

Thank you very much for inviting me to be part of this conversation.

My former BBC colleague Laura Kuenssberg wrote about Theresa May in July, reflecting the consensus then: 'She is by nature a careful and cautious politician'.

After last Friday's dramatic and eye-catching proposals on grammar and faith schools, and on the role of private schools and universities in supporting state schools, that assumption about the PM's cautiousness may need rapid revision. Taking on received wisdom in the education sector and heading straight for parliamentary clashes over the policy seems bold not cautious.

I'd like to concentrate today on the political imperatives that inform the PM's proposals and suggest another area of education policy that needs boldness to tackle it– the position of part-time higher education.

The key new phrases of the May administration, in terms of domestic policy, are 'social mobility' and 'industrial strategy'. The role of part-time learning and its major student demographic – learners older than conventional university students should play a vital role in addressing both priorities.

The focus in last Friday's proposals was on a particular aspect of 'social mobility' – enhancing the prospects of a number of pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to have access to selective secondary education.

However the PM has herself indicated that she also wishes to promote a less narrow vision of social mobility. In her first public words in office, the new PM pledged: "We will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you."

I take the PM's commitment to helping anybody as not just meaning 11 year olds or 18 year olds.

Through its now almost fifty year lifetime, The Open University has educated almost 2 million students who have had the chance to 'go as far as (their) talents will take them'. We are the great British corrective to the unfair distribution of life chances. And, we believe, the single largest engine of social mobility among all educational institutions in the UK. If the OU isn't firing on all cylinders then social mobility isn't moving fast enough either.

The OU has more disabled students than any other university in Europe, over 12,500 people with a wide range of disabilities – including mental health issues – choose to study with us each year. 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.

The second pillar of the PM's new domestic policy is her 'Industrial Strategy'. This is less clearly delineated than her new education approach, but it would be surprising if the shortage of skills in the workforce were not centre-stage in future plans to boost post-Brexit productivity. The political imperative in education has previously been to focus on the flow of pupils and students at 11 and 18. But for employers it is the stock of workers, from 18 to 80, that represent the real challenge. Recent research by London Economics showed that the effects of higher education study for those already in the workforce creates an immediate productivity improvement in the student and their co-workers.

In the past year or two there have been some welcome signs that government realises the need for policies to reskill and upskill the needs of mature/part-time learners:

making part-time students eligible for maintenance loan;

the changes to ELQ rules;

the introduction of loans to support postgraduate study up to the age of 60;

and the apprenticeship levy.

But, so far the mature and part-time market has not shown signs of recovery. The number of part-time university students starting degree courses in England in 2014/15 was 58% fewer than five years ago in 2009/10.

The government is hopeful that its reforms to market entry will encourage new providers, some of whom may decide to target mature and part-time learners. Of course the OU welcomes diversity of choice and competition. We are gearing up to deal with this and, perhaps to the surprise of some, we are working closely with 'Independent Higher Education' (formerly Study UK which brings together many alternative providers) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to create a validation service for Alternative Providers.

This month we announced five new providers are joining The Open University's degree validation programme, ahead of a pilot scheme to test a better model for the sector. All five new partners received the go-ahead to run degree courses just over six months after first approaching the OU, bringing current partnerships to 30, with more discussions in the pipeline.

But while there may be some improvement to part-time study by supply side reforms, the OU's own analysis of the part-time market (where our share has been growing and is now 38%) indicates that there is a need for further improvement on the demand side, especially in England where the fall in part-time study has been most pronounced.

A framework that lasts for life – six key asks for government

There is an urgent case for part-time degrees and degree apprenticeships to have similar national importance as full-time degrees and apprenticeships to meet present and future challenges for the UK.

The OU has developed six key recommendations to make this happen. As the Vice-Chancellor of the OU, I get to see the divergences in policy for HE all across the UK. However, it is in England that we see the biggest disruption and change right now, and that is where our proposals are focused.

Our first recommendation is the further extension of loan availability to Equivalent and Lower Qualification, or ELQ courses. Our experience is that the complexity around exempt and non-exempt courses are putting far too many people off. Secondly we recommend the introduction of next step loans. These are loans available for 120 credits, half the current limit. We have found that the financial commitment to several years of study is a significant barrier to students signing up for courses.

Our next two recommendations are about making it easier for learners to move from one institution to another. We propose a national credit and transfer service alongside a national validation service for vocational qualifications. This is absolutely

essential to save mobile students time and money. There's nothing that deflates enthusiasm faster than studying something you already know inside out.

Another thing learners desperately need is proper information, advice and guidance so that they can navigate through the wealth of information and find the right course for them.

Our final recommendation is on finance. We believe that Learning Savings Accounts could be an invaluable tool in helping address skills shortages in essential fields – like teachers, nurses and engineers. These already work very successfully in many parts of the world, and would enable people to put together funds from a range of sources – government funding, institutional scholarships, family support, employer contributions and so on – to pay for whatever training and development they need.

50 years ago the government set up the OU to make HE accessible to everyone - the university which can reach all people and all places, throughout and beyond the UK, in ways which other education cannot reach.

We now need a renewed programme of expansion of adult, part-time and distance education and training in England. The joining of responsibility for all education and training in one new Department for Education gives the new government in Westminster an ideal opportunity to start now to make this happen.