

**Written evidence submitted by the Director of Fair Access to Higher Education**

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

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	FE College
	FE sector representative organisation/trade body
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### **Executive summary**

1. There has been a deeply concerning reduction in part-time and mature student numbers. There were just over half the number (52 per cent) of mature entrants in 2014-15 compared with 2009-10 levels.
2. Mature learners are twice as likely to drop out in their first year of study, compared with young entrants. It is therefore vital for universities and colleges to consider what more they can do to attract and support mature learners.
3. OFFA's guidance in recent years has included a focus on mature learners as a particular target group. Mature learners are more likely than younger learners to have characteristics associated with disadvantage and under-representation in higher education.
4. Mature learners face particular barriers when studying, in particular financial hardship.
5. They also experience challenges accessing relevant information, advice and guidance (IAG) about entering higher education. Therefore

it is especially important for universities and colleges to seek to provide high quality IAG for mature learners.

6. Universities and colleges carry out a range of activities to attract and support mature students. These include: providing short courses, offering modular and credit-based study pathways, increasing their provision of alternative modes of study, and using student ambassadors to engage with prospective mature students.
7. Mature participation in higher education is vital for individuals, institutions and wider society. Mature learners often bring to their studies a commitment to excel, and significant life experience which helps to enrich and expand the nature of student body.
8. The number of 18 year olds in England is projected to decline overall between 2012 and 2020. Upskilling of mature learners, particularly through part-time student, will be crucial if we are to meet the demand for a graduate workforce.
9. There are a number of policy developments that can help to secure the future of adult learning. These include revising the fee and support regulations to encourage flexible modular provision, and encouraging credit accumulation and transfer between recognised awarding institutions.

### **About the Office for Fair Access**

10. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) is the independent public body that regulates fair access to higher education in England. We promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for people from lower income and other under-represented backgrounds.
11. We make sure that universities and colleges that charge higher tuition fees have adequate measures in place to attract disadvantaged students, and to support them during their studies and as they prepare to move on to work or further study.
12. The main way we do this is by approving and monitoring access agreements – documents in which universities and colleges set out their tuition fees and how they plan to improve access. All publicly funded universities and colleges in England must have an access agreement approved by OFFA in order to be allowed to charge higher tuition fees.
13. We then monitor whether the universities and colleges are meeting their access agreement commitments, and improving access, on an annual basis. If they break the agreement they have made with us, we can fine them, or limit the level of fee that they can charge.
14. We also help to improve and share the evidence base about what methods are known to work best. And we work to keep fair access

issues high on the public agenda, so that policy-makers understand how fair access contributes to social mobility.

### **OFFA's guidance on mature learners**

15. OFFA's guidance in recent years has included a focus on mature learners as a particular target group. We want institutions to consider the specific challenges faced by this group, setting out in their access agreements what they are doing to support and attract mature students.
16. In our guidance to institutions, we ask them to consider how they can attract and support mature learners with non-traditional qualifications into higher education. This is because mature students are more likely than younger learners to take a non-traditional route into higher education, such as via a Foundation Year, Certificate of Higher Education or an Access to Higher Education diploma.
17. We also ask them to take into account how they can better support mature learners to succeed once they have entered higher education. Mature learners face particular barriers when studying, in particular financial hardship.
18. In June 2015 we published a 'topic briefing' on mature learners.<sup>1</sup> The briefing gives an overview of what we're seeing in access agreements, gives examples of innovative and effective practice, and poses questions for universities and colleges to consider how best to make progress in supporting mature learners.

### **What is working well and/or not working well with regards to adult education in England?**

19. There has been a deeply concerning reduction in part-time and mature student numbers.
20. OFFA's latest Outcomes of Access Agreement Monitoring report<sup>2</sup>, shows that the decline in part-time and mature student numbers has continued in 2014-15 with a further reduction in the numbers of entrants from these groups. The rate of decrease in 2014-15 has further accelerated with substantial drops in the number of mature and part-time entrants from 2013-14 levels. These reductions are deeply worrying, particularly in light of the fact that there were just over half the number (52 per cent) of mature entrants in 2014-15 compared with

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<sup>1</sup> OFFA (2015) Topic briefing: mature learners. Available from: <https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance-and-useful-information/topic-briefings/offa-topic-briefing-mature-learners/>

<sup>2</sup> OFFA (2016) Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2014-15. Available from: <https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2016.04-Outcomes-of-access-agreements-monitoring-1.pdf>

2009-10 levels, and two fifths (40 per cent) of the number of part-time entrants in the same period.

21. We are concerned about the issues this decline raises for inclusion, equality and diversity as part-time learners are more likely to be from a disadvantaged background, are more likely to be women, and to be mature learners – 90 per cent of part-time students are mature.
22. Mature learners are more likely than younger learners to have characteristics associated with disadvantage and under-representation in higher education. Research by million+ and the National Union of Students (NUS)<sup>3</sup> highlights that mature learners are more likely than younger learners to:
  - have non-traditional qualifications
  - come from lower socio-economic backgrounds
  - have family or caring responsibilities
  - be disabled
  - be from black and minority ethnic groups
  - leave higher education within a year of entering.
23. It is critical that the whole sector works to reverse the decline in mature student numbers and we have called on institutions to consider what more they can do to attract and support part-time and mature learners in their latest access agreements.

### **What policies and/or practices best motivate disadvantaged adults to engage in adult learning?**

#### Participation in higher education

24. Universities and colleges carry out a range of activities to attract mature students. These include:
  - providing **short courses** to re-engage prospective students with learning. Some of these short courses lead to a higher education qualification or act as pathways to higher education courses. Short courses offer adult returners access to skills and encourage life-long learning. Work-based skills courses provide employers with better skilled and qualified employees.
  - offering **modular and credit-based study pathways**, such as Certificates of Higher Education, to provide a more accessible entry route for mature learners to return to study. This can help offer a ‘taste’ of higher education, and allow students to progress onto later years of honours degrees. Birkbeck, University of London, offers a range of Certificates of Higher

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<sup>3</sup> Million+ and NUS (2012) Never too late to learn: mature students in higher education. Available from: [http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/reports/Never\\_Too\\_Late\\_To\\_Learn\\_-\\_FINAL\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/reports/Never_Too_Late_To_Learn_-_FINAL_REPORT.pdf)

Education at a lower cost to attract mature students who may be more debt-averse than younger students.

- increasing their provision of **alternative modes of study**. This includes full-time and part-time evening, weekend and intensive block classes, as well as virtual learning, in order to make higher education more accessible to mature learners. These enable students to tailor courses to their particular circumstances and other commitments. Only a small number of institutions (less than five per cent) report this through their access agreements. An example is Coventry University, which delivers classes in six week blocks to target learners for whom traditional attendance is not possible.
- incorporating **credit-accruing work placements** into their flexible learning courses. These provide students with learning opportunities which can be easily combined with existing commitments. For example, Aston University has developed new opportunities for students to gain credit-bearing placement experience, in the form of a sandwich year or professional experience. In particular, this may appeal to mature learners who have previous work experience or family commitments.
- some institutions report success in **using student ambassadors** to raise aspirations and engage with prospective mature students. Universities and colleges often recruit younger student ambassadors, to whom potential mature learners may find it more difficult to relate. Using alumni or older learners as ambassadors in pre-entry events can be useful in encouraging mature learners. For example, mature students at the University of Leeds help promote higher education through the Learning Champions programme. This scheme has helped to raise aspirations and awareness of higher education among over 500 adults (in 2013-14) from a range of backgrounds.

### Student success

25. A number of institutions have identified the non-continuation of mature students as a particular challenge, highlighting retention as a significant barrier facing both full and part-time learners. The sector average 2012-13 non-continuation rate of UK domiciled full-time first degree mature entrants (11.9 per cent) is double that of young entrants (5.7 per cent).<sup>4</sup>

26. Many institutions report that they offer intensive pastoral, tutorial and mentoring support schemes for mature students. These are aimed at supporting students throughout the duration of their course, identifying those at risk of dropping out. For example, the University of Leeds'

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<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Statistics Agency UKPIs: Non-continuation rates. Available from: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pis/noncon>

Lifelong Learning Centre provides academic and pastoral support services to enhance the retention and achievement of mature learners, available at flexible times to fit around other life commitments.

27. Mature students are more likely to have undiagnosed disabilities than younger students. Therefore it is important for institutions to offer diagnostic assessments and additional learning support for mature students.

**Do we have a sufficient demand-led approach to adult education? If not, what more needs to be done?**

28. Mature learners face additional challenges accessing relevant information, advice and guidance (IAG) about entering higher education compared to their younger counterparts. Research by million+ and NUS<sup>5</sup> shows that many mature learners do not make use of public information sources and rely instead on institutional sources of information when applying to university. Therefore it is especially important for universities and colleges to seek to provide high quality IAG for mature learners. However, institutions may find it more difficult to reach out to and target IAG at mature learners because they are a disparate group outside of traditional classroom settings.
29. Less than 10 per cent of institutions refer to the provision of IAG to mature learners in their access agreements. An example of institutions where such activity is happening include Canterbury Christ Church University, which employs a pre-entry guidance officer to support mature students and ensure they are able to access specific marketing activity.

**What evidence is there on the impact, added-value and/or cost-effectiveness of adult education?**

30. There are significant benefits for universities and colleges in attracting and supporting mature learners. The Million+ and NUS report Never Too Late to Learn<sup>6</sup>, states that mature participation in higher education helps raise aspirations and increase wider levels of progression and social mobility.
31. Mature learners often bring to their studies a commitment to excel, and significant life experience which helps to enrich and expand the nature of student body. In short, mature participation in higher education is vital for individuals, institutions and wider society.
32. Data from the Office for National Statistics shows that the number of 18 year olds in England is projected to decline overall between 2012 and

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<sup>5</sup> Million+ and NUS (2012) Never too late to learn: mature students in higher education.

<sup>6</sup> Million+ and NUS (2012) Never too late to learn: mature students in higher education.

2020, and it will be 2024 before the 18 year old population recovers to 2015 levels.

33. With a smaller pool of prospective young applicants to higher education, there is therefore an opportunity for institutions to widen their recruitment to older age groups. Upskilling of mature learners, particularly through part-time student, will be crucial if we are to meet the demand for a graduate workforce.

**Major policy developments necessary to secure the future of adult learning in 2016 and over the next 5 -10 years?**

34. There are a number of policy developments that can help to secure the future of adult learning. These include:

1. **Revising the fee and support regulations to encourage flexible modular provision.** Students are currently required to be studying at an intensity greater than 25 per cent of a full-time qualification and for a specified qualification aim (this means that those studying for institutional credits are therefore ineligible for financial support). Allowing fee loans to be applied to part-time credits, regardless of whether a student wishes to secure a full qualification, would enable people to have a ‘taste’ of higher education without needing to find up-front funds.
2. **encourage credit accumulation and transfer between recognised awarding institutions.** Many mature students are looking for flexible ‘step on step off’ provision, yet the move has been to reduce flexibility by suppliers. As it currently stands, a single institution has to be responsible for awarding a qualification. This leaves little incentive for institutions to collaborate around credit accumulation and transfer. Making progress in this area would be a significant boost to flexible learning. For example, changes might support mixed modes of study through different providers to add up to a qualification – allowing a student to combine distance learning delivered by one provider with more traditional on-site provision through another.

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