

# **Closing the Learning Gap – Opening Up Opportunities for Adults**

## **Written evidence submitted by the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL)**

### **1. About UALL**

The Universities Association for Lifelong Learning is a UK-wide body committed to enhancing life-long learning in higher education and to the promotion of opportunities for mature students. This includes part-time, work-based and other forms of flexible provision. For more information see: <http://www.uall.ac.uk/>

### **2. Respondent**

This submission is made on behalf of the Association by the Chair of the UALL England Strategy Group:

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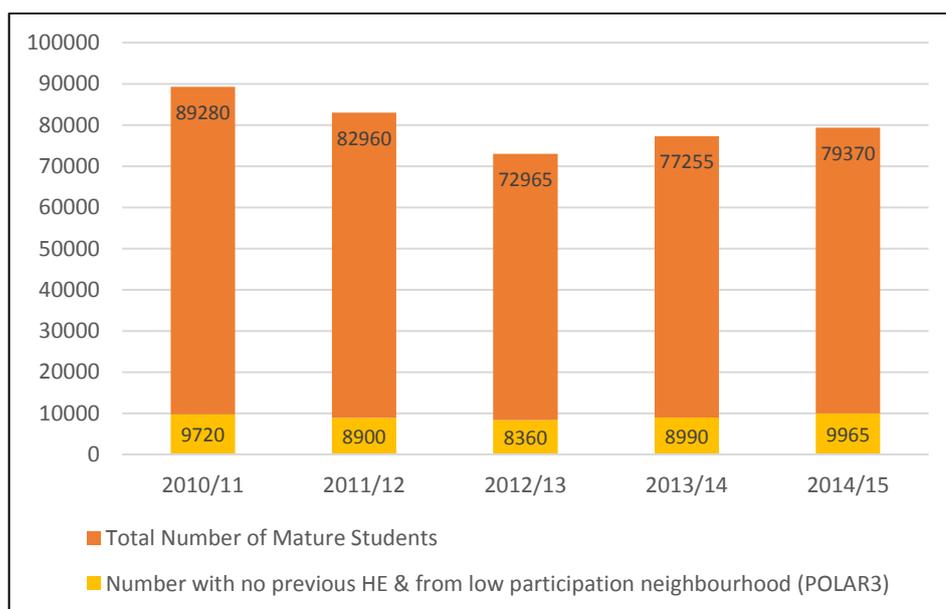
### **3. Executive Summary**

- There is significant provision of adult learning in higher education, including work that is focussed on widening participation.
- Numbers of part-time entrants to HE have fallen sharply in recent years and continue to drop. Full-time mature entrants have fallen less steeply and began to increase from 2013/14.
- The HE sector has strong policy drivers from government to increase participation in higher education and this includes addressing the needs of adult learners through part-time, flexible and work-based provision.
- Factors that motivate engagement of disadvantaged adults in education include the accessibility and relevance of provision, the quality of the learning experience and effectiveness of support in all aspects and at all points of the learning journey.
- The following are proposed as major areas for policy development:
  - a. funding for adult students that is individualised and portable across different levels and types of learning;
  - b. reversal of the decline in adult and further education through new funding and policy measures;
  - c. improved provision of information, advice and guidance.

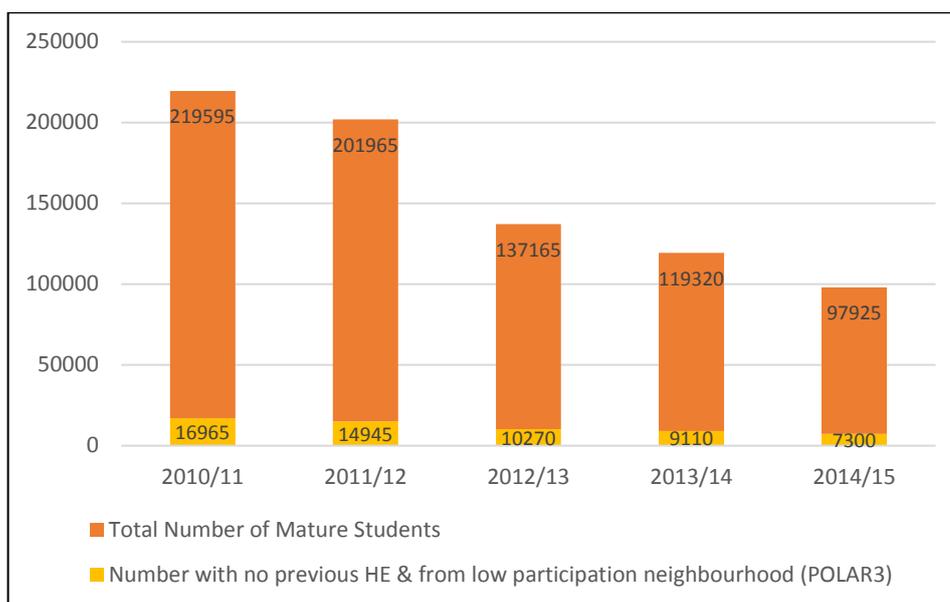
#### 4. What is working well/ not working well?

- 4.1 Higher education is a significant provider of adult education. This includes learning opportunities that engage with those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds such as:
- outreach activities, including community-based learning, that targets under-represented adult learners and is designed to promote progression to higher education by raising awareness and aspirations;
  - open-access programmes of short courses, accredited and non-accredited, that provide opportunity for adult learners to participate in higher education;
  - preparatory and foundation level programmes, including those that focus on adults and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, that develop academic skills and capabilities for progression to degree-level study;
  - degree, sub-degree and credit-bearing programmes that are specifically designed to engage with adult learners including various forms of work-based learning (Foundation Degrees, Higher and Degree Apprenticeships) and modes of delivery that are chosen to increase accessibility (part-time, distance and blended);
  - participation by adult learners across the whole portfolio of higher education programmes.
- 4.2 The HE sector also supports adult learning and widening participation through research into effective practice and the professional training of educators.
- 4.3 Data in the following tables indicate a fall in full-time mature entrants to HE in England to a low point in 2012-13 that has been followed by a gradual uplift in numbers, especially for those from the least advantaged backgrounds (POLAR3 Quintile 1). The decline in part-time entrants, both overall and for disadvantaged learners, has been much more severe and relentless with an overall drop of 44.6% between 2010/11 and 2014/15.

England Domiciled Undergraduate Entrants: Full-time Mature Students



## England Domiciled Undergraduate Entrants: Part-time Mature Students



4.4 The serious fall in part-time entrants has been examined in several recent reports: UUK (2013) “The Power of Part-time. Review of part-time and mature higher education” <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2013/PowerOfPartTime.pdf>; Bright Blue (2015) “Going Part-time: Understanding and reversing the decline in part-time higher education” <http://www.brightblue.org.uk/images/goingparttimereport.pdf>; HEPI (2015) “It’s the Finance Stupid! The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it” [http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/part-time\\_web.pdf](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/part-time_web.pdf). There is broad consensus that multiple factors are involved:

- student finance: the shift to tuition fee loans and accompanying rise in the cost to the student of higher education; exclusion from access to loans for students (except in designated subjects) who have already achieved equivalent level HE qualifications; exclusion of bite-sized learning from access to loans; exclusion (at present) of part-time students from financial support for maintenance;
- broader economic environment: long term-financial pressures on the least advantaged households; pressures on employers so that they are less able to release staff for study or provide financial support;
- adult learning opportunities: cuts in adult and further education that have reduced the availability of key stepping stones to higher education e.g. community-based learning, GCSEs;
- information: lack of accurate information on the part of potential students and their influencers on the possibilities of part-time higher education, progression pathways and eligibility for financial support;
- access and flexibility: constraints on the availability of study opportunities at times and in locations that are accessible to part-time students;
- supply: market-led changes in provision in some HEIs that have resulted in reductions in the part-time programme offer.

4.5 The current policy environment is increasingly giving attention to adult learners in higher education alongside widening participation. The recent White Paper includes measures to extend maintenance loans to part-time learners from 2018-19; establish financial support, also through loans, for those progressing to postgraduate study and broaden the range of subjects for which learners with equivalent qualifications will be eligible for student finance.

Correspondingly, there are clear expectations that higher education will address the needs of adult learners through greater flexibility in credit transfer and delivery of condensed, two year degrees whilst engagement with Higher and Degree Apprenticeships will create opportunities from which adult learners could benefit. The Office for Fair Access, similarly, is requiring HEIs to give attention to mature and part-time learners in Access Agreements.

## **5. Motivating disadvantaged adults to engage in adult learning**

### **5.1 Case Study: The University of Wolverhampton**

Wolverhampton uses the strap line 'University of Opportunity' to illustrate its commitment to supporting learners across the lifespan to access education. This means not saying "no" to people who want to study and providing multiple ways of addressing the challenges of adults participating in learning. These include:

- networks with FE colleges and adult education providers, combined with clear progression routes, to support learners who are not ready to enter their chosen field of study;
- the creation of community-based learning centres to enable people to access programmes locally, working with partners to make the steps into education easy and supported;
- incentives to study for employed adults through fee reductions (union members);
- mapping and accreditation of workplace training (armed forces);
- establishment of specialist training centres in companies to create learning cultures and education for each level of the workforce;
- new programmes aimed at parents of children in the University's Education Central Multi-Academy Trust schools which will focus on the ways parents can support their children as well as addressing their own educational needs.

### **5.2 Case Study: The University of Sheffield**

The University of Sheffield has completely overhauled its provision for mature first time entrants to HE in the last three years. Through the creation of twenty new full- and part-time degrees with foundation years, realistic progression pathways into the wider University have been made available to a wide constituency of adult learners who would otherwise be unable to achieve standard entry qualifications to the institution. These new pathways are supported by the Department for Lifelong Learning's non-accredited Discover courses, run in partnership with external community partners and Sheffield Museums, which seek to raise aspirations, build confidence and provide appropriate advice and guidance for adult learners seeking to make the transition from community based learning opportunities into HE. In delivering these wider opportunities, the University partially mitigates the decline in availability and take-up of formal and informal learning at FHEQ level 2 which creates a particular barrier to progression into HE for many disadvantaged adults.

### **5.3 Case Study C: The Open University**

The Open University is a leading provider of free, open educational resources (OERs) and is championing their use as a route into formal learning that helps to build confidence and encourages learners to reflect on their aspirations and study goals before beginning formal study. This is achieved through collaboration with a range of organisations to support learners to begin and progress their study journeys in ways that are meaningful to them. In one project, for example, widening access learners are reached through a network of trusted intermediaries that includes community workers, librarians, adult education tutors and union learning reps. A 'train the trainers' model is a key part of this work and includes a free course for learning facilitators to help develop their skills in navigating OpenLearn and using it to support and encourage new adult learners. Workshops, webinars and refresher sessions are also provided to extend networks as widely as possible.

- 5.4 The following are identified as key factors in motivating disadvantaged adults to engage in learning:
- easily accessible starting points: whether in terms of local and/or work-based delivery or through blended and on-line learning;
  - belonging: students feeling comfortable and supported in the company of staff and other learners;
  - relevance: learning that draws upon and is relevant to the experience of students and contributes, as appropriate, to their professional development;
  - well-designed learning: provision of an educational experience that builds the capabilities and confidence of students whilst also stimulating and challenging them to new learning;
  - opportunities for progression: clearly articulated routes through which students can advance in their studies and/or achieve qualifications;
  - well-managed transitions: support for students in moving between levels, groups and institutions;
  - clear information: accessible and accurate information at all points, including through impartial advice and guidance, so that students are empowered to make informed choices;
  - financial support: affordable, easily managed payment arrangements to ensure that finance is not a barrier to study whether in terms of direct or indirect costs;
  - pastoral support: support for learners in their handling of personal, family or work challenges that might impact on their studies;
  - effective administration: efficient and student-friendly administrative processes including initial enquiries and registration.

## 6. Proposals for Major Policy Developments

### 6.1 Portable, Individual Student Funding

The eligibility of students and the nature of financial support varies between different types and levels of adult learning provision. This is confusing and a disincentive to participation, flexible learning and progression. Consideration should be given to a more solid investment in adult learners via a funding regime that:

- is an entitlement for each adult, with the possibility of additional support for those with demonstrable financial hardship;
- can be deployed across an inclusive range of learning opportunities, including participation in HE;
- allows the student to decide when in their lives and at what intensity they wish to study.

### 6.2 Expansion of Adult and Further Educational Opportunities

Damaging cuts in the provision of adult and further education have already been identified as a factor in the decline in the participation of part-time and mature learners in higher education. It is critical for widening participation that learners have easily accessible, typically local, starting points for their educational journey and opportunity to gain qualifications that are often prerequisites not only for higher education but entry into professional careers. Our proposal is for:

- funding and policy measures to reverse recent reductions in adult education provision and, in particular, promote the delivery of community learning in the most disadvantaged districts;
- greater provision of GCSEs (especially in English, maths and sciences) and of ESOL targeted at disadvantaged adult learners.

### 6.3 Effective Provision of Information

Research, borne out by the experience of UALL member institutions (see BIS/YouGov (2015) “Perceptions of Part-time Higher Education”) indicates that there are significant gaps and misinformation in knowledge about part-time higher education. This applies both to potential students and to employers, friends and family members whom they may look to for information. It includes lack of awareness of different study modes and options and, often serious, misunderstandings about student funding. Greater attention needs to be given nationally to:

- public campaigns to raise awareness and accurate knowledge of current funding opportunities for part-time higher education;
- investment in impartial information, advice and guidance for adult learners including provision that enables students to map pathways to possible career outcomes;
- further expansion of the scope and reach of national resources for outreach to adult learners (see: <http://www.open.ac.uk/cicp/main/social-partnerships/national-networks-collaborative-outreach-nnco>)