
One in three undergraduate students enter university for the first-time when they are over 21 – not that you would notice given the obsession of both media and politicians with younger students progressing to university straight from school or college at 18 or 19. This focus on younger students has been put into even sharper relief in the debate about the next Director of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) – now confirmed by ministers as Professor Les Ebdon, former chair of million+ and currently Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire. Ebdon (and, at various points, his university) have been relentlessly attacked by political

Review of higher education: in spite of the expansion of higher education and rising levels of attainment in schools, one in seven students admitted by these universities now come from less advantaged backgrounds compared to the one in six admitted 15 years ago. In suggesting that these institutions should aim for an intake similar to that achieved in the mid-1990s, Ebdon opened a floodgate of anxiety amongst Conservative backbenchers concerned that this would lead to the dumbing down of ‘prestigious’ institutions. Within days four Conservative MPs had set up a Fair Access to Universities Group (FAUG) and published a report which essentially repeated the mantra

University isn't just for young people

For those who really care about social mobility, it is the decline in applications by mature students, and not the appointment of Les Ebdon as Director of OFFA, that should be setting alarm bells ringing, says **PAM TATLOW**

commentators – wisely, education journalists had somewhat less to say – for daring to suggest that the Director of OFFA might use the powers already available under the 2004 Higher Education Act to set more demanding targets for some universities.

The universities that Ebdon (and ministers) have in mind overwhelmingly recruit younger full-time students. The figures quoted at a pre-appointment hearing of the House of Commons BIS Committee are revealing, and had been quoted by the outgoing Director of OFFA, Sir Martin Harris, to the Browne

that the fault lay with (state) schools and the subject choice of students.

For those interested in ensuring that people of all ages have opportunities for learning and progression, this emphasis on younger students is depressing. It also completely ignores the diversity of the student profile that is one of the features of UK higher education and which has been a key factor in promoting social mobility. Many of the students with whom FAUG is interested will progress to university anyway (although perhaps not to the universities which these MPs apparently value). In fact, the

January and February statistics from UCAS, the universities admissions service, suggest that MPs should spread their interest and concerns more widely.

The 15 January UCAS date is the deadline for applicants to be considered on an equal basis for admission to university and is not the deadline for applications to university in 2012. It is well-known that many would-be older students will apply much later and some will wait for the outcome of access-to-HE courses where results are only known in late August. Other mature students will be more interested in studying part-time and will apply direct to a university rather than via the UCAS system.

Decline in applications

UCAS does not break down the application figures by UK country and age but the January statistics reveal an overall 11 per cent decline in applications from mature students who want to study full-time compared to January 2011. This has to be set against an overall 6.5 per cent decline in applications from younger students. UCAS also suggested that there was a greater decline in applicants from advantaged, compared to disadvantaged, backgrounds. This is a somewhat doubtful conclusion. The UCAS analysis is based on application trends linked with local government wards – a relatively crude measure of disadvantage. In fact the UCAS ‘deprivation’ analysis is only for 18-year-old students. This group now makes up fewer than half of all university applicants, and experienced a far smaller fall in applications than others did. Applications from 18-year-olds fell 2.6 per cent year on year, versus 12.6 per cent for 19-year-olds and 11.4 per cent for those aged 20. Applications from those aged 25 or over fell by over 10 per cent. The February UCAS statistics confirm the January trends.

In reality, the impact of the new 2012 fees and funding regime in England will not be known until enrolments have been analysed in 2013. However, the decline in applications by mature students rather than the appointment of Les Ebdon as Director of OFFA should be ringing alarm bells among MPs and ministers. Mature students often come from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Any decline in the number of mature students studying at university is likely to undermine rather than enhance social mobility. This is why million+ and the National Union of Students have called on ministers to devote more resources to ensure that older prospective students are aware that they do not have to pay fees upfront.

Million+ and the NUS are also engaged in a mature students project, the results of which will be published in May this year. Currently, 4,000 responses from mature HE students are being analysed and a series of workshops are being held in universities in England and Scotland. Early survey results provide further food for thought for those who, along with NIACE, have raised concerns about the Westminster government’s decision to withdraw all public funding from Level 3 courses for those aged over 24 (see <http://shop.niace.org.uk/adults-learning-extra.html>). From 2013–14, these adults will be faced with paying much higher fees upfront or taking out a further education fee loan on the same terms as that offered in HE.

Around 62 per cent of respondents to the million+/NUS mature students survey have said that Level 3 qualifications were their highest qualifications before starting their university course. Interestingly, around 65 per cent of all respondents (i.e. those with Level 2 and Foundation Degrees as well as Level 3 qualifications) have indicated that they started studying for their highest pre-entry qualification when they were over the age of 24. This suggests that significant numbers of mature students in England will have to be prepared to incur an FE fee loan plus an HE fee loan if they wish to progress to university in the future.

At a time when demand from mature HE students appears to have been undermined by the new fees regime, many will inevitably ask whether the use of FE fee loans to replace funding for Level 3 qualifications is the best way of ensuring that university is not just for young people. Unlike HE fee loans, FE loans will have an overall cash limit rather than be governed by student number controls. No-one knows what will happen if, and when, the money is used up. For its part, the High Court has recently deemed that the Westminster government did not pay ‘due regard’ to the promotion of opportunity as required under the equality legislation prior to introducing the 2012 HE fees regime. It remains to be seen whether the FE loan policy will be subject to, and will pass, a similar judicial test in terms of age and other equality factors.

Pam Tatlow is Chief Executive of the university think-tank million+. The million+/NUS mature students report will be launched at the House of Commons in May 2012: www.millionplus.ac.uk.