



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

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

The APPG met to discuss the decline in numbers of part-time and mature students. The meeting was attended by parliamentarians, students' union officers, and organisations and academics with interest in the higher education sector.

Jonathan Waller, Director of Information and Analysis at the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), opened the meeting with an outline of key figures about the decline in part-time and mature study, including examining differences across the nations. Jonathan went on to summarise recent research in the area¹ that attempts to explain the decline. Possible explanations included the economic downturn and austerity, a reduction in employer support for part-time study, changes to fees, and increasing Higher Education participation rates at younger ages. Specifically in England, changes to eligibility for financial support, loans, and funding are likely to have contributed to the decline.

Hana Faber from Birkbeck Student Union outlined her findings from asking students at Birkbeck why part-time and mature study might be difficult. She spoke about how students have concerns over affordability and 'being time poor'. A lack of available advice and being unsure what to expect from the course were also cited as causes for the lack of popularity of part-time and mature study.

Nicola Simpson, Acting President at the Open University Student Association, spoke about who part-time and distance learners are, with many Open University students finding distance learning their preferred model of learning due to work, caring responsibilities, health problems or disabilities. Nicola spoke about the main barriers for those considering higher education, with financial barriers including simply not being able to afford to study, lack of access to financial support from Government or employers, or not recognising the value of the investment in higher education. Other barriers include practical difficulties such as geography and juggling commitments, and informational barriers due to a lack of information about part-time higher education and the financial support available. Nicola argued that to combat the decline in part-time study, increased financial support and recognition of the importance of lifelong learning is necessary.

In comments from the floor, attendees discussed:

- Funding differences between full-time and part-time study
- The risks of 'investing in yourself'
- EU trends in part-time and mature study
- Provisions and trends for mature medical students
- Retention rates for part-time and mature students
- Credit transfer

For further information, please contact Alexander Lee, Political Affairs and Advocacy Manager, National Union of Students (alexander.lee@nus.org.uk).

¹ HEFCE report, 'Pressure from all sides':

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201408d/>

Universities UK study: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2013/power-of-part-time.pdf>