



Bridge Group Summit: Summary and Policy Recommendations

Collaborative action to address the dramatic fall in the participation of mature students in higher education

19 March, 2018

Expert panellists:

- Professor Claire Callender (Birkbeck and UCL)
- Laura Burley (Head of Government and External Affairs)
- Chris Millward (Director for Fair Access and Participation, OfS)

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1. Background to the Bridge Group

The Bridge Group is an independent, not for profit, policy association. We drive policy changes across government, universities, employers, and the third sector to effect positive changes in social mobility. We achieve this through research and on-going dialogues with experts, policymakers, and practitioners.

We offer senior stakeholders expert guidance on policy, drawing on the knowledge and experience of our associates and the latest research. Launched in 2010 at Google UK, the Bridge Group has maintained relationships with key influencers across sectors and has established itself as an authoritative voice on social mobility. Further details about the Charity are available online: <https://thebridgegroup.org.uk>

The Bridge Group has undertaken high profile commissions from the Cabinet Office, the Wellcome Trust, the BBC, and the UPP Foundation, and is driving change across sectors to promote greater social equality.

This summit on mature students is part of our wider programme of events developed to provoke debate around key issues for social mobility, and to focus attention on possible solutions. We will be hosting our annual conference at KPMG on 15 May, 2018, with leading policy makers and practitioners: '[Raising the Stakes: Collective Action in Pursuit of Social Mobility](#)'.

2. Summary of speakers' presentations

Professor Claire Callender: Part-time undergraduate participation in higher education in England

- Claire summarised findings from her latest report, co-written with John Thompson, and published by the Sutton Trust, '[The Lost Part-Timers](#)'. Her slides are available on our [website](#).
- There has been a long-term downward trend in part-time, undergraduate participation in England since 2008. But the fall has been most dramatic since the 2012 funding reforms.
- The 2012/13 funding reforms abolished maintenance and course grants for part-time students in order to open up access to higher education; however, the opposite from that which was intended has occurred. 40% of the decline can be attributed to the tuition fee increase in 2012.
- Part-time provision has changed in response to the funding reforms with fewer providers offering low-intensity, sub-degree courses. Students are not eligible for loans on courses sub-25% full-time.
- While the government has relaxed the criteria for eligibility for student loans, the evidence suggests that the strategy is ineffective; loans are not the most appropriate tool for encouraging participation amongst part-time students.

- The educational needs of part-time and full-time students are very different and a 'one-size fits all policy' will not work. The evidence suggests that part-time students would benefit from grants rather than loans to have 'up-front' funding to cover their costs.

Laura Burley: The Open University and how to increase the participation of mature students

- Since 2011/2012, there has been a significant fall in the number of students studying part-time in England (a decrease of 59% of first year undergraduate entrants in England). When Laura started work at The Open University in 2011, total student numbers were 250,000. Today, the total number is 174,000. The fall has been especially notable in sub-degree courses, such as level 4 and 5 HNDs and HNCs.
- Nevertheless, The Open University continues to dominate the market in part-time delivery, with 1 in 3 of all part-time students enrolled at the University.
- It's important to recognise the diversity of mature students as a group along with their varied motivations for studying and the different responsibilities they hold. The tendency to perceive students as young school-leavers has meant that mature learners and their needs have been forgotten.
- It is this forgotten group that policymakers need to focus on. If we can get the policies right to support part-time and mature learners, then it will better support widening access along with the development of skills, growth, and productivity. At a time of the 4th Industrial Revolution and the need for re-skilling and up-skilling, this market is a crucial one.
- We therefore need to look at whether the Government, as part of the Post-18 Review, could or should introduce some form of flexible learning incentive to better support part-time and mature students. This is because we know that the market is broken and financial help in reducing the fees for this group is going to make the biggest difference. (See OU/HEPI report, ['Fixing the Broken Market in Part-Time Study'](#)).
- In addition, as well as looking at the flexible learning incentive as part of the Post-18 Review, we should look at other policies to better support part-time and mature learners. For example, does the sector need the government to establish an adult participation target? What about better credit transfer? Or more focused Access Agreements? Could more be done at an institutional level to increase the representation of mature students and to support the National Re-training Scheme?
- The main question as we head towards the Post-18 Review is whether we need a system change (radical reform) or just need to tweak the current system (minimal change)? If this country is to produce choice, flexibility, and widen access, Laura proposes the former.

Chris Millward: Understanding the distinct needs of part-time learners

- The OfS can undertake activity to increase the supply of flexible provision. For instance, by removing barriers for new providers.

- One of the top priorities for the OfS is to increase the participation of mature students from underrepresented groups. All institutions will be required to assess their performance on access, success, and progression.
- Around £400 million is spent on support through Access Agreements but a small proportion of that is devoted to mature students. Targets therefore need to be reformed to ensure they are meaningful and effective.

3. Key themes emerging from discussion

Incentives for the higher education sector

- The financial incentives for providers to offer full-time courses are far greater than for part-time courses. Lifting the cap on student numbers had a profoundly negative impact on part-time study as the preference shifted amongst providers to full-time study.
- More could be done to build understanding of participation in informal part-time courses, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The OfS could have a role in recording participation in these types of courses.
- The majority of young full-time undergraduate students work during term-time and would also benefit from more flexible-provision. More links could, therefore, be made between the needs of full-time and part-time students to increase the pressure on institutions to offer flexible study options. Although, it is important to be mindful of the very different work contexts of part-time and full-time undergraduates and their discrete motivations for working and studying.
- Mature students are invisible in league tables. This means there is no incentive for institutions, particularly the most selective, to attract mature students.
- Russell Group institutions have largely withdrawn from the delivery of part-time courses. Does the Russell Group have a moral obligation to provide part-time provision? This is being pursued by an advisory group established by the Russell Group to assess solutions as part of its response to the Post-18 Review. It's important to note that the decline in part-time provision at Russell Group institutions is a feature of a sector-wide trend.
- We need to better understand the benefits to higher education and to the economy of part-time study.

Retention and success

- Retention rates are worse for mature students than school-leavers, but the data is not a reliable record of student engagement in higher education as it does not recognise those who suspend their study and return at a later date.
- Additionally, the TEF does not accurately capture part-time and distance participation in higher education. Due to challenges around 4 Nation data, the OU chose not to participate in the initial TEF, although it has just undertaken the subject-level pilot in order to help test some of the data challenges and will be entering in the future.

- Greater attention needs to be given to fostering a sense of belonging amongst mature students so they can feel more immersed in the university experience.
- The sector needs to recognise the heterogeneity of the group of students defined as 'mature'.

The role of employers

- HESA data on employer contributions to study underestimates the actual support given by employers. There is no record of the informal contribution that employers make, such as granting leave to study.
- The regulations around apprenticeship levy funding could be relaxed to make it easier for courses to be established. The degree apprenticeship offers a good model for mature students.

Engaging mature students

- Providers need to recognise that mature learners behave differently and have different needs. They should adapt, accordingly, to establish a market. The OU is undergoing a Students First Transformation Programme to ensure that it's offering the right products and the right learning, and to better improve the student experience.
- Many potential mature students do not realise the need to study in order to upskill. Consequently, there is value in improving information, advice, and guidance and messaging.
- Higher education institutions need to collaborate to engage mature students. People are not lacking in ambition but are sometimes unaware of how to navigate the system. Collaboration would be helpful to improve communications.

4. Recommendations for policy

- A. Student finance. The student funding system should be reformed to recognise that the mature and part-time sectors need to be treated differently. There needs to be an end to the 'one size fits all' approach. Greater focus should be on the provision of maintenance and tuition fee grants rather than on loans to reduce the up-front costs to students, and to promote participation amongst groups who are more debt-averse.
- B. Incentives for higher education. The market in flexible study needs to be rejuvenated and this may be achieved through introducing more incentives for institutions. This will involve a number of approaches, including:
 - setting national targets for mature participation;
 - including measures on mature student participation and success in league tables;
 - improving metrics on part-time provision and participation in the TEF; and
 - promoting collaboration rather than competition between institutions to engage mature students.

- C. Data. A number of changes are required to improve understanding of the nature of mature students' participation in higher education, including:
- introducing measures to monitor social mobility in higher education for mature learners. POLAR is not a suitable measure; and
 - refining measures used to record retention to recognise mature students' more long-term and fluid engagement with higher education.
- D. Information, advice, and guidance. Greater attention needs to be given to ensure that employees are informed of the benefits of study for their career progression. In particular, making direct links between upskilling and learning. Additionally, institutions need to invest in pre-entry career advice to support students in navigating their journeys into, and through, higher education.

5. Next steps

- The Bridge Group will be lobbying government throughout its Review of Post-18 Education to ensure that the recommendations made during the summit are heard.
- The challenges around the access, participation, and success of mature students will be addressed in the Bridge Group's annual conference on 15 May, [Raising the Stakes: Collective Action in Pursuit of Social Mobility](#).
- The Bridge Group will be conducting research to better understand the barriers to success in higher education for mature students.

6. Contact details

For any queries regarding the seminars or to share information please contact:

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