



## ***Keeping opportunities open: Addressing the decline in part-time and mature study***

Tuesday 28 March; 10:00am-11:00am;  
Committee Room 18, House of Commons, Westminster, SW1A 0AA

### **Introduction**

Recent studies have shown that there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of part-time and mature students entering higher education. Mature students are defined as those aged 21 or over when they enter higher education, whilst part-time study – naturally – covers courses that are spread over a longer period than their full-time counterpart.<sup>1</sup> A number of experts within the sector have called on decision makers to improve efforts in engaging with prospective students who may prefer part-time study options or may be returning to education at a later point in life. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students is committed to raising the concerns and issues facing students, and brings together MPs and Peers from across the political spectrum to campaign on improving the lives of students.

### **Key statistics**

- The number of part-time student entrants has dropped by 60% from 2009/10 to 2014/15
- During the same period, the number of mature students has also decreased by over 48%<sup>2</sup>
- 90% of part-time students are mature learners and 45% of these students in England are parents with dependent children<sup>3</sup>

### **Current situation**

There are currently a number of barriers facing part-time and mature students in accessing the higher education system. Research conducted by the Higher Education and Policy Institute (HEPI), in collaboration with a number of organisations within the sector, contributed to a report that outlined a number of reasons for this decline. A few of these reasons includes:

- Increase in tuition fees;
- Inflexible higher educational course design;
- Part-time and mature students tend to be more debt averse and less likely to take up student loan options, making loan-based student finance offers a considerable disincentive
- And, a lack of good quality information, advice and guidance for prospective students.<sup>4</sup>

The HEPI report identified a number of benefits to investment in part-time study, such as: contributing to economic growth, boosting productivity (particularly for employers), and driving social mobility.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, with regard to mature students, a study by MillionPlus and the National Union of Students found that mature learners bring significant life experience that helps to enrich and expand the nature of the student body. Furthermore, mature learners in particular can help to raise aspirations among their peer group and increase wider levels of progression.<sup>6</sup> There has since been a drive from bodies such as OFFA in encouraging higher education institutions to increase support, attract part-time and mature learners and offer flexible learning through delivering guidance.

Similarly, this decline in part-time and mature learning also draws on a wider issue of social mobility within the higher education sector. Experts in the sector have noted that the majority of part-time and mature learners typically come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and have non-traditional

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/299689/bis-14-516-national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/299689/bis-14-516-national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2016.04-Outcomes-of-access-agreements-monitoring-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/power-of-part-time.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2015/10/29/finance-stupid-decline-part-time-higher-education/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2015/10/29/finance-stupid-decline-part-time-higher-education/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Never\\_Too\\_Late\\_To\\_Learn\\_-\\_FINAL\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/Never_Too_Late_To_Learn_-_FINAL_REPORT.pdf)



qualifications.<sup>7</sup> Universities UK published a report titled *Working in Partnership: Enabling Social Mobility in Higher Education*, which put forward a number of recommendations including: the need for rigorous evidence-based approach in social mobility, and promoting the importance of flexible study, noting that mature students need to be part of the solution.<sup>8</sup>

## Next steps

There has been growing awareness of the need for new and innovative measures to attract part-time and mature students, at both an institutional level and Governmental level.

Recent amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill addresses the role of part-time and mature students; the first being a 'credit transfer' amendment, which aims to provide more flexibility to students in what and where they study as part of their higher education experience. This amendment, as Education Minister Jo Johnson MP noted, aims to "drive real change" in the way providers and students switch or change course through credit transfer. This could potentially offer new opportunities for both part-time and mature students. In addition to this, the Office for Students (OfS) will be expected to consider different forms of learning and promote social mobility, and increase opportunity for all students, including part-time learners.<sup>9</sup>

As an example at an institutional level, in response to this mature and part-time crisis, the University of Brighton has opted for offering more degree apprenticeships to students.<sup>10</sup> Degree apprenticeships were launched in 2015 and look to have the potential to promote local growth and development, meet employers' needs and could help institutions to reach widening participation and social mobility goals.<sup>11</sup> The University of Brighton believe that degree apprenticeships could play a role in engaging part-time and mature students especially those from under-represented backgrounds.

However, despite such examples, there is still much more work to be done in addressing future prospects for part-time and mature students. OFFA, for example, emphasise the responsibility on all institutions to consider how they can work to reverse this decline through offering an increase of flexible higher education study options such as two-year accelerated honours degrees.<sup>12</sup>

## Questions to consider

- How are higher education institutions encouraging and supporting part-time and mature students?
- What type of provisions is the higher education sector implementing to attract students from under-represented groups who traditionally tend to take up part-time study?
- What type of financial support is on offer for students that study part-time or who are mature?

**For details of our next event or to receive more information about the APPG on Students, please contact the Secretariat to the APPG on Students: [info@appg-students.org.uk](mailto:info@appg-students.org.uk).**

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/offa-topic-briefing-mature-learners/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2016/working-in-partnership-executive-summary.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/jo-johnson-higher-education-and-research-bill>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.theargus.co.uk/business/15164306.University\\_offers\\_more\\_apprentice\\_degrees/](http://www.theargus.co.uk/business/15164306.University_offers_more_apprentice_degrees/)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/degree-apprenticeships-realising-opportunities.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/target-groups/>