

UNIONLEARN ANNUAL CONFERENCE: 'THE UNION SKILLS ADVANTAGE', MONDAY 6 JULY 2015

- Good morning everyone and thank you for your warm welcome. Nearly 10 years ago, in 2006, The Open University and Unionlearn signed a memorandum of understanding. The aim was to work together to help more people access and succeed in higher education and that's what we've done ever since.
- Only last week, with crucial input from Unionlearn, the OU launched a new free course for learning facilitators such as Union Learning Reps, so that they can develop the skills to train others on the use of the OU's OpenLearn platform, which contains thousands of hours of free learning materials from the OU.
- There is something awe-inspiring about the power of learning and the way it transforms people's lives for the better.

- Among the things I am most proud of are the many heart-warming stories of people who have changed their lives through studying with the OU. They've all achieved incredible things, often carried by a very simple hope. I'll just give you a quote from Michelle, one of our Access students. Here is what she said at the start of her own journey with the OU: "I would like to decide, with help and support, the best degree to aim for and also build my confidence, skills and value myself and realise I can achieve. Ultimately (I'd like) a career change, enjoying my work and achieving not only for myself but for my family and our future."
- I am sure this will resonate with all of you here today, who are just as committed as we are to enabling learners to develop new skills and knowledge, to upskill, to reskill and ultimately, as Michelle put it so well, to achieve for their future.
- Could you imagine not being able to offer the same opportunities to learners like Michelle anymore? This might sound unlikely, but unfortunately it is not. The fact is: part-time higher education is under threat and we all need to fight to save it.
- Five years ago, one in every three undergraduates studied part-time. Today that figure is now just one in five.
- This is a loss of nearly 200,000 students – or what I see as 200,000 life opportunities that have been lost. Clearly this loss is a tragedy. A tragedy for those individuals concerned, but also a tragedy for Britain's society and the economy.

- Because part-time higher education doesn't just improve those individuals' lives – it has a ripple effect which affects *all* of our lives.
- Let me explain how. Gaining skills from university level study helps people get into work if they are unemployed. It helps those wanting to get a better job to retrain and increase their earnings. Our own research at the OU has shown that a person without traditional entry qualifications graduating from the OU will earn over their lifetime, around £117,000 more than he would have done without the qualification. (I say he, as this research relates to male earnings) That's clearly going to have big impact on that person's life and their family. It also means they will contribute more to the economy.
- But the benefits go further. Research undertaken by London Economics shows there is a halo effect in the workplace and when one person upskills it can boost the productivity of the whole department. What's more, if you increase the education level of all co-workers by one level, then this results in a larger wage increase for each of these workers than if they had just raised their own skill level individually.
- And this is just the economic benefits. Again, OU research has shown us that for the majority of our students, part-time study increased their wellbeing and their ability to be active and healthy citizens.

- Crucially, for the majority of part-time students, the only way to access higher education is on a part-time basis. For the majority of part-time students are already working – which means they need a flexible way to learn while they earn. For those who are not working, they may have family or caring commitments, which again make part-time study the only study option for them. In the case of the OU, we also have many students who do not live near a university they can visit on a part-time basis or they may have disabilities (20000 students at the OU are registered with a disability) that make it harder to learn in a traditional university environment.
- So cutting off access to part-time study is denying access to those in society who most need it and who will most benefit from it. And combined with the cuts to FE which is impacting on the adult skills budget – it is clear to see that the opportunities for any form of reskilling and upskilling as an adult are under threat.
- You might be wondering why part-time higher education is declining, especially when full-time higher education has remained relatively stable, even in light of increased fees.
- In part-time higher education, there isn't one single factor that has triggered the decline. But rather a combination of policy and macro-economic factors coming together.

- In 2012, when higher fees came into force in England, for the first time student loans were available to part-time students. The government expected around 175,000 part-time students to be eligible. But in fact, only around 31,000 part-time students successfully applied for a loan last year. Our own research at the OU shows that as many as 4 out of 5 prospective part-time students are not even aware they could be eligible for a loan. I would ask the help of everyone here, especially UnionLearn Representatives to make as many people as possible aware of the availability of loans for part time study.
- But even where students know about the loan system, there is a further hurdle in the fact that loans are only available to them if they do not have a first degree, except for a very few subjects – that is the ELQ restrictions. So for most of those who want to reskill or upskill, they will be excluded unless they can afford to finance their studies themselves or can agree funding from their employer.
- But with austerity cuts, many public sector employers simply cannot afford to pay for employees to upskill. And the private sector faces similar challenges in trying to stimulate growth after the recession.
- As you know, employers and individuals often prefer shorter chunks of learning that can be applied immediately – but to qualify for a student loan, you have to study at least 25% of the equivalent full-time course and you have to sign up for a qualification – which on a part-time basis is a six year commitment for a degree. I urge everyone represented here to campaign with the OU, along with

welcome support from the CBI, for the abolition of the short-sighted ELQ restrictions and for the availability of loans for structured skills development that is below qualification level.

- The picture I've just painted hopefully illustrates why there has been a 41% decline in part-time students in England over the last five years. It's interesting to note, that in the other UK nations where there are different fee and funding arrangements, the decline has been much lower.
- We are clear that for our new government – investing in part-time higher education – even in the face of substantial cuts at Whitehall – is an investment that will reap dividends both now and for many years to come.
- Part-time students are more likely to start repaying any student loan earlier than full-time students, and are more likely to repay it in full, and more quickly. They will contribute more through increased earnings, and we will help some of all most disadvantaged people become more financially secure, and lead happier and more fulfilling lives. What government would not want that as a legacy?
- I feel heartened that there is a huge concern about this in Parliament. We recently launched some fascinating polling results from ComRes showing that 73% of MPs that we spoke to said the drop in part-time students was a concern.

- I will personally be leading the OU's efforts to demonstrate the fundamental role of part-time higher education to the UK economy. The thousands of life-chances that can be changed. The skills gaps we can plug. The money we can deliver to the Exchequer.
- It would be naïve to think that there is a magic wand to make the complex challenges we face disappear. But I do believe that policy reform can do a lot to make it easier for people to access higher education. The role of employers is going to be crucial too – the whole system – learners, workers, employers, unions as well as education providers – working together to find solutions that will help us grow as individuals, as businesses and as a country.
- I hope that you will join me in supporting this fight. Because we all must work together to solve this crisis facing adult learners. In five years' time, I do not want to see another 200,000 life opportunities lost, I want to see millions of lives improved through learning.
- Thank you.