



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Note of speaker meeting: “Flexible pathways: part-time, adult education and life-long learning”

Speakers:

Peter Horrocks, Vice-Chancellor, The Open University

Martin Doel, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

Ruth Spellman, Chief Executive, Workers’ Educational Association

Rt Hon Lord Willetts, Former Minister for Universities and Science

Peter Horrocks opened the presentations by discussing the decline in the numbers of part-time students, he stated the percentages of decline, noting the worsening position of students in England and attributing this to the rise in tuition fees. Mr Horrocks described the impact that the drop in part-time numbers could have on a number of government priorities such as social mobility and productivity.

Mr Horrocks went on to explain how effective credit transfer arrangements could help to improve retention and expand attainment of a higher education qualification by a wider range of students. However, he noted that for credit transfer to be truly successful it would need the backing of the full sector and a more supportive regulatory framework within English higher education. In this vein he then went on to explain how the Open University owned online learning platform FutureLearn should be expanded to provide transferable credits for each online course completed.

He closed his remarks by referring to the recent positive policy interventions by government with the extension of loans to part-time students and consultation on maintenance loans to part-time undergraduates.

Martin Doel also began his presentation by commenting on the condition of part-time learning. He raised the issue that part-time students are likely to be immediately repaying their loan whilst they are still studying, this could be a particular consideration for older learners who have additional financial responsibilities. This is compared to full time 18/19 year old students who will consider the loan as a long-term future investment and who will not of course begin to make payments whilst still studying.

Mr Doel moved on to focus on how part-time is provided for within the higher education system, commenting that these courses are often seen as additional to the core activity that institutions are created for. He argued that therefore part-time learning lends itself more towards specialist institutions. He suggested that a turnaround for part-time learning might come via the apprenticeship levy, where employers are required to take on apprentices to work and study in tandem. However he warned that this could also be a potential threat, if degree apprenticeships are seen to be sponsored degrees by employers rather than content within the study being adapted with their specific employer in mind. He argued that the interaction needs to be much more constructivist.



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Finally, he concluded that partnerships between further education colleges and higher education institutions are generally very good and often longstanding. However he suggested that in those partnerships one partner is always more vulnerable. If senior leadership within a university changes then it's possible, and has occurred, where the direction of the institution is altered, as a consequence the local colleges and students which rely on the university as a validating partner are left very exposed.

Ruth Spellman set out the role of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA); she described the importance of upskilling and reskilling the adult workforce and explained how the ethos of the WEA was that adult education can lead to multi-generational transformation. She noted that often the way to reach disenchanted young people is through their parents.

She went on to describe the lack of employer spend on training and education of their workforce, suggesting that this began in following the recession but doesn't show any signs of recovery. Ms Spellman described the 17% productivity gap as reported by the Office for National Statistics, which also estimates that by 2020 a third of the workforce will be over 50 and by 2020, 80% of new jobs will be in occupations which require people that are highly skilled or graduates, and of the 13.5 million new jobs created over the next ten years only seven million will be filled by young people. Therefore she argued that as a country we need to get much more serious about skills and that needs to involve transforming education for adults. Looking in particular at the needs of those who don't have the pre-entry requirements to go to college or university and offer flexible and accessible education through life. She argued that this could be a more appropriate approach to solving the skill shortage and productivity issues of the present and future than a narrow focus on degrees or apprenticeships.

Ms Spellman applauded the work done by the Association of Colleges and The Open University that are including employability skills in the education courses that they are offering. She closed her remarks echoing Martin Doel that the most important aspect of any partnership between third sector education organisations and universities is that they are equal and neither partner is considered inferior. This would create a more productive relationship and ensure that the right information and advice are going to potential students.

Lord Willetts opened his comments by describing the shock at the speed in which part-time student numbers had fallen. He explained that this was unexpected and unintentional; many of the policies that were put in place were not expected to have this effect. He explained there was probably a misrepresentation and lack of understanding with those over 18 or 19 years old. He described the ease with which the government has to reach those of school age but the difficulty in reaching adults, a much more dispersed group. He recounted examples of many visits that he attended as the Minister where the students he spoke with understood the financial repayment system but the parents that were with them did not. Lord Willetts followed these comments by noting that another issue for part-time and adult education is the strength of the belief in focusing on early years learning. This emphasis has cross-party support and has shaped government policy on education.



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He concluded his comments by stressing the significance of online learning, in particular of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). He noted the increase of buy-in by institutions of these and suggested the great potential for adult learners and more flexible learning, complementing a more flexible and changing workforce, if they were to be associated with credits for university level qualifications.

Q&A and discussion

The discussion began by focusing on **credit transfer**. It was noted that credit transfer did exist between many institutions but it was done on an annual basis rather than by module. A challenge to modular credit transfer was vocalised, courses can be difficult and time consuming to compare and sometimes the links between universities and colleges were missing and therefore meant universities were unable to recruit possible students. Further uptake was supported but it was suggested that this would need to be pushed forward in line with government priorities, such as a possible link between the transfer of credits and increasing social mobility.

The conversation then turned to **changes in the world of work**, following the recession there had been a greater reluctance by employers to release their staff to study. It was argued that this was a clear contributing factor to the decline in part-time numbers. This led to a discussion about what **community structures** were in place to reach people and make them aware of where opportunities did exist. Attendees pointed out that there are big differences between students that study locally and commute and those that follow the more 'traditional' route of moving away at age 18. They also raised the issue that perhaps in this sense the way that part-time learning is sometimes considered an afterthought to full-time learning is not helpful in trying to reach these local students.

It was suggested that often institutions of all types are understandably preoccupied with the difficult day to day running of their business and therefore the **partnership work** can often fall by the wayside. There is an opportunity for the **third sector** here to help create links between potential students and courses. Attendees agreed that the focus on **early years learning** has been one of the possible reasons that there is less funding for older students, even between 16 and 18 where students receive less financial investment than those aged between 11 and 15. While it was understood that the education system was segmented by age for valid and useful reasons, it was felt that some sort of strategic or holistic overview of education for all ages would be useful.

The discussion concluded with a short appraisal of the forthcoming **apprenticeships levy**. The mood for this was generally positive and there was an interest in being able to use the levy as a training opportunity for university non-academic staff. It was suggested that this might be possible long-term, but as with most government programmes the initial focus would be restricted and any use of the levy in this way would need to be suggested in line with government priorities and not cause a public relations issue for the three million apprenticeship target.