with Access to HE qualifications, A-Levels or Highers started studying for these qualifications when they were over the age of 24 and workshop participants frequently talked about how they had 'dipped a toe in the water' by enrolling for an Access to HE course or to study AS-Levels and then gone on to discover a love for learning and a whole host of other opportunities. There is a risk that the withdrawal of direct funding for Level 3 qualifications and the shift to a system of linear A-Levels and standalone AS-qualifications will deter people from returning to education, let alone higher education.

There is also a need for greater employer understanding of the diversity of the student body. Amongst big graduate employers there is general assumption that all undergraduates are aged 21 and studying on a full-time basis and for recruitment processes and strategies to be structured accordingly. Such strategies overlook the diversity of the student body or the depth of talent that exists within it and should be re-visited.

9. Would you be willing in be contacted to (please tick as appropriate):

- discuss the issues in this review further?
- explore possible case studies for the final report? For example, we are interested in good practice about engaging with employers, communicating with potential learners and delivering flexible learning.

If you ticked either of the above, please provide contact details below:

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