

Rt Hon Dr Vince Cable MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills  
1 Victoria Street  
London  
SW1H 0ET

4 July 2012

Dear Secretary of State,

**Withdrawal of Funding for Level 3 and Access to Higher Education Qualifications for adults aged 24+**

We write to ask you to consider revising your Department's plans to withdraw funding from Level 3 qualifications learners over the age of 24+ from 2013-14. The Coalition's priority in cutting the deficit is well understood. However, as demonstrated in the recently published BIS equality assessment, the withdrawal of this funding and its replacement by a requirement that students over the age of 24 will either have to pay full-cost fees upfront or take out an FE loan, is likely to have a serious and negative impact on the number of older learners studying for these qualifications. This will have damaging consequences for those who wish to improve their qualifications and career prospects later in life and is likely to inhibit the up skilling required to ensure a more technically competent workforce which in its turn will contribute to economic growth. It will certainly also damage the progression and participation of mature students in higher education.

An analysis of HESA statistics included in *Never too Late to Learn*, a research report published by million+ and the NUS in May, confirmed that in 2010-11 one in three undergraduate students entered university for the first time when they were over 21. Million+ and NUS also surveyed almost 4000 mature students between October and December 2011. This revealed that the overwhelming majority of mature learners who progressed to higher education with Access to Higher Education qualifications started their journey by studying for these and other Level 3 qualifications when they were over 24.

UCAS application statistics for 2012 have consistently demonstrated a significant (11%) downturn in applications from mature students – much higher than for younger age groups. The participation of mature students makes an important contribution to the access agenda which Ministers have supported. However current evidence suggests that mature students are likely to be further deterred by the prospect of taking out both an FE and an HE loan, however progressive the repayment system.

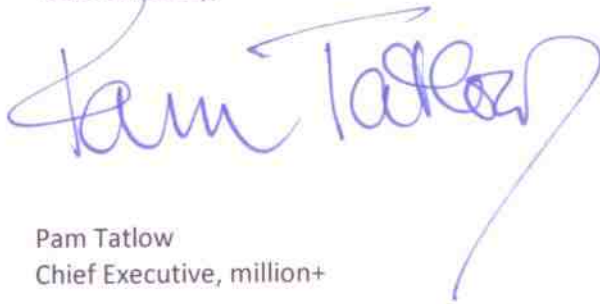
We now understand that regulations to introduce FE loans will be laid just before the Parliamentary recess, with a commencement date of 1 September. This timetable will provide no opportunity for Parliament to debate the timetable or the potential impact of these changes which we regard as significant.

In view of these concerns we think that it would be helpful if the Department could now consider the following:

- deferring the withdrawal of funding for Level 3 qualifications and the introduction of FE fee loans in 2013-14; the key merit of this approach would be to ensure that the full impact of HE loans on mature student participation in higher education in 2012 was fully understood, prior to the introduction of an FE loan system which may further deter older learners. It would also provide further opportunity to consider the operation of the new system, including by the Student Loan Company and any associated communications campaign
- continuing to fund Access to HE qualifications i.e. exempting these qualifications from any new system. These qualifications make an important contribution to access and social mobility; students include a majority of women returners and according to location, provide new opportunities for older learners from BAME communities

We should be very pleased to outline our concerns in person or provide further information that might assist your consideration of this important issue.

Yours sincerely,



Pam Tatlow  
Chief Executive, million+

Cc John Hayes MP, Minister for FE and Life-long Learning  
Professor Patrick McGhee, Vice-Chancellor, University of East London and Chair, million+