

**Forum for Access and Continuing Education
Thursday 30 June 2016**

Keynote Speech

Thank you so much for inviting me to address you.

Just recently, a group of students from the Fall's Women Centre have celebrated completing one of our health and social care modules. The centre was set up to support women most affected by the troubles, and from some of the most deprived communities in Belfast. With guidance from a mentor, these women have worked together to support each other through these first steps into higher education. They've gained confidence as well as skills and many have plans to continue studying.

The work that the OU does in Northern Ireland, such as that in the Fall's Women Centre is a powerful illustration of the way that education can counteract disadvantage and help to heal fractured societies.

I first came to Northern Ireland in 1981 when I was a young reporter for the BBC . I reported on bombings and shootings in a time of terrible dislocation. I've been back many times and it is a deep pleasure to see the thriving peaceful city whose hospitality I am sure we are all enjoying.

However divisions still remain, including on the largely religiously separated provision of education and teacher training. But those of us from the rest of the U.K. need to look hard at the divisions in our parts of the U.K.

This morning I want to begin by focussing on what the UK vote to leave the EU tells us about the divisions in UK society, the relevance of that to education and the crucial role of continuing education in addressing social disparities.

Media coverage of the outcome of the referendum has naturally focussed on the immediate political and economic consequences and the university and further education sectors are no exception. Naturally we are deeply concerned for our many staff from the other countries of the EU who have been feeling hurt and rejected by the vote. To them we are giving all the support possible and hope that their long term status here will be maintained. And of course we are focussed on other direct consequences such as EU students and research income.

Beyond that are questions about political stability, especially whether the UK will remain united. And what the effects on the economy might be, due to continuing uncertainties. All these might well have adverse consequences for higher education.

But while we have had our attention on the consequences of the vote it is also worth considering some of the causes of the vote, or at least the conditions that led to the highly divisive outcome.

For the following analysis I want to acknowledge an article on Politico.EU by Matthew Goodwin, Professor of Politics at the University of Kent. He has examined the voting patterns by local authority in an article called "Inequality not personalities drove Britain to Brexit".

The analysis correlates characteristics such as income or class with the voting outcomes. It is clear for instance that low income areas were much more strongly pro-Brexit than high income areas. In the local authorities with the 20 highest proportions of voters supporting Remain the median

income is 27000 but in the council areas with the 20 highest votes for Leave the median income is much lower, at £18000.

But the social factor most strongly and positively correlated with voting outcomes is percentage degree attainment. In the top 20 Remain areas the percentage of residents with a degree is 45% but in the 20 highest Leave areas the proportion is just 16%.

In other words three times the rate of degree attainment in one set of authority areas than another. To be frank that degree of education and social division is a national affront. And of course those poor educational outcomes feed directly into low skills, low income consequences for communities leading to resentments that, sadly, may be directed at outsiders and immigrants. In turn leading to the divisions in attitude which have fed the highly damaging national cleavage over Brexit. Thus educational disparity is both a consequence and a cause of national political division. It is deeply unhealthy and it is something that a new government needs urgently to address.

And let me relate that disparity to our conference today and the role of lifelong learning and continuing education. I get frustrated when there is commentary on the HE participation rate with the view being expressed that 50% participation is too high or "more than enough good". But how often do you see the question asked of the fairness of that participation rate? Can we possibly say that with geographic disparities in degree attainment so extreme that the "right" 50% are getting the opportunities.

It is, of course, hugely welcome that (at least in some parts of the U.K.) gaps in 18 year old participation rates are closing. But it is mathematically impossible to close the degree achievement gap simply by focussing on the flow of students coming through at 18. To address the stock, as opposed to the flow, of the workforce inevitably requires concerted action on upskilling and reskilling current workers.

I urge the new government, whoever might lead it, to consider urgent action to address this problem. I now want to turn to what the Open University is doing to combat educational disparity and what further policy shifts we believe are needed to help us do more.

And it's those longer-term challenges which are the purpose of today's event. So what I want to do this morning is to set out what I see as the importance of widening participation, describe some of the ways in which the Open University is responding, and suggest some of the ways we might seek to build on these initiatives for the future.

It's widely recognised that despite the huge expansion of higher education in recent years, access is still too often determined by gender, ethnic background and especially social class. Though the gaps in participation rates are narrowing, the wealthiest teenagers are still more than twice as likely to apply to university.

Not only does this matter for individual career prospects, life-chances and well-being, it also has profound ramifications for national productivity, economic growth and social mobility.

In this context, it is vital that we appreciate the consequences of the decline in the numbers of part-time students.

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

So the collapse in the numbers of part-time students in England is a double blow. Because these students haven't started studying full-time: their circumstances don't allow it. Rather, they simply don't study at all. And we can ill afford the waste of talent that represents.

In fact, I would argue that a narrow definition of widening participation is just what it sounds like: a contradiction in terms.

So efforts to widen participation cannot just be focused on eighteen year olds. Those, of course, are vital, and there is a real role and responsibility for us in higher education to be working with colleges, schools, and even early years settings to raise attainment, encourage ambition, and promote access.

But this cannot be the whole picture. Because actually, last year, a third of 'widening participation' students who started university were mature students. Many of whom missed out at eighteen, many of whom have family commitments, many of whom will be balancing study with work.

These are people for whom traditional models of study – away from home for three years – simply don't make sense. Indeed, it actually acts as a barrier to entry.

So it is essential that we have an inclusive and diverse higher education sector which offers the flexibility and support that these students rightly demand, alongside specific policies to address their particular needs.

The right systems of funding and financial support are absolutely central to that. And with that in mind, the recent introduction of more generous loans for part-time students have been an important step in the right direction.

Indeed, in recent months, there had been many encouraging signals from political parties across the spectrum and across all parts of the United Kingdom, indicating a developing consensus on the importance of this issue.

In Scotland, for example, the government committed to implementing the recommendations from the Commissioning on Widening Access, including introducing a new Commissioner for Access. Both the proposal to set targets for numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the idea of 'access thresholds' represent a clear commitment to urgent, wide-ranging and concerted action. The Scottish government has also committed to a broad review of funding for enterprise, skills and higher education.

In Wales, the ongoing Diamond review of Higher Education Funding and Student Support has made widening access one of its central principles. While yet to report back, thoughtful attention is being given to the importance of financial sustainability and the importance of the part-time sector. This is very promising for the forthcoming recommendations.

In Northern Ireland, the government announced an enhanced support package for part-time students, including loans as well as grants to fees.

And in England, the recent white paper made important commitments to widening participation, improving life chances and supporting lifelong learning. In particular, it underlined the contribution that part-time and flexible study should make to life-long learning.

These are all extremely positive signs. And while recognising the uncertain and rapidly changing political and policy context, I also think that there is a major role for us in facing up to this challenge and tackling it head on.

We know, for example, that some universities are doing far more than others to address this issue. Some are undertaking fantastic and really effective outreach work, recruiting hugely talented and dedicated students who go on to thrive at university and beyond.

But others are actually recruiting from a smaller pool, narrowing participation rather than widening it. So there is a real case for examining what we as a sector are doing and how effective it is being.

As individual institutions and as a sector, there is a great deal that we can do through thoughtful and creative initiatives that reach out to potential students who want and deserve the opportunities that higher education can offer. That will take radical thinking, bold ambition and leadership.

And I think the Universities UK Social Mobility Advisory Group is ideally placed to provide that. We have been tasked with improving access and long-term success for under-represented groups in higher education. Our discussions have been very positive and productive to date and I am sure that today will provide further useful food for thought.

But I would also just like to say a few words about the initiatives that the Open University itself is undertaking.

In many ways, of course, widening participation is just 'what we do'. We were founded to serve people for whom university always seemed like an impossible dream. We believe in creating opportunities and offering people another chance.

But we also know that we cannot be complacent and rest on our reputation, sitting back and waiting for students to come to us. On the contrary, we see it as a central part of our mission to proactively and imaginatively develop the solutions that anticipate the needs of potential students.

First, we place a huge emphasis on recognition of prior learning. We see this as a crucial way to save students time and money, without needlessly making them repeat what they've already learned and study what they already know.

We see clear benefits of this, not only in recruitment but in retention and completion rates.

In fact, more than a quarter of our students have taken advantage of some form of credit transfer by the time they graduate.

One of the most popular ways to do so is by studying for our Open Degree. We are proud of offering the most flexible degree in the UK, which students can entirely tailor to their own personal interests and professional requirements.

It's a modular programme, so that students can mix and match the courses that suit them. And of course, based around modules, rather than years, makes it far easier to recognise relevant prior learning. That's especially useful for our students who might have HND's or HNC's and want to take the next step in gaining a degree.

In Scotland, we have been able to do even more to create genuinely clear and flexible progression pathways. Our Back on Course Scotland initiative is reaching out to former students who for whatever reason needed to leave university without completing their degree. It offers time and space for students to reflect on their next steps, whether that's work or study.

One of our recent beneficiaries of this programme told us that she didn't think she'd be able to go back to university. 'I thought you got one chance and that was it.' But because we were able to recognise everything she'd already achieved, it was a powerful motivating force to enable her to try again, with renewed confidence and self-esteem.

More recently, we've extended this possibility of credit transfer online, by accrediting some of the Massive Online Open Courses offered by our business school. Students will be able to earn up to thirty credits for particular modules offered on FutureLearn. In the process, they can test out how well our online learning suits them, before making a commitment to a full degree: a 'try before you buy' option.

We see this as an important part of harnessing digital technology to make higher education more focused on learner needs, in a way that is focused on promoting collaboration and building communities online.

And we also have plans to take this further with new courses that enable students to advance their continuing professional development, in partnership with leading professional organisations.

In Wales we have been innovative in deploying our vast range of Open Educational Resources in widening access work, using them as taster materials in some of the most disadvantaged communities.

In Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland we have a well-established partnership with the trade union Unison, and work together to bring those who work in low paid jobs into learning.

What I would very much like to see in future is funding being made available for such courses – that is, loans for people who just want to study a module in the first instance, not a whole degree. I think this would really help open doors for people who just want to try out higher education without having to make the full commitment right away.

Next, we see our role in the Social Partnership Network as a key aspect of our commitment to widening participation. Working with unions and trade organisations, colleges and voluntary sector groups, our aim is to reach those people who think that university just isn't for them, and demonstrate otherwise.

One aspect of our work here is to support students in making the move from informal to more formal learning. Another is to emphasise the vocational and skills-based aspects of higher education, so that people see the clear benefits for their job prospects.

Later on this year, thanks to HEFCE funding, we'll be launching a website that will not only outline in very clear and accessible terms how people can take up and benefit from higher education, but also offers introductory courses in social care, starting a business or planning for the future. The target groups are those who are currently unemployed, or working in low-paid, unqualified jobs, who want to develop their career or start a new one; helping them take the first steps towards gaining the necessary skills.

And we are also very interested in the potential for developing life-long learning accounts. We see this as part of the solution to the funding dilemmas for the sector, by encouraging individual and employer contributions matched by public funding, with more available for those on low incomes. This would empower individuals to develop their career over the long-term, not just working towards one qualification, but able to retrain and re-skill over the course of their lifetime. It could pay for advice, guidance and career development opportunities as well as more traditional forms of education. If developed effectively, these could offer the choice, flexibility and personalisation which are so important to learners who may be tentative or unsure about higher education.

Finally, before I finish, I want to stress how crucial I believe employer engagement is to widening participation. Reaching out to new students has to mean working in partnership with their

employers. They are then more likely to be positively engaged in helping their students succeed – and of course, will see the benefits themselves, in a more skilled and engaged workforce.

With that in mind, I am really excited about the ambitious plans for new apprenticeships in England over the next few years. These are likely to be particularly attractive to students who would not otherwise consider higher education, because it offers the chance to study for a degree while working and immediately applying the skills they have learned in really relevant and productive ways. And of course, there are no tuition fees attached.

We've been developing a series of apprenticeships relevant to central and local government, healthcare, banking and insurance, as well as a digital and technology solutions apprenticeship to help analysts and engineers develop more specialised and advanced skills.

In Northern Ireland, our apprenticeships programme has really taken off – especially in healthcare, where government and training providers alike are working together to address the skills gaps in nursing. As part of this, we are running a programme to upskill those already working in caring to become fully trained nurses. This has been incredibly popular and successful. In fact, we've just doubled the programme in size within the statutory sector and will be rolling it out within the independent sector in the coming months.

Recently, our first graduation ceremony of the year, one student struck me as particularly overcome with emotion. And when I asked about her experience, she told me that the OU had literally saved her life. I want that same profound, transformative experience for many more people. Every single person with the potential and the determination to succeed in higher education should have the opportunity and support to do so, regardless of their background.

The current UK government has been working on what it calls its Life Chances agenda. Within that it has called for evidence in relation to Lifetime Learning. The OU will be submitting its ideas, along the lines I have outlined this morning.

But with the potential disruption of a change of PM, it is crucial that the long-term lessons of last Thursday are not lost – that the UK is a nation of profound social and economic disparity which is causing national division. Improved education of adults and the existing workforce is one of the most immediate and direct ways to address that. It is encouraging that at least one of the candidates to be PM, Boris Johnson, has already said, in an article in the Telegraph on Monday, that he wishes to continue the Life Chances agenda. And only this morning Theresa May calls for a country that works “not for a privileged view but for everyone regardless of who they are and regardless of where they are from”.

I urge all of us and our national leaders to commit to using the Brexit vote as a spur to action when we all work to address national social and economic division.

Thank you very much.