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## The Role of Part-Time Students in Widening Access

### OU's contribution to widening participation: past, present and future

Thank you very much for inviting me to talk with you today.

It's great to be part of a thoughtful and constructive debate among so many people committed to widening participation.

I'm going to reflect on what widening participation means for one of the most significant – yet perhaps most invisible – group of students: part-time students.

Because if you really want to widen participation and increase equality of opportunity. If you want to increase skill levels and enhance global competitiveness. Then part-time provision has got to be a significant part of the answer.

Individuals benefit, because part-time students incur less loan debt and pay off their loans faster than those studying full time; while their new skills pay off in terms of higher earnings and increased well-being.

The economy benefits, as those already working can immediately apply their new skills and knowledge; while others can retrain or refocus to meet skills gaps and shortages.

And society benefits, as part-time provision helps break down the barriers to entry for many of the groups we are discussing here today.

Because we know that a disproportionate number of part-time students come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

In fact, for many people in Britain, part-time study is the *only* way to access higher education.

Whether it's because they are working, have children, come from a low income background, have physical disabilities or mental health issues: for many people full-time just isn't an option. So if they can't study part-time, they don't study at all.

Part-time study, especially through distance or online learning, is also far more cost effective than traditional, full-time, face-to-face study, both for individuals and their employers. Both for individuals, their employers and the treasury.

Because we calculate that a part-time degree costs the public purse twenty five per cent less than a traditional degree.

In fact, the benefits to the Treasury of supporting a part-time student are highly significant – they get a return of between nine and fifteen times on their investment.

But despite all these obvious advantages the numbers of students studying part-time have fallen by more than half in the past five years.

That's down to a combination of two factors - higher fees and reduced support – which have put far too many people off higher education.

For example, though there are now student loans available for part-time students, only about a third are actually eligible.

Prospective part-time students – who sometimes already have significant financial commitments – are understandably more debt averse than eighteen year olds.

The number of employers, including the public sector, wanting to sponsor their employees through degrees has also declined in a more uncertain economic climate.

All this has a critical impact on participation rates for the target communities we are discussing today.

For example, between 2011/12 and 2013/14, new entrants to English universities from low participation neighbourhoods actually fell by more than seven thousand.

And 99 per cent of this decline is because of the fall in part-time numbers.

The director of the Higher Education Policy Institute has called this collapse in the numbers of part-time students 'arguably the single biggest problem facing higher education at the moment'.

And I absolutely agree.

And it's obvious, given what we know about our target groups, that you simply cannot widen participation in higher education without a thriving sector in part-time provision.

### **The role of the OU in widening access**

We believe, The OU, has a particular role to play here.

Widening participation has always been central to our mission.

Our founders recognised the inequality and injustice that prevented so many people – particularly those from lower income groups – from attending university.

They believed that who you were, and where you came from wasn't nearly as important as your potential, your talent, and your commitment to learning.

So for more than forty five years, widening participation has been central to our mission.

For many people, the standard model of higher education – straight out of sixth form ready for three years full time study – often just doesn't suit.

What they need instead is flexibility, diversity and a responsive model of higher education which they can individually tailor to their needs.

And that's exactly what we offer. Our unique and flexible model of learning has given hundreds of thousands of students the opportunity they need to realise their potential and fulfil their dreams.

We take people on the longest journeys: from few qualifications – or none – right through to degrees, higher level apprenticeships and other advanced qualifications.

We support those already in work who are looking to progress their careers.

And we play an absolutely critical role in helping any number of groups who historically have lower participation rates in higher education.

From those with disabilities or mental health issues, those who are geographically isolated from other universities and those from low income groups.

In fact, three quarters of our 'widening participation' students say that without the Open University, they would not have been able to attend higher education at all.

And students from groups with historically low participation rates are more likely to study at the Open University.

For example, half of all part-time students from low participation areas study with the Open University. And around one in five of our new students is from a low-income area.

In total, thirteen per cent of all students from low participation areas are studying with the Open University. No other institution has more than three per cent.

The Prime Minister's targets for doubling the entry rate for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is highly relevant here: and this is something I'm going to come back to in a moment.

### **How the Open University supports its students**

So the Open University takes our commitment to widening participation extremely seriously, and put a huge amount of effort into supporting those faced with additional barriers to participation. Let me give you just a few examples.

First, we have developed a core curriculum for students from the most under-represented groups, in the form of our Access modules. Covering introductory materials across the humanities, social sciences, and STEM subjects, these modules help students gain confidence and develop study skills, increasing their chances of success. Over the past decade, one in six of our students have benefited from an Access-type module.

Second, we also have made a significant investment in effective support for students with disabilities. That covers everything from talking books and specialist equipment to appropriate adaptation of exams. As a result, eighty per cent of our students with disabilities report that our services have helped them succeed.

Finally, we pay a great deal of attention to retention, because as you know, disadvantaged students can have lower completion rates. Our collection and analysis of data on the student

experience is used in sophisticated ways to support student motivation, encourage ongoing engagement, with appropriate interventions from tutors and other staff as appropriate.

All this is grounded in a strong evidence base, reflects what our students want and need, and makes a demonstrable difference to recruitment and retention, as well as giving each and every one of our students the best possible experience.

### **The future of part-time study**

I want to turn now to think about the future of widening participation in part-time education, in a rapidly changing political and financial context.

Now, there's a lot in the recent government green paper on higher education to applaud.

Making part-time students eligible for maintenance loans, for example, should help many thousands of people manage the costs of living while studying;

While the changes to ELQ rules, so that people wanting to study for a second degree in STEM subjects will be eligible for loans, is also very welcome.

And of course, the introduction of loans to support postgraduate study up to the age of 60 is also extremely useful.

I suggest, though, that all this financial support through loans, important though it is, is most valuable for those students who are willing and able to take on more debt.

And those students are unlikely to be those from communities with low participation rates.

Support for widening participation, then, has to be more than just an expansion of loans.

Now, we also strongly support robust and ambitious targets on increasing participation rates from disadvantaged communities and BME groups.

We'd argue, though, that this focus mustn't detract from other groups who are also disadvantaged and have historically low participation rates – like disabled students, for example, or mature students.

And we'd also suggest that part-time provision is going to be absolutely critical to meeting the challenge the Prime Minister has laid down.

Because we know, for example, that one in five undergraduates from neighbourhoods with low participation rates either chooses, or has no option but, to study part-time.

In fact, students from areas with historically low participation rates in higher education are twice as likely to study part time.

So it's a real worry that the green paper seemed to be overwhelmingly focused on young and full-time students.

We'd argue that there's no point having a target for widening participation if you are going to try and achieve it through a narrow definition. It's a contradiction in terms.

So we want to work with the government to broaden that focus to accommodate the needs of *all* potential students – not just those who fit the traditional mould.

Especially since we know that those who miss out at the age of eighteen are likely to be from the very groups that we've been talking about today: those with disabilities, those from BME communities, and those from low income backgrounds; together with parents, carers, and those who need to retrain.

So the Prime Minister's vision of a truly inclusive higher education sector simply cannot be realised if delivered through a one-size-fits-all model. Part-time students and mature students need choice and flexibility, if higher education is going to be a realistic and affordable prospect in future.

In this context, the announcement in the Autumn statement that the Student Opportunity Fund is going to be cut by fifty per cent over the next parliament, is a critical and concern.

It seems possible that these cuts could have a disproportionate impact on part-time students, in what is already a declining market, unless the policy decisions are taken.

At the Open University, the student opportunity fund has been a vital part of our widening participation work, and has underpinned many of the initiatives I described for you before.

It's funded the development of our curriculum materials.

It's paid for our support for students with disabilities.

And it's helped subsidise or even waive fees for those on the lowest incomes.

In short, it's made higher education accessible and affordable for many who thought it would always be beyond their reach.

And these are the very students who benefit the most – and which provide the greatest return-on investment – from higher education: those from groups with low participations rates, those without traditional qualifications, and those with disabilities.

Yet without the student opportunity fund, a significant proportion of our activity supporting vulnerable and non-traditional students would be at risk.

It presents us with a stark choice.

Either stop doing those things. Or possibly put up fees in order to continue funding them. Which in turn could deter more students: in a vicious and self-defeating spiral.

We also question whether it's right to put the financial costs of our work to widen participation on other students.

Other universities, of course, also struggle with the inherent unfairness of this issue. That's the consequence of a system in which efforts to widen participation are done on an institution-by-institution basis.

And it also means that activity to widen participation isn't co-ordinated across the sector, with some communities missing out.

So I think that greater co-ordination of widening participation activities through collaborative outreach has got to be part of the answer. Certainly our experience through the Social Partnerships Network has shown just how effective that can be.

This might also suggest the need for creative funding for activities that seek to create appetite and raise aspirations among the communities that we are talking about.

And I'd suggest that every university has a part to play in this.

This will be a key issue for the new social mobility group being established by Universities UK. I'm delighted to be a part of that group and am confident that it is going to take a radical, ambitious and imaginative approach to some of the challenges being discussed today.

While we collaboration and co-operation across the sector on widening participation as absolutely essential, we'd also argue that there is a particular role for the part-time provision in meeting this challenge.

Furthermore, the Open University, as the most significant provider of part-time higher education, can offer a series of ideas on enhancing and reshaping the part-time market, based on our experience of 'what works'.

For example, we believe there is scope to develop more 'feeder' schemes into traditional higher education – especially promising students gain essential skills in English and maths. Technology and digital platforms are an ideal way to help students prepare for advanced learning. And tuition support, offered at distance, the OU module could help students where teaching in their schools fall short.

And there is potential to expand our OpenPlus scheme – a 2 +2 model where disadvantaged students study at home for the first two years, as a gradual introduction to higher education, before completing their degree at another UK institution.

We also think there are new ways we could work with the Office for Fair Access to incentivise rather than discourage part-time study.

And above all, we believe it is crucial to ensure that part-time students are acknowledged and supported through appropriate funding.

## **Conclusion**

We recognise the need for practical and realistic solutions which take account of the broader economic and political context. But we also passionately believe in standing up for the best interest of our students, and our potential students.

That's especially important when it comes to our part-time students.

If you are someone who is studying for an apprenticeship while working thirty hours a week, perhaps in a low-paid job, and then raising kids on top of that, it's understandable that you don't primarily identify as a part-time student, or have the time to campaign and lobby on your own behalf.

As a result, the voices of part-time students are too easily overlooked in general assumptions. That makes it even more important that we advocate for their interests.

The part-time sector clearly still has a specific and critical role to play in higher education, especially in terms of widening participation.

So all of us who want to see an increasingly accessible sector, with an increasingly diverse student population, and all the social and economic benefits that brings, have to fight together for excellent and effective part-time provision.

The OU looks forward to working with you on this vital endeavour.

Thank you very much.